

JW: Welcome to a special episode of "The Clinic." In addition to Keri and Michelle, we've got the leg staffer who they've been working very closely, Carli Olson, in Assembly Member Maienschein's office joining us.

CO: Hello.

JW: We're actually going to deviate a little bit from our normal format about talking about the process as it relates specifically to your bill and talk a little more broadly about how you interact with Carli and vice versa, that bill sponsor, leg staffer relationship.

Let's go back to the beginning. I realize we touched on this a little bit in an earlier episode, but Keri, Michelle, what was your thought process for deciding which member or members to approach to be the author of the bill you're sponsoring?

KF: Once we had decided that our topic was going to be foster youth, we started looking at members of the legislature who had authored bills in that area and stumbled upon Assembly Member Maienschein. Then did a little more research and realized that he had also done a bill with The Clinic before. We knew that he was someone that we wanted to talk to about our policy proposal idea.

At that point, we didn't have a bill yet. We just knew the policy area that we were researching.

ME: Right. We were just doing a lot of research. We also were looking at it from a political standpoint of who's someone who could really help us get this through. Assembly Member Maienschein is on the Republican side, but he has this great reputation for working with everyone on both sides of the aisle. We really admired that about him. We knew that he was passionate about children's issues and that maybe this could be a good fit.

JW: You're looking for a member who was passionate about children's issues, that has a history of working on foster care bills, cherry on top of the cake there is having worked with Clinic before. Were there any other members that you were looking at that were checking those similar boxes for you?

KF: Not that I can recall because once we started looking into Assembly Member Maienschein, we contacted his office and found out that his legislative director Olga was a McGeorge alum. We got a meeting with them pretty quickly and started talking

with them about our policy proposal. We all worked really well together and we're all on the same page. We really didn't look any further.

ME: He was a pretty instant fit honestly. I don't know that it always goes quite that easily for people to find someone that would want to work with them on their bill and policy ideas. Really, he checked all the boxes for us and what we were looking for. It was so great working with his staff that we really didn't look any further.

JW: Well I want to pitch this over to you now, Carli. It sounds like, at least from their end that the working relationship got off to a pretty good start. What are you looking for when a sponsor comes to your office and has a bill idea? What's the thought process that goes into whether or not your boss decides to take up that bill or not?

CO: First of all, thank you for having me.

JW: Absolutely.

CO: I appreciate it. Keri and Michelle have been wonderful, and I'm really glad to be here. There are a lot of different things that we look at. Going into the new legislative year, we like to target, our boss likes to do a full bill package every year, which is about 25 bills.

As we ran 25, the previous year only allowed 50 bills max within that session. We were at 25 this year. We came with ideas, very often, lobbyists will come in offering us language in unbacked form, meaning that they went to another office to get the official leg counsel language brought to us.

They'll come to our office and say, "Hey, will you sponsor this for us? This is what the bill does. This is why we think your boss would be great," which is essentially what you did. I don't think you came in...Did you come in with language at all for the bill?

KF: No, not at first.

ME: We were still exploring specific ideas and began brainstorming actually. We were at the brainstorming level.

CO: Which is the other way of doing it, which I personally prefer because then you get to help develop this policy straight from your hands and work with somebody. You two are the experts on the policy. You start developing this language. We, as staff, go through and talk with our own policy advisers within the caucus.

We'll reach out to other associations and get their communique on it, see if there would be any opposition on the bill. Looking at this, I actually did not initially start working with Keri and Michelle on this bill. Christine left for another office but I'm very glad that I'm here today because it's a great policy. You're wonderful to work with, too.

KF: It's been great to work with you, too.

CO: Thanks.

ME: We found that it was a good transition. Even though we missed Christine, we were super happy to have Carli.

CO: We answer all these questions that, if our boss were to throw them out, as we already had answers to them. The biggest thing is, if we've had a relationship before with the sponsor, that would be a huge guarantee that we'd want to work with them before, which we have worked with the policy clinic before, reading how the sponsors come into our office, how they carry themselves.

Obviously, both of you carry yourselves so well. You know so much about the policy and are willing to help us, too. I think as we were chatting about this earlier, I staffed 12 additional bills into the Assembly Member's committee. I'm very busy.

Of course, I'm going to dive into the policy myself to know what I need to do on my end, but we really look for sponsors that can help us champion this bill to the governor's desk.

JW: Once you make that decision to take on a bill like your office did with 1784, what are some things that you're looking on early on whether that's in the brainstorming process or they've already come to you with language that give you that indication that this is actually going to be a pretty successful working bill?

CO: I'm big on interpersonal relationships. Regardless if somebody comes to me with a great idea, but not a lot to go with, if I know that I can interpersonally work well with the sponsor and that they're committed in getting me information or helping me find information that I need.

That's a huge tell of the relationships to come, which I think has been proved very successful between all of us. You say, "I need a letter for this." I would say, "OK, I'll go and yell at this person to get us a letter," vice versa.

[Laughter]

CO: Where ask them, "Hey, can you respond to this question that we had from somebody asking us about the bill?" and then they, I mean, we communicate at least every week if not multiple times a week on the bill. We have a budget ask too. I think just the constant communication is a tell all of a great sponsor.

JW: Actually, you already answered the next question, which is how frequently are you all in communication? It sounds like...

ME: Pretty often.

KF: It depends on what's going on. Like if it's the week of our committee hearing we may be in contact multiple times a day. We've been in a waiting period the last few weeks. Sometimes it's every day, but not necessarily. We all respond really well, we're all very effective in our communication. We have the group text and we respond emails right away.

CO: Email thread.... The legislature I like to say is a very hurry up and wait mentality. We'll be constantly communicating about the budget request, and the policy, and who we're meeting with next all day. Then I won't talk to them for a couple of days at all because we're in a waiting period and appropriations or, I think. It varies, but definitely I like to keep in contact as much as possible.

JW: Okay, this relates to keeping in touch, which is you start discussing amendments or people to reach out to and try to find the balance over ownership of the bill and making decisions on the bill. How do you strike that balance?

I realize there's a bit of a push and pull between these people came with a bill idea. They're the genesis of it, but at the same time it's your boss's name on the bill at the end of the day. How do you strike that balance when it's getting down to making decisions on the bill?

CO: I don't think we've really had an issue with that both the three of us working together. I've had issues like that in the past with different bills. I come from the perspective of, "No, I am hired to do everything for my boss." I advise him. He at the end of the day makes the final decision and I want to make sure that I respect that.

If a sponsor comes forward with their bill and we've been working together. They say, "Hey, I want to put in this one thing." But I know as a staff member that if we did put in that one thing the bill would essentially die at policy committee or die at appropriations because of this request.

I have to respect their request obviously because they brought this to me and I respect the sponsors maybe the drawing period, but I do have to check in with my boss. If my boss were to say, "No, I don't want to put that in." Then I have to respect that.

JW: For the most part it sounds like a team effort unless there's the hard no from the boss on something where that would doom the bill.

CO: It is a team effort where the bill belongs to Assembly Member Maienschein. However, you two are the sponsors of it. The weight of the name of the sponsor carries a lot of clout when it comes to carrying a bill throughout legislative process, especially since people who see the bill is sponsored the McGeorge Policy Clinic and Keri and Michelle go, "OK, this is something that I definitely need to pay attention to," even regardless of the member's name on the title. Luckily, I'm very fortunate to work for Assembly Member Maienschein who has a great reputation.

He really is involved in a lot of the process of working the bill. I think it's 50/50, but at the end of the day my boss does have obviously, some say as the Assembly Member.

[Laughter]

JW: A little more than 50/50.

CO: Yeah, maybe a little.

KF: Because we have worked so well together from the beginning, and there's a lot of great communication, we really haven't run into an issue where Assembly Member Maienschein has wanted to do something or not do something with the bill, and Michelle and I felt like we were opposed to that.

We trust Carli and Assembly Member Maienschein and know that, if we come to them with an idea or a suggestion and they say no, there's a really good reason for that.

CO: Also, too, that goes back to knowing if you're going to accept a sponsor request from a stakeholder in a sense that our office, we're very trusting of each other. Therefore, when I work with somebody on a bill, I want to be trusting of them.

We had the experience of having a trusting, progressive relationship with the Policy Clinic before. Knowing that, I knew that coming forward with this bill, we wouldn't run into any issue.

ME: That trust has really taken us a long ways. Like Keri said, I keep thinking about communication. I can't think of a time that we were in a disagreement because we all were so open minded about discussing ideas. I don't think any of us ever came to the table with, "This is the only way this can happen." Like, "OK, this is an idea that I had. What do you think? What are the pros and cons?"

It seems like, as we've done that, and I know for sure, as Keri and I have met with other stakeholders is we've been open minded to hearing what other people have to say. I feel like it's just improved the bill, and it's instilled a lot of trust.

I was just talking to someone at a meeting today. She was like, "Oh, no, I'm not worried about that." They know that, if we say we're going to do something a certain way as a favor for them, or whatever the case is, that it'll be fine. We'll all work together.

KF: We're willing to make changes, changes in strategy, changes in language, to strengthen the bill, even if it's not something we would've envisioned from the beginning, but if it's going to keep it going through the process.

ME: It keeps the heart and the spirit of what we wanted to do intact. We're not giving the whole thing away. It keeps the heart of it intact still. It usually makes an improvement that we haven't thought of.

JW: Thank you so much for taking the time to join us today, Carli, and provide your insights into this whole relationship's been working.

CO: Thanks for having me.

KF: It's fun to have you join us.

CO: I know. It's, wow, my first podcast.

[Laughter]

ME: Thanks for coming.

CO: Thank you.