

Saying “Good Bye” to Benjamin

Written by Kathleen Vinehout, State Senator 31st District
Monday, 18 July 2016 19:21



Sen. Kathleen Vinehout says farewell to staff member Benjamin Larson. Legislative staff play an important role in serving the public good and many people living in the 31st Senate District know Ben because they contacted the office.

MADISON - “I make the promises and my staff keeps them,” said former state Senator Dale Schultz (R-Richland Center). I don’t know if Senator Schultz was the first to say this but his statement certainly describes the important role of Capitol staff.

Our 31st Senate District long-time staffer **Benjamin Larson** will be leaving soon for Minneapolis. Ben is following his wife who will take up advanced studies in the Twin Cities.

Legislative staffers touch many lives and Ben has certainly influenced the course of life for many people. He is often the first person people encounter when they contact our Capitol office.

Calling your state Senator might not be the first action taken when you have a problem with state government. The state bureaucracy is vast and varied. Usually people begin with the agency that handles the problem they face, like contacting the Department of Natural Resources if they need a permit or the Department of Public Safety and Professional Services for an issue with a license.

By the time folks get to our senate office, they are often frustrated and discouraged. The story of their problem is complex. Their situation did not fit some neat rules of state government and they feel like the proverbial square peg someone tried to pound into a round hole.

Therefore, the call or email comes to our senate office.

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Often Ben answered the phone. He listened with an empathic ear and took notes as he thought about the plan of action to help the person.

Sometimes the action was clear. He could provide referral to an office or knew the proper person to call. In other cases, the action was not clear due to the complexity of the person's dilemma.

I remember a case several years ago, that resulted because laws were in direct conflict with each other.

Ben worked hard to help an Eau Claire family adopt a boy from Ethiopia. Federal law required the family to prove the boy had access to health care before he could be adopted. State law would not allow the provision of coverage until the boy was a Wisconsin resident.

Ben worked for several months to obtain the proper clearances and documentation to facilitate the adoption. The ecstatic family, so thankful their adopted son finally came home, stated in a letter, “Without the work of our state Senator Kathleen Vinehout and her amazing staff member Ben Larson this would not have been possible.”

An excellent staffer is gentle and comforting with people who go through the agony of conflicting laws, but firm and insistent when advocating for those people.

Even when we are not in session, the work does not end. The interim period, as it is called, is a time to prepare for the upcoming legislative session. My staff aids in this preparation by researching laws in other states, reviewing the history of Wisconsin laws or drafting bills that originated as constituent ideas. Together we craft a plan for the next legislative session.

During the summer, I also spend a great deal of time out at various events – fairs, festivals and gatherings – listening to people's opinions, ideas and problems. I scribble these details on bits of paper and carry them to Madison.

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Then Ben and his fellow staff listen to me describe the situation, read my notes and help me think of the next step. Staffers follow up with constituents to get important details. They call expert staff in agencies or work with attorneys who help research topics and draft legislation. While I’m on the road in western Wisconsin listening to constituents, my staff is doing the hard work to come up with solutions.

For a legislator who comes from varied backgrounds of farming and teaching at a university, seeing staff craft creative solutions through a myriad of obstacles is a thrill.

Constituents may never know the long hours spent or the multiple roads traveled to arrive at a solution to their particular problem. Nevertheless, I see their work. They do help me keep my promises.

Ben had well over 50,000 contacts with constituents. In each case, he served with good humor during trying times, patience with people’s frustrations, persistence in the face of obstacles, perseverance and genuine kindness.

Thanks Ben! We wish you the best!