

May 12, 2020

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Republican Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Chuck Schumer
Democratic Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Speaker Pelosi and Leaders McConnell, Schumer, and McCarthy:

We write to express our deep concern over the lack of a clear and transparent plan for maintaining congressional operations during the COVID-19 pandemic. We understand this virus has brought about unprecedented challenges for leaders the world over. However, it has been nearly two months since “social distancing” measures went into effect in the United States, yet there continues to be considerable confusion as to whether and how Congress will conduct its business in the weeks ahead.

The American people need to know that their representatives will continue to govern at this critical moment. We understand there are difficult questions as to exactly how Congress will proceed with certain activities, particularly the passage of complex legislation. We do not expect you to settle all disagreements at once, nor do we expect you to adopt a single path forward for the House and Senate. But we do believe there are concrete steps you can take right now to resume essential business and provide much-needed clarity for Members of Congress, the Capitol Hill workforce, and your constituents in the months to come.

First, we strongly urge you to limit the number of people who must be physically present in the Capitol complex, and provide clear guidance to those who are. We understand there has been ongoing confusion as to whether staff (who have largely been working remotely) should resume working in their Capitol Hill offices, and what protocols those who do return must adopt, such as whether to wear face masks in public spaces.

Regardless of whether Members of Congress return to Washington, DC, we believe the vast majority of staff can and should continue working from home. We suggest that the House and Senate adopt a temporary default-to-remote policy to make clear that staffers should stay home – unless told otherwise. Those who must return need better guidance and basic assistance – propping open doors, ensuring availability of disinfectant wipes in high-traffic areas – to limit the virus’s spread. We must protect those public servants and their families who *do* need to report to work in person, including Capitol police officers, medics, and contractors, and limit the

potential for the virus to spread elsewhere – when, for example, Members return to their districts.

Second, we encourage you to embrace – and provide clear guidelines for using – technology that will allow a significant portion of congressional business to continue remotely, particularly virtual meetings for Committee hearings and oversight. Some have described this as a “digital first” approach – if it can be done remotely now, then it *should* be done remotely. We applaud the Senate’s Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations for its recent, virtual hearing on this exact topic, and hope to see other Committees follow suit. We also commend the House for enabling Members to introduce bills, add cosponsors, and extend remarks digitally for the time being, ensuring that this essential legislative function continues even when Members cannot convene in-person.

Third, and related, it is important that public proceedings like hearings remain transparent and accessible, and are not overtaken by private video or conference calls (as important as those are). Congress’s public-facing activities are a critical feature of our democracy, and now more than ever, are needed to show the public that their elected representatives are indeed working for them.

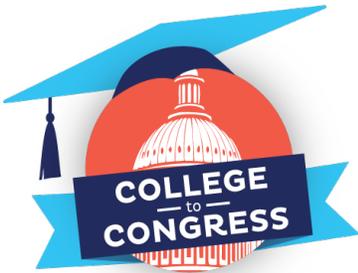
Lastly, while these recommendations are temporary and could be instituted for short durations – a week or two at a time – it is incumbent upon Congress to prepare for a lengthier disruption to its operations as a result of this pandemic. Public health officials have warned about the possibility of a future, subsequent wave of infections.

We urge you to draft emergency preparedness plans now, which can be socialized with Members ahead of time and relied upon if Members again need to remain in their districts for several months or longer, later this year or next. And of course, at an appropriate future time, Congress should address its longstanding continuity of government weaknesses and update contingencies for the entirety of government, with lessons learned from the current moment.

We thank you for considering these views and for your commitment to the institution.

Sincerely,





Marci Harris
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POPVOX*



Lorelei Kelly,
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