



Tips on Surviving Your First Session

(from past first-year legislators who survived one!)

1 **Come to orientation.**

Go to the mentor groups and ask some questions. Get to know as many people personally as possible — including members of the opposite party and chamber, and staff. Be open to the entire experience: and

enjoy meeting people. For more training, be sure to visit the Orientation page for access to additional training videos.

2 Try to find common issues and values with both sides of the aisle. Try not to prejudge issues in committee or on the floor. Keep an open mind and listen carefully.

3 Get lots of rest and a good night's sleep. Come to session rested mentally as well as in shape physically — you will rely on both before session is over. You will find many demands on your time, all of which you think you should do. Do them all — in moderation. Go to functions, but leave early. No donuts, less beer, and proper rest! Be prepared to work 10 to 16-hour days. Be sure to get your flu shot before coming to session.

4 Find time to exercise. Work out. If you don't take care of yourself, you can't take care of your constituents. Work hard to stay healthy and avoid the "Capitol crud".

5 Build relationships. Establish a seatmate relationship. Cultivate relationships with fellow first-years. They are facing the same uncertainties/problems you are. They will be your friends. You need a buddy system. Work on relationships on both sides of the aisle. Find a mentor you can trust, especially experienced legislators, and use any downtime to learn from them! Learn how to manage your bills,

papers, committees, and schedule. Find someone who can help you prioritize — you may have to neglect some things.

6 **Don't let the first day get you down.**

You are not alone in knowing NOTHING of the process. There is a vast amount of knowledge in the body of legislators and the GREAT folks who support us. You can learn so much by just listening and watching. Listen first; talk second. Never fear asking questions or asking for help! Ask lots of questions. Learn your way around the building and the legislative website.

7 Be as familiar as possible with the State Constitution. Get familiar with the existing House or Senate and Joint Rules that were in place during the last session and the new ones that will be presented. Learn the rules and insist they be followed. Rely on experienced members for protocol and rules, but think for yourself on the issues.

8 Preserve time for study. Be a good consumer of information and be prepared - don't assume someone else will get it right. Focus on the bills that come to your committees. Listen and ask questions about them. Prepare for each day, e.g., read bills in advance, write journal notes during hearings, prepare lists of bills that will have exec action, anticipate floor action and be ready to speak.

9 Don't be afraid to talk to staff. Get to know legislative staff as a resource as soon as possible. Legislative attorneys, researchers, and fiscal analysts are there to help you, and they will make your life easier — use them. (Mentor groups were instituted so you would have a staff person that you know.) Seek out staff for advice. Don't hesitate to ask staff questions! Get involved in the process of your bills being written. Use the staff (they are great) and take advantage of the virtual resources to ask for information or help.

10 Follow good hygiene practices: Wash hands and use hand sanitizer as often as possible. You shake lots of hands and colds and the flu go around. You cannot be effective if you are sick. Wear masks, and social distance as much as possible. Use virtual technology when possible.

11 Get really good snow tires (studs are best) for those Helena hills. Outfit your feet with yaktrax to avoid slipping in the really icy parking lot and having to file a workers' comp claim — safety first, freshman!

12 Answer constituent e-mail quickly in open moments.

13 Be respectful and polite to everyone. That includes members of your party (whether or not you agree with them), members of the other party (whether or not you disagree with them), legislative staff, lobbyists, the public, and every single person who makes your life easier for 4 long months. Come to serve others, not yourself.

14 On the House or Senate floor, conduct yourself in a manner as if your mom and dad (or your spouse or children) were watching. Listen more than talk. Listen, Listen, Listen, Talk! Use the same decorum if you are participating virtually. Use a professional background (staff can provide you one).

15 Be a person of your word. Never lie. If you're not going to support a bill, say so. Always be honest and speak your truth.

16 Lobbyists play an important role in the process. Attend lobby functions when possible and meet members from both parties socially. Get to know the lobbyists. The better you get to know them, the more you can trust them and get information, or know you can't believe or trust them. Just know that they represent their clients' interests and have information from that perspective.

17 Not all bills sponsored by members of your party are good. Not all bills sponsored by members of the opposite party are bad. Do not sign on to every

bill that someone asks you to, they can come back to bite you. Understand what you are signing on to; it is embarrassing to vote against a bill you cosponsored or agreed to support or oppose (before you read it). Pay close attention to other people: their motives and agendas. Do not let them overshadow your principles. Make your own decisions.

18 Carry several bills (but no more than 10). You will get experience in front of several committees, but don't pick all of your bills up or introduce them all at the same time. Write the introductions of your first bills, keeping them short and precise. Long intros kill bills. Carry just a handful of bills so you can really devote time to talking with stakeholders and other legislators — especially if you are in the minority.

19 Don't shame, insult, brag, or crow over a bill's success or failure. It may cost you a vote you'll need later.

20 Laugh at yourself. A lot. But don't laugh at anyone else unless they are laughing also. Have fun. Take yourself seriously, but not TOO seriously.

21 When you make a mistake, admit it, rectify it (if possible), and move on. Do not harp on it and don't allow anyone else to either. Take a deep breath and let mistakes roll off.

22 Remain positive and be kind.

23 If you have questions, ask. There is no stupid question. Ask lots of questions and pay attention to the process. Don't be nervous or scared. Ask for help or advice from fellow legislators, staff, and lobbyists.

24 Watch videos of hearings in committee and proceedings on the floor. Seeing them is believing — it helps prepare you for the actual events.

Contributions by first-year legislators from the 2007 through 2019 sessions and by staff.

Compiled by: Susan Byorth Fox, Executive Director, updated October 2020.