

Meeting the Public Scrutiny

Speaker Greg Stumbo of Kentucky has a unique perspective, having been the Kentucky attorney general and the speaker of the House of Representatives. “When I was the AG, everyone believed me, but as a legislator, nobody believed me.” He was exaggerating for effect, but his point was that the public tends to give the benefit of the doubt to executive branch officials, but be highly skeptical of legislators. In giving advice to his legislative colleagues at NCSL’s Fall Forum in Tampa last week, Speaker Stumbo told them that they have to stand up for their branch of government. When making budget decisions in tough times, legislators “have traditionally underfunded themselves because of the intense public scrutiny.” The answer, he suggested, is to take a fair share of the cuts, but be ready to explain the need for legislative funding. He helps Kentucky legislators be ready to explain the case for the legislative expenditures. The guidelines are to be clear and honest in explanations and use common-sense reasoning to explain decisions. His strategy in Kentucky is to disseminate memos to legislators so they will have the straightforward talking points on the issues that will likely come up with their constituents. The high public scrutiny for legislators won’t change any time soon---Speaker Stumbo urged legislators to take on that challenge, continue to fund the legislature at fair levels, and be prepared to tell constituents why the legislature needs to be strong.