

NHLTA Legislative Advocacy Guide

NHLTA POSITION

NHLTA's position on a bill should be voted by the NHLTA Board either at its next meeting or via email, phone poll or electronic poll (e.g., via Survey Monkey). NHLTA may elect to monitor a bill initially, reserving judgment until more is known about the issue.

IDENTIFYING ADVOCATES

NHLTA may identify advocates on a specific bill via a SurveyMonkey poll announced on the NHLTA website and on NHLTA and NHLA listserves. The survey method has been effective in generating a list of advocates with contact information and how each person is willing to participate in the lobbying effort.

NHLTA may also seek to build a coalition of groups that support its position on a bill. For example, other non-profits may share NHLTA's perspective and the NHLA may also be a logical advocacy partner. The Board will reach out to likely partners to ascertain their positions and willingness to collaborate on legislative strategy.

RESEARCH

Background of the bill: NHLTA Board members will contact the sponsors and co-sponsors of the bill to learn why the bill was filed. In addition, other board members may be asked to contact individuals in the towns of the sponsors and conduct additional research to learn the genesis of the issue. If the bill has been filed at the request of the library community, the reasons for the bill will be outlined by NHLTA.

Legislative Committee: The members of the committee to which this bill has been assigned will be identified, and links to webpages where the committee members can be further researched (for town of residence, contact information, party affiliation) will be made available to Board members. A list of the committee members and the town(s) they represent will be cross-matched to the volunteer advocates and public libraries in those towns.

Content/Impact of the Bill: NHLTA will review the bill text carefully to understand the full effect of the legislation, list the issues that passage of the bill would present, and possibly research legislative history of the original statutory language. If NHLTA opposes the bill, negative consequences of passage will be explained in detail. If NHLTA supports the bill, the positive outcomes will similarly be described.

FORMULATION OF TALKING POINTS

Knowing the background of the bill and the impact of the proposal, NHLTA needs to formulate a list of "talking points." This list should be shared with advocates and others

who can then articulate their own advocacy statements that reflect their personal experience and yet remain consistent with the NHLTA position and messages. It is important to “stay on message”, and talking points will help advocates do so.

ADVOCACY STRATEGY

It is important that our strategy take into consideration the normal legislative process, including a number of timing issues. It is much more effective to contact legislators when the bill is about to come before them in committee or on the House floor, then to contact them weeks before they’ve even read the bill. (Most members don’t read bills until they’ve been scheduled for a hearing, so calling a legislator who is not familiar with the issue at all is less productive.) As a result, the following timetable is recommended:

1. Contact committee members that you **PERSONALLY** know now, to give them a heads up on the bill. You might ask them to let you know when the bill is scheduled for a hearing.
2. Once the bill is scheduled for a hearing, legislative committee members should be contacted by their own constituents by email, phone and snail mail. This does not and should not be a campaign of many people sending in duplicate letters (like postcard campaigns), but individual communications. Talking points are useful in drafting such letters/emails, but should not be copied word for word, as that sort of repetition renders the communication less effective. This is also the time when letters from groups, such as those signed by the trustees of individual libraries, are appropriate.
3. Also in advance of the hearing, letters addressed to the committee as a whole should be sent from towns around the state. These letters should be addressed to the Chair of the committee.
4. Hearing: NHLTA should plan to have one representative from the association present testimony at the hearing. NHLTA should also try to coordinate testimony from several other trustees, with the preference being from towns with representatives sitting on the committee hearing the bill. *(See tips on written and oral testimony below.)* Most committees get impatient when many people testify on a bill and repeat the same message over and over. Often the Chair will ask speakers to limit their comments to 2-3 minutes if many are signing up to testify. However, there is no limit on how many people may testify. If many people attend a hearing, it can be desirable to have no more than a half dozen testifying on the bill, and have all other advocates register their position in writing. *(See below on hearing process.)*

NHLTA should also coordinate with other groups that may be advocating on the bill, such as the NH Center for Non-Profits or NHLA.

At least one NHLTA board member should remain to the end of the hearing. Many Chairs will assign a bill to a subcommittee and will do so at the close of the hearing, naming the members of the subcommittee. If this happens, advocates will need to follow the subcommittee proceedings as well, which will be scheduled for a later date and should be noticed in the Legislative

Calendar, published weekly on Thursday or Friday. Occasionally, if a Chair senses that members have already made up their minds on the bill, the Chair can go into Executive Session at the close of the day and take a vote on whether to recommend the bill “ought to pass” (OTP) or is “inexpedient to legislate” (ITL). This is more likely to happen in the Senate than in the House.

5. **Post Hearing:** If you have a PERSONAL relationship with a Committee member, you can follow-up after the hearing to ask what they think will happen and offer any other information that might help in the process. Remember to thank the legislator for their support/assistance.
6. **Executive Session:** The full committee must vote on all bills that come before it. They can vote OTP (ought to pass), ITL (inexpedient to legislate), or they can recommend the bill go to “interim study” for further consideration and possible amendment. If the vote is unanimous or nearly so at the committee level, the bill is likely to be placed on the Consent Calendar, and the committee’s recommendation is likely to be accepted by the House without debate. If the vote is close or the issue is somewhat controversial, the bill will be put on the Regular Calendar and can be debated and amended on the House floor. NHLTA’s advocacy efforts to the full House will depend on whether the bill is on the Consent or Regular calendar and how likely the outcome appears.
7. **Floor Vote:** If the bill is on the Regular calendar, it may be wise for NHLTA to encourage trustees to communicate with their representatives from around the state. It may also be appropriate for NHLTA leadership to contact the majority and minority leaders in advance of the floor vote, since the parties meet in caucus before a House session to review the bills coming up for vote and discuss any party recommendations on how their members should vote. I would not expect that a library bill would require this level of advocacy.
8. **The Senate:** If the bill passes the House, it will then move on to the Senate and the process begins all over again. If the bill survives in the Senate but is amended, then the bill will go back to the House for concurrence with the changes. If the House does not concur, it can ask for a Committee of Conference, in which appointed House and Senate members work out the differences and either agree on a final bill that each body will approve, or they may fail to reach agreement, in which case the bill dies.
9. **The Governor’s Office:** If a bill passes both the House and Senate, it then goes to the Governor’s office for her signature. This is the last opportunity to kill an undesirable bill, and requires further advocacy. Again, it seems unlikely that an anti-library bill would get to this stage. If the bill is pro-library and the Governor plans to sign the bill, NHLTA should arrange a bill-signing ceremony with photos taken for posterity.
10. **Thanking Supporters:** It is always important to thank legislators that have supported NHLTA’s position, win or lose.

The Hearing Process

1. Hearing Rooms are small, many with only 15-20 seats in the audience. Arrive in advance of the hearing if you want a seat. There may be hearings on other bills scheduled before and after your hearing, so be prepared to wait as the prior hearing could run long. All hearings, except for a few Senate committees, are held in the Legislative Office Building.
2. In the House, individuals who wish to testify on a bill must fill out a pink card, listing the bill number, their name, their position on the bill, and about how long they expect to speak (generally not more than 5 minutes). They may also be asked to indicate whether they have written testimony to submit. If individuals do not wish to speak, they can sign a form available in the committee room with their name, where they are from, who they represent if applicable, and whether they support or oppose the bill.

In the Senate, there will be a form on a table inside the hearing room, one form for each bill being heard that date, on which advocates can write their name, where they are from (and/or what organization they represent if appropriate), whether they support or oppose the bill, and if they want to speak.

These forms then are given to the committee Chair, who calls on individuals to testify.

3. **Legislative protocol.** The committee chairman conducts the meeting. First, the chairman calls upon the bill's primary sponsor to testify, then upon other legislators who wish to speak. Next, members of the public who have signed up are called upon to speak, alternating between those who support and those who oppose the bill. In most cases, the chairman will call on people in the order the cards were submitted.
4. **Listen to those who testify before you on your bill.** To be effective, your presentation must be flexible. If someone has made a point you planned to state, note briefly your support of the previous speaker and add any additional information, but do not simply repeat an argument already made. Your statement to the committee should not be read verbatim. Be conversational. Use this opportunity to make eye contact with members of the committee on your important points.
5. **When you are called.** Take a seat at the small table facing the committee. Legislative protocol calls for you to greet the committee as follows:
Mr. (or Madam) Chairman, Members of the Committee, Good Morning.
My name is _____, I am a resident of TOWN, and I am speaking on behalf of the NH Library Trustees Association (or TOWN Public Library).
I am here to support (or in opposition to) Bill # ____.

After you have completed your statement, the chairperson will ask if committee members have any questions. Note that spectators (sponsors, other legislators, lobbyists and interested parties) may not ask questions of a witness. Most committee members treat witnesses with respect and appreciate their participation in the legislative process. However, if you are asked a nitpicking or hostile question, do not lose your composure. *Do not become angry or argumentative - it never helps your cause. Also, never attempt to answer questions for which you do not have the facts.* Preserve your credibility by offering to obtain the information and forward it to the committee. Never misrepresent a fact or offer an opinion for which you do not have back-up information and do not base your testimony on anecdotal “evidence” from others.

Finally, do not ask questions of a committee member during your testimony unless it is to clarify a question, which was posed to you. If you address a particular representative, call them by their title—e.g., Representative Smith—even if you know them personally from home. Conclude your testimony by thanking the chair for the opportunity to speak.

Other Tips on Oral and Written Testimony

Even if you are planning to offer verbal testimony at the hearing, bring written testimony with you, with enough copies for all the committee members, plus a few extras. (Usually 25 copies is sufficient for a House committee and 10 copies for a Senate committee.) Keep it as brief as possible, generally not more than 2 pages. (Legislators won’t read lengthy submissions; they just don’t have time, given the volume of legislation they handle.) If you don’t want to speak but do plan to attend the hearing, you can bring your written comments to the hearing and give it to the committee clerk, again enough copies for all the committee members. You can also send in written comments to the Committee either before or right after the hearing.

Some DON’Ts When Communicating with Your Legislators:

- Don’t be awed by your legislator, and don’t be nervous. They are citizens just like you, trying to do their job. You are giving them information they need to be well informed on an important issue.
- Don’t apologize for taking their time. You are helping them do their job.
- Don’t be vague. Express your points clearly and concisely, supported with facts and, if possible, personal experiences.
- Don’t be argumentative. Discuss your point with courtesy. A negative encounter will adversely affect all your future contacts with that legislator.
- Don’t expect your legislator to support your positions every time. Convey your understanding and continued support.

Writing to a Legislator

A thoughtful, well-written letter can be an effective way to convince a legislator

of your concerns. *Form letters, on the other hand, are often discounted.* On top priority bills, NHLTA will often provide members with points you may want to cover in your letter and back-up information or statistics. You should incorporate some or all of these points in your letter, but *in your own words*. You will be most effective if you follow some simple guidelines when writing to an elected representative.

1. Keep your letter brief (one page is best), easy to read and to the point.
2. Identify yourself and, if you are a constituent of the legislator to whom you are writing, say so. Refer to the bill number and topic, state your position up front, and explain why you hold that position. Tell how the bill or the action will affect you, your library, New Hampshire residents, etc. Be sure to be clear on what specific action you want them to take.
3. Be as positive as you can. It is always appropriate to make a proposal or to suggest ways to amend the bill to make it more acceptable.
4. Volunteer to be a resource person or to provide more information if necessary. Make sure to include your telephone number, title (if appropriate) and address.
5. When writing to a legislator, it is best to send your letter to his or her home address, which can be found on the General Court website. If you send your letter to the State House, use the following format. If you are writing to the chairperson of a committee, address your letter as such and send it to the committee. Committee addresses are also available on the General Court website.

In either case, you must address your letter to "The Honorable..." for members of either the House or Senate. The salutation would then be "Dear Representative _____" or "Dear Senator _____".

USEFUL LINK:

NH General Court (the Legislature's website): <http://www.gencourt.state.nh.us/>

From here you can go to the House of Representatives section or the Senate's section of the site, find out who is on which committees, the status of particular bills, hearing schedules and more. You can also find out which legislators represent your community, along with their contact information.