

A Hill Worth Climbing

The Congressional Fellowship Program

by MSgt Justin Kronenberg

I knew serving as a Congressional Fellow would be surreal, but I never imagined how impactful I would find my year on Capitol Hill.

A Day in the Life

On the morning of 7 April 2022, I accompanied Senator Kevin Cramer (R-ND), a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, to a DOD posture hearing where Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs GEN Mark Milley were testifying on President Joseph Biden's fiscal year 2023 budget request. I sat behind the Senator taking notes as he asked the witnesses questions, which I helped draft.

Just before lunch, the Senator took a meeting with Secretary of the Navy Carlos Del Toro to discuss amphibious ship requirements. That afternoon we drove to Fort Belvoir just south of Washington to meet with soldiers from the 1-188th Air Defense Artillery Battalion—a North Dakota-based unit deployed to provide air defense in the National Capital Region.

That was an interesting day, but it could have been any Thursday in the life of a staffer on the Hill. Serving in that capacity for a year as an active-duty Marine—trading cammies and boots for ties and suits—was a rare opportunity to bridge gaps between the executive and legislative branches of government and across the military-civilian divide.

Why It Matters

Public support for the Marine Corps is crucial to its continued resourcing, and nowhere is this more evident than in the halls of Congress. That is why the Service invests considerable talent in the Office of Legislative Affairs (OLA) and

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Marine Congressional Fellows pose for a group photo on the steps of the U.S. Capitol in December 2022. (Photo provided by author.)

its Congressional Fellowship Program (CFP).

OLA facilitates a shared understanding between the Marine Corps and Congress to ensure support for the Commandant's legislative priorities and requirements and to maintain the Corps' unique role within the Joint Force as the Nation's premier force-in-readiness. One of its most effective tactics is the Congressional Fellowship Program, which places active-duty Marines in the personal offices of U.S. Representatives and Senators.

Those legislators are responsible for crafting the annual National Defense Authorization Act and its accompanying appropriations bill upon which the DOD relies for authorities and funding.

How It Works

Marine Congressional Fellows serve 54 months in support of OLA, fostering relationships with influential members of Congress while learning about legislating and public policy. For officers, the first six months of that time are spent exclusively in graduate education. Officer fellows finish their remaining course requirements at their own pace, earning a Master of Public Policy degree from George Mason University's Schar School of Policy and Government.

Staff noncommissioned officers are assigned to professional development internships with the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Legislative Affairs to learn more about the legislative process. They also begin courses with the Government Affairs Institute at Georgetown University toward earning a certificate in legislative studies.

All fellows attend briefs from the Commandant of the Marine Corps, the deputy commandants, and the Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps to gain an understanding of their legislative priorities for the coming year.

Marines work in a congressional office full-time from January to December of their fellowship year. Most fellows are assigned to members who serve on the armed services committees or defense appropriations subcommittees, where their own personal experience in uniform helps inform conversations that



Senator Kevin Cramer shakes hands with his departing legislative fellow, MSgt Justin Kroenberg, in December 2022. (Photo provided by author.)

can lead toward meaningful improvements to defense matters.

Fellows frequently attend meetings between their assigned Senator or Representative and visiting dignitaries, senior leaders from the DOD, other executive branch agencies, defense contractors, lobbyists, and constituents. Marines often draft documents to help prepare their member for these office calls or for hearings. Fellows often accompany their member to key hearings featuring DOD witnesses, taking notes and answering questions they may have about testimony. Marine fellows also draft legislation and work on constituent matters.

“The Congressional Fellowship is a tremendous opportunity for Marines to better understand national-level decision-making, be exposed to different leadership styles, and, simultaneously, contribute to the development of key

legislation on behalf of their Member of Congress,” said MajGen Bobbi Shea, the Legislative Assistant to the Commandant of the Marine Corps. “The payback tour is an invaluable component of the Fellowship experience—in which our Fellows continue to help inform and educate Congress on the things that matter to our Fleet Marine Force. That is why the Corps places such an emphasis on the selection of quality Marines who demonstrate our core values every day.”

After a year on Capitol Hill, fellows are assigned to a two-year utilization tour in the National Capitol Region, typically working as a legislative subject-matter expert in Headquarters Marine Corps for the Legislative Assistant—either in OLA or in support of one of the Deputy Commandants. During these assignments, Marines prepare senior leaders for office calls, hearings,

and coordinate responses to congressional inquiries and questions for the record.

How to Apply

The annual application cycle begins in May when a Marine administrative message (MARADMIN) is published, detailing the process and its requirements. Applicants must have a bachelor's degree, exceptional performance, military appearance, character, and judgment. They must also be skilled written and oral communicators and be familiar with current service and DOD issues and international relations.

The Congressional Fellowship Program is open to active component staff sergeants, gunnery sergeants, and

master sergeants with more than ten years of service as well as officers eligible for Commandant's Career-Level or Intermediate-Level Education Board selection. Applicants must meet the criteria in the MARADMIN, and Marines selected for panel interviews will be notified by OLA. Selectees are notified via MARADMIN later in the year and execute orders the following June.

My tour on the Hill was one of the most rewarding experiences of my career, and I cannot recommend it enough. Impacting national defense legislation from within a member of Congress' office is an opportunity experienced by only a small handful of Marines. I encourage any Marine looking

for a challenging broadening experience to apply to the Congressional Fellowship Program.

>Editor's Note: More information and applications are available here: <https://www.marines.mil/News/Messages/Messages-Display/Article/3416425/cy25-congressional-fellowship-for-active-component-staff-noncommissioned-office>.

>>Author's Note: The Congressional Fellowship Program is accepting applications now. For more information, visit <https://www.bqmc.marines.mil/Agencies/Office-of-Legislative-Affairs/Congressional-Fellowship-Program>. (Photo provided by author.)

