

New Wave



The emerging generation of legislative staff leaders may change and challenge the way legislatures do business.

BY GARRY BOULARD

As baby boomers head for the exits of state government over the next several years, the emerging legislative staff leaders will come primarily from what demographers like to call Generation X.

This transition from boomers to the those born between 1965 and 1980 heralds significant change and challenge for legislatures.

“When compared to baby boomers, this generation is very much bottom-line focused,” says Tammy Hughes, the president of Claire Raines Associates, a demographic studies group. “They don’t need complete sentences or paragraphs to get the idea of

Garry Boulard is a free-lance writer in Albuquerque, N.M., and a frequent contributor to State Legislatures.

anything. Just give them the bullet points, and they’re off and running.”

They also are the first generation to grow up in the world of computers, notes Peverill Squire, co-author of the recently published “State Politics Today—Politics Under the Domes.”

“Their techniques for gathering information are so dramatically different than any previous generation that it is bound to have an effect on the type of jobs they hold,” says Squire, a political science professor at the University of Missouri.

“For legislatures, particularly in states that don’t have the same access to resources as California or New York or some of the other larger states, this means an ability to access much more information, more quickly than at any time before,” says Squire.

That urge to do things quickly, however, brings with it a downside, says Hughes: “In any workplace setting, but particularly one with a big bureaucracy that has a lot of meetings, this particular generation could become easily frustrated. They don’t want to talk about solving a problem as much as they want to actually solve a problem.”

Frustration levels aside, says Squire, the emergence of members of Generation X in leadership positions at the state legislative staff level is destined to change the way legislatures do business. “They represent a totally new energy,” says Squire. “And with any institution, that is always a good thing.”

State Legislatures talked with 10 staffers who are part of this emerging generation or younger about how they see their role.



BLAINE BRUNSON

Age: 36

State: Texas

Position: Chief of staff to Lieutenant Governor David Dewhurst

Blaine Brunson already has spent more than a decade in Texas state government. He worked for the Legislative Budget Board after earning a B.A. in business at Angelo State University while also working for the House Appropriations Committee. He earned his M.B.A. at Texas State University.

“I like working inside the process, especially when it comes to budgetary matters,” says Brunson.

After serving as staff to the Senate Finance committee in 2000, Brunson went to work for Lieutenant Governor David Dewhurst in the spring of 2003 as a special assistant for budget policy. This fall, he was named Dewhurst’s chief of staff. Dewhurst has a dual role, serving as president of the Senate and lieutenant governor.

Brunson’s varied duties at the Texas statehouse have left him with a sense of awe. “I know that some younger people say they are disillusioned with the political system, but I have never felt that way here,” he says. “And I think that’s because I have been very lucky when it comes to the quality of people I have worked for.”

Brunson is aware of how large life can be inside the Texas statehouse, and credits his wife Sonja for not letting things go to his head. “She’s told me that just because I have spent the day telling people ‘No’ when it comes to money issues, that doesn’t mean that I can come home and play that card with her.”



KATHLEEN CLYDE

Age: 30

State: Ohio

Position: Deputy legal counsel, House Democratic Caucus

Kathleen Clyde has seen her belief in representative democracy confirmed.

“I enjoy the fact that our districts on the House side are somewhat small, which means the members really do get to meet their constituents,” says Clyde, who came to her current position after graduating from Ohio State Law School and clerking for the secretary of state’s election legal team in 2008.

One of her duties is to help freshmen members, but it’s the constituent service aspect of her job she likes the most. “In Ohio we don’t have district offices for the members, so we set them up in a coffee shop or some other meeting spot where the people can talk to them,” says Clyde. “To me, that kind of contact is what it’s all about.”

Clyde’s bigger job is to keep the slim Democratic House majority intact through the next election in 2010, a challenge that is “one of the reasons I really like working here.”

PHIL DEAN**Age:** 36**State:** Utah**Position:** Senior policy analyst, Office of Legislative Research and General Counsel

Phil Dean is impressed with the way things are done in the Utah Legislature.

“I’ve come to appreciate the trade-offs legislators have to make, or the compromises that the system forces them to make, to get things done,” says Dean, who has a master’s degree in public administration from Brigham Young University.

“When you are outside the process, you don’t understand why some of the decisions are made,” he says. “But once you are inside, and you see how legislators have to work together in order to accomplish anything, you understand things much better.”

One of Dean’s special interests is property tax equalization. “I’ve even gone back to some of the old property tax reports from the 1920s,” says Dean, who has presented his findings in a way that legislators appreciate. “I try as much as possible to rely on graphics that will tell a story quickly. I know that the legislators are pressed for time.”

**BETH HRAY****Age:** 27**State:** South Carolina**Position:** Staff attorney, Legislative Counsel’s office

Beth Hray says she lucked out.

“When I was an undergraduate I thought I was going to become a teacher,” she says. “But I put that on the back burner and decided to go to law school instead.”

While a student at the University of South Carolina’s School of Law, from which she graduated in 2007, Hray went to work as a law clerk for the South Carolina General Assembly.

“Today I am writing education law and meeting with education policymakers,” says Hray, “so I was able to really marry those two interests.”

Hray says friends her age share her interests. “Many of them are committed to making a difference, whether it’s in their legal practices or on the private side, volunteering and hosting benefits.”

And she notices that same sense of public spirit among the legislators she works with every day: “They really want to change things for the better. They are very careful and thorough in the legislation they propose, which I have come to appreciate and respect.”





SABRINA LEWELLEN

Age: 32

State: Arkansas

Position: Manager of constituent services, research and special projects, Senate

Sabrina Lewellen gets a feel for how the legislative process works from several different perspectives, usually simultaneously.

“The research and special projects portion is about what the senators need,” explains Lewellen, a 2002 graduate of Vanderbilt University Law School. “That means helping them with speeches, presentations and talking points.”

Constituency services means “trying to meet the needs of the 2.7 million people that our 35 senators represent. We respond to their requests and queries as well as to any questions the members bring to us that they have received from their constituents.”

Lewellen finds her work to be nothing short of inspirational.

“To be able to sit here on the cultivation side of the law, instead of the enactment side, is fascinating,” Lewellen says. “People have needs, and in large part they trust the people they have chosen to represent them.”

“But sometimes people run into a problem, and they need assistance. That’s when I get to listen, research the options and hopefully help a senator who is trying to solve the problem for a constituent.

“It doesn’t get much better than that,” she says.



EMILY HOWARD

Age: 33

State: Virginia

Position: Journal clerk, House of Delegates

With an undergraduate degree in history from Randolph-Macon Women’s College, Emily Howard says she sometimes feels overwhelmed walking into the historic Virginia House of Delegates.

“You get a big dose of history just by being here,” says Howard, who first came to the Virginia General Assembly in 2000.

Helping to document and record the material for tomorrow’s history, Howard and her staff are responsible for “keeping track of all the activities with the various bills and resolutions on the floor.”

During session, that can easily mean a 60-hour week. But Howard says she enjoys what she is doing so much that she never thinks about the time.

“I don’t know how many people my age would like something like this,” says Howard. “But I love it. I am amazed by all the details that go into the process, the behind-the-scenes things you never hear about. To me, it’s endlessly fascinating.”

MATT MARSDEN

Age: 35

State: Michigan

Position: Press secretary, Senate Majority Leader Mike Bishop

In a Senate chamber that will see 30 of its 38 members unable to run for re-election next year because of term limits, Matt Marsden believes legislative staffers—some only in their 30s—may soon end up playing a larger role than ever before in keeping the Legislature functioning.

“Term limits obviously have a big impact on the institutional knowledge of state government,” says Marsden. “And as time goes by, there will inevitably be more new members looking to staff for help on things as basic as procedure, and many of those staff members will be in their mid to late 30s.”

Marsden worked in communications for Governor John Engler in the late 1990s and then became chief of staff for Michigan Congressman Joe Schwarz. He also worked for George W. Bush’s presidential campaign in 2000.

That breadth of experience has left Marsden, who graduated in 1996 from Michigan State University with a B.A. in political theory and constitutional democracy, with a sober feeling for public service.

“Of course, a lot of partisan bickering goes on,” he says. “But at the same time I think it’s important for people my age and younger to work in this environment so they can learn early on how the process works.”





SARA MCDOWELL

Age: 29

State: Oregon

Position: Human resources technician

Acknowledging she may be more technologically adept than some of her older fellow workers, Sara McDowell nevertheless treasures the experience of working every day in a state capitol still dominated by baby boomers.

“I don’t want them to retire,” says McDowell, who received her B.A. in sociology from Pacific Lutheran University in 2003. “I have an appreciation for people who are older than me and what they can teach me.”

McDowell brings that same sensibility to her job as a human resources technician for the Oregon Legislative Assembly. “I feel fortunate. I have never seen anything that has made me not want to work here. Being in a nonpartisan department allows you to move around and talk to different people, and I’ve come away from that respecting the many different people who work here.”

Although McDowell falls just barely into Generation X, she identifies more with Generation Y. “I don’t know if the Generation X people are gloomy or not, like some people say, but for Generation Y, when a project is assigned, we never think that it can’t be done. We say yes and then figure out how to do it.”

AARON OLSON

Age: 32

State: South Dakota

Position: Senior financial analyst, Legislative Research Council

Public service comes naturally to Aaron Olson.

“My father taught government at the high school level, and we were always talking about history and government and how things work at both the state and federal levels when I was growing up,” says Olson, who graduated from Northern State University in 1999 with a B.A. in finance.

Olson’s father also made it a point to take his students to the South Dakota statehouse every year so they could see floor sessions and listen to debates. That experience added to an already growing interest Olson had in the legislative process.

“It’s been a tremendous experience to see things from the other side, the work that goes on behind the scenes. You have to be prepared all the time for anything that might happen, answering things on the fly,” he says.

Working inside the Legislature is more exciting and challenging than Olson ever imagined. “There is always a lot to learn and research—and that’s one of the best things I like about being here.”



SCOTT SAGER

Age: 34

State: Wisconsin

Position: Senior legislative analyst, Audit Bureau

As a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee, Scott Sager studied the political process as an abstract form. “My area of interest tended more toward applied research rather than academic research,” he says. “I was very much interested in testing out real-world scenarios and solutions.”

For that reason working for the audit bureau of the Wisconsin Legislature has not been that big of a jump for the 34-year-old Sager. “As a graduate student you distill the political process to a simplified form,” says Sager.

“But when you see first-hand inside a legislature how policy is created and implemented—and the many different layers it needs to go through from conception to passage and its effect on people—it is a much more complex process than I first imagined.”

Helping to bring policy from conception to reality, Sager says he and his fellow staffers are “up to our elbows, looking at all the different components to determine what works and what doesn’t. Because we are not specialists, we are applying a trade—the trade of evaluation—into all sorts of different policy contexts.”

Perhaps atypical of his generation, Sager loves the intricacies of public policy. “I think people in my age group care about good government, but when you talk about what that looks like and the work that’s involved, it gets too detailed for many of them,” he says. “But for me, there can’t be enough details. That’s what I especially like about my job.”

 **CHECK OUT** more information on legislative staff at www.ncsl.org/magazine.