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Testimony to the United States House of Representatives
Committee on Appropriations, Legislative Branch Subco mmittee

Re: S&T Capacity at the Government Accountability Office

Dear Chairman Ryan, Ranking Member Herrera Beutler, and members of the
committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. Thanks to the bipartisan efforts of this
committee, following a provision in the fiscal year 2019 appropriations bill, the National
Academy of Public Administration (NAPA) conducted a wide-ranging study examining
science and technology resources within Congress.¹ NAPA's report identified important
gaps, and reaffirmed a narrative of historical decline in the legislative branch's staffing
and capacity. This narrative has been supported and augmented with additional studies
by Harvard University (including one I co-authored),² and numerous reports by think
tanks on both the left and right.

While there are those both inside and outside Congress who still favor restoring the
Office of Technology Assessment, NAPA as well as other analysts have pointed to the
Government Accountability Office's Science, Technology Assessment, and Analytics

¹ We've conducted a detailed examination of its findings here: <https://lincolnpolicy.org/2019/12/04/evaluating-the-2019-napa-report-on-st-policy-assessment-and-resources-for-congress/>.

² See: Mike Miesen, Laura Manley, et al., "Building a 21st Century Congress: Improving Congress's Science and Technology Expertise," Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, September 2019. <https://www.belfercenter.org/CongressSciTech>; Zach Graves and Daniel Schuman, "Science, Technology, & Democracy: Building a Modern Congressional Technology Assessment Office," Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation, January 2020. <https://ash.harvard.edu/publications/science-technology-and-democracybuilding-modern-congressional-technology-assessment>.

(STAA) team as a vehicle for this work. Since 2019, STAA has grown to over 80 FTE staff and undertaken thorough reviews of its methodological approach for technology assessment (as well as developing other products). However, there is still much that needs to happen for it to mature both institutionally and in terms of staffing capacity.

Serving Congress Beyond Committees

A major design limitation of OTA was that it primarily served committee leadership (this small support base also facilitated its political downfall). GAO's request process, governed by its congressional protocols, operates along similar lines. Yet, the need for science and technology expertise and analysis extends beyond just committee chairmen and ranking members. While this system is meant in part to manage scarce resources, there are potential approaches to open up shorter form analytic products to a broader constituency within Congress. To that end, we request the following report language:

Review of Congressional Protocols for S&T: The Government Accountability Office is requested to provide a report to this committee and to publish online within 180 days on appropriate congressional protocols to address requests from congressional committees (including those expressed by minority members) as well as individual member officers with respect to technology assessments and other non-audit reports generated by its STAA team.

Leveraging Outside Talent

As Comptroller General Gene Dodaro discusses in his recent testimony to this committee, GAO is actively exploring this use of temporary project-based staff for science and technology work at STAA. The use of rotators and project-based staff helps promote an interchange between academia and government, leading to the development of expert networks and staff expertise that otherwise wouldn't be possible to get in government. To encourage utilization and adoption of this model, we request the following report language:

Report on Hiring Authorities: The Government Accountability Office is requested to provide a report to this committee and to publish online within 180 days a report on available hiring authorities and their utilization for science and technology work in STAA, as well as how it might adapt talent and networking models from DARPA, the National Science Foundation, and the former Office of Technology Assessment.

Creating a Stronger STAA

Recent criticism of STAA (including analysis in the NAPA report) have pointed to its challenges in moving quickly and separating itself from GAO's audit-focused culture and bureaucracy. To address these issues and build consensus around STAA, policymakers should explore additional ways to give STAA greater autonomy. This might include a separate appropriations line item, or even modeling the relationship between the Congressional Research Service and the Library of Congress (see: 2 U.S.C. § 166).

Additionally, while we know there are significant limitations to what can be funded, we respectfully urge you to support GAO's budget request to provide additional resources for this important work. As with GAO and the original OTA, we believe a fully-funded STAA can provide a return to taxpayers that greatly exceeds its budget.

Thank you for your ongoing attention to this issue, and thank you for the opportunity to testify.