

# **Chris Van Hollen Interview**

Written by Emily Zhang and Cynthia Chen

On January 28, CAPA JRC interviewed senator Chris Van Hollen, a Democrat representing Maryland in Washington DC to get a deeper look into the experiences of an elective official representing citizens in the community.

Before Van Hollen became a senator, he was first a Congressman out of the 8th District of Maryland which includes Montgomery County, and parts of Frederick and Carroll County. His father was born in Baltimore and served in the Navy and then the foreign service, so Van Hollen explained that he grew up in many different countries that include Pakistan, India, Turkey, Sri Lanka. He is happy that Maryland reflects a place where there is so much diversity.

## **Experience as a senator**

What Van Hollen really enjoys about his job is that there is no “typical day”. There are two main parts of his job, working out legislation in the Senate and providing constituent services. Working out legislation includes debating different bills and proposals in hearings and voting on them. Constituent services span over many different issues from many different people throughout the state. People throughout the state may call him or his office if they have an issue such as Social Security, a veterans issues, or an immigration issue, and his job is to help them in these personal aspects. “[I] go from foreign policy to domestic policy, local issues, national issues, always interested, and I meet with groups like you,” said Van Hollen.



Behind the scenes of filming the interview (Claire Yu)

### **Supported issues**

Van Hollen’s focal points for Maryland are economic opportunity and ensuring high-quality education for everyone. Van Hollen has introduced various pieces of legislation to improve education including early childhood education and lowering costs for community college, four-year college, and other trainee programs. Van Hollen is also trying to improve transportation issues by modernizing infrastructure in the state. “If you look around, Montgomery County, or the state, you got a lot of people stuck in traffic, gridlock, and so we need to do more to address that issue.” Van Hollen also briefly mentions other issues he is working on include gun safety, criminal justice, and climate change.

### **How students can get involved**

There are lots of ways that students can get involved. Van Hollen’s office specifically has a big summer internship program, that is pretty structured with Maryland college students. Representing a state that is close to the capital means that there are a lot of applicants that apply and want to get involved. “We have those opportunities, in this office, the DC office, Senate

offices, as well as in our Rockville office and in our Baltimore office. We have other offices around the state but we don't have internships in all of them," said Van Hollen.

Van Hollen also states that "there are lots of opportunities [to get involved] both in the Congress but also in the state level and at the local level." He suggests that people go to Annapolis to testify about bills that they are specifically interested in or they can urge the state legislature to introduce a bill. Van Hollen mentioned an example of this- Maryland used to have a law that prohibited children older than a certain age could not accompany their parents into the voting booths, and after a student brought it to his attention, Van Hollen changed the law.



CAPA reporters speaking with Senator Chris Van Hollen in his office on January 28th, 2019.

(Claire Yu)

### **Thoughts becoming a senator and working in Congress**

Van Hollen sees politics and serving as a way to change things for the better, which is why he ran for the state legislature back in 1990. Though before that, he did not think of running and had been mainly focused on public policy issues, specifically the arms control foreign policy issues. Over time he got more interested in the local issues, such as schools and transportation,

and so then he ran for the Maryland legislature. Since then, he was able to be involved with legislature like the protection of the Chesapeake Bay, education, more funds for school construction to reduce class sizes, and clean energy initiatives. He sees the Senate as also a way to continue that effort and continued to pass legislature such as the Affordable Care Act.

“It’s a way to participate in our democracy and try to make improvements. It can be frustratingly slow sometimes because, in order to pass something you need to have you need to get it through the Senate, you need to get it to the House, you need the President to sign it, he vetoes it, or she vetoes it, it comes back to the Congress. Then you need a supermajority... it’s designed to be a tough process,” stated Van Hollen.

When asked about difficulties in his career, Van Hollen says that “the key thing is to look for ways to bring people together. He says that “You have to be willing to negotiate differences to pass a bill,” and that he has to be able to find ways to work together while being strong and supporting his own values and principles. Van Hollen also says that sometimes there is not a way to accomplish everything in “one big jump” but rather in smaller steps forward.

### **Hopes and beliefs for the future**

Van Hollen believes in bringing people together in this rather politically polarized country. Take the 35-day government shutdown as an example. Van Hollen is hoping that the government will not shut down again in three weeks, but in order for that to happen there has to be an agreement between Republicans and Democrats in the Senate, in the House, and then the President has to sign it, or an override of the veto is needed.

“The biggest test these days is identifying ways to find common ground,” said Van Hollen. Overall, Van Hollen’s goal is to try every day to do a good job representing his constituents in Maryland.

He tries to listen to the citizens of Maryland’s views, though it’s not a huge state geographically, it is a very diverse state both in terms of population as well as geography. He refers to Maryland as “America in miniature”, because of its geographic diversity, with western Maryland and the mountains as well as the Chesapeake Bay, Eastern shore, big cities like Baltimore, suburban areas like Montgomery County, and Prince George’s County, as well as a very diverse population.

“It’s a great honor to represent the state, but it’s important that I go out and, and listen to what’s on people’s minds and then try and take those ideas and work here in Congress. I have a lot of things that I think are important, and [I think it is important to] take a leadership role,” said Van Hollen.

## **Passing Legislation**

He wants to continue to introduce legislation that he thinks will expand economic empowerment, deal with environmental issues, protect the Bay, and reduce climate change.

“[I want to] make sure that this is a country where we treat people as Dr. King said on the content of their character, not based on ethnicity or race or religion right. Everybody needs to be treated with dignity,” said Van Hollen.

Van Hollen says that he is fortunate that his career in Congress has been in the middle of major pieces of legislation. When it comes to Maryland, he has helped pass major pieces of legislation protecting the Chesapeake Bay and energy efficiency. When it comes to the entire country, he has helped pass legislation to expand affordable health care with the Affordable Care Act and various other important bills. He has also introduced legislation that will provide more resources for research to fight childhood cancer.

Van Hollen has been able to pass various pieces of legislation, but the more major ones are legislation to protect the Chesapeake Bay and the Affordable Care Act.

“I’m always proud of the fact that if you look at Maryland, we are a place where people from all over the world come to pursue their dreams, and that gives us great strength,” said Van Hollen.



JRC interviewees and Van Hollen (Emily Zhang)