

HOW A BILL BECOMES A LAW

A bill can be introduced by its sponsor in either chamber, depending on whether the Primary Sponsor is a Representative or a Senator. If the bill begins in the House of Representatives, it will have a bill number that begins with “HB__” (for House Bill) and then a number; if it begins in the Senate, it will be called “SB__” (for Senate Bill) and then a number. The bill will keep that same number all the way through the process. The “Primary Sponsor” is listed first and “Co-Sponsors” are listed afterwards; having a number of co-sponsors of both parties usually shows that the legislation has fairly wide-spread or bi-partisan support.

Once the bill is introduced, the Rules Committee of the chamber will assign it to a Committee (e.g., Health & Welfare). The first hurdle is to have the bill passed favorably by that Committee. It is critical to educate all members of the Committee about the bill, so it will pass favorably. Advocates will primarily focus their attention on the Committee Chair and its members. The Committee Chair sets the date for a hearing and a vote by posting the bill. If the bill fails to pass the Committee – or never gets a vote – it has “died” for this session!

Once the bill is out of Committee, it goes to the full chamber for a 1st Reading. The next day, it has a 2nd Reading. During this period, members may file Floor Amendments to the bill.

The bill then goes back to the Rules Committee (very powerful, controlled by the majority party) which decides whether the bill will go to the floor for a vote – or be assigned to another Committee. If assigned to another Committee, it usually means that the leadership has a problem with the bill. Bills which cost money (have a fiscal impact on the state budget) will usually go to the Appropriations & Revenue (A&R) Committee for a hearing and vote there. If the bill does not pass out of the second Committee, it has “died” for this session!

If the bill is not assigned to another committee, it goes to the floor of the chamber for a 3rd Reading and posting on the Calendar. The bill will not be voted on until it is “called” by the Majority Floor Leader for a vote. When this happens, the bill’s sponsor will speak about the bill and any amendments which are filed will be debated and voted on. After the amendments (if any) are taken care of, the entire chamber votes on the bill.

If the bill passes, it is then sent to the other chamber and the entire process is repeated there! Usually, a bill will be sent by the Rules Committee of that chamber to the same Committee (e.g., Health & Welfare), but sometimes a different Committee assignment is made.

If the bill is passed through the second chamber without any amendments (changes), it then goes to the Governor. The Governor may sign the bill into law, may veto the bill or may let the bill become law without his/her signature. If the bill is vetoed, the House and Senate may override the veto by a majority vote in each chamber.

If the bill is amended in the second chamber and then passed, it must be referred back to the original chamber for “concurrence” with the amendment. If the change is approved, then it can go to the Governor for signature. If the first chamber does not concur, then the bill is discussed in a Conference Committee made up of House and Senate members. The committee will recommend a version of the bill which both the House and the Senate must then vote to adopt. If either fails to adopt the new version, the bill has “died” and will not become law this session!

TIPS FOR ADVOCATES ALONG THE WAY:

➤ Always refer to the bill by its number (e.g. “HB 268”); legislators will be looking at over 1,500 pieces of legislation in a 60-day session; perhaps 800 bills in a 30-day session! Referring generically to a bill (e.g., “the bill about disabilities”) is confusing and not helpful!

➤ Know where the bill is in the process and concentrate your efforts there. If a bill is introduced in the House, focus your calls, visits, communications first with the members of the Committee to which it is assigned and to House Leadership, and then to the entire House membership. Once the bill looks like it will pass the House, begin to focus on the Senate – first on Leadership and then on the Committee to which it is assigned and then to the entire Senate.

➤ Don’t forget to THANK legislators along the way! Begin with the Primary Sponsor and Co-Sponsors, then with the Committee Chair (who posted the bill) and those Committee members who voted for the bill, then to the chamber members who passed it on the floor.