Orientation Follow-up Program for New Members

UNC School of Government

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Panel Discussion: Emails, Phone Calls, and Drop-ins: Tips for Managing Constituent Requests

Moderated by David Brown (UNC School of Government)

with House LAs Pattie Fleming (Rep. Starnes) and Margie Penven (Rep. Horn)

and Senate LAs Irma Avent-Hurst (Sen. Nesbitt) and Carolyn Gooden (Sen. Apodaca)

Process for receiving, reviewing, tracking, and resolving constituent requests.

- The process depends on what type of request it is. The LA could task the Research Division or the agency, or handle it internally. The most important part of the process is constituent communications. It's important to follow up with all constituents and let them know what you're doing to help them.
- Use a form for logging calls or emails, such as the constituent request form that LAs can access on the NCGA Resources site. LAs may want to print a stack of blank forms for members or other staff to use as needed. Record the date, time, and pertinent information immediately.
- Consider asking callers to send an email summarizing their request so that it's easier to understand, track, and ultimately resolve.
- Email filters can help to organize your electronic inbox and allow you to manage requests more efficiently.
- Create separate email folders for each agency or issue.
- Create a separate email database for each county that the member serves.
- How to handle form letters is up to the member; some offices simply ignore them, assuming that those constituents with a legitimate concern will take the time to send original correspondence.
- Responding to a constituent with a form letter should be avoided if possible. Try to personalize the email or letter in some way so the constituent knows he or she is receiving individual attention.
- If feasible, have a weekly sit-down with the member to discuss all constituent requests from the past week.

- Keep the member informed when significant requests are resolved, in case he or she wants to personally deliver the good news to the constituent—either over the phone, or while home in the district.

Working with agencies to get constituents the help they need.

- Many requests require agency action, but the LA should still handle these personally, as agencies are often too busy to manage the request from start to finish.
- Use agency legislative liaisons to help you cut through the red tape and find the person who has the ability to resolve the constituent's concern.
- Don't tell constituents when you think you'll have an answer, because that could create an expectation of timeliness that—through no fault of your own—you ultimately can't meet. Educate them on the process and how to locate resources if there are opportunities for self-help.
- State agencies are often the cause of delays. Departments typically handle members' requests delicately, which can contribute to these delays.
- In order for delays to not reflect poorly on the member, LAs should be up front with constituents if an agency is the cause. But they may also want to educate the constituent that agency casework can be made more difficult by complicated problems, heavy workloads, and inaccurate or incomplete information from the requester.

Other observations about constituent services.

- LAs can provide a service by educating constituents as to what members' offices can and can't do. But even if the office isn't able to help resolve a concern, LAs should still let the constituent "vent" about the issue—sometimes just the knowledge that someone is listening to them can make constituents feel better about their predicaments.
- No matter the size of the district or the number of people represented, personal contact with the LA and, when feasible, with the member is always appreciated and often long remembered by constituents.
- When it's necessary to get the member involved in the resolution of a request, make efficient use of his or her time by having everything organized and ready for review before presenting the issue.
- LAs should make clear that members' offices cannot get involved in matters that are being litigated. Constituents needing legal assistance should be directed to Legal Aid or private attorneys.

- If requests come from non-district residents, the best approach is to direct the requester to the appropriate member's office and facilitate the introduction. Some offices offer assistance to non-district residents—proceed with caution here, as members can be territorial about their constituents.
- Redirect questions about Social Security to the appropriate U.S. Representative.
- You may reach a point when you can't do any more for the constituent. You should notify the constituent in writing of this fact, and if applicable, advise that he or she seek the advice of an attorney.

How new members and LAs can best work together.

- The member and LA should sit down and discuss expectations together, including what each wants out of the position and the member's perception of his or her home district's unique characteristics and values.
- It's best for new members to hire experienced LAs, if possible, for their ability to understand the office and inner workings of the General Assembly. When both the member and the LA are new to the General Assembly, first-session acclimation takes longer and is more difficult.
- It's also important to be realistic. New members often come into the legislature wanting things that even an experienced LA is unable to accomplish.
- Encourage new LAs to talk with veteran LAs about best practices and other tips, regardless of their members' party affiliations.
- Ongoing communication between member and LA is crucial. This reduces the frequency of misunderstandings and builds confidence in the LA's ability to manage the office.
- Consider summarizing your stances on key issues and providing this information to your LA so he or she can readily and accurately answer common constituent questions.
- LAs should never offer their own opinions about issues while serving in their official capacity, as this could be misconstrued as the member's own position. An LA should speak only for the member's views, if known (never assume). LAs should never lobby on their own behalf.

Additional tips to improve efficiency.

- Make smart use of resources, such as the NCGA Resources folder, email filtering, email folders, and templates for routine types of letters.

- Organize emails by topic. Delete unimportant ones after reading (e.g., daily summaries from news sites), and unsubscribe from unnecessary email lists.
- Answer what you can right away to keep backlogged work at a minimum.
- Become adept at identifying emails from non-constituents.