

Find Your Representatives

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Okay, so you're trying to be a good citizen. You want to contact your representative to express your opinion about something or to get help with a problem but you don't know who that is, or how to find her or him. Sometimes it seems like a scavenger hunt. And why do they need so many of these people, anyway?

In a nutshell, there are three levels of government – federal, state, and local – and each level has three branches– legislative, executive, and judicial. Each division of government has its own powers and responsibilities. You have several representatives at each level.

The *legislative* branch of government makes the laws. That's your town council, county council, state legislature, and the U.S. Congress. Local councils have varying numbers of members, usually from five to nine. There are 15 members of the Allegheny County Council. In the Pennsylvania General Assembly, representatives belong to the state house or the state senate. There are 203 state legislators and 50 state senators. On the federal level, Congress consists of the Senate and House of Representatives. There are 435 members of the house and 100 U.S. senators, two from each state. There are 19 House of Representatives members from Pennsylvania.

The *executive* branch manages the daily business of government. Generally, cities, towns, and boroughs have mayors, while townships have commissioners. Allegheny County has an elected County Executive. The governor is the state's chief executive, and the president heads the federal executive branch. Executive departments include such agencies as public works, transportation, treasury, education, welfare, and defense. There are also special entities, called *authorities*, which manage specific assets. I know you're familiar with the Port Authority, Allegheny County Sanitary Authority (ALCOSAN), and the Sports and Exhibition Authority. School boards are a type of authority, and oversee school districts, through their superintendents and other staff.

The *judicial* branch consists of the court system, from the U.S. Supreme Court through the U.S. district courts and state courts and down to your local magistrate.

Executive and legislative elected officials have specific terms of office, ranging from two to six years. In some positions there is a limit to the number of terms that a person may hold the office, while others have no limits. Some judges are elected, while the president or governor appoints others.

Now I'm going to tell you about the best part of the federal government. It's a Web site called www.usa.gov. Several government agencies developed the site, which was launched in September 2000. The U.S. General Services Administration administers the site, which contains complete information about *every* federal, state, and local government office. It includes members from the smallest town council to the U.S. Congress, every mayor, governor, and the president, and every department and program for everything. There is information on finding and contacting your representatives, starting a business, registering to vote, getting a passport, and everything else you ever want to know about your government. It's very well designed and easy to navigate. Go ahead, try it. If you don't have a home computer, you can use one at any public library in Allegheny County, or call 1-800-FED-INFO (1-800-333-4636).

Feel free to contact your representatives or government agencies whenever you like. You can ask a question, state your opinion, or ask for help with a problem. They are public employees with public offices. You can usually reach local representatives through the city hall or town offices. State and federal legislators have at least two offices – one in the capital city (Harrisburg, PA or Washington, DC) and one in the local district. I know it can sometimes be a nightmare trying to get help through a big government agency. If you can't get the director or manager to help you, your legislators can do it for you. Don't worry about bothering them; that's their job. State legislators, members of Congress, and U.S. senators employ staff people who are their eyes and ears in the community. They gather information, research issues, help constituents (that's you) with problems, and give advice to the legislators.

Just try it once. Call one of your legislators and tell her/him your position on an issue. You won't regret it.

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Please send comments, questions, and topic suggestions to
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