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Politics

Lieutenant Governors: On the Rise and Out the Door

With more qualified people in the position, the job is becoming more of a stepping stone to higher office.

BY ALAN GREENBLATT | MARCH 2016

Lieutenant governors these days often come equipped with better qualifications than their peers in the past. Maybe that's why some of them are leaving.

Three lieutenant governors are leaving or have left office recently for jobs in education policy. Joe Garcia, for example, will be stepping down as lieutenant governor of Colorado after the current legislative session ends to run the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education. "I can continue to work on the same policy priorities I've had in my current job, but work on them across a broader range of Western states," he says.

In Colorado, Garcia's influence over higher education policy has been more than advisory. To entice him to run for the job, Gov. John Hickenlooper agreed to put Garcia in charge of the state Department of Higher Education. Garcia certainly knows the subject matter. He'd already served as president of a community college and a state university.

Garcia is an example of a lieutenant governor who brings more to the position than ethnic, gender or geographic balance. There are still lieutenant governors who hang around the capitol with nothing to do, but fewer than there used to be. They don't all become agency heads like Garcia, but it's not unusual for them to be handed some sort of broad, interagency portfolio.

A decade ago, some lieutenant governors started overseeing homeland security operations, but lately a lot of them are working on state responses to rampant drug addiction problems. "You want leadership from the top on an issue like that, as well as coordination across the branches of government," says Julia Hurst, executive director of the National Lieutenant Governors Association (NLGA).

Like some other lieutenant governors, Sue Ellspermann of Indiana has been heading up a workforce development task force for her boss. Now that it's all over but the implementation, Ellspermann is up for the job of running a statewide network of community colleges known as Ivy Tech. "Here's a perfect combination of Ellspermann's background, her Ph.D. and her ability to work with the administration," says Ed Feigenbaum, a former NLGA staffer and editor of the newsletter *Indiana Legislative Insight*. Feigenbaum might have gotten the ball rolling with an item last year suggesting Ellspermann would be a perfect fit for a top academic post. He also noted it would allow Gov. Mike Pence to pick a new partner who'd speak to some potential political liabilities as he seeks re-election this fall. Ellspermann's move to Ivy Tech is not a done deal, but she's decided not to run. Pence has picked Eric Holcomb, a former chair of the state GOP, to replace her.

In Montana, Lt. Gov. Angela McLean left at the start of the year to take a job as director of American Indian/Minority Achievement with the state higher education commission. That might sound like a step down for someone who used to chair the university system's board of regents. But publicly released emails suggest McLean was unhappy some initiatives had been stripped from her purview.

This shows the conundrum governors now face. If they don't give their lieutenants any power, they won't be happy. On the other hand, if they offer them real responsibility, governors might find, like other employers, that it's hard keeping good help. Some lieutenant governors may be content just to wait their turn, but not all of them.

"My primary ambition has never been to become governor," says Colorado's Garcia. "After getting into my second term as lieutenant governor, the only good reason to stay, frankly, was to continue the work I'm doing and to run for governor. I didn't think that was going to be me." --- END