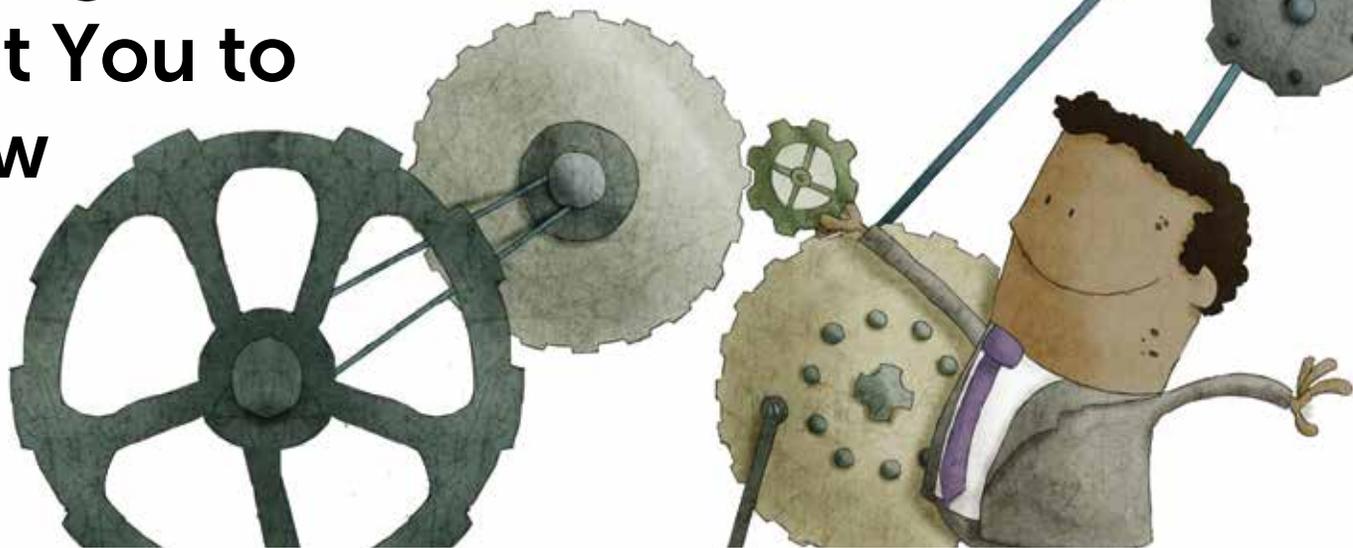


5 Things Clerks and Secretaries Want You to Know



By Holly South

Parliamentarians are the guardians of the gavel, protectors of the legislative process. They are the clerks, secretaries and their staff who juggle several roles to provide the knowledge, service and guidance legislators need to do their jobs well. They shepherd bills through the legislative process, record all chamber proceedings and advise legislators, including leaders, on parliamentary procedures.

Although the ways they are elected, the size of their staffs and their duties vary, clerks and secretaries all have a deep appreciation and respect for the legislative institution, pride in their ability to use their parliamentary expertise to help members, and a strong sense of civic duty.

Devotion to the legislature and commitment to public service are what draw these professionals to this work despite the stress and the long, irregular hours. Not everyone can do this job. But for those who can, who are in chambers day in and day out, who watch the process and see how hard legislators can work to

Holly is a policy associate in NCSL's Legislative Staff Services program and is NCSL's liaison to the American Society of Legislative Clerks and Secretaries (ASLCS).

get something accomplished, it's what one clerk called, "kind of inspiring."
Here's what they want you to know.

1

We don't run the place—but we make the place run.

We are experts on procedure—from interpreting chamber rules and tracking bills to compiling the calendar and journal—documenting each step of the legislative process. This requires us to be extremely organized, to expect the unexpected and to “go with the flow.”

Our staffs often describe us as the legislature's COOs or architects or even first responders because of our central role and the guiding hand we provide in our chambers.

Every morning we prepare a script and an agenda, which serves as a road map for the day. It includes the orders of business to be addressed, the bills to be processed and the messages to be handled from the other chamber or the governor.

And every evening, after the chamber adjourns, in at least 30 states, it's our job to record in the journal, as accurately as possible, every action taken that day. The journal must then be proofed and published so it can be viewed by legislators and the public.

2

We are passionate about the process.



We shepherd legislation through the process, from introduction to enactment. We are essentially the traffic controllers as legislation moves through our chamber and, if passed, goes on to the other

chamber or the governor. Whether a bill passes or not, we must store, engross (amend) and enroll it.

We believe a successful process helps the legislature run thoughtfully, efficiently and effectively. Our society may be geared toward instant gratification, but processing laws requires consideration. A push to get everything instantaneously would not result in better bills.

Members and staffers can be frustrated by the time it sometimes takes us to accomplish what they want, especially when there's "heat" on an issue. But there are very good reasons for the deliberate pace of the process. Government works on a timeline that's meant to protect the legislative process from the vagaries of personal opinion, what's in the newspaper or anyone's pet project. So, when we do our jobs, we do every step, every single day, for every single bill. There are reasons—in rules, statutes or constitutions—for what we do. Members naturally focus on passing their bills, but we focus on the procedural steps (many of which take place behind the scenes) that take a bill from introduction to enactment.

We don't care what's in the bills; we care that every bill gets processed the same way. It's our job to make that happen.

3

We care about our members.



We really want to help legislators succeed. We view educating them and sharing our knowledge of the legislative process as an important part of our job. We work very hard, in a confidential and nonpartisan manner, to make members'

lives easier and to make sessions run smoothly.

We enjoy answering the questions and addressing the concerns of leaders and other members. We like familiarizing them with Mason's Manual of Legislative Procedure. We bird-dog the details. We make sure the motions get made, the voting requirements are fulfilled and the deadlines are met.

4

We fear for the institution.



New lawmakers don't always appreciate or understand the importance of the details or why we do what we do and say what we say in the chamber. We are concerned that many new legislators lack an understanding of legislative procedures, have little institutional knowledge and are less experienced than their predecessors. Having to teach them about the institution, while processing the laws of the institution, is difficult.

Too often, these inexperienced legislators are less willing than their predecessors to be educated in the process, but are nevertheless determined to change it. Some new members rely on their staffs rather than bothering to learn legislative procedures themselves. We are concerned that this lack of knowledge could mean trouble for our democracy. When there's little interest in protocol, shortcuts can look appealing. It's not illegal, necessarily, but it's not what we should be doing—like voting on things that aren't being explained.

What Is ASLCS?

Clerks and secretaries can trace their beginnings to 1619. That's when the British House of Commons lent a clerk, John Twine, to the newly formed Virginia House of Burgesses. The American Society of Legislative Clerks and Secretaries was founded 324 years later—more than 30 years before there was an NCSL.

ASLCS today includes more than 400 principal clerks and secretaries and their staffs. The society's goals—to improve legislative administration and establish better communication among clerks and secretaries throughout the U.S. and its territories—are met through professional development workshops, networking activities and business meetings.

➔ Learn more about ASLCS at www.ncsl.org/aslcs.

5

We miss civility!



We are careful not to bring our own political beliefs into the chamber. We need to be able to explain a rule without inserting ourselves into the argument, without passing judgment. We must be able to work well with staff in the other chamber, regardless of the politics or relationships between members.

But the general lack of decorum in many statehouses is troublesome. We are concerned about all the rancor and discord. It's stressful for staff—and the members, too—and it isn't productive.

We all have to work together to be great together. Legislators should understand this coming in. But not all of them do. 🏠