I am Lori Yates, and I am the Director of Events and Engagement for the Illinois State Senate Republican Caucus.

On behalf of Illinois Senate Republican Leader Dan McConchie and the Illinois State Senate Republican Caucus, thank you to NCSL for allowing us to share the many creative ways our members connect with constituents.

Let me begin by telling you a story.
If you are involved in the legislative process, you know there can be what seems like dozens of bills passed every year that name roads and bridges after people who left big impacts in their local communities, such as first responders and veterans.

Outside of the bubble of the statehouse you’re in, however, very few people seem to know, or even care, about these namesakes, with the exception of family members and loved ones.

A few years ago, one of our Senators, Sue Rezin, passed legislation naming a state route in her district the “Witczak (WIT-Zick) Brothers Memorial Highway.”
You see, there were seven brothers from this area who served in either World War II or the Korean War.

Most lawmakers may send out a news release and a social media post about these types of events, but we saw this as a tremendous opportunity to connect with a variety of constituents.
We decided we would hold a special sign unveiling ceremony with the last surviving brother.

- We contacted the local fire department to use their garage space to hold the ceremony.
- We invited *every* veteran group from the senator’s district to come to the event.
- We invited all local and state office holders to come.
- And we invited constituents and other local organizations.
We also invited area students to attend, suggesting to schools that it was a chance to show thanks to our veterans and provide students with a unique learning opportunity.

Everything on the event day was ready and perfect, and then something amazing happened. The firehouse was full – standing room only.

The students came, local and city officials, random community members. Even several news outlets came to cover the event.
After the sign was unveiled to a thunderous applause, Senator Rezin spoke about why she sponsored the legislation, how she has gotten to know the family, and why it’s important to honor veterans such as these.

Then, Anthony Witczak, the last surviving brother, got up and spoke and you could hear a pin drop:

**PLAY VIDEO NOW (Video not accessible in this PDF document. If you would like to access it, please see PPT).**

What a moment inside that fire house. There were no dry eyes.

You could tell the students were moved beyond anything they would have learned in the classroom. Such an impactful day.

You may have also noticed that video had music to it.

The entire video, of which I just showed you just a snippet, was edited and turned into a 3-minute package featuring Senator Rezin, people singing the Star-Spangled Banner, a 21-gun salute, the sign unveiling, and of course Anthony’s remarks.

That caught people’s attention… it engaged them. That video had more than 7,000 views between Facebook and YouTube.
So, when thinking about your events, make sure you are capturing videos and photos that tell a story, – not just videos of the senator standing there and talking to the camera.

When you combine all of that, the impact this event had on people, the media coverage it generated, the social media reach, the word-of-mouth publicity it created, and the connection so many constituents now had with the Senator…. Constituent engagement was off the charts. This was truly not your average road naming ceremony.

So, I am excited to be here to share how our state senators have successfully connected with constituents in unique ways that foster real, positive engagement – just like that road naming event.
So how do our senators enhance messaging, visibility, and constituent services within their districts through events, partnerships, and collaborations?

Here is how it comes together:

At the beginning of each year, we hold a communications meeting with each of our senators in order to identify the following points. Legislators who don’t have staff support can ask themselves the following questions:

**#1 General Messaging**
- What are the priority messages/issues they would like to convey to their constituents?
- What bills are they sponsoring that they would like to specifically promote?

**#2 Policy Messaging**
- We then provide a list of policy proposals and ask members to rank issues from 1-10 so we can prioritize what is most important to them.

**#3 Targeted Messaging**
- Are there district-centric issues they would like to focus on?
- Are there specific constituencies, community groups, or statewide organizations they would like to work with more closely?

**#4 Social Media**
- How would they like to improve their social media?
- Are there different platforms that they would like use?
Are they willing to take more photos and do more videos with our team?

What are some major legislative goals they want to highlight on social media?

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#5 Events & Engagement

- Which constituencies within their district would they like to strengthen relationships with?
- Are there any local organizations in their district that they would like to partner with to host a public outreach event?
- Are there specific holidays or days or months of observance they would like to focus on in their outreach efforts?

Before I show you some of our unique events and engagement activities, let me ask you two questions you can take a guess at:
1) What percentage of users become regular customers after an experiential marketing event?

70%

For our purposes, you could really switch “users” to “constituents.” So, essentially, 70% of constituents become regular customers after a marketing event. Regular “customers” of your legislator and his or her brand.
2) What percentage of event attendees say that they have a more positive opinion about the company, brand, product, or service being promoted after the event?

84%

So, “84% of event attendees say they have a more positive opinion of the senator after the event.”

Powerful.

As you can tell, events, if done right, can be hugely positive for your legislator, what he or she stands for, the party they represent, and their relationship with their constituents.
So, let’s get into some examples you can use.

We all know the pressure nurses have been under as front-line responders during the COVID crisis.

So, when answering the question, “Which constituencies within your district would you like to strengthen relationships with?”, Senator John Curran said that he wanted to strengthen his relationship with nurses.

Here’s how we went about strengthening this important relationship.
First, we identified when National Nurse’s Appreciation Week was (May 6-12 of each year).

We then reached out to the Illinois Hospital Association to see if they could connect us with some hospitals in the senator’s district.

The Illinois Hospital Association made an introduction to the governmental affairs representative of Advocate Hospital that serves his district.

And we then held a phone call with them and brainstormed on what our Senator could do to demonstrate his appreciation.
We developed an idea that the Senator and his staff would greet nurses at the 6 a.m. shift change at the hospital with coffee, donuts, flowers, and notes of appreciation.

Senator Curran was able to personally thank over 250 nurses for their service during the shift change.

Our staff took video and photos that we posted on social media.

Out of that appreciation event, the head nurse asked Senator Curran to address the hospital systems nurse’s council which included a council of nurses from multiple hospitals around his senate district.

We were then able to replicate this event for several other of our members.

If you can’t do an event, you could film an appreciation video to share on social media, as well as email to each of the hospitals/medical facilities in your district to have the hospital share with staff. This still allows the legislator to show support but can be easier to accomplish for offices with smaller staffs/larger districts.
Another group of legislators desired to connect with more young people.

It’s no secret that many young people are disengaged with government.

So, we developed, from scratch, the Youth Advisory Council.
The Youth Advisory Council is designed to encourage high school students to take an active role in learning how state government operates.

The students are nominated by their teachers from high schools across the district as students who might be interested in exploring a career in public service.

In the spring, the students travel to Springfield to hold a mock committee hearing, tour the Capitol, and listen to speakers.

Senators then also hold another meeting with the students in their district later that year where they hear from local leaders, business leaders, and inspirational speakers.
We also make sure we get quotes from several students from different high schools.

PLAY VIDEO NOW (Video not accessible in this PDF document. If you would like to access it, please see PPT).

That is done for two reasons.

One, it shows the Senator is engaging people from all over the district, not just one area.

But also, and this is key that not many people do…, when the Senator’s press staff sends the news releases out about this event, local papers in all those areas are more likely to print the story and photos because they have students from their community quoted in the news release and photos are provided.

And let me tell you, it worked.
Pictures of the Senator and quotes from students were in a multitude of different media outlets across his district.

So, that is definitely a tip you can bring to your team: **Have tailored news releases, with quotes from local individuals and pictures, sent to local news stations, newspapers and websites that cover that area.**

While it takes a lot more work and organization, the payoff is worth it.
We also take pictures of the senator and each student, and quickly get them developed so we can give it to them by the end of the day.

That will forever be a reminder to parents and grandparents about what a great job their senator is doing.
So, those two examples hit two constituencies... young people and nurses. Veterans are another important group.

Meeting with veterans to talk issues is always a great idea for lawmakers.

What if we could take honoring these brave men and women a step further and personally connect them to their state senator so they can share personal stories of bravery and service?

Our team developed the Veterans Day Wall display.
District and communications staff, through letter writing campaigns to schools, social media, news releases, e-newsletters, and working with veterans’ groups that our office helped connect, spread the word of encouraging constituents to submit a photograph and a written story of a veteran in their life.

The Veterans Day Wall, located in the Illinois Capitol Rotunda, then showcases those photos and stories around the Veterans Day holiday.

It was very impactful to read the amazing stories of bravery and honor of those who fought for our country on this display.

Every year, our caucus also holds a media event to highlight the wall which garners great media coverage.

This display is easily something your staff, interns, or volunteers could do. While we did this in the capitol rotunda, you could host this anywhere in your district, like Village Hall, a VFW, or any venue with high foot traffic.
What we do is create a PowerPoint presentation on a timed rotation with photos and stories of the veterans. We then connect that to a large screen television, which is placed in the middle of the wall.

The general public can read the stories, but they too can also participate. We had sheets of paper where they could write their loved one’s name and a short story and staple it to the wall.

This display really helps tie our senators to the backbone of our nation, our veterans, and honors them in a special way.
The last event I want to discuss with you shows the power of community and a whole lotta love.

This outreach program was featured on both Martha Stewart’s and the Better Homes and Garden websites.

During the heightened part of the pandemic, those living in long-term care and assisted living facilities were forced to limit their social interactions.

In an effort to mitigate senior isolation, we introduced the “Valentines for Seniors program.”
This program consisted of asking churches, schools, and community members to write Valentine’s Day cards for seniors in long-term and assisted living facilities in their districts and delivering them to their respective senators’ offices.

In the several days leading up to Valentine’s Day, the senator and volunteers delivered the cards to local senior living facilities.

Across our caucus, more than 45,000 cards were sent to seniors.

The thing to remember about things like this is that the Senator isn’t just engaging with seniors.

Because of our comprehensive lists of churches, schools, and community leaders, those groups are, in essence, also engaging with the senator.

Even if they do not take part, they are aware the senator is really trying to build up his or her district in a positive way.

Additionally, we heard from so many family members of the seniors living in these facilities thanking our senators for thinking of their loved ones.
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more IDEAS

✔ State Capitol guests of honor – identify community leaders to come visit the statehouse as a guest of the Senator and recognize them on the Senate floor.

✔ Women’s conference – identify a speaker or speakers and host an event just for women on certain issues, empowerment, or parenting.

✔ Blood drives, coat drives, drive through flu shots, electronic recycling fairs, a shred your documents event, food drives, and more.

I will quickly mention some other events your team can do that will foster excellent engagement:

- State Capitol guests of honor – identify community leaders to come visit the statehouse as a guest of the Senator and recognize them on the Senate floor.

- Women’s Conference – identify a speaker, or speakers, and host an event just for women on certain issues, empowerment, or parenting.

- Blood drives, coat drives, drive through flu shots, electronic recycling fairs, a shred your documents event, food drives, and more.

You might be thinking that the Senate Republican Caucus can do this all because we have a staff that is bigger than most legislatures in the country.

So, think about having more interns, find volunteers, and find partnerships with organizations that you can team up with you to help balance the workload.
Also, this is key, remember to have someone dedicated to capturing names, addresses, email addresses, and phone numbers at these events so you can further advance your database and reach certain groups with a message quickly and easily.
Building a specific database of groups of people like this— it is gold for constituent outreach and engagement for the senator.

These unique events and outreach efforts have been so fruitful for our senate members.

But don’t just take my word for it:
PLAY VIDEO NOW (Video not accessible in this PDF document. If you would like to access it, please see PPT).
Thank you. I am open to questions.