

Know that Legislative Staffers Have Your Back

GET ACQUAINTED.

Legislative staff can be especially critical for part-time legislators, which most states have. "We have legislators that are still fully employed in professions," Christensen said, "anywhere from being a school teacher to a businessman. To have staff for them is critical to getting any work done. (We can help) getting research work done on policy issues, getting bills drafted, getting committees set up and things like that. We're like any other staff to any other professional; we're critical to the process."

GET INFORMED.

One of the biggest challenges for new legislators is simply learning how the legislative process works. Legislative staffing agencies can help with that. "They (policymakers) need to know how the process works, how to get bills in and out of committees, through floors and so on," he said. "Understanding the legislative rules is critical. Our staff provides real help in that area. I require all my staff to know the legislative rules. When a legislator has a question, our staff can answer that question. ... We also prepare what we commonly call cheat sheets, where we focus on the major rules that are critical to functioning in committees and on the floor. We give those to legislators and train them on that."

GET SOME EXPERT ADVICE.

Since it's impossible for anyone to know everything, Christensen believes it is critical for legislators to develop expertise on a particular topic that interests them. Legislative staff can help with that, too. "My staff, we divide them into teams to specialize in education or tax or environment or natural resources," he said. "A legislator can come to those people, spend some hours and just say, 'Tell me what you know.' They (staffers) will show them what's in the code and how the federal government interacts in these areas. We do briefing papers in these areas so legislators can get up to speed as quickly as possible."

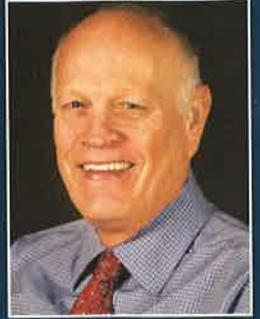
GET A READING.

Legislative staffers also can help policymakers figure out which way the wind is blowing among their constituents. "We're glad to put together a working group for you," Christensen said. "We can have an outline of the issues you want to deal with, the things you want to address. Let's get input from all the stakeholders to see what their ideas are on this so we can come to a better bill. We help legislators solve problems."

GET COMFORTABLE.

Christensen trains his staff to be customer oriented and wants policymakers to feel comfortable with the advice and expertise his staff can provide. "We are a nonpartisan office," he said. "We try to walk that middle road as carefully as we can. (We try) to be informative, to be factual, not to sway legislators one way or another. ... I guess what I want them to know is that we're trustworthy, that we know what we're doing, we have expertise and we can help them solve their problems or address their issues. We want them to feel comfortable with us. They can talk to us frankly and openly, confidentially. We hold those confidences." 

Michael Christensen,
chair of CSG
West's Legislative
Service Agency/
Research Directors
Committee, has
been director of



Utah's Office of Legislative Research & General Counsel for 13 years. His staff of 60 helps state legislators be more effective. Here are his tips for new and experienced lawmakers on how legislative staffers can help.

