Betsy Wright Hawkings
Chief of Staff, Representative Christopher Shays of Connecticut

Special Exhibit: A Century of Women in Congress

Working as Legislative Director
Betsy Wright Hawkings describes responding to letters from constituents when she first arrived in the office of Representative Christopher Shays of Connecticut.
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I always jokingly say I didn't become LD because I was the smartest person in the room. I got—I became LD because I wrote the most letters. And we had a huge backlog of letters when Chris came into office and—because the office—when, when a Member dies in office you can't respond to any legislative mail. And so, there were—there was a huge backlog of constituent inquiries and then he was a new Member so people were writing him and they were, at the time it was, you know, handwritten. I mean, we started off by getting, you know, 200 letters a week. It quickly grew to a thousand because we were responding to all these people. And his default setting was nobody gets a form letter. And we, we worked on that over time, but it was not uncommon to have an eight, nine, 10-page response go back to somebody, telling them basically every thought he had ever had on that subject. You know, and every bill he had ever written and, and—but I think because I had never had a job for another Member before, it was easy for me to hear this was what he wanted and this was how he wanted it done. I didn't—I didn't know any better. By the way, that mail, that, that approach to mail is strongly discouraged by pretty much every management organization. But I didn't know any better at the time so I was like, all right, I'll do what he wants, you know, and I just started pounding out the mail and I figured out a formula where, you know, to make sure that we were using approved language so that he didn't have to read every letter but also make sure that, that we tailored the letters so that people knew that someone had read the letter and he signed everything and he read the first and last paragraphs. So, anyway, I just figured out how to pound a lot of those out.