

## Legislative Effectiveness Committee

### Meeting Summary

August 2013

**Meeting Session:** The Freshman Class: Why Didn't You Tell Us About...?

**Overview & Panelists:** Despite the best plans of new member orientations, first-term legislators almost always feel they didn't get enough preparation for the legislative session. This session gathered some first-term legislators and new member orientation planners to examine what the freshman legislator class really needs to know.

Moderator: Susan Fox, Executive Director, Legislative Services, Montana

Panelists: Representative Kathy Coleman, Wyoming

Senator Bryan Townsend, Delaware

Susan Liddle, Manager, Constituent and Resource Services, Legislative Council, Colorado

**Summary:** Susan Fox described the importance of new member orientation and the types of formal and informal sessions they use in Montana. She then introduced her fellow panelists.

Senator Bryan Townsend described some of his challenges as a first session lawmaker. He praised Delaware's orientation, but reflected that there were three categories of challenges he encountered:

1. Navigating the bureaucracy. Senator Townsend thought that he would have benefitted from a list or timeline of relevant legislative deadlines. He almost missed a key deadline and sort of lucked into finding out about it. Orientation planners would provide practical help to freshmen legislators if they created a timeline with important deadline dates such as bill requests, introduction and crossover.
2. Constituent contacts. In Delaware, certain traditions have been established regarding recognizing constituents' birthdays and accomplishments. It would help to learn some of those unwritten customs and traditions. Freshmen should learn the best practices of how their established colleagues connect with their constituents.
3. Political considerations. New legislators must walk a fine line in reacting to the legislative agenda. How and when can you respectfully disagree with your leadership? How can you be true to your principles and constituents without being branded a trouble-maker?

Representative Kathy Coleman felt that Wyoming's new member orientation prepared her well on the range of topics and processes that she encountered during the session. Her only suggestion was to expand the time spent in mock session as this was something the new legislators were concerned about. Representative Coleman then outlined the welcoming approach by her Sheridan/Douglas legislative delegation and the value it had for her in learning about legislative business:

1. Open invitation. Once she was appointed to fill a vacancy, the other members of the delegation routinely invited her to participate fully with them in all their formal and informal legislative meetings. In addition to getting to know key stakeholders and citizens, her fellow delegation members took time to explain the background and history of the issues that were raised.
2. Legislative forum. The delegation partners with the chamber of commerce to hold a two-day forum with organizations and individuals in anticipation of the Wyoming legislative session. This forum is an effective and efficient way for the lawmakers to identify the community's priorities for the session.
3. Continued mentoring. Each member of the delegation kept up the helpful advice during the session. She also learned which delegation member was the expert in the various topic areas that arose during the session.

Although she realizes that the Sheridan/Douglas legislative delegation is unique in its solidarity and welcoming attitude, Representative Coleman suggested that other delegations could be encouraged to help mentor a new colleague.

Susan Liddle substituted for Natalie Mullis, who had a family emergency to attend to. Susan described the Colorado orientation, which is legislator-focused. It is designed to give them context and keep the training interactive and simple. The training is planned with adult learning theory in mind, believing that freshmen lawmakers must have a chance to interact with the material, not just hear it. Colorado divides the orientation into three parts: first getting the lay of the land, then learning the legislative process and finally mastering legislative skills. They do a lot of the orientation in small participant groups and when they are finished, each new lawmaker is given "go to" staffers in the key nonpartisan agencies to help continue the learning process. The lawmakers are not restricted to only using these contacts, but the staff group acts as a "buddy system" to help answer questions and demystify the bureaucracy.