

How laws are made in Massachusetts

The Massachusetts Legislature makes our state laws. Its official name is the General Court. It is made up of the House of Representatives (160 members) and the Senate (40 members). It meets for two-year sessions. Formal meetings for the 2015 – 2016 session began in early January, 2015 and will end on July 31, 2016. The Legislature’s website is <http://malegislature.gov/>

This chart shows the basic steps for how a “bill” (a proposed law) becomes a law. It is a complicated process. A bill can die at many steps along the way. Thousands of bills are filed each session but usually only several hundred become law. Most bills are never voted on. For those that are voted on, the date is not set in advance. Instead, the Legislature schedules a vote after a bill has made it through the necessary steps.

Step 1: Bill is filed	Any legislator or the governor can file a bill. If a member of the House files the bill, it will be given a number such as “H.123.” If a member of the Senate files the bill, it will be given a number such as “S.123.” You can look up most bills on the legislature’s website.
Step 2: Bill goes to a committee	Most bills about criminal justice issues go to the Judiciary Committee. It is made up of six senators and 11 representatives. There are two co-chairs – one senator and one representative. New committee members are appointed each session.
Step 3: Committee hearing	The committee holds a public hearing on each bill. Usually many bills are scheduled for the same hearing. Anyone can attend the hearing, testify for or against a bill, or submit written comments about their views on a bill.
Step 4: Committee decision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● If the committee agrees with the bill, it gives it a “favorable report.” The bill moves to the next step. ● If the committee disagrees with a bill, it can give it an “unfavorable report,” which usually kills the bill. ● Sometimes a bill is sent to a “study committee” for further consideration. In most cases, this kills the bill. ● The committee can also write its own bill by redrafting other bills that were filed.
Step 5: Further committee(s) review	After a bill is favorably reported out of the Judiciary Committee, it will be reviewed by other committees. Bills that require public funding are sent to either the House or Senate Ways and Means Committee. Before a bill can be considered by the full House, it must go through the House Committee on Steering, Policy and Scheduling. Before a bill can be considered by the full Senate, it must go through the Senate Committee on Ethics and Rules. Many bills die during the committee review process.

	<i>Either Step 6 or Step 7 can happen next. The order doesn't matter, as long as both the House and Senate pass the bill.</i>
Step 6: House considers bill	The House of Representatives can make changes to a bill, called "amendments." The House must approve a bill twice before it can advance. If the House passes the bill first, it moves on to the Senate. If not, the bill dies for that session.
Step 7: Senate considers bill	The Senate can also make changes to the bill. Like the House, the Senate must also approve a bill twice. If not, the bill dies.
Step 8: Conference committee	If the House and Senate pass different versions of the bill, then three members from each body meet to work out an agreed upon version. The compromise version must then be approved as is by both the House and Senate by July 31, 2014. If not, the bill dies.
Step 9: Bill sent to Governor	The governor has 10 days to approve the bill and sign it into law. If he signs it, the bill becomes law. If the governor doesn't agree with the bill, he can send it back to the legislature with amendments or he can "veto" (reject) the bill. If the governor takes no action, the bill becomes law after 10 days.
Step 10: If needed, bill goes back to legislature	The legislature can vote to approve or reject the governor's amendments and send the bill back to the governor. The governor can then sign or veto the bill. The legislature can override a governor's veto by a vote of two-thirds of the members of both the House and Senate. The bill then becomes law.
Step 11: Bill takes effect	Most bills go into effect 90 days after the governor signs them into law. However, the legislature can include a statement saying that the bill addresses an emergency situation and that it will go into effect immediately upon signing.

Take part in the legislative process! Get involved!

- Find out who your state legislators are at <http://wheredoivotema.com>. You can also call the Secretary of State's Citizen Information Service at (617) 727-7030.
- Attend public hearings on bills. Testify in person or give the committee your views in writing.
- Visit, call or write your legislators to ask them to work for or against a bill.
- Anyone can attend a House or Senate session to watch the debate. You can also watch sessions online. For Senate session, go to http://masslegislature.tv/?l=sen_video. For the House, go to http://masslegislature.tv/?l=hse_video.