



Advocacy Toolkit

The California Innocence Coalition (CIC) consists of the three innocence projects in California, the [California Innocence Project](#), the [Northern California Innocence Project](#) and the [Loyola Project for the Innocent](#). The mission of our coalition is to advocate for change in California laws and policy based on the devastating impact of convicting the innocent. Collectively, the California Innocence Coalition has won the freedom of over 70 wrongly imprisoned individuals who collectively spent over 750 years in prison for crimes they did not commit.

We are calling on like-minded people to support this effort and call for necessary changes to a system that is not working for all. Read on to learn how you too can be an advocate for the innocent.

1. Learn about Innocence Issues

To be an effective advocate, you first need to know the facts. Acquaint yourself with [prevalent issues](#) in our criminal justice system that need major reforms, such as police misconduct, ineffective assistance of counsel, and compensation for exonerees. As well as the [causes](#) of wrongful convictions.

2. Understand State Policy-Making

To advocate on behalf of CIC, it's important to understand the basics of State policymaking.

Californians are represented by 120 legislators: 40 senators and 80 assembly members. These legislators draft and introduce bills, debate their merit, and vote to pass or kill the bills. These bills are how we can make real change for the clients of innocence organizations. That's why the CIC policy team is dedicated to working with local and state officials to submit bills that hold police and prosecutors accountable for fair investigations and trials.

Legislators collect ideas for legislation in late winter for the following year. They meet with policy experts and advocates, like CIC, to propose bill ideas. Legislators author bills, but organizations can co-sponsor legislation and help the author move it through the legislative process using their own resources.

Once written, bills must pass through committees and floor votes in the house and senate before being sent to the Governor for signature. You can keep track of bills that will affect our justice system. Current list of bills that are in the legislative process are listed on the [California legislature's website](#) or [LegiScan](#).

3. Contact Your Legislator

The job of each legislator is to represent the interests of their constituents. In other words, they work for you. Contacting your legislator by letter, email, or phone is an effective way to affect change. [You can find your legislators here](#). Use the following tips to ensure your message gets through.

Write a letter/email

- Use your full name and your address to make it clear that you are a constituent.
- Use your own words. Mass correspondences from organized campaigns often use identical language and are more easily ignored.
- Timing is key. Write your legislator and the chairperson of the committee dealing with the bill while it is under consideration.
- Be clear, brief, and constructive. Identify the bill or issue of concern in the title or subject line. Provide a brief explanation of why you support or oppose the bill/issue. If you have a personal connection, use concrete examples of how this bill would affect you, your family, community, or business.

Sample Letter

[Date]

Honorable [name of legislator]
California State [Senate or Assembly]
State Capitol, Room [# here]
Sacramento, CA 94815

Re: AB 760 - Support

Dear [Senator/Assembly Member] [Last Name]

I am a resident of [city/town] located in your district. This letter is in reference to AB 760, which is scheduled to be heard in [your committee / the Assembly / the Senate] soon.

All 50 states and the federal government provide the right to post-conviction DNA testing in various capacities, but there is no such right to fingerprint matching in most states. The post-conviction processing, examination, and matching of fingerprints can lead to the exoneration of many unjustly incarcerated individuals. Failing to provide post-conviction access to fingerprint databases also increases the likelihood that the guilty remain free. AB 760 will allow currently incarcerated individuals to seek fingerprint testing of relevant evidence, the results of which could prove their innocence. For these reasons, I strongly support AB 760. [personalize with your thoughts on the issue and how they impact you personally]

Thank you for taking the time to review my concerns on this piece of legislation. After this bill comes up for a vote, I would appreciate being informed as to how you voted and why. I am available to answer questions or provide testimony on this important issue.

Sincerely,
[Your name]
[Address]
[Phone number]

Call

- Prepare a script with your main points and practice what you're going to say. Try to keep it under four minutes.
- Identify yourself as a constituent in the legislator's district and ask to speak with the legislator. If they are not available, ask to leave a brief message and request a return call from the legislator.
- On the call, briefly explain the problem, why you're concerned, and give your idea to fix the problem. If discussing a piece of legislation, identify the number and title of the bill and explain why you do or don't like it.

Sample Script

"Hello Assembly Member or Senator [last name]. My name is [first and last name] and I live in your district in [town/city]. I am calling today to ask for your support on AB 760. The post-conviction processing, examination and matching of fingerprints can lead to the exoneration of many unjustly incarcerated individuals. Failing to provide post-conviction access to fingerprint databases also increases the likelihood that the guilty remain free. AB 760 will allow currently incarcerated individuals to seek fingerprint testing of relevant evidence, the results of which could prove their innocence. For these reasons, I strongly support AB 760. [personalize with your own thoughts and personal connections to the issue]. Please take my name and phone number [name and phone number], I am happy to answer any questions you might have about this important issue. Thank you for your time."

4. Advocate Among Your Network

Advocating on behalf of CIC doesn't solely extend to legislative outreach. We encourage you to advocate for innocence issues throughout your network, by spreading the word via social media or submitting a letter to the editor for your local paper. Here are some tips to consider:

Social media

- Follow CIC on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [Instagram](#) to hear the latest from us and share our contact with your own followers.

- Follow or ‘friend’ elected representatives that are proponents of CIP innocence issues and publically share your support for reform.
- Post regularly and share credible, timely information about innocence cases, legislation, and news from trusted sources.
- Use relevant hashtags to link to broader conversations: #cainnocencecoalition #CApolitics, #CALeg
- Use your posts to encourage friends and family to engage in issues offline (e.g., calling representative or attending events and rallies).
- Mention elected representatives in relevant posts to catch their attention and encourage interaction (e.g., on Twitter you can use their handle @RepresentativeX).
- Post content with this [link to images](#) on your own social media and be sure to tag @ca_innocencecoa–Instagram and Twitter, and @CAinnocencecoa–Facebook plus the handles of elected representatives.

Write a letter to the editor

Contact your local newspaper to write about a timely and important issue. Depending on the readership of the publication, this has the potential to reach thousands of residents, as well as key lawmakers. A few tips to get you going:

- Think about timing. Is there a case being reviewed or a bill that will shortly be voted on? Consider submitting a letter around key events or anniversaries.
- Make it personal. Explain how this issue affects you, your family or your community. Use examples from your own experience.
- Keep it short and simple. Focus your letter on one key issue or argument and keep to the word limit set by the publication. In most cases, it will be under 200-250 words.

While the wheels of change can move slowly, clear and persistent engagement with elected officials can help us move closer to justice for the innocent. Every action makes a difference and we’re grateful for your support.