

# ACLU Mississippi

## HOW TO LOBBY YOUR STATE LEGISLATOR

### TABLE OF CONTENT

<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>2</b>
• What is Lobbying?	
• Who can lobby?	
• Lobbying 101-The Basics	
<b>Getting Started.....</b>	<b>4</b>
• Developing a Game Plan	
• Set Up a Meeting	
• Preparations	
• Professionalism	
• What to do at Your Meeting	
• What to do after Your Meeting	
<b>If You Can't Meet In Person.....</b>	<b>6</b>
• What other ways are there to Lobby?	
<b>Keeping an Eye on the Results.....</b>	<b>7</b>

## INTRODUCTION

The citizen's voice is perhaps one of the most powerful tools in their possession when it comes to making changes to our government. However, many feel that their voices are not heard or get lost in the crowd, and when a voice fails to succeed at the ballot, it can lead to frustration and deterrence for the citizen. The ACLU of Mississippi has developed this guide to help you connect with your Legislator and assist you in making the changes that you want to see from your Mississippi Government.

- What is Lobbying? The goal of lobbying is to influence those involved within a legislative body. You are a constituent of your Legislators, regardless of party affiliation, and it is their job to listen to you because you hold the power of the vote. However, voting is only a portion of your power as a citizen. Lobbying gives a citizen even more power by directly contacting and connecting with your Legislators, and there is nothing quite as effective as meeting with somebody face-to-face and talking about the issues that impact you and so many others.
- Who Can Lobby? The answer is anybody and everybody! The idea that a lobbyist has to be hired or work for an organization is not always the case. As a citizen, you have every right to frequent your State Capitol and interact with those who are making the laws that govern you.
- Lobbying 101-The Basics: Lobbying is aimed at influencing an elected official and persuading them to vote in your interests.
  - Often, a Legislator may have very little knowledge on a particular issue, so it is important that you provide them with the necessary information so they can make an informed decision when it comes time to vote. This, however, does not always guarantee that they will be on your side, so be prepared to face opposition from time-to-time, and acknowledge that you both may not see things the same way. This should not be a deterrent for you. In fact, this initial meeting not only helps your voice be heard, but it also helps you establish a relationship with your Legislator.
  - Relationships and connections are important in the world of government, so keep this in mind when meeting for the first time. Good impressions never hurt!

- Odds are that you have *very* passionate feelings about the issues you are bringing up to your Legislator, or else you wouldn't be taking the time out of your day to speak with them, right? Do try to keep in mind that you are speaking on behalf of others as well, rather than just yourself. Making things about the greater good of the constituents, which is something that benefits your Legislator as well, can be an effective tactic in making sure your points are taken into consideration. Provide examples as to how the changes you want to see will better those in your community, and don't be afraid to remind your Legislator that, if their constituents are happy, then it reflects well on them at the polls.
- Words tend to carry a lot of weight, and thus can make a significant impact when used correctly. Try not to let emotions run too high when addressing the issues you've brought along. Certain word choice can evoke different reactions, so if your word choice is too negative or comes off as aggressive, things may not play over quite as well. However, do not try and fluff up the issues or downplay them; make sure they know you are serious about the matter. Find an appropriate balance between the two in order to ensure that the conversation goes smoothly.
- It is important to keep in mind that, at the end of the day, your Legislator is the one who makes the final decision. This does not mean that your time and efforts are wasted if they do not vote in favor of your argument or take your stance into consideration! The fact of the matter is that you have done a great amount of work just by educating your Legislator and having your voice heard. There are plenty of opportunities to speak with them again, which is beneficial for both of you because you will be establishing a relationship that could pay off further on down the road if you are to meet again.

## GETTING STARTED

Lobbying your Legislator may seem daunting at first, but rest assured, it is not as difficult as you may think! With adequate preparation, your initial meeting will go over much smoother than if you run into it headfirst. Developing a solid plan beforehand will benefit you greatly when meeting with your Legislator.

- **Developing a Game Plan:** Much like preparing for a test, it pays to know your material beforehand. Brushing up on the issues you want to bring up and solidifying what it is you want out of your Legislator are imperative. Also come prepared with an alternative(s) result in the event that they adamantly decline your first proposal. Make sure that this backup plan still results in somehow accomplishing your overall goal.
  - Once you have a good idea of what you plan to argue and how you intend to go about it, your next step should be deciding on who to lobby. The State Capitol is full of all kinds of different Legislators, staff members, interns, and visitors, so make sure you are able to pinpoint who your target audience is. A good way to go about this is to do research on your Legislator. Your State Legislature’s website has an abundance of information at your disposal, so feel free to access it and learn as much as you can, such as your Legislator’s party affiliation, district, voting record, interests, committees that he/she are involved with, and any positions of importance they may hold. Being familiar with these things can help you get a feel for how they may receive your initial argument.
  - There is a form of hierarchy within government, and those who hold positions of power or who have senior status tend to be influential when it comes to voting. If you are aiming at making a significant change or impact, these are the members you need to seek out and speak with, as they have the ability to sway those around them more effectively than a recently-elected official.
  - Additionally, it is key to identify those who will more than likely be open and supportive of your argument. These will gain more headway for you than going directly to a Legislator who you know will not budge on his stance and trying to sway his opinion.
- **Set Up a Meeting:** Getting to meet with your Legislator is perhaps the biggest step in lobbying your State office holders. After spending all this time preparing what you are going to say, now you have to set up a meeting in order to have your voice heard. There are several ways to accomplish this. One way

is to locate a staffer or a page (a student volunteer) and give them a note that states your business. These notes can be found at tables that reside near the Chamber entrance. The staffer or page will then take the note and give it to the Legislator, and will return once they are able to tell you if they can meet with you or not. This method can be somewhat short-notice, so it may not always result with an immediate 'yes.' So, if you are worried about being turned away at the door, send an email or letter to your Legislator, or give them a call. You can also try to contact them through their social media. You should state your intention and determine a day and time that works best for both of you to meet. If you do not get a response, try again in a couple of days.

- **Preparations:** You should prepare some materials for your meeting, such as your main arguments and answers to any questions you think will be asked. Having these two things ready will show your preparedness, as well as how serious you are about the matter. Additionally, you should give your Legislator a one to two page paper that clearly states your business. This paper can include facts pertaining to the issue at hand, statistics, any bill numbers that are relevant, as well as any contact information you have. Make sure this document gets straight to the point, and bring copies if you intend to meet with several individuals.
- **Professionalism:** Meeting with a Legislator is just like meeting with a potential employer for job interview. It is necessary to conduct yourself professionally, meaning to avoid the use of rude or vulgar language (no matter how upset you may get when it comes to your chosen issue), dress professionally, stick to business and do not go off on tangents, make sure to convey your message(s) quickly and efficiently, and be sure to thank them for their time.
- **What to do at your meeting:** Outside of conducting yourself in a professional manner, you should also be punctual to your meeting. Arrive early, as you would for an interview or any kind of important event, and confirm how much time you have to speak. Sometimes you may have to speak with a staffer, rather than the Legislator, and in this case you should conduct the meeting as you would have originally. Relay your message and address any concerns or confusion that your Legislator may have. If the aim of your meeting is to sway a particular bill or other piece of legislation and the Legislator agrees to support you, be sure to thank them and offer yourself as a resource. This means you can provide them with more information on the matter, or whatever they may feel would be beneficial. And odds are that if they support your proposition, then they will be more than happy to get others on board, too. This

will not always be the outcome, though, and your Legislator may feel undecided about the matter. Try and figure out why and find ways that you could potentially bring them over to your side. Do not get deterred or agitated if this happens! Be kind and courteous for their decision and still thank them for their time. After all, you may have to interact with them again in the future, so try and maintain a good relationship.

- **What to do after your meeting:** Follow up! The world is incredibly connected these days, so you have numerous ways of following up. This can be done through a phone call, email, written letter (hint: handwritten letters add a more personal touch). This is your chance to remind your Legislator of your main argument and restate your goals, as well as the chance to provide them with more resource materials. Remember that, just like in your in-person meeting, it is important to conduct yourself professionally, even in a letter or email. Following up also works as a way to further sway your Legislator, especially if they are still undecided. You can mobilize others, some of which may have more influence, and have them reach out, too.
  - Remember, relationships are important in government! Don't let this one meeting and the follow up be the only interactions you have with your Legislator. Keep in touch, follow any social media they may have, sign up for their email list (if they have one), and respond to other legislation that is being passed around in their office. You may have to remind them who you are at first, but if you maintain an established relationship well enough, then they eventually may remember you.

## **IF YOU CAN'T MEET IN PERSON**

Perhaps you live too far away from the State Capitol, or maybe your job does not allow you to meet with your Legislator. Whatever the reason, there are still ways for you to lobby and participate in your government.

- **What Other Ways Are There to Lobby?** We are not hurting for ways to communicate in this day and age, so utilize these ways to speak with your Legislator. You and your community can create a petition and have it sent to your Legislator. With enough constituent signatures, you are sure to gain their attention. If you are unsure how to create a petition, the ACLU of MS is glad to help. Similarly, letters and emails work just as well, especially if they all are raising concern over a particular issue. Lastly, nothing beats a phone call. Set up a group of fellow constituents to call your Legislator and express their opinions and concerns.

## **KEEPING AN EYE ON THE RESULTS**

Everyone likes to see their hard work pay off, and it is no different when it comes to seeing the changes you worked for. If the goal of your lobbying message was to make some kind of change, it is crucial to keep an eye on it until it is time for the vote; your job does not stop at the end of your meeting. Have your Legislator’s constituents call, email, or write to them and voice their stance on the matter. In the event that a public hearing is held on the matter, gather up as many people as you can get to attend. This is another chance to have your voice heard, so don’t pass it up! You can also keep an eye on the progression of legislation through the Mississippi Legislature’s [website](#), which has a search bar for numerous bills from different sessions.

**The ACLU of Mississippi is dedicated to promoting, defending, and extending civil liberties to all Mississippians with emphasis on issues related to criminal justice reform, youth justice, equality, and freedom of speech and expression.**

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