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Constituent Services: Overview and Resources

Introduction

The priorities and activities of Member offices are varied. In addition to working on legislation and oversight, offices are commonly expected to provide constituent services as part of their representational duties. This expectation began in the earliest Congresses. Following requests for assistance with Revolutionary War pensions and other matters, the House, in 1794, and the Senate, in 1816, established select committees to address private claims. Today, many similar matters would be considered constituent service.

Each Member office chooses how to engage with constituents and how to allocate resources in support of these activities. Constituents often contact Member offices and initiate requests. Sometimes a Member office is one of several places a constituent can turn. Other programs, opportunities, or services may require a Member office to serve as an intermediary. Offices can also engage in outreach activities to promote available assistance.

The following sections provide a brief overview of many common constituent services provided by congressional offices. It is not intended to be an exhaustive or a prescriptive list. Information on additional resources is also provided, when available.

> "You learn more about the job by doing constituent service work than anything else.... It tells you whether or not the legislation is doing what it is supposed to do. It is a valuable learning experience, and it keeps you in touch with the people."
>
> —Anonymous former House Member, quoted in John R. Hibbing, "Voluntary Retirement from the U.S. House," *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, vol. 7, no. 1 (February 1982), p. 62.

Help with Government

Federal Government Resources

Sometimes constituents simply seek information about the federal government. Small business owners, for example, may want to know about federal contracting opportunities or the procurement process. Parents may have questions about federal financial aid for college. Member offices commonly refer constituents to the appropriate government agencies, and sometimes provide website links or reference materials in their offices to assist with these inquiries.

Casework

Casework refers to the response or services that Members of Congress provide constituents seeking assistance, often with a federal agency. Common requests involve applications for Social Security, veterans', or other federal benefits; obtaining a missing record or payment from a federal agency; or assistance with immigration matters. Each Member office has considerable discretion in how it defines and approaches casework, subject to House or Senate rules and statute. An office's casework definition may include other constituent services, including those that are listed separately here. For additional information, see CRS Report RL33209, *Casework in a Congressional Office: Background, Rules, Laws, and Resources*.

Grants Work

Federal grants may be available for state or local governments, nonprofit community organizations, research entities, and small businesses. Federal grants are not provided directly to individuals; they often are awarded to state or local governments, which may sub-award them to other community organizations. Given the competition for, and limitations of, federal grants, Member offices sometimes provide constituents with information about developing grant proposals or identifying alternative funding options. For more on federal grants, see CRS Report RL34035, *Grants Work in a Congressional Office*.

Opportunities for Students

Internships

Most Member offices offer internship opportunities, which must, under House and Senate rules, be primarily educational in nature. As with all personnel decisions, each office has considerable discretion to determine, among other things, how many (if any) interns it has, length of internships, office location in which interns will work, qualifications, and compensation. For more information on internships in Congress, see CRS Report R44491, *Internships in Congressional Offices: Frequently Asked Questions*; for information on other federal government internships, see CRS Report 98-654, *Internships, Fellowships, and Other Work Experience Opportunities in the Federal Government*.

U.S. Service Academy Nominations

College-age students who want to apply to the U.S. Military Academy, U.S. Naval Academy, U.S. Air Force Academy, or the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy must receive an official nomination, which can be obtained from a Member office. The number of nominations from each state, territory, or district is set by statute; the number of nominations available to a Member office can be further affected by the number of currently enrolled students from an area or nominations made by a preceding Member for the current admissions cycle.

Nominations typically must be submitted to the service academies by January 31 for the academic year that begins the following July; an earlier deadline usually applies for Members who are not returning for the next session of Congress. Offices can largely establish their own criteria

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Foreword by Alan S. Frumin

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and processes for making nominations, which may include additional deadlines, application materials, or interviews with candidates. For more information, see CRS Report RL33213, *Congressional Nominations to U.S. Service Academies: An Overview and Resources for Outreach and Management*.

Senate Page Program (Senate Only)

Pages have served in Congress since the early 1800s, typically working as messengers. The Senate Page Program (2 U.S.C. §49) is currently suspended due to COVID-19 precautions but will resume in the fall of 2021. The program is generally open to 16- or 17-year-old high school juniors and administered by the Senate Sergeant at Arms. Senators may sponsor interested high school students, who then compete for a limited number of positions. The page program typically runs four sessions each year—fall, spring, and two during summer. Lodging, schooling, and meals are provided.

Congressional App Challenge (House Only)

K-12 students from participating House districts can compete in the annual Congressional App Challenge. Students design their own software application, individually or in groups of up to four. The students' work may begin before the competition, but submissions are usually accepted between July and November, with winners announced in early December. For more information, see https://housenet.house.gov/serving-constituents/congressional-app-challenge-cac.

Congressional Art Competition (House Only)

High school students from participating House districts are eligible for the Congressional Art Competition, also known as An Artistic Discovery. A winning piece of visual artwork is chosen from each district and displayed for a year in the Capitol. Updated rules are usually released in January. Winners chosen by House Member offices often must be submitted by early May. For more information, see CRS Report R42487, *The Congressional Arts Caucus and the Congressional Art Competition: History and Current Practice* or visit https://housenet.house.gov/serving-constituents/art-competition.

Assisting with Washington, DC, Visits

Capitol Tours and Gallery Passes

Currently, the Capitol Visitor Center (CVC) is closed and Member- and staff-led tours are not permitted in the Capitol due to COVID-19 precautions. The Architect of the Capitol (AOC) provides virtual tours and exhibits that may be of interest to constituents at https://www.aoc.gov/explore-capitol-campus/visitor-resources.

When the CVC is open and operating in its regular capacity, any visitor can typically receive a free guided tour. When allowed, many Member offices also often provide their own tours of the Capitol, which can be customized to reflect local or other interests. Access to the Capitol Dome is not permitted, unless a special tour is requested from CVC staff and a Member accompanies the group. The CVC hosts tour training classes for congressional staff, and can provide routes, guidelines, and accessibility information.

The CVC does not distribute gallery passes for the House or Senate chambers. The House and Senate Galleries are currently closed to visitors due to COVID-19 precautions. Constituents usually receive gallery passes from a Member office. An office can obtain passes by presenting a written request, signed by the Member, to the chamber's Sergeant at Arms or appointments desk.

White House Tours and Other Sites

Public requests for free, self-guided White House tours must be submitted through a Member of Congress. A "tour coordinator" for each office registers with the White House Visitors Office and submits constituent tour requests through an online portal. Requests must be received at least 21 days in advance, but can be sent up to 3 months prior.

Some Member offices provide additional information about Washington, DC, attractions or tour itineraries. Due to COVID-19 precautions, some sites may currently be closed or operating in limited capacities. Most federal government sites are generally free of charge and open to visitors on a first-come, first-served basis; some provide tours and others are self-guided. Timed-entry tickets are required for some attractions, however, and there may be small service fees for advance reservations.

Commemorations and Recognitions

Congressional Congratulations

Members of Congress may write letters recognizing constituents' public distinctions or achievements (39 U.S.C. §3210(a)(3)(F)), subject to House or Senate franking rules. Some common reasons for recognition include public office appointments or elections; acts of heroism or citizenship; or key awards or honors. Through local news and networks, Member offices can sometimes identify individuals they wish to recognize. Member offices may also encourage constituents to notify them of possible recipients.

Flag Requests

Requests from constituents seeking a U.S. flag flown over the Capitol must be submitted to the Architect of the Capitol (AOC) by a Member of Congress. Flags must be purchased by the constituent, along with a certificate fee if the flag is flown over the Capitol. Requests typically must be made at least two weeks in advance. Constituents can request that a flag be flown on a certain date, but no date guarantees can be made, due to weather and a varying volume of requests. See http://www.aoc.gov/flags or contact the AOC for more information on the flag program.

Presidential Greetings

The White House Greetings Office has provided greetings to U.S. citizens commemorating certain occasions. Member offices sometimes submit requests to the White House on behalf of constituents or provide information on how constituents may request them; these requests typically must be made at least six weeks in advance of an occasion.

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