

Jon Wainwright: Welcome back to The Clinic. We're here with Michelle Evans and Keri Firth. So when we left off last time you were planning for two budget subcommittee hearings - one in the Assembly, one in the Senate.

Let's talk a little bit about ... well, let's start with this actually. How different is that from going into an Appropriations hearing? They're both fiscal in nature, it seems like they would be more or less the same testimony.

Keri Firth: Well in the subcommittee hearings, it seems that they're a lot more detail oriented in that they ask a lot more questions. In addition to that, both representatives of the Department of Social Services and the Department of Finance are at those hearings. After we give our two minute testimony then they have a chance to testify themselves on their opinion of our budget request.

JW: Ok.

Michelle Evans: I also noticed that there was just a different personality to each committee. There was just a different atmosphere...

JW: Ok. You want to dive into a little bit more what you mean by that?

ME: Sure. I'm trying to think of the right words to describe. I noticed in one of the committees we were there a really long time. And the committee was very interested in hearing a lot of details, and allowing people to tell their stories. There was more emotion involved, and just really, really getting into the mud in all of the issues. And that was just the atmosphere and it was just going to take as long as it takes.

And, you know, Keri and I'd testimonies were very sharp and very on point. Two minutes tops. And short and to the point, and then in hindsight, you know, knowing what I know now, I could've interjected a little more personality or, I don't know. We probably would've changed up more...

JW: A little more of that personal flair.

ME: A little bit more. Where in the committee after that, when we got up to testify, we were on and he let us know when you hit your two minutes, you were done. It was less about the emotional part of it and more about ... impress us.

KF: Just give us the facts, and the details.

Keri and Michelle speak over each other

ME: Yeah, and so, it's just two totally different things. And probably our testimonies were somewhere in the middle of the personalities of both committees. But it's been fascinating for me.

Like, if I go on and become a lobbyist and I were to testify, I probably would go each time there is a new committee makeup and observe for a little while and just see the flow of that committee and atmosphere with those committee members to see what they seem to be really looking for and what speaks to them.

JW: Is that, you feel, driven mostly by the Committee Chair? Or do you feel like you go into a committee meeting and one of the committee members has been swapped out by leadership. Does that one member, or two members here or there, does that change the dynamic? Or is that dynamic mostly driven by the committee chair?

ME: Well my sample size so far...

JW: Fair.

ME: ... is three committees. But, I would say in that experience. Actually, four now.

KF: Mhm. Yes, four.

ME: There have been four committees. And in those four committees I think the atmosphere is largely driven by the Chair. Of course, the other members have opportunities to say something but I think that they really follow the Chair's lead in the way that they interact for the most part.

JW: That's kind of on a more ethereal level. Getting down to substantive differences between the Assembly and the Senate subcommittees that you were testifying at, what were some of the main differences in those committees?

KF: Well, the Senate subcommittee had fewer members. There were only three members in that subcommittee. And Dr. Pan was the Senator that chairs that committee. Substantively, he keeps everything short. There's not as many committee members to ask questions, he invokes strict time limits on your testimony.

Whereas the Assembly subcommittee there were more members and the Chair didn't invoke as many time limits. That affected the substance of each committee.

ME: And we didn't really have substantive questions in the Assembly subcommittee, where in the Senate we did have some substantive questions. And also, the Senate subcommittee requested more information of us ahead of time, before we were placed on the agenda. They wanted more documentation and research - which we were happy to send, we had just never had anyone ask us for that detail.

Before, heading into the committee, they just wanted Cliff's Notes. In this committee, Dr. Pan, "Do you have research? I want to read it. Tell me where you're getting this from."

And so we sent a lot more information ahead of time.

JW: Interesting.

KF: Yeah, for that committee we actually sent our policy analysis and a lot of research. He wanted that before the subcommittee hearing. That's the first time that we've been asked to do that for a committee hearing.

JW: How do you feel like those hearings went?

KF: I feel like they went really well.

ME: Yeah, I think they were good. It was in, you know, again, it must be my social worker background, so I'm tuning in to all the ups and downs of it. But it was an intense experience. A lot of it just being there. For a long time. We were there for half the day for both of the budget subcommittees.

And it was good. You're in the hot seat when you're up there and you're wanting to do a good job, and I feel like we did. I feel like we said what we wanted and needed to say.

KF: And before we testified at the budget subcommittee, Senator Pan gave us a bit of a shout out to the crowd.

ME: Oh yeah. He totally did.

KF: And he...

ME: And it was a packed house. And we're in a big committee room.

KF: Yes. And all of our big interest groups that we've been working with and trying to get their attention and he told the audience before we testified that although we were students from McGeorge Law School - and he liked McGeorge Law School - we were there on the merits. We were there testifying because of the hard work that we've done and we were not given a pass just because we're McGeorge students.

ME: Yeah. He's like, "It's a big deal to show up here. Not just anyone gets to show up in this committee and have this opportunity to testify and be heard."

And so yeah.

JW: That's really cool!

ME: It's really nice to hear that. And he didn't go easy on us.

KF: No he did not.

ME: He definitely didn't.

JW: Which makes sense considering how much of the research eh wanted up front before the committee hearing.

ME: Right. Absolutely. But it was really nice. Because we're kind of the lone rangers. A lot those people, they all know each other. All of those different organizations have been working in this policy area for a very long time, so Keri and I are kind of the outsiders.

JW: The new kids on the block.

ME: We're the new kids on the block. And when we go up it's just the two of us. We don't have a whole gang. We're gathering support.

JW: You don't have the long line of supporters that are just giving the me too testimony at the mic.

KF: We generally just have one or two.

ME: They're trickling in, and it is growing, which is impressive given that we are the new kids on the block. Not to toot our own horn, but kind of. It is exciting.

KF: We're earning street cred on the fly.

JW: Hashtag humble brag. I get it.

ME: But we're really earning some support by just really ... working hard.

KF: We keep showing up. We keep showing that we're working hard, that we're committed, that we take this issue very seriously...

ME: Know what we're talking about.

KF: that we know what we're talking about. And we are there to play nice with everyone else too. We want to get their support. We want to work with them. We want to run the language of our bill and our budget request past them because we know that we all need to work together to make policy happen in this area.

ME: And at the end of the day, it's easy to lose sight of the vision, but we really do believe that this is something that will be in the best interest of children. That really will help foster parent retention and really help with the stability of children in the state of California, and maybe beyond.

And so, yeah. When we put it back into that perspective and people see that we are really sincere in our efforts, that seems to go a ways too.

JW: Well that's good. So what have you been learning from these committee hearings? Are there any changes in tack that you've had to make since there committee hearings,

or are you pretty much on the same course that you were thinking you going to be on going in?

KF: No. We have had to change our strategy some as a result of the committee hearings. But, even though we make changes, it seems that they just make our bill and our budget request stronger.

For instance, there were some questions that were brought up in the subcommittee hearings by DSS and DOF, and as a result, instead of requesting our funds from the General Fund, we're now requesting them from a specific pot of money called the Foster Parent Recruitment Retention and Support Funding.

JW: There's got to be an acronym for that.

KF: FPPRS.

ME: And so we're asking for a line item for this pilot program to be included as a line item in the FPPRS budget.

KF: Instead of just General Fund.

JW: Okay. Is that money already in the FPPRS budget? Or are you trying to get the money you were requesting from the General Fund added into FPPRS?

ME: Well, we'll see how that goes because the FPPRS budget does have existing funds. The problem with that pot of money is that it has been cut and a lot of people are lobbying, and that's a other story.

JW: That's another podcast.

ME: That's another podcast in and of itself. But they're lobbying to not have the budget cut.

KF: And they're lobbying to have it extended, to have money added.

ME: Right, so right now we've asked for it to be a line item, but ultimately they could look at it and say, oh, if we want to add this program we'll need to add...

JW: Need to find \$4.75 million.

KF: And also, different strategies have come out of the subcommittee hearings is that after the hearings we have followed up more with staff members of the committee members. For instance, with the policy committee and the Appropriations Committee there wasn't much follow up to do because there wasn't a lot of questions in those hearings. So having follow up meetings has also helped inform our strategy - finding out

what the staff members took away from our hearing and testimony and getting advice from them. That has helped our strategy too.

ME: And also offering more clarification for them, and also us getting clarification on, okay, let's make sure we understand what the feedback and what it is that you'd like us to do about it.

JW: Okay. I want to circle back a little bit here now. You mentioned that you've got a slowly growing base of supporters, which is always good to hear. But I know from conversations we've had between the last time we recorded and now that there was a period where things seem to have stalled. Do you want to talk about that a little bit?

ME: Well, there was one organization that is a big organization that had said, told us, that they were moving towards a position of support, but they hadn't offered us an official support letter yet and we didn't know why. We'd had multiple conference calls with them, we had amended our bill with specific things that they needed to help them feel comfortable of the direction of the bill.

But still, we hadn't gotten that letter. And we weren't sure why. And there were other organizations that were saying, "Well, we're not going to give you a letter until we see a letter from them because while they haven't come out in opposition, we can't go against them."

KF: We have to let them go first and then we can follow.

ME: Right, and so ...

KF: And though they liked the idea in conversations and meetings, they wouldn't do an official letter of support without that...

JW: Without that one major player in the space signaling, hey, it's okay to do this.

ME: So we finally were like, okay, we're just going to have to accept that we're not getting that letter and go another direction. We're going to have to figure out another way to rally support around this.

JW: Okay. What were some of the ways you were thinking about doing that?

KF: Well Michelle and I, we knew that we needed to maybe develop a media strategy, but we have no idea what that entails. So, we came to you.

JW: Fair enough.

KF: You were so helpful and you have a ton of experience in that.

JW: That's being generous, but...

ME: Well...

KF: A lot more than us. You gave us some good advice.

JW: And you got good advice from Professor Frazier as well.

KF: Yes. Professor Frazier gave us some names of people that we could talk to about getting some media coverage. So we had started compiling a kind of to-do list of people to contact to gain media coverage, writing an op-ed and getting Assembly Member Maienschein to send that out under his name. And...

ME: So, we're beginning to walk that direction while we're still law students...

KF: Preparing for finals...

ME: Preparing for finals, yep.

JW: And you've got bar prep just looming there in the back of the head.

ME: Yeah, that's kind of ever present.

JW: The brooding omnipresence of bar prep.

ME: Yeah. That, I was going to say never do a podcast on that one.

JW: On bar prep?

ME: Yep.

Jon chuckles

KF: So we had developed this strategy, but then Carli, our staffer at Asm. Maienschein's office, she did a lot of work to get a support letter from this organization. She has worked with them on other bills, so I think she had a little bit more pull with them than we did and they sent their letter last week.

JW: Fantastic.

ME: And I think they weren't in opposition. I just think it wasn't top on their to-do list and they're incredibly busy. So Carli, having a personal relationship and go, "Hey, this is a big deal to us. This is a big deal to my sponsors. They just need to know. Other people are waiting. Are you a yes or a no?" You know?

KF: And even with her, it still took her several attempts to do that. They didn't respond to her the first time. But we got it and now other support letters have been coming in also.

JW: That's good.

KF: And we still have our media strategy on hold. Which we'll probably still do some of after finals.

JW: When there's time to breathe.

KF: For like, the two days between finals and bar prep.

ME: It's not a lot of time, but you know, we'll still get to do it. And as we'll have structured time, I know that for Keri and I, this is a huge priority. And actually, might be some of my reward time. After I study then an hour of this evening I get to work on the bill.

JW: Fun. So where are things going from here now that you've got through the budget subcommittee process. Or at least, the beginnings of the budget subcommittee process. The bill's still on suspense file in Assembly Apropos. So, are we just chilling for a while, or what's going on behind the scenes right now?

KF: Well, for the budget proposal, in a way we're kind of chilling, but we're also in talks with the budget subcommittee consultants and available for questions that they have. Every once in a while they have questions and we answer them.

ME: And they have trailer bill language for the budget that was sent last Friday, there's still ... we're following up with the staffers for the Senators that sit on that committee and just keeping the communication lines open.

KF: It's a little more informal now because we're already in the process so a lot of it is done by email or phone, we don't have to go in for meetings.

But for our bill, we've been chilling on that but now it's time to make amendments to get it out of Appropriations. So we have a meeting coming up with the consultant for the Assembly Appropriations Committee to talk about amendments to make.

JW: So it seems like now, mostly more reactive to requests rather than proactively trying to get on someone else's calendar.

KF: Yes.

ME: Which is a huge change, at least for us.

KF: Yes. Yeah, we've been fighting a long time to get on people's calendars and get their attention and get them familiar with this issue sand this program that we're proposing.

JW: Well the next deadline isn't too far away so we'll have to check back in when we get closer to that. But in the meantime, good luck with finals. Good luck with bar prep, and thanks for taking the time.

KF: Thank you.

ME: Alright. Thanks Jon.