

## Who's Who in a Congressional Office

A legislative staff is the invisible force in U.S. lawmaking. Most of the work on Capitol Hill is done by these 20 and 30-year old bright, hardworking staffers. Staffers advance the interests and priorities of the Members of Congress for whom they work (the "boss") and the states and districts they represent.

All Members of Congress have staff during their term in office. Often referred to as "personal staff" (as opposed to "committee staff"), they work in both the district and Washington D.C. offices. The personal staff handles constituent needs, drafts legislation, works with the media, coordinates scheduling, and meets with advocates, constituents, and lobbyists. There is a lot of turnover in Congressional offices, especially at lower levels, contributing to the challenge of maintaining expertise in a particular issue area and sustaining relationships with constituents.

**Administrative Assistant (AA) or Chief of Staff (CoS):** reports directly to the Member of Congress, and has overall responsibility of evaluating the political outcome of various legislative proposals and constituent requests. Usually the person in charge of overall office operations, including the assignment of work and the hiring and supervision of staff.

**Legislative Director (LD):** the staff person who monitors the legislative schedule and makes recommendations regarding the pros and cons of particular issues and proposals. Works with the Member and CoS/AA to determine legislative priorities, oversees development of legislative proposals, and directs the work of legislative staff.

**Legislative Assistant (LA):** most offices have multiple LAs who are responsible for a portfolio of issues and meetings with constituents. For example, depending on the responsibilities and interests of the Member, an office may have a different LA for health issues, environmental matters, homeland security, or taxes. The average LA for health has little if any formal knowledge or education about health care concerns.

**Legislative Correspondent (LC):** more common in the Senate due to the volume of mail received in Senate offices, LCs work closely with a particular LA on a portfolio of issues. LCs are responsible for sorting, reviewing, and responding to constituent correspondence and monitoring and reporting on the issues of

importance to constituents. LCs also do research and some writing for LAs. May conduct meetings with constituents when the LA is unavailable.

**Press Secretary or Communications Director:** responsibility is to build and maintain open and effective lines of communication between the Member, the media, the constituents, and the general public. Serves as the Member's spokesperson.

**Scheduler, Appointment Secretary, or Personal Secretary:** with the CoS, is responsible for allocating a Member's time among the many demands that arise from Congressional responsibilities, staff requirements, and constituent requests. Also make travel arrangements, and arrange speaking dates and visits to the district.

**State or District Director:** highest ranking staffers in the Member's state or district office. Serves as a CoS for activities and staffers in the local office. Work closely with the CoS in Washington to coordinate activities, priorities, and awareness of what is going on locally of relevance to the Member.

**Caseworker:** staff members in district offices assigned to handle constituent requests. Resolve problems presented by constituents related to federal agencies (e.g. social Security, Medicare, veteran's benefits, immigration concerns, passports). A Congressional office may have several caseworkers. Caseworkers are terrific resources for nurses. They are well versed in insurance and Medicare issues. If you are experiencing a problem or need help on behalf of a patient, you can enlist the help of a caseworker in your Member's district or state office.

In addition to staff who work in the Member's offices, Congressional committees and subcommittees all have their own staff. These are broken down into majority staffers and minority staffers, with the ratio reflecting the ratio of the committee and subcommittee membership. These staffers have expertise in the issues for which the committee or subcommittee has jurisdiction. They draft legislation, investigate issues of importance to the committee chairman, and organize hearings, mark-ups, and develop policy. These staffers are principal players in the development of legislation. Much less turnover occurs among committee and subcommittee staff, and these staffs have a greater depth of expertise than personal staff. Establishing and maintaining relationships with key committee staffers is a worthwhile investment of time and energy.

Committee chairs and ranking members usually have staff in their personal offices as well as on their committees or subcommittees. When contacting a Congressional office, find out whether the staffer responsible for your issue of concern is a member of the personal or committee staff.

### **Working with Staffers**

Getting to know staff members can be very beneficial. Even if you can't travel to Washington, you can develop relationships with local district staff. Keep the following points in mind when working with Congressional staffers:

- 1. Remember who they are.** They are key figures in developing policy.
- 2. Do not overestimate what they know.** They often need outside expertise. Don't be condescending or use jargon. Ask first how familiar they are with a particular subject so you can tailor your remarks to their knowledge level.
- 3. Do not underestimate their influence.** Legislators trust them, depend on them, and act on their suggestions. They have direct access to the Members, and make recommendations to direct the Members' positions and actions. Junior staffers are often promoted to senior positions, so it is important to treat all staffers with respect.
- 4. Be honest.** Provide accurate, complete information to maintain your credibility. If you don't know an answer, promise to get back to them and do so.
- 5. Provide summarized, useful information.** Information should be concise, brief, focused and have references. More information can always follow.
- 6. Visit them before asking for assistance.** If possible, introduce yourself and get acquainted before you need to request something from a staffer.
- 7. Do not attack ideas.** Sometimes staffers reach out for input on a draft proposal. This is an honor; if you disagree, be respectful and give constructive criticism and offer alternative ideas or proposals. Thank them for asking for your viewpoint.
- 8. Follow-up.** Be a tenacious advocate. Congressional staff are overworked and could easily forget your issue unless you follow-up.

**9. Be a resource and stay connected.** Maintain regular contact, be a local resource on which the staffer can rely. Send newsletters, updates, or articles you think may be of interest in keeping up to speed on key issues in your community. Don't inundate or overwhelm them, however.

**10. Express thanks to the Member of Congress and staff.**