



Collaboration between congressional district and Washington, D.C. offices helps secure benefits for National Guard and Reserve members

Lessons Learned

1. Members of Congress have an opportunity to do quality oversight when they hear about issues from constituents in their home state district offices that have national implications.
2. Congressional offices should create a structure that allows information from constituent services to be transmitted to the legislative team.
3. Outside stakeholders can help educate members and increase pressure and momentum for legislative goals.

Constituent service is a critical function for every congressional office, with district caseworkers routinely helping citizens on issues ranging from Social Security and Medicare to veteran's benefits, immigration and tax matters.

While most of the cases center on individual problems, there are instances when an issue brought to a district office has broader national implications and may call for a legislative remedy or oversight by Congress. It is important for district staff to be the canary in the coal mine—to identify such issues when they arise, to alert the Washington staff and for the aides on Capitol Hill to follow through on the information. This requires the district and Washington offices to have a strong working relationship and to communicate and coordinate their activities.

This is exactly what took place in 2016 when staff members in the district office of Rep. Tim Walz (D-Minn.) began receiving numerous complaints from constituents that soldiers and airmen from the National Guard and Reserves, who had been deployed overseas, were not getting the same benefits as their active duty peers. As the complaints mounted, the district staff began to dig deeper, discovering that the issue was not confined just to the congressman's constituents, but affected thousands of National Guard and Reserve members across the country.

In passing the National Defense Authorization Act in 2012, Congress gave the Department of Defense authority to order National Guard and Reserve components "to active duty for pre-planned missions in support of the combatant commands." While providing the Pentagon with a cost-effective way to meet the needs of commanders by using National Guard and Reserve

forces, Congress did not extend eligibility to these soldiers and airmen for health care, education, leave, pay and retirement benefits.

The disparity began to hit home as DOD increased its use of the new authority, deploying National Guard and Reserve troops to support the U.S. efforts on the Sinai Peninsula in Egypt, the European Reassurance Initiative combatting Russian forces in Eastern Europe and NATO's Operation Joint Guardian in Kosovo.

After discovering the scope of the problem, the caseworkers in Walz's dis-

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trict office were able to use their team's existing structure to flag the issue for their legislative counterparts in Washington. In Walz's office, each major issue such as veteran's benefits, Social Security, Medicare and immigration is assigned to a team consisting of a legislative staffer, caseworker and an outreach specialist to ensure coordination between the district office and Washington. Each issue team conducts weekly

calls, which allows the caseworkers to share trends they have observed from their work in the community.

When the military benefit issue continued to come up during constituent interactions, district staffers Mark Krogmann and Shawn Schloesser

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raised the subject during one of the calls with the Washington office.

As a former member of the Army National Guard, co-chair of the National Guard and Reserve Components Caucus in the House of Representatives, and the ranking Democrat on the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, Walz understood the issue and strongly supported creating parity in the benefits earned by National Guard and Reserve troops. His Washington staff quickly reached out to the DOD, the National Guard Bureau, the Minnesota National Guard and the Congressional Research

Service to get more information about how the law was being used. The DOD legislative office informed aides to Walz that a legislative fix was the only way to ensure these service members would get the benefits they were seeking.

Walz enlisted the help of Rep. Steven Palazzo (R-Miss.), a current member of the Mississippi National Guard and Walz's fellow co-chair of the House National Guard and Reserve Components Caucus. Palazzo and Walz introduced the Reserve Component Benefits Parity Act in March of 2017 to provide National Guard and Reserve members with the same benefits as their active duty peers. The two lawmakers also issued a Dear Colleague letter that drew support from about 70 House members, and took other steps to promote the legislation.

As the legislative process unfolded in Washington, Krogmann said the role of the district staff was to "make sure we stayed in the loop and continued to communicate with people in the district about the efforts we were making on the issue." Krogmann and Schloesser also kept local National Guard and Reserve representatives informed regarding what was taking place in Washington, collected vignettes on how the legislation would positively impact constituents and helped rally support.

When Palazzo's stand-alone bill was not reported out of committee due to cost concerns, the support of the outside stakeholder groups such as the National Guard Association of the United States and the Reserve Officers Association became even more important. These groups used their existing relationships and networks on Capitol Hill to continue the push to equalize the benefits and raise the issue during congressional testimony.

With this support and the leadership of Walz and Palazzo, provisions dealing with educational benefits for the affected National Guard and Reserve troops were included in the Harry W. Colmery Veterans Education Assistance Act (The Forever GI Bill). In addition, health coverage for this group was part of the National Defense Authorization Act of 2018. Other legislative efforts are continuing for similar benefit parity issues.

The legislative success of Walz and Palazzo was due to a number of factors, including their concern for veterans, years-long relationships and their bipartisan cooperation. But the starting point was having alert staffers in Walz's district office who communicated what was happening at the grassroots to responsive counterparts in Washington. ♦

Resources

Letter of support from Reserve Officers Association http://cymcdh.com/sites/www.roa.org/resource/resmgr/files/legislative_letters/RepWalz-ReserveComponentsBen.pdf

NGAUS statement of support for Reserve Component Benefits Parity Act <https://www.ngaus.org/newsroom/news/ngaus-applauds-introduction-guard-and-reserve-benefit-parity-act>
Story by Rep. Palazzo in National Guard magazine <https://www.ngaus.org/newsroom/news/righting-wrong-rep-steven-palazzo>

Letter asking SASC to consider including these benefits in the NDAA <https://www.ngaus.org/sites/default/files/20170929%20NGAUS%20FY18%20NDAA%20Conference%20Letter.pdf>
Dear Colleague letter from Walz & Palazzo <http://dearcolleague.us/2018/02/reserve-component-benefits-parity-act-of-2018/>

Announcement that Palazzo would co-chair Reserve Components caucus <https://palazzo.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=398491>