

# HOW A BILL BECOMES LAW IN PENNSYLVANIA

**Introduction:** Anyone may draft a bill; however, only members of the General Assembly can introduce legislation, and by doing so become the sponsor(s). There are three basic types of legislation in Pennsylvania: bills, house resolutions, and senate resolutions. By and large, resolutions are not used to enact law, but for chambers to enact rules like how much time is used in a debate, to denounce some act of violence, or to review existing laws. A joint resolution can be used to enact law (though it is rare) or to begin the process of a state constitutional amendment.

**Step 1. Referral to Committee:** The official legislative process begins when a bill or resolution is numbered and printed by the Legislative Reference Bureau. Bills are then referred to standing committees in the House (by the Speaker of the House) or Senate (by the President Pro Tempore)

**Step 2. Committee Action:** The House has 24 permanent committees made up of 15 House members of the majority party and 11 members of the minority party. When a bill reaches a committee it is placed on the committee's calendar. It is at this point that a bill is examined carefully and its chances for passage are determined. 75% of bills don't make it out of committee. Prior to a vote, actions the committee can take are:

- Convene Committee meetings to discuss the matter with experts (open to the public)
- Hold a public hearing on the bill
- Refer the bill to a subcommittee for further review

**When it is ready for a vote the standing committee can:**

- Table, or set aside, the bill to make it inactive (basically killing it)
- Change, or amend, the bill
- Defeat the bill
- Accept the bill

**Step 3. Scheduling Floor Action & the Caucus:** After a bill is reported back to the chamber where it originated, it is placed in chronological order on the calendar. In the House there are several different legislative calendars, and the Speaker and Majority Leader largely determine if, when, and in what order bills come up. The Senate also has several legislative calendars.

Prior to the actual vote being taken, however, each party will privately discuss the bill in "caucus" to try to come to agreement on how to proceed with the bill.

**Step 4. Debate:** When a bill reaches the floor of the House or Senate, it must be considered on three separate days before final passage. This is intended to slow down the legislative process and make sure there is time for public

input. The first day of consideration is a reading of the bill with no vote taken and no amendments. The second day can have amendments offered. If a bill requires expenditures of funds it must be sent to the appropriations committee for a “fiscal note” on how much the bill will cost prior to a third consideration. The third day is the vote. 102 are required for passage in the house and 26 in the Senate (constitutional majority).

**Step 5. Voting:** After the debate and the approval of any amendments, the bill is passed or defeated by the members voting.

**Step 6. Referral to Other Chamber:** When a bill is passed by the House or the Senate it is referred to the other chamber where it usually follows the same route through committee, caucus and three separate considerations on the floor. This chamber may approve the bill as received, reject it, ignore it, or amend it.

**Step 7. Conference Committee Action:** If only minor changes are made to a bill by the other chamber, it is common for the legislation to go back to the first chamber for concurrence. However, when the actions of the other chamber significantly alter the bill, a conference committee is formed to reconcile the differences. If the conferees are unable to reach agreement, the legislation dies. If agreement is reached, a conference report is prepared describing the committee member’s recommendations for changes. Both the House and the Senate must approve of the conference report. This mainly happens when legislative chambers are led by different parties.

**Step 8. Final Actions:** After a bill has been approved by the House and Senate in identical form, it is sent to the Governor. If the Governor approves of the legislation and signs it, the bill becomes law. Or, the Governor can take no action (for ten days if General Assembly is in session or 30 days if Assembly is adjourned) after which it automatically becomes law. If the Governor opposes the bill, she or he can veto it. With appropriations bills, the Governor can use a “line item veto” to veto specific items in the bill.

**Step 9. Overriding a Veto:** If the Governor vetoes a bill, the General Assembly may attempt to “override the veto.” This requires a two-thirds roll call vote of the members who are present in sufficient numbers for a quorum. The same number is required to override line item vetoes.

Adopted from the following sites:

- 1) [https://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.naswpa.org/resource/resmgr/imported/OAI\\_Bill%20Becomes%20a%20Law.pdf](https://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.naswpa.org/resource/resmgr/imported/OAI_Bill%20Becomes%20a%20Law.pdf)
- 2) <http://www.pacapitol.com/Resources/PDF/Making-Law-In-PA.pdf>
- 3) [https://www.padental.org/Images/OnlineDocs/Advocacy/DayOnTheHill/How\\_a\\_Bill\\_Becomes\\_Law\\_in\\_Pennsylvania.pdf](https://www.padental.org/Images/OnlineDocs/Advocacy/DayOnTheHill/How_a_Bill_Becomes_Law_in_Pennsylvania.pdf)