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Citizen Cabinet To Tell Leaders What People Think

BALTIMORE (AP) — Fed up with gridlock in Washington? Americans will soon have the opportunity to do something about it without having to run for office.

A group called Voice of the People is launching a Citizen Cabinet initiative that will give residents a direct connection with Congress to help them solve pressing issues.

Webster's Dictionary defines gridlock as a situation in which no progress can be made. Many people feel that currently applies to Congress.

"There's terrible gridlock up there. They are screwing everything up. They can't make a decision about anything," said voter Ann Litke.

"I'm very frustrated. They are MIA — missing in action," said voter Shirley Barber.

But Voice of the People, which has ties to the University of Maryland, is trying to change that. It started an initiative called Citizen Cabinet that aims to use technology to let members of Congress know exactly what's on the mind of their constituents.

"The problem is that they really don't know what most people in their districts think," said Dr. Steven Kull, the president of Voice of the People.

Kull is launching the Citizen Cabinet in three states. Oklahoma will represent a conservative (red) state, Maryland will represent a liberal (blue) state, and Virginia will be listed as purple because it can fall Democrat or Republican.

Organizers are looking to recruit 900 people in Maryland for the initiative, 400 of whom will come from Baltimore's 7th District. They will be selected through the same scientific methods used by pollsters.

"The Citizen Cabinet idea is a way to give the people a greater voice in public policy," Kull said.

The volunteers will serve six-month terms. Every three weeks, they'll be asked to navigate a policy simulation questionnaire online that could take up to 20 minutes.

“They’ll be briefed on an issue that Congress is dealing with. They are presented with policy options, with arguments for and against each one, and they ultimately make their recommendations,” Kull said.

That data is shared with members of Congress, the administration and the public. Once it is public, anyone can go to vop.org and try it for themselves.

Organizers said they believe Citizen Cabinet evaluations are more comprehensive than polls, which typically provide “yes” and “no” answers. They said the Citizen Cabinet should give members of Congress an accurate understanding of their constituents’ viewpoints instead of that of special interest groups.

“If members of Congress are hearing and taking that into account in their decision making, that’s success,” Kull said.