



The View from the Hill: Working as a Congressional Staffer

[Steve Seidenberg]

Virtually unknown outside Washington, Capitol Hill legislative aides and staffers often put in long hours for low pay. So why do many aspiring law students (and even JDs) flock to these positions?

They're at the White House Rose Garden when the president ceremonially signs a bill into law. They're at congressional press conferences and Senate committee hearings on judicial nominees. But they're not the ones being photographed or interviewed; if a news camera pans over them, it's usually by accident.

Staff assistants, legislative assistants, legislative counsel, and chiefs of staff—the staffers who work on Capitol Hill—play a key role in creating the law, putting together press conferences, and orchestrating committee hearings. But they rarely get to be in the spotlight.

Congressional staffers aren't drawn to these positions for the money, either. In 1999, legislative assistants in the House received, on average, between \$33,000 and \$44,000, while legislative assistants in the Senate received \$48,276. Legislative counsel in the Senate received an average salary of \$60,610, while their counterparts in the House received a bit less. Those who stayed on the Hill and worked their way up the hierarchy could become legislative directors, pulling down an average of \$61,075 in the House and \$91,438 in the Senate—but only after about a decade of service.

Compare these figures to the average first-year associate's salary at any major law firm, and you just have to ask: Why do these people work long hours, often in cramped offices, for relatively low wages?

It's all about making a difference—and for some, the promise of future rewards.

"I've [already] had the opportunity to write two bills," says one new staffer. She came up with the ideas for both, worked with legislative counsel to translate them into legalese, and watched as the bills garnered nationwide press coverage from mammoth media organizations like ABC, CNN, and The New York Times. She says, "I've had the chance to see an idea turn into actual legislation that may go somewhere." Associates at law firms rarely get to work on such high-profile issues from day one.

It's not just a matter of abstract policy, either: Staffers get to see how their work helps real-life citizens. "Working with constituents is the best part of the job," says one legislative aide. "It makes your job a reality. It lets you know why you're doing what you're doing."

But if you think it's a dead-end career or solely for idealists, think again: Senate minority leader Trent Lott, Senator Mitch McConnell, Congressman Barney Frank, and U.S. Supreme Court justice Clarence Thomas, among others, all paid their dues as Capitol Hill staffers before landing their current positions.

The Staff Assistant

Like almost everyone contacted for this story, Dawn doesn't want her real name to appear in print. In part, it's because most staffers and ex-staffers are not supposed to talk to reporters; senators and representatives are the only ones on the Hill authorized to garner media attention. According to some aides, even innocuous-sounding statements might embarrass the boss or come back to

haunt you.

Being a junior staff member in the Senate, says Dawn, was like being part of a family. "There's a hair salon in the Capitol Building, a dry cleaners, a cafeteria. You know everyone there. And you're all in it together—you all work together and go out together. Everyone's in their 20s and 30s; only the highest-level people are married. Because your work is your first thing—that's what you're there to do." After working on the Hill for a year and a half, Dawn left to go into the private sector. But she didn't stay away long: "Last winter," she says, "I took an \$11,000 pay cut to go back."

Dawn worked for a Senate committee as an assistant to a major staff director. She answered phones, handled constituent mail, and helped with hearings. "I was a glorified receptionist," she admits. But the job was interesting and intense. For one thing, she had to handle lobbyists. "They wanted to get into hearings and markups [sessions in which committee members edit pending bills]," Dawn explains. "I had to make sure the right people got in. The game is to know who's who and to keep the peace. You have to find out who's important and who's going to squawk [if they don't get in]."

She also ran interference between the committee's press secretary and the media, made sure reporters and lobbyists got copies of committee testimony, and provided sensitive information to senators and staff while keeping it away from prying eyes. It was a high-profile job that involved a great deal of face time with important people on the Hill.



When the Senate committee was in session, handling major legislation, Dawn and the other committee staffers routinely worked 18-hour days. But, she notes, "there is that beautiful thing called recess: One week a month, when Congress is not in session, you pretty much just come into the office and do nothing. During March recess, I would come in, watch the NCAA game, go to lunch, maybe have a drink or two, then come back only because I had to answer the phone. It was the same for the lawyers—only they got to leave because they had cell phones. The staff director would be gone, playing golf." And in August, Dawn says, "you get just about the entire month off."

She thinks it all balances out: "In Congress, you work hard and you play hard." And the experience was a great stepping-stone: Dawn is currently pursuing her JD at a prestigious East Coast law school.

The Legislative Assistant

Julia (actual name withheld) first arrived on the Hill during college as part of an internship program. She loved it so much that she returned as soon as she graduated. After three years, she's worked her way up to being a legislative assistant on a congressman's personal staff.

"I write memos on controversial bills—covering the pros, the cons, who supports the bill, and who's against it; and I make a recommendation on how to vote," she says. "I attend markup sessions with my boss, and if there are important issues, I put together briefing books that contain talking points or statements for [him] to make during the markups. If [the congressman's] going to offer an amendment, I draft it and compile supporting information."

Julia's responsible for staying on top of certain policy areas. "I didn't come to the Hill with the intention of working on transportation issues," she says, "but I enjoy it." When it comes to the issues within her purview, she is the liaison with the outside world, meeting

regularly with constituents, lobbying groups, and advocacy organizations. "For the most part, it is the staff's job to be the office experts on whatever issue the boss is dealing with. I obviously can't know everything about these issues, but I need to know who I should speak with to find out," she says.

The Legislative Counsel

"People who come from law firms go into culture shock," says George (real name withheld). They have nice offices, great support staff—and then they come to the Hill. "I work in an office with no windows," says George. "I answer my own phone and do my own copying. I don't mind it, but it takes time away from doing more valuable work."

As Democratic counsel for a House committee, George has plenty of valuable work to do. Aside from reporting to the member who hired him, George says, "I'm responsible to the committee's chair and its ranking minority member, the subcommittee's chair and its ranking minority member, Democratic party leaders in the House, and people in the White House—although I don't do that last part as much as I used to. The leadership will call up and say, 'What's the committee position on this?' or 'What's happening with that bill?' And if a bill contains something that a member may be concerned about, it's my job to tell him about it."

George's job is writing-intensive. He prepares background memos for his congressman and for other members on the committee. Each memo discusses the problem a bill is intended to solve, the bill that's presented, what effects the bill will have, and who's for and against the bill. "It's done the same way that an associate would write a memo or do background research for a brief [at a law firm]," says George. "The idea is to provide members with the information to know what's going on." But some members of Congress are information junkies. "I've had members come up to me who want to go section by section through a 420-page bill," he says. Sometimes, George

drafts the actual wording of legislation, which also involves, he says, "writing 'Dear colleague' letters to members—explaining why this bill is wonderful—and circulating these letters along with the draft bill."

Ever wonder how members of Congress find time to write speeches, op-ed pieces, and newspaper columns? Well, they often get help—from people like George. He may do early drafts for op-ed pieces, assist in preparing speeches, or put together talking points. "Some members want you to write everything out, including the procedural things they have to say," George explains. "I've seen people who didn't know what was in their own bill and how it changed the prior law. If those people get off their talking points, they're totally lost!"

George, like all committee counsel, is responsible for bills affecting an assigned part of the law. (At one point in his career, he handled bankruptcy legislation and other bills affecting commercial law.) To keep up with developments in his field, George meets regularly with advocacy groups, academics, and judges.

He also practices some fancy procedural footwork, often having to answer the question "Is there a creative way for a member to do what he wants to do when the [parliamentary] rules say he can't do it?" He says, "Now that I'm in the minority, I've become a rules nerd. I'm best friends with the folks in the parliamentarian's office."

George admits, "There really is a major difference between being in the majority and being in the minority. Members of the majority party don't have to worry much about parliamentary rules; they can pretty much do what they want. They have control of the committee, control of the agenda. There are very few opportunities for the minority to frame the issues. The majority also has more money and staff. They get better offices. Sometimes salaries are better in the majority. And of course, you get your way."



Overall, George says, his job "can be very stressful [but] very rewarding. You're in the middle of things that really matter. But it can be frustrating if the national political winds blow against you."

The Chief of Staff

There's no such thing as an average workday for Kevin Ryan—at least, not since he became the chief of staff for New York congressman Anthony Weiner. "I do policy work for the science committee," Ryan says, "meet with political action committees and policy committees, handle local issues, keep an eye on [the congressman's] schedule, take meetings when he can't be there, and do a fair amount of staff management. A lot of the skills I learned in law school come into play [in my current job]. For instance, I write memos about issues and bills—but not in legalese."

It took Ryan several years to work his way up the Hill hierarchy to become a chief of staff. He first moved to Washington to work on Michael Dukakis's presidential campaign. Then he landed a job as a Capitol Hill staffer, "opening [then-senator Daniel Patrick] Moynihan's mail" for \$16,000 a year, and slowly moved up the ranks. Four years later, Ryan went back to school and earned a JD/MPA (master of public administration) from Syracuse University. After graduation, he managed Weiner's political campaign for a House seat—and when Weiner won, Ryan got the nod to be chief of staff.

While Ryan followed the JD road to the top, other people just stay on the Hill, moving up into higher-paying and more responsible positions. Working on the Hill opens many doors, and people often use the experience as a springboard to other government and private-sector jobs. "For instance," says Ryan, "if you have expertise on the Judiciary Committee, then you can go over to the Department of Justice."

Perhaps the most common career path is for staffers to work on the Hill for a few years before and/or after law school and then cash in on their experience by joining a trade association, a lobbying group, or a law firm that has clients with legislative interests. "Those organizations are always looking for people with Hill experience," says Ryan. "Nonprofits pay a lot less, so ex-staffers may work for companies for a while in order to pay off their student loans. But people generally stay in the same industries. You get expertise in that field and work in it for the rest of your career."

Some staffers, Ryan notes, move back to their home districts and run for public office, or use their political connections to become judges. Asked about his own career plans, Ryan says, "That's a good question. I have no immediate plans to leave. But after the next election..." He admits that he is considering several options—which is one of the advantages of working on Capitol Hill.

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