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'Freshmen' reps start work today

After being sworn in, new state legislators begin representing their districts – and some wait to get out of 'the bullpen'

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New Rep. Geoffrey Diehl of Braintree shows the house chamber to wife KathyJo and daughters Kaylee, 9, and Emily, 4, at the State House, Wednesday January 5, 2011. Inauguration of the House and Senate at the State House, Wednesday January 5, 2011. Greg Derr/The Patriot Ledger 2011 NEWS photo



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Inauguration day at the State House

By Nancy Reardon Stewart
Patriot Ledger State House Bureau

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BOSTON — It's the day when everyone shakes their hand, wishes them good luck and snaps their photo. For one day, the spotlight is on the new guys on Beacon Hill.

That day was Wednesday. Now, having been sworn in, the "freshmen" find themselves on the bottom rung of the State House power ladder.

Sen. John Keenan, D-Quincy, is one of just three freshmen in the Senate.

But the House welcomed 39 new lawmakers into its ranks Wednesday. Six of them from South Shore communities: Rep. Tackey Chan, D-Quincy; Rep. Mark Cusack, D-Braintree; Rep. Rhonda Nyman, D-Hanover; Rep. Geoff Diehl, R-Whitman; Rep. Angelo D'Emilia, R-Bridgewater; and Rep. Shaunna O'Connell, R-Taunton.

That's a big freshman class compared with the last session, when the South Shore had just one new House member, and 2007, when it had just two.

Today is the first real day on the job for the freshmen.

Lawmakers have only three weeks to get their priorities in order. Jan. 21 is the deadline for filing bills for consideration during the two-year legislative session that just began.

Keenan, one of just 40 senators, is working out of his predecessor's spacious, multi-room office and hoping he gets to keep it. He succeeded Michael Morrissey of Quincy, who did not seek re-election last year and was sworn in Wednesday evening as Norfolk County district attorney.

In the House, new lawmakers don't have offices. They may be office-less for a few months – until the speaker's office has given the House's 160 members their committee assignments.

For now, freshman representatives and the one staff member that each of them has are crammed into two windowless, basement-level hearing rooms called "the bullpen." With 39 pairs of people and 39 separate phone lines, the rooms resemble a telemarketing office.

For some, it's an unglamorous turn. They find themselves in a space inferior to their campaign offices. Others take pride in going through a legislative

right-of-passage.

"All 40 of us are shoved in a room together," said state Rep. Mark Cusack, D-Braintree. "It's nothing glorious, but we're up here to do the work of the people, and that's what we're focused on."

Rep. Geoff Diehl, R-Whitman, said working elbow-to-elbow doesn't bother him, either.

"I'm not even concerned about the office, to be honest with you," Diehl said. "I just need the desk, the computer and the access to file bills."

Before they took their oaths of office Wednesday, most of the new lawmakers were already getting calls for help from constituents. And some, like Cusack, have yet to hire a staffer to help.

Cusack is still looking over résumés to find the right person to be his legislative aide.

"I had to get my feet wet before I could worry about someone else," he said.

Cusack, 26, knows what he's looking for because he once interned at the State House. He also knows where he should focus his attention.

"I'm realistic about being a freshman rep," Cusack said. "I'm not going to be on the floor of the House passing major pieces of legislation. Where I can focus and where I want to focus is being responsive to the people."

Cusack's freshman colleague from Quincy, Tackey Chan, also has several years as a legislative aide behind him. He worked for Morrissey during Morrissey's tenure as a senator.

"You get thrown into the fire immediately," Chan said. "I already got a few calls for constituent issues already, so that didn't take long."

When he stopped by his desk in "the bullpen" after being sworn in, Chan already had some papers on his chair.

"It didn't take them a lot of time to drop off mail," he said, chuckling.

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