



The Our American States podcast—produced by the National Conference of State Legislatures—is where you hear compelling conversations that tell the story of America’s state legislatures, the people in them, the politics that compel them, and the important work of democracy.

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The Best Jobs on My Life: Legislative Staff Reflect | OAS Episode 23 | Dec. 7, 2017

Welcome to Our American States, a podcast of meaningful conversations that tell the story of America’s state legislatures, the people in them, the politics that compel them, and the important work of democracy. For the National Conference of State Legislatures, I’m your host, Gene Rose.

The National Conference of State Legislatures is currently celebrating “Legislative Staff Week,” recognizing the 31,000 people that work for America’s state legislatures.

These citizens work as bill drafters, budget analysts, committee staff, constituent liaisons, information technology support, legal advisors, parliamentarians, and researchers. They also work in human services, operations, public information and media, safety and security, and several other departments. More information on legislative staff is available at www.ncsl.org/legislativestaff.

In this episode of Our American States, we will talk with three staff members to learn about their jobs, how they started their careers with their legislatures and advice they have for others, especially young people, who might be considering these types of public service jobs.

Our three guests today are Chuck Truesdell from Kentucky, Martha Wigton from Georgia and Lauren Hieger from Missouri. And here are our conversations with those staff members.

Gene: So we’re talking now with Chuck Truesdell who is a legislative fiscal analyst with the Office of Budget Review at the Legislative Research Commission in Kentucky. Chuck, welcome to the program.

Chuck: Thanks for having me. I’m excited to talk with you.

Gene: So why don’t we get started here? Tell us about how long you’ve worked in the legislature and what’s your current role and why do you feel it’s a necessary position?

Chuck: I’ve worked here at our LRC for about 15 years now. For the last six plus years I’ve been in our budget office as a fiscal analyst, primarily focusing on K-12 education issues and pensions. I did transportation issues for a while before that, and before that for about eight plus years I worked in our Public Information Office as a speechwriter and a media relations staffer.

And in all of those roles I think I've really contributed not just to the legislative process, but also to the betterment of our commonwealth simply because we have 138 legislators in Kentucky and they don't have time to be specialists at all of the competing interests that they have to deal with, everything from Medicaid to education to corrections, pensions and transportation. They hear a lot of different sides of every issue and sometimes it's difficult for them to know who to trust with the information that they're receiving.

That is our role as nonpartisan staffers, is to cut through all the angles and give them an honest analysis of where the true facts lie and to help them avoid the potholes that come through passing legislation. There are a lot of times you have unintended consequences for a bill that passed because you didn't really see that when you passed bill A, it would have complications that led to other issues.

Gene: So Chuck, that's some great information and raises a lot of questions in my mind, particularly, one, we live in such a partisan world right now it seems like... you, being a nonpartisan staff, what's it like working in an atmosphere that is so politically charged?

Chuck: Honestly, that's one of the reasons I love working for the legislative branch of government. Every day is interesting, there's something new coming down the pike. A lot of times I have to keep updated with the news cycles of social media to see what's happening to get the latest information to provide to my legislators.

Up until last year we had a divided legislature. We had a Republican majority in the Senate and a Democratic majority in the House. We have Republican majorities in both chambers now, but for the first 14 years or so of my legislative career, we had split control. And so they really needed somebody that they could trust, both sides, to sit down with one person and tell them this is the honest fact, and that to me is one of the big reasons I love working here is because when you see an issue and most people say well, they really need to do something about that, I'm in one of those positions where it's more along the lines of I need to do something about that, or I need to do the research.

I see all the time things are reported in the media and I see a number and it's like that doesn't quite make sense to me. Let me digest their methodology and see how they came up with that number and see if I trust it, or if there's some other reason to explain what they're coming up with. And legislators appreciate that because it helps them make better public policy rather than just reactionary: this is what we're reading in the media, so this is what has to happen. That's the most rewarding part I think of my job.

Gene: So tell us a little bit more about that job Chuck; just explain a little bit more about what you do in the Budget Review Office.

Chuck: Sure. You've heard the old quote: "there are lies, damn lies and statistics." Well, it's pretty much the same thing with any sort of numbers. I can make the numbers say whatever you want them to say depending on what you want them to say. However, my job is to make sure that all of those numbers are explained.

The reason I moved from being a speechwriter and media relations person to being a budget analyst is a lot of this job is communication. A lot of any legislative job really I think is in some

ways I'm a teacher with a class of 138. Some are really up-to-speed on the issues that I'm talking about; some need to go back to Education Budget 101 and learn how we do every little step of the process. That's really my role is helping them understand what everything means.

I've often said that sometime in the late '70s/early '80s, that's when a lot of state legislatures escaped from under the thumb of their executive branches. I know here in Kentucky, 50 years ago the Governor would tell the Speaker of the House: these are the bills that you're going to pass today. One of the largest reasons that legislatures are now an independent branch of government and they can go toe-to-toe with the executive branch is because they have in-house experts. They don't have to rely on the Governor's numbers and accept them for what they're told they are.

We have in-house experts now who can explain: this is what the Governor is saying, but what he's not telling you is this. That happens regardless of party. We are the guardians of the institution now, especially at a time when partisan politics has somewhat poisoned the separation of the branches of government. I think that's one of the more rewarding parts of my job, is to be the guy that they trust to provide accurate information.

Gene: Well it sounds like your experience in the information office before you went to the fiscal office served you well. Is that usual, Chuck, for people to switch roles when they're working for a legislature from one department to another? Those seem like two pretty different departments.

Chuck: They are; they're vastly different. I talk about how I used to be a word guy and now I'm a numbers guy, but really I was both along the way. It's hard to be a communications staffer without knowing some of the numbers that you're having to use in a press release, and it's hard to be a budget guy without being able to explain in words what you're coming up with.

But that's one of the things that I love about the legislature. We have people who do everything from communications to budgeting to being issue experts in particular areas, to bill drafting, to attorneys, to constituent services folks, to legislative assistants and secretaries. We have so many different jobs within our agency that you can change careers almost, but never change employers working for our legislative agency. And that's what I did.

After a while, I'll be honest, I got tired of writing press releases. Speeches just didn't work for me anymore. I got sort of bored. I went back to school, I got some training so I could work in our budget office, and it's wonderful because I'm working generally with the same people I always worked with. I see my old coworkers and my old boss in the hallway every day, but it's like I've changed jobs. I've got a whole new career path, but I'm still working in the same building with the same people.

And I think especially for younger generations where they don't see themselves working in one job for 30 years or however long before they retire, that's why legislative service can be so great and I think so much better than any other job you can find out there because it gives you the security of having one employer with the diversity of having many different career paths at the same time.

Gene: So talk to us about that moment, Chuck, when you applied to work for the legislature. I don't think a lot of people go to school thinking I'm going to work for the legislature. What was that moment like for you?

Chuck: I certainly never intended to work for the legislature. As it happened, I was taking a college course in state government. I was commuting back-and-forth between my job and the college that I attended; it was about an hour apart and it was really wearing me down. So as it happened, I knew who our state representative was. He worked in the bank across the street from my office. And I said: you know who I am; you know my talents. Where would I be best of service to the state? And he said at first: you know, we could really use somebody like you in the Department of Agriculture because of your background coming from farm country.

I had to explain to him: I'm not a farm kid. I don't know agriculture. Where else do you think I should go work? And so he said: well, I mean we could always use somebody like you in the legislative branch, and my job had been at a newspaper and I had been writing editorials and following the legislative process. But honestly, I had never heard of the Legislative Research Commission. It never even crossed my mind about all the staff that they had.

He didn't help me along. He just gave me a phone number, an email address. I contacted them, got an interview in our Public Information Office, and the scary thing was I accepted the position not knowing it was a temporary position. I'm sure they explained it to me. So they came to me about three months into the legislative session and said: we'd really like to hire you on full-time; we'd like to keep you around. And my first thought was: You weren't going to keep me around already? And then I said: yes, yes, I would love to stay here full-time!

I fell in love with it. I was a legislative page when I was in middle school. I came to the state capital for one day and never even dreamed that I would end up being on that same floor every single day during the legislative session for five or six years in a row. I'm not on the floor every day anymore, but when I am called to go into the chambers, I still get that sense of wonder and awe every single day.

We know as legislative staff... we see some bills as more important than others. Obviously I'm a budget staffer; I think of the budget bill as the big kahuna and everything else as sort of small potatoes compared to my bill. But every bill they pass has so much importance to somebody out in our state. It never gets old. That feeling never goes away.

Gene: So you would recommend this career to a young person coming out of college now?

Chuck: Absolutely. Especially if you want some variety in your daily job description, if you really see that you want to contribute something to society, if you are the sort of person who wants to be active in your career instead of waiting to be told what to do, legislative branch service is incredible. Every day is different. Every day throws you a curveball. You'll never be bored. If you are bored, it's your own fault because there's always something to do, always something to learn, always something to teach others.

Gene: Has there been a defining moment for you working in the legislature where you just said yeah, I'm at the place I belong?

Chuck: There was one particular time. We were in the conference committee working on the budget; this was in 2016. We had some contentious issues as we always do working on a budget because we have limited resources. And all of a sudden, I had this captive audience of about 20 legislators, the highest-ranking, most important people in the legislative branch of government sitting in there quietly waiting for me to tell them not what to do, but giving them the critical information they needed to make those big decisions that would ripple throughout the commonwealth.

We had to decide which communities got new school buildings. How much money do we need to put into our teachers' pension system? Will this be enough? Or where can we get more? And there's no feeling like somebody just sitting there looking at you rapt with attention depending on you to tell them what they need to know. That was sort of like wow – what I do matters. You always have that feeling sort of in the back of your mind, but that was when it really became real to me that my job is important, my job matters, not just to me, but to everybody who lives in this state. Most people will never know my name, but I'm doing something to help them, and that's when it really hit home to me.

Gene: Well, we really appreciate your perspective on this, Chuck. Do you have any final thoughts on this before we let you go?

Chuck: The only thing I would say is it's a challenge. I don't want to sound too idealistic because there are rough spots. I mean, obviously in politics there's always going to be sometimes you get disheartened. But they're so vastly outweighed by the good that you can see being produced in the legislative branch and by your own actions. So I think even when times are tough, it's worth it and it's the toughest job I've ever loved.

Gene: We appreciate your time. We've been talking with Chuck Truesdell, a legislative fiscal analyst in the Office of Budget Review at the Kentucky Legislative Research Commission. Thank you so much for your time today, Chuck.

Chuck: Thanks Gene.

Music

Gene: We're talking now with Martha Wigton who is the Director of the Georgia House Budget and Research Office. Martha, welcome to the program.

Martha: Thanks for having me.

Gene: So tell us, Martha, how long have you been working at the Georgia House?

Martha: I have been working for the legislature for 28 years. I did some time in the Senate and I have done some time in the House. Currently I am the Director of the House Budget Research Office and we staff all of the standing committees as well as do the work for our interim study committees, which are kind of our deep dives into issues – that's where we do that work.

We also staff the appropriations committee and write the budget. It's the only bill that our legislative counsel doesn't write. We do that in our office and it generates in the House. I think that's true for most chambers. So we have a really big task for our office.

Gene: So tell us what's a typical day for you?

Martha: It's never dull. You may think that your whole day is kind of planned and ordinary and that is never the case. It always explodes with something that you never expected. We come in and we typically, during the session, start running the minute we get in the door. We have meetings sometimes as early as 6:30 in the morning. We have a lot of agricultural members and they're farmers; they like to get started and get going, so we get going and hit the ground running.

We work until the job is done during the session. In the off session, though, we get a little bit of time to explore some of the things that make us curious and dive into some issues, which is really rewarding.

Gene: So tell us: How did you get started working for the Georgia legislature? What was your entry point and how did you even consider a job there?

Martha: You know, it was really happenstance – I was a teacher and I had come to Atlanta and while I was here was asked to stuff envelopes for a candidate. And I really liked the candidate's message and became very invested in what he was saying, what he was trying to do, and he actually was elected to office and brought a few of us from the campaign to his capitol office. Once I got here every day just got better and better. So now I've made it into a 28-year career.

Gene: So that's really something that speaks to what kind of career you can have working for a legislature; I mean, starting from stuffing envelopes to being Director of the Budget and Research Office, you really got to experience some growth there.

Martha: Absolutely. And, you know, it was never a career that I had considered. I never even really heard much about having a career in government or politics or policy necessarily. I mean, we're kind of a well-kept secret in a way. There's a lot of opportunity for a lot of skillsets to succeed here.

I was an English major, I do a lot of writing, and that's really needed. It's a skillset that's really needed here... a lot of analysis, a lot of different skillsets are needed, and there's a lot of opportunity for people. You don't have to have a major in politics or government or public service in any way. You can kind of explore what you have in a lot of different ways working for the legislature.

Gene: You mention politics and that's something that I think across the country people notice things are very partisan; there's a lot of gridlock particularly at the national level. What do you have to say to people who would kind of be wary of working for an organization that has politicians working there?

Martha: It has its moments where you get very frustrated. For instance, for us, something that's really good policy tends to fall by the way because the politics won't allow for it. So it has its

frustrating moments. But those are far outweighed by the times when something really tangible comes out of your work. So if you are able to pass a law or you are able to fund a program that supersedes all of the politics, that reward just kind of outweighs the frustration when you get mired into some of the partisan issues.

Gene: Is your office a nonpartisan office?

Martha: We are a nonpartisan office and I think we're pretty successful at doing that only because we kind of stick to: we'll give you the facts; how you spend them is your issue to the members. You know, we'll give you all the information that you have and try and stay objective as possible at all times, and that works. People learn to trust the information that you're giving them, and that's a big part of what we do is try and be a really trustworthy customer service office.

Gene: So there must be times during a legislative session where politics runs into information that you're putting out. Does that affect your job at all?

Martha: So we in Georgia have a very small partisan staff, which makes it good because we all kind of work together to try and get things done. But from our office's point of view, again, we just try and stick to whatever the details are, and they can spin that however they see that information is useful to them, which happens all the time. But we just try and stay out of that. You know, this is the fact and how you want to view that fact is up to you, your members and your public.

Gene: Has there been a moment that you've worked there at the legislature that you thought: I really am at the right place at the right time, and this is the job for me?

Martha: You know, that happens all the time. Sometimes the reinforcement comes in the smallest ways. It might be a phone call from a constituent where you're able to actually help them solve a problem very quickly. Or it can be something that's really long-term where you've worked on a project for a couple of years and it finally comes to fruition.

So I would say I get reinforced in my job in a lot of ways, some small, some large, but they just continually keep me going and I reinvest my energy back into the job because it's just a lot of fun and very rewarding.

Gene: What would you tell others, particularly millennials right now, who might be just graduating from college and looking for a career and maybe legislatures aren't on their radar? What would you tell them?

Martha: Now I think that actually public service careers for millennials are perfect, and the pay is okay and sometimes the disappointments when you work on something and it doesn't come to fruition can be pretty deep, but the rewards just absolutely outweigh all the negatives. You can see a project go from an idea into something tangible, become a law. You can pull it together and have financing and fund it and it's almost like birthing a baby. I mean, you are vested in the success of that issue. You watch it grow. It can be extremely rewarding, never dull.

And I think millennials, they want to satisfy their curiosity; they want to be creative and have a sense of community. And you get all of that here – the rewards and the life balance outside of session can be a payoff, you know, those hard hours that we do during our 40 days in the desert. So I think it's absolutely a great fit for millennials.

Gene: Okay, any final thoughts, Martha, before we let you go?

Martha: I appreciate the opportunity to be a part of this, Gene, and love my career; it's been very rewarding, and I have no plans to go anywhere anytime soon. But I have a very young office, they're all very engaged. I think that most of them have committed to long-term service, which is really rewarding after seeing so many people kind of look at a career here after a year and go somewhere else. We don't seem to have that problem.

Gene: Thank you, Martha. We've been talking with Martha Wigton, Director of the Georgia House Budget and Research Office. Thank you for being on Our American States.

Martha: Thank you, Gene.

Music

Gene: So we're talking now with Lauren Hieger who is the Missouri Senate Majority Caucus Communications Director. Lauren, welcome to the program.

Lauren: Thank you, Gene. I'm excited to be on today.

Gene: Tell us a little bit about your career, Lauren. How long have you been in the legislature and how did you get started?

Lauren: Sure. I kind of have a crazy way on how I got involved in politics. I actually am trained... in college I went to school for journalism and graduated from Mizzou J-school (Missouri Journalism) in broadcast news. Shortly after that I went to Joplin, Missouri and that's where I was for the next four years working in television news at two different stations there, first as a reporter. The last three years of my career I was the evening anchor for the 5:00, 6:00 and 10:00 o'clock news at KODE in Joplin, Missouri.

And I loved every minute. It was a wonderful city. I learned so much. I made some wonderful friends and now we live all across the country, so I have different places I get to go visit to go see them now, so it was a great experience.

But I was from St. Louis, my family was all there, and I was looking for opportunities to get back, and it was right around the time kind of that the economy was really changing, journalism was really changing, and I kind of knew the time may be to switch careers. So I moved back to St. Louis and worked for a local college doing some community relations.

Then about a couple of years after that I was really kind of getting that urge to get back into something a little more exciting, a little more of what's going on around the world type of thing, and I kind of fell into politics. I started on a local campaign for just a few months to try it out and

then the next thing I knew, I was hired by the Missouri Senate and I've been there five years in January.

It's my favorite job that I've ever had. It's something new every day, something different. It's challenging. It's exactly what I needed and what I still need today.

Gene: So talk to me, Lauren, about what a typical day for you might be when you're working for the Senate and the majority caucus there.

Lauren: Sure. Well, every morning I wake up and the first thing I do is check the news. It's funny because I think my brain is just trained that way; that's what I used to do in my old virginal journalism job and that's what I do today. I look for anybody who might have mentioned the Senate. I try to find anything maybe if we put out a statement the day before, I try to make sure that it got out there in the news and who ran it, and I pull all those together.

And so by the time Monday comes around, I put together a weekly report for my colleagues so they can kind of see how the news covered the Missouri Senate throughout the week before. So I organize all of those in the morning, I go through Twitter; I go through Twitter probably every hour, making sure we aren't missing anything big.

Now if we're in session, which we will be here in just a month, I will then kind of move on to our media plan of the day. So a typical day might be I send out tweets alerting people to what hearings are going on. If we have a big bill on a certain hearing, I'll call attention to that. Once we go into session then my twitter reflects what's going on, on the floor, what bills are up, and I try to put some messaging through that as well.

And then depending on whether or not we take a vote on the big bill, I assemble talking points for my caucus so that way they can take that information home and they can relate it to their constituents. I'll put together a press release noting the big accomplishments of the week: what we did, what we didn't do, what we're going to work on for the future. And then I usually prep for our press conference. We hold weekly press conferences on Thursday. So I usually put together some talking points for that. That's a pretty typical day I would say for me during session.

Gene: We have kind of similar careers. I started out as a journalist in Missouri and ended up working for the Missouri House of Representatives and when I did that, a lot of my journalism friends accused me of going over to the dark side. But what I found anyway was that I felt that in some ways I was contributing even more to a better society by working for the legislative branch of government. Do you feel the same way?

Lauren: Oh absolutely. You know, that's one thing I loved about journalism was just every day learning something new about a new subject or a new story you're reporting on and meeting new people. And I get to do exactly that in my role here. I'm constantly going to hearings about farming issues, which I grew up in St. Louis, so farming is something I know nothing about. But the difference between reporting on it and then being a part of it is I get to see it happen, not necessarily the behind-the-scenes, but I get to see the idea start and then the idea develop into a bill, and then it goes through a hearing and a debate process, and I get to sit there and be part of that process throughout till the end.

And so to me that's exciting. And now going on my sixth session, I've been able to see some pretty cool things happen and some pretty big bills actually take action and see the effect that they have on people. And I can remember the conversations we had in the very beginning. That to me is really exciting and it's why I'm still doing it.

Gene: Has there been a defining moment for you, Lauren, in your career with the Senate there, a particular time that you thought: I'm really in the right place at the right time?

Lauren: I don't know if I would say there's a defining moment because there have been a lot of them. I will say as crazy as things get and we work till 2:00 in the morning, sometimes I've gotten home at 5:30 a.m. in the morning, but I've never been upset about that. It's one of those things that I actually look forward every morning to go to work, and people don't believe it when I say it. You know, I used to count the hours and think okay, two hours left, okay, an hour and thirty minutes left. That thought doesn't ever cross my head because I always know that there's something that we've got to work on that's more important to me to work on at that time.

And I think it's kind of all of those feelings that make me realize that wow, I really am in a great place – to be happy with what we're doing and to be excited to be at work almost every day... nine times out of ten.

Gene: Right? You work for a partisan caucus and there are a lot of employees who work there who are nonpartisan. Do those two different worlds get along, or are there challenges for you working for a partisan group?

Lauren: I feel like we are so fortunate. When I first started everyone said: oh, there's a Senate family; it's the Senate family; we call ourselves the Senate family. And I said okay, okay. But then I realized it is a family and we have some of the most incredible people working in the Senate that I've ever worked with in my entire life. It's one of those things that you never worry about things getting done because everybody just does what's expected of them and most go above and beyond what you would even expect. And the quality of work is just fantastic.

And, of course, like any family, you're going to have issues and you're going to have arguments, but the way we've kind of created this culture and this environment is that we address those issues and we talk about them and we try to make sure that the next time around, those issues don't arise again. And there are really very, very few, if any... I can't think of any on the top of my head who I am not excited to work with and pleased to work with, and that goes not only with the nonpartisan staff, but the partisan staff on the other side of the aisle from us. Even my counterparts from the other party, we get along really well and we work well together when we can.

Gene: There must be times though when your colleagues on the other side, that you have a little tiff, I would guess?

Lauren: Oh, of course. I would say not a tiff, but more, you know what – it comes down to we try to find those middle grounds and sometimes you're never going to find the middle ground; it's not possible, and especially when it gets to be late at night. So I think we try to recognize when

we've hit that point and somebody is going to have to make a decision. We either call it or sometimes there's a thing called a previous question that we can use.

I do think my colleagues will try to do everything they can before they get to that point, but sometimes there is no agreement; there is no way around it. And when it gets to be really late at night and people are tired and they're crabby, it's time to either pull back or start fresh the next morning. That's going to happen and that's going to arise and you're not going to always agree. But we all have to come to work the next day together and it's going to be a different issue the next day, and it could be an issue where we work well together.

So there's not kind of that holding a grudge against people. You've got to work through those issues and you've got to get to that next day.

Gene: What would you tell others about considering a career in public service and working for a legislature specifically?

Lauren: What I would say is read everything you can about issues on all sides. Don't just stick to one issue and think this is the only way. Try to get all different sides of an issue. And get involved. Volunteer. Volunteer for an hour; volunteer for two hours. Go visit if you're younger. See if you can do a shadow day with a legislator. Internships... it amazes me... we have lots of internship opportunities and I don't know if people know about them or if they're scared to take them. But we'd love to give those opportunities to people.

The stuff that we do you can't always learn in school. A lot of it you have to go out there and actually witness and be a part of. So the more you can do that... the building, the capitol building, the more that you can participate... Go sit in a hearing just to observe, just to see how it works... I think is a wonderful experience for everyone of all ages.

Gene: So Lauren, as we get you out of here, would you mind sharing your twitter address with our audience and give us any final thoughts that you might have?

Lauren: Oh, absolutely. My Twitter account is my name, which is @laurenhieger, but if you want to follow more of our work, kind of the things that we're doing in the majority caucus, that is @mosenmajority, and that's a little more active than my account. So you can kind of see what we're doing that day, what's coming up later in the afternoon, what's coming up the next week.

And we do have a blog too. It's MO's Senate Sidebar, if anyone wants to check out our blog for a little different perspective on some of the bills that we're working on and tasking, and that will gear up again starting in January. And I just look forward to another exciting year. You just never know what to expect. Every day can be different, which is fun, but you've got to be prepared to just go with the flow, which is something that's hard for me and I've learned to do.

Gene: Thank you so much for this Lauren. I really appreciate you spending some time us. Again, we've been talking with Lauren Hieger who is the Missouri Senate Majority Caucus Communications Director. Thank you for being a part of Our American States.

Lauren: Thank you so much, Gene, for having me. It was fun.

Music and Gene VO:

And that concludes this edition of Our American States. We invite you to subscribe to this podcast on iTunes and Google Play. Until our next episode, this is Gene Rose for the National Conference of State Legislatures. Thanks for listening.