

WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

LEGISLATIVE MANUAL

Why should Catholics care about government, politics, and public policy? As Christians, we are commanded by Jesus to love our neighbor. One significant way of demonstrating this love is by creating a lawful and just society.

While it is tempting to think that government is off in the distance "doing things" to taxpayers, our society is better served if we remember that government is a tool for achieving the common good. WE are the government.

Government exists to serve citizens; citizens do not exist to serve the government.

The government, however, cannot serve us unless we take responsibility for sharing our ideas about how to achieve the common good. This manual is designed to help individuals understand how laws are made and how to influence the legislative process.

HOW A BILL BECOMES A LAW IN WISCONSIN

Adapted from the Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance

Wisconsin's lawmaking procedure gives the citizen a number of opportunities to observe and participate in proposed legislation. The Senate and Assembly each determine their own rules of procedure, which differ slightly. There are also joint rules, which govern the business between the two houses.

The rules of either house may be suspended by unanimous consent or by a two-thirds vote. This practice is used when the members wish to pass legislation more quickly.

Introduction of Bills

Any member of the Legislature, individually or together with members of either house, may introduce a bill. Bills may also be introduced by committees of the Legislature or the Legislative Council.

Legislative Committees

Nearly every bill is referred to the appropriate committee by the presiding officer. Every bill appropriating money, providing revenue, or relating to taxation must be sent to the Joint Committee on Finance before being passed.

Any bill making or changing an appropriation, or increasing or decreasing state or local fiscal liability or revenues, must have a fiscal estimate indicating the anticipated cost or revenue of the measure. As a general rule, most bills are accorded a public hearing. A schedule listing all the bills that will be heard the following week is published.

If a committee wants the full Senate or Assembly to act on a bill, it refers the bill, along with its recommendations (called a "committee report"), to the body for consideration.

Action in First House

Generally, the bills and the accompanying committee reports are referred to special committees within the Senate or Assembly, which are panels that schedule the business for each day's session. On rare occasions, the presiding officer will refer a bill directly to the calendar.

On the day when a bill has been "calendared" for action, debate on the bill begins, first with consideration of bill

amendments. These may be amendments submitted by any member or recommended by the committee.

After all amendments have been considered, the house votes on final passage of the bill. The vote may be by voice or roll call. Normally, a majority vote is sufficient for passage but, in some cases, the statutes or constitution require a two-thirds or three-fourths vote.

A *roll call* is taken on any bill if a sufficient number of members request it or if it is deemed desirable by the presiding officer. A roll call must always be taken on a measure that involves an appropriation, a tax, the credit of the state, a gubernatorial veto, a constitutional amendment, banking, or increased retirement benefits for public employees. All votes are final unless a member of the winning side asks the body to *reconsider* its action.

Once the bill has been passed, it is *messed* to the other house. A house can take no further action on a bill once it has been messed to the other house.

Sometimes, when a bill has been significantly revised by amendment, the house that passed it will reprint the bill to incorporate all the changes. This is known as *engrossing* the bill.

Action in Second House

The bill must then go through practically the same procedure as in the first house. Late in a session it is not unusual for committees to report bills received from the other house to the floor without holding a new public hearing.

If amendments are attached by the second house, the bill must be returned to the first house so that the amendments may be acted upon. If the bill passes both houses in identical form, it is *enrolled*, or prepared in final form, to include all the adopted amendments.

Conference Committees

If the house where the bill originated does not agree with the bill as adopted by the other house and if neither house recedes from its position, a *committee of conference*, usually

consisting of three members from each house, is appointed to resolve the differences. Senate and Assembly rules require that a member of a conference committee must have voted in favor of the bill when it passed. This is intended to assure that the conferees will represent that house in any negotiations in the committee.

If the conference committee comes to an agreement, its proposal, called a *conference report*, is referred to both houses. A conference report may not be amended.

If the conference report is accepted by a roll call vote in each house, the bill is enrolled.

Action by the Governor

Enrolled bills are presented to the Governor for signing. So that the Governor's office is not overwhelmed with too many bills at any one time, the bills are presented upon the

Governor's request.

The Governor must act on a bill within six days (Sunday excepted) after receiving it, or the bill becomes a law without his or her signature. (If the Legislature has adjourned, failure to sign becomes a *pocket veto* and the bill is killed.)

The Veto

The Governor may also veto a bill or, in the case of an appropriations bill, veto parts of it. If the Governor vetoes a bill, s/he must return it, together with objections, to the house where it originated. It can then become law only if each house passes it over the veto by a two-thirds vote of the members present. The bill dies if the veto is sustained (failure in either house to override the veto by the required two-thirds vote).

GUIDELINES FOR CITIZEN INVOLVEMENT

Next to voting, the most important way citizens can participate in government is to communicate their wishes to legislators.

Become Informed

In order to communicate most effectively with your legislators:

- Listen to news broadcasts on radio and television;
- Check legislative/news resources online (see <http://legis.wisconsin.gov>);
- Read the daily newspaper, church publications, and news magazines;
- Study resource materials on the subject from neighborhood or church libraries;
- Discuss the subject with family, neighbors, and friends;
- Request information from any organization or group which has taken a stand on the issue;
- Give serious thought to the moral or ethical implications of the issue.

Once you feel comfortable discussing the issue, it's time to communicate your views.

Don't Be Intimidated!

Legislators are people just like you. Like you, they have a job to do, and they won't be doing it long if they are inaccessible or unreceptive to citizens. Like you, they don't know everything. Most often they will appreciate information that helps them realize how laws and programs affect the people they represent. **Remember, you are as much a help to them as they are to you.**

Personal Visits

The best way to express an opinion to any public official, especially a legislator, is a personal visit. After meeting you,

s/he will have a personal feeling about your concerns.

One of the best places to visit personally with legislators is in their home district offices. They have a little more time to talk there and they can relate to you as a constituent.

A visit to the legislator's office in the State Capitol can also be effective, if it is properly arranged. Be sure to write or call in advance for an appointment. If you want to discuss a particular piece of legislation or bill, mention it when making the appointment. Above all, know your facts and your position.

On the day of the visit:

- Be on time for the appointment. Don't be upset if you are asked to meet with a staff aide.
- Be as specific as possible in your discussion.
- Be brief and concise, but cover all points which concern you. Offer to leave useful data, charts, or information, or to send more information if it will be helpful.
- When possible, talk about your own experiences and how the issue affects you.
- Give your legislator a chance to talk and respond to any questions s/he may ask.
- If your legislator disagrees with you, listen carefully for reasons, but be **firm** in your opinion. As a constituent, you are important to your legislator. State your issue confidently and reasonably.
- Don't threaten or be sarcastic. Even if a legislator can't vote for your side of the current issue, s/he may be helpful to you on another occasion.
- If your legislator agrees, thank him or her and offer to provide support or information as the issue progresses.
- Before you leave, thank your legislator for the time given to your visit.

Letter Writing

Most legislators keep a mail file on every bill and review it carefully when the bill comes to the floor for a vote. A legislator may read portions of a well-written letter aloud during legislative committee hearings or floor debate. Many times just a few persuasive letters are the determining factor in how a legislator votes. When you write, be sure to:

- Identify your topic immediately. If you are writing about a specific bill, refer to it by number and subject.
- Be specific in stating your position, either for or against. Make clear why you are advocating a particular position so that, if amendments are proposed, the legislator will know their effect on your position. If possible, back your position with reliable facts and figures.
- Be clear and concise but never curt.
- Be reasonable and do not make threats.
- Be yourself. Don't try to sound like a "professional." Use your own stationery and your own words. Copying material or form letters prepared by someone else is usually ineffective.
- If possible, use a personal example of how and why the issue concerns you.
- Ask for an answer. To get a personal response, ask for the legislator's opinion.
- Be positive. Avoid criticism. If possible, express appreciation to your legislator for some recent action, vote, or public speech made on behalf of your cause.
- Consider the factor of timing. Try to communicate your position while a bill is in committee or just before a decisive vote is to be taken.
- Always sign your name legibly.
- Be sure to include your return address and phone number in your letter, not just on the envelope. Envelopes sometimes get thrown away before the letter is answered.
- Check the spelling of your legislator's name and address him/her properly as follows:

SENATE	ASSEMBLY
The Honorable (NAME) Wisconsin Senate PO Box 7882 Madison, WI 53707-7882	The Honorable (NAME) Wisconsin Assembly PO Box 8952 (for names A-L) PO Box 8953 (for names M-Z) Madison, WI 53708-8952 (for A-L) Madison, WI 53708-8953 (for M-Z)
Dear Senator (NAME) Sincerely yours,	Dear Representative (NAME) Sincerely yours,

Telephone Calls

You may prefer to place a telephone call to your legislator, especially if you have met previously through a personal visit. A phone call is particularly effective if time is short, or you want to discuss a matter and exchange viewpoints. There are

several points to remember:

- Telephone calls to legislators should always be made during normal business hours.
- Your legislator can usually be reached at his/her office in Madison but, during a legislative recess, the legislator can often be contacted at his/her district office.
- Follow the standards for personal visits above and, if possible, follow up the call with a written letter.

Other Communication Methods

E-mail. While email is generally a more informal communication tool, you should apply the same letter writing standards. **When e-mailing your legislators remember to include full contact information. This verifies the source of the information.**

A legislator's e-mail address may be obtained from the email directory from the State's legislative website. Visit <http://legis.wisconsin.gov>.

With three exceptions, there is a consistent format for the e-mail addresses of state legislators:*

Members of the Assembly

Rep.Lastname@legis.wisconsin.gov

Members of the Senate

Sen.Lastname@legis.wisconsin.gov

*Rep. Robert Brooks (Rep.Rob.Brooks@legis.wisconsin.gov)

Rep. Jim Ott (Rep.Ottj@legis.wisconsin.gov)

Rep. Leon Young (Rep.Youngl@legis.wisconsin.gov)

Say Thank-You

Thank your legislator if s/he supports your position through their vote. Everybody appreciates a complimentary letter and your legislator will know that you are aware of his/her voting record. On the other hand, if a vote is contrary to your position, don't hesitate to let him or her know in a polite letter.

There is no way a citizen can be sure a letter will result in the action requested, but it is well worth the effort for citizens with serious opinions to write.

Legislative Hotline

The State Legislature has a hotline telephone number (1-800-362-9472) that may be called Monday through Friday from 8:15am to 4:45pm. (In the Madison area, dial 608-266-9960.) It is a toll-free service that can:

1. Give you basic information about the State Legislature.

- Status of bills and proposals
- Time and place of hearings
- Names of committee members

- Daily agenda for the Senate and Assembly

2. Assist you in communicating with your legislators.

- Getting word to your legislators that you would like them to contact you.
- Providing names, addresses, and phone numbers of your legislators.
- Informing your legislators when you need copies of bills and other documents.

Online Legislative Resources

The Wisconsin Legislature: <http://legis.wisconsin.gov>.

The Governor's Office: <http://www.wisgov.state.wi.us>.

The Wisconsin Catholic Conference (WCC) has a homepage where you can find the WCC's *Capitol Update* e-newsletter, official statements by the state's bishops on public policy matters, press releases on issues of concern to the WCC, staff testimony to legislative committees, opinion columns produced for the state's five diocesan publications, and other information. Visit <http://www.wisconsincatholic.org>.

Hearings

If you are aware of a bill that you would like to comment on at a public hearing, you should contact the chair of the committee to which the bill has been referred to determine if and when they will be scheduling a public hearing on the bill.

When attending a public hearing be prepared to spend the day. Committees often hear testimony on many different bills at a single meeting. If you testify at a public hearing, it is a good idea to have a written statement of your main points. Be sure to bring enough copies to distribute to each member of the committee, the committee clerk, and the legislative counsel. Send a copy to your own legislator as well. Be brief.

You may be asked some questions by the legislators when you complete your statement. Be prepared to answer to the best of your ability, but don't feel you have to be an expert. It is ok to say, "I don't know." However, if you can get the information from a reliable source, you may want to offer to check into it and get back to the legislator via letter.

If you cannot attend a hearing, you still can have an impact on the committee's deliberations by sending a letter to the committee members prior to the hearing date.

Learn to Use the Media

Using the media to get the attention of others can be essential. Here are a few helpful hints on how to go about it.

1. **Know your facts.** People in the news business value accuracy more than anything else.
2. **Know the media in your area.** Find out which stations

or newspapers are popular. Get to know the names of the news editors or reporters who cover the issues that concern you.

3. **Make sure they hear from you.** The best cause in the world will fail if it is kept a secret. There are a number of ways to keep the media aware of your position.

- Write letters to the editor.
- Visit editorial boards and tell them how you feel and why. This is best done as a group, so they know the issue is a concern to others besides you.
- Be available for radio and television talk shows. Hosts are always looking for interesting topics. If you aren't comfortable doing this yourself, find someone else who is.
- Invite reporters to meetings or forums that discuss your issue. That will educate them on the issue and, like the visit to the editor, let them know people agree with you.

Keep Current on the Issues

There are several ways that Catholics and other interested citizens can keep abreast of the issues the Wisconsin Catholic Conference and other church agencies are tracking. In this way, you can be of great help to the Church.

- **Read Catholic publications.** Diocesan papers and magazines regularly carry news stories about the WCC and its public policy activities.
- **Sign up for the bi-monthly Capitol Update.** This electronic newsletter provides timely information on bills, hearings, and other public policy developments of interest. To subscribe, visit the WCC website and click on "Join the WCC E-Advocacy Network."
- **Check the WCC website.** The WCC website is regularly updated with information regarding the activities of the WCC. Resources available on the website include: bishops' statements, educational tools on Catholic social teaching, issue briefs on current public policy concerns, testimony, and action alerts.
- **Stay in touch with key parish committees.** Parish committee chairs or officers are usually kept informed of important projects or issues of concern to diocesan agencies. Many times, diocesan mailings include information about legislation of importance to their work.
- **Use the phone or email.** The WCC is always willing to answer your questions about legislation or public policies, call 608-257-0004 or email office@wisconsincatholic.org.