

Note on “Solving” Constituent Inquiries

It goes without saying that many constituent problems brought to the attention of a Legislator cannot be resolved at the state level. This is particularly true with respect to local government issues. What is an appropriate response when a constituent seeks assistance in a purely local matter outside the purview of a Legislator’s primary functions?

One role of the Local Government Commission is to provide information and resources to Members of the General Assembly with regard to constituent inquiries involving municipal issues. In performing this function, the staff of the Local Government Commission has taken notice of the fact that, at times, inquiries may involve citizens who feel aggrieved or upset by a particular incident or circumstance. In many instances, merely providing background explanatory information is all that is required. In other cases, however, constituents may seek redress through the office of their State Representative or State Senator and, in so doing, may pose a question to a Legislator in the following form:

“What can you (the State Legislator) do to help solve my problem?”

Inherent in this question is the constituent’s belief that the Legislator can intervene effectively on his or her behalf. In many cases, however, such active intervention is either not permitted or not feasible. Thus, a meaningful response involves explaining to the constituent that remedies must be pursued at the local level. In effect, the question originally posed by the constituent often must be rephrased as follows:

“What must I (the constituent) do, and where do I (the constituent) go to find out if redress is available?”

In order to answer this rephrased question, a constituent may well require the advice of private legal counsel. Nevertheless, short of offering legal advice, a Legislator’s office may be able to provide the constituent with helpful information, as indicated on the following chart.

Law	Forum	Remedies	Resources
What laws, if any, may be relevant to the inquiry?	Where does one go to get relief? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ To the municipality (to an elected or appointed official, to the governing body, or to a board, department, or commission)? ○ To a district justice or to the common pleas court? 	What kind of remedies or relief, if any, may be available?	What other avenues or contacts can be pursued?