

Lessons and Advice from Former Governors

Challenges Common To Outgoing Governors

The National Governors Association (NGA) has conducted various surveys of former governors. Among other things, former governors were asked to identify the aspects of leaving office that presented the greatest challenge to them and their families.

The personal aspects of transition posed the greatest difficulties. For example:

- Preparing for change, including adjusting to an election loss, worrying about a period of decompression, dealing with the abrupt cessation of activity and sense of involvement, experiencing diminished opportunity to participate in challenging activities and losing close personal associations with staff and fellow officials;
- Determining future employment for both the governors and their spouses, including deciding what to do for a career change and the type and location of new employment; and
- Handling the details related to housing and moving, including getting situated in a new home, locating or reacquiring personal belongings (e.g., a car, furniture, household items), actually moving and returning to household maintenance responsibilities.

Other problems experienced by governors during the last months in office included:

- Rushing to complete unfinished program agendas;
- Sharing experiences and offering advice to others without appearing to be imposing or domineering;
- Handling job assistance requests; and
- Disposing of records and papers.

The months following the end of term also presented problems for former governors and their spouses. For example:

- Fulfilling the continuing commitments of being a former governor and first lady, including handling the state work that can continue for many months, such as mail and scheduling; and
- Fulfilling these commitments without an office, staff or secretarial support.

Recommended Solutions to Transitioning Out Challenges

Looking back, former governors identified steps they could have taken to help address these problems or concerns in a more satisfactory manner. Regardless of the circumstances prompting their departure—constitutional mandate, choice or defeat—the message from former governors is consistent: Plan ahead.

Major planning advice cited by former governors includes the following:

- Conduct better long-range planning in general;
- Implement a records disposition policy at the outset of the term;
- Develop a more sensitive process for dealing with transition;
- Create a more comprehensive plan spaced over the entire transition period, rather than focusing solely on the final weeks;
- Start planning earlier for the return to nonofficial life; and
- Plan for heavy residual responsibilities for state business after leaving office, including arranging for staff assistance. In one former governor's words: "Plan to spend practically full-time for at least 60 of the first 90 days out of office, then perhaps 45 of the next 90 days, then [from] 30 to 45 of the next 90 days and some lesser amount in the final quarter."

Specific Transition-Out Advice from 5 Recent Former Governors

In preparation for the large number of 2010 gubernatorial elections and governors transitioning out of office, NGA conducted a brief survey in August 2009 to obtain transition-out advice from governors who most recently left office. The following is a sample of the advice these former governors shared.

- 1. What advice would you give governors who are approaching their final 12-18 months in office?**
 - Bring projects to an end. Start the process of finding jobs for key staff. Do a yearbook of staff and major accomplishments (using campaign funds).
 - Be deliberate about how you spend your time. While you likely will not be able to line up your next career while in office, you can meet with folks to simply seek their advice on next steps.
 - Continue to focus on accomplishing your agenda. Do not coast. Make sure the initiatives you really care about root strong enough to survive. Do not be afraid to propose new “doable” initiatives. Do not worry about being a lame duck, you are still the governor.
 - Get a job. Learn to drive.
 - Identify those last, major initiatives you want to accomplish and know you have only four to six months to get them done—lock in your legacy.

- 2. What were the major challenges you faced in the final 12-18 months in office?**
 - Tax reform.
 - Lack of mandate, need to make difficult choices in a bad fiscal climate.
 - It was harder to get things done, but by no means impossible. I proposed and got enacted a more rigorous core high school curriculum in the last 18 months even though my poll numbers were low. It took a lot of work travelling the state and personally selling to legislators.
 - Completing my agenda. In my case, passing right to work to a vote of the people and completing the capitol building by placing a dome on the existing building with largely private funds.

- 3. What contributed most to your efforts to finish strong and ensure a smooth transition out of office?**
 - We did long-term planning and worked with the governor-elect.
 - Helping key staff find their next step with the caveat of having them stay until the end of the administration.
 - I only had eight years to make a difference and wanted to use all that time to get things done. I set a tone with my staff and cabinet that we would be very cooperative with the new governor and his team irrespective of the party affiliation. That is what people expect of us. We spent at least 18 months planning and preparing documents for transition. My staff also had a constructive attitude. I also worked with my staff to make sure they would continue to have good opportunities in or out of government.
 - Accept the results of the election and happily embrace your successor.

- 4. What, if anything, do you wish you had done differently as you approached your transition of office?**
 - Spent more time sorting through papers and pictures when I had the staff.
 - I might have spent more time thinking about what I would do next—although it is difficult because you have to be so careful talking to those who would present opportunities due to ethical concerns.

5. What were the major challenges you faced in the year following your departure from office?

- Adjusting to a new life and completing a new house.
- Letting people know how to find me.
- It took me a long time (seven to eight months) to finalize my plans for my next position. My situation may have been unique because I did not want to seek another office or be a full-time lobbyist. A major challenge was learning to staff myself and becoming computer literate. It was also hard to adjust from a breakneck schedule to a slower pace. And I certainly missed staff in the governor's office where we had a close-knit team that interacted daily.
- Realizing that I was ordinary again and accepting that as a fact and as a good thing.

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