

Experience Counts

When term limits made experience unconstitutional in Michigan, two smart women staffers moved into important positions of power.

By Cynthia Kyle and John Lindstrom



PHOTO: MIKE QUILLINAN

Suzanne Miller-Allen, right, and Cindy Peruchietti, two of Michigan's longest serving staffers, are part of an elite group that is increasingly important to effective administration in term limited legislatures.

It was her first day of work at Michigan's Capitol and Cindy Peruchietti was in tears.

"I thought how in the world did I get to be so lucky."

She was so excited on that day 17 years

John Lindstrom is editor of Gongwer News Service-Michigan Report, a daily newsletter covering Michigan government and politics. Cynthia Kyle is an East Lansing-based writer who has worked for the Associated Press, the Lansing State Journal, U.S. News & World Report and Newsweek.

ago that she arrived at 7 a.m., a time when the classic revival building is occupied almost exclusively by security officers and maintenance staff.

Her new job: legislative staff assistant to Representative Michael Bennane, a Detroit Democrat.

Three years later, Suzanne Miller-Allen would make her way from Chrysler Corporation's governmental relations office to the

halls of the Michigan Senate.

Her new job: legislative staff assistant for Senator Dick Posthumus, a Republican farmer from Alto near Grand Rapids. Her boss at Chrysler had urged her to find a job in politics to satisfy her growing Republican activism. "You're not going to make it in government relations," he said.

Since that time, the gilded glory of the Michigan Capitol has been recaptured through renovation, the two women's legislative paths have crossed constantly and politics in the state have been turned completely upside down by term limits.

Now, their first floor Capitol offices are almost directly across from each other, and they are among the longest serving—whether staffer or elected lawmaker—in any of the 16 states with limited terms.

Gone are the career House and Senate members, some with service records as long as 40 years.

In 1992, Michigan voters endorsed a constitutional change that imposed some of the strictest term limits anywhere in the United States. House members can now serve three two-year terms, and never return again. Senators can hold office for two four-year terms and no more. Both have lifetime bans against further service.

NEW PRESSURES

There's no indication voters will reverse the tidal wave that's brought an ever-changing sea of newcomers to Michigan's capital city of Lansing and an ocean of new pressures on legislative staffers.

"I don't know what the average tenure of staff is, but it's diminished because the job security with the members is not there,"

Allen says.

When she first arrived, it took a staffer 23 years to get a Capitol parking space, Peruchietti says. Now it's down to around 15 years.

In their current jobs, Allen and Peruchietti rank as two of the most important non-elected people in Michigan's Legislature. Allen, 38, is chief of staff to Senate Majority Leader Ken Sikkema, a Republican from a Grand Rapids suburb. Peruchietti, 44, is chief of staff to Senate Minority Leader Bob Emerson,



SENATOR
BOB EMERSON
MICHIGAN

son, Democrat from Flint.

They also are a part of an elite group viewed as increasingly important to effective administration of a legislature operating under term limits. That group is shrinking. New lawmakers bring in new staff. Experienced staff move to other occupations, worn out by the stress of a constant turnover of legislators and growing partisanship.

That turnover comes at a time when—Allen and Peruchietti agree—experience is crucial to term-limited chambers. Experience, combined with relationships that build on personal trust no matter the party, help create a cooperative atmosphere.

That personal touch is critical, both believe, to ensuring that the vast bulk of legislative business that is not partisan is accomplished efficiently.

Term limits makes those interpersonal skills more difficult to attain and employ, both women acknowledge.

"Cindy and I are an example of something that is very much lost in term limits. That is the interpersonal relationship between members. They're not here long enough," says Allen.

"I have many, many good friends who are Republicans, who work for both the House and Senate and whom I respect immensely," Peruchietti says. "We share views on lots of issues. There's just a few that we don't."

OLD PROS WORK TOGETHER

That interpersonal relationship proved key this year as the two chiefs helped their

bosses finesse the details of a budget cut the Senate took as Michigan tried to wrestle it back into balance.

"We've become sort of a team," Peruchietti says. "We took 12.3 percent cuts in the first round. And you didn't hear any screaming because we worked things out beforehand."

Peruchietti and Allen have seniority over all but eight members of the 148-member Legislature (110 members in the House and



SENATOR
KEN SIKKEMA
MICHIGAN

38 in the Senate). Two of those eight are their respective bosses. Sikkema was first elected to the House in 1986 and Emerson in 1980. Both were former staffers.

In another twist, Allen has more chronological seniority than her husband, Senator Jason Allen, a Traverse City Republican, first elected to the House in 1998 and then to the Senate last year.

The experiences the two women share extend beyond their current positions. Both have worked in the minority, majority and leadership offices in the House and Senate.

Peruchietti was deputy chief of staff to former Representative Curtis Hertel. The Detroit Democrat was co-speaker in 1993-94, then minority leader from 1995-96 and speaker when Democrats retook the House in 1996.

She has been on Emerson's staff since he was elected to the Senate. Emerson served first as floor leader and then became Democratic leader after the 2002 election.

Allen worked for former Representative Paul Hillegonds, who was co-speaker with Hertel when the body was tied. She was Hillegonds' chief of staff when the GOP controlled the House from 1995-96 and was Sikkema's first hire when he became House minority leader in 1997.

With both chambers of the Michigan Legislature having turned completely over at least once, Allen and Peruchietti said the need for experienced staff is now more acute than ever.

Why? Because in a term-limited legislature, the world is born anew with each new

lawmaker.

"Assumptions are made that, 'Oh, this is the first time we've ever done this issue,' and it isn't," Allen says. "Or this is some new idea that's the same idea recycled from something offered before, and the staff can offer that perspective."

TRAINING NEEDED—NOW

Across the country, in term-limited states, legislators and staffers are in line for added training—legislators in the basics, and staffers in policies and procedures. Training can range from informal seminars conducted by special interest groups to classroom sessions leading to continuing education credits.

In Michigan, the Senate Fiscal Agency has created materials for lawmakers and staff detailing the state's appropriations process. With term limits turning over both houses, ensuring that the agency knows the people it will work with is "a huge issue," says Executive Director Gary Olson, the recent NCSL staff chair.

Short-time legislators come to office passionate about public policy and politics, but they lack a veteran's understanding about making their way through the bureaucracy. They also face a sea of interests competing for their attention, says AnnMarie Schneider, director of program development, College of Social Science, Michigan State University.

"Since term limits, there's been more and more of an exchange between information sources and the legislatures," she says. "The problem with that is legislators are just totally bombarded. That's where the staff come in."

MSU runs a three-day seminar for newly elected House and Senate members and a Political Leadership Program that attracts legislative staff, as well as political hopefuls from around the state. More than 300 people have gone through the leadership program since 1994.

Those selected walk away with a certificate and a network, Schneider notes. "If you meet someone who has graduated from the program, it's an instant connection."

Legislative staffers want those connections and credentials. "They're seeking more formal training. They're looking for statements that can testify to their credibility and experience," Schneider adds.

Staffers may know more about issues and

POLITICS BROUGHT THEM TOGETHER

He is from Traverse City, a resort city on the little finger of Michigan's mitten, and she is from Farmington Hills, an upper middle class suburb of Detroit.

They met at the Dallas airport in 1984 when he was serving as a driver for the Michigan delegation to the Republican National Convention. She was attending the convention.

They dated long distance for years. She worked in Lansing; he served in the Army, then returned home to the family clothing business. Then finally, in 1992, Suzanne Miller and Jason Allen married.

But they didn't live together regularly until after the 1998 election. That was when Jason was elected to the Michigan House of Representatives and could spend most the week in Lansing where Suzanne was chief of staff to GOP Senator Ken Sikkema.

"That first month together was rough," she recalled. When Jason learned of his wife's understated estimate of that time he roared with laughter. "I wasn't going to say anything about that."

Politics was the reason they met, and they dated while working on campaigns.

It's now their occupation. And even when they escape the Capitol pressure by taking hikes in the northern Michigan woods, politics is often their conversation. Now their talk is focused on the re-election efforts of President George W. Bush, rather than on statewide legislative debate.

"It's been a special relationship," he says. Jason, now 40, was at Miami University in Ohio and president of the college Republicans when they met. Suzanne was building her credentials as a Republican activist. After they married, Suzanne, now 38, worked in

Michigan's capital city for House Republican leaders Paul Hillegonds and then Sikkema. Jason worked at the family haberdashery and served on the Grand Traverse County Com-



Suzanne Miller-Alen, chief of staff to the Senate majority leader, walks along a corridor in Michigan's Capitol with her husband Senator Jason Allen.

mission. They made a commuter marriage, seeing each other on the weekends.

They now own one house on Lansing's east side and a Victorian near downtown Traverse City, where Jason still works a few weeks of the year at the men's store.

By the time Jason made his move to Lansing, Suzanne had moved to the Senate with Sikkema. When Jason was elected to the Senate, the chamber had to change its rules to

allow Suzanne to continue working while her husband serves from the 37th District.

Though they now are closer, the two respect each other's different positions. When they travel the enormous district together, Suzanne reminds constituents that Jason is the elected official with decision-making authority.

And as chief of staff to the Senate majority leader, Suzanne says she has said "no" to Jason's office as often as she has to any other lawmaker's.

While Suzanne helped teach him the legislative ropes, Jason learned about politics from a key, and controversial, experience while chairman of the House Education Committee. That was when the committee's second bill of the year authorized state takeover of the Detroit school system, one of the most hotly debated acts in Michigan history.

On a personal level, the couple has a daughter, Meredith, 4. Recently, they lost a son, Jack, at birth.

The tragedy brought the Capitol together behind them. Days later, when Jason returned to the Senate, his voice broke with emotion and gratitude as he described the Legislature as "a special place."

Eligible for one more term in the Senate, Jason is now seen as one of the top candidates for majority leader should Republicans continue their hold on the chamber.

Should that happen, it is unlikely the couple will continue to work together in the Senate. For the present, they are making few predictions, but Jason expects the future will bring change.

"Suzanne's career path is different from mine," he says.

—John Lindstrom

procedures not only before lawmakers are elected, but for the entire term lawmakers serve.

With so little time to serve, lawmakers no longer have the luxury of "sitting and watching for a year" before seeking a leadership post or writing legislation, says Professor Gary F. Moncrief. A political scientist at Boise State University in Idaho, he has done considerable research on political candidates and the effects of term limits.

With experience and accumulated knowledge beyond that of the legislators they serve, staffers are gaining in influence, he says. In a recent study of several hundred lobbyists, Moncrief and a colleague found that "all types of nonpartisan staff have gained influence under term limits."

Term limit backers recognize the need for experienced staff, though to different degrees. Term limits were meant to change the people representing the public, says Patrick Anderson, principal of the Lansing-

based Anderson Economic Group and a primary author of Michigan's term limits proposal.

"It did not mean changing every employee of the state," he says. "We fully recognized experienced staff was very desirable."

Paul Jacob, a fellow with Washington, D.C.-based U.S. Term Limits, says term limits curb the chance that staff members will gain inordinate power through ties to a long-standing lawmaker.

Experience is most critical to procedural staff, he says. Lawmakers should bring in new staff to work on policy issues. "Anybody can get up and argue they know as much about policy as anyone else," he says.

Peruchietti specialized in health policy for Bennane, who was then chair of the House Public Health Committee, and focused her preparation there.

"One of the first things I did was read the entire public health code and the Constitution," says Peruchietti, a graduate of Central Michigan University. That's no small feat considering the public health code is one of the longest and most complex in Michigan law.

"I was kind of embarrassed when I did it because everyone thought I was kind of a moron for reading them," she says, laughing. "I'm really glad I did it though. I've never regretted it."

The knowledge impressed Hertel, who hired her away from Bennane.

Allen brought a master's in labor relations from Wayne State University, along with a bachelor's degree and a second master's in public relations from Michigan State University, to the Legislature. Hillegonds hired her as caucus administrator.

SURVIVING SCANDAL

Many of Allen and Peruchietti's greatest tests came when Republicans and Democrats shared power in the House during 1993 and 1994.

The House budget was slashed dramatically, recalls Hillegonds, now president of Detroit Renaissance. "What drove [Allen] first and foremost was running a tight ship administratively." She was "very creative" in finding a way to provide more options to members for staff benefits while lowering costs overall.

At the same time, a financial scandal overwhelmed the nonpartisan House Fiscal Agency. A sitting House member—a former agency analyst—pleaded guilty to fraud and resigned. The agency's director was sentenced to federal prison, and the chairman of the chamber's most powerful committee was relieved of the post.

The scandal left the fiscal agency decimated as the Legislature worked feverishly to finish Michigan's budget.

Peruchietti played a critical role in organiz-

ing caucus policy staff to fill in as fiscal analysts and keep budget activities on track, remembers Hertel, now director of the Port Authority of Detroit and Wayne County.

"I don't think you can overestimate" the need for legislators to employ experienced staff, says Sikkema. He stresses that repeatedly with new senators.

Most newly elected legislators want to invite to Lansing people who have worked on their campaigns, but "I don't know how you would survive without experienced

"It doesn't make sense that you would always want someone new running your government. No other business could survive that way."

—CINDY PERUCHIETTI

staff," says Emerson. Some lawmakers, who have insisted on hiring only campaign workers, have found themselves running behind other legislators in meeting their campaign goals, he says.

Both Allen and Peruchietti tried to operate as effective employment agencies, pairing experienced staff members with lawmakers, after the 2002 election when 27 of the 38 senators were new.

"We gathered their resumés and became sort of a clearinghouse for the new folks, not only to give them [lawmakers] the resumés, but to give them recommendations on what their strengths are," Peruchietti says.

Allen took a special interest in helping staff members find jobs, as well as matching staff to new members.

In the face of increasing burdens, legislative staff members are finding themselves called upon to work longer hours, take on increased duties and serve as guides, over and over, to a steady stream of new arrivals.

Maine legislators recognized the new stresses and gave nonpartisan staffers—professionals who work in the state's legislative information, fiscal and policy analysis—the right to organize.

"A portion of this comes from term limits," says Carl Leinonen, executive director of the Maine State Employees Association, representing about 100 nonpartisan legislative staff members.

There's no talk of unions among Michi-

gan's staff members. But increasing turnover worries Allen and Peruchietti. Staff members fresh from campaigns haven't yet had a chance to embrace a cooperative, rather than competitive, frame of mind, Allen says.

GOP staff members have refused to share such basic information as when a committee might act on legislation, says Peruchietti. "I find their desire to help people is less because they perceive this wall between the two parties," she says.

To break down the walls, staff events have been planned. Allen and Peruchietti have organized lunches for all the Senate chiefs of staff. And staffers are encouraged to participate in community events.

The same factors that make experienced staff valuable to lawmakers have made them valuable to others, as well. When staff members leave, they often land jobs as lobbyists, in public relations firms or in think tanks.

WON'T STAY FOREVER

Even Allen and Peruchietti know they may not be on staff forever. Allen's future in the Michigan Legislature may depend in part of the political fortunes of her husband, since he is viewed as a top candidate for majority leader.

Were it not for her loyalty to Emerson, Peruchietti might have left the Legislature with the last election. She does not see herself there after 2006. "I don't want to be like some fixture who just stays. Whoever comes in will want their own people," she says. "And that's no insult."

Living in the Legislature before and after term limits, neither Peruchietti nor Allen are fans of the restrictions that Michigan's populace has embraced.

What baffles her, Peruchietti says, are people who supported term limits, thinking it didn't affect their lawmakers. They wanted to keep their local legislators, but change those in different districts, she says.

"It doesn't make sense that you would always want someone new running your government," she says. "No other business could survive that way."

"I think they've been a bad thing," Allen says. "I voted for it, but I think it was underestimated what losing all that experience meant for people's districts. By the time they learn to do anything, they're gone." ■