

CONGRESSIONAL STAFF CAPACITY: IMPROVING
STAFF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT, INCREAS-
ING RETENTION AND COMPETING FOR TOP
TALENT

HEARING

BEFORE THE

SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE
MODERNIZATION OF CONGRESS

OF THE

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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CONTENTS

OPENING STATEMENTS

	Page
Chairman Derek Kilmer	
Oral Statement	1
Vice Chairman William Timmons	
Oral Statement	2

WITNESSES

Ms. Catherine Szpindor, Chief Administrative Officer for the House of Representatives	
Oral Statement	4
Written Statement	6
Mr. Brad Fitch President and CEO of the Congressional Management Foundation	
Oral Statement	10
Written Statement	13
Mr. Aaron Jones, Director of Congressional Relations at the Wilson Center	
Oral Statement	19
Written Statement	21
Discussion	24
Ms. Greta Engle, Vice President of Employee Benefits at USI Insurance Services, on behalf of Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM)	
Oral Statement	35
Written Statement	38
Ms. Lynnel Ruckert, Former Congressional Staff	
Oral Statement	45
Written Statement	47
Ms. Fran Peace, Former District Director	
Oral Statement	50
Written Statement	52
Ms. Dao Nguyen	
Oral Statement	58
Written Statement	60
Discussion	64

CONGRESSIONAL STAFF CAPACITY: IMPROVING STAFF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT, INCREASING RETENTION AND COMPETING FOR TOP TALENT

THURSDAY, MAY 6, 2021

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE MODERNIZATION OF CONGRESS,
Washington, DC.

The committee met, pursuant to call, at 11:03 a.m., via Zoom, Hon. Derek Kilmer [chairman of the committee] presiding.

Present: Representatives Kilmer, Cleaver, Perlmutter, Phillips, Williams of Georgia, Timmons, Rodney Davis of Illinois, Reschenthaler, Van Duyne, and Joyce.

The CHAIRMAN. I am going to bang the virtual gavel. The committee will come to order.

Without objection, the chair is authorized to declare a recess of the committee at any time.

I now recognize myself for 5 minutes to give an opening statement.

Listen, there is a very clear reason why this committee has held more hearings focused on improving congressional staff capacity than on any other topic. It is because, quite frankly, this institution's ability to effectively uphold its Article I responsibilities absolutely depends on the hard work of dedicated public servants who work here.

Staff ensure that Members are able to do the jobs they were elected to do. They are often the first people our constituents encounter when they reach out to the Federal Government for help.

They are also typically the first to speak with constituents who want to share an opinion or an idea related to the work of Congress.

And, every single day, staff are on the front lines connecting citizens to their government. And that work matters so much, particularly now, given the many challenges our constituents have faced over the past year.

Staff also help Members work through complicated policy questions. Their expertise and guidance are invaluable to Members who are working hard to make sure that their constituents' views are reflected in the policymaking process.

So, when I say that staff are dedicated, I mean they are in every sense of the word. Members could not carry out their representational and policymaking responsibilities without the support of

staff. And that is exactly why Congress needs to do more to support them.

Modernizing Congress requires us to change the way we think about a lot of things, including staff. We know that modern organizations put a premium on not only attracting, but keeping talented people. They understand that investing in the kinds of programs and benefits that employees want is key to maintaining a high-performing and stable workforce.

Now, unfortunately, Congress has a longstanding tendency to view these kinds of investments as expenses. The focus, in other words, is on costs rather than returns. This is an area where I think Congress really needs to change the way it thinks.

Investing in staff pays off, and the returns are exponential. Staff with long-term institutional knowledge and deep ties to the communities in which we serve are so essential to making Congress work better for the American people.

Instead of treating constant staff turnover as just the way things work on Capitol Hill, Congress should invest in the kinds of benefits and programming that would make a long-term career on the Hill attractive. Whether that is a first-time homebuyer assistance benefit or a childcare subsidy or a college savings plan or better healthcare options or all of the above, Congress needs to do better.

Congress needs to do better, because small salary bumps and title changes can't compete with better paychecks and better benefits and a healthier work-life balance, and that is evidenced by the fact that the typical staffer leaves the Hill after 4 or 5 years.

The longer Congress ignores the so-called "brain drain" from Capitol Hill, the harder it becomes for the legislative branch to uphold its Article I responsibilities, and that is a disservice to the American people, because what too often fills that void is hired lobbyists.

Today, we are going to talk about steps Congress can take to regain a competitive edge in the career marketplace. We will hear former staff explain why a long-term career on the Hill often isn't sustainable for so many. And we will also hear from experts focused on empowering staff through mentorships and professional development programs. And we will learn about the latest in employee benefit trends and how Congress compares.

So I am looking forward to this discussion and to hearing what the experts joining us today recommend.

And I would now like to invite Vice Chair Timmons to share some opening remarks as well.

Mr. TIMMONS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And thank you to our witnesses for being here today to discuss this very important issue.

In the Rules of the House, where this select committee was established, it states that this committee's mission is to make Congress more effective, efficient, and transparent on behalf of the American people. There are many ways to achieve this mission, but one of the most important ways to do so is investing in staff, our teams.

Our teams are everything. They are the ones who are communicating with constituents on a daily basis, whether it be a staff assistant answering a phone call, a communications director re-

sponding to a social media message or comment, or a constituent services representative handling a casework issue.

These are the people that are essential to making Congress work better, more effective, more efficient for the American people.

I believe a big part of the reason Congress is viewed as ineffective or dysfunctional is because we do not take the necessary steps to invest in our team members. We have seen numerous companies in the private sector put an emphasis on staff retention, whether that be through a benefits package, continued employee training programs, or just an overall better emphasis on the work-life balance.

As the chair said, a typical Hill staffer leaves the Hill after 3 to 5 years. Sure, there are some that come to the Hill after college just for the experience, knowing they will not be here for more than a year or two. But the majority of staff leave because they simply cannot afford to stay.

And I do not just mean financially. It is simply just—it is not sustainable mentally and emotionally. So many staffers become drained, and they have to leave.

Being Hill staff can be a thankless job, and that is why we must take steps now to foster an environment of learning and growth. Paying a competitive salary may fix some of these problems, but it does not address all of the obstacles that we face.

I am looking forward to hearing from today's panel of witnesses upon how recommendations can be made in the 116th, and new recommendations to foster a more positive environment for staff so that we can better serve the American people.

And with that, Mr. Chairman, I yield back. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Mr. Vice Chair.

Speaking of terrific staff, the terrific staff of this committee put together two A-plus panels of witnesses. Our first panel features three experts on staff professional developmental and training, and our second panel features four experts who will address staff pay, benefits, and retention.

Our witnesses are reminded that your oral testimony will be limited to 5 minutes. And, without objection, your written statements will be made part of the record.

Our first witness is Catherine Szpindor, the Chief Administrative Officer for the House of Representatives. Previously, Ms. Szpindor served as the Chief Information Officer for the House of Representatives.

She joined the House in 2011 as the Director of Enterprise Applications, and then was promoted to Deputy CIO and Acting CIO prior to being named CIO.

That was a lot of CIOs in one sentence. Sorry, Catherine.

During her time in the House, she has directed improvements to technology infrastructure and applications, adoption of cloud technologies, and the implementation of collaboration and conferencing tools in support of remote working during the COVID-19 crisis.

Ms. Szpindor, you are now recognized for 5 minutes to give an oral presentation of your testimony.

STATEMENTS OF MS. CATHERINE SZPINDOR, CHIEF ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER FOR THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES; MR. BRAD FITCH, PRESIDENT AND CEO OF THE CONGRESSIONAL MANAGEMENT FOUNDATION; AND MR. AARON JONES, DIRECTOR OF CONGRESSIONAL RELATIONS AT THE WILSON CENTER

STATEMENT OF CATHERINE SZPINDOR

Ms. SZPINDOR. Thank you. I appreciate it.

Chairman Kilmer, Vice Chairman Timmons, members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today about the CAO's efforts to improve congressional staff retention through our staff training programs. It is also an honor to be here with you and the other panelists.

The CAO's motto is "Member Focused, Service Driven," and this drives everything we do. Part of being Member focused is also being staff focused.

Among more than a hundred services the CAO provides to the House, we take great pride in providing the training programs to develop the skill sets that staff need to be successful.

We continue to see an enormous need in this area and are committed to stepping up our efforts to provide the most needed and relevant staff training.

It is our hope that, by better preparing our staff for their work and aiding them to gain competence and skills needed to succeed, staff will stay on the Hill and become experts and leaders within our institution.

CAO training has evolved. Many of you may remember when it was just a few classrooms where you could learn WordPerfect and other technical skills.

However, in 2017, the CAO launched a House-focused professional development organization, the Congressional Staff Academy, to better align with the needs of Members and their staff.

This effort resulted in new state-of-the-art classrooms, administrative systems, and, most importantly, new classes to address the needs of Member and committee offices.

The team focused its limited resources on introductory professional development for select staff profiles, including chiefs of staff, communication directors, schedulers, caseworkers, and new managers.

Each year since its launch in 2018, the Staff Academy has grown its course offerings and its attendance. Last year, the attendance for Staff Academy courses, not including required training, such as workplace rights, ethics, et cetera, the attendance was 8,548, which is a fivefold increase from the prior year. This year, we are on track to exceed that.

That said, we are not satisfied with the progress to date. With continued focus on meeting the needs of Members and staff, we are doubling down on our vision for the Staff Academy to be an essential resource for every staffer in the People's House.

This year, we are launching a new program focused on Member office staff skills. This program will be led by full-time veteran D.C. and district staffers who have excelled and know what other staff need.

They will be teaching others what they have learned—unfortunately, sometimes the hard way—and they will be recruiting their colleagues to train and mentor as well. Our team will focus on the everyday skills staff use to be successful in their role.

So, for instance, a new district director will be able to learn from a veteran on how to communicate with their Member's priorities at a community meeting. A new chief might learn from a veteran chief tips for developing their budget. And a new legislative assistant might learn how to approach the Rules Committee or write questions for a committee hearing.

We will use a mixture of best practice panels, internal and external speakers, quick tips, emails, videos, one-on-one coaching, quick lunchtime classes, and traditional courses to provide a full spectrum of content to our staff. Our hope is staff will learn things that no one ever tells you about to actually get things done.

So far, our small team of full-time staffers have made great strides. We are in the process of hiring four new instructors with extensive Member office experience. We hope to roll out our new program this summer.

As we expand the Congressional Staff Academy operations, I am confident we are in a great position to deliver even greater value to the Members and staff of this institution. We ask for your support and partnership as we seek to develop and retain staff in the House.

Thank you. And I will be glad to answer any questions you may have.

[The statement of Ms. Szpindor follows:]

Chair Kilmer, Vice Chair Timmons, Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today about the CAO's efforts to improve Congressional staff retention through our staff training programs. It is also an honor to be here with you and the other panelists including representatives from some of the nation's leading Congressional training organizations—we look forward to collaborating with all of you.

The CAO's motto is "Member Focused, Service Driven" and this drives everything we do. Part of being "Member Focused" is being "Staff Focused." We support the staff so they can support the Member and the entire office can support their constituents.

We're proud to support Members and staff through payroll and financial services, logistics, counseling and employee assistance, photography and creative services, technology support, cybersecurity protection and vendor contracting to name just a few.

We also take great pride in providing the training programs staff need to develop the skill sets they need to be successful. We continue to see an enormous need in this area and are committed to continually stepping up our efforts to provide the most needed and relevant staff training.

House staff come from many backgrounds with no formal prior job specific training. Staff may feel overwhelmed and uncertain at various points and have to learn on the job through trial and error and observation. At the same time, we have talented and experienced people on the House campus who can and want to help each other. We want to facilitate the sharing of best practices between 441

unique but parallel offices who are doing the same things—many of which are done nowhere else.

The CAO leadership wants to use our role, our resources, and our location to bring staff together in a non-partisan way, to better prepare them for their work and to give them the confidence and skills to succeed. Our hope is that staff will stay on the Hill and become experts and leaders as they work on behalf of the American people and benefit our institution.

CAO training has evolved. It began with a few classrooms where you could learn WordPerfect and other technical skills. In 2017, the CAO launched a House-focused professional development organization, the Congressional Staff Academy, that would better align with the needs of Members of Congress and their staff.

This effort resulted in new state-of-the art classrooms, administrative systems, and most importantly, developed classes to address the needs of the House-specific job profiles in Member and Committee offices.

A team of professional educators and instructors composed of staff and consultants designed an operation that implements industry-leading practices in the instructional design, development, and content delivery geared toward adult professionals. Additionally, the Staff Academy team enabled House offices to find, access, and track their development online and via mobile devices, which is helpful for D.C. and district staff. This foundational work while challenging has paid great dividends especially now that we are fully virtual.

Initially, the Academy team focused its limited resources on developing introductory professional development for select staff profiles including Chiefs of Staff, Communication Directors, Schedulers, Caseworkers, and new managers.

Additionally, they worked to create and rollout the Workplace Rights training to every House employee in person, across the country, totally over 13,000 individuals.

The Staff Academy conducts a thorough biennial needs assessment by surveying, interviewing, and meeting with hundreds of staff in every role in a Member and Committee office. This adds to constant feedback our staff receive and value through regular conversations and frequent engagement with staff in Member and Committee offices. This is used to identify yearly course development plans.

Since 2018, the Staff Academy has grown in its course offerings, and its attendance both in volume and efficiency. For example, in 2018 the Staff Academy had 1,601 students register for classes with a 28% attendance rate. In 2020 they had 8,548 students register for classes with a 64% attendance rate, and this year they are on pace to exceed those numbers already serving 3,676 and maintaining a 64% attendance rate for students from Member and Committee offices. These numbers do not include required trainings such as Ethics, Cyber or Workplace Rights and Responsibilities, which combined means the Academy schedules, delivers, and tracks attendance for more than 40,000 individual seats in classes on an annual basis.

That said, we are not satisfied with progress to date. With a continued focus on meeting the needs of Members and Staff, we are doubling down on our vision for the Staff Academy to be an essential resource for every staffer in the People's House.

This year, we are launching a new program focused on Member Office Staff Skills. This program will be led by full-time veteran D.C. and district staffers who have

excelled and know what other staff need. They will be teaching others what they've learned the hard way—and they'll be recruiting their colleagues to train and mentor as well.

Our team will prioritize the everyday skills that staff use at the most basic level to be successful in their role. So, a new District Director will be able to learn from a veteran on how to communicate their Member's priorities at a community meeting, a new Chief might learn from a veteran Chief tips for writing their budget, and a new Legislative Assistant might learn how to approach the Rules Committee or write questions for a committee hearing. We'll use a mixture of best-practice panels, internal and external speakers, quick tips, emails, videos, idea sheets, one-on-one coaching techniques, peer-to-peer sessions, quick lunchtime classes, and traditional courses to provide a full spectrum of content to staff. Our hope is staff will learn the things no one ever tells you about to actually get things done.

So far, our small team of full-time staffers has made great strides. We are in the process of hiring four new instructors with extensive Member office experience. We hope to roll out our new program this summer. Next year, we plan to add an additional set of instructors after we evaluate our results this year.

As we expand the Congressional Staff Academy operations, I am confident that we are in a great position to deliver even greater value to the Members and staff of this institution, so we can fulfill our mission of helping you to do your constitutional duties. We ask for your support and partnership as we seek to develop and retain staff in the House.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Ms. Szpindor.

We had to create the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress punch card for our second witness, a frequent flyer with the committee, Brad Fitch.

After this visit to the committee, congratulations. I owe you a free latte.

Mr. Fitch is the president and CEO of the Congressional Management Foundation, a position he has held since 2010. He spent 25 years in Washington as a journalist, congressional aide, consultant, college instructor, internet entrepreneur, a writer and researcher.

I am concerned you can't hold a job, Brad.

Mr. Fitch began working on Capitol Hill in 1988, where he served for 13 years in a variety of positions for four Members of Congress.

Mr. Fitch, welcome back. You are now recognized for 5 minutes to give an oral presentation of your testimony.

STATEMENT OF BRAD FITCH

Mr. FITCH. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Mr. Vice Chairman, members of the committee. I am grateful for this opportunity today to testify before you on the topic of congressional staff capacity.

As you all know, one of the biggest challenges to staff capacity is high turnover. Many staffers leave their jobs due to this punishing schedule, comparatively low pay, and general public derision.

According to your own "2019 House Compensation and Diversity Study Report," staff in Member offices stay in their position an average of 2.5 years, while leadership and committee staff stay 2.7 years.

One of the issues leading to staff turnover is staff pay. To be sure, most people who apply for a job in Congress don't do it for the money.

In our research we conducted with the Society for Human Resource Management as part of our "Life in Congress" series, we asked staff why they stay in their jobs. They cite meaningfulness of work, the desire to help people, and their dedication to public service for the top reasons for staying.

However, the reasons they cited for leaving have to do with low compensation and professional development opportunities. The desire to earn more money is the top reason they cite for leaving their job.

And turnover on Capitol Hill results in a cost of institutional memory, policy expertise, and process knowledge. And this puts Congress at a significant disadvantage.

Consider looking at Congress and the entire public policy arena as a three-way competition between the executive branch, the legislative branch, and the private sector.

CMF conducted an analysis of representative staffers from these three areas who all worked on the National Defense Authorization Act.

The key executive branch staffer had 30 years' experience and was paid nearly \$200,000. The staffer working for a member of the House Armed Services committee had 4 years' experience and was

paid one-third of that. And the lobbyist working for the defense contractor had worked on the bill 30 years and was paid ten times what the House legislative assistant was paid.

Put simply, Congress is significantly overmatched in the public policy arena.

With that context in mind, CMF provided 11 recommendations in its written testimony, and we would like to highlight five here today.

First, increase the Member's Representational Allowance by 20 percent. And this change, by the way, is not really an increase, but just rather a correction for the years the House cut its own budget. To make the House more competitive for hiring outstanding employees, it should consider an actual increase in pay for staff.

Second, establish a salary threshold for junior staff. Too many congressional staffers have to take a second job just to make ends meet. A minimum salary floor would ensure a living wage for your employees.

Third, consider a recommendation related to overtime pay in Congress—or, to be more accurate, the lack of overtime pay.

As this committee knows, the Congressional Accountability Act applies certain rights and protections of the Fair Labor Standards Act to congressional staff.

The House may need to make some changes to ensure that the institution is following the intended purpose of the Congressional Accountability Act.

Specifically, the Department of Labor recently changed the minimum salary threshold for overtime eligibility to just over \$35,000.

We urge the committee to thoroughly examine this issue and make recommendations to the House to ensure that the institution is not only living up to the letter of the Congressional Accountability Act, but the spirit of the act as well.

Fourth, increase the budget for the Congressional Staff Academy. Initially under the leadership of CAO Phil Kiko, and now under CAO Catherine Szpindor, the House has made a gigantic leap forward to enhance professional development opportunities for staff.

The establishment of the academy and the plans the current CAO has for its growth are, quite simply, the most important and most consequential steps the House has ever taken to improve professionalism, job retention, and effectiveness for those who serve in Congress.

Fifth, the House should also consider changing the student loan repayment program so that all staff have equal opportunity to equal benefits.

Currently, each office receives the same amount, regardless of how many eligible employees it has, and independently determines how to distribute those funds.

We recommend changing the student loan program to replicate transit and healthcare benefits.

Finally, for the House and Senate to genuinely address the challenges to staff capacity, the institution must change its culture.

Too often, given the extraordinary demands on the job, staff are viewed as easily expendable and easily replaced. This not only has a tangible negative impact on the institution of Congress, it exacts a terrible toll on these amazing public servants.

A recent news story looked at the insurrection of January 6 and the aftermath impact on the attack on congressional staff. One congressional staffer said in the article this: "Staff in general have a feeling like they are being invisible, like nobody is looking out for us."

Staff are the lifeblood of this institution, and the culture needs to change and treat them accordingly.

This committee has been an oasis of constructive thinking on how to improve the institution of Congress, and your work can create a transformational change that will not only impact the people who work on Capitol Hill, but will create a legislative institution to better serve our Nation.

And as this chairman and vice chairman have wisely pointed out on many occasions, ultimately your mission is to enhance the product and services you deliver to your principal stakeholder, the American people.

Thank you.

[The statement of Mr. Fitch follows:]

TESTIMONY FROM BRADFORD FITCH, PRESIDENT & CEO, CONGRESSIONAL MANAGEMENT FOUNDATION
TO
SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE MODERNIZATION OF CONGRESS
MAY 6, 2021

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Vice-Chairman, and Members of the Committee. I'm Bradford Fitch, President and CEO of the Congressional Management Foundation, and I am grateful to have this opportunity to testify before this Committee on the topic of congressional staff capacity. As you know, throughout CMF's 44-year history, supporting congressional staff has been a core component of our mission. We heartily applaud the Committee's interest and exploration of this topic and hope CMF can contribute to the creation and implementation of Committee recommendations that will improve the professional development of congressional staff, increase job retention among staff, and enhance the congressional work environment to reinforce Congress as a viable, long-term career for dedicated public servants, as opposed to a stepping stone to better paying jobs in Washington and throughout the country.

This testimony is based on quantitative data CMF has collected from congressional staff, as well as qualitative data collected in our direct work with staff through training programs and our work with individual congressional offices. In Members' personal offices, work in Congress typically starts as an intern in college, which may then lead to an entry-level position. Many staffers often quickly leave due to the punishing schedule, comparatively low pay, high stakes, and/or public derision. In fact, according to the "2019 House Compensation and Diversity Study Report," staff in Member offices have been in the position for 2.5 years on average while staff in committee and leadership offices average 2.7 years in position.

That means most of the key staffers on Capitol Hill—the ones who directly support the policy and constituent engagement work of Senators and Representatives—are fairly new to their jobs. This has been the case for at least 10 years.

To be sure, most people who apply for a job in Congress don't do it for the money. In our research for the "Life in Congress" project (a collaboration by CMF and SHRM, the Society for Human Resource Management) staff cite the meaningfulness of their work, their desire to help people, and their dedication to public service as the top reasons for staying in their jobs. However, their reasons for leaving their jobs have mostly to do with low compensation and the human resource infrastructure. Their desire to earn more money is the top reason staff cite for leaving their job. This is hardly surprising given that congressional salaries have largely remained stagnant or declined in the past decade, putting Congress at a significant disadvantage compared to other employers. A Legislative Assistant in the House with three years of experience or more could easily increase their pay by 25 to 50 percent if they move to a trade association or a lobby shop. A Senate Chief of Staff can triple their salary in a few years after leaving Capitol Hill.

Staff cite inadequate opportunities for professional development almost as often as the desire to earn more money as a reason they leave their jobs. Congressional staffers are well-educated, motivated, ambitious employees who want their careers to progress. With little consideration given to professional development on Capitol Hill, the best way for staff to advance is to leave their jobs or leave Congress.

Turnover on Capitol Hill results in costs to the institution. Institutional memory, policy expertise, and process knowledge all are damaged. There is also significant time and expense associated with continuously hiring and onboarding new employees. Turnover also leads to loss of productivity and disruption to teams and workflows. However, unlike any other workplace, a limited infrastructure exists to manage these problems or quickly get new staffers trained and productive on their jobs. It isn't hard to infer that the resulting problems directly impact the public policy that affects the entire nation.

Consider looking at Congress and the entire public policy arena as a three-way competition between the Executive Branch, the Legislative Branch, and the private sector. CMF conducted a quick analysis of representative staff from these three areas who all worked on a recent National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), a bill passed annually. The key Executive Branch representative had 30 years of experience and was paid nearly \$200,000. The staffer working for a Member of the House Armed Services Committee had four years of experience, and was paid one-third that amount. And the lobbyist for a defense contractor who worked on the bill had 30 years of experience and was paid 10 times what the House Legislative Assistant was paid. Put simply, Congress is significantly overmatched in the public policy arena.

And congressional staff themselves recognize this problem. In 2016 CMF conducted a survey of senior staff in U.S. Senators' and Representatives' offices to understand their perceptions of certain aspects of congressional performance, which resulted in our 2017 report, "State of the Congress: Staff Perspectives on Institutional Capacity in the House and Senate." We surveyed staff on 11 key aspects relating to institutional capacity and public access. We asked staff how important each aspect was for the effective functioning of their chamber, and how satisfied they were with their chamber's performance for that aspect.

Almost all of the respondents to our survey considered staff knowledge, skills and abilities to be important to their chamber's effectiveness, and 83% felt it to be "very important." However, only 15% were "very satisfied" with their chamber's performance in this area. Of all the aspects of congressional operations we asked senior staffers about, this was the most important to them, and it had the greatest gap between "very important" and "very satisfied," at 68 percentage points.

Of slightly less importance to the respondents was their chamber's human resource infrastructure in support of its staff. Still, 49% said it is "very important" that their chamber's human resource (HR) infrastructure adequately support staffers' official duties, and only 5% were "very satisfied" with their chamber's performance.

As the Committee considers recommendations to address deficiencies in the area of staff capacity, we hope you remain focused on these two areas: creating a highly professionalized workforce, and

providing the human resources infrastructure to support that workforce. With that in mind, CMF would like to offer the following recommendations for consideration.

1. Increase the Members' Representational Allowance (MRA) by 20 percent, a recommendation submitted to the Appropriations Committee recently by Majority Leader Hoyer and Representative Jeffries. This change is not really an increase, but rather a correction for the years that the House cut its own budget. Even with this change the House is not explicitly making improvements to its staff pay. To make the House more competitive for hiring outstanding employees it should consider an actual increase in pay for staff. Another option to enhance pay could be to examine some expenditures currently in the individual office domain and shift those costs to the institution. In the 116th Congress this Committee recommended the House examine bulk purchasing of commonly utilized items as a strategy to save costs. Similarly, the House could examine those areas that could be borne by the institution to free up funds for staff pay, such as computer hardware, software, district office security enhancements, and virtual or telephone town hall meetings.
2. Establish a salary threshold for junior staff. Too many staffers have to take a second job just to make ends meet. The Committee previously has wisely recommended pay band guidance for congressional staff. So, to compare the House to the Executive Branch, a new employee at a junior level as a staff assistant, GS-5, working at the Internal Revenue Service would start at a salary of \$38,632. There are many Staff Assistants and Legislative Assistants working in the House for less than that amount. A minimum salary floor would ensure a living wage for your employees.
3. Increase the budget for the Congressional Staff Academy. Initially under the leadership of Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) Phil Kiko, and now under CAO Catherine Szpindor, the House has made a gigantic leap forward to enhance professional development opportunities for House staff. Many of their most exciting ideas are still underway, and we look forward to hearing the testimony of CAO Catherine Szpindor on this topic. Yet at this point CMF can say this: the initial establishment of the Congressional Staff Academy in 2017, and the plans the current CAO has for its growth, are quite simply the most important and most consequential steps the House has ever taken to improve the professionalism, job retention, and effectiveness of those who serve in Congress. This great work deserves additional support from this Committee and the House as an institution, and we strongly recommend the House consider increasing the budget for the Congressional Staff Academy. Transparency Note: While CMF has previously contracted with the House to provide training services to congressional staff, we do not currently have a contract to provide training services through the Congressional Staff Academy and have no plans to pursue such a contract.
4. CMF also recommends eliminating an outdated House rule that discourages staff training by prohibiting offices from paying for training that includes a certification. We understand this rule initially was put in place so that funds were not expended solely to benefit individual staff members at taxpayer expense. However, can you picture any industry that actually prohibits staff from getting professional development if that training comes with some kind of

certification? The House should amend this rule to allow offices to pay for training that includes certification, if that training directly relates to the job responsibilities of the employee or the mission of the office and excludes campaign and political training.

5. This Committee also should consider a recommendation related to overtime pay in the Congress – or, to be more accurate, the lack of overtime pay. As this Committee knows, the Congressional Accountability Act applies certain rights and protections of the Fair Labor Standards Act to congressional staff. The House may need make some changes to ensure that the institution is following the intended purpose of the Congressional Accountability Act. Specifically, the Department of Labor has changed the minimum salary threshold for overtime eligibility to \$35,568. We urge the Committee to thoroughly examine this issue and make recommendations to the House to ensure that the institution is not only living up to the letter of the Congressional Accountability Act but the spirit of the Act as well. And if legislative changes are required to ensure that eligible staff working overtime are paid overtime - just as they would be in the private sector - then this Committee could chart a course for the House to follow.
6. The House should also consider changing the student loan repayment program so that all staff have an equal opportunity to equal benefits. Currently, each office receives the same amount and independently decides how to distribute it among staff. This translates to unfair and unequal benefits. If one office has four staffers utilizing the program, and another office has two, the office with fewer staffers utilizing could be getting greater benefits. Would you distribute transit benefits this way, with one office giving some staff \$150/month in pre-tax benefits and another office giving staff \$200? We recommend changing the student loan repayment program to replicate transit or health care benefits, and transfer all administration of the program to institutional offices of the House.
7. The House should also consider creative partnerships with the Executive Branch to provide additional resources to House offices. If there are limitations on congressional resources, evaluate and study the ability to partner with Executive Branch agencies in areas where they can accommodate Legislative Branch staff (e.g., childcare facilities, training similar to USDA courses).
8. The House also should consider expanding the House Child Care Center. The current facility still has a long waiting list, and this deficiency is pushing out very good public servants from working in the Congress. A staffer should not have to choose between a career on Capitol Hill and starting a family.
9. This Committee has previously recommended raising the cap on the number of staff currently serving in Member offices, a recommendation CMF heartily endorses. This limit often prevents offices from offering opportunities to worthy employee or intern candidates. For example, we know of many offices that could accommodate more part-time staff or interns if the cap was changed. And, if there is resistance to lifting or eliminating the staff ceiling, perhaps consider a carve-out that certain individuals would not count against the ceiling – interns, wounded veterans, individuals with disabilities, etc.

10. Create a staff council where staff throughout the institution are nominated by their peers to represent them before the institution. The council would meet periodically to raise and discuss issues relevant to staff and identify issues that need to be conveyed to institutional organizations, such as the Committee on House Administration, the Office of the Chief Administrative Officer, House Employment Counsel, etc. This would not only serve as a professional development opportunity for participating staffers, it would provide a visible venue for staff concerns and interests to be represented.
11. Designate a majority and minority staffer, likely from the Committee on House Administration, to actively participate in and represent the United States at the Inter-parliamentary Union. This would facilitate the House learning from other legislatures the international thinking about legislative operations, staffing, technology, philosophy, etc. and sharing House practices internationally. For participating staffers, it is also a significant professional development opportunity. The House would likely benefit greatly from the research and engagement and enable ideas to be explored and adopted without undergoing the same processes—and making similar mistakes—as other legislatures.

Finally, for the House and Senate to genuinely address the challenges to staff capacity, the institution must change its culture, which for decades has declined to embrace a role as steward of its workforce. Too often, given the extraordinary demand for jobs in Congress, staff are viewed as expendable and easily replaced. This not only has a tangible negative impact on the institution of Congress, it exacts a terrible toll on these amazing public servants. A recent news story examined the impact of the insurrection on January 6, and the aftermath of that attack on the mental and physical well-being of congressional staff. One staffer quoted said this: “Staff in general have been feeling like we’re invisible, like nobody is looking out for us.” Staff are the life blood of this institution, and the culture needs to change to treat them accordingly.

I don’t have to tell Members of Congress what you know so well and so personally: the level of vitriol flowing into your offices through phone lines and the internet has reached unprecedented and dangerous levels. Last week during a training program of congressional staff, CMF conducted a snap poll of 55 staffers, and asked if they had experienced direct insults or threatening messages or communications. More than three-quarters said they had.

This is all the more disturbing knowing what kind of people serve in congressional offices. Congressional staffers are not alone in their passion to help despite stressful and demanding conditions. First responders, nurses, Navy Seals, and others also make sacrifices resulting from their commitment to serve. The difference between them and congressional staff is this: most Americans who make sacrifices for others are lauded for those sacrifices, whereas congressional staff are ridiculed, belittled, and literally spat upon in the public square. There comes a point where the abuse overwhelms the passion, the negativity erases all meaning of why they jumped on this crazy rollercoaster called Congress to begin with. On some level they prepare themselves for this life. But nothing seems to quite prepare them for the threats and foul invectives screamed over the phone line, the skewed portrayal of what motivates Congress constantly churned by the Internet, or the haranguing at the Thanksgiving dinner table by a relative whose sole knowledge of Congress is based on three episodes of *House of Cards*.

The Congress must deeply consider how these present times are affecting congressional staff – these silent patriots who toil under the dome. They are passionate public servants hoping their contributions can make the world a better place. This Committee has been an oasis of constructive thinking on how to improve the institution of Congress and enhance the staff work experience. CMF hopes that your fine work and enthusiasm for improvement spreads to other Members of Congress. If the culture is not changed, and strategies are only talked about and dabbled in, then we do not foresee significant changes in the congressional work environment. As Peter Drucker—the father of modern management theory—put it: culture eats strategy for lunch.

We know from working with this Committee in the 116th Congress that you “get it.” Our request is that you continue this quest to improve the Congress, and convince others in the institution to join your cause. This kind of transformational change will not only impact the people who work on Capitol Hill, but will create a legislative institution to better serve our nation. And, as this Committee has wisely pointed out on many occasions, ultimately your mission is to enhance the product and services you deliver to your principal stakeholder: the American people.

I thank the Committee for this opportunity to address you, and look forward to continuing to assist you in your important work.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Mr. Fitch.

Our next witness is Aaron Jones, the Director of Congressional Relations at the Wilson Center, which runs highly regarded training and professional development programs for congressional staff.

Previously, Mr. Jones served for 8 years in the office of Representative Hal Rogers. His expertise is in Federal budgeting, the appropriations process, legislative history, and U.S. politics.

Mr. Jones, you are now recognized for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF AARON JONES

Mr. JONES. Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Vice Chairman and members of the committee. Thank you for asking me to testify before you today.

As the chairman said, I currently serve as the Director of Congressional Relations for the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, a Federal trust instrumentality created by Congress in 1968 to provide a place for scholarship, open debate, and actionable ideas that the legislative branch can use to create policy.

We do not advocate positions. Rather, our job is to provide Congress with the expertise that you need in order to make informed decisions and take educated votes on the issues our Nation faces.

Through the policy education programs that we run at the Wilson Center, we know that there are men and women within this institution who care deeply about growing professionally, and they care deeply about this country, and they want to work with the other side to find common ground. This may not be something that the media likes to report on, but that doesn't mean it isn't happening.

Our job, as people who care about our country and this institution, is to continue to provide these opportunities and to make sure that we do not create a self-fulfilling prophecy where we say that there is no bipartisanship, therefore, we must make it so.

I served as a staffer for Congressman Hal Rogers in the mid-2000s for several years. And as a staffer seeking to grow professionally, I actually applied to the Wilson Center's Foreign Policy Fellowship Program in 2013 and completed the program. I traveled with a staff delegation trip to Mexico in 2014 that was arranged by the Wilson Center for a group of alumni from the program.

I never dreamed as a staffer that participating in this program would lead to my becoming the Director of Congressional Relations and managing that very same program, but it has been wonderful to see the growth that I have seen in staff.

The Wilson Center runs several policy education programs for congressional staff, the vision of which is to allow congressional staff to come together, learn, and grow. The core of our programs is the Foreign Policy Fellowship Program, which is supported by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

This program targets mid- to senior-level staffers and consists of six classes held on Friday afternoons. Each session focuses on a different foreign policy topic and lasts for 2 or 3 hours.

Participants also engage in interactive simulation exercises that are designed by our experts, and these exercises place participants in groups where staffers from both Chambers and both parties

have to work together to come up with responses that appeal to the whole group.

Finally, there is also a social hour, which of course this portion has been omitted during the COVID pandemic, but we intend to reinstate that as soon as conditions permit.

We also run master class sessions on various important issue areas that are targeted for senior-level staff. These classes take deep dives on issue areas where staffers work for several hours studying it. So far, we have conducted master classes on cybersecurity, Russia, China, the Arctic, North Korea, and there are upcoming sessions on Africa and water security.

Beyond these offerings, we also have classes on cybersecurity and artificial intelligence that follow the foreign policy fellowship models and master class models.

To date, we have had nearly 1,300 congressional staff participate in the various classes that we offer—including, I might add, one member of the second panel who will be testifying before the committee today.

Upon graduation from these programs, staffers become part of an alumni network. We engage these alumni by offering additional briefings, forums, delegation trips to keep staffers informed, and, most importantly, interacting with each other.

As Members know, the congressional delegation activities of traveling with their colleagues cannot only be an educational asset for policymaking, but it also builds relationships and friendships that extend beyond Chamber, beyond party, and can last a lifetime.

We have heard directly from participants that their experience within our programs have led to staff working together across the aisle either to create legislation or simply to have a sounding board with the other side as they craft their policies.

After 8 years of running this program, the Wilson Center has developed a reputation among staffers for providing solid, non-partisan expertise, and this is useful to their Members as well as to their careers.

Many staffers hear about this opportunity for professional growth by word of mouth, from their peers and from their colleagues. One participant recently told us that he had heard about our programs while he was doing interviews on the Hill, describing the opportunity as a professional development opportunity and perk for the job.

I am often contacted by chiefs of staff and other hiring managers on the Hill who take notice of our programming that is listed on candidates' resumes, and this is very rewarding for us.

I hope that I have demonstrated today that this proves that there are rays of sunshine through the clouds of partisanship that we are often hearing about. It is my hope that places like the Wilson Center can continue to find resources to maintain these types of programs for congressional staff, not only for their individual professional development, but for the health of a vibrant democracy.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

[The statement of Mr. Jones follows:]

**TESTIMONY OF AARON JONES
DIRECTOR OF CONGRESSIONAL RELATIONS
WOODROW WILSON INTERNATIONAL CENTER FOR SCHOLARS**

**BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON MODERNIZATION**

UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

MAY 6, 2021

Chairman Kilmer, Vice Chairman Timmons, and Members of the committee, thank you for asking me to testify before you today.

I currently serve as the Director of Congressional Relations for the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, a federal trust instrumentality created by Congress in 1968 to provide a place for scholarship, open debate, and actionable ideas that the legislative branch can use to create policy. We do not advocate a position; rather, our job is to provide Congress with expertise in order to make informed decisions and take educated votes on the issues our nation faces. The legislative branch is called upon to do everything from naming post offices to declaring war. No individual Member or staffer can be an expert on all the things you are asked to weigh in on. You must rely on trustworthy experts who will dispense good advice and avoid lobbying.

It is commonplace to hear that our politics are broken and that Congress has never been so divided. Not only does our history prove that sentiment incorrect, but through the policy education programs we run at the Wilson Center, we know that there are men and women within this institution who care deeply about this country and want to work with the other side to find common ground. This is not something that the media likes to report. Ratings are better for stories where Republicans and Democrats are at each other's throats and a government shutdown clock is winding down to zero. A story about congressional staffers regularly meeting to develop professionally, become better advisors to their Members, learn about issues, ask honest questions and work through consensus building exercises just isn't one people want to read. But that doesn't mean it isn't happening. Our job, as people who care about our country and this institution, is to continue to provide these opportunities and make sure that we do not create a self-fulfilling prophecy where we say there is no bipartisanship, therefore we must make it so.

I began my career as an intern on Capitol Hill in the mid-aughts, working for Rep. Hal Rogers, for whom I worked until 2014. While working for him, and with the Appropriations Committee during his tenure as Chairman, I saw first-hand the behind-the-scenes bipartisan work done every day, many times into the night and on weekends, by staff on both sides of the Committee. In

2014, I began to seek out ways to grow professionally and was advised by a mentor to find ways to meet other staffers from across the aisle. Taking this advice, I worked on a Masters Degree using the program available for staffers through the Naval War College. A colleague in Rep. Rogers's office also told me about the Foreign Policy Fellowship Program he was taking at the Wilson Center.

I never dreamed as a staffer that participating in this program would lead to my becoming the Director of Congressional Relations at the Wilson Center and managing the very same program. When I participated as a staffer, the program was run by Aaron David Miller who was the then-Vice President for New Initiatives. CEO Emeritas Jane Harman envisioned a program where congressional staff could be separated from their offices for a few hours a week, to come together, learn, meet, and grow together. I am proud to carry on this work from Dr. Miller and under the leadership of Jane Harman and our current CEO, Ambassador Mark Green.

At the Wilson Center we run several policy education programs for congressional staff. The core of our programs is the Foreign Policy Fellowship Program (FPFP) which is supported by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York. This program targets mid-to-senior level staffers and consists of six classes held on Friday afternoons. Each session focuses on a different foreign policy topic and lasts two to three hours. Participants also engage in an interactive simulation exercise designed by our experts. These exercises place participants in groups where staffers from both chambers and both parties have to work together to come to responses that appeal to the whole group. Finally, staffers come together for a social hour (this portion has been omitted during the pandemic, but we intend to reinstate this when conditions permit).

In addition to FPFP, we run Masterclass sessions on various important issue areas which are targeted towards senior-level staff. These classes take a deep dive on one issue area and staffers can work for several hours studying it. Thus far, we have conducted Masterclasses on cybersecurity, Russia, China, the Arctic, and North Korea, with sessions on Africa and on water security upcoming. Beyond these offerings, we also have classes on cybersecurity and artificial intelligence that follow the FPFP and Masterclass model.

To date, we have had nearly 1,300 congressional staff participate in the various classes we offer. Many staff take multiple classes with us. About two-thirds of our participants work in House offices and one-third in the Senate (as expected due to the different size of the chambers) and are pretty evenly split between party affiliations. Upon graduation from these programs, staffers become part of an alumni network. We engage with our alumni further by offering additional briefings, forums and delegation trips to keep staffers informed and most importantly, interacting with each other. As Members know from congressional delegation activities, traveling with colleagues can not only be an educational asset for policy making, but it also builds relationships and friendships that extend beyond chamber or party, and can last a lifetime. We have heard directly from staff participants that their experiences in our programs have led to staff working

together across the aisle to either create legislation or simply to have a sounding board with the other side as they craft policy. As one staffer told us, “Through the Wilson Foreign Policy Fellowship I expanded my understanding of global political issues. The supportive environment spurred great debate and discussions of complex problems that allowed me to learn from others and challenge myself. I continue to be incredibly grateful for the relationships and friendships I formed during the program.” I can attest to this as well from my own experience participating in the program as a staffer and traveling to places to see in person the issues we had studied.

One of the things we are most proud of with our programs is the broad bipartisan appeal that we receive among congressional staff. After eight years of running this program, the Wilson Center has developed a reputation among staffers for providing solid, nonpartisan expertise that is useful to their work for their Members, as well as for their careers. Many staffers hear about this opportunity for professional growth by word-of-mouth from their peers and colleagues. One participant recently told us that he had heard about our programs while he did interviews on the Hill, describing the opportunity as a professional development perk of the job. I am often contacted by Chiefs of Staff and other hiring managers on the Hill who take notice that our programming is listed on a candidate’s resume. Another staffer alumna has said that she considered our program to be “one of the most eye-opening experiences from my time on Capitol Hill, given how much I learned and how much more open I became to welcoming new ideas and new viewpoints.”

I am submitting for the record, an article published in the most recent edition of the *Carnegie Reporter*, a publication of the Carnegie Corporation of New York. This article goes through the policy education programs that are funded by Carnegie, including those at the Wilson Center and other institutions. [Carnegie Reporter - Continuing Education for Congress: Building Trust and Expertise — To Get Things Done](#)

I hope what I have demonstrated here today proves that there are some rays of sunshine through the clouds. It is my hope that places like the Wilson Center can continue to find the resources to maintain these types of programs for congressional staff, not only for their individual professional development, but for the health of a vibrant democracy.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Mr. Jones.

We are now going to move into member questions. Just so folks have a sense of the batting order, it will be myself, followed by Mr. Timmons, then Cleaver, Davis, Phillips, Joyce, Williams, Reschenthaler, and then Van Duyne.

So with that, let me recognize myself for 5 minutes, and let me start with Ms. Szpindor.

I wanted to share that I have been hearing good feedback about the Staff Academy. It is obviously a tough job training people how to do these jobs, which often require a pretty unique skill set and, when it comes to Congress, occasionally an understanding of archaic traditions.

In the past, there has been some feedback of frustration with trainers telling staff how to do their job or without having necessarily an understanding of how Congress actually works.

I guess I was wondering, has there been consideration of hiring staff part-time to just develop curriculum and lead courses? I think the thinking is this could help pay our talented staffers a bit more and ensure that our training is based on current experience. Has that been considered?

Ms. SZPINDOR. It has. And, quite frankly, that is why we decided that, while we are hiring these four additional individuals, two who can help with district office training and two who can help with—on the staff here on the Hill—these individuals we are hiring are individuals who have recently been staffers at the House.

And we are hoping that not only can they help us in preparing some of the course material and doing the training, but they can also entice other individuals, through sort of an adjunct type program, to come in and contribute in those courses, to add to them, to maybe do some additional instruction during a live training course or a videotape training course.

So, yes, we have realized that, in order to really make this identify with those individuals in the office, we need to have people who have actually done these things before and can talk with the staff that they are trying to train to make them understand what was successful for them, and maybe that can be carried over to make them successful as well.

The CHAIRMAN. I want to follow up on the training that you offer. I am pretty struck that retention can often be tied to the degree to which a staff member feels that the office in which they work is investing in them and that their relationship with their manager is one of a loving critic who is investing in them and trying to help them improve professionally.

Having said that, oftentimes in this environment you have people stepping into management roles who haven't managed before.

So can you talk about the management training courses that you offer and the feedback you have gotten from staff who have attended those? And are you able to measure the effectiveness of those programs and whether they are having a positive impact on office culture and retention?

Ms. SZPINDOR. Yes, I can.

We have a number of leadership programs that we do offer throughout the year, both for staff—and within the CAO, as well

as staff management training and staff training for those in the offices.

We measure a lot from feedback that we get from the evaluations that are done from the classes. But also we have our customer advocates that are assigned to each of the offices. They provide us feedback.

We understand that our evaluations over the past couple years have improved, and right now we are getting about a 97 percent positive feedback on our course evaluations over the past year. So that is good. We want to improve. We want to do better.

Our attendance tells us that it is popular. Our people are attending. As I said earlier in my presentation, we had this year alone—I am sorry, last year we had attendance of 8,548, and these were with the nonrequired training programs that we all go through, like the workplace rights, like ethics, like cybersecurity training.

This year we have already trained 3,676 employees. So we expect to really beat the records that we have had in the past as far as training that we have done.

So we feel like that there are some really good indicators. Our evaluations are going up. Training attendance is going up. And we are beginning to offer more and more training for individuals.

The LinkedIn courses alone require—I think there is something like a total of thousands of courses that are available through LinkedIn learning that people can view at any time. They are online, and they are in seven different languages. For anyone who needs something in a language besides English, they can take this training.

We get a lot of people that go in and take a variety of management courses through that particular medium, because it is easy to go online and do the training.

So we are looking at a variety of ways to provide the training, and we see that we have got to improve in what we offer to the staff, which is why we are hiring the individuals that we are this year. And I expect the growth to be really good in the number of people that are attending and in the evaluations that we receive.

So I am pleased.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

Ms. SZPINDOR. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

Next up, we have got Mr. Timmons, and Mr. Cleaver is in the on-deck circle.

Mr. TIMMONS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I am going to begin with Mr. Fitch.

Mr. Fitch, you referenced increasing the entry level salary. What number do you think is appropriate there? I mean \$15 an hour is thirty, thirty-one, thirty-two thousand dollars. Is that sufficient, or where are you going with that?

And I guess another question is, how many people on the Hill make less than \$32,000? Is that really a big problem that I am not as aware of?

Mr. FITCH. Well, if you are one of those people that are making less than \$32,000, it is a big problem, because you are looking at ramen noodles for dinner most of the time.

And the number, I am not going to offer that at this time. I would like the opportunity to research that further. And I think that, at some levels, it may need to be adjusted based on location.

I mean, we live in the Washington, D.C., area. We did a little analysis, a quick analysis of what an entry level employee at the IRS would make as a staff assistant, and at the entry level they are paid \$38,000 as a minimum. And we were just looking at comparative to the executive branch.

I think this is something that should be actually explored a little bit in some focus groups with some of your own staff and look at their experiences at how they are making ends meet with a \$30,000 or a \$29,000 a year.

And, unfortunately, I do think it does require some level of a mandate, because we continue to hear stories of managers who are, frankly, engaged in a race to the bottom to bring in the lowest-paid staff member. And they treat it like a badge of honor, which is just horrible.

But you can't manage all culture at one time. So I do think that the House having some kind of floor will address some of those deficiencies.

Mr. TIMMONS. Sure. And I guess the challenge there—I mean, I think D.C. is one thing, because the cost of living is so high, but certain more rural areas, if you are in a very rural area, it is just a different story for an entry level job.

But I definitely agree. We pride ourselves on taking care of our team members. So it would be interesting to know how many people are working on the Hill that make less than \$32,000 a year. I am sure we can look into that.

Thank you, Mr. Fitch.

And, again, I wanted to appreciate, I was just looking at my email. Three, 4 years ago, it was 2018, is the first time I emailed you, and I emailed you at 6 a.m. And you got back to me four hours later, and you said, "I am really sorry for the delay."

And I just think that is great. We hit the ground running because of the resources that you offer, and I just really appreciate the role that you all play in helping Congress really get offices set up. So thank you for that.

Mr. FITCH. My pleasure.

Mr. TIMMONS. Ms. Szpindor, I want to go back to you regarding the recommendations that we made in the 116th.

Do we need to do something, direction through appropriations, or are there changes that can be made without needing actual directive? Could you just give us an update there?

Ms. SZPINDOR. From the last Modernization Committee?

We are making progress on that. We are prepared at any time to sit down and begin updating you on the progress we are making.

Yesterday, in fact, we have rolled out digital signatures for congressional offices to use through our new Quill program, and that is one of the things that we have been working on from a modernization standpoint.

We have probably about 20, 25 projects that are ongoing that we think is consistent with the request that was made in the 116th. And we are tracking all the others to make sure that we have them

prioritized and ready to go as soon as we have staffing available to start working on those.

So we are making good progress, and we would love to sit down with you at any time and review those projects.

Mr. TIMMONS. Sure. Thank you. Thank you so much for that. We really appreciate all your hard work. And just please use us as a resource to get you whatever additional help you need to get all of these things implemented. We really do appreciate all your hard work.

One specific area. Could you talk about the recommendation regarding onboarding training for new employees? Have we made any progress there?

Ms. SZPINDOR. Well, our HR Department has developed a human capital program where part of that is recruiting and ensuring that we have recruiting that is sent out to a variety of different groups to ensure that we have a broad diversity of individuals that are applying for our courses and a much greater audience of recruiting firms that we can pull from.

So we are seeing that, from a recruiting standpoint, we are seeing many more applications and many more submissions than what we have in the past.

Mr. TIMMONS. Sure. I don't want to take—I am over my time. I apologize. We are going to definitely get with you soon.

But, again, thank you so much for all your hard work, and we look forward to helping you through this process. Thank you.

Ms. SZPINDOR. I thank you for that. Thank you.

Mr. TIMMONS. I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Vice Chair Timmons.

Next up, Mr. Cleaver, and Mr. Davis is in the on-deck circle.

Mr. CLEAVER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, thank you, Mr. Timmons, both of you, for this meeting today.

I would like for all three of our witnesses to respond to this question.

How do you think the American public would respond to the Members of Congress adequately paying its workforce? What would be the response of the taxpayers in your estimation?

Mr. FITCH. Well, I will take the first one. And I think you have obviously teed up, Congressman, one of the challenges. Anytime Congress, quote/unquote, "spends money on itself," it is criticized, sometimes unfairly. I remember looking at the—when they spent money on the Capitol Visitor Center, we even had critics. And I am like, "What about the word 'visitor' do you not get? It is not the Congress."

But there are ways to address that. So, if you didn't want to see an overall increase in the overall either legislative branch budget, you could shift costs within the legislative branch. For example, certain institutional costs could cover things that are currently paid for by the MRA, everything from hardware, software. There are more creative ways to do it. And I think that may be one of the ways that this committee may want to recommend so it doesn't have to eventually take the hit.

But in the end, the legislative branch has to get on an equal footing with the executive branch, and that may mean an increase in pay.

But I think you do need to look at internally how the numbers go, because a lot of the money, as you know, is being eaten up in security and in building costs at this point in the leg branch, and that has got to be addressed at some point or else that is going to continue to suck money out of the personal, committee, and leadership offices.

Mr. CLEAVER. Thank you.

Mr. Jones.

Mr. JONES. I am happy to take a stab at it as well.

I think that one of the problems is a perception of the American public that staff are paid a whole lot more. I don't think that there is a recognition [inaudible] that there is low pay in Congress.

And, also, I think there is also a perception of big offices with a whole bunch of people working, and they are working 9 to 5, and that is it. I can't tell you how often I have picked up the phone at 6, 8 o'clock at night when a constituent calls in and they are shocked that somebody is answering the phone.

But I think there is a perception problem that needs to—this is something that needs to be talked about.

And I worked for Congressman Hal Rogers when he was chairman of the Appropriations Committee, and those that are on the committee that are also on the Appropriations Committee can remember well the circular firing squad that we had during the last recession in what Mr. Fitch called the race to the bottom on congressional staff salaries.

We are still recovering from that. Member pay and/or Member Representational Allowances are still recovering from that to where I know staffers today who are being paid as much as I was when I started in 2006, 2007. But I think perception among constituents, when you show constituents [inaudible].

Mr. CLEAVER. Thank you, Mr. Jones.

Ms. SZPINDOR. I will add just a few comments.

I mean, I think that we can provide excellent staff training, all three of us can who are speaking today. But, really and truly, if the staff can't afford to live in D.C. and they can't afford to function with the salary they have, then that has got to be addressed.

I think that it is going to be the way it is presented to the American people. We have to give them the ability, if they are going to work here, to be able to make the money they need to live.

And all of the great training we provide and everything will certainly help them be able to function in their job, but still, at the end of the day, if they are not able to find a place to live that they can afford, that is going to cause retention to suffer.

Mr. CLEAVER. Thank you.

Mr. Fitch, I was at the White House two weeks ago for a meeting, and I looked around the room in the Oval Office with a number, about eight Members from both sides of the aisle.

And I looked at the people who were standing around the walls, the people who work over in the White House, and every single one of them, every one that was in that room once worked over in the House of Representatives.

Shuwanza Goff, for example, was the floor manager that I think Mr. Kilmer would remember easily.

And I am sitting there thinking, these are thieves over here in the White House. These are convicts. They are stealing all of our people.

Now, I didn't say that to the President, because I have a lot more sense than that. But, my goodness, I thought it was horrible.

My time is up. But you mentioned, Mr. Fitch, about this branch of government falling behind, and one of the reasons is that we train people over here for a year or two, and then the White House—I don't care what administration it is—they steal them.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Mr. Cleaver.

Next up, we have got Mr. Davis.

Mr. DAVIS. Okay. Thank you, Mr. Chair. I appreciate the opportunity to be here today.

And all the witnesses. Great discussion.

I do want to also echo some of the comments that were made by Derek, the chair, in regards to the Congressional Staff Academy, Ms. Szpindor. I think, looking ahead, we will be in a much better position to retain staff and be able to move forward.

And, as many of you know on this committee, we have former staffers that are now Members of Congress.

So this is a committee that I hope will get a lot of things done to benefit addressing the issue that we are here to talk about today.

Ms. Szpindor, during the last Congress we talked about making the CAO more of an outward-facing organization. How has that worked since you began? Because I am someone who believes a stronger, more proactive approach from the CAO to Member offices is something that we can have more Members be informed with.

You mentioned earlier you have folks that are put in place to be our liaisons. But give us a little more detail about what you plan to do even more so in the future.

Ms. SZPINDOR. Sure.

Well, I think a big step for me was hiring someone to just focus on customer relations. Lisa Sherman came in, a former chief of staff, and with her expertise and having worked in Member offices, she has really added a fresh perspective to how we believe we can move forward.

And I think, by the work that she is doing to hire these new instructors from the staff, this is going to help us a great deal.

But she also has some great ideas on how to market the products that we have directly to the staff. Because what we are finding out, Congressman Davis, is that we have a lot of things that we have developed that people really just don't know about.

Mr. DAVIS. You are right.

Ms. SZPINDOR. And I think that, by having a marketing branch, an outreach branch that is part of the CAO, we can mature that to where we are providing information that each Member office needs to know about the services we provide and how to get in touch with us and in touch with the right people to be able to acquire those services or get help with those services.

We are also looking at major changes to our technology group and how we are reaching out and working with each office. And I am not quite prepared to announce that. We are working on it. But

we are looking at how we can provide more services, more real-time, modern services to the offices, and you should be hearing about that in another month or so.

Mr. DAVIS. Great. Great. I think Lisa is great. I worked with her in my capacity on House Administration before, and the Franking Commission. I am glad you are seeing her make a difference and put that office perspective in place within your agency. I look forward to hearing some more from you in the future and sitting down with Lisa to talk about some of the things you just mentioned.

You know, one program that I always highlighted when I was a staffer and continue to highlight to my team is the student loan repayment program here in the House. I watched some of my colleagues pay off their student loans with this program.

But there were things that Mr. Jones mentioned about the lowest-paid employees—Mr. Fitch mentioned about the lowest-paid employees. I always was upset as a staffer that the lowest-paid employees were the ones who couldn't take the full benefit because of the tax provisions that used to be in place. But many of my colleagues on this committee and other colleagues joined me in passing a bill that I authored that would take away that tax penalty for up to \$5,250 a year.

How are you letting employees and letting offices know that now they can offer this same program and their lowest-paid employees can take the full benefit without having to worry about paying Uncle Sam in the future?

Ms. SZPINDOR. I know that our Payroll and Benefits group has held sessions with offices. I know that we have sent out material.

I think that it is a great point. We need to do more in that area to make them aware of that. I think, with the way we have been working remotely and everything, it has been a little bit more difficult for our Payroll and Benefits group to be able to get that message out to everyone.

But I will take that back, and we will see what we can do.

Mr. DAVIS. Well, thank you, Catherine, and thank you to the witnesses.

And thank you, Mr. Chair. I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Thanks, Mr. Davis.

Next up, we have got Mr. Phillips, and Mr. Joyce is in the on-deck circle.

Mr. PHILLIPS. Thank you, Mr. Chair. I realize I am a little too modern for Congress. I do have a tie here, everybody. It is just I forgot to tie it. So we will get to that in a future hearing.

I want to thank our witnesses and reflect on the fact that, when I came to Congress from the private sector, amongst my many unpleasant surprises was how poorly we resource our offices, particularly since we are the customer service department for over 700,000 people.

And what saddens me is that we are a country that seems to regularly undercompensate the most important people in our country, teachers and first responders and police officers and firefighters and public servants in our own offices.

I am embarrassed when I have to review compensation for my team and recognize their sacrifices to all of us and to the country,

and want to celebrate this hearing, because, frankly, the only way to rectify it is actually a simple way, which is a little bit of courage, I think, from all of us.

With that said, I wanted to start with you, Ms. Szpindor, relative to professional certificates and professional development.

I understand that it is not in the public's interest for public dollars to be spent to further educate or enhance the careers of public servants, but in the private sector we would sometimes resolve that by paying for college or classes or professional certificates in return for a commitment to stay on board for X number of years so there is a return on that investment.

I am just curious, from your perspective, what is the rationale on the prohibition that precludes us from paying for staff training and professional certificates, and if there is some way you think that we might present it in a thoughtful way that could move the needle.

Ms. SZPINDOR. Well, I think you just mentioning that is going to help quite a bit.

We do, I know, within the CAO provide quite a bit of additional training for people to go and take training courses that prepare them for the certifications. It has been our policy not to pay for the exact certification, but to provide them whatever training they need to be able to qualify for that.

And as far as college courses and college training, I have always been a big proponent of that as well, having come originally from the private sector. And for some of our employees, we do let them go to training at MIT or Harvard when there are professional development courses that they have. We set aside training dollars to have them go and attend some of the one-week, two-day, three-day courses that some of the larger institutions provide.

We certainly can continue to go back and look at the policies that we have around certifications. For me personally, having a number of certifications, one being for project management and other things in my career, it is helpful when you cannot only provide the training, but you can also cover the costs for the certification, because sometimes those costs are very expensive.

Mr. PHILLIPS. Terribly so, I would agree.

And I want to make it clear, too, I don't see public service as a path to become wealthy, but we should be certainly competitive.

Now, I am not familiar with the data. If any of you could share with us your estimate of the gap between comparable jobs in the private sector relative to various categories of the offices in the House. Anybody have a sense of how significant you think the gap is in the pay in percentage terms?

Mr. FITCH. Yeah, I can speak to that, Congressman Phillips. We have done research on that. And it is does vary widely.

On average, it is about 20 percent between private sector and executive branch, but it does vary widely. So, for example, if you are a House legislative assistant and you move off the Hill to K Street or an association, you are probably going to look at a 20, 25 percent bump.

If you are a Senate chief of staff, you are triple your salary within a year. So if you see a Senate chief of staff leaving their job, you can pretty much bet that they have got a kid who is about 10 or

12 years old and they need to raise money to get them to college. And I have seen that happen multiple occasions. But in general it is about—the average is about 20 percent.

Mr. PHILLIPS. All right. I see my time is running out.

Just a message to my colleagues. I think we can do better, and I think we should be attracting the best and the brightest to public service. No better way to do so than at least be competitive.

With that, I rest my case and yield back. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Mr. Phillips.

Next up, we have Mr. Joyce, and Ms. Williams is in the on-deck circle.

Mr. JOYCE. Thank you, Chairman and Ranking Member Timmons.

I have got little bandwidth here at the house, so even though my screen might be black, I am still here with you. I apologize for that.

And, Congressman Phillips, I am deeply offended that you did not wear a tie. I have got mine on.

Mr. Fitch, in your testimony you discuss the level of vitriol flowing into the offices from phone lines and the internet has reached unprecedented and dangerous levels.

Do you have any recommendations for the committee on what the House can do to better prepare our staff for handling difficult and even—those calls—but even sometimes stressful situations that might start to occur when we reopen?

Mr. FITCH. Yes, I do.

The Congressional Management Foundation actually wrote a short blog after January 6 in coordination with the American Psychological Association. So a couple of recommendations we have.

First of all, obviously staff training in dealing with difficult situations, role playing can be very helpful.

Secondly, we recommend that offices strongly consider during these periods of time changing their phone policies to have phones roll over to voicemail.

We have had offices do this. And a lot of Members resist that: “No, somebody has got to be on the phone.”

No, you don’t, because what you are giving up is you are putting that staffer on the front line to get death threats and all sorts of vitriol.

And what we have found, when offices have made this change and they follow up with the constituent two, four, even ten hours later, the constituent is perfectly happy.

So it doesn’t reduce your customer service if you allow the phones to go to voicemail and then respond. What it does do is it reduces the mental stress and mental health toll on your staff.

So I think that is one of the biggest things that individual offices can do, whether the committee makes a recommendation of best practices. But the technology is there for offices to do this and help their staffers get through this difficult period of time, this whole kind of time calms down in a post-January 6 world.

Mr. JOYCE. Well, I am certainly in agreement on having that break, if you will. I have a certain individual here in the district that seems to call me after happy hour and is an executive at a large corporation. Now, I have found that the things he says on the

phone are disgusting, and I can't imagine the staff having to deal with the same thing.

And the trouble with this, too, is I think staff sometimes feel like they are supposed to be that buffer. I didn't find out this guy was calling and leaving these messages and doing this stuff for a little while until he raised the ante and all of a sudden they thought my personal safety might be in jeopardy.

And you begin to worry about the effect on these young people and what we can do as a whole to try to bring this vitriol down.

Well, I will pass on any further questions and my remaining time back to you, Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Mr. Joyce.

Next up, we have Ms. Williams.

Ms. WILLIAMS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And I think I speak for so many people that are serving with us today, especially on this committee, that serving as a Member of Congress is an absolute honor for me. And as Members of Congress, we are fortunate to have staff who feel the same way about serving our constituents.

I know that my staff is top-notch, and I will put them up against anyone for the work that they are doing to serve our district. But for too many congressional staff there are so many obstacles to coming to the legislative branch and actually staying here, as we have been exposing and discussing today.

From the prospective intern with a dream of pursuing public service, which I get those random phone calls that people are wanting to start to work in my office because they want to truly serve the people, to longtime Hill staffers that are starting a family, too often we see people turning away from the Hill based on factors like income and how are they going to actually raise a family.

And we have to do all that we can to ensure that it is affordable and feasible to serve as a staffer in Congress. So I am so happy that we are having this discussion today.

Mr. Fitch, I know we have touched on this, but I want to package it all up in a nice little bow for the committee and for everyone that is watching.

How could investing additional resources in the legislative branch for staff pay and benefits help ensure that we are able to attract candidates for congressional staff positions who represent the diverse backgrounds and experiences of the people in our district?

Mr. FITCH. Well, that is a big challenge, and I think the House made a tremendous leap forward when it established an Office of Diversity and Inclusion. And I think it should continue on that path, and we are continuing to work with that.

I will admit, as a nonprofit organization, in the wake of the George Floyd murder and the protests, we asked ourselves how we could help as well to try to increase diversity of candidates. And I think part of it, frankly, has to be an investment.

I did just a back-of-the-envelope look at how much money the Congress spends on bringing in diverse candidates—and this is back of the envelope, so don't hold me to this—but just back of the envelope, Google spends about 75 times more on diversity and inclusion programs than the Congress, 75 times.

You have got less than 10 people focused on that. And it is a great start because, you know what? Ten years ago, you didn't have any people focused on it. So it is terrific that it is moving in this direction. The Senate needs to follow suit and do the same thing the House is doing. But I think there does need to be more resources. There needs to be efforts to build relationships with historically Black colleges and universities and build that pipeline pool.

And the other great thing that is going on, there are some terrific nonprofit intern programs because we all know the intern pipeline is the way to staff. You look at Pay Our Interns and College to Congress are the two fantastic nonprofits that we work with that are trying to diversify the intern pool so that those future interns become future chiefs of staff.

Ms. WILLIAMS. Thank you, Mr. Fitch. And just another question for you.

So we all know that it is important that once we get good staff that we are actually able to keep them. And we want them to be able to buy homes and start families and send their kids to college. And you talked about that Senate chief of staff, when their child is getting ready to start thinking about college, that is when they leave.

So what are some of the top reforms that we should keep in mind, gear it toward helping congressional staff build long-term wealth as they start their careers here so that they don't have to turn away when they have these big life changes?

Mr. FITCH. Well, I think one metric that has been mentioned here earlier today is you do need to have a comparison of what your competitors are paying. And so be mindful that this is a competitive environment. It is still the most attractive job in Washington. As being a former staffer, I can say that. It is still one of the best jobs. I did it for 13 years. I wouldn't give it up for all the world.

But I do think you have to look at the competitive offerings. And that means looking at benefit structure. For example, we have talked about college paying. Right now, it is a tuition—it is a student loan reimbursement for the loan. Well, some private sector organizations—and we have just heard the CAO does this—actually pays for college courses, not just the loan. And so looking at a garden variety class payment program, which is done very much in the executive branch and the private sector.

And so I think looking at some of those programs that are in the private sector, and, again, if you are mirroring the private sector, you are much less likely to get criticized if you are doing the same thing as Eastman Kodak and Google. And I think that is one thing to look at because I do recognize that public perception is a factor.

Ms. WILLIAMS. Thank you so much.

And, Ms. Szpindor, I had more questions around professional development, but you have given us lots of information.

And my time is expiring, so, Mr. Chairman, I will yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Ms. Williams.

I think the other members who were on and in the queue have left. I don't know if—I just want to make sure that is correct. I don't see them popping up.

Does any member of the committee have any other questions for this panel? Otherwise, we will move on to our second panel.

Okay. So let me say thank you to each of our witnesses. Really, this is good and meaty stuff, and I really appreciate you sharing your time and expertise with us.

So, with that, we will proceed to our second panel if we can get them onto the Zoom.

Our first witness is Greta Engle, vice president of employee benefits at USI Insurance Services and a member of the Society for Human Resource Management.

In a career spanning 30 years, Ms. Engle has worked with many employers in employee benefit plan consulting, funding alternatives, regulatory compliance, and employee engagement.

In the pandemic environment, she has helped her clients and HR colleagues manage new employee benefit challenges, including engaging a remote workforce, return-to-work strategies, vaccine incentive programs and emergency savings benefits.

Ms. Engle also founded HR Leadership Group, which helps to address the latest HR concerns.

Thank you for being with us, Ms. Engle. You are now recognized for 5 minutes to give an oral presentation of your testimony.

STATEMENTS OF GRETA ENGLE, VICE PRESIDENT OF EMPLOYEE BENEFITS AT USI INSURANCE SERVICES, ON BEHALF OF SOCIETY FOR HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT (SHRM); LYNNEL RUCKERT, FORMER CONGRESSIONAL STAFF, ON BEHALF OF HERSELF; FRAN PEACE, FORMER DISTRICT DIRECTOR, ON BEHALF OF HERSELF; AND DAO NGUYEN, FORMER CONGRESSIONAL STAFF, ON BEHALF OF HERSELF

STATEMENT OF GRETA ENGLE

Ms. ENGLE. Thank you so much. Chairman Kilmer, Vice Chair Timmons, and distinguished members of the committee, I am so grateful to be here and to discuss the latest trends in employee benefits, particularly, as Chairman Kilmer mentioned, with respect to COVID.

I am here before you on behalf of SHRM, the Society for Human Resource Management, with over 300,000 members who design and implement benefits to recruit and retain top talent worldwide. SHRM research routinely finds that benefits are an important part to an employee's overall job satisfaction. They can improve productivity but also reduce turnover.

And, again, in the private sector, employee benefits make up approximately one-third of the total compensation cost. So, therefore, engaging in a strategic benefits plan to maximize that return on investment is something that HR practitioners are tasked with.

Again, it is also a highly effective recruitment and retention tool. For the first time in history, we now have five generations of workers side by side, each with vastly different benefit needs. Meanwhile, employers continue to make benefits changes to support their workforce during the pandemic. Prior to, salaries in the private sector remained flat for more than 10 years.

While the pandemic has exacerbated this challenge, it has also led us into new opportunities. Employers and employees alike have incurred financial hardships, underscoring the importance of financial stability. As a result, more employers are implementing or considering financial wellness programs and benefits, like employer-provided educational assistance, including student loan repayment, as a benefit, emergency savings accounts, again, often with matching employer contributions.

Benefits like educational assistance can be used for employees pursuing opportunities to upscale themselves or rescale as they return to—

The CHAIRMAN. There we go. Please continue.

Ms. ENGLE. Sure. Ultimately, these strategies will extend beyond the workplace and allow employees to pursue better livelihoods for themselves, their families, and future generations.

In surveys, millennials tend to value benefits more than other generations. Some analysts have predicted that this preference will cause the trend to more benefits to continue as baby boomers leave our workforce and our Nation recovers from the pandemic.

A few of the latest trends in benefits start with healthcare. The bottom line is that the private sector is moving more towards a value-based system, where we are looking to actually measure the performance of provider networks for both quality and cost and offer lower out-of-pocket costs to employees.

Employers are also adding a new incentive, such as getting MRIs from a cost-effective center. Again, there is no clinical difference from one MRI to another, but they can have vastly different financial cost. Again, that is more out-of-pocket spend saved for the employee.

Continuing in popularity are also HSAs, Health Savings Accounts, which make up most of my employer clients today, and there is often a matching contribution for those.

Mental health, again, you covered it earlier, but 117 million Americans are facing a shortage in mental healthcare providers, and we are seeing a significant value and an uptick with respect to mental health providers via teleweb.

Prior to the pandemic, in our own clients, USI saw approximately 12 percent who were on antidepressants, with only 3 percent having been formally diagnosed by a mental healthcare professional. So we are turning to drugs more than service. During COVID, medications in our data spiked to 18 percent of employees. And that may become our new benchmark.

Even before the pandemic, flexibility in leave were on the rise, with more organizations trying to offer some new programs. Paternity and maternity pay is something that we have seen an uptick in as well. Americans are waiting longer to begin their families, and one of the biggest things that I am seeing now is in infertility but also adoption programs. Again, in vitro fertilization jumped just 19 percent in 2019 but 29 percent back in 2020.

These are just a few of the trends that we are seeing in the world of the workplace and, again, commend you for what you have done in student loan repayment programs. And retaining top talent is something that we are both committed to. SHRM welcomes the opportunity to be a resource to you, and together we can build better

workplaces and create a better world. I look forward to your questions.

[The statement of Ms. Engle follows:]



**Statement of Greta Engle
Vice President, Employee Benefits
USI Insurance Services, Inc.**

**On Behalf of the
Society for Human Resource Management**

**Submitted to the
U.S. House Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress**

**Hearing on
“Congressional Staff Capacity: Improving Staff Professional Development, Increasing
Retention and Competing for Top Talent”
Thursday, May 6, 2021**

Introduction

Chairman Kilmer, Vice Chair Timmons and distinguished members of the Committee, I am Greta Engle, Vice President of Employee Benefits at USI Insurance Services, Inc. in Hunt Valley, Maryland, with corporate headquarters in Valhalla, New York. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify before the Committee and for holding this important hearing.

During my 30-year career, I have advised private, municipal, for-profit and not-for-profit employers on how to create and implement competitive and attractive employee benefit programs. I have extensive knowledge on workplace trends, analyzing benchmarking data and leveraging internal technical resources to advise my clients to elevate their organizations and give them a competitive edge in the labor market.

My experience has required I use an objective lens, providing advice on benefits offerings while keeping costs in mind to ensure that I’m adequately balancing the goals and objectives of a variety of stakeholders. This includes chief executive officers, chief financial officers and human resource (HR) leaders. As you can imagine, these stakeholders often have conflicting views on both the employee and financial impacts on an organization.

I appear before you today on behalf of SHRM, the Society for Human Resource Management. SHRM strives to create better workplaces where employers and employees thrive together. As the voice of all things work, workers and the workplace, SHRM is the foremost expert, convener

and thought leader on issues impacting today's evolving workplaces. With 300,000+ HR and business executive members in 165 countries, SHRM impacts the lives of more than 115 million workers and families globally.

SHRM members implement and comply with critical workplace policies every day, including those for the design, management and administration of benefits. Because human resource professionals sit at the intersection of work, workers and the workplace, they have a unique perspective about the enhancement of employee benefits to recruit and retain top talent in a 21st century workforce.

Strategic Use of Benefits

HR departments and organizations invest significant resources in designing benefits packages that can be used both to recruit new employees and to retain the talent they already have. In a SHRM survey¹ on job satisfaction and engagement, the vast majority (92 percent) of employees indicated that benefits are important to their overall job satisfaction. Results also showed a relationship between benefits and retention, with 29 percent of employees citing their overall benefits package as a top reason to look for a position outside their current organization in the next 12 months. Thirty-two percent of employees who were unlikely to look for an external position cited their overall benefits package as a top reason as well.

These findings illustrate what HR professionals know—benefits are powerful and can either cost or save an organization a substantial amount of money associated with employee turnover. With employee benefits making up approximately one-third (31 percent) of total compensation costs² organizations must engage in strategic benefits planning to maximize their return on investment.

Benefit offerings have been significantly impacted both by the multi-generational workforce and the COVID-19 pandemic. For the first time in history, five generations are working side by side, each with different benefit needs. For HR professionals, the challenges of blending a multigenerational workforce include keeping up with new workplace trends and regulations; designing benefits strategically to create a happier, more productive workforce; and understanding what motivates each generation. Employees in different life stages may want and need different benefits. While employers cannot afford to offer the best of every benefit, they can ill afford to under-invest in the benefits that are most important to their employees. Employers continue to make benefits changes to support their workforce during the pandemic. My testimony focuses on current trends in employee benefits in the private sector.

Current and Post-Pandemic Employee Benefits

Prior to the pandemic, and much like what's been experienced in Washington, salaries in the private sector have remained flat for more than 10 years. While the pandemic has exacerbated this challenge, it's also led us into new opportunities. For example, the trend of companies increasing nonwage compensation and benefits, rather than wage increases, is being used to attract workers. In surveys, millennials tend to value benefits more than other generations; some analysts predict this preference will cause the trend of more benefits to continue as baby boomers

¹ Society for Human Resource Management. 2017 Employee job satisfaction and engagement: The doors of opportunity are open

² Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2021, March 18). Employer costs for employee compensation. Economic News Release. Retrieved from <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/eecc.nr0.htm>

leave the work force (or post pandemic choose to stay in the workforce longer) and as our nation recovers from the pandemic.

Outlined below are some of the latest trends in employee benefits.

Health Care

The private sector is moving towards a more value-based health care system. In this environment, higher-performing (quality/cost) options are afforded at the lowest out-of-pocket cost share. Insurance networks are reimbursing higher-performing doctors and facilities at higher rates than for those not performing well. Networks may also drop provider and facility agreements, leading to increased health risk and costs (due to re-admission rates, medical errors, etc.)

Employers can also add their own incentives. As an example, plan participants may receive cash incentives for choosing the best imaging facility. An MRI may be the same service everywhere, but it ranges widely in cost without adding any value to the patient. Pharmacy Benefit Managers are also selling “value-based” drug formularies with these same kinds of metrics, focused on better clinical outcomes at a lower price point.

According to the 2020 SHRM Employee Benefits Survey, preferred provider organization (PPO) plans continue to be the most popular health care insurance offering, with 80 percent of employers including a PPO option, compared to 35 percent offering a Health Maintenance Organization.

Many employers have opted to offer a high-deductible health plan (HDHP) – either linked or unlinked with a Health Savings Account or Health Reimbursement Account – instead of a traditional health plan or as an additional choice. For the clients that I serve, Health Savings Accounts are very popular, and employers often match or even exceed employee contributions.

Mental Health

The pandemic has thrust the importance of mental health to the forefront around the globe. The number of people seeking help with anxiety and depression is skyrocketing. From January to September 2020, there was a 93 percent increase over 2019 data in the number of people taking anxiety screenings. For depression, this was equally troubling with a 62 percent increase over the prior year.³ As a result, 23 percent of organizations plan to offer increased mental health benefits or coverage to staff either temporarily (4 percent) or permanently (19 percent).⁴

Currently, 117 million Americans live in areas facing shortages of mental health care providers. According to early predictions, by the year 2030 there will be a shortage of over 12,500 psychiatrists and 11,500 addiction counselors in the United States.

At USI Insurance Services, we analyze clinical data on our total client population, which includes 32 million members. Our 2021 mental health statistics include:

³ Mental Health America. The State of Mental Health in America <https://mhanational.org/issues/state-mental-health-america> (2021)

⁴ SHRM Research 2021 HR Look Ahead Survey Data Points on Child Care & Mental Health

- Prior to the pandemic, 12 percent of USI client employees were on an anti-depressant.
- Only 3 percent are formally diagnosed with depression, meaning they did not seek treatment from a mental health provider for a diagnosis.
- During COVID-19, depression medications spiked to 18 percent of employees which we expect may become our new benchmark.

Given the surge in mental health needs, more telehealth providers have emerged. In addition, telehealth utilization overall has increased and is a positive reaction to the pandemic. Telehealth options in mental health will continue to offset the financial burden of out-of-network care, as well as the time that it can take to be seen by a provider.

Additionally, employee assistance programs remain among the tools that employers leverage to provide additional resources to manage mental health. Outside of a health plan, ongoing wellness programs focused on tools and resources to reduce stress range from in-person, Peloton type approaches to the use of mobile apps like Headspace, MoodMission and more.

Physical Wellness

Employers not only design benefit offerings to recruit and retain talent, but also to help employees be better consumers of health care. Take for example, the following programs that employers routinely implement, which have longer-term impacts beyond the employer-employee relationship:

- Chronic illness: Employers offer disease management incentive programs to re-engage in person clinical care for diabetes, offset costs for multiple prescription drugs/insulin, etc.
- Preventable Cancer: Missing early detection for cancer testing will continue to have long-term impacts. Reengaging employees and their families to make up missed screenings is imperative. Incentives can be offered for these activities outside of a lower healthcare premium (paid time off).
- Various industries tend to influence whether employers make COVID-19 vaccines mandatory to return to work. Hospitals for example, may require them, whereas an IT company may not. Paid time off to receive a COVID-19 vaccine is among the employee benefits being offered.

Retirement Savings

The vast majority of employers believe that retirement savings are very important or extremely important to their workforce. Defined contribution plans remain the most common offering, with 90 percent offering a traditional 401(k) or similar plan and 61 percent offering a Roth 401(k) or similar plan.⁵

I would also note that before the pandemic, 53 percent of Americans did not have an emergency savings account.⁶ Employers are beginning to adopt programs that encourage building up savings for emergencies. This often takes the form of an employee-owned bank account to which an employer can contribute.

⁵ SHRM 2020 Employee Benefits Survey

⁶ AARP Unlocking the Potential of Emergency Savings Accounts

<https://www.aarp.org/content/dam/aarp/ppi/2019/10/unlocking-potential-emergency-savings-accounts.doi.10.26419-2Fppi.00084.001.pdf> (October 2019)

Workplace Flexibility and Leave

Even before the pandemic, workplace flexibility and leave were on the rise, with more organizations offering flexible work options and paid leave. In 2020, 64 percent of organizations offered a paid-time-off (PTO) bank that combines both vacation and sick time, while 98 percent offered paid vacation and 94 percent offered paid sick time. In addition, employers continue to offer generous paid leave for new parents, with half (50 percent) of organizations offering paid leave to mothers and slightly fewer (40 percent) to fathers. Thirty percent of organizations reported offering family leave above federal *Family and Medical Leave Act* leave requirements.⁷ Organizations with workforces made up primarily of adults under 40, or those looking to recruit greater numbers of younger workers, will likely see even stronger pushes for paid parental and family leave. Older workers dealing with elder care responsibilities are likely to advocate for family leave that can be used to care for aging parents as well as dependent children. Paid leave is associated with increased productivity, increased engagement, better physical wellness and positive employer brand.

As noted above, remote work was increasing in popularity as a benefit prior to the pandemic, with telecommuting of all types increasing in recent years. With vaccines now widely available, many organizations are implementing their return-to-workplace strategies, which are likely to include a mix of remote and in-person work. Consider, for example, that 53 percent of employed Americans would choose to work from home permanently if given the option, and that 35 percent would take a salary reduction to do so.⁸

Private sector employers continue to offer other benefits promoting work/life fit, including compressed work weeks. Thirty-two percent of employers offered compressed workweeks in 2020.⁹ Many federal agencies offer alternative schedule options, such as a flexible work schedule and/or compressed work schedule programs for their employees. With heavy workloads, long and unpredictable work hours and limited time with family and friends, alternative schedules could be an attractive option for congressional staff.

Wellness

In 2020, 54 percent of organizations offered a general wellness program to employees. Likely as a result of the pandemic, more organizations offered stress management programs, with 26 percent offering this benefit in 2020, compared to just 14 percent in 2019.¹⁰

Infertility/Adoption

As Americans are waiting longer to begin families, services and needs for reproductive health are among the new benefits employees are seeking. To add, because of the pandemic stay-at-home orders, social gatherings were halted over the last year, delaying milestone events like marriages and starting families. Given this dynamic, infertility and adoption benefits will likely see a surge. As a result, the number of organizations offering these benefits has increased. In 2020, 28 percent of organizations offered in-vitro fertilization coverage, compared to 19 percent

⁷ SHRM 2020 Employee Benefits Survey

⁸ SHRM COVID-10 Research: Returning to Worksites (Feb. 2021)

⁹ SHRM 2020 Employee Benefits Survey

¹⁰ *Id.*

in 2019, and 29 percent offered infertility treatment coverage (other than in-vitro fertilization), compared to only 20 percent of organizations in 2019.¹¹

Childcare/Eldercare

Thirty-seven percent of HR professionals anticipate that supporting the needs of employees with children or eldercare responsibilities will be a significant challenge for their organization this year.¹² Given the increasing demand and decreasing capacity, daycare and childcare remain among the benefits needed by employees.

Concierge services that can help employees find safe and quality providers in addition to setting up site visits and interviews are gaining in importance. Employee Assistance Plans can help with this, but there remains high demand. Ongoing COVID restrictions impact access to quality daycare. To address these growing needs, 25 percent of organizations plan to offer additional leave or flexibility options to employees with childcare or elder care responsibilities above and beyond what is provided to other employees either temporarily (15 percent) or permanently (10 percent).¹³

Education Assistance

Providing education assistance is an important tool American employers have long used to build, attract and retain a skilled workforce, and one that will be a critical component of recovery moving forward. SHRM has been a longtime advocate of efforts to strengthen and expand employer-provided education assistance as a workplace benefit.

First enacted in 1978, this employer-provided education assistance benefit has had a widespread, positive impact on employers and employees alike. However, the \$5,250 exclusion has not been increased in over 40 years and must be updated to respond to current workplace and workforce needs. Section 127 of the Internal Revenue Code allows employees to exclude up to \$5,250 from income per year for courses at the associate, undergraduate and graduate levels with education assistance provided by their employer.

According to a SHRM Employee Benefits survey conducted in 2019, 56 percent of employers provided education assistance to their employees. As learning continues to evolve, so must education benefits. It is critical that employers have the flexibility to offer support throughout a variety of stages in the education lifecycle to give employees choices when making education-related decisions. Employer-provided education assistance benefits are not only necessary to meet current needs; used to invest in training and development of the workforce they will have a lasting impact on work, workers and the workplace and the U.S. economy for years to come.

These benefits are used to reskill and upskill existing employees to fill open positions and address the U.S. skills shortage. By investing in their existing talent pool, employers have seen a return on investment of well over 100 percent. Employees who take advantage of employer-provided education assistance improve their opportunities for upward mobility and wage growth.

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² SHRM 2021 HR Lookahead data points COVID-19 (March 2021).

¹³ *Id.*

Entry-level and mid-management education assistance recipients received, on average, a 43 percent incremental wage increase over a three-year period as compared to non-recipients.

Furthermore, investment in workforce development through education, training and employment opportunities will encourage financial stability and savings. The pandemic has created financial hardships, forcing some to remain in the workforce longer than anticipated, delaying life milestones like starting a family, purchasing a home, saving for retirement and the ability to pay for critical services like health care. Investments like employer-provided education assistance are not the answer to all of the above, but can be a valuable resource for employees to pursue professional goals and better livelihoods for themselves, their families and future generations.

Conclusion

Mr. Chairman and Vice Chair Timmons, thank you again for allowing me to share my experience and the latest trends related to employee benefits.

A comprehensive and flexible benefits package is an essential tool in recruiting and retaining talented employees. SHRM appreciates policymakers' support for employer-provided benefits and employers' ability to customize offerings to meet their unique workforce needs.

I applaud the Committee's focus on modernizing and improving the congressional workplace to better meet the needs of its dedicated employees. SHRM welcomes the opportunity to be a resource to the Committee on all issues impacting work, workers and the workplace. Together, we can build better workplaces to create a better world.

I look forward to your questions.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Ms. Engle. You stuck the landing at 5 minutes. Good job.

Our next witness on this panel is Lynnel Ruckert. Ms. Ruckert served as then Majority Whip Steve Scalise's chief of staff for 8 years. She began her career in 2001, answering phones for the Energy and Commerce Committee, and departed in 2016 as the highest ranking House female staffer on Capitol Hill.

During her D.C. tenure, she worked with Congress and the White House to develop and execute strategy on major trade, healthcare, and tax issues. Since returning to Louisiana, she has served as the chief of staff to Attorney General Jeffrey Landry and as the Assistant State Treasurer.

Ms. Ruckert, you are now recognized for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF LYNNEL RUCKERT

Ms. RUCKERT. Greetings. My name is Lynnel Ruckert. I spent 15 years in Washington, D.C., before returning home to Louisiana. It was an honor of a lifetime to serve in the House of Representatives as a staff assistant scheduler, legislative assistant, deputy chief of staff, and finally chief of staff for 8 years.

On behalf of the thousands of House staffers working today and the legions of Capitol Hill alumni, I thank Chairman Kilmer and Vice Chairman Timmons and the entire committee and staff for your efforts to strengthen the institution we love.

I will never forget my first business card with the congressional seal, but the seal does not pay the rent. Paid parking, metro reimbursement, student loan repayment program, increased choice of on-campus eateries and the Thrift Savings Plan are positive aspects of Capitol Hill life.

Some ideas that the committee has discussed to further enhance the employee experience and which I support are considering an optional bimonthly payment system. The current monthly payment system can be difficult to manage, especially when living paycheck to paycheck.

A floor salary and pay bans for each position would be helpful to recruit broad talent from varied backgrounds that are not so dependent on supplemental dollars from home.

A human resources department that provides training to develop and retain staff, promote bipartisan events for staff to mingle, give recognition for years of service, and allow for flexible work schedules during work periods.

As important as the institutional support provided to staff is the support provided in individual offices by the Member and the staff who manage them. A positive office culture that invests in and promotes mentorship in the professional development of staff is essential. Those who manage congressional staff have the opportunity to make or break their staff's congressional experience, and this committee can help promote and strengthen the support for building a positive office culture, which help retain and enrich the staff experience.

A mentorship-type philosophy is a great benefit to the individual staff and institution. It is possible to incentivize junior staffers with exposure by providing opportunities to staff the boss for meetings and events, sending them to training to learn about issues and

expand their knowledge base, give them an opportunity to travel to the district, meet with real people that are affected by their work, establish a speakers series for new staffers on how to set up for success on Capitol Hill and beyond.

It is also critical that we find a way to retain staff longer. The knowledge they cultivate over the years is a great benefit to the Members and their constituents. Some ideas to retain senior staff are: establish an in-house credential program aligned with a school for a grant masters in congressional operations or policy, reward tenured staff with bonus pay for years served, allocate premier parking spots for longevity as an incentive to stay, allow time off for deeper professional development experiences off campus.

The institution of Capitol Hill is unique and offers endless possibilities. As a Hill staffer, you learn how to work with others to achieve a common goal, how to think proactively and remove obstacles to reach success, and time management skills.

I hope your continued work serving on this committee acts as a turning point where thousands more staff will have a positive experience on this shining city on a hill. Thank you.

[The statement of Ms. Ruckert follows:]

Greetings. My name is Lynnel Ruckert. I spent fifteen years in Washington, D.C. before returning home to Louisiana. It was an honor of a lifetime to serve in the House of Representatives as a Staff Assistant, Scheduler, Administrative Director, Legislative Assistant, Deputy Chief of Staff and; finally, as a Chief of Staff for eight years. On behalf of the thousands of House staffers working today and the legions of Capitol Hill alumni, I thank Chairman Kilmer and Vice Chair Timmons and the entire committee and staff for your efforts to strengthen the institution we love.

Nearly everyone that works on the Hill moved to Washington, D.C. to make a difference. Staffers work long hours in a fast-paced environment while sharing crowded office space. The phones, emails, research and memos are endless while the pay is less than the private sector and the cost of living in Washington is high. Since Congressional members are up for election every two years, the lack of job security adds to the high stress environment. Staffers dedication to the greater good should be rewarded with compensation and benefits competitive with the private and public sector.

I will never forget my first business card with the congressional seal; but, the seal does not pay the rent. Paid parking, metro reimbursement, student loan repayment program, increased choice of on campus eateries, and the Thrift Savings Plan are positive aspects of Capitol Hill life. Some ideas the committee has discussed to further enhance the employee experience, and which I endorse, are:

- Consider an optional bi-monthly payment system. The current monthly payment system can be difficult to manage when living paycheck to paycheck.
- A floor salary and pay-bans for each position would be helpful to recruit broad talent from varied backgrounds that are not dependent on supplemental dollars from home.
- A Human Resources department that provides training to develop and retain staff.
- Promote bipartisan events for staff to mingle.
- Give recognition for years of service. (pin, keychain, certificate, or something visible).
- Allow for flexible work schedules during District work periods.

As important as the institutional support provided to staff is the support provided in individual offices by the Member and the staff who manage them. A positive office culture that invests in and promotes mentorship and the professional

development of staff is essential. Those who manage congressional staff have the opportunity to “make or break” their staff’s congressional experience, and this committee can help promote and strengthen the support for building positive office culture, which will help retain staff and enrich their experience.

In 2008, when Congressman Steve Scalise was first elected, he told me, “Whatever this camaraderie thing you have going....I like it-keep it up.” He realized that being a part of something greater than yourself is a motivator. Although constrained by budget and square footage, many Chiefs of Staffs find creative ways to motivate and incentivize workers. Starting Monday mornings with team meeting where we review the upcoming week’s schedule and hear status updates on projects. On Fridays, there was “Idea Lab” where the entire staff looked at the month ahead to brainstorm on how we could maximize the office meetings, floor and committee agendas to connect with constituents in the district. Having the entire staff participate gave junior staff an opportunity to learn about the different tracks in the office...administrative, legislative, communications. A mentorship type philosophy is a great benefit to the individual staff and the institution.

It’s possible to incentivize junior staffers with exposure by:

- Sending a press release to their hometown paper, college newspaper and the Capitol Hill papers announcing they have landed a job on Capitol Hill. And posting these items on social media platforms.
- Providing opportunities to staff the boss for meetings and events.
- Sending them to training to learn about issues and expand their knowledge base.
- Give them an opportunity to travel to the district to meet with real people that are affected by the work done by the staffers.
- Establish a speaker’s series for new staffers on how to setup for success on Capitol Hill and beyond.

It is also critical that we find a way to retain staff longer. The knowledge they cultivate over the years is a great benefit to the Members and constituents. Here are some ideas to retain senior staff:

- Establish an in House credential-training program perhaps aligned with a school to grant MA degree in congressional operations or policy.
- Reward tenured staff with bonus pay for years served.
- Allocate premier parking spots for longevity as incentive to stay
- Allow time off for deeper professional development experiences off campus

- Encouraging senior staff to promote opportunities for staff with shared experiences to gather after the last vote of the week (ex: bipartisan women chiefs group, Agriculture LDs, etc).
- Recognizing staff who are mentors to younger staff or staff with shared affinities through a more formal and less ad hoc recognition process,

The institution of Capitol Hill is unique and offers endless possibilities. As a Hill staffer you learn how to work with others to achieve a common goal, how to think proactively and remove obstacles to reach success and time management skills. Hill staffers have the opportunity to gain 'polish', which sets you apart from others. We also all have the opportunity to be part of something larger than ourselves; and the most successful offices not only pay staff well, but have a culture that communicates the degree to which you are part of something special on a regular basis, so that you want to stay and continue to be part of it..

Once you gain success on Capitol Hill, you can achieve anything. My former officemates have gone on to become successful lobbyists, campaign staffers, a real estate agent, an attorney, an elected official, a wall street banker, small business owners, and an insurance agent. But they got their start as part of something important here on the Hill with mentors who took the time to invest in them and make them feel valued so that some of what they learned as Hill staffers gave them the confidence to pursue their dreams.

I hope your continued work serving on this committee acts as a turning point where thousands more staff will have a positive experience on this shining city on a hill.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Ms. Ruckert. I appreciate your testimony.

Our next witness is Fran Peace. Ms. Peace served as district director for Congressman Wally Herger from 1987 to 2013. Prior to that, she worked for Congressman Herger when he served in the California State Assembly.

Ms. Peace has also worked in the insurance and realtor industry and is actively involved in community service work, including with the Beale Military Liaison Council, which serves Active military families and veterans from Beale Air Force Base in northern California.

Ms. Peace, you are now recognized for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF FRAN PEACE

Ms. PEACE. Thank you. Good morning, Chairman Kilmer and Vice Chairman Timmons, and members of the committee. My name is Fran Peace, and I come to you today as a former district director for 26 years in northern California.

I was asked to comment on congressional staff recruitment, development, and retention. Before I get started on what I believe to be the nuts and bolts of district operations, let me first state that my background is from the private sector, focusing primarily on customer service in the major retail industry of insurance work and other realtor, and I was also the CAO for a small financial investment company.

Working with people and meeting deadlines was my strength. Recruiting personnel in the district is unlike Capitol Hill, where Member offices have access to a likely pool of candidates from the House resume banks. In the district, many times we stick a blind ad in the local newspaper advertising for a customer service representative. Bold as this may sound, we attracted a wide variety of potential candidates who had excellent customer service credentials.

I was raised in an environment where the customer is always right. This attitude served our office well, especially as it applies to casework and fieldwork. We also looked at community service and whether the candidate devoted time to service organizations. This is key to determining a service-beyond-self attitude. Outreach beyond the normal political service majors can be helpful in recruiting qualified personnel. Being part of a dedicated team is paramount to staff development.

It is important for district leadership to understand the challenges presented by outside influences. Pressures from constituents, whether it be from angry casework callers, written inquiries, or from protests from angry groups, become an unstable environment for staff. Excellent training must be available, whether it be from CRS, the management organizations, or similar services specializing on how to provide service with a smile.

Being on the front lines, understanding what constituent service representatives experience on a daily basis is important to not only your district, but to the national scene of why Congress exists in the first place, and that is to serve the people who elected you.

Once elected to Congress, your offices and personnel are there to serve everyone. It doesn't matter if you are Republican, Democrat,

Independent, or Libertarian. You now represent everyone. Service is the only commodity or product you have to sell.

Many times your district staff feel isolated, being so far away from Capitol Hill. It would have been helpful to have regular congressional staff communications, like newsletters, webinars, or, back in my day, conference calls, to share best practices between district offices, and even post-employment opportunities along with helpful resources to resolve issues. This communication should be available to all staff.

Retention of personnel depends on how well we gel with each other. As district director, we had regular staff meetings, many retreats and staff potlucks. We celebrated birthdays, bring-your-dog-to-work days, and we worked to have fun.

We implemented a trauma team to help resolve difficult casework issues. We would share casework problems and how to resolve the sometimes impossible. Webinars or even communication on the latest changes from Federal agencies that impact constituent work would have been helpful for staff to keep up to date.

Finally, it is of utmost importance that the chief of staff and district director get along, not only get along but sincerely like working with each other. During my tenure, I served under only two chiefs in 26 years. I was fortunate to have worked with caring leaders. We had a special bond and truly enjoyed working with each other.

Managing a congressional office is much like managing a Major League Baseball team. The manager of a pro ball team must be able to recruit players who gel with existing team members. The manager must also manage personalities, recognize pitfalls, and be able to resolve any potential problems.

COVID-19 has given each of you this unique opportunity to rethink how we can do business post-COVID and for the benefit of all involved.

Thank you for this opportunity to comment, and I look forward to our discussion later. Thank you.

[The statement of Ms. Peace follows:]

House Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress

Panel 2

Congressional Staff Development and Retention

Witness Testimony by Fran Peace

May 6, 2021

Good afternoon Chairman Kilmer and members of the committee. My name is Fran Peace, and I come to you today as a retired District Director for 26 years from Northern California. Thank you for holding this hearing today and for allowing input from a former district director.

I was asked to comment on congressional staff recruitment, development and retention. Before I get started on what I believe to be the nuts and bolts of district operations, let me first state that my background is from the private sector focusing primarily on customer service as a scheduler for a major retail chain, insurance claims work, Realtor and chief administrative officer for a financial investment company. Working with people and meeting deadlines was my strength.

Staff Recruitment:

Recruiting personnel in the district is unlike Washington, D.C., where Member offices have access to a likely pool of candidates from the House Vacancy and Placement Service and various resumé banks. In the district, quite often we seek a blind ad in the local newspaper advertising for a "Customer Service" representative. Bold as this may sound, we attracted a wide variety of potential candidates who had excellent customer service credentials. I was raised in an environment where the "customer is always right." This attitude served our office well in congressional work, especially as it applies to constituent casework. We also looked at community service and whether the candidate devoted time to community service organizations. **This is key to determining a service beyond-self attitude.**

It is important to note that hiring staff in Washington, D.C., and in district offices differs in many respects. On Capitol Hill, resumé building is key for many Hill hopefuls. The short tenure of a Hill staffer is sometimes a reluctant, but accepted practice for Member offices. In the district, we hire our constituents. In many instances these individuals are from the local business sector looking for gainful full-time employment and excellent benefits. Qualified applicants are not always political science majors or recruited from the Member's campaign. For example, I have found that the best district caseworker is one who has life experience and has worked in the "customer service" industry. Field Representatives may have come from the communications, public relations industry or from local government.

I was always sure to disclose during prospective employee interviews the tenure for Members of Congress—every two years they must stand re-election, and there is no guarantee of employment beyond that. There has been more than one occasion where a prospective employee expressed uneasiness with this concept.

Being on the frontlines, understanding what constituent service representatives experience on a daily basis is important not only to your district but why Congress exists in the first place--- to “serve the people who elected you.” Once elected to Congress, your offices and personnel are there to serve everyone. It doesn’t matter if you’re Republican, Democrat, Libertarian, Green or Natural Law Party. You now represent the entire district. Service is the only commodity or product you have to sell. As Members of Congress, each of you need to be engaged with staff. It is important to understand what they go through each and every day. Shadow them and be their intern for a day.

Staff Development:

Staff development is a broad term and deserves attention. Being a part of a dedicated team is paramount to staff development. A teamwork approach is key to keeping staff interested and motivated.

A basic new staff orientation at the local level can be helpful in preparing your district office for what lies ahead. A thorough explanation of the demands upon a district office and staff is the first step in preparing staff to be better prepared to handle the ever-changing daily menu. District leadership become peers to junior staff. It is important for district leadership to understand the challenges presented by outside influences. Pressures from constituents whether it be from angry callers or visitors, written inquires, or protests from angry groups become an unstable and stressful environment for staff.

Listening to your staff, offering support, encouragement and praise can go a long way to handling difficult assignments.

District staff must be able to respond to emergencies such as natural disasters whether it be wildfires, floods, earthquakes, tornadoes, etc. Helping constituents during a natural disaster is an emotional experience and staff must be trained to handle work in crisis situations. During a disaster, almost overnight congressional staff are expected to become disaster coordinators in order to help their Members maneuver the myriad of local, state and federal services while at the same time directing constituents to seek appropriate assistance. A strong foundation in crisis management and frontline preparedness can prepare staff for unforeseeable events.

Staff Retention:

Once you've hired your dream team, it's up to the district director to retain some continuity of focus and dedication in the field-of-service. Building strong relationships within your team should be a principal focus.

Retention of personnel depends on how well we work together. District Directors must be able to work with many different personalities and be able to recognize internal conflicts between staff. Implementing regular staff meetings, mini-staff retreats, potlucks and other special occasions are helpful in getting to know one another. We celebrated birthdays and bring your dog to work days (more than once per year), which contributed to a more family atmosphere. We implemented a trauma team to help resolve difficult casework issues. We would share casework problems and how to resolve the sometimes impossible. Like doctors, we consulted, made recommendations and deliberated on the final outcome to see what worked and what we should have done differently. Caseworkers are the bread and butter of any district operation. Being accountable to your constituents cannot be overstated. Excellent follow-up and timely responses are critical.

Salaries and benefits are critical in the retention of personnel. Regular increases are necessary to retain dedicated hard-working staffers. District staff should also understand that increases in salaries is commensurate with service and performance. It is a privilege to work for a Member of Congress. There are generous benefits associated with the Thrift Savings Program and the federal matching package, health care availability, student loan assistance and other standard benefits.

There are a number of considerations that should contribute to the discussion of district office salaries versus offices in metropolitan areas. In rural areas, the cost-of-living is not as expensive. For district staff, we can be joined by young career-seeking individuals just out of college looking to gain experience. Other job-seekers are individuals with long-time family history in the area or those seeking to add a second income to the family budget.

To be fair, it is important to make sure salaries are competitive with the local area. While district offices attract more career seeking staffers, thoughtful consideration must be given to the value of institutional knowledge and memory from professional staffers. District knowledge preservation should be important to a Member of Congress. Capturing and maintaining institutional knowledge has proven to increase productivity by reducing time and resources spent on training new staff. There are other value-added benefits such as understanding of the history and culture of a Member's district.

District directors should work with staff to seek balanced solutions to work life and family life. Maintaining a healthy lifestyle contributes to a happy work environment. Learn to recognize

when staff may be going through an especially difficult life experience and assist and refer as appropriate to specific House Personnel agencies. Your district operation depends on it.

Finally, it is of utmost importance that the Chief of Staff and District Director get along – not only get along, but sincerely enjoy working with each other and appreciate mutual respect. During my tenure, I served with only two Chiefs (COS) in 26 years. I was fortunate to have worked with caring and thoughtful leaders. We had a more than compatible relationship and together we worked towards a common goal. The Member of Congress needs to recognize the importance of this relationship and encourage and build upon the qualities of this connection. Everything else depends on it.

Finally:

Managing a congressional office is much like managing a major league baseball team. The manager of a professional ball team must be able to recruit players who gel with existing team members. The bullpen is where we develop new staff recruits. We attracted interns from our local colleges with some becoming regular staff members. The team leader or coach must also manage individual personalities, recognize pitfalls from internal conflicts and work to head off any potential problems.

In order to win the World Series Championship, a manager or coach must be able to build a strong team. A team that respects one another, one that respects and encourages one another and a team that can work together under the most difficult of circumstances.

The Covid pandemic has given Congress opportunities to begin again. Congress has experienced a year hiatus from the ordinary or business as usual operations. Covid-19 has given each of Member a unique opportunity to rethink how we can do business post Covid for the benefit of our sacred institution. My desire and wish for you is to understand and support your district staff. They are truly the nuts and bolts of your success.

Recommendations to Consider:

As a former district director, I have developed a “wish list” of recommendations for Members to consider when building a new operation or working to improve upon their existing organization.

Recruitment:

It would be beneficial to have a dedicated “staff/employee” account to pay for occasional employment agency fees. Not every candidate can afford these fees on their own, especially if they are unemployed.

Consideration is in order for the ability to hire more part-time staff with the flexibility to move into full-time work. In the district, young employees are looking to build experience and may be finishing college, doing graduate work, etc. Even a part-time staffer can fill a full-time position if flexibility from both sides is maintained.

Recruiting personnel from the state and federal government would be ideal such as social security caseworkers, immigration services, etc., but Members simply do not have that kind of budget to pay and compete with GS wages.

An option to recruit qualified district staff would be to seek individuals from within the community who already know the culture and make-up of the district. Seeking a pool of field reps for example from the agricultural community, business community such as the chamber of commerce, real estate even local government such as counties or cities require that district office salaries be competitive with these industries.

Staff Development:

An employee under stress may not feel comfortable in seeking services from the OEA. I believe these services have a purpose, but training the DD on how to better assist in-house is a consideration. Staff are more comfortable talking to the DD rather than going outside the office to Capitol Hill.

CRS or another organization should sponsor a “boot camp” for new District Directors and other staff. This can be done within the Member’s district with professional consultants in order to keep travel costs down of always send staff to D.C. This is not criticism of CRS, as their services are quite helpful to new staff in the beginning. CRS does outline the services that are available to district staff and hearing from the various federal agencies and congressional liaisons are very helpful in the beginning. However, this is textbook information. District staff need training on how to sometimes be “caregivers” when the need arises.

The ability to telecommute and utilize Zoom, Google Duo, etc., is more available now thanks to the pandemic. This concept can be invaluable in selective circumstances such as staff meetings, working with branch district offices, etc. Webinar training, panel discussions and motivational speakers would go a long way in training district staff.

Staff Retention:

It’s not always better pay that keeps staff happy. Consideration should be given to more flexible work hours for salaried staff. Working 4 days/10 hours per day with a three-day weekend is a good incentive for staff assistants and caseworkers. Field staff should be also given flexibility to have the freedom of flex hours. Field staff are expected to cover large districts in rural areas. Many times, we are in the field for days at a time.

Consideration should be given to splitting the MRA and allowing a separate budget for District offices that include payroll, leasing office space, hiring personnel and normal office budgeting. Increasing the MRA is not necessarily a pre-requisite, however better allocation of existing funds and fine tuning the budget to better reflect district operations is a better approach.

There is concern for key field staff who must pay expenses while traveling. In sprawling districts, there are no Metro systems. The mileage reimbursement for a personal car never seem to match the initial cost of an automobile, insurance, maintenance and fuel costs, especially in states like California. Members have a car allowance, but more often than not, these cars are parked at the airport sometimes 90+ miles away.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Ms. Peace.

And our final witness is Dao Nguyen. Ms. Nguyen most recently served as the executive director of Future Forum, a generational caucus of young House Democratic Members of Congress, of which I am proudly a member, although about to age out, I think.

In this capacity, she oversaw the organization's expansion from 25 to 50 members and worked closely with congressional offices and stakeholders to develop coalition support for initiatives focused on engaging young Americans, empowering the next generation of public service leaders, and promoting innovative public policy.

Dao, I am grateful personally for your service in that capacity, so thank you for your work on that front.

Prior to that, Ms. Nguyen served as a senior staffer to Congresswoman Stephanie Murphy, a senior policy adviser to Congressman Adam Schiff, and in the office of Congresswoman Karen Bass.

Ms. Nguyen, you are now recognized for 5 minutes to give an oral presentation of your testimony.

STATEMENT OF DAO NGUYEN

Ms. NGUYEN. Chairman Kilmer, Vice Chair Timmons, and members of the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress, thank you for inviting me to testify.

I spent so many of my formative years on Capitol Hill sitting behind Members of Congress at hearings like these, and I never thought in a million times I would be sitting in front of you all, much less doing it virtually from my own home.

My name is Dao Nguyen. I am here in my personal capacity as a former congressional staffer who proudly served in the House of Representatives for nearly a decade. In 2011, I bought a one-way ticket to D.C. to start my Hill career with an unpaid internship.

I landed a full-time entry-level job in a personal congressional office as a staff assistant, and I went on to hold multiple legislative roles where I oversaw 10 to 12 vastly different policy areas at any one time.

Finally, I had the pleasure of serving as the executive director of the Future Forum Caucus, a congressional Member organization of Members dedicated to issues important to young Americans.

And like so many others on the Hill, I enjoyed forming long-lasting relationships with the constituents and the communities that we represented. I saw firsthand the impact of government each time we met with constituents on issues they cared about and again when we advanced solutions to problems that were raised.

But truth be told, the longer that I stayed on the Hill, the harder it became for me to plan for my future. And I know I was and still am not the only staffer to feel this way. I felt the rub most as a junior staffer living in Washington, D.C., one of the most expensive cities in the country.

As I advanced on Capitol Hill, I found it increasingly difficult to juggle mounting financial and personal obligations on a Hill salary. Like many other congressional staffers, I helped to care for family, I aspired to own a home, and I want to have a family someday.

While I loved my time on Capitol Hill, I made the bittersweet decision to leave at the end of 2020, in part because I was offered a

more competitive compensation package in the private sector that would provide more financial certainty and stability.

I want to make it clear that I deeply cherished my time in Congress, and I have nothing but the utmost respect and appreciation for my former employers and colleagues. I was lucky to work in offices where I was paid a competitive salary relative to my peers and provided with opportunities for professional development within the confines of what these offices were equipped to provide.

My appearance in front of you today is not about chastising nor criticizing the institution of Congress. Rather, I am here because I love it, and I want to help address institutional problems that often hold Members of Congress back from hanging onto experienced staff with institutional knowledge and expertise, with the ultimate goal of better serving the American people. And that is why I support the select committee's work in finding meaningful solutions to the issues of staff retention and recruitment.

Based on my experience and the concerns voiced by my peers, I believe the implementation of the following recommendations, among others, would make a positive impact: provide a 20-percent increase for the Members' Representational Allowance for committee offices and for leadership offices to increase staff pay; establish a nonbinding pay ban system in the House that provides a salary floor for each position and accounts for annual cost of living adjustments; provide congressional staff with opportunities to gain certifications; provide management training for senior-level congressional staff; and last but not least, ensure the health and safety of every congressional staffer on campus.

And I want to make sure to emphasize this last point. The events of January 6th painfully underscored the degree to which congressional staff are vulnerable to security risks. As much as practicable, the institution of Congress has a responsibility to preserve the health and the safety of every person on its campus, including congressional staff.

The congressional workforce plays an important role in helping Members of Congress deliver for their constituents and their districts, yet pay and benefits are often not commensurate with the work, the time, and the passion that staffers invest in Capitol Hill. These are structural issues that can often lead to low morale, high turnover of staff, and the inability of offices to retain and recruit top talent.

Once again, I commend the Select Committee on its work thus far to address these issues, and I encourage you to execute on these recommendations and continue to seek input from both current and former congressional staff.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. I look forward to your questions.

[The statement of Ms. Nguyen follows:]

Written Testimony of Dao Nguyen
Former Congressional Staffer & Executive Director of the Future Forum Caucus
Before the House Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress on “Congressional
Staff Capacity: Improving Staff Professional Development, Increasing Retention and
Competing for Top Talent”
May 6, 2021

Chairman Kilmer, Vice Chair Timmons, and Members of the U.S. House Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress, thank you for inviting me to testify on this important topic today.

My name is Dao Nguyen and I am a principal at Cornerstone Government Affairs. However, today, I appear before you in my personal capacity as a former congressional staffer who proudly served in the U.S. House of Representatives for nearly a decade.

I spent so many of my formative years on Capitol Hill sitting behind Members of Congress at hearings like these. And I never thought in a million years that I would be sitting in front of you all, much less doing it virtually from my home.

In 2011, I bought a one-way ticket to Washington D.C. to start my Hill career with an unpaid internship. Like many other young interns, I never would have found my way here had it not been for financial assistance from my family and my alma mater, the University of California Berkeley. As a first-generation immigrant and the daughter of Vietnamese refugees, I made it my mission to succeed in government and politics – fields in which Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) people were and still are underrepresented.

I soon landed a full-time, entry-level job in a personal congressional office as a Staff Assistant. I went on to hold multiple legislative roles as a Legislative Aide, Legislative Assistant, Senior Legislative Assistant, and Senior Policy Advisor. In these positions, I enjoyed the responsibility of overseeing large policy portfolios, sometimes working on ten to twelve vastly different policy areas such as health care, immigration, environment, small business, and criminal justice. Before leaving Capitol Hill, I had the pleasure of serving as the executive director of the House Future Forum Caucus, a congressional member organization of 50 young Members of Congress dedicated to bridging the divide between young Americans and their government.

Like most congressional staffers, I enjoyed forming long-lasting relationships with the constituents and communities that we represented. I saw first-hand the impact of government each time we met with constituents on issues they cared about, and again when we advanced solutions to problems that were raised. Over time, I am very proud to have worked on legislation that made a meaningful difference in the lives of families just like mine.

But truth be told, the longer that I stayed on the Hill, the harder it became for me to plan for my future – and I know I was (and still am) not the only staffer to feel this way. I felt the rub most as a junior staffer living in Washington, D.C., one of the most expensive cities in the country. As I advanced on Capitol Hill, I found it increasingly difficult to juggle mounting financial and

personal demands on a Hill salary. Like many other congressional staffers, I help to care for family back home, and I also aspire to own a home and have a family of my own someday.

While I loved my time on Capitol Hill, I ultimately made the bittersweet decision to leave at the end of 2020 in part because I was offered a more competitive compensation package in the private sector that would provide me with more financial certainty and stability. And, again, I was not the only staffer to make this calculation.

I want to make it clear that I deeply cherished my time in Congress, and I have nothing but the utmost respect and appreciation for my former employers and colleagues, all of whom are incredible public servants who supported me throughout my career. I was lucky to work in offices where I was paid a competitive salary relative to my peers on Capitol Hill and provided with opportunities for professional development within the confines of what congressional offices were equipped to provide.

My appearance in front of the Select Committee today is not about chastising nor criticizing the institution of Congress. Rather, I am here because I love it and I want to help address institutional problems that often hold Members of Congress back from hanging on to experienced staff with institutional knowledge and expertise, with the ultimate goal of better serving the American people.

To that end, I support the Select Committee's work in finding meaningful solutions to the issue of congressional staff retention and recruitment. I applaud the committee in its work thus far and believe many of the recommendations discussed in the 116th Congress should be considered once again. Based on my experience and the concerns voiced by my peers, I believe the implementation of the following recommendations would make a demonstrably positive impact:

- **Provide a 20 percent increase for the Members' Representational Allowance (MRA), for committees, and for leadership offices to increase staff pay** - In 2011, the Congressional Budget Office's ten-year budget outlook projected House salaries and expenses to rise to \$1.867 billion in Fiscal Year 2021 to accommodate inflation. The actual amount appropriated for this year, however, was only \$1.481 billion – a cut of \$386 million, or 20.7%. This increase would simply return funding for House salaries and expenses to the 2011 inflation-adjusted baseline. An initiative to this effect is being led by Democratic Caucus Chairman Hakeem Jeffries and Majority Leader Steny Hoyer.
- **Establish a nonbinding pay band system in the House that provides a salary floor for each position and accounts for annual cost-of-living adjustments** – Developing a pay band system similar to the General Schedule classification and pay system used by the Executive Branch would provide current and potential congressional staffers with more clarity on what they can expect to be paid and allow them to better plan for their future. A pay band system would also provide staff with an additional resource to advocate for fairer compensation and could also prevent pay discrepancies between congressional offices. This would be especially helpful for junior staff positions.

- **Remove franking-related costs from Member MRAs and move them to a central account with a pre-determined cap for all offices** - Because both staff pay and the high costs of franked mail both fall under the MRA, Members are financially constrained in both the quantity and quality of constituent correspondence and staff pay. Some offices have high franking costs while others do not. This inadvertently becomes a detriment to staff and Members, who are limited by a collective MRA. A central account could be run through the Chief Administrative Officer and offices that reach the pre-determined cap could still utilize the MRA for mass communications.
- **Decouple staff pay from Member pay** – It is critical to retain talented senior staff who have institutional knowledge and can make congressional offices work more effectively on behalf of their constituents. Currently, congressional staff salaries are limited by a Member's own salary because staff cannot earn more than Members, which has led to senior staff departing for more competitive offers in the Executive Branch or private sector.
- **Provide congressional staff with opportunities to gain certifications** – Providing staff with training opportunities for every role in a congressional office is important to the overall cohesiveness and productivity of an office. Certifications should be offered for the roles of Staff Assistant, Legislative Correspondent, Legislative Assistant, Legislative Director, Scheduler, Press Assistant, Communications Director, Chief of Staff, District Caseworker, and District Director. Access to any of these certifications should be offered to any staffer who seeks them regardless of their title or seniority in order to provide staff with better insight into each other's work and provide them with the opportunity to learn about new positions.
- **Provide management training for senior-level congressional staff** – Providing management training for senior-level positions akin to those provided in the private sector would help ensure that offices are able to oversee robust congressional operations to the benefit of their constituents.
- **Increase the federal student loan repayment program** - The federal student loan repayment program is an incredibly important and effective tool for retainment. However, offices are currently limited in the overall amount they receive and make available to individual staffers. A significant increase to the program for each office would help congressional offices better retain talented staff.
- **Ensure the U.S. House of Representatives Child Care Center keeps up with current demand** – According to a 2018 Child Care Aware analysis, the cost of child care in Washington, D.C. ranks highest in the country at about \$24,000 for infant care and about \$19,000 for toddler care. The Child Care Center provides a great and affordable service to congressional staff, but day care slots continue to be severely limited and the waitlist remains long. Ensuring that staff can access these services more easily would help improve staff retention.

- **Increase diversity of congressional staff** – Congressional offices should be provided with adequate resources to ensure that they can recruit and retain top talent from communities of color. According to a recent report by the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, “only 13.7% of senior House staff are people of color even though they make up 38% of the U.S. population at large.” Having a congressional workforce that better reflects the rich diversity of the populations they serve ensures that diverse perspectives are taken into account when Congress legislates. It can also vastly improve the ability of Congress to build relationships with their constituents.
- **Require mandatory implicit bias and cultural sensitivity training for all hiring managers** – Ensure that hiring managers are equipped with the information and training to foster congressional offices that provide a welcome and inclusionary environment for congressional staff and the constituents that staff interact with.
- **Issue a regular survey on ways to improve pay, benefits, and quality of life** – Provide staff with a voluntary and anonymous mechanism to voice concerns about pay, benefits, and quality of life at their workplace to glean important future recommendations to address staff retention and recruitment.
- **Ensure the health and safety of every congressional staffer on campus** – The events of January 6 painfully underscored the degree to which congressional staff are vulnerable to security risks. As much as practicable, the institution of Congress has a responsibility to preserve the health and safety of every person on its campus, including congressional staff. The institution should also ensure that adequate resources are provided to protect the health and safety of congressional district staff. Like every Member of Congress, staff must interact with the public on a regular basis to serve their districts well. Ensuring that offices can do so safely is both critical to the work of the Congress and beneficial to the constituents they serve. In addition, congressional staff should continue to have access to robust mental health counseling from the Office of Employee Assistance.

Congressional staff play a critical role in helping Members of Congress deliver for their constituents and districts. Whether they are answering the phones, responding to a high volume of mail, authoring and advancing legislation, cultivating lines of communication with their constituents, serving as a liaison to federal agencies, or overseeing a large team of public servants, congressional staff are fundamental to the work of Congress. Yet, congressional pay and benefits are often not commensurate with the work, the time, and the passion that hard-working staffers invest in Capitol Hill. These are structural issues that can often lead to low morale, high turnover of staff, and the inability of offices to retain and recruit top talent.

Once again, I commend the Select Committee on its work thus far to address these issues and I encourage you to execute on these recommendations and continue to seek input from both current and former congressional staff.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify.

The CHAIRMAN. Thanks very much for your testimony.

With that, we will move to member questions, and I will recognize myself for 5 minutes out of the gate.

And, Ms. Nguyen, I want to start with you. I know that, in this job, there are long days, difficult days, and folks are able to power on because we feel like we are contributing positively to the country, but as staff begin to feel a sense of burnout and start considering a post-Capitol Hill career, what were the benefits that sounded the most attractive to you?

What do you think would have the largest impact on retention? Is it first-time home buyer programs? Is it the benefits that would help a staffer start a family, like adoption services or IVF and childcare? Is it work-life balance? Give us some guidance as to what you think could be difference makers.

Ms. NGUYEN. Thank you, Congressman. Those are all really great options. And whether or not these additional benefits are going to help retain staff or recruit new ones, it is a yes and no. These options would be great and many of them are being offered in the private sector, but these options alone have their limitations.

Sure, things like investments in 527s, fertility benefits, first-time home buyer benefits, all these things are great. They can help round out someone's compensation, but it is still no substitute for offering the congressional workforce with a competitive salary. What good is it to own a home if you really can't make that monthly mortgage payment down the line?

If there are benefits that I believe are definitely worth expanding, I would really encourage you to prioritize expanding current benefits, including the student loan repayment program and access to childcare. And I know we touched on the student loan program earlier, and I really commend this committee's work.

I know you all included a provision in the CARES Act allowing borrowers to skip payments for 6 months and avoid taxes on the benefits they receive, and it is my understanding that you are looking to reauthorization of this measure beyond the pandemic.

But beyond that, I would certainly recommend that the committee explore an increase to the overall amount that offices can receive and can allocate because, as you know, offices are limited in the overall amount they receive and make available to individual staffers.

Personally speaking, I graduated college with a relatively small amount of student loan debt. I was able to pay it off within a few years of my time on the Hill. But I did so because I was working in an office where I was one of the very few people who needed access to that benefit. So I, in turn, was able to access the maximum amount.

But I know from anecdotal examples that many of my peers in other offices were not quite as lucky. They worked in offices where every person participated in the program, which brought down the repayment amount for each person, meaning that it would take much longer for folks to make a dent in their student loan debt. So I think that is what I would say on the student loan repayment.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

Ms. Ruckert, I have a question for you. And I want to preface this by saying I don't want this to sound partisan, but I need your

help. You know, you saw Leader Hoyer and Chair Jeffries recently come out, I think rather courageously, in proposing an increase in the MRA and establishing pay bands, as you recommended in your testimony, and delinking Member salaries from senior staff, so that hopefully Congress could retain senior staff.

It seems like this needs to be bipartisan for us to actually get it done. And many of these things are things that this committee, on a bipartisan basis, have recommended. But you worked for a Conservative leader. Can you help us make the Conservative case for doing these things?

Ms. RUCKERT. Well, Congressman Kilmer, thanks so much for the question. I did advocate for the pay bands and the minimum pay for positions, and I think that is something that can be looked at bipartisantly. And other things I advocated for were management training for Members and also chiefs of staff and legislative directors so that not only it is a compensation issue, but are you working in a happy environment that gives you opportunity for growth and training? So I think it is a combination of compensation and also best management practices put into everyday working on the Hill.

The CHAIRMAN. Anybody else want to take a swing at that pitch? Okay.

Mr. Timmons.

Mr. TIMMONS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I might even answer that question. You know, I really think that we are spending so much money, it is just beyond my comprehension that we would not invest in having the best possible staff running our country. I mean, it is just beyond my comprehension that we are in a situation where we do not prioritize that.

So, I mean, I fully support making sure that we are able to retain the best team possible because that is the way that we are going to get the better outcomes that we need. So it wasn't part of my question, but I will take a stab at it.

Okay. So let's go to Ms. Ruckert. Did you have a tough time retaining staff? In my office, we lost two people I guess in 28 months. They went to K Street and got a 50-percent pay increase. We couldn't compete with that. So, I mean, you have a lot longer history on the Hill. Could you talk about your retention challenges?

Ms. RUCKERT. Sure. Well, Washington, D.C., is far from Louisiana. And although Congressman Scalise hires people from all over, some Louisiana people move to Washington, and it is not what they think. So they are homesick, and they leave quickly. That was one sort of junior staff type issue.

But then there is also—I think Capitol Hill is a great training program for any line of work you are going to go in. We had staffers that went on to become real estate agents, elected officials, own their own insurance agency. Because you learn how to be proactive. You learn how to be a problem-solver. You have that Capitol Hill polish, which I think is when you are surrounded by smart, fast-paced people from all over the country, you learn great polish. And I think that helps Hill staffers get recruited away.

Some staffers remain forever. Congressman Scalise has two staffers that have been with him since 2008, since he was elected. They may have taken a turn and left to go to private sector and then

were wooed back because they missed the team atmosphere that he certainly cultivates.

So it is a mixed bag of you are always trying to retain people. And my fellow chiefs would use creative ways to overcome the compensation and the tight office space by going out of their way to recognize their work, give them opportunities with the boss, highlighting them, sending a news release when they joined the staff in their college newspapers, in their hometown newspapers, just to give them exposure.

Mr. TIMMONS. Thank you for that. I guess I am going to add one more question to that.

So my experience on the Hill was in 2006. I was a Senate staff assistant. I was an intern, then staff assistant. And I was staff assistant for then Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist. I saw him once. I saw him twice for like half an hour.

Now, compare that to the House. And I guess he is leadership—he was leadership, so there is that variable. But compare that to the House. I spend all of my time with my team, and, you know, I have interaction with everybody.

Is there a challenge Senate versus House, or is it pretty much the same issue?

Ms. RUCKERT. I have never worked on the Senate side, but I kind of always felt like the Member is sort of the sun, and the staff is the planets around them. And the closer you are to the sun, the happier the employees seem to be, for the most part.

So we would go out of our way to make sure that, even junior staffers, interns—we would do a shadow day for interns, where they would spend the day with the Congressman, accompanying him to committee meetings and constituent meetings, just so they could see what his life is really like. Just always looking for opportunities.

I was a chief of staff that had two children. So I didn't want to be with him every evening. So we rotated those responsibilities. And that helps with morale, I believe.

Mr. TIMMONS. Sure. Thank you for that.

Ms. Engle, could you talk more about the emergency savings accounts? That is a new concept to me, and could you elaborate?

Ms. ENGLE. Yes, I would be happy to. So, there again, AARP put out a study—it was real impactful—where the average American doesn't even have \$400 to set aside for an emergency. That was before the pandemic. So we know that there is a really serious issue of financial stability in the country.

So some of my employer clients are looking at ways to have an incentive program where if the employee is putting aside a certain amount of money, that that employer will, in fact, match it, and it goes right into the employee's personal account that they own and they control.

It is backed up with a group of programs around training and budgeting. Again, I echo Ms. Nguyen's sentiments around, if you don't have the money, it is kind of hard to manage the money.

But, by the same token, there are a lot of tricks and tips that these professionals help employees with one-on-one education, so at least they are squeezing that dollar as effectively as possible.

So I am excited that more of my clients are looking at it. I think that it is a really important benefit.

Mr. TIMMONS. Thank you, ma'am. I am out of time.

Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

I want to thank all the witnesses for their time. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Thanks, Vice Chair Timmons.

Next up, Mr. Cleaver.

Mr. CLEAVER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I apologize. I have got a Financial Services hearing at the same time. But I wanted to say this is a very important hearing, and I appreciate both of the leaders doing this.

In response to the last question about the Senate, my post-graduate degree is in theology. I have found no theology that would allow me to believe that God actually wanted a Senate, but there is. You know, it is here. So I guess we have to deal with it.

But here is my question: I dealt with this in some ways with the last panel. And this is for all three of you. And I am struggling with this issue. So I think that we are weakening one of the— weakening the legislative branch of the government when we lose our people to the executive branch of the government. And it is an every-4-year deal. And then once they go to the executive branch, then everybody in the world wants them.

And so is that a good sale to the public? I mean, is that something that we can—that you think the public understands, that we are creating an imbalance in the branches of the government if our best or certainly the people who get the experience early on and then move to the White House—and, of course, we have bright people coming right on after them. But they go to the White House. Do you think the public cares? Anybody? Ms. Engle?

Ms. NGUYEN. I will take a stab at that, if that is okay. And I think that is a great question that you posed, Congressman.

I think it boils down to the fact that Capitol Hill is an American workplace like other Americans workplaces. It is a competitive marketplace. At the end of the day, in order to ensure that Congress functions and elected officials can deliver for their constituents, Capitol Hill has to compete for the best and the brightest too.

And Congress is competing against the private sector, as we have talked about, and sometimes other parts of the government, and it continues to keep falling far behind its competitors.

In most cases, congressional staff love their jobs, and in order to keep doing them and to keep providing a good service to the public that they serve, they want and need to be fairly compensated. And many of them come to work ready to fight every day so that families in their districts and their constituents can make a good living and be fairly compensated as well.

Mr. CLEAVER. Thank you. Either of you, either of the other witnesses care to respond?

Ms. PEACE. Can you hear me?

Mr. CLEAVER. Yes.

Ms. PEACE. Let me just comment on the district perspective. I don't think anybody just graduating from one of our local colleges aspired to be a district office caseworker. What happens, normally we recruit them, and then they are good, and we want to keep

them, but sometimes we have to compete with the State capital, which is 75 miles away.

And, Congressman, you were saying that you lose folks to the executive branch. Well, we lose folks also to the State capital because they have a different system over there. They pay their staff better. They have step increases. They are paid longer—or more for their longevity.

And then those people move on to Capitol Hill. So it is a steppingstone that is I think part of the natural way things work. I am not sure how you could avoid that because working in Washington, D.C., is very glamorous. Working in the district is not, but it can be.

Mr. CLEAVER. But if we paid more money, don't you think that would allow us to maintain those bright young people certainly for a longer period of time?

Ms. PEACE. Increase in salaries will help keep a potential district office worker, but in the district, especially from a rural district where I worked for 26 years, we represented 20 percent of the State of California, and it took 4 or 5 hours to get from point A to point B.

It is not glamorous being in the district as it is in working on Capitol Hill. There is always that glimmer of hope for a district worker if they don't have other commitments to try and get to D.C., 3,000 miles away. I just think it is the way the business operates. I am not sure, as a district director, I had any control over that.

Mr. CLEAVER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. My time is up.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Mr. Cleaver.

Next up, Mr. Joyce.

Mr. JOYCE. Thank you.

Ms. Peace, continuing on that, I agree that casework is one of the most important services our congressional offices provide to our constituents. It is right there on the ground level. It certainly requires a certain level of unique skills and expertise.

You mentioned in your testimony that you implemented a trauma team to help resolve difficult issues inside your office. Could you explain to us how that worked and what other recommendations you have to attract, retain, and train effective caseworkers?

Ms. PEACE. A trauma team that we had in-house is just like an ER department at your local hospital. When you have a very difficult case—and all of you know some of the difficult cases; you might be dealing with a potential suicide or something like that—but you have staff available to bring that issue to a conference room, and we all hear about that case and we all provide input.

Just as doctors would, you make recommendations on whether surgery is necessary or more X-rays and more consultation. But if you solve the more difficult cases as a team rather than place the burden on an individual, it helps to de-stress the situation.

Mental health and wellness programs are an invaluable new tool that is available to many corporations. And I think something along those lines can be implemented at the district and Capitol Hill level to help caseworkers and staff cope with the unforeseen or the high-stress situations that are coming along our way, whether it is handling an angry protest.

We have had situations where people actually remove screens from windows, and they come in. How do you handle that? Do you call the police right away, or do you try and de-stress the situation by working with the protesters?

All of these things add a tremendous burden to an individual, but if you keep working as a team, they are solvable.

Mr. JOYCE. And certainly it would be a great exercise in team building.

Ms. PEACE. Yes.

Mr. JOYCE. I agree with you on that. Well, you know, and relying on your expertise, if you had a magic wand, what suggestions do you have to improve the way district offices operate?

Ms. PEACE. Thank you for that. Many of your district offices are very rural, and they are so far away from a major city. Traveling and reimbursement for gas, tow trucks. I burned through four different cars, four brandnew cars, and logged in about 800,000 miles during my tenure. The travel reimbursement rate per mile was fair at the time, but I am not sure how much it has increased.

You know, gas cost in California is exorbitant. You pay for your insurance. You pay for tow trucks. You pay for accidents that happen on a stretch of highway. You are traveling in all kinds of weather. You are spending the night trying to get from point A to point B for a meeting. The miles in between is really exorbitant, and you are absorbing all those costs.

Perhaps a better travel reimbursement might make it more equitable for your field staff and your district director to absorb the expenses.

Mr. JOYCE. You know, one last one. Security-wise, what security would you have between—you mentioned you wouldn't be calling the police yet if they are ripping the screens off the building. I am a former prosecutor. So I think they should be calling them right away when they are seeing the crowd. But what kind of security would you think should be in effect then?

Ms. PEACE. Well, in our district office, after this particular incident, we had a buzzer put in at the receptionist's desk to alert the police or sheriff, and they would come. But we also had a swinging gate. Where, you know, you have a counter and you have folks that want to storm your office, a 4-foot counter is not going to keep them out. You don't want to build a glass wall between you and your constituents. That is not customer service.

I am not sure if rolling your phones over to an irate caller—I think he had mentioned it before—and then getting back to them. You have visitors that come and pound at your door. You can't keep your office locked up. You are there to serve your constituents. However unpleasant as it might be, you have to work and get through it.

Right now, I think, just watching the news, the environment is a little different and maybe even a little more dangerous, but there are still things you could do to provide good customer service and keep your staff safe and secure from unforeseen elements.

Mr. JOYCE. Thank you all for your time today and your answers. I have more questions, but I am all out of time.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Mr. Ranking Member.

The CHAIRMAN. Yes, Mr. Joyce.

Mr. Phillips.

Mr. PHILLIPS. Thank you, Mr. Kilmer.

We recently had a hearing relative to congressional fellowships. My office takes advantage of a number of fellowship programs designed to bring people from various agencies, the administration, to our office. We cross-fertilize, of course. But I am not aware of any programs that allow Hill staffers to actually take some time in the executive branch or various agencies.

I am curious from any of you who wish to start, what do you think about that notion? First of all, why isn't there such a program? And based on your respective experience, do you think that would be a good offering for Hill staff to have a little bit of time in the other branch?

Ms. NGUYEN. I can start by saying that if I had to take a guess at why an exchange program like this doesn't currently exist, it is because congressional offices are underresourced as it is. And it would be tremendously difficult for a Member of Congress to allow a staffer to kind of take whatever time off in order to go work in a different agency or whatnot.

But, with that being said, if we could tackle the resource problem and an exchange program like this could be created, I do think, from my personal experience, it would be a tremendous benefit because, as a congressional staffer, part of your job is also dealing with Federal agencies, communicating with the liaisons in those agencies to get things done for your constituents. And so to be able to have insight into how agencies work, how the executive branch works would be tremendously helpful.

Mr. JOYCE. I appreciate that. That was my suspicion.

Anybody else? Any other shared perspectives or diverging ones? Okay.

Ms. PEACE. Congressman, let me just add there is a different perspective from the district. We would have loved to have more fellows come in from Social Security, the IRS, maybe Veterans Affairs because they are paid for by that agency to work in congressional offices. That tool is very helpful and should be kept in your box of tools.

Mr. PHILLIPS. Indeed, and that is my belief is cross-fertilization is always a net benefit to everybody, and we should certainly seek ways to—if we are going to undercompensate, we should at least find ways to over-invest relative to experience and opportunities.

Another question for all of you is relative to surveying. You know, Congress is pretty good at thinking we understand issues and then oftentimes imposing them without often asking questions of the people that we would most impact.

I am curious, is there any precedent for doing a survey of Capitol Hill staffers, asking what specifically they want to see? What benefits, what amenities, what other investments we could make? Is anybody aware of any substantial survey work relative to Hill staffers? No?

Ms. NGUYEN. Congressman, I am not aware of such a survey, and I think I left more recently than anyone on the panel today.

But I will say that that idea would be certainly a welcome one, particularly if it were provided on a voluntary basis, anonymous basis, so that staffers, particularly on the junior level, are able to

voice the concerns that they have without fear of retribution. I think that would be an outstanding idea. And to be able to do it in a way where it is regular enough so that this committee and your colleagues are able to glean continuous recommendations for ways to improve conditions for the workforce.

Mr. PHILLIPS. I appreciate that.

Ms. ENGLE. Congressman, if I can just interject, that is a great question. From a private sector perspective, just to rest assured that that is a best practice in HR. So, again, getting the data and then making data-driven decisions for better benefits.

Mr. PHILLIPS. One reason I love hearings like this is sometimes some of the obvious that we haven't even considered, including this. It just came to my mind as we are talking that we should ask the question of those that we are talking about right now and allow them to prioritize what we advocate for.

So, with that, I will leave that in our respective laps. And thank you all very much for your perspectives and time. We are trying to make a difference, and you are helping us to that end, so thank you.

And, with that, I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you. Really great ideas there. I don't see any other members who have not yet had an opportunity to ask questions.

Do any members have any additional questions for this panel before we let them go?

Okay. Seeing none, let me thank our witnesses for their terrific testimony, some really terrific ideas and I certainly appreciate it.

Speaking of staff, I want to thank the staff of our committee for putting together such a great hearing with such terrific witnesses. Really great work to our team.

I also feel somewhat compelled to thank my internet provider since I did not have any disruptions today. I have been working so hard on rural broadband, I didn't realize I needed to be working on suburban broadband as well.

So, without objection, all members will have 5 legislative days within which to submit additional written questions for the witnesses to the chair, which will be forwarded to the witnesses for their response. I ask our witnesses to please respond as promptly as you are able.

Without objection, all members will have 5 legislative days within which to submit extraneous materials to the chair for inclusion in the record.

And, with that, this hearing is adjourned. Thanks, everybody.

[Whereupon, at 12:53 p.m., the committee was adjourned.]