



Better than the Facebook hearings: partnering with legislators

by Anne Meeker, Thad Kerosky, Harlan Weber (Code for Boston) – Brigade Congress 2019

Session Notes

Introducing Anne Meeker, Director of Constituent Services for Representative Seth Moulton (MA 6th District)

- When folks contact Rep. Moulton's office, they get connected to a caseworker. Her team is made up of three full-time and one half-time case workers that each have specialties
- Serve as the “evidence collecting arm of congress”. What are we seeing on the ground? What are the trends? How can we translate that into legislative action to help our constituents?
- Anne cannot interact with the political campaign side of operations. There is a clear line between constituent services and political affiliations.
- Keep in mind that not all offices work the same.

How did we get connected?

- Anne reached out to Code for Boston when she was a case worker working on social security issues. Began working with brigade on developing a social security benefits calculator to response to constituent issues. [windfall elimination/awareness project]
- Heard about local brigade from someone with knowledge of Code for America in Washington D.C.
- Barrier to more case workers on her team from working with Code for Boston is getting folks to after hour events (timing, location, etc).

Primary Advice for Partnering with Legislators:

1. Make Friends with your constituent services caseworkers (and meet them where they are)
 - a. Keep in mind a case worker's time commitments. Often overloaded with over a hundred open cases.

- b. Brigades can conduct issue based advocacy, not candidate based.
 - c. Not sure how to start the conversation? Ask what's on their caseload!
- 2. Understand your representative's strengths (and meet them where they are)
 - a. Get to know which committees they are on. For example, healthcare is outside of Seth Moulton's wheelhouse because he does not serve on those committees and would therefore need to partner with someone on the right committee to introduce/cosponsor legislation with a good chance of passing. However, there are still case workers that still specialize in these issue areas.
- 3. Think outside Schoolhouse Rock: What convening/oversight role can your legislators help with?
 - a. Not just policy making, but oversight and accountability! Representatives have the ability to issue letters asking for information, conduct oversight hearings of Exec-branch agencies
 - b. Convening role: if you are having trouble making connections with other government offices or local nonprofits/etc, your local representative may be able to make that introduction
- 4. The more effort you make in contacting constituent services, the more effort they will make to get back to you.
 - a. Contact Method Impact Hierarchy, according to Anne:
 - i. Biggest impact you have is requesting a meeting with the Representative or the right staff member; or
 - ii. Set up time for a phone call; or
 - iii. Submit letters; or lastly
 - iv. Submit petitions
- 5. Benefits of this relationship
 - a. Case workers are able to work more efficiently, identify constituent issues more accurately, and report this directly to the representative.
 - b. More value capture for district - X district was about to solve issues that amount to an additional Y million dollars in benefits for the district.
 - c. Brigade learns more about governmental function and has the opportunity through events like town halls to interact with constituents and legislators.
 - d. Case workers may be able to benefit from tools your Brigade has already built.
- 6. Caseworker resources:
 - a. Often siloed, but there are some opportunities for collaboration
 - b. State delegation will get together to exchange best practices in specific subject areas. These tend to take place quarterly.
 - c. Listserv where folks share information.

- d. Some institutional resources: Congressional management foundation, partnership for public service, speaker office does some district director conferences
7. What happens when your representative changes? Things to keep in mind:
 - a. Congressional elections are every 2-years
 - i. If it's a friendly transition, case workers may stay
 - ii. In the event that they don't, you will need to build new relationships
 - iii. Your senate office might be able to help bridge the gap
 - b. High level of turnover at the staff level.
 - i. Low pay for case workers. Positions are entry-level. Burnout is common.
 - ii. Constantly being asked to do more for less as population grows

Action Items:

- Christopher from CfA to provide guidance document for Brigades regarding lobbying
- Brigades to share success stories of working with government representatives and their staff
- Code for Boston to share work about the Social Security Windfall Elimination Provision. This affects several states and this project may be redeployable.