

**Written testimony before the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress  
United States House of Representatives  
“Fostering the Next Generation of Leaders”**

**Leadership development and training of state legislators  
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Chairman Kilmer, Vice-Chairman Graves and Members of the Select Committee:

The National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) is the national, bipartisan organization serving all state legislators and legislative staff. Our mission is to strengthen the institution of the legislatures, provide connections between the states and serve as the voice of state legislatures in the federal government. NCSL provides unbiased and comprehensive information to help legislators navigate complex policy issues. Thank you for inviting me to discuss how states and NCSL provide professional and leadership development for state legislators.

Americans expect their elected officials to solve problems and be stewards of democracy. It is an expectation that is about to enter its fifth century on American soil. In less than two weeks, Virginia will celebrate the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of representative democracy on this continent when it marks the first meeting of the Virginia House of Burgesses on July 30, 1619. As the laboratories of democracy, state legislatures have been serving the American people ever since. They tackle tough topics. State legislators study, negotiate, compromise and collaborate to get things done, and the vast majority of legislation passed is done so with bipartisan support.

Yet, there is no formal training ground to be an effective legislator, nor a solitary path to learn the skills to be an effective legislator. Some states are beginning to expand on what have been limited legislative training programs. NCSL, and other organizations, are also increasing programs to help legislators develop the skills and knowledge they need to thrive as policymakers and representatives of the people they serve.

My work includes researching programs states are implementing to advance skills and to create professional development courses that NCSL delivers in the states. The main question I'll address is: “How do state legislators get the training they need to excel at their job?” Below is background as well as ideas and recommendations based on NCSL's research at the state level.

**What are the states doing to provide training?**

**A. Orientations**

Every legislature and/or chamber has a new member orientation program. As part of new member orientations, most states are providing a base-level introduction to the necessary topics legislators will need immediately. Most orientation programs include these topics: the legislative institution, the roles of the parliamentary officers, legislative staff resources, the budget process, ethics, bill enactment, chamber etiquette, rules and procedures and the committee process as well as logistics like getting reimbursed and how to use legislative IT systems. Increasingly, states

are including a sexual harassment prevention component. Some programs expose legislators to basic policy issues that are likely to come up in the session.

A unique idea comes out of Missouri where they offer an “on-the-road” orientation program. For six days, newly elected legislators tour the state to better understand other districts and the state as a whole. Plus, they form friendships and bonds that last throughout their legislative career.

Other states partner with universities like Tennessee (UT), North Carolina (UNC), and Michigan (MSU) to conduct orientation training.

It’s important to note that timing and resources can be difficult for states. States vary greatly on how much time they have before starting session and most states have constitutionally mandated session end dates, so they have limited time windows to conduct new member orientations. Legislators have access to very different staff resources and, in many states, legislators are essentially solo practitioners who must rely on their peers, lobbyists and veteran central, nonpartisan staff to learn the ropes.

#### B. Ongoing orientation training

Some states provide ongoing programs to help legislators cultivate skills beyond their initial orientation. Wisconsin, Maine, Hawaii House, Colorado Senate, and Washington House are a few examples of chambers or legislatures that provide ongoing professional development in at least one topic (for example, Colorado provides ongoing parliamentary procedure training, Idaho provides civics education and other chamber and caucuses assign mentors).

Orientation programs are not perfect. They have shortcomings such as:

- 1) A shortened time-frame to cover a massive amount of information.
- 2) They don’t necessarily catch legislators who come to the legislature after the traditional election cycle, through special elections or appointments. Unless a state has ongoing training, many of these legislators are trial-by-fire.
- 3) Many don’t offer continued learning opportunities or pathways. While that is changing in some instances, many are still one-off information sharing programs.

### **What does NCSL offer?**

#### A. Onboarding

Newly-elected legislators receive a ‘Welcome Packet’ including skills briefs, policy specialist contact information, a personal liaison to connect with, NCSL’s State Legislatures magazine, a catalogue of archived webinars, and a link to NCSL’s podcast (which features 20-minute discussions with experts and other legislators in policy areas and professional skills).

#### B. In-state training

Requests for NCSL to design and conduct legislative-specific training have skyrocketed in the past two years. As new faces arrive in state legislatures, expectations and interests are changing. Leadership across the country find ongoing skills development for their caucus or all members appealing, principally to help new legislators create a standard of what it means to be successful in their job as a legislator.

Our most popular in-state training requests are for committee chair training, effective legislator training, ethics, negotiation, media relations and strategic planning facilitation for Legislative

offices (in large states like California) leadership teams and/or caucuses. Often, we will conduct these trainings with an expert panel of former legislators to share their experiences, emphasizing peer-to-peer learning. NCSL's programs are designed using adult learning techniques and involve extensive interactivity to boost engagement and peer-to-peer learning. The programs are always customized to be relevant to the legislative environment and to reflect the norms and cultures of individual states.

The essential part of in-state training for legislators is that it is customized to the legislative environment. The enormous amount of professional development available in universities and through the private sector is often a mis-fit for legislators because it doesn't address the environment in which they function. NCSL's services are critical in the states because all programming is tailored to the uniqueness of the legislature. The most important piece of advice I could offer is that all leadership development programs should be tailored to the participant and their role in the legislature.

#### C. Online training

NCSL has produced a robust suite of webinars on both policy topics and procedural/skills topics. While we are still perfecting the webinar format, we find these are easy to access and can be viewed "on-demand" by busy legislative professionals. These also tend to be most popular with legislative staff, but we find legislators engage on hot policy topics and in "what I wish I knew"-type of programming.

The NCSL podcast has become a version of this "on-the-go" learning and can be absorbed during a commute or a spare 20-minutes. The podcast is the 21<sup>st</sup> century version of a very popular series of cassettes and CDs NCSL produced in the past called "How to be an Effective Legislator." Topics that are evergreen and still in demand are: chairing a committee, dealing with the media, managing the budget, mastering the rules, finding mentors and staff, building consensus and serving your constituents.

#### D. Leadership Development

NCSL offers specific programming for legislators in leadership positions. Their roles require unique skills to excel in the legislative setting. The key tenets of NCSL's leadership programming are:

- broadening the participant's mindset as a leader (what do leaders need to consider to be an effective leader?);
- teaching critical skills;
- providing the ability to talk to and share information with peers.

We offer numerous workshops annually exclusively for legislative leaders focusing on themes such as risk, decision-making, culture and trending policy topics. Because the leader (and his/her leadership team) is critical in moving legislation and ensuring the business of the legislature is accomplished, standard training isn't enough for this group. They need specialized and targeted programs that directly address their challenges and provide tools, so they can strive to be the best leader possible. These are also the people who are the guardians of the legislative institution and who have broader interests to consider than typical rank-and-file legislators.

Experiential programs have become a critical component in our leadership development offerings. Based on historical events, NCSL offers in-depth executive leadership programs in

Gettysburg and Normandy. The Gettysburg program focuses on transformational leadership using three separate case studies based on the leadership at the Gettysburg Battle. Normandy pushes leaders to consider their ultimate leadership legacy through the lenses of courage, imagination, risk and sacrifice and corresponding examples from D-Day. The effectiveness and uniqueness of these programs can be credited to the fact that they were created specifically to address legislative leadership. Leadership in the legislative environment is different than the business (or other) environments. Training must be tailored to address that fact, or it isn't effective.

E. Emerging Leaders

Additionally, NCSL offers an emerging leaders program. Participants are identified as "up-and-comers" by current leadership are offered an opportunity to attend a program introducing them to leadership theory and skills, with programs such as collaborative problem solving, leading through change and managing a caucus. Often, we see them climb the leadership ladder during their legislative career. Our goal is that the Emerging Leaders program is a critical first step in charting that course.

F. Legislative Staff

While the focus of this testimony is primarily on legislator leadership development, it is important to note that NCSL has long-established and extensive development opportunities for legislative staff, attended by more than 1700 staff every year. NCSL also offers the option to design and run in-state programs on topics like management and writing.

G. A note on other organizations

NCSL's training options are robust and extensive and we hope we are the go-to resource for legislators and staff. It is important to note that other organizations also offer additional legislator development opportunities and are an additional resource where legislators can gain knowledge, skills and contacts. NCSL sometimes works with these organizations (such as CSG, SLLF, Senate Presidents' Forum, and others) to provide learning experiences for legislators.

**How does NCSL determine what to offer and what strategies does NCSL use to deliver?**

We determine our offerings based on conversations with legislative leaders, legislators and legislative staff directors, plus informal surveys and conversations with training professionals in the states. Within the next year, we will embark on an extensive needs assessment exercise to further curate our offerings to improve and strengthen our current offerings.

As with any progression, certain courses are better for newly-elected legislators and other programs are best understood and useful for more seasoned legislators. "Drinking from the fire hose" is an often-used expression to describe a legislator's first session. It's difficult for newly-elected legislators to absorb leadership philosophy or strategically think about working with the media and lobbyists when they are still trying to find the bathrooms.

Providing professional development is about meeting the learner where s/he is, not spewing information at them. Using adult learning techniques is a key component of how NCSL creates new learning content.

**What can institutions do to promote leadership development?**

Peter Drucker said, "Culture eats strategy for breakfast." If our institutions rely solely on strategy for success, we are doomed to fail. The culture that exists within our institutions determines their ultimate

success or failure. Culture is too often an afterthought yet should be top of mind to create the best possible environment for creating sound policy. Culture doesn't need to start at the top, but it can perish there. Leadership, as well as rank-and-file, need to understand and contribute to a culture of development, growth and learning. Most importantly, our legislative institutions must make professional development a priority.

### **Strategies/Questions for Congress to consider:**

- 1) What is the true feedback on the current orientation program? What are the successes and pitfalls? Are you willing to adapt? If not, how will this affect incoming freshman classes and their effectiveness in Congress? What does a successful career in Congress, whether 4 years or 40, look like? What skills, knowledge and experience are critical to success? How do you expose new members to those principles and skills?
  - a. Strategy: Ensure the orientation is flexible and adaptable to each new class and to the changing learning expectations and attitudes of new members. Find facilitators who are willing to re-create learning material every time. Try experiential learning. Focus on collegiality and relationship building.
- 2) What is the current attitude of continuing learning? What is one small step that can change, or update, that attitude?
  - a. Strategy: Openly discussing continued education and individual skill building can create interest. Peer to peer discussions and learning opportunities, even informal, often are the best type of adult learning. You likely have infinite access to policy briefings and training on political skills like fundraising or media relations, but what are you learning about leadership and being an effective steward?
- 3) What is the current leadership pipeline and how early does it start? Are current leaders thinking about the leaders of tomorrow? You too will one day be a picture on the wall. Have you left the institution better than when you arrived? Did you help shape the leaders who followed you, so they, in-turn, knew how to train the leaders following them?
  - a. Recommendation: create a program for emerging leaders. The program could be designed in many ways but having continuing education beyond orientation will be a first step in providing necessary legislative training to the next generation of leadership.

### **Conclusion**

NCSL believes that by developing individual legislators and leaders in the states, we in-turn strengthen the institution of the legislature, the heart of our mission. I start most of my trainings with one question, "Why did you run for office?" It shouldn't be hard to answer, and most of the time it isn't. Most legislators know exactly why they wanted to be part of the legislative institution that is the foundation of American democracy. But, often, the noise of the everyday legislature can push this thought to the recesses of their mind. By bringing this thought to the forefront at each training, members engage because they know this will make them a better legislator, a better servant of their district, help them excel at their job. It's not partisan, it's not politics, it's good leadership for the future.