Strategies for State Engagement in the Presidential Transition

By Lisa McKinney [1]
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With President-elect Donald Trump set to take office in January, all eyes are on the administration’s transition process, a sweeping and intensive effort that requires the participation of public servants from all levels of the federal government. While the transition looks different from president-elect to president-elect, there are a few key components that are universal to all successful transitions, Edmund Moy, the former director of the United States Mint who worked on George W. Bush’s transition team, told attendees at the “The Next Presidential Administration & Relations with the States” session Dec. 10 at the 2016 CSG National Conference in Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia.

The process includes a review of federal agencies in which a “beachhead team” gathers information and helps shape briefing materials for the new administration. A team made up largely of volunteers will come in to each department and create a portfolio of information for the president-elect, said John Acton, who led the transition team for the U.S. Department of Homeland Security during President Barack Obama’s transition into the White House.

“From the civil servant perspective, we work on a portfolio of products for the transition team,” he said. “Another product that the career folks work on is the 30-60-90 day binder, that includes issues that could rise up and bite the new administration in the first 30, 60 and 90 days.”

The part of the process that often gets the most media and public attention is political appointments. In the federal government all four million people that make up the career staff report to about 4,000 elected or appointed political officials, who are there to make sure the policies of the new president are implemented and manage their department or agency. About 97 percent of political appointees serve at the pleasure of the president, meaning they will vacate their offices on Jan. 20 when the new president is sworn in, said Moy.

“The person in charge has to have policy views in sync with the president and the ability to implement those policies effectively,” he said.

Once top positions are filled, the remaining appointed staff is hired working with the cabinet or department that has the vacancy. The process is not too far removed from the process for hiring positions outside of government. Resumes and references are collected electronically so recruiters can search applications using key words. The incoming administration currently has about 800,000 resumes to consider for the 4,000 positions it has to fill, according to Moy.

Moy said incoming administrations also will often reach out to various constituencies for
recommendations for positions, which is an opportunity for state officials to get involved in the process. “If you have candidates, I would encourage you to recommend them for the specific positions that affect your state,” he said.

Acton said that there is often a lot of interest within an incoming administration in “quick wins”—action items they can get accomplished quickly to build momentum. State leaders who can help the administration do so can use the opportunity as a way to engage with the transition team, he added.

“Folks on the outside who were most successful in engaging in the process leveraged all their networks and resources,” said Acton. “If there is a specific issue in your jurisdiction that is hot button—such as water quality—may get you entree into the transition team. There is also strength in numbers. They are likely to sit down with someone representing all the states or everyone on a particular issue, rather than doing a lot of one-off meetings.”

Both speakers were optimistic that the processes in place to ensure a smooth presidential transition will serve the incoming Trump administration well.

“The 2008 transition was regarded as a huge success,” said Acton. “In 2008, all the agencies got a memo from Bush saying that we would do everything we could for the Obama administration to set them up for success. … This time around Obama has recognized the power of that kind of experience and has stepped up and given that same message.”

He said that having worked with both Trump’s and Hillary Clinton’s teams for several months before the election, he believes that most of the drama regarding the transition exists only in the press.

Both speakers also said that the results of the transition will become clearer very soon as the inauguration approaches.

“The waters are muddy regardless of who the president-elect is,” said Moy. “It is chaotic time. ... (But) the federal government is designed not to have a revolution, but an evolution.”