

Chapter 15

Congressional Offices: The Real Deal and Who's Who

Because legislators spend a great deal of time out of the office, their staff may well be considered the invisible force in U.S. lawmaking. In fact, most people do not realize that most of the work on Capitol Hill is done by 20 - and 30 - year - olds who are bright, hard-working, and devoting their time and energy to the public policy process. They advance the interests and priorities of the Members of Congress for whom they work and the states and districts they represent.

All Members of Congress have staff to assist them during their term in office. The legislator's staff, often referred to as "personal staff" (as opposed to "committee staff," as discussed below), includes both the district (at home) and non-district (Washington, DC) offices. The personal staff handles constituent needs and drafts legislation, works with the media, coordinates scheduling, and meets with advocates, constituents, and lobbyists. There is quite a bit of turnover in Congressional offices among the staff, especially at lower levels, which contributes to the challenge of staffers maintaining expertise in a particular issue area and advocates developing and sustaining relationships with staff. To be most effective in communicating with Congress, knowing the titles and principal functions of key staff is helpful.

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

Legislative Director (LD): The LD usually is the staff person who monitors the legislative schedule and makes recommendations regarding the pros and cons of particular issues and proposals. The LD works with the Member of Congress and the CoS to determine legislative priorities, oversee the development of legislative proposals, and direct the work of legislative staff.

Legislative Assistant (LA): Most Congressional offices have multiple LAs who are responsible for a portfolio of issues. 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 majority of your interactions with most Congressional offices will be with LAs. It is important to note that the average Health LA is a woman in her mid-to-late twenties with a bachelor's degree in Political Science and little, if any, formal knowledge or education about healthcare concerns.**

Legislative Correspondent (LC): More common in the Senate than in the House as a result of the volume of mail received in Senate offices, LCs work closely with a particular LA focused on a portfolio of issues. LCs principally 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 the LAs (e.g., background issue memos,

talking points for the Member of Congress) with whom they work and also conduct meetings with constituents, usually when the LA is unavailable.

Press Secretary or Communications Director: The Press Secretary's responsibility is to build and maintain open and effective lines of communication between the Member, the constituents, the media, and the general public. The Press Secretary serves as the Member's spokesperson and works to promote the Member's profile, inform the public of the Member's views on specific issues, and help advance the Member's legislative agenda.

Scheduler, Appointment Secretary, or Personal Secretary: A Scheduler, with counsel from the CoS, maintains the primary responsibility for allocating a Member's time among the many demands that arise from Congressional responsibilities, staff requirements, and constituent requests. Schedulers also are responsible for making travel arrangements and arranging speaking dates and visits to the district. Some Members have one scheduler in DC who maintains their entire schedule, whereas others have one scheduler in DC and one "at home" in the district or state who keeps the calendar for all local events.

State or District Director: State or District Directors are the highest-ranking staffers in the Member's state or district. In essence, this person serves as a CoS for all the activities and staffers in the local office(s). District Directors work closely with the CoS in DC to ensure coordination of activities, priorities, and awareness of what is going on locally of relevance to the Member.

Caseworker: Caseworkers are the staff members in a district office assigned to help with constituent requests. Caseworkers' responsibilities may include helping resolve problems constituents present in relation to federal agencies (e.g., Social Security and Medicare issues, veteran's benefits, immigration concerns, passports). A Congressional office may have several caseworkers. **Caseworkers are terrific resources for rehabilitation nurses. These staffers are well versed in the challenges of Medicare reimbursement, private insurance, veteran's benefits, and related issues. If you are experiencing a problem of your own or on behalf of a patient with which you are having difficulty attaining resolution, do not hesitate to enlist the help of a caseworker in your Representative's or Senator's office. Oftentimes, just one phone call made or letter or sent on behalf of the Member of Congress, can get a complex matter resolved quickly and painlessly.**

In addition to staff who work in individual members' offices, Congressional committees and subcommittees all have their own staff. The committee and subcommittee staffs are broken down into majority staffers and minority staffers, with the ratio usually reflecting the ratio of the committee and subcommittee membership. These staffers typically have expertise in the issues for which the committee or subcommittee has jurisdiction and often have law or other advanced degrees. These staff members draft legislation, investigate issues of importance to the committee chairman and ranking member, organize hearings and mark-ups, and develop policy. Committee and subcommittee 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. Therefore, establishing and

maintaining relationships with key committee staffers is a worthwhile investment of time and energy.

Chairpeople and Ranking Members typically have staff in their personal offices as well as on the committees and subcommittees on which they sit. For example, Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Chairman Tom Harkin (D-Iowa) has a significant set of staffers who work for the committee as well as personal staffers who also may work on healthcare matters. When contacting Congressional offices of Members who are part of committee leadership, finding out whether the staffer responsible for your issue of concern is a member of personal or committee staff is important.

For your members' Washington, DC, and local office information, visit www.house.gov or www.senate.gov.