

WHY I LOVE THE LEGISLATURE

Legislative staffers from across the country describe what drew them to the statehouse.

BY MEGAN
MCCLURE

Megan McClure is a senior staff assistant with NCSL's Center for Legislative Research and Support and is NCSL's liaison to the Legislative Research Librarian staff section.

ANNE ZIAJA

**Executive Director
Massachusetts Senate Office
of Education & Civic Engagement**



"The goal is to give citizens the tools to be actively, confidently engaged with state government."

Anne Ziaja credits a summer internship in Washington, D.C., during the nation's bicentennial celebration in 1976 as the pivotal moment when she decided she wanted to work in government. After an internship with the Massachusetts Senate, she was hired to work for that chamber's civic education programs.

Now in her 40th year at the Senate, she is the executive director of the Office of Education and Civic Engagement.

"What I find especially gratifying is meeting someone who participated in an internship or seminar and who credits [my office] for his or her continued participation in government," she says.

Ziaja received NCSL's Kevin B. Harrington Award for Excellence in Democracy Education in 2013 for her work informing students and the public of the value of democracy and civic responsibility. "Especially meaningful to me is that this award is named for Massachusetts Senate President Harrington, the first president of NCSL and a major proponent of civic education. He gave me my first job in the Massachusetts Senate."

SONIA GAVIN

**Legislative Reference Librarian
Montana Legislative Services Division**



"I am not your typical introverted librarian. I really enjoy interacting with the public, talking to them about the legislature and the legislative process."

Sonia Gavin worked in student government at the University of Montana, "so being involved with the state Legislature was very appealing," she says. She credits her cousin, who had recently moved to Helena, however, for convincing her to move to the state capital. The position of legislative information resources manager was open, so she applied and got the job.

As a librarian in the Legislative Services Division for the last nine years, she says her job is one part digging up research and one part working with and educating constituents. "Helping someone navigate our legislative website is very rewarding," she says, "especially when you can help someone find an answer to a question."

The best research question she's been asked? It was about a parasite that attacks wolves. "A researcher gave me just the Latin name for it, and I had to dig to find anything regarding the topic. I came up with about 10 articles that helped with the research. It was a good challenge and tested my skills."

PAUL SMITH

Chief Clerk
New Hampshire House of Representatives



"I'm kind of a geek. I love parliamentary procedure and helping members navigate the parliamentary process to be an effective legislator."

Paul Smith has the unique perspective of having served as both a state legislator and a staffer—in that order. He won a seat in the New Hampshire House when he was just 22 years old. After serving two terms, he joined the legislative staff and eventually was elected clerk of the House, in late 2014.

A self-described "quintessential Yankee," he has a deep appreciation for his home state and its civic traditions.

"I truly wouldn't want to be in any other legislature in the country," he says. "It's often mocked for its size, but it really seems to me that we're the most democratic body in the country. You can call up your state rep, you see them in the grocery store—you have access."

Smith was recently named one of New Hampshire's "40 Under Forty," an annual recognition by the Union Leader newspaper of some of the state's brightest young achievers. He also received the Outstanding Eagle Scout Award, presented by the National Eagle Scout Association for achievement at the local, state or regional level.

Given his holistic experience of legislative work, Smith has advice for legislators and staffers alike: "Don't make assumptions. Always be interested in what may come. I hate to use the term 'keep an open mind'—but you should."

JENNIFER FLETCHER

Legislative Librarian
Alaska State Legislature



"I am never entirely sure what each day will bring, what areas of legislative history or subjects I will need to research."

Jennifer Fletcher has an unusual relationship with Juneau. Since moving there, she's found herself "in a decaying orbit around the community, leaving for a while only to be pulled back in." She was hired in 2012 to work on a project for the Alaska Legislative Affairs Agency, digitizing the Legislature's archived audio recordings. She soon began working on a second project, then took up her current position as a librarian.

The range of subjects she researches on any given day keep her motivated and engaged. "I see librarianship as one of the best ways to be a generalist," she says, "and legislative history is a quite diverse and deep body of knowledge."

In her time with the Legislature, Fletcher has supervised the digitization of thousands of hours of audio recordings, sheets of microfiche and rolls of microfilm. She is also preserving materials from the 1955-56 Alaska Constitutional Convention.

She sees her work as a means of expanding the use of those materials and developing research expertise. "Increased availability of materials leads to increased use," she says, "and in-house digitization projects help staff develop knowledge of how to use the resulting resources and their contents."

Read more about Fletcher's work preserving materials from the Constitutional Convention in the NCSL blog.

CHARITY STOWE

Deputy Director of Legislative Affairs,
Leadership Assistant
Indiana General Assembly



"Giving a voice to those who are often lost in the system is some of the most satisfying work."

Charity Stowe began her career with the Indiana General Assembly as an intern shortly after her college graduation. She was subsequently hired as a legislative assistant and has served in that role for the last three years. In July 2015, she took on an additional role: deputy director of legislative affairs.

Stowe says her work with constituents is the most fulfilling part of her job. "Advocating for them in tough situations makes me feel like we're making a difference."

She also values the opportunity she had to work closely with her legislator on a paid sick leave bill a couple of sessions ago. "Paid leave is an issue I care a lot about," she says, "and getting to research and learn the ins and outs and what other states were doing is definitely a highlight from my time here at the legislature."

The legislature's annual volunteer project offers yet another way for Stowe to support her constituents. This year, staff from all four caucuses gathered on the Statehouse lawn "in a bipartisan effort," she says, to help build a home for a Habitat for Humanity family.

Above all, Charity advises other legislative staff to "never stop caring. Working your hardest and giving insight where it's needed will have a lasting effect on you and those you interact with." 