

## **New Member Orientation in State Legislatures**

### **Advice from 2012 Coordinators**

New member orientation program coordinators in the state legislatures have provided NCSL with advice for their colleagues for over a decade. In past years, they have given us these timeless tips for orientations:

- Plan well ahead.
- Get leaders' support.
- Don't overwhelm the participants.
- Focus on the essentials.
- Make it hands on.
- Give participants time to get to know each other.
- Be flexible and make adjustments.
- Provide training in segments that allow time for reflection.
- Custom fit your computer training for a wide ability range.
- Give participants materials that allow them to continue learning.
- Get feedback and adjust future programs based on that information

Our 2012 survey shows all of those tips are still good, but the current responses had some clear themes. This year's replies stressed not overwhelming the new members, giving them time to get to know each other, giving them additional materials and getting feedback, and provided a new tip about using legislator panels in training sessions.

#### Don't overwhelm the participants

The 2012 survey comments kept mentioning the theme that "too much territory covered results in less retention." One coordinator mentioned that the hardest part of planning is figuring what to keep out of the program. Another cautioned fellow coordinators to remember that it is "an orientation. The details will work themselves out" as the freshmen start the actual session. This "don't overwhelm them" comment also reflects the fact that coordinators are getting pressure from many sources to add more to their orientations.

#### Give them time to get to know each other

One coordinator said that the most important part of the orientation was the receptions, and he was being serious. So much about legislating involves building trust and relationships, and that often starts with a lawmaker's fellow new members. Legislators begin the process by understanding their colleagues and what makes them tick. These receptions often give the participants a chance to unwind and reflect on what they've heard and what their peers are thinking about heading into the session.

#### Give participants materials to continue learning

Coordinators gain a lot by creating training materials for the participants. First, it forces the orientation planners to think of exactly what they want to convey in the orientation. Reducing things to writing forces them to be clear, concise and accurate in what they provide, which in turn provides sharper focus to the training. Second, some new members may miss parts of training for a variety of reasons, so the use of training materials helps make sure everybody gets the important information. Lastly, even though the orientation is important, leadership fights, business or family concerns, media requests and other factors can often keep participants from paying attention all the time during the program.

### Get feedback and adjust future programs

Earlier comments from coordinators have stressed the value of doing participant surveys after the orientation. In 2012, we received additional suggestions to personally interview some participants as well, allowing the coordinators to use follow-up questions to seek out new ideas. Also, the coordinators suggested seeking input from legislators who mentor new members, as they know what the new members asked about as the session went along.

### Using legislator panels

One new practical suggestion involves a traditional part of new member orientation: the panel of experienced legislators giving their tips on good legislative practices. These panels are very popular and often spark some good discussion. Coordinators worry about cancellation, as last-minute problems can drop one or more of the faculty for a session. One coordinator suggests always having at least four people for this type of session, which gives you a built-in cushion in case of cancellation and also provides some variety in the advice. Further, you want to offer the new members a sense that there is no single path to being an effective legislator.