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SPRINGFIELD DISPATCH WITH BRITTAN BOLIN

Bolin speaks up for court clerks

Lobbyist aims to help state legislative proposals work with judicial system

BY JOSH WEINHOLD
Law Bulletin staff writer

After working with circuit court clerks for eight years, Brittan Bolin said she learned a lot about how those offices function.

But understanding the essential role they play in the judicial system didn't come from knowing how they handle files or fees, she said.

That realization, Bolin said, developed when she found out one clerk's office keeps baby formula, diapers and snacks on hand to help people who bring their children to court with them.

"They're like the frontline of the court system," Bolin said. "When you go into a county courthouse, you're going to interact with them. They keep the whole thing running."

As the lobbyist for the Illinois Association of Court Clerks (IACC), Bolin said she aims to communicate that importance to the Illinois General Assembly as it considers bills impacting those offices.

Often, she said, that means ensuring lawmakers understand the effects of creating a new fee for a court filing or imposing a new fine on criminal offenders.

"When we talk about the cost to the counties and the court system, it's about keeping the court system accessible," she said. "A lot of times fees sound good, but you've got to keep the court system open to the public."

Bolin, 47, came to Springfield in 1989 after majoring in history at Blackburn College in Carlinville, Ill. Though she initially planned to work in public relations, she got a job on the Illinois House Republicans' staff, analyzing policy and working with constituents.

Later, she handled legislative affairs for the Illinois comptroller's office and then-Lt. Gov. Corinne Wood. She began private lobbying work in 1999.

She now runs her own one-person operation, Brittan Bolin Consulting, where she also coordinates lobbying efforts for groups including the American Heart Association, Illinois Coalition of Non-public Schools and Illinois Federation of Dog Clubs and Owners.

When the IACC hired her, Bolin said, she engaged in long conversations with circuit court clerks to learn how their offices operate.

It took some time, she said, but she eventually found simple ways to describe complex court operations to legislators.

"The way I look at it," she said, "if I can understand it, then I can usually make them understand it."

Lobbying for the IACC presents a unique challenge, though, as the group avoids taking strong positions on legislation, she said.

Instead of supporting or opposing a proposal, Bolin said the association aims to "massage" a bill to get it to a point where clerks can implement it effectively after it becomes law.

"That's the thing about the clerks — their office is ministerial," Bolin said. "They don't weigh in on the

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Brittan Bolin

Lobbyist, Illinois Association of Court Clerks

- **Career:** Policy analyst, Illinois House Republicans' staff, 1989-1995; legislative affairs staff, Illinois Office of the Comptroller, 1995-1999; legislative affairs director, Lt. Gov. Corinne Wood, 1999; director of government relations, Ronan Potts LLC, 1999-2003; vice president, state government relations, McGuireWoods Consulting LLC, 2006-2009; and owner, Brittan Bolin Consulting, 2003-2006 and 2009-present.
- **Age:** 47.
- **Education:** Bachelor of arts, Blackburn College, 1988.
- **Interests:** Traveling and spending time with her family.

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"They're always looking for compromise and always working with legislators, which is really great to see," he said.

Randolph County Circuit Clerk Barbara Brown, a longtime co-chair of the IACC's legislative committee, said the group didn't always play such an involved role in the lawmaking process.

About a decade ago, however, a stream of new laws required actions that proved difficult for clerks to implement, she said.

"We were just getting bombarded more and more frequently by these changes that were coming so fast and furiously," Brown said. "We realized that we had to become more proactive."

Since working with Bolin, Brown said, the IACC gained a better understanding of how to push for changes in legislation.

Now, for example, when lawmakers want people convicted of driving under the influence to pay a fine that funds roadside memorial signs, the IACC checks in to make sure existing court infrastructure can handle such a transaction.

And after several years of working together, Bolin now spots potentially troubling sections of bills before sending them to the clerks for review, Brown said.

"Brittan has committed herself to understanding, as best as anyone can, these internal logistical and mechanical matters," Brown said. "It doesn't take one of us to scrutinize legislation to find a problem."

Bolin, a married mother of one, said the IACC also often ends up in discussions about larger pieces of legislation.

Several years ago, a medical-practice reform proposal called for clerks to provide copies of all such cases to one specific entity. That bill presented a logistical challenge and also clashed with open records policies, Bolin said.

And another recent bill connected to firearms owner's identification cards injected clerks into the process of determining whether a person deemed mentally incompetent by a court should be able to own a gun.

"That kind of stuff is not intended to create problems for the clerks," Bolin said. "They just don't understand the actual processes of the clerk's office when things are being put together."

jweinhold@lbpc.com

merits. They're very conscious of the fact that the nature of their job is to make sure the court functions."

Frequently, Bolin said, she gets involved in discussions over new fees and fines — an especially popular idea in recent years, given the state's budgetary challenges.

Bolin said the IACC's members typically offer suggestions on how to make proposals fit better with courts' existing financial collection and distribution processes.

State Sen. Ira I. Silverstein, D-Chicago, chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, said the IACC's willingness to cooperate proves essential to developing effective pol-