
Reflecting on One Exceptional, Partly Virtual Year on Capitol Hill

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Serving as a 2019-2020 IEEE-USA Congressional Fellow on Capitol Hill has been an honor and a privilege. And what a year it has been! I never would have guessed when I put pen to paper on my application in November 2018, when I accepted my fellowship offer in February 2019, or even when I embarked upon this journey in September 2019 that I would have a front-row seat to presidential impeachment proceedings, a close call with conflict in the Middle East, a devastating global pandemic, racial and civil unrest, the fight to save the United States Postal Service, and the passing of a Supreme Court Justice. Any one of these would be noteworthy in a “normal” year, and to

experience all of these events in under twelve months is truly unprecedented.

I came into the fellowship eager to contribute to the federal policymaking process and to experience Congress from the inside. I sought to better understand the origins of legislation and the nuts and bolts of the authorization-appropriations process, which enables federal spending to carry out government activities. I decided to join the office of Congressman Seth Moulton of Massachusetts's Sixth District, where I could oversee a large portion of the science and technology legislative portfolio, and work on issues ranging from emerging technologies (artificial intelligence, quantum computing, cybersecurity, 5G telecommunications networks, and synthetic biology) to data privacy to advanced manufacturing.

You are always running from one thing to another on the Hill — whether a briefing, hearing, meeting with an advocacy group or lobbyist, or coffee with a colleague — and this is amplified ten-fold if your chamber is in session, your boss is in town, and votes are taking place. It felt strange that on Thursday, 5 March, I had a lighter load and was able to sit under the majestic Capitol Rotunda and reflect before heading to a National Academy of Engineering reception in the Senate. While COVID-19 was not yet a full-blown crisis, my psyche somehow knew that I needed to take advantage of this time and the opportunity to be alone with my thoughts among beautiful, majestic architecture prior to the dark days ahead.

I am lucky to work for a boss who takes leadership, science, and disaster preparedness very seriously, and executed Phase 2 of our coronavirus response plan on the evening of Wednesday, 11 March, when Tom Hanks and the NBA irreparably inserted “coronavirus” and its impacts into our collective consciousness. I am forever grateful that a colleague pressed an iPad connected to the House network into my hands the day before, enabling me to carry out my legislative duties from home. We had one day at Phase 2 before entering Phase 3, “maximum telework,” on Thursday, 12 March. I have been on Capitol Hill precisely one time since then.

We were reduced to Zoom Congress in the blink of an eye — which is legal, as the Constitution does not require Members' physical presence in the District of Columbia to do the nation's business. I am fortunate to serve in a tech-savvy office, where we engage in robust Slack debates, and I get to see the faces of my boss and colleagues on our morning videoconference. Some offices are solely conducting business via email and phone. If the pandemic has one silver lining, it is that COVID-19 has accelerated the adoption of modern processes and procedures throughout Congress. While remote voting may not be implemented any time soon, the electronic submission of legislative documents and evaluation of how technology can lead to better constituent services is a start.

The rest of March and all of April and May is a blur. I compiled a daily set of COVID-19 science reading links; handled biotech, manufacturing, and PPE-related constituent services requests; supported my boss on his Coronavirus Advisory Board calls with leading public health experts; and contributed to oversight letters to hold those in power accountable. I additionally secured original co-sponsorship on the *Nursing Home COVID-19 Protection and Prevention Act*, and managed to finish our Commerce, Justice, Science appropriations submissions.

I was stunned and frustrated by the lack of coordination and guidance coming from the Executive Branch on everything from testing to contact tracing to PPE to mechanisms for awarding rapid response research grants and manufacturing funding. In the absence of a strong national strategy, it was fascinating to watch state and local governments attempt to fill the gaps and take matters into their own hands. For me, this meant steering constituents to the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative's Manufacturing Emergency Response Team, and watching in awe as Massachusetts

Governor Charlie Baker struck an agreement to bring PPE to the Commonwealth via the New England Patriots' Boeing 767.

I also was struck by the sheer number of constituents contacting our office with generous offers to help — with their time, treasure, and expertise. Whether large manufacturing firms offering their resources to small manufacturing firms producing ventilators, people with contacts having access to N95 masks abroad, or an entrepreneur who pivoted her entire operation to manufacturing cloth masks, the residents of Massachusetts' Sixth District selflessly rose to the occasion to help out their neighbors on the front lines and protect the most vulnerable in their community.

June, July, August, and September have brought a temporary return to other focus areas and issues, including the *National Defense Authorization Act* (NDAA) and the 12 appropriations bills to fund the government, 10 of which have passed the House and zero of which have passed the Senate as of 22 September. (The House passed a Continuing Resolution on 22 September to fund the government through 11 December 2020 and avert a government shutdown. The Senate is expected to vote on the same Continuing Resolution during the week of 28 September.) We have spent a significant amount of time reflecting on civil rights, and working to ensure that the United States Postal Service continues to deliver for every American on a timely basis. I also was able to staff Congressman Moulton for three House Budget Committee hearings: one on the federal government's role in research and development; one on the need for the federal government to further invest in technology; and one on artificial intelligence and its impacts on the workforce and economy.

However, it is imperative that Congress does not view this time as a reprieve from COVID-19 — the virus is still present and spreading, and much remains unknown heading into fall and flu season. I continue to emphasize that scientific evidence and data are key and must inform our policy response. Furthermore, there is still so much that needs to be done to shore up our communities and tackle associated economic issues. I am optimistic that the five 2020-2021 IEEE-USA Congressional Fellows will continue to advance this critical legislative work.

I am grateful to have had a tiny bit of impact during my year on Capitol Hill, and am confident that lessons learned from my fellowship experience will stay with me throughout my career. While I certainly did not expect to serve during such turbulent and uncertain times, it is true that a smooth sea never made a skilled sailor and that you learn more in crisis than in comfort. I am glad that I was able to leverage my science and engineering background to keep the residents of Massachusetts' North Shore informed, healthy, and safe, and contribute to matters of national importance. My sincere thanks to IEEE-USA for the opportunity.

Note: AAAS is one of about 30 scientific and engineering societies, including IEEE, that sponsor fellowships in U.S. Congress each year

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