

## NONPARTISANSHIP

The General Assembly has established several nonpartisan offices to assist it in accomplishing its lawmaking responsibility. The offices are not identified with a political party or any special interest; they work to facilitate policy development by the legislature and its committees and individual members. This report explains what it is to be a nonpartisan professional employee responsible for helping the General Assembly carry out its mission. It focuses on assistance provided in development, consideration, and passage of legislation. It describes common scenarios, but is not an exhaustive list, and suggests behaviors showing the application of nonpartisan principles.

### Statement on Nonpartisanship

Nonpartisanship is the core value that guides how we serve the General Assembly. It guides how we interact with legislators, our partisan colleagues, agency officials, lobbyists, and the public, and it motivates us to:

- serve fairly and impartially all legislators, regardless of party or rank;
- acquire in-depth knowledge, develop strong analytical and communication skills, and practice the discipline of putting aside one's personal beliefs when serving legislators; and
- ensure that our work is objective, balanced, and accessible.

### Focus Areas: Aspects of Nonpartisan Work

Our work centers on issues related to five key “focus areas”: (1) communication, (2) professionalism and accountability, (3) professional products and services, (4) customer service and feedback, and (5) teamwork. Together with nonpartisanship, they form the building blocks for our offices' unique role in the Connecticut General Assembly. Each one is described briefly below.

- **Communication** means communication within each nonpartisan office, among the nonpartisan offices, and between each of the offices and its clients: legislators and staff. Effective and open communication is vital to a successful organization.
- **Professionalism and accountability** refer to the behavior, attitude, and work quality expected from the nonpartisan offices and to the work environment and experience of each nonpartisan staff member. We continually strive to improve our professional skills and are responsible for meeting the high standards of performance expected by our customers and colleagues.
- **Professional products and services** mean all the types of information that each office produces for the General Assembly as well as the best ways to provide to our customers these products and services .
- **Customer service and feedback** relate to how we identify and respond to the changing needs of our clients, the committees, individual members, and other General Assembly staff, and how we solicit and respond to feedback regarding our products and services.
- **Teamwork** refers to having a common mission and purpose and working collaboratively toward common goals. Although we work in different offices and perform different functions, we recognize how we depend on each other to do our jobs. Consequently, we continuously improve how we support and reinforce each other.

## **Nonpartisanship and Focus Areas: Foundation for Success**

Nonpartisanship is inextricably embedded in every aspect of our work. In the following examples, we describe how we apply our principles of nonpartisanship to some of the processes and structures that comprise the focus areas of our work.

**1. Communication:** As nonpartisan staff, we communicate information that legislators need to understand issues and make decisions. We do so knowing that others could hear our words and perceive our actions as favoring one side or the other. Consequently, it is crucial for us to ensure that each communication (whether verbal or printed, formal or informal) is neutral, unbiased, accurate, discreet, and, when appropriate, confidential.

### *Examples*

- Confidential Drafts: When a legislator or anyone else, other than a bill's proponent, asks to see a draft of a bill, we advise the person of confidentiality principles, specifically that the proponent of the bill must verify that the draft may be disclosed and to whom. In this situation, we advise that a draft can only be released with the proponent's authorization.
- Floor Debate: At times staff may be called upon to assist members on the floor as they bring out bills or amendments. To maintain the nonpartisan nature of our support, our practice is that staff should not stand directly next to a member during debate. When a member asks staff to be in the chamber during debate, we advise the member that we will remain in a neutral location (e.g., the well or in the rear of the chamber) and that we will be available to all members, as needed, while we are there. In addition, we specifically let ranking members know that we are also available to them during debate.
- Staffing a Bipartisan Committee: The obligation of nonpartisan professional staff to communicate its work in an objective, balanced manner is especially clear in the case of an equally bipartisan committee, such as the Program Review and Investigations (PRI) Committee, which is headed by co-chairs and ranking members representing each political party and each chamber. At a minimum, copies of all materials developed in the course of the committee's work and prepared for the committee's use by PRI staff, including correspondence from the committee leadership, are made available to both chairs.

**2. Professionalism and Accountability:** Our ability to serve legislators depends on whether they believe we provide factual, unbiased, and timely assistance. We measure ourselves against this standard, which is why we pride ourselves on our reputations and hold in high regard the professional relationships that our offices have earned with each of the caucuses and the larger legislative community. Our ability to maintain these reputations and relationships ultimately depends on our capacity to put aside our personal views, opinions, and theories and provide honest, comprehensive, and unbiased information. It also depends on our ability to stay current on issues and successfully communicate what we learn.

### *Examples*

- Caucus Attendance: Committees handle nonpartisan staff presence in their caucuses

differently. What is viewed as "appropriate and helpful nonpartisan behavior" in one committee might be seen as disruptive in another. As nonpartisan staff, we use our judgment and work with the co-chairs and ranking members to reach an understanding about how to handle our attendance and participation in caucuses. In one committee, for example, "popping in" to both caucuses may be appropriate or expected. In another committee, the chairs and ranking members may prefer staff to remain in a neutral location and wait for further direction or requests for attendance.

- Seating at Committee Meetings and Public Hearings: As nonpartisan staff, we are available to all committee members and, therefore, we try to sit in a neutral location during meetings and hearings. If one or both committee co-chairs asks us to sit next to them, we will inform them of our preference and that, regardless of where we sit, we are available to all members. This situation becomes less of an issue when more than one nonpartisan staff is present.

**3. Professional Products and Services:** We provide products and services that reflect our knowledge and expertise about a wide range of policy areas. They are objective, impartial, comprehensive, and independent of our personal beliefs or third-party interests. Our products and services address legislators' needs and concerns, not our own interests or views.

#### *Examples*

- Taking Member Requests: Each OLR and OFA written response to a request for information objectively answers a particular question as directly as possible. We include all relevant data and do not omit any to help make a case. However, a requestor may frame a question narrowly or pointedly and the end result may appear to support or oppose a position. We try to include information "on both sides of an issue" but in the end, we must answer the question that we are asked.
- Revising Documents: Once staff issues a work product (e.g., report, fiscal note), our offices will not revise it to further a political agenda. However, we do accept feedback and may revise a product, as appropriate, based on additional information submitted and further review.
- Supporting Report Findings and Recommendations: As nonpartisan professionals, PRI staff clearly document all sources of information used to prepare a product, such as a committee report, and identify standards and criteria used to develop findings and recommendations.
- Presenting Policy Options: To the extent possible within resources and time constraints, staff will identify best practices, generally accepted research findings, and expert opinions and present information in an unbiased manner. If the available evidence or theory is conflicting or inconclusive, staff will attempt to capture and present fully each side of a policy position.

**4. Customer Service and Feedback:** As nonpartisan staff, we serve a relatively small, but highly diverse, client base—the 187 General Assembly members. In doing so, we try to be responsive to all members' needs and do not assume that the products and services legislators wanted 10 years ago are the ones they want today. Consequently, we continuously examine and assess how members

request our assistance and we respond to comments and suggestions about how we can improve a product or service. Working with legislators in different settings gives us ideas about new products and services that can help them operate more effectively in those settings. And, given advances in information technology, we experiment with new ways to present and deliver information. We also devise strategies for getting information to members within relatively short deadlines.

### *Examples*

- Competing Deadlines: When we receive a request to complete a large project in a short timeframe, other clients' projects may be impacted. Each central office allocates staff resources to accommodate requests and typical committee workloads. Staff are available and at times reassigned to meet rush deadlines and legislators' needs. In other cases, staff tries to negotiate a more flexible deadline. If this is not possible, we provide as much information as feasible within the timeframe while being cognizant of our commitments to other members. We also discuss alternatives, including providing partial information immediately and the remainder at a later date.
- Anticipating Needs: It is common for several committees to draft bills addressing the same topic. When this happens, we may prepare tables and charts comparing the bills' key provisions to assist chairpersons and ranking members to quickly grasp the major differences.

**5. Teamwork:** Rapid and widespread social, economic, and technological changes require legislators and their staffs to address increasingly complex problems and issues while working under tighter and tighter deadlines. Recognizing these changes, the nonpartisan offices know that they can best help the legislature meet these challenges by finding new ways to work together. For example, we often work in ad hoc interoffice teams to bring unique knowledge and skills to bear on a problem or issue. Sometimes these collaborative efforts benefit the individual member who sought our services; other times, groups, such as bipartisan screening committees, standing committees, and working groups benefit.

### **Examples**

- Subject Matter Collaboration: Staff consult and work together throughout the committee and amendment processes to develop, refine, and screen bill drafts and substitute language.
- Joint Fiscal Notes and Bill Analyses: Serving on the Finance Committee means understanding how economic trends interact with the rules for assessing and collecting taxes. OFA and OLR help members understand the interplay of this interaction by preparing joint fiscal notes and bill analyses for bills the committee intends to send to the floor.
- Playing to Our Strengths: Given the bipartisan nature of PRI committee work, a strong working relationship with colleagues in the other nonpartisan offices benefits development of well-balanced proposals for statutory or budgetary changes aimed at improving state programs. Consultation with relevant staff from OLR, OFA, and LCO can provide helpful insights, based on their work with subject-matter committees, about the pros and cons of different policy options.