

## Responding to queries big job

**Congressional office hears from thousands**



**By Philip Rau | Monday, Feb. 1, 2016**

If you send a letter or e-mail to your congressman in Washington, D.C., does anyone read it?

The short answer is, yes — and they read a lot of them. Tens of thousands each year. Success

But what happens between the time you put your stamp or e-signature on a piece of correspondence and when a response arrives in your mailbox or inbox might be more complicated — and a bit more personal — than you think.

Butler's U.S. Rep. Mike Kelly, R-3rd, is no stranger to constituent communications. Kelly's office says it receives more than 1,000 e-mails, calls, letters and faxes each week.

Most of the communication — about 85 percent — comes via e-mail, said Thomas Qualtere, Kelly's communications director.

Qualtere said the pace and volume of constituent input varies depending on the time of year and the issues of the moment. Since taking office in January 2011 Kelly's office has received 287,000 pieces of individual correspondence, averaging 1,100 each week.

The most popular issues all-time in the 3rd District are gun rights, immigration and net neutrality, the office said. Currently, net neutrality, trade promotion authority and Medicare top the list, according to the office's records.

Via e-mail, correspondence can make it into staffers' hands almost instantly and receive a relatively quick response, Qualtere said. It typically takes the office five to seven days to send a response once a piece of correspondence has been received by Kelly's Capitol Hill office.

Constituents who elect to send hard copy letters — which the office calls "snail mail" these days — can be in for a considerably longer wait.

Since 2001's Anthrax attacks when contaminated letters sent to news media and two U.S. senators killed five people and sickened 17 others, incoming congressional postal mail is processed through a Maryland-based facility that "scrubs" all letters before they're delivered to Capitol Hill.

The process adds about two weeks to a letter's delivery, Qualtere said.

Once a letter or e-mail makes it to Kelly's Washington, D.C., office, it's saved on a digital system and awaits attention by Kelly and his staff.

How that response is created depends on the issue, timing and person sending the correspondence, said Qualtere.

As a matter of course the office only responds to residents of the 3rd District, and has prepared, "detailed responses" to chain and form letters, which make up a large portion of the communication the office receives, Qualtere said.

The office also sometimes receives batch correspondence from school and civic groups as part of projects, as well as requests for memorabilia like American flags or help setting up tours of the Capitol.

The office said it's helped organize hundreds of those tours each year, and typically sends out more than 1,500 American flags in response to requests each year.

The net effect, Qualtere said, is that the office ultimately responds in writing to about 60 percent of its incoming correspondence.

What those responses are is ultimately in Kelly's hands, Qualtere said. The office holds a full staff meeting each week to review all its correspondence, update the congressman and make those decisions.

Many times the responses are handled by staffers, Qualtere or Kelly's chief of staff Matt Stroia. Sometimes, though, a particular issue or topic catches Kelly's eye and motivates him to spend personal time getting involved.

Kelly pointed to three cases — two veterans he helped replace or obtain missing service medals in 2014, and a 2011 letter from a grandmother that moved him to help author a bill helping pediatric cancer patients — as examples of that.

"When you get into this job, you start to be able to touch peoples' lives in different ways than any other (position)," Kelly said.

He said he doesn't see it as a choice or a trade-off, and doesn't accept the conventional wisdom that members of Congress have to choose between being authentic and personal, and reaching out to their constituencies en masse.

"I think you're either authentic or you're not," Kelly said. "It's just an expanded family, and I'm really in a position of 'my gosh, we can really help some of these folks.'"

But the job is so big that Kelly employs a full-time staffer, legislative correspondent Brendan Fulmer, in Washington who handles all the office's incoming correspondence. Fulmer sorts it and assigns a response letter based on the writer's topic.

The congressman also employs five full-time “caseworkers” who are based throughout the 3rd District and deal first with correspondence that is sent to Kelly’s district offices in Sharon, Butler and Erie.

Kelly said his approach — “build the best customer service team in the country” — comes from his years running car dealerships in Butler County.

“I was never overwhelmed by the numbers or the model because I’ve already done that,” he said. “I already know: It’s not what you know, it’s who you know.”

Fulmer’s job is one that Stroia is intimately familiar with. Stroia used to be a legislative correspondent himself and called the task difficult, with a “high burn-out rate,” but essential to American democracy.

“That particular job is one that feels like it’s never done,” Stroia said. “Our numbers have never been zero. Mike entered this office with letters waiting for him on day one.”

The job of tracking and responding to voters who write, e-mail or call with questions, stories and opinions has grown bigger than sorting and sending, Qualtere said. Kelly hired him away from the House Republican Conference about three years ago, and gave him the task of growing the office’s presence on social media.

Qualtere and Stroia say the emphasis was a necessity.

“It’s not optional. An unprecedented number of people get their daily news from Twitter and Facebook,” Qualtere said. “There’s where news gets broken, passed around and commented upon. So we have no choice. We have to be fully invested.”

Fully invested is just what Kelly is. The congressman says he won’t shy away from the online exchanges, which can often be anonymous and brutal.

“I would be a fool to say ‘I only want to hear good news.’ That’s a Pollyanna attitude and that is not reality,” Kelly said. “The one thing I really appreciate is when it’s a civil remark.”

Qualtere said the congressman has more than 15,000 “friends” on Facebook and more than 5,000 followers on Twitter — numbers he says put Kelly among the most engaged federal officials on social media.

Stroia and Brad Moore, Kelly’s district director, say the office’s plan to grow Kelly’s online presence has been simple.

“It’s simply the congressman being the congressman,” Stroia said.

The medium has become so powerful, Moore said, that staffers rely upon it as a barometer indicating general opinion in the district. And the moment they finally knew their approach was working came last year, when Stroia and Moore found out that two of the most apolitical people they knew had their attention grabbed by Kelly on Facebook.

“When we really knew it had clicked was late last year, when Matt (Stroia) and I got home from work and both our wives, unprompted, brought up something that Mike said or did on Facebook,” Moore said. “That’s when we knew we were starting to get a reach.”