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District Offices in State Legislatures

By Angela Andrews

District offices give legislators and their staff a venue to conduct their work, hold meetings and retain close ties to the communities they represent. The National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) recently conducted a survey about district office operations, including funding, oversight and staffing. Of the 99 state legislative chambers, 24 allow their members to open district offices and provide funding to do so.

District Office Funding. All 24 chambers that allow district offices also provide financial support in the form of an allocation for their operation. However, the amount of the allocation and what it covers vary from chamber to chamber.

> NCSL defines a district office as: *A physical office in a legislator's district that is supported by the legislature, either through funding or oversight, and staffed by individuals who are paid by the legislature.*

For example, four chambers provide members with an allocation that covers all district office operations, including rent, utilities, office supplies and district office staff salaries. Rank-and-file members serving in the Maryland General Assembly receive an allocation of $18,565 a year, while Illinois representatives receive $69,409 a year and Illinois senators receive $83,000 a year.

Twelve chambers report giving members a specific allocation amount to cover legislative expenses, including district office operations but not staffing. In comparison, Missouri senators receive $7,200 annually to cover their legislative expenses, including district offices, while Florida senators can receive up to $38,928 a year.

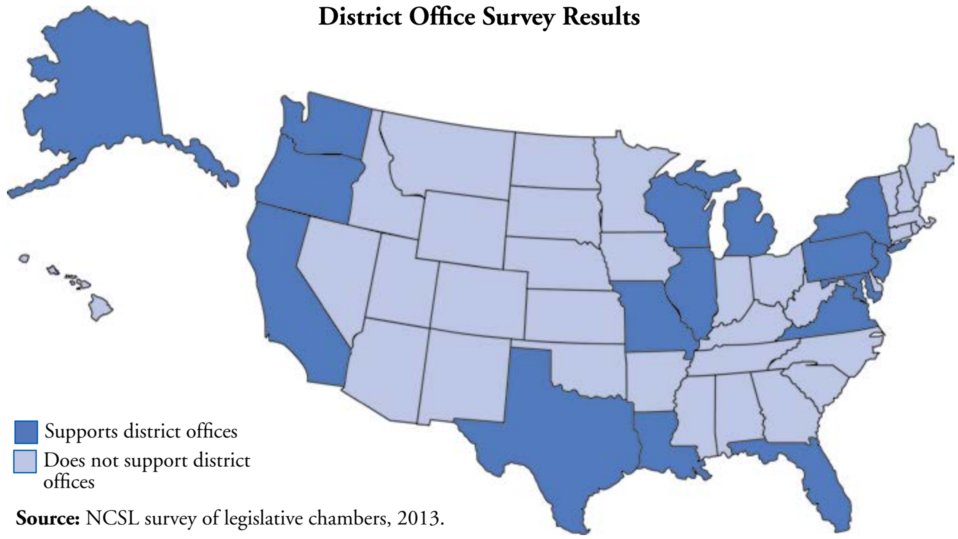
In most chambers, should the member choose not to open a district office, he or she can use the allocation for non-district office expenses, such as constituent communications, mileage reimbursement, travel or other chamber-approved expenses. The Alaska and Louisiana legislatures, however, prohibit legislators from using the allocations for other purposes.

District Office Oversight. In addition to receiving funding for district offices, lawmakers must adhere to specific chamber policies and guidelines about district office location, leasing, office size and other regulations. District offices usually are located within the physical boundaries of a member's district, but there are exceptions to this rule. One reason for allowing offices outside district borders is the prohibitive cost of rent in major metropolitan areas. The Florida House, Illinois House and Washington Senate, for example, allow legislators to open offices in less expensive areas than their home district.

Did You Know?

- About a quarter of legislative chambers provide support for district offices through funding and oversight.
- District offices provide legislators and their staff with a space to conduct work, hold meetings and retain close ties to the communities they represent.
- Members may be allowed to locate their district office in a commercial space, a business or their residence, depending on their chamber's policies.

Most district offices occupy leased space, but some legislatures permit members to set up shop in their personal business or residence. Florida representatives can use either personal business or residence space for their offices, as can members of the Maryland General Assembly, Michigan Senate and Virginia House. Washington senators can use personal residences for their district office, but they must be ADA-compliant and have a separate entrance and signage.



Source: NCSL survey of legislative chambers, 2013.

A lease typically is required to rent district office space, and 12 chambers require members to sign leases for district office space. In the Wisconsin Senate, the chief clerk must approve the lease to ensure that it meets all state regulations, but senators are responsible for signing it. By contrast, administrative officers in the California Senate and Assembly, Michigan Senate and Texas Senate, for example, sign district office leases on behalf of their members.

In addition to location and leasing requirements, some legislatures regulate the size of a district office. The California Assembly, New Jersey Assembly and Pennsylvania Senate set square footage limits for district offices. In the Pennsylvania Senate, for example, the amount of office square footage is tied to the size of the district.

Staffing. District office staffing typically is limited only by the amount of funding available to members for staff salaries and benefits or by a legislator-to-staff ratio set by the chamber. The Florida House permits no more than two staff to work in a member's district office, while the Alaska Legislature, California Senate and Assembly, Florida Senate and New Jersey Assembly allow members to have three or more staff in their district offices. Based on the member's needs and preferences, most district staff can split their time between the member's district office and capitol office. Staff in the Louisiana Legislature and Illinois House conduct their work solely in the district office.

District office staff usually are subject to the same rules and regulations as staff in capitol offices. In most states, this includes prohibitions on campaign or personal work on state time. The Maryland General Assembly, for example, rules out campaign work from state offices or offices funded by district appropriations, and Florida House staffers must take a leave of absence from official duties to engage in partisan or election-related activities.

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