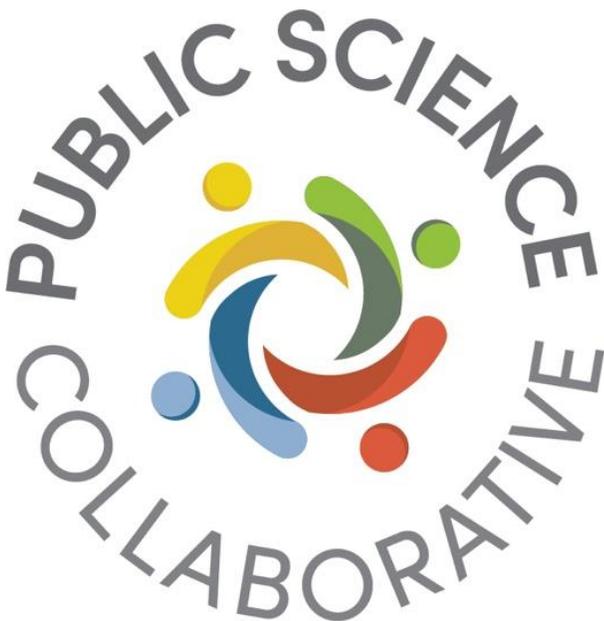




Iowa Legislative Advocacy Toolkit



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Iowa Legislature Basics



Iowa’s legislature is split into two chambers, the Iowa Senate and the Iowa House of Representatives, similar to many state legislatures and the U.S. Congress. The Iowa Senate is comprised of 50 state Senators, while the Iowa House has 100 state Representatives. Senators are elected to four-year terms, and Representatives serve two-year terms. The Iowa Legislature website has a [useful tool](#) to help you find your own Senator and Representative.

The two-year periods between legislative elections are called General Assemblies. The 2025 and 2026 legislative sessions will be part of Iowa’s 91st General Assembly. During the legislative session, legislators meet in Des Moines, typically Monday-Thursday, to conduct formal business, including subcommittee and committee meetings and floor debates on bills. The session starts in January and will end when business is finished, typically in May.

The Legislative Process

Legislation is created through an eight-step process. The process begins when a bill is introduced to the House or Senate and then assigned to a topically relevant committee for review. The assigned committee assembles a three-person subcommittee to host public meetings and prepare a report with their recommendations before the bill is reviewed again by the committee. If the committee approves the bill, the bill will be brought to the floor for debate and vote. If the bill passes, it will repeat the process in the next chamber (e.g., House or Senate) before being brought to the floor for debate and voting. Once the House and Senate approve, the bill goes to the Governor for consideration and final approval. Table 1 provides more detail about each step.

Table 1: The Legislative Process



Step 1: Bill Introduction. Legislators can introduce bills in either the Senate or the House. The Governor and state agencies can introduce bills as well. Bill sponsors are the legislators who put their name on a piece of legislation when it is first introduced. A bill can have just a single sponsor or many sponsors.



Step 2: Committee Assignment. After introducing a bill, it is sent to a committee for consideration. Committees are oriented by topics. For instance, the education committee handles education-related proposals. The Iowa Senate has 17 committees, and the House has 21.



Step 3: Subcommittee Review. Once assigned to a committee, the committee chair will assign a 3-person subcommittee, providing the first review of a proposed bill. Subcommittees will host public meetings where the legislators will discuss the proposal and any concerns or questions. Organizations, lobbyists, and the public can attend these subcommittee meetings also to offer their thoughts. The subcommittee will provide a report, generally either recommending further consideration, recommending further consideration with a possible amendment to address concerns, or recommending that the bill *not* move forward.



Step 4: Committee Review. Similar to the previous step, a committee will review the bill to decide whether it should move forward as written or whether to address any concerns with the legislation by making changes. Committee meetings are also public, but generally do not have feedback from interested parties during this stage. A committee can 1) vote to approve the bill, 2) amend or provide a recommendation for amendment to the bill, or 3) take no action. If the committee chooses not to move the bill on, the bill is “dead” in that form.



Step 5: Floor Debate. When a bill is approved by a committee, it goes to the floor for debate and a vote. At this stage, all 50 Senators or all 100 Representatives will vote on the bill. There also may be amendments to the bill, all of which are voted on by the chamber. There is time for debate for each vote, where any legislator can speak about the proposal. Although bills voted out of committee are all eligible for debate and a floor vote, chamber leadership (the President of the Senate and the Speaker of the House) decide which bills to bring to the floor and can opt not to bring a bill to the floor for a full vote.

Table 1: The Legislative Process Continued



Step 6: Referral to the Other Chamber. Once a bill passes one chamber (e.g., Senate), it is sent to the other chamber for consideration. The other chamber will complete steps 2-5, where they may also consider amendments or any changes they wish to make. Just like in the chamber where the bill was initiated, the bill can die at any stage in this chamber.



Step 7: Additional Actions. The Senate and the House must vote to approve the exact same bill for it to advance to the Governor's desk. For this reason, if the second chamber amends a bill, the bill will return to the first chamber for a vote on the bill as it has been amended. This process can become lengthy because a bill might go back and forth several times between the two chambers. Even when the same party controls both chambers of the legislature and agrees on the legislation's goals, there is no guarantee that they will agree on the specific language presented in a bill.



Step 8: Governor's Consideration. When a bill has been approved by both the House and Senate, the bill goes to the Governor. Depending on the kind of bill, the Governor has a certain number of days to act on it, either signing the bill into law or choosing to veto it. If vetoed, a bill could go back to the legislature for a veto override, accomplished with a 2/3rds vote of the Senate and House. A veto override is rare, especially when one party holds a governing trifecta (Governorship, Senate majority, and House majority).

Contacting Legislators

Iowa legislators enjoy hearing from constituents and concerned citizens, but they are also busy and receive a lot of feedback, so it is important to make each interaction count. The easiest ways to contact a legislator are by email or by calling with a message that will be delivered to them. However, while easy, these methods can have a limited impact. They can be most effective when coordinating a large group of people to provide feedback on a specific proposal or topic.

In-person interactions with legislators are more effective than email or phone communication. Legislators appreciate meeting with concerned citizens, hearing stories, and asking questions. This could happen at public forums or other district events that legislators host. However, visiting the Capitol is the easiest way to have access to all 150 legislators in person. Hand-written notes and thank you messages can also show legislators you spent time and effort contacting them.

How to Visit the Capitol



Anyone can visit the Capitol building in Des Moines and send messages to the House or Senate chambers to try to meet with legislators. This process involves going to the second floor and to the doors of the House or Senate chamber. There will be a table just outside the door with paper slips on it. You can fill out one of these slips with the legislator's name and a brief message about who is sending the note and what you want to discuss. Once the slip is filled out, you can hand the note to a doorkeeper, who will make sure the note is delivered to the legislator. Sometimes, legislators will immediately come out to speak. Other times, they may be delayed, or the note may be delayed because of a debate or a committee or caucus meeting.

How to Talk to Legislators

When talking to a legislator, make sure to **have a plan**. You can start with a short introduction of yourself or your group, then explain why you are there to talk to them. Be prepared to answer questions, as legislators have varying knowledge of different issues or pieces of legislation. For example, a bill's sponsor might have in-depth knowledge of the legislation, whereas a legislator not on the committee may have little knowledge about the issue. **Legislators appreciate hearing stories** about how proposed bills may affect you or people you know in Iowa, and it can be useful to have printed materials with a few key facts or data points about the issue.



Legislators are typically most interested in hearing from constituents about issues because they represent those people. However, it is also worthwhile to talk to other legislators, starting with those most closely tied to the issues you care about. This might mean starting with sponsors of proposed legislation and the subcommittees that first review those proposals before reaching out to other committee members as proposals reach this legislative stage. Finally, reach out to the floor manager of the legislation and other members of the House or Senate.

The last thing to remember is that all legislators are Iowans, just like you. Political issues bring much passion for everybody, but it is important to remain composed and cordial even when talking to a legislator who disagrees with you. Even if they disagree with you that day on that issue, they could be a key ally on a future issue or have their opinions change over time due to your conversation. Use each interaction to build relationships, leave a positive impression, and keep your eye on the long game.

Resources

Legislature Resources

- [Iowa Legislature Website](#)
- [Find Your Legislator](#)
- [Find Legislation](#)
- [2025 Iowa Legislative Session Timetable](#)
- [Daily Meeting Calendar](#)
- [Other Schedules and Calendars](#)

Advocacy Resources

- [Iowa League of Cities Advocacy Toolkit](#)
- [Common Good Iowa Advocate's Guide to Visiting the Iowa Capitol](#)
- [Recovery Advocacy Project Advocacy Guides](#)

Glossary

The terms listed here are ones you are likely to hear or read while learning about legislature or engaging in advocacy work at the Iowa Capitol.

Caucus: Either a word used to describe the group of legislators from a party in a chamber or a meeting of a party's legislators. For instance, the "Senate Republican caucus" would refer to all Senate Republicans, while "Republicans are caucusing in Room XXX and Democrats are caucusing in Room XXX" would mean the Republican legislators and Democratic legislators are each having meetings with the members of their party.

Chair: The leader of a committee, who is a member of the majority party in the chamber. Committees also have Vice Chairs, who will take on the chair's duties if necessary.

Chamber: This can refer to the two legislative bodies—the Senate or the House. It can also refer to the physical rooms in which the full Senate and the House meet.

Chief Clerk: The staff person in the House of Representatives who is in charge of the administrative and parliamentary functions of the House. For instance, the Chief Clerk's office will ensure that bills are filed and messaged to the Senate correctly. When in session, the Chief Clerk sits in front of the Speaker of the House, ensures that correct procedures are followed, and is most publicly noticed for reading bills when a vote occurs.

Clerk: Each legislator has a clerk to assist them as required by the legislator. For example, a committee chair's clerk will take minutes during committee meetings.

Committee: A group of legislators reviewing bills on a specific topic, such as agriculture or health and human services. Committees vary in size, with most Senate committees between 10 and 20 Senators, while House committees are generally larger, often with more than 20 Representatives. The party that holds the majority in the respective chamber will typically hold a majority of seats on the committees, and party leadership decides which legislators will be assigned to which committees.

Constituent: A citizen of the district that a legislator represents.

Debate Calendar: A list of bills that have passed a committee and are eligible for debate on the floor and a vote. A sub-list is the Daily Debate Calendar, which is the list of bills that may be debated and voted upon on a given day.

Doorkeeper: A legislative staff member who stands at the House and Senate chambers door. When sending a note to ask to speak with a legislator, doorkeepers send the note along and may call out when the legislator is available.

Floor: The physical space where the full Senate and full House meet. It also refers to when a bill has reached the stage where the entire Senate or House is voting on it.

Floor Manager: The legislator in charge of a bill when it reaches the floor of a chamber. When a bill is voted on, the floor manager will introduce it, describe what it accomplishes, comment on any proposed amendments, and be available for questions from other legislators.

Funnel: One of several deadlines when bills have to reach a certain stage to be considered further. Bills are typically considered dead if they have not reached the necessary stage for a funnel deadline. However, bills that concern the budget or taxes are not bound by the funnel, and sometimes bills that did not survive the funnel can be revived as an amendment to a bill that did survive the funnel deadline.

Gallery: The balcony area in the Senate and House chambers where the general public can sit and observe floor debate.

Iowa Code: A document or collection of documents with all permanent laws passed and signed into law by the Iowa Legislature and Governor. Iowa Code is organized into chapters and sections of related topics. Bills modify different parts of the Iowa Code.

Journal: A daily documentation of a chamber's activities and legislative actions. Bill introductions, committee assignments, committee meetings, and floor votes are all examples that might be included in the Senate or House Journal.

Leadership: The legislators who have been selected for a variety of positions within a chamber or a party inside of a chamber. President of the Senate, Speaker of the House, and majority and minority leaders are part of leadership.

Legislative Services Agency (LSA): An office of non-partisan staff assisting with various legislative tasks. Among other roles, LSA has legal staff to draft and provide legal expertise on legislation and fiscal staff to provide estimates and forecasts of state budgets and how bills will affect the budget.

Lobbyist: A representative an organization pays to advocate for or against certain legislation. Lobbyists relay input from specific businesses or groups to legislators and often have feedback on how bills might impact the organizations they represent. Lobbyists can publicly register for, against, or undecided on a bill.

Majority Leader: A legislator selected by the majority party caucus to be the party's leader in the chamber. Duties include representing the party on the floor, consulting with the Speaker of the House or President of the Senate about the debate schedule, assigning legislators to specific committees, and communicating the majority party's agenda.

Majority Party: The party with the most seats in the respective chamber. Currently, Republicans are the majority party in both the Senate and the House.

Minority Leader: A legislator selected by the minority party caucus to be the party's leader in the chamber. Duties include representing the minority party on the chamber floor, assigning legislators to committees, and communicating the minority party's agenda.

Minority Party: The party with a minority of seats in the respective chamber. Currently, Democrats are the minority party in both the Senate and the House.

Page: A staff member in either the House or Senate who performs miscellaneous duties for legislators, clerks, and other legislative staff. Pages are high school juniors or seniors supervised by the Sergeants-at-Arms and Chief Clerk or Secretary of the Senate. When requesting to speak with a legislator or sending a message into the chamber, pages will deliver the message from the doorkeeper to the legislator or their clerk.

President of the Senate: A legislator selected to preside over the Senate. Majority party members typically select the legislator before the beginning of the session and then is formally elected by a vote of the entire Senate at the beginning of the session. The President of the Senate follows the rules and procedures of the Senate to facilitate debate and votes.

Ranking Member: A legislator in the minority party who has been named to a leadership position inside a committee.

Rotunda: The large open space on the main floor of the Iowa Capitol. Organizations often reserve this space for events.

Secretary of the Senate: The staff person in the Senate who oversees the administrative and parliamentary functions of the Senate. For instance, the Secretary of the Senate's office will ensure that bills are filed and messaged to the House correctly. When in session, the Secretary of the Senate sits in front of the President of the Senate, ensures that correct procedures are followed, and is most publicly noticed for reading out bills when a vote occurs.

Sergeant-at-Arms: The staff member in each chamber who oversees making sure that chamber rules are followed, including who is allowed in the space at what time and the decorum of the public.

Speaker of the House: A legislator selected to preside over the House. Majority party members typically select the legislator before the beginning of the session and then is formally elected by a vote of the entire House at the beginning of the session. The Speaker of the House follows the rules and procedures of the Senate to facilitate debate and votes.

Sponsor: The legislator that puts their name to an introduced bill. Bills can have one or many sponsors.

Subcommittee: A group of legislators (usually three) put together to review a bill before the full committee considers it.

Supermajority: A supermajority occurs when a party holds a 2/3 majority in a legislative chamber (67 seats in the House or 34 seats in the Senate). This is also known as a veto-proof majority because a 2/3 vote in each chamber can override a governor's veto of a bill. As of the 2024 November election, the Republican party currently holds a supermajority in both the Iowa House and Senate.

Trifecta: A situation where the same party is in the majority in both the House and Senate and occupies the governor's office. Iowa has had a Republican trifecta since 2017.

Veto: The governor can veto a bill, or refuse to sign it, meaning the bill will not become law. However, a governor's veto can be overridden by a 2/3 vote by the House and the Senate.

Well: The physical space at the front of the chamber where the Speaker of the House, President of the Senate, Chief Clerk, Secretary of the Senate, and other staff may sit.