

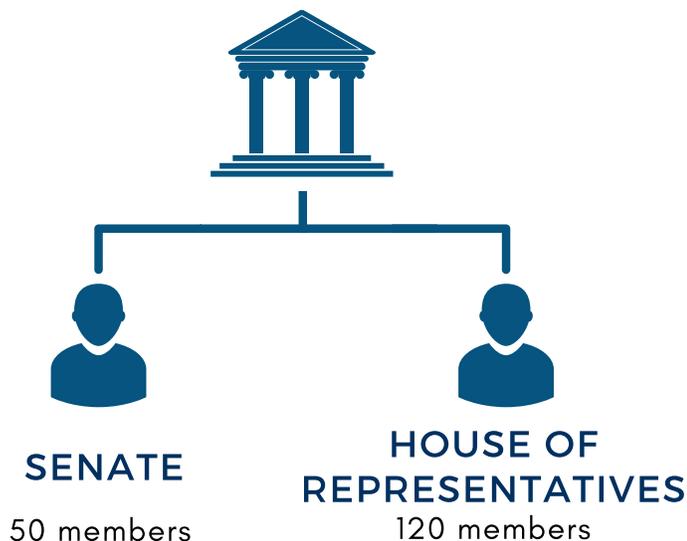
ADVOCACY

The act of speaking up and taking action is called advocacy. Services for individuals living with brain injury are often determined by decisions made at the legislative level of government. Every citizen in North Carolina has a right to share their voice and be heard by public officials. Even though it may feel better in the moment to argue, blame, or rant about the issues affecting your life, concise and personal testimony can be more effective. Though it may be daunting, real change can come about when people with brain injury speak up or have someone to speak on their behalf, if needed.



GENERAL ASSEMBLY

The North Carolina General Assembly (NCGA), or legislature, is made of two bodies or houses who are responsible for making and passing state laws, also known as statutes. Each legislator is voted for by citizens in their respective district in North Carolina and serves for two years. The legislature convenes in even-numbered years for shorter sessions, and every odd numbered years for its long session. Legislators are also involved in various committees to address specific issues.



YOUR ROLE

The legislation process can often be confusing and overwhelming to know how you can get involved. After a bill is drafted, it is referred to a committee for discussion. The House & Senate both get together for a session every year in the chamber to present calendared bills before deciding if those bills should be tossed, amended, and/or smoothed out into a law.

Your voice can make the difference between voting for or against a specific piece of legislation. If a legislator doesn't hear from their constituents (residents in their district) about an issue, they will have to make a guess as to what the public would want. As they are elected officials, if enough people make their thoughts known it is more likely to influence a vote. One voice in a crowd will not be as loud or have as much of an impact as a group of people saying the same thing. By advocating, you are a part of a movement and discussion larger than just one person. Individuals with brain injury, families, professionals, and their allies have a message that is impossible to ignore.



WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Advocacy involves identifying barriers to a life that is inclusive and addressing those concerns with the right people and organizations. In many cases, a person with a brain injury will advocate for better healthcare treatment, accommodations for disability, and/or for representation in legal matters. Anyone can become an effective advocate for themselves when prepared with the right information and resources. You do not need you be in this alone. You might seek out an advocate, such as a case manager, attorney, family members and/or friends to help out.



Download a Bill Tracker App or visit bill tracking websites

You can search, track, and report on legislation for any state and US Congress. The NC General Assembly website includes bill look-up by keyword, number, etc. Apps and other websites include Govtrack or TrackBill.



Find out who represents you and contact your legislator

Keep it short, sweet, and simple, referring to bills by their number, title, and sponsor. Use your own words to make it more personalized and have resources to back up your reasoning (rather than using opinions or ranting to persuade). Address your letter to a specific individual and include your contact information.



Testify at a hearing or committee meeting

Legislators are divided up into committees for certain topics and have a hearing to collect testimony for bills. This is your chance to speak your mind and suggest changes before the committee takes any action. The **NC Brain Injury Advisory Council** may have more ideas on how you can get involved at the state level. Visit www.ncdhhs.gov/assistance/disability-services/traumatic-brain-injury for more information.



Learn more

- Stronger NC: strongernc.org
- NC General Assembly: www.ncleg.gov
- Brainline: brainline.org
- Disability Rights NC: disabilityrightsn.org
- NC Advocates for Justice: www.ncaj.com
- NC Justice Center: www.ncjustice.org
- NC Council on Developmental Disabilities: nccdd.org

WHEN VISITING

Every legislator is different, but there are certain tips to make the best impression you can when visiting them. Remember to always thank staff and the person you are meeting for their time at the beginning, afterwards, and with a follow-up note to their office. In your follow up letter/email, remind the individual who you are and the issue you were there to discuss. Maintain eye contact and shake their hand at the meeting's beginning and end.



DRESS TO IMPRESS

Think about if you were meeting someone for the first time and their clothes had holes, stains, or were unkempt. It may be more difficult to pay attention to their message because you were looking at their messy hair. Dressing up a little more professionally in a blazer/dress pants or dress/skirt can leave a good impression and help you feel confident.

PLAN AHEAD

Scheduling a meeting ahead of time increases the chance of your representative being available. Be on time, if not 10-15 minutes early to the meeting. Buildings often have multiple floors and rooms that can be confusing to navigate. Account for travel, parking, and finding the room when scheduling.

BE POLITE

Sometimes the representative might not be available to meet - even if you schedule an appointment! Try not to get upset or mad, though. You may not meet directly with your representative, but their staff that works with them are the next best thing. Ask if they are available to talk and leave materials with them to pass along.

BE PREPARED

Be sure to know and structure your information beforehand. Avoid getting off track, using opinions as facts, or losing sight of the issue at hand. If you struggle with staying on topic, bring someone along to keep you on topic or write down the information beforehand with bullet points to refer to. Be prepared to give some background on brain injury or statistics.

BE FLEXIBLE

Have quick talking points written down for you to refer to. Your scheduled 30 minute meeting may get cut short to 5 minutes. Practice what you might say if you only had an elevator ride with the person. Ask yourself, What is the problem you are trying to address? Why is it important for you and others to fix? What is the solution you propose?

SHARE

Your personal story is often a way to connect with others and make the issue more than just words on a page. Explain why you are there, as well as how the issues and their decisions affect you. Try not to be so detailed that the message you are trying to say gets lost or you make the individual feel uncomfortable with too much personal details.



WHEN WRITING OR CALLING

You might contact your legislator or individual in government for a position on a council, to comment on a bill, or any number of situations. It may be harder to connect to a story or a voice when it is not standing in front of you. That means that any writing or calls should be meaningful and specific. Any way you can help them relate to you and commit to understanding your experience, the larger the impact you can have.

KEEP IT BRIEF

- Strive to keep your letter close to a single page addressing one issue or bill. If you are referring to bills, do so by number, title, and sponsor.
- Avoid putting in additional information that may distract the reader. Follow your introduction with a brief statement of your issue and explanation of why it is important.
- When calling, practice or write down what you plan to say. This may prevent getting off topic or feeling nervous.

IDENTIFY YOURSELF

- Describe what brings you to this issue and/or the organization you are a part of. Emphasize how their decision impacts you. Include pictures or articles that cover your story.
- Use your knowledge and experience to educate. Avoid using opinionated statements as facts.
- Research your representative to help make a connection. Investigate their area, previous sponsored bills, or committee participation.

ALLOW FOR FOLLOW-UP

- Include specific contact information for yourself and offer to act as a resource should they have questions or information is needed.
- Request a time to meet in person to discuss the issue further and hear more about the process and legislator's views.
- If you have called and have not received a reply in a week, perhaps follow up with an email or letter. Be polite and understanding, as they have very busy schedules.

BE THOROUGH

- Re-read your letter looking for grammatical and spelling errors. Ask another person to read over it or read it aloud.
- Ensure your letter is addressed correctly to the appropriate Senator or Representative.
- Avoid using informal, slang, or abbreviated language. Instead of criticizing or making demands for change, ask for the legislator's views and their support, indicate likely effects, and suggest an alternative approach.