NCSL has become the highly respected organization it is today under William T. Pound’s leadership.

BY JULIE LAYS

The year was 1974. America was in a nasty recession, unemployment hit a high of 11.3%, OPEC controlled energy prices, air pollution filled the skies and speed limits were capped at 55 mph. You could buy a computer, if you had $9,000 and could carry 50 pounds.

Back then, a majority of legislatures convened only every other year. And, when they did, women occupied less than 10% of the seats nationwide. No one was term-limited and only about 3% of legislators considered themselves full-time lawmakers. Across the country, 5,100 legislators were Democrats and 2,385 were Republicans. The nation was a different place. Or, was it?

Dolly Parton was hot, wild weather was frequent (148 tornadoes hit 13 states) and executions were on hold. Policy discussions centered on clean air, the high costs of college, overcrowded prisons, marijuana, abortion and gun control.

And all eyes were focused on the chaos in the federal government. Seven former White House officials had been indicted and charged with conspiracy to obstruct justice for their role in the Watergate scandal. In August, President Richard Nixon resigned.

In that context, state legislatures were needed more than ever to be the government by and for the people. Many believed that with some support and assistance, legislatures were more likely than their federal counterparts to fulfill the Founding Fathers’ desire to “form a more perfect union, establish justice, in-
Three Into One

In the mid-’70s, there were three national organizations competing for state legislators and legislative staff. The National Legislative Conference, founded by a group of legislative service agency directors in 1948, was under the wing of the Council of State Governments. Then came the National Conference of State Legislative Leaders in 1959, followed by the National Society of State Legislators in the early ’60s. After a few failed attempts to merge themselves, a group of lawmakers asked the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University, then under the direction of political scientist Alan Rosenthal, to survey legislators and staff and recommend a solution.

In August 1974, following the researchers’ advice, representatives from the three groups voted to dissolve their organizations and form the National Conference of State Legislatures, effective Jan. 1, 1975.

The organizations formed a 34-member Executive Committee and, with a $500,000 grant from the Council of State Governments, NCSL was born.

The executive committee decided funding should come through appropriations from the states based on their population, and that holding an annual meeting would be the most democratic way to approve the NCSL budget, elect officers and the Executive Committee, and adopt policy positions. That annual business meeting has grown into the Legislative Summit and draws about 6,000 people a year.

Each of the original groups left its mark on NCSL. NCSL’s Leaders’ Center responds to the needs of legislative leaders through special seminars, trainings and publications. The support of legislative staff has continued and expanded under NCSL, with three of the seven NCSL officers and one-third of the Executive Committee being staff. NCSL also has nine very active professional staff associations.

The Executive Committee selected Earl S. Mackey to be NCSL’s first executive director. Mackey led the National Legislative Conference and had previously served in the Missouri House. The committee also decided to locate the headquarters of the new national state organization in a state capital, and out of 10 cities, Denver was chosen. NCSL’s founders also agreed to run a smaller state-federal office in Washington, D.C.

Open for Business

The D.C. office opened in January 1975 and soon moved to what became known as the “Hall of the States,” because the building was home to most of the major state government associations, including the National Governors Association and the Council of State Governments. The Denver office opened in April that year, with William T. Pound and Carl Tubbesing hired as special assistants for state services.

Pound, a native Coloradoan, wrote a letter to Mackey explaining why he should be hired. “As a political scientist with a background and interest in legislative activity … I believe that my education and experience might be profitably employed by the National Conference of State Legislatures and I would appreciate the opportunity to further discuss such employment with you.” Mackey quickly knew Pound would be a good fit and the rest is history.

One of the first things NCSL staff did was produce a monthly newsletter called State Legislatures Today. Forty-five years later, the newsletter’s successor, State Legislatures magazine, remains the only national publication dedicated to the ideas, issues and insight of the men and women who work in the nation’s state and territorial legislatures.

From the beginning, NCSL has been committed to supporting sound management and fiscal policy and good organization of the legislative institution.

NCSL staff have always placed high priority on prompt, nonpartisan responses to information requests; comprehensive, unbiased research reports; and balanced, relevant magazine articles. In NCSL’s earliest days, a small group of generalists would review all pending information requests and discuss how to answer them.

Those days are long gone. Information requests now number several thousand a month, and NCSL policy staff are experts in their fields. NCSL has grown in concert with the hot policy issues of the day. The energy crisis of the late 1970s, for example, led to an expansion of NCSL grants in the areas of energy, natural resources and the environment. NCSL’s growing reputation in those policy areas helped to obtain grants in human services, health care and criminal justice.

As information technology was developing in the early 1980s, a small group of legislative staff directors worked with NCSL to create an electronic information exchange of legislative research reports called LEGISNET. This very early use of online information systems for the exchange of policy information among the states was a milestone in NCSL’s growth and value to states.

Federalism in Flux

NCSL is on its eighth U.S. president and has seen the state-federal relationship...
and services, including advertising in the magazine and the sale of publications and exhibits at the annual meeting, to diversify funding sources.

In 1982, NCSL established the Foundation for State Legislatures to foster partnerships with the private sector and to support the work of the conference. Its volunteer board of directors is composed of corporate and union executives, state legislative leaders and senior legislative staff. Its fundraising has grown from $108,791 with 27 members in 1985 to $2,775,500 with 220 members in 2018.

And in 1983, NCSL, along with other state and local organizations, formed the State and Local Legal Center to advocate for state and local governments in U.S. Supreme Court cases. The center has had a significant impact on the court's federalism decisions.

Changing of the Guard
When Mackey retired in 1987, Pound became NCSL's executive director. Under his leadership, the conference has continued to expand the depth and breadth of its resources. Grants and contracts grew in number, with grants making up 42% of NCSL's funding by the early 1990s.

Public cynicism and distrust in all levels of government, however, continued to grow as well. Citizen initiatives set term limits on lawmakers in 21 states, requiring NCSL to adapt to a more frequently changing membership. The organization launched the Trust for Representative Democracy, a public education and outreach initiative that, among other projects, created the Legislators Back-to-School program, which encouraged lawmakers to visit their local schools to talk about our form of government.

NCSL established the Center for Ethics in Government in 1999 to promote ethical behavior among state legislators, staff, lobbyists and advocates. The center conducts training programs in ethical decision-making and is a clearinghouse for information on states’ ethics laws and rules.

One of the biggest logistical projects Pound oversaw was the construction of a new NCSL headquarters building on Denver’s East Side. The organization took a bold step away from high and ever-increasing downtown rents and bought land at the former Lowry Air Force Base, which was being redeveloped for commercial and residential use. The three-story building, which opened in 2002, houses a mini-dome, photos of the 50 state capitol and the majority of NCSL’s research staff.

Defending Democracy
NCSL was founded on the conviction that legislative service is one of democracy’s worthiest pursuits. But democracy is under fire. NCSL’s latest efforts to bolster democracy’s defenses include creating the Center on Legislative Strengthening and the Redistricting and Elections Program in 2017. Meanwhile, the organization has beefed up its services for staff and expanded its training offerings for lawmakers and their leaders.

The greatest challenge state legislatures face, Pound says, is "the extreme partisanship that exists in all levels of government, the attitude that, ‘If you’re not with us then you must be against us.’"

The unabashed party loyalty that elevates partisan politics over respect for the legislative institution is a barrier to thoughtful lawmaking. NCSL’s strengths lies in its determination to remain the premier bipartisan organization that serves all legislators, regardless of party, and their staffs, no matter how venomous our politics are or how polarized our country becomes.

Under Bill Pound’s leadership, and working in partnership with state legislatures, the organization has helped build stronger states and, thus, a stronger nation. And we’re sure that will continue as the mantle of leadership passes to Tim Storey, NCSL’s new executive director.

Julie Lays is the editor of State Legislatures magazine. This history is based in part on an article by Karl T. Kurtz, former director of operations at NCSL, who joined the organization when it opened in 1975.