

Sarah Lange, NE – 2025

When I was twelve years old, I developed an interest in current events and politics. I started following the news consistently, learning about various political figures, federal agencies, and more. Little did I know I would meet some of those political figures and visit many federal agencies just a few years later. Twelve-year-old me never could have imagined being selected for the United States Senate Youth Program. Even now, I know I won't be able to grasp the full impact of USSYP for many decades to come.

While Washington Week was filled with influential speakers and building tours, my favorite part of the week was engaging with my 103 fellow delegates. All of the delegates I met are the kindest, most intelligent, and motivated future public servants I have ever met. Every time I spoke to a delegate, it was like looking through a window into their community and worldview. The 63rd delegate class has challenged me to grapple with my viewpoints and consider the various perspectives on issues. On a macro level, I've met 103 best friends who care about improving people's lives just as much as I do. I look forward to continuing to work with my fellow delegates in college, our professional careers, and beyond.

Realistically, most public servants go un-thanked: they aren't paid very well and usually work without praise. As a natural introvert, the lack of public recognition doesn't bother me. Still, Secretary of State Marco Rubio's words in the Benjamin Franklin State Dining Room during Washington Week reinforced my decision to become a public servant. Secretary Rubio, having met countless wealthy individuals, said that he never heard anyone in their last days say, "I wish I would've made more money." He told us that there's absolutely nothing wrong with choosing a career that doesn't pay great because you enjoy it—the story of many public servants at the State Department and throughout the government. At the end of the day, public servants can say that their careers made a tangible difference for people. Not everyone can say that about their career. I would say, and I believe many other delegates would agree, that Secretary Rubio was one of the most enlightening and passionate speakers that we had the opportunity to hear from throughout the week.

Brian Kamoie, Deloitte consultant and former USSYP delegate from Pennsylvania, offered practical advice to delegates. He offered three main pieces of advice: commit to serve, think big, and take bold, ethical actions. As Mr. Kamoie emphasized, these are all key traits of a successful public servant. Public servants must be committed to serving the public, not themselves. Public servants must imagine a world better than the one they live in and work towards making that a reality. Public servants must be daring yet intentional. Mr. Kamoie represents what it means to be a dedicated public servant. Given his work in disaster preparedness in both the public and private sectors, I asked Mr. Kamoie his opinions on recent efforts to politicize, or condition, disaster relief funding. Mr. Kamoie, in true public service fashion, responded that politicizing disaster relief funding is wrong because it hurts people at their worst. No one should be questioning if someone is a Democrat or Republican when their house is burning down—you just put out the fire.

Politicians decide to run for office for a variety of reasons. While some politicians enter public office to make others' lives better, others do it for personal reasons. New Hampshire Senator Jeanne Shaheen is a prime example of a politician who ran for public office because she saw and recognized a need for change. Senator Shaheen grew up in the tense political and social climate of the 1960s. She was a public school teacher in a newly integrated school. As the governor of New Hampshire, she used her experience as a teacher to successfully fight for public kindergarten. She didn't always agree with her state legislature on everything, but she worked tirelessly to find common ground. When I was listening to Senator Shaheen's speech, I was incredibly inspired by how she used her personal experience to make key changes in government. Senator Shaheen reinforced in me the importance of bipartisanship. Small, incremental changes are better than none at all.

Throughout the week, the event I was most looking forward to was touring the Pentagon. Not only is it a massive construction and architectural masterpiece, but it's the location where so many important national security decisions are made. Thanks to our excellent Pentagon tour guides, I got to hear many fun facts about the Pentagon (it was built in just 16 months). The tour guides also showed us the wing of the building that was reconstructed after 9/11, when 184 individuals passed away at the Pentagon. Their sacrifice will never be forgotten, and their names and stories are displayed in a memorial inside the building. This impacted me deeply. A life of public service means being willing to sacrifice yourself for others. USSYP taught me that that's a risk the best public servants need to be willing to take.

Washington Week exposed me to many new perspectives. I met people with different political viewpoints than myself, people who live in communities not like my own, and people who experienced a dissimilar childhood. One perspective I didn't expect to explore, though, was the one provided by NASA astronauts—the perspective from outer space. Visiting NASA headquarters was one of my favorite building tours of the week, purely because of how much I learned. I learned about fields of science I didn't even know existed. My favorite part of the NASA tour, though, was hearing from Crew 71 astronauts. Knowing the risks of space exploration, they all decided to spend months aboard the International Space Station conducting research. The NASA tour taught me that public servants come in many different forms. The field of work you are working in isn't as important as your dedication to serving people.

Throughout the week, I was thoroughly impressed by everyone who contributed to the 63rd annual USSYP Washington Week. From the outstanding Military Mentors who shared their passions with us to the catering staff who prepared top-tier food every day, everyone who had even a small role in Washington Week did an amazing job. It's not easy to plan and execute a week with as packed a schedule as we had. I commend every single person who helped conduct Washington Week and USSYP as a whole.

Washington Week left me more motivated than ever to stay curious and never stop fighting for change. USSYP has made a lasting impact on me in ways I can't fully realize. As I continue my educational and professional pursuits, I will continue to work towards a career in public service. After Washington Week, I know government is where I'm meant to be, whether that be in law, economics, policy research, or a different area entirely. I'm looking forward to working alongside my fellow delegates in these areas and celebrating their successes. While Washington Week is over, my journey toward becoming a public servant is just beginning.