

Vermont Legislature: How to Connect with Legislators

Overview of the Vermont Legislature:

The Vermont legislature operates on a biennium, referring to a two-year term with which bills are presented and have the opportunity to move through the legislative process into enactment. While there is no time limit to how long each of the two sessions in a biennium will go, a session will begin each year in January and typically go through May or June.

The Vermont House and Senate consist of 150 House members and 30 Senators representing each district across the state. Districts for the [House](#) and [Senate](#) can be found online. Each year they meet to write and pass legislation that impacts the lives of Vermonters across the state. This work is primarily done through legislative committees, which consider bills put forward by representatives and recommend further action to be taken by the House and Senate. A deeper dive into the full process of how bills get passed out of committee [can be found here](#).

For the purposes of prevention work, the primary committees to look out for are as follows:

House Committees

- Health Care
- Human Services
- Judiciary
- Corrections & Institutions

Senate Committees

- Health and Welfare
- Institutions
- Judiciary

These committees meet regularly each week Tuesday-Friday while the Legislature is in session to discuss bills that have been referred to them from the House or Senate floor, and hear testimony from community members and organizations that are impacted by the bill's content. These public discussions offer an opportunity for community members to listen in on the direction the committee is headed with a given piece of legislation.

Bills are proposed legislation that is provided by lawmakers to the larger legislative body. When a bill passes, they become state law, known as statute (also known as an "act").

As a note, the House is typically granted more time to review bills as they are allotted full working days for committee discussions, whereas the Senate is only granted 3 hours per day.

Because of this, you will often see duplicate “companion” bills presented to each chamber, to give more time for each side to ask needed questions and hear from stakeholders.

How to access committee meetings remotely

Each committee’s online page [can be accessed here](#). Clicking on the link brings you to a summary page:

- On the left hand side is a list of committee chairs and members. Clicking on their name will bring you to a page with their contact information and bio.
- Selecting the “agenda” link at the top of the page will produce a list of all scheduled testimony for the week.
- Clicking on the “livestream” link will bring you to the committee youtube page where you can access all public testimony remotely.
- Selecting the folders with weekdays listed at the bottom of the page will bring you to a folder of materials specific to testimony conversations. Often stakeholders who could not testify in-person will provide input in writing on these pages.

The Budget

Every year the Governor’s office (often referred to as the “5th floor”) proposes a budget for the State for the next fiscal year. It is put together by the Department of Finance and Management and referred to Appropriation Committees of the House and Senate. Only the Legislature is authorized to appropriate funds, and typically changes are made to the proposed Governor budget. These changes take the form of a bill throughout each session, known as the “Big Bill”. If the two chambers have disagreements on funding priorities included in the Big Bill, a Budget Conference Committee is convened to resolve differences. If a budget is passed and does not receive support from the Governor, the legislature can override the veto with a supermajority vote; if this is unsuccessful, the legislative approval process starts over. This often can push back the end-date for the legislature as this process picks back up in June following a Governor veto. If an agreement cannot be met, all essential programs are funded with prior year allocations.

Sometimes throughout the year, the legislature may decide the current budget needs adjustments. These changes are made through a Budget Adjustment Act, which follows similar procedures to the regular budget process.

Engaging with the Legislative Process

Although testimony is typically offered only to representatives of organizations, associations, and state agencies, the public has many opportunities to impact the legislative process. Building relationships with legislators, and reaching out to testify are two mechanisms community members can take advantage of. Importantly, the legislature is composed of community members. Most are not content experts, and are swayed by the same arguments you would use to talk to your friends and neighbors. Below are some quick considerations to enhance your conversations with our elected officials.

Building Relationships with Legislators

1. Contact your legislators and let them know the issues that you care about
2. Request a quick 15 minute meeting
3. Provide short communication in writing over email
4. Take a solutions-based approach
5. Try to understand their views or the views of people who may oppose you
6. Share your story as the focal point (your values, your lived experience etc.)
7. Provide input to sympathetic lawmakers at critical moments

Tips for testimony:

1. Introduce yourself to the Committee Assistant & Committee Chairs
2. Provide outreach via email sharing:
 - a. Your personal story
 - b. One piece of relevant data highlighting the issue
 - i. Common data sources:
 1. [VDH SUD Dashboard](#)
 2. [VDH Report Page](#)
 3. [DSU Annual Report](#)
 4. [BRFSS](#)
 5. [YRBS](#)
 6. [Social Autopsy Report](#)
 - c. One solution to the problem
3. Review legislative process & current status of bill prior to testifying
4. Practice accessing zoom prior to sharing testimony
5. Provide verbal testimony sharing same information in step #2