

Making friends in Congress



Congressional district liaisons discuss unique challenges and opportunities in vital roles

Tony Perconte treats the staff members of his representative in Congress like neighbors—because they are. The Scotch Plains, NJ Branch 4102 president and NALC congressional district liaison (CDL) happens to live around the corner from one of the district offices of Rep. Leonard Lance (R-7th). Perconte talks to the congressional staffers regularly at their office or in chance meetings, and sometimes brings them doughnuts or a card with a message of appreciation. Even if they don't talk about postal issues every time, Lance's staff members know Perconte is the go-to guy for questions about postal issues.

Staying close is an important part of Perconte's strategy for developing a relationship with Lance and his staff. "I try to listen to what he's saying," Perconte said. "I try to attend his town hall meetings in the district and hear what he has to say about all issues, not just postal issues."

Perconte is one of many CDLs who apply what they've learned from NALC legislative training and from their own experience to get their messages across to members of Congress, often through the painstaking developing of trust and the backing of fellow carriers, our sister postal unions, local businesses and postal patrons.

"The job of a CDL consists of more than just meeting once a year with our congressional leaders," Perconte said. By staying close and focusing on what Lance and his staff are working on, not just beeline straight to postal or labor issues, Perconte has established himself as a reliable and welcome source of information.

"It's become a personal-level relationship," he said. "It's not just, 'Oh, here comes Tony—what does he want now?' If he has a question about the Postal Service, he'll call me."



Tony Perconte leads a lobbying visit to the offices of Rep. Leonard Lance (R-NJ).

Because of the high turnover among congressional staff, Perconte added, that relationship-building process never ends.

As with Perconte, reminding fellow letter carriers to stay in touch with their representatives in Congress is an essential part of **Jamie Drayton-Bey's** work as a CDL in Virginia's 2nd Congressional District, represented by Rep. Scott Rigell (R). "Even though I keep in contact with the congressman, I encourage the other carriers to as well," said Drayton-Bey, a member of Virginia Beach Branch 2819.

Staying in touch using different forms of communication—personal meetings, e-mails and letters—and enlisting other carriers to do the same is important, she said, because members of Congress have so many issues to deal with besides the Postal Service. "His committees don't pertain to us," she said, which creates more of a challenge to get Rigell to focus on postal issues. Thanks in large measure to Drayton-Bey and the letter carriers in the district, Rigell has signed on as a co-sponsor of H.Res. 12, the resolution supported by NALC for maintaining six-day delivery.

Drayton-Bey learned the ropes by working as a released carrier for the AFL-CIO's campaign in support of Barack Obama's election as president in 2008. "I walked around, talked to a lot of people, and saw how the process works," she said.

Perconte also got his start as a CDL after working on a campaign. President Rolando appointed him in 2012 to a special team of grassroots activists organized to generate opposition to legislation proposed by Rep. Darrell Issa (R-CA). Issa, who was then chairman of the House committee in charge of postal issues, proposed a bill that would have

severely cut USPS services and closed facilities—resulting in the loss of thousands of postal jobs. His legislation also sought to erode our collective-bargaining rights (see the August 2012 issue of *The Postal Record* for more information). Perconte's experience with that campaign taught him to connect with allies as well as directly with members of Congress and their staff members.

"A must is to know your 'champion allies' within the community," he said. Allies may include other unions and labor groups, military veterans groups (the Postal Service is the largest civilian employer of veterans), business owners and senior citizens. Perconte talks with the presidents of other branches in the district to find all possible allies, and then asks them to weigh in on postal issues with Lance and with the news media. "Ask allies to write letters to the member of Congress, letters to editors, make phone calls to the member of Congress—and suggest a request for an office visit," he said.

Perconte's hard work has paid off. Lance is a co-sponsor of all three of the resolutions supported by NALC: H.Res. 12, H.Res. 28 (door delivery) and H.Res. 54 (calling for USPS to restore service standards to 2012 levels).

"Most important for me as a CDL," Perconte said, "is to take pride in representing the NALC, never give up, don't be afraid to call on local NALC leaders and members, grow the union involvement locally, know the issues, and if all that fails—start over again and be willing to change your strategy."

Face-to-face time is an important part of **Keith Steffen's** strategy as a CDL for the 2nd District of Wisconsin. Steffen, a member of Madison, WI Branch 507,

works hard to assure that his face is noticed by Rep. Mark Pocan (D), his staff and his supporters. "You get on their e-mail list and find out when they are going to appear at different events," he said. "Try to be there when they are. You might not get a chance to talk to them, but by being there, they'll see you and remember you."

Steffen has walked in parades with Pocan and attended his town hall meetings, and he encourages members of NALC and other unions to attend as well. "Get on their team," he said. "You have to get to know people who move in the same circles," not just the member of Congress. Steffen also builds his network by inviting Pocan to his own events, such as branch picnics or rallies in support of postal reform or labor issues. Pocan has attended a few of these and has spoken at some. "If they can see a couple hundred people and shake some hands, they will show up," he said.

When Pocan has a town hall meeting, Steffen often attends to ask a question. Resisting the temptation to discuss every legislative issue letter carriers are working on, Steffen focuses on one issue each time. The value of the questions, and of Pocan's answers, goes beyond their own interaction: "Not only does that educate the member of Congress about your issues," Steffen said, "it educates other people at the meetings."

And whenever Pocan does something positive for letter carriers, whether it be a vote in Congress or simply attending a rally, Steffen doesn't forget to thank him, in person or in a letter. He has had many reasons to thank Pocan, who is a co-sponsor of all three resolutions favored by NALC. Pocan asked pointed questions of witnesses and spoke out

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in defense of the Postal Service in hearings when he served on the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, which has jurisdiction over postal issues.

Because Pocan is relatively friendly to labor, Steffen has worked as a released carrier on his campaign through the AFL-CIO and has encountered the congressman at pro-labor rallies. “You can be on their campaign team if they are a friendly representative,” Steffen noted, but working as a CDL isn’t as

easy if the member of Congress is less labor-friendly or even hostile.

Just ask Mason City, IA Branch 471 member **Herb Copley**. For several years, Copley faced a stiff challenge in Iowa’s 4th District, where he was a CDL until he left the job to a new volunteer

carrier a few months ago. His member of Congress is hardline Republican Steve King, a frequent antagonist of labor unions. King once introduced a bill that would make all states “right-to-work” states, superseding state laws. King’s AFL-CIO vote rating is 7 percent, meaning he has voted against labor 93 percent of the time.

As a labor union representative, Copley’s task was simply to make any kind of meaningful contact with King. “I had very little success,” he said. He sometimes reached King’s staff members, but “I was having trouble getting any kind of communication with him.”

Then he had a breakthrough—he invited King to carry mail for a day with a letter carrier. “I just kept going and

kept looking for an opportunity, and finally came up with this idea.”

With Copley accompanying them out of uniform and off the clock, and with reporters trailing, King visited the post office in Mason City in March. The congressman checked out an LLV, sorted mail and accompanied a carrier on his route to deliver it.

Copley and other members of Branch 471 also had an opportunity to discuss with King a number of important issues, such as the pre-funding mandate, six-day mail delivery, door-to-door delivery, and maintaining service standards. King pledged to “look into” supporting measures to protect six-day delivery, such as H.Res. 12.

“This trip today and carrying some mail in Mason City brings just enough interest that I’m likely to go right back to Washington and do that,” King told reporters after he walked the mail route.

“I wanted to be sure he knew what our job really was,” Copley said. “I wanted him to see the drop shipments from UPS and FedEx, and see what we really do and that we are normal people.” Copley also took a group of state legislators on a similar tour.

“It looks pretty easy to go out to deliver mail,” Copley told reporters on the day King walked the route, “but I think the congressman got a better idea of what we do, and once he understood what we do, then it was easier to talk about the issues that we face.” The event generated several local news stories.

To help King understand how his interests align with those of letter carriers, Copley focused on the larger issue of mail service to everyone in King’s district. “Look at what we’re seeing with service standards—people in Iowa are starting to notice. You can’t even get a letter across town

in one day,” Copley said. “You need to explain how it affects them, or it doesn’t make any sense.”

That takes listening skills: “Get to know what their concerns are so you can answer their questions,” he said.

As the stories above suggest, there are thousands of NALC activists and examples of how they got involved at the local level and what they do to stay involved. To build on our rich history of activism, this month NALC will launch the Letter Carrier Activist Network with a training conference. The training will bring together identified activists from across the country to the Maritime Center in suburban Baltimore for three days of comprehensive and interactive training. The training will be tailored to each participant to ensure that each activist has the tools, resources, knowledge and skills he or she needs to begin, or build upon, efforts in his or her state on the legislative, mobilization, communications and political activism fronts.

Our goal is for our activists to understand the ins and outs of the network and to learn how to be an effective part of it. At the same time, they will learn how to encourage other members to get involved, too.

“The national training conference brings all the elements of our political, legislative, grassroots and communications programs together,” NALC President Fredric Rolando said. “Our objective for this training is to cultivate our pipeline of activists by demonstrating that there is a role for everyone who wants to get involved in the Letter Carrier Activist Network by showing them the way.

“It’s a great way to be part of the solution in an exciting way, and to learn more about how our system of government works.” **PR**



Herb Copley