Legislative Effectiveness Committee

Meeting Summary
August 2013

Meeting Session:	**Dynamic Committees**

Overview & Panelists:

An effective legislative committee needs contributions from a strong committee chair, ranking minority member, other legislators and staff. This session explored how to get the best leadership and contributions from all these people.

Moderator: Tim Rice, Executive Director, Legislative Information System, Illinois
Panelists: Rep. Lucy Weber, New Hampshire
Sen. Don Balfour, Georgia

Laura Rose, Deputy Director, Legislative Council Staff, Wisconsin

Summary:

Tim Rice engaged the panelists in a talk show format to learn their ideas about best practices for committees. The group identified some key characteristics and concerns for committee chairs:

- Fairness. The committee members, staff and public respect a chair that is fair. A good chair treats others as he or she would like to be treated and allows members to have their say and ask their questions. The chair shouldn't "play favorites," as the rules should be the same for everyone.

- Control of process and time. The chair needs to keep things operating smoothly by enforcing the rules and balancing openness with efficiency. Good chairs communicate to their members that they need to read the bills beforehand and take steps to learn the applicable background.

- Welcoming atmosphere. Ordinary citizens should be treated kindly and encouraged in their testimony. The act of testifying may be terrifying for those unfamiliar with legislative processes, and the chair can take steps to make the experience much more comfortable for them.

- Works well with ranking member, staff and other legislators. A strong committee needs good work from everyone. Although the ranking member has an obligation to his or her party to note areas of disagreement, this can be done with respect and efficiency. The chair and ranking member need to communicate to ensure that the right balance occurs. Similarly the chair needs to talk regularly with committee staff so they know the priorities and can accommodate the chair and others' needs for memoranda, amendments and other documents.

The panel also talked about technology and some of the trends in committee practices. Although many committees' rules limit committee participation to in-person activity, emerging technology and citizen needs are encouraging some states to allow various types of remote participation. Audience questions included the process of taking steps to help citizens testify or otherwise participate in the legislative process, and Wisconsin, California, North Dakota, Virginia and Alaska were all recognized as having guidelines or procedures to help the public participate.