Congressional Offices and Staff

Members of Congress have two broad areas of responsibility—legislative and representational (constituent service). This Best Practices Guide describes how House and Senate offices are structured to execute these responsibilities and provides some specific recommendations about when and how to contact various congressional staff.

CONGRESSIONAL OFFICES

The cornerstone of the U.S. Capitol was laid by George Washington on September 18, 1793, and, for more than a century, Members of Congress who desired individual offices had to rent private quarters or borrow space in committee rooms. This situation changed in 1901 when legislation was enacted to build two nearly identical office buildings on either side of the Capitol. Now, the House occupies four major structures on the south-side of Capitol Hill (the Cannon, Longworth, Rayburn, and Ford buildings) and the Senate has three primary edifices on the north-side (the Hart, Dirksen, and Russell buildings). Members' personal offices are located in these buildings and are assigned by seniority.

In addition to a Washington office, Members are permitted to lease space in federal buildings and other commercial facilities back home. Located in or near the largest cities of the state/district, these field offices usually house from one to five staffers, serve as a forward operating base for the Member when Congress is not in session, and are the hub of his/her constituent service operations. House members from densely populated (urban) districts may have a single field office and representatives from rural states as many as five or six. The situation is similar in the Senate where, for example, the junior senator from Texas has seven state offices, but his counterpart from Rhode Island just one.

PERSONAL OFFICE STAFF

The 540 Members of Congress have some flexibility when it comes to how they spend their office budget ($1.3 to $1.9 million per year for representatives and $2.5 to $4.0 million for senators). However, by law, representatives may have only 18 full-time and four part-time employees (a limit enacted in 1979). The non-partisan Congressional Management Foundation (CMF) surveyed House offices and determined that the average office had 15 employees. Senators, on the other hand, have no limit on the number of employees as long as they stay within the combined allowances available for staff and office expenses. According to the CMF, the average number of employees in a Senate office is 35. Senate staff size varies according to the population of a state. Senators from states with fewer than two million people average 33 employees, while Senators from states with over 10 million people average 44 employees. Each House and Senate office has a personal staff structure that resembles (sometimes closely and sometimes not) the following:

- **Chiefs and Directors.** The *Chief of Staff* manages all offices and staff. Often the individual who is closest to the Member, he/she may have served them in other staff or campaign positions. (In large offices there may also be a *Deputy Chief of Staff*). The *State Director* (Senate) or *District Director* (House) oversees day-to-day operations of the field offices.
- **Legislative Staff.** Located within the Washington office, the legislative staff is led by a *Legislative Director* who oversees *Legislative Assistants* and *Legislative Correspondents* (sometimes referred to collectively as *Legislative Aides*). Legislative assistants manage a specific portfolio of issues and legislative correspondents handle (as you might surmise) constituent communications related to legislative matters.
- **Communications Staff.** Congressional offices have at least one full-time employee to handle media inquiries and generate publicity. The lead communicator holds the title of *Communications Director* or *Press Secretary*. Senators and highly-visible representatives are likely to have a small communications team reporting to the communications director.

- **Caseworkers.** Constituents frequently ask Members of Congress to contact federal officials to locate missing benefit checks or intercede in other administrative "cases." Senators and representatives take casework very seriously since it is a tangible way to demonstrate value to constituents (aka voters). Nearly all casework is handled in the field offices by *Caseworkers* or *District Representatives*.
- **Scheduler.** Members of Congress receive dozens of requests each day for meetings and events. Most representatives have a full time *Scheduler* in Washington to handle such requests (some may also have a scheduler in the main field office). Senators — especially those from populous states —may have more than one person responsible for scheduling. (For more information about securing congressional meetings see the Best Practices Guide: *Face-to-Face Meetings*.)
- **Staff Assistants.** Every office has a small cadre of individuals (often right out of college) who sort the mail, answer the phones, and handle other clerical responsibilities. These individuals hold a variety of different titles. They are young, ambitious, and anxious to move up the ladder. (Remember: today's receptionist could be the Chief of Staff in a few years!)

COMMITTEE STAFF

The preceding discussion relates to personal offices. Both the House of Representatives and the Senate have 20 "standing" (permanent) committees and several "special" or "select" committees. In addition, there are four joint House-Senate panels. Each of these committees have professional and administrative staff:

- **Professional Staff.** The committee and subcommittee staff that you are most likely to come into contact with are *Professional Staff*, a general catch-all title that refers to staff members hired by either the chair or ranking minority member but who work for all committee/subcommittee members from their political party. Professional staff members handle some or all legislative issues that fall under the jurisdiction of their panel. (Since they are hired by a specific representative or senator, they may also manage other legislative issues for that Member.) The top staffer carries the title of *Staff Director* and for committees and some subcommittees there is also a *Chief Counsel*, the attorney who has legislative drafting responsibilities.
- **Administrative Staff.** As outlined in the Best Practices Guide entitled *Appropriations Advocacy*, the staff director (lead professional staffer) for each appropriations subcommittee holds the title of *Clerk*. For other panels, the title *Clerk* or *Chief Clerk* refers to an individual who does not handle legislative matters, but rather deals with administrative tasks such as printing, scheduling, etc.

BEST PRACTICES

Every university should make it a priority to not only establish a personal relationship with their senators and representatives but also with key congressional staff. Because turnover is high (especially among the legislative and communications teams) this must be a continuous effort. Here are some specific suggestions about making staff contacts:

- **Cold Calls.** The office receptionist keeps at his/her fingertips a list that shows which legislative assistant is assigned to each issue area. If you are making a cold call, simply ask the receptionist: *Which of your legislative assistants handles agriculture issues?* If you subscribe to a published congressional staff directory, you may be able to discern that information on your own, but given the high turnover rate, you'd be well advised to ask the receptionist: *Does Jason Bourne still handle homeland security issues?*
- **Call the Right Person.** If you're contacting an office about a legislative matter, seek out the LA who handles that issue area. If they're not available, leave a voicemail.

CONGRESSIONAL OFFICES AND STAFF

Do <u>not</u> go up the chain of command and leave multiple voicemails (unless, of course, the matter is both urgent and important.) If you have an existing relationship with the chief of staff or district director, it never hurts to call them first and ask: *Whom in your office handles energy issues?* But, in general, it's better to call the appropriate legislative assistant directly. (And be patient about a return call.)

- **Cultivate Myriad Relationships.** Make it a priority to know <u>all</u> of the top aides in each office, including: (1) chief of staff; (2) state/district director; (3) legislative director; (4) communications director; (5) all legislative assistants handling issues of concern to your institution; and (6) scheduler. There are many different ways to get to know these key individuals, but all involve time and expense. However, as should be self-evident, it is always better to become acquainted with a staffer <u>before</u> you need their assistance.
- **Don't Overlook the Field Staff.** Many people make the mistake of thinking that all of the really important staff in a congressional office are located in Washington, D.C. This is simply not true. The state or district director and those who head up each of the field offices travel frequently with the Member (and thus have their ear), regularly fill-in for the Member at mid-week events and tend to be older and

serve longer. Field operatives communicate constantly with the Member and his/her team in Washington, providing critical insight about "what the folks back home are thinking." Make them your best friends!

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Successful congressional relations programs are built upon the recognition that a senator or representative is merely the "tip" of their own "iceberg." Staff perform critical support functions and wield enormous influence with "the boss." To advance your legislative agenda, you absolutely must establish and maintain relationships with the key staff in each congressional office connected to your institution.