



2021

A Practitioner's Guide to Impacting Immigration Policy

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Introduction

Hi! My name is Sierra Yamanaka.



On his first day in office, President Joseph R. Biden Jr. sent the US Citizenship Act of 2021 to Congress, and signed a number of immigration-related executive orders, signaling his commitment on day one to improve life for those trying to make their way to the United States. In the midst of both a global pandemic and a change in administration, the border community in Southern Arizona worked together to address the challenges they faced.

I have the distinct privilege of working in the Tucson district office of Congresswoman Ann Kirkpatrick, serving as her scheduler and Deputy District Director. This position has given me access and insight into not only how the community was responding to increases in asylum seekers but also what the federal government's response was as well.

I started my job with the Congresswoman at the start of the 117th Congress, on January 4th, 2021. The new administration began on January 20. By the beginning of February, it was evident that the community needed to come together to ensure that everyone was prepared to receive migrants in the Tucson area. Organized by Pima County, a "Humanitarian Working Group" was formed to meet bi-weekly to share information.

Included on these calls were a mix of different levels of government, non-governmental organizations, and even transportation companies. Essentially anyone who could be considered a stakeholder in the issue of migrant arrivals.

These calls served as the inspiration for this guide, in combination with the Human Rights Practice Program at the University of Arizona. I had the opportunity to take what I was learning in class and apply it in the field, and vice versa. What I discovered was that I had a unique inside perspective on how immigration policy is created and how that policy affects real people on a daily basis.

My hope is that you will take this guide and use it to educate yourself about the power that your voice has in our government. It can be easy to feel like the "immigration problem" is just too big to solve. But there are tangible actions that the federal government can and has been taking to improve the situation, and in order to keep pushing forward, they need to hear from their constituents. That is where you come in.

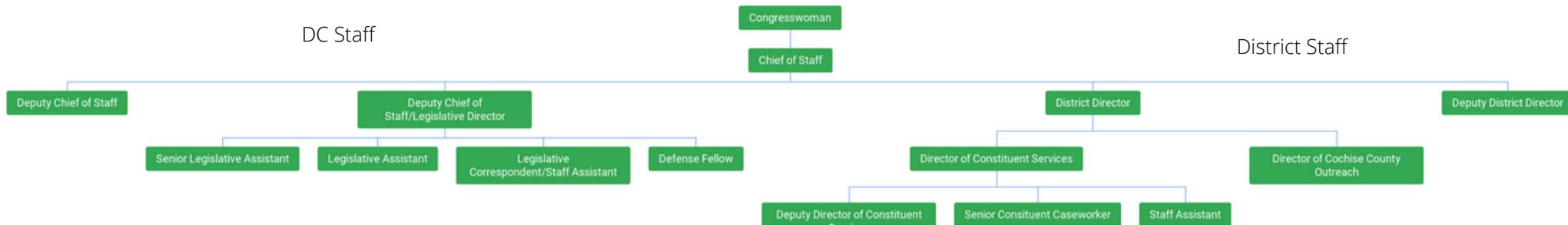
A couple of disclaimers about this guide:

Things in government, particularly when it comes to immigration issues, can move quickly, and some information may not be current by the time you are reading this.

What is true for the office of Congresswoman Kirkpatrick may not be true of other offices.

The Congressional Staff

FOR CONGRESSWOMAN ANN KIRKPATRICK



The staff of a Congressional office are the backbone and are key to influencing the decision-making of the Member. The Member's time is extremely well-protected, and they aren't able to meet with everyone who wants to while making public appearances, voting on legislation, participating in committee work, and caring for their families. In many cases, the staff may have a deeper knowledge of specific issues that they can then brief the Congresswoman on later.

The office is overseen by the Chief of Staff and is divided into staff based in the Capitol, and staff based in the district. DC staff work primarily on the legislative team, helping the Congresswoman make policy, participate on her committees and meet with groups and constituents. The staff in the district offices help constituents with issues pertaining to federal agencies and do outreach to the community with and on behalf of the Congresswoman.

Did you know?

Each Congressional office is able to create their own staff structure to accommodate the individual needs of each Member and office.

DC vs District Work

Each member of the team plays an important role in our interactions with federal agencies, constituents, and the larger border community. Here are some examples of the kinds of work that is done among the DC and District teams related to immigration policy.

DC Staff	District Staff	Both
Providing the district team with important, and relevant policy information	Providing local perspective to DC team	Meeting with stakeholders, advocacy groups, and constituents
Sending letters on behalf of the Congresswoman to federal agencies, other elected officials, etc.	Liaising with local officials including state, county and municipal electeds, as well as on-the-ground agency heads, like Customs and Border Protection	Participating in, and leading task force meetings on Central American asylum-seekers and Afghan refugees
Assisting the Congresswoman in introducing and supporting legislation that will reform and improve the immigration system	Working with constituents directly who need assistance with a federal agency like US Citizenship and Immigration Services	Hosting Immigration Advisory Council meetings to help inform the Congresswoman on a variety of perspectives from the community

Q&A with Deputy Chief of Staff Emily Cummins

Emily Cummins is Congresswoman Kirkpatrick's Deputy Chief of Staff and covers immigration policy. She has been working on Capitol Hill for a little over 4 years, and in this office since 2019.

SY: How did it come to be that you handle immigration policy for our office?

EC: In our office, we have a very small policy team. We split every policy area between 4 people. When I first started with the Congresswoman, I was just handed over the issue areas that my colleagues weren't able to handle, or were hoping to offload from their portfolio. Over time, I expressed my interest in the immigration portfolio, along with other issues that were interesting to me. As other members of our policy team shifted around, I was able to take on immigration. The Congresswoman's district sits right on the border, so it was extremely important to me to cover both immigration and the environment, as these two policy areas are often incredibly intertwined in border communities.

SY: I have observed you in meetings and you seem to have become an expert in some very nuanced policy. How did you get started in building your knowledge base on immigration, and what do you do to keep it current?

EC: Everyone learns about these issues differently, and I think the most important part of understanding policy is to know how you learn best. For me, I learn the most about nuanced policy through conversations with experts - both folks who are living and breathing this work on the ground, and also more academic individuals, who study these policies here in DC. Immigration policy is both incredibly nuanced, and incredibly politically charged.

It is so important to remain grounded in the communities and organizations who are working on the ground in the district - to ensure that we are staying up to date on all that is impacting them, and also to tune out the often misleading political noise that so often comes with these issues.

So it was really important for me to maintain close relationships with stakeholders who are working with migrants along the border in Arizona and in Tucson. They are real experts, and it is in their best interest that we understand what they are going through, so they are always ready to explain nuance or outline why a certain policy may be helpful or harmful to them and the individuals they serve. There is so much to know in this space, so staying connected with these folks helps me weed out what is most important to understand, and what might not be as pressing. Generally, if I still have a question on these topics, I will follow up with the Congressional Research Service, based right here in Washington, D.C. There are a few experts there who are able to give me a detailed understanding of the policy in place, and also provide historical background for why that policy was created in the first place. They write really helpful reports on these topics for me to reference afterwards, but I always find having a conversation to be a much easier way to understand the complicated issues.

Lastly, it is really important for me to stay humble, and know that there is always more to learn about immigration policy. When working with experts, it is easy to get intimidated and feel that I should know more about the topic than I do. But the more I open myself to asking questions and seeking more information - the better understanding I have of this exceedingly complicated policy arena.

Q&A with Deputy Chief of Staff Emily Cummins

SY: So much of this work revolves around relationships. How do you maintain relationships in this space, and how do you decide which ones are most important to your work?

EC: Yes – I completely agree – this work is impossible without maintaining strong relationships with stakeholders. I have done my best to maintain an open line of communication with our most trusted stakeholders. They have my personal cell phone number, and on occasion have used it. We all play a role in shaping immigration policy, and it is important for both parties – our office and our friends on the ground – to maintain a strong and healthy connection. We learn so much from them, and in turn, we do everything we can to make their jobs easier. We have written letters to both the Trump and Biden administrations on their behalf, we have supported key legislation that would help ease the burden for asylum seekers at the border. We have also convened regular roundtables with our key stakeholders to learn about what is happening on the ground at that exact moment, and what their most pressing requests are. We continue to maintain those relationships by reaching out periodically, responding when they reach out, and even visiting them when I'm in the district in person. But I think the key to all of this is that the folks I work with most closely know that I genuinely care about them and the individuals they serve. These relationships are real, and the work they are doing is so important to me, the Congresswoman, and our entire office. Those genuine feelings shine through our interactions – and I believe that is how we've remained close over the last few years.

SY: One example of the strong relationships we maintain in our office is Casa Alitas, the International Rescue Committee, and the Kino Border Initiative. How did they become such trusted partners to our office? Are those folks better policy advocates than other groups who do not provide services but only try to organize/lobby?

This is a great question. These groups have been wonderful partners in the immigration work we have done, and it largely has to do with the way they communicate with us. Individuals representing each of these groups have gone out of their way to meet with me, sit with me, and explain in great detail what they need most from us. They first approached us with care and went out of their way to explain how we could help and enhance the work they do. They have come to DC and also let us visit them in Arizona.

Another important factor that sets these groups apart from other immigration policy groups, is that they work directly with migrants in and around our community. They have been able to show us this work in person, and we have been able to help outline just how impactful federal policy can be in the lives of the individuals they work with. Instead of lobbying or sending us messaging points, these groups show us real-world, on the ground impacts of immigration policy, and offer tangible solutions for us to support in Congress.

SY: What is the role of the Congresswoman in all of this? When do things get escalated to her attention, and how do we use her voice?

EC: While I'm doing most of the grunt work and behind-the-scenes work, the Congresswoman is really the one driving our policy position on these topics. She relies on her staff to build these relationships, and be her eyes and ears on the ground, so she can frame and support the larger, policy directions we present her. As these groups outline for me what policy changes and funding lines are necessary, I do the same for the Congresswoman. She also often visits with these groups while she is in Arizona, so she has a real, first-person understanding of the issues we discuss. It is also crucially important for the Congresswoman to see these communities first hand, because she is able to take her experiences back to D.C., and actually speak with other, non-border members about the plight that migrants and asylum seekers face in this country.

Q&A with Deputy Chief of Staff Emily Cummins

SY: How does Ann's role on the Appropriations Committee affect your work? How does being in a border district make a difference, if any?

EC: The Congresswoman's position on the Appropriations Committee is hugely important to this work. So many of the problems that asylum seekers and vulnerable migrants face stem from the inadequate funding and staffing at the government agencies who they can access for proper visa information, work permits, and legal documents that will allow them to stay here safely. The Congresswoman's position on the Appropriations committee elevates these issues among a group of Members of Congress who do not inherently understand the struggles that border communities face. Often, Members of Congress who do not live in a border district only hear the hateful and misleading anti-immigrant rhetoric pushed by certain politicians and members of the media. It is important for her voice to be heard in Committee to begin to dispel that rhetoric. Furthermore, the work that Members of Congress do on the Appropriations committee is fundamentally holistic - meaning that they look at every aspect of the federal budget. This allows for the Congresswoman to frame certain challenges that the border faces in a unique way. For example, through her work on the Appropriations committee, the Congresswoman has been able to advocate for and secure much needed funding to modernize the ports of entry in our district. This kind of investment is hugely important for the district, but also plays a part in immigration policy as well. Not only will these funds enhance and improve the immigration operations at our ports, but they also call attention to and improve the drug detection technology at our ports of entry, which is where over 90% of illegal drugs enter the country. By continuing to talk about these points in this way, the Congresswoman helps further dispel hateful and biased rhetoric towards migrants who are fleeing their homes for safety.

SY: How has working with the Biden Administration been different than working with the Trump Administration?

EC: I have noticed two main differences in working with each administration -

First, we felt that the Trump administration was pushing extremely harmful and hateful policies on an executive level. For example, the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), or "Remain in Mexico" policy that he instituted to keep vulnerable asylum seekers from entering the country. This was in addition to his hateful comments he would make towards immigrants. So we were constantly battling these policies and comments.

Second, we never heard from the Trump administration on any of our inquiries. We never really got any engagement from them on any of our bigger questions about MPP, or even smaller questions on other policy decisions - like choosing to expel migrants in the middle of the night. They ignored all of our requests for a review of conditions in ICE detention centers, and had no interest in working with us on anything.

The Biden administration has been a lot more forthcoming, and are just easier for us to get in touch with. They are still getting on their feet a bit, and untangling the web of immigration policy takes time and is confusing, however, when I do reach out and ask questions, I generally get a response. Their efforts at dismantling the MPP program are slow moving, but the President's intention of ending the program is still something that we are hearing, which is a positive step in the right direction for us.

Q&A with Deputy Chief of Staff Emily Cummins

SY: What advice do you have for someone who is passionate about making a difference on immigration policy and wants the Congresswoman to take action?

EC: If you have concrete requests of the Congresswoman in the immigration space, I would recommend trying to set up a meeting with staff, it will probably be me, to discuss these requests. It is great when folks come prepared with real suggestions and are interested in hearing from us as well. I greatly enjoy meeting with constituents who are interested in certain aspects of immigration policy and who have ideas or anecdotes for how to make it better. Feel free to reach out to us any time! I think a lot of folks either get intimidated by meetings with Congressional offices, or don't think that we care about the issue you want to talk about. And I'd like to just dispel that right away - we love meeting with constituents who care about their community, and we want to do everything we can to improve our very broken immigration system. So please do reach out!

What happens when I call or write to your office?

The Congresswoman can be contacted through a phone call or mailed letter to either our DC office or our District Offices, or through the web form on our website.

01. Casework or Opinion?

Our interns will review your message and determine if it should be sent to our Constituent Services team or if is an opinion on a specific issue.

Casework might look like: A green card holder is having trouble making an appointment for a citizenship interview. Our Constituent Services team can contact Citizenship and Immigration Services to see what the issue is and to help resolve it.

02. Opinions are Tallied

Your opinion will be entered into our database with a copy of your message and a summary of what you are asking for. Every week, our Legislative Correspondent reviews how many messages on each issue we have received, both pro and against, and communicates that to the Legislative team, the Congresswoman and the staff as a whole. These opinions help shape the stances she takes on each issue.

An opinion might be: A rancher who lives near the border opposes border wall construction because of the damage being done to their property.

03. The Congresswoman sends you a letter

The Congresswoman will send you a letter thanking you for communicating with her, and explaining her position on the issue you wrote or called in about.

What happens when I meet with your office?

The best way to get a meeting with the Congresswoman is by joining an existing group that is advocating for the cause or issue that you care about. Her staff is always happy to meet with individual constituents about their concerns.

01. Reach out to the Congresswoman's scheduler, or use their website.

The Scheduler in each Member's office receives each request and organizes the Member's time.

02. Come prepared to your meeting.

If you are able to get a meeting with the Congresswoman, it is likely you will only have as little as 15 minutes with her. It is important to be ready with your story and with a specific ask of her or the office.

03. Keep in touch with the staff.

After you have made your ask of the Congresswoman, keep an eye on the bill that you are asking her to cosponsor or support. Continue to stay in touch with the Legislative staff who can provide you with updates.

Tips and Tricks to Get Your Voice Heard

Include your zip code.

The primary priority of Members of Congress? Their constituents. The office will use your zip code to verify that you live within their district.

Tell your personal story.

Personal stories are powerful and can help convey the emotion behind an issue better than just stating simple facts.

Be concise.

State your point clearly and make sure you are communicating about one issue at a time. We are better able to track one opinion per letter or phone call. You can call or write in as many times as you would like!

Have a specific ask.

Knowing which bill you would like the Congresswoman to co-sponsor, vote for or vote against is the most helpful information you can include. It will help inform the decisions that get made about each piece of legislation.

There is power in numbers.

The more that the Congresswoman hears about an issue, the higher on the priority list it becomes.

Other Levers of Power to Consider

Aside from voting on legislation, Members of Congress have other ways that they can influence policy.

Committees

Each Member sits on a variety of committees which oversee different aspects of the Federal government. Which committees does the Congresswoman sit on? What kind of hearings are coming up in those committees? What kind of questions does the Congresswoman plan on asking during those hearings?

Letters

The Congresswoman can also write letters to agencies at all levels of government with official inquiries. These carry extra weight, and can help expedite the communication of information. Who do you need information from, and how can the Congresswoman help?

The Takeaways:

Immigration is complex!

There are so many opportunities for improvement in the US immigration system, from the reasons migrants feel the need to leave in the first place, to the way the border itself operates, to the treatment after people have arrived. Find your issue and make your voice heard.

Please reach out.

Connecting with your Member of Congress isn't as intimidating as it may seem. They are here to represent you, and they can only do that effectively if they hear from you.

Keep at it.

Change can happen slowly. Keep up the pressure when you aren't seeing the results you are hoping for. But be sure to celebrate the wins that come along as well!

Southern Arizona Contacts

Rep. Ann Kirkpatrick (AZ-02)

kirkpatrick.house.gov

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520-881-3588

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(202) 225-2542

Rep. Tom O'Halleran (AZ-01)

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Oro Valley District Office:

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Rep. Raul Grijalva (AZ-03)

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