

2026 Annual Legislative Prep Package

Built for nonprofit leaders & policy teams who know session matters and want a clear plan before it begins.



Prepared by Norris Policy Group

Why Legislative Prep Fails (and What Works Instead)

Most organizations understand that legislative sessions matter. Far fewer prepare for them in a way that actually improves outcomes.

The most common failure is timing. Teams wait until filing deadlines approach or bills start moving to engage, at which point their options are already constrained. By then, priorities are reactive, positions are rushed, and internal alignment is incomplete. What follows often feels busy, meetings, emails, coalition calls, but lacks strategic coherence.

Another frequent problem is the conflation of advocacy with strategy. Activity becomes the proxy for effectiveness: more testimony, more meetings, more alerts. But without clear goals, decision rules, and a shared understanding of what success actually looks like, effort does not translate into leverage.

Finally, many organizations underestimate the internal demands of session. Decision-making authority is unclear. Red lines have not been defined. Policy staff and leadership are not aligned on tradeoffs. When fast-moving developments require rapid judgment, teams slow down, or default to caution, at precisely the moments when clarity matters most.

Prepared organizations operate differently.

They treat legislative prep as a leadership responsibility, not an administrative task. Before session begins, they clarify goals, priorities, and limits. They map the policy landscape and the players who shape it. They establish internal decision pathways so staff can move quickly and confidently as conditions change.

Most importantly, they enter session with discipline. They know which fights matter, which don't, and why. They understand that legislative success is rarely about volume or visibility. It's about timing, alignment, and credibility built long before the gavel drops.

In practice, the difference between organizations that scramble and those that shape outcomes is not passion or effort. It is preparation.

The Legislative Readiness Framework

Effective legislative preparation is not about predicting every bill or anticipating every twist of session. It is about entering the process with enough clarity, structure, and discipline to respond intelligently when conditions change.

The framework below reflects how prepared organizations think about session. Not as a flurry of activity, but as a sequence of decisions made under pressure.

1. Clear Goals and Red Lines

Prepared organizations begin with clarity about what they are trying to achieve and what they are not willing to trade away.

This means articulating a small number of priority outcomes, identifying acceptable compromises, and defining true red lines in advance. Without this clarity, teams default to reactive positioning and internal debate at precisely the moments when decisiveness matters most.

Diagnostic question:

Can your team clearly state its top legislative priorities and non-negotiables without hesitation?

2. Policy Landscape Mapping

Prepared teams understand the terrain before session begins.

They track likely bill concepts, committee jurisdictions, procedural choke points, and historical patterns that shape how ideas move or stall. This allows them to distinguish between noise and real risk, and to allocate attention where it actually matters.

Diagnostic question:

Do you know which policy areas are most likely to see action, and which are unlikely to move, before session starts?

3. Power and Player Awareness

Legislation moves through people, not paper.

Prepared organizations identify the formal and informal actors who influence outcomes: committee chairs, staff leads, coalition anchors, institutional skeptics, and trusted messengers. They understand not just who holds authority, but how decisions are made and where persuasion is most effective.

Diagnostic question:

Do you know who shapes outcomes behind the scenes, not just who sponsors the bills?

4. Internal Decision Authority

Session rewards speed, but speed without structure creates risk.

Prepared teams establish clear internal decision pathways before session begins. Staff know when they can act independently, when leadership input is required, and how tradeoffs should be evaluated. This prevents paralysis and reduces last-minute escalation.

Diagnostic question:

When a fast decision is required, is it clear who decides, and on what basis?

5. Narrative Discipline

Prepared organizations speak with consistency and intent.

They define the core narrative that anchors their advocacy and ensures that testimony, meetings, and written materials reinforce the same strategic story. This discipline builds credibility with policymakers and prevents mixed signals across coalitions.

Diagnostic question:

Would your staff and leadership describe your legislative message in the same way?

6. Rapid-Response Capacity

No amount of preparation eliminates surprises, but it determines how well you absorb them.

Prepared teams plan for rapid response: bill drops, amendments, media moments, and unexpected coalition shifts. They anticipate pressure points and ensure they can respond quickly without sacrificing judgment.

Diagnostic question:

If a major development occurred tomorrow, could your team respond decisively within hours, not days?

Taken together, these elements define legislative readiness. Organizations that invest in them do not control outcomes, but they consistently improve their position, protect their priorities, and engage session from a place of strength rather than urgency.

Legislative Readiness Self-Assessment

This short assessment is intended to help nonprofit leadership and policy teams evaluate their readiness for the upcoming legislative session. It is not a test, there are no perfect scores, but it does highlight areas where additional preparation can materially improve outcomes.

Answer each question honestly. A pattern of “not sure” or “not yet” responses is often more informative than a single gap.

Strategy & Priorities

1. Can we clearly articulate our top three legislative priorities for this session?
2. Have we defined specific outcomes we are seeking for each priority?
3. Have we identified non-negotiables or red lines in advance?
4. Do leadership and policy staff share the same understanding of these priorities?

Policy Landscape Awareness

5. Do we have a working understanding of which policy areas are most likely to see action this session?
6. Have we identified relevant committees, calendars, or procedural choke points that could affect our issues?
7. Are we distinguishing between high-risk bills and background noise?

Power & Players

8. Do we know which legislators, staff, or institutions are most influential on our priority issues?
9. Have we identified trusted messengers or coalition partners who can advance our goals effectively?
10. Do we understand where opposition is likely to come from and why?

Internal Decision-Making

11. Is it clear who has authority to make fast decisions during session?
12. Have we established internal guidelines for evaluating tradeoffs or compromises?
13. Can staff act confidently without escalating every decision to leadership?

Narrative & Messaging

14. Have we defined a clear, consistent narrative that anchors our advocacy?

15. Would staff, leadership, and coalition partners describe our message in largely the same way?

Capacity & Responsiveness

16. Do we have the capacity to respond within hours to major developments (bill filings, amendments, media moments)?
17. Have we planned for unexpected developments without relying solely on improvisation?

Interpreting Your Results

- **Mostly “yes”:** Your organization is entering session from a position of strength. Ongoing coordination and discipline will be key.
- **Several “not yet” or “not sure”:** These are common gaps and addressable ones. Targeted preparation before session can significantly improve clarity and effectiveness.
- **Many unclear answers:** This is a signal, not a failure. Legislative sessions reward preparation, and the earlier gaps are identified, the easier they are to close.

What Legislative Readiness Looks Like in Practice

Legislative preparation does not eliminate uncertainty. But it meaningfully changes how organizations experience session and how much influence they are able to exert when it matters.

The following examples illustrate common patterns seen across sessions.

Example 1: Waiting vs. Entering with Clarity

An organization enters session without clearly defined priorities. When multiple bills touching its issue area are filed, internal debate begins: which bills to support, which to oppose, and how hard to engage. Decisions are delayed while leadership seeks alignment, and by the time positions are finalized, key moments for shaping language or strategy have passed.

By contrast, a prepared organization enters session with a short list of priorities, clear red lines, and internal agreement on what success looks like. When bills are filed, staff can quickly assess alignment and engage early, often before positions harden and pathways narrow.

The difference is not effort. It is timing and clarity.

Example 2: Reactive Advocacy vs. Strategic Engagement

A team responds to each new development as it arises, issuing alerts, attending hearings, and joining coalition calls as capacity allows. Activity levels are high, but staff struggle to distinguish between symbolic engagement and moments that truly affect outcomes.

A prepared team allocates attention selectively. It understands which committees, votes, and procedural steps actually matter for its priorities and focuses energy accordingly. Rather than reacting to everything, it intervenes deliberately at leverage points.

Prepared organizations do less, but what they do matters more.

Example 3: Internal Bottlenecks vs. Decision Discipline

During session, a fast-moving amendment raises concerns. Staff recognize the risk immediately but lack clarity about decision authority. Leadership is unavailable, escalation slows response, and the moment passes without intervention.

In a prepared organization, staff know in advance when they can act independently and when leadership input is required. Decision rules are established, tradeoffs are understood, and response is timely. Even imperfect decisions are preferable to missed ones.

Speed with structure beats caution with delay.

Example 4: Coalition Drift vs. Narrative Alignment

An organization participates in a coalition without clearly defining its own narrative or limits. Over time, messaging drifts, priorities blur, and the organization finds itself supporting positions that are only loosely aligned with its mission.

Prepared organizations enter coalitions with a clear sense of purpose. They know what they are there to advance, what they will not support, and how their message fits within a broader effort. This clarity strengthens, not weakens, the coalition by setting expectations early.

Alignment is easier to maintain when it is defined in advance.

Example 5: Scrambling Under Pressure vs. Responding with Confidence

Unexpected developments are inevitable: late-filed bills, surprise amendments, shifting political winds. Unprepared teams scramble, relying on improvisation and individual heroics to keep up.

Prepared teams absorb surprises more calmly. They may still adjust strategy, but they do so from a foundation of shared understanding and internal trust. Pressure reveals readiness or the lack of it.

Preparation does not prevent surprises. It determines how costly they are.

These examples are not outliers. They reflect common dynamics across legislative sessions. The organizations that consistently protect their priorities and influence outcomes are not necessarily larger or louder, but they are more prepared.

How I Work With Teams

I work with nonprofit leaders and policy teams who understand that legislative success is built before session begins and who want to approach the process with clarity, discipline, and intent.

My role is not to replace internal expertise or speak for organizations. It is to help teams prepare strategically so that when session begins, they are aligned internally, clear about their priorities, and ready to act decisively as conditions change.

In practice, this work often includes:

- Clarifying legislative goals, priorities, and red lines
- Mapping the policy landscape and identifying real leverage points
- Stress-testing internal decision pathways before session pressure sets in
- Helping teams align strategy, messaging, and expectations across leadership and staff

I work best with organizations that value preparation, candid assessment, and thoughtful decision-making. I am most useful early, before positions harden and options narrow, but can also support teams that need to regain clarity midstream.

This work is not about volume advocacy or reactive engagement. It is about entering session with a shared plan and the confidence to adjust it intelligently.

A Note on Fit

This approach is not for every organization.

Teams looking for last-minute fixes, constant visibility, or purely transactional advocacy support are unlikely to benefit. Legislative prep works best when leadership is willing to invest time upfront to reduce risk later.

Next Steps

If you are preparing for an upcoming legislative session and want to sanity-check your readiness, I offer a short pre-session strategy consult designed to help teams identify gaps, pressure points, and opportunities for focus.

These conversations are exploratory and practical. The goal is clarity, not commitment.

Preparation does not guarantee outcomes, but it consistently improves judgment, timing, and leverage.

Call to Action: Turning Preparation Into Clarity

Legislative preparation is most effective when it happens early, before deadlines compress options and urgency replaces judgment.

If your team is preparing for an upcoming legislative session and wants a clear-eyed assessment of readiness, I offer a pre-session strategy consult designed to help organizations:

- Pressure-test priorities and red lines
- Identify internal decision bottlenecks before they matter
- Clarify where attention and effort will have the greatest impact
- Enter session with shared expectations and confidence

These conversations are practical and grounded. They are not sales calls, and they are not audits. The goal is to leave with a clearer sense of where preparation is solid, where risk exists, and what steps, if any, would be most useful to take next.

For some organizations, this consult is sufficient on its own. For others, it becomes the foundation for deeper strategic support during session. In either case, the focus is clarity, not obligation.

If this approach aligns with how your team thinks about legislative work, I welcome the conversation.

Legislative sessions move quickly. Preparation is what allows teams to move deliberately.