

Orientation for New Members

UNC School of Government

January 7, 2014

Panel Discussion: Behind the Scenes—How Your Legislative Assistant Can Support Your Work

Experienced LAs will discuss tips and best practices for managing a legislative office and handling constituent requests.

- **Irma Avent-Hurst** (LA for Senator Van Duyn)
- **Paula Fields** (LA for Senator Rabon)
- **Pattie Fleming** (LA for Representative Starnes)
- **Margie Penven** (LA for Representative Horn)
- Moderated by David Brown, UNC School of Government

Note: Although there was substantial agreement throughout the discussion, each statement does not necessarily reflect the consensus of all members of the panel. We took great care to reproduce the discussion but any errors should be attributed to the transcription and summarization process, not to the panelists.

Establish effective lines of communication with your LA

- Establish communication lines on Day 1. Communicate your expectations and how you want the office to run.
- Weekly face-to-face meetings with your LA and interns can:
 - Provide information on bill progress that you may have not been able to follow.
 - Let you know of constituent calls received so you can be prepared if you encounter constituents at home over the weekend.
 - Provide information on committee meetings that LAs (or interns) attended or listened to online in your absence.
- Some LAs provide hard copy materials every day. These may include your daily/weekly schedule, event invitations, notes on bills that are going to be seen, and the legislative calendar.
- LAs have remote access to email, calendars, and other databases and often work from home.
- Outlook is the email platform used. A member's contacts are shared between the LA and member, not outside of the office.
- Texting is an important and easy way to communicate throughout the day with your LA.
- If you have a new LA, encourage them to ask you or other LAs questions so they can learn how to find the resources they need. Make sure they get a mentor to "show them

the ropes.” If there isn’t someone appropriate in a nearby office, ask the LA Directors for advice on assigning one.

- When discussing expectations with an experienced LA, remember to talk about preferences for your office environment and processes that may be different than what they were accustomed to in their last member office.

Your office culture is yours to create

- Each member’s office operates differently. It depends on how the member wants the office to function.
- LAs generally work the same hours as the member or longer, often coming in prior to the member’s arrival to prepare for the day.
- Schedules can change five or six times each day so many members prefer to use a virtual schedule rather than a paper one.
- Microwaves and refrigerators are available. LAs can find food for you if meetings cause you to miss a meal.
- Political activity is prohibited in the office.

Trust, rapport, and thanks will go a long way

- One of the biggest mistakes a member can make is not developing trust with his or her LA. Don’t “demand” things of your LA. Take time to build rapport and they will be happy to help you.
- LAs should not be used simply to run errands for you, but they can pitch in on many fronts to make your worklife easier. However...
 - Remember that LAs are state employees. Some things you may consider asking them to do (politically and/or personally) are not part of their official duties. For example, an LA running an errand to retrieve something from your apartment who is injured en route would not be covered by workers’ compensation.
- Most LAs...
 - Have access to their boss’s emails.
 - Have permission to file bills on their member’s behalf.
 - Are in charge of the member’s schedule.
- Some experienced LAs even write the first draft of resolutions.
- There are many ways to show your appreciation for a job well done: a simple thank you, paying them back on time if they paid for something out of pocket for you, and buying them lunch every once in a while.

Advice for your LAs regarding constituent services

- LAs have the time to listen to every constituent, while you may not. Let them be the front line for this effort.
- LAs use forms to track constituent calls so interns and anyone else can record the important information.
- Most of the time the LA can handle the call by resolving the issue for the constituent. Initially, they should tell them they will inquire about the issue. They should not promise them they will fix it.
- Every call is important. LAs do not like to leave people hanging. Constituents are calling because they need help not, because they need a referral to more bureaucracy.
- Legislative liaisons in the state agencies can help with constituent issues—relationships with them (and with North Carolina’s congressional delegation) are important.
- The office cannot get involved if the constituent concern involves a matter in litigation. LAs should apologize politely for not being able to help and advise the constituent to contact their lawyer.
- Contact information on mayors, county commissioners, and city council members from the jurisdiction should be readily available in case constituents are not directing their concerns to the people who can best help them.
- School visits happen regularly. LAs or other office staff should make the students feel that their visit is special—for many, this is their first trip to the General Assembly and for some their first trip to Raleigh itself. The students will receive a tour, may sit in the chamber during part of the session, and can ask questions of your LA as your representative. Members are not expected to participate extensively in school visits and may not always be available.
- Let your LA know if you want to be pulled out of meetings to meet with visiting constituents, and whether this is true for all meetings or just certain types.
- In some offices, visitors and people who send emails get added to the newsletter list.
- If someone from another district calls your office, the LA should politely redirect them to the correct member via a three-way call transfer. Give the other member a chance to serve his or her constituent. The correct member will have local contacts that you may not. If the constituent calls your office again because they got no response from their own member, the LA may look to you for how to proceed.

General advice

- LA Directors can help with sensitive issues and training.
- Information Systems Division (ISD) staff can help you sync phones, tablets, laptops, and similar devices.
- Keep old bill drafts on file for future reference.