

Testimony of Meredith McGehee
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Before the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress
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Chairman Kilmer, Vice Chair Timmons, and Select Committee members—thank you for inviting Issue One to testify today. I appreciate the opportunity to discuss how Congress can strengthen its rules and norms to best 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 cross-partisan organization working with Republicans, Democrats, and independents to advance common sense reforms to fix our broken political system.

Let me begin by commending the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress for the bipartisan solutions that the Committee advanced in the previous session, each of which would improve the way the House functions. Finding the common ground to issue 97 recommendations is a feat that in these hyperpolarized times that should be noted with appreciation. Thank you to Chairman Kilmer and Vice Chair Timmons for your continued leadership on these issues.

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. The bipartisan recommendations advanced by the Select Committee would directly support this aim. That is why, under the leadership of former Members of Congress Tim Roemer and Zach Wamp, Issue One’s bipartisan ReFormers Caucus has brought together more than 200 former Members of Congress, governors, and Cabinet officials in support of these recommendations and a stronger Congress. Ambassador Roemer was particularly engaged in aiding in the creation of this Select Committee, using his experience on the 9/11 Commission. He also supported its extension and reauthorization to continue the much-needed work of making Congress a more representative and functional body.

Out of those 97 recommendations, I am here today to highlight a few that impact a key driver of functionality and capability in Congress: the ability of the institution to attract and retain staff.

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 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.

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>

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>

So, what can be done?

Many of the bipartisan recommendations advanced by the Select Committee in the 116th Congress would strengthen Congress' ability to attract and retain staff. Some recommendations—including making permanent the House Office of Diversity and Inclusion—have already been implemented. Others require additional consideration and advancement.

I would draw your attention to the previous Committee's recommendation to create a central human resources office. This office could improve staff retention in three key ways. First, it could identify best HR practices, particularly for hiring managers, and work with the House Office of Diversity and Inclusion to help Member offices reach a more diverse talent pool. Second, it could provide a one-stop shop for understanding staff benefits, lessening the administrative burden for Members and staff alike. Lastly, this office could establish recommended pay bands by staff position, which would provide member offices with a useful baseline for determining competitive compensation.

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.

In the previous session, the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress recognized these challenges, offering suggestions to make onboarding and continued education for staff more comprehensive, standardized, inclusive, and bipartisan. In particular, the recommendation for a certification process to accompany staff training would help drive participation in training, standardize these positions, and better equip staff with the skills they need to perform their role at the highest level.

The Congressional Staff Academy can help address many of these challenges; 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 Staff Academy is simply underfunded to meet the demands placed on it. In order for congressional staff to receive the highest level of onboarding and continuing education, the Staff Academy must be given additional resources.

In the previous legislative session, the Select Committee worked closely with the Committee on House Administration to move these issues forward. We hope that the Committee will again make these issues a priority. Issue One looks forward to working with the Members and staff of the Select Committee to bolster congressional staffing, as well as broadly working to build a stronger legislative branch. You might also be interested in knowing we are encouraging Senate leaders to undertake a similar effort to ensure that institution, with its roots in the 18th century, is better prepared to serve the American people in the 21st century

Thank you again for this opportunity and for your time. We at Issue One stand ready to support the Select Committee's important efforts.