

# THE JOB OF A CONGRESSMAN

U.S. Rep. José E. Serrano



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108 **Help Wanted**

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U.S. REPRESENTATIVE— Residents of Congressional district seek highly qualified and dedicated individual to perform multiple duties of legislator, committee member, and advocate for the district. Position requires long hours. Applicants must be at least 25 years of age, citizens of the U.S. for at least 7 years, and residents of state in which congressional district is located. To apply, file Statement of Candidacy with the Federal Election Commission.

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Dear Friend:

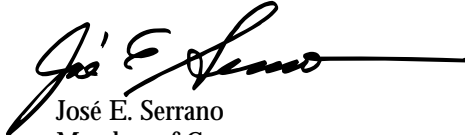
You will almost certainly never see a classified advertisement like the one on the opposite page. Why not? First of all, “openings” in the House of Representatives only occur every two years, and when they do, there are only 435 of them in the country. Second, Members of Congress already attract enough attention that most candidates need no reminders about when elections happen.

Despite all the attention that Congress gets from the press, however, average Americans still have few opportunities to glimpse their Representatives’ regular day-to-day activities. These activities only occasionally make headlines, but all of them are critical to our system of democratically-elected representative government.

This pamphlet aims to give you a broad overview of what the day-to-day work of a U.S. Representative might involve. “Might” is an operative term in this case; the U.S. Constitution gives few specifics on how members of the House of Representatives are supposed to fill their days. Indeed, all Members have plenty of room to define their jobs as they and the residents of their congressional districts please.

Nevertheless, most Representatives must fulfill a basic mix of official and unofficial roles to be successful. I have outlined those roles here.

I am delighted by your interest in the job of a Representative, and I hope that this publication will answer some of your questions. If you have any additional questions or comments, please do not hesitate to write to me at the address in the back of this pamphlet.



José E. Serrano  
Member of Congress

## **THE CONGRESSMAN AS A LAWMAKER**

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The most important role of a Congressman is that of a legislative decision maker on national policies that dictate the activities of the U.S. executive branch. During each session of Congress, thousands of bills and resolutions are introduced in the House, of which hundreds are reported to the House floor by committees. When a piece of legislation reaches the floor, Members debate and amend its provisions before voting on its final passage.



A bill is one of many possible forms that legislation can take.

Many factors shape a Representative's response to a piece of legislation. First, all Representatives hold their own specific beliefs about the appropriate role of government. These fundamental beliefs shape how they approach most issues of both foreign and domestic policy, ranging from the use of military force abroad to the provision of healthcare for the elderly.

When dealing with a specific issue, Members of Congress are responsible for synthesizing facts and opinions from a wealth of sources. Each day, Members' offices receive hundreds of phone calls, letters, faxes and emails from constituents, issue advocates, and other Members. Reports from the press often help to set Members' agendas. Congressional research agencies provide objective, non-partisan information. Members can also consult with executive branch officials, academics, professionals and other issue experts. With help from these sources, Representatives offer amendments and vote "aye" or "no" on legislation on the

floor based on the best interests of their constituents and the country.

Another job that Representatives fulfill is to introduce or cosponsor legislation on issues of importance to them or their constituents. Most legislation, however, never moves beyond the committee, where it first goes after being introduced. To increase the chances that a committee will report a bill or resolution to the House floor, a Representative must gather support both inside and outside the Congress. These activities might include asking colleagues for support, reaching agreements on other legislation or garnering direct support from voters or interested groups.

#### SERRANO THE LEGISLATOR

Congressman Serrano's legislative priorities have reflected both the demographics of his congressional district and his core political values. Of the roughly 650,000 persons he represents in the South Bronx, about 42 percent earn incomes below the poverty line and 30 percent are foreign-born. As a result, Congressman Serrano's legislative efforts have focused on securing a fair share of education, jobs, housing and economic aid for socioeconomically disadvantaged Americans. Some of Congressman Serrano's major legislative proposals have aimed to:

- Promote "English-Plus" policies and oppose an official national language.
- Liberalize immigration laws to allow larger numbers of immigrants to apply for permanent residency.
- Provide additional educational opportunities for historically disadvantaged groups.
- Normalize relations with Cuba and end the adverse effects of the embargo on the Cuban people.
- Reserve the use of armed force as an option of last resort in international relations.

## **THE CONGRESSMAN AS A COMMITTEE MEMBER**

Besides debating and amending legislation on the House floor, every U.S. Representative serves on at least one and usually two committees. In the 108<sup>th</sup> Congress, members of the House of Representatives sit on 19 standing committees, which are permanent, and 4 joint committees, which are composed of Members from both the House and Senate. The Speaker of the House can also appoint select committees to address specific subjects. A committee member develops expertise in the subject area of that committee.

### **CURRENT COMMITTEES OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

#### **Standing Committees**

Agriculture  
Appropriations  
Armed Services  
Budget  
Education and the Workforce  
Energy and Commerce  
Financial Services  
Government Reform  
House Administration  
International Relations  
Judiciary  
Resources  
Rules  
Science  
Small Business  
Standards of Official Conduct  
Transportation & Infrastructure  
Veterans Affairs  
Ways and Means

#### **Select Committees**

Intelligence (Permanent)  
Homeland Security

Committees serve vital functions. The most important job of a standing committee is to issue recommendations on bills and resolutions related to its assigned subjects. Committees conduct hearings to gather information from witnesses, who testify either voluntarily or under subpoena. Committees also hold meetings to “mark up” legislation. During a markup session, committee members can propose, debate, and vote on amendments to a bill or resolution. As on the House floor, a majority of votes determines the passage of amendments and final recommendations.

In addition to reporting legislation, committees might conduct investigations, direct studies or issue reports. With the

huge volume of issues that confronts the nation today, the specialization made possible by the committee system is necessary for Congress to perform its many roles. This specialization is also essential to Congress's oversight of executive branch activities, which ensures that the federal government is working effectively for the people.

#### SERRANO THE COMMITTEE MEMBER

Congressman Serrano serves on the influential **Committee on Appropriations**, which is responsible for approving federal expenditures. This committee is particularly important because making appropriations is a power reserved exclusively to the Congress under the Constitution. Congress has traditionally injected fiscal discipline into government activities, making sure that the executive branch spends wisely. Within the Appropriations Committee, the Congressman is one of 13 subcommittee leaders of his party, called "**ranking members**" when another party controls the majority in the House.

Congressman Serrano is also one of three vice chairmen of the **Democratic Steering and Policy Committee**, or Committee on Committees, which is a body that makes committee assignments for all Representatives that belong to its party.



Robert Mueller, left, Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, testifies before the Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, State and the Judiciary of the House Appropriations Committee. The hearing addressed funding for FY2003.

## **THE CONGRESSMAN AS AN ADVOCATE**

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Members of the House represent their constituents well beyond the legislative process. They aim to be their constituents' primary link to the federal government by helping them secure federal funds and navigate often complicated federal regulations and proceedings.



Serving as an advocate for the Sixteenth Congressional District in the South Bronx is one of U.S. Rep. Serrano's many roles.

One way that they fulfill this function is by acting as educators. Through town meetings, briefings, and talks with different local groups, U.S. Representatives keep their constituents informed of the latest issues and debates on Capitol Hill while gathering their input at the

same time. Representatives also distribute information about Congressional activities via legislative alerts, letters, newsletters and other correspondence.

In addition, a Member of Congress can often more directly assist constituents with their transactions with the federal government. This type of assistance falls into the categories of projects and casework. Projects involve securing federal assistance or funds for local purposes. A Member can secure this type of assistance by making requests for additions to legislation, or by aiding local governments and groups in the process of applying for existing federal grants.

Casework, on the other hand, involves facilitating interaction between individuals and government agencies. The



“customers” of casework are usually constituents who are having difficulties with government agencies or programs, and the Member’s staff can often help them take full advantage of federal services for which they are eligible. Typical casework areas include pensions, veterans’ affairs, immigration and many others. Casework does not just benefit single individuals one at a time; sometimes recurrent types of casework can point to pervasive problems that call for legislative action. On the whole, whether in the form of casework or projects, more interaction between Members of Congress and their constituents brings both groups closer to each others’ needs.

#### SERRANO THE ADVOCATE FOR THE 16TH DISTRICT

**Casework.** Although Congressman Serrano’s office assists constituents on a wide range of issues, immigration issues comprise the bulk of the caseload in his office.

**Projects.** Serrano’s status as a top appropriator has allowed him to secure a diverse array of federal projects for his South Bronx congressional district. Among his most notable projects have been

- ☑ A federally-funded scholarship program to encourage students in the Bronx to pursue Foreign Service careers.
- ☑ Various conservation and environmental projects in the South Bronx, including river and park restoration, air quality studies and funding for other local initiatives.
- ☑ Funds for the construction of affordable housing options for needy families.
- ☑ Funds to aid small business and economic development in the South Bronx.

## **THE CONGRESSMAN AS A PUBLIC FIGURE**

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With a Representative's immense official duties come a ceremonial leadership function of matching proportions— no small task, considering each congressional district contains an average population of 650,000. On a daily basis, Members receive numerous invitations to receptions, conferences and other special events both in Washington and in their districts. They try to attend as many as possible but are not able to attend all of them because of all the official duties that they must fulfill.

## **THE CONGRESSMAN'S STAFF**

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The job of a Congressman is demanding and time-consuming. Fortunately, members of the House can each hire up to 22 staffers to assist them in almost all of their duties. Staffs work either in congressional district offices or in offices near the Capitol. They help legislators meet their constituents' needs by performing some combination of the following activities:

- ☑ *Legislative* staffs research and analyze policy issues to assist with a Member's lawmaking duties.
- ☑ *Administrative and Legislative* staffs process and respond to mail.
- ☑ *Office Management* staffs coordinate hiring, pay and the allocation of office resources.
- ☑ *Press and Public Relations* staffs keep constituents and members of the press apprised of the Member's activities.
- ☑ *Projects and Casework* staffs assist constituents in their transactions with federal agencies and services.
- ☑ *Scheduling and reception* staffs receive visitors in the office, and manage the Member's appointments.

ABOUT THE CONGRESSMAN

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*Congressman José E. Serrano is serving his eighth term in the 108<sup>th</sup> Congress, representing the Sixteenth Congressional District in the South Bronx. He is Ranking Minority Member of the Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, State, and the Judiciary of the House Appropriations Committee, as well as a senior member of the newly-created Appropriations Subcommittee on Homeland Security.*



WRITE TO THE CONGRESSMAN

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THE CONGRESSMAN ON THE WEB

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**<http://www.house.gov/serrano>**

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