Learning to Legislate

New member orientation is critical in term-limited states like Louisiana.

Call it boot camp for lawmakers.

When members of the Louisiana House of Representatives realized term limits approved in 1995 were finally going to force out nearly half of the body, they launched a plan to prepare the crop of freshman legislators for the 2008 sessions. The 105-member body lost 60 legislators—44 to term limits. Only two of the 17 standing committee chairs remained.

“It was critical for the new members to have a basic understanding of the process when we began the special session in February,” says House Speaker Jim Tucker. “Our orientation was scripted to give them the tools they needed so that when we ‘went live’ we were ready. And, I must say, they really have risen to the occasion.”

How did the Louisiana House pull off such an ambitious undertaking? By taking a bipartisan approach, tapping veterans and planning ahead.

Former Speaker Joe Salter appointed a committee in 2006, well before the fall 2007 election. He called on veteran lawmakers and outside experts to craft an approach that would ensure both new members and their staffs were ready for prime time when the session began.

The committee—looking at the findings of a National Conference of State Legislatures’s study and the effects of term limits in other states—knew the best way to prepare freshmen was with in-depth orientation. Based on the best practices from other states, they came up with a program that augmented the Legislature’s traditional one and a half days of orientation and included:

♦ One-on-one training with key staff called “The Welcome Wagon.”
♦ A traditional orientation conference.
♦ Special training on ethics.
♦ Leadership training.
♦ Orientation for legislative district office assistants.
♦ Committee-level orientation.

New members got a personal welcome, learning about the House departments and how they function. They got tips on opening a district office and hiring assistants. They learned how they would get paid and how to turn in expenses. They heard about the Legislature’s ethics rules.

The training started with new members who had no opposition. The remainder were scheduled as soon as their races were decided, one group after the primary and the other after the general election.

Then came an intensive three-day orientation program in December, which included mock committee meetings and floor ses-
Freshman legislator Patricia Haynes Smith asks a question during the House orientation program. Also pictured with Smith is Representative John Bel Edwards.

Representative Herbert Dixon discusses an amendment during the mock floor debate.

Representative Robert Billiott indicates his “yes” vote while talking on the phone during the Mock Floor Debate.

Legislators meet during a breakout session on media relations. From left are Representatives Noble Ellington, Steve Pugh, Frank Hoffman, Chris Hazel and Joe Lopinto.
sions. The new lawmakers were introduced to the legislative process and learned about agencies and how to run an office. They were briefed on the technology available, media relations and the role of lobbyists.

NEW STAFF LEARN, TOO

The orientation didn’t end with new legislators. Their 44 new assistants also were trained. Representatives Regina Barrow and Karen St. Germain, former long-time district office staff, gave frank advice, from time demands to loyalty to working with House resources to dealing with policy issues.

St. Germain emphasized networking and camaraderie among the district office assistants, telling them: “The new legislators coming in have no clue! They’re going to be great legislators, but they can’t be great without you.”

After the inauguration in January, Speaker Tucker held an extended organizational session to consider changes in procedure sparked by the term-limits study. Lawmakers also were briefed on the intricacies and pitfalls of Louisiana’s Code of Ethics and the requirements for financial disclosure and lobbyist regulation, crucial information in light of new Governor Bobby Jindal’s proposals for ethics reform.

Citizen initiatives limiting the terms of legislators were passed in 1990 by voters in California, Colorado and Oklahoma. Subsequently, 18 other states adopted term limits, but in four—Massachusetts, Oregon, Washington and Wyoming—they were thrown out by the state supreme courts. In addition, legislatures in Idaho and Utah repealed the measures. The Idaho repeal was upheld by a popular vote in 2002. More than 300 legislators have been termed out of office since limits first took effect with the 1996 elections.

Some of the findings of a study of term limits by NCSL were:

> Term limits have not led to a more diverse group of legislators. In term-limited states, there is no substantial difference in legislators’ age and occupational backgrounds. But there are some examples of minorities increasing in legislatures.
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> Between 1995 and 2004, the only term-limited legislatures to show an increase in female members were California and South Dakota.
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> Political careerism does not seem to end with term limits. Long-serving members forced out by term limits are likely to run for other elective office.
committee planning and preparation, and running a fair and productive hearing.

“The single most important thing you can do is plan what it is you want to achieve in your committee,” Rauschenberger told them. “The second thing is, establish some policies as early as you can and stick to them. And last, show hospitality and respect for your committee members.”

McMillan stressed fairness: “You have an obligation to examine the issue on its merits and make sure your committee members aren’t just taking the easy way out to send something on that ought to have a full and fair discussion.”

Tucker urged the leadership team to hold organizational and briefing meetings of their committees during the February special session so members could become familiar with procedure and their subject matter.

JUDGING SUCCESS

So how successful was this approach? The initial feedback from the freshman class was positive. Evaluation forms distributed during the three-day orientation gave the program a near-perfect grade.

House Clerk Alfred “Butch” Speer is encouraged, noting that he’s heard only “positive things about the entire process.”

Freshman Representative Herbert Dixon says the orientation not only “furthered our knowledge of the inner workings of the process and our jobs within that process, it also gave us the chance to get to know one another and understand other points of view.”

Representative Jonathan Perry, an attorney who represents a rural district in southwest Louisiana, had never even been to the Capitol before he was elected.

“I didn’t know what to expect. The one-on-one sessions with staff made me more comfortable. And I was shocked at how much the staff does for the reps.”

North Louisiana Representative Frank Hoffman, a former school superintendent who is a play-by-play sports announcer for the University of Louisiana at Monroe, put it most colorfully: “When I first got here, I didn’t know if I was pitching or playing second. This isn’t rocket science. You can learn. But there is no doubt that the training helped. And I’m still learning every day.”

CHECK OUT an NCSL study on the effects of term limits, and profiles of the Louisiana Speaker of the House Jim Tucker and Senate President Joel Chaisson II at www.ncsl.org/magazine.