

The Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women

Advocacy Guide 2025



THE MASSACHUSETTS COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN

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What's Your Issue?

What do you care about? What would make your community a better place? What changes do you want to see in the world? Active citizenship and civic engagement are both crucial to our political system and an effective way to improve our society. This guide will equip you with the basic skills necessary to advocate effectively. From building political relationships to testifying at a public hearing, we will demystify state government and arm you with the resources necessary to make your community a better place to live.

Why advocate?

- Your experience and voice matter! Advocacy is a chance for legislators to hear the personal stories of women whose lives have been affected by the issues addressed by legislation.
- Women represent 51% of the population but occupy fewer elected seats.
- Legislators are elected to represent the interest of their constituents and are eager to hear your thoughts.
- Democratic responsibility—citizenship confers certain responsibilities, including maintaining the United States' robust, representative system of government. If legislators do not know their constituents' thoughts, they cannot accurately represent them in the legislature and policy will become less effective and relevant.

How does one advocate effectively?

- Educate yourself on issues that you care about and that affect your community.
- Assess your resources and identify your goal (i.e. passing a specific law).
- Talk with your legislator and/or their aides.
- Submit written or oral testimony at a public hearing.
- Write a letter to your local newspaper.

What's Your Argument?

What's your message? If you had to give an elevator pitch educating people on your issue, what would you say? Use the Talking Points Worksheet included in this guide to help you get started.

Tips

- Find a current bill related to your issue on: <https://malegislature.gov/>
- Do your research! It is important to understand the bill you are interested in. Most bills are just a few pages long so try to read it completely.
 - * See if your legislator has cosponsored or supported this bill and/or similar bills in the past.
- Find key facts from a reputable source that support your argument.

TALKING POINTS EXAMPLE

Equal Pay Bill, S.2119

- This bill clarifies terminology in the existing law to effectively implement equal pay for comparable work.
- This bill permits employees to discuss their salaries with other employees without the threat of disciplinary action.
- This bill requires employers when advertising jobs to include the minimum the job pays and prohibits employers from paying wages less than what is advertised.
- In Massachusetts, women working full-time earn on average 11,000 dollars less than men each year, losses that are magnified over a life of earnings
- Equal pay for equal work is essential for women's and their families' economic security, when women are the sole or primary breadwinners in 40% of households with children under 18
- As a working mother, the gender pay gap hurts me and my family.

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Who are the Stakeholders?

Once you've settled on an issue, use the Power Mapping Worksheet included in this guide to determine who your potential allies and opponents are. This will help guide your advocacy effort.

Is your issue a state or federal issue? Who are the legislators who make decisions on your issue? What districts do they represent? If you are not a constituent of these legislators, do you know someone who is? Is he or she a stakeholder and/or could he or she help you in your efforts?

Building Political Relationships

Your elected officials can be powerful allies in advocacy work. It is important to build relationships *before* you need something. When the time comes, they'll be much more likely to act on your concerns.

A legislator and his or her staff should be responsive to constituents. Ideally, legislators should vote on legislation in accordance with their constituents' views. Constituents have the power to hold their legislator accountable by voting him or her out of office. As a citizen, you have the ability to influence the elected officials from your area, as well as their staff and/or campaign teams.

Identify who your elected officials are: <https://malegislature.gov/Search/FindMyLegislator> - to find your Senator and Representative. Stay focused on lobbying *your* representatives instead of trying to influence elected officials and staff who don't represent you. You will have the most influence over your own legislators.

Also, be aware of the differences between your legislators at the State House and your legislators in Congress. If you're focused on state-level issues and legislation, it would be more effective to build a relationship with a state legislator than a Congressional lawmaker.

Potential Targets

Legislators—*Legislators represent thousands of constituents—how can I make sure my voice is being heard?*

- As in all relationships, it is always best to be polite, reasonable, and respectful towards your legislator. Chances are you'll need your legislator's support more than once, and on more than one issue. Thus, it is in your best interest to maintain a positive, long-term relationship.

Staff—the “gatekeepers”

- Most of them get tons of calls and emails per day from (often angry) advocates. As such, staff can be harder to win over, but they can be a powerful ally in influencing your legislator. As with legislators, it is important to be polite and kind when interacting with staff.

Tips

- Make a list of the names and contact info for your elected officials and their aides that you know. Jot down any personal details that you learn about them that could help you strike up a conversation later.
- Go to events, like town hall meetings, office hours, and community events. Introduce yourself every single time.
- Write letters to the editors and social media posts in support of the legislator. Thank them for the work that they do.
- Attend an advocacy/lobbying day hosted by a local organization involved with your issue. For example, MCSW holds an annual Advocacy Day focused on women's issues.

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Coalition Building

Groups can be more powerful than a lone individual, so it might make sense to join an existing coalition or form your own. Coalitions unite stakeholders from across district lines, giving them influence over a greater number of legislators.

Joining an Existing Coalition

Research local coalition groups and stakeholders already engaged with your issue. Contact them to see what help they need. If a specific bill that you are interested in isn't already on their agenda, tell them why it should be of interest to them.

Building a Coalition from Scratch

- Use the Power Mapping Worksheet included to identify stakeholders, like non-profits, clubs, and community groups. Reach out to allies and beneficiaries to express that you would like to explore the possibility of building a coalition focused on your issue.
- Traits of successful coalitions:
 - A clear, agreed-upon mission statement that defines the coalition's purpose, the scope of the coalition's work, and a description of what the coalition aims to accomplish.
 - A group of strong, invested leaders.
 - A diverse group of stakeholders.
 - Effective communications and outreach.
- Identify what resources you have as a group—this could include existing political relationships, donors, and/or special skills or experience. Identify resources that you are missing and plan to address these gaps.
- Look at existing coalitions, either related to your issue or not. What do they do well? What do you want to emulate in your coalition? Where could they improve?

Coalition building takes time and is challenging so don't be discouraged if it doesn't completely come together on your first try!

The Legislative Process

How does state government work in Massachusetts?

The Massachusetts legislature, comprised of a Senate and a House of Representatives, is responsible for creating state laws. The legislature (or, more formally, the General Court) meets in two-year sessions, beginning on the first Wednesday in January of an odd-numbered year (e.g. 2017) and ending on the day before the beginning of the next session.

- Step 1. There Ought to be a Law!
 - * Citizens may propose a bill to a legislator and request his or her support in creating a bill. Legislators create initial bills and seek co-sponsoring legislators.
- Step 2. Petition is Filed
 - * Most legislation is submitted during the first month of the two-year session. Bills are given House or Senate numbers and assigned to a relevant joint committee.
- Step 3. A Hearing is Held and Testimony Heard
 - * Joint committees hold hearings and collect testimony from citizens who support and oppose the bill. This is called the bill's "first reading".
- Step 4. Committee Report Directs the Measure's Path
 - * A committee can give one of five recommendations: 1) ought to pass; 2) ought not to pass; 3) ought to pass as changed; 4) discharge to another committee; or 5) refer for further study. Most bills must be given a favorable report by a deadline (usually early in the second year of the session) in order to remain active. The bill moves through several committees, including Ways and Means. The bill number often changes once, if not several times, during this process.
- Step 5. Bill is Read on the House or Senate Floor
 - * Debate may take place. This is the bill's "second reading".

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- Step 6. Bill is Reviewed by the Committee on Bills in the Third Reading
 - * This allows the committee to make sure the language of the bill is correct and constitutional.
- Step 7. Bill is Read on the House or Senate Floor (Again)
 - * Debate may take place. This is the bill's "third reading".
- Step 8. Bill Passed to be Engrossed by One Legislative Branch
 - * A vote follows the reading—if the majority votes in favor of the bill, the bill is "engrossed", or passed by that body.
- Step 9. Second Legislative Branch Reads Bill
 - * The bill is read on the floor of the other legislative branch (for example, if the original bill is first passed by the House, the bill will then go to the Senate). Debate may occur. If amendments are approved for the original bill, a conference committee is formed to create a version of the bill that both branches will adopt.
- Step 10. Bill Passed to be Engrossed by Second Legislative Branch
 - * A vote follows the reading—if the majority votes in favor of the bill, the bill is "engrossed", or passed by that body. A vote to enact by both legislative branches results in passage of the bill, with the newly-created Act sent to the governor.
- Step 11. Bill Enacted and Sent to Governor
 - * The governor has four options: 1) sign the bill into law; 2) allow the unsigned bill to become law; 3) veto the legislation; or 4) send the bill back to the Legislature with recommended amendments. A veto by the governor can be overridden with a two-thirds vote in both legislative branches.
- Step 12. The Idea Becomes Law!

For more information, visit: <https://malegislature.gov/Engage/HowIdeaBecomesLaw>.

There are opportunities for advocacy at every step in the legislative process. For example, you can encourage your legislators to join the bill as a co-sponsor before it is filed. While the bill is in committee, you should focus lobbying efforts on committee members and/or supply testimony at the bill's hearing.

Contacting Your Legislator

Phone calls and in-person meetings are generally more effective because they better engage staffers and/or legislators.

Calling

- Before the call, consult your talking points. Familiarize yourself with information about the legislation, key facts, and why your legislator should vote yes/no on this bill. If you can, include a personal story about how this issue has affected your life.
- If your legislator has two offices, call their district/local office, as it is less likely to be busy or have a long hold.
- It is unlikely that you will be able to talk to the legislator himself or herself. You will usually talk to an aide or will be able to leave a message.
- Be ready to give your name, zip code, and address to verify that you're a constituent.
- Introduce yourself-- where you're from, etc.
- Use your talking points to have a conversation about the bill. Explain your argument but also be willing to listen to their concerns.

PHONE CALL EXAMPLE:

"Hi, my name is Jane, and I'm a constituent in Boston, ZIP code 02114. I'm calling to urge Representative Smith to support H.3680, An Act Establishing the MA Pregnant Workers Fairness Act. As a pregnant, working mom, this law would help protect my health, my baby's health, and my family's economic well-being. Can I count on Representative Smith's support?"

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E-mailing

E-mails and letters are usually grouped by topic, counted, and included in reports for the legislator to read. Mass mailings of form letters that address the topic generally are sent in response. This is why responses rarely respond directly to your concerns and often feel impersonal. If you do send an e-mail, make it personal. Staffers sometimes select a few e-mails for the legislator to read.

Tips

- o Social media, while helpful to develop rapport, is not as powerful because it's easy to ignore and impossible for legislators to tell if you live in their district.
- o Remember to use official titles in both letters and emails—a letter should be addressed formally (e.g., The Honorable Jane Doe, Senator). Emails should start: Dear Senator, Representative, Governor, Mayor, Councilwoman, etc.

Meeting With Your Legislator

Setting up a meeting

1. Call the member's office or email the staff to request a meeting. If the lawmaker is unavailable to meet with you, ask for a meeting with the legislative aide.
2. If you are going as a group, let the staff know how many people will be coming with you. There is strength in numbers!

Before the meeting

1. Research the bill and relevant facts.
2. Review your talking points — what is the bill? What are its key points? Why should this legislator support the bill? Include key facts and personal stories, if possible. How does this issue affect you or your community?
3. If you are meeting with a legislator as a group, choose a spokesperson.

At the meeting

1. Review all fact sheets to familiarize yourself with the legislation.
2. Arrive early — the layout of the State House is quite complex so you may need to ask for directions.
3. When you arrive at the office, state your name. Ask to speak with Senator _____ or Representative _____ or their legislative aide, if the legislator is not available. If nobody is available, ask if you can leave a copy of written testimony with the office.
4. Introduce yourself — where you're from, if you are representing an organization, etc.
5. Use your talking points to introduce the legislation. Use your talking points to have a conversation about the bill. Explain your argument but also be willing to listen to their questions and their responses.
6. Ask if they have any questions, and answer them honestly. If you cannot answer a question, that is OKAY.
7. Once you're finished with the meeting, thank them for their time.
8. Follow up a few days later with a thank you note. Remind the legislator what you talked about and why he or she should support the bill.

Written Testimony

What is testimony?

Testimony is a short piece of writing or an oral presentation from citizens about their views on a bill. Written testimony is accepted for inclusion in the record of a hearing.

Guidelines

- o Use a heading that includes the name and number of the bill, the committee, the date of the hearing, and your name.
- o State your opinion on the issue in a summary paragraph at the top of the testimony.
- o Explain what the legislation or policy would do and why you oppose or support it.
- o Use your talking points to shape your testimony.
- o Include a personal story— how have you been affected by this issue? Why do you or members of your community have a stake in this issue?
- o Keep your testimony succinct. Avoid long sentences and unnecessary words.

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- To conclude, ask the body to support your position: “Therefore, I urge the committee to support _____.”

How to Submit Written Testimony

Email your written testimony to the committee chairs. Each committee has a webpage which can be found at <https://malegislature.gov/Committees>. Click on the chairs’ names to find out more about them and their contact info. Be sure to submit your testimony before the public hearing is held, so the committee members can properly consider it.

WRITTEN TESTIMONY EXAMPLE:

H.1769 AN ACT ESTABLISHING THE MASSACHUSETTS PREGNANT WORKERS FAIRNESS ACT

Presented to Joint Committee on Labor and Workforce Development on July 21, 2015

Spokesperson: Victoria Budson

On behalf of the Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women, I strongly encourage the Joint Committee on Labor and Workforce Development to support H.1769, An Act Establishing the Massachusetts Pregnant Workers Fairness Act, sponsored by Representative Ellen Story and Senator Joan Lovely.

The Pregnant Workers Fairness legislation is well aligned with our mission, as it prevents employers from discriminating based on pregnancy, and requires employers to provide accommodations for conditions related to pregnancy or childbirth, including the need to express breast milk. This legislation enables pregnant workers to continue their work without compromising their health or their income. 15 states including Texas, Alaska, and New Jersey have already passed Pregnant Workers Fairness protections. We believe that this bill will benefit working women, their families, employers, and the public.

Women currently make up about 50% of the American workforce, with about 75% of working women expected to become pregnant at some point in their lives. When employers fail to provide reasonable accommodations for pregnant workers, they put these employees at a higher risk for premature births. The benefits of reasonable accommodations for pregnant workers extend beyond the employee, as employers would enjoy lower employee attrition rates and higher employee productivity. Furthermore, although Massachusetts acknowledges pregnancy-related disabilities as sex discrimination, the Commonwealth does not sufficiently protect pregnant workers.

Passage of this legislation will no longer require women to choose between the health of their babies and financial security. Reasonable accommodations, such as allowing a pregnant worker to carry a bottle of water or sit at a cash register, would not increase company costs or regulations. For this reason, the Commission strongly encourages you to support the Massachusetts Pregnant Workers Fairness Act. We welcome the opportunity to serve as an ongoing resource on this issue. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Public Hearings

What is a hearing?

A hearing occurs early in the legislative process to allow the public to officially participate in government decisions. Hearings are held in order to gather facts and hear arguments through testimony and help legislators make decisions in the public interest. Anyone can present testimony at a public hearing. A well-attended hearing that demonstrates broad public engagement and concern for a controversial matter will not only send a strong message, but also attract media coverage. Typically, several bills will be discussed during each hearing.

When are hearings?

Public hearings at the State House are held for bills once they have been assigned to a committee. The date and locations of these are posted on the bill’s page at <https://malegislature.gov>.

Guidelines for presenting testimony

- Sign up early. You want to speak as early as possible while the committee is fresh. The sign-up sheet is located outside the hearing room one or two hours before the hearing begins.

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- Submit written testimony. You should give committee staff your written testimony, with enough copies for all committee members, before the hearing so that they can distribute it to the committee. Your written testimony can cover the points that you did not have time to make in your presentation.
- Introduce yourself. Make it clear whether you are representing yourself or an organization.
- Be brief. Use your talking points to create a three minute presentation. Choose only your key points and avoid repeating what others before you have said. Try to include personal experiences as much as possible.
- Don't read, but use notes for guidance; a relaxed conversational style is more effective.
- Dress for success. Business attire is appropriate to demonstrate respect for the committee.
- Bring supporters. It can be very effective to bring a large group of people to a hearing as a show of support.
- Wait briefly after you finish for questions from committee members. If you do not know the answer, offer to get them an answer later.

Writing to Your Local Newspaper

The op-ed section of your local newspaper can help you spread your message to your community, as well as elected officials.

Tips

- Open with a strong statement—try using a striking fact or personal story.
- Keep your letter succinct and focused on the issue. If possible, refer to a relevant, recent article.
- Specifically mention the piece of legislation that you are focused on.
- Mention the name of your legislator—often they get a report about articles they are specifically mentioned in.
- Include your name, address, and phone number. Newspapers often contact letter writers to ensure they are credible sources.
- Include any professional or volunteer positions if they are appropriate.
- Adhere to the word count and follow newspaper guidelines.

OP-ED EXAMPLE:

To the Editor:

As a working mom, I know firsthand the challenges posed by fluctuating work schedules. Often, I have been notified about a change in my schedule only a few hours before I was expected at work. I had to scramble to make child care and transportation arrangements and when I arrived at work, I was tired and stressed. Last Sunday's editorial, "Fluctuating Schedules Hurt Retail Workers" certainly rang true to my experiences.

83% of hourly part-time employees have fluctuating schedules and 40-60% of full-time low wage workers are expected to work additional hours with little to no notice. Women are disproportionately affected by unfair scheduling, as two-thirds of low-wage workers are women. If families know their working schedules in advance they can more easily arrange their life around it, in terms of childcare, caregiving responsibilities, a second or third job, pursuing education, and organizing family transportation to and from school and work.

I urge citizens of Anytown and Representative Smith to support H.3144, An Act Establishing Just Schedules for Employees. This bill would establish employee rights to additional payment if they are not given sufficient advance notice of any changes to their work schedule. The bill specifies that if employers make changes to an employee's schedule within 10 days of a scheduled shift, they are required to pay between one and four additional hours of predictability pay, in addition to wages earned for hours worked. This bill will protect employees of the retail, fast food, and hotel industries of the Commonwealth, as well as low income families.

Sincerely,
Jane Doe
Commissioner, Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women

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Additional Resources

<https://nwlc.org/beyond-clicks-calls-a-toolkit-for-in-person-resistance/>

https://lwwma.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Citizen-Lobbyist-LWVMA.FINAL_.pdf

<http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/assessment/promotion-strategies/start-a-coalition/main>

Questions? Contact us at: mcsw@mass.gov.

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APPENDIX: Talking Points Worksheet

Bill Number and Name:

What are the key provisions of this bill?

What does this bill aim to accomplish?

What are some important facts about the issue this bill will address?

Why should legislators care about this issue?

Why do I care about this issue? How would this bill impact me/my loved ones/members of my community?

Why might someone oppose this bill? How can you counter their argument?

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APPENDIX: Power Mapping Worksheet

Allies — who supports your efforts? What are their strengths/resources?

Beneficiaries — who would benefit from your efforts? How would they benefit? How can you engage with them as stakeholders or allies?

Opponents — who opposes your efforts and why? What are their arguments? What could you do to address their concerns?

Decision Makers —who makes the decisions regarding your issue (legislators, government agencies, etc.)?

What decision makers do you potentially have influence over as a “boss”? What have their views on your issue been in the past? Do they seem open to changing their position? Do they serve on any relevant committees or in any relevant positions?

If your identified decision makers oppose your efforts, what are their concerns? What could you do to address their concerns?

Choosing Primary Targets

Who are the key beneficiaries, opponents, or decision-makers? Who are the beneficiaries, opponents, or decision-makers who might be open to changing their opinions?

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	Target 1	Target 2	Target 3
Current opinion on your issue			
Reasons for opposition/neutrality			
What is your current relationship with them? How much influence do you have over them?			
What influence do they have over any decision-making related to your issue?			
What next steps could you take with them? (ex. Setting up a meeting with them, sending them more information, etc.)			