



What I wish I'd known then ...

Kansas lawmaker looks back on her first year in office, and offers tips to help newcomers survive the hectic months ahead

by Kansas Sen. Elaine Bowers (Elaine.Bowers@senate.ks.gov)

Even though it seems like eons ago, it was only in the fall of 2006 that I was preparing to become a new Kansas state representative.

As I think about it now, it was a daunting prospect — the idea of getting ready for a job without truly understanding the full scope of the position.

Regardless of this fact, I was entirely willing to throw myself into it with gusto.

Although this was my first time in elected office, I felt totally comfortable representing the area where I grew up, raised my own family and operated a small business with my husband — I knew who I was and from where I came. I also knew I didn't know everything, especially about the legislative branch, and I wasn't going to assume anything in advance.

Looking back, there are many things on my list of "I wish had known" items. I share that list in this article, with the hope that it, in some small way, can help our new state legislators in the Midwest as they prepare for their first year in the job.

Take care of yourself

First, I wish I had known as a newcomer about the crazy schedule that legislators are forced to keep.

The legislative day begins before 8 a.m. and doesn't end at 5 p.m.; it runs long into the evenings with receptions and dinners. It is mentally and, surprisingly, physically draining.

I learned the hard way to drink more water and take my vitamins. The little exercise I get is taking the stairs in the Statehouse while wearing a pedometer as encouragement. (I know now that walking is quicker than waiting for an elevator anyway!)

Perhaps there is no way to prepare a person for this unique job, but one of the most important things I know now is to stay healthy and try to eat properly. Of course, this is easier said than done. Even today, I will still pop in to the Doctor of the Day to have my blood pressure checked, and it is a good way to make a new friend in the medical field who volunteers his

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or her service for a day from all across our great state of Kansas.

Learn the rules of the legislature

The legislative procedure and daily process is fascinating, and I have learned a lot by observing.

I was lucky to be assigned seat No. 85, near the back of the chamber in the Kansas House, where I could watch the interaction of the more experienced legislators as they carried and debated bills during my first few months.

I also witnessed alliances being formed between the members and saw firsthand how members truly "work across the aisle."

I quickly learned, too, the importance of understanding the rules of the legislature. This knowledge allows a lawmaker to control the legislative process — for example, sometimes ending debate as quickly as it started, in committee or on the floor, simply by knowing the rules.

Find a way to stay organized

As much time as it took at the start to understand the rules and process, however, another challenge was even greater — finding a way to stay organized and on task.

I thought a simple daily calendar notebook would work, but it has taken me eight years to finally find a system in Topeka and at home to keep me on track. I think allowing myself to be flexible has helped a great deal.

As we are all unique in our states, it could be an ongoing experiment to find what works best for each individual. A three-ring binder for the invitations, plus my daily schedule printed out during session, works for me. However, I am still open to change if I find a better way. It is safe to say that I am still evolving in my organizational abilities.

Ask for help, then thank the helpers

As a new legislator, I was looking forward to working with others in Topeka to solve problems.

I was surprised about the large, broad range of questions and requests for information from home. I learned a long time ago not to be too proud to ask for help. So not knowing "how" to answer, I quickly learned the "who."

I simply needed to find the right person in the right agency to help my constituents. I've learned to ask for a timely deadline and to be copied on all responses after I find the right helper. I still keep a

magic list of fix-it people, which itself is constantly changing.

I take every opportunity to share my list of experts with my colleagues, as I believe we all do better when we help each other become more successful. If I have the knowledge and skills to help someone, then I do — regardless of party or chamber.

I also like to see to it that the people behind the scenes (researchers, revisers and agency support staff) are given the proper credit. A well-deserved thank you can go a long way. I have found, too, especially at the end of session when the days are long, that cookies and mini-cupcakes are a favorite.

Listen twice as much as you talk

I am sure both novice and experienced legislators will remember the people who helped them from the beginning.

The best tip I ever received was from the man who urged me to run for office: "Always remember that you have two ears and one mouth." In other words, listen twice as much as you talk. Simple but true.

There are many people who have been my own mentors — former Speaker Melvin Neufeld, whom I still bounce things off of today (I have his "top 10 rules" on my desk); the late Kansas Senate President Ross Doyen, who believed in me as a legislator before I did; and the late Rep. Bob Bethel, who was a lay minister and who died in a car wreck driving home from session in 2012.

I owe a lot to the legislators who took the time to make sure I was understanding and growing — it has helped make me the legislator I am today!

I think it is important for us all to think back to our early days and know that we now are the "old-timers" and have a responsibility to the newest members of the legislature. It is our turn to offer advice and encouragement, and to coax the best out of a newer member — and ourselves for that matter.

The best way to start out the new session on a positive note is to lead by example and show true respect for one another regardless of geography or philosophy. And finally, a bit of fun advice from a co-mate who is no longer with me in Topeka: "Sit up straight and don't chew on your pencil — you never know when you might be on TV!" ★

Sen. Elaine Bowers, a Republican, was elected to the Kansas Senate in 2012 after serving six years in the House. She is a graduate of two leadership training programs of The Council of State Governments: the Bowhay Institute for Legislative Leadership Development (BILLD) and Toll Fellows.

Estimated # of members who will be serving in the state legislature for the first time in 2015

