

## 2012–2013 GSA-USGS Congressional Science Fellow Final Report



Todd Anthony Bianco

### A Typical, Life-Changing Experience

My time as the GSA-USGS Congressional Fellow is winding down, and the new class is already

on the Hill. Looking back on my orientation last year, I remember that the thing most on my mind was what I would actually be doing on a day-to-day basis. So in this report, I would like to give a more specific idea of my experience in a Congressional office.

It's useful to start with office structure. A member of Congress will have at least one office in the home district or state and at least one personal office on the Hill. Depending on the member's position, there may also be a committee or leadership office on the Hill. My placement was in the personal office of Senator Sheldon Whitehouse of Rhode Island, and most of my interaction was with other personal offices, so I'll review a general personal office structure.

In a D.C. personal office, a member typically has (at least) a chief of staff, an office manager and office staff, an executive assistant and scheduler, a communications team, and a legislative team. Congressional Fellows serve on the legislative team, which is headed by the legislative director—always referred to as the “LD.”

The LD manages the individuals who work on various policy issues, like healthcare, energy and environment, or education. In that effort, below the LD are the legislative assistants (LAs). Of course, depending on the size of the office and its culture, there may be a title or two between the LD and the LAs, like “Senior Policy Advisor,” but to keep it simple these can be grouped as LAs. Just below the LAs are the legislative correspondents (LCs) who are most often responding to constituents' letters and supporting the LAs. Congressional Fellows can expect to find themselves under the mentorship of an LA.

The LAs are the staffers who are developing and advancing policy, as well as keeping their boss updated on Congressional activity. To do this effectively, LAs need to be quickly and

constantly acquiring information. This is one place a scientist can make a difference; a well-trained scientist is an expert and trusted researcher. The rest of the recipe is communication and speed.

Given that, here's what a typical day might include for a Congressional Fellow. The morning often starts with reading the news. I go through the same clips my boss gets and also check the headlines of a handful of other news sources and headline aggregators in my issue area (energy and environment) and read anything that catches my attention.

Often, LAs and fellows need to address a question or issue raised by the senator or update their boss for a meeting. This is usually done by writing a memo. Whatever the topic of the memo is, it is always important to find the best information quickly. The benefit of being a strong researcher is that while you may not know the best information off hand, you likely know you've found good information when you see it. Because speed is just as important as depth, it's okay to start simple; I jump on the Internet for most small matters. For more comprehensive work, or for issues related directly to the government and legislation, offices look to the Congressional Research Service, which is named for its mission, or the Government Accountability Office, which investigates how the federal government is performing.

While legislative staff is constantly gathering information, the communications team is constantly disseminating it. Fellows often help generate content that supports the communications staff. This might be for a speech, a press release, talking points, or some other product. In this case, the real work is simplifying complicated information, while keeping it extremely accurate.

Fellows can also expect to have a handful of constituent and staff meetings throughout the week to hear and discuss policy. A mentor may assign a fellow to many meetings, covering a range of topics that the fellow will do some work on, but allow the fellow to find which issues on which to focus. Other fellows may experience that their office already has a particular piece of legislation for them to develop. Either way, once a fellow's issue portfolio is more refined, these meetings give staff a better idea of what problems are out there, what are the concerns of their constituents, and if there is a good role for federal action.

On top of these common responsibilities, fellows in personal offices work as support for hearings, briefings, floor debates, events, and whatever else might appear on the boss's calendar. But instead of reviewing these, I want to close with some thoughts for scientists who have an interest in public policy.

As I already noted, the legislative team is constantly acquiring information to help improve policy decisions. Senator Whitehouse has an excellent legislative team, as do most senators. However, the number of staffers supporting legislative decisions drops quickly across the Capitol to the House of Representatives. For example, one House office I interviewed with last year had two legislative staffers. In many locations, state and local government is a part-time position for the lawmakers themselves. Therefore, there is a need for expert researchers and science advisors. You do not need to be a Congressional Fellow to send a letter volunteering your skills to your state representative, city council, or school board. You simply need to find the time.

I encourage GSA members to listen to a 2011 National Public Radio interview, *A Case for a Presidential Science Debate*, which included former Congressman Vernon Ehlers. Ehlers explains how he wrote such a letter to then-Congressman Gerald Ford, offering to set up a science advisory committee to answer any questions the Congressman might have—free of charge. The rest is history, and I echo Ehlers' point: likely you'll receive a nice letter declining your offer, but maybe you'll find a chance to do something good for your community while broadening your life experience.

As always, I would like to close by encouraging anyone to contact me directly about my year on the Hill. I would also like to thank our members and leadership for their support in the fellowship. It has been an honor to serve as the GSA-USGS Congressional Science Fellow, and the experience has been life-changing.

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