



# CASEWORK NAVIGATOR



# CASEWORK BASICS

LEGISLATION & OVERSIGHT FOR  
CASEWORKERS

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developed by



# LEGISLATION & OVERSIGHT FOR CASEWORKERS

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# INTRODUCTION

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Over their careers, every caseworker will run into edge cases that test the flexibility and comprehensiveness of agency rules, or persistent examples of mishandling that point to fragile or sticky parts of an agency's systems. No matter how effective the caseworker can be individually, these types of cases may not be resolvable through normal channels.

However, that doesn't mean giving up: rather, bringing in colleagues from the legislative team to explore structural changes is how caseworkers' individual interactions with constituents can scale to solve these problems for the long term.

While it may seem outside of the scope of traditional casework, encouraging caseworkers to prepare a legislative request or suggest an oversight activity benefits the Congressional office and the casework team in a variety of ways:

- Encourages the caseworkers to dive more deeply into the issues affecting constituents.
- Offers caseworkers another line of effort to point to when constituents may be dissatisfied with the response or outcome of their case.
- Builds the relationship between the DC and state staff and a strong foundation for future collaboration, including using casework staff to make positive connections with local stakeholders.
- Helps the DC team understand and recognize casework, potentially improving the accuracy or mail responses and the effectiveness of referrals.
- Gives the casework team greater visibility into the legislative process and timing, which helps them educate constituents and improves any future requests.
- Affords opportunities for skill and professional development for caseworkers, which could result in greater job satisfaction and improved retention.

This chapter will cover an introduction to the legislative toolkit available to Congressional offices, tips for caseworkers on how to build productive relationships with legislative counterparts and make smart casework asks, and how casework expertise can contribute to strengthening a team's legislative work



# THE CONGRESSIONAL POLICY TOOLKIT

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To solve constituent problems, caseworkers have a broad toolkit at their disposal, and the expertise to understand how different situations may call for different approaches. Legislation works the same way: while [Schoolhouse Rock](#) may have focused just on a simple bill, legislative teams work to advance Member priorities through bills, resolutions, hearings, nominations, Committee work, relationship-building, communications, and more.

All of these “tools” are affected by the Member’s party, committee assignments, seniority, relationship with party leadership, relationships with other Members, point in the legislative calendar, and more. [Legislating has become a lot more complicated](#) in recent years: advancing priorities is often a long game, with multi-year strategies that bring multiple approaches to bear—in addition to a significant bit of luck.

To advance casework priorities through legislative work, caseworkers have to know enough about legislative activities to be able to effectively participate where appropriate. This includes understanding how to productively raise an issue with legislative team colleagues, how to manage expectations for constituents involved in legislative actions, and understanding the situations and activities where your expertise and assessment of common constituent problems may be helpful information.



# Types of Legislative Actions

Congress has four types of legislation that it can pass: bills, resolutions, nominations, and treaties. This chapter will focus on the first three as most relevant for casework.

Bills and joint resolutions are pieces of legislation that must be passed by both the House and the Senate before being signed by the President. They differ only in their styling and in the areas that each may address (for example, authorization will be a bill, but declarations of war, continuing resolutions, and debt limit changes will be joint resolutions).

According to CRS, bills and joint resolutions may be used for the following purposes:

- Amendment or modification of existing law, including the Constitution;
- Authorization or reauthorization of federal policies, programs, and activities;
- Establishment of federal departments and agencies or alteration of their structure;
- Revenue (tax) legislation;
- Appropriations and continuing resolutions;
- Reconciliation bills;
- Private bills;
- Authorization of military force;
- Adjustments of debt limit;
- Entering or repealing treaties;
- Alteration of date for convening of Congress;
- Congratulations, condolences, condemning actions, approval/disapproval, welcomes, thanks, etc.; and
- Recognition of and support for commemorative periods.

Both houses may also offer “concurrent resolutions,” which do not make laws, and are used to handle internal business and to express a “sense of Congress” that does not need the President’s signature. Nominations and treaties are only taken up by the Senate, as part of the Senate’s responsibility to “advise and consent” on the President’s actions in these two areas.



# Legislation mechanics

When bills are introduced, they are **sponsored** by the individual Members who introduce them, and may be **cosponsored** by additional Members. Some offices make the distinction of “original cosponsors” to note Members who signed on as the bill was introduced, as opposed to Members who signed on later—this is particularly important for pieces of legislation where the lead cosponsor or lead original sponsor may have collaborated in drafting the legislation; it is common to try to introduce bipartisan legislation with an original cosponsor from the other party.

After being introduced, bills are referred to the committee of jurisdiction for further consideration. To advance further, bills must be brought to a vote in Committee, “passed out” of the Committee, and then brought to a vote in the appropriate chamber. This means that except for legislation with very broad support, bills must have the support of both Committee leadership and party leadership to advance.

When caseworkers (and constituents!) start thinking about legislative solutions to a problem, a “**standalone**” bill—Schoolhouse Rock style, or a single bill focusing on a single issue—is often the first impulse. However, it’s worth noting the extremely small success rate of introduced pieces of legislation: according to Congress.gov, in the 117th Congress, Members introduced over 24,000 bills and resolutions, but only 365 of those became law.

However, this number requires some additional context:

First, some Members actually use this to their advantage, preparing “**messaging bills**,” or bills never intended to become law, to serve a communications purpose. While Members will rarely openly say that they do not expect bills to advance, this has nonetheless developed as a clear category of legislation.

Second, those 365 pieces of law also include large pieces of “**must-pass**” legislation like the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). These large pieces of legislation are often vehicles for hundreds of smaller concepts and Member priorities that may have little to no chance of making it through as standalone bills. Members are often able to leverage their support for a must-pass bill to ensure that these bills include their priorities, either written into the bill from the start or introduced as amendments.

“Must-pass” bills also sometimes include another category of legislation worth noting: [appropriations and authorizations](#).





# Appropriations & authorizations

Congress’s “power of the purse” is at the heart of its ability to regulate the federal government. To actually make the decisions about what money goes where, Congress has to go through two processes: authorization and appropriation. The two work together a bit like setting a child’s allowance: authorization is setting the ground rules about what the child can spend money on, and appropriation is actually handing them the money for those purposes.

Authorizing bills start, end, or modify federal programs. For example, the Armed Services Committees handle the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), which governs the programs and functions of the Department of Defense. Authorization provisions may have a variety of time limits, which is why many areas of federal spending come up for regular reauthorizations: for example, the NDAA happens annually, but the Farm Bill comes up roughly every five years. Authorizing bills also directly create authority for the government to spend money for certain programs, including “mandatory spending” for entitlements like Social Security and Medicare.

The Appropriations process picks up on the authorizers’ work for the rest of federal spending—i.e. “Discretionary spending,” or about 30% of the federal budget. Working within the scope of federal programs set by authorizing committees, the Appropriations Committees then work to actually “appropriate” or formally provide money for those programs. The Appropriations Committees are divided into twelve subcommittees, and each is responsible for an appropriations bill that governs federal agencies and programs in its jurisdiction. The full Committee sets the amount of money available for each subcommittee (called a 302b allocation), and the subcommittees decide how to allocate those funds from there.



Members, and especially those on the Appropriations Committees, have a lot of input into the appropriations process through three types of request:

### Programmatic

These requests are to change the overall amount of money available for particular programs. For example, a Member may want to “zero out” a program they disagree with, or increase funding for a program that serves their district or state.

### Report language

Report language requests change the specific language that appropriates money, and can be used to modify the rules around particular programs, including having agencies provide additional information.

### Member-Directed Spending

Recently brought back after a 10-year moratorium, Member-Directed Spending requests are for Members to “earmark” specific amounts of money for projects in their states and districts. These are subject to additional transparency and eligibility requirements, including that they may only go to nonprofits and government entities, and are only available for certain spending areas.

Appropriations Committee members may also participate in the “markup” process, where Members may weigh in on their subcommittee’s draft bill text in a public hearing. In times of particular political acrimony, this step may be bypassed.

The Appropriations process is also where Congress can run into trouble ensuring that the federal government stays open: when appropriations are not passed on time, agencies do not have funding to continue operations, leading to a full or partial government shutdown. Negotiating tactics over these bills often include rolling multiple appropriations bills into “minibus” or “omnibus” spending bills that act as “must-pass” pieces of legislation to avoid a shutdown.





# Types of Oversight Actions

However, the authorization and appropriation processes raise some important questions: how does Congress know how much money to provide to each agency, and how does it make sure that the agencies spend that money in the manner it was intended? A vital counterpart to Congress's legislative function is its **oversight** authority, or Congress's prerogative to monitor the activities of the Executive branch. Casework is one branch of oversight, where Congressional staff use Congress's authority to conduct oversight of agencies in order to support constituents and aid in the redress of grievances.

More formally, oversight is where Congress gathers information about agency activity to inform legislation. Questions addressed through oversight dig into what might be going wrong at an agency that is causing constituent problems, or whether an agency is acting in line with Congress's intentions on carrying out a particular program. Oversight is legally considered to be part of Congress's legislative authority, but some oversight investigations can solve problems in their own right, rather than necessarily leading to additional legislation.

The oversight toolkit is equally large, and there are many options from the very simple to the hugely complex and long-term.

For individual Members, oversight may look like a letter to an agency head requesting information on a program (for example, the number of constituents experiencing phone wait times of over 45 minutes for Social Security customer service support). For additional weight to these requests, multiple Members may sign on to a letter, including entire delegations for regional problems.

More complex oversight investigations are largely handled at the committee level, where expert staff may gather information from agencies, whistleblowers, external experts, and more. Many Committee investigations involve or culminate in hearings where committee staff bring agency leaders in to provide testimony and answer questions regarding a particular issue. Individual Members on committees may participate by asking questions at these hearings, which can be a highly effective way to focus attention on local problems and constituent experiences.

Oversight may also take advantage of Congress's support agencies, including the Congressional Research Service and the Government Accountability Office. Experts at these organizations can prepare reports from existing information, as well as preparing original research for Congress on agency function. GAO also issues recommendations for Congress and agencies that may also be helpful starting points for understanding the root causes of constituent problems, as well as suggesting potential solutions.

Finally, on the Senate side, confirmation hearings for Presidential appointees are also a great opportunity for Members to gain insight into agency priorities and operations, particularly if the nominee is an internal promotion.



# WORKING WITH YOUR LEGISLATIVE TEAM

Between committee work, hearing prep, drafting legislation, researching legislation, providing recommendations on votes, building staff-level relationships, and more—legislative staff are constantly busy in a fast-paced, high-pressure environment, juggling multiple priorities from the Member, stakeholders, and the never-ending parade of “fly-in” meetings from advocacy groups and lobbyists.

For caseworkers, getting attention for casework priorities requires some long-term strategy.

## Basics of Relationship Building



In high-performing offices, there are strong relationships between the DC legislative team and the casework and outreach staff in the district/state offices. Just as with agency contacts, establishing good working relationships between casework staff and the legislative team in Washington is helpful for both sides and starts with understanding each team’s roles.

Since turnover on staff and with interns is a given, the team should take steps to ensure that new-to-the Hill legislative directors, legislative assistants, and legislative correspondents understand what casework is and who handles which areas.

Likewise, the casework team and other district/state staff should have an understanding of how the legislative team is structured and the roles that field representatives and other state staff are expected to play in the office’s legislative and appropriations processes. While each Member office will establish its own staffing structures, most will designate legislative staff with the following roles:



# Legislative Staff Roles

## Legislative Director

Establishes legislative agenda; directs legislative staff; serves as resource person for LAs; briefs Member on all legislative matters; reviews constituent mail.

## Legislative Assistant (General)

Handles issues outside the Member's priority areas; briefs Member on votes and hearings; staffs Member at hearings; meets with constituents; answers constituent mail; prepares speeches and record statements.

## Legislative Assistant (Priority)

Same duties as General Issues LA, but handles Member's priority issues (committee, district or mission related); develops legislation and strategies for legislative priorities; staffs Member at mark-ups and hearings.

## Legislative Correspondent

Researches and writes legislative correspondence; conducts legislative research; assists Legislative Assistants as needed.

## Projects Coordinator

Coordinates the Member's appropriations requests, including Member-directed spending. Liaises with professional staff on Appropriations committees and subcommittees (may be based in DC or state/district office).

*Adapted from [Congressional Management Foundation](#).*



## Legislative Staff Roles (continued)

As a starting point, the office should create an easily accessible and regularly updated document that indicates which caseworker, field representative, legislative assistant, and legislative correspondent handles each issue. If the office's CRM or mail system already establishes issue codes and assigns incoming mail to the legislative staff, that list is a great place to start.

If the office does not already maintain such a document, the process of creating it will offer staff some insight into the priorities of the office. Does the Legislative Director have responsibility for certain issues while others are housed in the vast portfolio of a junior Legislative Assistant (LA)? That might signify the relative importance of those issues to the Member.

As the list is compiled, consider including Committee staff that report to the Member on the Senate side, but be sure to clarify whether and how the office communicates with Committee staff. Knowing the protocols around communication with Committees will be very helpful in the context of legislative asks. Committee staff can sometimes also be helpful with casework.

Once created, this issue assignment document can live on the office's intranet and should be easily accessible for anyone who answers the phone or sorts incoming correspondence.

## Meetings, Meetings, Meetings

Beyond identifying basic portfolio assignments, what opportunities are available for the legislative staff to learn more about the work of the casework team? Is there a process for caseworkers to share feedback from constituents with the legislative team? The best way to understand the scope of opportunities is to start finding and creating venues for communication and collaboration between counterparts.

### "Brown-bag Lunches or Zoom Coffees"

Virtual meetings can offer time for the casework team to share what they do with current or new Hill staff and with interns in the district/state and on the Hill and for the legislative team to share their priorities for the session or work period. It can be helpful to share candid information about the prospects for big legislation or spending bills, but equally helpful to learn about any Committee priorities. Once a format is established for these meetings, they can be scheduled for each new intern cycle (Fall, Spring, Summer) and added to the onboarding checklist for any new staff.

Beyond orienting new staff, scheduling regular virtual meetings to share information between caseworkers and the legislative team can keep the connections strong and everyone up-to-date on casework trends and legislative priorities.





## “Legislative Shop” Meetings

If the office already has a regular meeting between the legislative staff and state staff, including the casework manager or the whole casework team can add important constituent perspective and will keep the casework team abreast of their Member’s priorities. As with all meetings, it can be helpful to pay attention to the norms of who speaks and how long each person speaks. A meeting where most staff respond with “nothing to add” may not be one where the caseworker would want to go into a lot of detail about the treatment a constituent had at the hands of the Social Security Administration. Learning how to summarize a case in 2-3 minutes (the length of an elevator ride) is a great skill for casework team members to practice among themselves so that everyone is prepared to succinctly present the key points of a case and draw a clear line to the bigger issues.



## Invites to Casework Team Meetings

Conversely, for offices that have regular meetings for casework staff, particularly for large states and districts with multiple offices, casework teams may consider inviting a member (or a rotating member) of the legislative staff to join to get a better sense for the casework process and issues of importance to the district.

## Mail Meeting

Does the “mail team” of Legislative Correspondents (LCs) and/or staff assistants already have regular meetings? Adding the casework manager or a rotating representative from the casework team can be a great way to share information about what the office is hearing from constituents and an opportunity to build relationships with the DC team.

Legislative Correspondents (LCs) are often promoted to Legislative Assistants. Experienced caseworkers can be extremely helpful to new LCs trying to learn their issues areas and write mail responses. Caseworkers might offer to review an LC’s form letters and should communicate frequently when it’s unclear if the constituent’s concern is a case or a legislative comment. Close collaboration with the LCs will result in a more unified voice on issues and ultimately in legislation that centers the constituent’s experience. And when the LC moves up or on, that relationship creates a strong foundation for collaboration on legislation and oversight.



## Full Staff Meeting

Does the office have full staff meetings with the DC team? If casework data or anecdotes are presented in that meeting, be strategic about which issues to raise and succinct in the presentation. If the full staff meeting does not currently include time to report on constituent concerns, this would be a great addition to the agenda. When caseworkers see trends that might benefit from a legislative solution, beginning to “seed the ground” by sharing in full staff meetings may be helpful. Ideally, consult with the appropriate legislative aide before raising an issue “above their heads” in a large group setting.

## Be “In the Room”

In DC, there’s a common piece of wisdom that if it’s your issue, you need to be in the room to brief the boss.

Caseworkers who want to contribute to the legislative effort or give feedback on materials for local events should be prepared to “be in the room”, or be accountable for the projects they take on. This includes basic elements of professionalism like:

- Delivering assignments on time,
- Respond immediately to important inquiries, and
- Delivering any promised materials on time and error free.

Given the ebb and flow of casework, it is important to plan accordingly, assess capacity, and communicate early if a casework emergency may impact your ability to complete a project.





# Two-way Street: How Caseworkers Can Support Legislative Work

Good working relationships are built through repetition: if a casework team only ever approaches their DC counterparts with complex asks, without offering anything in return, they may not be able to expect the same warm reception as a casework team that commits to being an enthusiastic and reliable resource.

## On-the-ground Intelligence

Caseworkers have strong “antennae” for sentiments in the state or district around federal programs and constituent needs. They also have access to a valuable pool of data from casework on the “pain points” constituents face in working with federal agencies. This insight may be valuable for DC in multiple ways. Caseworkers may consider asking:



- Is there any data that the casework team could routinely gather that might help the DC team?
- Would it be helpful for the district/state staff to share with the DC team notes on meetings with local stakeholders or with local agency staff?
- Can the casework team help prepare briefing materials, talking points, or press materials for local events touching on their casework portfolios?
- How can the casework team use their knowledge of issues and local stakeholders to help with district/state facing legislative processes like earmarks (CPF/CDS)?
- If the team is considering a piece of legislation, can the casework team provide any insights from their work and networks on its potential reception? These may include identifying potential supporters and detractors (including off-the-record agency perspectives from outside traditional legislative liaison offices), and brainstorming strategies to win support with local stakeholders.



# Insight for Oversight

Caseworkers are in a prime position to identify trends in agency practice and procedure that directly affect constituents, to observe whether the implementation of legislation appears to follow Congressional intent, and to prompt questions that can sometimes lead to immediate change in agency policy or become a useful foundation for legislative proposals. For many casework problems, oversight is often the appropriate place to start, and caseworker insight can help strengthen a team's oversight capacity.

As noted above, there are several types of oversight actions that caseworkers can explore with their legislative counterparts.

## Member Letter to Agency

Caseworkers may want to suggest that their Member write to an agency head when their casework reveals systemic issues or they want data or background on an agency program. “Going it alone” on a letter will make sense if the matter can't wait for the unpredictable timeline of the delegation letter review process, if the problem is within the jurisdiction of the Member's committee assignment, or if it is of particular or personal interest to the Member.

Drafting Member letters to agencies is a great way for caseworkers to use (and demonstrate) their detailed knowledge of their portfolio issues and to establish themselves as partners with their legislative counterparts. Caseworkers can also help facilitate an effective response from the agency by sharing a copy of the Member letter with the Congressional Liaisons and, if needed, explaining the background in a phone call.

## Dear Colleague Letter (Open to Many Members)

“Dear Colleague” letters may be written to an agency head or to the Chairs and Ranking Members of committees. They are often circulated via party or caucus listservs or to all of the LAs in a particular portfolio (military or veterans, for example). For example, a letter might circulate from all of the Northern states advocating for release of emergency fuel assistance dollars (LIHEAP) or to address the backlog in Social Security Disability Income (SSDI) case processing.

As “Dear Colleague” letters are circulated, it is worth taking a look to see if the Member has already signed on, which other Members have signed, and whether the letter seems worth signing “as is” or with edits. Flagging the letter with a brief “take” from the caseworker on how it would impact constituents in the district or problems with the agencies in the casework portfolio can help LA's prioritize the district/state constituents among the many requests they receive. If the Member agrees to sign on, the casework team can help share that information with district and agency stakeholders.



## Delegation Letters to Agency Heads

A state or regional delegation will often write to a federal agency head about matters of concern throughout the district. These are often issues where constituents are contacting multiple offices hoping to get a solution to a problem that affects more than one constituent. The proposed closure of the local post office, falling milk prices that threaten the viability of dairy farms, or the exposure of the State's National Guard to open burn pits while deployed are examples of broad-impact issues that might prompt the Congressional delegation to collaborate on a letter to the head of a federal agency.

The protocol for writing and sending these letters may vary by office. Consider asking:

- Does the office have a policy of routinely signing onto delegation letters? If so, what is the approval “chain-of-command” within the office for vetting letters?
- Are there protocols around which Member office writes the first draft of the letter and the order in which the offices sign?
- Does the more senior Member of the delegation always have the last edit, or does the office that initiated?
- Do letters originate in the district/state office? Are delegation letters typically “signed” in the district/state or in DC?
- Does the Member prefer bi-partisan, bi-cameral letters, or does the team mix and match who signs onto delegation letters based on the topic?
- Does the Comms team typically engage in the approval process for delegation letters and does the office typically send press releases with copies of the signed letter?
- Are caseworkers authorized to share delegation letters with constituents? And finally, who will handle any follow up with the Agency when the delegation receives a response?

Knowing the written and unwritten protocols for delegation letters will help the Casework team engage more effectively and confidently in this important oversight tool.

## QFRs (Questions for the Record)

Questions for the Record (QFRs) are a great opportunity for the Member to go on record raising a systemic issue and to ask the agency to respond in writing. QFRs can typically be submitted within a prescribed window of time after the hearing. The casework team can suggest questions to their legislative counterparts, draft approval memos for the Member, and make note to check back with the LA to see when the Member receives a response. QFRs can be a high-impact way for a Member to flag a casework concern, and the casework team can use its detailed knowledge of federal programs to develop questions that force agencies to look at their operations. The responses can then feed back into any future oversight or legislative activity.



## Questions for Nominees

On the Senate side, confirmation hearings are fair game for questions to nominees on agency policies and operations. While the legislative team may have a full slate of questions when the nominee is under the Member’s Committee jurisdiction, it’s worth flagging any particular constituent issues the team has seen, particularly if there are compelling stories or visuals associated with the problem. Note that the team should be especially careful to vet a constituent whose story might be featured in a committee hearing.

## Committee Inquiry

Professional staff on legislative committees are another great resource for caseworkers who want to elevate constituent concerns. Staff on authorizing committees and the appropriations subcommittees have their own Congressional Liaisons who are focused either on policy or budgetary matters. While these Liaisons can be helpful at responding to Requests for Information (RFIs) (either informal or formal), it is not recommended to send individual constituent inquiries through these channels as they are not set up to track the response or handle the sensitive information contained in privacy release forms.

## A Note on Whistleblowers

One of the primary sources for oversight investigations are “whistleblowers,” or employees who come forward to report waste, fraud, abuse, or other improper behavior in their workplace. Whistleblowers receive special protection from retaliation for whistleblowing that can be vital for Congressional offices to be aware of when working with whistleblowers.

The House Office of the Whistleblower Ombuds hosts incredible resources on working with whistleblowers, including scripts for intake and case management, and legal resources whistleblowers can consult in the course of working with Congress.

# Using Stories

Caseworkers also have unique access to the stories of how a problem affects individuals or families in their states/districts that can be very helpful for hearing questions, bill rollouts, and more. A picture paints a thousand words, even on the floor of the House or Senate.

Before putting forward a constituent’s story, it is crucial to ask for their consent, set expectations of the outcome, and make sure they are prepared for potential negative feedback as a result of media or social media coverage. It is equally important that the team vet any constituent they hope to feature in floor speeches or public events to verify their identity, their residence, and the basic facts of their story. If derogatory information is revealed, the team should consider whether they can make the case for their proposal without featuring that constituent’s story or if there are other constituents who may be willing to share their similar experiences.



# Elements of a Successful Ask

Like any casework inquiry, a legislative ask also depends on context, relationships, and the rules. While each team's process is different, caseworkers can set up their requests for success with the following elements:

## Directed to the Right Person, in the Right Format

As caseworkers build relationships with the legislative team, it will be helpful to clarify the “chain of command” for legislative asks. Some questions they may want to cover:

- Should a caseworker bring ideas to the individual LA, to the LD, or directly to the Chief of Staff? Who makes the final recommendation to the Member?
- Should the team raise these issues in team meetings?
- Can an individual caseworker reach out directly to their counterparts on the Legislative Team, or are these requests best routed through the casework manager?
- What is the best format to submit a request? Is it an informal conversation, followed by a formal proposal?

No matter the team's format, requests to the legislative team should be clear but flexible: for example, presenting the problem with data and anecdotes, but avoiding being prescriptive on whether the legislative solution is an oversight option, an amendment, an appropriation request, or a stand-alone bill.

## Thoroughly Researched

When scoping out a casework problem to bring to the legislative team, caseworkers will need to come prepared with enough information to make the problem actionable. This requires answering a few questions:

**How many people does this problem impact? What's the scale of the harm this problem is causing?**

Caseworkers will be familiar with anecdotal data about the impact of a problem, but particularly in a smaller state, it may be vital to contextualize those anecdotes with additional data and background information. If possible, the impact of the problem and the proposal should be quantified. Talking to colleagues in your delegation or monitoring caseworker listservs can be a good starting point.



For information on the scope of constituents in the district or state who may be impacted, the Census offers a wealth of information on demographic trends that might help provide a context or data to support a request. The Census offers an online guide for Congressional offices hoping to use data from its annual American Community Survey and My Congressional District has an amazing district-level dashboard. Census Bureau staff are also available to answer questions from Congressional staff about how to access and use the Census data.

### How does this relate to the Member's priorities?

This question helps contextualize the question of impacted constituents. For example, a very widespread issue or one that causes significant harm to constituents may be a priority for the Member even if it does not fit neatly into the Member's policy priorities and committee assignments.

### Do we have any idea what's causing this problem?

For systematic problems, there is a good chance that information exists about what's causing them. Resources for background research include:

- » **Congressional Research Service (CRS)**

The CRS website ([public link](#)) contains up-to-date reports on major policy issues, “background and issues for Congress” (often including any previous versions of legislation on an issue) and great “explainers” on a number of complex topics. By request, CRS will provide Congressional offices tailored confidential memoranda, briefings and consultations, expert congressional testimony, and responses to individual inquiries. CRS can be a great first stop for caseworkers who wonder if there may be a legislative solution to a problem raised by constituents.

- » **Agency Inspectors General**

Originating with the Inspector General Act of 1978, most federal agencies now have established independent Offices of Inspector General (OIG) whose role is to prevent and detect waste, fraud, and abuse relating to their agency's programs and operations, and to promote economy, efficiency, and effectiveness in the agency's operations and programs. IG reports can be a great source of data on problems that caseworkers may notice. The Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency (CIGIE) maintains a searchable list of reports created by its member IGs at [www.oversight.gov](http://www.oversight.gov). A list of all Inspectors General is available [here](#).





» **Government Accountability Office (GAO)**

GAO conducts oversight and foresight reports and audits of federal programs either at the request of congressional committees or as statutorily required by public laws or committee reports. It is always worthwhile to search for any reports that GAO may have already conducted on an issue (and to subscribe to topic-specific email updates). Copies of reports and testimony by GAO are available online here. GAO prioritizes requests from Congressional committees, but individual members may also submit requests, and this can be a great first step toward a legislative solution to a problem identified through casework. More information about making requests is available here.

» **General Media and Trade Publications**

A quick internet search using keywords related to the problem can often reveal trends or other anecdotal evidence that the problem is affecting more than just a few constituents. In addition to the national and local news, government trade publications such as Federal News Network and GovExec track trends in federal government. There may also be issue-oriented trade publications or blogs that could provide helpful background information.

This kind of research offers great experience for state-based interns.

### Has anyone tried to tackle this before?

For example, has the GAO issued recommendations on this, and have they been implemented? Have other offices introduced legislation on this problem, and if so, has it advanced? Has the White House weighed in on this issue in any capacity? This research may identify avenues for potential action, including possible bills to cosponsor or re-use, efforts to follow up on in hearings, and more.

### Who would support/oppose this?

In offices where caseworkers do not normally conduct outreach, it is often helpful to raise the proposal first with the Outreach Team or District/State Director to determine who should do the legwork with stakeholder groups. The office's mail history can yield important data on constituents who have a high interest in the topic, as can the published legislative agendas of national and local stakeholder groups.



## Well-timed

There is often a disconnect in timing between DC and district/state offices. While casework ebbs and flows in response to local conditions, agency backlogs, or world events, it's not uncommon for things to get busier in state/district offices when the Members come home for recess, just when the DC staff have taken a breather to do some planning or catch-up.

Paying attention to the DC schedule—including the dates Congress is in session, the legislative calendar, appropriations season, and any committee hearings or events on the Member's schedule that the DC staff may be focused on—can help the state/district based staff know when their requests or updates will get focused attention from their DC counterparts, and whether the timing is right for a legislative solution to a problem they have identified.

While most opportunities will come via the Member's committee assignments and be planned out early in the year, it is a good practice to keep a wish list of issues or funding that would be helpful to the constituents and to address systemic issues the team has identified through casework. The casework team can draw on this list if a legislative vehicle arises unexpectedly. There are thousands of examples where an issue that was completely off the radar is suddenly being voted on the floor because of some national or world event or court case. It pays to be ready with an ask that can be dusted off when the opportunity arises: the Member and the constituents will appreciate the effort.

## Patient for the Long Game

After doing comprehensive background research on an issue, the casework team will need to trust the judgment of the legislative team on whether and how it makes most sense to take action. These are the moments when strong relationships developed between the state/district and Washington, DC teams can be forged (and tested). It is helpful to remember the long game: an idea that wasn't salient this year could be a top priority next year. The chamber could change party control, the Member could receive a new committee assignment, and the proposal that the team developed can be brushed off, updated, and put to good use.

Meanwhile, can the research and contacts that have been established be used to address the problem in other ways? Convening stakeholders, bringing in State or local officials with an interest in the problem, and working with the communications team can often lead to solutions or help build interest in the problem for a future effort.

