

# Connecting with Your Legislators: A Guide for New Mexico Libraries





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# Why Your Library Should Get Involved

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Your state and federal legislators must deal with thousands of new issues every year—some of which may affect your library’s operations and earnings. Legislators want to make the best possible decisions on behalf of their constituents, but they cannot be experts in all areas. In considering bills, they often must rely on others to bring information to their attention. They count on their district staffs, the staffs of state or federal agencies and departments, advocacy groups, and in particular, their constituents.

That’s where libraries come in. Lawmakers may know very little—or even hold misperceptions—about library operations. Other constituent groups may be encouraging legislators to introduce or vote for legislation that could have a detrimental impact on your library and your ability to serve your patrons. Legislators need to hear from you in order to understand the entire situation accurately and thoroughly.

*Without your participation, others will influence or control legislative decisions that may profoundly affect your library.*

## **There’s strength in numbers**

Your library may be able to amplify its message to legislators by working with libraries with the same interests and concerns—such as New Mexico Library Association (NMLA), New Mexico Consortium of Academic Libraries (NMCAL), and the Librarians Section of the New Mexico Municipal League (NMML), the New Mexico School Libraries Task Force or even your regional libraries. Legislators need to know when an industry or trade group is affected by proposed legislation, especially when a hot-button issue arises.

The American Library Association (ALA), the NMLA Legislation Committee and the New Mexico State Library (NMSL) provide information about New Mexico libraries to elected officials and government agencies whenever possible, especially through ALA’s government relations office in Washington, D.C. But lawmakers, especially at the state level, always pay closer attention to the voters in their own district.

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# Watch Out for Conflicts

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Make sure the position your library advocates to legislators does not conflict with that of your library's parent organization. A position that may seem to be in the library's best interests actually could contradict the parent's existing legal requirements, contracts, or policies.

You will need to find out who handles government relations (GR) activities for your parent organization. While some organizations hire GR specialists as full-time staff, others may assign GR responsibility to the public relations staff, president's office, or other department. Some may contract with outside consultants or lobbyists. Set up a meeting or conference call to inform these people of your library's legislative concerns and ask for their help in reaching out to legislators. You may want to include your boss and other senior management.

The GR staff may already be working on your issues, but they could be totally unaware of the specific ramifications for your library. Institutional libraries, in particular, may need to educate the GR staff about issues impacting the library, especially the financial impact. GR personnel are often immersed in issues involving higher education administration—library issues typically are not on their radar screen at all. Be prepared to teach them about library operations and finances.

It's possible your parent's GR staff will be occupied with organization-wide issues and won't have the time to deal with your library's special concerns. If this is the case, find out if your organization has rules concerning contacting legislators on your own, either as an official representative of the library or as a private citizen. Share your specific plans with the GR staff and ask for their feedback before approaching legislators.

## **Your tax status**

Nonprofit organizations, including tax-supported entities such as municipal/county libraries, school libraries and university libraries, are still eligible under federal law to participate in advocacy and government relations. Even if your library or your library's parent organization holds a 501(c)3 tax status, you are still entitled to contact your lawmakers and lobby for specific legislative action.

However, nonprofits that devote substantial amounts of staff time and money to government relations need to file special forms with the Internal Revenue Service. Most libraries are not likely to commit enough resources to fall in that category, but you should check with the IRS to be sure: [www.irs.gov](http://www.irs.gov)

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# Who Are Your Legislators?

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Grassroots participation begins by finding out the names of your legislators and their contact information. There are a number of places you can check:

**Online:** Contact information for both state and federal legislators is available online:

New Mexico State Legislature:

[www.nmlegis.gov](http://www.nmlegis.gov)

You can also look up your members of the U.S. House of Representatives and U.S. Senate at their respective web sites:

[www.house.gov](http://www.house.gov) (includes search by zip code)

[www.senate.gov](http://www.senate.gov)

You can also utilize the Capwiz, a Legislative Action Center put together by the ALA:

<http://capwiz.com/ala/nm>

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# Tracking State and Federal Legislation

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The ALA tracks federal bills affecting libraries and reports on those bills via Capwiz. There are literally thousands of bills introduced across the nation each year that potentially could have some sort of impact on libraries.

For a current call to action list of the federal bills actively tracked by the ALA, go to:

<http://capwiz.com/ala/nm>

Most bills do not become law, though. Each bill is assigned to at least one committee for further research, discussion, and revision. A committee may alter a bill substantially and then send it on to the House or Senate for a vote. But the majority of bills never get that far. However, sometimes a bill moves rapidly through the legislative system to a final vote, so it's important to contact your lawmakers right away if something affecting your library has been introduced. You should alert the NMLA Legislation Committee about your concerns and how particular proposals would impact your library.

Here are some suggestions for tracking legislation on your own:

**State bills:** The New Mexico State Legislature web sites provide the full text of bills and amendments as well as their current status. You can usually look up bills by number or keyword. The amount of information about a bill varies by the location of the bill within the legislature. The site also offers a free service to alert you by e-mail when a bill's status has changed or a new bill on a specified topic has been introduced.

<http://www.nmlegis.gov/lcs/billfinder.aspx>

If you plan to track bills, you should familiarize yourself with the lawmaking process for the state. You can contact the information office at the state house for information on the lawmaking process.

Each year during the New Mexico State Legislative Session, the NMLA Legislation Committee sends regular emails out via the NMLA listserv and also writes a report for the NMLA newsletter. They contain information on bills that pertain to libraries around the state. You can join NMLA and subscribe to these informational newsletters at [www.nmla.org](http://www.nmla.org).

**Federal bills:** The Library of Congress maintains the Thomas website (named for Thomas Jefferson), which features extensive information about the U.S. Congress plus a search engine to look up any House or Senate bill.

[www.congress.gov](http://www.congress.gov) or <http://thomas.loc.gov>

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## Getting to Know Your Legislators

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It's important to cultivate a positive relationship with your legislators now, before any critical legislation arises. Legislators will be more likely to respond to your concerns on an issue later if they are already acquainted with your library and the value it brings to your community.

Also keep in mind that legislative committees meet year round and an estimate of the budget as well as the needs around the state is determined in the fall prior to the next legislative session. This is why you need to express your needs before the legislative session starts in January.

There are a number of casual ways to get to know your elected officials:

- **“Town hall” meetings.** State legislators and congressional representatives often hold public meetings with constituents in their districts. Some meetings may

be open forums where constituents can raise any question or comment; others maybe intended to gain feedback on specific topics. Legislators typically stick around afterwards to meet and greet attendees. Call your legislators' district offices or check their web sites for a schedule of meetings.

- **Organization meetings.** Lawmakers like to speak to civic and business groups, especially in election years. Invite legislators to address a meeting of your library or a local business group affiliated with your library.
- **Community events.** Legislators often come out to local events and activities where they can meet constituents. Contact event organizers to find out if legislators have been invited to participate, or check with district offices for schedules. Invite your legislators to adult or children's program events at your library.

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## Tours and Personal Visits

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For more extensive, one-on-one interaction with your legislators, you can arrange to pay a personal visit to their offices or invite them for a guided tour of your library.

Typically a visit is more appropriate when you have a specific issue or bill you want to discuss. A tour, on the other hand, offers you a chance to show the legislator how the library operates, describe ways the library benefits the district, and dispel any misperceptions. Elected officials do take time to visit businesses, schools, and other facilities in their districts, especially during legislative recesses.

### How to conduct a personal visit

- **Determine your agenda.** Your visit should have a clear purpose, such as spelling out how specific legislation impacts your library or asking the legislator to introduce new legislation to resolve certain problems. Craft your message before contacting the legislator.
- **Schedule the meeting.** Contact the legislator's district office and work with the scheduler to find an available time. Follow up with a letter confirming the date and time.
- **Keep to the point.** Arrive a few minutes early for your visit. Introduce yourself (including your title and library name) even if you have met the legislator previously, and provide your business card. Legislators are often short on time, so get down to business right away.
- **Affirm your expertise.** Briefly outline your library experience. If your visit concerns materials, explain the library's critical role in providing materials to the public.

- **Talk in terms they understand.** Many officials do not deal with education and library issues in depth regularly. Avoid using industry acronyms, abbreviations, or terminology such as “bundling” without explaining.
- **Give concrete examples.** Legislators want to know exactly how issues or proposed laws help or hurt their constituents. Don’t assume the legislator knows anything about library services. Be specific but don’t exaggerate or mislead. Don’t cite facts unless you’re absolutely sure. You may want to prepare a fact sheet in advance to give to the legislator.
- **Record questions.** Bring a small notepad to jot down any questions the legislator may have that you can’t answer on the spot.
- **Ask for support.** Wrap up the meeting by asking the legislator to support your position.
- **After the visit.** Follow up with a thank-you letter. Briefly restate your position, and be sure to include any information requested during the meeting.

## Tips for your visit

- **Busy legislators.** It’s possible the legislator’s schedule will be full when you call. You may be asked to meet instead with a staff person who handles the type of issue or legislation you want to discuss. You may even prefer to meet with staff, because they often have more time and are more knowledgeable about the details of the issue or bill. Staff will share your comments with the legislator.
- **Stay upbeat.** Always be polite and positive when meeting with lawmakers, no matter how you may feel about an issue or a legislator’s past actions. Use your visit to educate the legislator. Never display anger or threaten to vote against the legislator.
- **Joint visits.** Consider coordinating with other library administrators for a group visit to legislators. You still need to focus the visit on specific issues or legislation, but a group will make a stronger impression on the legislator.

## How to conduct a tour

- **Coordinate the visit.** If you are an on-campus library, you may have better luck scheduling a time with your legislator if the library is part of a campus-wide tour. Work with the school’s public relations office or other appropriate office to set this up.  
If your library is a part of a municipal/county government, you may want to work with them to create a community tour although you can invite them just for a tour of your facility if so desired.

Nonprofit libraries may want to work with other local merchants or organizations to create a community tour.

- **Plan the tour.** Prepare a tentative agenda for the visit. Don't expect the legislator to merely drop by for a casual look-around. Plan out what you want the legislator to see and hear while at your library. The tour should emphasize how your library benefits the district, and how proposed bills might affect the library.
- **Contact the legislator.** Call the district staff person responsible for the legislator's schedule to set a time and date. Be prepared to explain why a tour is important and what the legislator will learn from it. Follow up with a letter of confirmation and an agenda, if appropriate.
- **Finalize the agenda.** Prepare your entire staff for the tour, but especially those that may be called on to explain or demonstrate something to the legislator. Assemble a fact sheet about the library to give to the legislator.
- **During the tour.** The legislator should be accompanied by a library employee at all times, not left to wander around.
- **Follow up.** Send a thank-you note to the legislator and staff contact. Include any additional information.

### Tips for your tour

- **Clean the library.** Make sure the library looks its best. This maybe the only time your legislator visits.
- **Be flexible.** Your legislator could arrive early or late, may need to leave ahead of schedule, or may stay longer than expected. The legislator may also bring unannounced guests. Plan various versions of your tour agenda to accommodate any last-minute changes.
- **Parting gift.** You may want to give the legislator a shirt, mug, or other inexpensive imprinted item.

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## Writing to Your Legislators

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Letters are often the most effective means of contacting legislators. Legislators keep track of the letters they receive and use them to gauge public opinion on bills and issues.

A letter written on letterhead stationery and mailed via the postal service or faxed usually gets more attention from legislators than something sent by e-mail. Due to security screening procedures, mailed letters to Congress may be delayed. If time is of the essence, use fax.

However, the U.S. House of Representatives does offer an online service that enables you to e-mail a message directly to any representative:

[www.house.gov/writerep](http://www.house.gov/writerep)

The U.S. Senate site at [www.senate.gov](http://www.senate.gov) lists senators individually with links either to their e-mail address or to an online contact form that you can fill out with your message.

Most state legislators, although not all provide similar online contact services. Check the legislature's web site. No matter how you plan to send your letter, make sure it is properly addressed.

These salutations should go at the top of your letter:

**For state legislators:**

The Honorable \_\_\_\_\_  
New Mexico Senate (or)  
New Mexico House of Representatives

Dear Senator (or)  
Representative \_\_\_\_\_

**For federal legislators:**

The Honorable \_\_\_\_\_  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator \_\_\_\_\_  
(or)

The Honorable \_\_\_\_\_  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515  
Dear Representative \_\_\_\_\_

**Tips for your letter**

- **Be specific.** Your message should be clear and to the point. In the first paragraph state what issue you are writing about. Refer to specific bills by number and subject matter.
- **Be polite and positive.** Never write in an angry or threatening tone, regardless of your personal feelings. Avoid complaints and criticisms; instead offer constructive suggestions for improving the situation.
- **Provide examples.** If possible, describe how an issue or bill affects people or the local economy. Give supporting data to back up your position.

- **Assert your expertise.** Include a short description of your library experience. If you are writing about a materials matter, explain the library's vital role in furnishing materials to patrons.
- **Keep it short.** Longer is not better when it comes to letters. Try to keep your message to one printed page. Legislators receive tons of mail; lengthy letters do not impress them.
- **Request a reply.** Ask the legislator where they stand on your issue.
- **Signature.** Include your name, title, library name, parent organization if applicable, your business phone number, your business e-mail address, and the library's address (both physical and postal).

## Form letters and petitions

Form letters and petitions sometimes are used in an effort to show legislators there is substantial public support for a particular position.

**Form letters:** Some organized groups prepare a form letter, postcard, or e-mail message and may ask you to send it to the legislator. The group may even offer to send it on your behalf. While legislators do take note of these mass messages, they recognize that the letters are part of a group's campaign and that the individual senders did not go to much effort. As a result, form letters may not carry as much weight as personal letters.

**Sample letters:** Some groups may provide sample letters as a guide to writing a personal letter. These can be useful, as long as you don't merely repeat the wording in the sample letter. Describe the impact of the legislation in your own words.

**Petitions:** Depending on state law, citizens can initiate formal petitions to place issues on the ballot or recall an elected official. However, contrary to popular belief, legislators are not compelled to vote in any particular way just because citizens sign and submit a general petition. Some groups do take up petitions in hopes of pressuring legislators or garnering media coverage.

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## Calling Your Legislators

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Telephone calls to legislators can be effective right before a vote when there is no time for letters or visits. You can call your legislators' offices any time if you are simply seeking information or assistance.

If you are calling about a bill, ask to speak to the legislator directly. If the official is not available, ask to speak to the staff person who is handling your issue.

## Tips for your phone call

- **Be clear and concise.** Identify yourself, refer to the bill number, state your position clearly, briefly offer examples or supporting data, and ask for the legislator's support. Always be courteous and positive.
- **Rehearse.** Write your message down and practice saying it out loud before calling the legislator.

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## Talking Points

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Most legislators know a little about libraries in general but nothing about all the services the library provides. But legislators are keenly interested to learn more in order to understand the problems of their constituents and how proposed legislation might help or hinder.

Here are some points you might want to mention to your legislators:

### **Emphasize your library's impact on the local economy.**

Because the economy is a primary concern for all legislators, they especially will want to hear about your library's role in the local economy.

- The number of people your library employs.
- The circulation of materials of your library.
- The amount of money your library returns to the community by utilizing the NMSL's New Mexico Library Value Calculator. Located under quick links at [www.nmstatelibrary.org](http://www.nmstatelibrary.org)
- How your library aids local tourism, conference business, and literacy programs.

### **Explain how your library helps supports the institution**

Public school and higher education funding is always a pressing issue for legislators. They need to understand how your library contributes to the school's mission.

Municipal/County funded libraries as well as non-profit libraries should inform legislators of the contributions they make to their community's mission.

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# Preparation Begins at Home

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How can you ensure that you will get your message across to government leaders? The most effective way is to practice—by promoting the same message to your community leaders first.

If your local leaders fail to recognize the value of your library and don't acknowledge your professional expertise, then you'll have a tough time convincing state and federal officials. Like legislators, community officials and even campus administrators may be completely in the dark about your library's operations and true worth.

Get your immediate supervisor on board first, and then move on to other leaders.

- Schedule one-on-one meetings with key leaders to explain library operations, possibly over lunch or coffee. Tailor your information to the individual – make it your business to find out his/her interests. Also, know the library's statistics!
- Update these leaders regularly through e-mail, phone calls, or personal visits.
- Prepare presentations for the academic senate, student government, governing council, chamber of commerce, and other bodies. Create a fact sheet to hand out and leave time for questions.
- Use existing communications vehicles (newsletters and website, for example) to share information and reinforce your message. Keep your news media in the loop.

## Bibliographic Note:

*CONNECTING WITH YOUR LEGISLATORS: A Grassroots Guide for College Stores.* Washington, D.C.: NACS Government Relations Department, eBook was adapted to address New Mexico library issues to create this guide.

## SAMPLE LETTER

[Date]

The Honorable \_\_\_\_\_  
New Mexico Senate (or)  
New Mexico House of Representatives

Dear Senator (or)  
Representative \_\_\_\_\_

New Mexico public libraries are struggling to cope with unprecedented usage: job seekers are making use of computers and free access to the Internet to find employment. Families with extremely strained budgets are flocking to the library for books, CDs, DVDs, games, and programs — all free. Children are coming to the library in record numbers for afterschool help or a safe place to stay. Everyone from preschoolers to senior citizens are using the library as a free gateway to both fun and education as budgets are tighter and resources are scarce. At the same time, local gross receipt taxes, the major source of funding for public libraries, are decreasing.

Municipal and County public library budgets are being cut across the state and non-profit libraries are experiencing depleted grant funding from corporate sources. It is becoming impossible to supply the needed extra assistance at a time when libraries are being heavily used by New Mexico residents desperate for their services.

Due to this limited funding, we are asking members of the New Mexico Legislature to recognize the importance of libraries to our communities and to the livelihood of the citizens of the State of New Mexico by supporting the library General Obligation Bond Projects in Senate Bill 66.

Sincerely,

[Your Name]

[Library Name]

[Address]

[Phone]

[Email]

New Mexico Library Association  
Legislation Committee  
[www.nmla.org](http://www.nmla.org)  
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