

## Lessons Learned from 2009 Fellow

To: Future fellows  
From: Monica Feit, 2009 fellow  
Re: Senator Dodd/HELP Committee

I probably had the best fellow year possible. I joined Senator Dodd's staff just as he was named acting chairman for the HELP Committee (Sen. Kennedy was ill at the time). This meant that he – and his office – took the lead on health reform. With only 2 permanent health staffers, I was involved in all aspects of crafting and negotiating the HELP Committee's bill (*Affordable Health Choices Act*), as well as assisting through the longest markup in the committee's history and managing the merged bill on the Senate floor. It has been an exhausting year and I have worked very long hours but the experience has been phenomenal.

As chairman of the HELP's Subcommittee on Children and Families Sen. Dodd's health staffers are technically HELP staff. This meant that I interacted regularly with other Committee staff as well as health staffers from the offices of other Committee members. In addition, I was involved in all CT health issues, meeting with constituents and helping plan the Senator's health events in the state. This was an ideal position and I highly recommend it as you get the benefit of both experiences – Committee and personal office.

The HELP Committee is a great Committee. I suspect it will change a lot as health reform passes and many staffers move on, but working as intensely as we did this year staffers forged strong bonds. In addition, Senator Dodd is a wonderful senator to work for. His staff is a mix of young and seasoned staffers and while they work very hard, there is also a sense of fun. Within the Subcommittee, the staff members are terrific. Again, everyone works very hard, but people really like each other and there is a lot of collegiality. The office has had many fellows which is a benefit.

I think the most difficult time of my fellowship was the beginning. It took some time to get settled and figure out my role. I would recommend being proactive in reaching out to staff if they haven't been clear about your role.

Also, I think it's important to have reasonable expectations. I had just completed my PhD prior to the fellowship, but there were lots of tasks I did that did not even require a middle school degree (copying, hole punching, binder making). It's important to remember that you are making a contribution to the process and learning an enormous amount in the process.

*Highlight of the year: After completing work in Committee and on the floor on the bill that gives FDA regulation over tobacco products, I went to the bill signing ceremony in the Rose Garden at the White House!*