

THE LEGISLATOR AS REPRESENTATIVE

Factors Affecting How a House Member Serves in Public Office

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Overview

The legislator has a number of roles – as representative, as lawmaker, and as controller of the purse strings. Though the member serves as representative in all of these roles, the member has a direct role as representative in serving the district. This section covers matters of interest to the individual legislator.

Concerns of the Individual Representative

As an individual representative, the House member has a number of concerns. Areas of particular importance, all of which are explained more fully in the following pages, are:

Constituent Services

The member may serve district constituents in a variety of ways, including: assisting in obtaining aid from public agencies; providing information about state programs, current law, and pending legislation; seeking ideas and opinions and expressing his or her own; providing assistance at the State Capitol; and securing assistance, projects, and programs for the district.

Laws Concerning Legislators' Conduct and Conflict of Interest (ethics and financial disclosure, campaign finance, lobbyists, elections, and other prohibited conduct)

The Code of Governmental Ethics permits the member to receive only certain things having economic value from certain persons and specifically prohibits certain actions and activities. It also requires legislators to disclose income from certain sources and certain information relative to filing tax returns. The campaign finance laws require reports of election contributions and expenditures, limit the amounts of contributions, and also prohibit certain practices. The legislature has enacted laws regulating legislative lobbying. These laws require registration and disclosure of expenditures by lobbyists and regulate campaign contributions by lobbyists and lobbyist principals during legislative sessions. Other laws prohibit certain practices in elections. Additionally, a number of provisions of the Criminal Code affect public officeholders.

**Resources Available
to
Assist the
Member**

Emoluments

Allowances are available for district office expenses and furnishings, payment of the salary of a legislative assistant, and the member's monthly expenses.

Information Resources

Many resources to assist the member are available from House staff, both information in written form and other types of assistance. Many other state government sources of information and assistance are available to the member and his or her constituents.

See **Information Resources** beginning on page G-1.

**Authority to Attend
Any State Board,
Commission,
Agency, or
Committee Meeting**

State law authorizes members of the legislature to attend any meeting of any state board, commission, agency, or committee. Such attendance is permitted at both public meetings and those held in private or executive session.

See R.S. 24:8.

SERVICES TO CONSTITUENTS

Some Ways a Representative May Assist Constituents

Interaction with constituents is a basic activity of any legislator. The following is an overview of some of the types of services that a legislator can provide to his or her constituents.

District Office

Maintaining a district office with a capable and responsive legislative assistant is very important. The district office is the hub of constituent linkage and is the nucleus around which all services and contacts revolve.

Caseworker

As a "caseworker", the legislator and his or her staff can aid in solving both governmental and personal problems. A constituent or local agency may need specific help or information to resolve a wide range of difficulties, such as those related to hurricane recovery, social services, Medicaid, workers' compensation, public retirement systems, transportation, public safety, or corrections. The legislator is often an arbiter and an enabler, intervening with a state agency on a constituent's behalf. Veterans, or their dependents or survivors, may need assistance in dealing with state and federal veterans' offices. Many times constituents only need to locate the correct person to assist them with a governmental problem, and other times they just want someone to hear their story. When a problem is satisfactorily resolved, this "casework" can be very rewarding.

Student Financial Assistance

Information concerning student financial aid for postsecondary education is frequently the subject of inquiry from constituents. The Louisiana Office of Student Financial Assistance (LOSFA) acts as the state guarantor under the Federal Family Education Loan Program and administers most state-funded grant and scholarship programs, including the Taylor Opportunity Program for Students (TOPS), a merit-based aid program, and the Louisiana Go Grant Program, a need-based aid program. LOSFA also administers the Student Tuition Assistance and Revenue Trust (START) Saving Program, a qualified state tuition program, which is designed to give parents a tax-advantaged method of saving for their children's postsecondary education and includes a matching state grant for amounts saved. Information concerning the programs administered by LOSFA and other sources of postsecondary education financing can be found on LOSFA's website <http://www.osfa.la.gov/index.jsp>

or by calling 1-800-259-5626. The financial aid office of any postsecondary institution is also a good source of information concerning student financial assistance.

Legislators also have the ability under state law to award a tuition-free scholarship at Tulane University, subject to specific guidelines. An overview of the program is available on Tulane's website <https://tulane.edu/financialaid/grants/legis.cfm> or by calling (504) 988-3390.

For more information, contact the staff of the Education Committee at (225) 342-2408.

**Information about
Legislation**

The legislator and his or her assistant are often called upon to provide specific information about legislation, both proposed legislation being considered during session and that enacted into law during a previous session. House Legislative Services staff can help by providing information on existing or proposed law. In addition, district office assistance phone lines staffed by the Poynter Legislative Research Library and the legislative websites provide a wealth of information, including bill status, bill history, bill text, amendments, votes, fiscal notes, committee agendas, and daily journals.

See **Information Resources** beginning on page G-1.

**Keeping in Touch
with Constituents**

To keep in touch with constituents' views, a legislator may have community meetings (town hall meetings) where people can express opinions or concerns. The legislator will also receive communications expressing opinions on certain bills and issues. Constituents will telephone, fax, e-mail, or text their legislator during session concerning the legislator's vote on certain bills. Open communication with constituents can help the legislator better understand how the people of the district stand on particular issues or bills before an upcoming vote. The House Communications Office (HCO) can assist by providing tips on how to respond to a constituent, notifying constituents of town hall meetings, and alerting the media if needed. Surveys or opinion polls, produced by and sent to voters through the HCO, can inform constituents about session activities and provide important feedback to the legislator.

The House Communications Office assists members and staff with all facets of public outreach and media relations as they develop and set public policy. To accomplish this mission, the office designs and prints marketing strategies, informational materials including speeches, House newsletters, and weekly session updates on legislation. The office creates publications that increase knowledge of and promote public involvement in the legislative process; acts as liaison with the media, schools and community organizations; and the public, and develops audio, video, and print communication materials.

The HCO website can be accessed here:

http://house.louisiana.gov/H_Staff/H_Staff_Communications.aspx

State Capitol Tours

Arranging tours of the State Capitol may be requested by schools or other groups in the district. The state tourist information desk, located in the State Capitol Rotunda, will help with the arrangements. The House Communications Office can also provide photos of your group at the State Capitol with sufficient notice.

When a group visits during session, a legislator may introduce the group as a point of personal privilege. It is also customary after introduction in the House Chamber for a legislator to invite the group to have ice cream at the House Dining Hall at the legislator's expense.

Special items are available and can be arranged in advance such as coloring and activity books from the House Communications Office, honorary state representative certificates and student lapel pins from the Rural Caucus director, and a multitude of items from the Louisiana Capitol Foundation.

The parking lots nearest the State Capitol are closed to public parking for security reasons. Any questions or issues regarding parking should be directed to the Department of Public Safety Police, Capitol Detail.

For contact information, see **State Capitol tours** on page G-5.

Assisting Local Government

Local governments rely heavily upon financial assistance from state government. State government provides assistance through annual appropriations for such programs as supplemental pay for police and firemen, dedicated revenues from state taxes, and revenues allocated as required by the constitution. Legislators often introduce legislation to provide for assistance to local government, such as the return of sales tax revenues collected from hotels to the tourism commission, the governing authority, or some other entity in the parish in which the money was collected. Legislators work with their officials to develop legislation needed to assist local governments and special districts in carrying out their functions and to assist with economic development in the member's district.

Emergencies and Disasters

In the event of a declared emergency or disaster, legislators have a direct line of communication with the Governor's Unified Command Group (UCG) through the Chairman of the House Committee on Homeland Security. During this time, legislators will receive daily briefings and updates regarding the emergency or disaster. Information will be disseminated through scheduled telephone conference calls and emails, containing situational awareness reports and reports from the governor's UCG briefings. This information will assist the legislator in providing necessary information to his or her constituents.

While these reports from the UCG briefings are helpful, constituents are best served when there is direct communication between the legislator and the director for the respective Parish Office of Homeland Security (OEP). The Governor's Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness (GOHSEP) communicates directly with each parish OEP director to facilitate information and provide the requested resources for each parish. Therefore, GOHSEP recommends that legislators first contact their parish OEP to inquire about any requests for resources made by constituents.

Parish OEP: <http://gohsep.la.gov/ABOUT/PARISHPA>