

# Keeping It Local



A GUIDE FOR MANAGING

## CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT & STATE OFFICES

CONGRESSIONAL MANAGEMENT FOUNDATION

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SOCIETY FOR HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

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# Keeping It Local

3RD EDITION



## A GUIDE FOR MANAGING CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT & STATE OFFICES



CONGRESSIONAL  
MANAGEMENT  
FOUNDATION

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# Foreword

by the Society for Human Resource Management

Effective leaders don't just do things right; they identify the right things to do — and the right people to do them. They anticipate change, stay ahead of it and manage it into an advantage.

The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) helps create and support such leaders. For more than 60 years, we have been the world's largest organization devoted to promoting effective workplace policies and practices that leverage any organization's greatest asset — its people.

Creating a professionally managed workplace — finding and retaining the best talent, investing in career development, conducting constructive performance reviews, and providing equitable benefits — is the way great organizations drive change and harness people's full potential. Smart people policies contribute to lower turnover, higher morale, and greater staff satisfaction and loyalty.

That means more than just having happy employees leaving Capitol Hill every night and returning every morning: Research shows a direct correlation between employee satisfaction and productivity. In the case of a congressional office, high productivity means the kind of legislative results and constituent service that translate into success, term after term.

SHRM is privileged to partner with the Congressional Management Foundation in sponsoring *Keeping It Local*. As CMF recognized more than 20 years ago in setting the vision for this guide, an efficient and effective collection of congressional offices is vital to more than the individual Members of Congress. It benefits our entire nation, and honors the system of democracy that all Americans revere.

We hope this book inspires you and your colleagues to create a lasting legacy both through the work you do — and the way you lead.

Sincerely,

Laurence G. O'Neil

*President & CEO*

*Society for Human Resource Management*

*March 2010*





## Preface

*“All politics is local.”*

The Honorable Thomas P. “Tip” O’Neill, Jr.

So goes the famous quote of the late Tip O’Neill, Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives (1977–1986), after his first and only campaign loss in 1935. The next year he was elected to the Massachusetts House of Representatives, the first of 25 consecutive elections spanning 50 years of public service. In that half a century, O’Neill continued to hammer that message home to all aspiring candidates.

Nowhere is this lesson heeded more diligently than in the district and state offices of Members of Congress. It is here that members of the House of Representatives and Senate meet one-on-one with their constituents; here that caseworkers intercede with federal agencies on behalf of frustrated citizens. Grant proposals for local projects are researched in district and state offices, and plans for attending Rotary Club meetings, high school graduations, church services, plant tours and “traveling office hours” at the local shopping center devised.

Thus, CMF decided on the name, *Keeping It Local*, for the third edition of our guidebook for district and state offices. Like its companion, *Setting Course*, which is geared for the Washington offices of federal representatives, *Keeping It Local* is a product of more than three decades of knowledge gleaned from hundreds of staff training classes and office consultations, dozens of surveys and hours of diligent research to make sure we have captured all the best and most accurate advice.

Each chapter has been studiously examined for currency and applicability. New sections were added on handling employee performance problems, resolving conflicts in the office and managing additional constituent services, such as military academy nominations and tour and flag requests, while the chapter on technology was scrapped altogether as antiquated. The chapter on casework was extensively revised and expanded to reflect the growing demands on district and state offices for these services. Valuable information from the Congressional Research Service of the Library of Congress, the House Office of Employee Assistance and

the Society for Human Resource Management was incorporated to augment CMF's own body of knowledge.

New charts and graphs were added with data from our 2009 survey of 130 District and State Directors, Chiefs of Staff and Deputy Chiefs of Staff to give offices a way to benchmark themselves against their counterparts. A handy list of "Dos and Don'ts" was appended to each chapter, and helpful icons and boxes of tips were sprinkled throughout for quick and easy reference.

Finally, the entire book was re-examined, re-ordered and refreshed, and a new graphic design incorporated for visual appeal. In addition to making *Keeping It Local* an invaluable source of advice, our goal was to make the book easy to read, the information effortless to access and apply, and the lessons simple to digest.

CMF's mission for more than 30 years has been to help congressional offices run more effectively so Members and their staffs may better serve their constituents. *Keeping It Local* is the latest in our series of management guidebooks seeking to fill that mission.

Beverly Bell  
*Executive Director*  
*Congressional Management Foundation*  
*March 2010*

## Acknowledgments

Revising a guidebook last published more than 10 years ago is a significant and sometimes daunting task. The Congressional Management Foundation (CMF) would not have been able to produce the third edition of *Keeping It Local* without the assistance and dedication of the following individuals and organizations.

First, CMF would like to thank our partner, the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), whose generous sole sponsorship made this edition possible. As the world's largest professional association devoted to human resource management, SHRM is dedicated to promoting effective management and leadership all over the globe. CMF is proud to work with them to offer management advice and techniques to individual House and Senate offices through this publication, our professional development training programs for senior congressional staff and our upcoming 112<sup>th</sup> Congress edition of *Setting Course: A Congressional Management Guide*. We also extend our gratitude to members of the SHRM Total Rewards, Employee Relations, Staff Management and Labor Relations Special Expertise Panels, who reviewed, edited and provided guidance on several chapters.

*Keeping It Local* also exists because of the participation and assistance of hundreds of congressional staff. CMF is indebted to the House and Senate staff who contributed to this edition, especially the District and State Directors, Chiefs of Staff and others who responded to our survey and shared their practices, advice, challenges and experiences. We offer special thanks to the staff who gave interviews and offered their expertise on a range of topics: Julie Merz, Office of the Assistant to the Speaker; Vincent W. O'Domski, Rep. Charlie Dent; Ann Peifer, Rep. Adam Schiff; Lisa Pinto, Rep. Henry Waxman; Tracee Sutton, Senator Kent Conrad; and Cathie Trevallee, Rep. Tammy Baldwin. By seeking input directly from the staff, we were able to target the advice in this book to their specific needs.

CMF is also appreciative of the assistance provided by the following institutional and support offices: Congressional Research Service, especially Eric Petersen; House Employment Counsel; House Office of Emergency Planning, Preparedness and Operations; House Office of Employee Assistance, especially Bern Beidel; Office of Compliance; Senate Chief Counsel

for Employment; Senate Employee Assistance Program; Senate Sergeant at Arms; and the United States Capitol Police.

Finally, I would like to thank all CMF staff for their support, guidance and patience during this process. Executive Director Beverly Bell provided leadership throughout the revision and was instrumental in its successful completion; Deputy Director Kathy Goldschmidt expertly researched and rewrote chapters and provided critical thinking on several others; and colleagues Tim Hysom and Collin Burden conducted research and were instrumental in the survey design and analysis. CMF management consultant Meredith Persily Lamel offered her expertise in current best practices; Chairman of the CMF Board of Directors and management consultant Ira Chaleff contributed his wisdom in key moments; and consultant John Sorrells provided critical thinking that helped define the structure and tone of this revision, and also contributed to and edited several chapters. CMF interns Emily Harig, Caitlin Mathis, Molly Powell, Yanning Sun and Van Van provided important assistance from the research and fact checking through the production stages. Thanks also to Rich Pottern Design for conceptualizing and executing a new design and layout for this edition, giving new life and enhancing the usability and readability of this book.

CMF is grateful to all of these individuals and offices for their contributions of time and talent. This collaborative process enabled us to bring together the best possible guidebook for district and state offices.

Nicole Folk Cooper  
*Director of Research and Publications*  
*Congressional Management Foundation*  
*Editor, 3rd Edition of Keeping It Local*

# Introduction

## The Challenges of Governing

When candidates run for the House or Senate, they usually know why they want to hold elected office. What many, if not most, fail to realize is that, once elected, they not only become a Senator or Representative. They also essentially become the chief executive officer of an organization. In cases where the transition is friendly, they take over an existing infrastructure. In cases where the transition is acrimonious, they face the formidable task of building a new organization from the ground up. In either case, a lot more is involved in transitioning to Congress than politics and the legislative process. Being a truly successful legislator also requires effective leadership and business management skills.

As with any start-up business, new Members face many management challenges in establishing their offices, including:

- Determining the vision, mission and goals that will guide their legislative and constituent service efforts;
- Deciding what organizational structure and chain of command will lead to the successful execution of the vision, mission and goals;
- Integrating or assembling a qualified and capable district/state and Washington, DC staff;
- Establishing policies and procedures that will enable staff to function at the highest possible levels of efficiency and effectiveness, often under extreme pressure and with demanding deadlines;
- Creating a fair and equitable method of compensating and rewarding staff; and
- Defining and managing the roles, responsibilities and relationship between the staff in the district or state and those in DC.

These important management tasks often get lost in the furor of activities faced by newly elected Senators and Representatives. Figuring out how things work on Capitol Hill, learning how the legislative process operates, filling the office with staff, purchasing supplies and equipment, and so

many other activities seem more urgent than establishing a strategic plan and clear policies and procedures. However, without a solid strategic underpinning, decisions are based on what other offices do or they are made in a vacuum. As a result, the decisions do not always serve the office well. Unfortunately, once made, they can be hard to undo and can result in management problems that can hinder an office's effectiveness for a long time.

To help House and Senate offices avoid — or recover from — unwise management decisions, the Congressional Management Foundation offers this guide to running district and state offices and its companion, *Setting Course: A Congressional Management Guide*. While *Setting Course* focuses on the strategic management decisions generally made in Washington by the Member or Chief of Staff, *Keeping It Local* focuses on the strategic management decisions — and unique challenges — the State or District Director faces.

### **The Need for an Equal District/State & DC Partnership**

In most ways, congressional offices operate as typical small businesses, but in one aspect, they are more like *large* businesses. Each Member of Congress maintains at least two offices: one in Washington, DC and the other(s) back home in the district or state. Many of these offices are thousands of miles and one or more time zones apart, but to best serve Members and constituents, they must function very effectively together. To do so, congressional offices — like any formal organization — must resolve, at a minimum, the following issues:

- How to maintain good communication among branches and employees;
- How to coordinate and monitor their activities;
- How to balance central control with autonomy;
- How to respect the distinct culture of each branch office while nurturing one unified, cross-organizational culture; and
- How to manage conflict constructively while cultivating teamwork and cooperation.

Approximately 40 percent of a Member's personal office staffers are located in district and state offices, and most Senators and Representatives spend more than 40 weekends a year in their district/state. The fact that Members are investing so much time and so many resources in their

district/state offices underscores the need to manage these offices well. To maximize this investment, both the DC and district/state offices must steward their partnership. This must be a relationship of equals.

Unfortunately, it is a common mistake to view congressional district/state offices as entities almost completely separate from the Washington office. District/state offices must be accepted and be treated by their colleagues in DC as an integral part of the Member's mission. Likewise, they must also view themselves as integral to the Member's mission or they will not hold up their end of the partnership.

### **The Importance of the District/State Office**

One very important aspect of an effective partnership between the offices is to understand the role and importance of the district/state operation.

In the past, the focus of congressional activity was in Washington. That was where the action was; and as a result, most of the staff were based there. However, that is no longer the case. District and state offices have increased in logistical, operational and political importance to Senators and Representatives. They perform nearly half the work, and comprise nearly half the staff, of the office. What is the cause of this shift of congressional work — and workers — to the districts and states? And what does it mean for the way congressional offices operate in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

For starters, more federal government programs are affecting the lives of constituents, from Social Security to federally funded local projects. Additionally, states and cities have more control over how federal dollars are spent, which places demands on district/state staff to become engaged in how those funds are distributed. This results in a growing need for Members to become more involved in local matters.

Citizens are also becoming savvier about the legislative process through the explosion of information available. Whether it is televised floor or committee proceedings, 24-hour news channels or blog updates, what happens in Washington just does not seem so far away anymore. A congressional office may be able to distinguish between legislative activities in DC and casework or community outreach handled in the district/state, but constituents and local media might not. For many constituents and reporters, there is no difference between contacting DC or a district/state office — especially by email. Next door is the same as across the country.

In addition, technology has made Members and staff more accessible. Congressional offices can communicate electronically with more constituents more quickly than ever before and can directly engage them in public policy. Citizens are also using technology to stay informed of what their Senators and Representatives are doing and to make their voices heard. This results in greater coordination and awareness at the grassroots level, and constituents are turning out in greater numbers at Member events and appearances in the district/state.

Through all of this, constituent expectations for service and access to Members and staff have been raised and increased levels of service have become self-perpetuating. The more a congressional office does, the more it is expected to do. Members of Congress have responded to the demands

*“Members’ offices are more and more sophisticated, and so are constituents’ expectations. Members and constituents alike depend increasingly on congressional staff back home to serve them effectively and efficiently. They’re an absolutely crucial part of our operation.”*

— Chief of Staff

by increasing the number of offices they operate back home, staffing those offices with more employees and giving them greater responsibilities for assisting individual citizens and entire communities through casework, special projects and other constituent services.

### **Common Differences Between District/State & DC Offices**

As crucial as district and state offices have become, they are not always well understood by their counterparts in Washington. Nor do they always understand the DC staff as well as they should. This leads to tensions, miscommunications and management challenges that are among the most common and frustrating District/State Directors and Chiefs of Staff face. For the partnership to work effectively, it is very important for managers in both offices to understand, acknowledge and even embrace the differences between the district/state and Washington staff.

Members of Congress serve two basic roles in Congress. As legislators, Members participate in activities to develop and review the laws of the land. As ombudsmen, Members conduct the activities necessary to serve their constituents and represent their interests in the federal government. Though both the district/state and DC offices support Senators and Representatives in these roles, the bulk of the legislative work is conducted in DC and the bulk of the service-oriented work is conducted back home.

Members' different roles in Washington and their district or state require them to run offices that perform correspondingly different functions. Often, this results in other differences, as well.

**Demographics.** CMF studies show that staffers in Washington tend to be younger — usually in their 20s or early 30s — often single, and almost evenly split between men and women. Turnover, particularly among junior-level staff, is exceptionally high. District/state staff, by comparison, tend to be at a different place in their lives, both personally and professionally. They are, on average, 40-years-old or about 10 years older than their Washington counterparts are. They are also more likely to be parents and more than 60 percent of district/state staff are women. Staffers in district/state offices also tend to have longer tenures than the DC-based staff.

The fact that the staffers in Washington and the staffers in the district/state tend to be at different places in their lives can lead to the same types of misunderstandings common in any diverse professional environment. The particular challenge of a congressional office, however, is that the differences tend not to be within a single office, but between two or more offices separated by distance. This makes it more difficult to foster understanding and acceptance of the differences.

**Pressures and priorities.** Though all congressional staffers feel significant pressure, staff in DC tend to feel most deeply the demands of politics and the legislative schedule, while those in the district/state feel greater pressure from the very human needs of constituents. Understandably, such disparate types of pressures breed different values and priorities.

Too often, Washington and district/state staffs resent each other because neither understands the other's pressures and priorities. Many DC staffers consider their work crucial to national policy, while district/state staff are more inclined to see their work as crucial to constituent welfare and continued support for the Member. Washington staff wonder why no one answers the telephone in the district/state office after 6:30 p.m. District/state staff suspect that no one in Washington realizes they are working the entire Memorial Day weekend to help the Member at an event. Washington staff are annoyed when district/state staff call with casework-related questions during busy voting times. District/state staff are frustrated when their emails to Washington do not receive a prompt response. District/state staff believe the DC staff are out of touch with local politics,

while the Washington staff believe the district/state staff should be more knowledgeable about the legislative process.

Worse yet are the frustration and anger that build up when district/state staff feel they are being treated as second-class citizens. CMF encounters this situation frequently while conducting management engagements with congressional offices, and surveys of District and State Directors quantify the point. Both House and Senate respondents cited the “attitude of DC staff towards district/state staff” as the second most common source of problems or tensions between the offices.

**Culture.** The culture clash between the offices can be boiled down to the simplistic descriptors, “Inside the Beltway” and “Main Street.” Washington is a political, bureaucratic and international city, and, though they come from all over the United States, congressional staff in DC quickly become part of the type-A Capitol Hill culture once they arrive. District/state staff retain the culture of the people back home. This often leads to misunderstandings. For example, the DC staff sometimes feel the district/state staff are not dedicated enough to the Member’s success because they are not in the office at all hours. District/state staff, on the other hand, often feel the DC staff are completely out of touch with the people they are supposed to be serving.

The culture clash is often exacerbated by the fact that the Member, like staff, is to some degree different in the district/state than when in Washington. In the district/state, Members might adopt an approachable style and local traditions — things they need to be at ease with, and accepted by, their constituency. In Washington, Members must adopt professional and political styles appropriate to the culture of Capitol Hill and the city. They must be able to build relationships with their colleagues and employ legislative skills to accomplish the duties for which they were sent to Congress. As a result, the staffs often see the Member differently and more in line with the culture in which they exist.

The purpose common to both staffs is, of course, service to the Member and to their constituents. Nevertheless, because of their differences, the two staffs can easily lose sight of their shared purpose. This can lead to a lack of respect and an unraveling of communication and coordination that can significantly hinder the work of the office. The underlying problems that lead to such tensions must be resolved for the Member to effectively serve and represent his or her constituency.

A successful partnership requires that staff learn to recognize and respect each other's differences. Indeed, they must embrace the fact that, through their differences, they often complement each other's strengths and weaknesses, talents and interests. It is neither necessary nor even desirable that the partners be too much alike: their differences can be and often are a source of strength and creativity. District/state and Washington offices are distinct entities that bring critical skills to the work they must do in the interest of the Member and their constituents. Like partners in a good relationship, their staffs must acknowledge, respect and gain strength from the differences.

## **Conclusion**

Whether a Member has one or multiple district/state offices, each functions as an integral part of the overall organization and is no less — and no more — important than the DC office. Failure to recognize the need for integration and consistency in management between the offices can only lead to confusion, dissension and inefficiencies in carrying out the mission of the Member. Members of Congress need good management and a good, strong, capable workforce to do their jobs well. Coordinating the widely varied activities of several offices — often hundreds of miles apart — is a tough management challenge, but a critical one to conquer. Through an equal partnership with the DC office and good management of the district/state staff and operations, District and State Directors play a crucial role in meeting this challenge.

Chapters 1–3 describe how to build a lasting partnership between Washington and district/state operations through planning and establishing a coordinated agenda; creating management systems that compel both the district/state and DC offices to monitor and adhere to that agenda; and employing communication practices that support its implementation.

Chapter 4 introduces the concept of strategic outreach, i.e., how district/state offices can be more than just reactive respondents to constituents' requests. Staff can help further the strategic goals of their Senator or Representative — and the interests of constituents — through targeted outreach to strategic groups and stakeholders.

Chapters 5–8 provide guidance for managing some of the critical — and most strategic — activities of a district/state operation: scheduling, events, casework and projects. In addition to discussing how to implement effec-

tive procedures for conducting the reactive components of these activities, these chapters also address how to be proactive in these areas.

Through this book, it is CMF's hope — and our objective — to provide congressional district/state offices with valuable information and guidance to make their operations as strategic and successful as possible so that they may serve Members and constituents as effectively as possible.

# CHAPTER 1

## Creating a Coordinated Agenda

### *This Chapter Includes...*

- The value of planning
- The importance of the coordinated agenda
- How to establish and implement a coordinated planning process

Strategic planning is the process by which a congressional office sets priorities and determines where it will commit resources (especially the Member's time). Planning also provides the staff with clear direction and empowers them to make decisions. No action that a congressional office undertakes is more important than strategic planning.

This chapter will describe and dissect the planning process and demonstrate how a congressional office can develop an office-wide strategic plan, which is much more than a priority-setting device. It is one of the most critical tools available for coordinating the work of district/state and DC offices and ensuring all staff work with the same goals in mind.

## The Value of Planning

It is natural that many elected officials wish to be all things to all people. Despite the negative connotations of this sentiment, it also harbors an admirable quality. Elected officials at every level want to satisfy their audiences by serving them well. Whether the crowd is a committee room full of congressional colleagues, a school auditorium filled with parents, past campaign contributors, county workers or a group of reporters, most Members seek some way to satisfy the audience — to meet the needs of those who ask for assistance.

This tendency is summarized in the old political adage about government bureaucrats and politicians. Bureaucrats, it is said, are people who hate to say “yes.” Politicians are people who hate to say “no.” Planning, and the practice of setting goals and priorities, is the process of learning how to *strategically* say “no” — of accepting that there is no Santa Claus, no free lunch, and no way elected officials can do everything they want to do in Congress.

Planning for congressional offices is the process of establishing a sensible, flexible set of overall goals and priorities that provides purpose and direction to the office. It permits the elected official to be a proactive leader on

issues and service programs of choice, and be reactive when desirable, not just when political circumstances force a reaction. This means the successful plan will reflect not only what one hopes to accomplish, but also what is to be avoided.

*Planning for congressional offices is the process of establishing a sensible, flexible set of overall goals and priorities that provides purpose and direction to the office.*

Strategic planning forces offices to think more analytically before setting new goals or agreeing that last year’s activities, with minor changes, should be pursued again in the coming year. It requires anticipation of the events that will shape the agenda (e.g., political, economic, international, national, local), which allows the Member and staff to analytically and logically determine how to take advantage of opportunities and guard against the events or trends that can impede effectiveness or threaten viability.

CMF’s research and management consulting work has shown that the benefits of strategic planning for congressional offices are substantial. They include:

- Setting clear priorities and making thoughtful trade-offs in light of those priorities.

- Forcing both Members and staff to look at the “big picture,” rather than constantly making decisions on the parts.
- Allowing offices to be proactive and forward-thinking, instead of reacting to daily events.
- Allowing offices to develop clear strategies for accomplishing defined goals.
- Generating a clear sense of purpose that directs and motivates the Member and staff.
- Creating a process for rationally allocating the office’s resources (i.e., the Member and staff’s time, the office budget).
- Expediting decision-making by establishing clear criteria to follow.
- Improving the coordination of the full range of office functions (i.e., legislation, press, scheduling, casework, projects, mail and administration).
- Reducing the potential for Member and staff frustration and burnout by focusing the office’s energies on a manageable plan, rather than a potpourri of initiatives.
- Providing an instrument for measuring the overall effectiveness of the office.

All organizations can benefit from such planning. Unfortunately, just as in the private sector, there are many congressional offices who are not realizing the benefits gained from this type of planning. According to CMF research, approximately 50–60% of House and Senate offices do not have “clear, written goals for the district/state offices.” Without clearly stated goals, these offices tend to have very little sense of direction, with predictable results. They usually work very hard, but because of inadequate planning, they do not work very smart. They tend to spend too much time shifting priorities and pursuing non-essential objectives. They inadequately coordinate the differing office functions and activities. They are overly reactive and never seem to find enough time to follow-up on their own initiatives. And, both the Member and the staff tend to be frustrated, if not downright disillusioned.

Members and their staffs frequently are reluctant to engage in this type of strategic analysis. Offices might view the process as too expensive or



time-consuming. For some of these offices, they may set goals outside of a planning process, but with minimal staff participation and input. Others believe that strategic planning and the establishment of specific goals will inhibit their ability both to react quickly to changes in the policy and political environment and to complete their necessary routine functions. The planning CMF recommends, however, assumes that 70–80% of a congressional office’s time is spent completing the routine, but essential, office functions and reacting to events. How the office utilizes the other 20–30% becomes the critical question. If no plan is in place for guiding this “discretionary” time, the time tends to be used ineffectively — exploring a changing array of initiatives, continuing to simply react to events or staying focused on the office routines. The strategic planning process outlined in this chapter will help all offices manage discretionary time more effectively by incorporating vision, strategy, teamwork and discipline into the office. It will also outline the rationale for a coordinated process that actively seeks staff input and participation.

### **The Importance of the Coordinated Agenda**

Developing clear direction is just as important for district/state offices as it is for the Washington office. Staffers that manage these increasingly complex and dynamic offices are forced to answer very tough and politically sensitive questions almost daily, such as:

- Which events should the Member attend on a weekend?
- Which constituent groups deserve priority attention from the Member and the office?
- In which geographic regions should the Member spend more, or less, time?
- How can the office best collaborate with state and local elected officials?
- What types of projects or proactive activities should the office undertake?
- What image should the Member project to constituents, and what local press strategy would best reinforce that image?
- How much energy and resources should the office devote to outreach activities, and which of them will be most effective in the district or state?

These decisions are critical and interrelated. None can be made in isolation. Even a seemingly small decision can affect office operations in ways that were not imagined. For example, if an office decides to handle constituent cases dealing with state and local government matters, it might not have any time left for other outreach-type projects, such as community taskforces or issue-specific workshops. Similarly, a decision to increase the Member's visibility among unemployed constituents might increase the caseload so much that the office is unprepared to handle it.

In the most effective congressional offices, district/state goals are carefully integrated with the goals of the Washington office. Even though the focus and functions of the two offices differ (e.g., constituent services vs. legislative activities), most of the goals can and should be effectively integrated in a coordinated agenda. Regardless of how well-managed individual Washington or home offices may be, a Member's overall effectiveness will be limited if the Washington and district/state offices fail to develop a coordinated agenda that clearly defines common goals and related activities, and ensures that both offices will work together effectively and efficiently.

Legislative initiatives pursued in Washington should be supported or balanced by events in the district or state. For example, a district office might use several means to generate constituent support for a bill the Member has introduced: public forums on the issue, field hearings, press events or opinion pieces in the local newspaper. Legislative priorities, such as a focus on foreign relations, can be balanced by state office activities that emphasize the Member's activities on behalf of the state. Similarly, Washington staff can support major district/state office initiatives by providing research and briefing materials and identifying speakers and guests.

Without establishing a coordinated agenda, tension and conflict between Washington and district/state offices can grow. Rather than working together toward common goals, each staff pursues its own agenda. Opportunities for staff to develop personal rapport and a spirit of teamwork are limited. A planning process to develop a coordinated agenda will help identify and spell out office-wide goals and activities to avoid this common problem.

*A Member's overall effectiveness will be limited if the Washington and district/state offices fail to develop a coordinated agenda that clearly defines common goals and related activities, and ensures that both offices will work together effectively and efficiently.*



In one House office, the level of mistrust and poor communication had grown to the point that both the Washington and the district offices once actually planned and paid for two separate, identical events without realizing the other was taking the lead. After this costly debacle, the staff was brought together to determine why such poor communication existed between the two offices. At first everyone blamed the problem on a lack of respect or non-responsiveness from the “other” office. Then they realized that they had little reason to work together or coordinate their activities. Over time, each office had come to define its work as separate and distinct from each other: Washington did legislation, press and mail; the district did casework, outreach, projects and managed Member events back home.

After some discussion, they realized that while this was the simplest way of operating, it was not the most effective. The offices informally established different and sometimes conflicting priorities and routinely encouraged the Member to stay “off message” by asking him to juggle a wide range of themes — some developed in Washington, others developed in the district.

Their solution for fixing their “communications problem” was not to try to increase or improve communication between all the staff, but to develop a single plan to which both offices could agree. They convened a strategic planning session and this five-term office developed its first office-wide plan. By creating a shared agenda, they quickly solved their communications problem. Staff began talking more routinely about shared projects and activities, provided one another with phone and email updates on their progress; and shared projects became an act of teamwork rather than a distraction from their work. In short, their perceived “communication breakdown” was symptomatic of a much larger problem — the failure to plan.

### **Establishing a Coordinated Planning Process**

What information should be included in a strategic plan? What process should you follow to develop your plan? Who should be involved in the planning process? There is no single best way to answer these questions. Management literature abounds with a seemingly endless variety of planning methods and techniques. The general planning concepts, practices and approaches presented here are those that CMF has found to work effectively in congressional offices, which each office should adopt or

## Objectives of a Coordinated Strategic Planning Process

- 1 Establish goals that provide a clear sense of direction to the Member and district/state staff.
- 2 Integrate Washington and district/state office goals in a single, coordinated agenda.
- 3 Establish priorities by determining what trade-offs the office must make among different activities — thus helping the Member and staff decide when to say “no” to new ideas or emerging opportunities.
- 4 Make sure the office has adequate resources to achieve the goals established.
- 5 Develop a written game plan for achieving the established goals.
- 6 Designate which staff are responsible for each task and set deadlines for their completion.
- 7 Incorporate a periodic review of the plan and goals to measure progress and identify opportunities for improvement.

modify as appropriate. Regardless of which process is selected, to be most effective it should incorporate an assessment of the following:

- **The Member’s personal goals and interests.** The best starting point for a congressional office planning process is to clarify the over-arching or long-term goals of the Member. Guidance on drafting a mission statement that encompasses a broad, yet concrete, vision is on page 13.
- **The needs and interests of the district/state.** While it is not essential that all office goals target the direct needs of constituents, it is important that as many goals as possible have the interest of the constituent at heart. Consequently, it is important to systematically analyze not only what the interests of the district or state are today but also what they might be 2–3 years from now.
- **Office strengths and weaknesses.** Assess the internal environment — the strategic strengths and weaknesses of the Member and the office, both real and perceived. It is critical in making plans that an office understand both its strategic assets and li-



abilities. Effective goals should capitalize on the office's strengths while minimizing its weaknesses.

- **Opportunities and threats.** Explore the external environment — review what is happening locally, nationally and internationally that could create opportunities or pose threats and problems to the Member, the office and the Member's future political goals (e.g., economy, change in Administration, state budget problem, changes in composition of committees, emergence of a new issue, possible state referendums). Too often congressional offices react to events rather than anticipating them. Consequently, offices are sharply limited in their ability to position themselves to take advantage of opportunities or avoid problems.



Integrating and balancing these perspectives in one of the basic processes outlined below and summarized in Figure 1-1 will result in more achievable and realistic strategic goals.

**Full-staff process.** The most frequently-used planning method, especially for House offices, is for all staff to attend a two-day planning session with the Member. CMF recommends this approach over the others for the following reasons:

- It encourages the fullest exchange between the Washington and district/state offices.
- It reduces confusion because all staff hear the same information at the same time in the same manner.
- It provides staff an opportunity to learn firsthand how their boss thinks and what he or she values most.
- It creates the greatest level of staff ownership in, and commitment to, achieving the goals they helped develop.
- It sends a strong, egalitarian message that the opinions of all staff are valued, and no views are excluded from the goal-setting process.
- It allows the two staffs to spend two whole days together each year, which can work wonders for interoffice rapport and morale.

The disadvantages of this method are:

- The planning session can be expensive, depending on staff size or the distance between Washington and the district/state.

- The group might have trouble making decisions quickly because of its size. Carefully structuring and facilitating the planning process can minimize this problem.
- Staff's desire to air complaints about past and present internal office management can overtake the direction-setting agenda.

**Liaison process.** Another common approach is for each office to conduct its own planning session, inviting a liaison from the other office. Most likely, this liaison would be the DD/SD for the DC planning session, and the CoS and/or LD for the district/state session. The Member should attend *both* sessions. There are several advantages of this method:

- It is less expensive than the full-staff method.
- It includes the entire staff of each office.
- It helps instill teamwork within the offices.
- As with the full-staff approach, it provides staff an opportunity to learn firsthand how their boss thinks and what he or she values.

But there are also disadvantages:

- It's harder to develop a truly coordinated agenda when each office develops its plan separately and receives input from only one of the "other" office's staffers.
- It can reinforce the divisions and autonomy of the two offices and inhibit the planning process' potential to improve communication and teamwork.
- It might be difficult for the Member to find time for two planning sessions.

**Small-group process.** In this method, key staffers from both offices meet with the Member for one to two days and work through the planning process as a small team. This approach works best when management staff use it as a precursor to full-staff planning sessions. This approach has some advantages:

- It contributes to the development of a small, cohesive management team whose ability to work well together will improve the office's decision-making and coordination.
- It allows key staff from different offices to work closely together and gain a better understanding of the "other" office's work.

Figure 1-1

### Pros and Cons of Planning Processes

Model	Basic Characteristics	Advantages	Disadvantages
<b>Full-Staff Approach</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All staff attend a two-day planning session with the Member.</li> <li>Most frequently-used planning method, especially for House offices.</li> <li>Recommended by CMF over the other planning approaches.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Encourages the fullest exchange among staff.</li> <li>Reduces confusion because all staff hear the same information at the same time in the same manner.</li> <li>Provides staff an opportunity to learn firsthand how their boss thinks and what he or she values most.</li> <li>Creates the greatest level of staff ownership in, and commitment to, achieving goals they helped develop.</li> <li>Sends a strong, egalitarian message that the opinions of all staff are valued, and no views are excluded from the goal-setting process.</li> <li>Allows the two staffs to spend two whole days together each year, which can work wonders for interoffice rapport and morale.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Can be expensive, depending on staff size or distance between DC and the district/state.</li> <li>Might be difficult to make decisions quickly because of the group size (carefully structuring and facilitating the planning process can minimize this problem).</li> <li>Staff's desire to air complaints about internal office management can overtake the direction-setting agenda.</li> </ul>
<b>Liaison Approach</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Each office conducts its own planning session, inviting a liaison (usually the CoS/LD or DD/SD) from the other office.</li> <li>Separate agendas are drafted by each office and then reviewed by the "other" office staffer.</li> <li>The Member attends both sessions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Less expensive than the full-staff method.</li> <li>Includes the entire staff of each office.</li> <li>Helps instill teamwork within the offices.</li> <li>Provides staff an opportunity to learn firsthand how their boss thinks and what he or she values.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Harder to develop a truly coordinated agenda when plans are developed separately with limited input from the "other" office.</li> <li>Can reinforce the divisions and autonomy of the two offices and inhibit the potential to improve communication and teamwork.</li> <li>Might be difficult for the Member to attend two planning sessions.</li> </ul>
<b>Small-Group Approach</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Key staff from both offices meet with the Member for 1-2 days as a small team.</li> <li>Most helpful as a precursor for management staff before a full-staff engagement.</li> <li>Not recommended for Senate offices unless followed by a full-staff engagement.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Contributes to the development of a cohesive management team whose ability to work well together will improve the office's decision-making and coordination.</li> <li>Allows key staff from different offices to work closely together and gain a better understanding of the "other" office's work.</li> <li>The group is small enough to reach consensus and make decisions quickly.</li> <li>Reduces cost.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Excludes other staff from the planning process, possibly weakening their understanding of, and commitment to, the goals set.</li> <li>Risks creating office divisions and tensions between those in the "inner circle" whose views are solicited and those on the outside who feel their opinions are not valued.</li> </ul>
<b>Hybrid Approach</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Office develops own approach based on beneficial characteristics from other models.</li> </ul>		

- It avoids having too many cooks in the kitchen — the group is small enough to reach consensus and make decisions quickly.
- It reduces cost to your office.

The primary disadvantages of this approach are:

- It excludes other staff from the planning process, possibly weakening their understanding of, and commitment to, the goals set.
- It risks creating office divisions and tensions between those in the “inner circle” whose views are solicited, and those on the outside who feel their opinions are not valued.

Because of these disadvantages, we recommend that offices, particularly those in the Senate, follow a small-group planning session with a full-staff engagement.

**Hybrid approach.** Finally, an office can develop its own hybrid method. For example, one House office that prefers to minimize the Member’s time commitment to the planning process has both staffs meet individually without the Member to draft annual goals. The Member then meets with key staff from both offices to refine each office’s goals and develop them into an integrated office-wide plan.

## The Planning Time Frame

Most congressional offices that conduct a formal planning process meet annually to produce a *one-year* plan. There is, however, a compelling reason for developing a *two-year* plan simply because Congress operates on a two-year calendar. Also, it usually takes staff longer than a year to accomplish key goals, such as passing legislation. Furthermore, most House Members already plan their political activities on a two-year basis because of their election cycle. Though the two-year horizon can make planning more difficult, it requires both the Member and staff to plan in longer time frames and tends to inspire broader, more creative thinking.

If an office chooses to develop a two-year plan, however, it must hold at least one interim planning session to review the plan. Congress is a dynamic environment, and unless the office modifies its plan to incorporate unexpected political changes and new information, the plan will soon be outdated and ignored. CMF suggests that offices informally review and reassess their plans every six months.



Whatever time frame is chosen, CMF recommends that the planning session take place between November and March. Doing so will allow staff both to take advantage of the usual legislative break at this time of year and to incorporate the entire annual legislative cycle into your plan.



### Conducting an Effective Planning Session

- 1 The Member should not dominate the session.** Almost nothing stifles creative and original thinking more than having the boss answer all of the questions raised by the process before staff analysis and discussion. Consequently, Members must understand that their role is as much to listen to the ideas and analysis of staff as it is to present ideas.
- 2 Make the session as participatory as possible.** The planning session can be truly exciting and exhilarating, but it can also be painfully slow and arduous. Staff participation is critical to making it energized and productive. If a large number of staff is involved, break into small groups to do some of the analysis and then report those findings back to the full group. This approach can be more productive if the small groups are addressing different but related issues.
- 3 Hold the meeting outside of the congressional office.** In the office, especially during a weekday, the Member and staff will be distracted and feel like it's business as usual. Changing the environment usually helps staff approach the assignment with some energy and excitement. There are limits on where the office may hold a meeting using official funds, so check with the Committee on House Administration or the Senate Rules and Administration Committee for details before proceeding.
- 4 Give staff time to prepare for the session.** With only a day or two to complete your planning, your session must be as productive as possible. Brief the staff on the session objectives ahead of time and get them thinking strategically before the session by giving them questions to ponder — or answer — before you begin. Without adequate preparation time, it will be hard for staff to shift gears from routine, day-to-day activities to strategically analyzing the next two years.
- 5 Keep the meeting informal.** Informality and comfort aid creativity and original thinking. Encourage the staff and the Member to dress casually and operate informally. Promote debate, spontaneous speaking and even humor.

**6 If possible, use an outside facilitator.** A facilitator can provide valuable assistance in shaping the planning process and ensuring that issues raised are resolved fairly and expediently. If, however, the Chief of Staff runs the meeting, it can impede the effectiveness of the session. If he or she strictly adheres to the facilitator role, they are essentially precluded from expressing their opinions. If, on the other hand, the roles of facilitator and advocate are mixed, there is the very real risk of conveying to the staff that the process is rigged to gain consensus for predetermined views. One option would be to rotate the facilitator role among staff throughout the day so that one person does not control the entire process and other staff have the opportunity to develop facilitating skills. CMF, which produced this book, assists congressional offices with the development and execution of strategic planning sessions. Contact CMF at 202-546-0100 for more information.



## The Mission Statement

Congressional office planning often centers on the task of surveying the political landscape for opportunities to serve constituent needs, meet the Member's political objectives and affect public policy. Though seizing such opportunities is important, it alone does not constitute effective planning. The plan must also reflect the Member's values, political ambitions and personal interests. It should inspire, motivate and reinforce the aspirations of the Member, or else it is unlikely to be followed. If the Member has no clear sense of mission, short-term objectives are less likely to contribute to any long-term accomplishments. Productivity in diverse areas over many years doesn't necessarily add up to any clear sense of solid achievement.

*If the Member has no clear sense of mission, short-term objectives are less likely to contribute to any long-term accomplishments. Productivity in diverse areas over many years doesn't necessarily add up to any clear sense of solid achievement.*

For example, during a planning session that CMF facilitated, a third-term House Member realized that the primary reason he decided to run for Congress had been neglected in his office's activities during his six years in Congress. Why? *Because he had never articulated it to his staff, to his constituents or to his colleagues in Congress.* Six years of responding to the exigencies of the political moment had led the Member away from the central goal, the reason he ran for Congress in the first place. When the Member finally told his staff what his broad mission was, the priorities and work of his staff changed dramatically to support the mission. It also

gave both the Member and his staff a clearer sense of purpose and commitment to their work.

To maximize the chances of making significant long-term accomplishments, we recommend that the Member kick off the planning process by preparing a written mission statement. The mission statement should clearly define broad yet distinctive goals that the Member hopes to accomplish while in Congress. Many Members, when pushed to write a mission statement, offer up such platitudes as: “to make a difference,” “to get re-elected,” or “to give my constituents the best representation possible.” These are noble aspirations, but they offer the staff little guidance as to what vision drives the Member (and should drive the staff), or how this mission differs from those of virtually every other Member of Congress.

An effective mission statement should present a broad, but concrete, vision. The themes addressed in a mission statement can focus on broad legislative goals, constituent service goals or political goals. Examples of workable mission statement themes include:

- To become a leading advocate of educational reform while in Congress.
- To play a lead role in my state’s economic development.
- To get elected to the Senate in this decade.

In facilitating office planning processes, CMF has found that many Members operate intuitively. The challenge of the mission statement is getting the Member to clarify and articulate the values, ambitions and experiences that comprise this intuition. Discussing the following questions should help provide some clarity:



- Why did you run for Congress? What specifically did you hope to achieve if elected?
- What would you like to be remembered for at the end of your tenure in Congress?
- Which Members of Congress do you most respect and why?
- What is your vision of America’s future?
- What values or characteristics should define the way your staff work and the office operates?

The mission statement should embody no more than four main themes, but preferably just one or two. The more focused the mission statement,

the more direction it provides the entire staff. If a mission statement has more than four themes, the Member has yet to make the hard choices the process demands. An office can't successfully pursue more than a few long-term goals at any one time without spreading its resources too thinly. A quick review of the most effective Members of Congress should demonstrate that they developed early in their careers a clear, long-term focus — and adhered to it steadfastly.

Finally, the mission statement does not need to be revised every year or two. Rather, it should be used as the starting point of the planning process. The planning team should then review the mission statement at the start of each Congress to make sure it still reflects the Member's long-term vision and goals. Usually, the mission statement needs only minor alterations. However, sometimes a Member's mission changes significantly. The Member decides, for example, that they no longer want to pursue the goal of becoming a leader in energy policy. Instead, they want to become an influential leader within their party. In that case, a new mission statement needs to clearly embody the new direction and the rationale for pursuing it.

### **Developing Goals**

Once the office has a broad mission statement that spells out the Member's long-term vision, short-term vehicles should be developed for pursuing these broad themes. These goals should relate directly to the mission statement and should be concrete, realistic, meaningful and achievable.

Staff should prepare for the goal-setting process by answering the following questions individually, in small groups, or in one large group. Write down the answers on large flip chart paper and then post them around the room for easy referral.

1. What are the main themes of the Member's mission statement?
2. What key issues is Congress likely to deal with in the next two years?
3. What possible national and international issues or trends — economic, political, demographic, technological or scientific — might emerge in the next two years and command congressional attention?
4. Which, if any, key issues or trends would interest the Member or would significantly affect constituents?



5. What issues are likely to dominate the district's or state's political/economic agenda in the next two years?
6. Which district/state issues or trends might deserve special attention from the Member or the staff in the next two years?
7. Which issues do constituents currently feel most strongly about?
8. What campaign promises did the Member make that constituents now expect to see fulfilled?
9. What kind of image does your Member want to project, and how should the office reflect this image?
10. What political problems or weaknesses should the office be sensitive to in the next two years (e.g., criticism of a vote, impact of an anti-incumbency movement)?

Armed with all of this analysis, staffers should have a good sense of the important factors, events and trends necessary in developing office goals, and the office should now be ready to begin the process of defining the goals through a brainstorming exercise. As the planning team calls out possible goals, one of the team members writes them down immediately on a flip chart that the whole group can see. Participants should resist the temptation to evaluate ideas during the brainstorming session. Doing so inhibits the creative process. Staff will be reticent to toss out ideas spontaneously if they see their ideas critiqued immediately.

### **Evaluating Potential Goals**

A good brainstorming session should generate an impressive list of potential goals. As with mission statement themes, an office should keep its list of short-term goals to a minimum. CMF recommends no more than six, but preferably only three to five, short-term goals. Again, the purpose is to single out the goals that are most important, most feasible and most consistent with the office's mission statement — not to make a shopping list of enticing possibilities. Too many goals can lead to the staff (and the Member) losing focus on which are truly the most important. To facilitate this goal evaluation process, the following organizational tools may be helpful.

The first of these is a simple device to help assess goals. Pictured in Figure 1-2 is a grid that relates the two factors of "impact" and "ability to achieve." To use it, place each potential goal in the quadrant that most closely characterizes it. The grid is most helpful when there is difficulty agreeing on how to select and rank goals.

Figure 1-2

<b>Impact Achievability Grid</b>		
	<i>Ability to Achieve</i>	
	<b>High</b>	<b>Low</b>
<b>High</b>	<b>1st Priority</b>	<b>3rd Priority</b>
<b>Low</b>	<b>2nd Priority</b>	<b>4th Priority</b>

Another method is to weigh potential goals against a set of criteria. The following list of questions provides some examples an office might use to develop criteria to select its goals:

1. Is the goal consistent with the Member's overall mission?
2. What is the likelihood of achieving this goal in the next two years?
3. Does the goal interest the Member?
4. Will the goal positively or negatively affect the Member's constituents?
5. Will accomplishing the goal provide the Member with substantial benefits?
6. What resources will be required to complete this goal?
7. Will pursuit of the goal place excessive demands on the Member's time or on the staff's time?
8. Will the work involved utilize the office's strengths (e.g., the skills and expertise of the Member and staff and the Member's committee assignments)?
9. Can the expertise developed in pursuing the goal be applied effectively to other future office goals (i.e., the reusability of information and expertise)?

In Figure 1-3 CMF has placed these questions into a "criteria scorecard," providing a way to measure competing goals against a formalized set of standards. This figure proposes generic criteria that should be modified to



reflect the needs of the office. A particular criterion may be so important that it is given double or triple weight or it may become the litmus test for further consideration of a goal. This instrument can be easily adapted to an individual office's needs.

To use it, first write each proposed goal across the top. Then, score how strongly the goal meets each criterion on a 0 to 3 scale, with 3 being the highest rating. To obtain each goal's total score, add the goal's scores for all of the criteria. The goals can then be ranked from best to worst according to their total scores.

**Figure 1-3**

<b>Scorecard for Goal Evaluation</b>						
	<b>POTENTIAL GOALS</b>					
	Goal	Goal	Goal	Goal	Goal	Goal
<b>Consistent with Mission</b>						
<b>Likely to be Achieved</b>						
<b>Fits with Member's Personal Interests</b>						
<b>Consistent with Constituent Needs</b>						
<b>Success Provides Substantial Benefits</b>						
<b>Not an Excessive Drain on Member's Time</b>						
<b>Not an Excessive Drain on Staff's Time</b>						
<b>Uses Office's Strengths</b>						
<b>Develops Reusable Expertise</b>						
<b>Other:</b>						
<b>Other:</b>						
<b>Total Score:</b>						
<b>Scorecard Ranking:</b>						

## Developing Action Plans

After establishing one-year or two-year goals, the next step is to devise action plans for accomplishing each goal. The action plan lists the specific actions and tasks that must be taken to achieve a goal. Some goals might require just a few steps, while others might require as many as 20. To be effective, the action plan should also list the person(s) — including the Member — responsible for each task and the deadline for completing each action.

Assigning responsibilities in the action plan pulls together both the district/state staff as its own team, and the Washington and district/state offices as a larger team. It also prevents task redundancy and provides an opportunity for staff to use their specific skills and talents. Knowing the agreed-upon deadlines improves the likelihood that staff will accomplish tasks on time and can lead to increased accountability among the team. Without them, staff may not understand which tasks are most important.

By formulating an action plan, an office gets a written document that coordinates the activities of different staff (even those working out of separate offices); creates a clear strategy instead of an unrelated series of steps; and increases Member and staff accountability by ensuring that everyone is aware of his or her responsibilities and when work should be finished.

This action-planning process also has the benefit of giving the Member one last opportunity to determine whether it really makes sense to pursue a goal. Frequently, offices for which CMF has facilitated planning sessions revised one of their goals at this stage. After listing the tasks necessary to achieve the goal, they came to realize that it would be harder to achieve and/or take more of the Member's and staff's time than they had imagined. It's much better to discover this problem in the planning session than after six months of hard work.

The action plan in Figure 1-4 shows how a complex or formidable initiative can be broken down into orderly, easy-to-follow action items and measure progress toward the goal. Breaking large tasks into smaller ones, and putting assigned responsibilities in writing for all to see, makes it more likely that the whole job will be done properly and on time. The office should prepare an action plan similar to this one for every significant or long-term project the office undertakes — from a large conference to a series of town hall meetings. Most offices underutilize this valuable, highly-versatile planning and monitoring tool.

Figure 1-4

### Goal-Oriented Action Plan

**Goal: Cultivate relations with community leaders and civic groups in zip codes that will become part of our district after redistricting is finalized.**

Action	Staffer(s) Responsible	Start Date	End Date	Status
Identify the counties/cities/towns that will become part of our district	DD		10/09	Complete
Identify the key community leaders and constituent groups in these areas	DD		11/09	Complete
Identify the issues of greatest concern to these leaders and groups	DD and LD		01/10	In progress
Brainstorm and discuss strategies (legislative, scheduling, communications, outreach, projects and constituent services) to address these concerns	DD, CoS, LD, Communications Director, Projects Director, Casework Supervisor, Scheduler		02/10	
Seek Member's input and approval on strategies	CoS, DD, Member		04/10	
Finalize specific strategies by drafting separate but coordinated action plans for each of these functional areas	DD, CoS, LD, Communications Director, Projects Director, Casework Supervisor, Scheduler, others as necessary		05/10	
Begin implementing the plan	Same as above		06/10	
Meet with staff monthly to review progress	CoS, DD		07/10-12/10	
Measure progress at year-end; conduct review of strategies and determine what could be improved for next year	All staff involved		12/10	

This example action plan is organized around a strategic *goal*. However, many offices organize their plans around office *functions* (e.g., legislative, administrative, press, scheduling, constituent services). For example, the Communications Director writes an action plan that incorporates the press objectives developed by the planning team, while the Legislative Director devises an action plan to meet the legislative goals.

Both goal-oriented and functionally-oriented planning are workable so long as they are driven by agreed-upon, office-wide goals. What should

be avoided at all costs is structuring a planning process in which goals are independently developed for each functional division. Such a process, while not uncommon, encourages each staff member to determine independently what the Member's priorities ought to be. The result may be a press plan, devised by the Communications Director, that pursues priorities that are different from or even in competition with those set forth in the legislative plan generated by the Legislative Director and Legislative Assistants. And both the press and legislative plans may conflict with the priorities outlined in the scheduling plan devised by the Chief of Staff, District/State Director and Scheduler.

In short, a functional planning process can encourage the development of clear office goals by forcing the Member and staff to discuss and resolve their differences.

## **Implementing the Plan**

The culmination of all the effort described in this chapter will be a written plan distributed to the whole office. The plan should summarize the office's strategy for the next two years and outline the steps that will be necessary for that strategy to be effective. It will contain all of the elements discussed so far: the Member's mission statement; the supporting short-term goals and why they were selected; and the action plan needed to accomplish each goal.

However, the planning process does not end with the distribution of a written plan. Implementing the plan — your coordinated agenda — is another challenge and the focus of Chapter 3.

## **Conclusion**

Formal planning provides the office not only with priorities and a clear sense of direction, but also with a device to integrate the goals and activities of the district/state offices with those of the Washington office. Such integration doesn't just happen by itself. Few staffers find ways on their own to work with the "other" staff toward common goals. Rather, it's natural for them to feel increasingly comfortable focusing solely on the work of "their" office, giving little thought to the work of the "other" office and how it contributes to the priorities and goals of the office at large.

Over time, a lack of direction will discourage collaboration, teamwork and commitment. In fact, it encourages the cool "peaceful coexistence"

that characterizes relations between so many district/state offices and their Washington counterparts. The problem may be defined as a communications problem, or as a personality conflict. But more often than not, CMF finds that the real problem is that staffers in each office consider their counterparts' work separate and distinct from their own. Following the planning process described here can replace inter-office animosities with three key characteristics of effective congressional offices: teamwork, engagement and shared focus. When staff understand how their work fits into the bigger picture of what the Member is hoping to accomplish, they are more likely to be engaged in their work and committed to their office. The outcome of the process — a coordinated agenda — will provide staff the vision and guidance essential to achieving your office's goals.

## Creating a Coordinated Agenda

## CHAPTER SUMMARY 1

### DO...

- Engage in strategic planning to set goals and priorities for the Member and staff, allocate resources and enable your office to be more proactive and effective.
- Integrate the district/state and DC goals into a coordinated agenda that encourages both offices to work together for improved teamwork and effectiveness.
- Consider the advantages and disadvantages of the basic planning methods (full-staff, liaison, small-group, hybrid) before choosing one that works best for your office.
- Assess the following to guide your planning: the Member's personal goals and interests; district/state needs; office strengths and weaknesses; and opportunities and threats.
- Consider developing a two-year strategic plan, rather than just one-year, to take advantage of the full legislative cycle and to encourage comprehensive thinking for the entire congressional session.

### DON'T...

- Allow the Washington and district/state staffs to pursue separate agendas, which increase the likelihood for conflict, tension and costly mistakes.
- Operate without a clearly-defined long-term vision of what the Member seeks to accomplish in Congress.
- Write a mission statement that is too broad ("to make a difference") or establishes too many themes. The more focused it is (preferably one or two themes), the more direction it provides the staff.
- Include more than 3-5 short-term goals in your strategic plan. Single out what's most important, most feasible and most consistent with the office's mission statement.
- Draft an action plan without deadlines or assigning responsibilities. Specific timeframes and clearly-defined roles are essential to keeping everyone accountable and focused on the plan.



## CHAPTER 2

# Clarifying Responsibilities and Performance Expectations

### *This Chapter Includes...*

- Processes for selecting the appropriate management structures for the overall office and for the district/state operation
- The advantages and disadvantages of the different management structures
- Five steps towards an effective performance management system

Chapter 1 discussed the importance of establishing a strategic plan that sets the direction for the congressional office and how to integrate the work of the district/state and DC staff. However, for this strategy to be effective, two key questions must be resolved: who's responsible for monitoring the progress of the staff in achieving the goals of the plan; and who is best qualified to run the district/state operation.

In this chapter, CMF explores these leadership questions and suggests a process for determining the best management structure for the overall office and the district/state operation. It also addresses the issue of conflict — a major result of an ill-fitting management structure — and how offices can alleviate it. Among the solutions presented are steps to set up a performance management system.

## Selecting a Management Structure

The term “management structure” is a catch-all phrase that generally describes the structure an organization uses to manage its operations and oversee each employee.

Larger public and private organizations frequently depict their management structure visually in an organizational chart, which shows the hierarchy used to manage the organization. While few congressional offices draft such diagrams, the questions of authority, responsibility and accountability are central to their operations as well and the subject deserves careful consideration by Members and management staff. CMF recommends the following questions be answered when determining which management structure is best:



- Who will report directly to the Member?
- Who will report directly to the Chief of Staff (CoS)?
- Will the District/State Director (DD/SD) report directly to the Member or to the CoS?
- Who will report directly to the DD/SD?
- Will the district/state offices be managed by region (or geography) or function (e.g., casework vs. outreach vs. Member schedule and travel)?
- Which other staff will have supervisory responsibilities?
- Which, if any, staff will report directly to more than one person (e.g., Member and CoS)?
- Does the CoS or the DD/SD (or both) have political savvy and close ties to the community?
- Is the CoS from the district/state?
- How strong are the political, legislative and managerial skills of the Member, CoS and DD/SD?
- Should the office hire a Deputy CoS or Deputy DD/SD to help manage the office or can an Office Manager assist with these duties?
- Does the Member need someone in the district/state office who is highly visible and accessible?
- How far is the district/state from Washington, DC?
- How often will the CoS travel between DC and the district/state?

- To what extent will travel time and expenses affect budget and staff resources?
- How can the office take advantage of technology to improve communications and coordination?
- In what ways can the office use technology in lieu of in-person meetings?
- How well do the CoS and DD/SD work together?

There is no single best management structure. The key is to select one that best suits the mission, goals and personnel of the office, taking into account the answers to these questions and the six factors summarized in the shaded box below.

House and Senate offices tend to use three basic management structures, though a number of offices create hybrids from these main types. This section describes these structures from most to least centralized, and the advantages and disadvantages of each (summarized in Figure 2-4).

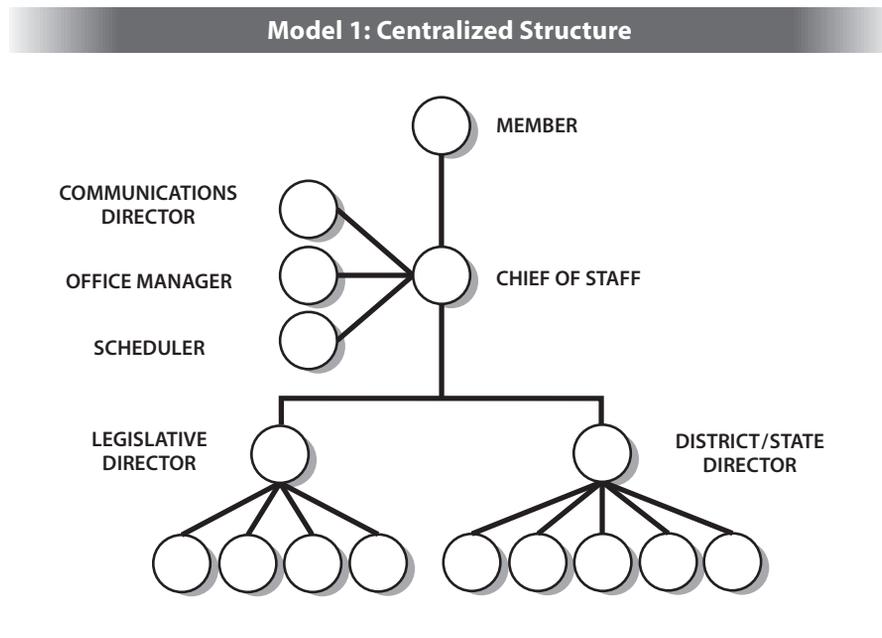
The most common structure in both the House and Senate is the centralized model (Figure 2-1). *The vast majority of House and Senate offices use management structures that resemble this model.* This model has all staff reporting to the Chief of Staff, with the Chief of Staff reporting to the Member. In this model, other staff also may report directly to the Member. However, its defining characteristic is that the Chief of Staff has a great deal of responsibility for managing the office.

This model has several advantages that justify why it is so commonly used. First, it is simple and clear. If the Member or staff has a question, needs clarification or has a problem, it is abundantly clear who they should see about it. Second, because virtually all relevant office information flows to the Chief of Staff, it allows one person to efficiently coordinate the activities of the entire staff. Third, by making the Chief of Staff the office gatekeeper, this model provides well-controlled access to

#### Factors to Consider When Determining Your Management Structure

- 1 Management styles of the Member, CoS and DD/SD.
- 2 Political skills of the CoS and DD/SD and their knowledge of the district/state.
- 3 Management abilities of the CoS and DD/SD.
- 4 Political, constituent or local needs.
- 5 Proximity (i.e., travel time and expenses) of the district/state to Washington.
- 6 CoS–DD/SD rapport.

Figure 2-1

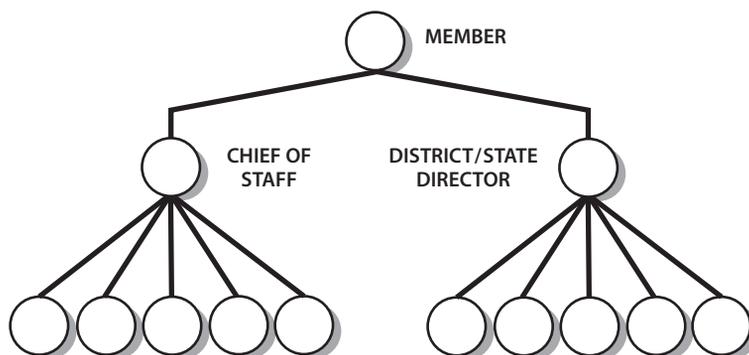


the Member, thus protecting the Member from unnecessary interruptions and allowing him or her to focus on Member-only activities.

However, CMF has found through its research that this model has some clear drawbacks to consider. First, such a structure places a tremendous burden on Chiefs of Staff. Few are actually capable of staying on top of all of the office activities and supervising all of the staff. Consequently, success using this structure tends to require a Chief of Staff with very good management and interpersonal skills, and a good, experienced staff that requires minimal assistance and supervision. This combination is unusual in congressional offices. Second, this structure makes the Member and the office very dependent on one staff person. If the Chief of Staff leaves the office, it may be difficult to find a replacement capable of immediately and comfortably taking over the job. Third, this model tends to make it more difficult for a district/state staff person to effectively represent the Member back home. Under this model, there is no district/state staffer with ready access to the Member or the authority needed to make decisions. For some offices this is a liability; for others it is insignificant. Fourth, this centralized structure can sharply limit staff access to the Member if the Chief of Staff chooses to take on the role of staff liaison, which often harms staff morale.

Figure 2-2

### Model 2: Washington–District/State Parity Structure



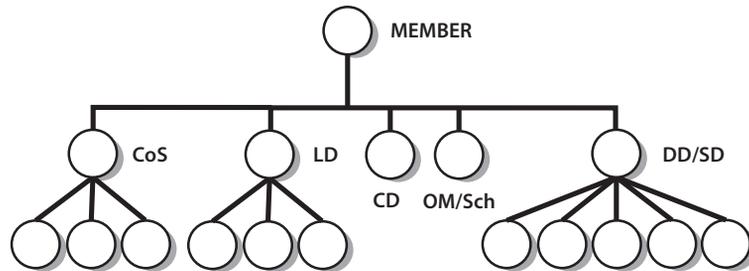
The parity structure (Figure 2-2) is used by 17 percent of House offices and several Senate offices. Under this structure, all of the Washington staff generally report to the Chief of Staff while all of the district or state staff report to the District/State Director. The defining characteristic of this model is that the Chief of Staff and District/State Director share responsibility for the management of the office and report directly to the Member. They generally decide which other staff meet with the Member and when.

This model has several strengths: First, decentralizing authority allows for shared management responsibilities within the office, which can result in greater management oversight and control. Second, it provides the District/State Director with authority to actively and visibly represent the Member in the district/state. For some offices, this is especially desirable if the District/State Director is politically savvy and has close ties to the community and the Chief of Staff is not from the district or state. Third, it provides controlled staff access to the Member by using the Chief of Staff and District/State Director as gatekeepers.

The model also has some weaknesses. First, unless the Chief of Staff and District/State Director work well together, this model can lead to competing agendas, conflicts between managers and competition among staff. Second, this model, like the centralized model, can limit staff access to the Member if the Chief of Staff and District/State Director choose to be the primary liaisons for their respective offices.

Figure 2-3

### Model 3: Functional Structure



The functional structure (Figure 2-3) is used by *9 percent of House offices and several Senate offices*. In this model, all staff responsible for independent functions of the office report directly to the Member. Thus, the Member may have as many as five direct reports: the Chief of Staff; the District/State Director; the Legislative Director; the Communications Director; and maybe even the Scheduler or Office Manager. However, in this structure, the Chief of Staff usually retains responsibility for the overall management of the operation. Thus, the other functional heads generally report both to the Member as well as to the Chief of Staff.

On its face, this structure makes sense. It creates a group of managers, each of whom is responsible for his or her functional areas, and thus reduces office bureaucracy and the dissemination of information from one level to the next. It also provides those Members who want to keep track of office activities ample opportunities to do so, while providing some limits on staff access. This structure can also foster the development of a management team, which reduces the Member's reliance on any single person.

For this structure to work well, the office must have a Chief of Staff who is comfortable working collaboratively with the other management staff. The Chief of Staff's power and effectiveness in this structure does not come from his or her position in the hierarchy, but from the ability to earn the respect and trust of the other function heads.

The primary downside of this structure is that it is more complex than the others and requires more attention and maintenance. Because several staff share responsibility and accountability, the Chief of Staff and functional heads must work hard to ensure that office activities are properly

coordinated. Failure to coordinate creates confusion and mistakes due to unclear and overlapping responsibilities. In addition, this structure places greater management responsibilities on the Member than does either of the other two — responsibilities that Members frequently find they cannot or do not want to manage.

Finally, 7 percent of House offices and several Senate offices follow “other” structures, typically combinations or hybrids of these basic models. Due to their larger staff sizes and the number of state offices they manage, Senate offices have more options and flexibility when defining their management structure. The occurrence of hybrid models illustrates the need for managers to carefully consider the pros and cons of each structure (summarized in Figure 2-4) and implement a structure that best meets the needs of the office.

Once a management structure has been selected, every staffer must clearly understand how the office will operate and how decisions will be made, including the chain of command and the expectations for, and responsibilities of, each manager and employee. Equally important, offices should expect to make modifications in the structure as circumstances evolve or change. For instance, a new Chief of Staff will bring a different set of skills and experiences to the job than their predecessor. The political situation may also be altered because of changing demographics, redistricting or a new opponent for the seat. Such changes require offices to reassess, and probably make some changes to, their existing management structure. The reality is that an office does not operate in a static environment, so there should be regular review of the management strategy and structure to ensure responsiveness and viability. This, in turn, places expanded responsibilities on the management team.

The consequences of not selecting a management structure, or not defining it to employees, can cause significant problems in staff productivity and morale. CMF has found that when offices have not clearly defined or communicated their office structure, the managerial role essentially defaults to the Member. Any staff person with a decision to make must see the boss.

The obvious disadvantages of this situation far outweigh the advantages. Staff access is maximized, but usually at the expense of effective office coordination and order. Members tend to develop good working relations with their staffs, but are overwhelmed by the work they take upon themselves. In short, this situation tends to lead, at best, to controlled chaos.

*The consequences of not selecting a management structure, or not defining it to employees, can cause significant problems in staff productivity and morale.*



Figure 2-4

Pros and Cons of Management Structures			
Model	Basic Characteristics	Advantages	Disadvantages
<b>Centralized Structure</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All staff report to CoS</li> <li>Only CoS reports to the Member</li> <li>CoS has a great deal of responsibility for managing the office</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Simple and clear</li> <li>Allows one person to efficiently coordinate the activities of the entire staff</li> <li>Provides controlled access to the Member</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Large burden on CoS</li> <li>Requires CoS with strong management and interpersonal skills</li> <li>Best for experienced staff who need minimal assistance and supervision</li> <li>Very dependent on one staff person</li> <li>More difficult for district/state staff to effectively represent the Member back home</li> <li>Limits staff access to the Member</li> </ul>
<b>Washington-District / State Parity Structure</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>CoS and DD/SD share responsibility for the management of the office</li> <li>Each reports directly to the Member</li> <li>CoS and DD/SD generally decide which other staff meet with the Member and when</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Allows management responsibilities to be shared within the office</li> <li>Provides the DD/SD with authority to actively and visibly represent the Member in the district/state</li> <li>Provides controlled staff access to the Member by using the CoS and DD/SD as gatekeepers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Can lead to competing agendas, conflicts between managers and competition among staff</li> <li>Can limit staff access to the Member</li> </ul>
<b>Functional Structure</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All functional heads report directly to the Member</li> <li>CoS usually maintains office management responsibility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reduces office bureaucracy and the relaying of information</li> <li>Provides Members opportunities to more closely track activities</li> <li>Develops a management team, making office less dependent on one person</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Complex and requires more attention and maintenance</li> <li>Shared responsibilities require proper coordination</li> <li>Increased management responsibilities on the Member</li> <li>Requires a CoS committed to collaboration with the other management staff</li> </ul>

For these reasons, CMF recommends that the Member play a minimal role in managing the day-to-day district/state operations. As leader of the office, he or she should be heavily involved in setting the overall direction, strategy and goals of the office and should be consulted on all major decisions. However, the Member should leave the daily operational decisions to key management staff.

### **Management Structure Within the District/State Operation**

The distribution of management responsibilities *within* and *among* the district/state office(s) is just as important as the distribution of responsibility between those offices and Washington. Processes similar to the ones described in the previous section can help you determine the optimal management structure for district/state operations.

The management of district/state operations can be broken down into four overall activities:

1. Overseeing constituent services, particularly casework;
2. Day-to-day management of operations and staff;
3. Managing local activities, such as events, outreach and projects, including the Member's travel in the district or state; and,
4. Integrating these activities into a coordinated agenda.

In many cases — particularly in the Senate — all four tasks may be too much for a single manager. Yet many Chiefs of Staff and District/State Directors refuse to delegate. For some, their boss often puts so much pressure on the task that the manager feels he or she must perform every task themselves. For others, they lack the skills to delegate effectively and end up micromanaging staff or providing no oversight at all. Some incorrectly assume they have enough time to oversee all district/state office activities. As a result, communications may breakdown, details might be overlooked and a general lack of coordination can occur, leading to staff dissatisfaction, inefficiency and frustration. Therefore, CMF recommends that the CoS or DD/SD delegate responsibilities — according to either office *functions* or office *regions*. Further, a periodic review and accounting of the delegation process allows preemption or mitigation of any negative outcomes that may occur.

In a function-oriented management structure, a hands-on supervisor oversees a specific district/state office function (such as casework, outreach or press) across all of the offices in the district/state operation.



In a region-oriented management structure, an office manager for that region oversees all activities in each region of the district or state (or each office serving that region). It's not surprising that this structure prevails in most state operations, where hundreds of miles often separate offices.

In determining the management structure for the district/state operation, it is critical to seriously consider the following questions in order to choose a model that meets the Member's management style, as well as fitting the needs of the district/state operation. Senate offices should also keep in mind that they have more structural options than House offices, due to their larger staff sizes and budget.



- What is the relationship and management structure between the CoS and DD/SD?
- Where is the CoS located — in DC or the district/state?
- Will the CoS be splitting time between DC and the district/state?
- What are the priorities of the district/state office(s)?
- Are district/state priorities tied to certain functions or regions?
- What are the management abilities and interests of the DD/SD?
- Does the DD/SD prefer a hands-on approach to the day-to-day details or would they rather focus on specific office activities/priorities?
- What are the management and political abilities of the district/state staff?
- Do any staffers have expertise in certain functions and skill for supervising others?
- Is there at least one person in each of the district/state offices who could act as a “branch manager,” overseeing both the political activities and constituent services of that office?
- Does the volume of casework requests warrant a Casework Supervisor or Director of Constituent Services, allowing the DD/SD to work on other priorities?
- Does the size or geography of the district/state necessitate regional managers?
- Are any regions of the district/state so distinct — either culturally, politically or economically — that a regional manager must have a thorough understanding of the region to be effective?

- Does the Member insist that the DD/SD concentrate solely on political activities?

## Managing Conflict Between Supervisors

Supervisors within district/state operations are perhaps more subject to conflicting agendas than other staffers. They contend with several layers of conflict: Washington vs. the field offices; political activities vs. constituent services; priorities in one part of the district/state vs. those in another. Most supervisors eventually find ways to integrate these priorities, but not without great potential for conflict every step of the way.

If this conflict isn't properly managed, key players may cooperate only sparingly, creating a tenuous and divisive environment that makes it difficult for management and staff to effectively operate. When the lack of communication between Washington and the district/state results in the pursuit of two entirely different agendas, it can tarnish the Member's image and render his or her overall strategy and goals ineffective. For

example, in one office, the State Director pursued a policy of increasing the Senator's visibility on business issues, while the Chief of Staff and Legislative Director advised the Senator to resign from the Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee to take advantage of an opening on the Environment and Public Works Committee. This lack of a coordinated agenda found the Senator publically attacked for hypocrisy — casting himself as pro-business at home while shifting his attention to environmental issues in Washington.

Conflict of this sort is often times ignored. Staff can avoid the problem because they work out of different offices; they can perform their duties with minimal cooperation. This avoidance is an understandable reaction, but an unhealthy means of coping.

Managers must resolve major conflicts that impede the work of the overall office. This usually requires honest communication between the involved parties and promotion within the office of a collective mindset that sees the airing of different opinions as healthy and contributing to better decisions and a better office. Constructive conflict between managers can be harnessed to create a better product or outcome that has the support of the collective leadership.

*When the lack of communication between Washington and the district/state results in the pursuit of two entirely different agendas, it can tarnish the Member's image and render his or her overall strategy and goals ineffective.*



Sometimes the problem stems from ill-defined roles and responsibilities. Most district/state offices follow a management structure in which overall responsibility rests with the Chief of Staff, the District/State Director or both. Interestingly, CMF's research with congressional offices has found a significant disparity between the understanding of Chiefs of Staff and the understanding of DDs and SDs as to who is responsible for providing operational leadership in the office back home.

In CMF surveys of House and Senate offices regarding their management structure, Chiefs of Staff are more likely to respond that their office follows a centralized model, in which all staff report to the Chief of Staff, including the District/State Director, and the Chief of Staff reports to the Member. However, when District and State Directors are surveyed, they are more likely to respond that they report directly to the Member, not the Chief of Staff. This disparity is particularly pronounced in House offices. Depending on who is asked, approximately one-third to more than half of House District Directors, and one-quarter to almost half of Senate State Directors, say the District/State Director reports directly to the Member.

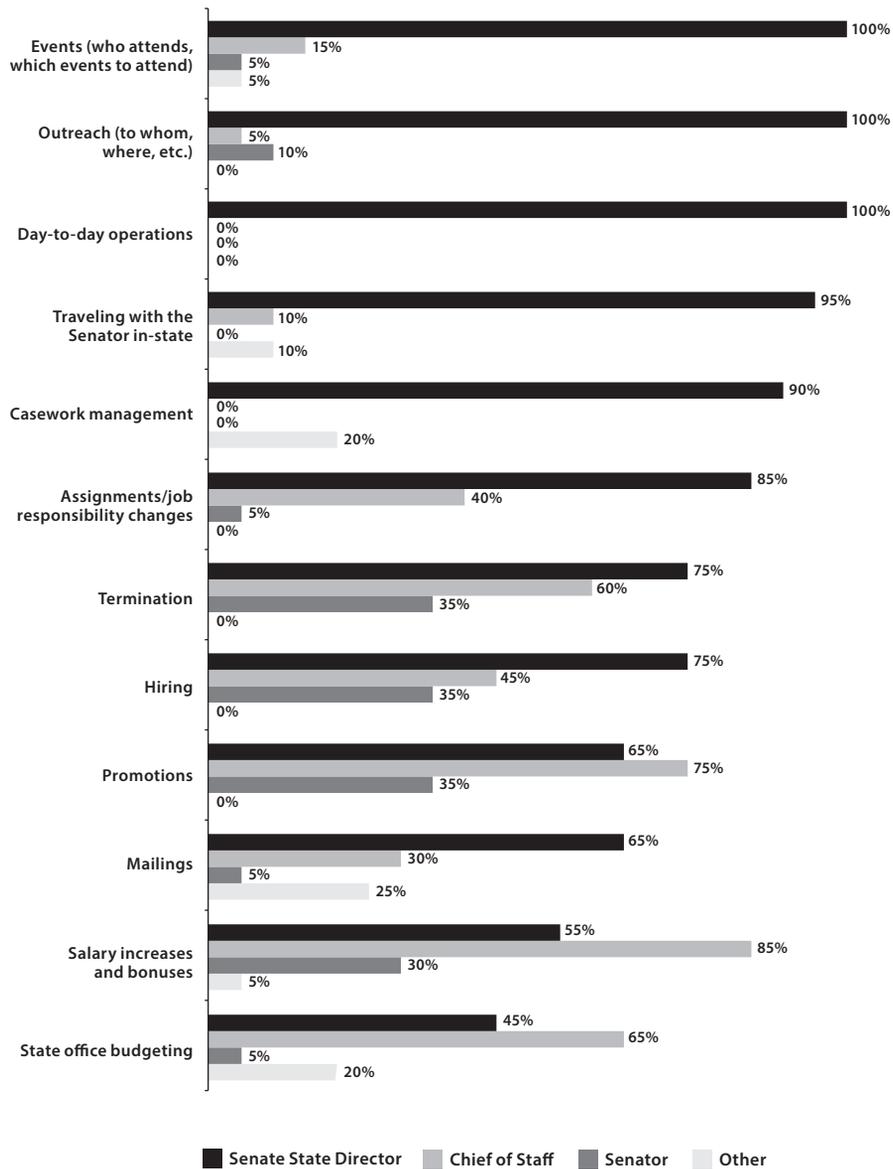
This finding underscores the need for District and State Directors to clarify with the Chief of Staff which decisions must be made by, or in collaboration with, the CoS and which decisions the DD/SD can make alone. Figures 2-5 and 2-6 illustrate CMF's research on who has the primary responsibility for management decisions involving the district/state offices and staff. Chiefs of Staff tend to be more involved in budgeting and staffing decisions (i.e., salary increases and bonus payments, promotions, hiring and termination), than in events, outreach and casework management, which are typically the responsibility of District/State Directors. The data also shows that a number of operations are managed jointly or in conjunction with the Member. To minimize conflict and confusion and to build trust and goodwill, the most important action the DD/SD can take is to clearly define the roles, responsibilities and mutual expectations of the senior managers.

Let's say, for example, that the DD resents the CoS for usurping their authority, while the CoS believes they are merely fulfilling their own management responsibilities as the Member defined them. A serious discussion among the CoS, the DD and the Member can resolve this sort of misunderstanding after the fact, *or* clearly defined roles and responsibilities in the beginning can help avoid such counterproductive conflict.



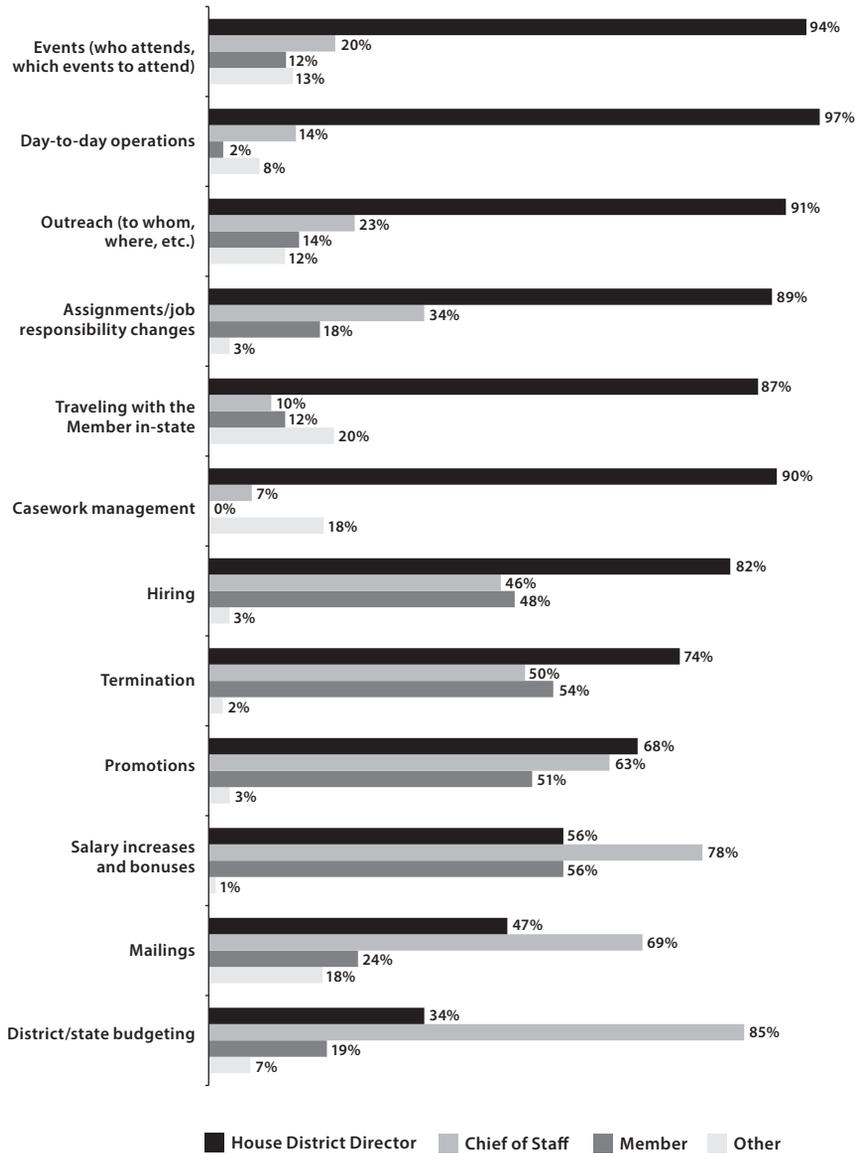
Figure 2-5

**Primary Responsibility for Managing State Operations  
(Senate Offices)**



**Figure 2-6**

**Primary Responsibility for Managing District/State Operations  
(House Offices)**



In other instances, the conflict might be more complex, involving work styles and personalities. Suggestions on how to handle (and prevent) these types of situations are outlined in the next section and on page 40. Such intercession should not be avoided, as it is unlikely that conflict will resolve itself without action. As one philosophic House Chief of Staff puts it, “Conflict is like bread mold in the closet. Unless you take care of it, every time you open the door and look in, it gets worse.”

*As one philosophic House Chief of Staff puts it, “Conflict is like bread mold in the closet. Unless you take care of it, every time you open the door and look in, it gets worse.”*

### **When Conflict Warrants Special Attention**

Occasionally, conflicts can become so serious that they hamper the performance of the entire office. This is especially the case when significant, ongoing conflicts arise among supervisors. When that happens, staff become frustrated and confused by mixed signals and competing priorities, morale and work suffer, and sometimes even the Member’s reputation suffers. These conflicts warrant special attention.

Fortunately, concerns in both the corporate and government sectors over these types of conflict and the damage they cause have led to a variety of programs and procedures for managing them. Assistance ranges from training and guidance to facilitation of informal conflict negotiation processes to more formal alternative dispute resolution processes. In fact, the strategies available to resolve serious conflicts are almost as diverse as the problems that cause them.

While some conflicts are best managed through a formal dispute resolution process, most can be resolved through less formal, non-binding processes. When conflict is addressed early by working with the individuals involved, it is often possible to tackle the issues at the root of the conflict and resolve it. In some cases, it is most helpful for an employee to do this by working individually with an employee assistance professional to develop personal conflict management strategies. In others, it is more effective to work with all employees involved to examine and discuss the issues and the employees’ different perspectives and expectations to collaboratively define the problem and identify solutions. In still other situations, working with staff through a training program to help identify and describe individuals’ personality, communications, behavioral or conflict styles can be helpful. These tools can also be useful in the day-to-day functioning of the entire team. They help employees and supervisors





## Resolving or Preventing Conflicts in Your Office

- 1 Define and understand the source of the problem.** Make sure to identify and address the causes of the problem and not simply the symptoms. Are there differing opinions and perspectives on priorities, responsibilities, performance or styles?
- 2 Approach the discussion as a joint problem-solving session.** Once the problem is identified, engage in mutual planning to resolve the differences. Brainstorm possible solutions by focusing on the underlying issues and try to find common ground. Winning the conflict or disagreement, or wanting to assign blame, should be far less important than preserving good working relations within the office.
- 3 Commit to addressing conflicts as they occur.** Over the course of a Member's term, priorities will evolve, staff will turn over and responsibilities will shift, creating natural areas for conflict. Recognize and acknowledge that it may not be easy, but that the constructive airing and resolving disagreements is more productive than letting problems fester and grow.
- 4 Come to mutual understanding and specific next steps.** Define what follow-through is needed or what action(s) should be taken to prevent this situation from occurring again. The focus should be on the future, not the past.
- 5 Don't forget about the Member.** Naturally, they tend to get caught in the middle of conflicts, particularly those between Washington and the district/state offices. Typically, Members don't have the time or inclination to referee disagreements or negotiate solutions, so it is preferable to resolve conflict on a staff to staff level. However, at times the Member may be inadvertently contributing to the conflict, and should thus be part of the dialogue required for resolution. In this case, it is ideal for the staff in conflict to arrive at a level of agreement from which they can together bring the issue to the Member's attention. If staff fail to work through their conflict the Member may feel compelled to step in, often to everyone's discomfort.
- 6 Seek professional assistance.** If the previous suggestions prove unsuccessful, an impartial, outside mediator is the next logical step. House and Senate services are available through the House Office of Employee Assistance (202-225-2400) and the Senate Employee Assistance Program (202-224-3902). CMF, which produced this book, also conducts office assessments and facilitates sessions focused on addressing internal office problems and ways to resolve them. Contact CMF at 202-546-0100 for more information.



identify the communications styles at work under normal circumstances and those that emerge in the midst of a conflict. They can also assess the different personality styles each employee brings to a conflict and how the styles drive their approaches to, and expectations for, interpersonal interactions in the workplace.

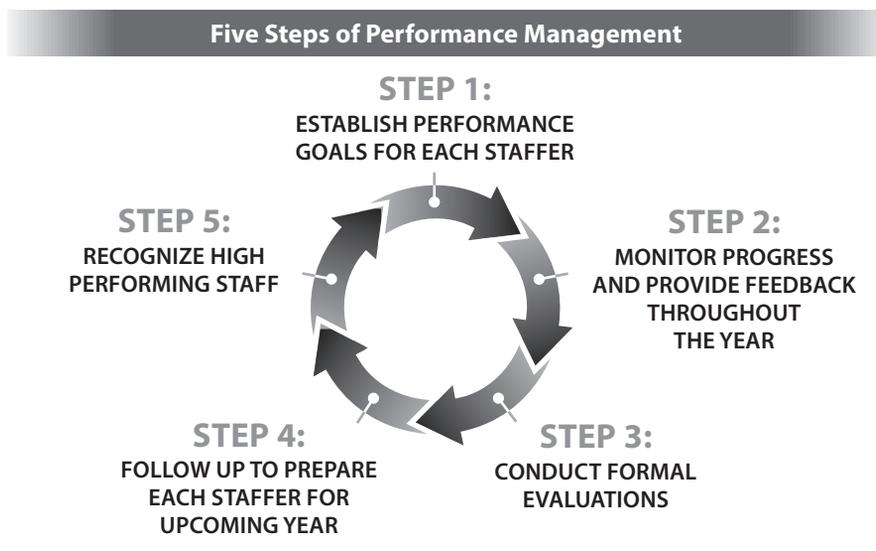
Confidential assistance with planning and facilitating conflict management processes is available for employees and for congressional offices through the Senate Employee Assistance Program (202-224-3902) and the House Office of Employee Assistance (202-225-2400). Additionally, CMF, which produced this book, also conducts office assessments and facilitates sessions focused on addressing internal office problems and ways to resolve them. Contact CMF at 202-546-0100 for more information. Regardless of whether the office seeks resolution through an individual or group approach, the bottom line is that it is crucial to immediately address conflicts — especially those among supervisors — and find ways to resolve them. Failing to do so is a sure recipe for disaster, leading to missed opportunities, mediocre performance and low morale.



## Implementing a Performance Management System

Figure 2-7 shows the five steps of a performance management system. It's a circular process and, for the best results, ideally should be conducted annually for each staffer. This section will explore each step in-depth.

**Figure 2-7**





### **Step 1: Establish performance goals for each staff person.**

The first step in establishing a performance management system requires each manager to sit down with each staff person he or she supervises to set goals and expectations for the year. People perform best when they understand what is expected of them and how their performance will be evaluated. All too often congressional offices are reluctant to take the time to clarify what is expected of staff individually.

Some Hill managers argue that setting goals is too confining and rigid for a fluid workplace; others contend that it is unnecessary because staff almost always know what their priorities are, and where they should be focusing their energies. Both arguments are easily rebutted. First, individual staff goals, like overall office goals, can be modified during the year should office priorities, or the duties of the staff person, change. Second, CMF's experience in working with many House and Senate offices annually

is that staffers often do not understand what their priorities should be. The result is a workforce that lacks direction, and workers who tend to work very hard but who do not improve their skills as quickly as they should.

#### **Congressional Accountability Act**

Though House and Senate staff are "at-will" employees, they are still guaranteed certain protections under the Congressional Accountability Act (CAA). Members of Congress and staff responsible for managing personnel should familiarize themselves with the 12 civil rights, labor and workplace safety and health laws applicable to the Legislative Branch.

The CAA also created the Office of Compliance (OOC), which educates congressional employees about their rights and responsibilities and investigates alleged violations. More information CAA and OOC is available at [www.compliance.gov](http://www.compliance.gov).

The Office of House Employment Counsel (202-225-7075) and the Senate Chief Counsel for Employment (202-224-5424) provide legal guidance on personnel policies and practices and represent employers in litigation arising under the CAA.

An excellent starting place for this goal-setting process is developing job descriptions. (See the next section, "The Role of Staff in a Performance Management System," on page 54 for guidance.) Committing to paper both primary and secondary responsibilities will help the staff and their supervisors understand individual responsibilities and determine annual performance goals. In addition, it is very important that these individual goals reflect the overall strategic goals of the office. Consequently, a staffer and their supervisor should also review the office's strategic plan



and determine which goals require that staffer's involvement, and what specifically they should be doing to accomplish these goals.

Staff performance goals can also address an individual's personal goals. For example, a State Director may choose to focus on becoming a better public speaker; a Field Rep may want to learn negotiations skills; or a Scheduler may want to take a course on event planning. All performance goals should be viewed by staff as reasonable and attainable. The purpose of this exercise is neither to create undue staff anxiety nor force staff to become overachieving workaholics.

Regardless of how these goals and expectations are established, they should be in writing so that both staff and supervisors can refer to them throughout the year. The staff must understand that these goals will be the basis for how they are judged and recognized during, and at the end of, the year.

***Step 2: Monitor progress and provide feedback on staff performance throughout the year.***

After setting the goals or expectations for each staff person, it is important to determine how best to support that person in meeting their goals. At a minimum, managers should monitor staff progress periodically throughout the year. For staff who remain focused, this may simply mean asking how their work is going every once in a while or checking in with them over lunch. When staff have a tendency to lose sight of their goals, this may mean meeting monthly to review progress, or having those staff develop action plans outlining, step-by-step, how they intend to accomplish their goals. Even well-intentioned, highly-motivated staff can lose sight of their goals, especially when they take on too much work.

Feedback is the act of evaluating performance with the intention of influencing an employee's behavior. Feedback can be positive or negative. Acknowledging good performance and letting staff know when they have met office expectations is as important as critiquing performance. The key to effective feedback is to provide it soon after an activity is completed, in an objective manner that clearly identifies the specific behavior you seek to reinforce or improve. The closer the feedback is given to when the activity or behavior occurred, the more likely the staffer will incorporate the feedback into their performance.

All too often managers assume that someone given clear critique of their performance will be able to improve it. In some cases, this assumption

is not accurate, and staff need additional specific guidance in *how* to improve. The job of the manager is to then figure out why someone is failing to successfully incorporate feedback into their work, and to help that person do so.

When staffers lack the skills or knowledge necessary to improve, sending them to training programs to improve their skills is an option. Other professional development options include having them read relevant materials or reviewing memos or speeches that exhibit the kind of work product sought.

A more labor-intensive, but often more successful approach, is to provide the staff person with one-on-one coaching. That is, someone works with the staff person on a regular basis to address a problem or support a skill enhancement effort. Coaching is appropriate when a manager decides that the staff person needs ongoing guidance to improve, or to improve more quickly, and feedback by itself will be insufficient. A coach may be the supervisor or someone designated by the supervisor.

Coaches therefore need to determine what is needed of them to help staff improve. Do they need to teach skills such as how to manage time better or communicate effectively with the Member? Do they need to address attitude problems? Once the rationale for coaching is clear, the coach works with the staff on an ongoing basis to bring about the desired change. Coaching may require a series of ad hoc meetings over several weeks, or regularly scheduled meetings lasting for a year or more.

The first challenge managers face in providing useful feedback or coaching is to create a climate of trust between them and the staff they supervise. Staff must be confident that their supervisors are committed to helping them grow and flourish in their jobs. If they do not have this confidence — i.e., if they suspect that their supervisor doesn't really care about their growth, or is interested in taking credit for staff successes — they are unlikely to enter



#### **Establishing a Trusting Relationship with Staff**

- Be honest and sincere; don't seek to manipulate.
- Be fair, evenhanded and consistent.
- Do the things you say you will do.
- Really listen to your staff.
- Ask your staff for input; if you don't incorporate their suggestions, explain your reasoning.
- When you disagree with staff, explain your reasoning.

into a constructive coaching process. In a trusting relationship, staff will feel comfortable admitting that they need to improve a skill or change an attitude. They will be able to candidly discuss the anxieties they feel when asked to change their behavior. If this type of frank discussion cannot take place, neither feedback nor coaching is likely to succeed.

While this monitoring, feedback, training and coaching work can happen on an informal basis, managers should not forget to record these activities in a personnel file. It is only fair to make sure there is some record that reflects the staffer's overall performance over the course of the year. This data about how well a staff person did or did not do in pursuing performance goals, or responding to feedback and coaching, is critical in determining performance goals for next year and salary increases. Alternatively, documentation is vital should you need to take steps to improve performance or begin disciplinary action.

### ***Step 3: Conduct formal staff evaluations.***

Formal evaluations are the linchpin of the performance management system. They are the primary vehicles through which staff will be held accountable for their performance and should be conducted once or twice a year. Most congressional offices conduct staff reviews in December or January, when there is time to engage in thoughtful discussions, and when offices are focusing on goals for the New Year.

Evaluations require preparation on the parts of both supervisors and the staff they oversee. These six steps should help managers prepare for staff reviews:

1. **Require staffers to review their own performance goals and fill out a job appraisal form, so they're prepared for the review.** Staff should be asked to submit written self-evaluations to their supervisors a few days before evaluation meetings are held. In these self-appraisals, staff should be expected to address specific questions regarding how well they've met their goals. These job appraisals can then form the basis for an open exchange between supervisor and staff during the evaluation sessions. (See Figure 2-8.)
2. **Decide who is the best person(s) to deliver the evaluation.** Usually, the staffer's supervisor should handle the review process. But if senior managers (such as the Chief of Staff or District/State Director) have views to share, they should also be included. Alternatively, the supervisor can interview other managers about their

views of the staffer's performance and incorporate those views in the evaluation. The Member can make a brief appearance to reinforce the evaluation of outstanding staff, but he or she should not sit through the whole review, nor conduct it, unless the staffer is principally supervised by the Member (e.g., Chief of Staff, District/State Director).

3. **Review the written self-evaluations.** Carefully reviewing the self-evaluation will help managers determine where they agree and disagree with staff perceptions. They should write down reactions and questions to raise and discuss in the meeting.
4. **Review documentation in the staffer's personnel file.** As discussed in Step 2, supervisors should be keeping a record of the staffer's performance throughout the year to ensure the performance review is not just a product of recent memory. Based on these notes, supervisors can then develop other questions or issues they wish to raise.
5. **Choose your core message.** What are the key points the staffer should take away from the meeting? The more messages included in the session, the more difficult it is to ensure you are understood. A core message for a star performer could sound like this: "You have met or exceeded all of your goals and are doing a fabulous job. How can we make sure you are challenged and fulfilled in your job in the coming year?" Whereas, a core message for an under-performing caseworker might be, "You've shown growth in how effectively you're handling your cases this year. One area, however, where we need improvement is being more proactive in identifying outreach opportunities that relate to your case assignments. How can I help you tackle this problem more successfully this year?"
6. **Generate examples that support your core message.** Even the brightest staffer is not telepathic. Clear examples from the course of the year or the review period will provide a more precise understanding of achievements or shortcomings. If a District Director says, "You need to coordinate more with the DC office," without spelling out exactly what that coordination entails, the staffer will be less likely to act on this recommendation. Additionally, such a vague comment is open to the staffer's interpretation of what "more coordination" means. Examples are the best tools managers have to help staff understand why change is necessary and in their interests.

The principal purpose of the evaluation session is to help staff improve their performance in the future, not simply review the past. Everything, from the topics selected to the tone of the meeting, should support that forward-looking goal.

If there is a climate of trust and regular staff feedback throughout the year, the review will be like a checkup and should take only 30–45 minutes. If there has been little or no feedback throughout the year, the perfor-

mance evaluation will be more like a complete physical, taking a couple of hours. Since staff should have been receiving feedback all along, the review should not hold any surprises. An evaluation that surprises staff is an indication of a failure to provide adequate feedback and coaching throughout the year. It means that managers have deprived staffers of valuable information that could have helped them perform better during the year.

To begin, the manager should set a positive tone for a discussion and state the purpose and structure of the meeting. Ask the staffer where he or she

*The principal purpose of the evaluation session is to help staff improve their performance in the future, not simply review the past. Everything, from the topics selected to the tone of the meeting, should support that forward-looking goal.*

**Figure 2-8**

### Sample Staff Self-Evaluation Form

1. What were your performance goals for the past year?
2. How successful were you in meeting each of these goals?
3. What obstacles or problems hindered your success in meeting these goals?
4. What could you have done better over the past year to meet or come closer to your performance goals?
5. What could the office have done better to support your efforts to meet these priorities?
6. Beyond these individual goal-related activities, what else did you do this year to help the office achieve its goals?
7. What actions did you take that go beyond the expectations of your job?
8. What ideas or projects did you propose and/or initiate over the past year?
9. What were your greatest disappointments or sources of dissatisfaction over the past year?
10. What are your weaknesses, or in what areas would you like to improve or develop over the coming year?
11. What support do you need from this office (the Member, Chief of Staff, other staff, or other resources) to assist you in improving your performance in these areas?
12. How can this office promote your overall professional development in the coming year?

wants to start and let them do much of the work. This review should be an opportunity to nurture their growth and learning, not a chance for the manager to demand or dictate change. It should be a dialogue, not a top-down lecture. Let the staff grapple with the hard questions, such as why they did not meet their performance goals. The manager should facilitate useful discussion, clearly state the core message and focus constructively on how to use this review to improve performance in the future. For underperforming staff, the manager might identify areas of weakness, explore factors that might be inhibiting the staffer's productivity and discuss ways the staffer might improve in these areas. For the solid and star performers, the manager might identify their strengths, cite specific contributions they have made to the office, express appreciation for their efforts and encourage staff to continue to leverage their strengths for successful outcomes.

The session should end with the manager repeating his or her message and developing an understanding on the next steps for the coming months. For star performers who want to expand their skills and responsibilities, ideas on development opportunities and new duties should be discussed. If the employee is not meeting expectations, the manager needs to discuss why and how the employee should improve. The manager should draft a Performance Improvement Plan (PIP) that describes the specific steps the staffer will take to remedy the problems identified, as well as the steps the office will take to assist the employee in his or her efforts. A PIP should include performance goals, how the supervisor will measure progress and dates for formally assessing progress (i.e., weekly, monthly).



In cases where an employee's performance jeopardizes the ability to keep his or her job, the employee must clearly be told what must be done to improve performance or face termination. He or she must also be told, however, that the supervisor and the office are committed to helping them improve, so dismissal can be avoided. Staff, especially underachieving staff, need to know the score and be given a fair chance to improve their work. By and large, firing an employee should be an office's last resort, an action taken only after other remedies have proven unsuccessful. This is both a good management practice and a prudent legal practice. Offices that fire staff without ample warning run a greater risk that charges will be filed against them for unfair treatment. More information on how to manage performance problems is included in the next section on page 51.

## How to Run Successful Staff Performance Meetings

- 1 Focus on performance, not personality.** Discuss what has or has not been accomplished, and use specific examples whenever possible to support your points.
- 2 Listen carefully and patiently.** Staff may have data or perceptions that you did not consider, which could reshape your assessment of their performance.
- 3 Strive for insight, not indictment.** Work to solve problems, rather than focusing on assigning blame.
- 4 Strive for understanding, not agreement.** When there is disagreement, it is important to realize that one goal of these sessions is to reach understanding of each other's point of view. However, it is not necessary for staff to agree with the assessments of their supervisors in order to improve performance.
- 5 Focus on staff development, not staff discipline.** The goal is to improve performance in the future, not to punish past transgressions.
- 6 Start with low-risk items and build towards more difficult issues.** If you can get agreement on the smaller items first, it makes it easier to tackle the larger problems later.
- 7 Clearly state your core message.** Make sure that employees walk out of the meetings with an unambiguous picture of how their work is seen and what they should work on in the future to improve their performance and contribution to the Member.
- 8 Thank the staff for their time and candor.** These meetings can be difficult and a source of anxiety for staff. Make sure you thank them for their efforts.
- 9 Promptly write up a meeting summary for the file.** Record what was discussed and agreed to. These memos will form the basis of future performance goals and activities and serve as important legal documents in cases of termination.
- 10 Evaluate the session and your performance.** Conducting these sessions requires skill and practice and the best way to improve them is to take a few minutes to evaluate, in writing, the meetings you lead: what went well; what did not; and what you would do differently.





There is one forbidden subject during this discussion — money. Obviously, most offices link pay to office performance. However, if staff believe that an objective of the meeting is to determine how large a salary increase or what level of bonus pay they should receive, they understandably will be reluctant to reflect openly on how they can improve. Instead, they will probably focus on how they can make the best case for the most money. Consequently, offices must de-link these meetings from actual compensation decisions. Offices can do this by making it clear that salary and bonus decisions will be made weeks, if not months, after the session. Alternatively, managers could decide and announce compensation decisions before the staff evaluation meetings.

***Step 4: Follow through on the evaluation and prepare for the upcoming year.***

After the session, managers need to make sure that the process that has been initiated does not get placed on the backburner and forgotten. No task is more important to managers than devoting time to improving staff performance and enhancing their contribution to the office. Supervisors and staff should develop specific written products as a follow-up to the performance evaluation session within a few days to a few weeks after the meeting. If the follow-through steps are not in writing, they are far less likely to occur.

Staff who received good or great evaluations should be asked to draft a new set of performance goals for the coming year. Those who received poor evaluations should be given a Performance Improvement Plan (PIP) by their manager.

In both cases, managers should ensure that these documents are consistent with what was discussed at the evaluation meeting. In some cases, a short follow-up meeting may be necessary to clarify, or even renegotiate, goals, timelines or the actions expected from staff or the office.

***Step 5: Recognize high-performing staff.***

Just as underperforming staffers need to be made aware of how they are falling short, good and great staffers who meet or exceed the office's expectations need to be made aware that the caliber of their work is recognized and appreciated. CMF recommends that offices reward staff who achieve their goals through a combination of monetary (i.e., salary increases and bonuses) and non-monetary means.

In an effective performance management system, pay is tied to performance. The staff who best achieve their established performance goals are most highly compensated. Ideally, offices should use a combination of both permanent salary increases and bonus pay (or temporary salary increases). Salary increases are generally more appreciated, but frequently offices make salary decisions at the end of the year. This means that it is often months before a staffer is rewarded monetarily for outstanding work. A one-time bonus, made soon after a project is completed, is a more effective staff motivator and morale builder than a payment made later. In addition, bonus payments, given throughout the year or at the end of the year, afford managers greater budgetary flexibility. Salary increases are automatically built into the baseline budget in subsequent years, while bonuses will not impact the following years' budgets.

Non-monetary rewards for high-performing staff might include providing opportunities to work more closely with the Member; expanding their job responsibilities or providing more development opportunities; or providing time off or a more flexible work schedule. Congressional offices too often neglect these non-monetary rewards and the value staff place upon them. The non-monetary rewards can be discussed and selected in a job evaluation session because they are part of the "next steps." But, as mentioned earlier, money should never be discussed during the performance review.

### **Managing Employee Performance Problems**

While a good performance management system is critical to effectively setting expectations and monitoring the performance of employees and, ultimately, the effectiveness of the entire team, it is never a guarantee against employee performance problems. Sometimes the biggest challenge in managing the workplace is dealing with an employee's declining performance when there is evidence that it may be the result of personal difficulties outside the workplace. It is at such times that the supervisor faces a dilemma. While the supervisor is responsible for working with the employee to correct the performance issues, he or she must balance that responsibility with respect for the employee's personal life. The supervisor must also be cautious about entering into a discussion he or she is not prepared or trained to handle.

When a supervisor begins to notice performance issues with an employee, it is important to use a consistent and straightforward process that may include the following components.





**Observation.** Look for patterns or changes in the employee's productivity or behavior. Describe the problem, but do not attempt to evaluate it. Be sure to recognize some of the common performance problems, including attendance, performance, behavioral and physical changes. Is the employee exhibiting excessive tardiness or patterns of absenteeism? Is the employee exhibiting excessive tardiness or patterns of absenteeism? Is the employee suddenly missing deadlines or exhibiting poor judgment? Has the employee become moody or subject to emotional outbursts? Have there been significant changes in the employee's appearance or demeanor?

**Documentation.** Maintain consistent documentation of the employee's performance, both positive and negative. This will provide the employee with an objective view of his or her performance and any evidence as to how it has declined. Document factually and define the specifics of the performance problem without judgment.

**Consultation.** If the supervisor suspects that the decline in the employee's performance is because of an outside personal issue, he or she may wish to contact their chamber's employee assistance service. These offices can walk managers through the process of preparing for a performance management and intervention meeting with the employee, can explain their resources available to employees and discuss how to make a performance-based referral to the employee assistance service. The House Office of Employee Assistance is available at 202-225-2400 and the Senate Employee Assistance Program is at 202-224-3902.



**Performance intervention.** Whether an employee's problems manifest as attendance, performance or behavior issues, the supervisor should approach the problem by following the office's existing performance management procedures, including the formal staff evaluation and providing ongoing feedback to staff. Both mechanisms are critical elements of performance management, but supervisors should not wait until an employee's annual evaluation to discuss a decline in performance. This discussion is usually most effective when it occurs as soon as possible after a pattern of declining performance is observed.

In the discussion, the supervisor should clearly define the process for improvement, expectations for ongoing performance and a timeframe for improvement. The supervisor should also solicit the employee's ideas for improving performance. After the discussion, the supervisor must document details of any actions to be taken immediately and in the future, and monitor them to ensure the employee stays on track. Documentation

should also include any consequences if the employee fails to meet the performance objectives.

When the employee's performance is possibly impacted by an outside personal issue, the discussion must constructively confront the performance problem while providing an avenue for effectively intervening in the outside issue without actually discussing the specific personal problem. The goal is to provide a deliberate and proactive process that enables the supervisor to help an employee recognize and address poor job performance and to access the appropriate resources to assist in improvement.

For example, a supervisor might say, "I've noticed a distinct change in your performance over the past six weeks. Since you are a valuable part of our staff, I want to do everything I can to assist you in getting your performance back to the level that you've performed in the past. In addition to discussing a plan to help us both stay focused on correcting these performance issues, I want to also make sure that you are aware of the resources at your disposal, should there be anything of a personal nature contributing to these recent performance difficulties. The Senate Employee Assistance Program/House Office of Employee Assistance offer confidential services for staff. Here's the contact number for their office, should you want to discuss anything with them. If they can assist you with anything that will support you in getting your performance back on track, they are an appropriate resource to help. That way, you and I can keep our focus on your performance itself."

**Referral.** If the employee's performance does not improve after taking the routine supervisory corrective measures above, a referral to the chamber's employee assistance service might be appropriate. This should be conveyed as an additional performance management tool to help the employee deal with a performance issue, not as a disciplinary action.

A referral to the employee assistance service can be formal or informal. An informal referral might be appropriate when an employee informs the supervisor of a personal problem, but there is no impact on the employee's job performance thus far. A formal referral is more appropriate when the employee's personal or behavioral problem, or mental health or addiction issue, directly surfaces on the job and a pattern of deteriorating performance is apparent, or when previous attempts by the supervisor to correct the employee's performance have had no corrective or lasting results. In either case, the supervisor should emphasize the confidential

nature of the service and encourage the use of the service to help the employee address problems and improve performance.

**Follow-up.** As with any effective performance management system, a critical step is following up to ensure the corrective actions are being taken. With a formal referral to the employee assistance service, the supervisor should follow up with the employee and the service to assure that they are continuing to make use of the resources available to support their ongoing performance on-the-job.

### The Role of Staff in a Performance Management System

In addition to completing their self-evaluations, staff can also assist managers in other parts of the performance management system. Senior managers sometimes lack the time, necessary information or the expertise to develop accurate and meaningful position descriptions and objective performance criteria for their employees, which results in:

- Important matters falling through the cracks because staff are uncertain about who has what responsibilities;
- Tension developing because responsibilities appear to overlap;
- Staff uncertainty about how to improve their job performance because they don't get enough meaningful feedback; and,
- A perception that the compensation process is unfair or unpredictable.

To avoid these types of problems and improve the morale of district/state staff, supervisors can have individual staffers develop their own position descriptions and performance criteria based upon their understanding of their responsibilities and goals for the year. This bottom-up process fosters a greater sense of ownership of their jobs and a greater commitment to achieving their goals and the goals of the office.

#### **Step 1: Draft bottom-up position descriptions.**

Staffers should be asked to draft their own position description that includes the following information:

1. The specific office functions they perform, including routine, day-to-day tasks and those that are more broadly a part of the office's strategic plan.
2. The resources they need to fulfill their job requirements, such as a travel budget, intern assistance and, most importantly, manage-



ment and staff support. For example, will the DD need to get the Member's approval for certain types of initiatives? Will a Case-worker need legislative research regularly from a certain LA?

3. Other position-appropriate tasks or responsibilities they'd like to perform, and responsibilities they'd ideally like shifted to someone else. These lists often lead managers to discover opportunities for "win/win" solutions when staff assignments can be traded in such a way that one or more staffers end up happier and better matched with their interests or skills. However, trading staff assignments should only be done with careful consideration and good communication so that, in the end, it is clear who is responsible for what and that the needs of the office, not just the staff, are best served.

### ***Step 2: Draft bottom-up performance appraisal criteria.***

It's important and fair that staff know not only what work they're expected to perform, but on what basis their performance — and ultimately their compensation — will be evaluated. Managers often make such decisions subjectively, a practice that, though expedient, is likely to be unfair or *perceived* as unfair. At the least, this practice will undercut staff morale; at the worst, it could become a legal or public relations debacle.

Each staffer should draft a set of performance criteria for their job by reviewing their position description, identifying their major tasks and developing reasonable performance goals for the year. The criteria should also reflect concrete goals set for routine functions.

A staffer who meets or exceeds the criteria should be among the first to receive whatever budget money is available for merit pay increases or bonuses. Such a performance-based system is fair, honest and objective.

### ***Step 3: Review and finalize the drafts to achieve clarity and mutual understanding.***

Next, the supervisor must review each staffer's proposed position description, growth goals and performance appraisal criteria. He or she can discuss and revise job descriptions individually with each staffer or meet with the entire district/state staff and discuss options for modifying assignments to improve efficiency or better match staffers' interests. Ultimately, the Member may also play a significant role in determining the appropriate position descriptions for staff.

A supervisor might disagree with the criteria a staffer has set, but such disagreement can be constructive. Such constructive conflict brings different perspectives to the attention of the other person and forces both parties to strive for consensus on the job's priorities and the establishment of a just process for evaluating performance. It's better to clarify this information at the start of the year and for a staffer to agree to this process than to argue later that their evaluation was based on unreasonable or unclear expectations.

The eventual agreement constitutes a “psychological contract” between staff and supervisors. It covers what supervisors expect of staff and what assistance and support staff need from supervisors to do their job well. In short, it establishes a set of commitments and mutual expectations between staff and management. Staff too often are held accountable for unfinished tasks for which they did not receive adequate support. Such lack of support must be taken into account when evaluating performance.



For more information on developing a performance management system and managing staff, see CMF's premier publication, *Setting Course: A Congressional Management Guide*. Finally, as with all employment-related legal issues, contact the House Office of Employment Counsel (202-225-7075) or the Senate Chief Counsel for Employment (202-224-5424) for guidance.

### **The Problem of the Politically-Oriented District/State Director**

One final word about a potentially serious conflict CMF has seen with some regularity through its consulting work. In offices where the DD/SD (or district-based CoS) defines their job primarily as operating as the “key political player,” there is a tendency for the staff to resent the Director. The Director pursues the political agenda with little communication with the staff, while the staff pursues the constituent service agenda with little guidance from the Director. The staff may perceive the Director as someone who seemingly spends all their time on the phone, at meetings or banquets — playing the game of politics while they are left to deal with the “real work.”



Worse yet, if staff aren't privy to the Director's daily schedule, they will not fully understand how his or her activities contribute to the office at large. They're frustrated to have a Director who, more often than not, isn't there to direct. (Sometimes this situation also occurs between field

representatives and other staff because their duties also require them to be out of the office frequently at events and other outreach activities.)

Though this conflict is primarily structural, staff and Director alike tend to see it as personal, which only perpetuates it. In this situation, staff may view the Director as lazy, arrogant or insensitive to their needs, while primarily interested in pursuing a separate agenda ahead of the office's larger agenda. The ensuing resentment and mistrust can harm the morale of the district/state office. Here are three tactics a politically-oriented DD/SD can employ to address the problem or prevent it from occurring.

1. **Make sure that staff know what is happening.** Provide them and the Washington office with your weekly schedule; give regular updates summarizing the political agenda you've set for the office; discuss this agenda at regular staff meetings. Such measures can help restore harmony, coordinate the political and constituent services agendas and instill confidence in your efforts. By letting staff in on some of the larger political decisions that are made, they will feel like trusted and valued team players instead of hired help. The importance of inclusive communication in this area cannot be understated.
2. **Find ways to keep in touch with the staff and their constituent services agenda.** Communicate that while your work focuses on the political matters facing the office, their work with constituents is highly valued and will be supported as much as possible. Staff meetings, one-on-one meetings and phone conversations are some of the best means to convey this message of personalized support. A less personal, but sometimes effective, method for keeping abreast of the staff's activities is to review monthly or quarterly updates from them that summarize the status of casework, projects and all other major functions. If this path is chosen it is important to provide meaningful and constructive feedback and recognition.
3. **Have the Member spend a few minutes explaining the Director's role and priorities to staff.** Just a few minutes of the Member's time can be invaluable in helping establish or renew long-term trust between the Director and staff. Staff often finds the opportunity to revisit their reason for joining the Member's staff invigorating and exciting. The Member can reaffirm to staff that he or she fully authorizes the Director's focus on political matters and that it is part of the overall office plan. The Member can explain



that the Director was handpicked for his or her ability to represent the Member at political events; to meet in their stead with local officials and community leaders; and to decide what the Member should do and whom they should see on their visits back home.

## **Conclusion**

Running a top-notch district/state office requires a management structure that is best suited to the strengths of its managers; the management style of the Member; the needs and expectations of constituents; the overall goals or priorities of the office; even the geography of the district or state. Most personal offices develop a management structure for their offices early on, but then fail to review it periodically. The processes and recommendations laid out in this chapter should allow systematic reassessment and possible modification of the management structure to ensure it keeps current with the office's needs.

Another distinguishing characteristic of a well-run office is a staff of high-performing, engaged and motivated employees. Members of Congress want staff who exhibit these qualities, and who stay with the office for a long time. They want managers who will take the time to turn inexperienced but promising staff into valued assets. And they want clear lines of accountability they can trust. This chapter provides offices a process for managing staff that will create this type of staff and office. The five-step performance management process will allow offices to grow talent rather than leaving that to chance. Any of these steps taken individually should improve staff and office performance to some degree. But, incorporating all five of these steps into an annual process should provide a huge payoff to those offices willing to do so.

## Clarifying Responsibilities and Performance Expectations

## CHAPTER SUMMARY 2

### DO...

- Weigh the advantages and disadvantages of each management structure against the styles, abilities and political skills of the Chief of Staff and District/State Director before selecting one that best suits the office's mission, goals and personnel.
- Spend the time to carefully consider which management structure is most appropriate for your district/state operation.
- Delegate district/state responsibilities by office functions or by office regions to prevent communications breakdowns, overlooked details and a lack of coordination.
- Lessen the likelihood of conflict between managers by clearly defining the roles, responsibilities and expectations of the Chief of Staff and District/State Director.
- Reap the benefits of improved staff performance and work product by following the five-step performance management system throughout the year.
- Foster in staff a greater commitment to the office and their work by having them draft their own job descriptions and performance criteria for their manager's review.

### DON'T...

- Operate without a well-defined management structure. Conflict results when responsibilities, authority and accountability are not clearly outlined.
- Forget to regularly assess your management strategy and structure to ensure it continues to be responsive and viable given your current environment and personnel.
- Allow conflicts between offices and staff to go unchecked. Commit to resolving conflict in a positive manner.
- Assume that staff know their priorities and what's expected of them. Clarify in writing their individual and office goals and how their performance will be evaluated.
- Discuss money in performance reviews. The purpose is for staff to reflect on their behavior and identify areas for improvement, not make the case for salary increases or bonuses. Deliver compensation decisions separately — before the reviews or well after.
- Overlook the value of non-monetary rewards for high-performing staff, which also serve as a motivator and morale booster.



# CHAPTER 3

## Reaching Goals Through Coordination and Teamwork

### *This Chapter Includes...*

- Keys to long-term effectiveness and success
- Techniques to create good interoffice relations
- How to assess your interoffice relationship

Why is it that so many planning documents end up gathering dust on a shelf? Because — even if the planning process generated great ideas and enthusiasm — it's natural for staff to revert to an old and comfortable routine. It's understandable that staff would prefer to attend to pressing matters, and chronically feel they can't afford the time to begin the new initiatives described in the strategic plan. Thus, along with the planning process must come some method of monitoring implementation of the plan.

Once an office has developed its coordinated agenda and established the management structures that support it, it will face the even greater challenge of actually carrying out that agenda. This is especially true in congressional offices, which have a strong service orientation. Casework and constituent requests keep coming in no matter what else is happening, and it's particularly hard for district/state offices to separate "serving the customer" — or being reactive — from pursuing broader strategic goals. Additionally, many offices struggle to create a solid working partnership between the Washington and district/state staffs, which is critical for suc-

successful implementation of the plan. In this chapter, CMF provides offices with solutions to these challenges, and guidance for achieving their priorities and improving communication and teamwork between their offices.

### **The Difficulty of Staying on Track**

Successfully meeting strategic goals is just as much about what shouldn't be done as opposed to what should be done. Probably the biggest challenge offices have in implementing the plan is keeping the Member and the staff focused and regularly working on it. In particular, offices will almost always find that attractive new issues and possible initiatives arise. Too often offices, at the encouragement of the Member, will begin pursuing these new issues with virtually no consideration of the impact of this new work on the goals enthusiastically agreed upon in the strategic plan. Consequently, the new issues slowly and methodically crowd out the old ones.

The problem is that frequently the new issues do not warrant the attention they receive. They are not more important, more advantageous to the Member or more achievable than the goals in the plan they replace. It's just that there is no management mechanism in place to ask the critical questions that ensure offices weigh these new ideas as critically as they did the initiatives included in their plan. Specifically, Members and staff alike need to collectively ask two questions before embarking on any new and major initiatives:

1. Is this initiative sufficiently attractive that it warrants supplanting another strategic goal or action item in our plan?
2. If so, which goal or actions will be sacrificed to make room for working on this new initiative?

Sometimes offices will find that the new idea does have more merit than one or more of the goals listed in their strategic plan. In that case, it can be substituted for an existing goal and a new action plan should be developed. However, more often than not, offices will find that when subjected to scrutiny, the exciting new initiative of the day does not warrant the bumping of a previously established goal.

### **Maximizing Effectiveness by Focusing on Strategic Priorities**

How can offices maintain the discipline necessary to effectively follow-through on their strategic plan? In his best-selling book, *The Seven Habits*



of *Highly Effective People*, Dr. Stephen Covey defined effectiveness in terms of bringing about “the maximum long-term beneficial results possible.” Thus, in order to be effective, it is important to know what results are to be achieved. It is possible to be very efficient at getting many things done without being effective.

Dr. Covey uses two criteria, urgency and importance, to develop a matrix that can help determine where your time, energy and resources should be focused (see Figure 3-1). Urgent tasks are those that need to be done immediately, such as answering a ringing telephone. Important tasks are those that contribute to the achievement of goals and objectives, such as identifying funding sources for a housing project in your Member’s district or state.

**Figure 3-1**

		<b>Urgency and Importance Matrix</b>	
		<b>Urgent</b>	<b>Not Urgent</b>
<b>Important</b>	<b>QUADRANT I</b> Dealing with crises or handling projects with deadlines	<b>QUADRANT II</b> Planning, building relations and preventing crises	
<b>Not Important</b>	<b>QUADRANT III</b> Interruptions; some calls, mail and meetings	<b>QUADRANT IV</b> Busy work; some calls and mail	

Dr. Covey argues that the most crucial quadrant for achieving long-term effectiveness is Quadrant II. By planning, building relations and seeking to prevent crises, it is possible to achieve goals and objectives. Successful organizations, like successful people, maximize the likelihood of significant accomplishment by investing time in Quadrant II activities. The more time spent with Quadrant I activities — those that are urgent and important — the more one is responding to outside pressures rather than shaping their own activities. Time spent responding to matters in Quadrants III and IV do little to contribute to long-term effectiveness.

Effective congressional offices, like effective people, make time to do those things that are truly important — like pursuing the goals of their strategic plan. Figure 3-2 lists some of the activities in which district or state offices could be engaged and their location in the Covey quadrants:

**Figure 3-2****Matrixing Typical District/State Office Activities**

	<b>Urgent</b>	<b>Not Urgent</b>
<b>Important</b>	<p><b>QUADRANT I</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conference call with the CoS and Scheduler to finalize Member's weekend schedule</li> <li>• Natural disaster hits district/state</li> <li>• Large group protests Member's politics outside office</li> </ul>	<p><b>QUADRANT II</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meeting between LAs and Caseworkers to address communication breakdowns</li> <li>• Regular lunch between Field Reps. &amp; Caseworkers to share information and plan outreach</li> <li>• Meetings to build relationships with key agency contacts</li> </ul>
<b>Not Important</b>	<p><b>QUADRANT III</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Answering phone calls</li> <li>• Requests from students for research materials</li> <li>• Interruptions</li> </ul>	<p><b>QUADRANT IV</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attend local school board meetings</li> <li>• Member attendance at events with no planned role and low turnout</li> </ul>

Most Quadrant I activities are one-time activities with a deadline, while most Quadrant II activities are designed to set priorities and create systems that will allow an office to effectively complete the work that needs to be done. Because they are not driven by deadlines, the danger is that these activities will be delayed in favor of ones that are less important, but more pressing. However, having the organization and discipline to devote regular time to Quadrant II activities is the key to long-term effectiveness and success in achieving the goals set out in your strategic plan. Once effective work systems have been put into place, things that may seem urgent, like a casework problem, can be easily resolved.

In a congressional office, the challenge of becoming a highly effective organization and implementing a coordinated agenda can be broken down into two managerial challenges: managing the work and managing interoffice relations. Managing the work involves organizing, coordinating and monitoring all activities developed to achieve office-wide goals. Managing interoffice relations involves ensuring good will and good communications among offices. Strong interoffice relationships are the product of clear vision, duties and expectations, along with respect and recognition. The key to success on all these fronts is taking the time to develop systems and office practices that allow an office to work effec-

tively and maintain a focus on strategic goals — in other words, engaging in Quadrant II activities.

## Managing the Work

Managing the work includes managing both the major projects (a two-day conference or seven-day trip across the state) and the routine, day-to-day activities of a district/state office. To do both, tools are necessary to help staff plan and track their work, and systems should be implemented to ensure that the plans are followed. CMF recommends that an office adopt some of the following, simple methods.

**Action plans.** As discussed in Chapter 1, an action plan is a document that details every task needed to complete a project, including deadlines and individual staff responsibilities. Whichever staffer is primarily accountable for the outcome of a major project should systematically think through and prioritize these points, organizing them into a written plan that others involved in the project can review and use for guidance. This exercise is essential for large projects, especially those involving the collaborative effort of several staff. Following an action plan requires staff to think and plan methodically. It helps identify potential problems on the front end; increases understanding of tasks and accountability; forces staff to double-check that the goal warrants the work required to achieve it; and prevents the ad hoc planning that so often dooms large or long-term projects.

If no formal action plan is developed for a major activity, important steps fall through the cracks because priorities get tangled and staff will not know who's in charge of what. Then, as is so often the case, the entire office gets called upon at the 11th hour to bail out an initiative that could have been completed well ahead of time had there only been better organization. Fire drills of this sort are taxing for everyone, bad for staff morale and not conducive to quality work.

Having a plan of action for a proposed project is helpful, but it does not guarantee implementation. Major projects, in particular, must be carefully reviewed and tracked by the staffers responsible for them. CMF recommends that offices regularly review all action plans with the appropriate staff to make sure that deadlines are met and problems are discovered and addressed early on. Offices need mechanisms for monitoring prog-



*If no formal action plan is developed for a major activity, important steps fall through the cracks because priorities get tangled and staff will not know who's in charge of what.*



ress, solving problems that arise and ensuring the work gets completed on time. CMF recommends the following for overseeing both the office's major and daily activities.

**Weekly staff meetings.** Staff meetings are a common method for briefing the staff and coordinating their efforts. CMF offers the following suggestions for well-run, effective meetings that help staff maintain a clear focus on the coordinated agenda:

- Devote a portion of the meeting to the staff's reports and to a discussion of their progress on implementing strategic goals. This practice keeps the entire staff focused on the overall office plan and reduces discussion of less important matters. Equally important, it underscores that staff are accountable for completing their assigned tasks. Though it's probably unnecessary to review the strategic plan at *every* staff meeting, you should review it at least once a month.
- Include both Washington and district/state staff in the meeting through a conference call or videoconference. If the two staffs rarely hold joint meetings, they will soon view their activities as separate, distinct and requiring only minimal coordination. All staff should practice good etiquette during these meetings, even if it's via videoconference (i.e., identify who is speaking, speak one at a time and talk directly into the speaker), so that participants at the other end can easily follow the proceedings.
- For Senate Washington offices, comprehensive, full-staff meetings could become unwieldy and may be more suitable to occasional meetings, such as quarterly check-ins; smaller departmental meetings might be more practical in these instances. State offices should meet both separately and together through conference calls, videoconferencing or in-person, if possible.

Offices frequently make the mistake of trying to do all the necessary planning and coordinating for the week in a single weekly staff meeting. It is sometimes an efficient organizing model for the CoS or DD/SD, but is almost always inefficient for the rest of the staff. Why? Because it means that every staff member has to listen to all discussion and problem-solving even when it doesn't affect their work for the week. For example, case-work staff may have to sit through a detailed discussion of the Member's travel plans for the weekend that may not directly impact them. While all staff benefit from becoming more informed of the office's activities, if

certain issues or projects require *extensive* planning or discussion, schedule another meeting for the relevant staff rather than discussing it with the entire group.

**Frequent ad hoc planning meetings.** Consider organizing ad hoc meetings to address specific problems or opportunities that arise (e.g., breaking events or general office problems). The key is to convene the meeting with the appropriate staff, set aside the necessary time and don't try to squeeze problem-solving meetings into the weekly staff meeting. The issues will be addressed more efficiently if only those who need to participate are there; they have ample preparation time and the necessary information to think about the problem or opportunity; and are not forced to reach decisions prematurely with too little time for consideration.

If, for example, the Member wants to pursue a new initiative, then a meeting should be scheduled that includes the Member and the relevant staff affected by the initiative to evaluate the merits of the initiative and consider the two questions raised on page 62. Possible outcomes of such a meeting include: deciding to include a new goal in the plan and drop an old goal; deciding not to pursue the new idea; or deciding to conduct some further preliminary research before making a decision. Over time, such meetings will create office discipline and enhance office follow-through, while further fostering strategic thinking.

**Functional meetings.** Rather than trying to do most of your coordination and oversight in a single weekly staff meeting, organize other meetings by office function. For example, schedule regular caseworker meetings (weekly, bimonthly or monthly) to problem-solve or review challenging cases facing the office. Other meetings could be organized around different office functions (i.e., outreach, scheduling and events, projects).

**Weekly or monthly progress reports.** Weekly updates from staff to the Member and Chief of Staff or District/State Director can keep management well informed of the staff's progress. To ensure this reporting do not become simply a rundown of what staffers are working on, CMF recommends that offices apply the following rule: require staffers to begin each update by reporting on their progress on activities that relate directly to the office's strategic plan rather than on the most recent events. This practice reminds staff that their first and foremost responsibility is to meet the plan-related activities and not just to handle the daily, routine



work and react to events. The format and process is less important for these updates than the documenting and sharing of information among staff. The focus should be on the outcomes — the staff's progress — not the updates themselves.

**Monthly strategic planning meetings.** Chiefs of Staff should hold all-staff meetings at the beginning of each month to review progress on the strategic goals. The Member should not be present at these sessions, but the Chief of Staff must know the status of the Member's progress prior to the meeting. The Member, like the staff, must remain accountable to the agreed-upon goals.

The primary purpose of the meeting is to determine if the action items listed for completion in the previous month were, in fact, completed. Such regularly scheduled meetings clearly communicate the office's commitment to meet its goals and not simply fall back into the old routines. Another important purpose is to discuss problems staff may be having with meeting their deadlines. The action plan may underestimate the difficulty in obtaining a location for a district/state event or the time it takes to get a piece of legislation drafted by the Legislative Counsel's office. Or perhaps a staff person became distracted on another assignment that they thought was an overriding short-term priority. These meetings are a good opportunity to identify and discuss problems and to make the regular and necessary adjustments required.

**Quarterly senior management meetings.** Similar to private-sector quarterly board meetings, these meetings are another effective tool for reviewing progress and maintaining coordination. The Member, Chief of Staff, District/State Director, Legislative Director, Communications Director and any other senior management staff should meet to review progress towards office goals. The team should examine underlying assumptions of the overall office plan and assess the relevance of new information or events that have transpired since the plan was drafted to determine whether the goals warrant revision.

**Individual meetings.** Clear action plans and regular oversight are critical components of an effective management system. These tools need to be reinforced by a management practice of holding all staff accountable. The DD/SD should consistently make sure that staffers understand that those who turn out high-quality work on time will be recognized, while staff who fail to meet their deadlines or whose work products are inconsistent

or sub-standard will not be rewarded and may face consequences. In too many congressional offices, management fails to properly acknowledge outstanding workers and address the unacceptable work performance of others. Over time, this management failure tends to demoralize the best performers and discourage the average or sub-standard staff from making the effort to address their performance problems.

As discussed in detail in Chapter 2, the best practices for building an office culture that promotes excellence is to engage in ongoing dialogue with all staff about their performance. Supervisors should meet with individual staff either quarterly, monthly, or weekly to review action plans; determine if individual goals are still appropriate; the status of goals, projects, and tasks; what resources are needed to accomplish them; and review performance issues, if any. Be clear about what is expected of them, what they do well and where they need improvement. Then, inform them when their specific work meets or exceeds expectations and when it falls short. Recognize outstanding work with bonus pay, raises, office-wide praise and, of course, public and private words of appreciation from the boss. Staffers who consistently do not meet deadlines should be counseled regarding their performance and its subsequent impact on the office and potentially be placed on a Performance Improvement Plan (PIP) by their manager. Do not wait until the end of the year to discuss a staffer's performance, whether positive or negative. Meet with the staffer regularly to review expectations and performance, which serves both the interest of the staffer and office.

**Timelines.** Some Chiefs of Staff hang a large timeline on their walls that chart the office's goals and the primary "milestones" or timeframes when significant actions are to be completed. Such a visual display will catch people's attention, let them know that their duties will not be allowed to slip through the cracks and create an easy reference status report on which to base further discussion or meetings.

In short, the plan must be a living document. If it is reviewed regularly and revised when necessary, it will provide a way to rationally integrate shifts in the Member's interests and the policy terrain. It will also keep the office focused on its priorities while allowing for intelligent trade-offs based on a strategic view of your options.

*The DD/SD should consistently make sure that staffers understand that those who turn out high-quality work on time will be recognized, while staff who fail to meet their deadlines or whose work products are inconsistent or sub-standard will not be rewarded and may face consequences.*



## Conducting Effective Meetings

- 1 Meet at regularly scheduled times** when possible so that the effort of securing a time that works for everyone does not have to occur each week.
- 2 Designate a meeting facilitator.** Most Chiefs of Staff believe that it is more effective for them to run a meeting than for the Member.
- 3 Have a clear purpose** (e.g., information-sharing, coordination, problem-solving). Without it, meetings try to accomplish too much, go too long and diminish the energy of the participants.
- 4 Operate from a written agenda** so everyone knows what is to be discussed. Whenever possible, distribute it in advance to allow staff to prepare.
- 5 Establish a starting and ending time (and stick to it!).** Ideally, each agenda item would also have a starting time, which requires the facilitator to think through how long the meeting should take.
- 6 Inform staff of their responsibilities ahead of time** (bringing their calendars, briefing other staff on relevant issues, note-taking, etc.).
- 7 Everyone should participate but no one should dominate.** Staff comments and questions should be encouraged so the meeting is not just about top-down management direction.
- 8 Adhere to a standardized format.** If staff understand the format and what is expected of them, the meetings will operate more efficiently.
- 9 End by summarizing the results and next steps.** Review who is going to do what by when. Afterward, promptly circulate this summary to all staff, including the major topics discussed, decisions made and assignments.
- 10 Assess their effectiveness.** Even effective formats can grow tiresome over time. Ask staff for feedback and suggestions that would improve future meetings.

## Measuring Office Performance

In addition to guiding offices, plans are useful tools for evaluating an office's performance by asking and answering the following questions:

- Did we meet the goals laid out in our plan?
- Where did we succeed, and where did we fail?
- When we succeeded, what were the variables that contributed to our success?
- When we failed, what were the variables that contributed to our failure?
- Given this analysis, what changes should we make in the operation this year to improve performance?

Asking these questions does more than simply make the office accountable. Such evaluation also creates a process for promoting organizational growth. The best offices in Congress, like the best businesses, have a strong capacity for improvement. They regularly identify and address problems. They learn from their mistakes and they turn shortcomings into growth and success. Through this learning process good offices become great offices.

*The best offices in Congress, like the best businesses, have a strong capacity for improvement. They regularly identify and address problems. They learn from their mistakes and they turn shortcomings into growth and success. Through this learning process good offices become great offices.*

## Obstacles to Creating Good Interoffice Relations

The challenge of creating strong working partnerships between the Washington office and the district/state offices is routinely cited by congressional offices as one of the most troubling problems they face. It is also one of the most difficult to solve because offices are frequently unclear about the cause of the problem. Members are often bewildered and disappointed that their staff don't get along well and allow matters to slip between the cracks due to breakdowns in communications. The assumption is that smart, mature and committed people with shared goals (promoting the interests and agenda of the Member) should be able to develop good working relationships and solve questions concerning jurisdiction or information-sharing. What is lost in this analysis are the three fundamental obstacles to creating effective interoffice communication and coordination between Washington and the district/state:



1. Distance
2. Different core functions
3. Drive for efficiency rather than effectiveness

Unless these problems are addressed directly, they are unlikely to go away.

The first and most obvious obstacle is that the Washington and district/state offices tend to be physically far apart, and for that reason have minimal face-to-face contact. The second obstacle is that the offices generally work on different functions (casework and outreach in the district/state vs. legislation and constituent mail in Washington). Frequently, they feel they share little in common with their colleagues in the “other” office.

Given these differences in geography and function, the inclination of most congressional staff and their managers is to operate independently. It is much easier to make a decision in Washington than to coordinate and conduct a meeting with some of the state staff to make sure they agree with your thinking. . . and vice versa. Most people have a strong inclination to want to work efficiently. They want to get their work done as simply and with the least amount of time and energy as necessary to do a good job. Thus, the drive for efficiency is the third obstacle to good interoffice relationships. Coordinating work long-distance with colleagues who frequently have a different perspective can be time-consuming and frustrating.



Not surprisingly, many well-intentioned offices find that simply getting the work done is hard enough. Including staff from the other office into the decision-making process, or even taking the time to share what has been decided, becomes difficult. As a result, offices tend to develop work routines and patterns that exclude, rather than include, the other office, creating problems that undermine the entire office operation, including mistrust, resentment, concealing of information and poor communications. Attempts to alter these independent work patterns are often viewed as making trouble, unnecessary micro-management, “power grabs” or unrealistic and unnecessary demands.

Efficiency, however, does not always equal effectiveness. Congressional offices work most effectively when Washington and the district/state offices are working in unison. But this coordination of work takes time — the scarcest resource in Congress. So, many offices choose instead to only coordinate projects that absolutely require coordination, and share information only on a need-to-know basis.

Interestingly, CMF's survey of District and State Directors reveals that, in far too many offices, interoffice communication problems exist but are generally tolerated. A majority of House and Senate respondents was either "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with the communication and cooperation between Washington and district/state operations (see Figure 3-3). Yet, "breakdowns in communications among staff" were the top choice for both the House and the Senate respondents when asked about the greatest source of problems and tensions between DC and district/state offices (see Figure 3-4).

This data suggests that while most managers are well aware of communication problems, they've resigned themselves to endure them. They may doubt whether significant improvements in communication are possible. And, even if they want to make improvements, they aren't sure how to go about it.

**Figure 3-3**

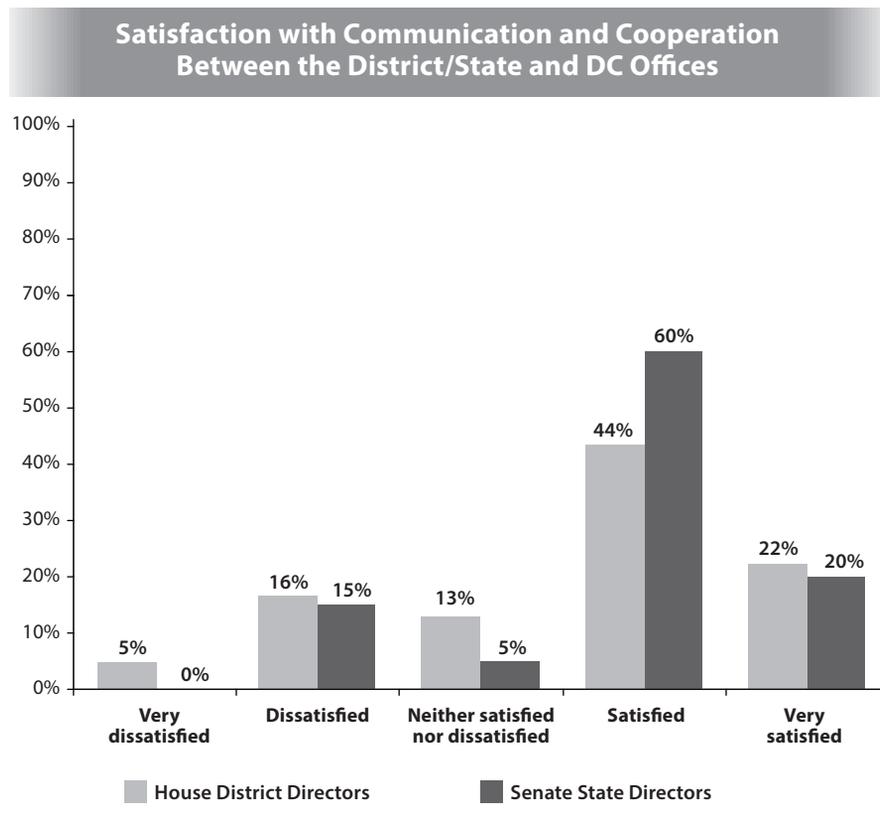
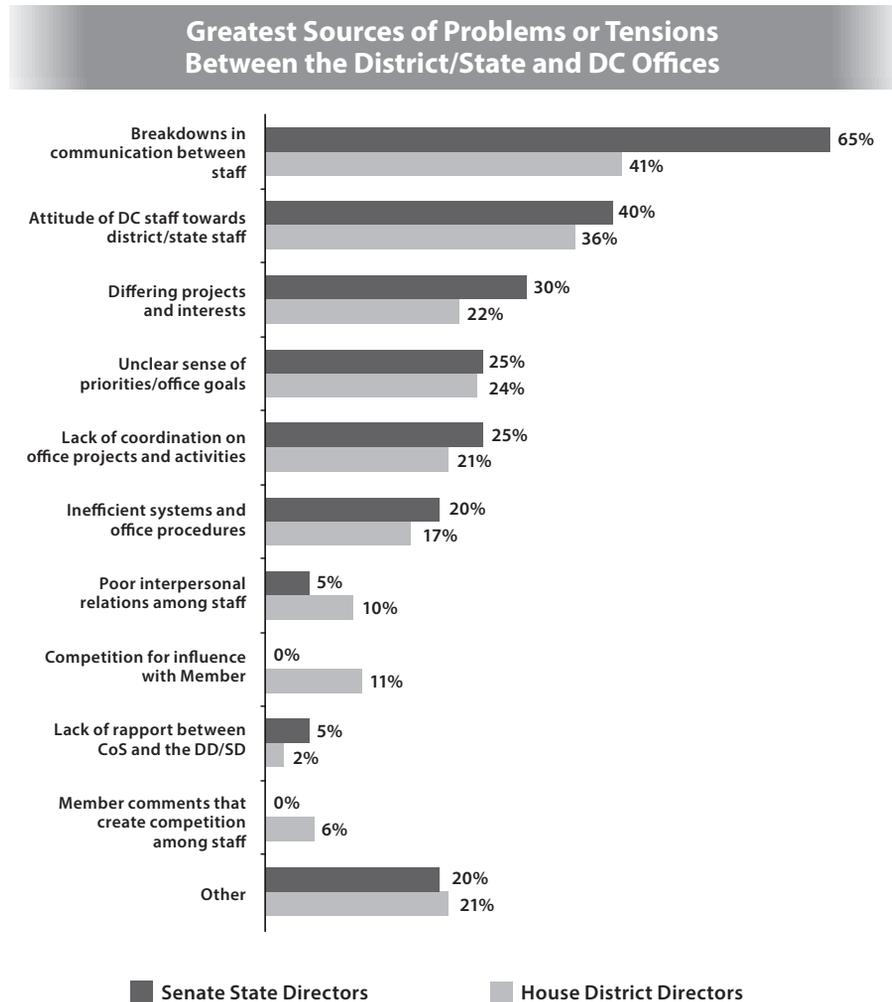


Figure 3-4



Note: Respondents were allowed to choose their top two problems so results total more than 100%.

### Techniques for Enhancing Interoffice Communications and Coordination

What can be done to prevent falling into this trap? What can a Chief of Staff or District/State Director do if independence from, and resentment of, the “other” office has already begun? The following practices can enhance office communications and improve interoffice relations.

**Conduct annual planning sessions.** As discussed in detail in Chapter 1, gathering all of the personal staff together in either Washington or the district or state to develop an office-wide plan is an excellent vehicle for developing a common sense of purpose and teamwork within offices. While the main purpose of most staff planning sessions is to generate a strategic document, they are also invaluable for developing good rapport with staff from the other office. Annual planning sessions are also a prime opportunity to identify sources of communication breakdowns and develop solutions to avoid them in the future.

**Ensure a good Chief of Staff and District/State Director relationship exists.**

There is no substitute for a solid partnership between the CoS and the DD/SD. CMF's experience and surveys of congressional offices show that many poor Washington–district/state office relationships can be traced to mistrust between their senior managers. According to the House and Senate offices that reported they have a “good” or “excellent” working relationship between the CoS and DD/SD, the keys to building trust are: (1) mutual respect and (2) open, honest and frequent communication, particularly through telephone calls. The ability to have open and ongoing dialogue is particularly important when discussing and clarifying each person's assumptions and expectations and is another critical step for preventing conflict between these two. This also will influence and help persuade the respective staffs in each office to do likewise. Other mechanisms used to clarify roles and ease communication between the CoS and DD/SD include: weekly conference calls between the Member, CoS and DD/SD; regular meetings between the Member, CoS and DD/SD management team; and establishment of joint procedures for hiring and terminating staff in Washington and the district/state.

**Demonstrate that the Member highly values the work of each office.** Lack of appreciation can breed resentment. Given the amount of time DC staff see the Member, a stop-by to the district or state office to express appreciation for hard work, or a job well done, and to meet with district/state staff is always helpful to morale and communication. Member visits to the district/state office may be more feasible for House offices than Senate offices, whose Members may visit home less often and usually have a larger area to cover.



*There is no substitute for a solid partnership between the Chief of Staff and the District/State Director. Mutual respect and open, honest and frequent communication are keys to building a trusting relationship.*

**Ensure clarity of staff responsibilities and duties.** This point was discussed at length in Chapter 2, but is crucial and so bears repeating. Lack of clarity regarding the responsibilities of staff can lead to unnecessary tensions and staff conflicts, staff uncertainty about their responsibilities and important matters falling through the cracks. Office-wide clarity about individual duties can prevent these problems. Take the time to establish clear position descriptions, resolve questions that arise regarding staff responsibilities and provide opportunities for routine review and clarification.

**Encourage regular staff communication and interaction.** This is critical not only for managing the overall strategic plan and large events, but for implementing routine office activities. Members and top managers in both offices should not only set an example through frequent daily communication, they should also encourage staff to do the same by identifying opportunities for staff to collaborate. For example, an LA who handles banking reform should provide all relevant congressional information to the Field Representative who meets with constituent bankers, other industries and consumer groups affected by reform. Washington staffers need to receive information on the positions of constituent groups, especially when these groups travel to DC to meet with legislative staff.

Some congressional offices follow a system in which only the DD/SD or the CoS contacts the other office for requests. In CMF's experience, this practice weakens bonds between the two staffs. One reason these offices follow such a needlessly restrictive system is that they haven't distinguished a communications channel from a command channel. While orders from one office to another should indeed follow prescribed chains of command, simple requests and information exchanges can suffer from such formality.

**Set expectations for and recognize staff collaboration.** If managers are consciously trying to promote an office culture that encourages staff collaboration, there must be rewards for supportive behavior and disincentives for unsupportive behaviors. For example, staff should know that their ability and willingness to "collaborate with other staff" and to "respond promptly to internal staff requests" are not only expected but important components of their jobs. Recognize and counsel staff regarding collaborations appropriately. Staff should know that collaboration and responsiveness are part of the criteria used when evaluating all staff

performance and determining promotion, raises and bonus pay. Better yet, include these criteria in all office job descriptions, the office policy manual and in annual staff performance goals. It speaks convincingly of the office's commitment to working as a coordinated team rather than independent offices and staff.

**Communicate often through a variety of means.** Balancing the push-pull of information in a congressional office is a commonly-cited challenge to good communications. However, most offices with good DC–district/state relationships err on the side of communicating too often, rather than not often enough. Email is most commonly used and is critical for keeping staff informed about the office's activities. However, offices shouldn't over-rely on any single communication method and should instead utilize whichever communications vehicle is most appropriate for the situation and desired outcome. For example, while

### Tapping Into the DC Pipeline

There is an abundance of resources — mostly online — to help Members of Congress and their staffs do their jobs better. For district/state staff, familiarizing themselves with the legislative and policy resources used by the DC staff is an invaluable way to stay informed of the latest happenings on the floor and around Washington. Listed below are some of the most popular and helpful resources.

#### Internal, Congressional Staff Only:

**HouseNet (the House intranet)** — <https://housenet.house.gov>

**Webster (the Senate intranet)** — <http://webster>

**Congressional Research Service (CRS)** — <http://www.crs.gov>

**Legislative Information System (LIS)** — <http://www.congress.gov>

**Leadership and party officials, as well as officers of the House and Senate** — various sites, easily accessible from the House and Senate intranets or the public sites: [www.house.gov](http://www.house.gov) and [www.senate.gov](http://www.senate.gov).

#### External, Publicly Available:

**Congressional Quarterly (CQ)** — <http://cqrollcall.com/cq/>

**National Journal** — <http://www.nationaljournal.com>

**Politico** — <http://www.politico.com>

**Roll Call** — <http://www.rollcall.com>

**The Hill** — <http://thehill.com>

**The Washington Post** — <http://www.washingtonpost.com>

**The Washington Times** — <http://www.washingtontimes.com>



efficient, email can be misread or taken out of context due to its impersonal nature, so it is difficult to have an effective discussion through email. Additional formats for communicating to and with staff include in-person meetings, conference calls, videoconferences, messaging (text and instant) and intranets. Items to communicate include the Member's schedule; updates on meetings held in DC or the district/state; press releases and op-eds; *Congressional Record* statements; replies to constituent letters on breaking issues; mail and casework reports; office planning documents; and other valuable information routinely needed by staff. Making this information accessible to all office staff should significantly reduce the volume of staff requests for information, increase the flow of critical information and free up time to discuss important matters rather than simply providing information.

**Create interoffice teams to implement goals.** Washington and district/state staffers often work on similar issues: veteran's health care; infrastructure improvement; immigration reform or the environment, to name a few. How can staff maximize the impact of their work toward common or related goals? It can be accomplished by creating interoffice teams to work together throughout the year on achieving office-wide goals and coordinating their goal-related activities.

**Encourage cross-promotion of staff between the Washington and district/state offices.** Sometimes, a staffer in the district/state is interested in pursuing a position in the DC office, or a Washington staffer is interested in moving back to the district/state. Having DC staff with experience in district/state operations and district/state staff with first-hand knowledge about how Capitol Hill works can improve the relationship and communication between the offices. Managers should encourage their staffs to consider these options when assessing their personal and professional growth in the office. Such a move could more accurately align the staffer's position with their interests and skills, while the office benefits from the staffer's knowledge and perspective.

**Foster personal relationships between offices.** Good communication is built upon frequent *informal* communication. Consider this scenario:

You work in a district office and you need information on a veteran's claim from the Legislative Assistant (LA) who deals with Armed Services matters in your Member's Washington office. The LA has worked there six months and you've never met him; you've only spoken with

him on the phone. In the past three days, you've called him twice, but he hasn't returned your call. You can't help thinking that he's ignoring you and he doesn't appreciate the importance of your work.

*or*

You've known the LA for several years. He's originally from the state and drops by your office just to say hello whenever he visits his parents. Two years ago when you visited Washington, you got to know each other over lunches. You touch base by email on issues that come up in your shared areas of expertise and now you have a good rapport. When he hasn't returned your second call in three days, you're more likely to wonder whether he's all right rather than to resent him for ignoring you.

Efforts to help Washington and district/state staffs get to know each other informally and build relationships with one another will pay off when the time comes for them to interact professionally. The resulting trust and respect are especially important given that this is a *long-distance* relationship. Ensuring coordination of day-to-day matters requires some additional practices designed to reduce misunderstandings and information gaps. The Member and top managers can encourage and create opportunities for staff interaction and communication beyond the formal annual retreats through:

- **Interoffice staff exchanges.** When establishing the annual budget, provisions should be made to cover the costs necessary for personnel to spend a week or two in the other offices shadowing various staff members while they do their jobs. The visiting staffer should be given tasks specific to that office so they understand what it's like to be a part of that environment. For example, a caseworker visiting the Washington office might be assigned to draft responses to legislative mail. This work will provide them with a better sense of the processes that go into answering mail in DC. An LA visiting the district or state office could also conduct intake interviews with constituents, or review the files of all recent cases in their issue area and identify patterns that need legislative oversight. Washington staff who aren't originally from the Member's district/state can particularly benefit from this sort of work exchange.
- **Non-working visits.** Washington staff from the district or state should be encouraged to pay an informal visit to the district or state office when they visit home. Likewise, Washington staff

should enthusiastically welcome district/state staffers who visit the DC office and the nation's capital. Staffers visiting the other office can also serve as informal ambassadors, identifying and communicating concerns to their colleagues back home or in Washington.



## **Assessing (and Reassessing) Your Interoffice Relationship**

The Washington–district/state office partnership is a relationship that requires constant effort and attention to keep it healthy. It isn't sufficient to simply establish 'ground rules' and expect them to work flawlessly thereafter. Offices need a foundation of trust, which is a by-product of open and honest communications. Earning trust between offices is critical to the effectiveness of each office. Without it, it is very difficult to operate cohesively. It requires ongoing efforts and energy to overcome the forces that encourage staff and offices to operate independently of the "other" office. Because trust is such a valuable commodity, offices need to periodically assess their communication practices and constantly look for problems and opportunities to improve. Just because office communications seem to work well today is no guarantee they will work well in the future. Staff turnover is high on Capitol Hill, and new challenges force congressional offices to adapt. CMF recommends that your office consider the following ideas for assessing office communication practices and improving interoffice relations.

1. The DD/SD and the CoS should hold quarterly meetings with their staff for the sole purpose of identifying communication or coordination problems with the other office(s), and listing suggestions for solving them. The two offices can then swap lists and each hold another meeting to review, modify or accept the suggestions. Alternatively, the two offices can review the lists together through a videoconference or conference call.
2. Use the annual, joint staff planning session to formally review difficulties with current communication or coordination procedures. Setting aside an hour or two to focus on this issue alone is an excellent use of time at a joint office planning session. The session should result in a list of measures that will be taken to improve interoffice communication and coordination.
3. Conduct an annual staff survey to determine problems and elicit feedback from staff. Free web-based survey software is easy to



## Evaluating the DC–District/State Relationship

- 1 Does your office have written goals that the Washington and district/state staff work collaboratively to accomplish or do staff pursue separate strategic agendas that require little coordination?
- 2 Do the CoS and the DD/SD have a trusting and supportive working relationship? Do they role model how the DC and district/state staffs should treat each other?
- 3 What is the level of clarity around the roles and responsibilities of each office and around the general duties of each staff person? Is there ongoing confusion related to which staff are responsible for performing what duties?
- 4 What is the level of understanding around, and the level of respect for, the contributions that the other provides to your constituents? Is there a tendency for staff to view the staff in the other office with some resentment?
- 5 Does the staff feel that the Member highly values the work of both the Washington and district/state offices, and is there equity in the resources provided both offices?
- 6 Are staff collaboration and demonstrations of teamwork between the offices recognized (formally or informally)? Is resistance to collaboration and communication tolerated?
- 7 Do both the Washington and district/state staffs informally keep staff in the other office informed of their activities via phone or email or do staff talk only when they have a specific question, request or comment?
- 8 Does your office make it easy for both staffs to access written records of interest to staff in both offices (e.g., schedule, speeches, press releases, positions, votes)?

use, allows staff to maintain their anonymity and automatically tabulates the results. Another method is to distribute a written survey, instruct staff to return it anonymously and have a staffer summarize the results. CMF can work with an office to develop the survey so that it assesses communication processes and office



relationships objectively. (Offices interested in conducting this feedback process can call CMF at 202-546-0100 for advice and/or assistance.) Most importantly, the survey results and action plan should be shared with the entire staff as a starting point for office-wide discussions on ways to improve. On the previous page, CMF provides some sample questions to consider including in an office survey or use to assess the state of your interoffice relations.

No single communication system works best for all offices. The offices of a Representative from a Maryland or Virginia suburb of Washington, D.C. — whose staff can drive to Capitol Hill just as easily as to the district office — are likely to have different communication needs than a Senator from Wyoming whose state offices are 400 miles apart and 2,000 miles — and two time zones — from Washington. The solitary district office in a five-square-mile Boston district will have very different communication needs than the five state offices spread across Tennessee. And these are just the logistics. The human variables — individual temperaments, interpersonal skills, staff friendships — are just as important in determining and reassessing an office's communication needs and options.

## Conclusion

Effectively implementing an office's agenda is a significant management challenge. First, it means that offices must exercise the discipline to set aside time each week to work on strategic priorities and not get consumed by constituent demands. Second, it requires that offices create work structures and mechanisms to ensure the work is being performed efficiently and effectively, and that there is sufficient oversight that problems are corrected quickly. Finally, and most importantly, effective implementation of a coordinated agenda requires excellent coordination and collaboration of the work of both the DC and district/state offices. In this chapter CMF has outlined recommendations for accomplishing all three troublesome tasks.

Any Chief of Staff or District/State Director interested in implementing the changes recommended in this chapter needs to understand that such an undertaking may require more than changing management practices. It very well may require changing the culture of the entire office. Culture change does not happen overnight. People tend to resist work systems that monitor their progress, hold them accountable, encourage

them to take the time to share information or operate as teams. The key to success is incremental change. Implementing all of the suggestions simultaneously is probably too much change for the staff and too difficult to oversee as a manager, which increases the likelihood that attempts to improve will fail or be abandoned. Instead, prioritize what's easiest to implement or what's most important to improve. Either way, don't delay getting started. The return on investment (ROI) to Member offices is tremendous.

## 3 CHAPTER SUMMARY

### Reaching Goals Through Coordination and Teamwork

#### DO...

- Develop systems and office practices that allow an office to work effectively and maintain its focus on strategic goals.
- Monitor progress on strategic goals in multiple ways: action plans; weekly, monthly and quarterly meetings; and regular progress reports.
- Hold all staff accountable by recognizing outstanding performers and addressing the sub-par work product of others.
- Use formal and informal strategies and communications to address the three fundamental obstacles to good interoffice relations: distance, different core functions and the drive for efficiency.
- Coordinate activities among all offices by scheduling annual planning sessions; promoting collaboration; and sharing news and information frequently.
- Create a good working relationship between the Chief of Staff and District/State Director through mutual respect and open, honest and frequent communication.

#### DON'T...

- Pursue a new and major initiative without scrutinizing how it would affect the strategic plan, goals and office resources.
- Let critical activities, such as planning and relationship building, be delayed by less important, but more pressing activities.
- Undertake a major project without first drafting a comprehensive action plan that includes tasks, responsibilities and deadlines.
- Try to cram project work into a single weekly staff meeting. If *extensive* planning or discussion is required, schedule another meeting with the relevant staffers.
- Confuse a communications channel with a command channel. Directives and decisions should follow the prescribed chains of command, but simple requests and information exchanges should be common and routine among staff.

# CHAPTER 4

## Fostering a Strategic Outreach Culture

### *This Chapter Includes...*

- Why strategic outreach is important for district/state offices
- Guidance on how to create a strategic outreach culture among staff
- Advice for integrating strategic outreach with the Member's goals and constituents' needs

It is tempting to say “yes” to as many of the constituent requests for speeches, plant tours, meetings and assistance as the Member and staff can handle and to treat them on a first come, first served basis. However, doing so results in all of the Member's time being spent responding to the requests of others, rather than advancing his or her own goals. When this happens, the workload of a congressional office can overwhelm staff and prevent them from focusing on the coordinated agenda at all.

Instead, this chapter discusses how to become a proactive office in a reactive environment. It offers suggestions for how managers can foster a proactive mindset in staff and provide services that further the Member's mission and goals. It explains how to define outreach objectives and identify activities to meet those objectives and reach new or critical audiences. In short, this chapter explains how to translate the office's strategic agenda into specific outreach activities — scheduling, events, casework and projects — that provide the greatest benefit to constituents and the greatest advantage to the Member.

## The Purpose of Strategic Outreach

Strategic outreach is the process by which an office's strategic plan and coordinated agenda are translated into proactive activities conducted by the district/state office to help carry out the Member's mission and accomplish the Member's goals. It does not significantly change the types of work the district/state office does, and it does not necessarily add work to already over-taxed staffers. Rather, strategic outreach provides a framework for making wise decisions about what activities the office can and should initiate to provide the greatest benefit to constituents and the greatest advantage to the Member. The framework can also help assess and prioritize the many incoming requests, since it provides criteria upon which to base strategic decisions.

Four basic activities offer opportunities to conduct strategic outreach:

1. Strategic scheduling of the Member's time;
2. Strategic initiation of meetings and events;
3. Proactive casework outreach; and
4. Strategic and proactive grants and projects activities.

District/state offices engage in scheduling, meetings and events, casework, grants and special projects every day. In fact, these activities comprise the bulk of the work in most district/state offices. However, few offices view these activities as anything but reactive. They receive requests from constituents and decide — sometimes based on non-strategic criteria — which invitations to accept, which events to attend and which cases and projects to take on. Offices that take advantage of strategic outreach opportunities initiate their own activities to reach strategic new audiences and provide services that directly align with the Member's mission and goals.

Strategic outreach can run the gamut from asking an unfamiliar VFW post if the Member can speak at their next meeting, to extending a hand to the Red Cross to help it with its latest project, to creating a briefing for businesses interested in obtaining government contracts. The key is that the office is strategic about the contacts and events it initiates.

*The most effective district/state offices are those that make the time to focus on strategic outreach, while still maintaining responsive constituent service operations.*

The most effective district/state offices are those that make the time to focus on strategic outreach, while still maintaining responsive

constituent service operations. Increasingly, solid constituent service is

no longer enough. Members must be perceived as having clear goals that they actively pursue, not just as politicians seeking to retain their jobs. They need to demonstrate their effectiveness. That is where strategic outreach comes in. It is a critical tool for communicating the Member's targeted message about what he or she cares about, hopes to accomplish and has accomplished in Congress.

## Obstacles to Conducting Strategic Outreach

Many offices believe that outreach is important, but knowing the office should conduct strategic outreach and actually making the time to do it are two entirely different things. Why do offices tend not to do outreach? There are a number of explanations.

- **Offices are overwhelmed with responding to constituent requests.** Frequently, offices establish patterns of reacting to constituent demands in their first term instead of developing activities to promote the Member's agenda, and they never break out of this habit. They find a formula that appears to work, and may not feel a strong need to adjust it. These offices often only realize they have missed opportunities to advance the Member's agenda in the face of a crisis. For example, the Member receives no credit for a legislative initiative worked on for several years; hears through the grapevine that a strong and vocal constituent group feels alienated; or suddenly faces a strong challenger who appears to have come from nowhere. For some offices, realizing the importance of strategic outreach comes too late.
- **Staff are uncomfortable promoting an agenda.** Another reason offices have for not doing strategic outreach is that district/state staff view their role as responsive public servants, not as calculated strategists. They define themselves solely as serving constituents, and many even view advancement of any agenda as inappropriate. What they fail to realize, however, is that strategic outreach in support of the Member's goals can make the office even more effective in serving constituents. An office can attain more — and often bigger — successes by working strategically and methodically toward specific goals rather than applying a completely reactive and often scattershot approach to district/state activities.



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However, without participation in office-wide strategic planning sessions, district/state staffers may not appreciate their important role in attaining the Member's goals and communicating the Member's message while simultaneously serving constituents. Offices that do not develop outreach strategies, or that do not see outreach as providing good customer service, are not maximizing their potential in the district/state.

- **Office relies too heavily on core supporters.** Members and their staff also have a tendency to gravitate to whom they know. Many conduct outreach and initiate meetings and events, but only with groups with which they are already comfortable, and from whom they already enjoy support. While a Member should not ignore his or her base, truly strategic outreach is premised on the need to identify and focus on stakeholders who are really critical to strengthening or expanding the base — those with whom the Member still needs to form relationships and alliances — not just on those who are already supporters.
- **Staff feel only the Member can perform outreach.** Finally, many district and state staffers think the Member, not the staff, is responsible for conducting strategic outreach activities. These offices may be strategic about setting up the Member's district/state schedule, but staff schedules remain reactive. Limiting strategic outreach activities to those in which the Member can participate is unnecessary and usually hamstring the office's efforts entirely. The Member's time is a valuable, but extremely limited, resource. Staff must play a significant role in helping to establish and expand the Member's presence and image in the community, communicate the Member's message and attain the Member's goals.

### **Creating an Outreach Culture**

Even in offices where the value of strategic outreach is recognized, building an office culture that supports an ongoing process of thinking creatively and strategically to identify opportunities to advance established goals does not happen overnight. Developing an office culture that is not only service-oriented but also strategically oriented takes some time.

Providing high quality service to constituents requires staffers to be friendly and responsive to constituents who contact the office — essen-

tially a reactive task. It requires staff to answer the critical question, “How can I best serve these constituents and make sure they understand that helping them is important to the Member?”

An outreach mindset, on the other hand, requires staff to generate their own ideas on how to communicate with strategic constituents who have not initiated contact with the office — a proactive task. Developing strategic outreach initiatives requires asking very different questions, such as: “What can the office do to build relationships with this group?” or “What event could we organize that would effectively communicate our message on this issue?” If management wants staff to become comfortable contributing to the outreach activities, the office has to promote creative and strategic thinking. This section explores strategies and techniques the District/State Director should employ to foster an outreach culture.

- **Make it clear to staff that they are expected to think strategically and help identify and develop outreach opportunities.** That means clearly conveying the Member’s goals and keeping them the focus of all the work of the office. Managers should provide staff with opportunities to contribute their ideas and publicly recognize successful outreach efforts. Another idea is for managers to incorporate discussion of strategic outreach into staff meetings and encourage staff to regularly scan the environment for groups the office should reach out to, events for staff to attend and opportunities for initiating contacts or events in support of the Member’s goals.
- **Provide staff the context and perspective they need to become strategic.** Staff need to clearly understand the relevant details — environmental, social, political, etc. — about the district/state. They also need to understand the Member’s priorities and the context behind them. Ideally, district/state staff should participate in a strategic planning session with the rest of the staff to define those priorities. It is important for staff to grasp the context in which they do their work, and how their work helps accomplish the Member’s goals.
- **Create group opportunities for staff to learn how to generate effective outreach initiatives.** Routinely pull staff together, posing a specific question such as, “How can we gain wide-scale attention in our state for the boss’ bill to reduce handgun violence by children?” Ask staff to spend 15–30 min-



utes brainstorming ideas on how the office could achieve this end. The experience of regularly thinking creatively as a group will markedly enhance everyone's problem-solving skills and make it easier for staff to identify opportunities and generate ideas on their own. Try to make these outreach strategy meetings fun and enjoyable, which usually enhances the creative process.

- **Address any staff concerns that may exist about contributing to the office's outreach initiatives.** In some offices, for example, Caseworkers who have defined their jobs strictly as serving constituents will be uncomfortable being expected to identify outreach activities because they may seem too calculated or too political. These staffers must clearly understand that being asked to think about outreach targeted to specific regions or groups does not affect how they handle constituent cases. It simply enables them to reach out to — and serve — constituents who might not otherwise contact the office and with whom the office, by providing proactive offers of assistance, can develop strategic relationships that can help achieve the Member's goals. In some offices, these expectations are clearly defined in staff's position descriptions or annual performance goals so there is no ambiguity regarding staff's role or responsibility in strategic outreach.

## Defining Strategic Outreach Objectives and Activities

By definition, strategic outreach must be targeted. Clearly, helping to accomplish the Member's articulated goals and priorities is the primary purpose of strategic outreach, but how does an office translate them into outreach opportunities?



### Additional Information

CMF, which produced this book, has helped hundreds of congressional offices conduct these analyses as part of their strategic planning sessions. For additional guidance or information, visit the CMF website at [CongressFoundation.org](http://CongressFoundation.org) or contact CMF at 202-546-0100.

CMF has found that there are exercises that can be incorporated into an all-staff strategic planning session, or a more specific district/state staff outreach planning session. Stakeholder analysis and an analysis of the internal strengths and weaknesses of the office and of the external opportunities and threats, known as a SWOT analysis, can help the office identify strategic outreach objectives and opportunities.

By focusing these analyses on strategic outreach and the Member's goals, an office can quickly identify groups and activities it should pursue for its strategic outreach. Additionally, when staff participate in the process, they can directly see how their work contributes to the Member's goals. They are more likely to contribute to strategic outreach if they have an opportunity to shape the outreach objectives and activities and understand how it relates to their work.

**Stakeholder analysis.** A stakeholder analysis helps to define who the office's stakeholders are, which ones should be prioritized and how the office is performing with its interactions with the priority stakeholders. Through a stakeholder analysis, an office can determine whom the office should be reaching out to more often and how to analyze and prioritize the many invitations it receives. CMF recommends the following process for conducting a stakeholder analysis:

1. Identify all of the constituent groups, business interests, government entities, or individuals that can “stake a claim” on the Member's or the office's attention, or which affect the Member and/or the office.
2. Analyze and rank the importance of each stakeholder to the office. Are they (a) essential, (b) important but not essential or (c) marginally important in attaining the Member's goals? Can they significantly hurt or help the office in reaching the Member's goals?
3. Grade the office's performance in meeting the needs and expectations of the “essential” stakeholders. It is important to note this assessment should reflect how the stakeholder would grade the office, not how the office would grade itself.
4. Develop outreach strategies to better meet the needs and expectations of the most important stakeholders (unless the office has concluded that the stakeholder is very pleased with the office's performance).

A rigorous stakeholder analysis can point out that the office is spending inordinate amounts of time with constituents who — because the office is doing very well by them — do not actually need so much time, or that it is giving short shrift to some stakeholders who really need to be better cultivated. For example, if the Member was a doctor prior to his election, supports much of the national legislative agenda doctors favor and



has deep roots in the medical community, it is not essential for him to spend a lot of time with doctors. The Member might want to cut back his involvement with them if he is already addressing their concerns. This change will give him time to build bridges to groups that will not always be supportive of his efforts, but who might be valuable allies on key issues. For example, if the stakeholder analysis concludes that the Member's standing with the business community is uneven, the office should spend more time identifying ways to strengthen and broaden business support.

**SWOT analysis.** A SWOT analysis requires an office to examine the environment in which it does its work. It is a methodical way of identifying internal strengths and weaknesses and external opportunities and threats to develop strategies for capitalizing on the strengths and opportunities and mitigating the weaknesses and threats. When applied to strategic outreach, a SWOT analysis can help place parameters on the activities an office decides to undertake. If strategic outreach ideas do not align with the office's strengths and opportunities, the office probably will not gain much from them unless it first overcomes relevant weaknesses and threats, and it could end up spending a lot of time and resources for nothing. For conducting a SWOT analysis, CMF recommends the following process.



1. As a group, brainstorm the office's and Member's strengths and weaknesses. Include only those things which are current, internal and over which the office or Member has control. For example, strengths might include a choice committee assignment, rapport with the press or the Member's particularly engaging personality. Strengths are things you can rely on and build on.

Weaknesses might include broken promises from the campaign, new or inexperienced staff or a bad relationship between the Member and the most important local media outlet. Weaknesses are things that can hamstring the office, but over which the office or the Member has some control.

2. Brainstorm the factors in the environment (Congress, district, state, nation, etc.) which pose opportunities or threats to the Member or the office. Include only those things that are possibilities in the future, external to the office and over which the office has no control. Depending on the office's perspective, the following could be examples of opportunities or threats: passage of a major piece of legislation, possible change of congressional leadership, economic recession (and recovery) or further terrorist threats.

- Now analyze the lists. Circle the strengths and opportunities that offer the greatest potential on which to capitalize, and circle the weaknesses and threats that are most important to mitigate.

### Identifying and Selecting Outreach Opportunities

Using the results of the SWOT analysis and the stakeholder analysis, and keeping the Member's goals in mind, the office should have enough strategic information on which to base its outreach plans and to ensure that they target the right stakeholders and capitalize on the office's strengths and available opportunities. When developing plans, consider the following questions:

- In which events or forums already scheduled by others in the district/state should the office seek to participate to help achieve the Member's goal(s)?
- What kinds of district/state events can the office develop that will generate understanding and support for the Member's goals?
- With which groups, organizations, companies, government officials or community leaders should the office be meeting? What does the office want to accomplish by meeting with them? Why and how might the office want to work more closely with them in the future?
- Is there a trend, hot issue or popular forum the office can or should take advantage of?

In answering these questions, it is critical that the district/state office solicit input from the DC staff. They will undoubtedly participate in some of the outreach activities (e.g., preparing speeches, performing research, briefing the Member on relevant legislation), and they will feel more committed to its success if they are part of the development. Including them also reinforces the concept that there are no "Washington" or "district/state" activities. The staff back home may take the lead on district/state outreach, but there are important roles for both offices to play.

Whichever opportunities for outreach the office chooses, it is essential they be integrated with one another and that they grow out of the overall planning process. Visibility for the Member is not a sufficient goal; each activity the office undertakes should promote the Member's

*Whichever opportunities for outreach the office chooses, it is essential they be integrated with one another and that they grow out of the overall planning process.*





broader strategic agenda. Consider the following strategic questions when selecting outreach opportunities:

1. Does the proposed activity support achievement of one of the office's goals? One office scheduled the Member to meet with more than 50 schools in one year thinking it was a good idea generally. It is a nice idea — if the Member is running for school board. This civic-minded but non-strategic schedule did not allow the Member time to accomplish what he really wanted to do — he was already all booked up.
2. Is the cost of pursuing this outreach initiative — in staff time, money or other lost opportunities — worth the benefit? It is important to weigh the trade-offs, especially when pursuing an ambitious outreach strategy. The SWOT analysis can go a long way toward helping answer this question, since it requires the office to clearly define strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.
3. Is the activity likely to generate favorable and prominent press coverage? Press attention does not have to come right away — or even at all. However, having a press strategy from the outset, rather than trying to gain press coverage after the fact, is more likely to yield more and better media attention when the office wants to receive it. A project can lead to the Member joining local leaders to brief the media on an issue or on related community plans, for example.
4. Will the proposed outreach initiative reach the office's essential stakeholders? Refer to the stakeholder analysis to determine whether activities will target the most critical stakeholders. This does not mean the office should ignore other stakeholders, but strategic outreach should focus primarily on those with which the office needs to establish or strengthen relationships and alliances.
5. What are the obstacles to success, and what can the office do to overcome them? When planning outreach opportunities, it is important to consider the possible problems the office might encounter and develop strategies for mitigating or eliminating them. The problems may never arise, but if the office is prepared for them, they will not become the resource-taxing crises they might if they were unanticipated.

After answering these questions and selecting outreach opportunities, the office should have a first draft of the major strategic outreach activities it wants to conduct that year. Using this draft, managers can assign staff responsibilities, set deadlines and coordinate the team. For example, the Scheduler will need to block out time or dates on the calendar; the DD/SD might ask stakeholders about their expectations of and goals for the event; LAs and Field Reps will want to do relevant research and preparation; and the Communications Director will want to lay the groundwork for good media coverage.

However, just because the office has a blueprint does not mean it is set in stone. Opportunities may arise later that should be seized. Offices should evaluate new opportunities using the criteria outlined above to determine if they meet the office's goals, and if trade-offs need to be made with the events and projects in the existing plan.

### **Evaluating Outreach: Learning from Experience**

Every strategic outreach initiative the office undertakes will be a learning experience. As such, staff involved should review each activity after the fact to determine what the office did well, which skills need to be improved and how it may want to do things differently in the future. This is called an after action review, and it should be a process that focuses on learning from experience and avoids assigning fault or blame. To be most effective, after action reviews should be conducted as soon as possible after the completion of a project or activity to capture the most valuable data from which to learn. The primary questions to ask during an after action review are simple: What went well? What did not go well? What can the office do differently next time? It should not take long for the staff involved in the outreach activity to generate answers for each question. The answers should be captured, kept on file and referred to the next time a similar outreach activity is undertaken. This way, the office gains wisdom from its experience.

If an office wishes to go into more detail with their after action review — which may be useful for particularly ambitious, far-reaching or long-term outreach activities — the staff should explore the answers to the following questions:

- Were the objectives of the outreach activity clear? If not, why not? It is difficult to accomplish objectives if they are not clear, so the answer to this question can be particularly enlightening.



- Were communication and coordination smooth? If not, why not? An office that does not have well-established lines of communication may find itself struggling when attempting outreach because staff is not used to routinely updating each other or coordinating with external individuals and organizations to the extent necessary to carry off a truly successful strategic outreach activity.
- Was there adequate planning? Was the timeline realistic? If not, how was it unrealistic? Was the action plan comprehensive enough to encompass all of the necessary activities or did it omit key steps? Effective planning is critical for pulling off

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strategic outreach activities, especially when the office is just beginning to perform this work. When the office is no longer reacting to others' events and activities, but initiating its own, it

needs to carefully think through timelines and action plans to ensure success.

- Were there adequate resources (staff, time and money) to handle the initiative? Conducting strategic outreach is a high-profile activity and therefore a more risky proposition than simply reacting to invitations and requests. It is critical that resources are available to make outreach activities a success. For example, if an office uses its newsletter to solicit survey feedback on an issue, it must be sure it is prepared for the response generated. Are there enough people to enter and analyze the data? The office will only get value from the data and be able to use it effectively to further their outreach efforts if it is analyzed and capitalized upon as soon as possible on the heels of the survey.
- Who was in charge? How were decisions made? If there was no manager of the outreach activity, but the group functioned well and made the right decisions, the office deserves a pat on the back for fostering a high-performing team. If the person in charge was able to handle things well, that is also commendable because it demonstrates the management capabilities of staff. But if the person in charge did not live up to expectations, what was the reason? Did he or she have buy-in from others in the group? Did he or she receive inadequate direction from the

manager? What coaching does this failed group leader need to be successful next time?

- Was the staff well prepared? This question is especially important for staff representing the Member at meetings outside the office. The key to making these staff meetings with targeted groups successful is to plan strategically beforehand. Ask, “What is the purpose of the meeting? What is the desired outcome?” Answering these questions before the meeting will help ensure that targeted groups leave meetings believing that they are priorities for the Member; that the Member and the office understand the group’s concerns; and that the office will provide assistance wherever possible. They may also want to generate ideas for future events, speeches or projects that both parties might undertake together. Make sure that staff representing the Member had clear answers to these questions going into a meeting. If they did not, identify ways to ensure they do in the future.

Still another means of assessing the success of strategic outreach activities is to ask those with whom the office worked. A simple telephone call to a constituent group asking, “How did we do?” will usually provide helpful feedback. Another option is to ask attendees of the office’s event to complete a questionnaire or online survey to evaluate the office’s performance.

Finally, an office can assess some events and outreach initiatives by examining the amount and the quality of the media coverage it received. Did the coverage accurately and adequately reflect the objective of the event? Did the message of the event reach constituents beyond those who attended? Did the press strategy for the event work as expected and generate the desired coverage?

There are multiple ways of measuring the effectiveness of a strategic outreach project. The bottom line is that reviewing an activity — or several activities over the course of the year — should be considered a learning tool, not a way to assess and fix blame.

Evaluating the office’s outreach activities will dramatically improve the decision-making process, provide feedback to staff and create a learning organization that is capable of ongoing growth and improvement. Most importantly, it will help ensure the office’s outreach efforts are effectively advancing the goals established in the strategic plan.

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## Conclusion

Many Members run for elected office “to make a difference” in the lives of their constituents, but they can only leave a legacy if they and the staff have clarity about what they want to achieve and how to go about it. Without goals, priorities and clear strategies, offices behave in a reactive manner, treating all invitations and requests with equal importance. While it is more *efficient* to simply respond to what district/state constituencies urge the office to do, it is not the most *effective* way to spend a term. That is where strategic outreach comes in.

Strategic outreach is the process by which an office establishes a framework for proactively initiating meetings, events and projects to advance the Member’s agenda. It forces Members and their staffs to develop an agenda in the district/state that reflects the office’s strategic plan. In some offices, it means becoming more targeted and disciplined. In others, it forces the office to reach out to a broader spectrum of constituents and interact with new groups.

The payoffs for successful strategic outreach are huge. Through strategic outreach, it is easier to articulate the Member’s impact to constituents because it can clearly connect the dots between the legislative agenda and the activities and accomplishments in the district/state. It can also help solidify and expand the Member’s base. Strategic outreach helps an office focus on, and understand, which constituent stakeholders to whom the Member needs to reach out more proactively and which he or she might spend less time on. Finally, strategic outreach, because it depends on analyzing trends in the district/state, can go a long way toward demonstrating that the Member understands his or her constituents.

There are internal advantages to being a proactive office as well. It is easier to retain talented staff if they are encouraged to identify opportunities for the office and pursue them. A staff that is pushed to perform, and then evaluate its performance, is an organization that does not grow stale. The next four chapters build on this principle and describe in detail how to execute this proactive district/state agenda through scheduling, events, casework and projects.

## Fostering a Strategic Outreach Culture

## CHAPTER SUMMARY 4

### DO...

- Foster a proactive mindset and creative thinking among staff by incorporating outreach priorities into staff meetings, group discussions and job descriptions or performance goals.
- Define a framework for identifying outreach objectives and prioritizing opportunities by incorporating the results from a stakeholder analysis and/or SWOT analysis.
- Analyze the office's relationship with stakeholders to determine which ones need to be cultivated or strengthened.
- Assess the environment when developing outreach strategies to capitalize on the office's strengths and opportunities and mitigate its weaknesses and threats.
- Ensure proposed outreach: furthers the office's strategic goals; is a valuable and beneficial use of resources; is likely to achieve press goals and reach desired stakeholders; and can overcome obstacles to their success.
- Evaluate outreach activities using internal and external feedback to learn from the experience and conduct more successful activities and decision-making in the future.

### DON'T...

- Fall into a reactive or comfortable pattern in which the office focuses solely on incoming requests and relies too heavily on core supporters.
- Allow staff to view outreach as calculated or inappropriate when it is actually strategic and can make the office more effective in serving constituents.
- Limit outreach activities to the Member. Staff must help establish and expand the Member's presence and image in the community, communicate the Member's message and attain the Member's goals.
- Forget to solicit input from the DC staff when developing outreach plans. There are important roles for both offices to play in these activities.
- Undertake new outreach activities without evaluating them against your strategic objectives and determining if trade-offs need to be made with existing activities.
- Use after action reviews as a tool to assign fault or blame when activities do not go as well as planned.



# CHAPTER 5

## Capitalizing on Scheduling Opportunities

### *This Chapter Includes...*

- How to develop and implement a strategic schedule
- Roles and responsibilities of the scheduling team
- Developing criteria for evaluating opportunities and making decisions
- Staffing and location of the district/state scheduling function
- Planning and executing a successful district/state trip
- Suggestions for addressing common scheduling problems

The best schedules — and the scheduling systems that created them — are driven by strategic goals. Implementing this type of strategic scheduling system requires a collaborative process that typically includes the Scheduler, District/State Director, Field Reps, projects staff and DC staff (Chief of Staff and Communications Director).

But how do you do it? Conscious effort, clarity of purpose, good systems, staff teamwork and ingenuity are required to maintain this focus. Helping an office develop an effective goal-driven proactive scheduling system is the goal of this chapter.

## Strategic Scheduling Defined

What is strategic scheduling? Simply put, it is knowing where the Member wants to go (even approximately), and using his or her time well to make sure they get there. If you have a strategic plan, and outreach strategies to implement, you know where the Member wants to be. Strategic scheduling will get you on your way.

Strategic scheduling is *proactive*. The office does not just respond to requests. The office decides where the Member needs to go, whom the Member needs to see and who needs to see the Member. It is *goal oriented*: the Member does not spend a minute more than necessary on those activities that are not in pursuit of the strategic goals. It is *creative*: district/state trips are not an endless stream of disconnected events that the Member attends at the request of others, but a seamless expression of the office's strategic plan. It is *inclusive*: the schedule is created not by the Scheduler alone, nor by any other single staff person, but by a group that works to ensure that everyone's views are heard, that needs are balanced and that all bases are covered.



## Six Steps to Developing and Implementing a Strategic Schedule

### Step 1: Define office goals.

The foundation of strategic scheduling is a focus on, and adherence to, goal achievement. The importance of setting goals and various methods for developing them are discussed thoroughly in Chapter 1. Very little in this strategic scheduling model will work for an office if there is not at least a sense of the Member's priorities for the year or the term.

### Step 2: Evaluate the impact of office goals on scheduling.

An office's strategic plan will be translated into action through the schedule. Thus, the planning team should evaluate the impact that each of the goals will have on scheduling. This evaluation can provide answers to key scheduling questions, such as:



- How much time will be spent in the district or state?
- What specific times will be spent in the district or state?
- What type of events will the office create?
- What type of requests will get priority?
- What level of attention will be given to certain groups?
- What activities are "musts," either weekly, monthly or yearly?

Some goals are stated explicitly in scheduling terms. A goal like “Increase favorability ratings in East Riverside by 20 percent” has obvious implications for the district schedule. The Member will probably be in East Riverside quite a bit, in addition to spending time playing a visible role on issues of importance to East Riversidians.

Other goals will need a little more translation. The impact on the schedule of a goal like “Introduce and obtain passage of Amusement Park Deregulation Act” is less clear. It may require time for hearings, time spent touring amusement parks or time working on behalf of causes benefiting children to soften the Member’s image and deflect charges of endangering children for profit.

### ***Step 3: Communicate goals to staff.***

It sounds obvious, but it is not always clear. The office’s goals cannot be translated into action unless staff understands them. How the Member’s schedule is put together is critical to achieving his or her goals, and communicating these goals to staff will be critical in how the schedule is put together. CMF recommends that staff be involved with developing the office goals, but if they are not, the goals should be presented to staff in detail. Staff need to understand not only what the Member’s goals are, but how the office intends to achieve them. This can be done through face-to-face meetings or written plans or memos. A common understanding and shared sense of mission will allow staff to work together in building the schedule and will vastly reduce internal staff conflict over scheduling matters.

### ***Step 4: Assemble the scheduling team.***

A good strategic scheduling system is inclusive, and a key element of that system is the scheduling team. The team should be comprised of those people who have input into the Member’s schedule, for whatever reason: they have specialized knowledge or key insights (Communications Director, Field Rep); they have functional responsibility (Scheduler); or maybe just because they have creative minds.

Teams will vary across offices in size and composition. Senate offices tend to have larger teams, simply because they have greater functional and geographical specialization, and one or two staff are not going to have the whole picture or the understanding necessary to develop a good schedule. Figure 5-1 shows which staffers are involved in developing the district/state schedule.

*Offices that do not use a scheduling team often divide the Member's available time and parcel it out to different staff members to schedule individually. This approach inevitably results in a choppy schedule that lacks focus and cohesion, and does not create collaborative support for the office's goals.*



Offices that do not use a scheduling team often divide the Member's available time and parcel it out to different staff members to schedule individually. The District/State Director is responsible for the weekend in the hometown, a Field Rep for a day in a far-reaching county and the Scheduler gets two hours on Friday afternoon for office visitors, etc. This approach inevitably results in a choppy schedule that

lacks focus and cohesion, and does not create collaborative support for the office's goals.

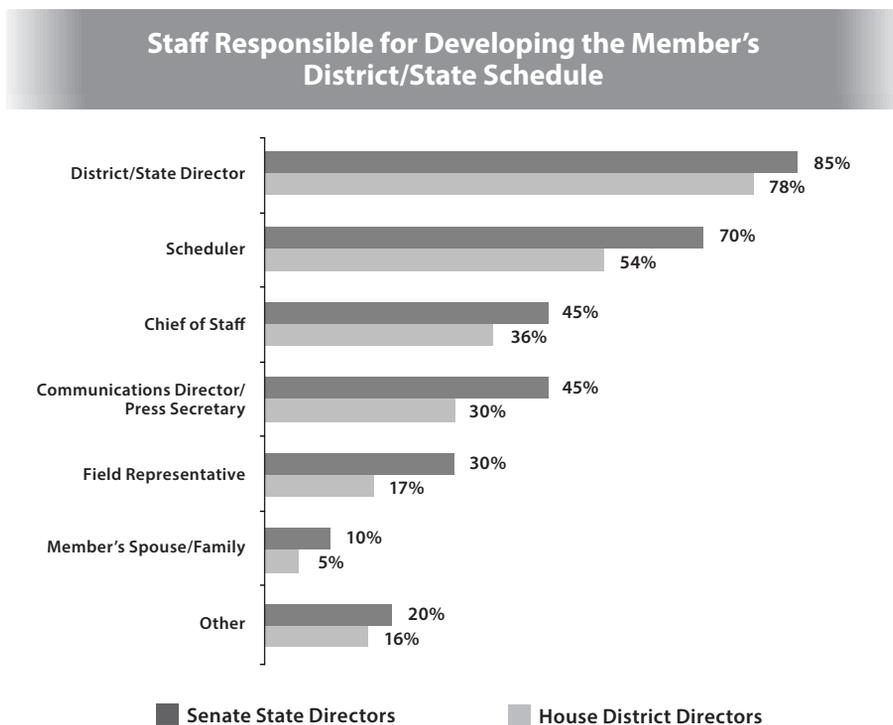
CMF strongly recommends the team approach, but not that all scheduling decisions be made by committee. The scheduling team will have input into the schedule — making suggestions for activities, working as a group to create events and keeping each other apprised of events on the horizon that will require the Member's (and their) attention. Decisions on routine scheduling matters will be made by the Scheduler, with appropriate (and agreed upon) input from the Member and/or Chief of Staff.

According to CMF's research, the majority of House and Senate offices use a scheduling team, customized to their office's needs and personnel. Offices have an endless variety of team configurations to choose from. In fact, House and Senate offices that responded to CMF's survey reported more than 15 different staffing configurations. There is no one correct structure or team composition. Regardless of what configuration the office uses, the key is to define and agree on the roles of each person involved. Some possible team members, and suggested roles, are offered here:

**Member.** The Member must decide what level of involvement he or she wishes to have in setting the schedule. Weigh the time the Member will spend tinkering with the schedule against other pressing political and legislative demands. Ideally, the Member should develop enough trust in staff to allow them to make most scheduling decisions. Giving staff this responsibility is much easier when there are clear strategic goals to work toward.

**Member's family.** The family might want a voice in setting the schedule and the team must accommodate their input. In some cases, a spouse might have knowledge of the district and its key issues that is unmatched by staff. In other cases, a spouse may want input on only a limited scope

Figure 5-1



of decisions, or may only require early notification, not input into decision-making. (See p. 106 for suggestions on how to determine the family's involvement and reduce conflict with staff.)

**Scheduler.** The Scheduler is ultimately responsible for the schedule. He or she must supply information about events as needed, provide a contact person for each scheduled event, develop the final schedule, respond to requests and communicate with staff.

The amount of decision-making authority granted to Schedulers varies widely, depending upon their level of experience and the level of trust and comfort in their relations with the Member. Some Schedulers serve as the final arbiter on all matters of scheduling, while others readily defer critical scheduling decisions to others. Ultimately, a single individual should have the authority to add and remove events from the schedule. The Scheduler is uniquely situated to weigh all of the competing options and priorities. (See the next section for a discussion of this role.)



## Minimizing Conflict with the Member's Spouse/Family

Problems between the Member's spouse/family and staff are most likely to become apparent around the schedule. This is understandable: both sides are in competition for a precious resource — the Member's time. Addressing the following issues up-front will create a framework for family/staff interaction that reduces conflict and tension.

- 1 **Clarify the roles and outline procedures for family input.** If the family's role is left vague, confusion and frustration will ensue. The types of questions to address are: Does the family get veto authority over scheduling decisions, or only the opportunity to raise concerns? Should the family review all invitations at the front end of the process or be consulted only on specific matters? Family input into the process is often more crucial to district/state scheduling as this cuts into the most precious family time — weekends and congressional recesses.
- 2 **Foster a comfortable relationship between the Scheduler and the family.** The Scheduler should communicate with the family often. The Scheduler, not the Member, Chief of Staff or District/State Director, knows the schedule best and is in the best position to provide accurate information. At a minimum, the family should receive the schedule as soon as it's available with enough time to answer their questions or address their concerns.
- 3 **Block out important dates and family events.** Some Schedulers mark all family birthday and anniversary dates in the Member's calendar each year, just as any other event would be noted. All scheduling requests are then discussed in the context of those family occasions. Schedulers should also ask the family to notify the office of other events as soon as possible, such as vacations, parent-teacher conferences, etc.
- 4 **Establish clear limits on the spouse's claim to the Scheduler's services.** Inappropriate and unethical family demands on staff are most likely to come to the Scheduler, who must be supported in attempts to deflect them. At the same time, some Schedulers make inappropriate offers of assistance to spouses — because they view their jobs as "making life easier for the Member."

**District/State Director.** The District/State Director is often considered the Member's overall "point person" in the district or state. As such, he or she should obviously be involved in shaping the district/state schedule, but might also have key information that would be helpful in developing

the DC schedule. The DD/SD's familiarity with various constituent groups and key contacts can help a Scheduler decide which of the competing groups should be placed on the Member's schedule and which could be seen by staff.

**Field Representative.** Field Representatives are often the first to know about an issue or organization that deserves the Member's time. They should have input into the scheduling process, either directly or through the District/State Director. For offices in which Field Representatives cover specific regions, it may be best to alternate their participation on the scheduling team, so over time the entire district/state is taken into account.

**Communications Director/Press Secretary.** Press staff are usually a vital component of the scheduling team. If media coverage is desired, it is always easier to build that in when an event is being formed than to try, perhaps unsuccessfully, to graft it on at the end. The Communications Director/Press Secretary is the most reliable assessor of what the media will cover and what type of coverage to expect.

**Legislative Director.** The LD usually has input into the DC schedule, as he or she knows where the Member needs to spend time to achieve the office's legislative goals, but the LD could also be helpful in crafting the district/state schedule by connecting the Member's legislative priorities to outreach and events.

**Chief of Staff.** As the staff person with the "big picture" perspective, the Chief of Staff can ensure that the schedule is a model of balanced, focused, seamless continuity.

**Others not on the "team."** On an as-needed basis, some offices rely on input from political consultants, local government leaders, interest group leaders and/or trusted advisors from the community. These folks are not a part of the regular decision-making team, but their suggestions are routinely solicited. It is not necessary or advisable to include these advisors in every meeting for several reasons: first, there are ethical limitations; second, they will have divided loyalties and their own agendas; and finally, because you do not want them to usurp the role of the staff.

### **Step 5: Develop scheduling criteria.**

Once the team is in place, the office needs to determine how that team is going to make decisions and how they are going to identify and create opportunities to advance the Member's agenda and strategic goals. The best

*Offices that use a clear set of scheduling criteria make faster, better and more consistent decisions, with fewer conflicts.*

way to create this framework is to use the office's strategic plan and the Member's personal preferences to develop criteria that will be used both to create events and, more importantly, to respond to scheduling requests. Offices that use a clear set of scheduling criteria make faster, better and more consistent decisions, with fewer conflicts.

Criteria are critical to an office's success in their "reactive" strategic scheduling. More than with proactive scheduling, it is easy to get distracted from the strategic goals when you are responding to invitations. It is tempting for many scheduling teams to oil the squeakiest wheel; for the Member to accept interesting, exciting or fun invitations that do not advance goals; or to attend others' events rather than dedicate the time and resources to create your own. Having a framework in place will not remove these problems, but it should significantly alleviate them. For example, it allows staff to make preliminary judgments and immediately classify individual requests as they come in to the office as a "yes," a "no" or a "maybe."

Following is a list of questions an office can use to help determine what sort of criteria would be suitable. Using the answers to these questions as a starting point, an office can develop criteria for scheduling that reflect the strategic plan. It can then use these criteria to proactively identify and schedule promising opportunities, or to react to invitations already received.



- What are the office's short- and long-term goals? Where and how does the Member need to spend time to achieve them? What outreach strategies has the office developed to meet these goals in the district/state?
- With what individuals or groups could the office work closely to pursue outreach strategies and advance goals? How can the office best work with these individuals and groups?
- What are the regions of the district or state to which the Member must devote significant time? What kinds of events are appropriate for and work well in these areas?
- How important is media coverage? How likely is the office to get any media coverage and will it be positive?
- What is the Member's personal style? Is the Member better with scripted events or informal gatherings? With large or small groups?

- What personal preferences or activities of the Member must be considered (e.g., hates going to bed late, dislikes flying more than once a day, insists on jogging daily)?
- Are there certain times that should be blocked out strictly for the Member’s family (e.g., late Saturday evenings or Sundays)?

It is, of course, imperative that the Scheduler have the ability to communicate “no” in a way that does not alienate constituents. It is important to be selective in scheduling, but the office obviously cannot afford to have constituents feel they have been treated carelessly. The Scheduler does not expect to be loved — part of the job is telling constituents something they do not want to hear — but the way in which the message is communicated can be the difference between disappointed understanding and outright anger on the other end of the phone.

### **Step 6: Conduct a strategic review.**

Strategic scheduling works because it keeps your eyes on the prize. To maximize its benefit, an office should regularly evaluate three things: first, that the office really did keep its focus; second, that keeping the focus got the office where you thought it would; and third, that the original destination is still the desired destination.

By evaluating where and how the Member spent his or her time, the office can tell whether the office’s scheduling decisions support the Member’s goals.

This “scheduling audit” will help keep the office on track and ensure that problems in the district/state scheduling process are corrected before they have a chance to fester and grow.

*By evaluating where and how the Member spent his or her time, the office can tell whether the office’s scheduling decisions support the Member’s goals.*

1. **Compile and analyze a comprehensive report of district/state visits broken down into several categories:** subject (education, labor, foreign affairs, etc.); type of group (business organization, civic club, individual constituent, etc.); type of event (press conference, town meeting, etc.); locale (city, county, etc.); or any other breakdown that might be useful. This step is easy to complete if you have developed a good coding system for your computer’s scheduling program.
2. **Compare this tally against the office’s strategic plan.** Determine whether the allocation of the Member’s time was consistent with the office’s goals and outreach strategies. You should be



able to analyze trends and discuss progress — or lack of progress — towards the stated goals.

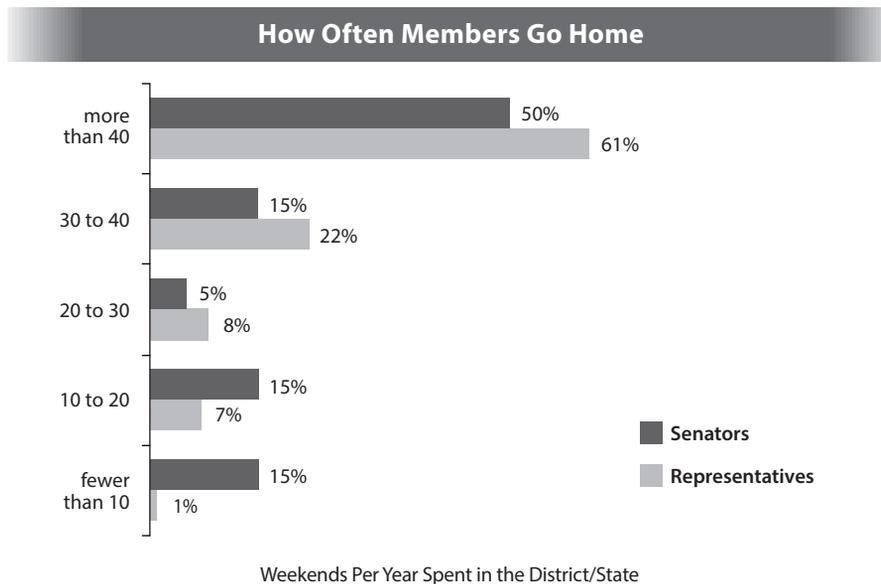
3. **Decide whether changes are needed in the scheduling process to ensure that staff time is allocated more strategically.** An office might change the composition of the scheduling team, revise the scheduling criteria or target certain groups or areas in the coming year.

### Staffing and Location of the District/State Scheduler

Another key decision to make is where to locate the district/state scheduling function and who should perform it. Should an office have two Schedulers: one for Washington and one for the district/state? Should the district/state Scheduler work out of the DC or district/state office?

Almost all Senate offices have two Schedulers, while House offices are split more evenly. Offices should consider a number of factors when deciding where to base the district/state Scheduler, such as how often the Member goes home. As Figure 5-2 shows, 83% of Representatives and 65% of Senators spend 30 or more weekends in the district or state each year. If the Member is home every weekend and every recess week, this makes

Figure 5-2



a bigger scheduling workload than a once a month trip, and would argue for a separate district/state-based Scheduler.

Another factor to consider is the distance of the district or state from Washington. If it is three time zones away, making last minute schedule changes from Washington is going to be a challenge, so a district/state-based Scheduler would work better. Finally, what are constituents used to? Having someone available locally can be seen as advantageous, but so can getting to deal directly with Washington. Do not unwittingly deprive constituents of something they perceive as having value.

There are other advantages and disadvantages to both locations to consider when making this decision. Having district/state scheduling done in Washington provides the Scheduler and Member with immediate access to each other. It can lessen confusion and tension between Washington and district/state staff, and can simply be more efficient.

On the other hand, having scheduling done out of the district/state office demonstrates roots in the community. It allows the Scheduler to visit event sites to assess their appropriateness. The Scheduler can form better relationships with constituents because he or she can meet with people instead of just talking to them on the phone. Additionally, the district/state-based Scheduler will have a much better understanding of the local geography and travel time between communities, and appear more accessible to constituents than would a Washington-based counterpart. However, the district/state-based Scheduler might feel isolated from the decision-making center, and communication breakdowns are more likely on scheduling matters between the offices.

Keep in mind that, for House offices, the Scheduler position tends to include other duties. In Washington, the Scheduler may also serve as the Office Manager or Executive Assistant. If this is the case, that person may not have the capacity to schedule for the district as well and a separate position should be filled. In the district/state office, this person may either act solely as the Scheduler or their duties may be combined with other positions, such as the District/State Director, Constituent Services Rep/Caseworker or Field Rep.

Members should exercise great care in hiring and in deciding which office — Washington or district/state — to locate the person responsible for district/state scheduling. All too frequently, the decision about where to base the district/state Scheduler is made after-the-fact, and is based on personnel. If the Washington Scheduler is from the district/state and knows it



well, he is more likely to be assigned district/state scheduling. Conversely, if the DD/SD has a staff person with whom she is really comfortable, then scheduling back home is more likely to be district- or state-based. An office's staffing situation may mesh perfectly with an objective assessment of its needs. But an office is better served in the long run if this decision is based on objective factors first, and then staff hired that can work within the configuration chosen.

### **Starting Points for District/State Schedules**

An office with a scheduling team in place, a strategic plan and clear-cut criteria can develop a strategic schedule from any of a number of different starting points. Some options to consider are the length of the trip, the degree of certainty about dates and times and the particular goals the office is trying to achieve.

**Themes.** Starting with a "theme" is a sure-fire way to build a schedule, but it is usually reserved for longer (i.e., a week) and more predictable (i.e., August recess) time. In building this type of schedule, staff begin with the question, "What do we want to convey in this week?" The answer can be issue focused ("Member as a friend of business" or "Member as an advocate for children") or image focused ("Member as a mediator between opposing factions).

The coherence of the schedule comes from the focus. All public events reinforce the image. Events that distract or detract are scheduled at other times. Press staff like theme- or message-based schedules because they are easier to package for successful media coverage. However, legislative or field staff may dislike them because the focus that makes for good press coverage often makes for an increased, and sometimes unreasonable, workload on a single staffer.

**Timing.** What is the right time to conduct a meeting, event or project? For example, if a health care LA needs to scour the district/state in search of constituent input for the Member's health care amendment, this outreach should be scheduled for a recess period, well in advance of the Member presenting the amendment for consideration in Washington.

**Events.** Often on shorter trips, such as weekends, schedules are built around events that are occurring or invitations that have been accepted. The challenge in these event-based trips is to first accept the right invitations and then to build additional events or appointments around them. The success of this type of schedule is often measured by how well the

Member did at the event and how well the rest of the schedule used their other available time, neither under- nor overscheduling. For more on planning and executing strategic events, as well as ideas for various proactive activities, see the next chapter.

**Locations.** Frequently in Senate offices, but less often in House offices, schedules are built around particular locations. While the original impetus is sometimes a single event, the point of this type of trip is not the event itself, but the success of the location-based schedule built around it.

### **A Model Procedure for Scheduling a District/State Trip**

Regardless of the platform on which a particular trip schedule is built, standard procedures must be developed for the actual planning and execution of district/state travel. Every office will operate its scheduling process somewhat differently — fitting a system to its staff, structure, criteria and procedures. But there are common elements they should share. The two most important of these are the use of a standard timetable or step-by-step process for developing a trip, and the assignment of specific staff responsibility for the tasks involved in scheduling and executing district/state travel.

The following timetable was developed around a weekend in the August district/state work period (see Figure 5-3). The letters on the calendar indicate ideal “starting points” for each activity. The process is the same for more routine, shorter weekend jaunts, but the time frame will be compressed. It is also important to note that while the example is valuable in portraying a well-managed system, it omits numerous advance and administrative tasks that staff must undertake during the same period.

Throughout:

- Hold weekly scheduling meetings.
- Seek input from appropriate staff and other advisors.
- Maintain regular communication with upcoming meeting or event hosts.
- Keep good records of conversations, decisions and confirmations.

A. **Develop a long-range scheduling plan** early in the year using your strategic outreach plan and the criteria discussed previously, for either the first session or the entire upcoming term. (A draft should be ready by the end of January each year.)



Figure 5-3

**Developing a District/State Schedule—A Model Timetable**



Target weekend: August 13-15, Friday through Sunday

- B. **Determine the dates for the trip**, based on the congressional calendar and/or certain invitations confirmed. Other demands will also factor into the decision: family commitments, committee travel, etc. Generally, decide by selecting the block of time with the most worthwhile invitations or the best potential for creating your own events. Determine the length of the Member’s stay. (This can be done as early as January for predictable, annual events and recesses, but should be done no later than about two months before trip.)
- C. **Create events** that carry out a particular theme, target a specific constituency or take the Member to a certain geographic region identified by the outreach strategies in your strategic plan. The target date for beginning to schedule proactive events depends on the type of event. If it requires a district-wide or regional mailing, as well as extensive staff preparations, seven weeks prior is not unreasonable. (Four to seven weeks before trip.)
- D. **Accept selected invitations** to build the remainder of the schedule around, generally one or two events for which significant advance notice is needed. (Seven weeks before trip.)

- E. **Sketch out a travel pattern** between the main scheduled events. Ideally, figure out starting and ending points for each day, coordinating the ending point of one day with a logical starting point for the next day. (Six weeks before trip.)
- F. **Review pending requests**, especially those that allow flexible dates, and accept those that suit the Member's strategic plan and travel pattern (e.g., civic groups that have placed an open invitation for the Member to meet with them). This file will probably wear thin with review. It is best to group requests by city or county to make it easier to fit them into the travel plan when needed. (Three to four weeks before trip.)
- G. **Request materials**, such as briefing memos, speeches, talking points, etc., from the various staffers responsible for preparing them. More time might be needed for prepared-text speeches, depending on the Member, the staff and the office's proofing and revision process. (Two to three weeks before trip.)
- H. **Coordinate with the press staff.** Even though the Communications Director has been involved in developing the schedule, it is important to make sure he or she has all the information needed to properly attend to press matters. In a rural district or state, press releases might have to be sent two to three weeks ahead of an event, or the staffer might want to make advance calls to the media plugging the event. (Two to three weeks before trip.)
- I. **Select staff** to accompany the Member based on the event(s) to be attended and the Member's needs. It is always better if staff know well ahead of time that they will be expected to assist the Member on a particular weekend (two to three weeks before trip, or earlier). Though staff convenience is often low on the list of priorities, they too have families and personal plans that should be respected.
- J. **Make flight arrangements** as soon as the House/Senate schedule is known, usually on Thursday or Friday for the next week. Arrangements will likely change frequently during the following week. (One week before trip.)
- K. **Make driving and lodging arrangements.** Driving can be arranged up to the day before, if a single driver is used throughout the weekend and is open to such last-minute arrangements. (One week before trip, or week of travel.)

- L. **Actual travel.** See to it that the Member walks out the door with packet in hand containing the weekend schedule, briefing materials, a copy of next week's schedule and any other pertinent documents.
- M. **Be available** during weekday office hours to field calls or questions from the Member and accompanying staff.
- N. **Follow-up.** After the event or the weekend, talk to the staff who attended. If possible, seek the views of friends in attendance for candid assessments of what worked and what did not. Only by knowing what went right and wrong can you improve future trips. Distributing an evaluation form to constituents at district/state events is another valuable way of getting good feedback (as is telling constituents that you value their input). See the next chapter for a more thorough discussion on evaluating events.

### Specific Staff Responsibilities

After developing a timetable for a particular trip, the next step is to ensure that all critical tasks are appropriately assigned and that everyone involved understands the specific staff responsibilities for scheduling and executing travel.

Successful district/state scheduling requires enormous amounts of communication, cooperation and coordination: between the Washington and district/state staffs, between the Scheduler and individual staff, between the Member and staff, between the Member and their family, and between the staff and the Member's family. Assigning strict individual staff accountability is necessary to ensuring the smooth implementation of a district/state scheduling process. Some common assignments CMF has identified are outlined below.

#### **Schedulers:**

- Notify all staff of briefing materials, speeches, background information, etc. needed for the trip (see Figure 5-4).
- Collect and compile briefing materials from legislative and/or district/state staff.
- Ensure that all necessary staff are apprised of the schedule and any changes to it that effect them.
- Coordinate scheduling details with the Member's spouse or family.



**Figure 5-4**

**Sample Event Preparation Request Form**

(Given to Staffer by Scheduler, copy to Legislative Director or Chief of Staff)

TO: Staffer

FROM: Scheduler

If you need additional assistance, let the Scheduler know as soon as possible!

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name/description of event: \_\_\_\_\_

Event sponsor: \_\_\_\_\_

Other VIPs attending event: \_\_\_\_\_

Event date: \_\_\_\_\_ Event time: \_\_\_\_\_

Event Location: \_\_\_\_\_

Other info: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Description of requested Member participation at event: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Type of advance preparation needed (i.e., background briefing, talking points, speech, award presentation, press release): \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Topics: \_\_\_\_\_

Time Limits: \_\_\_\_\_

Other info: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Date due: \_\_\_\_\_

Submitted to: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

- Make follow-up calls to groups requesting regarding format, expectations, crowd size, transportation, etc. (not content).
- Make transportation and lodging arrangements.
- Determine other key travel issues (e.g., Is a driver necessary? Should a staffer accompany the Member?).

***Legislative and field staff:***

- Prepare background information for the Member (and accompanying district/state office staff) regarding legislative action of interest to groups with whom the Member is to meet.
- Make follow-up calls to groups requesting the Member's presence to verify the expected content and attendees of the meeting/event (but not the details).
- Provide the Scheduler with copies of letters or memos that pertain to issues that might arise at an event or meeting.
- Develop full-text speeches or talking points.
- Coordinate with the DD/SD, Scheduler and Systems Administrator to send appropriate invitations or other mailings.

***District/State Directors:***

- Coordinate with the Scheduler and legislative staff to determine briefing materials, speeches, background information, etc. needed for the trip.
- Determine staff responsibility for trip "advance" — scouting and selecting sites, driving proposed routes, securing necessary equipment, etc.
- Coordinate with legislative staff, Scheduler, other district/state staff and the Systems Administrator to send appropriate invitations or other mailings.
- Assign appropriate district/state staff to accompany the Member during travel.

***Communications Directors/Press Secretaries:***

- Coordinate mailings and invitations with the appropriate DC and district/state staff.
- Review and edit the Member's talking points for the event.

- Coordinate press coverage with local media, legislative staff, district/state staff and Scheduler.

**Chiefs of Staff:**

- Make sure that everyone is doing what they are supposed to do, and that everything is working as it is supposed to.

Clarifying roles in the manner described above will help ensure that breakdowns in communication, duplicative work and “dropped balls” are kept to a minimum.

**Availability of Schedule Information**

An important key to effectively implementing strategic scheduling and minimizing breakdowns in communication is providing all staff in all offices with access to the Member’s schedule. CMF has found much higher levels of staff cooperation and coordination in offices where all staff have access *and* are expected to review the daily and weekly schedule.

Most House and Senate offices use Outlook or the office’s constituent database to schedule — the easiest ways to facilitate this practice because they store the current schedule in one easily accessible place. In an environment where schedules are constantly changing, an online schedule will:

- Save time on the part of the Scheduler;
- Provide Washington and district/state staff with access to the latest information; and
- Store, retrieve and organize data, allowing the office to assess progress towards its strategic goals.

For example, it is possible for the office to tally the locations and topics of meetings to determine if the Member’s time is being spent wisely. This type of reporting is more difficult and complex to do if an office is using multiple programs or less collaborative methods. For these reasons, offices should consider streamlining their scheduling processes — or at least ensure they are coding information consistently for the strategic review recommended on page 109. The benefits to the entire staff of doing so usually far outweigh the advantages to keeping an outdated or cumbersome system in place.

**Addressing Common Problems**

Even if an office is using a strategic approach, scheduling presents a number of difficulties. Some of these are unavoidable, and not the least of

these is an erratic congressional calendar. Below are a number of common scheduling problems that offices face. The key to successful scheduling is identifying problems that are avoidable and learning to cope with those that are not. Some suggestions for doing so are offered below.

***Problem: Excessive travel time in the district/state due to a large or odd-shaped district/state, unpredictable traffic, pressing commitments at opposite ends of the district/state or lack of commercial transportation between main cities.***



The most the office can hope for is to make extra travel time semi-productive. Make sure the Member has plenty of reading material — for starters, information that will be useful on the trip. In addition to a briefing book, staff can compile other information of interest about the communities being visited — pending grant or casework requests, recent correspondence from VIPs, and clips from the local paper. This is also a good time to go through all the pesky items from the bottom of the Member’s inbox. Of course, staff will need to develop mechanisms to ensure that the Member’s travel briefcase does not become the “black hole” into which important information vanishes.

Consider also the use of cell phones, mobile and handheld devices, laptops and digital voice recorders to help put that time to good use.

Additionally, if there are long distances to cover, seriously consider using a driver. Balance your office’s desire not to look “imperial” against the Member’s need to prepare, mentally and physically, for the next event. The Member can work while the driver worries about traffic, and they can trade places just before the next stop if necessary.

The Member might also consider using travel time for personal business, such as listening to audiobooks, calling the family or writing thank you notes. These activities are hard enough to fit into the congressional schedule, and sometimes the Member will need a break from the stress to be a normal person. Frankly, catching up on sleep is a very good use of travel time.

***Problem: Overscheduling.***

Though there are other causes, overscheduling is largely a problem of being unable to say “no.” If both the Member and the Scheduler have difficulty turning down requests — for fear of alienating current or potential support, or for other reasons — then overscheduling is inevitable. The Member must learn to tell requestors, “I’ll check on it and get back to

you,” then pass the request on to the Scheduler, who becomes the “fall guy” if the invitation is declined. Veteran Schedulers compare their jobs to that of the Roman messenger. They cannot expect to be liked all the time.

Schedulers must learn to say “no” diplomatically and be the ones to take the heat because of it. It is part of the job. A Scheduler to one veteran Member summed up the attitude of many Schedulers:

“If (the group is) mad at me and not at my boss, I’ve done my job well.”

The Member will derail this process if he or she aids and abets those groups who will try anything to get around the Scheduler to secure the Member’s participation at an event. And the Member certainly cannot get in the habit of accepting invitations and neglecting to inform the staff.

One option used by offices to reduce overscheduling in the district/state is to host open community or mobile office hours. If run effectively, these meetings can be an effective use of the Member’s time because the Member can greet, chat and take photos with constituents, who get the opportunity to seek assistance and get one-on-one face time with the Member, even if it is limited.

***Problem: Missing worthy events in the district/state because of an erratic congressional schedule or because many groups want the Member on a weekday.***

Your office cannot control the congressional schedule. The Member’s schedule should anticipate the possibility of the House or Senate remaining in session later than planned on Thursdays and Fridays. Staff must make it clear to local organizations that want to see the Member on Friday that he or she might have to cancel at the last minute. In general, staff should attempt to restrict Friday events to those that can be canceled or postponed.

In addition, be creative about responding to requests that conflict with the congressional schedule. A family or staff member or a trusted local official can be a good surrogate to offer or have on call should the Member have to cancel on a moment’s notice. Other alternatives include sending video greetings, teleconferencing and video conferencing.

***Problem: Member unwilling to commit or slow to make decisions.***

Getting Members to respond promptly to invitations can be a challenge for the typical Scheduler. If the problem is slowness on the Member’s part, the Chief of Staff, District/State Director, or Scheduler can point

*Schedulers must learn to say “no” diplomatically and be the ones to take the heat because of it. It is part of the job.*



out the negative consequences of delaying a decision. Waiting to commit until merely days before events will reduce your opportunities to play a key role in good events. Also, the quality of staff briefing materials will decline in proportion to the limited prep time. Opportunities missed due to late responses, or the anger of groups or individuals desiring the Member's presence are some of the consequences the office will face.

On the other hand, it may be equally damaging to respond to outside pressures and accept invitations prematurely. This can result in last minute cancellations, angering the inviting group and annoying staff.

The office must strike a balance. For every request, there is an appropriate time for the definitive response from your office. It varies according to the type of event and according to the schedule. Good communication between the office and the requestor, as well as the combined political judgment of the Member and staff, will help a Scheduler develop a sense of proper timing for each unique set of circumstances.

***Problem: Member overinvolvement in the scheduling "minutiae."***

Members often learn that they are overinvolved in scheduling decisions only when their staff tells them they are and that they need to butt out. If the office or the Member suspects the Member is spending too much time on scheduling decisions, we recommend you work towards a *management-by-exception* arrangement. That is, once the Member is comfortable with the scheduling system and staff, the Member should give them the authority to make all routine scheduling decisions. The Member then gets involved in scheduling only when staff are unsure of the proper decision. Initially, staff could refer about one-third of the decisions to the Member. But over time, the office should become so confident with this arrangement that the Member makes less than one-tenth of the decisions. The Member's involvement is the *exception*, rather than the rule.

***Problem: Member's family demands on time or problems arising from spousal input.***

Many Members are hesitant to address these thorny issues. Conflicts between staff and family, particularly between Schedulers and spouses, are bad news for everyone involved. And, unless the family never wants to see the Member and does not care how their time is spent, *this conflict is inevitable*.

If the Member fears to tread here, the office is likely to experience increasingly dissatisfied Schedulers, resulting in more frequent turnover, and

frustrated Chiefs of Staff as well. The Member is not likely to go through a series of spouses, of course, but the family will be unhappy unless these issues are dealt with.

The key to a cooperative and happy relationship between a Scheduler and a spouse is the negotiation of clear limits and responsibilities for both. The input a spouse will have in the Member's schedule, the guidelines for notifying the spouse about the schedule, and the amount of sacrosanct "family time" are among the issues to be addressed. Use the tips on page 106 to resolve them now.

*The key to a cooperative and happy relationship between a Scheduler and a spouse is the negotiation of clear limits and responsibilities for both.*

***Problem: Scheduler difficulty judging which events will be most worthwhile, inability to work with other staff in a team environment, inadequate coordination between Washington and district/state staffs.***

These are actually problems with judgment. If your office has done a good job defining its goals and priorities, it is simply a matter of time and education for the Scheduler to learn to accurately assess the worthiness of invitations. He or she will become educated through working on a team with other staff and listening to their perspectives. A wise Scheduler will: keep abreast of both district/state and DC happenings, even if he or she is not responsible for both schedules; talk frequently with district/state staff, particularly those in the field, in addition to reading the daily newspaper clips; learn legislative procedure to assess the floor schedule; and develop good contacts on committees and with outside organizations. A Scheduler who has developed judgment in this fashion will have little difficulty working in a team environment, and will seek the advice and input of staff when necessary.

***Problem: Scheduler provides inaccurate information.***

Schedulers hate to send bosses to events ill-prepared, to say nothing of how much their bosses hate it when they do. This happens either because the Scheduler did not ask enough of the right questions or because the requestor did not describe the event thoroughly enough. Amazingly, the latter is sometimes deliberate. One Scheduler sent his boss to what was billed as an "informal meeting" with "a few members" of a local organization. The Member was on the opposite side of the group's main concern. When the Member arrived, more than 100 people (plus press) were



present. During what became a “protest rally,” the group unfurled a banner with a statement that would commit the Member to vote with them on that issue, and demanded he sign it. The Scheduler commented, “It’s surprising how many groups have tried this approach. I’ve become very wary of groups that won’t specify the number of people attending.”

It is a Scheduler’s job to ask questions and get details (see Figure 5-5). If certain information has not been divulged, he or she should call others who will be attending to get the necessary answers, and follow up with a letter or email outlining his or her understanding of the event.

***Problem: Scheduler does not obtain complete information.***

Many groups want the Member to do “visual” things, but neglect to tell the office beforehand. Members get asked to toss the baseball on opening day, ride an elephant in a parade, even serve as a dunk-tank victim for charity.

If anything goes wrong, usually the Scheduler is accountable. Therefore, a Scheduler should do what good journalists do: get more information than necessary and edit out the nonessential details. A new Scheduler should develop a checklist of questions to which he or she can refer during conversations with requestors. These questions should try to gather the most specific and detailed information possible to prevent surprises.

**Conclusion**

An effective district/state schedule will simultaneously achieve the Member’s strategic goals, provide variety, satisfy constituent demands, accentuate the Member’s strengths, protect the Member’s personal and family needs and utilize travel time. Amazingly, this is not asking the impossible. A strategic scheduling system will do an excellent job of balancing these diverse demands.

A strategic scheduling system will help the Member use time to the best advantage because it is goal focused. It provides variety and accentuates the Member strengths because it is proactive and creative. It will not drag the Member to an endless series of other people’s events — the Member will participate in events that the office created to help achieve strategic goals. This satisfies multiple demands because it is an inclusive process — everyone has a place at the table and a voice in the decision-making.

The Member’s commitment is critical to the success of this system. The Member must remain focused on goals and priorities — or at least allow

**Figure 5-5**

**Sample Event Scheduling Form**

**BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

Name/description of event: \_\_\_\_\_

Event sponsor: \_\_\_\_\_

Event date: \_\_\_\_\_ Event time: \_\_\_\_\_

Event location: \_\_\_\_\_

Sponsor contact name: \_\_\_\_\_

Sponsor contact phone and email: \_\_\_\_\_

Description of requested Member participation (if speech, give length and topic; if activity, give details): \_\_\_\_\_

Other VIPs attending: \_\_\_\_\_

Requested RSVP deadline: \_\_\_\_\_

Other info: \_\_\_\_\_

**ACTION TAKEN**

Confirmed \_\_\_\_\_ Regretted \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

If Confirmed

Lodging (if needed): \_\_\_\_\_

Driving directions: \_\_\_\_\_

**EMERGENCY CONTACTS**

**BEFORE EVENT DATE**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone and email: \_\_\_\_\_

**ON EVENT DATE**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Cell phone and email: \_\_\_\_\_

Advance prep. needed (i.e., background briefing, talking points, speech, press release): \_\_\_\_\_

Assigned to: \_\_\_\_\_

Date due: \_\_\_\_\_

Additional materials to bring (i.e., award to be presented, generic outreach materials): \_\_\_\_\_

Staff attending: \_\_\_\_\_

Other info: \_\_\_\_\_

the staff to keep him or her focused. The Member must let staff make decisions freely within the established framework. The scheduling team must be able to work together as a well-oiled, high-performance machine.

Like any good office system, the scheduling system can and must evolve. Revisions might occur because of changes in staff or priorities, or because the office wants to experiment with something new.

No scheduling system will ever be perfect, largely because of the environment within which congressional offices operate. But the goal should not be perfection — it should be effectiveness. The effectiveness of the scheduling system will be evidenced by a Member who is busy yet unhurried, highly visible but not without privacy, focused yet able to accommodate a wide range of constituencies.

## Capitalizing on Scheduling Opportunities

## CHAPTER SUMMARY 5

### DO...

- Develop and implement a scheduling system that advances the Member's strategic goals by:
  1. defining office goals;
  2. evaluating the impact of office goals on scheduling;
  3. communicating goals to staff;
  4. assembling the scheduling team;
  5. developing scheduling criteria; and
  6. conducting a strategic review.
- Determine roles and responsibilities for the Scheduler(s) and other staffers on the scheduling team.
- Carefully consider the Member's travel schedule and the distance from DC to the district/state before hiring and deciding where to locate the person responsible for district/state scheduling.
- Forecast a long-range scheduling plan for either the first session or the entire upcoming term.
- Establish procedures for the planning and execution of district/state travel, including timeframes and staff assignments.

### DON'T...

- Rely on reactive scheduling, where the office simply responds to invitations or requests. Instead, actively seek and create opportunities to achieve goals.
- Neglect to get feedback from event attendees through surveys or candid assessments. Knowing what went right and wrong can improve future scheduling trips.
- Overschedule. Schedulers must learn to say "no" diplomatically and take the heat because of it. While schedules are necessarily busy, a hectic campaign-like pace is not always required.
- Wait too long to respond to invitations, which angers those who are inviting you, nor reply too quickly, which might result in last-minute cancellations. Learn to balance these competing challenges.
- Let conflict between the Member's family and staff fester and grow by ignoring or avoiding it. Set up ground rules for the family's involvement in scheduling and how staff should interact with them.



# CHAPTER 6

## Planning and Implementing Successful Events

### *This Chapter Includes...*

- A discussion of proactive events and how to determine which activities are best suited for the Member's goals
- Understanding the factors that should influence event choices
- Steps to comprehensively plan and execute successful events
- How to improve staff communication and coordination and monitor progress
- Standards for effectively evaluating individual events and overall office performance

An “event” is any public forum in the district or state that the Member attends in an official capacity. Conferences, speeches, workshops, debates, field hearings, town hall meetings and roundtables are all events. So, too, are visits to factories, hospitals, schools, parades and picnics.

Participating in events is a critical function of most district/state offices. These events help constituents form impressions of their Representatives and Senators. Except for Members who are committee chairs or party leaders, most Members are more likely to get media coverage for what they say and do while in the district or state than while speaking on the House or Senate floor. Additionally, with the volume of, and easy access to, information on the Internet, it is important for Members to seek di-

rect, unfiltered ways of communicating their work, agenda and priorities to constituents.

This chapter will help offices translate outreach strategies into actual events that help realize the Member's goals. It will describe the types of events that can be held, the factors that should influence those choices and how to develop and implement an events action plan.

### **Proactive vs. Reactive Events**

Every office will likely undertake “reactive” and “proactive” events. However, many congressional offices rely too heavily on reactive events: accepting, or reacting to, an invitation and scheduling the Member to attend the group's event. These types of events are initiated and conducted by outside groups, primarily to meet their own agendas. Offices rely on such events because they are the fastest and easiest way to fill the Member's district/state schedule. It is much easier to have the Member attend an event for which someone else is responsible for logistics: attracting the audience, booking the room and speakers, inviting the press and providing the food. Often, however, the result is that the Member's own message is superseded by that of the group hosting the event.

As discussed in previous chapters, offices that develop outreach strategies in support of a strategic plan can effectively advance the Member's goals and ensure that reactive events do not dominate the Member's agenda. Guided by such careful planning, an office can make sure that the choices it makes will best advance the Member's message. But how do you plan and implement those events? The remainder of this chapter offers a blueprint for doing just that.

*Offices that develop outreach strategies in support of a strategic plan can effectively advance the Member's goals and ensure that reactive events do not dominate the Member's agenda.*



### **Events on a Strategic or Proactive Schedule**

Proactive activities range in complexity from an individual appointment to creating a high-visibility public forum with guest experts, media coverage and a large audience. This section discusses some types of proactive scheduling to consider, while the next section helps an office determine which types of events are best suited for the Member's goals and how to make them successful. For maximum impact, CMF recommends that offices employ a range of events as part of their outreach strategies, rather than focus exclusively on one type.

**Individual appointments.** Plenty of people would like to spend some individual quality time with the Member and one of the simplest ways to accommodate that need is by scheduling regular office hours in the district/state office. It is convenient for the Member and for staff, and if done strategically, can ensure that the Member is meeting with the right people and gleaning the information needed for legislative activity or projects. However, individual appointments can become time-consuming and usually provide little visibility in the community at large.

**Community or open office hours.** These events differ from individual appointments in that the Member usually travels to a public place to meet with constituents, rather than host scheduled appointments in the office. A similar option employed by a few Members is to operate or lease a “mobile office” that also allows the Member and staff to travel to constituents in various parts of the district or state. When considering these approaches, one difference is that mobile offices have additional maintenance and operational costs that must be factored into an office’s decision-making.

When run effectively, these types of office hours can be an effective use of the Member’s time because he or she can greet, chat and take photos with constituents, who get the opportunity to seek assistance and get one-on-one face time with the Member, even if it is limited. For House and Senate offices, these events not only increase visibility and encourage a proactive mindset, they also enable the Member to serve remote areas and reach constituents who may be unable to travel.

**In-person town hall meetings.** The most traditional form of Member–constituent interaction is in-person town halls. Though some may question their effectiveness, many Representatives and Senators conduct these types of meetings one to six times a year. Town halls can accommodate a large number of people and usually result in media coverage, though at times the Member’s message may be secondary to the strong opinions of a few attendees. Still, in-person town meetings provide an open, direct and unfiltered dialogue between citizens and their elected officials.

**Telephone town hall meetings.** An innovative way that offices have reached out to constituents is through telephone town halls. These meetings invite constituents, through automated calls, to participate in a live conference call with the Member at a set date and time. During these large-scale interactions, thousands of constituents may be on the line with

the Member and can ask questions on a particular topic or a wide range of issues, depending on how the event is structured.

These calls allow the Member to reach a large number of constituents in a relatively short timeframe (the calls usually last 30–60 minutes); they require less logistical prep than in-person meetings; and they allow the Member to conduct outreach in their states and districts while in DC. Citizens participate from their homes, usually resulting in a greater number of people on the call than could likely attend an in-person event. A criticism of these calls is that they can be seen as too much of a contrived political event, so staff should be careful with their moderation of the questions asked.

**Online town hall meetings.** Similar in concept to telephone town halls, these sessions use web-based software that allows constituents to interact with Members from the convenience of their home or workplace. Using a computer, constituents are able to see and hear the Member respond in real-time to questions they submit online.

CMF, which produced this book, conducted research on the effectiveness of these events and found distinct benefits to engaging with constituents in this way. First, constituents like the sessions and find them to be valuable uses of their time (95 percent of CMF's participants said they would like to participate in similar events in the future). Second, offices can reach a large number of constituents, as well as a more diverse and representative sample of the opinions in their states and districts. Finally, if conducted using

best practices, online town halls can be a valuable tool to hear from constituents, have them learn from the Member and each other, and further engage them in the democratic process.

best practices, online town halls can be a valuable tool to hear from constituents, have them learn from the Member and each other, and further engage them in the democratic process.

**Site visits.** Sometimes whom the Member sees is not as important as where the Member is seen. Visiting certain sites (factories, child care centers, schools, transportation hubs, wildlife preserves, etc.) can help gain information and support needed to reach a goal. And sometimes information or support is not needed — simply being seen taking an interest in a particular area is sufficient.

**Task forces/advisory boards.** More often than not, the Member's goals will not be achieved by the office alone, but by working in concert with

#### Additional Information

For more information on how CMF's sessions were conducted, or their efficacy, view the entire report, *Online Town Hall Meetings: Exploring Democracy in the 21st Century*, at [CongressFoundation.org](http://CongressFoundation.org).



a range of other interested parties. Offices that make effective use of task forces and advisory boards identify and draw upon the strengths and expertise offered by third parties. These participants are usually eager to offer assistance, ideas and solutions, especially when it relates to a priority issue of theirs. Taking time to form and work with task forces or advisory boards might make some goals more achievable. Even if it does not, it certainly gives the Member visibility and leadership on an issue, which can sometimes be almost as beneficial as actually achieving the goal itself.

**Roundtables, conferences, field hearings.** These top-of-the-line events are complex to plan and execute and often involve many people outside the office (and thus outside its control) but offer high visibility. Visits by Cabinet secretaries, field hearings arranged through the Member's committees, informational or problem-solving workshops, etc., could spotlight an issue, highlight a problem or explain recent legislative changes. Focusing on a specific need and incorporating the expertise of others can make these events a highly effective means to promoting and achieving the Member's goals.

**Press/visibility.** Obviously, the Member needs not only to *do* good, but to be *seen* doing good. District/state staff and media-savvy press staff will constantly be looking for good "photo opportunities." It may sometimes serve the Member's goals to appear at press visibility events created by others, but the office is likely to find the need to create its own events as well. Consider televised town meetings, site visits, individual chats with reporters and photos of meetings with award-winning constituents, along with the more common stand-up press conferences. Keep in mind that if events are viewed as all style and no substance, it could backfire and cause negative publicity for the Member.

## Factors Affecting Event Planning

In addition to the office's goals and strategic plan, three factors should govern which events an office chooses to participate in or organize: the Member's style; the unique characteristics of the district/state; and the capabilities of the staff.

**Member's style.** Understanding the Member's style, preferences, abilities and weaknesses ensures that the Member is confident in, and comfortable with, the events in which he or she will play a prominent role. Some Members are

*Three factors should govern which events an office chooses to participate in or organize: the Member's style; the unique characteristics of the district/state; and staff capabilities.*

dynamic public speakers while others perform best in informal, personal settings. For one Representative, a parade is an exhilarating experience, making him feel more in touch with constituents; for another, perching on a convertible's rear seat, waving to crowds, is a source of great discomfort or even embarrassment. Some Senators enjoy impromptu public meetings when controversy emerges and they have to respond quickly; others seek structured activities that lend themselves to solid preparation and thoughtfulness.

Member buy-in is crucial to successful events, and pitching events that play to a Member's strengths and preferences will ensure that poor delivery will not weaken a strong message. One DD described the results of an ill-fitting event this way: "She wasn't comfortable. Her performance was flat. The media reflected it and little was accomplished. The fit simply wasn't there."

***District/state characteristics.*** In addition to considering the Member's personality, it is also necessary to consider the unique characteristics of the district or state, such as: density (urban, rural, or suburban); geography; and constituent demographics (ethnicity, economic profile, age, educational background, etc.). These characteristics present certain constraints and challenges that must be addressed when designing proactive events. For example, a Senator from a large northern state maintained contact with 30 percent of his constituency, which was scattered in remote rural areas, using technology instead of travel. Through live videoconferences, high school students were able to discuss legislation and issues with the Senator. E-newsletters and online videos were also heavily promoted and disseminated throughout the state.

Urban areas, too, can challenge event planners to be innovative. For example, one district faced an unusually high influx of new constituents. They were not familiar with the area and even less familiar with the Member. On top of that, the office had experienced past difficulties in attracting crowds to community meetings. The staff felt that there was less "word-of-mouth" from neighbor to neighbor in high-rise apartment buildings and that obtaining contact information to invite the new citizens to meetings was cost-prohibitive. Faced with these constraints, the office felt that television coverage was the best way to keep the growing community informed of the Member's work. The Member began hosting regular shows on community access channels and building solid relationships with local TV stations.

**Staff capabilities.** Finally, creating an effective event also requires knowledge of the strengths and limitations of staff and an understanding of their individual and collective skills. A great idea for an event sometimes has to be rejected because of these types of constraints — either a lack of staff resources or the hands-on skills required to execute a successful event. For example, one office wanted to help the large numbers of constituents whose homes were about to be foreclosed. Despite some preparation and learning about recent legislation regarding the issue, the staff was wholly unprepared to answer constituents’ complex questions about mortgages and refinancing. Many constituents left angrier and more frustrated than when they arrived, especially at their Representative for providing inadequate assistance. In short, it was a well-intentioned idea, but one that the staff was incapable of pulling off effectively.



## Planning Individual Events

With these factors in mind, an office can then begin to plan and implement events. In doing so, CMF recommends the steps below, which will help an office thoroughly and carefully plan events. A comprehensive plan decreases the likelihood of critical tasks falling through the cracks, ensures that deadlines will be met and that all staff are on the same page. As one House District Director stated, “Focus on the big picture but don’t forget the tiny details.” This process helps an office achieve such a balance to execute successful events.

*“Focus on the big picture but don’t forget the tiny details.”* — House District Director

1. **List one or more events to support each outreach strategy identified in the office’s strategic plan.** These events can be selected from those to which the Member has been invited, or events the office initiates on its own. When evaluating events, ask why the office should conduct or participate in it. What need is the event filling? How will the event promote or advance the Member’s goals?
2. **Identify and agree on one or two concrete, measurable objectives for each event.** Objectives should be linked to the goals and strategies they are designed to advance. They must also be specific enough to allow an office to determine empirically whether they have been achieved. An objective of “increasing visibility in the district,” for example, provides inadequate direc-





*The Member and staff must agree on concrete, measurable objectives before proceeding with event planning.*

tion to the staff responsible for shaping the event. Some examples of clear and concrete objectives include:

- Mention of the Member's identity theft legislation in the local daily newspapers.
- Getting the Mayor to speak at the event and publicly support the Member's bill.
- Public announcement by area business leaders of their support for the Member's local economic development initiative.

The Member and staff *must* agree on the objectives before proceeding. If they have varying viewpoints on what success looks like and what is realistic and achievable, they will not have a solid foundation to work from. They will also have very different perspectives as to how successful the event was and if they should conduct a similar event in the future. This step is critical in preventing disappointment from the Member's perspective and frustration from the staff's.

3. **Identify a timeframe for each event.** As described in Chapter 5, the office should have developed a long-range scheduling plan for one to two years. The events the office chooses to conduct within this timeframe should be scheduled in conjunction with the congressional calendar, district/state work periods, the Member's designated family time/events and other important dates.
4. **Designate a staffer to be primarily responsible for coordinating each event.** Usually, the DD/SD or Field Rep will take the lead for district/state events. If the event is a major press conference, however, the Communications Director might want to coordinate it. Similarly, if the occasion is a groundbreaking ceremony for a flood-control initiative the office was instrumental in securing, projects staff could take the lead.
5. **Make an action plan for each event.** The lead coordinator for each event, in conjunction with other appropriate staff, should list each and every task that must be completed for the event. All tasks — from those that must be completed eight weeks before the event to those performed during the event — should be listed on the plan. The questions in Figure 6-1 can help develop this list.

**Figure 6-1**

### Formulating a Comprehensive Planning Checklist

Even with the best planning, communication and coordination, unexpected “surprises” are bound to happen. The following questions, compiled from district/state staff, can prevent last minute glitches by helping craft a comprehensive event action plan, which could then be used as a template for future events.



#### Logistics

1. What kind of space is required?
2. What equipment is needed (e.g., a podium, microphones, video camera, projector, laptop, lighting)?
3. What else is needed (e.g., flip charts, notepads, water pitchers, extra chairs)?
4. How will the office transport staff and materials (e.g., signs, handouts)?
5. Is a professional photographer needed? Should the office take its own photos?
6. How should the audience be invited? Should certain groups be targeted?
7. Does the office have updated contact information, email distribution lists or mailing lists?
8. How many people does the office expect to invite? What is the target for attendance?
9. How will the office handle overflow or uninvited guests?
10. Will the invitation(s) have to be approved by franking?
11. What food arrangements are necessary?
12. How will the Member get there? Who will staff the Member?

#### Program

1. Who should be invited to participate or attend (e.g., federal or local officials, community leaders)?
2. What briefing materials will the Member need beforehand?
3. What, if any, handouts or briefing materials should be prepared for the audience?
4. What research will staff have to do to prepare these materials?
5. How much extra time should be built into the agenda to accommodate late arrivals of speakers and participants?
6. How will the office handle last minute guest or speaker cancellations?
7. Is the event being held during or around rush hour?

#### Press

1. What type of reporters or media is the office trying to reach (e.g., dailies, weeklies, TV, radio, blogs)?
2. How can the event be shaped to attract them?
3. How should reporters be notified (e.g., press release, email or phone calls)?
4. Are briefing packets necessary?
5. What, if any, equipment setups are needed to accommodate radio and TV reporters? Who will provide technical support?
6. Should the Member meet with reporters before or after the event?
7. What, if any, follow-up press activities should the office pursue after the event (e.g., press release, editorial board meetings, columns or op-eds)?

#### Advance Work

1. Who will test the equipment prior to the event?
2. Is the lighting adequate?
3. Will a photographic backdrop be used?
4. Who will test drive the Member's planned event route to ensure there is ample travel time?
5. Does the office need to obtain security or police assistance?
6. Whom should the office contact if serious disruptions or threats are made?

#### Follow-Up

1. Whom does the office need to call or send thank you notes to?
2. Are there any activities to conduct after the event (e.g., setting up meetings with federal officials or inserting a *Congressional Record* statement)?
3. What bills will have to be paid?
4. What type of evaluation should be conducted to assess the event's success?

Do not worry about listing too many tasks — the more comprehensive the list, the better. Tasks can always be narrowed down or streamlined later if needed. At this point, it is more critical to capture everything to make sure all bases are covered. Then, group the tasks by general function (e.g., press, programmatic, logistics and advance). For more on creating and implementing action plans, review Chapter 4.

- 6. Determine who is responsible for each task.** The lead event coordinator should now make assignments, which will need to be carefully reviewed and approved by the District/State Director (if they are not the lead). Effectively delegating responsibility requires more than simply assigning duties. It also requires agreement from designated staff that they will fulfill the tasks assigned to them.

The process of matching tasks with people is important to the success of an event, as well as to the professional development of staff. A common concern voiced by district/state staff is that their skills are not fully utilized. Staff are assigned the same roles, event after event, with little opportunity to exercise unused skills or develop new ones. DD/SDs should tap their staffs' diverse skills when planning and managing events. While possible avenues for professional development should be discussed as part of the formal performance review, managers should also informally and more frequently ask staff to volunteer or contribute their skills or interests to ongoing events. Ask staff if they would like to take responsibility for any event-related activities, or determine if they could lend expertise to an event. The answer might uncover hidden staff talents and interests like knowledge of sound systems, experience doing advance work or a talent in graphic design.

- 7. Assign deadlines for each task.** People need structure to work effectively. Even when staff have the best intentions, work without deadlines will slip, largely because more pressing demands and requests will take priority. Deadlines help determine the order in which tasks should be completed, how long it will take to complete each task and which tasks have hard, unmovable deadlines and which deadlines the office has set for itself and can modify if necessary.



If it is the office's first time conducting this type of event, or if the event is more complicated or high-profile, the office may wish to increase the amount of time estimated for the various event components. After the event, the office will become more experienced at estimating the time required to complete tasks successfully.

After filling in the deadlines, the DD/SD and lead coordinator should review the action plan to make sure that the timeframe set earlier is still realistic and achievable, given the amount of work required to make the event a success, and that the staff assigned to complete the work will have the necessary capacity to do so. The DD/SD should review the plan in the context of the office's broader agenda and other events so that each event is not planned and executed in isolation. The DD/SD and lead coordinator should edit the plan as necessary to minimize potential conflicts and overlapping responsibilities.

Once the DD/SD (and the CoS if necessary) has approved the overall plan, the lead coordinator can then discuss the assignments and deadlines with staff. Staff may also identify potential issues with the plan, so after the lead coordinator has finalized it with the DD/SD, the action plan should be distributed to every-

#### **A Note About Security**

One of the realities with planning large-scale public events is learning how to respond to protests or potential threats. District/state staff should establish good working relationships with local law enforcement agencies, and proactively seek their guidance to develop a protocol for these situations before they happen. If threatening language is used — whether in person, on the telephone, or through constituent mail — offices should also notify the U.S. Capitol Police Threat Assessment Section (202-224-1495), whose staff are specially trained to investigate potential threats to Members of Congress.

These procedures should be part of a comprehensive emergency response and continuity of operations plan for the office. Local law enforcement and House and Senate resources can assist district/state staff in developing these materials and preparing for other threatening or emergency situations, such as acts of terrorism and natural disasters.

For more information, contact the following organizations: House Office of Emergency Planning, Preparedness and Operations (202-226-0950); Senate Office of Law Enforcement and Security Operations (202-224-2525); U.S. Capitol Police Public Information Office (202-224-1677).



one (though the Member may be best served by a streamlined list of major milestones in the plan).

Once distributed, effective implementation of an event action plan requires constant communication and coordination among staff; the monitoring of progress in meeting plan deadlines; and the evaluation of the results once the event has occurred. The next section offers guidance in each of these areas.

### **Staff Communication and Coordination**

Without good communication among staff, all the planning in the world will not magically bring about a dynamic event. Good communication and coordination is especially important when the event requires coop-

*Without good communication among staff, all the planning in the world will not magically bring about a dynamic event.*

eration between the district/state and DC offices. In CMF's work and research, many congressional offices have relayed example after example of unsuccessful events, directly

attributable to breakdowns in interoffice communication. One story especially stands out:

A Representative hosted a four-day constituent forum in DC. The district and DC offices were each given responsibility for planning the event. On the first day, the Member and Chief of Staff were waiting for their guests outside the room, only to discover that the constituents were already enjoying refreshments at another location. They quickly realized that the district and DC staffs had arranged for completely separate events, in different House office buildings. The Member was furious. The Chief and District Director were panic-stricken. The constituents were confused.

At the heart of this expensive breakdown in communication was a history of mistrust, animosity and competitiveness between the two offices. Not all offices have experienced such costly and embarrassing problems, but many have their own stories of how poor coordination between offices hampered the success of an event.

Chapter 3 discusses numerous ways to improve communication between the district/state and DC offices, including planning sessions, creating interoffice teams and routinizing basic communications. Employing these practices will improve the overall strength of interoffice communications and in turn the effectiveness of the office's event planning and execution.

Probably the most important communication link in event planning is between the Scheduler and the lead event coordinator. Both staffers need adequate lead-time to do their jobs well. They should also understand the demands of each other's roles so that they can support one another in the event planning process. Without such an understanding, problems will ensue.

One state staffer, for example, requested that the Senator travel to a county that was rarely visited. Unfortunately, the DC Scheduler selected a date and time that were anything but conducive to a successful event. In addition, state staffer was given less than two weeks to plan the event. "Because the schedules are always finalized at the last minute, I felt as though I was set up for failure," she commented. "Hardly anyone showed up and the event fell flat on its face."

Here are a few simple suggestions to close such gaps in coordination:

- Develop a regular dialogue between the Scheduler and the lead event coordinator. The Member's schedule changes frequently, and what might be perceived as a minor change by the Scheduler could ruin a carefully planned event.
- Make sure that the lead coordinator and the Scheduler regularly and frequently update the event action plan and the schedule so that each are up to date on the changes in, and progress of, both.
- Involve the lead event coordinator in the scheduling team's meetings in the weeks preceding the event and include the event on the meeting's agenda.
- Hold brief (5–10 minutes) daily check-ins for the week preceding the event so the lead coordinator can monitor progress, discuss last minute changes and ensure that all plans are in place before the event.
- Schedule a meeting/conference call the week of the event to coordinate "day of" responsibilities, and ensure that all staff are aware of their roles and contingency plans for the event.

### **Monitoring Progress**

The action plan is a great tool for planning events. But unless the progress of the event work is regularly charted, the event could still run aground.





To be most effective, the action plan should be a *working document* that is regularly revised to reflect the inevitable changes in plans, assignments and deadlines. As discussed in Chapter 3, an office has several options for tracking the staff's progress, including meetings, regular status reports and frequent phone calls and email from the lead coordinator to the others involved. Regardless of the method used, the staff's progress should be updated weekly or biweekly, to keep all staff accountable and the event on track.

### Evaluating the Results

Chapter 5 introduced a concept called a "scheduling audit," to help evaluate the effectiveness of a strategic scheduling operation. Events, too, should be evaluated regularly and systematically. Evaluating event planning, as well as the event itself, forces the office to honestly assess its performance and, when necessary, develop strategies for improvement.

Remember, the evaluation should remain focused on the office's overall strategic outreach goals and on the specific objectives of particular events. It is best to review these goals and objectives and have them on hand before conducting the evaluation.

**Individual events.** Probably the best technique for evaluating the success of an event is to hold an after action review with all staff involved in the event, including those who developed the event objectives and action plan. The primary focus of the meeting is to determine if the office has met its objectives for the event. If clear and concise objectives were established, agreed-upon and written down, this is a straightforward question to answer. Either 200 people attended or they did not. If it becomes clear that the event did not meet expectations, the office must analyze what went wrong and how to correct it in the future. As part of this process, it is helpful to have the event coordinator write an evaluation memo comparing objectives with outcomes.

Most problems result from insufficient planning. Begin by examining the event planning process and ask questions like:

- Was the action plan detailed enough?
- Was the action plan based on reasonable assumptions?
- Were roles and responsibilities well matched?
- Was progress adequately tracked?



- Were communication and coordination sufficient?
- Were contingency plans made?

Other sources of feedback that are helpful in evaluating events include:

- **The Member.** The Member is usually a terrific barometer for measuring the dynamics of an event. Make a habit of soliciting his or her feedback. If the event is deemed a huge success by the staff, but the boss is not satisfied, understanding why is critical in obtaining Member buy-in for future events. Again, having agreed-upon objectives for the event, where the Member and staff achieve consensus on what a successful event means to the office, are critical to have before planning and conducting the event.
- **Constituents who attended the event.** The DD/SD or a Field Rep can randomly call 6–8 constituents and ask simple but straightforward questions about the event: How did you learn about the event? What did you like/dislike about it? What did you learn from it? What were your impressions of the Representative? The office could also solicit feedback from a larger percentage of the audience by distributing a brief questionnaire at the event (a sample of what could be asked after a speech is depicted in Figure 6-2). Alternatively, the office could contact attendees later through an online survey, though response rates are usually higher when asking for feedback at the time of the event, rather than afterward. Either way, seeking constituents' opinions about the event should provide candid feedback and many constituents will be flattered that they were asked for their input.
- **Friends the office has asked to attend the event and serve as evaluators.** This is a worthwhile tactic for a large forum or for an event that requires extensive planning. Because these people will know ahead of time that they are to carefully evaluate the event, they should be particularly attentive to details that may otherwise go unnoticed and should be able to provide the office with more extensive feedback.
- **Media coverage.** Assess how well the event was covered; which aspects or themes the reporters emphasized; and what reactions were reflected in their stories, on blogs or mentioned to staff informally.

**Figure 6-2**

**Model Speech/Event Evaluation Form**

As your Member of Congress, it is important to me to provide you with the best representation that I can. This survey will allow me to understand your needs better and to improve my ability to meet your expectations.

Please complete and return this form to me at the address listed below.

Event & date \_\_\_\_\_

Your name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City, state & zip \_\_\_\_\_

Email address \_\_\_\_\_

Would you like to sign up for my email newsletter?  Yes  No  Want more information

1. Did I address the subject(s) you expected or hoped to hear about?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

If not, what subject(s) did you want to hear about:

2. Please rate the length of my speech.

Too long < 1 2 3 4 5 > Too short

3. Please rate the level of detail in my speech.

Too much detail < 1 2 3 4 5 > Not enough detail

4. Please rate the amount of time devoted to questions-and-answers.

Too much time < 1 2 3 4 5 > Not enough time

5. How many times have you heard me speak in the past year?

6. What was your main reason for attending this event?

Please return to:

(Member's Name)  
(Member's Address)

*Thank you!*

**Comprehensive assessment.** If the office is coding individual events by topic, sponsor and city/locality, it can almost effortlessly do a collective assessment of all the office's events. This assessment should take into account staff events and meetings held as part of the office's outreach plan, not just Member events. Specifically, such a review should determine if the events the office is participating or conducting are enough to achieve the office's strategic goals. It can answer questions such as: How many events focused on education? How many times did the office participate in functions organized by outside groups? How many events did the office attend in the northern counties of the state? If the office does not consistently code and track events, this is another compelling reason why it should.

Finally, event evaluation can become sophisticated and lengthy, but assessments that are too ambitious usually are not completed. Keeping the assessment process simple and not too time-consuming will make it more likely that the office completes its assessment and learns from its experience.

## Conclusion

If planning and implementing strategic events sounds like a lot of work, it is. But it is the kind of hard work that can excite staff, build morale and produce a sense of achievement — both with respect to the success of the event and the teamwork it took to pull it off.

Not every proactive event requires heroic effort. The effort an event requires depends on, among other things, the type of event. Setting up a tour through a factory, waste dump or community center can be extremely effective if it is the right event at the right time.

The level of energy and work necessary will also vary according to the type of strategic plan, management structure and communications system an office has in place. For example, some offices find staging a town hall meeting every quarter a strenuous task, while other offices have made a fine science of planning and coordinating town meetings; they can hold several in a month's time without feeling a bit overburdened.

But today's legislators must utilize all options available to them to affect the policy process; and creative, well-planned events go a long way in garnering the support necessary to do so. Whatever the unique circumstances faced by each office, the plans, processes and pointers offered in this chapter should help bring focus and direction to event planning and result in successful events.

## 6 CHAPTER SUMMARY

### Planning and Implementing Successful Events

#### DO...

- Consider the Member's style, preferences, abilities and weaknesses and pitch events that play to the Member's strengths.
- Take into account how the district/state's density, geography and constituent demographics can impact event planning.
- Create events that draw upon the skills and abilities of staff and understand their limitations before planning or committing to an event.
- Ensure that the Member and staff agree on concrete, measurable objectives for each event before proceeding.
- Encourage regular communication and coordination between all staff involved in the event, especially the lead coordinator and Scheduler.
- Evaluate the office's overall event plan as well as the individual events to assess performance and learn from the experiences.

#### DON'T...

- Rely on a single type of proactive activity — various events tend to draw different audiences, serve different purposes and offer different benefits.
- Forget the tiny details when planning individual events. A comprehensive action plan that spells out every task will help prevent unexpected surprises and last minute glitches.
- Neglect to use events as an opportunity to develop new skills in staff or draw upon their little-known or unused abilities.
- Underestimate the importance of deadlines, which are critical in keeping staff accountable for their assignments and the event on track.
- Create complicated event evaluations — overly ambitious or lengthy assessments are usually ignored or not completed.

## CHAPTER

## 7

## Maximizing the Casework Operation

### *This Chapter Includes...*

- An overview of what casework is and how it is conducted
- Advice on making key decisions about casework operations
- Recommendations for developing casework policies and procedures
- Suggestions for managing Caseworkers
- Guidance on managing and monitoring the casework system
- Information for managing select non-casework constituent services

For many district and state offices, casework — assisting constituents with problems they are having with federal agencies — is the most time-consuming and resource-intensive constituent service they provide. A favorable resolution to a case can be extremely gratifying and even heartwarming. An unfavorable resolution can be frustrating and disheartening. Whatever the outcome, the casework process is usually complex, often emotional, and always requires a great attitude and excellent communication and project management skills. Successfully managing Caseworkers and the casework operation takes some finesse. It begins with establishing and enforcing clear policies and procedures, but it also requires flexibility and active oversight to effectively adjust workloads and adapt to changing constituent needs. Managing a casework opera-

tion also requires compassion and insight to keep Caseworkers from burning out, since the job includes a significant amount of stress.

This chapter will help managers effectively design, assess, improve and manage their casework systems. It is not intended to be a manual to train Caseworkers to interview constituents, craft letters to agencies or research laws and regulations. Rather, it is designed to help State and District Directors and Directors of Constituent Services effectively establish and manage their offices' casework operations.

### **What is Casework?**

Because each office defines casework for itself, there are as many definitions for casework as there are congressional offices. Many House and Senate offices include any constituent request, such as military service academy nominations, congratulatory letters and getting earmarks for public works in the district or state, in their definitions of casework. However, for the purposes of this chapter, casework is defined more narrowly as the assistance a House or Senate office provides to constituents who are having problems with a federal agency. Sometimes this intervention is as a liaison or ombudsman, seeking information and facilitating a timely response. Other times the intervention is as an advocate, seeking a timely resolution that is favorable to the constituent. Most district and state offices do not define casework so narrowly, but the distinction is important to effectively address the management challenges unique to intervening in the work of federal agencies, which often deeply affects the lives of the constituents involved.

*In nearly every area the federal government interacts with citizens, Members of Congress have conducted casework.*

The types of casework congressional offices handle run the entire gamut of federal services. In nearly every area the federal government interacts with citizens, Members of Congress have conducted casework. However, the most common casework topics include:

- Immigration services;
- Federal benefits (military, veterans, Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, etc.);
- Disability claims;
- Requests for reassignment from military personnel;
- Passport problems;

- Housing issues;
- Disaster assistance; and
- Small business assistance.

Casework is usually reactive, as it requires a request — and explicit permission — by a constituent for a congressional office to become involved in a case. Proactive casework occurs when a congressional office solicits casework requests through general outreach or through targeted outreach to particular groups, such as those affected by a natural disaster, economic crisis or military action.

### The Casework Process

Most constituents who request casework assistance of a congressional office do so because they feel they have exhausted their other options. The Senator or Representative is usually the last resort. As a result, constituents are often frustrated and/or desperate, and their casework requests are often time-sensitive. The congressional office basically becomes involved in a process over which it has little control or authority beyond the purview of the Member of Congress. The congressional office does not usually solve the problem, but simply works to help expedite a resolution. When Members are asked for their assistance, most offices follow the same basic process:

1. **Intake.** The constituent contacts the office via telephone, postal mail, fax or email to request assistance. Information about the case is collected and entered into the office's constituent database and the case is assigned to a Caseworker. If necessary, the Caseworker contacts the constituent for more information about the case.
2. **Authorization.** The Caseworker provides a privacy release form (via postal mail, fax or downloadable PDF) for the constituent to sign. Many agencies will accept any document signed by the constituent and granting the Member access to records which will help resolve the issue, but some require specific forms be submitted before they will grant the Member access to records. The constituent returns the signed privacy release form to the office via postal mail or hand delivery. The privacy release must be physically signed by the subject of the case, but it need not be witnessed or notarized. Some agencies require an original copy, so a faxed or photocopied version is not sufficient.



3. **Action.** The Caseworker either contacts the agency to initiate the case or contacts the constituent to collect more information, including any case-related documents, and then initiates the case with the agency. The agency acknowledges receipt of the Member's inquiry and begins working on the case. The Caseworker monitors the status of the case, interacting with the agency and constituent, as necessary.
4. **Resolution.** The agency provides the service or information. Response times vary widely, from days to months, even up to a year. The Caseworker notifies the constituent of the resolution via telephone, fax or postal mail. The case is closed and the office retains records in electronic and paper formats as necessary.

Though this process seems straightforward, Caseworkers face a number of challenges in initiating and resolving cases, including:

- Getting privacy release forms signed and delivered promptly by the constituent;
- Collecting relevant information and documents from the constituent;
- Managing constituents' expectations, especially when they are upset, misinformed and/or have expectations that exceed what the office can realistically provide;
- Knowing which agency handles a case, whom at an agency to contact and keeping abreast of often-changing agency contacts;
- Managing and understanding diverse, inconsistent and changeable agency procedures;
- Having easy access to up-to-date online information from agencies that addresses common casework issues and questions;
- Receiving responses and progress updates from agencies; and
- Managing the urgency of many cases.

Many of these challenges can be overcome through good management, which involves having a clear understanding of the role and priority casework will play in the office, establishing and communicating clear policies and procedures for conducting casework, hiring and training good Caseworkers, and effectively overseeing the casework operation.

## Determining the Role and Priority of Casework

Not all offices assign casework the same priority. For some offices, casework takes a back seat to outreach and special projects more directly related to the legislative goals of the Member, so the casework operation has a limited role. For other offices, casework is the highest priority for the state or district office because the Member considers constituent service to be the focus of his or her tenure. The priority each office assigns to casework depends a great deal on the following four factors that every office must weigh when developing or reassessing its casework operation:

1. **The environmental, economic, political or emergency circumstances of the district or state.** An office will need to commit resources to casework based in part on considerations over which it has little control and which can be difficult to predict. For example, natural disasters; deterioration of the local, state, or national economy; and changes in the population will all place pressure on an office to increase the role and priority of casework. Casework requests increase as constituents' needs for — and dependence on — government services increase. Additionally, the practices of other Members of the state delegation and — for more recently elected Members — the practices of the predecessor can also place pressure on an office to prioritize casework. Offices' caseloads will ebb and flow with the changing circumstances of the district or state, so they must continually assess the environment and adjust the resources committed to casework to reflect changing constituent needs and pressures over which the office has limited control.
2. **The demographics of the district or state.** Offices representing higher percentages of constituents from demographics that tend to be more reliant on government services — e.g., senior citizens, veterans, recent immigrants, lower income, etc. — will inherently have heavier caseloads than other offices. For these offices, casework will likely be given a greater role and higher priority.
3. **The Member's view of his or her role.** Every Member serves two basic roles in Congress: the legislator and the ombudsman. Some prioritize one role over the other, and this can have significant impact on the role and priority of casework in their of-

fices. Members who emphasize the legislator role tend to believe they were elected to write laws and affect public policy, and not to become “super social workers.” Such Members want to meet their constituents’ basic needs but tend not to be interested in developing superlative casework operations. Members who emphasize the ombudsman role tend to believe that casework is one of the most effective ways to meet the individual needs of their constituents. These Members often insist their offices go to great lengths to develop a highly proficient casework operation,

*When determining the priority of casework, it is critical to take into account the Member’s view of his or her role.*

and to continually expand their caseload and productivity without a loss of quality. When determining the priority of casework, it is critical to take into

account the Member’s view of his or her role. It is difficult to manage a large, high-priority casework operation without the Member’s support.

4. **The Member’s political circumstances.** Some Members have safe seats and do not have to worry about going to great pains to thoroughly serve every constituent who contacts them. Others, however, feel they cannot afford to make casework less than a top priority. Political circumstances tend to be more important for House offices and for Senate offices representing states with smaller populations since the impact of strong constituent services can be felt more resoundingly.

Most of these factors are perpetually in flux. It would be a mistake for an office to determine the role and priority of casework once in its first year and then operate on that decision for the rest of its tenure. Casework should be a flexible operation that responds to the changing needs of both constituents and of the Senator or Representative. Part of a successful casework operation is continual reassessment of — and adaptation to — the environmental and political circumstances of the district/state. This can be done either formally through the office’s annual or biennial strategic planning or informally, as needed.

If an office determines that casework is a high priority, it does not have to wait for casework requests to come in — it can seek them. Though casework has traditionally been considered reactive, offices can conduct proactive outreach to heighten the visibility of its casework operation, increase its caseload and expand the services it provides to constituents.

Many offices already conduct a range of outreach activities that result in increased casework requests, including:

- Ensuring frequent Member visits to the district or state;
- Operating more district/state offices;
- Informing constituents of the casework services available to them through the media, notices in the Member's newsletter or brochures on casework services and federal programs;
- Deploying mobile offices that allow Caseworkers to reach constituents who do not live or work near any of the Member's district/state offices;
- Using toll-free telephone numbers which allow constituents in states or large districts to call the office free of charge;
- Conducting regular or community office hours with staff and/or the Member throughout the district or state;
- Arranging events such as town meetings or informational seminars on government programs at which the Member or staff can encourage constituents to air their problems or ask questions;
- Assigning Caseworkers to conduct regular outreach visits with groups that tend to have casework needs, such as senior citizens, veterans, immigrants and the unemployed;
- Meeting with nonprofits that could refer constituents with casework issues to the office; and
- Enabling constituents to request casework assistance online.

Offices should carefully consider what caseload is appropriate given its resources and casework goals. The standard view is that more is always better. Members want to believe their offices can increase quantity without a loss of quality. However, as an office's caseload increases, there is an increased risk that initiation on cases will take longer and the quality of the work will decline. Without adding additional staff or reducing the non-casework tasks performed by Caseworkers, either the turnaround time on cases will increase, or the amount of time Caseworkers devote to each case will decrease.

Outreach can also be used to regulate an office's caseload. For example, one Senate office decided to curtail all casework outreach activities for several months in an effort to reduce the number of incoming cases.



The departure of two Caseworkers had reduced the office's capacity for processing cases. The Senator and State Director understood the trade-off they faced and chose to maintain their responsiveness by temporarily trying to reduce the number of constituent requests. According to the office, this tactic worked. The flow of new cases declined because Caseworkers temporarily stopped promoting the office's casework services.

A decision to temporarily reduce outreach might be warranted for several other reasons. For example, if a district/state office were revamping its casework system, moving or opening an office, or planning a major conference, it would make good sense to reduce the influx of new cases. In addition, many offices regularly cope with sharp seasonal changes in casework. District/state offices can use outreach strategies to regulate these cyclical fluctuations. Slow seasons can be met with aggressive outreach to smaller communities or by planning town meetings or other outreach events, while busy seasons can be better managed by reducing outreach. A steadier, more regular caseload allows for greater consistency in casework quality and preserves the sanity of the casework staff.

In any case, an office's decision to conduct extensive outreach or to temporarily expand or reduce its casework outreach all depends on the role and priority the office assigns to casework. However, the role and priority of casework must regularly be reviewed and reassessed in light of the circumstances of constituents and of the Senator or Representative. Conducting this reassessment is a key component of effectively managing a casework operation.

### **Developing Casework Policies and Procedures**

Another critical element of managing an exemplary casework operation is developing and communicating clear casework policies and procedures. Without coherent policies, standards and procedures to govern the work, there is significant risk for misunderstandings and miscommunication, duplication of effort, loss of data, lack of follow-through and inconsistent service because each Caseworker will operate based on his or her own understanding of how things should be done. In one Senate office, for example, casework is performed differently by each Caseworker because the office never established any procedures or standards. Some Caseworkers faithfully enter detailed information about every case they handle into their constituent database, while others only sporadically enter a portion of their cases. Some Caseworkers contact agency staff primarily by phone,

while others deal with them exclusively in writing, except in emergencies. Some Caseworkers draft only original correspondence to agencies and constituents while others rely heavily on form letters. Additionally, the Caseworkers reported an informal process for initiating action on new cases that ranged from 24 hours to two weeks.

In short, because no procedure, system or policy was developed or enforced, the office had as many systems as it did Caseworkers. The result was that the quality of the casework varied considerably. A constituent would receive a significantly different service simply depending on the Caseworker to whom the case was assigned.

Unfortunately, this example isn't an aberration. Many offices still do not develop written, or even unwritten but informally understood, procedures to give Caseworkers guidance on how they are expected to perform their work and what standards they are expected to meet. And some offices that do establish good systems and procedures on paper fail to adhere to or enforce them. To compound matters, management often has no reliable casework data with which to identify and correct the problems generated by the lack of policy and procedures. It is virtually impossible to manage a casework operation that has no standards and Caseworkers who have no parameters or guidance. For this reason, it is critical to develop a written casework manual, which will serve two critical purposes. First, it will serve as an excellent training guide for new Caseworkers and a reference tool for veteran staff. Second, it will provide uniform standards that will help ensure the quality and consistency of the casework performed.

The best way to develop policies and procedures is to discuss them openly with Caseworkers as a group. Such a process allows the staff to share their collective experience and personal preferences. It also greatly increases the chances that the system ultimately will be adhered to, since the Case-

*It is virtually impossible to manage a casework operation that has no standards and Caseworkers who have no parameters or guidance.*

### **Additional Casework Resources & Training**

CMF offers several additional casework resources for district/state staff on our website. We have provided how-to guides and best practices on casework, as well as sample manuals that House and Senate offices can download and adapt to reflect office policies. In addition, under contract with the Chief Administrative Officer of the House, CMF conducts a series of webinars customized to district office staff on various casework and constituent service-related topics. Visit [CongressFoundation.org](http://CongressFoundation.org) for more information.



workers will feel invested in it, rather than feeling as though a rigid system is being imposed on them by an untrusting supervisor. The casework manager or District/State Director should facilitate the discussion as well as offer his or her views. Disagreements can be resolved by the District/State Director, or through consensus, a vote or further research.

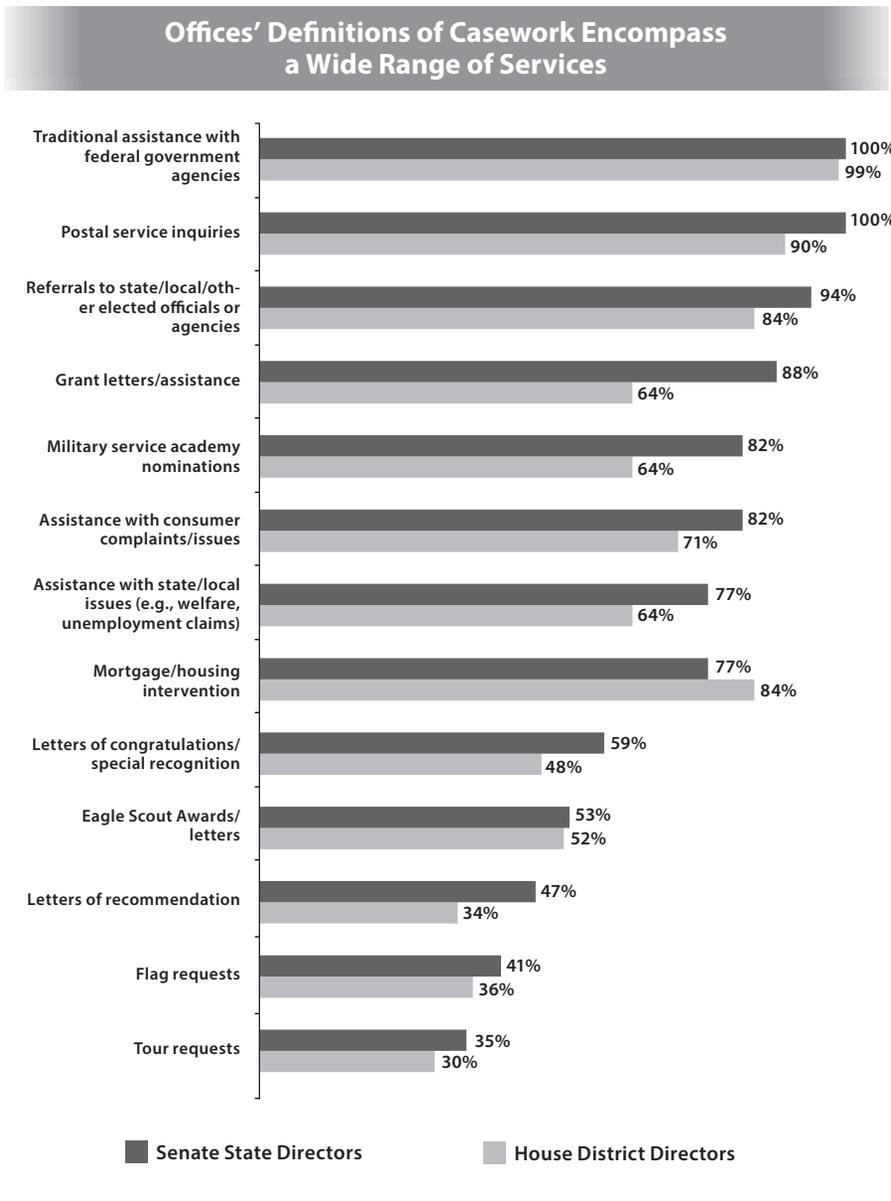
Few policies endure over time unless they are written down. Once the office has developed policies and procedures, they should be captured in writing in a straightforward, easy-to-read document that will be distributed to each Caseworker. The manual should then be reviewed and, if necessary, revised at least once a year. As circumstances change — the goals of the office, the relative priority of casework, the office's caseload, the number of Caseworkers, etc. — so must policies and procedures. The manual must be kept current to be relevant or it will quickly become obsolete and unused. An office can include a wide range of constituent service and office procedures in its manual, but at the very least, it should address the following.

***The definition of a case.*** What will constitute a case in the office? As shown in Figure 7-1, each office operates by different definitions. For some, only a matter requiring action with or information from an agency qualifies as a case. For others, *any* constituent request — even questions Caseworkers can answer without doing any research — is considered a case. This is an important distinction to make. It is imperative that all Caseworkers in an office follow the same definition of casework. Confusion will abound if this definition is inconsistent, and it will become difficult to assess each Caseworker's caseload. If an office allows the definition of a case to fluctuate, it becomes impossible to determine whether changes in the caseload reflect a marked increase in casework — and thus, a need for additional staff — or simply an unclear definition. Once the office has clearly defined what a case is, it becomes a simple matter of applying casework policies and procedures to every matter that falls within the definition and developing additional policies and procedures for non-casework constituent services.

***Procedures for casework intake.*** How should the office handle phone and in-person requests? Should staff urge constituents who call or walk in to put their concerns in writing, or should the constituent be interviewed on the spot? What questions should staff ask in such an interview? Who is responsible for handling phone or walk-in cases? What training should staff have before conducting intake interviews? Should the office use a

standard intake form for all cases or different forms for different types of cases? How will the website be integrated into the casework intake process? When should information be entered into the database and what are the guidelines for doing so? Offices must develop clear policies for how

**Figure 7-1**



the initial contact with a constituent will go and who will be involved, and they should include regularly updated information in their casework manuals to support the intake process, such as:

- Intake forms (both general and agency/topic specific);
- Answers to frequently asked questions;
- Examples of state and local cases with contact information for referrals;
- Procedures for emergency cases, if they are to be handled differently; and
- Documents to support training new staff on intake procedures.

While emergency cases usually require immediate action, many offices strongly encourage constituents to transmit their non-emergency casework requests in writing. They argue that a written letter or email helps the constituent focus on the crux of the problem and thus reduces the time staff must spend questioning the constituent to clearly understand the problem.



Some offices train interns to handle the intake function. Other offices argue that intake can be highly sensitive and should be handled only by the Caseworkers. CMF encourages offices to have interns handle intake, but only after training them well. Proper training for casework intake should include: observing an experienced Caseworker conduct several intake interviews; reviewing some basic materials on interview techniques; working from a list of basic interview questions developed by experienced Caseworkers; and developing an effective shorthand note-taking system. Finally, interns must be trained to determine when a problem is too complex or sensitive that the intake should be done by an experienced Caseworker.

***Expected timeframes for assigning and initiating action on cases.***

How quickly will cases be assigned to Caseworkers? Once a case is assigned, how soon should the Caseworker initiate action? Most offices have general expectations for turnaround time for assigning and initiating action on cases, but many fail to put their policies in writing or to enforce them. As a result, turnaround times can become lengthy and haphazard, creating serious management problems and potentially even political problems. Emergency cases that are not taken up in a timely manner, and the speed and consistency with which cases are handled, can substantially affect the Member's reputation in the district or state.



Why do so many offices fail to adhere to the policies they have set? One reason is that they set unrealistic standards that the Caseworkers cannot attain and so ignore, as a result. Having Caseworkers ignore the standards spells trouble, however, because it indirectly sends the message that the standards do not deserve to be taken seriously. Caseworkers could conclude that it does not much matter if they miss the mark by two days or two weeks. In contrast, standards that are less grandiose but adhered to provide important management control.

According to CMF's research, 86 percent of House offices and 75 percent of Senate offices initiate action on newly received cases in 48 hours or less, on average. However, CMF strongly recommends that offices regularly review and adjust the standards for the timeframe within which action must be initiated based on the caseload. Staff should feel that what is expected of them is reasonable and that it considers their workloads. They must also clearly understand that they will be held accountable for meeting the established standards. This turnaround standard must be established jointly by the Caseworkers and their supervisor. It should take into consideration the caseload, the relative value the Member places on casework responsiveness, other office responsibilities and the constituent's expectations.

***Procedures for initiating cases.*** When should Caseworkers write an original letter to an agency to initiate a case? When will a form letter suffice? Should Caseworkers initiate cases with agencies primarily through written correspondence or through phone calls? When is a phone call preferable to a letter, and vice versa? How should data be captured in the office's constituent database? What are the office's expectations and guidelines for starting work on a case? Clear policies and procedures are critical because case initiation can have significant impact on the interactions the Caseworker will have with both the constituent and the agency throughout the life of the case.

The decision whether to write original letters or form letters to agencies can be reduced to a balance between speed and quality. A letter that is personally written or targeted to a specific case will usually be more effective, but will take longer to write. An office must determine for itself whether and when the additional time is warranted. Chances are slim that a one-size-fits-all policy for writing original letters or form letters will work. Instead, a policy on the use of form letters versus individual letters must consider several variables:

- Whether the office's caseload tends to be heavy or light, since heavy caseloads will necessitate a higher percentage of form letters;
- What type of case it is, since some agencies require more detailed information than a form letter can provide;
- Whether the constituent can write a compelling argument, as Caseworkers may need to write original letters if the constituent is unable to write persuasively on his or her own;
- Whether the office values timeliness or thoroughness more highly, as form letters will help facilitate a faster turnaround and original letters will facilitate thoroughness; and
- How strong the writing abilities of the Caseworkers are, since strong writers will be better equipped to write original letters when time allows.



For offices that prefer phone contact with agencies, it is important to follow certain steps. First, all conversations — on the phone or in person — should be properly documented in the case file. A handwritten summary can suffice, but a short note in the constituent's database record is far preferable. If this is not done, staff might be exposing their Member to unwarranted public criticism. How can the office argue that the agency gave it the wrong information when there is no record of the information or when it was received? Second, staff should require that unfavorable decisions be put in writing. It is easier to appeal a decision in writing than a decision communicated over the phone. Third, it is important that a disappointed constituent clearly understand that the office presented the case to the appropriate agency and that it was the agency, not the Member, which made the unfavorable decision.

***Policies for reviewing outgoing correspondence.*** Will someone need to review outgoing correspondence before it is sent? If so, whom? What will that person (or those people) look for? What is the expected turnaround time for reviewing correspondence? Most offices recommend that all letters to agencies and constituents be reviewed by a second reader — usually the staffer who oversees casework. The quality of those letters reflects directly on how the Member is perceived. Mistakes inevitably occur in any operation where dozens of letters are written daily, even if the letters are primarily form letters. It is the responsibility of management to ensure that the occasional errors are caught and corrected. It is also the responsibility of management to ensure that the letters convey

the proper tone and casework protocol. Remember that cases occasionally grow into news stories, and letters written by congressional staff may be quoted in local papers. It is therefore essential that someone with good writing skills as well as sound political judgment review all letters the office produces.

One Senate office shared an embarrassing story that underscores this point. In a military case worked on jointly by a Caseworker and an intern, the Army rejected a soldier's request for a transfer. In a letter above the Senator's signature, the intern relayed the decision to the soldier, stating that she was sorry the Army "could not have been more cooperative." The letter was mailed without being reviewed by anyone in the office. Based upon the inference that the Senator thought the Army had been uncooperative, the soldier presented the letter to his commanding officer, who passed the letter up the chain of command. By the time the letter reached the Pentagon, the matter had become a major source of irritation for the Army, which felt the Senator's slight was unwarranted given the facts of the case. It took a letter of apology from the Senator to resolve the matter.

***Guidelines for following up with agencies.*** How long should caseworkers generally wait for a response from an agency? How should they follow up? What is the expected turnaround time for responding to interim inquiries from agencies? The answers to these questions will depend, to some degree, on the type of case, the urgency of the case, and agency policies, but management should establish guidelines for moving cases along if they seem to have stalled and for reining in Caseworkers whose expectations for action are unrealistic.

Effective casework depends in no small part upon the relationships the office has with the agencies with which it interacts. How the case is initiated will set the tone, but the follow-through will solidify the relationship. The office should consider the tone Caseworkers should use in their follow-up with agencies and when and whether it is appropriate to be a squeaky wheel or to be confrontational.

An office should also establish reasonable and enforceable turnaround standards for acting on interim responses from agencies. Without such standards, Caseworkers may treat follow-through as a secondary priority. Thus the office may be excellent at initiating cases quickly but unacceptably slow at processing cases to completion.

**Policies for keeping constituents informed.** How often should a Caseworker contact a constituent with information on the status of his or her case? What should Caseworkers do to manage constituent expectations for a resolution? How should Caseworkers handle constituents who call or write repeatedly for updates? One office whose Member views himself as strongly committed to delivering outstanding casework services follows a policy of contacting all constituents with active cases every three weeks, even if there is no new information to report. Other offices do not keep track of their active constituent contacts because the constituents do a good job of keeping in touch on their own.

Managing constituent expectations is one of the most important casework activities. If constituents clearly understand what the office can and cannot provide, the likely timeframe for resolving their case, the role of the Member and the office with respect to the agency, and how often the office will provide updates,

*Managing constituent expectations is one of the most important casework activities.*

then they will likely be more understanding of the process and less likely to consume significant, but unnecessary, Caseworker time and energy. For this reason, it is important for the office to establish policies and guidelines — and to provide supporting documents and information — for setting and managing constituent expectations.

Offices that adhere to a policy of regular contact should implement standards for informing constituents by phone, letter or email on the status of, and resolution to, their cases. Though it is time-consuming for Caseworkers to make the calls or write the letters keeping constituents informed, it could save time and trouble down the road. Reminders can be set in the constituent database or in their calendars to prompt staff to check in with constituents according to the timeframes the office has established. When the outcome of a case has been determined, one office notifies the constituent by phone only if the outcome is positive or successful. Otherwise, the constituent is notified in writing.

**Guidelines for when to consult with the supervisor.** Under what circumstances must a Caseworker engage a supervisor in a case? Will standards be different depending on a Caseworker's experience or tenure in the office? What types of information are important to convey to the supervisor or District Director? Are there times when the Chief of Staff or Communications Director should be engaged? Good casework requires that Caseworkers exercise a tremendous amount of individual

judgment — about people, the veracity of information and how best to press an issue with agency staff. One of the most important judgments the Caseworker must make, however, is whether a situation requires the input of the casework supervisor. Unfortunately, most supervisors do not spell out for their casework staff which matters require a second opinion. A frequent consequence is that staff do not consult the supervisor often enough. This is not as pressing a problem in offices with experienced casework staff who work out of the same office, but it is especially important to resolve in satellite offices with younger, less experienced Caseworkers who work without on-the-spot supervision.

The casework policies and procedures manual should outline the types of questions or concerns Caseworkers should discuss with their supervisor. One Senate office has the policy of referring the following matters to the supervisor:

- Issues that are arguably both state and federal, such as welfare;
- Legal questions;
- Any request that involves “questionable” circumstances;
- Abusive or threatening letters;
- Issues that stump the caseworker; and
- Letters from VIPs.

While this list may be a good starting point, it is best if the supervisor and casework staff develop the list for their office together, based on their own personal experiences. Additionally, the office’s policy should also encourage Caseworkers to consult with their supervisor if they have any doubts about a specific request for assistance. Experienced House and Senate staff stress the importance of “learning the whole story,” before proceeding on any constituent request. In doing so, staff must obtain all the facts pertaining to the case, and not just the perspective of an individual. If there is anything about the request for assistance that does not seem right, Caseworkers must feel comfortable raising their concerns with the casework supervisor, and possibly the District/State Director, before taking action.

***Procedures for documenting, filing and archiving cases.*** What information should be included in a case file? What will be documented on paper and what in the constituent’s electronic record? How soon should it be entered? How long will records be maintained? To what extent will paper documents be converted to digital documents? How will records be



accessed and by whom? What reports will be produced from the records and how often? Maintaining a filing system is usually considered a fairly straightforward and simple task. Consequently, some offices do not realize the need to develop uniform documentation and filing procedures for paper and electronic files until information is lost. To avoid such problems, it is important to develop and implement a written filing policy that ensures uniformity.

Almost all offices have computerized their casework records to some degree, and most rely on the office's constituent database to track all constituent interactions. By creating a record in the database for each case and using that record to track all action on the case, Caseworkers can access the most important information about a case within seconds. The record should include such data as: the constituent's name, address, telephone and Social Security numbers; agency contacts; the due date for the agency's response; and a brief summary of all case activities (e.g., letters and phone conversations). Storing such data electronically right from the beginning of a case saves significant time tracking down information, enables cases to be easily transferred to another Caseworker, facilitates reminders to take action, ensures that casework reports are accurate and allows Caseworkers, as well as their supervisors, to review a several-months-old case on one screen. Some offices also include additional information, including scanned images of paper correspondence, which allows all of the relevant information about a case to be easily accessed at once.

In addition, to ensure that all Caseworkers are following the same procedures in using the database, an office should address the following questions:



- What constitutes a case? Should constituent inquiries or passport applications be entered as cases on your database?
- What constituent information should be obtained before a case is logged in?
- How will the office code the cases so reports on different types of cases can be easily generated?
- When should a case be closed on the system?
- How and when should records be archived once they are closed?

Weekly or monthly casework reports are only as helpful as the quality of the information entered into the database. Uniformity of procedures

helps ensure that reports from different Caseworkers and district/state offices are comparing the same variables, not apples and oranges.

The constituent database is the backbone of most casework management systems, but paper files are still important for most offices. As with the electronic files, the procedures an office develops to standardize paper casework files should address certain basic questions:

- What information should be included in each case file?
- How should the information be organized?
- How and where should Caseworkers file pending cases?
- When should Caseworkers have their closed cases transferred from their pending files to the central or main files?
- How should the central files be organized?
- Who should be designated to file closed cases and manage the central file?
- How long should closed cases be kept on file?
- Should archived files be disposed of, stored in a federal storage center or returned to constituents?
- Who should be designated to transfer or dispose of old cases?

There is no best system for filing casework. Many different systems work well, but the most efficient casework filing systems share the following critical components.

- **Uniformity among Caseworkers.** All Caseworkers should file active or pending cases according to the same system. Otherwise, when a Caseworker takes leave or is out sick, fellow Caseworkers may not be able to answer constituent or agency questions in the interim. Additionally, if a Caseworker cannot locate the year-old file of a constituent who re-contacts the office, it will be hard to offer fast, high-quality service. Continuity and efficiency will be lost. Similarly, filing procedures for each Caseworker's own pending files, as well as for computer files, should be identical to those used in the central filing system. For example, if Caseworkers organize pending files alphabetically by subject (the most common approach), the central file should be organized the same way. Such uniformity will reduce confusion.



- **Designated responsibility for the central filing system.**

The office should designate a specific person to maintain a central filing system for the office's paper files. This person must ensure that closed cases are properly filed; old files are regularly removed; files temporarily taken and used by Caseworkers are signed out before being taken; and lists of archived files are meticulously maintained for fast retrieval. If no one is specifically assigned to steward the central file, those tasks tend to get neglected and information gets misplaced or lost.

- **Ready access to recent case archives.** It is important that files on recently closed cases (archived files less than three years old) be quickly and easily available to Caseworkers. It is not uncommon for an office to reopen a closed case upon being re-contacted by the constituent involved. Access to the case history can significantly reduce the time a Caseworker must spend relearning or re-documenting the case. This is especially true in instances when the Caseworker who handled the initial case is no longer with the office. Not only does ready access to the case history save time, it also engenders confidence in constituents, who tend to be understandably frustrated if they had to resubmit documentation and spend several hours briefing another Caseworker.

While most offices agree with these points, several follow a policy of destroying files that have been closed for at least two years due to a lack of storage space. By filing as much as possible electronically, this should not be an issue, provided the office is willing to invest in electronic storage. Also, some offices may not be aware that the National Archives offers complimentary, secure storage of inactive files for Members of Congress at their 13 Federal Records Centers located throughout the country. To locate these regional centers, visit the congressional services section of the National Archives and Records website at [www.nara.gov](http://www.nara.gov) or contact their congressional affairs office at 202-357-5100 or [congress.affairs@nara.gov](mailto:congress.affairs@nara.gov).



By establishing and documenting clear policies and procedures on the key casework management issues, Caseworkers — current and future — have clear parameters for their work and managers have tools they need to assess and oversee the casework operation and Caseworker performance. A casework manual that is collaboratively developed, includes as much guidance as possible without overly constraining the judgment of Caseworkers, is enforced and is regularly reviewed and adapted to current

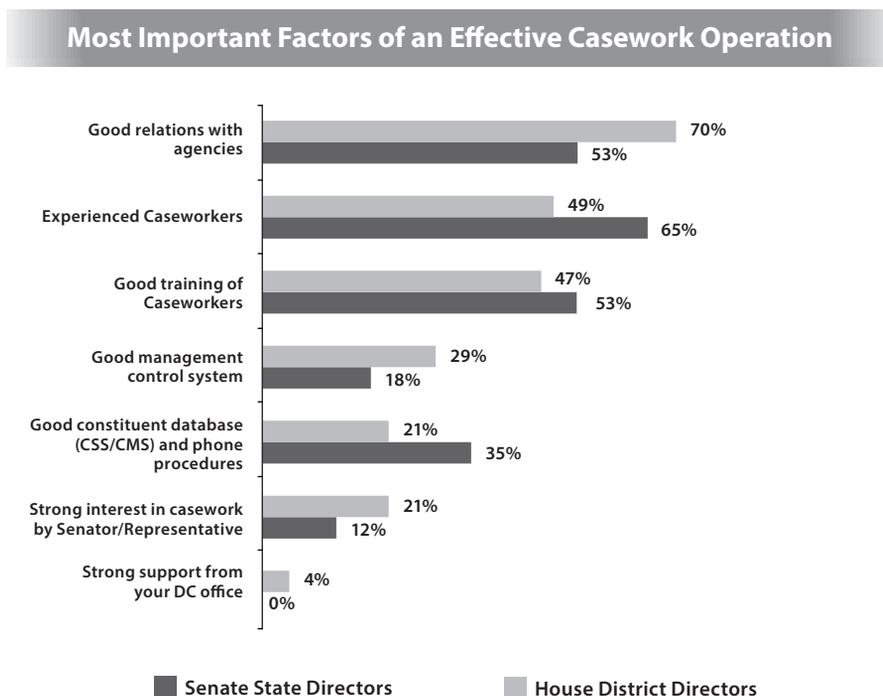
circumstances can make a tremendous difference to casework performance and to a manager's oversight of the casework operation.

## Managing Caseworkers

Knowing the role casework plays in an office and having policies and procedures to guide the casework operation are critical to a successful casework operation, but even more important is to have Caseworkers with experience, training, good judgment, excellent communication skills and solid project management skills. As Figure 7-2 shows, House and Senate offices consider experienced Caseworkers and good Caseworker training to be two of the most important factors to a successful casework operation, along with good relationships with federal agencies.

Caseworkers tend to be experienced professionals who have a fair amount of autonomy to use their judgment in resolving cases. When

**Figure 7-2**



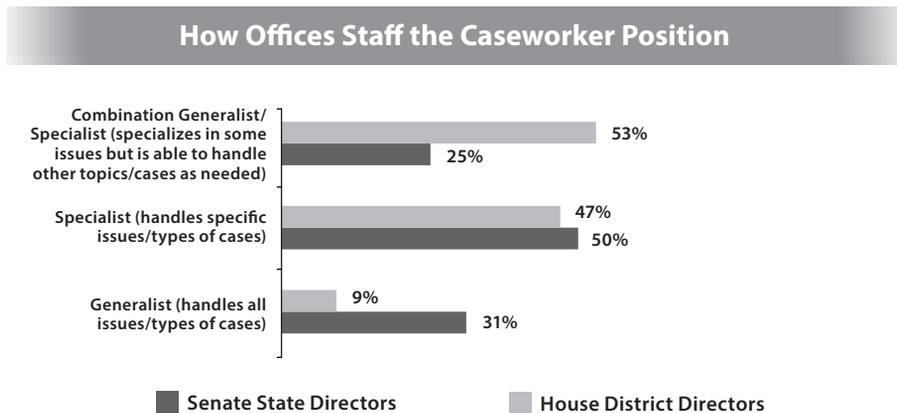
Note: Respondents were allowed to choose their top two factors so results total more than 100%.

hiring and training Caseworkers, an office must be clear about how they expect these staffers to do their jobs and how they will be managed. Effectively managing Caseworkers depends a lot on certain decisions an office makes about how casework will be conducted and distributed and about how Caseworkers will be hired and trained. The key issues for managing Caseworkers are discussed below.

**Staffing generalist or specialist Caseworkers.** One of the important decisions about Caseworker responsibilities is the decision about whether staff will be generalists who handle all types of cases, specialists who handle only specific types of cases or a combination of both. As Figure 7-3 shows, the staffing of this position varies widely in House and Senate offices. For the reasons outlined below, each office must decide which approach best suits its needs.

Several good arguments can be made for specialists. Specialization allows the Caseworker to become an expert in specific areas and thus more proficient in handling cases in those areas than a generalist would be. Specialists also have a better opportunity to develop good working relations with key agency staff. They can speak regularly with an agency officer and develop a professional rapport more easily than can a generalist who contacts the agency staffer only occasionally. For example, immigration Caseworkers develop agency contacts and knowledge of immigration regulations that are difficult — if not almost impossible — for a general-

**Figure 7-3**



Note: Respondents were allowed to select multiple answers so results total more than 100%.

ist to duplicate. In addition, a casework system organized around agency specialists allows for a simple and logical system for distributing cases. Each Caseworker is clearly responsible for his or her own issues. Thus, if a constituent calls to check on the status of their case but cannot remember the Caseworker's name, the appropriate Caseworker can be easily identified just by learning the nature of the constituent's case.

Additionally, an office with a heavy caseload made up of particularly complex cases (e.g., political amnesty or Social Security disability) might consider having specialist Caseworkers for these cases. A specialist would be able to make the time to thoroughly understand the highly specific laws and regulations in question, as well as how the agency involved reviews such cases.

However, casework specialization offers several disadvantages that make good arguments for the generalist approach. Specialization makes it harder to find a substitute for an absent or departing casework specialist because, more than likely, no one else in the office is adequately trained to handle the cases in the same area. In contrast, an office of generalists is more versatile and flexible in the types of cases they can handle comfortably. Having generalist Caseworkers also encourages teamwork. For instance, if all the Caseworkers deal with the same particularly complex law or uncooperative agency, there is a greater chance that they will share helpful tips or even work together on certain cases. Also, it is easier to train new Caseworkers if there are several people who can offer training and advice, rather than just one.

Another disadvantage of specialization is that some Caseworkers argue that specializing creates a greater risk of job burnout. Caseworkers who work on the same cases and deal with the same agency staff, day in and day out, might lose interest in their work sooner than generalists, especially if the cases they handle are particularly frustrating, complex or emotional.

***How casework is distributed.*** The decision to specialize or generalize will determine how the office distributes the workload to its Caseworkers. Those that choose to specialize have essentially three options to consider:

- **Share intake but centralize casework.** One option is for Caseworkers in smaller, satellite offices to be responsible for intake and then refer cases to the appropriate specialists in the larger office. This approach allows offices to concentrate casework closer

to cities where there is easy access to regional agency staff, and it permits all Caseworkers to work together in a central location, thereby simplifying casework management, increasing shared learning opportunities among caseworkers and bolstering mutual support and Caseworker morale.

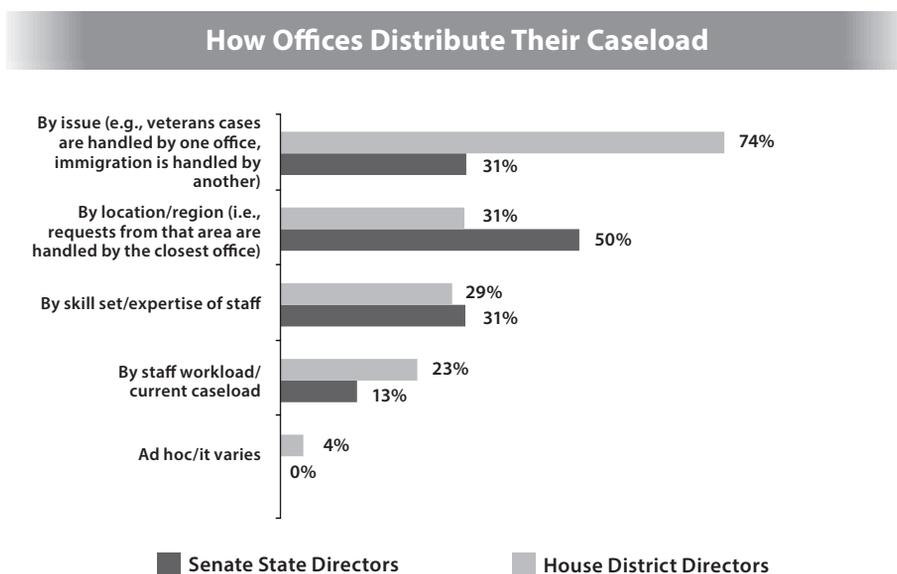
- **Locate specialists regionally.** A second option for distributing casework works best for offices with geographic regions with special or distinctive needs, such as a rural area that deals heavily with the Department of Agriculture. If the office has a small presence or satellite office in such an area, it might make sense for the Caseworkers in that office to specialize in agricultural cases. Non-agricultural cases would then be referred to Caseworkers in other offices.
- **Specialize by office.** A third possible arrangement for distributing casework in a specialist system is through office specialization, rather than Caseworker specialization. Thus, all Medicare cases would be assigned to staff in a specific office and all immigration cases to another.

District/state operations that utilize generalists can distribute cases in a number of ways. The most common method is for each office to handle the casework requests it receives. In districts that do not lend themselves to such a geographic division of labor (primarily dense urban districts with one office), other distribution methods must be developed. Some offices distribute casework based on constituents' last names. One Caseworker, for example, handles all cases for constituents whose last names begin with the letters A to G, while a second handles cases H through N.

As Figure 7-4 shows, most House and Senate offices distribute cases by location or by issue. Regardless of how an office distributes its cases, it is essential that the distribution process be regularly reviewed to ensure equity. While the composition of cases an office receives tends to change gradually over time due to changing laws, demographics or office priorities, these changes can also sometimes happen very quickly. In either case, the office must be ready to redistribute the cases to maintain an equitable balance.

The problem of inequitable distribution of cases does not always surface naturally. Overworked and frustrated staffers will often accept their burden silently, assuming that everyone else is facing the same demands.

Figure 7-4



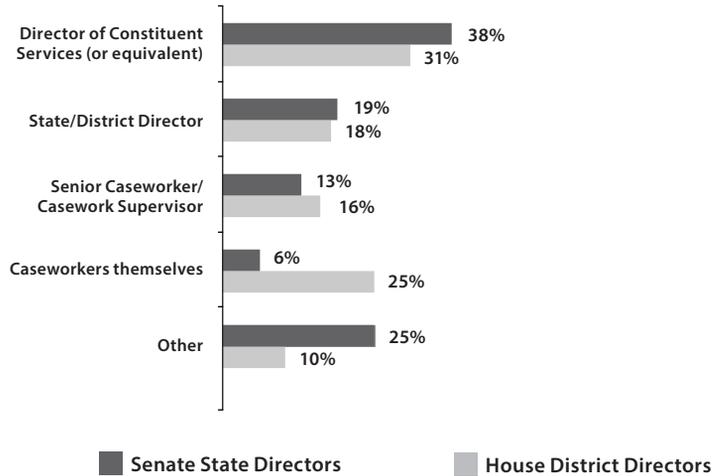
Note: Respondents were allowed to select multiple answers so results total more than 100%.

Unnecessary backlogs can develop and a Caseworker might put in regular overtime unnecessarily. Consequently, managing casework requires keeping regular tabs on each staffer's caseload and modifying the distribution as needed.

**Who assigns cases.** In addition to determining how cases will be distributed, it is important to determine who will be responsible for making assignments to specific Caseworkers. As Figure 7-5 shows, many House and Senate offices have a Director of Constituent Services or other manager review incoming cases, assign them to caseworkers and track the status of individuals' caseloads. Assignment criteria might include the complexity of the case, the present backlog of cases and the Caseworkers' areas of expertise or preferences. Such a system offers the advantage of flexibility. It limits the likelihood of one Caseworker creating a three-week backlog while fellow Caseworkers operate on a two-day turnaround. The work can be tailored to the skills and experience of each Caseworker, allowing generalists to develop informal specialties in certain types of casework. And finally, the manager can monitor all district/state casework loads and redistribute them among offices if one office is swamped.

Figure 7-5

### Most Caseloads are Assigned by a Manager or Supervisor



Finally, some offices, especially those with fewer Caseworkers, distribute casework informally. One office allows its three Caseworkers to distribute the cases among themselves through their own distribution system. Informal systems like this can work fine in smaller offices if the Caseworkers get along well with one another and communicate effectively. However, informal systems should be avoided in larger or less harmonious offices; they invite the tension and conflict that can result from perceptions of unequal skills, motivations or workloads among coworkers.

**Hiring and training Caseworkers.** Once the office establishes the approach it will take to casework, it is easier to figure out what skill sets are needed. For example, knowing the priority of casework and whether Caseworkers will be specialists or generalists will help determine whether Caseworkers must be experienced professionals or more entry-level staffers and whether their duties will focus exclusively on casework or whether they will have other duties, as well.

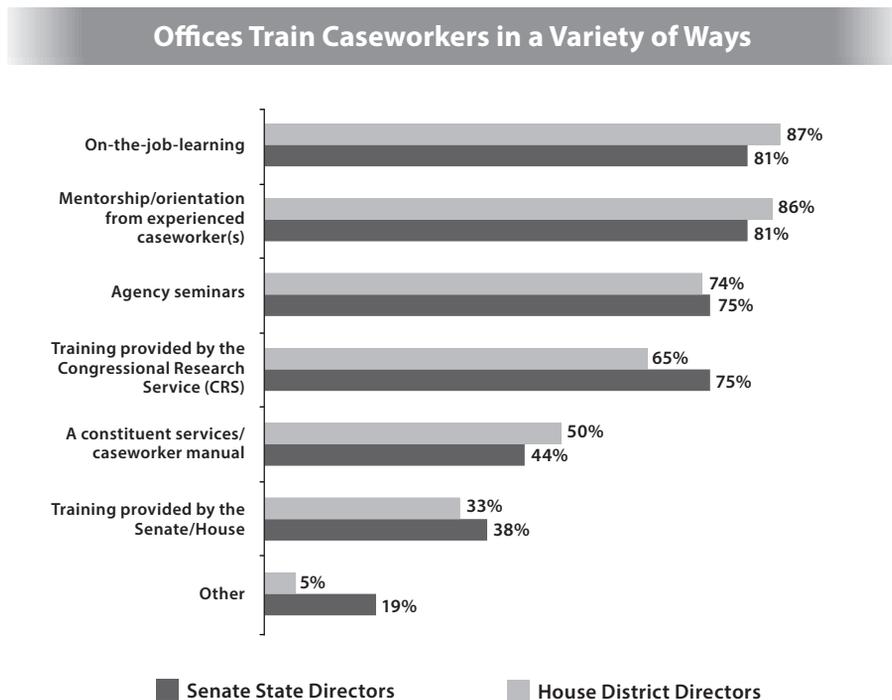
As with any hiring process, CMF recommends the process for hiring Caseworkers be methodical and strategic to ensure the office gets the skills it needs and the professional qualities necessary to succeed in the office. For advice on developing job descriptions and conducting strategic

hiring processes, review the information provided in Chapter 2, and the additional information posted at CongressFoundation.org.

Once Caseworkers are hired, they must be trained. Even experienced Caseworkers must receive training on the specific policies, procedures and expectations of their new office. As Figure 7-6 shows, offices take a variety of approaches to training new Caseworkers, with most relying heavily on on-the-job training and mentorship by experienced Caseworkers in the office.

As with the hiring process, CMF recommends that Caseworker training be well planned, focused and strategic. Though on-the-job training is common for all positions in a House or Senate office, if it is not carefully combined with more proactive training strategies, it can lead to mistakes and misunderstandings that leave both the new Caseworker and colleagues feeling frustrated and beleaguered. Learning by doing relies on trial and

**Figure 7-6**



Note: Respondents were allowed to select multiple answers so results total more than 100%.

error, which requires significant supervisor and colleague time providing feedback, correcting mistakes, and sometimes recovering from embarrassing snafus. A few hours of well-planned and strategic training can save significant time and effort getting an employee performing effectively.

In combination with on-the-job training, most offices have an experienced Caseworker mentor or provide an orientation for new Caseworkers, an excellent opportunity to provide more structured training. One option for making this approach work as effectively as possible is to split the training responsibility among the Caseworkers in the office. For example, one Caseworker provides training on intake, another teaches the art of letter writing, a third provides training on the constituent database and a fourth discusses how to research cases. In short, the entire casework staff becomes responsible for training the new staffer in an orderly way over a period of days. Such a structured approach can greatly reduce the number of rookie mistakes and time-consuming staff interruptions that occur with on-the-job training.

Agencies occasionally offer casework seminars that many offices take advantage of when training their new Caseworkers. These seminars are excellent for giving new staff an understanding of the agencies with which they will be working. An alternative to waiting for the next agency seminar is to set up meetings between new Caseworkers and agency staff. Such meetings give both sides an opportunity to get to know one another better and allow agency staff to present a basic orientation on how their agencies operate.

Offices should also consider DC-based training programs. The Congressional Research Service (CRS) offers a highly regarded casework workshop in Washington, DC that lasts several days. Besides covering a wealth of details involved in performing casework, the program includes an orientation to Congress and the research services available to congressional staff. Both the House and Senate also regularly offer computer training for staff. Enrolling a new Caseworker who lacks proficiency in the programs necessary to conduct casework is a wise investment of office resources. Several days of intensive training can give staff the skills they will need to use computers effectively in their casework. This also applies to training on the office's constituent database, which must be provided by the database vendor. Effectively utilizing these databases are critical to casework management, but they are not always intuitive, and they are not used outside of the House and Senate, so good training is a necessity.

If Caseworkers come to DC for training, time should also be set aside for staff to work in the DC office. While a week's worth of exposure to the Washington office is not going to provide tremendous insight into the nuts-and-bolts of casework, it will help the staffer understand how the DC office works and who to contact later on with specific casework questions. In addition, the personal rapport that can develop in a week's time can wonderfully enhance future long-distance communications.

**Managing Caseworker burnout.** CMF's research found that burnout is a major factor leading to Caseworker turnover. The job of a Caseworker is extremely stressful. Caseworkers juggle dozens of cases, hundreds of details, deadline pressures, less than appreciative constituents and uncooperative agency staff. As Figure 7-7 shows, offices employ a number of strategies to reduce the risk of burnout and help staff cope with these pressures. Offices should consider these options, outlined below, as a way to keep Caseworkers content and engaged in their work.

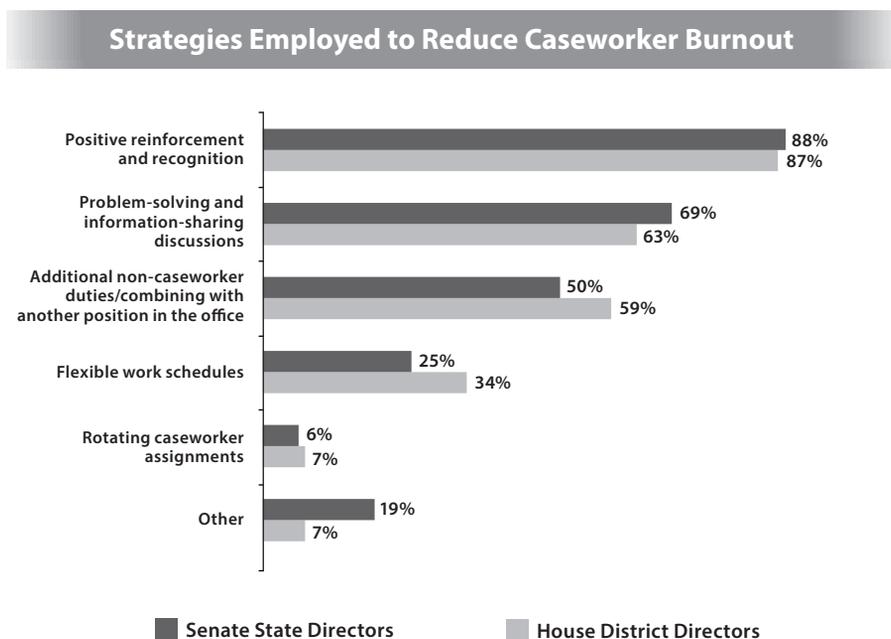
- **Rotating or cross-training Caseworker assignments.** Offices report that after a year or two, specialist Caseworkers often get tired of dealing with the same types of cases day in and day out. By rotating casework specialties or assignments regularly, or by cross-training staff on different issue areas, Caseworkers will keep learning about new laws, regulations and agencies and deal with new agency liaisons. The ongoing learning process, offices report, keeps Caseworkers challenged. It also has the secondary benefit of increasing the breadth of Caseworkers' knowledge in a "specialized" office and ensuring appropriate backup expertise in each area of specialty.
- **Involving Caseworkers in non-casework responsibilities.** Casework can become repetitive. Most of the Caseworker's time is spent at a desk either talking on the phone or drafting letters. Involving them in non-casework matters, like representing the Member at events, researching a speech or helping to plan the Member's travel in the district or state allows them to develop and practice different skills, work with different people and, most importantly, enjoy some variety in their work life.
- **Creating outlets to discuss cases.** Casework can become depressing and frustrating. Caseworkers are regularly asked to assist desperate families in need of immediate assistance against great odds. Failure is a constant and unavoidable hurdle with which all



Caseworkers must learn to cope. Usually the best way to contend with the difficulties of the job is by ensuring that the Caseworkers have outlets to discuss their work, to share their frustrations, and to support one another. In many offices, this occurs easily and naturally. However, in other offices, these informal outlets do not readily exist. A Caseworker may be working alone in a satellite office, the office culture may tend to discourage staff from taking time to “sit around and chat,” or some newer staff may not be welcomed into the inner circle of the more experienced Caseworkers. In these offices, opportunities should be created for Caseworkers to talk or simply vent. Supervisors can make it a habit of touching base regularly with each Caseworker and letting them know they are interested in talking to and hearing from the staff. Some offices use staff meetings solely to share problems and counsel one another. One District Director holds an informal get-together in her office every day after 4:30 p.m. for any Caseworkers who feel like unwinding. Another brings donuts and invites Caseworkers into his office every Wednesday morning to help them gain perspective on how the week has gone so far and what to expect for the remainder of it.

- **Providing positive reinforcement.** Caseworkers are not usually thanked by constituents, especially those who are disappointed by the outcomes of their cases. Consequently, the casework supervisor or District/State Director must let the staff know that their commitment and hard work are appreciated. Members should also make it a point to let the Caseworkers periodically know that their work is valued. Kind words from the District or State Director are appreciated, but all congressional staff need to know that the Member, too, values their contribution. This is especially true of the many Caseworkers who have little contact with the Member and feel their work is often taken for granted.
- **Adopting flexible work schedules.** Some offices believe that Caseworkers should be given considerable control over their schedules. If, for example, they need a “mental health day,” they may take it with no questions asked. Similarly, if they want to come in late or leave early they may do so, as long as their work is completed in the agreed-upon timeframe.

Figure 7-7



Note: Respondents were allowed to select multiple answers so results total more than 100%.

## Interacting with Departments and Agencies

As shown earlier in Figure 7-2, both House and Senate offices ranked “Good relations with agencies” as one of the two most important factors for an effective casework operation. In fact, House offices ranked this as the most important factor, more important even than experienced Caseworkers. Obviously, the importance of these relationships should not be underestimated, especially since federal department and agency staff can exercise a good deal of control over how a case is processed. Does the agency expedite the case or drag its feet? Will the agency give congressional staff informal advice or simply “go by the book”? What can an office do to make sure the agency is helpful as possible?

CMF believes experience and good relationships are closely related. First, experienced Caseworkers will usually bring with them established relationships at individual agencies they have worked with in the past. Second, even if an experienced Caseworker does not have contacts at a

particular agency, he or she will have the skills necessary for developing the rapport and credibility needed to build them.

To develop this critical rapport with agency staff, most offices recommend cultivating personal and friendly relations with agency staff, but some recommend maintaining respectful, professional and, if necessary, adversarial relations. A third group says that *both* approaches are necessary, depending on the agency or department and the specific agency contact.

The way Caseworkers interact with the agencies depends in large part on how the office views its casework role and the role of the agencies. Most

*The way Caseworkers interact with the agencies depends in large part on how the office views its casework role and the role of the agencies.*

offices — 76 percent of House offices and 82 percent of Senate offices — indicated that they define their role and relationship with agency staff depending on the type of case they are working on. In some cases, they

serve as liaison between the constituent and the agency, and in others, they serve as an advocate on behalf of the constituent (within the boundaries of the ethics rules, of course). When offices view their role as liaison, they tend to operate using a personal and friendly approach. Inherent in this approach is a fundamental trust that agency staff share the goal of

### How Much Help Can You Provide?

According to House and Senate rules, Members (and their staff) may communicate with executive and independent agencies on behalf of their constituents to:

- Request information or a status report;
- Urge prompt consideration;
- Arrange for interviews or appointments;
- Express judgment(s);
- Call for reconsideration of an administrative response which the Member believes is not supported by statutes, regulations or law;
- Perform any other service of a similar nature consistent with House and Senate rules.

When providing assistance to an individual or group, Members and staff must base their actions on the merits of a constituent’s case or of the project, irrespective of political considerations, party affiliation or campaign contributions.

Before acting on constituent service requests, including casework, projects and grants, staff should familiarize themselves with the full text of the rules and seek guidance from the Senate Select Committee on Ethics (202-224-2981) and the House Committee on Standards of Official Conduct (202-225-7103).



resolving the constituent's problem fairly. The case for this approach was well articulated by one District Director who said, "It's always easier to get things from people if you're nice to them and don't assume they're wrong." She recommended approaching all discussions with agency staff as problem-solving exercises in which Caseworkers objectively lay out the case and then ask: "What can we do to work this out?" A State Director concurred, adding that, "On borderline cases where agency staff can exercise discretion, your attitude can play a significant role in the outcome of the case."

When the personal and friendly approach is the preferred approach, offices should consider the following recommendations from district/state staff:

- **Never miss an agency seminar.** Let them know you are conscientious and are trying to understand their rules so you can work within them.
- **Visit the agency staffers who handle your cases whenever possible.** It is important for Caseworkers to develop a personal rapport with the agency staff with whom they regularly work.
- **Acknowledge excellent work by the agency.** Doing so can only encourage more of the same. If your office deals with a liaison officer who is extremely knowledgeable and helpful, write a letter to his boss saying how terrific her staff is.
- **Send congratulatory letters to agency staff who have been promoted or transferred.** Most will appreciate that you treat them as real people and not as uncaring bureaucrats.
- **Never try to motivate an agency staffer through negative reinforcement.** This approach, which can involve confrontation, raised voices and filing a complaint with their supervisor, runs the risk of damaging the relationship between the office or Caseworker and the agency.

When offices place themselves in the advocate role, they see themselves as arguing for the constituents' interests, as attorneys would. In this role, the Caseworker's job is not to coordinate with the agency liaison, but rather to advocate for the merits of the constituent's case and represent the constituent's interest before the agency as best they can. In this role, a Caseworker often, but not always, employs an adversarial approach if he or she feels that the constituent is not getting fair or prompt attention.





Inherent in this approach is a fundamental mistrust of agency staff and a conviction that institutional forces encourage them to be less than cooperative. The advocacy approach is voiced by a District Director, who said, “We don’t chat with agencies. We don’t want to be their buddies. We are advocates and can’t be friends with the people whose decisions we must regularly challenge...We make sure our constituents don’t get screwed by the system.”

District/state offices should deliberately decide which casework model they want to emulate and whether it will change based on the case and then communicate those decisions clearly to staff. The Member should have considerable input into these important strategic decisions. He or she must be comfortable with the way casework staff represents the office with federal agencies. It is also important that the Caseworkers know and follow clear guidelines for acceptable behavior in dealing with agency personnel. Too often, each Caseworker makes their own decisions that reflect a personal stylistic preference or view of casework rather than the views of the boss. Offices should also be sensitive to the guidelines for advocacy by the office imposed by House and Senate ethics rules, which are clearly described and regularly updated in the CRS report, *Casework in a Congressional Office: Background, Rules, Laws, and Resources*.

### **Managing and Monitoring the Casework System**

Once an office has addressed the critical decisions, established policies and procedures for handling casework, and hired and trained Caseworkers, the overriding management concern becomes how to effectively manage and monitor it all. For casework supervisors or District/State Directors, the keys to managing it effectively are:

1. Maintaining access to accurate, essential information;
2. Encouraging effective staff communication;
3. Reviewing casework data in a regular, systematic way; and
4. Conducting regular assessments and adapting the system based on the results.

***Maintaining access to accurate information.*** There are three aspects to maintaining access to accurate information: constituent and case information, agency information, and public information. It is the casework supervisor’s job to ensure that, once policies and procedures are estab-

lished for each of these, they are adhered to and enforced. Maintaining bad, incomplete or outdated information can lead to mistakes and misunderstandings that can damage a Caseworker's — or even a Member's — credibility.

Constituent and case information refers to the data collected about a case. It includes constituent contact information and other personal information, the actions and status of a case, the documents collected related to the case, correspondence and other critical pieces of information necessary to move a case toward resolution. Much of this information will be entered into the constituent database. In fact, the more data that is entered into the database, the easier it will be to access and monitor cases, assuming the data is entered in a timely fashion. Casework managers must ensure that constituent and case information is uniformly collected and maintained by all Caseworkers, and that the information complies with the office's policies.

Agency information includes the seemingly ever-changing agency contacts, rules and regulations, laws and procedures, and other government information and action that affect casework. Fortunately, Caseworkers can keep abreast of many of the changes through agency websites and regularly updated CRS briefs. The key is to seek out the changes and, once identified, to update information in a shared resource available to all Caseworkers. This will provide ready access to current information to all Caseworkers and help prevent mistakes that can be caused by reliance on outdated information. Such a resource can be invaluable to Caseworkers as they perform their duties, and, if it can be accessed remotely, it can give Caseworkers freedom to perform their work while they are out of the office conducting outreach, meeting with constituents and staffing the Member at meetings and events. By equipping Caseworkers with laptops, cell phones or other mobile devices that can give them remote access to critical information, the office can extend its reach, which can be especially helpful in rural districts and states.

The third aspect to maintaining accurate information is the public information provided on the Senator's or Representative's website. The website can be a very important tool for providing excellent constituent service, and the district or state offices must be actively involved in developing this online resource. Some offices still operate on the perception that, by minimizing the amount of information on the website and encouraging constituents to contact the office for information, they will

be providing better service to constituents. This tactic is flawed for two reasons. First, constituents who seek casework and constituent service information online are hoping to find it online. If they do not find what they are seeking, they are not likely to call or send an email; they will search for the information elsewhere — possibly on the website of another member of the delegation. Second, providing more information online is actually more likely to result in the constituent contacting the office. The more they know about the services the office provides, and how to initiate a request, the more confident they will be about reaching out to the office. To best serve constituents, Member websites should contain thorough, up-to-date information about the most common casework issues, links to agencies and assistance organizations, information about what the office can provide, and forms that allow constituents to initiate casework. An office may also want to conduct outreach by using the website or an email mailing list to encourage constituents to initiate casework.

**Encouraging effective staff communication.** The supervisor must understand the problems Caseworkers are facing and must be able to assess their performance so that the overall casework system can be modified and improved as necessary. In many offices, these communication needs are taken care of informally: staff consult with one another throughout the day. Other offices rely on more structured communication, such as weekly staff meetings. Using both approaches is ideal. Informal communication addresses pressing daily decisions, while meetings allow for structured discussion of broader issues, such as improving the intake process, making better use of technology, absorbing the caseload of a departing Caseworker or dealing with an uncooperative agency. The key for the casework supervisor is to encourage, facilitate and provide forums for this critical communication.

**Reviewing casework data systematically.** Reliance on informal, verbal communication will provide a majority of the information needed to effectively manage a casework system. However, the casework supervisor needs objective data, as well. Regular, systematic review of basic casework management reports generated from the constituent database can provide both Caseworkers and their supervisors with valuable insights that would have been otherwise indiscernible.

Constituent database software offers ready access to a wide range of statistical data; it is up to casework managers to decide what data they will

regularly review. At a minimum, offices should generate the following data monthly:

1. **A complete master file of all open and recently closed cases.** Distributing a master list of current cases to all office staff allows the office to handle inquiries efficiently. Receptionists can easily refer to an alphabetized list of all cases and quickly identify the Caseworker handling each one.
2. **The caseload of the entire office as well as that of each Caseworker.** This data allows the office to assess increases and decreases in its caseload and respond accordingly (e.g., reduce outreach or increase the number of office volunteers). It also helps the office maintain an equitable balance of the workload among its Caseworkers.
3. **The number of cases opened and closed by the office and by each Caseworker.** This information provides an indicator of productivity. It identifies problems and documents when the office as a whole and/or individuals are operating proficiently.
4. **The number of letters produced by the office and by each Caseworker.** This data provides a more detailed measure of individual and overall office workloads than does a review of the number of cases opened and closed. Some agencies require written (rather than oral) correspondence. Caseworkers working in those areas might thus have greater workloads than Caseworkers who deal with agencies that operate more readily over the telephone.
5. **A monthly breakdown of the types of cases the office is processing.** By tracking the types of cases it handles, the office can better understand constituents' problems and concerns. As discussed in the previous section, such a breakdown can also help identify important, but not readily apparent, trends occurring in the district or state.

For offices interested in more carefully monitoring their casework, the following additional data can be collected and regularly reported, as long as the information necessary to generate it is entered into the database:

1. **The number of cases not acted on for 30, 60 or 90 days by the office and by the Caseworker.** This information can serve as a reminder to Caseworkers when an agency response is



overdue. It also documents which agencies are having problems responding promptly. Finally, this data demonstrates how well the staff are following up on their open cases.

2. **The disposition of all closed cases, by office and by Caseworker.** Clearly, there is no way to determine an appropriate balance between favorable and unfavorable decisions. It varies widely depending on the caseload composition. There should be some consistency, however, in disposition rates within offices where Caseworkers are generalists all handling the same caseload. There should also be consistency when a new Caseworker takes over the caseload of a departing worker. By reviewing this data on a semi-annual or annual basis, a supervisor may determine whether further staff training is needed, and if so, where.
3. **The mean life of open cases, by office and by Caseworker.** Reviewing this data will identify the pace at which the office and individual Caseworkers process their cases. Such data may determine, for example, that one Caseworker is spending too much time on cases while another spends too little time.
4. **The number and types of cases, both open and closed, from different cities and counties in the district or state.** It is important that offices better understand the concerns and problems of their communities by documenting the numbers and types of cases coming from each community or region. Such data provides valuable political information and lets offices know where further outreach efforts might be indicated.

Regularly reviewing casework reports offers several notable benefits. One of the most significant is that they can help managers identify problems early on. Having data in hand can give supervisors a chance to address

*Having data in hand can give supervisors a chance to address problems before they become crises.*

problems *before* they become crises. The problems might be broad-based, such as a declining caseload in the northern part of the state, or more specific, such as the declining productivity of a Caseworker.

Many problems evolve in increments and thus are not readily apparent to Caseworkers, and Caseworkers who are having problems might be embarrassed by their lack of productivity or uncomfortable asking for assistance, even if the backlog is due to external factors. The Caseworker's decision to shoulder the problem quietly does not give the supervisor the chance to lend a hand in solving it, but having good data does.

Casework reports can also be used to document and regulate workloads. Many offices, for example, report that casework follows seasonal cycles that differ from district to district and from state to state. By monitoring the data on open cases, some offices are able to regulate their annual workloads through good management of their outreach efforts (, increasing outreach during slow periods and reducing it in busy months). Regulating the caseload, according to Caseworkers, improves staff morale as well as the overall quality of casework.

The third reason to regularly review reports on the type and the origin of cases is that it allows offices to identify larger policy problems that might necessitate legislative or regulatory change. Caseworkers are often the first to observe problems or deficiencies in a new law. Such important trends are more likely to emerge if complaints are systematically monitored. For example, if three Caseworkers in three different state offices are all dealing with an increase in disability disputes, they might not individually recognize a pattern, but if their supervisor is able to review all of their data, a pattern might emerge that deserves examination.

When implementing a system of regularly monitoring casework reports, however, casework supervisors must be very sensitive. Caseworkers could resent and oppose the collection of data if they view it as an effort by management to police their performance. To preempt this potential concern, it is essential that the Caseworkers understand that the system's purpose is to collect valuable management data that can be used collectively by the staff to improve the office's overall performance. The data should not be used to punish performance, or pit worker against worker in a competition to see who can process the most cases in a month. The constructive purpose must be clearly stated and, more importantly, strongly reinforced by the actions of the person responsible for supervising the casework. Offices can involve the Caseworkers in the process of determining what information should be collected. In addition, regularly share the data collected with the Caseworkers, which powerfully conveys the message that the system's purpose is to make constructive improvement and not to police Caseworkers.

**Assessing and adapting the casework system.** By listening to Caseworkers and reviewing casework reports regularly, the casework supervisor will have much of the data necessary to identify changes and trends that might necessitate modifications to policies or procedures in response to the needs of constituents and Caseworkers. However, it is also impor-





tant for the casework supervisor and the Caseworkers to keep abreast of environmental changes in the community, state and nation — and even in the office — which could affect casework. For example, a national or local crisis, reductions in state or municipal services, or changes to the Member’s mission or goals could necessitate significant changes to the casework operation in response.

CMF also recommends an annual or biennial strategic review of the casework operation. What has it accomplished? Does it reflect the stated priority and role of casework? Is it contributing to the Member’s goals? Is it meeting constituents’ needs? What changes, if any, need to be made for the future? This review can be done informally by the casework supervisor, but it will probably be more productive if it is done with the entire casework or district/state staff in a formal strategic planning session. By working together to assess the past, conduct stakeholder and other analyses and establish goals for the future, the analysis is more thorough and the staff is more likely to embrace the changes that result.

### **Non-Casework Constituent Services**

As discussed earlier in this chapter, offices’ definitions of casework usually encompass much more than providing assistance with problems constituents are having with federal agencies. Most offices also include referrals to state and local officials and agencies, grant assistance, military service academy nominations, and assistance with state and local issues such as welfare and unemployment claims. Many also include letters of recommendation, congratulations and special recognition in their definition of casework, and others include flag and tour requests. Whether these services are considered cases and handled as casework is a decision each office must make for itself, but even if they are not, they are constituent services that most offices will provide. They should be factored into the workloads and workflows of the district or state office staff, and the office needs to have clear policies and procedures for handling them. Following are suggestions for managing the most common and time-consuming non-casework constituent services.

***Military academy nominations.*** Four of the five U.S. military service academies require candidates to be nominated by Members of Congress. Only the U.S. Coast Guard Academy does not. Each academy has its own requirements and deadlines, but congressional offices may use their discretion to determine how to identify the candidates they will nomi-

nate, including the criteria they will use to evaluate applicants. Some of the advice provided by veteran offices for conducting the nominations process includes:

- **Consider the nominations process a year-round task.**

Veteran offices recommend not trying to conduct a nominations process in a last minute or *ad hoc* way because the candidate pool will not be large or diverse enough.

According to CMF's research, the biggest challenge both House and Senate offices face in the nominations process is marketing the nominations process and getting the word out to qualified constituents. Many feel that, though the candidates they receive are qualified, they would like to see more applicants. The best way to market the process is by making a concerted, year-round effort to conduct outreach and build relationships with schools, parent groups, student groups and other organizations that can help direct qualified applicants to the office.

### Navigating the Nominations Process

Because each academy has its own deadlines and requirements, figuring out the nominations process can be a daunting task. Fortunately, congressional offices can request the *Congressional Guide for Admission to the United States Service Academies* from any of the service academies. More detailed information about the nominations process can also be found in the CRS report, *Congressional Nominations to U.S. Service Academies: An Overview and Resources for Outreach and Management*.

- **Assign responsibility for the process to a specific staffer or staffers.**

No matter what process the office uses to determine nominees — whether completely in-house, with the congressional delegation or with an independent advisory board — someone in the office must have specific responsibility and authority for the nominations process. If it is unclear who is responsible, the task is likely to fall through the cracks.

- **Develop and communicate clear processes, guidelines and deadlines.**

Offices need to be explicit both internally and externally about their process for identifying nominees. What do candidates need to provide the office? What are the deadlines for submitting applications? How will the office interact with the candidates? What interview questions will be asked? What criteria will be used to evaluate and rate candidates' interviews and packets?

What is the role of candidates' parents, if any? Once the office has established its process and deadlines, it should then provide guidance to potential candidates by posting detailed information on its website, sending packets in response to inquiries and distributing them as part of the marketing effort. Some good resources for developing this information are the military academies' websites and the websites of other Senators and Representatives, some of whom provide excellent information about academy nominations. By providing detailed information, the office helps candidates and their parents understand what is expected of them, and it demystifies the process. It can also help manage the expectations of parents, which, according to CMF's survey, is the second biggest challenge offices face related to service academy nominations.

- **Keep the Member remote from the process.** Since each Senator and Representative can only nominate a small number of candidates each year, and because there is no guarantee their nominees will be accepted to the academies, the nominations process often leads to disappointed applicants and parents. Many offices have found it helpful to distance the Member from the process slightly by using a nominations process that involves a panel of respected constituents. These offices recommend relying on an independent, nonpartisan advisory or review board comprised of former academy graduates, veterans, current military officers, community leaders, educators or others to work with the office to evaluate the candidates and identify the nominees. Offices that use this approach find it especially useful because disappointed candidates and parents cannot place blame solely on the Senator or Representative.
- **Provide an unranked nominee list to the academies.** Congressional offices have the option of sending their nominees to the academies in a ranked or unranked order or in a hybrid of the two, with one principal nominee and the rest unranked. Most offices send their nominees unranked and allow the academies to determine the best-qualified candidate.

**Grants and projects assistance.** Each office defines projects work for itself and the definitions vary widely among House and Senate offices. For some, projects work consists mainly of providing constituents with assistance researching and applying for federal grants. For others, projects

work includes congressional appropriations, economic development and/or community initiatives. Depending on the office's definition, purpose and goals, projects work can be a significant and time-consuming component of constituent service. For these reasons, projects work and related activities are addressed thoroughly in the next chapter.

**State and local assistance and referrals.** House and Senate offices are frequently asked to assist in matters under the jurisdiction of state or local authorities, including some federal programs that are administered at state and local levels. Examples include: welfare, child support, some environmental issues, some housing and urban development issues, prison issues and unemployment. Each office must decide when and how to become involved in these matters. Some offices may refer some or all of them to state and local officials or agencies, others may choose to avoid them and still others will want to provide what assistance they can. Most offices will decide on a case-to-case basis.

The key is to remember that the Senator or Representative does not have authority or jurisdiction over these matters. The state or local agency can use its discretion about whether to be responsive to the Member or to involve the Member in the resolution process. When interacting with both the constituent and the agency, it is important to acknowledge this openly, and to proceed with it clearly in mind.

**Letters of greeting and commendation.** Many Senators and Representatives like to send letters to constituents acknowledging milestones and accomplishments. These letters can be straightforward to create and manage, and they are appreciated by constituents who are often flattered by the notice of their representatives in Congress. Keep in mind, however, that the frank and official funds can only be used to recognize constituents who have achieved a public distinction, such as Eagle Scout attainment or a Girl Scout Gold Award, high school graduation, citizenship or appointment to a military academy. If the milestone or accomplishment is purely personal — such as a retirement, birthday, anniversary or condolences — the frank and official funds may not be used. This includes use of the Member's official letterhead and office equipment.

Additionally, Senators and Representatives can request presidential greetings for constituents' special occasions such as birthdays, anniversaries, weddings, births, Eagle Scout/Gold Award and others. Congressional staff should contact the White House Greetings Office for updated guidance and deadlines.

**Tour and flag requests.** Many district and state offices are instrumental in processing constituent requests for tours in Washington, DC and for flags to be flown over the U.S. Capitol. Many Members believe these services provide a personal touch to a constituent's special event or visit to DC. A flag flown on a specific day or a personalized tour of the Capitol can make an occasion more memorable.

Unfortunately, many offices have difficulty processing these requests — mainly tour requests — for several reasons. First, most tours require several weeks or several months advance notice and many constituent requests arrive on short notice or at the last minute. Second, different places have various submission requirements, including the information that must be provided and the deadline for providing it. Third, offices receive a high volume of requests, particularly for tours of the White House, and have no control over how many people will receive spots on any given tour.

For these reasons, district/state and DC staff must work together to manage constituent expectations, process tour and flag requests in a timely manner and ensure that constituents receive current and accurate information regarding these services. This is easier if the office has clearly defined its procedures for tours and flags, including staff responsibilities. While most offices manage these requests in the DC office, the district/state staff who handle much of the intake can guide constituents through the requesting process and make them understand that, essentially, the office is a pass-through for tour requests and cannot guarantee admittance to any attraction. Flag requests are of particular importance because constituents must pay for the flag and the fee associated with flying it over the Capitol, so specific procedures must be in place for the processing, monitoring and record keeping of these requests.

## Conclusion

For many district and state offices, casework is the workhorse of their operations. It is a constant drumbeat in the background and cannot be ignored. Constituents have come to expect it — and to expect that it be done well.

The key to meeting their expectations is managing the process so that they feel red tape has been cut and their case has been ably represented. Caseworkers are increasingly prized not only for their compassion and ability to help, but also for their skill in managing an increasing and complex workload. An information-rich environment and implementation of logical, well-understood procedures will help Caseworkers excel in this effort.

## Maximizing the Casework Operation

## CHAPTER SUMMARY 7

### DO...

- Determine and communicate a clear definition of casework.
- Assess environmental and political factors, and the Member's goals and interests, when determining the role and priority of casework.
- Develop clear policies and procedures for conducting casework.
- Take care to effectively hire, train and manage your Caseworkers.
- Maintain high-quality, up-to-date constituent and case information, agency information and public information about casework.
- Clearly define the relationship and tone Caseworkers should establish with the agencies they interact with.
- Regularly produce and review casework reports from the constituent database.
- Revise casework policies and procedures based on changes in the Member's priorities, caseloads, and the needs of constituents.

### DON'T...

- Allow changes in casework volume to have significant impact on the quality of casework.
- Neglect to enforce casework policies and procedures and keep all Caseworkers operating in the same way.
- Forget to provide Caseworkers opportunities to let off steam so they do not burn out.
- Miss opportunities, such as seminars and CRS programs, to enhance Caseworkers' knowledge.
- Use casework reports to shame Caseworkers or pit them against one another.
- Fail to conduct a thorough review of casework priority, policies and procedures annually or biennially.
- Neglect to establish clear policies and procedures for other constituent services, such as military academy nominations, letters of commendation and tour and flag requests.



# CHAPTER 8

## Defining and Identifying Projects Work

### *This Chapter Includes...*

- Defining the role of projects in an office
- Discussion of the staffing, job responsibilities and location of the projects function
- How to effectively manage projects work, including processing and evaluating requests and identifying and tracking projects

“Projects” are not as easily defined as scheduling, casework, events or legislation. As a result, they are perhaps the least understood segment of a congressional office’s work. Yet for many offices, projects offer the opportunity to directly affect the lives of constituents. They also present the Member with opportunities for high visibility. Whereas casework aids individuals and their families, and legislation often benefits people throughout the country, projects focus on the particular needs of a large number of constituents within the Member’s jurisdiction. Thus, actions taken by the projects staff can often affect the well-being of an entire community and create leadership opportunities for the Member. The benefits to constituents and Members alike underscore the relative importance of implementing a well thought out, focused projects program.

To assist offices in managing an effective projects program, this chapter helps an office define its projects work by discussing the factors that

affect project planning: clarifying the Member's goals; articulating how projects can help pursue those goals; selecting the location of the projects function; and defining and coordinating responsibilities among staff. By resolving these issues strategically, offices can minimize the confusion that can surround projects work and maximize their efforts on behalf of the district/state.

### **Defining Projects Work**

So what exactly is projects work? Projects can include assisting communities or organizations in applying for federal grants; submitting appropriations requests; pursuing opportunities for economic development; addressing environmental or land use concerns; and engaging in mediation and advocacy of local disputes. More specifically, projects might include helping a town find funds for a sewer system; assisting a local health center in remaining eligible for federal monies; aiding a public library as it searches for private sector capital to run a literacy program; or seeing that constituents know where to go to learn about operating a small business.

**Grants.** The term "grants" loosely refers to the competition for federal loans and contracts, in addition to available federal grants. To assist individuals, groups or communities in securing grants, staff might need to:

1. Identify sources of financial and technical assistance. Usually this pertains only to federal programs, but sometimes includes state and local government programs or private-sector assistance.
2. Disseminate essential information about grants, loans and contracts — their funding cycles, dollar amounts, award patterns, application procedures, deadlines and applicable contact information.
3. Circulate information about non-financial assistance available — such as training, surplus property and goods, technical assistance and publications.
4. Offer guidance in the grant application process and contact those who make funding decisions.
5. Write letters of interest or support from the Member to the granting agency.
6. Monitor applications as they move through the agency's review process.

7. Announce grant awards — to the Member, the recipients and the press.
8. Track all awards coming into the district or state, even those on which your office did not work.
9. Provide the Member, legislative staff and Communications Director with grants statistics.

**Appropriations.** In addition to competitive funds, offices also get requests for congressionally-directed spending items, more commonly known as “earmarks.” These “direct” funds can be more difficult to obtain and are subject to greater scrutiny than existing federal programs and assistance. Additionally, due to the annual appropriations timeline, these requests must be acted on in a compressed timeframe. For these requests, staff might:

1. Develop internal guidelines for which projects the Member will support.
2. Educate constituents about the appropriations process and manage their expectations for funding.
3. Learn what the various committee processes are for appropriations requests and their corresponding deadlines.
4. Coordinate requests with other members of the congressional delegation.
5. Seek additional or more thorough documentation from applicants justifying their request.
6. Submit written statements to the appropriate committee outlining the Member’s support.
7. Post submitted requests as necessary to comply with public disclosure requirements.

**Economic development/job creation.** This area might be more important in some districts and states than in others, depending on local or regional economic trends. Much of the grants work described previously applies to economic development and job creation as well, but other specific tasks are also involved, including:

1. Working with community leaders to identify common development goals and action needed to achieve these goals. Tasks will

likely include introducing groups who have similar or complementary goals, and matching resources to projects.

2. Assisting local businesses in identifying government contracts.
3. Identifying potential homegrown business opportunities and fostering their development.
4. Recruiting outside industry to the district or state.
5. Providing export assistance to local businesses.

**Community development.** Unlike economic development, community development includes housing, social services and facilities related to the common good, such as schools, community centers, parks and recreation facilities, and police, fire and rescue stations. Again, the tasks for grants work listed previously can be applied to most community development projects.

**Environmental and land use issues.** Some of the most sensitive and — usually — political issues faced by projects staff involve environment and land use concerns, such as:

1. Solid waste problems: overburdened and noxious landfills, applications for new landfills, incinerators and tire dumps.
2. Toxic waste problems: former dumpsites that are now emitting hazardous fumes, and transportation, storage or disposal of toxic materials.
3. Emergency and disaster response: flooding, hurricanes, tornadoes, wildfires and chemical spills.
4. Dams and other water control construction.
5. Transportation issues: the construction, repair, and/or expansion of roads, light rails, subways, bridges and airports.
6. Preservation of natural areas by designating them as wetlands, wilderness areas or wild and scenic rivers.

**Mediation and advocacy.** While necessary in all categories of projects work, mediation and advocacy is worth mentioning separately because of its significance. Projects staff can often act as a liaison for the constituent with federal agencies. For example, an office might:

1. Act as an advocate for a local community when a federal agency will not allow an approved project to proceed because of some misunderstanding or discrepancy in regulations or procedures.
2. Present a local community's point-of-view to a federal agency when an application may have been unfairly rejected.
3. Serve as a moderator or mediator at a meeting between local opposing groups, to air all opinions and target discussions toward reaching a workable consensus.

Projects work in a congressional office can encompass any or all of these categories. There are various “definitions” of projects work, depending on how an office views its purpose and priorities. Before beginning major projects work, senior managers in an office must resolve the overarching issues that will shape the work of the projects staff. Unfortunately, however, most congressional offices do not do this so the practices of projects staff evolve over time without any clear direction or assurance that the work is targeted toward office priorities. To minimize the confusion and conflict that can surround projects work, an office should clearly define their work in this area by carefully considering:

1. The goals the Member is seeking to achieve and the role projects will play in pursuing those goals.
2. The staffing and location of the projects operation.
3. How to define and coordinate responsibilities among projects staff.

### **Clarifying Goals and the Role of Projects in Pursuing Them**

Probably the most challenging feat in managing an effective projects operation is clarifying project goals. This is important because most offices will usually get more requests for assistance than they can handle. Therefore, it is crucial that the projects staff be capable of setting priorities — of rationally and consistently deciding which matters deserve priority attention and which do not. To accomplish this task, they must know what the Member thinks is most important.

Projects staff alone should not answer these questions. Each office should establish several office-wide, strategic goals through a formal planning process, and then develop outreach strategies to meet those goals. The projects staff must then work with the Member and key staff in developing projects that reflect the office's overall goals and outreach strategies.



Many offices view projects work as optional while others believe it is their most valuable function. Because every office undoubtedly receives some

*Because every office undoubtedly receives some requests for assistance but views projects work differently, decisions need to be made about the prominence of projects work in the office, and how to allocate resources to this function compared to other office operations.*

requests for assistance but views projects work differently, decisions need to be made about the prominence of projects work in the office, and how to allocate resources to this function

compared to other office operations. These decisions, therefore, require a thorough examination of office goals and overall priorities, and consideration of the following factors:



1. **Member's long-term goals.** Does the Member want to focus his or her energies on servicing the needs of the district/state, or on developing a national legislative agenda?
2. **District/state needs.** To what extent does the district/state have needs that lend themselves to projects work? For example, economically-distressed areas may have greater needs than more prosperous districts.
3. **Constituent perceptions.** Is the Member vulnerable to criticism that he or she is not attentive enough to the folks back home?
4. **Delegation politics.** Has another Member of the delegation already staked out a reputation for high-quality projects? If so, it may be hard to make inroads in this area. Conversely, the other Member's reputation may create constituent expectations for your office to provide service of similar quality.
5. **Local politics.** Does the Member belong to a different political party than the dominant party in the district/state? If so, is it possible that state or local elected officials will choose not to seek the office's assistance?
6. **Differing regional attitudes.** What is the attitude of district/state residents about government involvement, federally-funded projects or intervention in local matters? Is government assistance viewed as the people's due or as a handout?
7. **Jurisdiction.** To what extent does the Member want to get involved in matters that could involve local, state, other federal and

even international authorities? For example, border states might undertake projects go beyond domestic jurisdiction and require working with international organizations and contacts.

Finally, the Member will need to define the public image he or she wants the staff to project. For example, should the staff be viewed as activists working on behalf of the constituent against an unyielding, impersonal bureaucracy? Or should they assume a more passive stance, serving as a facilitator instead of an advocate? As with casework, this is a personal decision that should reflect the Member's philosophy on the role of congressional offices.

After addressing these questions, an office should be in a good position to determine the priority of projects work in the office. The next decision is to determine the level of staff resources necessary to meet these expectations.

### **The Staffing and Location of the Projects Function**

CMF's research has found that most House and Senate offices have at least one staffer responsible for managing projects, with a number of Senate and House offices staffing more than one projects person. Regardless of the number of projects staff in each office, most of these employees usually perform other duties as well. These additional responsibilities range from casework and outreach, to office management and constituent correspondence, to legislative issues and appropriations requests. Senate offices are more likely than House offices to have a single Projects Director who works exclusively on projects.

CMF's research also shows that the majority of projects staffers are based in the district/state. This makes sense given that, according to the Congressional Research Service (CRS), more than 90% of federal funding is administered on the state and local level. For this reason, projects staff should develop good working relationships with local officials and community leaders, which is easier to achieve if working out of the district/state. Staffers based in the district/state also tend to be better positioned to conduct outreach efforts. They are more likely to have visited a relevant site or met with the people requesting assistance. If they hail from the area, they are more likely to have existing contacts and an understanding of the local needs. Assistance from press and legislative staff are only an email away.

However, several House and Senate offices base their projects staffer in the Washington office. This location draws upon the legislative expertise of the staffer, who may also have contacts at the federal agencies' headquarters. Depending on the office, a DC-based projects staffer may have more access to the Member than if based in the district/state, particularly in Senate offices. In addition, locating the projects staffer in DC allows for easier coordination of grant announcements with the press staff (traditionally, though not always, located in DC), and enables them to more actively offer legislative solutions to district and state problems.

Each office must weigh the pros and cons of these options against its definition of, and goals for, projects work, recognizing that regardless of where the staff is located, projects work will require some activities in both Washington and the district/state. Because Senate offices may have two or more staff performing the tasks, they have more flexibility in deciding where projects work should be conducted. In this case, it is important to establish the division of projects responsibilities — by subject matter, by the executive department that has jurisdiction, by the level of difficulty, or by the current workload of each staffer. Coordination of effort may require more effort if the workers are in different locales, but well-utilized technology can effectively overcome the distance.

### **Defining Job Responsibilities and Coordinating Staff**

Because the definition of “projects” work is broad and open to each office’s interpretation, it can easily become a dumping ground for miscellaneous

*Projects work often overlaps with the work of other staff. To minimize conflict, the office must clearly define job responsibilities and procedures for working together.*

office activities. As a result, projects work often overlaps with the work of other staff. For example, is a complaint about a local landfill a casework responsibility or a projects responsibility? Is a request for specifically appropriated funds for roadwork a legislative or projects responsibility? Should the Communications Director or projects staff handle grant announcements?

To minimize conflict, the office must clearly define job responsibilities and procedures for working together. If the projects staff need the assistance of the legislative staff, should they directly contact the appropriate Legislative Assistant (LA) or go through the Legislative Director (LD)? If the projects staff and caseworkers cannot decide who should handle a request for student financial aid information, how will the dispute be resolved? The following pages discuss overlapping project functions and



specific aspects of projects work that require staff cooperation. After an office has defined roles and responsibilities, CMF recommends that this information be included in the office's constituent services manual. Doing so will keep all staff on the same page and serve as a useful training tool for new staff.

### ***Working with the Communications Director:***

- **Coordination of grants announcements.** Decide in advance who will contact the media, who will write press releases and who will notify the recipients.
- **Highlighting significant accomplishments.** Projects staff need to inform the press staff about those projects of which the office is most proud, or that are great achievements for the Member.
- **Determining federal money statistics.** The Communications Director may need projects staff to identify how much money has come into the district or state from a particular agency or into a particular county or town within a certain period.

### ***Working with the LD and LAs:***

- **Coordinating appropriations requests.** If a project requires legislatively appropriated funds, who should be responsible for the legislative legwork? If the legislative staff assumes responsibility, the projects staff must be sure to provide all necessary information about the project.
- **Justifying reauthorization of programs.** The projects staff should inform the legislative staff of how a program has helped the district or state whenever it comes up for reauthorization or appropriations.
- **Analyzing amendments.** The projects staff can provide LAs with an analysis of how proposed changes in a program will help or harm the district or state.

### ***Working with Caseworkers and Field Reps:***

- **Addressing frequent complaints.** Caseworkers should alert projects staff to recurring casework problems or complaints that might be addressed through legislation or special projects.
- **Recognizing a greater need.** In their outreach in the district/state, Field Reps may notice trends in communities or recognize

large-scale problems, which the projects staff could seek to solve through community-wide solutions.

### **Working with the CoS or DD/SD:**

- **Clarifying the supervisor's role.** Will it be participatory or supervisory? Do they want periodic updates on all projects, or just on selected ones? Do they want notification of all grant announcements?
- **Monitoring progress.** How should the projects staff keep management informed of the status of their activities? In what format should project staff prepare updates? How often does management want updates on projects work?

### **Getting Organized**

Once an office has determined where and how it will staff projects work, it is time to get organized. If staff are already doing projects work, they might respond, "But, I don't have *time* to get organized!" Yes, it seems hard to justify taking time away from directly handling a request or assignment, but in the end, an office will gain more than it will lose. Being organized will help staff feel more in control of the job and will make them more valuable to the office. Projects staff should follow four primary organizational steps to improve performance and should capture the resulting process in the office's constituent services manual.

#### **Step 1: Gather reference materials and information.**

Projects staff should have many sources of important information at their disposal. Government and private publications, lists of department and agency contacts, reference materials and private sources can all provide comprehensive background information on funding and technical assistance available through federal programs and private entities, including:

- Who administers the program
- Regulations that pertain to the program
- Goals and objectives of the program
- The amount of money allocated to the program
- The type of assistance offered
- Who is eligible



- Details of the application and award process
- Selection criteria
- Examples of projects selected in the past
- Relevant publications
- Contact names, addresses and telephone numbers
- A list of other related programs to consider

In particular, the Congressional Research Service (CRS) ([www.crs.gov](http://www.crs.gov)), the Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance (CFDA) ([www.cfda.gov](http://www.cfda.gov)) and the Foundation Center ([www.foundationcenter.org](http://www.foundationcenter.org)) are among the most popular and helpful sources of information. They offer comprehensive research assistance and access to the various public and private funding sources.



### **Congressional Research Service: In a Class by Itself**

As an objective, nonpartisan resource for analysis, research and information, CRS ([www.crs.gov](http://www.crs.gov)) can assist staff with grants and projects work in several ways.

#### **Webpages:**

*Grants, Business Opportunities, and Student Financial Aid*

This webpage compiles information on finding grants and federal domestic assistance, business contracting and procurement opportunities and student financial aid.

*Grants and Federal Domestic Assistance*

This webpage, updated automatically on House and Senate servers, can be added to a Member's website, providing direct access and timely information to constituents.

#### **Reports:**

*Grants Work in a Congressional Office*

*Ethical Considerations in Assisting Constituents With Grant Requests Before Federal Agencies*

*Resources for Grantseekers*

*How to Develop and Write a Grant Proposal*

*Congressional Liaison Offices of Selected Federal Agencies*

#### **Training & Professional Development:**

District- or state-based projects staffers should consider attending the CRS *District/State Staff Institutes*, which include workshops on managing grants and projects. Institutes are usually held six times per year and last three days. For more information, call the CRS Program Section at 202-707-7904.



Additionally, projects staff should proactively seek information that helps them better respond to incoming requests and identify new projects opportunities. Such tactics include:

- Collecting regulations and guidelines on the programs the office works with most, which is especially helpful when advocating for a particular issue or group.
- Gathering topical information such as agency and organization reports in related subject areas.
- Scanning trade newspapers and articles on topics that come up frequently in projects work.
- If not from the district or state, reviewing background literature and maps about the area and reading the local newspapers to gain a better understanding of the district's or state's needs.
- Signing up for mailing lists and updates from local community organizations that deal with matters related to office projects to stay informed of their activities.

### ***Step 2: Organize contacts.***

One of the most important sources of information for projects work is personal contacts, or those that can be developed. Good projects work requires collecting the contact information of mayors, county commissioners, city managers, planning and development organization officials, and so on. Additionally, since most federal funds are managed and awarded on the state and local level, developing good working relationships with contacts at state administering agencies (SAAs) is essential for projects staff.

These contacts will serve as allies, advisors, intelligence sources and occasionally opponents. They are essential to successful projects work and their names, telephone numbers and email addresses must therefore be easily retrievable and usable. Keeping a stack of business cards might seem handy, but it does not organize this data efficiently nor does it use it to greatest effectiveness.

Some offices maintain email distribution lists in their Outlook, a convenient and easy way to update contact information and communicate with people. If using Outlook, this information should be stored in Public Folders to give access to multiple staff. Another method is to input these contacts and lists into the office's centralized constituent database. The

capabilities of these programs allow staff to assign codes to each name, organization or category of contacts, allowing them to be retrieved in minutes and in multiple formats. For example, an office could query its database for a listing of all the mayors in the state, or of all the state legislators in the district. The constituent database also has the advantage of reporting data and recording the history of interactions with these contacts — when requests were received and in what format, how long the office took to respond to requests, when responses were sent and follow-up taken, etc.

Regardless of the method used, it is critical to develop procedures that all staff should follow to consistently record, update and track this information.

### ***Step 3: Develop standardized intake procedures.***

Once the reference materials and contacts are organized, the next step is to develop standardized intake procedures. Standardizing this process saves time and ensures that all the necessary questions are asked up front. It also serves as a useful summary of the request.

Most offices record all constituent inquiries and requests for assistance in their constituent database. Just as with casework, storing this information electronically offers numerous advantages. First, the intake information is easily accessible by other staff, such as the DD/SD or other projects staff. Second, these summaries can be quickly transmitted to other offices when necessary. Third, if inputted and managed properly, these systems can effectively track, organize and report on projects requests.

Before acting on a request, it is critical that an office obtains the most complete and accurate information possible during the intake process, including:

1. Name of person making contact, and title, if appropriate.
2. Name of organization or community represented.
3. Mailing address, telephone number and email address.
4. Date of initial contact.
5. Form of initial contact (e.g., telephone, email, letter or referral).
6. Date of initial acknowledgment.
7. Type of assistance requested.



8. Dollar amount sought.
9. Previous funding sources.
10. Federal funding sources contacted on this project.
11. Status of application for funding: Has one been submitted? If yes, for how much? When? To which agency? When is the deadline?
12. Other offices that have been contacted.
13. Action taken by your office.

#### ***Step 4: Establish a filing system.***

The final step to getting organized is establishing a system for easy referral and retrieval. When filing, think strategically about the information at hand and retain those documents (in hardcopy or, preferably, electronically) that will need to be referenced in the future. Here are some ideas to consider:

- **Constituent files.** Most of this information should be stored electronically in the office's constituent database. If possible, important hardcopy originals should be scanned and stored in the constituent's electronic record as well, or stored securely on the office server. Doing so will save physical space, increase the likelihood that the document can be easily retrieved when necessary and maintain the integrity of the document over time. If the Member represents a state or multi-county district, consider arranging these files by county or town, and then alphabetizing by constituent or group name within each unit. This is an especially useful system when the Member is visiting a particular area and wants to know what is going on there. If the Member represents a single-city district, filing cases by the federal agency involved in its resolution might be the most expedient.
- **Subject files.** Staff may collect brochures and other general information for reference. An office might want to arrange these files by subject or program area or by department or agency. If this system becomes complicated or complex, an office should create a master list of files for easy reference.
- **Community files.** For outreach purposes, keep up-to-date information about each town, city or county in a separate file. These files can help provide an understanding of what is important or

controversial in a given area, and the types of activities in which a community is involved. Examples of this type of information would be local newspaper articles, newsletters and publications by economic development, local planning, tourism and nonprofits.

- **Industry files.** It might be beneficial to keep files about any prominent industries in the district/state, especially if the office conducts a lot of economic development work. Information in these files may include annual reports, public relations material and newspaper articles about the facilities, the company or the industry in general.
- **Grant announcement files.** Once a federal agency has notified the office of an award, and the office has subsequently announced it, keep track of this information for future use. Award information is helpful to press staff when preparing e-newsletters or writing speeches, and to legislative staff seeking information for related votes. One suggestion is to file by calendar or fiscal year, and then have sub-categories of executive departments and agencies within those years. (For more on announcing awards, see the section at the end of this chapter.)
- **Press and media coverage.** Press clips and articles about a project can be filed with that project, but another copy should be stored with the press files. These clippings are helpful in summarizing the Member's accomplishments. Again, filing by county or agency makes retrieval easy.

## Processing Project Requests

For projects staff, the goal is to successfully handle every case, but success does not necessarily mean finding funding for every request. Success means that the Member's office has provided excellent customer service to everyone, regardless of the outcome. Each constituent or group should know that the Member cares about his or her concerns and feel that the Member has been responsive to their needs.

Ideally, each request should be handled in a timely and effective way. Each case should be acted on *as it comes in*, by following the six steps recommended below.

1. **Complete an intake form.** When a request for assistance comes into the office, each case should be entered into the office's con-



stituent database immediately, so the office can keep an accurate record of its turnaround time on requests.

2. **Determine what is being requested.** Is the constituent asking for guidance, support or intervention?
3. **Determine how the office should respond to the request.** Since this is generally the most complex and important challenge, it is explored at length in the following section.
4. **Draft an appropriate response.** Some requests require no more than a standardized answer. Develop — and keep up-to-date — a library of responses to handle frequent requests, such as those for general types of information or letters about controversial projects. Stock paragraphs can also be drafted for frequently-cited references, to merge into various letters as appropriate. Always take the time to make the initial letter complete, informative and personal. To enhance the response and save time drafting it, enclose or link to additional information whenever possible.

When a request cannot be answered through form letters, contact the constituent immediately to acknowledge receipt and inform them that the office needs to do more research. This will not only please the constituent, it will allow more time to fulfill the request thoroughly. A standardized letter or acknowledgement form is fine for this purpose.

5. **Assess the relative priority of each project.** When determining the priority of the project, consider both the office's strategic goals and the goals for projects work in the office. The highest priority projects should then receive the greatest amount of staff time.
6. **Develop a mini action plan for each project.** When moving forward on a project, list all of the tasks necessary to complete the case, including staff responsibilities and deadlines. The higher priority the project, the more detailed and thorough the action plan should be.

### Evaluating Requests

As mentioned previously, the most complex aspect of processing requests for assistance is determining what the appropriate response should be. Congressional offices can evaluate and address requests using the re-

sources and methods discussed below. Before acting on any request, staff should familiarize themselves with the full text of the rules and seek guidance from the Senate Select Committee on Ethics (202-224-2981) and the House Committee on Standards of Official Conduct (202-225-7103) as necessary.

**Requests for information.** Some constituents may be starting their research, or want to begin exploring the options for federal assistance. Others may be familiar with opportunities and processes, but would like to take advantage of the wider array of information a congressional office can provide. While most of this information may be available online, constituents might need guidance to find it or want access to information not readily accessible.

Through the intake process, make sure to capture what information the constituent is requesting. Then, search for and identify the information needed and, if applicable, refer the constituent to particularly helpful websites and reference publications.

**Requests for support.** Often constituents who request assistance are not seeking information; they have already done their homework and applied for funding. What they want now is a letter of support for their project from their Representative or Senator. While offices do not need to be cautious about giving out information, they do need to be careful about supporting specific projects. Information is something entitled to every citizen. Support, however, is a commodity the Member should lend with discretion.

Review the following questions to determine how to proceed with a request for support:

- Is the project in the broad public interest? Whom does the project benefit? How many people would the project benefit?
- Who is making this request? Does the office know this person or organization? What is the reputation of this organization? Does it actually represent the views of the people it claims to represent?
- Do local officials support the project? If not, is the project important enough to risk incurring the wrath of these officials?



*While offices do not need to be cautious about giving out information, they do need to be careful about supporting specific projects. Information is something entitled to every citizen. Support, however, is a commodity the Member should lend with discretion.*



- Who opposes the project? Does the project merit the risk of alienating these individuals or groups?
- Are there other groups in the district or state competing for the same assistance? Would they consider working together to strengthen their case?

The DD/SD should work with projects staff to assess the group or individual making the request and understand the local politics surrounding an issue. Local newspapers can also help illustrate just how explosive the issue is. In some cases, such as when two local groups are competing for the same grant, an office may wish to write a letter of interest rather than one of unqualified support.

When the office does not support a project, the response needs to be worded diplomatically but clearly. The office does not want a letter of interest mischaracterized and publicized as a letter of support, nor does the office want to unnecessarily alienate a requestor. Without ever expressing support, it is possible to thank the requestor for bringing the matter to the Member's attention or for their interest in the well-being of the community. Or, the office could advise the requestor that the Member or office will look into the matter and report back their findings. Remember to treat all correspondence as public information. It is always possible for a letter to wind up in the local newspaper, shared among friends or published on the web.

Many offices have also become increasingly concerned about the budgetary impact of projects and have adopted office guidelines prohibiting letters of support for projects that are not authorized or for projects that have received no hearing in committee, for example. In an effort to be more transparent about the process, and to use staff time more effectively, some congressional offices have posted these guidelines on their websites for grant-seekers to review and/or posting the funding requests that they have submitted to committee. Having clear guidelines available in writing and on the Web can help eliminate or prevent confusion surrounding the process.

**Other possible actions.** Sometimes a constituent's request may be more complicated than any of those listed above; at other times it may not be appropriate or advisable to offer the information, support or intervention the constituent requests. In these cases, an office can still be helpful, either through referral or through outreach and matchmaking.

- **Referrals.** Some projects are better handled by a state or local agency. Depending on the office's philosophy and mission, staff may either continue to work the case, or simply direct the constituent to the appropriate state department or agency. If the latter is the case, the constituent should be notified in writing of the referral immediately, and provided information on the agency or program as well as contact information in the relevant state/local office.
- **Outreach and matchmaking.** When a worthy project is not moving because there appear to be no resources to help it do so, it is time for an office to get creative and do some matchmaking. Matchmaking is a technique often reserved for high-priority projects because it can involve significant time and energy. There are two types of matchmaking: matching communities or groups that have similar goals, and matching resources to needs. If other groups are working on a project similar to the request, the two might benefit by working together. For example, two small, neighboring communities may each wish to put in a public water system, but their own small tax bases might make such a project prohibitive. A projects worker can act as an envoy or mediator and find ways to help them join forces so both communities can achieve their goals.

One House projects staffer shared a success story: A small community experienced several misfortunes at once. Factories throughout the area were going out of business, and a devastating flood seriously damaged the town, spurring the closing of yet another factory. The mayor did not know where to start looking for new employers. The projects staffer contacted the state university, which agreed to produce a feasibility study to determine what types of industries the town should recruit. The staffer was also able to raise the necessary funding for the study through the regional planning and development council. Had the projects staffer not acted as matchmaker, the town would not be on its way to recovery.

## Project Identification

Projects can be either “reactive” or “proactive.” Most offices will undertake some of each, but the best projects work is somewhere in between: more proactive than casework, but more reactive than events planning. While offices must be equipped to respond to needs of its citizens, it is

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also critical to identify projects that reflect the office's strategic outreach goals. Developing a strategic plan that includes a variety of outreach strategies ensures that the office undertakes a mix of projects that effectively advance the Member's goals.

An office's strategic plan and stakeholder analysis should already have identified areas where the office needs to focus outreach efforts. But some offices need help identifying ways of incorporating or expanding projects work as part of these efforts. Few offices feel they need to add projects to their already heavy workloads, but this type of process is critical to identifying creative opportunities to advance outreach strategies. If an office takes the time early in the year to reach out strategically for new projects work, they will be much closer to achieving outreach goals. Below are some general approaches that might enhance current outreach efforts.



1. **Make trips to every town or county** in the district or state and pay courtesy calls to the local elected officials and heads of economic development and nonprofits. Inform them of how the Member can help and encourage them to contact the office in the early stages of any project. Through these meetings, the projects staff can establish an essential network for identifying important projects and resolving delicate political problems that arise.
2. **Attend regular meetings** of the local Chamber of Commerce or industrial development board. These meeting will not only improve and maintain the office's contacts; they will often yield opportunities for the Member's office to be of assistance to an area or region in critical ways.
3. **Conduct or sponsor workshops** on topics targeted to specific groups or geographic areas. If unemployment is a major problem, hold seminars at colleges on how to apply for federal job opportunities. Similarly, a forum on small business can attract new employers to an economically-depressed region.
4. **Scan the *Federal Register* and advise priority groups** of grant solicitations that they might find helpful, or of proposed regulatory changes on which they might like to comment.
5. **Hold brainstorming sessions** with communities or groups important to the Member's goals on how to address their concerns.

6. **Start a projects e-newsletter** for distribution to local community groups offering information on available funding, application deadlines, recent grant awards in the area and projects on which the office is already working.
7. **Research what other offices are doing** that is well received by constituents. If an issue affects the district or state, locate other offices facing similar problems and find out what they are doing to address it. There may even be opportunities for collaboration.
8. **Mine the national, state and local news for project opportunities.** Do not just comment on current events; if they affect the folks back home, organize efforts to enable the district or state to capitalize on it or limit its damage to constituents. For example, Commerce Department speakers can discuss export opportunities with local businesses.
9. **Stay in close contact with federal departments and agencies** so the office is immediately aware of any services or projects the executive branch can offer constituents.
10. **Canvass the Member's congressional colleagues** on their interest and availability to travel to the state or district to speak an issue of expertise that resonates with constituents. Borrow the knowledge of another Member to bring insight on an issue, process or community dilemma.

## Tracking Projects

After initiating action on a project, it must be followed up on in a timely manner. It does little good to write a terrific letter of support for a grant if it misses the deadline. Nor will a constituent be impressed with a large packet of information if it took several calls and three months to obtain it. As discussed earlier in the chapter regarding casework, an effective tracking system must be developed to monitor projects work.

A tracking system serves two general purposes: it alerts staff when action on a project is required, and prepares aggregate reports to analyze all the projects the office is working on. Tracking is not only one of the most arduous tasks projects staff face; it contributes greatly to their success. A good system ensures that deadlines are met and matters do not fall through the cracks. Management reports give projects staff an op-

portunity to assess the overall work of the office and determine whether a change in course is necessary. They also provide valuable information to the Member and other staff — if the Member is preparing to speak in a certain area, for example. Historical data is also essential when new projects staff come on board.

Technology is a manager's best friend when it comes to tracking and reporting; an office's constituent database can be used to track individual requests and summarize them in a management report, just as it tracks casework. This software can also alert staff when an inquiry has not been responded to within a specified timeframe.

Just as with casework monitoring, consistent coding and tracking should be employed by all staff who use the system. When developing a coding scheme, offices should consider what information they would want to retrieve and analyze. Do you want to rapidly access all projects by county? Or do you want breakdowns by county *and* by issue, so you can retrieve all housing projects the office worked on in a specific area? Do you want to calculate how many new requests were received in a month or how many projects the office undertook in a three-month period? This information is critical when conducting a year-end review of projects work and progress towards an office's strategic goals, but first data must be entered into the system in a timely and consistent manner.

### **Award Announcements**

Working hard on a project on behalf of constituents in the district or state can be admirable and satisfying. For most offices, however, projects work does not end with assisting groups and communities with their requests, but rather with communicating the Member's accomplishments in this area as appropriate. This is not always easy. The office may want to highlight certain projects to the media themselves, and let constituents or groups publicize others.

All congressional offices receive notice of federal awards, but generally, Senators are notified before Representatives. In addition, Members of the same party as the Administration will probably be contacted before those in the opposing party. Most media will give credit to the office that reaches them first, not necessarily the office that deserves the credit. Therefore, it is very important to have a good strategy for getting the word out on successful projects that the office wants to highlight to the media.

If an office has been working on a project, and is almost certain it will be funded, but has not yet received the announcement, here are some safeguards for projects staff to follow:

- **Give the press staff all the pertinent information about the project ahead of time**, so they can write a press release that is ready to go when an announcement is made.
- **Brief reporters on background ahead of time, explaining the project, its ramifications and the Member's role.** Then when an announcement is made, each reporter can be quickly notified. This allows the office to touch all bases in minutes — and minutes matter.
- **Make sure you learn of the award decision immediately when it is reached.** Do not be afraid to be persistent with the congressional liaison staff of the awarding department or agency. Ask when the award is expected, and call frequently, starting a little before the time they told you. They may choose not to call your office first, but if you happen to call right after they receive notification, they will usually tell you the truth.
- **Remember the constituent, not the media, is the client.** Therefore, it is important that the constituent hear from the office if an award is about to be made. This reinforces the relationship and reminds them of the instrumental role the Member played in obtaining the grant — a point they hopefully remember when reporters contact them.

For awards the office is not expecting, make sure there is a standardized procedure to follow so that the office can still be quick in getting the word out. Keeping consistent records of awards can be useful for e-newsletters and speeches. After all the rush is over, a nice touch is to follow up with a congratulatory letter to the recipient.

### Conduct a Strategic Review of Projects

How can an office measure the overall success of projects? An annual year-end review composed of the following steps makes sure the office is on track and that projects are advancing the Member's overall strategic plan.

1. **Compile and analyze a comprehensive report of projects visits broken down into several categories:** subject (economic development, community development, etc.); type of



group (business organization, civic club, housing nonprofits, etc.); locale (city, country, etc.); or any other breakdown that might be useful. This calculation is easy to do if the office has been consistently entering and coding information into its constituent database and scheduling program.

2. **Compare this tally against the office's strategic plan.** Determine whether the allocation of staff time and the progress made on outreach projects are consistent with the goals established in the strategic plan.
3. **Determine whether changes are needed in planned outreach projects, or in the criteria used to evaluate projects,** to ensure that staff time is allocated more strategically in the future.

## Conclusion

Unlike most other congressional activities, neither the scope nor the tasks of projects work are clearly defined. Offices vary significantly as to what projects work they undertake, how they handle the work, where it is conducted and the priority they assign to it. This chapter helps offices think through and answer these difficult questions and provides practical guidance for project staff in researching and processing requests.

The work of projects staff is complex and demanding, but can be among the most rewarding of all congressional work. Helping match public and private resources to redevelop an aging waterfront area can reinvigorate an entire region. Identifying the need for a legislative remedy allowing veterans to receive critical health care coverage can literally mean a new lease on life for hundreds of former servicemen and women and their families.

While the level of energy and work required for projects will vary according to each office's strategic plan, one thing is certain. Whatever projects work is undertaken will be easier and more effective with a well thought out process for identifying, evaluating, initiating and tracking projects in the district or state. In the end, this will help offices successfully perform the valuable service projects work provides to communities.

## Defining and Identifying Projects Work

## CHAPTER SUMMARY 8

### DO...

- Clarify the Member's goals and how projects can advance them to help determine the priority of projects work among office operations and the resources that should be allocated to it.
- Define projects work by considering the following: the Member's goals; district/state needs; constituent perceptions and attitudes; delegation and local politics; and jurisdiction.
- Weigh the pros and cons of basing projects staff in the district/state or in DC and select the location that best supports your goals.
- Clearly define, communicate and coordinate the job responsibilities of projects staff to minimize confusion and conflict in the office.
- Assess the overall public interest in the project, as well as the group/individual making the request and the politics surrounding the issue, to determine the appropriate response for your office.
- Develop a strategy for announcing awards to improve staff coordination and timeliness and ensure the Member gets proper credit.

### DON'T...

- Allow the work of projects staff to evolve over time without any clear direction from management or without targeting the work toward the Member's strategic goals.
- Act on a request without first obtaining the most complete and accurate information possible to ensure the office makes an informed and calculated decision.
- Process projects and grants requests without first understanding the House and Senate rules that govern this activity.
- Neglect to capture the processes and procedures of projects work in the office's constituent services manual to help ensure the consistent recording and tracking of this information.
- View projects work as only reacting to incoming requests. Enhance outreach efforts by proactively seeking and identifying projects that reflect the office's goals.
- Fail to measure the overall success of projects work as it relates to the office's broader agenda. Conduct an annual review to analyze the office's process and if changes are needed.



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