What it is Like to be a New State Legislator

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Veteran Senator Kathleen Vinehout writes about what it is like to be a newly elected legislator. Newly elected individuals sworn in as members of the Wisconsin State Senate and State Assembly face a daunting task preparing to make all the critical decisions that are required.

MADISON - “Good morning, Senator,” said a Capitol staffer. It took me a moment to realize the man was talking to me. That was ten years ago.

This week fifteen new lawmakers raised their right hand and swore to uphold the Constitution. They celebrated with a day of family, photos and receptions.



I recall how exciting the day was and how that excitement quickly turned to the daunting challenge of adjusting to my new role of Senator.

Following Election Day, the new legislators-elect attend orientation sessions, which provide vital information relating to all aspects of the Legislature. I remember thinking there was too much information packed into a few days. I realized, as my new colleagues will, the orientation is simply a glimpse of what they will need to learn over the course of the coming months.

Most new legislators come into office with ideas about changes they want to see in state

government. Fresh ideas can be a good thing. Wisconsin does face difficult problems that require innovation. However, it's hard to innovate when, as a rookie legislator, you are just learning the language. There are new acronyms, new processes, and new agencies.

Our state government consists of nearly 40 agencies and state authorities. Add in another 200 or so commissions, councils and boards. These groups serve critical roles and provide citizen input in state decisions. For example, the Medical Examining Board oversees the practice of medicine; the Council on Veterans Programs gives veterans input.

Five support agencies help lawmakers. For instance, the Legislative Fiscal Bureau (LFB) prepares nearly 100 information papers on key programs. Whether learning about school funding or transportation, citizens and lawmakers alike can access the work of the LFB. As budget deliberations progress, LFB analysts write over 700 budget papers providing lawmakers with critical information during deliberations on the state budget.

Working on complex budget issues dominates a lawmaker's workload in the first six months of a new legislative session. Many hours are spent reading the LFB summaries or the "Cliff Notes" of the state budget bill. Last budget, the final summary was over 900 pages.

All this to say a new lawmaker has quite a lot of information to master in a short time period. At the same time, hundreds of new friends will want to visit. Wisconsin has some hundreds of statewide associations – from AAA (automobile drivers) to WWOA (woodland owners). Many groups hire lobbyists or send their own members to visit legislators.

Nearly every group that visits their legislators brings a "leave behind" – a one-page summary of the issue(s) about which they are concerned. Given that a new legislator may have 8 or 10 "visits" in a day on topics ranging from livestock feed to prison reform, leaving behind details is essential.

The challenge for all lawmakers comes in understanding the agenda of those "leave behinds." What is the need? What story is not told? Who speaks for the other side? Who is the other side?

Many of the details discussed in those meetings either are or do become bills. Last session, members of the Assembly introduced 1026 bills and Senators introduced 804 bills. Those bills are examined in greater detail during legislative public hearings. The deliberative process of public hearings in both houses of the Legislature gives us all the opportunity to learn about how a bill might help Wisconsin citizens or have unintended consequences.

A vital part of a legislator's role is communicating with constituents. Every Senator represents some 170,000 people. About 5,000 of these people (with some exceptions) will be engaged in offering an opinion or needing some assistance.

Most of the help requested by constituents involves working with the myriad of state agencies, and local governments. For some, we must seek assistance from federal officials.

To help constituents, the lawmaker and his or her staff must navigate both relationships and the complexities of the law. And to change the law takes teamwork. You will need a yes vote of 17 Senators, 50 Assembly members and a governor who will not veto your plan.

Congratulations to all our new lawmakers. Just like the rest of us, those new legislators will need you, those whom they represent, to be involved and be in touch!

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