

Lawmakers learn about hardship

Oklahoman Editorial

IT'S UNLIKELY Paul Wesselhoft will ever need to navigate the bureaucracy involved in obtaining food stamps. So when he and other lawmakers make policy decisions that affect low-income families, they can only imagine the impact on their constituents -- a single mom working several jobs to afford decent daycare, a family of five struggling after a job loss -- while leafing through statistical reports.

It's the job of legislators like Wesselhoft, a Moore Republican House member, to understand the needs of all the people in their districts and throughout the state. He and 31 of his colleagues from both sides of the aisle are accepting that challenge, participating in the national Walk-a-Mile program that pairs lawmakers with low-income constituents.

Participants will talk on the telephone weekly this month. They will also participate in at least two activities together, including one from the constituent's life and one from the legislator's life. They must also try to live on the same food budget as their constituent -- in some cases as low as \$150 a month.

The program began in 1994, although Oklahoma hasn't participated in several years. This year's sign-up rate, though, is the highest of any state since the program's inception. That's a testament not only to the caring nature of Oklahomans but also to the effectiveness of term limits.

Most of the state's participating lawmakers, including Wesselhoft, were elected last year after term limits prevented many of their predecessors from returning to office. While they've no doubt had a steep learning curve, getting active in efforts like Walk a Mile provides them a street-level foundation on which to make decisions about issues such as child care subsidies, food stamps and job training programs.

Lawmakers will be able to walk back into their own lives after a month. Their constituents will continue to live with very real burdens that can be lifted or at least eased by politicians making an extra effort to govern with actual people in mind.