



MLCRA Web Document
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LEGISLATIVE PROCESS: How a Bill Becomes a Law in Massachusetts

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The often lengthy process of making laws in Massachusetts requires advocacy at every step of the way and is accurately described by the adage: “the squeaky wheel gets the oil.” This process for bills of interest to MLCRA will be described in two installments in the Patriot.

Every two years - beginning in the odd year (e.g., 2023) and ending in the even year (e.g., 2024)- the Massachusetts Legislature (General Court) begins a new **legislative session**. A “bill” (legislative proposal for a new or amended law) may be filed by House and Senate members. The **filing** deadline for House and Senate members is the **third Friday in January** of the new session. In MLCRA’s case, Senator Jehlin and Senator Lovely have been among those who have filed bills on our behalf. Bills may be filed in either the House or Senate and heard first in either branch.

Any citizen may also ask his or her legislator to file a bill for them “by request.” These bills do not necessarily have the support of the legislator who files them.

Initially, the House or Senate Clerk assigns a “docket number” to each bill. As the Clerks compile a list of all filed legislation, each bill receives a “bill number” and goes to the appropriate Joint Committee for a hearing. Each Joint Committee has a Chair, Co-Chair and Members assigned by the House Speaker and Senate President.

The Joint Committees then schedule **hearings** on each bill, typically grouped with other bills addressing similar or related issues. Hearings are open to the public and any interested party may attend and address the Committee or submit written testimony regarding any bill. MLCRA has submitted both written testimony and attended hearings for bills we support. The Committee holds an Executive Session to make recommendations on each bill. These may include: “ought to pass,” “ought to pass with an amendment,” “ought not to pass,” or a “study order.” It is common for the Committee to redraft a bill and for that bill to be given a new number. This usually happens when several similar bills are combined.

Bills given a favorable recommendation continue to the next step of the process – **bill readings** – of which there are three. The **First Reading** occurs when the Joint Committee recommendation is sent either to the Committee on Steering & Policy, or the Committee on Ways & Means (any finance-related bill). Each branch has its own Steering & Policy and Ways & Means Committees. Health care related bills may be sent to the Committee on Health Care Financing before going to Ways and Means. MLCRA supported bills have had First Readings.

The **Second Reading** occurs when either Steering & Policy or Ways & Means releases the bill and it is placed in the Orders of the Day (House or Senate agenda for the day, either formal or informal). During informal sessions, no roll calls are taken and only non-controversial matters are discussed. A formal session requires public debate and a roll call vote. A favorable roll call vote or voice vote is needed to send the bill to the **Third Reading**.

Each branch has a Committee on Bills in Third Reading. This committee checks bills for correct citations and legal technicalities. Once released by this committee, the bill goes to the House or Senate where it can be debated and amended again. A bill that has gone to the floor for debate then has a vote to pass the bill for **engrossment**. An engrossed bill then goes to the other branch to repeat the Third Reading and engrossment steps. If both branches pass the identical version of the bill it goes for a final vote of **enactment** in both branches. If there are differences between the House and Senate versions of the bill, a **conference committee** (including appointed members from both branches) may be appointed to work out the differences before it can be enacted.

An enacted bill then heads for the Governor's desk. The **Governor** may:

- >**sign the bill** and it generally becomes law in 90 days (a bill may also become law without signing, if the legislature is in session)

- >**veto the bill** (which the legislature may override with a 2/3 majority vote) If the legislative session has concluded, then the Governor must sign it for it to become law or it is considered a **pocket veto**

- >**send the bill back** to the legislature with recommendations for changes

If a bill is not passed by the end of the two-year session it does not become law, and the process needs to be repeated in the next session.

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