

# The Governors' Offices

By Barry L. Van Lare

*Each state provides its governor with an office staff dedicated to supporting the governor and to assisting the governor in the leadership and management of state government.*

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## Overview

As the state's chief executive officer, the governor is responsible for the leadership and management of the executive branch of government. While this responsibility is primarily carried out through political appointees the governor will name to head numerous executive departments and agencies, every governor also relies on a personal staff to oversee and coordinate these appointees, to assist in carrying out a number of additional functions providing logistical support to the governor, and to assist the governor in operational responsibilities assigned to the governor's office. Together the governors' offices in the 50 states employ nearly 3,200 staff members.

These offices play significant roles, and it is important to understand the tasks they perform and the way in which staff are assigned and organized to perform those tasks.

## The Critical Tasks of the Governor's Office

While specifics will vary from state to state, most governors' offices will be responsible for all or most of the following tasks:

### *Manning State Government*

A new governor must move quickly to fill critical appointments in state departments and agencies. In addition, the new governor will be faced with making appointments to a wide range of state boards and agencies of varying importance. The governor's office must find appointees who share the governor's priorities and have the management and political skills needed to implement those priorities and deliver other government services effectively and efficiently. Moreover, the governor's office must find candidates who can withstand the public scrutiny of the confirmation process and ensure that gubernatorial appointees conform to appropriate ethical standards. While these functions are particularly challenging at the beginning of a governor's term, they continue throughout the governor's administration as vacancies occur due to the expiration of terms or other personnel changes.

### *Developing Policies and Programs*

While the vast majority of state programs and policies may proceed unchanged during a governor's tenure, every governor comes to office with a number of priority issues that have developed during the election campaign. The governor's office will need to develop specific policies and programs to address those priorities and to build a convincing case for their adoption. As with appointments, these tasks are often most intense during the early months of a governor's term, but will continue as initial policies are implemented and as new problems and opportunities arise.

### *Allocating Financial Resources*

The governors also play a critical role in proposing the allocation of state resources through the executive budget. In a few states, the process of budget analysis and development is carried out by budget staff assigned directly to the governor's office. More commonly, the formal budget process is managed by a separate budget office reporting to the governor or to a department head appointed by the governor. However, governors often want to supplement the efforts of this specialized staff with political and policy input from their personal staff members.

### *Securing Public and Legislative Support*

Appointments, budgets and policy initiatives generally all require legislative approval. As a result, one of the critical tasks of the governor's office is to establish a productive working relationship with the state legislature. In addition, the governor's office will be expected to take the lead in communicating the governor's priorities to key stakeholders and in mobilizing public support for their adoption.

### *Overseeing Government Operations*

State government provides a wide variety of services to millions of residents every day. Ultimately the public will hold the governor responsible for how well these services are delivered. Individual governors attempt to oversee these activities in many different ways. In some cases, the governor will rely on management by exception, weighing in only when

an issue arises. More often a governor will work with department and agency heads to define priorities and to maintain a general sense of agency performance. In other cases, the governor will create and manage a system of performance review that will monitor performance on an ongoing basis.

#### ***Constituent Services***

Governors, like other elected officials, are the focal point for residents who encounter problems in their dealings with state government. These requests come to the governor by mail, e-mail, telephone and personal visits. Individual governors have responded to these demands in different ways. At the minimum, the governor's office will serve as a conduit seeing that government agencies are responsive to the issues. In other offices, the governor's staff serves as case managers working actively to evaluate and respond to problems.

#### ***Emergency Management***

The governor is expected to play an important role in responding to emergencies in every state. While operational responsibility will generally reside in a designated emergency management agency, the governor will be held responsible for seeing that the necessary systems are in place, for ensuring effective interagency coordination and for maintaining critical communications with the public. In some states, the coordination of homeland security is assigned to a unit within the governor's office.

#### ***Communication***

The governor also plays an important role in communicating his or her priorities and concerns to the public, as well as an equally important role in allowing citizen input into the policy process.

#### **Organizing the Governor's Office**

Historically governors have chosen from one of three organizational options. Many governors choose a hierarchical model with all staff reporting to the governor through a designated chief of staff. In other states, the governor prefers a decentralized model with several senior staff members and heads of functional areas reporting directly to him or her. In other states, the governor selects a hybrid model with the chief and a limited number of senior staff members reporting directly to the governor.

In most states, the governor's office is structured around some combination of the individual functions discussed below. In fewer states, the governor's offices include separate staff and/or offices with

specific liaison and/or operational responsibilities. Examples include special commissions on crosscutting topics such as economic development or tax reform, the management of high priority initiatives such as homeland security and small offices addressing concerns of special populations such as children or minorities.

#### **Functional Assignments in the Governor's Office**

While there is no single model governing the functional units or assignments that will be included in the governor's office, most governors' offices, whether large or small, will include staff, either units or individuals charged with many or all of these functions.

#### ***Chief of Staff***

The chief of staff is the most senior member of the governor's staff. While the specific functions assigned to the chief and his deputies or assistants may vary, those staff members usually serve in a variety of roles including leadership and management of the governor's staff, political and policy adviser, personal confidant and primary liaison with state departments and agencies.

#### ***Government Operations***

As chief executive officer, the governor is responsible for how well these services are delivered. Most governors' offices include individuals or units that are charged with working with department and agency heads to see that services are delivered economically and efficiently, that the governor's priorities and programs are implemented, and that problems are anticipated and addressed.

In some states the oversight of government operations will rest primarily on the chief of staff. In other states this responsibility is distributed among a number of senior advisers, policy staff or agency liaisons. In other states the governor's office includes a director of state operations, a chief operating officer or performance management staff.

#### ***Appointments***

The appointments staff is responsible for tracking the membership of often hundreds of state boards and commissions, identifying vacancies, recruiting and evaluating candidates, and recommending appointments to the governor. The appointments staff will often also assume responsibility for training or orienting new board and commission members and serving as a liaison with many boards and agencies to ensure they are responsive to the governor's priorities.

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In some states this staff will assist in filling high-level vacancies in state departments and agencies. In other states, recruiting for these executive positions may rest with the governor's chief of staff or other members of the governor's senior staff.

### ***Budgeting***

Most states have created an office outside the governor's office to manage the development and execution of the state budget. (See Table A.) In 10 states, however, this budget staff is included in the governor's direct office. Even when the governor is supported by a separate budget agency, the chief of staff, the policy director, agency liaison and other senior staff may be called upon to participate in the development and review of recommendations prepared by that agency.

**Table A:  
Location of State Budget Functions**

<i>Location</i>	<i>Number of states</i>
In governor's office	10
Freestanding agency	10
In finance department	12
In management or administrative department	21

*Source:* National Association of State Budget Officers, "Budget Processes in the States," Summer 2008.

### ***Legislative Relations***

The staff members responsible for dealing with the state legislature may have a variety of titles, including legislative liaison, legislative counsel, legislative assistant, legislative coordinator, legislative secretary and deputy assistant for legislation. In a few states, the legislative liaison and counsel functions may be handled by the governor's counsel or legal adviser.

This staff will oversee the development of the governor's legislative program, coordinate lobbying activities of the administration and negotiate many issues with the legislature. The legislative staff will usually monitor the progress on legislation and in many cases will have a strong role in recommending whether to sign or veto legislation.

### ***Legal Counsel***

The legal counsel's primary responsibility is to protect the legal interests of the governor and the governor's office, as well as to interpret federal and state laws and regulations and determine the impact they

may have on the governor's initiatives and priorities. The legal counsel may also be responsible for a variety of other tasks, such as making appointments to the state judiciary, advising on clemency for state prison inmates, serving as liaison with the state attorney general, coordinating the work of departmental legal counsel, reviewing proposed and enacted legislation, and overseeing the administration of ethics laws or regulations.

### ***Scheduling***

The governor's scheduling office is charged with creating and managing a process that will protect the governor's time and allow the governor the opportunity to set priorities while ensuring adequate time for personal and family needs. The scheduling office is also used strategically to schedule meetings, events and appearances that will promote the governor's programs and priorities. In many states the scheduling office is also responsible for advancing the governor's appearances and coordinating the preparation of briefing material for those appearances.

### ***Correspondence and Constituent Services***

The governor's correspondence staff is responsible for ensuring those who contact the governor receive a thoughtful and timely response and that their concerns are shared with the governor, the governor's staff, and appropriate departments and agencies. The correspondence staffs may also provide a number of other services, such as issuing proclamations or recognizing constituents for special events, such as milestone birthdays or graduations.

Constituent services activities can help make government more accessible and responsive. In some states the governor's staff serves primarily as a referral mechanism seeing that constituent service requests are referred to state agencies for necessary action. In other states the governor's constituent services staff will play an active case management role working to personally oversee state efforts to resolve the constituent's problems or issues.

### ***Policy Development***

Policy staffs in the governors' offices develop, analyze and recommend policies and programs to address governors' priorities. In some states the policy function may be assigned to one or more senior staff members, such as the chief of staff, legal counsel or legislative director, as an addition to their primary responsibility. In other cases the governor may have designated staff members with specific substantive expertise to be responsible for particular policy areas.

**Table B:  
Size of Governors' Offices in 2009**

<i>Office size</i>	<i>Number of states</i>
1-9	1
10-14	1
15-19	3
20-24	7
25-29	1
30-34	4
35-39	5
40-44	3
45-49	2
50-74	13
75-99	4
100+	6
Average	63

*Source:* Compiled using various editions of *The Book of the States*.

In other cases the governor may have named a policy director who is expected to work independently calling on department or agency staff when necessary.

Finally, several states have created an organizational unit within the governor's office with a central mission of developing policy and serving as liaison with department and agency heads around policy development. In some states this same policy unit may also be responsible for working with the governor's cabinet to provide oversight of government operations more generally.

#### **Information Technology**

Information technology plays a critical role in many tasks, such as scheduling, appointments, correspondence and constituent services. In many cases these functions are unique to a governor's office and are not supported well by off-the-shelf software or by existing systems serving traditional state agencies. In addition, a governor is expected to develop and maintain a Web site to provide information about his or her office and priorities.

#### **Intergovernmental Relations**

Many states have established Washington offices to maintain relationships and communication with their delegations and with the departments and agencies of the federal government. These offices monitor and evaluate legislative and regulatory proposals, ad-

vocate for federal legislation and coordinate efforts to secure grants and contracts for their states. In a number of states, these staff members are considered part of the governor's offices. In addition, some governors' offices have designated staff members to serve as liaisons to local government officials or to coordinate the interaction of department and agency heads with the federal government.

#### **Staffing the Governor's Office**

##### **Current Staffing**

According to state-reported figures, 3,142 positions were assigned to the offices of the 50 governors in 2008. The smallest office, Nebraska, had only nine staff members, while two of the largest, Florida and Texas, had more than 250 staff members. The governors' offices had 63 staff members on average. As shown in Table B, fewer than half of the governors had more than 49 staff members assigned to their offices, while 12 had fewer than 25 staff assigned.

Table C shows the staffing of the offices of the governors in the largest and smallest states. Not surprisingly, there is a fairly direct correlation between

**Table C:  
Growth of Governors' Offices in  
Selected States, 1980-81 Through 2009**

<i>State by magnitude of state and local spending</i>	<i>1980-81</i>	<i>2009</i>	<i>Change (%)</i>
<b>Ten Largest</b>			
California	82.6	185	124%
New York	180	180	0
Texas	266	266	0
Florida	10	293	2,830
Pennsylvania	70	68	-3
Illinois	6	130	2,067
Ohio	18	60	233
Michigan	60	85	42
New Jersey	60	126	110
North Carolina	57	74	30
<b>Ten Smallest</b>			
Maine	12	19	58
Rhode Island	7	46	557
Idaho	21	22	5
New Hampshire	19	23	21
Delaware	17	32	88
Montana	20	61	205
North Dakota	13	17	31
South Dakota	8	21.5	169
Vermont	12	14	17
Wyoming	6	22	267

*Source:* Compiled using various editions of *The Book of the States*.

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the size of the state and local expenditures in the state and the size of the governor's staff, although there are some exceptions.

More recent data provided by the states suggests that a significant number of governors are moving to reduce the size of the offices below that initially provided. Of 38 states responding to the survey conducted by the National Governors Association in late 2008, 25 have already made reductions and or plan to do so in 2009.

**Table D:  
Growth of Governors' Offices over  
Time, 1980–81 Through 2009**

<i>Year</i>	<i>Total number of staff</i>
1980–81	1,564
1990–91	2,529
2000–01	3,010
2003	2,867
2006	3,016
2009	3,142

*Source:* Compiled using various editions of *The Book of the States*.

### *Historical Trends*

As shown in Table D, the size of the staff assigned to governors' offices has doubled since 1980–81 when the reported staff totaled 1,562. While all but four states reported a larger staff in 2009 than in 1980, almost one-half of the total growth was experienced in four states, with Florida and Texas showing increases of more than 250 positions each and Illinois and California growing by in excess of 100 positions each.

Most of the growth in the number of staff members assigned to governor's offices came in the twenty years between 1980 and 2000 when the increase totaled almost 1,500. The size of governors' staffs has grown slowly since 2000, increasing by only 132; it appears likely these staffs will decrease at least somewhat during the current economic crisis.

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### **About the Author**

**Barry L. Van Lare** is an independent consultant and a senior adviser to the National Governors Association's Office of Management Consulting and Training that assists governors and their staffs in the leadership and management of state government and the organization and operation of the governor's office. Van Lare has more than 45 years of experience in managing federal, state and local agencies and in developing and implementing national health and human services programs.