

The Legislative Process – How A Bill Becomes Law

The Connecticut General Assembly is formally in session once a year – February through May in even-numbered years, and January through June in odd-numbered years. While in session, state legislators consider thousands of legislative proposals, called bills. Two to three hundred of these bills will survive the process and be enacted into law, while the thousands remaining will “die.” Even when the legislature is out of session, committees and individual legislators work on developing proposals – so state legislative work is a year-round job. The HBRA of Connecticut reviews every proposal and works with the legislature and state agencies in and out of session to represent our members’ concerns.

Even if a bill “dies” at some point during the session, the proposal contained in the bill can be resurrected as amendments to other bills almost up until the gavel falls at midnight on the last day of the session (i.e., adjournment). **Therefore, constant communication with legislators about an issue may be necessary until the very end of the session.**

The following is an overview of the legislative process in Connecticut:

Proposing a bill: Anyone can propose an idea for a bill by passing it on to a legislator who files it with the clerk’s office in the House of Representatives or Senate. The clerk’s office assigns the bill a number. All House bills begin at number 5,000, while numbers 1 to 4,999 are reserved for Senate bills. The clerk’s office then sends the bill to the appropriate committee having primary jurisdiction over the matter.

The committee/public hearing process: Unlike Congress and most other states, committees in the Connecticut General Assembly are joint House and Senate committees. They are co-chaired by a Representative and a Senator from the majority party in each chamber. The committee acts as the bill’s overseer and decides if it should continue on through the legislative process. The committee’s co-chairs may decide to “hold” a bill by not allowing it to receive a public hearing or a vote and thereby killing it. A bill may have to pass through several committees for approval. If even one committee rejects it, the bill is considered dead. Any committee can also change - or amend - the bill. The change can be minor or a total rewrite. This can be a way to revive a dead bill. Before the original committee to which the bill was assigned can approve or amend a bill, the committee must hold a public hearing to allow the public and government officials to comment on it. The committee can accept or reject ideas expressed during public hearings. Subsequent committees that look at the bill do not hold additional public hearings before acting on it. Whenever a bill is first referred by a committee to the House or Senate floor for further action, it receives a File #.

House and Senate votes: Each committee has a deadline for approving bills and passing them on either to other committees or to the House or the Senate floor for a vote. The House and Senate may also refer the bill to other committees or may vote on the bill and either pass, amend or reject it. If one chamber amends it, the bill goes back to the other chamber for another vote. A bill has to be passed by both the House and the Senate with the same language to be “enacted.”

The Governor’s role: A bill approved by both chambers (House and Senate) is sent to the governor to be signed into law. If the governor vetoes a bill, a two-thirds vote in both the House and the Senate is needed to override the veto. If the governor neither signs nor vetoes the bill within a certain time, it automatically becomes law.

Public Acts and general statutes: Once a bill is signed by the governor, it is referred to as a “public act” and is given a new number that includes the year of passage (e.g., PA 99-101, PA 06-217). Eventually the public act will be “codified” into state law books with yet a new number, at which point it’s referred to as a section of the Connecticut General Statutes (e.g., C.G.S. section 8-25).

Regulations: After a bill has become law and if it confers authority on a state agency, the appropriate state agency will draft regulations to implement or enforce it. The agency must either hold public hearings or accept written comments on the draft regulations to give the public a chance to express their views. The agency then issues its final regulations but the final step in passing a regulation, unique to Connecticut, is approval by the legislature’s Regulations Review Committee.