For first-term legislators, spring brings a flurry of committee meetings, bill drafting and budget discussions. In this CSG continuing series, we check in on our four freshman legislators—South Carolina state Rep. Micah Caskey, Illinois state Rep. Theresa Mah, New York state Assemblywoman Yuh-Line Niou and Arizona state Rep. Maria Syms—to see how their first session is shaping up.

In what ways has the legislative experience been different from what you expected?

“Come into the House with the expectation that many of the veteran legislators would be less than welcoming—and, thankfully, it has been the opposite. So far, my experience has been that the speaker, the chairman, the majority leader and on down have made themselves available to me, they have been open to meeting with me and hearing me out every time that I’ve asked. I have been pleasantly surprised that there are many veteran legislators who enjoy exploring ideas together.”

“The intensity of the job is perhaps what is not as easily anticipated. As a policy advocate in the past, I would perhaps focus on one bill, or a small number of bills, and usher them through to passage. As a legislator, you are responsible for the bills you file, and you must learn about and be attentive to how you co-sponsor, hear about in committee, are told about by advocates or lobbyists, and every bill is made to stand on its own in sessions. The sheer volume of proposals and the number of people who want to discuss their proposals with you is staggering and something you do not truly experience before becoming a legislator.”

“I have worked many different sessions in multiple legislatures and have taken different roles throughout the years, but this was my first session as a legislator. I think nothing can really prepare you fully for this legislative experience. … You don’t get to take time off. You don’t get to have someone cover you. I went through some personal hardships this budget season, and I realized how much we all sometimes end up having to sacrifice to serve. My best friend passed away two weeks ago. She was in a coma while we were in the most difficult period of negotiating our budget. Every ounce of my being wanted to be with her and our budget wasn’t on time. It is an incredibly humbling realization. …

I know of colleagues who themselves are battling illnesses, or the loss of loved ones, or dealing with other hardships at home. It makes me admire them even more for their dedication.”

“In this case, giving dignity and justice to the veterans is the most since the beginning of session. He is one of the brightest talent in the state, and his legislative experience has been different from what you expected. …

Mr. Reid has been a seasoned guide, mentor and friend in helping me find my way in the House during this first session. …

It is difficult to say who has helped me the most. So many people have been helpful. Perhaps one of my colleagues, who is also one of my downstairs neighbors, and who alerted me to the vacancy of the committee together and I have appreciated her advice, support, counsel and leadership on many issues.”

“Given much of the negative rhetoric and hyperbole in the media about political leaders, I think what surprised me the most is just how bipartisan the legislative process can be. I am very proud of my first bill recently signed into law by the governor that requires universal, mandatory testing of rape kits. … Several democrats signed on in support of the bill and it ultimately passed out of the House and Senate unanimously. We should always look for areas of common ground so that we can craft solutions that will have a practical impact on the citizens we represent. In this case, giving dignity and justice to women and victims and keeping more criminals off the streets are wins for everyone.”

Which person has helped you the most since the beginning of session?

“I have to name one person, it’s Charles Reid, the clerk of the House. …

Mr. Reid has made himself available at every turn to help me master the rules of the House and much more. He has been there to answer questions about parliamentary procedure and to guide me to the appropriate subject matter resource or staff member. …

Mr. Reid has been a seasoned guide, mentor and friend in helping me find my way in the House during this first session.”

“My entire staff is incredible and I have to say I can’t do anything without them. I must give special shout outs props though to my deputy chief of staff, Laurence Hong. He is going to kill me for this, but he is the person who has helped me out the most since the beginning of session. He is one of the most dedicated and talented individuals I have ever had the privilege to work with and serve with. …

He pulled off dozens of miracles and really goes continuously above and beyond for our constituents every day.”

In one word, how would you describe your first three months as a lawmaker?

“Educational.”

What resources have you accessed to help adjust to your new role as a legislator?

“We have some of the best and brightest talent in the state serving as staff in the South Carolina House of Representatives. It would be impossible for me to overstate the contribution that our staff makes to improve the lives of South Carolinians. They do such an extraordinary job helping legislators and often work long hours with little recognition. …

Their efforts to provide comprehensive research and thorough analysis is something to behold; I’m honored to work alongside them.”

“I have been open to meeting and talking with anyone and everyone who wishes to meet. I have also made it a point to attend as many receptions and briefings as possible, especially on topics with which I am not very familiar. For example, I represent an urban area, but I have attended numerous events hosted by the agriculture industry and have had meetings with both the Illinois and Cook County Farm Bureau to learn about their program, which pairs urban legislator with rural counties. It seems like a terrific opportunity that would not be afforded to me were I not a legislator!”

“When I need them for just a little bit of advice or encouragement or [information] on their multitudes of issue specialties.”

“Subject matter resource or staff member. …

As far as other resources, I read the local and national papers regularly. …

I spend a good portion of my day speaking to people and learning about their priorities. As far as other resources, I read the local and national papers regularly. …

I also do a considerable amount of legal research on the bills I am reviewing and/or proposing. I rely on House leadership and my senior colleagues when it comes to procedures and learning about how a bill and amendments move forward. Finally, we have a great research and policy staff that assists with background information on bills.”

Keep following our freshmen legislators’ journey in the July/August issue of Capitol Ideas!