

Testimony of Meredith McGehee
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Before the Subcommittee on the Legislative Branch of the Senate Committee on
Appropriations
April 9, 2020

Chairman Hyde-Smith, Ranking Member Murphy, and Subcommittee members — thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony and to address the capacity of the legislative branch.

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.” We advocate for a range of solutions, including rebalancing the role of money in politics, securing our elections, and strengthening Congress so that it may fulfill its Article One responsibilities. To support our advocacy efforts, we formed the bipartisan ReFormers Caucus, which brings together more than 200 former members of Congress, governors, and Cabinet officials.

Issue One is deeply concerned about the state of our politics, including the polarization that has made it increasingly difficult for Congress to get any work done. The current COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates that Congress is capable of working together under extraordinary circumstances — but Americans also deserve a strong, functioning Congress that can address the issues that affect them every day. Which is why I would like to highlight a key driver of dysfunction in Washington that is hindering Congress’ ability to consistently and effectively serve the American people. I’m referring to Congress’ *capacity* — its capacity to legislate, deliberate, and represent Americans. **Put simply: Congress’ ability to perform these critical functions has not kept pace with the challenges of governing a large and diverse nation in an increasingly complex world.**

The numbers themselves paint a sobering picture. In the last four decades, the U.S. population has nearly doubled¹ and federal spending has increased almost 800 percent² — but the total number of congressional staff has declined 27 percent.³ In the same period, Senate committee staff has decreased by 30 percent,⁴ and the staff of three crucial supporting agencies — the Congressional

¹ Data compiled between 1979-2019 from: United States Census Bureau. Historical National Population Estimates: July 1, 1900 to July 1, 1999. <https://www.census.gov/population/estimates/nation/popclockest.txt>; and: United States Census Bureau (2019, July 1). U.S. and World Population Clock. <https://www.census.gov/popclock/>

² Data compiled between 1979-2019 from: Chantrill, C. Federal 1979 Spending by Function. https://www.usgovernmentspending.com/fed_spending_1979USmn; and: Chantrill, C. Federal 2019 Spending by Function. https://www.usgovernmentspending.com/fed_spending_2019USmn

³ Data compiled between 1979-2015 from: Brookings Institute Vital Statistics on Congress. Congressional Staff, 1979-2015. https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/vitalstats_ch5_tbl1.pdf

⁴ Data compiled between 1979-2015 from: Brookings Institute Vital Statistics on Congress. Staffs of Senate Standing Committees, 1947-2015. https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/vitalstats_ch5_tbl7.pdf

Research Service (CRS), Government Accountability Office, and Congressional Budget Office — has been cut by 40 percent.⁵

This decrease in Hill staff impacts members of Congress’ ability to craft policy. Let’s be honest: the amount of time that many members spend on policymaking has to compete with the demands of the campaign cycle. Issue One’s research shows that in the last quarter, the typical Senator raised an average of \$1,700 per day, while Senators up for re-election in 2020 raised an average of \$15,300 per day.⁶ The need to spend hours per week dialing for dollars can leave members with little time to focus on policy. As a result, members have to rely more and more on staff, many of whom are inexperienced and leave the Hill just as they are gaining substantive policy expertise.

As anyone who visits the Hill regularly knows, staff skew young in age and turnover is high. As a recent CRS study shows, the average Senate staffer has only been in their position for 2.7 years.⁷ For legislative assistants, who advise Senators on key subject-matter areas, the average tenure in the position is only 2.1 years.⁸ To put this in perspective, if you are a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, and the staffer advising you on the National Defense Authorization Act is only in the position for one cycle of the bill’s annual review, your ability to impact that legislation will be seriously undercut.

Unfortunately, low pay is a major factor contributing to staff turnover. Staff who play a vital role in crafting and negotiating legislation often earn half of what they can make in the private sector or federal government. As a result, staffers get their “Hill ticket” punched and leave, taking with them valuable expertise and institutional knowledge.

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 Senate offices — make an average of \$43,898 a year,⁹ which is 14 percent less than the national average for recent college graduates.¹⁰ It is worth noting that this comparison does not account for the high cost of living in Washington, DC. For jobseekers with student loans to repay, or those 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 factors combine to exacerbate a lack of diversity in Hill offices, which undermines Congress’ ability to represent all Americans.

⁵ Data compiled between 1979-2015 from: Brookings Institute Vital Statistics on Congress. Staffs of Congressional Support Agencies, FY1946-FY2015. https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/vitalstats_ch5_tbl8.pdf

⁶ Ratliff, A. (2020, February 5). Four Things We Learned from the Latest House and Senate Campaign Finance Filings. *Issue One*. <https://www.issueone.org/four-things-we-learned-from-the-latest-house-and-senate-campaign-finance-filings/>

⁷ Petersen, R. E. and Eckman, S. J. (2016, November 9). Staff Tenure in Selected Positions in Senators’ Offices, 2006-2016. *Congressional Research Service*. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R44684.pdf>

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ Petersen, R. E. and Williams, R. T. (2019, June 11). Staff Pay Levels for Selected Positions in Senators’ Offices, FY2001-FY2018. *Congressional Research Service*. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R44324.pdf>

¹⁰ Koc., E. 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>

Let me be clear, by setting out this state of affairs, I do not mean to disparage Hill staff. In more than 30 years of public interest lobbying, I have found the vast majority of staffers to be exceptionally bright and highly motivated.

However, pitting staff in their mid-twenties — no matter how capable — against lobbyists and executive branch officials with decades of experience is a recipe for having special interests or the executive branch win *every time*.

So, what can be done?

I want to start by thanking you and the leaders of this Committee for the increase you were able to secure for the Senators' Official Personnel and Office Expense Account (SOPOEA) for Fiscal Year 2019. This funding was a critically important step to improving congressional capacity, and Issue One hopes there will be more targeted increases to the SOPOEA and committee funding in the future.

For those who might complain about Congress "spending money on itself," I would argue forcefully that having an experienced and diverse Hill staff is not about members themselves, but rather about protecting and strengthening the voices of the people they serve — their constituents.

It is also worth noting that this is a completely separate issue from that of Senator pay — the staff positions I'm referring to when expressing concern about retention are not earning anywhere near the current cap in staff pay.

That said, Issue One recognizes Congress is operating in a resource-constrained environment, particularly in this current appropriations cycle. So, we would also urge you to focus on other, cost-effective ways to improve staff retention.

First, we recommend that this Committee examine options to boost the Senate's human resources capacity. One option is to create a "one-stop-shop" that all Senate offices could turn to for help with hiring and management. It could provide hiring managers with tools to recruit candidates from a more diverse talent pool, assist them in understanding staff benefits and competitive compensation levels, and generally identify HR best practices. Expanding HR support Senate-wide could improve staff retention and diversity while lessening the administrative burden for Senators and staff alike.

We would also like to highlight the potential to boost retention through improved management training for staff. Over my career, when I have asked departing staffers why they chose to leave the Hill, about half have cited the need to earn more money. But the other half cited challenges with their managers.

I've seen and heard about these management problems time and time again. Since there is no required management training as staff move "up the ladder" on the Hill, staffers find themselves suddenly managing people without preparation, as they move from policy-only positions to legislative or district director roles. This is just a bad business practice that leads to inefficiencies and increased turnover, all of which undermines Congress' ability to serve the American people.

Finally, we urge you to consider, in the next Congress, creating a Joint Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress to examine and improve congressional operations. As I, along with a number of other congressional and public policy experts, wrote to Senate and House leadership in [a 2016 letter](#), establishing a Joint Committee could help Congress boost its internal policy capacity

so it can better compete with lobbyists and the executive branch. The current pandemic has demonstrated that, ultimately, if Congress is to fulfill its constitutional duties effectively, the institution must commit to thoroughly examining solutions to these issues.

One last observation is that work to modernize and improve Congress has inspired action from a wide range of organizations with differing missions and ideologies, but who still agree that a strong and functional Congress is an essential part of our democracy. For our part, Issue One has been meeting regularly with an informal coalition of nonprofit and advocacy groups, with the goal of better supporting critical, bipartisan work to strengthen the legislative branch. We have been heartened to see a formalized effort on the House side to improve congressional functioning, capacity, and effectiveness through the House Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress. We've also been impressed at how this desire to improve our first branch has united so many of us on the left, right, and in between. We hope that this broad support is reflected in this testimony and in the feedback you receive ahead of this appropriations cycle.

In closing, thank you for considering these recommendations, and for all your work to promote a strong and competent staff within the legislative branch.