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Constituent Services: Overview and Resources

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SUMMARY

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Constituent Services: Overview and Resources

Constituent service encompasses a wide array of nonlegislative activities undertaken by Members of Congress or congressional staff, and it is commonly considered a representational responsibility. Member offices vary in their priorities, activities, and scope of constituent service, but most offices try to assist with certain requests when possible. Member offices have engaged in constituent service activities since the earliest Congresses. Depending on what the constituent is seeking, requests may be addressed by a Member's Washington, DC, office, or by a Member's district or state office.

Many constituents contact congressional offices to initiate their own requests, but Members of Congress may also engage in outreach to let constituents know of the ways in which a Member office might be able to assist them. Members of Congress often post constituent service links on their official websites and may mention constituent services in newsletters, in other communications, or at events. These activities can help facilitate a lasting connection between Member offices and constituents, and they may also provide feedback for Members of Congress about how government programs or legislation are affecting a district or state.

A congressional office is sometimes one of several places a constituent can turn to. Other programs, opportunities, or services may require a Member office to serve as an intermediary. Constituent service activities can be simple, like relaying contact information for a local federal office, or more complex, like providing internships or casework assistance. Limited office resources, along with House and Senate rules, may affect what level of assistance a congressional office is able to provide.

This report provides an overview of common constituent services provided by Member offices, along with references to additional CRS products or other relevant resources. The activities discussed in this report are divided into the following four categories:

- Help with Government,
- Opportunities for Students,
- Assisting with Washington, DC, Visits, and
- Commemorations and Recognitions.

The report is intended to provide guidance for Member offices regarding constituent service, but it is not intended to be an exhaustive nor a prescriptive list of activities. Within the parameters set by the House and Senate rules, Member offices may largely shape their own constituent service operations to suit their own representational priorities and the needs of their constituents.

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Introduction

Member offices vary in their priorities and activities, but in addition to working on legislation, oversight, and other policy-related items, offices are commonly expected to provide constituent services. A broader discussion of constituent service and its relation to other commonly held views of Members' responsibilities can be found in CRS Report RL33686, *Roles and Duties of a Member of Congress: Brief Overview*.

The expectation of constituent service has existed since the earliest Congresses. Requests for assistance with Revolutionary War pensions and other matters led the House, in 1794, and the Senate, in 1816, to establish select committees for private claims. Today, many similar matters would be considered constituent service.

Often, constituents contact congressional offices and initiate requests. A constituent may contact a Member office requesting basic information about a government entity or process. Sometimes, a congressional office is one of several places a constituent can turn to. Other programs, opportunities, or services may require a Member office to serve as an intermediary. Each Member office chooses how to engage with constituents and how to allocate resources in support of these activities. Additional information about the use of official office resources in the House and Senate is available in CRS Report RL30064, *Congressional Salaries and Allowances: In Brief*.

Constituent service can present an opportunity for Member offices to engage in outreach and provide education about federal government functions and services. Member offices will often post constituent service links on their official websites, or may mention available services in their newsletters or other constituent communications. Requests from constituents may also provide feedback for Members of Congress about how government programs are working and what issues could be addressed through formal oversight or legislation. As one former House Member observed, "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."[1]

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, as Member offices are largely able to shape their constituent service operations to suit their own representational priorities or the needs of their constituents. References to additional CRS products or other resources are also provided, when available.

Help with Government

Federal Government Resources

Sometimes constituents seek information about the federal government. Small business owners, for example, may want to know about federal contracting opportunities or the procurement process. Parents of college-age students may have questions about federal financial aid. In these instances, Member offices largely relay publicly accessible information, such as websites, office locations, phone numbers, or forms, to their constituents. Offices may offer some additional explanation about how a particular agency or process works, or provide broad-based information about the federal government.

[1] As quoted in John R. Hibbing, "Voluntary Retirement from the U.S. House," *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, vol. 7, no. 1 (February 1982), p. 62.

Member offices commonly refer constituents to the appropriate government agencies, and sometimes compile and provide website links or reference materials in their offices to assist with these inquiries. The CRS casework web page (available to congressional offices at http://www.crs.gov/resources/casework) provides examples of links to websites that congressional offices may find useful for these types of requests, including tools to locate federal government loans or benefit programs, and foreign-language versions of government websites.

Casework

Casework refers to the response or services that Members of Congress provide constituents seeking assistance, often with a federal agency. Each Member office has considerable discretion in how it defines and approaches casework, subject to House or Senate rules and statute. Some congressional offices may consider as casework their liaison activities between the federal government and local governments or businesses concerned with the effects of federal legislation or regulation. An office's casework definition may include other constituent services, including those that are listed separately here, like grants work or U.S. service academy nominations.

Common requests for casework 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. Members and staff are limited in how much they can directly intervene in an agency's decisionmaking process on behalf of a particular case, but federal agencies are often responsive to congressional concern. When contacting federal agencies on behalf of constituents, Member offices can generally ask for information related to a case, urge prompt consideration, arrange for interviews or appointments, express judgements, or call for reconsideration of an administrative response.

For additional information, see

- CRS Report RL33209, *Casework in a Congressional Office: Background, Rules, Laws, and Resources*,
- CRS Report R44696, *Casework in Congressional Offices: Frequently Asked Questions*,
- CRS Video WVB00093, *Introduction to Congressional Casework*, and
- CRS Resources on Casework & Other Constituent Services, website available to congressional offices, at https://www.crs.gov/resources/casework.

Grants Work

Federal grants may be available for state or local governments, nonprofit community organizations, research entities, and small businesses. Those seeking grants often approach Member offices for information and assistance. Federal grants are not benefits or entitlements provided directly to individuals; they often are awarded to state or local governments, which may sub-award them to other community organizations.

Direct involvement by a Member office in the grant-awarding process is limited, but Member offices can often provide information or refer grant seekers to other sources. For example, to assist grant seekers, congressional offices can develop working relationships with grants officers in relevant federal or state departments and agencies. Congressional offices may compile information about available grants or host workshops to educate constituents about federal assistance. 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 information on how congressional offices approach grants work, see

- CRS Report RL34035, *Grants Work in a Congressional Office*.

Other CRS resources contain information that may be of use to grant-seekers who approach a congressional office, including

- CRS Report RL34012, *Resources for Grantseekers*, and
- CRS Report RL32159, *How to Develop and Write a Grant Proposal.*

Additional background information on how federal grants are administered can be found in

- CRS Report R42769, *Federal Grants-in-Aid Administration: A Primer*, and
- CRS Report R40638, *Federal Grants to State and Local Governments: A Historical Perspective on Contemporary Issues*.

Detailed information on specific types of grant programs, including community services block grants, federal housing assistance programs, rural development programs, and student financial aid, is available on the CRS grants and federal assistance web page (available to congressional offices at http://www.crs.gov/resources/grants).

Business with the Federal Government

Business owners seeking federal government contract opportunities may also contact Members of Congress. Member offices have no direct role in selecting federal contractors, nor can they offer any preferential treatment to companies seeking to do business with the federal government. Member offices can, however, provide information about business registration requirements, opportunities, and the federal contracting or procurement process to interested constituents. For more background information, see

- CRS Report RS22536, *Overview of the Federal Procurement Process and Resources*.

Opportunities for Students

Internships

Most congressional offices offer internship opportunities, which must, under House and Senate rules, be primarily educational in nature. Interns can provide additional, temporary assistance in an office, but their roles cannot supplant the duties of a regular staff member. Within the parameters set by the House and Senate rules, each Member 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*. Constituents may also be interested in internships elsewhere in the federal government, and more information on these opportunities is available in 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 (USMA), U.S. Naval Academy (USNA), U.S. Air Force Academy (USAFA), or the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy (USMMA) must receive an official nomination, which can be obtained from a Member office.[2] 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. Offices can largely establish their own criteria and processes for making nominations, which may include additional deadlines, application materials, or interviews with candidates. For more information about the role congressional offices play in the service academy nomination process, see CRS Report RL33213, *Congressional Nominations to U.S. Service Academies: An Overview and Resources for Outreach and Management*. Additional information about the service academies is also available in CRS In Focus IF11788, *Defense Primer: Military Service Academies*.

Senate Page Program (Senate Only)

Pages have served in Congress since the early 1800s, typically working as messengers. The program is generally open to 16- or 17-year-old high school juniors and is administered by the Senate Sergeant at Arms.[3] 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. More information is available at https://pageprogram.senate.gov.

Congressional App Challenge (House Only)

Middle or high school students from participating House districts can compete in the annual Congressional App Challenge. The Congressional App Challenge began in 2014, to highlight students' science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) achievements. Students design and submit their own software application, individually or in groups of up to four. Work on the app may begin before the competition, and submissions are usually accepted between July and November each year. Winners are typically announced in early December, and the winning apps are eligible to be displayed in the Capitol and on the House website. For more information and resources, House offices can refer to 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, which began in 1982. A winning piece of visual artwork is chosen from each district and displayed for a year in the Capitol. Updated rules are usually released early in each calendar year. Winners chosen by House Member offices often must be submitted by early the following May. More information for House offices interested in

[2] 10 U.S.C. §7442 (for USMA); 10 U.S.C. §8454 (for USNA); 10 U.S.C. §9442 (for USAFA); and 46 U.S.C. §51302 (for USMMA).

[3] 2 U.S.C. §49.

participating in the Congressional Art Competition is available at https://housenet.house.gov/serving-constituents/art-competition. For more information generally, see CRS Report R42487, *The Congressional Arts Caucus and the Congressional Art Competition: History and Current Practice*; and https://www.house.gov/educators-and-students/congressional-art-competition.

Assisting with Washington, DC, Visits

U.S. Capitol Tours and the Capitol Visitor Center (CVC)

The Capitol Visitor Center (CVC) provides free guided tours of the U.S. Capitol, along with historical exhibits, interactive activities, and educational programs. Reservations for individuals or groups can be made online up to three months in advance at http://www.visitthecapitol.gov/plan-visit/book-tour-capitol. Other resources for visitors from the CVC are available at https://www.visitthecapitol.gov.

Many congressional offices also typically provide their own tours of the Capitol for constituents, which can be customized to reflect local or other interests. Member- or staff-led tours generally may also visit some areas of the Capitol that the CVC tour does not. Access to the Capitol Dome, however, is not permitted, unless a special tour is requested from CVC staff and a Member of Congress accompanies the group.

The CVC regularly hosts tour training classes for congressional staff, and can provide routes, guidelines, and accessibility information. The House and Senate libraries, historian offices, Architect of the Capitol (AOC), and the Library of Congress may also be able to provide additional information of interest for congressional staff giving tours.

Virtual Tours and Resources

The CVC and AOC also provide a variety of online resources related to the Capitol Complex, which may be of interest to constituents who are unable to visit in person, including the following:

- Virtual Exhibits, at https://www.aoc.gov/explore-capitol-campus/visitor-resources/virtual-exhibits; and
- Virtual Field Trips, at https://www.aoc.gov/explore-capitol-campus/visitor-resources/virtual-field-trips.

Resources for K-12 teachers or students that may complement an in-person field trip or Capitol lesson plan include the following:

- Students & Teachers, at https://www.visitthecapitol.gov/students-teachers;
- Online Activities, at https://www.visitthecapitol.gov/online-activities;
- Elementary School Resources, at https://www.aoc.gov/explore-capitol-campus/visitor-resources/elementary-school-resources;
- Middle School Resources, at https://www.aoc.gov/explore-capitol-campus/visitor-resources/middle-school-resources; and
- High School Resources, at https://www.aoc.gov/explore-capitol-campus/visitor-resources/high-school-resources.

Additional educational materials are available online from the Library of Congress, House and Senate historian offices, and other offices.

Gallery Passes

The CVC does not distribute gallery passes for the House or Senate chambers. Constituents usually receive gallery passes from a Member office when the galleries are open for public visits. An office can typically 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 congressional office registers with the White House Visitors Office and submits constituent tour requests through an online portal. Requests for constituent tours must be received at least 21 days in advance, but can be sent up to three months prior. More information is available at https://www.whitehouse.gov/visit/.

Some Member offices provide additional information about Washington, DC, attractions or tour itineraries. With the exception of the White House, congressional requests for tours are not usually required for most sites of interest to visitors, including the Library of Congress, U.S. Supreme Court, national monuments, or Smithsonian Institution museums and sites. Federal government sites generally are 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 popular attractions, however, and small service fees may apply to make reservations in advance.

Commemorations and Recognitions

Congressional Congratulations

Members of Congress may write letters recognizing constituents' public distinctions or achievements,[4] subject to House or Senate franking rules and communications standards. 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

Constituents are often interested in obtaining a U.S. flag flown over the Capitol; requests from individuals seeking a flag must be submitted to the Architect of the Capitol (AOC) by a Member of Congress. Flags are available in several sizes and 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. House offices may also refer to https://housenet.house.gov/serving-constituents/flags/flag-faqs.

[4] 39 U.S.C. §3210(a)(3)(F).

Presidential Greetings

The White House Greetings Office has provided greetings to U.S. citizens commemorating certain occasions, like birthdays, weddings, anniversaries, and Boy Scout or Girl Scout awards. Member offices sometimes submit requests to the White House on behalf of constituents; these requests typically must be made at least six weeks in advance of an occasion. For more information, see https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-greeting/.

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