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A Decade of Fellowships: ASCE Program Gives Engineering a Voice on Capitol Hill

By Mark Fitzgerald

As Herbert Hoover once said, “In the great mass of our people there are plenty of individuals of intelligence from among whom leadership can be recruited.” Hoover certainly knew something about leadership—after all, he was at one time the U.S. president. But he was a civil engineer long before people began referring to him as the grand old man. He was therefore also deeply aware of how engineers can improve society and, adducing his own experience in organizing humanitarian assistance in Europe after World War I, even succeed in formulating national policy, legislation, and change. He believed that ingenuous debate and a frank statement of differences were essential parts of good governance.

Throughout its long history ASCE has embraced those sentiments. Indeed, if Hoover’s public service and humanitarian achievements have made it easier for engineers to find a seat at the decision-making table, then the Society’s Congressional Fellows Program has also made it easier for the civil engineering community to have a voice at that table. The program was started in 1996 to offer ASCE members a chance to work for one year on the staff of a congressional committee or for a U.S. senator or House member. Over the past decade, ASCE has sponsored 10 congressional fellows—all of whom have gained valuable insights into how Congress works while making members of Congress and their staffs aware of the interests and perspectives of civil engineers.

“Being a congressional fellow is such a great learning experience for engineers,” says ASCE’s current fellow, Eryn E. Robinson, P.E., M.ASCE, who is applying her

background in geological engineering to her position on the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works. “I think it’s an excellent opportunity for us to appreciate how legislation happens and to use our expertise to provide guidance on some of the technical issues that arise.”

Robinson’s primary undertaking thus far has been to support the various activities relating to the committee’s response to Hurricane Katrina. On November 14, she was part of a congressional delegation that included Louisiana’s senators, David Vitter (R) and Mary Landrieu (D), Senator Lincoln Chafee (R–Rhode Island), and committee staffers that visited some of the neighborhoods in Louisiana hardest hit by the hurricane. “We flew down and back on a military flight from Andrews Air Force Base,” says Robinson. “It was remarkable. Flying in, we saw the blue tarps on the roofs, and as we drove through the neighborhoods we could see the high-water marks and the spray paint on the buildings that had been marked to indicate if they were searched or if they had found bodies. We saw neighborhoods that were closed off to the public and to the residents who once lived there, areas that were so completely ruined that there was really nothing for anyone to go back to. It was a very powerful experience.”

Three days later Robinson helped Senator Vitter organize a committee hearing that focused on how the preliminary findings from the levee investigation can be incorporated into restoration work to increase the protection from hurricanes. “My experience with flood hazard mapping and my experience as an engineer have been especially useful during these hearings on levee performance,” adds Robinson. “I’ve been able to apply my background and knowledge to the more technical aspects of the testimonies and make it easier for others to understand the finer points of what’s being discussed.”

According to Jonathan Upchurch, Ph.D., P.E., M.ASCE, many of the Society’s congressional fellows have influenced the formulation of policy and legislation. Upchurch, ASCE’s 2002–03 congressional fellow, who worked on the staff of the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, played a significant role in helping the committee advance the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, and Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU), which was passed by both houses of Congress and signed into law last summer. “You learn that policy, process, and politics are the primary factors that influence the creation of legislation,” says Upchurch. “It’s impossible to know which one of these influences had the greatest impact on SAFETEA-LU, but there were clearly certain aspects of the bill where politics reigned supreme. There were other aspects where I think we were able to create good policy and we didn’t get a whole lot of interference from politics. The process, of course, played into the substance of what was introduced and the various phases associated with the passage of the bill.”

Although SAFETEA-LU will provide \$286.5 billion in total guaranteed funding for highway programs, public transportation, and highway safety, this figure is well

below the \$375 billion that the U.S. Department of Transportation estimated would be required to adequately fund the nation's transportation infrastructure. "It's not everything that everyone in the transportation community wanted," adds Upchurch. "There is, however, about a thirty-six percent increase in funding for research, which I consider to be a little bit of a victory, not only because that's the part of the bill I spent the most time on but also because in the previous transportation reauthorization bill there were hardly any gains in research funding."

Kevin Womack, Ph.D., P.E., M.ASCE, the 2001–02 congressional fellow, who served on the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works and worked on the research provisions of SAFETEA-LU prior to Upchurch, points out that the funding increase for research may be deceptive. "Okay, when you look at the bottom-line dollars, there is a little bit more research money, but, boy, after you look into the details you see that it's not what people want to have," he says. "I also know that many people in various state [departments of transportation] are not too happy with the federal aid title of the bill because of how their discretionary dollars were in effect cut by all of the designated projects. The outcome of the state donor and donee part of the legislation wasn't what most people wanted either; and, of course, everyone overall was simply frustrated that this reauthorization took so very long."

All in all, however, Womack believes that his contribution to the development of SAFETEA-LU was important because it underscored the value of research and generated a discussion concerning many of the issues that his work explored. "Even though it didn't get passed in the final bill, the research title that I wrote in the Senate committee was the first title of the surface transportation legislation that was finished," he says. "And because it was done, we were able to have a research roundtable that was successful in raising awareness, and this gave research more attention than it otherwise would have gotten. More and more people who had never been involved before started taking an interest, and I think this helped energize the effort that was put into research on the House side as well."

However inadequate SAFETEA-LU is in addressing the needs and demands of the nation's highways and public transportation facilities, many professionals in the civil engineering community believe that the new law will achieve some level of success in boosting the quality of the nation's transportation network. "I think SAFETEA-LU also makes some attempts to improve policy," adds Upchurch, who at the conclusion of his fellowship was offered a staff position with the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure (a rare honor), which allowed him to continue his work on SAFETEA-LU for another year. "It's certainly one of the largest pieces of legislation that ASCE has ever been involved with, and I think the fact that both Kevin Womack and I were able to influence the bill in both the Senate and the House also makes SAFETEA-LU the most meaningful piece of legislation that ASCE congressional fellows have had a hand in so far."

The knowledge and experience that fellows gain—especially with regard to the congressional decision-making process—and are able to utilize after their time on Capitol Hill are other important aspects of ASCE’s Congressional Fellows Program. David Westerling, Ph.D., M.ASCE, who served on the staff of Senator Kent Conrad (D) of North Dakota in 1999 and 2000, ran for the Massachusetts House of Representatives two years after his congressional fellowship. “It was a very close race,” recalls Westerling. “I got thirty percent of the vote in a three-way race and even eighty percent of the vote in my hometown, but it wasn’t enough to win.”

Even so, Westerling was subsequently elected by the residents of Harvard, Massachusetts, to serve as town moderator, and in that capacity he presides over and regulates the proceedings of town meetings and appoints the members of the finance committee. “I’m on the ballot every year, and everyone seems to like my style,” he says. “I also chair our annual town meeting, where town citizens can come and vote on articles that deal with issues such as the budget, new construction, and schools. The idea is to keep order and keep things moving. At this meeting, we essentially set the budget for the next year. We take a lot of votes and we do it all in one day. It’s a big event.”

Shortly after his congressional fellowship, Westerling helped launch a legislative fellows program in ASCE’s Boston Society of Civil Engineers Section. “We wanted to get involved in Boston, so we put together a committee and set a plan in motion that was based on the program that ASCE had established nationally,” he explains. “After we got a state public affairs grant from ASCE, the program quickly took off.” The Society created the State Public Affairs Grant Program in 1997 as a resource to help ASCE’s sections become involved in public policy at the grassroots level. The program is designed to give a higher profile to civil engineering issues and to bolster the image of civil engineers as leaders and as experts on the nation’s infrastructure.

Last month Westerling met with members of ASCE’s Maryland Section and staffers from ASCE’s government relations office to discuss plans for instituting a state fellowship in Annapolis. “We passed along some of the ideas and guidelines from our fellows program in Boston,” says Westerling. “Now the section is in the process of putting together a plan and a program to be approved by the board of government. I’m going to be writing some letters to the board expressing support and highlighting how well the meeting went and so forth, and I know that ASCE’s Washington office intends to support the efforts of starting up a fellows program in Annapolis as well.”

Having sponsored congressional fellows for 10 years, ASCE now has a broad network of contacts with legislative and political influence. “I think this program will be of tremendous benefit to ASCE in the future,” adds Robinson, who hopes to pursue a career in public policy after her fellowship ends in August. “Understanding how Congress works with federal agencies and what the agencies do translates into things that affect businesses and state and local governments. That’s why it’s so important to have civil engineering fellows working in congressional offices.”

An ASCE congressional fellowship is open to any ASCE member who is a U.S. citizen. Factors considered by the selection committee include the attainment of advanced degrees, registration as a professional engineer, career background, public policy experience, and ASCE involvement. ASCE members who are awarded a congressional fellowship receive an annual stipend and typically take a one-year leave of absence from their place of employment. Fellows are required to attend a two-week orientation program organized and conducted by the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the umbrella organization that directs the Congressional Science and Engineering Fellows Program—a cooperative undertaking by more than 20 national engineering and scientific organizations that as a group sponsor more than 30 congressional fellows each year.

The orientation program is designed to ensure that new fellows have a basic knowledge of the legislative process and the working environment on Capitol Hill. Orientation events include an overview of the legislative process; an update on pressing issues before Congress; and briefings by members of Congress, congressional staffers, and staff members from congressional support agencies, among them the Congressional Research Service, the Government Accountability Office (formerly the General Accounting Office), and the Congressional Budget Office. After orientation, fellows are interviewed by the staffs of congressional committees or individual members of Congress for positions and assignments. The focus of the fellows and their societies, the issues and tasks to be assigned, and the potential for making a valuable contribution are among the factors considered in the placement process.