2026

Government Relations Basics Toolkit

ASSOCIATION OF CHAMBER OF COMMERCE EXECUTIVES

Western Association of Chamber Executives

What This Toolkit Is

The Government Relations Basics Toolkit is a practical resource for chamber CEOs and professional staff who are leading or building a government relations program. We created it with smaller chambers in mind, where staff capacity is limited and the demands on the executive's time are high.

This toolkit will help you:

- Understand why government relations is a core chamber function and make that case convincingly to your board, members and funders.
- Build the internal support, budget foundation and governance structures a government relations program requires.
- Create a policy agenda that is grounded in member priorities and credible to elected officials.
- Run a public policy committee that takes positions through a clear, defensible process.
- Engage your members as messengers, advocates and active participants in your advocacy work.
- Build and sustain the relationships with elected officials and community partners that make your advocacy effective.
- Communicate the value of your government relations work to every stakeholder who needs to understand it.

The toolkit includes written guides, practical frameworks and ready-to-use tools and templates. The tools are immediately usable, but also adaptable to meet your chamber's needs.

What This Toolkit Is Not

This toolkit is not a legal guide. It addresses legal and ethical considerations, like lobbying registration, tax status, campaign finance and ethics rules, at an introductory level. We recommend consulting legal counsel for specifics needs or questions. Every state has different requirements, and the consequences of getting them wrong are real. Nothing in this toolkit substitutes for qualified legal advice.

This toolkit is also not a partisan playbook. The chamber's government relations work is nonpartisan by design. Our framework is grounded in economic competitiveness, driven by member priorities and evaluated by policy impact rather than party preference. This toolkit reflects and reinforces that orientation throughout.

Finally, this toolkit is not a ceiling. Chambers that are already operating sophisticated government relations programs will find some material here that covers familiar ground. The goal is not to define the outer limits of what excellent government relations work looks like. Our goal is to give every

chamber, regardless of current capacity, a foundation to build from and a clear direction to grow toward.

How to Use This Toolkit

The toolkit is organized into five modules that follow a logical arc from understanding to implementation. You do not have to work through them in order. Jump to the module that addresses your most pressing need. But if you are building a government relations program from the ground up, working through the modules in sequence will give you the most coherent foundation.

Each module follows a consistent structure:

- **Strategic Overview:** The "why" before the "how." Written for a chamber leader who needs to understand what's at stake before committing resources.
- **Practical Steps:** Action-oriented guidance written as if you're being advised directly.
- **Key Principles:** The rules that guide strong practice in this area, grounded in real chamber experience.
- **Strategic Questions:** Discussion prompts designed to surface real tensions and decision points for your board or leadership team.

A note on scale: every section of this toolkit is written with scale in mind. When a recommendation assumes more staff capacity than a small chamber has, a callout box provides a scaled-down version. If something feels out of reach given your current capacity, look for the callout.

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Module 1: Why Government Relations Matters

We believe that government relations is a core function of every chamber. It is not a specialty mission reserved for large organizations with dedicated staff. The decisions made at city hall, the state capital and Washington, D.C. have a direct impact on your community's economic future. They impact your member companies' ability to hire, grow and compete.

This module will give you the language and frameworks to understand this work, explain it to others and commit to it with confidence.

The Business Case for Government Relations

Chambers of commerce promote economic prosperity and community vitality. While missions and functions may vary, they tend to share core goals, including:

- Connecting and growing its businesses.
- Building and promoting their communities to attract residents, visitors, businesses and investors.
- Representing the unified voice of the employer community.
- Providing community leadership and convening key stakeholders to address their region's top challenges.

A key component to accomplishing these goals is government relations. Chambers must advocate for economic prosperity, a pro-growth policy environment and a competitive workforce.

There are many forces that shape the business environment, including markets, technology and workforce trends. But government sets the rules under which every one of your members operates. Zoning determines where they can locate. Tax policy determines how much of their revenue they keep. Licensing requirements determine who they can hire. Infrastructure investment determines whether their supply chains and customers can reach them. Regulatory policy determines the cost and complexity of their daily operations.

Governments at all levels make decisions that impact these operating conditions, whether your chamber is in the room or not. If your chamber is not engaged in the policy decisions that shape the business environment, someone else will fill that space.

The business case for chamber government relations is straightforward. Your members need someone fighting for the conditions that allow them to operate, grow and compete. The chamber is uniquely positioned to do that advocacy.

What's at Stake

Here are some of the most consistent ways that effective chamber government relations activity creates tangible value for members:

- **Tax and fiscal policy.** Property taxes, business license fees, sales tax structures and state income tax policy directly affect the cost of doing business. Chambers that engage on tax policy, consistently and with member backing, can ensure a strong business climate.
- **Regulatory environment.** Permitting requirements, environmental rules, labor regulations and professional licensing requirements all shape operational costs and complexity. When

regulations are proposed that would burden members unnecessarily, the chamber's voice can slow them, amend them or stop them entirely.

- **Workforce and education.** The availability of skilled workers is consistently among members' top concerns. Chamber engagement on workforce development policy helps build the talent pipeline members depend on.
- **Infrastructure and transportation.** Roads, broadband, public transit and utility infrastructure are preconditions for business activity. Chambers that advocate for infrastructure investment help secure the physical conditions that make commerce possible.
- **Economic development.** Land use policy, incentive programs and development regulations shape where investment goes and how fast communities grow. Chamber engagement in these decisions helps create the conditions for business attraction and expansion.
- **Community quality of life.** Public safety, housing affordability and amenities that attract and retain talent are increasingly important to members trying to recruit and keep skilled workers. These are legitimate government relations concerns, not just government affairs sideshows.

Government Relations is Core, Not Operational

Government relations is not a supplement to a chamber's mission. It is one of its most direct expressions of its purpose. When the chamber advocates for a competitive business climate, defeats a proposed regulation that would cost members money or helps win infrastructure investment that enables growth, it is doing exactly what it was organized to do.

If you treat government relations as optional work, then over time you will see the policy environment around your members deteriorate. Costs rise. Regulations accumulate. The business community's voice is absent from decisions that shape the local economy. Your members will notice.

Implementing an effective government relations program at your chamber can strengthen your reputation and improve your value proposition.

Government Relations vs. Political Action

One of the most common sources of hesitation about government relations work is the confusion between government relations and partisan political activity. Board members worry about the chamber "getting political." Funders ask whether the chamber will alienate stakeholders by taking sides. Staff wonder where the line is between advocacy and electioneering.

These are legitimate concerns, and they have clear answers. Understanding the distinction between government relations and political action is foundational to building a government relations program that your board, members and community will support.

Government Relations: Policy, Not Partisanship
Government relations is the work of engaging with government on policy issues that affect your members. It includes monitoring legislation and regulation, building relationships with elected officials and their staff, developing the chamber's positions on policy questions and communicating those positions through testimony, letters, meetings and member mobilization.

Government relations is issue-based, not candidate-based. The chamber does not care which party is in power. It cares whether the policy environment is good for business. Business leaders represent a variety of political interests and parties, and chambers work on behalf of all members.

Chambers should be nonpartisan – not neutral on policy. To do this, your chamber should have clear, well-reasoned positions on the issues that matter to its members. Evaluate government actions through the lens of their impact on economic competitiveness and business conditions, not through the lens of party affiliation.

Today's polarized political climate creates an "us-versus-them" division. While some people thrive on it, one of a chamber's enduring roles is to find common ground. Chamber leaders must adapt by strengthening their facilitation skills, fostering productive dialogue and promoting collaborative solutions to benefit the broader community.

Political Action: A Separate and Distinct Function
Political action is a separate function from government relations. It can include activities like contributing to campaigns, endorsing candidates running independent expenditures and more. The two functions are related, and many chambers do both. But this toolkit focuses on government relations, not political action.

Clearing Up Common Misconceptions

Several persistent misconceptions make chamber leaders hesitant to engage in this work. Here are the most common ones and the direct responses to each.

"If we take positions, we'll alienate half our members."

Chambers that have clear and transparent processes that are grounded in members' input, and deliberation can more easily combat this misconception. Ensure your priorities reflect what members broadly care about and your members understand how positions are taken. Create and communicate internal processes for navigating issues where member interests may conflict.

"We're too small to make a difference."

Your chamber's size and capacity matters less than consistency and credibility. A small chamber with a clear policy agenda, genuine member relationships and a reputation for showing up reliably has real influence with local and state officials. Elected officials count engaged constituents, not organizational headcount. A chamber that can deliver ten committed business leaders to a legislative hearing has more impact than a large organization that never mobilizes its members.

"Government relations is too expensive. We can't afford it."

The cost of this work scales with the program. A chamber CEO who attends city council meetings, meets with legislators twice a year and sends a quarterly policy update to members is doing meaningful work at minimal incremental cost. If you are just getting started, it is crucial that you create a realistic budget to support this function, both in terms of the resources and the time it will take to operate effectively. But the question is not whether you can afford a government relations program, it is whether you can afford not to have one, given what is at stake for your members.

"We'll lose our nonprofit status if we lobby."

Most chambers are organized as 501(c)(6) organizations. As a 501(c)(6), your chamber can engage in lobbying and government relations as a primary activity without jeopardizing its tax status. Political activity (direct candidate support) is more restricted and requires careful structuring. Consult your legal counsel for specifics, but do not let an unfounded fear of tax-status risk keeping your chamber on the sidelines.

"Neutrality protects our relationships with everyone."

This is perhaps the most seductive misconception. It feels true. If we never take a side, no one can be angry with us. But in practice, neutrality erodes the chamber's relevance. Elected officials stop calling when they want the business community's view, because the chamber doesn't have one. Members stop looking to the chamber for leadership on the issues that matter most. And other organizations with much narrower agendas will fill the space the chamber vacated.

The Return on Investment: What Effective Government Relations Delivers

Government relations investment is difficult to evaluate using the same metrics you would apply to an event or program. The outcomes are often less visible — a regulation that was never finalized, a tax that was not increased, a problem that got resolved before it became a crisis. And the timeline from investment to outcome can span years.

That does not mean government relations value is unmeasurable. It means you have to be deliberate about what you measure, how you frame it and how you communicate that value to members. The return on a strong government relations program shows up across four distinct areas.

Member Service and Retention
Government relations is one of the strongest drivers of member value that a chamber can offer. Done well, it can also be difficult for competitors to replicate. A networking event or awards program can be replicated by others in your market. An advocacy win that saves members money or reduces their regulatory burden cannot.

Government relations also provides a number of ways for members to get more engaged, like serving on policy committees, participating in legislative visits or taking action on issues that affect their business. These members will renew at higher rates than members who are not engaged. The chamber's government relations program provides them a reason to be part of something larger than themselves. It is a tangible return on their investment that goes beyond a listing in the member directory.

Even members who are not personally active in government relations benefit from knowing the chamber is working on their behalf. When a member gets a note from the chamber saying, "we fought this regulation and here's what it means for your business," that is a retention moment. It reminds the member why the chamber matters.

Regional Competitiveness
Chambers do not operate in isolation. Many of your members compete regionally, statewide, nationally and even globally. The policy environment in your community relative to neighboring communities, competing regions and other states is a significant factor in that competition.

Your chamber has a role to play in maintaining a competitive business climate and regulatory environment. The policy environment your chamber will influence is an important factor that companies will consider when deciding to locate, expand or leave your region.

Organizational Influence
A chamber with a credible, consistent government relations program becomes something that elected officials, state agencies and community partners need. They need the chamber's input when they're developing policy. They need the chamber's member network when they're building support. They need the chamber's credibility when they're trying to bring diverse stakeholders to the table.

That need translates into access, and access translates into influence. The chamber CEO who has built genuine relationships with key decision-makers gets calls before decisions are made, not

after. The chamber that has a well-known and respected policy process gets invited to the table on major community initiatives. This kind of organizational influence is both a government relations outcome and a force multiplier. It makes all other government relations work more effective.

Influence also attracts investment. Funders and major members are more likely to invest in a chamber that demonstrably shapes its community than in one that watches from the sidelines.

Communicating Value
When reporting government relations outcomes to your board, funders or members, organize your story around four categories:

- **Policy wins.** Specific legislative or regulatory outcomes the chamber helped achieve or prevent. Be concrete: the bill that passed, the regulation that was amended, the budget item that was funded.
- **Access and relationships.** Meetings secured, relationships established, invitations to participate in government processes. These matter even when they don't produce an immediate policy outcome.
- **Member engagement.** Members who participated in government relations activities, signed letters, attended legislative visits or served on the policy committee. Engagement is both an input and an output.
- **Agenda progress.** Movement on the chamber's stated legislative priorities, even when full wins haven't been achieved yet. A bill that moved out of committee for the first time is progress worth reporting.

Train yourself to report outcomes, not activities. "We attended three hearings" is activity. "We testified at the transportation committee and the committee chair specifically cited our members' concerns in her closing remarks" is an outcome. The difference matters, especially when you are making the case for continued investment.

How Chambers Engage in Government Relations

Chambers do not engage in government relations in a single, uniform way. The role a chamber plays on any given issue depends on the issue, the political context, the chamber's capacity and the strength of its relationships. Understanding these different roles helps chamber leaders make strategic choices about how to engage. It also helps them explain to others why the chamber is involved in ways that might not look like traditional government relations.

In our current politically charged climate, many chambers are being asked to act as, and are successfully serving as, unifiers. Chambers bring experience and success in advocating for members and community impact efforts. Through this work, chamber leaders have developed the skills needed to foster dialogue across divides and build consensus. Going beyond simply serving as conveners, they have become trusted sources of leadership on challenging issues.

However, community leadership can sometimes be more art than science. Chamber leaders frequently play different roles depending on the issue and its priority to its member organizations. Leadership is a spectrum. When advocating on certain priority issues, chamber executives may need to take a more uncompromising stand. This does not, however, mean they cannot serve as a unifying force for the community at large.

Educator
In this role, chambers inform members, the public and community leaders about policy issues that affect the business environment. This is often the entry point for chambers that are new to this work, and it remains a critical function for chambers at any level of program development.

Education can include policy briefings for members, reports on legislative developments, explainers on regulatory proposals, forums where business leaders can hear directly from elected officials and agency staff. The goal is to equip your members with the information they need to understand what is happening and why it matters to them.

Education is not a passive role. A chamber that helps its members understand complex policy issues is building the informed constituency that all other government relations work depends on. Members who understand the issues are more likely to engage, more credible when they do and more valuable as messengers when the chamber needs to mobilize.

Education is also often the least controversial role, which makes it a good entry point for chambers whose boards are hesitant about more direct advocacy. Once members are informed, the demand for the chamber to do more tends to follow naturally.

Collaborator
When operating in this role, chambers work alongside government, other organizations and community partners to address shared challenges. This role recognizes that many of the most important policy outcomes require cooperation across sectors. Chambers are often uniquely positioned to convene that cooperation.

Collaboration examples include partnering with the local school district on workforce readiness initiatives, working with the city on economic development strategy, joining a regional coalition to advocate for infrastructure investment, engaging with health systems and nonprofits on workforce housing. In each case, the chamber is not acting alone. It is bringing its network, its credibility and its convening power to a shared effort.

The collaborator role is particularly powerful when the chamber's interests align with those of organizations that don't typically think of themselves as business allies. When unlikely allies unite,

it sends a signal to policymakers that something important is happening. Examples include chambers with trade unions, faith-based organizations, the urban league and more.

Collaboration also helps chambers navigate issues where direct advocacy would be divisive. When the chamber is a co-convener rather than a solo advocate, it can engage in significant policy work without putting its own credibility or relationships entirely on the line.

Unifier

Chambers of commerce have proven their effectiveness as community changemakers leading to increased expectations from their constituencies. As a result, community members are now bringing new, oftentimes complex community issues to chambers, viewing them as trusted problem solvers. This shift has required chamber leaders to adapt and develop new leadership skills and approaches to meet elevated expectations.

When operating as a unifier, chambers bring diverse voices together around shared priorities. This can include building a policy agenda with input from stakeholders beyond the chamber's membership. This requires chambers to identify the major challenges to economic growth and community vitality and finding common ground on policy questions where their interests align.

This role can be the most visible on issues that transcend any single sector or community interest. This includes supporting broader societal initiatives, solving challenges that other institutions historically were charged with addressing and contributing to regional prosperity, all while maintaining core business support functions. Issues like childcare access, housing affordability and public safety can fall into this category.

Effective unification requires broad community input, active engagement and transparent processes. The legitimacy of the chamber's unified voice depends entirely on the integrity of the process that produced it.

Advocate

In this role, the chamber takes positions and actively works to influence policy outcomes. This is often what people think of first when they hear government relations, and it is a critical chamber function.

The advocacy role includes testifying before legislative committees, writing and delivering position statements, organizing state capital visits, mobilizing members to contact their representatives, hiring contract lobbyists on specific issues and publicly communicating the chamber's positions through media and member channels.

Effective government relations requires several things to be in place, including a member-driven process for taking positions, established relationships with the officials and staff, a credible,

mobilized member base that can demonstrate community support and a communication infrastructure that keeps members informed and engaged throughout the process.

This role carries the most direct policy impact. The goal is to build the capacity and credibility to advocate effectively. Ground your work in a transparent process that promotes member priorities.

Choosing Your Role on Each Issue

On any given issue, the question is not which role is correct in the abstract. It is which role is appropriate given the chamber's capacity, relationships and the nature of the issue. Some issues call for education and nothing more. Others call for full advocacy with member mobilization. Most fall somewhere in between.

Knowing when to play which role, and being intentional about it, is a sign of program maturity. Chambers that try to lead on everything spread themselves thin and lose credibility. Chambers that only support never build the capacity to lead when it matters most.

Key Principles

- **Government relations is core, not peripheral.** Advocacy for a competitive business environment is a direct expression of the chamber's fundamental mission. It is not a specialty function reserved for large organizations.
- **Engagement is not optional.** Chambers that choose not to engage on policy are not neutral, they are absent. In the arena of policy, absence means someone else's voice fills the vacuum.
- **Nonpartisan does not mean apolitical.** The chamber does not endorse candidates or advance partisan agendas. But it absolutely engages on policy, evaluating every issue through the lens of economic competitiveness and member impact, not party preference.
- **The chamber's breadth is its greatest asset.** No other organization in your community represents the full range of employers across industries, sizes and sectors. That breadth gives the chamber a legitimacy and weight that no narrow interest group can replicate.
- **Process protects everyone.** A documented, member-driven, board-approved position-taking process is the foundation of the chamber's credibility. It protects the executive, reassures the board and gives members confidence that their interests are being represented.
- **Choose your role intentionally.** The chamber does not have to play the same role on every issue. Educator, collaborator, unifier and advocate are all legitimate and valuable roles. Matching the right role to the right issue is a mark of program maturity.
- **Value must be communicated.** Policy outcomes are often invisible. The chamber's job is to make them visible to the board, members and funders in terms that connect chamber activity to outcomes that matter.

Strategic Questions for Your Leadership Team

Use these questions to open substantive conversations with your board, executive committee or leadership team. They are designed to surface real tensions and decision points, not generate easy agreement.

- If the chamber were silent on every policy issue for the next year, what would our members lose? What would our community lose? What would the chamber lose?
- When elected officials want to understand how a proposed policy would affect local businesses, do they call our chamber first? If not, who do they call and what would it take to change that?
- Does our board understand the difference between the chamber's government relations work and partisan political activity? If confusion exists, what is the cost of that confusion to the chamber's willingness to engage?
- Which of the four roles — educator, collaborator, unifier, advocate — does our chamber play well today? Which role represents the biggest gap between where we are and where we need to be?
- If you could point to one government relations outcome at next year's annual meeting and say, "this happened because the chamber showed up," what would that outcome be? What would it take to make it happen?

Module 2: Getting Started

Every government relations program starts somewhere. For some chambers, that starting point is a crisis, a legislative proposal that can't be ignored. For others, it is a quieter recognition that the chamber has been sitting on the sidelines too long and that members deserve more.

Either way, launching a program without a dedicated staff person, a large budget or years of institutional experience in policy work can be daunting. Take the first step by focusing on a small number of high-value activities and build deliberately from there.

This module covers the practical fundamentals of getting started, including the entry points that any chamber can use to begin building a presence in the policy arena, the budget considerations and the internal work of building the board and staff support to sustain the program over time. None of these steps requires a large upfront investment. All of them require commitment.

Common Entry Points

Chambers that build durable government relations functions typically start with one or two high-leverage activities, prove their value and use that momentum to grow. Trying to do too much too fast is one of the most common reasons new programs stall.

The four entry points below are reliable starting places for chambers at any stage of program development. Each one can be done immediately, with existing resources and no formal governance structure required. Think of them not as a checklist to complete but as a foundation to build on.

Building Relationships with Elected Officials
Relationships are the foundation of all government relations work. Everything else works better when decision-makers know who you are, trust your judgment and see the chamber as a credible representative of the business community. And the only way to build those relationships is to invest in them consistently, before you need them.

Start by identifying the elected officials who have the most direct influence over the policy issues your members care about. For most chambers, that list includes city council members, county commissioners, state legislators representing your region and your congressional delegation.

You do not need to build relationships with all of them at once. Prioritize based on who has jurisdiction over the issues closest to your members' concerns. Then make contact.

Schedule a one-on-one meeting. Invite the official to a chamber event. Show up at a public meeting or community forum where they will be present. The goal of this first contact is simply to be known. Make sure they are familiar with chamber and let them know that you want to be a resource to them on business and economic issues. Cultivate that relationship with regular contact over time.

For Small Chambers

Start by reaching out to your mayor or county executive. From there, reach out to your most senior state legislator and one member of your city or county council who has expressed interest in business issues. Build your connections from there.

Getting Better Informed
Developing habits and systems for staying current on the issues that matter to your community is a key component of government relations.

At the most basic level, this means reading. Subscribe to your state chamber's legislative alerts. Follow local government meeting agendas. Read the political beat coverage in your regional

newspaper. Set up Google alerts to track your region and key issues. Join relevant committees or working groups where policy issues surface early. Make it a practice to scan for issues that could affect your members' operating environment, even when nothing urgent is pending.

As your program develops, you may want more structured monitoring tools, bill tracking services, regulatory alert systems and relationships with lobbyists or policy staff who can flag emerging issues early. There are third party tools you can purchase, but many state legislatures offer free tracking tools. The goal is to cultivate the habit of paying attention, so that you are rarely caught off guard when something moves.

Getting informed also means learning the process. Understand how a bill moves through your state legislature, how local zoning decisions are made, how regulatory comment periods work. This procedural knowledge allows you to act at the right moment. A position taken too late, after a committee vote or a final rule, has no leverage.

For Small Chambers

Pick one information source and commit to it consistently. Your state chamber's legislative update, a weekly scan of city council agendas and one regional political reporter to follow on social media is enough to keep you meaningfully informed without consuming hours of staff time each week.

Learning the Legislative Process

You do not need to be a policy expert to run an effective government relations program. You need to understand the process well enough to know where influence is possible and when action is required.

Every level of government has its own procedural rules for how legislation is introduced, considered and enacted. At the local level, that might mean understanding how your city council structures its committee work, when public comment is accepted and how zoning or budget decisions move through the approval process. At the state level, it means understanding the legislative calendar, the committee system and how bills advance from introduction to floor vote. At the federal level, it means understanding the committee structure, the appropriations process and how the regulatory process works alongside legislation.

You do not need to master all three levels at once. Start with the level of government that most directly affects your members and learn that process well. Many state chambers or state chamber executive associations offer orientation programs for chamber executives that cover the state legislative process in detail. Many state capitols offer tours and briefings for business organizations. Your congressional delegation's district offices are often willing to explain federal processes to constituent organizations.

The investment in process knowledge pays compounding dividends. Every time you engage on a new issue, your understanding of how the process works helps you identify the right moment to act, the right people to contact and the right form of advocacy to deploy.

Keeping Members Informed

Member communication is both an entry point into government relations work and a core ongoing function. Before your chamber takes formal positions or mobilizes members for government relations, you can deliver significant value simply by keeping members informed about what is happening in the policy environment and what it means for their businesses.

A regular policy update, or even a brief paragraph in your existing member newsletter, signals to members that the chamber is paying attention to the issues that affect them. It builds awareness of the government relations function and creates the informed membership base that all future government relations depends on.

Start with what you already produce. Add a "Policy Watch" or "Issues We're Tracking" section to your newsletter. Include a brief update at your next board meeting. Post a summary of a relevant city council decision on your website. These are low-cost, high-visibility signals that the chamber is engaged.

As your program matures, member communication can become more structured and feature dedicated policy updates, action alerts, advocacy reports and annual program summaries. We'll cover member communication in greater depth later in the toolkit. The point here is that you do not have to wait for a sophisticated communications infrastructure to start informing your members. You can start this immediately.

For Small Chambers

Start small. Find a good news article about a key issue or priority and add a three sentence blurb and link to your existing e-newsletter. It takes just minutes to write, and it demonstrates to members, your board and elected officials that the chamber is paying attention.

Building Government Relations Into Your Budget

Government relations work costs money. Not always a lot of money, but resources are required and they need to be planned for if your program is going to last.

Start by creating a government relations line item in your budget, even if the initial allocation is small. This signals to your board that this is a program, not a side project. It creates accountability for how resources are being used. And it establishes the precedent that government relations is

part of the chamber's operating model year after year, not a special project that competes for discretionary funds.

The following categories represent the primary cost areas in a government relations program. Not every chamber will have expenses in all categories, and the amounts will vary significantly based on program scope and organizational size.

Staff Time
In most chambers, staff time is the largest government relations cost. When the chamber executive spends a morning attending a legislative committee hearing, that time has a cost. When a staff member prepares a member briefing on a pending regulation, that time has a cost. When you spend two hours building the relationship with a new city council member, that time has a cost.

Capturing staff time in the government relations budget does not mean you need to track every minute. It means making a reasonable estimate of what percentage of staff capacity goes to this function and reflecting that in the budget. For a chamber where the CEO is the only government relations resource, that might be 10 to 20 percent of the executive's time. For a chamber with a dedicated government relations staff person, it is likely closer to the full cost of that position.

Research
Government relations requires information about pending legislation, regulatory proposals, the policy positions of elected officials and other data to support the chamber's positions. Some of that information is free and some may require a subscription or a modest investment.

Research costs can include:

- Subscriptions to publications, policy updates or regulatory guidance relevant to your members' industries
- Bill and regulatory tracking services that monitor legislative activity and alert you when issues relevant to your members move
- A tool to conduct member surveys to gather input on policy priorities, which may involve survey platform costs, analysis time or both
- Membership in state or national chamber networks that provide research support and policy resources

For chambers just starting out, many of these costs can be minimized. Free tools, state chamber resources and shared research from coalition partners can supplement what the chamber produces on its own. As the program grows and the issues become more complex, the investment in research capacity pays dividends in the quality and credibility of the chamber's government relations.

Travel

Government relations work happens where government happens, which is often not where your office is. Travel costs are a frequently underestimated part of the government relations budget.

Travel expenses in a government relations program can include:

- Transportation and lodging for visits to the state capital during the legislative session.
- Travel to Washington, D.C. for federal advocacy days, congressional meetings or fly-ins.
- Transportation to local government meetings, public hearings and agency offices across your region.
- Attendance at conferences, policy forums or state chamber events where relationships are built and issues are discussed.

The scale of travel expenses depends heavily on the scope of your program. A chamber focused primarily on local government relations will have minimal travel costs. A chamber that is active at the state and federal level and participates in regional coalitions may require a more meaningful travel line.

Travel is often the first budget category to get cut when finances are tight. Resist that instinct where possible. The relationships built through in-person contact at the capital are not easily replicated through phone calls and emails.

Communications

Getting your positions and your program in front of the people who need to see them requires communication infrastructure. Some of that infrastructure is already in place in most chambers, like email systems, websites, social media accounts and member newsletters. The government relations budget should reflect the incremental costs of using those channels for policy communication.

Communications costs in a government relations program can include:

- Design and production costs for policy-specific publications, annual government relations reports or legislative agenda documents.
- Digital tools for member engagement on policy issues, like survey tools or grassroots advocacy software.
- Printing and mailing costs for position letters, legislative agenda documents or member briefing materials.

Like research, many communications costs can be minimized early on by using existing infrastructure and keeping materials simple. A clean, well-written PDF produced in-house and distributed through your existing email system is a perfectly credible policy communication. As your program grows and the issues require broader reach, the investment in more robust communications tools may be warranted.

Events

Relationship-building and member engagement in government relations often happen at events. The government relations budget should include realistic estimates for the events the program requires. Government relations events can include:

- Legislative receptions or briefings that bring elected officials and chamber members together in a relationship-building context.
- Policy forums or issue briefings where members hear from experts, officials or community leaders on issues the chamber is tracking.
- Capital visits or fly-ins where member delegations meet with legislators or congressional staff.
- Committee meetings and related hospitality for the chamber's public policy committee or working groups.
- Recognition events that honor elected officials or community partners who have supported the chamber's policy priorities.

Events are one of the highest-value activities in a government relations program — they build relationships, educate members and create visible demonstrations of the chamber's engagement. They are also one of the more expensive line items. Be intentional about which events belong in the government relations budget and which are better categorized elsewhere.

For Small Chambers

Start with a single line item labeled "Government Relations" in your operating budget. Even if the initial amount is $1,500 to $2,500, the line item matters as much as the dollar amount. It signals commitment, creates a conversation with your board and establishes a baseline to build from year over year.

Building Internal Support

A government relations program requires the active support of your board of directors, the functional cooperation of your staff and the ongoing engagement of volunteer leaders who are willing to put their names and time behind the work. Building that support is an ongoing leadership responsibility.

Gaining Board Buy-In

Your board of directors controls the chamber's budget, sets its strategic direction and ultimately determines whether a government relations program gets the resources and authority it needs to be effective. Getting the board aligned is one of the most important leadership tasks in building a government relations function.

The most effective approach to board buy-in is not a formal presentation or a policy briefing. It is a series of individual conversations, held over time, that build the board's understanding of why the chamber needs to be in the policy arena and what a credible program looks like.

Start with your board chair and your most influential board members. Understand their concerns before you start making the case. Some board members will be enthusiastic from the start. Others will be skeptical. Listen carefully to the skeptics. Their concerns reflect real risks that a well-designed program has to address. Acknowledge those concerns directly and show how the program's structure addresses them.

When you bring the government relations program formally to the board, frame it as a program, not a campaign. You are not asking permission to take a position on a specific issue. You are asking the board to commit to a structured, member-driven process for engaging on policy issues that affect the business community. Highlight how the process includes clear criteria, defined roles and board oversight at major decision points. That framing gives skeptical board members something to say yes to.

Several practical steps help move boards from hesitant to committed:

- Put government relations in the strategic plan. When the board approves a strategic plan that includes government relations as a core function, they have made a collective commitment that is much harder to walk back.
- Build it into the budget. A line item in the board-approved budget is a clear signal of institutional commitment. Even a small initial allocation establishes the precedent and forces an annual conversation about the program's scope and resources.
- Start with a low-risk win. If your board is hesitant, start with an issue where the chamber's position is broadly uncontroversial, a workforce initiative for example. Show the board what government relations looks like in practice before asking them to engage on something more contested.
- Report back consistently. A brief government relations update at every board meeting. Describe what the chamber is tracking, what positions have been taken and what the outcomes have been. This keeps the board engaged and demonstrates that the program is producing results.
- Invite participation. Board members who attend a legislative reception, participate in a capital visit or meet personally with an elected official become advocates for the program. Engagement creates ownership.

Addressing Pushback from Volunteer Leadership

Not all resistance to government relations work comes from the full board. It sometimes comes from individual board members, committee chairs or longtime volunteers who have strong opinions about what the chamber should and should not do in the policy arena. This kind of targeted pushback requires a different approach than building broad board support.

The most common forms of volunteer resistance fall into three categories.

The partisan concern. A volunteer leader worries that the chamber's policy positions will be seen as aligned with one political party, damaging relationships with members or officials on the other side. The response: the chamber's positions are evaluated on their merits for the business community, not their political alignment. The chamber will work with any official, regardless of party, who supports a competitive business environment. The chamber will oppose public policy that burdens member businesses unnecessarily, regardless of who introduces it. Show them examples of chambers that have maintained bipartisan relationships while taking clear policy positions.

The divisiveness concern. A volunteer leader worries that any policy position will divide the membership, because on any issue some members will be on one side and some on the other. The response: the position-taking process is specifically designed to surface and manage member conflict. The chamber does not take positions on issues where the membership is fundamentally divided. It takes positions where there is a clear, defensible business community interest — arrived at through a documented, transparent process. Members may not always agree with specific positions, but they can respect a process that is fair and consistent.

The expertise concern. A volunteer leader doubts the chamber's ability to engage credibly on complex policy issues without specialized expertise. The response: the chamber's role is not to be the policy expert in the room. It is to be the voice of the business community. The chamber draws on member expertise, contracted resources and coalition partners for technical knowledge. Its unique value is its ability to translate business community concerns into policy language and to mobilize the people and relationships that make government relations effective.

Getting Staff Aligned

In chambers where government relations is a new or growing function, staff who are not directly involved sometimes see it as separate from their core work — or as a drain on organizational capacity that should go to membership, events or other programs. This perception is understandable and worth addressing directly.

The most effective message is integration, not addition. Government relations is not a new program that competes with existing priorities. It is a function that strengthens every other program the chamber runs.

- The membership team has a stronger value proposition when they can point to specific policy wins that benefited members. Government relations gives them a story to tell.
- The events team has richer programming when government relations brings elected officials and policy experts into chamber forums. Government relations elevates the quality of what gets put on stage.

- The communications team has more compelling content when the chamber is engaged on issues that matter. Policy activity generates news, drives website traffic and creates member touchpoints that general chamber communications cannot replicate.
- The executive's time spent on government relations is not time away from members, it is time spent building the relationships and producing the outcomes that make the chamber's membership worth having.

Beyond messaging, practical alignment matters. Brief non-government relations staff on what the chamber is doing in the policy arena and why. Ask them to flag member conversations that surface policy concerns. Invite them to attend a legislative event or a policy committee meeting. When staff understand the work firsthand, they become supporters rather than bystanders.

Every member-facing staff person is a potential early warning system for issues that belong on the chamber's policy radar. A membership representative who hears three members complain about the same regulatory burden has valuable intelligence. Make sure staff know how to surface that information and that you are listening when they do.

Sustaining Support Over Time

Building internal support for a government relations program is not a one-time task. Boards turn over. Staff change. The issues that generated initial enthusiasm may resolve while new, more contested issues arise. Sustaining support requires consistent communication, demonstrated results and the ongoing cultivation of new champions inside the organization.

A few practices that help sustain support over time:

- Celebrate wins explicitly. When the chamber achieves a policy outcome — a bill passed, a regulation amended, a relationship that opened a door — name it clearly and attribute it to the program. Make the invisible visible. People support programs that demonstrably produce results.
- Connect government relations to member stories. A policy win described in abstract terms is forgettable. The same win described through the lens of a specific member whose situation improved is memorable. Build the habit of translating policy outcomes into human stories.
- Bring new board members along early. Every new board member is an opportunity to build a new advocate for the government relations program. Include a government relations orientation in your board onboarding process. Make sure new directors understand what the program does, how it is governed and what the chamber has achieved.
- Acknowledge when things are hard. Not every advocacy effort succeeds. Being honest with your board and staff about losses and setbacks — and about what the chamber learned and how it will approach similar situations in the future — builds credibility and models the kind of resilience that a sustained government relations program requires.

Key Principles

- **Start somewhere.** A government relations program does not need to be comprehensive on day one. Pick one entry point, do it well and build from there. The chamber that does three things consistently outperforms the chamber that tries to do twelve things poorly.
- **Relationships come first.** Every other government relations activity is more effective when it is built on a foundation of trusted relationships with elected officials and key staff. Invest in those relationships before you need them.
- **Put it in the budget.** A line item is a commitment. A verbal agreement to support government relations work is not. Get the program into the budget, even modestly, and protect it.
- **Process is your protection.** A documented, transparent position-taking process is the single best response to board hesitancy, member concern and public scrutiny. It shows that the chamber's positions are driven by a principled, member-grounded process, not by staff preference or political calculation.
- **Internal support must be built, not assumed.** Board buy-in, staff alignment and volunteer engagement do not happen automatically. They require sustained, intentional communication, demonstrated results and the ongoing cultivation of champions inside the organization.
- **Inform before you mobilize.** Members who are well informed about the issues the chamber is engaged on are more likely to act when called upon, more credible as messengers when they do and more appreciative of the chamber's value as a result. Communication is not an afterthought, it is the foundation of member engagement.

Strategic Questions for Your Leadership Team

Use these questions to open substantive conversations with your board, executive committee or leadership team. They are designed to surface real tensions and decision points, not generate easy agreement.

- What would it take for our board to describe government relations as a top three priority for the chamber? What is standing between where they are now and that level of commitment?
- If a major employer in our community needed help navigating a regulatory challenge or a permitting problem, would they call the chamber first? If not, who would they call and what would it take to change that?
- Is government relations visible in our chamber's budget, strategic plan and board meeting agenda? If not, what is the message that absence sends to our members, our board and the elected officials we want to influence?

- Which staff members outside the chief executive are most likely to hear member concerns about policy issues? Do they know how to surface that information, and do we have a process to act on it when they do?
- When you look at the elected officials who most affect your members' operating environment, how many of them know your name and return your calls? What is your plan to close the gap on the ones who don't?

Module 3: Creating a Structure

The difference between a chamber that occasionally engages on policy and one that consistently delivers results for its members is structure. Sustained engagement relies on systems to:

- Build a governance structure that is clear about who has the authority to act.
- Create a policy agenda that reflects member priorities.
- Operate a committee that deliberates issues through a consistent process.
- Establish a framework for taking legislative positions that produces defensible decisions.

Structure is not bureaucracy. It is the set of agreements and processes that allow a government relations program to operate with integrity even when issues are contested, the political environment is volatile and the pressure to act quickly is real. A chamber with clear structure can answer the questions that matter most:

- Why did we engage on this issue?
- How did we arrive at this position?
- Who approved this action?
- What is our process for handling something like this in the future?

Below, we will explore these key structural elements. We'll also address the challenges and policies for how your organization should navigate having member companies on opposite sides of an issue and policies for establishing who has the authority to act when time is short.

Define Who Has the Authority to Act

Every chamber government relations program needs a clear authority matrix, a written definition of what each actor in the governance structure is authorized to do without prior approval, what requires consultation and what requires formal approval before action is taken. A workable model for most chambers looks like this:

- **Role of the Board:** Defining the chamber's government relations structure and processes, approving the chamber's legislative priorities, approving action on issues outside the scope of the legislative agenda or those likely to generate significant public controversy and any action that commits the chamber's financial or reputational resources in a significant way.

- **Role of the Policy Committee:** Deliberating priorities and creating the legislative agenda for board approval, monitoring issues and taking positions on legislation within the approved agenda, supporting the staff with legislative outreach and keeping the board informed on the chamber's priority issues.
- **Role of Staff:** Monitoring issues and providing information to members, attending public meetings and hearings, building and maintaining relationships with elected officials and their staff, responding to media questions on chamber priorities, distributing positions and agenda documents and any other action consistent with an already-adopted position.

This framework is a starting point, not a template. Every chamber needs to calibrate it to its own governance culture, the CEO's relationship with the board and the pace at which the legislative environment moves. The important thing is that the calibration happens deliberately and is documented.

Committee Setup and Structure

The public policy committee is the engine of the chamber's government relations program. It is where issues are deliberated, the chamber's policy agenda is shaped by the voices of the business community, legislation is reviewed and positions are taken. A well-designed committee gives the chamber's government relations work legitimacy, engages members in meaningful work and creates accountability between the chamber and its volunteer leaders.

Defining Purpose and Responsibilities

Before recruiting members or scheduling the first meeting, write down what the committee is for. This sounds elementary, but the absence of a clear written purpose is one of the most common reasons policy committees drift, lose engagement or create governance conflicts.

A public policy committee typically has three core responsibilities:

1. Monitor the legislative and regulatory environment for issues relevant to the chamber's members and policy agenda.
2. Deliberate on those issues and take positions on those within the approved legislative agenda and recommend positions to the board for issues not covered by the agenda.
3. Support the chamber's advocacy by engaging in approved activities like legislative visits, testimony, member mobilization and more.

Committee Size and Composition

The right committee size is large enough to represent the diversity of the business community and small enough to have a productive deliberation. Aim for representation across:

- **Industry sectors.** Manufacturing, professional services, technology, health care, hospitality, construction, financial services and others relevant to your regional economy.

- **Company size.** Small businesses, mid-sized employers and large or anchor employers each bring different perspectives on how policy affects operations. All three matter.
- **Geography.** If your chamber serves a multi-county or multi-city region, representation from across that geography helps ensure that local policy differences are surfaced in committee deliberations.
- **Perspective and background.** Seek members who will bring different experiences, challenge assumptions and ask hard questions. That friction produces better positions.

Recruiting Committee Members

Recruiting the right people to the policy committee is one of the most important things you will do in building your government relations program. The committee's credibility depends on the quality of its membership.

The most effective recruitment is personal and specific. A phone call from the chamber CEO asking a specific member to serve, explaining what the commitment requires and describing why that member's perspective is needed. This is far more effective than a general call for volunteers. People respond to being asked directly, by someone they respect, for a reason that makes sense.

When recruiting, be honest about the commitment. Set realistic expectations around the number of meetings per year, the time required between meetings to review materials and expectations for participation in specific government relations activities.

Several qualities to look for in committee members:

- Willingness to engage seriously with complex issues and listen to perspectives that differ from their own.
- Credibility in the business community and a reputation for sound judgment.
- Ability to represent the interests of the business community broadly, not just their own company or industry.
- Comfort with the reality that the committee's positions will sometimes be contested and that the chamber will not win every fight.
- Availability. A highly credible member who cannot attend meetings is less valuable than a slightly less prominent member who shows up consistently.

Term Limits, Rotation and Meeting Cadence

Term limits protect the committee from becoming entrenched and ensure that the membership stays current with the business community's evolving composition. A standard model is two-year terms with a limit of two consecutive terms, after which a member steps off for at least one year before being eligible to rejoin. This keeps the committee fresh while allowing experienced members to continue contributing in other roles.

Meeting frequency should match the pace of your legislative environment. For chambers with active state or local legislative calendars, weekly or monthly meetings during the session and quarterly meetings when session is out is a reasonable baseline. For chambers with less active legislative environments, four to six meetings per year may suffice. The key is consistency. A committee that meets irregularly loses momentum and engagement.

Every meeting should have a clear agenda distributed in advance, relevant materials attached and a defined set of decisions or recommendations to produce.

Conflict of Interest Management

Policy committee deliberations will regularly surface issues where one or more committee members have a direct financial or competitive interest in the outcome. A committee member whose business is subject to a proposed regulation has an interest in the chamber's position on that regulation. A member whose industry is in direct competition with another member's industry may have interests that conflict on a specific issue.

These situations are not disqualifying — they are inevitable. But they require a clear, documented process for managing them.

At minimum, every policy committee should have a written conflict of interest policy that:

- Requires members to disclose any direct financial or competitive interest in an issue under deliberation.
- Defines the process for deciding whether a disclosed conflict requires recusal from discussion or voting on that issue.
- Documents disclosures and recusals in meeting minutes.
- Designates the committee chair or the chamber CEO as the responsible party for identifying undisclosed conflicts and raising them for resolution.

A conflict of interest policy does not prevent interested parties from participating in relevant discussions. Members with the most direct stake in an issue often have the most valuable perspective on it. What it does is ensure that the deliberation is transparent, that the decision-making is not captured by a single interest and that the committee's process is defensible when challenged.

Documenting Internal Processes

Every element of the committee's structure and process should be written down.

A committee charter is a single document that defines the committee's purpose, membership criteria, term structure, meeting requirements, decision-making authority and relationship to the board. The charter should be approved by the board of directors and reviewed annually. It is the document you point to when a board member questions how a position was taken, when a

committee member disputes a process decision or when a new CEO inherits a program and needs to understand how it works.

Beyond or within the charter, chambers should also document the position-taking process, the conflict of interest policy and any standing operating procedures the committee follows. These documents do not need to be lengthy. They need to be clear, current and accessible to anyone who is part of the process.

For Small Chambers

If you do not yet have a formal public policy committee, a three-to-five person advisory group of engaged members who meet quarterly to review the chamber's policy priorities is a functioning committee. Document their role, even informally. "This group advises the CEO on policy priorities and reviews draft positions before they go to the board" is enough to create accountability and structure without the overhead of a full committee governance process.

Building Your Legislative Agenda

A chamber's legislative agenda is a public statement of the issues it cares about and the positions it holds. Chambers without a formal agenda tend to engage on issues reactively, based on whoever raises a concern loudest or whatever is in the news. That approach produces inconsistency and makes the chamber's positions harder to defend.

It is important that your agenda and government relations activities are part of a structure that gives staff, your policy committee and the board a shared framework for decision-making.

The process of building the agenda matters as much as the agenda itself. A policy agenda that emerges from member input, committee deliberation and board approval has baked in legitimacy. It reflects the priorities of the business community. It gives the chamber cover when members challenge specific positions.

Seeking Member Input

The starting point for any policy agenda is understanding what your members care about. Member input done well produces an agenda that the full membership recognizes as their own.

An annual survey can be a key tool in this process. Keep it short and ask simple questions to gather input on their top policy concerns, what issues affect their businesses most directly and whether they would be willing to communicate with elected officials. The goal is to surface the issues where member concern is broad and deep enough to warrant chamber engagement.

Beyond the survey, committee discussions are a critical input channel. Whether you have one policy committee or a committee structure with issue committees that feed into your policy, be sure that you include members from across industries, company sizes and sectors. Their deliberations will surface issues, nuances and perspectives that no survey can capture.

Other input sources worth building into your agenda process include:

- One-on-one conversations with major members or sector leaders during regular retention and engagement calls.
- Feedback gathered at chamber events and programs. Note what members talk about before and after the formal program, not just during it.
- Issues raised through member service channels. If multiple members flag the same concern to your membership team, that is a data point.
- Input from allied organizations like your state chamber, regional coalitions and peer chamber networks often surface emerging issues before they reach the local level.

Translating Input into an Agenda

Member input will produce a range of issues. The policy committee's job is to translate that raw input into a focused agenda that the chamber can realistically act on. Start by asking if the issue meet the bar for chamber engagement.

- Does it directly affect the business environment or members' ability to operate?
- Does the chamber's voice add value that no one else is already providing? Lead where you are uniquely positioned to lead.
- Is action feasible given your current capacity and timeline? Honesty about capacity protects the chamber's credibility.

Keep the active agenda short. Three to five priority issues is the right range for many chambers. Depth of engagement on a small number of issues is far more effective than a long list of positions the chamber cannot meaningfully advance. Members, elected officials and coalition partners need to know what the chamber truly prioritizes. Not every issue that members care about is an issue the chamber should lead on.

Building in Flexibility

No matter how carefully you construct your agenda, something will happen that is not on it. The goal is a policy agenda that is specific enough to give the chamber direction and credibility, but flexible enough to allow rapid response when the moment demands it.

Build an internal process for acting on issues that arise outside the formal agenda if something arises that is directly relevant to the business community and time-sensitive action is required. Define the approval process for those situations clearly. A chamber that cannot respond to an urgent issue because it wasn't on the agenda loses credibility with members and elected officials alike.

Timing and Publication

For most chambers, the right time to finalize the annual policy agenda is late fall — November or December for a calendar-year legislative session. This allows the agenda to be in place before the session begins, giving the chamber a position on the issues most likely to move early in the year.

Once the board approves the agenda, distribute it widely. Send it to members. Share it with your congressional delegation, state legislators and local officials. Post it on the chamber's website. Announce it at a chamber event. The act of publishing and distributing the agenda is itself a form of government relations. It tells elected officials what the business community cares about and signals that the chamber is organized, serious and prepared to engage.

For Small Chambers

A one-page agenda document with three priority issues and a brief explanation of the chamber's position on each is a complete, credible legislative agenda. You do not need a comprehensive policy platform. You need a focused statement of your top priorities that you can actually deliver on.

Engaging on Controversial Issues

Not all issues on the chamber's radar are equally straightforward. Some are technically complex but politically uncontroversial. Some are politically sensitive but clearly within the chamber's scope. And some are genuinely controversial, the kind where taking a position will generate criticism, test relationships and require the chamber to absorb some reputational heat.

The framework for evaluating whether and how to engage on a controversial issue should weigh several factors:

- **Relevance.** How directly does this issue affect the business environment and the chamber's members? The more direct the relevance, the stronger the case for engagement even at reputational risk.
- **Breadth of member concern.** Is this issue broadly important to the membership, or is it primarily important to a narrow subset? Chamber engagement is most defensible when it reflects broad member interest.
- **Uniqueness of the chamber's voice.** Is the chamber's perspective on this issue distinct from what other organizations are already saying? If another organization is already making the business case effectively, the marginal value of chamber engagement is lower.
- **Risk calibration.** What is the realistic downside of engaging? What relationships could be damaged, what members could be alienated and how significant would that harm be? Compare that to the cost of not engaging.

- **Process confidence.** Is the chamber's position-taking process strong enough to defend the decision if challenged? A position that emerged from a transparent, member-driven, board-approved process is far more defensible than one that looks like a staff or executive preference.

The Need for Speed: Emergency Authority

Legislative and regulatory environments do not operate on committee meeting schedules. Bills move faster than expected. Regulatory comment periods close. A vote is called with 48 hours' notice. At some point, your chamber will face a situation where action is needed and there is no time for the normal process.

The answer is not to abandon process. It is to have a documented emergency authority protocol agreed upon in advance that allows the chamber to act quickly while maintaining accountability.

A common model is to rely on your executive committee or a small subcommittee of two to three board members who are authorized to approve emergency positions on behalf of the chamber when a full board or policy committee deliberation is not possible. The CEO brings the issue to this subcommittee, explains the situation and seeks authorization to act. The subcommittee's decision is documented and reported to the full board at the next meeting.

For issues that fall within the chamber's existing policy agenda, the CEO should have standing authorization to act, including making public statements, signing letters and taking defined advocacy actions. The board's adoption of the annual policy agenda is itself a grant of authority to advance the positions in it.

Whatever emergency protocol you establish, write it down, get the board to approve it explicitly and make sure the board chair and relevant subcommittee members understand their role. The worst time to figure out your emergency process is when you are in the emergency.

Key Principles

- **Structure enables credibility.** A documented, consistent process for building your agenda, deliberating issues and taking positions is not bureaucracy. It is the foundation of the chamber's credibility as an advocate.
- **The agenda must come from members.** A policy agenda that reflects staff or board preferences rather than genuine member priorities lacks legitimacy. Member surveys, committee deliberation and broad input from across the membership are key steps for creating a strong agenda.
- **Have an emergency protocol.** The legislative environment will not wait for the committee's next scheduled meeting. A board-approved emergency authority protocol allows the chamber to act quickly without abandoning accountability.

- **Know your legal obligations.** Lobbying registration, ethics rules and campaign finance law are not optional compliance questions. Take the time to learn these requirements early and consult legal counsel as needed.

Strategic Questions for Your Leadership Team

Use these questions to open substantive conversations with your board, executive committee or leadership team. They are designed to surface real tensions and decision points, not generate easy agreement.

- Does our chamber have a written, board-approved charter for our public policy committee? If not, what is the risk that the absence of that document creates and what would it take to produce one?
- When did the chamber last survey members on their policy priorities? Do the issues on our current agenda reflect what members told us they care about, or what staff and board members think they should care about?
- If an elected official challenged the chamber on how it arrived at a specific policy position, could we walk them through a documented, defensible process? If not, what is missing?
- Who in your chamber has standing authorization to speak publicly on policy matters without seeking prior approval? Is that authorization written down? Does the board know what it says?
- When did your chamber last review its lobbying registration status, ethics compliance and campaign finance obligations with legal counsel? If it has been more than two years, that review is overdue.

Module 4: Informing and Engaging Your Membership

Government relations is one of the most direct ways a chamber delivers value to its members. You work to protect their ability to operate, grow and compete. But that value only matters if members can see it, understand it and engage with it.

This module focuses on turning government relations into a visible, member-centered value driver. It covers how to communicate policy work clearly and consistently, create meaningful opportunities for member involvement, activate your strongest advocates and measure and demonstrate impact. Each element plays a role. Together, they build a government relations program that informs, engages and earns its place at the center of your chamber's value proposition.

Policy Communications

Chambers should incorporate policy communications across their various communications channels. This builds awareness of the issues and demonstrates the chamber's role as their advocate on the issues that matter to their businesses. It also creates the informed membership base that all other engagement depends on.

Effective policy communication does not require a sophisticated operation. It requires consistency, clarity and a commitment to writing for your target audience. Most chamber members are busy executives who will spend thirty seconds deciding whether to read what you sent. Meet them where they are.

Member Communications: Channels and Cadence
The right communication channels for policy content are the ones your members already use. Integrate policy communication into the channels already in use.

This simple three-layer approach is a good starting point:

- **Regular updates in existing channels.** A "Policy Watch" or "What We're Tracking" section in your email newsletter is the baseline. Keep it brief and publish it consistently. Members do not need exhaustive updates. They need to know that the chamber is paying attention and that more information is available if they want it.
- **Issue-specific communications when something significant happens.** When the chamber takes a position, wins a policy outcome or needs members to take action, a dedicated communication is warranted. These should be clear, direct and action oriented. Describe what is happening, what the chamber is doing and how members can help.
- **Annual summary.** A once-a-year summary of the chamber's policy activity and accomplishments gives the full picture that episodic updates cannot. This is the document you share with board members, major investors and prospective members to demonstrate the program's value.

Cadence matters as much as content. A newsletter section that appears in every issue builds a habit in your readers. Even when there is nothing urgent to report, a brief "here is what we are watching" update is worth more than silence.

Go Deeper
Chambers with active government relations programs can go beyond the baseline to create dedicated channels for policy communication to be sure the content doesn't get crowded out by events, member spotlights and other chamber news.

Policy Newsletter
A dedicated policy newsletter can give the chamber's policy program its own voice and its own audience. Members who subscribe are self-selecting as your most engaged advocates.

An effective policy newsletter does not need to be long. A few brief updates laid out in a scannable format. Use clear headlines, short paragraphs and keep the format consistent so members know what to expect. Cover your chamber's priorities, emerging issues and consider adding participatory elements like brief surveys or polls.

Consider offering the policy newsletter to a broader audience than just members. Elected officials and their staff, journalists who cover business and policy, community partners and prospective members would all benefit from following the chamber's priorities. You can make it weekly or monthly during the legislative session and quarterly out of session.

Dedicated Policy Area on Your Website
Your chamber's website is the most publicly visible element of your communications infrastructure. Be sure to dedicate a section of the site, or even just one page to your policy program. A well-organized policy could include:

- The chamber's current legislative agenda or policy priorities.
- A summary of the chamber's current positions on active issues.
- An archive of past position statements, testimony and public statements.
- Timely policy news and updates or an archive of your policy newsletters.
- Contact information specifically for policy inquiries.

Social Media
Policy conversations increasingly happen in real time on social media. Incorporating policy updates into your social media updates can be a great way to gain visibility from elected officials, journalists and community leaders.

Post consistently, not just when something urgent is happening. Tag relevant officials and partner organizations when appropriate, and use visuals when possible, photos from policy events, key statistics related to your priorities or a short video update from the state house.

Short-Form Video
Video is the fastest-growing format for content consumption across virtually every audience demographic, and it is underutilized in chamber government relations communications. A short video can explain a complex policy issue in two minutes or less. It also puts a human face on an advocacy campaign.

Smartphone cameras are capable of producing perfectly acceptable quality for social media distribution. A well-lit interview with a member explaining how a proposed regulation would affect their business can be a compelling part of your government relations work.

Op-Eds, Letters to the Editor and Earned Media

Earned media is among the most valuable forms of policy communication. A well-placed op-ed in the regional newspaper reaches an audience that dwarfs the chamber's member list and carries a credibility that paid advertising cannot buy.

Op-eds work best when they are timely, specific and clearly attributed to the chamber's CEO or a business leader. The best op-eds advance a clear position, support it with specific evidence and conclude with a call to action. Most regional newspapers are receptive to op-eds from chamber executives on business and economic issues.

Letters to the editor are a lower-barrier format that can be used more frequently. When a news story or editorial gets the business community's perspective wrong, a brief, factual correction submitted as a letter to the editor puts the chamber's voice on record.

Building the habit of monitoring coverage and responding when appropriate is a discipline that pays long-term dividends in press relationships and public positioning.

Measuring and Communicating the Value of Your Government Relations Work

Government relations outcomes are notoriously hard to measure. Objectives can be long term and take multiple years to accomplish. Sometimes the most significant wins are often the things that did not happen, legislation that was amended or defeated or a regulation that was never finalized. Your goals are often achieved working with others, which can make it difficult to identify your specific contributions.

Chambers must be deliberate about what they track and skilled at communicating the value in terms that resonate key audiences.

Moving from Activity Metrics to Outcome Metrics

Many chambers default to sharing activity metrics because they're easier to track and report. Things like how many meetings you held, bills you tracked, position statements you submitted and attendees at your state capital day. These metrics show the program is active, but they do not answer the question leaders care about most. How did your chamber's efforts affect the outcome and how does the outcome impact your members' bottom line?

Outcome metrics focus on results. Not every action will produce a clear outcome, but you can create more compelling reports by focusing on:

- **Policy wins.** Legislative or regulatory outcomes the chamber helped achieve or prevent. Be clear and accurate and include positive impact of legislative wins and details on costs avoided thanks to your efforts to defeat anti-business legislation. Don't overlook the value of playing defense. Defeating or amending bad legislation is as valuable gaining passage of your priorities.
- **Agenda progress.** Forward movement on priorities, even without a final win. Identify actions that signal real progress — a bill advancing, new commitments or cosponsors on priority legislation, a bad bill getting stalled in committee, a regulation streamlined, etc.
- **Access and relationships.** Stronger connections with elected officials and staff. New invitations for your chamber to participate in decision-making and increased responsiveness from policymakers. These are meaningful outcomes, even without immediate policy change.
- **Member engagement.** Members who take part in advocacy efforts — through events, committees, outreach, or testimony. Engagement strengthens the program and builds future influence.

This approach helps chambers clearly demonstrate value and impact.

For Small Chambers

If formal outcome reporting feels out of reach, start with a single discipline. After every significant advocacy action, write one sentence about what happened as a result. Over the course of a year, those sentences become your annual government relations summary. They also become the evidence base you need to make the case for continued investment in the program.

Best Practices for Drafting Policy Positions

How you write your position matters. Clear, credible communication gets attention and influences decisions. Weak or vague messaging gets ignored. Focus on these essentials:

- **Start with impact.** Lead with how the issue affects local businesses, jobs, costs, and growth. That's what decision-makers care about.
- **Be specific.** Use real numbers or examples when possible. Specifics make your position more credible and harder to dismiss.
- **Make a clear ask.** Say exactly what you want: support, oppose, amend, delay. No ambiguity.
- **Keep it short.** If it's not concise, it won't get read. Aim for one page or less.
- **Write to influence, not document.** Don't just state your position but make the case in a way that could change a decision.

- **Test for clarity.** Have someone less familiar with the issue read it. If they don't quickly get the point, revise.

Policy Events

Policy events are among the highest-value activities in a government relations program. They put members in direct contact with the policy process, and they frequently connect the elected officials with the leaders of businesses that are impacted by the decisions they make.

Policy events are also a great way to build relationships, visibility and credibility. A chamber that convenes business leaders and elected officials in the same room regularly becomes a known and trusted player in the policy environment.

Issue Briefings
Issue briefings are the most accessible and versatile policy event format. They can range from a thirty-minute segment of a board meeting to a dedicated half-day forum, depending on the complexity of the issue and the depth of engagement you want to create.

An effective issue briefing gives members the context they need to understand a policy issue, the opportunity to ask questions and the chance to share their own perspective.
Different event formats could include:

- **Expert panel.** Two or three speakers with different perspectives on the issue. It could include policy experts, business leaders and elected officials.
- **Elected official roundtable.** A small group of members in direct conversation with one or two elected officials on specific issues. These are high-value relationship-building events for both sides.
- **Member listening session.** A facilitated conversation among members about a specific issue, with staff capturing the key themes for use in the chamber's advocacy.

State Capital Visits
A state capital visit is one way that chambers engage their members in their advocacy program. For many business leaders, a capital visit is the first time they have ever walked the halls of the statehouse.

That experience can change how they think about the policy process, the chamber's role in it and their own capacity to make a difference. Members who have made a capital visit are more engaged advocates, more credible messengers and more loyal members than those who have not.

Prepare your members in advance, or kickoff your event by sharing:

- A briefing on the chamber's legislative priorities what specific points you want your members to emphasize when they meet with their elected officials.

- A one-page leave-behind that members can hand to legislators or staff during their meetings.
- The basics of an effective legislative meeting. Introduce themselves and their business, connect the issue to your community, outline their position clearly and leave on time.

D.C. Fly-Ins

Many chambers organize D.C. fly-ins or partner with other regional chambers or their state chamber to participate in one. These meetings bring delegations of local business leaders to meet with members of Congress and their staff and relevant federal agencies to discuss regional policy priorities.

For chambers that are primarily engaged at the local and state level, a federal fly-in may not be an annual priority. But for chambers with a large federal presence in their communities, a fly-in is worth the investment. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce provides resources and support for chambers considering a D.C. fly-in.

For Small Chambers

If a state capital visit is not feasible, invite your state delegation to a member lunch or breakfast. This can accomplish many of the same relationship-building and member engagement goals at a fraction of the cost and complexity.

Grassroots and Grasstops Engagement

Member engagement in government relations takes two forms that are complementary but distinct. Grassroots engagement activates the broad membership, encouraging a large number of members to contact elected officials, sign letters or take other visible actions that signal the business community's concern on an issue. Grasstops engagement identifies the specific business leaders whose relationships, credibility or standing make their voice particularly influential on a specific issue or with a specific decision-maker.

For Small Chambers

You don't need legislative advocacy software to manage grassroots or grasstops outreach. A simple email letter template and a list of which members have key relationships your most influential lawmakers is enough to get started.

Key Principles

- **Communication is not an afterthought.** The value of government relations work is invisible unless the chamber makes it visible. Consistent, clear communication about the chamber's work is crucial to sustaining it.

- **Stories outperform summaries.** A specific story about one member whose situation improved because of the chamber's engagement is more persuasive than any amount of aggregate data. Build the habit of capturing and telling those stories.
- **The right messenger matters as much as the right message.** Who delivers the chamber's position often determines whether it is heard. Invest in identifying your most effective voices.
- **Prepare members thoroughly.** An underprepared member in a legislative meeting can do more harm than good. Every member who engages on behalf of the chamber deserves a thorough briefing, a clear ask and a debrief when the meeting is done.
- **Close the loop every time.** Whether the outcome was a win, a loss or something in between, tell the members who engaged what happened. The member who is never told what their effort produced will not engage the next time they are asked.

Strategic Questions for Your Leadership Team

Use these questions to open substantive conversations with your board, executive committee or leadership team. They are designed to surface real tensions and decision points, not generate easy agreement.

- If a member called today and asked what the chamber has accomplished on government relations in the past twelve months, what would we tell them? Would that answer make them more or less likely to renew?
- Which of our members have personal relationships with elected officials that the chamber does not know about or has never activated? What would it take to build and maintain a current relationship inventory?
- Does our board receive government relations updates at a consistent cadence? Do those updates report outcomes, or do we mostly report activities? What would it take to shift the reporting toward outcomes?
- Are the members who participate most actively in our government relations program renewing at higher rates than those who do not? If we do not know the answer to that question, what would it take to find out?

Module 5: Relationship and Coalition Building

Government relations is fundamentally relational work. Policy knowledge, process knowledge and communication skill all matter. But they work best when they are built on a foundation of trusted relationships with the people who make decisions and the organizations that share your interests.

The chamber's unique position in this landscape is worth naming explicitly. No other organization in most communities sits at the intersection of so many different actors across industries, elected

officials at multiple levels of government, civic organizations, education institutions, nonprofits and the press.

It is that convening power that the chamber can deploy strategically to bring together unlikely combinations of voices, build coalitions that no single organization could assemble alone and influence outcomes that no individual advocate could achieve independently.

Building and Maintaining Relationships with Policymakers

Building and maintaining relationships with key policymakers is vital to your government relations program. There is no start and end date. It is a discipline practiced consistently over years that compound into the kind of trust, access and credibility that cannot be manufactured on short notice.

Build your relationships over time. Reach out during a low-pressure time and ask for a meeting just to establish the chamber's presence before and discuss high level priorities before there is a legislative ask. Elected officials and their staff have long memories for who showed up when nothing was urgent compared to who only appears when they need something.

Relationships create access. Access creates the opportunity to be heard. Being heard is the prerequisite for influence. Nothing in government relations bypasses that sequence. Chambers that invest in relationships consistently find that their government relations is more effective.

Relationships also create intelligence. An elected official who trusts the chamber will share information about emerging issues or key committee priorities. That early intelligence allows the chamber to engage proactively, which is a significant strategic advantage.

Who to Know

Effective relationship-building requires being deliberate about who is on your list. Not every elected official has equal influence over the issues your members care about. Your time is limited. Prioritize based on jurisdiction and influence.

Your relationship map should cover:

- **Elected officials at all relevant levels.** City council members, county commissioners, state legislators from your region and your congressional delegation. Within that group, prioritize based on leadership and committee assignments – those with direct influence over your members' concerns than one who does not.
- **Legislative and executive staff.** Staff often have more day-to-day influence over the details of legislation and regulation than the officials they serve. A committee staff director who has known the chamber CEO for years will return calls, share draft language before it is

public and flag issues that are about to move. Invest in these relationships with the same seriousness you invest in relationships with elected officials.

- **Agency and department heads.** Much of the policy that affects business happens through regulatory agencies and administrative offices. Know the people who run the agencies that regulate your members' industries. These relationships are often more accessible than legislative relationships and can be more directly useful when a member faces a regulatory challenge.
- **Newly elected officials.** The window immediately after an election is one of the best opportunities to establish a relationship. New officials are building their networks, learning their committee assignments and forming impressions of the organizations they will work with. Reach out without an agenda and offer to be a resource.

Build Relationships Before You Need Them

Do not let your first contact with a policymaker be a request. If an official only hears from the chamber when the chamber needs something, the relationship is transactional at best and burdensome at worst. Build the relationship first, then make the ask.

Practical relationship-building looks like:

- **Regular one-on-one meetings with no agenda.** Schedule a brief meeting. Grab coffee, lunch or a 20-minute office visit with your highest priority officials at least once a year. Your goal should be to check in, learn what they are working on and let them know what the business community is focused on. These meetings build the familiarity and mutual understanding that productive government relations require.
- **Showing up at their events.** Attend officials' town halls, ribbon cuttings and community meetings. Try to be a visible, consistent presence in their community engagement. Officials notice who shows up. Your presence signals that the chamber is engaged in the community, not just in the policy arena.
- **Inviting them into the chamber's world.** Invite officials to chamber events as speakers or guests. Host legislative breakfasts or roundtables where they can hear directly from business leaders. These settings give officials unfiltered access to the business community's perspective.
- **Recognizing their work.** When an official takes a vote or action that benefits the business community, acknowledge it. A brief note from the chamber CEO is noticed and remembered. Officials who feel that the chamber sees and appreciates their work will be more receptive to the chamber's perspective when difficult decisions arise.
- **Introducing members.** When you are with an official at a chamber event, introduce members whose businesses are in that official's district or whose work connects to issues the official cares about. Helping officials build their constituent relationships is a genuine service that costs you nothing and builds significant goodwill.

Maintaining Relationships Through Disagreement

Effective government relations does not mean agreeing with everyone. The chamber will take positions that put it on the opposite side of officials it has worked hard to build relationships with. How those moments are handled determines the long-term health of the relationship.

The most important practice is to warn before you oppose. If the chamber is going to take a public position against a bill an official is sponsoring, call them before you announce your position. Explain the chamber's reasoning. Acknowledge that you understand this puts you in a difficult position relative to each other. The official may disagree, but they will respect the courtesy.

Stick to the policy, not the person. Criticize the bill, the regulation or the decision, not the official's motives. The official who votes against the chamber's position today on one issue may be your most important ally on the next.

After a disagreement, reengage. Do not go silent after a difficult vote or a public opposition. Reengage acknowledging the outcome and looking for the next opportunity to work together.

For Small Chambers

You cannot maintain deep relationships with every official who matters. Pick a handful of the most important. The mayor or county executive, two state legislators from your region, one city or county council member with relevant committee work and one who is newly elected. Commit to meaningful contact with each of those five at least twice a year. When capacity grows, add to the list.

Recognition Programs and Legislative Scorecards

Recognition programs and legislative scorecards are tools for holding elected officials accountable to the business community's priorities. Used well, they incentivize officials to engage with the chamber's agenda and reward those who have demonstrated consistent support. Used poorly, they generate resentment, damage relationships and undermine the chamber's credibility as a nonpartisan voice.

The difference between effective and counterproductive use of these tools lies in the quality of the underlying process. Officials need to be able to see exactly how the chamber arrived at its assessment and know that the process was applied consistently and fairly across all officials regardless of party.

Recognition Programs

Recognition programs acknowledge elected officials whose voting records and policy actions have been consistently supportive of the chamber's legislative priorities. This can include annual awards presented at a chamber event or public acknowledgment in the chamber's member communications.

Recognition programs are most effective when they are:

- **Criteria-based, not relationship-based.** Recognition should be earned through a defined, documented set of criteria. This can include voting record, bill sponsorship or engagement with the chamber's agenda.
- **Consistent across sessions.** Applying the same criteria year after year builds credibility. Frequently changing the criteria could undermine your efforts.
- **Communicated clearly to officials in advance.** Communicate upfront to be sure officials know what the chamber is measuring.

Legislative Scorecards

A legislative scorecard rates elected officials based on their votes on a defined set of issues that the chamber has identified as priority concerns for the business community. Scorecards are public, typically distributed to members and often covered by the press.

A well-constructed scorecard requires four things:

1. A defined list of priority votes, selected before the session begins or before the votes are taken.
2. Clear, documented rationale for why each vote was included and what position the chamber's rating reflects. Officials and their staff will scrutinize the scorecard and will raise legitimate questions if the selection or rating methodology is opaque.
3. Consistent application across all officials, regardless of party.
4. Transparent distribution. Send the scorecard to officials before releasing it publicly. Give them the opportunity to raise factual errors and correct any genuine mistakes in the record. An official who learns their scorecard rating from the newspaper rather than the chamber will not react well.

Legislative scorecards carry reputational risk for the chamber as well as for the officials they rate. A scorecard that is seen as partisan, inconsistent or captured by a narrow interest will damage the chamber's relationships and credibility.

Before launching a scorecard program, be honest with yourself about whether the chamber's process is rigorous enough to withstand scrutiny. And leverage your position statements and key vote letters to be sure lawmakers know what votes you are tracking before the vote happens.

For Small Chambers

Recognition programs are more accessible than scorecards for chambers just beginning to build accountability mechanisms. A single annual award presented at the chamber's annual dinner, with clear criteria tied to the chamber's published legislative priorities, creates visibility for the program and is a great way to start.

The Power of Coalitions

Coalitions amplify advocacy by demonstrating that support for a position extends beyond the organization that originated it, and sometimes beyond the sectors and constituencies that officials expected to hear from.

Chambers are natural coalition builders. The breadth of the chamber's membership and its reputation for representing the broad business community rather than a single interest give it both the convening legitimacy and the connector capacity that effective coalitions require. But coalition building is not automatic, and not every coalition is worth joining.

When to Build or Join a Coalition

Being strategic about when and how your chamber participates in coalitions. Situations where coalitions add value include:

- When an issue's scope exceeds what any single organization can credibly represent alone. Infrastructure investment, workforce development, regional economic competitiveness. These are issues that touch multiple sectors and communities, and a coalition that reflects that breadth is more persuasive than any single voice could be.
- When the chamber's voice would be more powerful accompanied by voices that officials did not expect. A business organization supporting an education initiative is more compelling when it is joined by faith communities and neighborhood associations. A chamber opposing a regulation is more credible when it is joined by nonprofits and small business owners rather than just large employers.
- When the government relations effort requires capacity that the chamber does not have on its own. A coalition that combines the chamber's convening power with a partner's grassroots network or technical credibility is more effective than either would be working separately.

The chamber should be cautious about engaging in coalitions:

- When the coalition's positions are not fully aligned with the chamber's own policy agenda.
- When the coalition is effectively being used to provide cover for a narrow interest that does not genuinely reflect the business community's priorities.
- When coalition participation would compromise the chamber's reputation for nonpartisan, process-driven advocacy. Lending the chamber's name to a coalition whose governance, funding or agenda the chamber cannot fully account for is a reputational risk worth taking seriously.

Coalition Governance and Decision-Making

Before joining or convening a coalition, understand how it will be governed. Who makes decisions? What does consensus look like? What happens when coalition members disagree on strategy, timing or specific asks? What is the process for a member to step back from a specific position without leaving the coalition entirely?

These questions matter most when the issue gets contentious or the timeline gets compressed. A coalition with clear governance holds together under pressure. One without it fractures at exactly the moment when unity is most needed.

Managing Coalition Relationships

Coalition partners need to feel that their participation is genuine and valued. An organization that joins a coalition and then feels ignored in decision-making will not be a reliable partner.

Several practices sustain healthy coalition relationships over the course of a campaign:

- Communicate proactively and frequently. Partners who feel kept in the loop are more likely to stay engaged and more likely to be flexible when adjustments are needed. Silence breeds suspicion in coalition work.
- Share credit generously. When the coalition achieves something, make sure every partner organization's contribution is acknowledged publicly and specifically.
- Warn partners before taking positions that affect them. If the chamber is going to take a stance that modifies or complicates the coalition's collective position, other partners deserve a heads-up before it becomes public.
- Respect the constraints of coalition partners. A nonprofit whose funders include the government agency whose regulation you are opposing faces constraints the chamber does not. An education institution that depends on legislative appropriations has exposure the chamber does not. Understanding and accommodating those constraints is what keeps diverse coalitions intact.

For Small Chambers

You do not need to build or lead a coalition to benefit from one. Joining an existing coalition organized by your state chamber, a regional partner or an issue-specific organization is often the most efficient way to amplify the chamber's voice without taking on the full burden of coalition management. Show up, contribute meaningfully and build the relationships that will make future collaboration easier.

Don't Overlook Unlikely Allies

The most persuasive advocacy is often delivered by the messenger the official did not expect to hear from. When a business organization's position is supported only by other business organizations, it confirms a narrative that the official may already hold. When that same position is supported by a labor union, a faith community, an environmental organization or a neighborhood association, it disrupts the narrative.

Identifying and cultivating unlikely allies is a strategically valuable skill. It requires intellectual honesty about where the chamber's interests genuinely overlap with those of organizations that do not typically think of themselves as business allies and the willingness to engage those organizations with respect for their own goals and constraints.

Finding Common Ground
Approach potential allies with genuine curiosity about their goals before asking for their support. What is this organization trying to accomplish? Where does our issue connect to their mission? What would they need to see in our position or our approach to feel comfortable lending their voice?

Be honest with them about what you are asking for and why. An organization that joins because it genuinely shares a stake in the outcome, and is treated like a genuine partner, will be a durable ally on that issue and potentially on future ones.

Managing the Complexity of Unlikely Alliances
Working with unlikely allies requires more care than working with natural partners. Organizations that are allies on one issue may be adversaries on another. A coalition with a labor union on workforce development does not mean the chamber endorses the union's position on collective bargaining. A partnership with an environmental group on clean energy infrastructure does not mean the chamber supports the group's full regulatory agenda.

Be explicit about the scope of the alliance with clear and honest framing that both sides can own. Expect questions from your own members when a partnership is unexpected. Some will be enthusiastic and others will be confused or concerned. Communicate proactively about why the alliance makes sense for this issue.

Getting to Know the Policy Press

Journalists who cover politics and policy at the local and state level are among the most valuable and most underutilized relationships in a chamber's government relations network. They shape how the public understands policy issues; how elected officials perceive the business community's concerns and how the chamber's positions are framed when they reach a broader audience.

The relationship with the policy press should be built on the same principles as the relationship with elected officials. Invest before you need it, be genuinely useful and treat reporters as partners

rather than as vehicles for your message. A chamber that has earned the trust of the reporters who cover its beat is in a fundamentally better position than one that only calls the press when it needs something.

Who to Know

The policy press landscape varies significantly by market. It may include dedicated political reporters at daily newspapers, television correspondents, independent policy publications and specialized business journals.

Also pay attention to new media voices like policy-focused newsletters, podcasts and social media accounts with significant local followings. In many markets these outlets now reach audiences that traditional print and broadcast do not. There has also been a rise in nonprofit news entities focused on state policy.

How to Build Productive Press Relationships

A productive relationship with a reporter is built on being genuinely useful to them. Reporters covering politics and policy need sources who are knowledgeable, accessible and honest. A chamber CEO who returns calls promptly, provides accurate information, helps reporters understand complex issues clearly and is willing to be quoted on the record can become a go-to source. That relationship pays dividends that no press release strategy can replicate.

Several practices help build productive press relationships:

- **Initiate, do not just respond.** Do not wait for reporters to call you about a crisis. Reach out proactively when the chamber has something worth sharing. This could be a significant position, a policy outcome or emerging priority. Reporters who hear from the chamber regularly, not just when the chamber needs coverage, develop a more complete picture of what the organization does.
- **Be a resource, not just a promoter.** When a reporter is working on a story about a policy issue, offer to connect them with member sources who have firsthand experience. Help them understand the technical aspects of an issue. Point them to data and research. Reporters remember sources who made their job easier.
- **Be honest about what you know and do not know.** A source who acknowledges uncertainty is more credible than one who has a confident answer for everything. If you do not know something, say so and offer to find out. If you cannot comment on something, say why rather than simply declining.
- **Respect their deadlines and constraints.** A reporter on deadline who gets a quick callback will appreciate it. One who waits two days for a response writes the story without you. Be accessible.
- **Distinguish between on-record and background conversations.** Some conversations with reporters are appropriate for background, helping them understand context without

being quoted. Others should be on the record. Be explicit about which is which before the conversation begins, not after.

When the Story Is About You

At some point the chamber will be the subject of a news story rather than a source for one. A controversial position, a dispute with a public official, a question about the chamber's funding or governance could all hit the front page.

When this occurs, respond promptly. A chamber that goes silent when asked a hard question looks like it has something to hide. Be accurate, and do not overstate the chamber's position, understate a controversy or make claims you cannot support. Stick to what you know and what you are authorized to say.

Resist the impulse to manage every story. Some coverage will not reflect the chamber's preferred framing. That is the nature of journalism. A chamber that spends its political capital fighting every critical story erodes relationships that it needs for the long-term. Choose your battles. When coverage is factually inaccurate, correct it directly. When it is simply unflattering, let it go and do the work that produces better coverage over time.

Key Principles

- **Invest in relationships before you need them.** The official who takes your call during a crisis is one you built a relationship with long before the crisis arrived. There is no shortcut to this. Consistent, low-pressure engagement over time is what creates the access that matters when something is urgent.
- **The chamber's convening power is a strategic asset.** The ability to bring together business leaders, elected officials, anchor institutions and unlikely allies around a shared concern is something most organizations cannot do. Use it deliberately.
- **Coalitions amplify – they also complicate.** A well-managed coalition multiplies the chamber's advocacy reach. A poorly managed one creates governance conflicts, messaging problems and reputational risk. Be strategic about which coalitions to join, invest in governance upfront and manage coalition relationships with the same care you give to member relationships.
- **Unexpected voices change the dynamic.** The chamber speaking alone on a business issue confirms what officials already expect. The chamber speaking alongside an unlikely ally disrupts the expected narrative and signals breadth of concern that a single organizational voice cannot convey.
- **Accountability tools require process discipline.** Recognition programs and scorecards are only credible when they are criteria-based, consistently applied and transparent. A program that is seen as partisan or selective will damage the chamber more than it advances its agenda.

- **Show up in their world, not just yours.** Facility tours, community meetings and in-district events are relationship investments that put the chamber in the official's context.

Strategic Questions for Your Leadership Team

Use these questions to open substantive conversations with your board, executive committee or leadership team. They are designed to surface real tensions and decision points, not generate easy agreement.

- Which elected officials who have significant influence over our members' operating environment have never met with the chamber, toured a member facility or attended a chamber event? What is the plan to close that gap this year?
- Is there an organization in our community whose support for one of the chamber's current priorities would meaningfully change the dynamic with decision-makers? What would it take to build that partnership?
- Does the chamber currently participate in any coalitions where it is not clear what the chamber's participation is producing? What criteria should we use to evaluate whether continued participation is warranted?
- If the chamber were to launch a legislative scorecard, is the current position taking process rigorous and documented enough to defend the ratings it would produce? If not, what needs to be in place before a scorecard is a credible tool?
- When did a reporter covering politics or policy last call the chamber for comment on a story they were working on? If the answer is "rarely" or "never," what does that signal about the chamber's current standing in the policy press community?

Final Thoughts

Government relations is not a side function of a chamber of commerce. It is one of the clearest ways chambers fulfill their mission to strengthen the business climate, support economic growth and improve the competitiveness of their communities.

The work does not require a large staff, a political background or a massive budget to begin. It requires commitment, structure, relationships and a willingness to engage. Small, consistent steps can dramatically strengthen a chamber's influence over time.

Every chamber will approach this work differently based on its size, resources, community dynamics and membership. There is no single model. But the most effective chambers share several traits. They are business-led, process-driven, collaborative and proactive. They do not wait for crises to define their role. They help shape the future of their communities before decisions are made without them.

The goal of this toolkit is not to create government relations experts overnight. It is to help chambers take the next step, whether that means building a program from scratch, strengthening an existing effort or creating greater clarity and confidence around the work already happening.

Start where you are. Build steadily. Stay member informed. Focus on impact. And remember that meaningful influence is rarely built through a single issue or legislative win. It is built through trust, consistency and long-term engagement.

Special Thanks

Special thanks to the following chamber of commerce leaders who supported ACCE and WACE staff on this project.

Nicholas Adcock
President & CEO
Greater Riverside Chambers of Commerce

Daniel Brooks
Vice President of Business Advocacy
Billings Chamber

Nikki Devitt, IOM
President & CEO
Petoskey Regional Chamber of Commerce

Michael Guymon
Chief Advocacy Officer
The Chamber for Southern Arizona

Buckley O'Mell, CCE, IOM
Vice President of Advocacy
Little Rock Regional Chamber

Kevin Walker, CCE, IOM
EVP & Chief Policy Officer
Overland Park Chamber

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