

Co-Chairs Gorsek and Smith, and Members of the Subcommittee on General Government,

My name is AmyBeth Altenhofen, and I have worked for House District 44 since January of 2016, the same session that phase 1 of the CAMS project was approved. This means I am one of the few member staff who have worked continuously for the same district since before construction began on the Capitol building. I have also had the unique experience of going from a leadership office to a member's office when then Speaker Kotek resigned to run for governor. I would like to share how my role as legislative staff has changed in the last nine years.

When I first started as staff for House District 44, Oregon did not have the pay equity law and legislative offices only classified legislative assistants as either the first or second Legislative Aid (LA). The role of district staff in leadership offices is unique and can differ depending on the leadership and the district. My starting salary was less than \$33,000 annually but my job duties were similar to an LA1 of today. During the following six years, my job duties increased. By the time pay equity was fully implemented, I was classified as an LA3. For the last few years in the Speaker's Office, I was in charge of managing the Rep email, constituent email responses, all constituent casework, attending district events, planning town halls, assisting in scheduling when needed, writing newsletters, covering the front desk, staffing meeting with constituents and stakeholders, overseeing interns and working on district specific policy. I was even able to take on additional duties like running our fundraising raffle for the Governor's State Employee Food Drive. There was a significant uptick in workload during the legislative session, but the interim lull made that extra stress much more manageable. All of this changed in March of 2020.

After a shorter than usual 2020 short session, the COVID-19 pandemic kicked off the most intensely stressful interim, and one that I hope to never experience again. We are all familiar with the issues at the unemployment department office during this time and every legislative office was overwhelmed with constituent casework. Early on, a news outlet shared Speaker Kotek's newsletter encouraging constituents to reach out to our office if they were not hearing from Oregon Employment Department (OED). This launched several months of extremely high constituent cases for most legislative offices. Since I worked for the Speaker, I helped anyone who reached out to our office, constituent or not. Our office alone passed along over 1,000 unique claims to OED, many of which required repeated follow-up. I cannot speak to the caseloads for every other office, but I know most member's staff experienced similar levels of stress and burn out during this time. I believe that this stress led to the loss of many quality staff and the ramifications of increased constituent casework are still felt today.

Although we have not experienced this level of need from individual constituents since the initial cases were resolved, constituents still reach out regularly to legislative offices anytime there is an issue with unemployment. Because our offices were able to help so many constituents during the pandemic, Oregonians now know that they can reach out to their legislators for assistance with state agencies. This is one of the key components of our jobs, helping our member's constituents get the help they need from their government. However, this is just one component of the work that we do. When one of our duties needs more attention, it takes away from our ability to complete other responsibilities. When several obligations begin to increase, it snowballs into more work than one person can reasonably accomplish. Unfortunately, constituent casework is not the only aspect of the job that has become more complex since the pandemic. We have several policy areas that have increased in complexity as well.

Since 2022, I have worked for a Representative with an ambitious agenda with several complex policies. His agenda deserves my full attention whether we are in session or during the interim. This becomes an impossible task when I have to dedicate large portions of my time in the interim to scheduling, attending district events and neighborhood association meetings, responding to constituent emails, fielding constituent casework of varying complexity, creating newsletters and mailers, preparing talking points and speeches for public events, planning town halls, managing social media and running an internship program. Not to mention the need to hire and train a new legislative assistant before every session. Sometimes, we get lucky and find someone we want to keep after session, but we do not have the budget to retain them in the interim because I am at the top of the pay scale leaving little wiggle room. We have to count on these staff members being able to find temporary work and then we have to temporarily hire them repeatedly as funds become available. I have hired our current legislative assistant three times because we want to retain his talent for as long as possible. This whole process creates even more of an administrative burden during the interim.

Additionally, my member is unable to take on these responsibilities because he has to continue full-time employment during the interim and short session. If I had another year-round staff member to take on some of the administrative responsibilities, I could be using that time to help run workgroups, attend taskforce meetings, monitor agency rulemaking and meet with more stakeholders to create better policy before the session begins. This staff member would also be prepared to start session knowing the legislative process and key stakeholders, having systems in place for administrative tasks and would have a better understanding of our member's policy priorities. This would give our office the foundation to ensure that our member meets the needs of his constituents and successfully passes his policy agenda.

This session, my member introduced 58 bills, but we requested about 10 additional legislative concepts that we did not file. I strongly believe that if I had the ability to devote more time to policy in the interim, our office would not have needed to request as many legislative concepts or felt the pressure to introduce as many bills that were not fully developed. We would be a more efficient office if I had the consistency in the interim of a second staff member. For my member to be successful, he deserves consistent constituent communication and quality policy proposals. Constituents from House District 44 deserve to have consistent support and access to our office all year. The legislature deserves well thought out and vetted policies at the beginning of session. I believe this can be accomplished by allowing offices to staff appropriately.

I understand that we are facing fiscal challenges as a state, but I believe we can find solutions to our staffing challenges. We need member office budgets to reflect the current needs of constituents at the level they deserve. I ask legislative leadership and this committee to find solutions that adequately staff member offices so we can better serve the unique needs of our constituents.

Thank you,



AmyBeth Altenhofen

Chief of Staff to Representative Travis Nelson