

Managing Constituent Services During a Campaign Year

Introduction

NGA Consulting conducted a year-long focus in 2010 on the important considerations of governing while running for reelection. NGA Consulting sponsored a webcast for multiple categories of governors' staff followed by a conference call to provide constituent services directors with an opportunity to address specific issues or concerns unique to their position. Shared advice, questions and discussion points from the conference call are documented in this information sheet.

Provide Staff Guidelines on Separating Work from the Campaign

- **It's important to maintain a distinction between the governor's state office and the campaign office to make sure you comply with state ethics guidelines.**
- **Clearly state what an employee is not allowed to do on state time or using state resources (such as the phone system and e-mail).** As an example, a few distinctions on separating work from the campaign are listed below (from one state):
 - The law in one state allows state employees to be involved in the political process only on their own time. When staff are working in a public space, no campaigning is allowed.
 - Political attire is acceptable only when you're off the clock—no political buttons or political materials can be displayed in the state office. You can have a political bumper sticker on your car, drive your car to work and park it, but you can't post that same bumper sticker in your work space.

Provide Staff Guidelines on Public Records Laws

- **E-mail and phone usage are the most difficult to monitor and the easiest to abuse.** Although it should be well known, emphasize to staff that e-mails are not private, improper use of work email could be extremely embarrassing to the governor, and the governor's office could be subject to ethics violations if an employee is found to be using state e-mail and/or phones to conduct campaign work.

Develop Strategies to Handle Added Scrutiny and Constituent Requests during a Reelection Year

- **Establish good communication with your chief of staff, legal counsel and communications office** to ensure you understand their expectations on what they consider campaign-related inquiries.
- **Develop a strategy on how to handle campaign contributions that may come in to the governor's state office.** In one governor's office, they make it a policy not to forward campaign contributions to the campaign office. The governor's office sends them back to the sender with a letter stating that the office is not able to accept contributions on behalf of the governor's campaign.

- **Be consistent in what information your office provides (by phone or otherwise) on how to reach a campaign office for any candidate.** Get input from your chief of staff, communications office and legal counsel to make sure they agree with the approach you take. If you decide to provide phone and/or website information for your governor’s campaign, make sure you have the same information available for the other candidates.
 - It can be helpful to develop a brief statement or script for your phone staff so they know how to respond to these requests. (Example: “You’ve reached the state office for Governor X. We regret that we are not able to answer questions regarding the Governor’s campaign activities. However, we can provide you with that office phone number.”)
 - Instead of providing information for each and all candidates, you may prefer to have phone numbers for the major party headquarters in your state and refer callers to those offices.
- **Expect an increase in the number of questions about your governor’s policy stance on different issues.** Advise constituent services staff not to be goaded into debating campaign issues or the stances of your governor versus the opponent. It is not uncommon for campaigns to attempt to catch the incumbent “campaigning” from their state office. In other words, remember the caller might be trying to “bait you” and could be a planted call.
- **It’s important to use consistent language when handling constituent calls and requests during a re-election year.** Some people will try to threaten or goad you into helping them by saying they will or won’t vote for your governor otherwise. Having sample language ready can be helpful to front line staff members so your office can avoid embarrassing situations or having someone make the wrong decision or take the wrong approach.
- **Tell your staff to avoid discussions or questions from constituents about getting assistance in return for votes.** Your prepared script might say something to the effect of, “The governor’s office is here to serve all citizens of the state,” and “Let’s focus on the issue/question that you’re calling about.”
- **Be very aware that all you say and do reflects on your governor.**

Staffing and Workload Considerations

- **Expect staff anxiety during re-election and the transition out and be open to talking through their concerns as much as possible.** If needed, talk to your chief of staff and find out how to address and respond to these questions appropriately.
- **You will encounter a mix of staffing changes during re-election and the final year in office.** People may leave early for other opportunities, take a leave of absence to work on the campaign, or staff members may stay on staff in the governor’s office but volunteer for the campaign in their off time. **It’s important to be flexible and prepared to handle unexpected changes.**
- **Do your best to be a mentor when it comes to people leaving and new staff joining the office.** Help train new staff and make sure to help them feel like they belong. It can be hard to join a team at this stage in the game.

- **Make sure to cross-train staff members** so your office has enough capable and knowledgeable people to handle the phones, archiving, etc. Things may change in the short term so long-range planning is essential.
- **Be as thick-skinned as you can.** Every day you will encounter people criticizing you, your work, state government and your governor.
- **It's very important to plan ahead, be as flexible as you can, and most important, find time to take care of yourself.** In this job, we are responsible for taking care of our co-workers, the governor, and our state's constituents. You will need to look inward to stay focused.

Additional Information

NGA Consulting provides governors, chiefs of staff, and governors' staff members with valuable resources and management services to help lead and manage state government and organize and operate the governor's office.

Most NGA Consulting publications are available online at www.nga.org/management.

For additional information about strategies addressed in this information sheet, please contact **Christie Amberman**, associate director of NGA Consulting (202-624-5370; camberman@nga.org).

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