

Testimony of Meredith McGehee
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Before the House Appropriations Committee
Subcommittee on the Legislative Branch for Fiscal Year 2022

Chairman Ryan, Ranking Member Herrera Beutler, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on a matter that would help strengthen congressional capacity and enhance the institution's ability to meet the needs of the American people.

My name is Meredith McGehee, and I have been a public interest lobbyist for more than three decades, with an emphasis on promoting transparency, accountability, and strong ethics in our government. I am currently the executive director of Issue One, a leading crosspartisan organization working with Republicans, Democrats, and independents to advance commonsense reforms to fix our broken political system.

Issue One's mission is to "fix democracy first." Central to this mission is our commitment to help build a legislative branch that is capable, representative, transparent, and resilient. To this goal, we greatly appreciate this Subcommittee's ongoing work to improve Congress and advance the significant reforms included in last year's appropriations bill, as well as in previous years.

My testimony highlights a key driver of functionality and capability in Congress: the ability of the institution to attract and retain staff. It emphasizes the need for additional management training for congressional staff in leadership positions, calls for Congress to shift to a biweekly pay cycle, and requests additional funding for the Office of the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO).

Before I discuss the factors that impact staff retention, I would like to reflect on why these issues are so crucial to the operations of Congress. Having a capable, experienced, and representative staff is not about Members of Congress supporting themselves, but rather about protecting and strengthening the voices of the people they serve: their constituents. Congressional staff, both on Capitol Hill and in district offices, are crucial to the daily operations of the institution. They craft policy, advance legislation, and interact daily with constituents. A capable workforce is vital for Congress to be able to meet the challenges facing American communities and provide the kind of leadership the American people deserve.

Over the last 30 years, the responsibilities assumed by congressional staff have grown alongside a 30% increase in the American population and a 700% jump in federal spending. Despite these trends, however, the number of staff in House member offices has declined by about 20% over this same time period while the number of House committee staff has decreased by almost 50%.¹

Not only have these overall staffing levels decreased—but as anyone who visits the Hill regularly knows, staff skew young in age and turnover is high. As the House's recent compensation analysis shows, the average House staffer has only been in their position for 2.5

¹ Kosar, K. (2020, January 14). Written testimony of Kevin R. Kosar Before the U.S. House of Representatives, Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress.
<https://docs.house.gov/meetings/MH/MH00/20200114/110374/HHRG-116-MH00-Wstate-KosarK-20200114.pdf>

years.² For legislative assistants, who advise Members on key subject-matter areas, the average tenure in the position is a mere 1.3 years.³

Unfortunately, low pay is a major factor contributing to staff turnover. Despite the responsibilities and wide range of challenges facing these public servants, congressional staff receive lower pay compared to executive branch and private sector employees. Staff compensation has declined across communications, legislative, and administrative staff, prompting 65 percent of staffers to say that they plan to leave Congress within five years.⁴ Many get their “Hill ticket” punched and leave, taking valuable expertise and institutional knowledge with them to K Street. This dynamic causes Congress to turn to lobbyists for expertise, undermining voters’ faith in their elected representatives.

Moreover, low entry-level pay can prevent those from middle- and working-class backgrounds from taking a job on the Hill in the first place. Staff assistants—the entry-level position in most Hill offices—make an average of \$34,425 a year,⁵ which is 32% less than the national average for recent college graduates, according to the National Association of Colleges and Employers.⁶ For jobseekers with student loans to repay, who cannot rely on support from family members to live and work in an expensive city, this is simply not a job they can afford to take.

These barriers heighten the challenge of recruiting and retaining a diverse workforce. According to a 2018 report by the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, “People of color account for 38 percent of the U.S. population, but only 13.7 percent of all top House staff.”⁷ Without a diverse workforce, Congress is limited in its ability to represent all Americans.

So, what can be done?

A simple and impactful change would be to increase pay frequency for House staff to twice a month. Currently, congressional staff are paid on a monthly schedule, a cycle that increases financial instability and challenges workers in times of financial emergencies. Shifting to a biweekly pay frequency—a change recommended by the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress—would reduce financial burden on congressional staff.⁸ It would

² Chief Administrative Officer. (2019). House of Representatives Compensation and Diversity Study Report: Member, Committee, and Leadership Offices. *U.S. House of Representatives*.

https://www.house.gov/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/2019_house_compdiversitystudy_finalreport_membcommlead.pdf

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ See Furnas, A. and LaPira, T. (2020, September). Congressional Brain Drain. New America.

<https://www.newamerica.org/political-reform/reports/congressional-brain-drain/>

⁵ Chief Administrative Officer. (2019). House of Representatives Compensation and Diversity Study Report: Member, Committee, and Leadership Offices. *U.S. House of Representatives*.

https://www.house.gov/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/2019_house_compdiversitystudy_finalreport_membcommlead.pdf

⁶ Koc., W. et al. (2019, Summer). NACE Salary Survey: Final Starting Salaries for Class of 2018 New College Graduates, Executive Summary. *National Association of Colleges and Employers*.

<https://www.naceweb.org/uploadedfiles/files/2019/publication/executive-summary/2019-nace-salary-survey-summer-executive-summary.pdf>

⁷ Brenson, L. (2018, September). Racial Diversity Among Top Staff in Senate Personal Offices. Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies,

<https://jointcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Racial-Diversity-Among-Top-US-House-Staff-9-11-18-245pm-1.pdf>

⁸ The Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress. Final Report (October 2020).

[https://modernizecongress.house.gov/imo/media/doc/ModernizationCommittee_10152020r1Compressed%20\(newest%20gpo%20report\).pdf](https://modernizecongress.house.gov/imo/media/doc/ModernizationCommittee_10152020r1Compressed%20(newest%20gpo%20report).pdf)

also bring the House of Representatives in line with payroll practices employed by the rest of the federal government’s payroll practices and many American businesses. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, among private businesses, “Biweekly is the most common length of pay period.”⁹

However, compensation is not the only factor that drives high turnover rates among congressional staff. Any solution aimed at retaining a diverse and capable congressional workforce must also look at opportunities to improve training for Members, chiefs of staff, and others in leadership positions. For every staffer that leaves because of low pay, there is another that seeks a different job because of poor management or an unhealthy workplace environment. These issues are especially salient for staff of color, who too often find themselves in exclusive and unwelcoming spaces on Capitol Hill.

The Congressional Staff Academy, an initiative of the CAO, can help address many of these challenges by providing more rigorous instruction for managers, continuing to prioritize diversity and equity training, and offering certification along with its seminars for House staff. Currently, however, the CAO is simply underfunded to meet the demands placed on it, which have grown exponentially during the COVID-19 pandemic. In order for congressional staff to receive the highest level of onboarding and continuing education, the CAO must be given additional resources. This need was reflected in the office’s [recent testimony](#) before this Subcommittee, which called for an 8% increase over Fiscal Year 2021 funding. This increase would allow the CAO to continue developing meaningful training programs “tailored specifically to job roles within Member and Committee offices,” among other objectives. We would echo and support the CAO’s request.

Thank you again for this opportunity and for your time. As an organization committed to seeing a strong legislative branch, Issue One stands ready to provide information, expertise, and assistance to the Subcommittee.

⁹ See Burgess, M. (2014, May). How frequently do private businesses pay employees? U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. <https://www.bls.gov/opub/btn/volume-3/how-frequently-do-private-businesses-pay-workers.htm#:~:text=Results.pay%20frequencies%20are%20less%20common>

Meredith McGehee

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Meredith McGehee is one of the nation's foremost experts on Congress. As the executive director at Issue One, McGehee leads legislative efforts to build congressional capacity, reduce the role of money in politics, and strengthen our nation's voting infrastructure. Her experience as a leading public interest advocate, policy expert at numerous nonprofit organizations, and legislative director on Capitol Hill has distinguished McGehee as a policy expert on transparent, accountable, and effective governance.

Issue One

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Issue One is the leading crosspartisan political reform group in Washington, D.C. We unite Republicans, Democrats, and independents in the movement to fix our broken political system and build a democracy that works for everyone. We educate the public and work to pass legislation on Capitol Hill to increase transparency, strengthen ethics and accountability, reduce the corrosive influence of big money in politics, and bolster U.S. elections. Issue One's ReFormers Caucus of more than 200 former members of Congress, governors, and Cabinet officials is the largest coalition of its kind ever assembled to advocate for political reform.