

A PLAIN-LANGUAGE FIELD GUIDE

How the Three Governments Work — and Why Your Email Bounced

A complete walk-through of federal, state, and city government — who makes the rules, who does the actual work, what a “representative” is, and exactly how one email about Unit 806 ended up in front of three different offices at once.

Built to be readable by anyone — no civics background assumed, nothing left out. Every term is defined the first time it appears.

Subject: Goldtex Apartments, Unit 806 — chemical-exposure email & the state/city routing it triggered

Covers: three levels of government · legislature vs. executive · districts & at-large seats · constituent services · the people on the thread · the bounce, step by step

Prepared: June 2026

What's in here

1. The big picture: three governments stacked on top of you
2. Inside each government: rule-makers vs. the people who do the work
3. What a “representative” actually is (and “district” vs. “at-large”)
4. Pennsylvania’s government (the state world)
5. Philadelphia’s government (the city world)
6. The agencies that matter to *you*, and which government owns them
7. Constituent services: what these offices were actually doing for you
8. The cast: every person on the email, decoded
9. The bounce, slowed all the way down
10. One-page summary you can keep

1 The big picture: three governments stacked on top of you

You don’t live under one government. You live under **three at the same time**, and — this is the part that trips everyone up — they mostly don’t answer to each other.

- **Federal** — the national government in Washington, D.C. Runs the country: the military, immigration, federal crimes (FBI, DOJ), Social Security, and so on.
- **State** — the government of Pennsylvania, run out of Harrisburg. Runs state law, the state courts, the state police, and state agencies.
- **Local / city** — the government of Philadelphia, run out of City Hall. Runs the things you touch every day: trash, water, the police you see on patrol — *and building inspections and housing enforcement*.

Each of these three is a separate world. Each has its own elected officials, its own employees, its own buildings, its own budget. A person who works for one of them generally has **no authority over the other two**. A state official can’t order the city around; the city can’t order the state around. Hold onto that single fact, because your entire email chain is one problem ricocheting between the *state* world and the *city* world.

FEDERAL — United States (Washington, D.C.)

Military · immigration · FBI / DOJ · Social Security

STATE — Pennsylvania (Harrisburg)

State law · state courts · state police · state agencies

CITY — Philadelphia (City Hall)

Trash · water · police patrol · **building inspections & housing**

Figure 1. Three separate governments sit over you at once. They are stacked by size (federal is biggest), but they are **not** a chain of command — the city is not “below” the state in the sense of taking orders from it. Your housing problem lives in the bottom box, the **city**. Keep your eye on that box.

2 Inside each government: the rule-makers vs. the people who do the work

This next split exists *inside* every one of the three governments — federal, state, and city — and it’s the piece almost nobody explains. Within any one government there are two very different kinds of people:

- **The legislature** — the group of elected people who *write and vote on laws*. They argue, they pass bills, they hold hearings, they control the budget. They do **not** personally inspect your apartment or arrest anyone. Their power is making the rules and holding the purse.
- **The executive branch** — the agencies and departments full of *hired employees* who actually carry out the work: the inspectors, the enforcement officers, the clerks. Each executive branch is led by a single top elected official: the **President** (federal), the **Governor** (state), the **Mayor** (city).

So when something *physical* needs to happen — an inspector walks into Unit 806, a violation gets written up, a rental license gets pulled — that’s the **executive / agency** side doing it, never the legislature. A legislator can *pressure* an agency, *fund* it, or *embarrass* it in a public hearing, but the agency is a separate machine with its own staff. This is the gap between “someone who can complain loudly on your behalf” and “someone who can actually open your door.”

ANY ONE GOVERNMENT (this same shape repeats at federal, state & city)

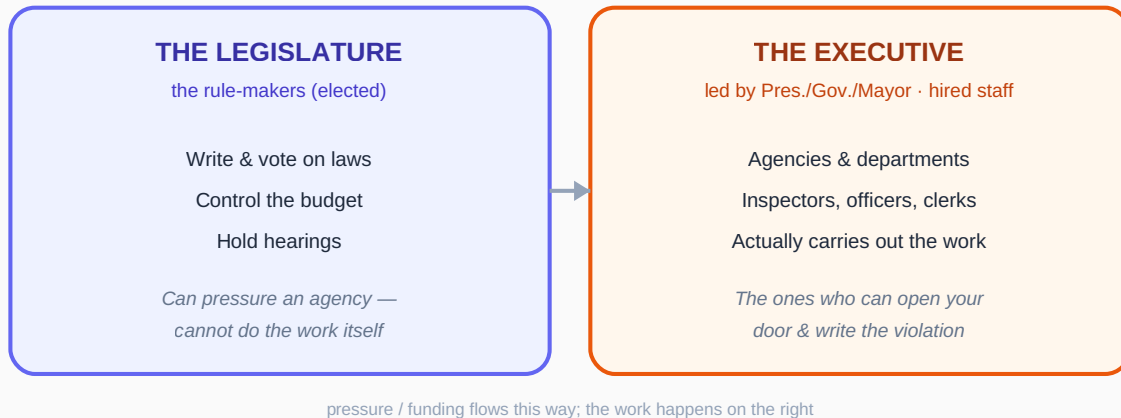


Figure 2. The same two-part shape sits inside every government. Your representatives live in the **left** box. The inspector who could enter Unit 806 lives in the **right** box, at the **city** level specifically. A legislator’s help is real, but it works by leaning on the right box — it is leverage, not a command.

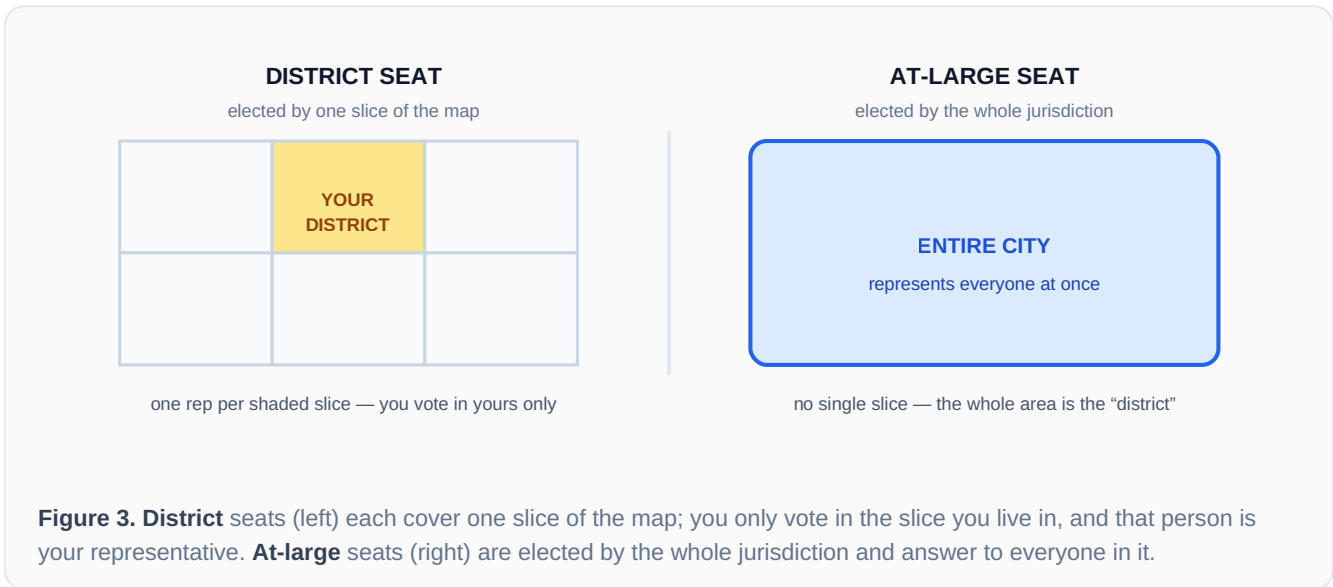
3 What a “representative” actually is

A **representative** is simply a member of a legislature — one of the elected people who make the rules. The word gets reused at every level, which is exactly why it’s confusing:

- A **U.S. Representative** sits in Congress, in Washington, D.C. (federal).
- A **State Representative** sits in the state legislature, in Harrisburg (state).
- A **Councilmember** is the city-level equivalent in Philadelphia (city).

Most legislators are elected from a **district** — a drawn-on-the-map slice of territory. You only get to vote for the representative whose district your home sits inside, and that person is *your* representative. You are their **constituent** (the formal word for “a person who lives in the area an official represents”). A representative’s first duty is to the people in their own district.

A smaller number of seats work differently: they are **at-large**, meaning that official is elected by the *entire* jurisdiction at once and represents everybody in it — not one slice. This matters later, because the city official best positioned to help you holds an at-large seat.



4 Pennsylvania’s government — the state world

Pennsylvania’s legislature is called the **General Assembly**, and like the federal one it has two halves (two “chambers”):

- the **House of Representatives** — 203 members, each serving 2-year terms; and
- the **Senate** — 50 members, each serving 4-year terms.

They meet in Harrisburg and write Pennsylvania law. The head of the state’s *executive* side — the person over all the state agencies — is the **Governor**, Josh Shapiro.

Two of the people on your email are State Representatives in that House: Ben Waxman and Mary Isaacson. They make *state* law. Read that twice, because here’s the catch that drives your whole story: **they do not run Philadelphia’s building inspectors.** Those inspectors are a *city* agency, a different government entirely.

5 Philadelphia’s government — the city world

Philadelphia’s legislature is the **City Council** — 17 members total. The structure is the detail that matters:

- **Ten** members are elected **by district** (one slice of the city each), and
- **Seven** members are elected **at-large** (citywide).

The head of Council is the **Council President** (currently Kenyatta Johnson). Council writes the city’s own laws (called *ordinances*) and approves the city budget. The head of the city’s *executive* side — the person over all the city departments — is the **Mayor**, Cherelle Parker.

THE KEY TAKEAWAY OF THIS WHOLE SECTION

The agencies that can actually fix your apartment problem are **city** departments, under the **Mayor**. Not state. That one fact explains why your email had to leave the state world and cross into the city world.

6 The agencies that matter to *you* — and which government owns them

Here are the specific offices your situation depends on, and the government each one belongs to. Notice they all sit in the same column.

Agency	Government	What it does for your situation
Licenses & Inspections (L&I)	City (under the Mayor)	Inspects buildings, writes up code violations, and issues or revokes rental licenses. This is the office that would actually send someone to Unit 806.
Fair Housing Commission (FHC)	City	Enforces the city's housing laws, including retaliation and habitability protections.
Commission on Human Relations (PCHR)	City	The city's civil-rights agency — discrimination complaints.

THE HINGE OF THE ENTIRE EMAIL CHAIN

Every fix you need is run by the **city**. None of it is state. A **state** representative has no direct authority over any of these. That mismatch — you knocked on a state door, your fix lives behind a city door — is the reason for everything that happened next.

7 Constituent services — what these offices were actually doing for you

Every legislator — a state rep, a councilmember — runs a local office staffed by people whose literal job is **constituent services**: helping the residents they represent get un-stuck from government. Someone's benefits froze; a department is ignoring them; a permit vanished — you call your representative's office and a staffer leans on the agency for you.

The representative doesn't *run* the agency. But agencies tend to pick up the phone faster when an elected official's office is the one asking — because that office controls hearings, budgets, and public attention. So it's **leverage, not command**. And it's a normal, free, expected service. You were not asking for a favor; you were using a channel that exists for exactly this.

8 The cast — every person on the email, decoded

State side — the @pahouse.net addresses (“pahouse” = Pennsylvania House)

Rep. Ben Waxman

STATE REPRESENTATIVE · PA HOUSE DISTRICT 182

Represents Center City and parts of South Philadelphia. **This is the office you emailed first**. One fact worth filing: before he was elected, Waxman was the press / communications director for DA Larry Krasner — so he has a prior working relationship with the office that is an adverse party in your Talley case. Not necessarily a problem; just something to be aware of.

Natasha Slezak

JUNIOR STAFFER / INTERN · WAXMAN'S OFFICE

Appears under two addresses — natasha.slezak@richmond.edu (her student/university email) and NSlezak@pahouse.net (her official one) — and two titles (“Intern,” “Constituent Services”). She is the person who actually **read your email, recognized it as a city-agency problem rather than a state one, and routed it to the right people**.

Colleen McAllister

CHIEF OF STAFF · REP. MARY ISAACSON · PA HOUSE DISTRICT 175

“Chief of Staff” = the senior person who runs a legislator's office day to day. Isaacson's 175th district runs the River Wards down through Chinatown — **which is where Goldtex sits**. That is why Colleen called you “one of your constituents”: **Mary Isaacson is actually your own home-district state representative**, and Waxman's office routed you to her. She is the one who set up the 9:30 call.

George Lawrence · Emilyn Loh · Alyxandra Lockhead

OTHER PA HOUSE STAFFERS (GLAWRENCE@, ELOH@, ALOCKHEAD@)

Copied in only to keep colleagues aware. Background names — you do not need to track them individually.

City side — the @phila.gov address (“phila.gov” = City of Philadelphia)

Tess Cruz

STAFFER · COUNCILMEMBER RUE LANDAU'S OFFICE (“CM” = COUNCILMEMBER)

City Council is the **city’s** legislature, completely separate from the state legislature. Landau holds one of the seven **at-large** seats — she represents the whole city, not one slice. Why her office specifically is the right one: before being elected, **Landau spent twelve years running the Philadelphia Commission on Human Relations and the Fair Housing Commission** — the exact city agencies that handle housing discrimination and habitability. Of every office that could have caught this, hers is the one whose entire background is fair housing.

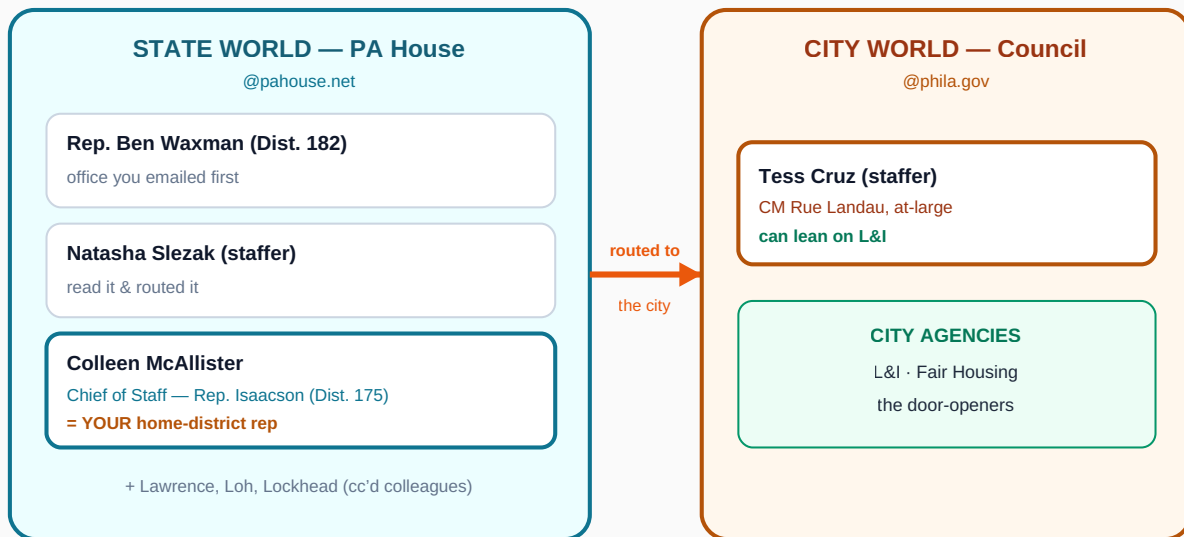


Figure 4. The thread laid out by world. Everything on the left is the **state** world (where you knocked); the orange arrow is the moment a state staffer hands the problem across to the **city** world (right), which is where the agencies that can actually act live.

9 The bounce, slowed all the way down

Picture your email as a physical envelope getting passed hand to hand. Here is every step.

Step 1 — You drop it in one mailbox.

You sent your chemical-exposure email to **one** place: Rep. Ben Waxman’s office — a *state* office. From your side it felt like “I emailed the government.” In reality you emailed one specific desk out of dozens that could have received it.

Step 2 — A staffer opens it and sizes it up.

Natasha, the junior staffer in Waxman’s office, reads it. Her job in that moment is *triage*: is this something our office can actually fix, or does it belong to someone else? She looks at what you’re asking for — get into Unit 806, inspect it, enforce the violations, deal with the broken HVAC and the tape — and she recognizes that every one of those actions is done by a **city** department (L&I, Fair Housing). Her office is a **state** office. Different government. Her boss has no button that makes a city inspector show up.

Step 3 — She doesn’t sit on it; she hands it to people who *can* press buttons.

This is the part that felt like a “bounce.” She didn’t bounce it away to get rid of it — she forwarded it to two offices that are actually positioned to act, and copied you so you could watch it happen:

- **Tess Cruz, in Councilmember Rue Landau’s office** (city side) — the office that can lean on L&I, because L&I is a city agency and Landau is a city official: same government. *This is the hand that can reach the lever you need.*
- **Colleen McAllister, in Rep. Mary Isaacson’s office** (state side, like Waxman, but a different rep). Why a *second* state office, if state offices can’t touch L&I? Because Isaacson is **your own** representative — Goldtex is in her district. There’s an unwritten courtesy among these offices: you route a person back to the rep who actually represents them, so their home office knows what’s happening and can add its weight. Waxman’s office isn’t yours; Isaacson’s is.

Step 4 — Why the same email shows up in two slightly different versions.

You saw one message under *Natasha*’s name (“I am connecting you with Tess Cruz... and Colleen McAllister...”) and a near-identical one about half an hour later under *Waxman*’s name. That’s just the office making the handoff official: the junior staffer teed it up, then it went out again under the representative’s name so the receiving offices treat it as coming from the boss, not the intern. Same handoff — more weight behind it.

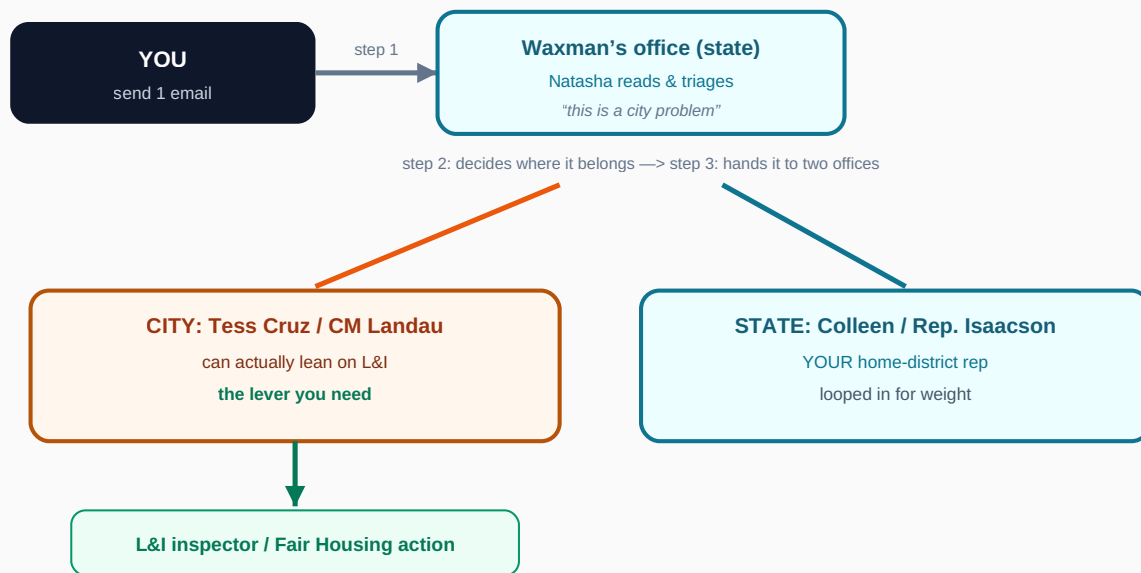


Figure 5. The full bounce. One email in (step 1) → a state staffer triages it (step 2) → she hands it to two offices (step 3): the **city** office that can pull the lever, plus your own **state** rep for weight. The only path that ends in someone at your door runs down the left, through the **city** agencies.

THE BOUNCE IN ONE SENTENCE

A state office can't make a city agency move — so the state staffer passed your problem to the one city office that **can** (Landau / Cruz) and looped in the state office that's actually **yours** (Isaacson / McAllister). That three-office chain is the handoff — not three separate things happening.

10 One-page summary you can keep

Question	Short answer
How many governments am I under?	Three at once — federal, state (Pennsylvania), city (Philadelphia). They don't take orders from each other.
Who makes rules vs. does the work?	The legislature (elected) makes rules; the executive (agencies, led by Pres./Gov./Mayor) does the actual work like inspections.
What's a "Rep"?	A member of a legislature. A State Rep sits in Harrisburg and makes state law.
What's "at-large"?	A seat elected by the whole jurisdiction instead of one district. Landau is an at-large councilmember.
Which government can fix my unit?	The city . L&I, Fair Housing, and PCHR are all city agencies under the Mayor.
Who did I email first?	Rep. Ben Waxman's office — a <i>state</i> office (District 182).
Who is my own state rep?	Rep. Mary Isaacson (District 175) — Goldtex is in her district. Colleen McAllister is her Chief of Staff.
Who can actually push L&I?	The city office — Tess Cruz in Councilmember Rue Landau's office (her background is literally fair housing).
Why did the email "bounce"?	You knocked on a <i>state</i> door; your fix lives behind a <i>city</i> door. The state staffer handed it to the city office that can act, and to your own state rep for weight.

This guide explains structure and roles only. Office-holders named (Gov. Josh Shapiro, Mayor Cherrille Parker, Council President Kenyatta Johnson, Reps. Ben Waxman & Mary Isaacson, Councilmember Rue Landau) reflect public records current to June 2026. Nothing here is legal advice.