

THE ROLE OF CONGRESSIONAL STAFF

Personal Staff

In the House and the Senate, the structure of staff differs greatly, largely depending on whether a Member of Congress chooses to emphasize constituent service or legislation; whether legislative issues are divided up by subject matter or the lawmaker's committee assignments; or other factors. A senator's staff may range in size from fewer than 20 to more than 60. A representative's staff is limited to 18 full-time and four part-time staffers. Senators and representatives also are often assisted on legislative matters by staff of the committees and subcommittees on which they serve and it is not unusual for an aide to perform both committee work and personal office work, regardless of which payroll he or she is on.

Constituent Service

A major responsibility of a Member's personal staff, especially in the House, is to provide service to the people back in the state or congressional district. Staffers respond to many constituent requests: among other duties, they untangle bureaucratic snarls in collecting Social Security or veterans' benefits; they answer questions about federal student loans and other government aid; they help home state or district organizations navigate red tape for landing federal grants; they respond to constituent mail on legislative and national issues; and they produce newsletters and other mailings to keep constituents informed of their representative's or senator's activities.

Such services are important not only for the benefits they provide to constituents, but also for the relationship they help foster between a Member of Congress and a voter. Junior Members of Congress tend to focus more attention on constituent service than their more senior colleagues, and representatives often spend more time on constituent service than senators.

Who is involved?

❖ **Staff Assistant/Receptionist**

The staff assistant/receptionist is most often located at the front desk of a Member's office and is responsible for greeting guests and answering the phones. Other responsibilities may include arranging Capitol and White House tours for constituents, handling general requests, opening and routing office mail and minor legislative responsibilities.

❖ **Caseworker**

Most offices have several caseworkers that divide up the federal agencies and deal with constituent questions and problems (a lost Social Security check, a denied veterans' benefit, etc.) associated with those agencies' programs. Some caseworkers also do legislative research or correspondence on matters relating to the agencies in which they have specialized. They also may go by the title of research assistant or staff assistant. Although casework operations may be centered either in the district/state office or in Washington, the majority of caseworkers are housed in the district office.

❖ **Legislative Correspondent (LC)**

This individual is responsible for monitoring all incoming mail and drafting responses to constituent letters concerning pending legislation. In some offices, a legislative assistant (LA) drafts letters in their own issue areas; however, in others, the LC drafts letters for the LA's regardless of the subject.

❖ **Grants staff**

The grants staff is responsible for assisting organizations (e.g. state and local government agencies, businesses, educational institutions, etc.) and individuals that are seeking federal grants. Grant programs range from federal aid for the construction of schools, sewers, airports and highways to awarding contracts to individuals and corporations to provide specialized assistance to the government.

Legislative Duties

Making laws is the fundamental job of a Member of Congress. To do the work, Members need Legislative Assistants for substantive and political guidance through the daily congressional agenda of complex, interdependent issues. There are more committee meetings, constituent meetings and hearings than any one individual can adequately prepare for and other Members, federal officials, special interest groups, and sometimes even the White House staff must be consulted before final decisions are made. Because of the volume of national issues that must be covered on a daily basis, a Member **MUST** rely on his/her staff at every major phase of the legislative process.

Who is involved?

❖ **Legislative Director (LD)**

The LD is the lawmaker's senior legislative aide and is responsible for supervising the work of a cadre of legislative assistants and legislative correspondents. The LD's primary responsibility is to guide the development of the lawmaker's legislative agenda and to monitor all of the legislative activities in the office. The LD is typically the final arbiter when it comes to developing legislative priorities and advising on key legislative decisions (such as whether or not to introduce or co-sponsor a bill or how to vote on a particular piece of legislation).

❖ **Legislative Assistant (LA)**

The LA typically monitors legislation through the committee review stage and on the floor and works under the supervision of the Legislative Director to initiate and advance legislation sponsored or supported by the lawmaker. The LA must be knowledgeable of the committee system and the rules of the House and Senate and meets with lobbyists and constituents interested in the proposed legislation. In addition, the LA typically performs other tasks such as handling the Member's legislative correspondence, drafting legislation, writing floor speeches, monitoring Committee activity, and meeting with constituents and special interest groups. You will find that most offices have a team of LA's that divide up and specialize in various issues areas. Representatives and Senators who are senior members of committees or subcommittees often have additional committee staff available to them to assist with drafting and introducing legislation.

Political Duties

In any congressional office, a substantial amount of time is devoted to nurturing political ties in the state or congressional district as well as in Washington. A Member's staff must work hard to ensure that the lawmaker receives due credit for legislative achievements and recognition for his or her efforts on behalf of constituents. In addition, staff members may spend considerable time developing relationships with the lawmaker's party leaders. This is particularly helpful in securing key committee assignments that ultimately benefit the Member's district and his or her constituents.

Who is involved?

❖ Chief of Staff (COS)

Sometimes referred to as the Administrative Assistant (AA), this individual coordinates and supervises the work of the office and has supervisory responsibilities over the entire staff. The COS is the chief administrator and often acts as the final arbiter in the Member's office. Frequently, the COS serves as the Member's chief political advisor, keeping the Member abreast of district and Washington politics. Some have accumulated enough power to act as the Member's virtual alter ego.

❖ District/State Director

This staff member is often the lawmaker's key political advisor in the district/state and is responsible for managing the local office and maintaining strong ties with community leaders as well as constituents. Most Members maintain one or more offices in their district or state to help with the casework load and to provide an accessible contact for constituents. Some Members even have mobile offices that travel around the districts.

❖ Communications Director (CD)

This staff person serves as the Member's chief spokesperson to the media. The Communications Director, sometimes known as the press secretary, composes press releases dealing with legislative issues as well as notable casework or grants efforts; writes newsletters; organizes press conferences; and generally maintains a detailed accounting of the Member's stand on the issues. In many cases, this staffer is a key political liaison for the office and is responsible for relaying the Member's views and activities to his or her constituents. Most press staff in the House work exclusively with media outlets in their respective district while Senators, who receive more national publicity and represent larger areas, often have deputy press secretaries in addition to the Communications Director.

Administrative Duties

Running a Congressional office is very similar to running a small business. Constituents expect their elected official to be responsive to their needs in a timely and efficient manner. To do that, lawmakers rely on administrative specialists whose job it is to ensure that the work of the office is carried out effectively.

Who is Involved?

❖ **Scheduler/Executive Assistant**

This person is responsible for managing and controlling demands on the Member's time. Sometimes the lawmaker's closest confidant, this individual maintains the lawmaker's schedule, deciding who does or does not see the lawmaker; maintaining the Member's personal correspondence and travel arrangements, and ensuring that the Member and his/her office is in full compliance with House and Senate rules and regulations. In the offices of more senior Members, this individual is key to gaining access to the lawmaker and staff.

❖ **Office Manager and Systems Administrator**

The office manager oversees all other administrative duties in the office. In many offices, this position will be combined with the scheduling and/or systems duties. The systems administrator is responsible for maintaining the office computer system particularly as it relates to correspondence.

Committee Staff

The introduction of legislation in Congress is a simple procedure, but whether the legislation is ever enacted into law depends on a complex and variable chain of events. Although thousands of pieces of legislation are introduced in Congress every year, a relatively small number become law. Reviewing proposed legislation and determining which bills pass falls primarily to congressional committees. Committee staff has expertise on the subjects within their jurisdiction, and it is at the committee review stage that legislation comes under its sharpest scrutiny. Usually, only bills that have survived the scrutiny of the experts will be given consideration on the floor of the House and Senate. It is important, therefore, to understand the role committee staff plays in the process.

General Background

Because the House is four times as large as the Senate, House committees generally have more members than Senate committees, which means more business in the House gets done at the committee and subcommittee level. Note also that senators rely more heavily on their staff because senators have more committee and subcommittee assignments than do House members.

Each congressional committee (and subcommittee) is headed by a chairperson who belongs to the party that controls the majority of seats in the House or Senate chamber. His or her counterpart from the minority party is called "ranking member." The term "majority staff" refers to staff working for the party controlling the chamber; their counterparts are called "minority staff."

Staff Functions

Titles and responsibilities may differ slightly from one committee to another. Following is a description of the staff in a typical committee office.

❖ **Staff Director** (chief clerk, chief of staff or chief counsel)

At the full committee level, the staff director is the top administrator of the committee, and usually is someone with extensive experience in Congress, or in federal agencies or private sector associations involved in the same types of issues as the committee. Subcommittee staff directors frequently are staff that have worked in the personal office of the subcommittee chair (as legislative or administrative assistants) and move to manage the subcommittee when their Member of Congress becomes the chair of the subcommittee.

The staff director is responsible for hiring and firing staff for the chairperson and directs the activities of the committee staff. He or she also manages the committee's work agenda, schedules markups and hearings (including finding witnesses for hearings) and is frequently the chief spokesman for the committee (except on committees that employ a press secretary).

❖ **Counsel (or deputy counsel, assistant counsel, general counsel)**

This staff person is almost always an attorney. These staffers draft legislation, evaluate information, work out compromise language and perform the nitty-gritty technical work in legislative markups. They frequently specialize in specific legislative areas within a committee jurisdiction. Counsels are rarely bipartisan in allegiance, and, if not directly attached to the committee chairman or a ranking member, they are likely to be appointees of another committee member.

❖ **Professional staff**

Behind this catchall title, you will find lawyers, economists, investigators, and other experts of various sorts, administrators, press coordinators and hearing editors. The role is roughly comparable to the legislative assistant in the member's personal office (except professional staff focus on a portion of the subject jurisdiction of the committee or subcommittee). The title is sometimes used by staff directors to minimize competition for status within the internal pecking order, and sometimes to cloud the public's view of who does what.

❖ **Associate staff**

This title is most commonly found on major House committees (Appropriations, Rules, Ways and Means). Associate staffs are hired by a committee member to be the member's eyes and ears on the committee. Associate staff normally works exclusively for their appointing representative, and perform research and other duties relating to legislation before their committee.

❖ **Economists or other specialists**

Committees sometimes hire specialist economists, doctors, engineers, scientists and other experienced professionals to work in such areas as the economy, tax law, health or energy. These experts sometimes are “consultants,” hired for a limited time or paid on a daily basis over a continuing period.

❖ **Clerical positions include secretaries, receptionists, staff assistants and clerical assistants**

Some perform mainly internal paperwork such as keeping the committee calendar up-to-date, referring bills that have been introduced to the appropriate departments and to administration officials for comment, and sorting mail. Other clerical staffers keep committee roll call votes; announce hearings, contact witnesses and process committee publications. These people can be vital for obtaining scheduling information and committee documents, and to help you gain access to professional staffers.