

# Guide to Involvement in Legislation

By CAPT Ike Puzon, USNR (Ret), Director of Legislation

This article is meant to assist members with involvement in our legislative efforts and legislative goals. Members have indicated a need to understand better the legislative process. Understanding your involvement in the legislative process, as well as understanding the legislative process, is important.

To influence legislative change, we need to understand the process. Additionally, it is your American right to influence the process.

A detailed explanation of the legislative process can be found at [www.senate.gov](http://www.senate.gov) under "Legislative Process and Legislation & Records;" or [www.house.gov](http://www.house.gov), "Learning about the Legislative Process;" or <http://thomas.loc.gov/home/lawsmade.toc.html>. The following is a simplified version of the process that is adapted to our members of the Naval Reserve Association.

First, every two years, we elect a new Congress. Each Congress has two sessions. We are just finishing the first session of the 109<sup>th</sup> Congress of the United States. The second session of the 109<sup>th</sup> Congress will start when Congress returns in January 2006 after the holiday period. Each Congress also returns with unfinished business from the previous Congress, or previous session.

There are four types of legislation: bills, joint resolutions, concurrent resolutions, and simple resolutions. An issue becomes law (a bill or joint resolution) when:

- introduced by a member; any member can introduce legislation.
- considered and passed by subcommittee (some legislation never leaves subcommittee or committee).
- considered and passed by committee; (majority party has the advantage).
- introduced to each House of Congress and each House of Congress passes the legislation. The Houses of Congress then must conference on the bill to make a bill or legislation identical. Once the identical legislation is again passed in their respective Houses, the identical legislation is sent to the President for signature. Once signed by the President, the legislation is law.

Before and during each of these events and timeframes prior to signature by the President, we (you) have the opportunity to influence the legislative process (in the Legislative Branch and the Executive Branch) by providing individual input or our Association's input on legislation.

So the simplified influence periods are:

- ❖ Each Congress starts every two years; sessions begin in January of each year.
  - Through your participation in the election process – you (and organizations) can influence legislation.
  - Getting to know the state district office staffs is very important at this stage.
  - Knowing the legislative calendar will assist in organizing the legislative efforts. [www.house.gov](http://www.house.gov), and [www.senate.gov](http://www.senate.gov) (see schedule for each House).
- ❖ After the State of the Union address, Congress will receive the budget from the President.
  - Meetings with your members in the district offices, and meetings in Washington, can begin to shape legislation.
- ❖ Congress then works on the budget, appropriations and authorization bills for each Cabinet level position, as well as individual issues of importance to the member, the committee, or the chamber..
  - The big push for legislation starts after the President's budget is delivered. Meetings, letters, faxes, and calls to your Representatives and Senators is highly advised, but influence at the state level and district offices is as important.
  - Constant interaction with the state district offices and with the Washington, DC, staffs is a must.
  - One-time interaction does not accomplish your or the organizational goal; constant, planned input is necessary.
- ❖ As the legislative year progresses, members introduce legislation that is then routed to each of the Committees and Subcommittees for consideration.
  - Knowing the professional staff members (PSMs) of each subcommittee and committee or, at least, the way to get information (your opinion) to the PSMs is very important.
- ❖ Each committee, along with their subcommittees ([www.senate.gov](http://www.senate.gov), and [www.house.gov](http://www.house.gov)) has jurisdiction over legislation that is introduced, depending on the subject. Those committees most important to Defense and Veterans: HASC, HAC-D, SASC, SAC-D, HLS-Government Affairs (Senate), HLS (House), Veterans Affairs (both).
  - Knowing which Senator or Representative is on these committees and subcommittees can make the difference in our legislative goals. Knowing their staffs in the state and Washington, DC, is very, very important.
- ❖ Subcommittees and committees usually hold hearings in the January to March/April timeframe on key pending legislation. Committees hold hearings throughout the year for consideration, but this timeframe is very important for Defense and Veterans issues.
  - This is the time frame when you need to pay attention to the questions, testimony, and what is being shaped. Your interaction at this time can make a difference.

- ❖ In the April to May time frame of each year, each House of Congress tries to act on the Defense and Veterans Authorization and Appropriations bills in some way, in order to get to the conference on the bills some time during the summer (or early fall) time period. Conference between the houses is used to resolve the difference between the passed bills in each House. Remember, what the House passes is not law; and what the Senate passes is not law. What becomes law is;
  - Identical passed (or conferenced) bills that are then sent to the President to sign.
- ❖ Influence in this legislative process is something that is built over time. It has to be organized and focused; it just doesn't happen overnight:
  - Understanding and reading the bill and provisions is the first step.
  - Understanding the process is a must.
  - Finding wide support is very important, and a must.
  - Working with district offices and Washington offices is a must to understand and influence the provisions of any bill.
  - Understanding the staff and the professional staff members of the committees and subcommittees is a must.
  - To influence a bill, joint resolution, or any form of legislation you must understand the timing and the people who are working the issue.
  - Ability to deliver the membership (votes), and support (numbers of people), will get attention for the desired legislation provision.
- ❖ The Congressional members need your input and most likely want your input. The way to make that input is through contact with their staffs, contact with the committee or subcommittee professional staff members, and contact with the member in the district and in Washington, or through an organization or association.
- ❖ We must have agreed upon legislative goals prior to trying to influence the process. All politics are local; organized efforts count; so your involvement at the local level is really as important. Organized appeal and response will get attention.

Finally, do not forget that you and the organization can appeal to the Executive Branch on legislation; in fact, you should! DoD, DoN, and the White House work for you. If they do not hear from you, then they assume you agree with them. Bottom line: Involvement is your right and responsibility. If you get involved, you can shape the legislation. The links to study the legislative process more closely [http://www.senate.gov/pagelayout/legislative/d\\_three\\_sections\\_with\\_tasers/process.htm](http://www.senate.gov/pagelayout/legislative/d_three_sections_with_tasers/process.htm), or [http://www.house.gov/house/Tying\\_it\\_all\\_shtml](http://www.house.gov/house/Tying_it_all_shtml).