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BY CAROL MARIN Sun-Times Columnist

Mike Quigley had just stowed the Aero bed when he answered the phone in his Capitol Hill office early Thursday morning.

"I get up about 6:30," he said, "put away the air mattress, go work out . . . make sure I get it cleaned up so it's like it never was."

Staffers can't be made to feel they work in the boss' bedroom.

Former Cook County Commissioner Quigley is Chicago's newest congressman, the 434th member of the U.S. House of Representatives, and one of about 50 who sleep in their offices.

Imagine the marble corridors of Congress, late at night, echoing with the footfalls of politicians in their pj's padding down the hall, toothbrushes in hand.

Mercifully, Quigley's communications director, Aviva Gibbs, erased that image in an e-mail: "There is a bathroom in the office suite . . . he's not shuffling to a shared bathroom at the end of the hall, in footie pajamas with a college-dorm shower caddy."

Whew.

He's a wonk and workaholic, so this arrangement works well for Quigley, who can't afford a Washington condo.

"It would cost about \$2,500 a month, which is my mortgage in Chicago," he said. "I'm not feeling sorry for myself, there are homeless people out there."

Truth is, Quigley is in heaven in Washington. The reformer who gave President Todd Stroger fits at Cook County board meetings is on the Judiciary and Reform committees. And he has cast his first dissenting vote.

In the wake of the FBI's investigation of Rep. John Murtha (D-Pa.) and the subpoenas to Rep. Pete Visclosky (D-Ind.), all having to do with questions about campaign contributions potentially influencing appropriations, Rep. Jeff Flake (R-Ariz.), has been pushing for a House ethics investigation. Speaker Nancy Pelosi's office let the freshman class know the Democratic leadership wasn't keen on that idea. And so Flake's resolution was tabled. But not, according to Politico, before picking up 29 Democratic votes from younger, more independent-minded members, including "the two newest Democrats in the House: Rep. Scott Murphy of New York and Rep. Mike Quigley of Illinois."

Then again, Quigley sees the downside: "When you start dissenting, it's a little different here. . . . Democrats before could dissent because it was against Bush," he said. "Now it's against Pelosi, Hoyer, Obama. That's heresy."

But on most issues, he's in complete agreement with the Democratic agenda, though he's struggling to master the complexities.

And so Quigley crams as though a pop quiz is coming up. Subjects include cap and trade, procurement, human rights and the environment.

But there's another task: to reconcile the conflicting messages of leadership.

Quigley described Pelosi's first breakfast meeting with the freshman class. "Pelosi said you need to get re-elected. You need to be in your district for every art fair and event," he recounted.

But then, he said, Majority Leader Steny Hoyer declared: "We have a most extraordinary agenda . . . plan on being here five days a week."

"The freshmen were all staring at each other," Quigley said.

And so it's 24/7. Five days in D.C., two in Chicago. Some family time with his wife and two college-age daughters, but not a lot.

This weekend included Ribfest, a meeting with the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender community and planting a tree.

Back in D.C. on Monday, he'll visit Walter Reed Army Medical Center and go back to the Capitol.

By nightfall, he'll drag out the air mattress again and decide what to read. The history of Turks and Armenians, the specs on the Osprey helicopter or briefing books on upcoming trips to Israel, Gaza, Iraq and Poland.

And, if there's time, maybe a quick episode of "The Simpsons" before calling it a night.

It's a little like "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington." But it's more, in Quigley's words, like "Fantasyland for wonks."

