

TIPS FOR CONSTITUENTS, By Beth McAdam, former legislative assistant

The General Assembly is a fascinating place where just a single idea can lead to legislation that affects us all. However, the system can be overwhelming and confusing to advocates and visitors. As the staff person to a legislator, I can assure you that the process is more manageable than it seems. Here are some tips to navigating the General Assembly:

Develop a relationship, even if that means with staff. Since legislators have limited availability, discussing your concerns with staff is a great way to begin developing a relationship. The months when the General Assembly is not in session is a great time to try to meet with your legislator to share your concerns and develop a basic understanding of their stand on issues important to you. During session, when legislators often have limited schedules, staffers are available to meet.

Understand that Rome wasn't built in a day. Though you may be extremely passionate about your issue or a particular bill, legislators must consider other rationales and the impacts of the legislation on diverse constituencies. Legislators must also consider the current political climate and timing. Despite agreeing with you on an issue, they may be unable to draw enough support or opposition for a bill. This is not meant to discourage you from advocating but to point out that passing meaningful legislation is a strategic process.

Don't be intimidated. The General Assembly is always dressed to the nines but legislators are normal people too. In addition, their offices meet all kinds of people and have diverse experience with the public. Therefore, if you go to the wrong office or you stumble when discussing an issue, so what? Try to feel as comfortable as possible. This will help you represent your issue to the best of your ability. In addition, ask staff to help you if you are confused. Maybe you need assistance in tracking a bill or you are befuddled when it comes to the budget. Believe me, we are too sometimes, so try not to feel embarrassed or intimidated. We are here to help you!

When you and your legislator don't see eye to eye; Stay positive, calm, and cool. This is very difficult, I know! However, you are leaving a lasting impression if you lose your temper; they may only remember the verbal altercation and not the insightful questions and concerns you raised.

Get to know this site: <http://legis.virginia.gov>. The Virginia General Assembly website provides information regarding all of the legislators, bill search capabilities, and meeting notices. The tools I use regularly are the House Session Live Video Stream, Who's My Legislator, and Lobbyist-in-a box, which is essential for tracking bills before the General Assembly. This tool sends you email notifications regarding the bills you have flagged, and provides you with information regarding their status as they move through committees.

Staff is here to support you. If you have an issue with a state agency or a problem within your community, staff is available to investigate your concerns. We are not always able to solve the problem, but will always try our best.

Legislators really do care. Because Virginia is a part-time legislator, the members of the General Assembly also have full-time occupations, with the exception of those who are retired. Regardless, being a legislator is a huge responsibility. During session, a typical day may start at 7AM and may last until 10 or 11PM, depending on the committees they serve on or the bill(s) they may be presenting. In the months between sessions, legislators work full-time jobs and then have community events, school presentations, constituent meetings, political engagements, and training during the day, evening, and weekends. They take on this position because they really care about their communities and the policies that affect their residents. The members are true public servants.