

Legislative
Advocacy
Guide

Public Policy Advocacy:

Influencing state government policymaking

Public policy can greatly impact children and families, yet too often, policies are developed without full consideration of their impacts on children and without families' participation in the process. Voices for Virginia's Children is working to change that by helping all stakeholders, including families, service providers, and other community members, engage in the process of effective advocacy.

Since the Virginia legislature, governor, and state agencies create and implement public policy, it is useful to understand how the Virginia government policymaking process works and how you can influence that process. This guide presents the basics about how individuals can advocate to make a difference for children in Virginia. It also provides information about the structure of Virginia's government, how a bill becomes a law in Virginia, and Virginia's budget process.

For additional details, contact Voices for Virginia's Children, where experienced staff members can provide guidance about influencing policies in your particular area of concern.

vakids.org

Your insight on the local impact of policy helps elected officials understand which policies work.



Section One: Legislators are influenced by YOU

Elected officials care about what their constituents have to say. To make a difference, you need to be informed and engaged. You don't need to be an expert, but your insight on the local impact of policy helps elected officials understand which policies work and which have a negative impact on children and families.

Whether you advocate as an individual or as part of a group, your efforts will benefit from a little planning. Taking action can be as simple as joining Voices' email network and responding to action alerts. If you have more time and interest, you can research an issue and phone your policymaker to express your opinions. If you are part of a larger group or effort you might consider additional steps, such as communicating with your allies, testifying at hearings, or visiting your legislators in a meeting.

Communicating with policymakers

Remember that in advocacy respectful relationships build the foundation for change.

Before you communicate with a legislator, do your homework. Get to know your legislator by researching him/her on the Virginia General Assembly website viriniageneralassembly.gov. Once you are on the website, click on the “**Who’s My Legislator?**” tab at the top of the page, then fill in your address information to identify your designated elected officials.

This website will give you the opportunity to:

- Learn his or her full name, length of time in office, and full-time profession
- Learn about the demographics of the district and his or her voting records, committee assignments, and areas of interest
- Look at the bills he or she has introduced in the past few years; if you find something that interests you, prepare some questions to find out more
- Develop some questions you can ask to gauge his or her knowledge of and interest in your particular issue

Remember that legislative aides are key support staff for legislators and are important gatekeepers who can facilitate your relationship with your legislator. Some aides also have substantial influence on policy issues and help to shape their delegate’s or senator’s positions. Regardless of how much policy influence a particular aide has, it will benefit you to establish a good working relationship with your legislator’s aide. Each one will appreciate any courtesies you can show, any help you offer the legislator, and any information you can provide to keep him or her fully informed.

In all of your interactions with policymakers and staff remember these key points:

Be positive and nonpartisan. Legislators are turned off by threatening or argumentative advocacy. NEVER threaten a legislator (“I won’t vote for you if you don’t support this legislation.”)! It is important not to alienate your legislator because you may need his/her support on later issues.

Be personal. Visits are better than letters or emails. Personal letters and emails are better than form letters. Sharing your personal experiences and concerns during a visit or in a letter/email will make your message more compelling. Also, when you meet with your legislator, ask if he or she prefers email, fax or postal mail. Be sure to communicate using the method he or she prefers.

Be persistent and patient. Building a relationship with your legislator takes time. Also, on many issues it may take several years to pass legislation.

Stay on message. Focus your visit, letter, or email on one topic. Use separate communications for different topics. During a visit, work to return to your topic if the legislator changes the subject.

Never give inaccurate information. It is far better to tell a legislator, “I don’t know, but I will find out and get back to you.” Your credibility (and the legislator’s if he/she uses your information) is at stake. Be sure to follow up with the complete information.

Relax. Advocacy does not have to be complex or intimidating – it’s simply you exercising your right as a citizen and having a conversation to express your views to the person elected to represent you. You do not need to be an expert. Just share your concerns and values, knowing that your views as a voter are important to your legislator.

Visits to public officials

Face-to-face visits are one of the most effective ways to develop a relationship with your legislator and to communicate your views. Legislators value visits and communication because it helps them stay in touch with their communities. Most legislators have offices within their districts and regular office hours during which they are available to their constituents. During the General Assembly session, legislators have offices in the General Assembly building in Richmond. Because of the hectic legislative pace, a legislator's availability is more difficult to predict when the General Assembly is in session. It is often easier and more effective to meet sometime other than during the session. The following are some recommendations for visiting with legislators.

Before your meeting

Write a letter of introduction. Explaining who you are and what you hope to talk about will help the legislator prepare for your visit. Include a relevant fact sheet or brief summary of what you plan to discuss.

Make an appointment. Call the legislator's district office when the General Assembly is not in session. Call the Capitol office during the legislative session. If you cannot meet with your legislator, meet with his/her legislative aide. Legislative aides are important sources of information, crucial conduits of information to the legislator, and may have substantial influence in the design, drafting and passage of legislation.

Develop an agenda. Think of the visit as a business meeting; go into the meeting with a plan and try to stick to it.

Consider a group visit. Visiting in a group can show the legislator that your cause has community support. Two or three constituents are ideal.

Bring a fact sheet. A one-page statement detailing your position, with supporting data, will help the legislator understand your request.

Be on time.

During the meeting

State the purpose of your visit. Briefly describe the issue(s). Be upfront if you are asking for something specific, such as support or opposition to particular legislation.

Make the issue local and relevant. Discuss the issue from your local perspective – how it affects his or her district and voters. Use local statistics, stories, and fellow constituents to support your issue. Mention if you are a constituent.

Personalize the issue. Describe why the issue is important to you or to those you represent—the more personal, the more he/she will pay attention.

Be a good listener. Let your legislator ask questions as you present your viewpoint and answer them knowledgeably and factually. You do not have to agree with his/her views, but you should show that you are willing to hear them. Ask if he/she has any questions for you.

Ask how you can be helpful. Show interest in issues of concern to your legislator and offer your assistance when possible.

Stay on topic. Be careful not to let the meeting stray off course. Let the legislator make comments, but don't let him/her avoid the issue. Tactfully bring the conversation back on track.

Thank your legislator for his or her time. Being courteous keeps the door open for future dialogue.

Leave materials. If you have a business card, leave one with your legislator and/or the legislative aide. Leave copies of your one-page fact sheet or other written materials. Voices for Virginia's Children regularly posts fact sheets on our website at vakids.org. You may save time by utilizing materials developed by others.



After the meeting

Write a thank you note. Regardless of his or her position, courtesy is important. A handwritten thank you note also gives you another chance to make your pitch. An email note is better than none, but generally a handwritten note will have more impact.

Update your legislator on the issue throughout the year. If new materials—editorials, fact sheets, letters to the editor—appear in support of your cause, send them to the legislator.

Legislators value visits and communication so that they stay in touch with their communities.

Telephone calls to public officials

Calling a legislator's office is an efficient way to communicate your position to a legislator. Before making the phone call, develop a concise list of points (no more than three) you want to make. If the legislator is unavailable, speak to the legislative aide or the secretary.

Give your name and address to the legislative aide or secretary. This is extremely important because they want to ensure that you are a constituent.

Focus on one issue. If you have several bills that you want to discuss, consider separate phone calls or select an alternate form of communication, such as email or fax.

Be concise. Clearly state your position. If calling about a specific bill, use the bill number ("I am calling to ask Senator Jones to oppose HB 123.")

Thank the secretary or aide. The person answering the phone is an important gatekeeper. Be courteous. When you visit the legislator's office, introduce yourself and make an effort to get to know this person.

If your legislator votes favorably, send a thank you note. This follow-up expression of appreciation will help build a positive relationship.

Personal letters/emails to public officials

Legislators read correspondence – especially when it is personalized and clearly from a constituent. The following guidelines should be used when writing to your delegate or senator.

Address written correspondence in the following manner:

The Honorable John Smith
General Assembly address (during the legislative session)
or District Address (remainder of the year)

Dear Delegate/Senator Smith,

The signature at the end of your letter or email should include your full address including zip code. In the body of the message:

Identify yourself. Refer to your district if you are a constituent.

Keep it short. For a letter, try to limit yourself to one type-written page. In an email, stick to three or so paragraphs.

Focus on one issue or bill. If you have several issues to discuss, consider multiple letters/emails.

Indicate your position. Use the bill number or budget amendment number relating to your issue (“Please oppose HB 123”). Indicate the bill or budget number at the top of your letter or email.

Make the issue local. Relate the impact of the legislation on your local area. Describe why you are concerned about the issue, using a brief personal story or example if appropriate.

Avoid form letters/emails. Be personal – if you are using a sample or form letter, be sure to adapt it, especially in the first sentence and paragraph! Legislators and their aides recognize form letters and are more likely to be swayed by your letter if it is personal.

Thank him or her for considering your opinion.

Because of the fast pace of the legislative session, fax and email are typically preferable to postal mail during the session. Ask your legislator which he or she prefers and use that method.



Is it appropriate to contact legislators other than those who represent me?

Constituents have the greatest leverage with their own legislators. Legislators listen to their constituents first and foremost. Contacting legislators who do not represent you is not typically effective. However, committee chairs, members of Appropriations and Finance, and members of the budget conference committee are in unique positions of power and hear from many citizens outside their districts. These legislators expect and are typically open to hearing from Virginians from across the Commonwealth. More information about influencing committee members can be found in the sections on Influencing Legislation and Understanding the Budget Process.

Section Two:

Structure of state government

The structure of Virginia state government is similar to that of the federal government. The three branches of state government are the executive (the governor, lieutenant governor, attorney general and state agencies), the legislative (the General Assembly and its affiliate agencies and commissions), and the judicial (the court system including the Supreme Court of Virginia). In public policy advocacy, the legislative and executive branches are your primary targets.

The Legislative Branch

The Virginia General Assembly is composed of the Senate and the House of Delegates and has the power to:

- Enact laws not specifically prohibited by the state or federal constitution
- Pass resolutions, including ones that initiate public policy studies
- Levy taxes
- Approve the budget
- Confirm the governor's appointments of cabinet secretaries, state agency heads, and board members
- Elect State Supreme Court justices, Court of Appeals, Circuit and District Court judges and members of the Judicial Inquiry and Review Commission

The General Assembly meets annually in a session beginning on the second Wednesday in January. Compared to many other states, Virginia has a very short legislative session. In odd-numbered years, the legislature meets for approximately 45 days. During even-numbered years, the sessions are lengthened to 60 days to provide time for biennial budget negotiations. The General Assembly reconvenes six weeks after each annual session to act on legislation the governor has vetoed or amended.

Because the General Assembly meets for such a short period of time, meetings before the session begins are crucial to building a relationship with your legislator.

The Senate

The Senate of Virginia consists of 40 members. Each member is elected for a term of four years and represents approximately 200,000 Virginians.

The lieutenant governor is the presiding officer (president) of the Senate and is elected in a statewide election for a four-year term. The lieutenant governor has no vote in the Senate except to break a tie.

The House of Delegates

The House of Delegates consists of 100 members. Each member is elected for two years and represents approximately 80,000 Virginians.

The Speaker of the House is elected by the members of the House and assigns all bills and resolutions to committees and appoints the membership of the 14 House standing committees. Because of these duties, the speaker is a much more powerful figure than the presiding officer of the Senate, the lieutenant governor.

The Executive Branch

The governor is elected to a four-year term and cannot serve consecutive terms. The governor has the power to:

- Act upon legislation passed by both Houses; he or she may sign a bill into law, suggest amendments, or veto the bill
- Make appointments to state boards and commissions
- Appoint cabinet secretaries and agency heads
- Propose a biennial budget for consideration by the General Assembly

Because the General Assembly meets for such a short period of time, meetings before the session begins are crucial to building a relationship with your legislator.

Section Three:

Influencing legislation - how a bill becomes law

Bills

A bill is a proposal submitted by a General Assembly member to

- Create a new law
- Amend an existing law
- Remove an existing law

The idea for a bill may come from General Assembly members, their constituents, lobbyists, the governor, cabinet secretaries or heads of state agencies charged with administering the law.

Resolutions

A resolution is a proposal requesting a study or expressing a legislator's opinion on a particular issue. Resolutions do not have the force of law and do not require the signature of the governor. A joint resolution must be passed by both the House of Delegates and the Senate. A House or Senate resolution must only pass in the chamber in which it is introduced.

Committees

Most of the legislative process occurs in the specialized Standing Committees created by each chamber to handle proposed legislation (see list below). Each committee considers all legislation introduced in its assigned policy area. The rules of the House and Senate specify the subject areas covered by each committee. Committees meet at regularly scheduled times during the session and at other times during or outside of the session at the discretion of the committee chair. Each committee may create subcommittees to consider particular bills and make recommendations to the full committee. Committees typically hold hearings, hear testimony from interested parties, debate the merits of proposed legislation, and vote whether to "report out" (pass) the proposed legislation for consideration by their entire respective chamber.

Senate committees

Agriculture, Conservation
and Natural Resources
Commerce and Labor
Courts of Justice*
Education and Health*
Finance*
General Laws and Technology
Local Government
Privileges and Elections
Rehabilitation and Social Services*
Rules
Transportation

House of Delegates committees

Agriculture, Chesapeake
and Natural Resources
Appropriations*
Commerce and Labor
Counties, Cities and Towns
Courts of Justice*
Education*
Finance
General Laws
Health, Welfare, and Institutions*
Militia, Police, and Public Safety
Privileges and Elections
Rules
Science and Technology
Transportation

* committees that often consider legislation concerning children's issues

As an advocate, your best chance of influencing legislation happens prior to and at subcommittee and committee meetings.

***Testimony from
community members
can and does
influence legislators.***



What happens during a committee meeting?

The committee debates the merits of bills under consideration and hears testimony from interested parties. The list of bills assigned to the committee is called the docket. During the legislative session, dockets are typically available on the General Assembly website lis.virginia.gov the day before the meeting. The chair of the committee determines which bills on the docket will be considered at a particular meeting.

Prior to a committee meeting, many committees refer legislation to an appropriate subcommittee to hear testimony on the bill and make a recommendation to the full committee. In the Senate, the subcommittee's recommendations are advisory in nature, and the full committee will still vote on every bill. In the House, however, when a House subcommittee does not recommend a particular bill, the full committee will not hold a hearing on the bill. Because bills can "die" in House subcommittees, it is very important to testify at House subcommittee meetings. When a House subcommittee recommends a bill, its recommendations are advisory, and the full committee will still hear and vote on every bill. Bills that receive full hearings in subcommittee may have shorter hearings before the full committee.

The patron (the legislator who introduced the bill) is usually the first to speak and introduces the bill to the committee. The public then has the opportunity to voice support or opposition to a bill.

**Every citizen of the Commonwealth has the right to attend a committee meeting and speak about legislation.
Testimony from community members can and does influence legislators.**

What you can do

Speak to the subcommittee and/or committee in support of or in opposition to the bill.

Use anecdotes, factual data, or personal experience to support your point.

Stay on message; short and to-the-point is more effective.

Pay close attention while committee members discuss the bill. Amendments could possibly change your opinion of the bill and affect your presentation.

Be prepared to answer questions from legislators. Provide committee staff written copies or a summary of your testimony to accompany your oral remarks.

Reading your remarks is acceptable, but generally you will be more effective if you speak directly to the members, and just highlight the main points from your written material as concisely as possible.

Adapt your remarks to avoid unnecessary repetition of points made by previous speakers.

Don't get rattled if a legislator leaves during your remarks. Legislators have many competing obligations during the session and often need to present to another committee meeting simultaneously.

After the patron of a bill (its sponsor) and any other witnesses speak to the committee, the chair of the committee calls for a vote on the bill. Most often, a bill is either passes out of committee ("reported"), is referred to another committee, or is defeated ("tabled," "passed by indefinitely," or "fails to report").

What happens to a bill reported out of committee?

If a bill is reported by a committee, it goes to its respective chamber (House or Senate), where it is debated by the full chamber and voted up or down as described below.

1. The First Reading: The bill title is printed in the calendar of the chamber in which it is being considered (the House or Senate). Once on the calendar, the bill goes to a second reading.

2. The Second Reading: The clerk reads the title of the bill to the chamber. The bill is explained by its patron to the chamber. The delegates debate the merits of bill and may propose amendments. The bill with or without amendments is voted on by the chamber. If it passes, it is considered "engrossed" – no more amendments can be made – and proceeds to a third reading.

3. The Third Reading: The day after the second reading, the engrossed bill is voted on by the delegates in a recorded roll call. If it passes, it goes to the other chamber to be considered; the process of considering the bill – committee vote, first, second and third reading – is the same. If the bill passes both chambers, it goes to the governor.

What you can do

Call, email, or fax your legislator to urge his or her support or opposition.

Get your like-minded friends, co-workers, etc. to do the same.

Write letters to the editor of your local newspapers urging your legislator to support or oppose the bill.



What happens after a bill passes both the House and Senate?

A bill that has passed both the House and Senate is sent to the governor.

The governor can:

Sign the bill into law. If the governor takes no action on a bill within seven days of its passing both the House and Senate, the bill automatically becomes law.

Veto the bill. The bill returns to the House and Senate for reconsideration. The legislature can override the governor's veto and enact the bill into law with a two-thirds vote in each house.

Send it back to the legislature with recommend amendments. The House and Senate debate the amendments. If both houses approve the amendments, the bill becomes law. If the amendments are rejected, the original bill returns to the governor to be reconsidered.

What you can do

Call, email, and fax the governor to ask him or her to sign or veto the bill.

Write letters to the editors of influential newspapers urging the governor to sign or veto the bill.

What happens to a bill signed into law by the governor?

Once a bill is approved by the governor, it becomes law effective on the following July 1st. The state agency responsible for the policy area addressed by the new law will then draft regulations directing how the law will be implemented. It is important for advocates to ensure that the regulations comply with the intent of the legislation. You can monitor the development of these regulations at The Virginia Regulatory Town Hall, a free online resource that allows users to find and track regulations. Before being adopted, draft regulations are generally subject to a 90-day public comment period. Any citizen may submit written comments (electronically or hard copy) regarding proposed regulations. The website for The Virginia Regulatory Town Hall is townhall.virginia.gov.

What you can do

Track and monitor regulations.

Submit written comments to the proposed regulations.

Write letters to the editor about whether the regulations comply with the intent of the bill.

Advocates can provide public comment to councils and boards. Meetings of boards and councils affiliated with the executive branch are always open to the public. These boards and councils frequently schedule time during their meetings for public comment. Meeting times, locations, and agendas are posted on each board or council's website.

Section Four:

Understanding the budget process

Public policy advocacy often involves budget issues. New services or initiatives may require new state funding, and identifying and approving the funding for new initiatives are major activities of both the executive and legislative branches. Having a basic understanding of the budget process will help you advocate.

Virginia has a biennial budget system, which means it adopts a two-year budget. The biennial budget is enacted into law in even-numbered years, and amendments to it are enacted in odd-numbered years. For example, the 2016-2018 biennial budget was adopted by the 2016 General Assembly.

Developing the Commonwealth's budget takes many months and involves many participants including the public, the governor and his or her staff, cabinet secretaries, agency heads and the General Assembly. The process includes five distinct phases:

1. Agency budget preparation phase

State agencies analyze their programs and needs through a strategic planning process. Based on this analysis, agencies prepare and submit proposed budgets to the executive branch Department of Planning and Budget (DPB), generally early in the fall.

What you can do

- Provide public comment to state agencies' councils and boards
- Attend and participate if public hearings are held
- Write or speak directly to agency heads to recommend funds for new initiatives

2. Executive branch budget development phase


DPB analyzes the budget requests of agencies to verify costs, confirm the need for services, investigate any alternatives for funding, and identify policy issues for the governor's consideration. This analysis takes place during the fall.

In the late fall, the governor and cabinet secretaries work together to prepare a proposed budget, reflecting the Administration's priorities.

The governor submits budget proposals to the General Assembly on or before December 20 in the form of a budget bill. He or she also distributes a budget document to explain the proposals.

What you can do

- Call, email, or fax the governor and cabinet secretaries to urge them to propose funding for a particular policy initiative.
- Meet with the governor's staff and/or cabinet secretaries to discuss the need for new funding.
- Write letters to the editors of influential newspapers in support of new funding.



Having a basic understanding of the budget process will help you advocate.

3. Legislative action phase

The General Assembly convenes each year on the second Wednesday of January. The governor's proposed budget is submitted to the General Assembly in the form of a "bill." In each house, the budget bill is referred to its "money" committee – the Appropriations Committee in the House and the Finance Committee in the Senate. These committees hold public hearings and committee discussions. Committee members may introduce amendments to the budget bill.

After review by each of these committees, the amended budget bill is brought to the floor of each house where other amendments may be made. Each house then votes on the amended budget bill. After each house passes its own version of the budget bill, the bill "crosses over" to the other house where it is again debated and voted on. Before the General Assembly adjourns, a conference committee resolves any differences between the versions passed by the two houses.

The General Assembly then sends the budget bill to the governor for his or her signature.

What you can do

- Testify at the committee hearings
- Meet with your legislator to request that he or she propose an amendment
- Call, email, or fax your legislator to ask him or her to support or oppose specific budget amendments
- Get your like-minded friends, co-workers, etc. to do the same
- Write letters to the editor of your local paper expressing support or opposition for particular budget amendments

4. Governor's review phase

The governor reviews the budget bill passed by the General Assembly. He or she may sign it, veto the entire bill or certain line items, or recommend amendments. If the governor vetoes the bill or any items of the bill, the bill goes back to the General Assembly during a reconvened session in the spring. If he or she recommends amendments, the bill is returned to the reconvened session for consideration and action by the General Assembly on the governor's proposed amendments.

What you can do

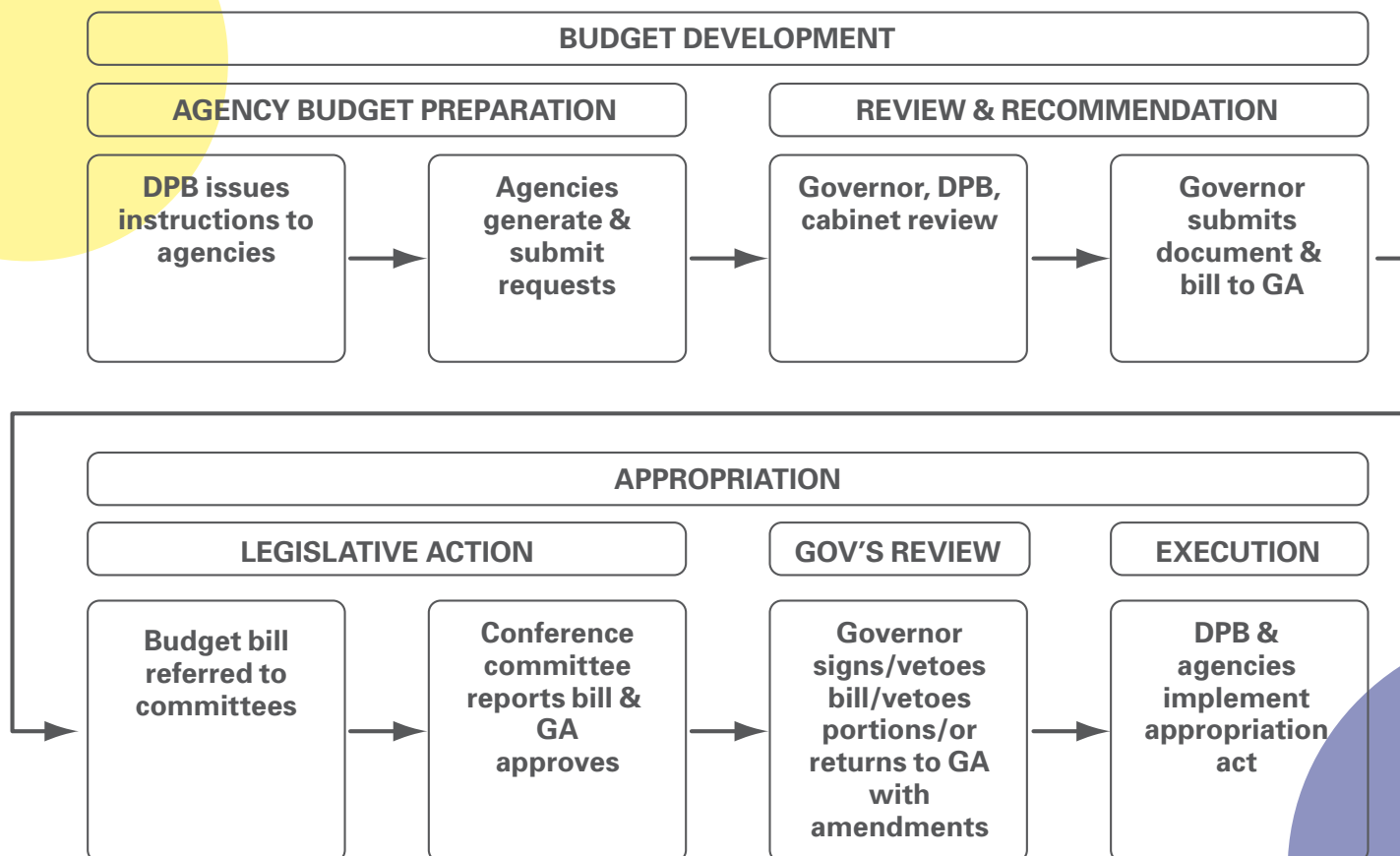
- Call, email, and fax the governor to ask him or her to support or oppose specific budget amendments
- Write letters to the editor of your local paper expressing support for or opposition to particular amendments

5. Budget execution phase

The budget passed by the General Assembly and enacted into law goes into effect on July 1 in even-numbered years and on the date of passage in odd-numbered years.

(Budget information taken from <http://www.dpb.virginia.gov/budget/faq.cfm>)

A chart of the budget process





1in5kids.org
The Campaign for Children's Mental Health

Visit Voices at vakids.org for fact sheets on many issues related to child well-being.

Appendix Advocacy resources

Voices for Virginia's Children: vakids.org

Voices' online tool allows you to email your legislators directly from our website. Sample letters and fact sheets are available on many issues related to child well-being. Also, you can sign up for our emails that include timely advocacy and legislative updates regarding a variety of children's issues including mental health, health, foster care, early care and education, and family economic success.

Virginia's KIDS COUNT Data Center: datacenter.kidscount.org/va

Virginia's KIDS COUNT Data Center allows you to access many key indicators on the well-being of Virginia's children across a variety of issues. When you talk with legislators, it is useful to share with them any available evidence to support why the issue is important and how the solution is supported by data from their own district.

The Campaign for Children's Mental Health: 1in5kids.org

The Campaign for Children's Mental Health, led by Voices for Virginia's Children, is a multi-year sustained effort to make mental health services more available and accessible to the children in Virginia who need them, regardless of where the children live or what "system" identifies their needs.

Virginia General Assembly: viriniageneralassembly.gov

The General Assembly website is an excellent resource for advocacy information. Bill text and the status of legislation are updated rapidly during the legislative session. You can also find out which delegate and senator represent you and learn more about them.

Virginia Legislative Information System: lis.virginia.gov

On this website you can read and monitor bills and track their progress during the session. You can access committee and subcommittee agendas and other documents, and research legislative activity from the current and previous sessions.

Legislative Information

House: 804-698-1500

Senate: 804-698-7410

Virginia Regulatory Town Hall: townhall.virginia.gov

The Virginia Regulatory Town Hall is a comprehensive source of information about regulations in Virginia. The Town Hall allows you to find regulations and track proposed changes, as well as to submit on-line comments about regulatory changes.

About Voices for Virginia's Children

Voices for Virginia's Children wants every child in Virginia to grow up in a safe and stable environment with the ability to thrive. We are the only multi-issue, statewide, child advocacy organization in the Commonwealth. Nonprofit and non-partisan, we champion public policies that improve the lives of Virginia's 1.9 million children. We are home to the KIDS COUNT Data Center for Virginia, thanks to a partnership with the Annie E. Casey Foundation. For more than 20 years, we have tracked multiple indicators of the well-being of Virginia's children and use that information to identify unmet needs and inform policy recommendations. We advocate for solutions that improve the problems facing some of the Commonwealth's most vulnerable children – including young children, those in the foster care and juvenile justice systems, those with mental health issues, and those living in poverty.

You can learn more about Voices and how to support our work at vakids.org.