

My ACS Congressional Fellowship

By Emily Lewis, Ph.D.

“Thank you, Mr. Chairman,” the Ranking Member begins, reading aloud the opening statement I prepared for the hearing. Although the initial enchantment of working in Congress fades over time, it’s still surreal to hear remarks I’ve helped prepare spoken by members. For this particular hearing, I’m sitting on the dais since I took the lead in developing the materials. Although the nameplate where I sit clearly reads “Committee Staff,” I get a glimpse of what it must feel like to be a member at these events. I also reflect on what a privilege ACS has given me to be in this position.

Preparing for hearings has been a major part of my duties as a fellow on the Democratic staff of the Natural Resources Committee. From writing memos, opening statements and questions, to briefing members and staff, to inviting and preparing witnesses, my work on these events has allowed me to delve deep into a number of different topics. I’ve discovered how to quickly study new policy subjects, and I’ve been able to learn about issues from experts in academia, non-profits, and the government. While stressful at times, it’s been exciting to help shape the public discussion on important topics, ensuring critical points are raised and, at times, that the underlying science is heard. With each consecutive hearing I handled, I was able to take on increasing responsibility and gain a more in-depth understanding of the subject matter, culminating in being entrusted to staff the Ranking Member and support to the rest of the committee.

While the busy Committee hearing schedule ensured that there was never a shortage of work on a day-to-day basis, I was also able to work on a number of longer-term projects during my tenure, including writing legislation and letters. Before coming to the Hill, it seemed as though bills were the primary way to accomplish all goals in Congress; however, I’ve realized that letters are often equally important, especially for members of the Minority party whose bills seldom pass. Through letters, I’ve helped members to clearly articulate policy priorities, propose actions to the executive branch, and build consensus among their peers. Although legislation can be a more direct approach to achieving a specific outcome, letters can be a powerful tool when the prospect of getting a bill through both chambers is low.

Legislation does still play a major role in addressing issues and building support, however, and one of the most educational experiences I had during the fellowship was working on a comprehensive bill. I worked hard to gain an expert understanding of the subject matter, but I quickly learned that writing a bill is not a one-person job. To ensure that I considered a diverse array of options, I worked with experts at the

Congressional Research Service, stakeholder groups, and government agencies to develop the content. I also collaborated with the House Legislative Counsel to perfect the legal text. While incorporating so many different perspectives was a bit overwhelming, the final product was well worth the effort and the patience.

Although it's impossible to learn everything about Congress in a year, throughout the fellowship I tried to learn everything I could within my reach, ranging from the very basics of how a bill becomes law to the subtlety of the politics that permeate the Hill. I've attended seminars and learned hands-on how the House and House committees operate; I've observed the transition of Committee leadership following an election; I've participated in discussions as to why a particular stance should be taken by a member. In reflection, I recognize that viewing all of my experiences through the lens of the Committee has played a major role in shaping my fellowship, and I realize that placement in any other office would have presented different opportunities to learn a distinct selection of information.

Sitting on the dais was one of the first moments I realized the magnitude of what I – a scientist with no formal policy training – could contribute to the Committee. It also highlighted how much I had learned since arriving on the Hill. The exchange of scientific thinking and policy training that the fellowship facilitates is one of the most unique opportunities for a scientist to apply his or her technical background, and I am honored that I was chosen to participate this year. I hope that ACS continues to make this opportunity available so that others can share this amazing experience, and I encourage all scientists looking for a way to use their skills outside of the lab to consider the fellowship.