



How a Bill Becomes a Law in Massachusetts^{1*}

1 | **FILING.** The Massachusetts Legislature operates on a two-year cycle. In January of odd-numbered years, state legislators' terms begin, and new bills (proposed laws) are filed. House bills, filed by state representatives, are filed with the [House clerk](#); Senate bills, filed by state Senators, are filed with the [Senate clerk](#). Bills typically have one (or sometimes two) primary sponsor(s), but may have multiple co-sponsors. **Advocacy organizations that want a particular bill to be filed identify primary sponsors in the Massachusetts House of Representatives and in the Massachusetts Senate, and then work with their primary sponsors on the bill's wording before the primary sponsors file House and Senate versions of the bill.**

Bills may be filed at any time during the two-year legislative cycle, but most are filed prior to what's called the "filing deadline." Typically, the filing deadline is the third Friday in January of each odd-numbered year, but the House and Senate can set a later deadline. Bills that are filed after the filing deadline are called "late-filed bills."

2 | **NUMBERING & CO-SPONSORSHIP.** When a bill is filed, it is given a temporary number, known as a "docket number." (For example, HD.1115, where "HD" stands for "House Docket.") After the filing deadline, bills are assigned permanent bill numbers. (For example, a House bill, H.1234, or a Senate bill, S.1234.) Legislators have a set period of time after the filing deadline to sign onto bills as co-sponsors – in some years, it's been as short as two weeks, and in other years, legislators have had much more time to co-sponsor a bill. **This is a great opportunity for advocates to demonstrate that a bill is supported by many legislators, by helping to round up co-sponsors.**

3 | **REFERRAL TO COMMITTEE.** Bills are generally referred to a committee based on primary subject matter. For example, many housing-related bills are referred to the Joint Committee on Housing.

4 | **PUBLIC HEARING.** A public hearing is scheduled by a committee, often grouping together bills that relate to the same or similar issues. Massachusetts residents, lobbyists, state officials, stakeholders, and other interested parties may speak ("testify") in front of the committee in support or opposition to a bill. In the past, legislative hearings were conducted entirely in-person. Since the start of the COVID pandemic, you also have the option of testifying virtually, through an online platform that is similar to Zoom and Google Meet. Testimony is generally limited to 3 minutes per person. Organizations and individuals may also submit written testimony to the committee. **The hearing is a great opportunity for advocates to show public support for a bill, and for state legislators to speak in support of a bill. Several One Family Advocacy Team members have testified at legislative hearings!**

5 | **COMMITTEE REPORTING.** From time to time, committees in the Massachusetts Legislature decide whether a particular bill will go forward or not. Bills are either reported favorably ("ought to pass") or unfavorably ("ought NOT to pass" or "sent to study"). Bills that are reported unfavorably do not move forward. Prior to committee reporting, the bill may be revised – sometimes significantly – by the committee. There is an official deadline (the "Joint Rule 10 Deadline") for committees to report bills. Typically, the Joint Rule 10 Deadline is in February or March of even years, which is the second year of the two-year legislative cycle. But the deadline for a committee to report a particular bill is routinely extended.

6 | **NEXT COMMITTEE.** Typically, after a legislative committee reports a bill favorably ("ought to pass"), it then goes to a second committee, which decides whether or not the bill will continue to move forward. In most cases, the second committee is the House Committee on Ways and Means or the Senate Committee on Ways and Means. (These are the same committees that write the state budget.) In other cases, bills are referred to the House or Senate Rules Committee. The second committee's Chair, in consultation with the [Speaker of the House](#)

¹ Rev. 12/6/2022. This summary includes some material from the InstaTrac document "How a Bill (Really) Becomes a Law."

or the [Senate President](#), plays a major role in this decision. **Given that the [Chairs of the House and Senate Ways and Means Committees](#) play such an important role in both state budgets and “regular legislation,” they are key decision-makers, along with the Speaker of the House and the Senate President.**

7 | **DEBATE – FIRST CHAMBER.** If the second committee decides that a bill will continue to move forward, it is brought to the full House of Representatives or the full Senate – this is called the bill’s “first reading.” It is then “read” a second time (“second reading”), and is up for debate, motions, and amendments. **In Massachusetts, most bills are not amended/changed by the first chamber that votes on it.**

8 | **THIRD READING AND ENGROSSMENT.** Following debate, the bill, if controversial or complex, may be sent to the Committee on Bills in the Third Reading for yet another review. But sometimes the bill moves directly to the next step, which is called “third reading.” The bill is then passed (“engrossed”) in the initial chamber, and sent to the other chamber. For example, a bill that is engrossed by the Massachusetts House of Representatives moves on to the Massachusetts Senate. **Note: In Massachusetts, a vote to engross a bill is a formality – if a bill makes it to a vote, it is always passed. Therefore, as a practical matter, advocacy in Massachusetts typically does not center on urging an individual legislator to vote for or against a bill. Instead, advocacy in Massachusetts typically focuses on urging your state representative or your state senator to lobby the leadership of the House or the Senate to move a bill forward.**

9 | **DEBATE – SECOND CHAMBER.** Step nos. 7 and 8 are then repeated in the second chamber – first reading, second reading, debate, third reading, and engrossment.

10 | **ENACTMENT.** If identical versions of the bill have been engrossed by the House and Senate, then the House and Senate take a final vote, called a vote on whether a bill will be “passed to be enacted.” **As with a vote on engrossment, in Massachusetts, a vote on enactment is a formality.**

In the event the bill is engrossed with differences between the House and Senate versions, there are three options: a) the bill does not move forward any further, b) the Massachusetts House of Representatives votes to accept the Massachusetts Senate’s version of the bill, or vice versa, or c) a conference committee is formed to try to reconcile the differences between the two versions, prior to enactment by the House and Senate. This last option (“c”) happens with every state budget, as well as with some complex bills. Three members of each chamber are appointed to the conference committee, with two state representatives from the majority party (in Massachusetts, the Democratic Party), one state representative from the minority party (in Massachusetts, the Republican Party), and two state senators from the majority party and one senator from the minority party. The conference committee may spend several weeks ironing out the differences between the House and the Senate versions of the bill, then substitute their language prior to enactment. This language cannot be amended or otherwise changed.

11 | **SIGNED INTO LAW.** If the Governor signs a bill, it becomes a law. However, the Governor can also veto the bill, return it with recommended amendment, or allow the unsigned bill to become law. If the Governor vetoes a bill, and then both the Massachusetts House of Representatives and the Massachusetts Senate vote by a majority of at least 2/3 of state representatives and 2/3 of state senators to pass the bill (a “vote to override”), the bill becomes law without the Governor’s signature.

**This process can take up to two years. In fact, legislation typically goes through multiple two-year legislative sessions before being passed into law – and most bills never even reach the finish line. However, there are shortcuts! For example, language from a bill can be inserted into ‘must-pass’ legislation, such as a state budget, or an economic development bill, and passed into law on an expedited basis. When legislative leaders want legislation to move quickly, they have the ability to make it happen.*