

Placement Report to the IEEE-USA Government Fellows Committee

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I am an IEEE-USA Congressional Fellow for the calendar year 2010. I am placed in the office of Senator Jon Tester of Montana, a Democrat elected to a first term in 2006. I began my placement in the first week of January.

In September 2009, I participated in the ten-day American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) Fellows Orientation Program. There were 189 Fellows sponsored by a variety of professional organizations. Most of these Fellows had already found a placement in the executive branch of the federal government. Thirty-two of them were Congressional Fellows, but, by design, none had begun the process of finding a placement. The orientation was excellent. AAAS staff were very well-organized and helpful. Distinguished speakers were brought in to address topics such as the legislative process, the federal budget, science policy, lobbying, the executive branch and foreign policy. Small group exercises were used to teach skills for working quickly as a team and to give a sense of the rapid pace at which decisions sometimes have to be made. Future Fellows should especially look forward to participating in these group exercises. Most of the orientation involved all 189 Fellows, but some sessions were specifically for the Congressional Fellows, such as the intensive day-long orientation at the Congressional Research Service. I strongly encourage future Fellows to participate in all AAAS orientation activities, including social events.

Orientation was immediately followed by the process of placement in a Congressional office or on a committee. Twenty-six of this year's Fellows were starting their Fellowship in September and only six, including the two IEEE-USA Fellows, were starting in January. AAAS provided the Fellows with a list of House and Senate offices and committees seeking Fellows, their policy interests and appropriate points of contact. The process began with an evening reception in a House Office Building to which Congressional office and committee staff interested in having a Fellow were also invited. Three Congressmen briefly addressed the gathering. At the reception, I met some interested staff and was even approached by several offices that had an interest in me, having read my resume in advance. I would suggest trying to schedule an interview at the reception to avoid having to do so via email or telephone later. Although the reception is an opportunity to begin the placement process, and I strongly encourage attendance, it is only the beginning and too much importance should not be placed on it.

For three weeks after the reception, AAAS provided a communal space near the Capitol with AAAS staff on site, computer access and reference books giving background information on Congressional offices. Most of the Fellows spent time here between interviews. Being able to share ongoing experiences with other

Fellows was helpful during a stressful process. Like other Fellows, I began by contacting by email (telephone calls were of little use) those offices (and committees) from the list that had policy interests similar to mine. I did not get interviews or even responses from most of the offices I contacted, although I was persistent in recontacting them. I believe the reasons for this lack of response were mostly that offices were looking for Fellows to start immediately rather than in January, and partly that some offices were only moderately interested in a Fellow and did not give priority to setting up interviews. It should be noted that offices can also obtain science fellows from the executive branch of government, for example, NSF, DoE, DoD and EPA; these fellows are also at no cost to the office. Thus they are competition for placement. After eight days, only eight interviews and no offers, I was obliged to return to work. However, in spite of my lack of success in this initial interview period, I strongly recommend that IEEE-USA Fellows begin the interview process, as I did, in September.

I continued contacting offices from home, and cast my net much wider, contacting nearly every office on the AAAS list, except those that specifically wanted someone for a topic in which I am not well-versed. I stressed my interest in working on energy and environmental issues even though my background is in research for the defense community. I informed offices that I would be in DC for interviews for a week in late October. Offices showed more interest, because some had not placed a Fellow from the September starts, and because some preferring a January start were now motivated to act. I was able to set up a few interviews before returning to DC. Many offices left arranging interviews to the last minute. A smart phone from which you can read email is essential, and I set up, on the fly, many of the ten interviews I had in the three days of my return trip.

Altogether, I contacted 47 offices and committees in the House and Senate, both Democrat and Republican. I interviewed with eighteen offices and committees, and had four offers. In Senator Tester's office I was interviewed by four people, including the Senator, before receiving an offer. I chose to join the office of Senator Tester for many reasons: I was compatible with his position on most issues, including energy and environment; I felt my mentor would be friendly and helpful; previous Fellows gave excellent reports of their Fellowship experience in his office; and the office had no other staff with a physical science background and was thus able truly to benefit from a Science Fellow.

I began my placement in the first week of January. I found the staff very welcoming and inclusive. I have been part of many constituent meetings on many topics, attended briefings and hearings both on behalf of the office and of my own choosing, and researched issues. The office has initiated a bill that should serve as a vehicle for me to learn about the legislative process. My mentor and other staff are working to give me the skills to operate more independently over time. I look forward to my year as an IEEE-USA Congressional Fellow!