

# health policy and management

## legislative policy advisor



### Legislative Policy Advisor Checkpoint

Are you interested in politics?

Can you appreciate the impact legislation has on the delivery of health care to the public?

Would you enjoy working with a varied group of constituents and lobbyists?

If so, read on

### A TRUE TALE

Even when she was on Capitol Hill as Chief of Staff to former Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole from 1986 to 1996, Sheila Burke, RN, MPA, says she never forgot her original career as a nurse. “Did I consider myself a public health professional? Absolutely, but not in the traditional sense. I certainly believe I had an impact on public health issues.”

Early in her career, Burke worked as a staff nurse in Berkeley, California, but left to work for the National Student Nurses’ Association (NSNA) in New York. She was hired in 1977 by Senator Bob Dole to be his legislative assistant for health care. “I was a Democrat,” she says, “but I thought it would be a challenge for me. He wanted someone with experience in health care and I fit the bill.” Burke came to the attention of Senator Dole through the recommendations of some congressional staff members who knew her through her NSNA work.

At the time, Dole was a junior member of the Senate Finance Committee, but he became the ranking Republican on the Committee within six months, and finally the Committee’s Chairman. Burke was Dole’s senior health staff member, and then his Deputy Staff Director. When Senator Dole became

“Making policy can easily throw you into a crisis-like environment with a great deal of tension, but there’s a feeling of enormous satisfaction, of making a difference, when you find a solution to a very complicated problem.”

Majority Leader, Burke moved to the Leader’s Office as Deputy Chief of Staff and then, finally, Chief of Staff. She says her progression was, in part, a reflection of his career. When Dole lost the 1996 presidential election, Burke left the realm of politics and governance to become Executive Dean and Lecturer in Public Policy at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. Currently she is the Smithsonian’s Undersecretary for American Museums and National Programs.



Sheila P. Burke, RN, MPA

---

## Profiling the job

The person who enjoys legislative staff work related to health care, Burke says, is someone who is fascinated by both the rough-and-tumble of politics *and* who appreciates deeply the impact legislation can have on the public health, including the health care delivery system's public health services. A legislative assistant on Capitol Hill helps members understand critical issues arising in her field of expertise, and provides useful information to legislators to help them understand their constituents' concerns. Some assistants also help draft legislation. As a specialist in health care policy, Burke's role was to thoroughly investigate specific public health care issues and provide an analysis of alternative points of view. In this role, Burke had an impact on broad U.S. health care policy.

What are the routes into the rarefied field of health care policymaking on Capitol Hill? Some suggest the best preparation includes the practical and legal skills obtained in law school. However, while many lawyers are excellent analysts and articulators of arcane matters of law, senators and representatives seldom choose their staff by consulting the personnel registries of law firms, according to Burke. Others suggest beginning with a university program in public policy or public administration. Burke herself holds a master's in public administration, which, she affirms, helped provide knowledge and understanding of how an organization works and the skills necessary to analyze and develop practical solutions to address its problems. All these skills are useful, says Burke, from formal schooling in law to an MPA to political science, but there is no single set of preparation or credential requirements for the job of legislative staff member. "It is one of the last American bastions of a feudal system of patronage, but one injected with a healthy dose of meritocracy. A member of Congress decides what she or he is interested in and hires you. You can be anything from an undergraduate to someone who has a doctoral degree."

Although Burke's background in health care was the specific asset Senator Dole sought in recruiting her, she considers her general training as a nurse great preparation for her work on Capitol Hill. So many basic nursing skills turned out to be transferable to policymaking in Washington, D.C., she says. "All of the skills that we learn in a variety of life settings are useful here. Nurses are trained to be quick on their feet, strategize, build consensus, solve problems and put together case summaries. Every last one of these skills is applicable to legislative staff work on Capitol Hill," says Burke.



*“Through all those years on Capitol Hill, I never forgot my original career as a nurse.”*

Sheila Burke,  
RN, MPA

As Senator Dole’s Chief of Staff, Burke had the managerial responsibility of overseeing the office and assuring that all staff performed well. “My responsibility with respect to health policy took on special relevance from my having been the Senator’s health policy advisor. In the latter position I brought to his attention important issues not necessarily pressing to a Senator’s wide agenda, drafted position papers for him once he had articulated to me his broad policy objectives, worked on his speeches, did analysis and directed staff members who were involved. The responsibilities were a broad array of what you might expect for any staff person who is preparing a Member for an issue.”

In areas of health care, legislation might deal with issues of quality, cost, financing, safety or ethics. Two laws Burke saw through to passage were concerned with hemophiliacs and hospice care. The first had to do with funding the needs of hemophiliacs. In the past, Medicare had covered the administration of a self-clotting factor, but before the new legislation, a patient had to be in a hospital. Senator Dole’s office became aware that people were capable of administering to themselves at home. After a lengthy analysis of that particular issue, including a documentation of all the risks, costs and benefits, Senator Dole sponsored the bill, Congress passed the legislation and now Medicare covers self-administration of the drug at home.

The original Medicare law did not cover hospice care, Burke says, largely because the benefit was neither generally available nor well known in the U.S. at the time of Medicare’s creation. Allowing someone to choose palliative care as an option, one traditionally not covered under Medicare, was a big issue. There were many concerns about abuse and ethics, issues that always arise in discussions about Medicare benefits, Burke says. She and her staff scrutinized existing state legislation in Connecticut, talked in depth with the Hospice Association of America (HAA), and worked with specialists in the field. They defined the issues, determined how best to finance hospice care and laid out the roles of patients and physicians. In the end, they successfully concluded a complicated policymaking process, and the federal government now covers hospice benefits under Medicare.

## A day in the life

No two days are the same on Capitol Hill, says Sheila Burke — except that on all days, the work of a legislative staff member could easily have broad implications for the U.S. population “and every day is exciting.”

Also unpredictable, she adds. Legislative staff workers have little or no control over their agendas, “since the day’s activities are generally dictated by whatever crisis arises, the priorities set by the Congressional leadership and the position the staff member occupies in the office hierarchy.” An ability to multitask and shift gears quickly — and to flourish in a fast-changing environment — is essential.



As a high-level key staffer working for Senator Dole when he was a member of the Finance Committee, Burke recalls, she dealt with a wide

variety of issues, programs and initiatives, many with direct implications for the everyday health of virtually every American. These included the Federal Maternal and Child Health program, as well as Medicare financing and Medicaid funding. During Senator Dole’s tenure as Majority Leader, she recalls, “I was always at the mercy of whatever was occurring on the Senate floor.”

The work of a Congressional staff member is by definition collaborative and team-oriented, with much of the most productive work taking place via meetings, conferences and informal discussions. Burke met often with Senator Dole to brief him on public health issues and help him gain a clear understanding of his constituents’ concerns. She also served as a liaison to other staff members, gathering information and views to be digested and transmitted to the Senator. Often, this meant presenting divergent views on a controversial issue, making sure Dole had sufficient information to address the situation credibly and intelligently.

“Washington plays an enormous role in health care, in its financing and structure, and as a result, there are numerous opportunities for legislation to be drafted for everything from the creation of new Medicare programs to



**Did you know?**  
According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, health care issues made up a greater proportion of bills in state legislatures than any other topic in 1999.<sup>1</sup>

elder care to the control and regulation of drugs and medical devices,” says Burke. “There is no aspect of health care in which the federal government does not play a role, and the daily work of Hill staffers reflects that diversity.”

Importantly, Burke’s contacts weren’t limited to Capitol Hill. Her investigations of key issues — hospice care, hemophilia treatments, AIDS research and others — brought her into regular contact with outside health care experts in many different disciplines. The logistics, strategies and coalitions developed through these interactions were the basis for network building and a great deal of legislation.

## >>> career at a glance

### Sheila P. Burke, RN, MPA

2000–Present	<b>Undersecretary for American Museums and National Programs</b> Smithsonian Institution
2000–Present	<b>Adjunct Instructor</b> Georgetown University Medical Center, Center for Health Policy
1996–2000	<b>Executive Dean</b> Lecturer in Public Policy, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University
1986–1996	<b>Chief of Staff</b> Office of the Republican Leader, U.S. Senate
1995	<b>Secretary</b> U.S. Senate
1985–1986	<b>Deputy Chief of Staff</b> Office of the Majority Leader, U.S. Senate
1982–1984	<b>Deputy Staff Director</b> Committee on Finance, U.S. Senate
1979–1982	<b>Professional Staff Member</b> Committee on Finance, U.S. Senate
1980–1981	<b>Research Assistant</b> Center for Health Policy and Management, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University
1977–1978	<b>Legislative Assistant</b> U.S. Senator Bob Dole
1975–1977	<b>Staff Nurse/Part Time</b> Doctor’s Hospital
1974–1977	<b>Director of Program and Field Services</b> National Student Nurses Association
1973–1974	<b>Staff Nurse</b> Alta Bates Hospital

1 <http://www.ncpa.org/pi/health/pd012400g.html>