CASEWORK NAVIGATOR
Give your team the tools they need to excel at casework.

CASEWORK BASICS
CASEWORK INTAKE

developed by POPVOX FOUNDATION

popvox.org/casework
# CASEWORK INTAKE

## INTRODUCTION

---

## INTAKE PHASES

- Recognizing Casework
- Gathering Information
- Privacy Act Release

## DEFINE YOUR TIMING GOALS

- Public Response Times
- Closing No-Show Cases

## INTAKE RESOURCES

- Intake Checklist
- Intake Accountability Policies
- Other Intake Goals & Policies

---

*last updated January 9, 2023*
“Intake” is the process of responding to a constituent’s initial inquiry to determine if their problem should be treated as a case.

Intake is the most critical moment in casework. A solid, welcoming intake process can make the rest of a case easier by building trust with the constituent. Conversely, a disorganized intake process can set a constituent on edge and make future interactions more difficult. It is also vital for offices to demonstrate accountability—one of the worst things for a Member to hear back home in the state or district is “I reached out to your office and never heard back!”

This chapter breaks down the intake process, and walks through process options to make the intake process an opportunity to build constituent trust.
INTAKE PHASES

The intake process can be broken down into three phases: first, recognizing that an inquiry may be casework; second, gathering enough information from the constituent to get the case started, and third, getting the constituent’s written permission (and other materials) to begin working.

1. **RECOGNIZING CASEWORK**
   - Making sure it’s a problem the office can address, getting constituents into the casework pipeline

2. **GATHERING INFORMATION**
   - Gathering enough information from the constituent to be able to submit an inquiry to the agency

3. **PRIVACY ACT RELEASE**
   - Obtaining a Privacy Act Release Form (PARF) from the constituent
Recognizing Casework

Phase one is air traffic control: recognizing casework, making sure it’s a problem the office can address, and getting constituents into the casework pipeline. Everyone in the office should know what the casework team does and be ready to help direct constituents, but it is likely that public-facing interns will handle the majority of this phase.

Does this sound like casework?
The core of a casework request is a problem with a federal agency: something is not going as the constituent expected, or something feels wrong, confusing, frustrating, or worrisome. That might sound or read like:

- It’s been [x time], how do I know what’s going on?
- I got two letters from [agency] that contradict each other—which one do I follow?
- They keep asking for x [document] but I sent it in already
- I can’t understand how my [benefit] was calculated
- I can’t get anyone on the phone at [agency]!
- I can’t meet the deadline for [appeal] and I don’t know what to do.
- I don’t know where to go for help with [problem].

This is not always straightforward: many asks will be vague, or worded as opinions rather than as straightforward requests for help.

For example, a phone call with a constituent might sound like:

"Hi, I wanted to call to ask about the Member’s position on USCIS offices going totally online and appointment-only—my sister is having a problem where she keeps getting stuck in this endless loop with their online system where it tells her that she’s not eligible to complete a form online and she needs to speak to someone in-person but then it won’t let her book an appointment at any office in three states… as an American citizen, I don’t think that this is right. Is there any legislation that the Member can introduce or sign on to that will fix this?"

Even though the constituent is asking about legislation that would address an agency’s customer service, there is clearly a personal problem for the constituent or someone close to the constituent with this agency that may be addressed through casework. For cases like these, it is important to train interns (in both DC and local offices!) or any other staff who might be answering the phone to recognize potential casework and direct them to the appropriate staffer.
Can we help this specific person with this specific problem?

Once a team has identified potential casework, the next step is to determine whether it is a problem that the team can handle specifically. There are three things to be aware of that would prevent a team from being able to handle a potential case:

**IS THIS A CONSTITUENT?**

As discussed in the Ethics and Legal chapter, House and Senate Ethics guidelines prevent a Member from using official resources, including staff time, to serve non-constituents (except in very rare circumstances).

Most Congressional website forms (either the mail program or online Privacy Act release form) will take care of verification. For cases that come in by phone, it is helpful to make sure that the constituent is in the district or state before they take the time to explain their whole case—even if that means gently interrupting them to ask for an address. Constituent addresses can be checked with the “Contact your Member” box on Congress.gov.

**WHO IS THE SPECIFIC CONSTITUENT THE CASE IS FOR?**

People often call on behalf of loved ones. While it is fine and even helpful to talk with family members or other relatives if they will be involved in the case going forward, it is vital to establish who will have to sign the Privacy Act release form, make sure that they are a constituent, and speak with them directly, if possible.

**IS THIS A FEDERAL AGENCY?**

Many people do not have a good understanding of which programs belong to which level of government, and understandably so. For example, while Medicaid is a federal program, it is administered by individual states. Some Congressional offices will handle Medicaid cases and others will not.

The best way to make sure that a team is prepared is to train staff and interns on a list of the most common federal programs and the most common non-federal inquiries, including state and local programs and questions about resources like legal help, health care, or other issues common to the state or district. A physical or digital list will be a helpful reference for new interns and staff working the phones.

If the case is not a federal agency, then it should be treated as a referral.
Gathering Information

Depending on the office’s process, phase 2 may still be handled by an intern, but this is likely the point where the intern or other front-line staff member passes the constituent to the correct member of the casework team. The goal of this phase is to gather enough information from the constituent to be able to submit an inquiry to the agency.

It is important to get the constituent in touch with the caseworker they will be working with as quickly as possible to minimize the number of handovers and repeated conversations required. This helps build trust while reducing the amount of time both the constituent and caseworker spend on initial conversations. For some offices, however, it may make sense to reverse phases 2 and 3, to ask for a Privacy Act release form as soon as it is clear that the constituent may be calling with a casework inquiry. If interns and front-line staff are trained to accurately recognize casework, then it can be helpful for them to ask the constituent to complete a Privacy Act release form before additional staff spend time getting into the weeds of the specific case. Having a constituent write their goal and describe the problem can provide helpful context and screen out those who may not be interested in the office actually pursuing their case.

While the main focus of this phase is gathering actionable information to develop an inquiry, it’s also important to note that this phase is where caseworkers are developing trust with a constituent. Intake is usually the most time-consuming part of casework for this reason, but it’s a worthwhile investment: taking the time to actively listen to a constituent’s story, validate their experience, and make them feel respected is a service in itself. It will also help develop a rapport that is vital for helping them through additional tough conversations and decisions down the road.
Run through your intake checklist

At this point it is essential to gather several crucial pieces of information that should be entered into the office’s CMS platform. A full checklist is available in the customizable section of this guide, but in broad terms, these include:

1. **UP-TO-DATE CONSTITUENT CONTACT INFORMATION**
   - The office may have purchased voter roll data (or inherited it from a previous office-holder), so the system may have some initial contact information, but this is notoriously unreliable. Always double check email, phone number, and mailing address. If the constituent expresses a preference for how they would like to be contacted, that should also be recorded.

2. **A CLEAR CASE GOAL STATEMENT**
   - In an ideal world, what does the constituent want to happen? This should be as specific and realistic as possible.

3. **CLEAR NOTATION IF THE CASE QUALIFIES AS “DIRE NEED”**
   - Some agencies allow for expedited case processing if the constituent meets criteria like experiencing homelessness, at risk of imminent foreclosure or eviction, medical emergency, or the inability to pay for food or medications.

4. **ACCURATE TAGS**
   - Tags should document the case’s agency, program, and any other information the office regularly tracks.

5. **CASE HISTORY**
   - Include a short summary of what the constituent has already done to resolve the problem.

6. **COPIES OF RELEVANT DOCUMENTS**
   - Include agency letters, application or appeals forms, relevant health, military, or tax records, and any other relevant documents. These should be consistently labeled with dates for easy reference.

In the initial conversation, it is essential to set realistic expectations for what the office can achieve. While the constituent’s ideal-world goal may be to have a supervisor who spoke brusquely to them fired, in addition to having their application re-considered, helping guide the constituent to focus on the application as the more important and attainable part of the process will help the constituent (and the team) prioritize efforts. Everyone on the casework team should be comfortable talking about potential actions (which are covered in more depth in the Agency Correspondence chapter) and expected timeframes for responses.
Privacy Act Release

The final step between an intake and a case-in-process is obtaining a Privacy Act Release Form (PARF) from the constituent.

The Privacy Act of 1974 mandates that federal agencies cannot release personal information pertaining to an individual without that individual’s written consent, and creates rules around how agencies may store data and how individuals may request that data. The primary purpose of the PARF is to make sure that the office has the constituent’s written permission for the agency involved to release the constituent’s information to the office. Without a PARF, the office can send an inquiry, but the agency cannot respond to the office.

This law (and others like it, including the Freedom of Information Act, or FOIA) apply only to Federal agencies1—not including Congress. Members are not restricted by the Privacy Act with regard to how they can handle or disclose constituent information.

What offices and constituents may not realize is that all information constituents provide to their Member of Congress is considered that Member’s personal property. Constituents have no legal say in how their information is handled once it is given to their Member of Congress, and no legal rights to request copies of that information or have their preferences for its disposal followed.

1 Or, in the case of HIPAA, covered medical entities like doctors and health insurance plans
PARF: Digital Signatures & Template Language

Most offices and constituents will prefer to use an online PARF on the Member’s website: the CASES Act of 2019 mandated that all federal agencies accept electronic signatures on Privacy Act Release forms within a set period of time; while CASES has not yet been fully implemented, most agencies will accept this online PARF, and it can easily be set up through your CMS vendor, website provider, and/or an approved third party CMS plugin.

Most CMS PARF templates come with standard language for the Privacy Act, including a statement like the following:

By checking the box below you are giving our office permission to look into the matter on your behalf. Please make sure to attach below any relevant identifying information and supporting documents which relate to your inquiry.

I hereby request the assistance of the [MEMBER] to resolve the matter described below. I authorize the [MEMBER] to receive any information that they might need to provide this assistance. The information I have provided to the [MEMBER] is true and accurate to the best of my knowledge and belief. The assistance I have requested from the [MEMBER] is in no way an attempt to evade or violate any federal, state, or local law.”

In addition to this language, offices can work with their CMS vendor and/or website provider to add custom questions to the online PARF, or to another pre-PARF form constituents fill out to request help. These options are an excellent way to capture all of the information you need in one place. Additional questions could include:

- **Summary of the problem and/or goal of the case**: while this is likely covered in the intake conversation, having it in the constituent’s own words can help further clarify.
- **Optional demographic information**: veteran status, gender, race/ethnicity, etc.
- **Contact information for any third parties** the office may need to contact (for example, the constituent’s lawyer, accountant, family members, benefit-management or caseworker/caretaker services involved, etc)
- **Has the constituent contacted any other elected official** about this case? This is especially important for identifying constituents who try to get different results from different Member offices.
- **How did the constituent hear about the office’s casework services?**
- **Data**: If the Member leaves office before the end of their term\(^2\) and the office is still working on this case, how would the constituent like their information to be handled?
  - Transfer to the incoming Member so that they can continue working on this case
  - Do not transfer

---

\(^2\) For the House, if the Representative leaves office before the end of their term, open cases are handled by the Clerk’s office until a special election can be held.
DEFINE YOUR TIMING GOALS

Part of building trust relative to constituents’ previous experiences with government agencies is about timing: how quickly do they get a response from the appropriate office?

Setting goals for response time in starting cases is a decision that the casework team should make in collaboration with other members of the team (staff assistants and LCs handling the mail program, intern coordinators, comms team, leadership) to design a system that helps the team meet response time goals with reasonable effort.

For example, if the goal is to get back to all casework inquiries in 24 hours, the casework team will need to make sure that is possible across all potential avenues for intake, including:

- Phone, live and voicemail
- Physical mail
- Email, through your website/CMS platform or to individual staff members
- Text, if your office uses a text integration with your CMS
- In-person visit to the DC and district offices
- In-person inquiry at a public event
- Social media, all channels
- Fax—still happens!

This means that the individual teams handling each of these channels must have a process that will reliably see and route casework inquiries to the appropriate caseworkers, and the casework team must have capacity to act on these referrals within the timeframe. The team must also consider whether that includes weekends and off hours, and if not, how to handle weekend and off-hours emergencies and contingencies. For example, if the caseworker who would normally handle a case is sick, will the constituent’s case go to a different caseworker, or will someone else on the team be designated to send them an interim response?
Public Response Times

If a hard-and-fast time goal is not feasible, alternative goals might focus more on process: for example, aiming to have all open intakes closed (i.e. a case started or the referral handled) by a certain point or points every week. Clear language on the Member’s website about how long constituents should wait before following up may help build that trust without holding the team to an unreasonable standard. For example:

"Our casework team aims to respond to all inquiries as quickly as possible, but may be delayed in periods of high demand. If you haven't heard back from our team within [number] business days, or your case is an emergency, please call us directly at [contact number]."

A short, regular check-in call with the teams involved with handling constituent communication may be a good way to keep everyone aligned on the same goal, and clear up any gray areas where something may or may not be casework—also helpful is sharing intake metrics on any regular leadership meetings or staff calls. This kind of regular focus and visibility will help keep all the teams responsible for handling constituent communication accountable to make sure no intakes fall through the cracks.

Closing No-Show Cases

Another area in which it is helpful to establish a time limit is for how long an office will wait for constituents to return a PARF before closing out the intake. Frequently, a constituent will reach out with a casework-related question, the Member’s office will direct them to the online PARF or send a PARF by email or snail mail, and the constituent will never follow up.

Handling follow-through will depend on the team’s processes, but for accountability, it is helpful to define a process for how the team will reach out to the constituent and when. For example, the office may give the constituent 14 days to return the form, and if the constituent has not responded by then, follow up with an additional email or phone call; if there is no response by this second deadline, the office may send a physical letter explaining that the office will close the case, but the constituent can re-open it any time by returning the release form.
INTAKE RESOURCES

Intake Checklist

Every new case requires gathering a few pieces of information in the intake process. Especially for offices training interns or specific staff members to handle intake, staying organized with a checklist like the one below can help make sure the process is as efficient as possible.

Is this a case?

- [✓] Is this a constituent?
- [✓] Is there a personally-relevant problem the constituent wants addressed?
- [✓] Is the problem with a federal agency?

Does this case have...?

- [✓] Updated constituent contact information
- [✓] A clear goal statement
- [✓] A short case summary
- [✓] Clear notation for which agency and program(s) the case involves
- [✓] Clear notes on any deadlines for the case
- [✓] Clear notes if the constituent meets “dire need” criteria
- [✓] Any additional information and/or preferences from the constituent
- [✓] Copies of any relevant documents the constituent has provided
Intake Accountability Policies

To stay accountable and avoid missing any intakes, teams may find it useful to write out policies on who is responsible for handling which intake channels, and timing goals for intake response.

Intake channels & responsibilities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PHONE CALLS AND VOICEMAIL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ex: the District Staff Assistant will be responsible for monitoring the DO voicemails and training DO interns; all voicemails will be returned within one business day</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SOCIAL MEDIA (ALL CHANNELS)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ex: the Press Secretary will monitor social media channels and reply to constituents interested in casework with appropriate contact information within 24 hours</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PHYSICAL MAIL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EMAIL (THROUGH WEBSITE, CMS PLATFORM, OR TO INDIVIDUAL STAFF)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TEXT MESSAGES (IF YOUR OFFICE USES A TEXT INTEGRATION WITH YOUR CMS)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IN-PERSON VISIT TO THE DC OR DISTRICT OFFICES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IN-PERSON INQUIRY AT A PUBLIC EVENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FAX</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
Other Intake Goals and Policies

PRF response time

Teams may want to consider setting a deadline for how long a case will remain open/how many contacts a constituent will receive about completing the PRF before closing the case.

Vacation/holiday policies

Teams may want to consider how to establish an ‘on call’ rotation to monitor an emergency voicemail or inbox for constituents calling with emergencies while the office is closed. This may also be applied to weekend and off-hours calls.

For example: for the week before New Year’s Day, the casework manager will be responsible for checking the DO voicemail once per day and routing appropriate emergency intakes to Caseworker A Monday-Tuesday, and Caseworker B Wednesday-Friday.
Caseworkers often report frustration with finding basic resources on setting up and running a standout casework operation. Our free Casework Basics program fills in the gaps between existing casework resources and on-the-ground wisdom, and serves as a central clearing point for internal and external information on casework.

**01** Definition & Rules

**02** Structuring a Casework Operation

**03** Casework Intake

**04** Agency Correspondence

**05** Closing Cases

**06** Safeguarding Constituent Info

Available now at popvox.org/casework

---

**Professional Development**

For offices interested in taking their casework operations to the next level, we offer a subscription-based professional development program exploring elements of standout casework. In particular, the program will focus on what caseworkers can learn from other industries and fields, and how casework teams can focus on process efficiency and effectiveness.

Learn more at popvox.org/casework

---

**Casework Navigator**

Give your team the tools they need to succeed.