Governor's Office Onboarding Guide: Correspondence

Overview

Mail is often the easiest way for constituents to convey to elected officials their personal feelings about issues and government. Most governors' contact with constituents will occur through regular and electronic mail, telephone calls and walk-in visits. When citizens take time to participate in the governmental process, they expect a thoughtful response. This makes the governor's correspondence an important conduit between state government and the public.

An efficient system for responding to mail and directing citizen requests is critical from the outset of an administration. Careful planning can ensure that correspondence between the governor's office and the public is handled well and the governor's written responses are timely and accurate.

An effective correspondence program must consider issues such as:

- How to categorize mail;
- How to handle electronic mail (email) messages;
- Procedures for referring mail;
- Use of standard replies;
- Creation of reporting and follow-up systems;
- Development of issue codes for future use in outreach efforts and public relations; and
- Quality control and automation.

Governors need to invest in the personnel and equipment necessary to handle an increasing volume of mail. If mail is not properly handled, backlogs can cause problems throughout their tenure. The volume and diverse nature of mail prevents governors from personally seeing and responding to each letter, so much of the mail may be answered by constituent services units or referred to staff members or agencies for an appropriate response. Therefore, governors must ensure that the procedures and systems established will provide responses in a timely manner and that the responses are consistent with policies and priorities. Unanswered mail can undermine public opinion of a governor by creating an appearance of unresponsiveness and a sense that citizens' needs and concerns are unimportant.

Organization and Staffing

Organization and staffing the correspondence program will depend on several factors. A key consideration is the level of support that can be expected from other units in the governor's office. Other factors include the volume of mail and other tasks for which the correspondence staff will be responsible.

Organizing the Correspondence Program

Most states have centralized responsibility for receiving and distributing mail. This responsibility also can include maintaining the necessary quality control and preparing routine responses or acknowledgments. Depending on the level and background of staff members in the correspondence unit, other agencies in state government may need to perform substantive reviews or approve correspondence on behalf of the governor. The assignment of responsibility for correspondence will affect the size of other units in the governor's office including appointments, constituent services, legal counsel, policy and scheduling, that may be asked to assume responsibility for pre- paring or reviewing correspondence.

As is true with many functions in the governor's office, correspondence staff will need to work closely with other staff. The importance of this collaboration

needs to be understood, and the governor and his or her senior staff need to encourage a supportive and cooperative office atmosphere. The cornerstone of this environment is the understanding that the correspondence unit is very much a service operation. The needs of constituents—who are the customers of the correspondence unit and the governor's office as a whole—must come first. Good management will maintain this philosophy as a motivating goal.

Selecting Staff for Correspondence

The size and location of the correspondence unit will depend on the volume of correspondence and the nature of the responsibilities assigned to the unit. In some governors' offices, constituent services and correspondence form a joint operation; in others, they are separate functions. Although staffing may range from one caseworker to a cadre of staff members, the purpose is essentially the same—to provide a liaison between the governor and the public, primarily addressing citizens' problems and concerns.

Staffing the correspondence unit requires careful thought. In many states, correspondence positions are entry-level professional positions requiring strong writing and organizational skills, knowledge of policy issues and an understanding of the inner workings of state government. Many governors' correspondence staff are responsible for answering mail related to is- sues and casework. The workload in correspondence usually is divided by issue area, requiring knowledge of program services in each area.

These positions also require strong time-management skills as well as a commitment to and concern for others. Correspondence staff must be empathetic, detail-oriented and able to communicate clearly about complex issues and circumstances. They 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.

Agency liaison is an important priority for correspondence staff. The need for correspondence staff to develop and maintain good relations with the agencies cannot be overstated. Effective agency relations must include an understanding of the importance the governor places on timely responses to the public and the enforcement mechanisms required to achieve this goal. Correspondence staff must have strong interpersonal skills and commit to maintaining open communication with state agency personnel.

Correspondence staff can suffer burnout. These individuals are particularly prone to burnout because of the constant pressure of incoming mail and urgent need for timely and high-quality responses. Ongoing staff training should be a priority. Staff training can range from short seminars on relevant topics to cross- training staff in different issue areas.

Managing Workload Challenges

Mail and other citizen contacts generate a substantial amount of work in any governor's office. The correspondence unit needs to remain flexible to handle a variety of inquiries and initiatives.

On any given day, the workload for the governor's correspondence staff could include receiving and logging general mail deliveries, reviewing and coordinating responses to email messages, managing a mass mail delivery of postcards urging a gubernatorial policy and coordinating staff responses to general issue mail. They also may include logging and following up on citizen casework calls and walk-in visitors, coordinating a mailing by the governor to inform people (who previously have written on a certain issue) about the latest legislative developments and working with the governor's senior staff to develop standard response letters on an upcoming issue.

How the governor staffs the correspondence function will depend on both the volume of mail expected and the degree to which the governor desires to use the mail to generate support for the administration's agenda. Gubernatorial outreach efforts will generate increased mail volume.

Staffing requirements will be affected by the need to maintain and update logs and databases and to manage requests from the governor's website, the level of automation established for particular correspondence processes, the use of administrative or support staff, and whether the responsibilities for letter preparation and review are delegated elsewhere.

The need for administrative or support personnel must be considered in the staffing plan for the governor's office. In addition to administrative assistance for professional staff members, support staff can ease the workload of correspondence and constituent services staff by helping route mail, keep official records, receive and log telephone calls and greet walk-in visitors to the governor's office.

Roles and Responsibilities

An efficient system to respond to constituent mail is critical to the effectiveness of the governor's office. A mail backlog can undermine the governor's credibility, leadership and political support. Early in their administrations, governors need to make some important decisions about their role in the correspondence program and the necessary policies and procedures to ensure that it runs smoothly.

Defining the Governor's Role in the Correspondence Program

Although the governor need not be involved in the mechanics of processing correspondence, he or she will want to ensure that the organization of the correspondence program reflects his or her management style. The governor also will need to decide which mail he or she will handle personally, the degree to which staff will be allowed to respond in the governor's name, as well as how often and in which situations mail will be referred to state agencies for their own response.

Finally, the governor must decide how to handle electronic messages, telephone calls and walk-in visitors. In most states, response to calls and constituent walk-ins can be handled by constituent services or correspondence staff, depending on the level of reply required. Reports of visits can be logged and referred to particular staff members for more detailed follow-up. Responses can take the form of a letter from the governor or an interim reply if a request needs agency consideration.

The governor must determine his or her level of involvement and priorities for the correspondence system. Key issues to be resolved include:

- The governor's willingness to delegate authority in the preparation of standard issue response letters, the use of the governor's signature and the referral to other staff or agency directors of mail directed to the governor;
- Procedures for communication between the governor's office and executive agencies to ensure the timeliness and responsiveness of replies to letters referred to them for disposition;
- Approval for letters prepared in the governor's office including who will read them and authorize responses;
- Establishing turnaround target deadlines for producing responses to constituent mail;
- The amount and type of constituent mail the governor wants to review personally; and
- The priority the governor places on constituent services and how he or she prefers to balance response methods.

The governor's office must establish procedures to process email. Some states have chosen to respond to email messages by U.S. mail. Other states acknowledge email messages with an automatic reply, indicating whether and when the senders can expect to receive a personalized response. Another method is to encourage constituents to submit electronic messages through a web-based submission form on the governor's website. The web form can include predetermined subject categories that enable the governor's office to easily generate standardized responses to the email message or automatically forward the email to the correct staff member.

Logging, Classifying and Routing Correspondence

In most instances, the governor's mail is received and referred to a central mail room or correspondence unit that is responsible for opening the mail and initiating the processing. Many states have implemented security procedures to process mail in an off-site location away from the governor's office.

Many governors' offices include the following categories to classify conventional and electronic mail:

- Personal mail for the governor, which should be acted on directly by the governor;
- Business mail from state and federal officials associations, prominent citizens and others whose correspondence deserves the attention of the governor or a key aide;
- Spontaneous issue mail from citizens who write independently to express how they think the governor should handle certain issues;
- Organized issue mail that is the product of mail campaigns;
- Case mail from citizens with a specific problem that they want the governor to solve, including information or assistance, complaints regarding institutional treatment and pardons and paroles;
- Invitations and scheduling mail; and
- Miscellaneous mail, including mail on legal affairs, letters from prisoners, correspondence from students and communications from people who want to be appointed to a state board or commission or who are endorsing someone else for such a position.

A governor's correspondence staff should be assigned responsibility to receive, open and distribute mail according to an agreed-upon classification system. In some states, correspondence units are equipped to handle a large volume of issue mail without routing these letters to agencies. These units typically include designated writers with assigned areas of expertise who work with appropriate agency and/or policy staff to generate pertinent paragraphs on the given issue.

Assigning responsibility for action on the mail requires a general routing strategy. The governor's personal mail generally is referred directly to the governor or to his or her executive assistant. Mail that relates to the governor's schedule generally is referred directly to the governor's scheduler. General case mail usually can be referred to an appropriate agency or case staff, sometimes with a routine letter of referral or interim response sent to the constituent with the governor's signature. Issue mail may be handled in a routine manner by the correspondence staff or referred to specific members of the governor's policy staff for attention. Important business mail generally will go directly to the governor, the chief of staff or assigned policy specialists on the governor's staff.

A key element of the correspondence control system is to record the mail received in the governor's office and track any subsequent action. Establishing deadlines, turnaround time targets and quality control measures is absolutely essential. Citizens have a right to expect a timely response to their inquiries. Ensuring the mail is answered timely and appropriately requires a good recording and tracking system.

A correspondence database can be an important tool to identify important correspondents, track public opinion on key issues and help prepare status reports and other information for the governor. The database also can be used to develop a mailing list for outreach correspondence by the governor, such as newsletters, announcements and issue updates.

The governor's office should develop guidelines to help agencies when they are asked to answer constituent letters sent to the governor. The referral process should clearly indicate the material being transmitted, the nature of the desired action and the turnaround date, where appropriate. A decision also must be made regarding whether the original correspondence is maintained in the governor's office or sent to the agency staff member responsible for

answering the letter. If the original is sent to an agency caseworker, the system must track the original letter and ensure that it is matched to the response letter to complete the case file. Another option is to use electronic imaging as a means of sharing correspondence and response letters between the governor's office and agencies.

Establishing a comprehensive database—preferably one that can be integrated with other functions in the governor's office or other state agencies—can help maintain this information more easily, avoid duplicative or contradictory interactions with constituents and provide timely information on overall staff performance. A database can help manage the workloads of individual staff members and monitor the quality and timeliness of replies.

Sending Acknowledgments and Standard Replies

Many types of incoming correspondence cannot be answered immediately because they require action—consulting case records, developing a policy or awaiting an agency response. To provide additional time for substantive answers, many governors' offices send a standard acknowledgment letter for all incoming mail. Sometimes, the acknowledgment advises recipients their mail has been referred to an individual in a state agency who will reply to them directly. In other cases, the acknowledgment letter will indicate that the governor has asked a certain official
to look into the situation discussed in the letter and report back to the governor. In the latter case, the fi substantive response would be prepared for the governor's signature by the appropriate agency. The choice depends largely on how strongly the governor feels about signing correspondence originally sent to him or her.

The decision on whether to use standard acknowledgments in all cases is difficult. The advantage of the acknowledgment letter is that it enables the governor's office to respond quickly on even the most complex subjects. The disadvantages are that acknowledgments double the number of letters that must be sent from the governor's office and reduce the pressures on staff members to produce a substantive, timely response.

Governors' offices often use set replies for letters with recurring subjects. Standard responses or standard paragraphs can be generated for any number of topics. Preapproved responses to a particular topic or pending issue can be developed and used to dispose of these letters quickly.

The governor or designated senior staff member must approve the original draft, and adequate quality control measures must exist to ensure that the reply is appropriate to the individual correspondent. A correspondence database often can be configured to help generate standard replies by merging the correspondent's name and address into a preapproved letter. In addition, issue mail from constituents can be categorized by subject so these contacts can be retrieved later to send a mailing to update constituents on changes or legislative initiatives in particular policy areas.

Signing the Governor's Mail

Governors' offices vary considerably in how mail is signed. In some states, the governor reviews and signs virtually every letter. In other states, approved drafts are signed by one or two staff members designated to sign the governor's name. Signing even a portion of the mail requires a substantial commitment of time; autopen machines are used in many states. These machines can alleviate many staff hours otherwise devoted to this routine task. Signature technology ranges from the manually operated autopen machine to computer signature devices that offer various signatures on computer tape to sign correspondence automatically.

When establishing a signature policy, the governor's office should develop a clear and definite procedure regarding the use of the governor's signature, determine who controls access to the signature, and specify the appropriate conditions for automatically signing correspondence.

Techniques and Tools

The correspondence program offers the governor a strategic opportunity to demonstrate his or her mastery of the state bureaucracy and build credibility with the electorate. To accomplish these objectives, the correspondence staff must remain motivated and committed to the importance of the mail operation. Emphasizing the goals of the correspondence program on a regular basis will help staff stay energized and recognize the value of their work.

Goals of the Governor's Correspondence Program

An efficient and controlled mail operation can create a positive public impression of how the governor is performing his or her job, increase the governor's knowledge of state operations and provide a vehicle for communicating policies and priorities to the public and the bureaucracy.

Create a Positive Public Impression

The mail enables the governor to inform constituents of state policies and procedures and the reasons behind them. This ultimately may help alleviate public frustration with bureaucratic processes. A governor who can obtain favorable action from an unresponsive agency gains grateful constituents.

Increase the Governor's Knowledge of State Operations

The mail can give the governor valuable information on the activities of state government and often can provide early warning of developing problems or emerging issues of concern. Similar complaints may signal trouble within a particular agency or issue area. In this way, the mail system provides information on how well the substantive and administrative operations are functioning and can alert the governor's office to operations in need of improvement.

Communicate Policies and Priorities to the Public and the Bureaucracy

The governor's office can handle constituent correspondence in a proactive manner to generate public interest and support for the governor's policy objectives and send special mailings and updates on particular issues.

Techniques to Advance the Governor's Goals

Problems that may occur when responding to the governor's mail generally fall into three categories:

- Responses do not answer the constituent's question or concern;
- Replies are not timely; or
- Replies do not accurately reflect the governor's views.

The governor's correspondence staff can use various techniques to make sure they are effectively serving the governor's goals while being responsive to constituents' concerns.

Standard letters sent from the governor's office should be selected carefully—and modified as needed—to respond to constituent concerns accurately. Using databases and form letters to create replies helps the governor's staff generate timely and flexible responses, but it also increases the possibility of duplicate or inaccurate mailings. Special care is needed to ensure accuracy and retain a sense that constituents are being treated as individuals. The mail-tracking system also offers the governor an opportunity to develop specialized mailing lists to provide follow-up information to interested constituents and for public information campaigns in support of the governor's program.

Correspondence addressed to the governor ideally should be answered within a few days of receipt. Most governors' offices cannot achieve this goal, not only because of the sheer volume of mail, but also because much of the mail cannot be answered until information is obtained from another state agency. Although most constituents are prepared to wait a reasonable time for an answer, long delays reflect badly on the governor and often produce additional follow-up correspondence that further clogs the system. Some governors have found that interim replies or routine acknowledgments are effective. These acknowledgments confirm that mail has been received and is being processed while allowing more time for a substantive reply to be prepared.

Mailings sent to constituents on behalf of the governor must reflect state policy and the views of the governor accurately. Problems can arise if statements on gubernatorial policy are generated through the correspondence program without a substantive review by the governor or the governor's policy staff. Under the most common procedures, the governor personally reviews letters or approves issue positions that will be sent to citizens with his or her signature. Letters that reflect new policies or important new statements must be reviewed personally and approved by the governor. Sometimes these letters are reviewed in draft by the governor, but not reviewed again until they are in final form. In situations that call for standard responses, the governor initially would approve a standard response but would not necessarily review succeeding responses even though they bear his or her signature.

Tools to Support the Correspondence Program

The governor's office can enhance the work of the correspondence program by using tools such as systems to monitor the status of replies, quality control checks, report schedules, filing systems, technology support, regular training and updated mailing lists.

Monitoring the Status of Replies

There is a tendency to allow mail to take a back seat to more pressing matters. Similarly, it is not unusual to postpone developing a response to a difficult or controversial issue. The performance of a correspondence system depends on a policy of continued monitoring and follow-up to encourage timely responses to constituent queries and ensure that letters are not lost in processing. Without such a system, serious backlogs can be expected. There are different ways to circum- vent this problem and ensure timely follow-up:

- **Status reports for correspondence handled in the governor's office.** For correspondence handled within the governor's office the unit supervisor will need to carefully monitor and direct staff to process the mail. The director can use status reports to instill some element of competitiveness among staff members as well as encourage teamwork and cooperation, particularly to handle any backlogs. Backlogs may be alleviated by modifying workload priorities; assigning additional staff to handle a particularly high volume of issue mail; or, under certain circumstances, classifying mail to be filed without response.

- **Status reports and liaison for correspondence assigned to agencies.** For correspondence assigned to agencies, a follow-up system may include generating unit status reports as well as individual listings of unfinished work. The governor may want to use these reports, generated weekly or monthly, in cabinet meetings or other settings to remind agency directors of pending cases and unanswered mail referred to their agencies. By instilling some element of competitiveness among state agencies, the governor can reinforce the priority of providing timely, accurate replies to constituents. Follow- up with agencies also can be enhanced by designating a single liaison contact within the agency.

Ensuring Quality Control

Quality control within the correspondence system involves at least three related activities: substance and policy verification, proofreading and timeliness. At a minimum, the quality control system must ensure that communications are substantively accurate and consistent with the governor's policies and desires. The correspondence unit can perform certain elements of a substance and policy review, but at some point the system needs to include at least selective review by policy and/or other staff members.

Although a few states rely on the governor for substantive review, a more formal system of staff reviews generally will be more effective and complete. Periodic reviews of standardized replies also are

necessary to update or modify information. If the review process is selective, correspondence staff will need to be trained to identify potentially serious issues. Substantive review also is important in casework responses. Care must be taken to ensure that the reply responds to the initial inquiry and the constituent is not merely resubmerged within the bureaucracy. Here again, it is helpful if the agency head plays an active role in quality control.

No matter where the substantive review is performed, separate proofreading checks also are important. Such a review will include production controls to minimize typographical and grammatical errors and ensure the selection of the proper standard response, salutation and use of appropriate letterhead and signatures. Such reviews are, in various states, performed by the head of the correspondence unit, a special assistant, the governor's executive assistant or some other staff member. Although this may prove to be a tedious and time-consuming step, it is essential to ensure that letters bearing the governor's signature are not sloppy in appearance and do not contain incorrect salutations. Technology has increased the capacity to generate letters, but it has not minimized the need for quality proofreading.

The final quality control check concerns the timeliness of responses. This issue relates to the logging and reporting systems and the impact of changing circumstances on the appropriate reply. For example, the response to a letter urging the governor to veto a legislative proposal will likely be different before and after his or her final action on the bill.

Preparing Reports

A key element of follow-up activity is to prepare regular reports that highlight the volume and content of constituent queries to the governor's office. Report systems need to be flexible because the nature of issues will change and it may be difficult to spot early trends. Reports can be used to help identify or track emerging issues or highlight apparent problems in individual agencies. They also can provide useful information on the direction in which issue-oriented mail is heading and give the governor an indication of the intensity of public sentiment. In many states, summary and trend reports are supplemented by a sampling of the mail or mail excerpts that are made available to the governor and senior staff.

Filing Correspondence

Filing systems maintain information on the disposition of correspondence. These files can be used as a historical reference on each piece of correspondence and its disposition and to generate mailing lists.

Several filing issues need to be resolved as the correspondence system is developed:

- What are the records retention policies, practices and requirements of the state?
- What will be retained by the governor's office (hard copies of correspondence, interim replies, agency-generated letters and draft responses)?
- Will a staff reading file be used for completed letters?
- What will be stored in the governor's office and what will be maintained elsewhere (agency files and central storage facilities)?
- How will files be maintained (in hard copy, electronically)?
- Who will have access to the governor's correspondence files?

Maximizing the Use of Technology

An effective and dependable automated correspondence system can be one of the most important tools for successful mail management. Although computer technology and software offer several possibilities for easing workloads, this goal can be achieved and maintained only through quality administrative support services and a commitment to staff training.

Using Mailing Lists to Enhance Outreach Efforts

Computer software has enabled governors' correspondence systems to handle mail efficiently and develop strategies to use incoming mail as a policy tool. Many correspondence software packages

make it easier and more efficient to log mail received into a searchable database that can be sorted by defined variables (geographic location, issue area and constituent name). Using such a database enables the governor to generate and update valuable mailing lists. The governor can use the computerized mailing lists to his or her advantage. For example, the governor may want to write all physicians concerning pending malpractice legislation or corporate chief executive officers concerning new state trade initiatives. Such targeted correspondence can help build awareness and support for critical parts of the governor's policy agenda.

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