States Show the Way

BY NATALIE WOOD

These days, most headlines about Congress tend to shout about its dysfunction, sigh over its inertia or bemoan its extreme polarization. Over the past year, however, a bipartisan committee of 12 members of the U.S. House of Representatives, five of whom are former state legislators, has gotten attention for the opposite reasons.

The U.S. House established the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress in January 2019 to focus on streamlining legislative procedures; creating a leadership pipeline; boosting staff diversity, recruitment, retention and compensation; and improving technology, innovation and administrative efficiencies. This isn’t the first time Congress has engaged in such a process. Reform efforts occurred in 1945, 1965 and 1993. What’s unique this time, however, is the committee’s strong desire to learn from state legislatures.

Enter NCSL, which teamed up with various legislative staff to spotlight our laboratories of democracy on Capitol Hill, educating the committee about legislative innovations, practices and realities throughout the year.

The committee received a primer on training, leadership development and new-member orientations from Stacy Householder, director of NCSL’s leadership and international programs. It heard about Missouri’s “freshman tour,” which takes legislators around the state by bus to learn about each other’s districts. It learned that legislators in Colorado, Hawaii, Maine, Washington and Wisconsin can receive ongoing professional development in at least one area, such as parliamentary procedure or civics education. Householder also described the array of training and professional development opportunities NCSL offers.

Diane Boyer-Vine, legislative counsel and head of the legislative data center in California, demonstrated her state’s “Member Portfolio” web application, which allows legislators to access nearly real-time updates on amendments and existing law, all at the touch of an iPad. Mike Rohrbach, chief information officer and director of information technology in Washington, shared with the committee why his state’s very accessible website, remote video testimony capabilities and cybersecurity training make it an IT leader. “Signing up to testify before a committee should be as easy as booking a hotel room. Tracking a bill should be as easy as tracking a package,” Rohrbach told the committee.

The committee also heard from Susan Clarke Schaar, clerk of the Virginia Senate, about scheduling and calendaring rules for busy lawmakers who often feel like they need to be in two places at once. Schaar noted in her testimony that, unlike U.S. representatives, Virginia senators (and most state legislators) don’t have committee meetings that conflict with floor session, so they can meet session attendance requirements.

During the committee’s final hearing, NCSL staff shared how the legislative process can foster bipartisanship and increase efficiency. Committee members asked questions about “regular order” (an assurance that rules will be consistently followed), decorum, bill referral, amendment processes, and committee authority and jurisdiction. From intermixed member seating in Maine to joint budget committees in Colorado and Wisconsin to secret-ballot voting by committee chairs in Nebraska, Congress heard how states strive for bipartisanship.

The modernization committee recently released legislation asking the U.S. House to pass 30 recommendations that committee members unanimously support. The committee will continue working this year, giving hope that, despite what you might see in the news, Congress won’t always be handcuffed by hyperpartisan dysfunction.

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