

**APSA Task Force on Congressional Reform
Report from the Subcommittee on Staffing Diversity and Retention
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1. Introduction

“Members of Congress are only as strong as the staff that surrounds them.”
Former Speaker John Boehner, May 2015

One of the principal lines of investigation charged to the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress was to investigate and make recommendations on “staff recruitment, diversity, retention, and compensation and benefits.” To assist in that effort, the American Political Science Association Taskforce Subcommittee on Staffing Diversity and Retention has developed several staff-specific reform recommendations for the Select Committee to consider as it conducts its work.

Congressional aides are members’ primary institutional resource, and members rely on them heavily to execute the many and varied functions of their duties as elected officials. From constituent casework to drafting and advancing legislative proposals, congressional staff are vital to each and every member and to Congress as an institution.

Congress benefits from the work of many talented staffers who are dedicated to the institution, its members, and its mission to represent the interests of constituents. Yet despite their acknowledged importance and influence, congressional staffers operate in a work environment in need of modernization. As a whole, the corps of congressional staff lacks diversity, particularly in more senior-level positions. More generally, Congress has difficulty recruiting, retaining, and training effective congressional staff. Due to a combination of a strenuous work demands, low and stagnant pay, and a lack of professional development opportunities, congressional staff commonly use service in Congress as a stepping stone to outside employment.

Through the work of the Select Committee, the House of Representatives has an opportunity to greatly improve its own capacity by investing in its workforce. By modernizing its human resource operations and improving staff compensation and professional development programming, Congress can reestablish itself as a desired

place of employment, where talented professionals build long-term careers, instead of one that is seen by many young people as a place to open doors to better opportunities down the road.

2. Identifying the Problem

Efforts to improve the congressional workforce are dependent on having accurate data about the staff currently serving members of Congress. In the private sector, attempts to increase the diversity and retention of employees are often stymied by a lack of measurable indicators that can be used to make informed decisions and to hold decision makers accountable. As a necessary first step, therefore, we recommend that Congress collect and report more comprehensive information about congressional office and committee staff, including data on the racial, ethnic, and gender composition of staff members. Such information will allow Congress to better understand hiring and retention patterns, as well as providing an opportunity to identify best practices, improve workforce performance, and advance the important goals of equity and fair hiring practices.

Recommendations:

Collect data on the race, ethnicity, and gender of congressional staff in a machine readable format

We recommend building on existing hiring practices. Specifically, offices currently follow the practice of completing a Payroll Authorization Form (PAF) when each hire is made and submitting a mandated monthly verification of payroll data for all current staffers. At present, this information is submitted to the Office of Payroll and Benefits, which then compiles it into quarterly reports that are provided to the public. We recommend, first, that in addition to filling out the Payroll Authorization Form, new staffers and those changing positions also fill out a form that includes basic demographic questions about race/ethnicity/gender (following established EEOC mandates), as well as questions about education and experience. Data for each individual staff member should be tracked via a unique identifier, and the information contained on this questionnaire should be submitted to the Chief Administrative Officer of the House. Interns and fellows should be included in this process, even if their funding is derived from a separate source. As the program launches, current staff should also be asked to complete the form described above, and to do so expeditiously. These staff-level demographic data should be made publicly available, in a machine readable format, on the Chief Administrative Office website.

Report data to Congress

We propose that the Chief Administrative Officer of the House produce and submit to the Committee on Appropriations of the House of Representatives an annual report that reviews the salaries and benefits of DC and district office and committee staff in the

House of Representatives to evaluate 1) the racial/ethnic and gender breakdown of each position in the House and in each member's office, disaggregated by the district and DC offices, 2) whether staff across offices and demographic categories receive similar pay for similar work, and 3) if there is a disjuncture, the extent and nature of that disjuncture, broken out by job responsibilities.

3. Increasing Workforce Diversity

Cultivating a workforce that reflects the diversity of the nation along multiple dimensions including gender, race, ethnicity, region, and economics is fundamental to achieving representation of constituent views. More diverse workplaces better reflect the needs of a heterogeneous society and achieve better outcomes. Achieving a more diverse workplace must start with recruitment, and the committee has several recommendations to help expand the candidate pool to provide offices with a path to recruiting a highly qualified and more broadly representative workforce.

Increasing workforce diversity is essential to ensure the government is representative of the people it serves. Moreover, the development of good public policy requires a legislative staff with diverse expertise and experience. Yet, current staffing practices rely on a circumscribed pool of talent. For example, according to the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, people of color make up 38% of the U.S. population, but only 13.7% of top House staff according to the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies. Furthermore, the Joint Center study also revealed nearly three-quarters of U.S. House Members (313 Members) had no top staff of color.¹

In 2019, the House established the Office of Diversity and Inclusion, an important first step. It is not yet clear, however, what the office's mandate is and how it will effectively execute its mission. It is critical that the House support the House Office on Diversity and Inclusion by placing it outside of party leadership offices and within the House Chief Administrative Office (CAO) that serves the 10,000 House members, officers, and staff. The Office of Diversity must be a nonpartisan and permanent office, insulated from partisan politics and inconsistent budget appropriations.² Relegating workplace diversity initiatives to one party's leadership offices is not sustainable or best suited to increasing workforce diversity. Moreover, to be successful the House must provide the Office on Diversity and Inclusion with consistent institutional support and resources according to best practices in Human Resources and the private sector. We recommend that Congress strengthen and expand the role of the nonpartisan Office of Diversity and Inclusion and the House Diversity Officer with increased funding and responsibilities.

¹ Scott, E., McCray, K., Bell, D., & Overton, S. 2018. *Racial Diversity Among Top U.S. House Staff (Executive Summary)*. Washington, DC: Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies.

² Partisan efforts currently exist, and they can help inform the new nonpartisan office, but they should remain distinct. The Senate Democratic Diversity Initiative, led by the Senate Democratic Leader Chuck Schumer, was created in 2007, however, their scope is limited to Democratic Senate offices and their resources are limited. Currently, Democratic members of the Committee on House Administration are seeking an Executive Director for the House of Representatives Diversity Initiative.

Recommendations:

Expand the nonpartisan House Office of Diversity and Inclusion, ensuring that its responsibilities include:

- Maintaining a public website with information about their diversity plan and evaluations of diversity efforts.
- Publicizing information about internship and fellowship programs for underrepresented communities.
- Conducting regular outreach to Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs), Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs), Asian Pacific American Institute for Congressional Studies (APAIs), (American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC) members, and other universities and colleges across the country to promote internships and jobs on Capitol Hill.
- Partnering with organizations that have a proven track record of identifying, promoting and supporting diverse staffers, including relevant caucuses and Congressional Member Organizations.
- Holding regular sessions with panelists on the Hill, such as “How to find, and succeed in, a job on the Hill,” “How to find other jobs on the Hill.
- Assisting any interested office in the development of a diversity plan.
- Coordinating with other relevant diversity efforts and the Office of Congressional Workplace Rights (OCWR) regarding HR policy and hiring.
- Supporting and expanding existing programs with a proven track record and pipelines that place interns and fellows of color in Congress such as the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation, the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute, the Asian Pacific American Institute for Congressional Studies, and the Charles B. Rangel International Affairs Program.

Increase access to congressional employment opportunities by modernizing job listings and resume bank

Increasing access to job openings has the potential to diversity Hill staff. As part of the House Vacancy Announcement and Placement Service, we recommend that all job opportunities are posted online through <https://www.house.gov/employment>.

We recommend that the House Vacancy Announcement and Placement Service should maintain a searchable resume database with information on job seekers. This database would be open to all interested job candidates, and would provide self-reported

voluntary information regarding the demographic characteristics of job seekers, including (but not limited to) party, race, ethnicity, sex, veteran status, LGBTQ status, disability status, and state of residence. This database will be accessible to congressional staff with hiring responsibilities and to the Office of Diversity and Inclusion.

We recommend that the Office of Diversity and Inclusion, in coordination with the House Vacancy Announcement and Placement Service, hold information sessions about employment opportunities in the House of Representatives and post recorded versions of these sessions online.

4. Retention: Compensation

The top reason given by congressional staff for why they depart Congress is low pay.³ For several decades, Congress has offered stagnant and uncompetitive salaries to its aides, particularly when compared with compensation levels for equivalent positions in the private sector. The effects of such low wages are compounded given that D.C.-based congressional aides live in one of the most expensive metropolitan areas in the country and are increasingly likely to come to Congress owing large amounts in student loans. As a result, Congress has struggled to retain qualified and effective staff. Staffers regularly depart Congress after short tenures, trading their congressional experience and connections for higher salaries offered by special interest and lobbying organizations. To combat this revolving door and to increase retention among its aides, we recommend that Congress increase salaries paid congressional staffers.

Relatedly, because of the discretion afforded members of Congress in how to run their own offices, each congressional office is markedly different in the types and amounts of non-salary benefits offered to staff. Some offices offer student loan repayment assistance, some don't; some offer regular sick leave, some don't. These office-by-office differences result in inconsistent compensation combinations that leave staff unaware of and uncertain about their non-salary compensation packages. We recommend standardizing such benefits across congressional offices to allow staff to better understand and anticipate their compensation, and to provide more flexibility to staff to choose employment in different offices knowing that minimum benefit packages will be offered in each.

Thus, in an effort to increase the retention of qualified congressional staff, we make the following recommendations in regards to staff compensation and benefits:

Recommendations:

Increase and streamline compensation for staff

³ Congressional Management Foundation, *Life in Congress: Job Satisfaction and Engagement of House and Senate Staff*, 2013.

Significantly increase MRA to enable Members to better pay staff.

Index MRA to inflation.

Prohibit members from returning unspent MRA funds

Pay transition staffers for newly-elected members between November and January

Pay House staff bi-monthly rather than monthly

Increase and centralize/standardize benefits

Provide for/increase non-MRA related compensation:

- Housing stipend (providing)

- Transportation to work stipend (increasing)

- Day care benefit

- Cell phone benefit

Establish standard minimum leave (vacation) policy

Centralize, standardize and improve student loan repayment reform (separate from members' MRA)

Centralize and standardize minimum paid family and medical leave, informed by research on best practices at the state level and in the private sector, to help retain employees

5. Retention: Advancement/Professionalization Training

We contend that a highly-trained staff benefits the institution, and also increases the satisfaction of individual staffers. A well-developed training program would offer education in the legislative process and constituent work and would help staffers to learn about careers on Capitol Hill and envision a longer tenure on the Hill.

The first challenge is ensuring that all staff have sufficient training to excel in their positions. The Congressional Research Service provides excellent legislative training. However, not enough staff take advantage of it, perhaps because they do not have the time, they do not know about it, or because members of Congress do not value it and either subtly or actively discourage their staff from taking advantage of it.

A second challenge in recruiting and retaining staff relates to professional development. Importantly, on this dimension, the needs of congressional staffers are not unique. Professionals in all fields benefit from opportunities to gain new skills and hone existing ones, to network with and learn from peers, and to understand the structure of the career ladder within their organizations. In turn, employers who provide robust

professional development programs enjoy highly-trained staff members who are more satisfied with their jobs and more likely to stay with their current organization. Thus, in addition to training to effectively onboard new staff in the legislative process and in work with constituents, it is important to offer ongoing opportunities and, perhaps a structured program, for more experienced staffers. Such programming would support the mentoring and career advice offered within individual member and committee offices.

Recommendations:

Increase, support, and require position-specific training

We propose two types of mandatory training for all new staffers--at least two sessions of in-person CRS legislative training and on-line training in constituent service, with different modules for DC and district offices. Current staff who have not completed this level of training should be encouraged to do so. This may require a modest increase in the CRS budget so that it can offer more in-person sessions and also create and produce on-line training.

In addition to training for permanent staffers, we recommend that interns and fellows also receive training that details House operations and typical intern responsibilities and opportunities. There are economies of scale to offering this at the level of the institution rather than office-by-office.

Support professional development of staff

We propose creating a more robust on-going professional development program for current staff, including regular "Life on the Hill" events that would offer a mix of speaker series where panelists discuss Hill-specific advancement and networking events. It is important to cooperate and coordinate with other groups that are already involved in such programming.

6. Retention: HR Management and Workplace Climate

Office management and office culture vary considerably between individual members' offices. While best practices in HR and management are followed in many offices, in some offices, poor performance in these areas come at a significant cost to members and the institution. Indeed, the second most significant reason that staff report leaving the Hill relates to frustrations with the management of their office.⁴ Poor management is rarely intentional; many staff in supervisory roles have not had sufficient experience or training to effectively manage and motivate other staffers, and many staff are not even aware of their rights as employees. It is important to ensure a basic minimum level of uniform human resources training for all staff and additional training for managers in all House offices.

⁴ Congressional Management Foundation, *Life in Congress: Job Satisfaction and Engagement of House and Senate Staff*, 2013.

Recommendations:

Increase, support, and require relevant HR and management trainings

We propose that Congress institute two new types of mandatory training, including: 1) In-person human resources information sessions for all staff located in DC, and online training for district staff, to ensure that they know their rights, benefits, and responsibilities, and 2) in-person management training for all staff in supervisory roles, including Chiefs of Staff and District Directors.

Topics in both trainings should include sexual harassment and discrimination prevention, promoting diversity and inclusion, employee rights and benefits (as detailed in the CAA), and ethics rules. Training for Chiefs of Staff and District Directors should also include management training on issues such as navigating the congressional and district work schedule, conducting effective annual reviews, dealing with performance issues, cultural competency, and motivating staff.

Enhancing freshman orientation for new members

We recommend that every new member orientation session include a module related to managing staff, including training on supervising, evaluating, and motivating employees; cultural competency; promoting diversity and inclusion; and preventing sexual harassment.

Supporting existing reporting structures and ensure good workplace environment

We recommend establishing an anonymous staff hotline to enable staff to report problematic office environments or management practices.

In addition, OCWR should administer an exit survey to all staff leaving or switching offices. The exit survey should contain detailed questions that addresses office climate, work conditions, why staff are leaving, where they are going, and other climate-related questions.