

Governor's Office Onboarding Guide: Constituent Services

Overview

Many citizens have little familiarity with state government. Their view of government often depends on the governor's ability to reach their communities or areas of interest. Moreover, many citizens will judge the governor based on how effectively state government responds to their individual problems and concerns.

A well-organized constituent services program can make a positive contribution to the governor's image and popularity. It provides his or her administration with opportunities to help people who are experiencing a crisis or who need access to government services. Citizens who have serious needs often are overwhelmed by the complexity or perceived unresponsiveness of state government. Constituent services activities can help make government more accessible and responsive.

The constituent services function in a governor's office generally includes one or more of the following activities:

- Information and referral to answer public inquiries about the governor or state government and refer citizens to appropriate state programs or agencies;
- Casework services to help citizens obtain specific benefits or resolve their problems with government agencies;
- Interest group relations to maintain or develop ties with special constituency groups to ensure the governor is aware of their concerns and they are informed about the governor's programs and priorities;
- Citizen participation programs to encourage and assist citizens and communities in making their views known on government issues and programs; and
- Public education programs or activities to help citizens better understand state government, the governor's priorities and ways to access government.

Although certain staff members may be assigned specific constituent services functions, an effective constituent services program will involve staff from almost all units within the governor's office. In addition, any program that includes information and referral or casework will require close cooperation between the governor's office and executive branch agencies.

An effective constituent services effort sends a positive signal to citizens that the government makes it a priority to address their needs.

Through an effective constituent services program, the governor can send a strong message to state government on the importance of being accountable to the citizens of the state.

Organization and Staffing

Some governors have established staff positions dedicated to performing one or more constituent services functions. Other states have combined constituent services with a correspondence unit. Another model is to parcel out individual constituent service responsibilities to other offices such as the press office or agency liaison unit. Whichever organizational approach is taken, it is important to clearly define responsibilities and establish a regular process for coordinating constituent services with related office functions. The chief of staff, deputy chief of staff or another member of the governor's senior staff often ensures this coordination.

Particular attention should be focused on the division of responsibilities between gubernatorial and agency staff. The governor's office can implement a centralized or decentralized model for constituent concerns involving state agencies. If functions are to be centralized in the governor's office, it is important

that the constituent services staff recognize they are not responsible for agency operations and that individual eligibility and service delivery decisions must be left to the agencies. Alternatively, if constituent services functions are de-centralized, someone in the governor's office must be responsible for periodic evaluation of agency responses.

Selecting Staff for Constituent Services

Because of the urgency and volume of citizen requests for assistance, the governor and his or her senior staff should be very particular in selecting constituent services staff. Although many constituent services functions can be combined, the skills needed to perform effective casework are different from those needed to take and refer a large volume of telephone calls or work effectively as a liaison with a constituent group. As a result, when tasks are combined, it is vital to confirm the necessary skills also are available.

Selecting casework staff is especially difficult. In many states, casework positions are entry-level professional positions requiring strong organizational skills, knowledge of policy issues and an understanding of the inner workings of state government. Many governors' casework staff are responsible for answering mail related to both policy issues and casework. The workload in constituent services usually is divided by issue area, requiring knowledge of program services in each area.

Casework positions also require strong interpersonal skills and a commitment to and concern for others. Casework staff must be particularly persistent and attentive to detail. They must be empathetic and able to communicate comfortably at many levels and in a variety of circumstances. These individuals need to be sensitive to the sometimes urgent needs of constituents and creative and flexible in developing strategies to serve people with diverse socioeconomic and geographic backgrounds.

Casework staff can suffer burnout. Cross-program training and flex time can help reduce staff fatigue. Although some specialization will develop, it is important for casework staff to remain knowledgeable about a variety of programs, both to

avoid burnout and accommodate vacations, vacancies and workload peaks. Some states use interns to help with certain duties so that caseworkers can maintain a more reasonable workload.

Burnout also can be reduced by encouraging caseworkers to participate in programs designed to recognize the value of their work and improve their understanding of state government. These programs often include inviting guest speakers from state agencies to brief staff on issue areas, allowing casework staff to attend legislative hearings when appropriate, and sharing staff with regional offices so they remain aware of concerns exclusive to particular regions of the state.

Managing Workload Challenges

The most critical workload consideration is to ensure there are sufficient staff to deliver the promised services. Casework mail can typically be parceled out among agencies in an emergency, but the operation of toll-free information lines and the performance of other outreach efforts often require permanent staff to meet ongoing demands. It also is important to recognize that work will grow over time. As services are publicized, new requests will be generated. Word-of-mouth referrals from satisfied constituents may increase demand substantially. The governor's office must be prepared to respond.

Roles and Responsibilities

An effective constituent services operation offers many opportunities to promote the governor's goals and priorities. A successful program can:

- Reduce citizen frustration in dealing with state agencies;
- Build bridges to important constituency groups;
- Reinforce the governor's image as an effective manager of state government;
- Underscore the governor's concerns about the needs of constituents; and
- Promote public support for gubernatorial initiatives.

Constituent service programs can serve as a barometer for tracking trends in public opinion and

anticipating issues or problems. Outreach efforts encourage groups and individuals to alert the governor to emerging issues. Constituent mail and calls highlight problems or programs of interest to the public. Casework requests may signal problems with program coverage or agency administration before they reach crisis proportions.

Any type of constituent services program requires a means of communicating with the public. In most states, ceremonial requests, informational inquiries and casework problems flow to the governor without any organized outreach effort. The convenience of email, 24-hour access to the office provided through social media and links on the governor's website, and outreach efforts have increased the number of inquiries to the governor. In addition, outreach efforts can increase the volume of requests substantially and produce the need for a more extensive or specialized system for managing the workload. Most states have systems to handle the logging and referral of letters, email, telephone requests and walk-in constituent concerns.

The constituent services function includes several different services. Although every governor's office will provide each of these services to some degree, the relative importance of each in any single state will vary depending on the governor's goals, his or her personal preferences and the traditional role of the governor's office. Constituent services usually includes providing information and referral, managing casework, maintaining interest group relations and promoting citizen participation and public education.

Providing Information and Referrals

Information and referral is the simplest and most common form of constituent services. Every member of the governor's staff will be called on to respond to requests for information and refer callers to the appropriate agency for additional information or services. However, many governors' offices have identified special staff to receive requests from the general public and created a network of referral resources to be used. Most effective information and referral programs share key components.

The information and referral program of most governors' offices is informal and largely unpublicized. Some states have encouraged agencies to develop specialized information and referral programs to meet specific needs. In a few cases, however, a governor's office has chosen to publicize a general state information line handled through the governor's office.

In many states, the governor's office may have access to a previously developed resource manual for selected types of constituent services. Where such manuals do not exist or are incomplete, community service programs may have compiled similar documents for their own use. In some communities, public and private agencies have used technology (such as 2-1-1 and 3-1-1 telephone information hotlines) to link individuals in need of services to agencies that can assist them.

The governor's staff may want to meet regularly with agency staff to become familiar with how referrals are handled.

Managing Casework

The goal of casework is to find a solution to a problem that has been presented to the governor. Caseworkers perform an invaluable service by acting as intermediaries for constituent concerns, mainly with state agencies. An agency's size, policies and organizational structure can seem overwhelming to average citizens; the caseworker can ease their anxiety and confusion, explain agency positions or help resolve disputes over agency decisions.

Constituent problems requiring casework often are referred directly to agencies without the governor's office taking an active role. In those situations, casework mail usually is tracked through the correspondence system and referred to an appropriate agency for direct reply. Some governors will write to the constituents directly to notify them of the referral, while others will rely on the agency to note that the reply is on behalf of the governor.

When a governor decides to have his or her staff provide these services directly, the critical casework

functions include intake, management control, service or referral, follow-up and quality control.

Intake involves several steps. Many inquiries will come by mail or email, others will come by telephone or web forms and some citizens may bring their concerns to the governor's office in person. It is important to ensure that receptionists, telephone operators and other staff members are trained and prepared to identify casework requests properly and refer them to the appropriate staff. Although most constituents will be cooperative, some individuals requesting services may appear distressed or disturbed. When possible, the receptionist or staff member handling walk-in requests should have immediate access to security personnel.

Casework assignments should be monitored on a regular basis to ensure timely responses. Unanswered requests can give constituents a negative impression of the governor and lead to added stress and reduced productivity among staff.

Constituent requests often are presented to the governor personally when he or she travels or attends public events. When possible, it is valuable to have a staff member traveling with the governor who can handle these requests. The governor or traveling staff member needs to carefully record such requests, including the name of the constituent and his or her contact information.

Management control requires a process for recording and tracking requests for service and assigning those requests to appropriate staff and agencies. In many states, this function is integrated with the governor's

correspondence system. Whatever recording and tracking method is used, casework assignments should be monitored on a regular basis to ensure timely responses.

Service or referral requires the clear identification of a problem, development of a solution and communication of that solution to the constituent. Staff must be trained to recognize the information needed to handle a case effectively. For example, the availability of services may depend on the citizen's age, gender, family income, prior history, geographic location or other criteria.

Occasionally, considerable time must be spent to research the circumstances of a particular case and develop effective solutions. Problem solving often can be expedited if the governor's constituent services staff develops a network of regular contacts in the state agencies. Those relationships can be enhanced by periodic meetings with, and support from, the governor and agency heads.

Follow-up involves communicating solutions to constituents and can be very time-consuming. Although letters may appear to be the most rapid means of response, some offices rely heavily on the telephone to be certain that the constituent understands the service being offered and ensure that the service responds to the constituent's needs.

Quality control should focus on the timeliness and content of the services and responses provided. Agency responses should be reviewed on a regular basis to ensure they are responsive to the constituent and reflect the governor's attitude toward constituent services. Once again, periodic meetings between the governor's office and agency staff can help define expectations and resolve problems.

Maintaining Interest Group Relations

In many states, interest groups play an important role in representing citizens' interests and influencing public opinion and the public's reception of the governor's initiatives. These groups can be organized along demographic, geographic and cultural lines. They also can represent groups of citizens with

common problems or concerns. Many governors use constituent services staff to maintain regular contact with interest groups.

The means of contact vary greatly. In some cases, interest groups are assigned specific points of contact within the governor's office. In other cases, staff members have direct responsibility for specific outreach efforts and are expected to attend meetings of selected groups, provide these groups with periodic reports on the governor's programs, inform the governor of any concerns the groups raise and ensure an appropriate response.

Promoting Citizen Participation and Public Education

A well-organized public education program will assist the governor in the effort to educate the public on the role of government or a new or revised government program. Such an effort can enhance the governor's image and visibility among citizens. At the same time, there is a growing desire on the part of the voters to interact with the governor and share their interests and concerns. Citizen participation initiatives seek to establish and maintain a communication bridge between the governor and his or her constituents and can take many different forms. The principal aim is to provide a link between government and citizens and increase public access to government programs and services.

In many cases, the tools for public education and citizen participation are closely related. Town meetings provide a platform for governors to explain their programs and a chance for citizens to express their concerns and views. A radio call-in show makes the governor accessible to the voters and gives him or her great flexibility to highlight issues or programs of concern. As a result, public education and citizen participation are promoted simultaneously. Of course these efforts are coordinated with the governor's communications and legislative staff.

As with most outreach efforts, the success of these activities depends greatly on the governor's personal style and his or her commitment to an ongoing program. A governor who is not comfortable in a give

and-take situation may prefer a more formal platform for his or her public education efforts.

Techniques and Tools

A strategic constituent services program can afford the governor many opportunities to increase his or her visibility and enhance his or her public image.

Challenges in Running a Strong Constituent Services Program

An aggressive constituent services program can lead to unintended problems. It is important to avoid potential problems, including:

- Creating unreasonable public expectations;
- Micromanaging the day-to-day operations of state government, which can lead to insufficient attention to broader policy concerns; and
- Supplanting agency responsibilities, which can cause a loss of accountability and undercut the ability of the governor's appointees to manage agencies properly.

To address these and other challenges, the governor's office can rely on various techniques to ensure the effective operations of constituent services. It also can take advantage of numerous tools, such as town meetings, websites and social media, to encourage greater citizen participation and promote public education.

Techniques to Enhance Constituent Services

The governor's constituent services staff can use different techniques to ensure they are effectively serving the governor's goals while being responsive to constituents' concerns. Staff members should address the cross-cutting nature of constituent services, pay careful attention to fact collection during casework, determine how to handle special requests and establish a clear chain of command.

Address the Cross-Cutting Nature of Constituent Services

Many constituent services program priorities will overlap with the goals of other functions within the governor's office. The cross-cutting nature of constituent services highlights the need for careful coordination among various units in the governor's office. For example, outreach efforts must be integrated into strategic scheduling activities, issue-related correspondence must reflect the governor's most current policy positions, the press office must be involved in public education efforts and constituent services must be added to the list of functions for which agency performance is monitored. The constituent services director should ensure that these considerations are taken into account among the governor's senior staff and that open lines of communication are established to ensure collaboration.

Pay Careful Attention to Fact Collection during Casework

In some cases, constituents do not fully understand their previous dealings with state agencies and may not be able to provide an accurate description of what has transpired. In other cases, constituents may omit critical facts. Constituent services staff performing casework must not make commitments or comment on agency performance until they have the full picture.

Determine How to Handle Special

Requests Other public officials such as members of the Congressional delegation and state legislators, often will refer constituent requests to the governor's office.

Some offices have established special procedures to handle such requests. At a minimum, responses sent by the governor's office should mention that the constituent concern is being handled at the request of the elected official who made the referral.

Establish a Clear Chain of Command

Governors' offices often find it challenging to address the concerns of constituents who contact them regularly about a multitude of issues and problems that may or may not be related to the business of state government. Sometimes these

constituents may be distressed or upset, and they are not satisfied with the best efforts of the governor's staff to respond to and refer their concerns through the appropriate channels. Constituent services staff should be trained to handle these situations and bring them to the attention of the constituent services director. The director should clearly identify a problem solving process and establish a chain of command to prevent difficult situations from escalating and resolve them as effectively as possible.

Tools to Promote Citizen Participation and Public Education

The governor's office can greatly enhance public education and citizen participation by using tools such as regional offices, town meetings, capital-for-a-day programs, toll-free information lines, the governor's website, radio call-in shows, television shows, other media events and citizen write-in campaigns.

Regional Offices

To expand constituent services, the governor may want to establish one or more regional offices; this is particularly useful in large states where frequent travel to all areas is not possible. A regional office promotes ongoing access to the governor's office and can help educate the public about the governor's priorities and programs.

In states where the capital is a small city, regional offices often are located in a large metropolitan area to take advantage of the various institutions and agencies located there and serve a densely populated area effectively. Other regional offices may be located in remote areas of the state to provide a gubernatorial presence that otherwise may not be felt.

Regional office staff should be well trained in casework, have knowledge of priority issues and possess good decision-making skills. These staff will, in effect, often speak for the governor and represent him or her at events in that region.

Ongoing, effective communication should be maintained between the governor's office and regional offices to avoid an "us" and "them" attitude. Where possible, regional staff should be involved in periodic staff meetings and given frequent opportunities to visit the capital. Rotating staff assignments can help ease isolation, generate ideas and encourage good relations between the offices.

Town Meetings

Town meetings convene community residents to discuss local concerns. The governor may choose to run such events as part of a capital-for-a-day program or as an independent activity. These informal meetings can become part of the governor's visits to locations across the state and provide him or her with a forum to hear constituent concerns, answer questions and promote policy themes and priorities. Single-event outreach to local communities through town meetings provides exposure but also requires a limited amount of the governor's time. Many governors also use the Internet to host virtual town hall meetings.

Capital-for-a-Day Programs

Although capital-for-a-day programs differ significantly among states, they usually entail the governor and members of the senior staff or cabinet traveling to a community— often a rural area or an area away from the capital—to operate the governor's office from this locality for a day or two. Trips often include meetings with elected officials and business leaders, open office hours, and planned public events and town meetings. Capital-for-a-day programs enable the governor to interact with people in different forums and draw attention to his or her goals and priorities for the region and the state.

The capital-for-a-day program design offers considerable flexibility and an excellent opportunity for collaborative work among functions, such as scheduling, casework, policymaking, and public and press relations. This type of program also has several short- and long-term advantages for schedulers. In the short term, the one- or two- day event provides a ready-made platform to promote the governor's priority issues relevant to that region. By setting the

agenda, the governor can ensure that scheduled meetings and public events focus on the appropriate priorities. On a long-term basis, the capital-for-a-day format provides a reason to defer or consolidate numerous individual invitations into one coordinated visit in order to maximize use of the governor's time.

Capital-for-a-day programs also offer an opportunity to focus local media attention on state-level issues. Advance work is critical and can entail early site visits and meetings with key leaders in the region. Preplanning should include a discussion of logistical arrangements, the identification of substantive issues and the development of press contacts.

The governor's website is a convenient tool for providing constituents with valuable information in a constantly accessible format.

Toll-Free Information Lines

A toll-free information line to the governor's office can provide low-cost access to state government. It can be used to receive requests for service and provide information on specific programs or services. The information line also can be used to solicit public opinion on issues of immediate concern to the governor.

A toll-free information line must be accessible and promoted directly to the public. In addition, the information line requires sufficient staff to answer the incoming calls on a regular basis. Finally, staff also must be prepared to encourage and enable citizens to express their views on public issues, provide information on specific services or programs and refer citizens to the agency or staff member best equipped to address their concern.

In several states, agencies provide staff coverage for the toll-free information line. Many private organizations also staff toll-free lines using specially trained answering services that are paid based on the number of calls processed. Computer-based voice mail offers another opportunity to expand the use of toll-free numbers while maintaining more control over staffing levels.

The Governor's Website

The governor's website is a convenient tool for providing constituents with valuable information in a constantly accessible format. It can provide access to the governor's photo, biography, speeches, press releases, information about management and policy initiatives, links to state agency websites and answers to frequently asked questions. Most governors' websites offer constituents an opportunity to communicate their concerns and views directly to the governor by email, through a web-based submission form or via social media.

Many governors also use the Internet to host statewide virtual town hall meetings, chats with classrooms or discussions with neighborhood civic associations. Communicating in real time is a good way for the governor to answer constituent questions, explain a new policy or deliver an important address to the entire state.

Radio Call-in Shows, Television Shows and Other Media Events

Gubernatorial appearances on radio or television enable citizen participation in state government. These appearances can take the form of regular events or infrequent programs planned to discuss and debate priority issues and to invite constituents to call with suggestions, comments or complaints.

Many governors find that call-in shows suit their personalities and provide a welcome opportunity for direct give-and-take with constituents.

Citizen Write-in Campaigns

A citizen write-in campaign involves requesting constituent input by advertising a write the governor program for voters to express their views for and

against issues. The governor can use the write-in campaign information to assess the level of public concern on selected issues or demonstrate public support for his or her programs. Such campaigns can be initiated through speeches, public announcements, the governor's website or the use of direct mail to constituents.

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