

LSCC Legislative Institution Subcommittee

Final Report 2008-2009

The Task Force on Legislatures of the Future of the Legislative Staff Coordinating Committee (LSCC) produced a report in 2000 titled Legislatures of the Future: Implications of Change. This report was the culmination of several years work looking at driving force issues in the areas of demographics, economics, technology, and politics, and then envisioning four possible scenarios of how legislatures would be impacted. These were not intended to predict the future; rather, they were to call attention to trends and possibilities and spark efforts to actively protect and strengthen the legislative institution.

Various efforts ensued over the years on the part of LSCC and NCSL to respond to the task force's findings and recommendations. Some of those efforts were explicitly aimed at addressing future issues; others, while more implicit, were none the less informed by the concerns raised by the task force. Some elements have been incorporated in NCSL's strategic plan. The LSCC Strategic Issues Task Force morphed into the Legislative Institution Subcommittee (LIS), carrying forward the charge of bolstering the legislative institution and those who serve it.

At the direction of then staff chair Sharon Crouch Steidel, the 2007-2008 LIS undertook a reexamination of the 2000 task force report as a basis for identifying horizon issues likely to affect legislatures, evaluating the currency of the findings of the task force, establishing guidelines for ongoing research into driving forces, and developing strategies for creating a culture of futures orientation within LSCC and NCSL. Using the methodology outlined by the 2000 task force in A Practical Guide to Futures Study, the subcommittee carried out those tasks, resulting in a set of recommendations that included several steps for integrating futures focus in LSCC and NCSL activities.

One specific recommendation was that the Legislative Effectiveness Committee (LEC) explore futures issues in its sessions, getting legislators as well as staff informed and engaged. Two members of LIS served as staff vice chairs for LEC in 2008-2009, and the LEC programs were well oriented to this focus. This synergy is valuable and should receive the attention necessary to maintain it in future years to realize its potential.

Another recommendation was that LSCC give attention to specific implications for legislative staff arising from horizon issues that had been identified. Staff Chair Gary VanLandingham gave that charge to the 2008-2009 LIS, asking that the subcommittee formulate a strategic plan for LSCC that addresses the impact on legislative staff due to impending retirements, the changing demographics of the available workforce, term limits, increasing partisanship, technological change, and budget challenges, among others.

The subcommittee engaged in several activities in pursuit of its goal. Research was done on horizon issues in politics and technology per the recommendations of the 2007-2008 LIS. Karl Kurtz conducted a survey of legislative staff that provided valuable insights into the demographics and outlook of

legislative staff. The Model Code of Conduct for Legislative Staff, adopted by LSCC in 1996, was reaffirmed. Strategic planning processes were considered. The work of the subcommittees on professional development, technology, and marketing and outreach was monitored for synergies. The result was a focus on three specific areas of concern.

First, the data show that at least 25% of legislative staff will be eligible to retire within the next five years, potentially resulting in significant gaps in skills and institutional knowledge. Further, generations following the boomers are smaller and differ in certain characteristics, indicating fewer replacement workers, and those may be less inclined to work in the environments usual to legislative staff. The current economic downturn may have some short-term impact, but the future need still looms.

Second, while partisan staff make up at least half of all legislative staff, they are proportionally under-involved in NCSL activities and under-represented on LSCC and the NCSL Executive Committee. The trends indicate that the numbers of partisan staff will continue to grow, and they have needs that NCSL can meet while maintaining an appropriate non- or bi-partisan stance.

Third, even before the current recession took hold, there were limitations on the ability of legislative staff to travel to NCSL activities. The majority of staff will never be able to travel, and those who can are often curtailed.

In light of these issues, the subcommittee offers the following recommendations of elements to be included in a strategic plan for LSCC to guide NCSL in its ongoing efforts to reach and serve legislative staff:

- Strategic marketing of NCSL activities and resources and targeted outreach to all legislative staff must continue to be a priority. NCSL already offers a wide range of services that can meet the needs of staff if they are aware that such services exist. For example:
 - Publications exist that can assist legislatures with staffing issues, including Model Code of Conduct for Legislative Staff, Succession Planning in the Legislative Workplace, and Embracing Diversity in the Legislative Workplace. Electronic versions that appear in search results and are downloadable will increase their accessibility and use.
 - Use the web site to not only accumulate resources for staff but organize them for various target audiences to increase accessibility and use.
 - Highlight efforts by states to deal with staffing issues on the web site and in State Legislatures.
 - State assignment staff and state ambassadors are keys to reaching staff who may not know about NCSL services, including partisan staff.
- Consideration should be given to strategies to increase partisan staff representation within LSCC. For example:
 - Encourage partisan staff participation in standing committees as appropriate, including appointments as staff officers to those committees.
 - Although synergies may be more limited, encourage partisan staff participation in staff sections as appropriate.

- Consider existing staff networks (e.g., LESN) as models for engaging partisan staff.
- Development and implementation of strategies and tools to provide resources to staff who cannot travel should continue to be pursued. For example:
 - Continue efforts to provide and promote podcasts, narrated presentations, electronic versions of hardcopy handouts, etc.
 - Since networking is the top reason given why staff attend meetings, investigate methods such as online social networking (e.g., LinkedIn, Facebook, Ning) to provide some of those benefits without travel.
 - Expand current efforts to provide staff development and other training from NCSL to states onsite where it reaches more staff and crosses boundaries of staff sections, functions, policy areas, partisan/non-partisan, etc. While some cost to the state may be necessary, it would be less than having staff travel to a meeting and would also enhance the sense of receiving a return on dues paid.
- Legislative staff should be partners in civics education efforts. These can be large coordinated programs such as Project Citizen and Back to School, as well as independent programs initiated by legislatures or legislators; they can be existing programs or new initiatives. Not only does legislative staff participation broaden those efforts, it provides opportunities to promote job possibilities and benefits.
- LSCC should maintain a futures focus and promote that focus within staff sections, standing committees, staff networks, etc.
- LSCC should take steps to preserve its own institutional knowledge. Reports from previous years as possible and from this point forward should be retained and made available. Past chairs should be utilized as advisors and mentors.

None of these recommendations is revolutionary. To some degree or another, these actions are already underway. What the subcommittee is advocating is focus on key issues and strengthening current efforts through that focus to enhance NCSL and its position as the premier source and resource for legislative staff. That in turn strengthens the legislative institution that we all serve.

Acknowledgements

Staff chair Gary VanLandingham embraced the work of the 2007-2008 LIS and challenged the 2008-2009 edition to apply its knowledge and insights to particular issues facing legislative staff and LSCC. Those charges were integrated with those of the other subcommittees, which hopefully is reflected in this report. His support and encouragement were essential ingredients in what the subcommittee accomplished.

Gary maintained the core membership of the subcommittee (as terms allowed), providing continuity and forward momentum. Subcommittee members were:

Phil Twogood, Florida, Vice chair

James Barber, Mississippi

Martha Carter, Nebraska

Holly Lyons, Iowa

Millie MacFarland, Maine

Roger Norman, Arkansas

Linda Pittsford, Texas

Carol Shaw, North Carolina

Dick Sweet, Wisconsin

Tom Wright, Alaska

There were times when the subcommittee was daunted by the scope and complexity of its tasks, yet there was always a willingness to engage and get something accomplished. This year's subcommittee continued last years' tradition of lively discussion, which always managed to get back on topic eventually and always provided ample food for thought and consideration. Meetings were always worthwhile, even if it meant being on the phone for hours.

Brian Weberg and Larry Morandi were NCSL liaisons to the subcommittee again this year. They provided excellent support and guidance when appropriate. The group was the better for their contributions.

Finally, acknowledgement goes out to all whose efforts have led up to this moment, and to all the legislative staff who serve with excellence. You are key components of this great American tradition known as the legislative institution.