

# The Nebraska Legislature: Understanding our Unique Unicameral



# State Law vs. Federal Law

**Federal law applies uniformly across the entire country.**

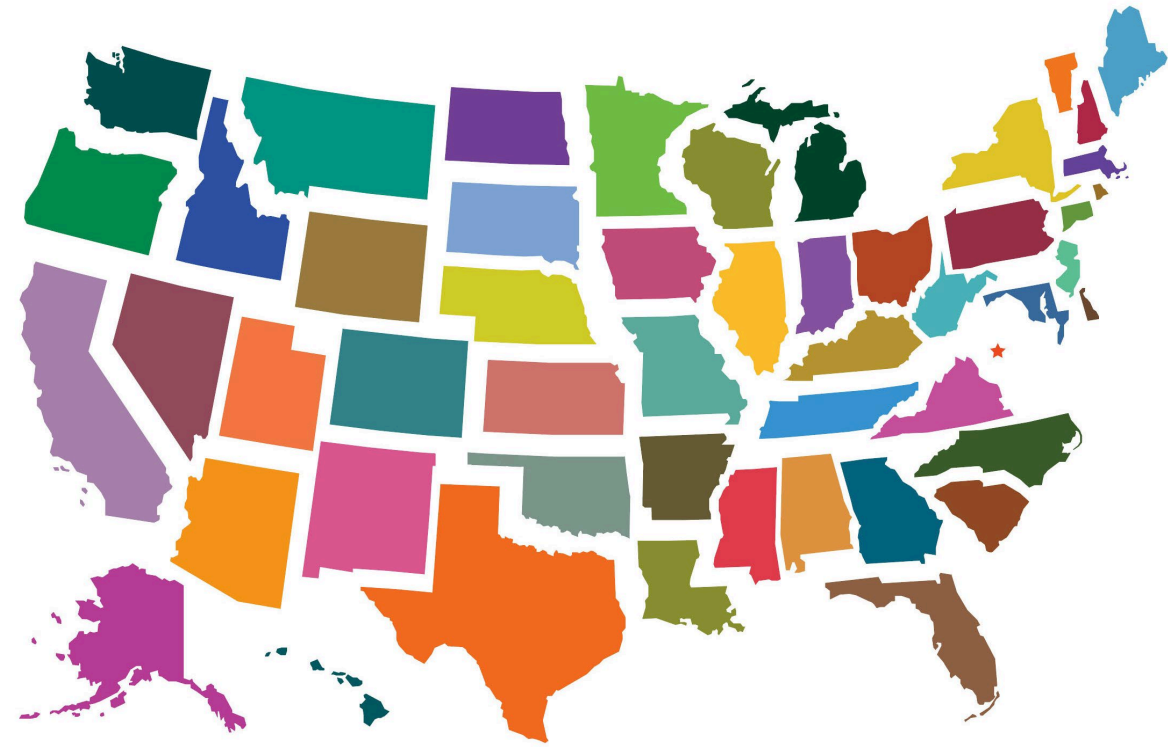
It governs matters such as national security, interstate commerce, and immigration.

**State law only applies within that particular state.**

State laws cover a wide range of issues, including criminal, family, and property law.

**Federal law takes precedence over state law.**

States cannot contradict federal law.



**Nebraska is the only state  
with a Unicameral legislature.**

**So, what does that mean?**

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**Unicameral (Uni = one)**

All legislative powers are concentrated in one assembly, which simplifies the law-making process.

**Bicameral (Bi = two)**

Two chambers (or “houses”). This system allows for a more thorough review of legislation, as bills must be approved by both chambers.

Typically, a bicameral is comprised of the Senate and the House of Representatives.







Nebraska is the only state with a nonpartisan, single-chamber legislature.

By eliminating the traditional two-chamber system, Nebraska has created a more streamlined, cost-effective governing body in which senators work collaboratively across philosophical divides.

Party labels are (supposed to be) intentionally set aside, allowing legislators to focus on substantive policy solutions rather than partisan posturing.



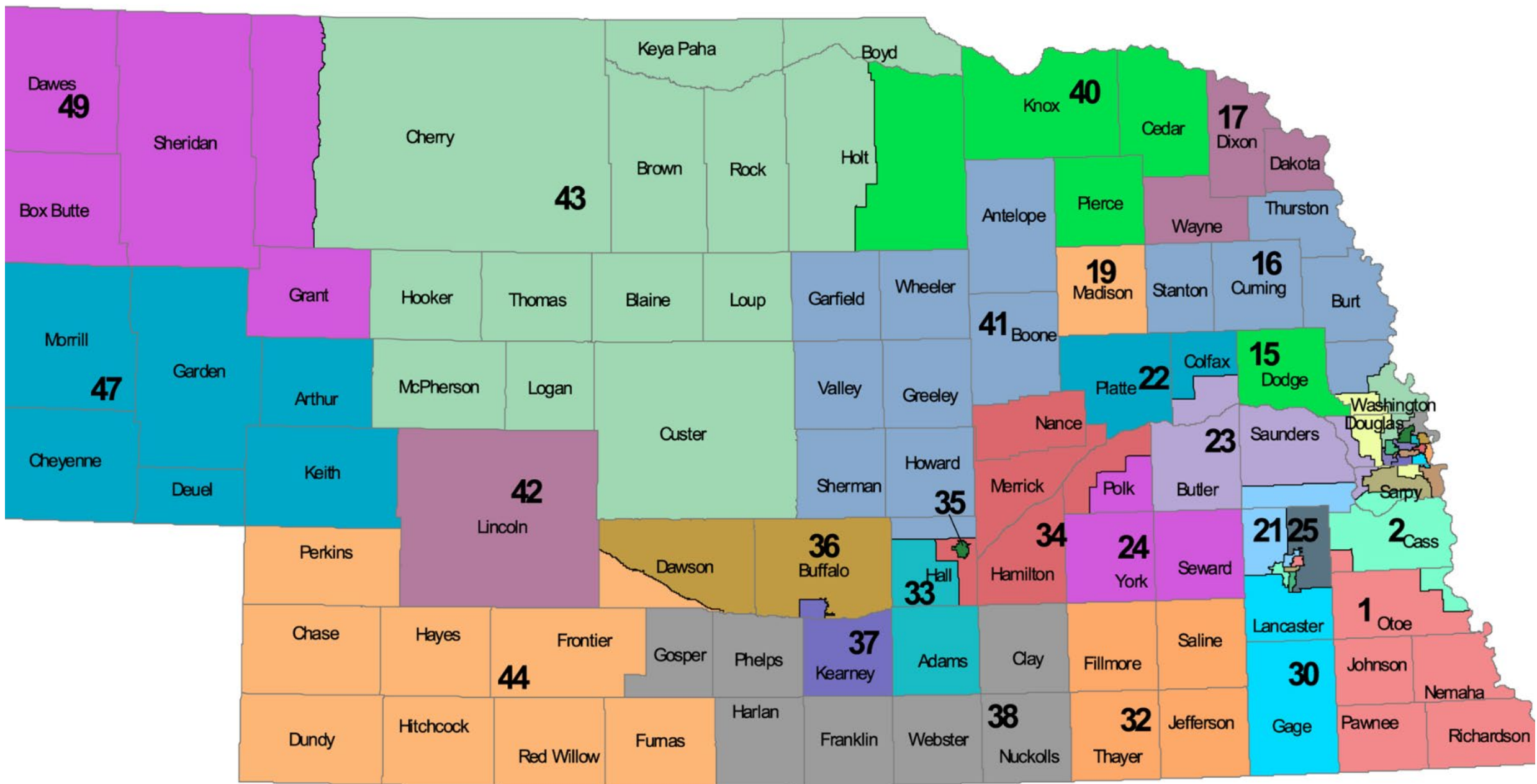
**There are 49 senators in the Nebraska Legislature.**

**Each senator represents one district which has about 35,000 people living in it.**

**Senators serve four-year terms. They are limited to two consecutive terms.**

**It is a part-time, citizen legislature, which means most of its members have other jobs.**

**Senators receive \$12,000 a year for serving in the Legislature.**





# The Nebraska Legislature uses a biennium structure.

That means it works **in two-year increments** with a “long” 90-day session the first year and a “short” 60-day session the second.

Both sessions of the two-year biennium cycle start in early January and continue through the spring, ending somewhere between April and June depending on the session.

If time sensitive or pressing matters arise outside of the time when the legislators are in session, they are able to convene for a “special session.”

Nebraska’s state fiscal year runs from July 1st-June 30th.

Laws approved during the session take effect July 1st.

[nebraskalegislature.gov/calendar/calendar.php](http://nebraskalegislature.gov/calendar/calendar.php)



# Maximize the Interim

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In the months leading up to a new session (~Aug-Dec), it's critical for community advocates to strategize together.

- What issues need to be prioritized?
- Which senators are willing to carry bills for us?
- And most importantly: **Relationship-building!**

The interim is a critical time to meet with as many senators as possible and educate them on our issues.



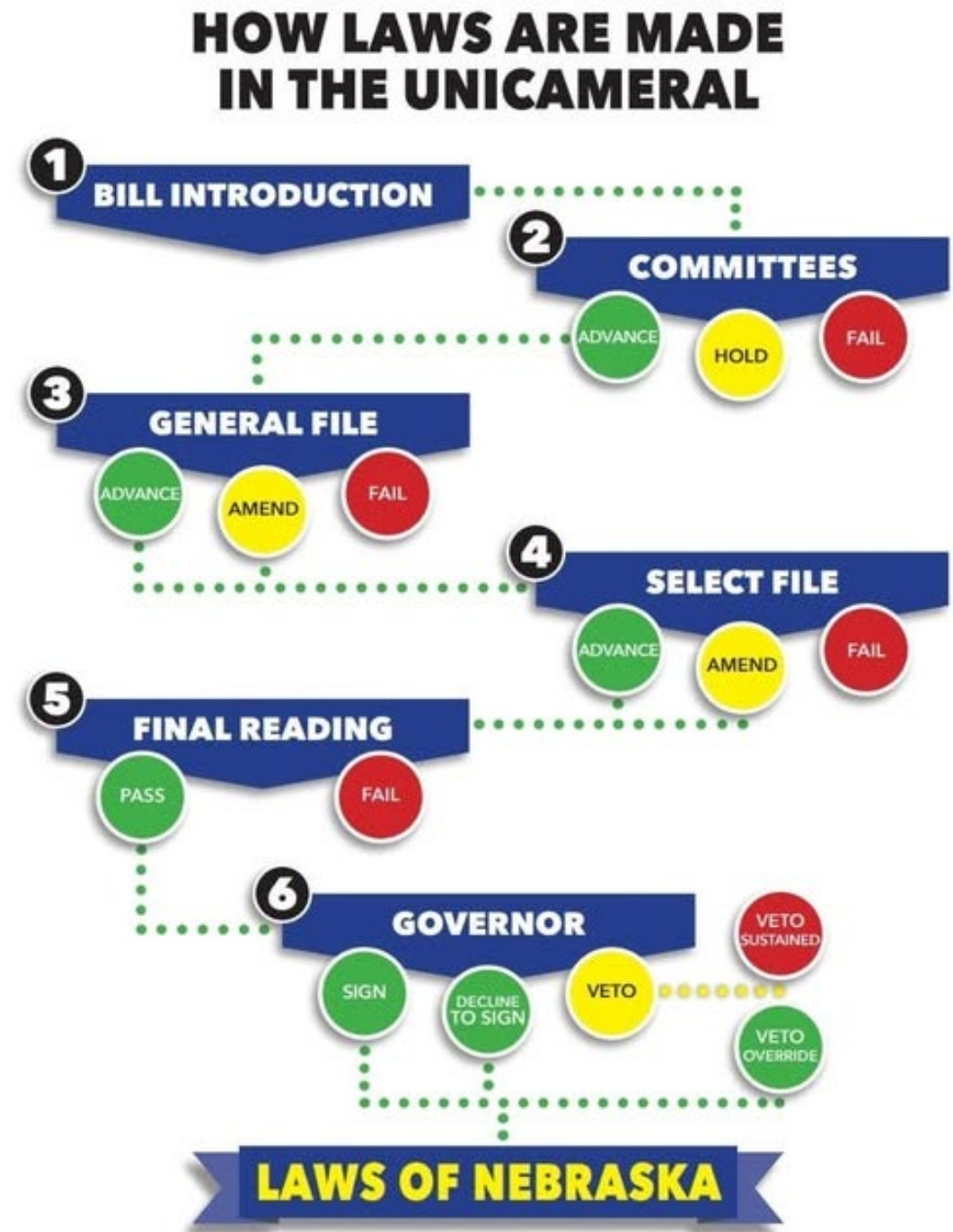


# The Law-Making Process

- The lawmaking process in Nebraska **officially** begins when a senator introduces a bill into the Legislature at the beginning of session.
- But the process **actually** begins much earlier, when a senator first begins to formulate ideas for new laws (e.g. over the Interim)
- An idea for a new law may be suggested by anyone: concerned citizens, special interest groups, state agencies or the governor.
- Senators are currently limited to no more than 20 bills per session.



- Before the Legislature can formally consider an idea, it must be introduced as a bill by a senator or legislative committee.
- Roughly 500 – 800 bills are introduced each session
- Committees debate and propose amendments to bills, and the full Legislature has an opportunity to debate each bill at least two times before its final passage.
- Senators may propose amendments to alter a bill at each stage of debate.



# The Law-Making Process

- Step 1: Bill Introduction
- Step 2: Committee Hearing
- Step 3: “General File”
- Step 4: “Select File”
- Step 5: “Final Reading”
- Step 6: Governor’s signature
- Step 7: Veto override (if necessary)
- Step 8: LAW

## Opportunities for Advocacy

- Step 1: Bill Introduction
- Step 2: Committee Hearing
- Step 3: “General File”
- Step 4: “Select File”
- Step 5: “Final Reading”
- Step 6: Governor’s signature
- Step 7: Veto override (if necessary)
- Step 8: Work over the Interim





# Committees / Public Hearings

- After a bill is introduced, it is sent to a committee which will conduct a **public** hearing on that bill in which citizens have a chance to express their opinions on record to committee members.
- After the **public** hearing, the committee members consider what action they want to take on the bill.
- The committee has 4 options:
  - **Advance** the bill to General File as is
  - **Advance** the bill to General File with suggested changes (amendments)
  - **Indefinitely postpone** the bill
  - **Take no action** on the bill

# Standing Legislative Committees

A listing of the committees and their meeting information is here:

<https://nebraskalegislature.gov/pdf/committees/roster.pdf>



1. Agriculture
- 2. Appropriations**
3. Banking, Commerce, Insurance
4. Business & Labor
- 5. Education**
6. General Affairs
- 7. Government, Military and Veterans Affairs**
- 8. Health & Human Services**
9. Judiciary
10. Natural Resources
11. Nebraska Retirement Systems
12. Revenue
13. Transportation & Telecommunications
14. Urban Affairs

# “General File” (Round 1)

- If the committee advances a bill, it goes to the *General File* stage.
- General file is the first time the full Legislature has the opportunity to debate and vote on a bill.
- **Senators also can propose amendments in General File.**
- It takes a majority vote of the Legislature (25 votes) to adopt amendments and to move a bill from General File to Select File
- **Emergency Clause requires 33 votes**



# “Select File” (Round 2)

- Select File is the second time the full Legislature debates and votes on a bill.
- This step allows senators another opportunity to amend, compromise and reflect on the proposed law.
- On Select File, a bill may be indefinitely postponed or advanced to the next stage



# “Final Reading” (Round 3)

- Final Reading is the third and last time a bill is considered by the entire Legislature.
- A bill may not be amended or debated during the Final Reading stage
- Usually, it only takes a majority vote (25 senators) for a bill to be passed on Final Reading.
  - However, a bill with the *Emergency Clause* requires a vote of 2/3 of the Legislature (33 senators).

# The Governor

- After the Legislature passes a bill in the final reading stage, it goes to the governor for their approval.
- The governor has five days, excluding Sundays, to decide what to do with a bill.
- If the governor signs a bill or declines to act on it, the bill becomes a state law.
- The governor may veto a bill, and can line-item veto, or strike specific budget items.
- The Legislature may override a governor's veto, although it takes a vote of 30 senators to do so.





# How to Read a Proposed Bill

A **legislative bill (LB)** is a proposed law and a **legislative resolution (LR)** is a proposed rule for how the Unicameral is administered.

A bill does not become a law until it passes multiple steps and goes through the governor's office without being vetoed.

A resolution does not have a direct impact on Nebraskans, but it can do things like get rid of supermajority requirements or remove the ability to filibuster.

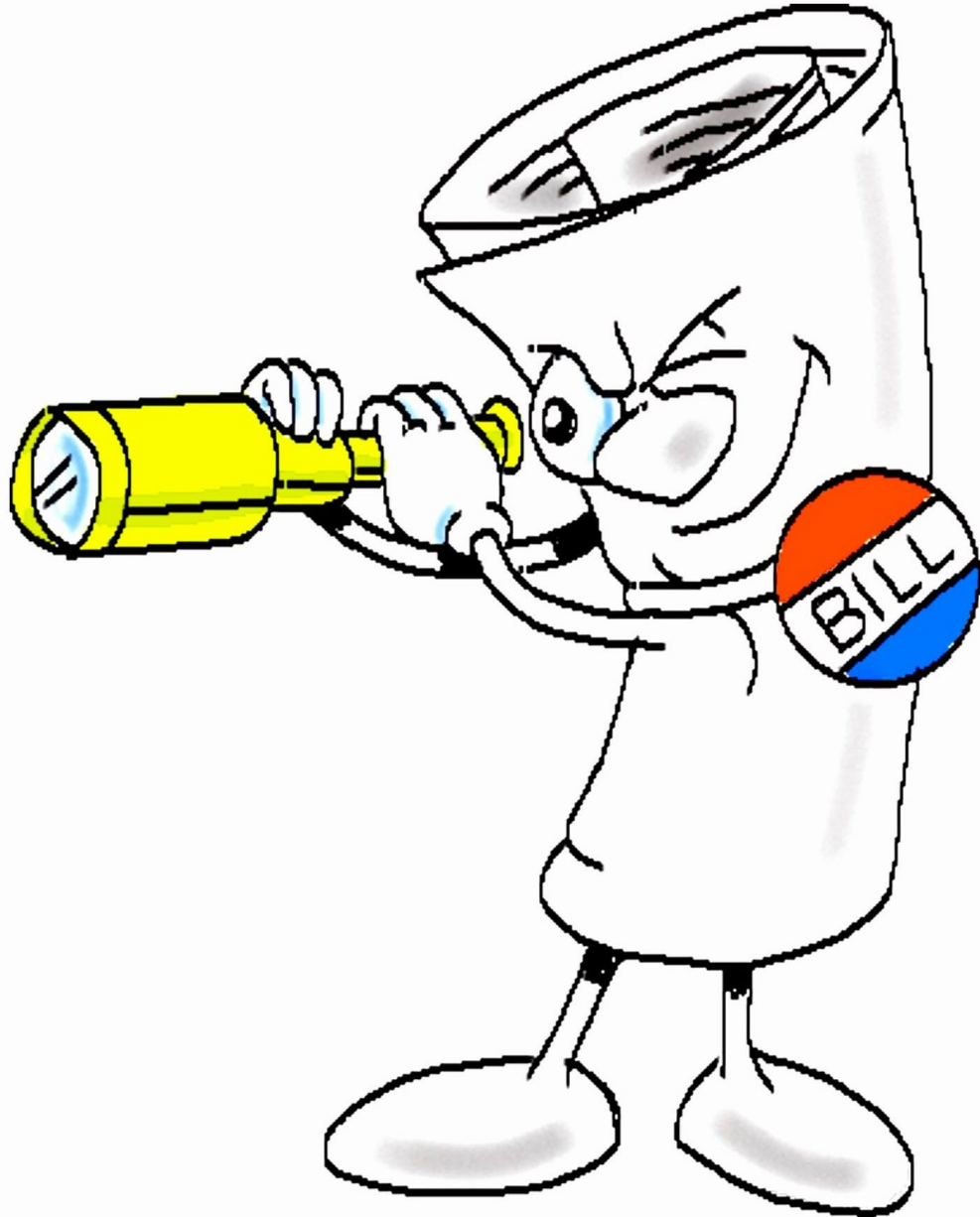
# How to Read a Proposed Bill

Often a bill is changing something that is already in state law. Proposed legislation is formatted to help the reader identify what is existing law, what is being added, and what is being removed.

Everything in normal formatting is existing law (no changes)

Anything underlined is being added

~~Anything stricken through is being removed~~



# Bill Tracking

**You can track up to 15 bills for free:**

[Nebraska BillTracker](#) | [Nebraska Legislation](#) |  
[NE.gov](#) | [Main Page](#)

You have also been emailed a sample spreadsheet created by Disability Rights Nebraska to track bills on your own



# Resource: The Unicameral Update

## *“The Nebraska Legislature’s Official News Source Since 1977”*

- The Unicameral Update is a news source produced by the Nebraska Legislature's Unicameral Information Office.
  - The office also works with the Legislative Technology Center on the web site design and content, and produces various educational and informational videos, brochures, and publications about the Nebraska Legislature.
- The Unicameral Update recaps what happened in the legislature that week.
- If you would like to receive a free subscription to the print version of the Unicameral Update call (402) 471-2788.
- To view the Unicameral Update online: <http://update.legislature.ne.gov/>

Nebraska Legislature - Home

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Session Information

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For Agencies

108th Legislature, 2nd Regular Session - Day 60

View Day 60 Activity

The Legislature is in session

Recent Legislative Information

The online Nebraska statutes have been updated as of June 28, 2023.

2024 Legislative Session Calendar

Introduced Legislation

2024 Appropriations Committee Recommendation Report

Senator List (Print Friendly)

Committee on Committees Report

Priority Bill Listing

2023 Annual Tax Rate Review Committee Report

2023 Biennial Budget Report

2023 Carryover Bills and Resolutions (8/14/2023)

2023 Interim Study Resolutions (7/21/2023)

Interim Study Listing

2023 After Adjournment Journal (6/6/2023)

2023 Final Worksheet (6/6/2023)

After Adjournment Worksheet (6/1/2023)

LFO Directory of State Agency Programs and Funds

2023 Subject and Section Indexes for Introduced Legislation (5/3/2023)

2023 Subject and Section Index for Passed Legislation (7/25/2023)

Hearing schedules

Public Input Options

General Fund Financial Status

News from the Unicameral Update

Unicameral Update

Search Current Bills

LB #

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Legislative Calendar

April

18

Today

April

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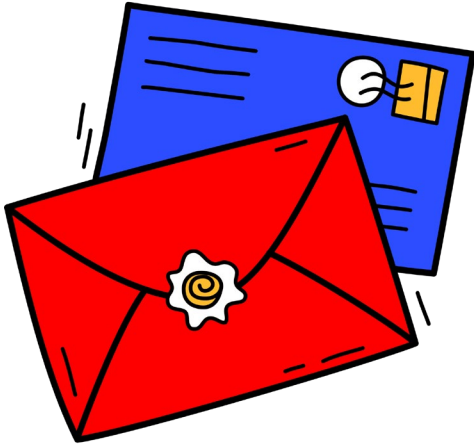
# Public Input Options

There are several options for the public to [provide input](#) on legislation:

1. Testify In-Person at public hearing
2. Submit Online Comments / ADA written comment
3. Send letter/email to individual senators
4. Phone calls to senator's office
5. Meet in person with senator or staff (in office or in the district)



# Resources: Contacting Senators



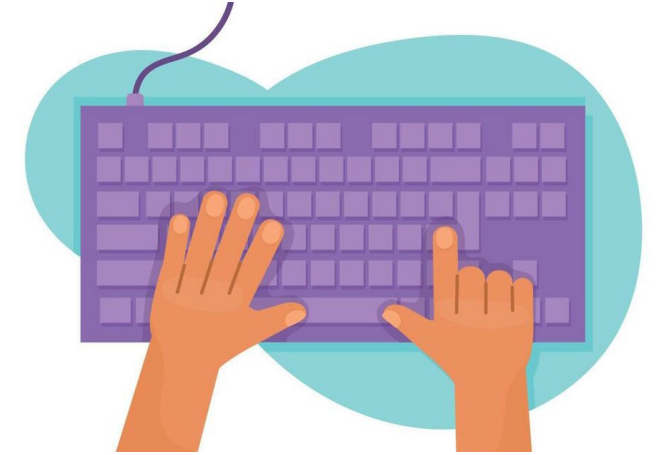
## Mail

Senator \_\_\_\_\_  
District #  
State Capitol  
PO Box 94604  
Lincoln, NE 68509-4604



## Phone

Senator Roster  
(with phone #'s)  
<https://nebraskalegislature.gov/pdf/senators/roster.pdf>



## Email

It's typically like this:  
[asmith@leg.ne.gov](mailto:asmith@leg.ne.gov)  
But doublecheck the  
webpage to be sure

# Submitting Online Comments

- The link to submit a comment is on each individual bill's landing page.

[Example: Nebraska Legislature - Legislative Document](#)

- Comments must be submitted **no later than 8:00am** the day of the public committee hearing.
- Must confirm your submission via email (two step process).
- Comments can be in support, opposition, or a neutral capacity.
- If you reference your profession/expertise, be sure to clarify whether your comment is on behalf of your organization or you speaking as a private citizen.

# Testifying at a Committee Hearing

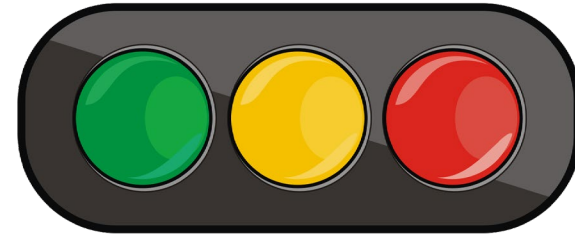
- Hearings usually begin at 1:30 p.m. CT
- Public testifiers are limited to 3 or 5 minutes. You must complete a testifier form (stacked by the hearing room entrance). You must state and spell your full name for the record.
- After the sponsoring senator finishes their introduction, the committee chair will ask proponents of the bill to come forward individually and state their reasons for supporting the measure.
- Then the chair will ask opponents of the bill to come forward and state their opinions.
- Be prepared to answer questions from committee members.
- It is a good idea to prepare written copies of your testimony to distribute to the committee. This gets your message across more effectively by making it easy for senators to refer back to what you've said and also helps to ensure an accurate hearing transcript.



A Public Committee Hearing



# Tips on Testifying



- Try not to repeat testimony offered by previous testifiers. If you know other people planning to testify, strategize ahead of time who will cover what points. This helps maximize the 3 or 5 minute time limit.
  - Prepare your testimony in advance and time yourself reading it aloud.
- Bring enough copies to distribute to all committee members, the two committee staff members, media and the transcribers' office. Fifteen copies is usually enough.
- Addressing committee members or testifiers from the audience is prohibited, and applause and other public demonstrations are not permitted at hearings.
- If auxiliary aids or reasonable accommodations are needed for you to attend a hearing, please call the Office of the Clerk of the Legislature, (402) 471-2271.
- If you have a hearing or speech impairment, please call the Ombudsman's Office at (402) 471-2035 or 800-742-7690. Advance notice of seven days is needed when requesting an interpreter.

# Glossary of Legislative Terms:

<https://nebraskalegislature.gov/about/glossary.php>



# Any Questions?



# Contact Information

## **Disability Rights Nebraska**

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Fax 402-474-3274

Toll-Free in Nebraska 1-800-422-6691

Website: [www.disabilityrightsnebraska.org](http://www.disabilityrightsnebraska.org)

E-mail: [brad@drne.org](mailto:brad@drne.org)