

Testimony of Meredith McGehee
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Before the Subcommittee on the Legislative Branch of the House Committee on
Appropriations
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Chairman Ryan, Ranking Member Herrera Beutler, and Subcommittee members—thank you for inviting me to testify today. I appreciate the opportunity to address the capacity of the legislative branch.

My name is Meredith McGehee, and I have been a public interest lobbyist for more than three decades, with an emphasis on promoting transparency, accountability, and strong ethics in our government. I am currently the Executive Director of Issue One, a leading crosspartisan organization working with Republicans, Democrats, and independents to advance commonsense reforms to fix our broken political system.

Issue One’s mission is to “fix democracy first.” We advocate for a range of solutions, including rebalancing the role of money in politics, securing our elections, and strengthening Congress so that it may fulfill its Article One responsibilities. To support our advocacy efforts, we formed the bipartisan ReFormers Caucus, which brings together more than 200 former members of Congress, governors, and Cabinet officials.

Issue One is deeply concerned about the state of our politics, including the polarization that has made it increasingly difficult for Congress to get any work done. This issue receives a lot of attention in the media, but I’ll note that the situation is not entirely bleak. We are heartened to see the bipartisan work of the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress, which is focused on identifying measures to improve the way the House functions.

However, today I am here to highlight a key driver of dysfunction in Washington that is often not talked about, but which merits this Subcommittee’s attention. I’m referring to Congress’ *capacity*—its capacity to legislate, deliberate, and represent the American people. **Put simply: Congress’ capacity to perform these critical functions has not kept pace with the challenges of governing a large and diverse nation in an increasingly complex world.**

Let’s be honest: the amount of time that many members of Congress spend on policymaking has to compete with the demands of the non-stop campaign cycle. Issue One’s research shows that in the last quarter, the average House member raised \$2,200 per day, and members in competitive races raised on average \$8,700 per day.¹ To reach these amounts, legislators spend up to 30 hours per week dialing for dollars,² leaving little time for actual policymaking. As a result, members have to rely more and more on staff, many of whom are inexperienced and leave the Hill just as they are gaining substantive policy expertise.

¹ Ratliff, A. (2020, February 5). Four Things We Learned from the Latest House and Senate Campaign Finance Filings. *Issue One*. <https://www.issueone.org/four-things-we-learned-from-the-latest-house-and-senate-campaign-finance-filings/>

² O’Donnell, N. (2016, April 24). Are Members of Congress Becoming Telemarketers? *CBS News*. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/60-minutes-are-members-of-congress-becoming-telemarketers/>; And: Grim, R. and Siddiqui, S. (2013, January 8). Call Time for Congress Shows How Fundraising Dominates Bleak Work Life. *Huffpost*. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/call-time-congressional-fundraising_n_2427291

The numbers themselves paint a sobering picture. In the last four decades, the U.S. population has increased by over thirty percent and federal spending has increased 700 percent—but the number of staff in House member offices has declined by about 20 percent.³ Similarly, the number of House committee staff has decreased by almost 50 percent in the last 30 or so years.⁴

Not only have these overall staffing levels decreased—but as anyone who visits the Hill regularly knows, staff skew young in age and turnover is high. As the House’s recent compensation analysis shows, the average House staffer has only been in their position for 2.5 years.⁵ For legislative assistants, who advise members on key subject-matter areas, the average tenure in the position is a mere 1.3 years.⁶ To put this in perspective, if you are a member on the House Armed Services Committee, and the staffer advising you on the National Defense Authorization Act is only in the position for one cycle of the bill’s annual review, your ability to impact that legislation will be seriously undercut.

Unfortunately, low pay is a major factor contributing to staff turnover. Staff who play a vital role in crafting and negotiating legislation often earn half of what they can make in the private sector or federal government. As a result, staffers get their “Hill ticket” punched and leave, taking with them valuable expertise and institutional knowledge.

Moreover, as I’m sure you’ll hear from others today, low entry-level pay can prevent those from middle and working-class backgrounds from taking a job on the Hill in the first place. Staff assistants—the entry level position in most Hill offices—make an average of \$34,425 a year,⁷ which is 32 percent less than the national average for recent college graduates, according to the National Association of Colleges and Employers.⁸ For jobseekers with student loans to repay, who cannot rely on support from family members to live and work in an expensive city, this is simply not a job they can afford to take.

These factors combine to exacerbate a lack of diversity in Hill offices, which undermines Congress’ ability to represent all Americans.

Let me be clear, by setting out this state of affairs, I do not mean to disparage Hill staff. In more than 30 years of public interest lobbying, I have found the vast majority of Hill staff to be exceptionally bright and highly motivated.

³ Kosar, K. (2020, January 14). Written testimony of Kevin R. Kosar Before the U.S. House of Representatives, Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress.

<https://docs.house.gov/meetings/MH/MH00/20200114/110374/HHRG-116-MH00-Wstate-KosarK-20200114.pdf>

⁴Brookings Institute Vital Statistics on Congress. Staffs of House and Senate Committees, 1891-2015.

https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/vitalstats_ch5_tbl5.pdf

⁵ Chief Administrative Officer. (2019). House of Representatives Compensation and Diversity Study Report: Member, Committee, and Leadership Offices. *U.S. House of Representatives*.

https://www.house.gov/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/2019_house_compdiversitystudy_finalreport_membco_mmlead.pdf

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ Koc., W. et al. (2019, Summer). NACE Salary Survey: Final Starting Salaries for Class of 2018 New College Graduates, Executive Summary. *National Association of Colleges and Employers*.

<https://www.nacweb.org/uploadedfiles/files/2019/publication/executive-summary/2019-nace-salary-survey-summer-executive-summary.pdf>

However, pitting staff in their mid-twenties—no matter how capable—against lobbyists and executive branch officials with decades of experience is a recipe for having special interests or the executive branch win *every time*.

So, what can be done?

I want to start by thanking you and the leaders of this Committee for the increase you were able to secure for the House Members' Representational Allowance for Fiscal Year 2020. This funding was a critically important step to improving congressional capacity, and Issue One hopes there will be more targeted increases to the MRA and committee funding in the future.

For those who might complain about Congress "spending money on itself," I would argue forcefully that having an experienced and diverse congressional staff is not about members of Congress themselves, but rather about protecting and strengthening the voices of the people they serve—their constituents.

It is also worth noting that this is a completely separate issue from that of member pay—the staff positions I'm referring to when expressing concern about retention are not earning anywhere near the current cap in staff pay.

That said, Issue One recognizes Congress is operating in a resource-constrained environment, particularly in this current appropriations cycle.

So, we would also urge you to focus on other, cost-effective ways to improve staff retention.

To start, we urge you to look at the excellent, bipartisan recommendations of the House Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress. The Committee's leaders, Chair Derek Kilmer and Vice Chair Tom Graves, recently introduced a resolution that would take important steps to improve the way Congress functions. This includes the creation of a human resources hub for staff, and the establishment of a diversity and inclusion office, both of which would improve staff retention and diversity.

The human resources hub in particular could improve staff retention in three key ways. First, it could identify best HR practices, particularly for hiring managers, and work with the new diversity and inclusion office to help member offices reach a more diverse talent pool. Second, it could provide a one-stop-shop for understanding staff benefits, lessening the administrative burden for members and staff alike. Third, it could establish recommended pay bands by staff position, which would provide member offices with a useful baseline for determining competitive compensation. The Select Committee is working closely with the Committee on House Administration to move these issues forward, and Issue One is encouraging every member of the House to support these bipartisan recommendations.

We would also like to highlight the potential to boost retention through improved management training for staff. Over my career, when I have asked departing staffers why they chose to leave the Hill, about half have cited the need to earn more money. But the other half cited challenges with their managers.

I've seen and heard about these management problems time and time again. Since there is no required management training as staff move "up the ladder" on the Hill, staffers find themselves suddenly managing people without preparation, as they move from policy-only to legislative or

deputy director roles. This is just a bad business practice that leads to inefficiencies and increased turnover, all of which undermines Congress' ability to serve the American people.

One last observation is that work to modernize and improve Congress has inspired action from a wide range of organizations—with differing missions and ideologies—who agree that a strong and functional Congress is an essential part of our democracy. For our part, Issue One has been meeting regularly with an informal coalition of nonprofit and advocacy groups, with the goal of better supporting this critical, bipartisan work. We've been impressed at how this desire to improve our first branch has united so many of us on the left, right, and in between. We hope this broad support is reflected in the testimony and feedback you receive ahead of this appropriations cycle.

In closing, thank you for considering these recommendations, and for all your work to promote a strong and competent staff within the legislative branch.