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An Open Letter to Those About to Serve

The election is over, and to the victors go the spoils. To all who ran, thank you for putting your name on the ballot because you helped keep our democratic traditions alive. Each cycle everyday citizens, like those who just campaigned, step up and put their reputations on the line just for a chance to serve our community, state and country. To those who won, you all ran hard-fought races intertwined with policies and ideas that will move the Mountain State forward. You made clear to the voters you were the better choice to lead our state. They put their faith in you to pursue new, bold initiatives that better our state. To do that, we must acknowledge we have more in common than the bitter discourse that is often highlighted by campaigns and gridlocks in Washington D.C. Here in West Virginia, we must work together, focusing on similarities, to move our state forward.

Elections can be hostile. Campaigns can cross lines just for a victory. Educating voters on an opponent's voting record is fair game, but campaign ads can put family members or military service in question, as well as take comments out of context. That bitterness cannot transfer over to policy making. The people of our great state will not stand for it. My hope is that our Governor and Legislature can move past the negativity to join forces for a better West Virginia. The next generation cannot afford bitter gridlock that leads to little policy change. West Virginia has started down the path towards prosperity, and we cannot turn back. We must keep moving forward.

Recently, I was scrolling through Facebook and saw a post that showed the Arlington National Cemetery. The caption was "There are no Rs and Ds on these headstones." When I served in the United States Marine Corps, I never knew the political party of the men and women who served with me. When those who died serving their country returned home, their caskets were adorned with an American Flag. Regardless of

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differences in political affiliation, ethnicity, gender or principles, these folks died in the service of their country. The men and women I led for 20 years cared about one thing, defending the values and principles of the United States. They fought for all of us. I suggest we, as elected officials, fight honestly with our words for all West Virginians to honor those brave men and women. We have the opportunity to show true leadership by working together in lieu of discord.

Some goals we can all agree on are striving towards diversified economy through innovation and technology, while bringing new industrial sectors to West Virginia. We must also find a way to retain our young people, to give them an incentive to stay. We must do a better job of preparing our students to succeed in their future careers. We have to better train our workforce for the jobs industries need. We must find efficiencies to ensure fiscal responsibility. Most importantly, we have to tackle the opioid epidemic ravaging our state.

As a former State Senator, here is some advice I have for the new members. If you are fortunate to serve as a lawmaker, expect criticism. Don't shy away from it; listen and reevaluate your positions. Be prepared to defend your vote, especially to the people you represent. Every vote you take should be done with your constituents' values in mind. Basing votes on values helps move us toward a better West Virginia. Once the vote is cast, move on. Debate the next issue and remain friends and colleagues while avoiding personal grudges. Most importantly, don't be afraid to oppose a bill even from your own party. Listen to your heart. If something tells you a policy is wrong, it probably is. West Virginia needs leaders, so make bold decisions without fear of consequences. With that, I look forward to working with all of you as we pursue a better West Virginia. Let's get the job done.

Kent A. Leonhardt
West Virginia Commissioner of Agriculture

The West Virginia Department of Agriculture protects plant, animal and human health through a variety of scientific, regulatory and consumer protection programs. The Commissioner of Agriculture is one of six statewide elected officials who sits on the Board of Public Works.

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