



# AIR FORCE ASSOCIATION

## CONTACTING CONGRESS

### CONTACTING CONGRESS TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Tips on Contacting a Member .....</b>	<b>2</b>
Addressing Correspondence	
The Content of Your Letter	
Correspondence Post-9/11	
Sending E-Mail	
Placing a Phone Call	
Scheduling a Personal Visit	
Arranging for a Member of Congress to Visit your Group	
A Multi-Tiered Approach	
Other Ways to be Heard by Congress	
<b>What to Expect When Contacting a Congressional Office.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>The Importance of Issue Awareness.....</b>	<b>7</b>
AFA CapWiz Program	
“Thomas” Legislative Research	
<b>The Role of Congressional Staff .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Congress, the Budget, and the Legislative Process.....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>AFA Government Relations Staff .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Useful Resources .....</b>	<b>12</b>

*\*Portions of this handbook have been reprinted with the permission of Capitol Advantage.*



## TIPS ON CONTACTING A MEMBER

### Addressing Correspondence:

*To a Senator:* The Honorable (full name)  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator (last name):

*To a Representative:* The Honorable (full name)  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative (last name):

*\*When writing to the Chair of a Committee or the Speaker of the House, it is proper to address them as: Dear Mr. Chairman or Madam Chairwoman, and Dear Mr. Speaker\**

### The Content of Your Letter:

- Your purpose for writing should be stated in the letter's first paragraph. Make sure to refer to specific pieces of legislation through formal bill numbers, i.e. H.R. \_\_\_\_ or S.R. \_\_\_\_.
- Address only one issue in each letter, working to keep the document to one page if possible.

### Correspondence Post- 9/11:

- As a result of increased security measures in the Senate and House of Representative's mail system, there is an approximate six-week delay in mail delivery. E-mail, phone calls, and faxes are the most efficient means to contact Congress. Staff are aware of these delays and will not discount the importance of your issue if you utilize these other contact mediums instead of sending a formal letter via the postal service.

### Sending E-mail:

- Follow the same suggestions outlined for a printed letter when generating an e-mail for a Member of Congress. Enter the bill number or topic that is the focal point of your message in the subject line of the e-mail. The body of your message should use this format:

Your Name  
Address  
City ST Zip

Dear (title) (last name):



### **Placing a Phone Call:**

- As with any type of communication with Congress, it is important to disclose your opinion in a concise and informed manner. The Staff Assistant or Intern who answers the phone in the office is trained to take your call and relay the message to the appropriate staff member (please see *The Role of Congressional Staff* for more detail). If you would like to have a more in-depth conversation, you may ask to speak directly with the Legislative Assistant or Legislative Correspondent who handles your respective issue.
- Legislative staff are often just as busy as Members of Congress, so you may have to leave a message and have the staff member get back to you. Leaving a message also affords the staff member an opportunity to research the issue before responding to your concern. If you do not hear back within a week, call the staffer again and remind him or her of your previous call.
- When calling about a popular issue most Staff Assistants will record whether you support or disapprove a particular bill/ issue and request your contact information. These numbers are tallied and analyzed by the legislative staff and the Member of Congress on a routine basis.
- If the issue you are calling about is not at the forefront, or if the office is unfamiliar with the issue, you may need to give the staff adequate time to prepare a response.

### **Scheduling a Personal Visit:**

- *Plan Your Visit Carefully:* Be clear about what it is you want to achieve; determine in advance what Member of Congress, personal staff, or committee staff can best help you achieve your goals.
- *Make an Appointment:* When scheduling an appointment with a Member of Congress, it is best to speak with the Member's scheduler or executive assistant. However, be aware that Members have incredibly busy schedules and may not be available to meet with you directly. A senator or representative will often defer his or her Legislative Assistant who handles your issue. These Legislative Assistants generally schedule their own appointments and are the prime advisors to the Member regarding legislation that falls within their area of expertise.
- *Be Prompt and Patient:* It is not uncommon for a Member of Congress to be late, or to have a meeting interrupted due to a crowded schedule. If the later occurs, be flexible and continue the meeting with staff present at the meeting.



- *Be Prepared:* Prepare succinct and well-organized briefing material to share with the Member and his or her staff. If possible, prepare a one or two page briefing memo summarizing your points that you can leave with the staff (See *The Importance of Issue Awareness* for more details).
- *Be Political:* Senators and Representatives want to represent what is in the best interest of their state or district, so demonstrate how your position benefits a broad base of your Member's constituency. Make sure to emphasize any grassroots advocacy programs and additional resources that you may have at your disposal that could develop support for your initiative.
- *Be Responsive:* Be prepared to answer questions and provide additional information. Follow-up the meeting with a thank-you letter outlining the different points addressed in the session, making sure to include any requested materials.

#### **Arranging for a Member of Congress to Visit Your Group**

- Extend a letter of invitation if your group would like to honor a Member of Congress or invite a senator or representative to an event. Follow the format for standard correspondence, providing as much detail as possible. Include the purpose of the event, any other notable invited guests, and the date, time, and location of the occasion.
- If the Senator or Representative is not able to attend, he or she will often send the appropriate staff member on his or her behalf. Though Members have very busy schedules, it never hurts to ask. Personal contact with a Congressional office is highly beneficial towards establishing a successful working relationship.

#### **A Multi-Tiered Approach**

- There are three favored methods for contacting Congress: the AFA CapWiz email program, a phone call, and personal interaction. The most effective outcome generally results from the use of all three. Remember that you are competing against many other groups and that persistence is fundamental in achieving your objectives. Demonstrating that your issues impact real people goes a long way in advancing your concerns within a Congressional office.
- Consider a visit to your Members' state or district offices if you are unable to travel to Washington DC. You can find the contact information for these offices either from the Members' websites or the AFA Government Relations Staff. The staffing assignments in the district offices tend to focus more on constituent casework, but there should still be someone with enough issue expertise to address your concerns.



- Make sure and let AFA know if you are having particular success with a certain Member of Congress or staffer. Teamwork is a fundamental element in helping achieve our objectives.

#### **Other Ways to be heard by Congress**

- Include your Members of Congress and their appropriate Legislative Assistants on your mailing list if you publish a newsletter or magazine.
- Writing a letter to the editor of your local paper also helps to inform your elected officials about your concerns. Most senators and representatives read daily news clippings from district newspapers, especially if his or her name is mentioned in the selection.
- Attend local events in which your representative or senator participates. Though you may not have the opportunity to speak directly with the Member, you can establish a connection by noting that you saw him/her speak on a certain issue at one of these events. It is also beneficial to introduce yourself to the staff members that usually accompany the Senator or representative at the event. The district offices will be able to provide a listing of these local appearances.



## What to Expect When Contacting a Congressional Office

- Your initial contact with the office will be through a Staff Assistant or Intern. These people may be able to answer some basic questions for you and refer you to the appropriate staff member. If you are simply calling to request that the Member either support or oppose legislation, it is likely that the Staff Assistant or Intern will record your position and ask you for your contact information.
- Identify yourself as a constituent, a member of AFA, and explain your military experience. The key here is to give yourself credibility on the topic that you would like to discuss. Members also like to know how the issue is connected to their constituents, committee assignments, and fellow colleagues.
- Senators and Representatives receive a high volume of calls and correspondence. Accordingly, staff members will generally only handle issues and requests if you are a citizen from their state or district.
- It is unlikely that you will actually speak with your Member of Congress when you call, but this should not imply he or she does not value your opinion. You will probably talk with a Legislative Assistant who will generally be well versed in your issue of concern, but might rely on you to provide specific details. Legislative research programs such as *Thomas* and *CapWiz* are great resources to use in preparation for these discussions. Legislative Assistants undertake most of the policy work in an office and advise the Member on what issues to support. Sharing your concerns with a Legislative Assistant will help him or her better understand and respond to the needs of the constituents.
- Condense your concerns onto a one-page “fact sheet” that you can share with the Legislative Assistant. Feel free to contact AFA National Staff, particularly the Government Relations office, for help in compiling background information to share with a Congressional office.
- Members and staff have extremely busy schedules and are inundated with requests, so it is important to remain vigilant. If you did speak with a Legislative Assistant, it is reasonable to expect a response back within a week if the topic is not pressing and a day or two if the topic is very important. If you have not heard back from the office in this amount of time, or have received a less than favorable response, contact them again and remind them of your initial call, letter, or email.



## The Importance of Issue Awareness

Members of Congress and their staff deal with hundreds of issues and meet with numerous constituent groups during each session of Congress. It is to your advantage to be well versed in the issues that are important to you so that you can maximize the positive impact you make in the office.

### **AFA CapWiz Program**

- The AFA Website now features a legislative update section powered by *CapWiz* (<http://capwiz.com/afa/home/>). This includes information on elected officials, current legislation and AFA's respective position on these issues, election and candidate information, and a means for you to contact your elected representative. The *CapWiz* program is an excellent resource that we encourage you to explore and utilize as much as possible.

### **“Thomas” Legislative Research**

- The Library of Congress' legislative research engine, *Thomas* (<http://thomas.loc.gov>), consists of several searchable databases, including bill text, committee reports, the *Congressional Record*, and roll call votes. With archives dating back to the 104th Congress, the site is a useful resource for background research as well as an excellent source for the current events in today's session of Congress



## The Role of Congressional Staff

*Each Congressional office is structured differently. This is a list of commonly used titles and general responsibilities.*

*Chief of Staff (CoS):* Reports directly to the Member of Congress. Usually has overall responsibility for evaluating the political outcomes of various legislative proposals and constituent requests. Usually in charge of overall office operations, including the assignment of work and the supervision of key staff.

*Legislative Director (LD):* Monitors the legislative schedule, supervises and coordinates Legislative Assistants, develops legislative strategy, and is the chief policy advisor to the Member.

*Legislative Assistant (LA):* The prime issue experts in a Congressional office. The title's inclusion of "assistant" is misleading since these positions, particularly in a Senate office, are quite senior. While supervised and coordinated by the LD, LAs interface directly with the Member and are one of the most trusted sources when it comes to advising the senator or representative on policy strategy, voting issues, etc. The number of LAs and issue coverage will vary from office-to-office. The topic areas are generally determined by the member's constituent base and committee assignments. Legislative Assistants may be responsible for just one issue and all its sub-groupings, i.e. Defense (see MLA), or a host of issues centered on a common characteristic, i.e. social issues to include welfare, education, etc.

*Military Legislative Assistant (MLA):* The Legislative Assistant that handles military and defense issues for the Member of Congress. Foreign Affairs also tend to be handled by this individual.

*Legislative Correspondent (LC):* Responsible for responding to constituent correspondence. These individuals have a variety of issues to cover, which are normally broken down in a similar fashion to those held by the LAs in the office. LCs will often coordinate their efforts with an LA to provide an encompassing and in-depth response to your letter or e-mail.



# Congress, the Budget, and the Legislative Process

## **The President's Budget**

Each year the president submits his Executive Budget to Congress on the first Monday in January. This budget is usually broken down into 13 general areas that reflect the 13 appropriation bills. Three of these areas are of significant interest to AFA: Defense, Military Construction, and Veterans Affairs. As the budget works its way through Congress, it passes through three basic phases.

## **The Congressional Budget Resolution**

The first phase is passage of the budget resolution, which sets top line figures for major government spending like defense activities. The House and Senate Budget Committees (HBC & SBC) approve the top line figures for the coming fiscal year and develop a 5 and 10 year budget outlook. Figures for the coming year are binding, and can only be altered by a two-thirds vote of both chambers. Funding in the 5 and 10 year plans are merely guidelines, and are superseded in the budget process of each successive fiscal year. The Budget Committees may also outline specific spending priorities and note these in the budget. Once the budget is written, it serves as a framework for the authorization and appropriation committees in their work in the second and third phases. The budget is a highly political process that outlines the priorities of the President and Congress for the coming year.

There are two distinct types of government spending: mandatory and discretionary. Mandatory spending is money that by law must be spent in specific amounts. For example, Social Security and Medicare are entitlements that must be paid each year, and their cost is based not on political priorities, but the number of people enrolled and the benefits to which they are entitled. Discretionary spending is money that the government is not legally obligated to

spend, or to expend in specific amounts. Defense spending is discretionary; meaning that the amount spent year-to-year is up for discussion and dependent on the priorities of the President and the Congress in a given year. Mandatory spending makes up nearly 60% of all federal spending, leaving only a third of the federal budget to be divided up among the various operating agencies; this is why the budget process is exceptionally important. The federal budget includes both of these types of money; however, the remainder of this article and the process pertains exclusively to discretionary spending.

## **Authorization**

The second phase involves passage of an authorization bill, which authorizes specific expenditures on programs. In the Senate, the Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC) has jurisdiction over defense spending, programs, and oversight. In the House the relevant committee is the House Armed Services Committee (HASC). Each year these committees hold hearings, hear testimony, and conduct research to write at least one bill, the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). Then the committee will "mark up" or amend that bill to ensure passage on the chamber floor, and give each committee member a chance to propose his or her ideas.

The Department of Veterans Affairs bill goes to the House and Senate Veteran's Affairs Committees for authorizing hearings, research, and markup. Authorizations may also contain non-budgetary legislative provisions, for example, procurement reform or reporting requirements.



## **Appropriations**

Passage of the defense appropriations bill - the final phase - provides the money that the authorization bill spends. The House and Senate Appropriations Committees (HAC-D & SAC-D) and their defense subcommittees are responsible for the defense appropriations bill. These bills do not usually contain non-appropriatory provisions, but it is possible. Military construction projects and funds are contained in a second bill, the Military Construction Appropriations bill; and the VA-HUD Appropriations bill funds the Department of Veterans' Affairs.

The three-part process described herein is quite idealized. Frequently, the phases are completed out of order, late, or in the midst of great controversy. The HAC and SAC sometimes fund programs at less than the levels authorized, or in some cases appropriate more money than is authorized to be spent. The appropriation or budget committees may also include legislative provisions in their bills, an act that the HASC or SASC view as an invasion on their "turf."

Legislation can be influenced and amended at any time during the process; and actions approved by one chamber can be disagreed to or directly contradicted by the other - thus forcing a conference committee hearing.

## **Conference Committee**

Once each chamber has passed their version of a bill, assuming there is even the slightest difference between the bills, each chamber will appoint members to represent it in a Conference Committee. The purpose of this committee is to

iron out the differences and eventually present a unified bill to the president for his approval. The conference is an extremely important part of the process as important issues can be added or removed from the bill, and at the end of the conference each chamber must vote up or down and may not offer further amendments.

## **The President**

After each chamber has passed identical legislation, the bill is presented to the President in accordance with Article 1 Section 7 of the Constitution. The Constitution does not require that the President sign a bill for it to become enacted; however, it is traditional for the President to sign a bill with which he agrees. A bill may also become law without the President's signature if he does not return the bill with objections within ten days.

Alternatively, the President may object to a bill by vetoing it, and returning it to the Congress. In this situation, each chamber of Congress may attempt to override the President's veto with a 2/3's vote; or the bill may be altered to meet the President's approval.

A final option known as the "pocket veto" allows the President to object to legislation without formally vetoing the measure. This situation is created when Congress prevents a formal veto by adjourning within the 10 day time frame for Presidential approval, and thus being unable to receive the President's veto message or to act upon it.

A bill becomes law on the date of approval or passage over the President's veto, unless it expressly provides a different effective date.



## **AFA GOVERNMENT RELATIONS STAFF**

**Doug Birkey, Director**

(703) 247-5804

dbirkey@afa.org

**Matt Bearzotti, Legislative Assistant**

(703) 247-5800 x4842

mbearzotti@afa.org

**Kristine Robbins, Legislative Assistant**

(703) 247-5800 x4844

krobbins@afa.org

**Air Force Association**

Attn: GRL

1501 Lee Highway

Arlington, VA 22209

Fax: (703) 247-5853

Toll Free: (800) 727-3337

grl@afa.org



## **Useful Resources**

**Air Force Association Website**

<http://www.afa.org>

**CapWiz Congressional Contact Program**

<http://capwiz.com/afa/home/>

**Thomas Legislative Research Engine**

<http://thomas.loc.gov>

**FirstGov- U.S. Government Information Clearinghouse/ Search Engine**

<http://www.firstgov.gov>

**Department of Defense Website**

<http://www.defenselink.mil>

**USAF Website**

<http://www.af.mil>

**U.S. House Switchboard (will connect you with your Representative)**

(202) 225-3121

**U.S. Senate Switchboard (will connect you with your Senator)**

(202) 224-3121

**U.S. House of Representatives Website**

<http://www.house.gov>

**U.S. Senate Website**

<http://www.senate.gov>

