

The Laymen's Guide to the Legislative Process

Getting a Bill Passed

By Susan Levin

I was successful in getting SJR32, a bill making every November Lung Cancer Awareness Month in the State of New Jersey (from November, 2004 until forever). Your state can do it too –use the following as a guide.

- A. Contact your State Legislature's Public Information Office to get specific information (usually there is a pamphlet) on the legislative process – there may be state by state variations on how to get a bill passed.
- B. Contact your local State Senator – I suggest starting with the Upper House first unless you have a personal relationship with someone in the Assembly; that this persons is a member of the majority party would be helpful; make an appointment with the elected official not just the legislative aide. Present the case for sponsoring the bill – the fact that other states are doing it is certainly an argument to be used. Offer suggestions on the wording of the bill and the proclamation that is to be issued by the Governor. Try to get a written commitment that there will be appropriate programming to create awareness of the disease. **NO IS NOT AN ACCEPTABLE AN ANSWER!** Get a commitment. **Success #1 – the bill will be sponsored**
- C. The Secretary of the Senate (or clerk of the Assembly) assigns it a number.
- D. The bill is formally introduced by the Secretary of the Senate (or the clerk of Assembly) and then referred to Committee (usually to the Health Committee.) Find out who is chairperson of the committee and who are the other members – the chairperson, however is the key – the person who decides the agenda – when the bill will be discussed and voted on.
- E. Keep in contact with the sponsor's office. The official has many items on the agenda, you have one, so stay focused. Ask if you could work with the sponsor to move the bill along. Assuming the answer is yes, feel free to contact the chairperson of the committee – make an appointment unless by some miracle, the bill is expeditiously put on the calendar, you have to make it happen.
- F. The bill has been voted out of committee. Now it must be put on the calendar for a vote by the entire house - In the Senate, it is the Senate President who has control of the agenda for voting sessions – call, email, personal visit if possible. Enlist the help of the Majority Leader, if necessary. The crucial step is getting the legislation on the calendar for a vote. Once it does get on the calendar, the vote is routine – no one is going to vote against it.
Success #2

G. The bill now goes to the other house – if you started with the Senate, in most states it would then go to the Assembly, where it will be assigned to committee- probably, the Assembly Health Committee – which committee the bill is referred to can be checked either on the legislative website or by phone in most states.

H. Follow the same procedure for the Assembly as you did for the Senate.

Success #3

I. The bill has been passed by both houses; it must then be signed by the Governor; that effort may also require some lobbying – phone calls, emails, etc. A governor is required to act on legislation within a prescribed time frame however it is not always our time frame.

J. The proclamation is issued. Try to get the Governor’s press office to issue a press release – maybe even a signing ceremony given the fact that for so many states this may be the first effort on behalf of the #1 cancer killer of men and women.

K. Get the word out yourself – contact the media; contact everyone you know with the information

Feel proud about a job well done! What I’ve written is a guideline – a general template – I hope it will be helpful – If anyone has additional questions, please feel free to contact me – I will try to address specific state questions as best I can. The symbolic value of this effort can be tremendous – it’s up to you – the time has come for lung cancer awareness to be on the front burner where unfortunately the numbers have earned it a place.

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