

WISE WOMEN

BEING A WOMAN AND A LEGISLATOR PRESENT UNIQUE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES. FOUR SEASONED LAWMAKERS OFFER SOME SAGE ADVICE.



PHOTO: WILLIAM WYATT

Maryland Delegate Adrienne Jones is the first African American woman in Maryland history to serve as speaker pro tem.

SL: What motivated you to become a legislator?

Texas Senator Leticia Van de Putte: I am a pharmacist. I was motivated because I was

Leah Oliver, who staffs NCSL's Women's Legislative Network, conducted this interview for State Legislatures magazine.

angry about health care policy. I couldn't understand why we would pay hundreds of thousands of dollars for a premature baby, but we wouldn't pay for the prenatal vitamins for the mom. And I couldn't understand why we had a comprehensive mandatory record-keeping policy for vaccinations and immunizations of cows in our

state, but we didn't have one for children.

Indiana Senator Beverly Gard: I was in the right place at the right time. In 1975, I was approached by a group of community leaders to run for the city council. I was the first woman elected in over 20 years. When a vacancy came up in my senate district, I chose to run for it.

Maryland Delegate Adrienne Jones: In the mid-1980s, I served on the Democratic State Central Committee for Baltimore County. When there was a vacancy in my district because of the death of a delegate, I was selected by the committee to fill out the remainder of her term. I always have been a lover of politics and public policy. I believe women are natural public servants—it is in our blood.

Delaware Senator Dorinda "Dori" Connor: My late husband had served in the legislature for 28 years. A month after he passed away, I defeated two opponents in a special election. The motivation was to continue to serve the public.

SL: What prepared you for legislative work and what other skills are helpful to have?

Gard: Serving in local government for 13 years was a tremendous asset going into the Senate. I'd also been involved in party politics. Many of the skills you use to manage a household, raise children or have a husband, come to play in the legislature.

Van de Putte: My role as a health care professional and as a mom prepared me for the legislature. In my career, I listen to people every day and then try to improve their

quality of life. In the legislature, we listen to people and then we help craft solutions that people can use to improve their quality of life. I think my skills as a mom have come in extremely handy, too.

Jones: In local government, you deal with all sorts of personalities, community groups, other elected officials, so it really prepares you to adapt that to work as a legislator. I serve on the Appropriations Committee and deal with budgets. When you're dealing with the state's funds you've got to make sure it's right.

Connor: Having been an educator, I try to look at my job as my classroom. In some ways my constituents and my colleagues are still students—just older. I give them information; I share the facts; I look for input; I want their opinion.

SL: How are women important to the legislative process?

Jones: Women are multi-talented. Women bring a very different perspective. We don't mind consulting others. I think we provide an added service to the legislature.

Connor: Women want to bring it all in, listen to all the answers. We will bring our personal issues to the floor and are not afraid to talk about them. Gentlemen tend to keep a lot of that close to the chest. That's why we are an important balance.

Van de Putte: The important decisions in families' lives always have been made by women. It makes a difference when women are at the table. Just like it makes a difference when you're dealing with housing policy and you've got somebody who's been homeless at the table or you're dealing in health care policy and you have somebody who's HIV positive at the table.

SL: What advice would you give to a new legislator about taking on traditionally women's issues or traditionally men's issues?

Connor: When I approach pieces of legislation, I don't look at it as a male issue or a female issue. There are issues that are very important for all of us to look at. You should

get involved in the whole process because you're here representing both genders and all issues.

Gard: My advice to a new legislator, whether male or a female, would be to look at their strengths and work toward their strengths. If you become an expert in any specific area, people are going to look to you for advice. For a woman, being accepted might take some time. My background is biochemistry and I'm chair of the Senate Environmental Affairs Committee. When I first came into the legislature, I heard a male voice in the back row say "What does a housewife from Greenfield, Indiana, know about environmental legislation?"

Van de Putte: I've never been on a health committee. I love technology, science, telecommunications, utilities and alternative fuels. Don't be afraid to venture out into something you may not know, but you love. You will be surprised at how much other legislators will respect you.

Jones: Be adept at one or two areas so you are in a better position to serve on a committee that covers the subject areas you know well. And don't be afraid to serve on a budget committee when your interests may be child welfare or health care because these issues need advocates for funding.



PHOTO: INDIANA SENATE COMMUNICATIONS OFFICE

Indiana Senator Beverly Gard started her political career on the Greenfield City Council where she was the first woman elected in 20 years.

SL: What wisdom or caution can you share with new women legislators?

Gard: Move slowly. Don't try to transform the state. Start building relationships, start learning issues. Learn the rules. Get to know the personalities involved and the politics. Do not forget the people who put you there.



PHOTO: ERIC CROSSMAN

Delaware Senator Dori Connor ran for her husband's seat of 28 years one month after he died in 1997 and defeated two opponents in a special election to win it.

THE WOMEN'S LEGISLATIVE NETWORK

The Women's Legislative Network of NCSL is dedicated to promoting the participation, empowerment and leadership of women legislators. It is an active, vibrant respected organization that serves the needs of women legislators in the 50 states. All women legislators are members of the Women's Legislative Network by virtue of their election to office.

The Network sponsors events throughout the year to give women legislators an opportunity to learn, meet colleagues from other states and enhance their skills. It sponsors forums and workshops on topics important to women legislators; hosts events for women legislators at NCSL meetings; provides networking opportunities through legislative receptions; and works with other organizations to ensure that the best resources and services are available to women lawmakers.

To become involved, attend Network events, subscribe to the Network News or apply for a Network Executive Board or Advisory Council position. Corporations can support the Network by becoming Alliance members.

Many women legislators have found the Network to be an important source of information, support and advice.

"One of the best things I did shortly after I was elected was come to an NCSL conference and go to the Women's Network," says Delaware Senator Dori Connor. "I felt automatic camaraderie not only with women in my state, but across the country. One of the best things women can do is jump in and get involved and learn from what others are doing."

Call or e-mail Leah Oliver, Network coordinator, with questions at (303) 364-7700 or leah.oliver@ncsl.org.

Develop a strong relationship with your constituents—use town meetings, press releases, questionnaires.

Van De Putte: It's incredibly important to know when to engage, when not to push the point. Try not to be one of the boys. Don't be afraid to ask questions or advice of senior members. If you represent your district then nobody's going to fault you. Take a deep breath, have a sense of humor, learn the rules, be respectful of other people.

Jones: Don't think you have to put in a bill the first year. Learn the system. Ask questions. All legislators have egos. They love it when you ask them for advice. By asking questions, you're developing a relationship and they'll remember you as a person who is concerned about the process. Don't forget about who put you there, because you can be on committees and travel to various forums and it doesn't mean a thing to your constituents if you're not able to deliver back home.

Connor: Be willing to accept if you've made a mistake. Learn your subject matter. Be consistent. Dress appropriately. Earn trust from your constituency. Take advantage of workshops and learn all the rules. Be prepared to eat the bear or the bear will eat you. The last thing that I do is look in that rearview mirror and give myself a pep talk. You've got to show confidence right from the beginning.

SL: What are the lessons you have learned from legislative leaders, both male and female?

Van de Putte: One of the lessons I learned from the speaker in 1991 when I was a freshman was always vote your district. Don't be afraid to go against the grain if it's good for your district, because that's who elected you.

Gard: Shortly after I came to the legislature I set a goal to be a committee chairman. So I watched others to see how they handled their committees in really effective ways. One in particular, Senator Pat Miller, is an exemplary chairman. I tried over the years to develop some of the skills that she has in being decisive, fair, having control of that committee. I think most women chairs tend to be more inclusive, develop relationships, and work toward consensus.

Connor: On our first day in the legislature, we all knew in a very short amount of time who we wanted to pattern and who we did not. Senator Myrna Bair, our former caucus leader and former head of the Women's Network, gave sage advice, "Do not be quick to declare your opinion on a piece of legislation." After you declare, you may have to change your mind. Remember to keep that open mind, keep that judgment to yourself until that last minute.

Jones: One lesson I learned from legislative leaders was don't be afraid to ask questions. It is OK to get up on the floor and say, "Can you explain what this bill does?" Another lesson is keep your word, if you're going to support a bill and tell your constituents or lobbyists that you are going to vote in favor of a bill, do not vote against it on the floor. Finally, share your bills—you don't have to have 15 bills. Share a couple with a new legislator, particularly bills you know will pass. It gives that new legislator the confidence to work on other legislation on their own.

SL: Why do you think only 22 percent of legislators are women and do you think that will change?

Jones: One of the biggest hurdles is fundraising. Women, for the most part, are more reluctant to ask for money than men. In addition, women have multi-obligations—family, community activities, church—that tend to delay them looking at public office. It will change when there is more sharing of family responsibilities by the husband/partner/children that will allow women to enter public life earlier.

Van De Putte: I think one of our strengths turns to be one of the weaknesses; we tend not to worry about who gets the credit as long as the work gets done. But when you're running for public office you tend not to have ballot success unless people make a direct connection between your positive works and your name. I think it's critical that women get rid of the "I'm not worthy" type of mentality. Understand that you need money to do the campaigning so that you can get to do the public policy.

Gard: I've been involved in trying to recruit women. For a woman to serve in the legislature, regardless of the age of her children, it is going to change the dynamics of her home life. It's a family effort, it involves every member of her family.

Connor: We now are starting to see more women in government relations and as lobbyists. That's made a big difference. A male lobbyist came to me and was very concerned that I seemed to be leaning in opposition to his thoughts. He put his hand on my shoulder and said, "Now you know your husband

would be supporting me.” I was taken aback and I looked at him said, “But my husband’s not here now. We are different people and our thoughts are different.” Women lobbyists aren’t like that. We speak each other’s language.

SL: What is the role of diversity in the legislative process?

Jones: It’s critical. We have legislators in their late 70s and legislators in their 30s and both groups give us a different perspective. We have legislators from different walks of life, not only by race, gender, religion and ethnicity, but political philosophy and economics, as well. Diversity brings forth different types of bills, which gives all of us a positive learning experience.

Gard: Most of our districts are becoming more diverse. My district certainly is. It has changed dramatically over the 16 years that I have represented it. I don’t think that the membership of the legislature reflects the diverse nature of the constituency there. We have a long way to go.

SL: How important do you feel it is to have a mentor? Did you have one? If so, how did he or she affect your career?

Van de Putte: My first mentor was a local elected official and life-long friend. He had served in the legislature before coming back to serve in county government. He made it a point in the early 1980s to begin appointing women to commissions and committees. I still go to him for advice. When you look for a mentor, make sure you find someone who’s not just successful, but who embodies that sense of public service that we all strive for.

Connor: My mentor would be my late husband. He had an ability to find common ground, to be a listener. He was able to suck it up, walk away and let it go. He never used a foul word, never spoke badly about anyone.

Jones: My mentor was my state senator, Delores Kelley. She was very instrumental when I first came to the legislature in terms of dispelling misconceptions I had about being a legislator and showing me the ropes.

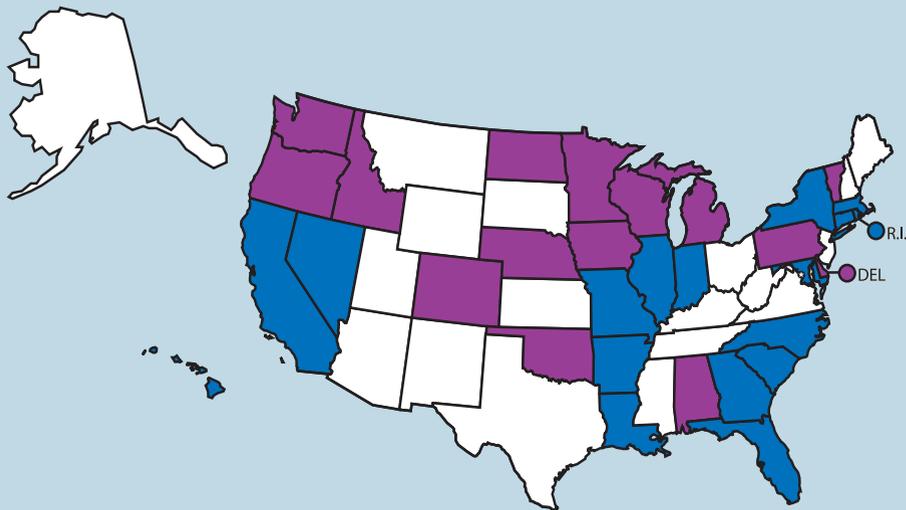


PHOTO: TEXAS SENATE MEDIA DEPARTMENT

Texas Senator Leticia Van de Putte, a pharmacist for more than 20 years, is Democratic caucus chair and incoming president-elect of NCSL.

WOMEN’S CAUCUSES

Formal women’s legislative caucuses often hire staff, hold weekly or monthly meetings during session, are policy-oriented, and may pay dues (\$10 to \$200) or raise funds. Informal caucuses are usually unstructured, primarily social, and meet once or twice per session.



- Formal (meets regularly and determines legislative priorities)
- Informal (meets infrequently for the primary purpose of socializing or networking)

Source: NCSL, 2005

My second mentor was my Appropriations Committee chairman, the late Pete Rawlings, who gave me the opportunity of serving as vice chair of a subcommittee which enabled me to show my expertise. Serving on the Appropriations Committee was instrumental in me getting recognized by our current speaker to serve in my present capacity as speaker pro tem.

SL: How can women legislators support each other?

Van de Putte: Several years ago, we had a whole package of bipartisan women’s health initiatives. But we could not get the bills set for the House floor for debate. We decided

among ourselves that we would all go to the front podium and surround the speaker. We had taken a blood oath to not vote for any other bill until our set of bills came up. He said, "We'll do it tomorrow." Well, tomorrow came and went. We met as a women's caucus and we decided the only way to make progress was to talk to our sisters—our sisters who are the spouses of our colleagues. We started making phone calls. Well, the guys came back the next day and said, "Why'd you call my wife?!" We said, "We gave you fair warning." The bills were set.

When we went to the governor's mansion for the bill signing, then Governor Bush said, "You can't play tricks with me. You can't call my spouse." And I said, "We were never thinking about calling Laura. We're going to call your mother." He said, "I'll sign the bill." We know that we can be effective as women, but as women it's not just the network of women legislators. We have to look at our sisters and use that network effectively.

Connor: We've done something similar. One of our legislators has a daughter and some sensitive issues were being discussed. We kept saying to him, "This could be your daughter." The daughter was a page on our floor and we just called her over and said, "We really need your dad's vote. We need you to lobby your dad." It made a difference.

Gard: I encourage women legislators to use their own personal experiences. I'm a breast cancer survivor and the year after my experi-

FOR MORE ADVICE ...

Listen to a longer version of this dialogue on the new CD entitled, "Wise Women: Sage Advice from Seasoned Lawmakers," the latest in the NCSL's How To Be An Effective Legislator series.

The CD offers women legislators valuable tips from carrying legislation to providing constituent service, from building consensus to maximizing your strengths. More information is available at: www.ncsl.org/programs/wln/wisewomen.htm

ence I sponsored a bill dealing with reconstruction after mastectomy. I went to the insurance committee to present this bill; there was not a woman on the committee. There was a plastic surgeon who made a very professional, but graphic presentation. All of the men on the committee sat there staring at the table. They wouldn't look anybody in the eye. When the bill was presented on the floor, it passed unanimously. There was some problem in the House and getting the speaker to come on board. So all of the women in the women's caucus held a televised press conference. The speaker was furious because we used that tactic, but the speaker let the bill get on the calendar and the bill became law.

Jones: There are enough women in the House that when there is legislation that is

not favorable to women or issues of concern to women, we can influence an outcome of a bill by walking off the floor if need be. As speaker pro tem, I try to talk to women, particularly the freshman, and ask how they're doing. I try to encourage them because sometimes they don't get that from anybody else. In Maryland, we have one of the largest women's caucuses in the country which is also a great help in terms of support.

SL: What is one final piece of advice?

Gard: The advice that I would give is spend your first year or two learning the process, developing relationships and learning the rules.

Connor: My dearest friend advised me to remember to refill my cup. Don't keep emptying yourself every day. If you don't have a way to refill it, you're going to be of no help to anyone. So, I get a manicure every week. Remembering to refill your cup is important so you can get up and do battle the next day.

Van de Putte: Have a sense of humor, don't take yourself so seriously. Be professional, be prepared. Know that there are going to be pitfalls and that it is a long process. You don't have permanent coalitions. Work by the issue. Remember that not everything is partisan. I'm reminded that there's a saying "an unreliable ally is more dangerous than a clever opponent." Remember that we can reach across the aisle on issues and find common ground. 