

Report to My FASS Colleagues: Good Golly, Eight Months Already?

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Friends and scholars, good morning from Washington, DC—or, more precisely, the office of Congressman Robert E. Andrews (D-NJ). As I approach the eighth month of my AAAS Congressional Science Fellowship, I can report that it continues to be an exciting learning experience that I recommend to both new PhDs and all who can afford to take a year of sabbatical. It is a different universe on The Hill. At least in the House, it's a cubicle, not an office. Need quiet time to think? Well, there are office machines running, legislative staffers on phones in their cubicles, and you no doubt will be interrupted to respond to some emergency request. A wizened, experienced sage of Washington, DC (Barb Glenn) told me, "As a fellow, you leave your PhD at the door." So yes, there are occasions when one has to answer phones or stuff envelopes. But ultimately, fellows are on The Hill to make policy and laws and, when applicable, to bring science-based knowledge into the legislative process—a different universe indeed! As Congressional Science Fellows, we help make policy. In contrast, as research scientists, in a broad sense, we execute that policy. Furthermore, as research scientists, we are the masters of our domain, that is, highly skilled specialists in our given fields. In contrast, as a legislative staffer, particularly in the House, a broad-based working knowledge of several issue areas is necessary. At our orientation, a speaker described the situation we face as presumptive legislative staffers by saying that "as research scientists, your knowledge base is an inch wide and a mile deep. In contrast, as a staffer your knowledge base needs to be an inch deep and a mile wide."

Cheers patrons: "Norm, how's life in the fast lane?"

Norm: "I don't know. I haven't found the entrance ramp."

By midyear into the Fellowship, I became aware of both how much I have learned and how much I have yet to learn about the legislative process. Fundamentally, it is what we learned in our junior high school civics classes, yet it is far more complicated and sophisticated than I ever realized. Yes, the congressional members (senators and congressmen or congresswomen) do the final negotiations, make amendments, and must vote to pass or deny legislation. However, what most people outside Washington, DC, do not appreciate is the role of the legislative staffers in the legislative process. While the members vote and gather votes, the staffers wordsmith ideas into the language of the bill. This language is the end result of dozens of hours of a staffer doing the relevant background searches, initial wording of the bill, and ultimately a good part of the negotiating with other members' staffers on the bill's language through progressive passages through the subcommittee, committee, and ultimately the House or Senate.

The give-and-take of staffers representing a member of Congress and staffers representing a congressional committee is an art form in itself. Each staffer wants his or her boss's twist on the bill's language after committee suggestions, and later after amendments. At nearly each step along the way, the staffer reviews the bill, checking the language and making

sure the member's original intent has not changed significantly. This is not learned from a book but over time and with practice. Another thing you may not know about staffers is that most are in their 20s and were political science majors.

“You can't always get what you want . . .”

In the beginning (September 2007), the class of fellows underwent an intensive two-week orientation that highlighted the congressional legislative processes. At its completion, we were set free to roam the halls of Congress, resumes in hand, seeking a member that would support a fellow. My resume indicated an interest in issues in agriculture, specifically, food animal production and well-being, agricultural biotechnology, biodiversity, conservation, and ecology. Notwithstanding, I landed in an office where the constituents are predominantly urban dwellers (Camden, NJ) and the Congressman's (Rob Andrews) main interests are armed services, education, and labor. For various reasons, I accepted an offer to work as a legislative assistant in Congressman Andrews' office, knowing that my issues included animal well-being, homeland security, and transportation. After a few months, issues pertaining to energy and firefighters were added.

I learned what to do by doing and then asking. Like the other two staffers and our legislative director, I was expected to do the following: execute legislative ideas developed by Congressman Andrews (background, drafting, negotiating, editing, and passing legislation); meet and correspond with constituents in relevant issue areas; keep Congressman Andrews informed of relevant legislation, floor action, and background legislation (i.e., what groups supported what bills); process requests for co-sponsorships and dear-colleagues; and provide updates of issues (cases) to upper staff.

I will not discuss the individual cases I am addressing except to say that I am learning a lot about homeland security, transportation (specifically, the Federal Aviation Administration), and the legislative issues facing our firefighter and EMT communities. I am also privy to a leadership style that I had not experienced since the last football game I played for Rutgers University 38 years ago. There is the quarterback (my boss) calling the plays that are expected to be executed precisely. That's not to say Congressman Andrews is not open to suggestions; to the contrary, he listens, thinks briefly, and then, in his calm, didactic style, dictates the next steps in the process. It did not take long for him to earn my confidence and respect. Why? Because I watched and I listened to him when he was not in the public eye but behind closed doors. Here, Congressman Andrews' words revealed more than just that he is an extremely bright man and an excellent strategist, and certainly more than just a politician. I learned that Congressman Andrews takes his responsibilities to his constituents very seriously, which I respect very much.

Let me end by saying that the Congressional Science Fellowship is an experience that may not be suited for everyone. The time was right in my career to go this route for several reasons I will not discuss here. However, after my fellowship began, the President's 2009 federal

budget was released and, as of this writing, my ARS laboratory is unfunded. If that ARS door remains closed, this Fellowship experience will certainly permit me to at least get my foot in policy and legislative doors in and around Washington, DC. If you are in Washington DC before August 29, please come visit. My e-mail is murray.bakst@mail.house.gov.