

## Civics in Action for Girl Scout Cadettes

We strengthen our democracy when civically engaged kids become civically engaged adults. That's where Girl Scouts comes in! From the very beginning, civic engagement has been part of our DNA. We build girls of courage, confidence, and character who become engaged citizens and change the world.

As you're working on the Citizen badge with your girls, you may want to share more information about our democracy and how it works. This tip sheet includes words to know and activities to try with your girls.

### ACTIVITIES

#### Visit State Capitol

Want to show girls government in action? Take a field trip to visit your state's capitol and have girls witness a session of congress or speak with a senator, representative, or governor (or one of their staff).

Before your visit, have girls research a few facts about the capitol. Why was the location chosen? When was it established? How many state representatives and senators are there? Girls should know enough to ask questions directly and leave understanding the following:

- The state makes its own laws that are separate but allowed by federal laws.
- The governor, representatives, and senators are elected by the state residents.
- What is a full term of service by an elected official and what, if any, are the term limits?
- What are the duties of a state representative? How are they different than those of a senator? How are they different from the governor's duties? How does each official make their decisions?

#### Attend Municipal or State Court Hearing

Visiting a real hearing with your troop will not likely be as explosively entertaining or dramatic as a scene from a movie. But experiencing a real hearing is a great way to observe how the court operates. Nearly all hearings are open to the public, but the content of the hearing—as well as any relationships your girls or their families may have to the defendants, prosecutors, jury, or judge—should be considered. Before attending, ask your girls about what they expect to see and hear in the court. You may also consider talking to courthouse staff prior to visiting. Girls should leave the hearing with questions about procedure or terms they heard. They should also leave understanding the following:

- Whether the case they heard was criminal or civil.
- What the case was about.
- Whether a judgement was made and what the judgement was.

### **Start a Petition for State Residents**

Have your girls think of a petition they could make on behalf of the residents of your state. They should research who ought to be petitioned, the best way to communicate with them, and the issues that person or group responds most positively to. Whether it's a representative, senator, the state congress as a whole, or the governor, your troop's main focus should be on being recognized. If your girls' petition is heard and addressed, great! If it doesn't receive enough signatures or is ignored, see it as a learning opportunity. The girls should investigate what happened and come up with changes that may have helped it succeed.

A few things for girls to consider when starting a state petition:

- The best method of contact for the office or offices they're petitioning.
- Amount of signatures the petition needs to be considered by state government.
- How the petition can be submitted: is ink on paper the only acceptable way?  
Are digital signatures okay?
- Find a popular issue that will make a positive impact on all state residents.

### **Attend School Board, City Council, or Congressional Meeting**

Another way for the girls to see how their government works? Visiting a local or state meeting. School boards work on the local issues related to education, the city council works with issues of the town or city, and the state, of course, works on issues that affect the whole state. If your troop plans to visit your state's capitol, why not try to visit a session of congress? Otherwise, local meetings tend to be easier to reach and, sometimes, include issues that are easier to understand. Visit the Girl Scouts' website to learn more about attending city council meetings.

Have girls do some research and consider reaching out to officials or staff prior to attending to ask about the upcoming issues, protocol, and what to expect. Girls should leave any meeting they attend understanding the following:

- What issues were discussed and/or voted on.
- What the vote meant for the community or state.
- How was the meeting run? How did it begin? What was the "meat" of it? How did it end? Who was "in charge?"

## GLOSSARY

**Congress:** The legislative branch of government. It has two “chambers”: the Senate and the House of Representatives.

**House of Representatives:** Sometimes just called the “House”; it’s known as the “lower chamber” of congress. It’s responsible for writing laws. The U.S. House has 441 members, but only 435 can vote on issues. (Have your girls dig into why six members aren’t allowed to vote!)

**Senate:** This is the “upper chamber” of congress. It’s responsible for writing laws, too—but it has other responsibilities like approving treaties, confirming judges, and sometimes conducting trials.

**Criminal law:** Criminal law addresses wrongs committed against the government or the good of the community. Stealing or physically harming someone is a criminal offense.

**Civil law:** Civil law addresses disputes between private parties. An example of a civil offense is saying something untrue in public to hurt someone’s reputation.

**Municipal Court:** Another name for “city court”. This type of court usually handles city ordinance violations (like being too loud after midnight), some civil cases (like breaking a contract), and minor criminal cases (like spray painting property that isn’t yours!).

**State Court:** These courts interpret state laws. They can be in charge of any case except really big ones dealing with federal laws, or crimes that affect the whole country (something like treason).

**Appeal:** When a case goes to court and a judgement (decision) is made, the party who disagrees with the judgement can ask the case to be reviewed by a higher court. It’s like a do-over. The highest (and last) court to hear any case is the Supreme Court.