

How a Bill Becomes Law in Wisconsin

Understanding the Legislative Process and Advocating for Change

Drafting

A legislator comes up with an idea for a bill, and has the Legislative Reference Bureau draft it. The draft is then circulated for legislators to sign on as cosponsors. The bill is then introduced and given a number. Senate Bills are called SB#; Assembly Bills are AB#. **What you can do:**

- Advocates can meet with their legislators before the session begins to discuss problems that might be solved by legislation, or to suggest specific bills.
- While in draft form, advocates can approach legislators to cosponsor.

Referral

The Speaker of the Assembly or the President of the Senate refers the bill to a committee for review. There are several dozen such committees. **What you can do:**

- Sometimes the bill's sponsor can request a specific committee. If your legislator sponsors a bill at your request, you can ask if a particular committee might give a more favorable report.

Hearings

Most bills are scheduled for public hearings. The Committee Chair schedules the hearing, usually grouping several related bills to have hearings on the same day. The Legislative Hotline (800-362-9472 / 608-266-9960, or website <http://www.legis.state.wi.us>) can tell you which committee is holding a hearing on a particular bill and will give you the Chair's phone number. By calling the Chair, you can verify the date, time, and location of the hearing. **What you can do:**

- There should always be at least one advocate testifying at a public hearing. The testimony of constituents who attend the hearing is always more effective than that of paid staff. Those who are not comfortable speaking can register in favor of or against a bill, submit written testimony, or just attend to support those who are speaking.
- If it is impossible to attend the hearing, you can still have an impact. Usually hearings are scheduled on short notice, so there is no time for letters. If your legislator is on the committee, call the office and leave a message or send an email stating your position on the bill. (Be sure to include your home address in any email messages.)

Executive Session (informally called "Exec-ing the bill")

This is rarely done the same day as the hearing. Usually the committee takes several weeks to consider the bill. At this meeting, the committee decides what to recommend to the Senate and/or Assembly. The committee may recommend the bill for passage, may recommend amendments, may rewrite the whole bill (called a "substitute amendment"), or may recommend indefinite postponement. **What you can do:**

- There is usually enough time between the hearing and the executive session to write letters. If you have a legislator on the committee, send a brief letter explaining your position on the bill and urging a vote for or against it. Organize 3-5 other people in the district to write also. A face-to-face meeting with your legislator is even more effective.

- If you don't have a legislator on the committee, it is still possible to have an effect. You can ask your own legislator to speak to a committee member on your behalf. Also, you can write to the chair, who has some responsibility to consider the wishes of the whole state.

Joint Finance Committee

Bills that affect state or county budgets must be reviewed by the Joint Finance Committee. JFC is made up of legislators from both houses. This committee holds hearings and executive sessions to approve all, part, or none of the funds called for in the bill. **What you can do:**

- The suggestions in Hearings and Executive Sessions also apply here.
- In many cases, however, bills before Joint Finance are voted on at the same meeting as the public hearing.

Floor Action

Each bill reported out of committee is then eligible to be scheduled for floor debate by the full body of the Senate or Assembly. Any legislator may propose an amendment or a substitute bill. The full body (Senate or Assembly) must vote on any amendments or substitutes before considering the main bill. **What you can do:**

- Since every member of the Assembly or Senate will be involved now, every advocate should be also. Contact your legislator and urge action on the bill. The best move is to arrange a constituent meeting when the person is home in the district. The second best tactic is to write a letter. If neither is possible, you can make a phone call. With either writing or calling, it's important to organize other constituents to do the same.

The Second House

This is a repeat of the steps above, except the committee may exec a bill without a hearing. If the second house makes any amendments, the bill must return to the first house for further consideration. If the bill passes without amendment, the bill goes to the Governor to be signed into law. **What you can do:**

- The suggestions in Floor Action apply here.

Conference Committees

If the Senate and Assembly versions of the bill are not identical, a conference committee is appointed. Three members from each body write a new bill, the "Conference Report," which is a compromise version of the two bills. The Conference Report must then be voted on by both houses. It cannot be amended.

Governor's Office

After passing both houses, the bill goes to the Governor for his/her signature or veto. **What you can do:**

- Advocates can call or write the Governor to urge his signature or veto.