



U.S. House of Representatives

CAO

CHIEF ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER

Statement Before the House Appropriations Subcommittee on the Legislative Branch

*Health and Wellness of Employees and State of
Damage and Preservation as a Result of the
January 6 Insurrection*

The Honorable Catherine L. Szpindor
February 24, 2021

Good morning Chairman Ryan, Ranking Member Herrera Beutler, and Members of the Subcommittee.

I am pleased to join you today and appreciate the opportunity to discuss several topics that are important to the Office of the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO), including:

- The resilience, dedication, and ability of the CAO workforce
- The CAO's response to COVID-19 in support of the House of Representatives
- The CAO's response to the January 6 insurrection in support of the House of Representatives
- The CAO's commitment to health and well-being throughout the House of Representatives

Resilience, Dedication, and Ability of the CAO Workforce:

Mr. Chairman, as you know, my appointment as the Chief Administrative Officer began on Sunday, January 3. Just three days later, the Capitol was under siege. Like so many other Members and staff, I was sheltering in place, along with several CAO employees, as chaos was ensuing just outside of our office in the Capitol.

Although I will never forget those harrowing hours, the focus of my testimony is not about my own personal experiences. But I would like to take a moment to recognize the entire CAO team and everyone else who was locked down in the U.S. Capitol and the House office buildings.

I am tremendously grateful for the dedication and rapid response of so of my colleagues and the professionals from all House entities, including Member and Leadership offices, Committees, Officer organizations, and the U.S. Capitol Police. The efforts to restore order and protect our democracy were a shining example of the commitment we all share for this institution.

As a group, CAO employees are an engaged and highly motivated team. Results from our 2020 employee engagement survey note that our employees overwhelmingly feel a sense of pride working for the House of Representatives. This connection to a greater purpose inspires the workforce to deliver services to ensure Members of Congress can perform their Constitutional duties.

From the early onset of the COVID-19 pandemic through today, CAO employees continue to design new services and resources, roll out updated technologies, and find innovative ways to perform their jobs. I am extremely proud of the way all CAO employees are supporting this institution and am honored to serve with them.

The CAO's Response to COVID-19 in Support of the House of Representatives:

Mr. Chairman, the COVID pandemic has fundamentally changed the way we conduct the business of the House. Less than one year ago today, the CAO organization, along with all other House entities, rapidly responded to prepare offices for a maximum telework posture. This daunting and unprecedented challenge required maximum coordination with no prior roadmap to replicate. Fortunately, the

unwavering support from the House leadership made our transformation to a remote workforce possible.

Within our organization, several CAO business units collaborated to establish a Telework Readiness Center in the Rayburn Cafeteria to distribute laptops and tablets to Member offices. As a result, over 300 laptops were received for remediation, nearly 1,500 new devices were imaged for Member offices, and over 1,600 pieces of equipment were purchased by the Office Supply store and imaged by House Information Resources.

While none of us could have imagined the full impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to highlight that our migration to Microsoft Office 365 in the summer of 2019 was critical to our successful ability to telework over the past year. Since March 2020, the House information technology infrastructure has supported nearly 21 million chat messages, 425,000 virtual meetings, and averaged over 6,000 remote workers on any given day. House Members and staff average 785 Teams meetings each day over the past six months.

These numbers are as staggering as they are impressive. Arguably they put the House of Representatives on par with any best practice organization in the public, private, or non-profit sectors.

In addition to these technological enhancements, the CAO Safety and Office Design and Move Services teams conducted over 180 consultations with Member offices. Through these efforts, the CAO provided important safety information on social distancing standards, office layout and configuration suggestions, and guidance on maximum occupancy requirements. The team also provided over 800 plexiglass barriers and other personal protective equipment (e.g., masks, hand sanitizer, gloves) to offices around campus.

While it is impossible to know when this institution will return to a full onsite operating status, one thing is certain: COVID-19 may have changed the nature of work forever. Thus, as we move into the next several months, the CAO is committed to continually evolve our services to meet the needs of the House. Doing so will require additional resources and funding, and I am very appreciative of the collaborative effort from your subcommittee in assisting us with supplemental funding.

The CAO Response to the January 6 Insurrection in Support of the House of Representatives:

During the January 6 insurrection, we were all thrust into a situation that changed the way we think, feel, and operate. As events transpired, we had to manage multiple aspects of our crisis response efforts quickly and effectively. One of my first priorities was to ensure that all CAO employees were taking appropriate safety measures and following direction from the Sergeant at Arms and the U.S. Capitol Police. To ensure that this occurred, I sent a message out to the entire CAO workforce at 2:50 p.m. asking any employee who was onsite to lock their doors and shelter in place until it was safe to move throughout the Capitol complex.

At the same time, my staff and I were coordinating with the House Sergeant at Arms, the Clerk of the House, the Architect of the Capitol, and the U.S. Capitol Police. Together, we followed our continuity

planning response to ensure the Capitol building was clear, order was restored, and the House chamber was prepared for the Vice President and Members of the House and Senate to certify the results of the Presidential election.

Finally, as the events were transpiring, the CAO's Office of Cybersecurity took several critical actions to ensure the House network, equipment, and technology infrastructure remained secure and to protect sensitive information. These efforts included issuing commands to lock computers and laptops and shutting down wired network access to prevent unauthorized access to House data.

We also provided guidance to the entire House community through an e-Dear Colleague letter asking offices to (1) account for all IT equipment; (2) contact the cybersecurity team if anything is missing or if a possible breach occurred; and (3) change passwords on any equipment that may have been inadvertently exposed to unauthorized access. Additionally, as CAO, I sent several follow-up e-Dear Colleague letters and responded to inquiries from Members on the status of House cybersecurity following the January 6 attack. The House's Chief Information Security Officer and his staff are prepared to brief any members interested in discussing the current state of House cybersecurity.

The CAO's Commitment to Promoting Health and Well-Being Throughout the House of Representatives:

Last week, Paul Tewksbury, the Director of the Office of Employee Assistance (OEA) and Bryan Weiss, the Manager of the House Wellness Center testified before this subcommittee. Both Paul and Bryan highlighted the monumental efforts underway to provide a full range of mental health and well-being programs for 10,000 employees across the House, including the U.S. Capitol Police and the Congressional Budget Office.

OEA's focus on mental health, coupled with the House Wellness Center's approach to ongoing well-being support, provides employees of the House with a best-in-class compassionate care model. Ultimately, this arrangement helps make the House of Representatives an employer of choice.

Even though the OEA and Wellness services are aligned in the same department and seamlessly integrated, this testimony will highlight specific activities from each offering beginning with the Wellness program.

Mr. Chairman, as the champion of this program, we cannot thank you enough your support of the Wellness team. Since officially launching in October 2018, the Wellness Center's program has matured from a concept into a holistic set of tools and services designed to educate, motivate, and empower staff.

Key highlights from the Wellness program include the development and delivery of:

- Personalized guidance for staff in all areas of life, including child-care and parenting, senior care and caregiving, financial guidance, and legal assistance. Each of these services are available for all staff through our agreement with LifeCare.
- A host of mobile and web-based well-being applications, including mindfulness and nutritional solutions. These applications have close to 2,000 registered users.
- Educational training programs and guidance across all dimensions of well-being, including mindfulness, stress management, and physical activity.
- A benefits plan navigation and transparency tool allowing employees to improve health literacy and make informed decisions about their health care options. During the 2021 open enrollment season, this new tool was accessed by nearly 1,000 unique users.
- A wellness coaching platform offering one-on-one lifestyle and behavioral change guidance.
- In direct response to COVID-19, the team also added emergency back-up child and elder care, as well as an online academic resource center and educational tutoring services.

In the next month, the House Wellness Center will launch a Wellness Champion program to identify well-being enthusiasts who can serve as a liaison between their offices and the Wellness Center. Essentially, this network of staff within offices around campus will help market Wellness Center offerings, help the Wellness staff learn about respective office well-being needs, and inspire others to participate in our programs.

Mr. Chairman, the Wellness Center may be a new office, but they have made tremendous strides in less than 30 months. Most of this can be directly attributed to the hard work of the team and the unwavering support from this subcommittee.

The second organization I would like to highlight today is the Office of Employee Assistance. For the past thirty years, this office has been honored to serve Members, congressional staff, and employees from the U.S. Capitol Police and the Congressional Budget Office. Their confidential counseling, consultations, trainings, and office retreats have impacted the health and well-being of generations of Members and staff.

While the physical scarring and damage to our magnificent Capitol building can be detected and repaired, the emotional aspects of the events of January 6 are more difficult to notice and treat. After a critical incident, feelings of fear, desperation, anxiety, and depression can linger undetected or even be ignored.

No group of staffers knows this better than our OEA team, which is why they immediately deployed their critical incident response posture as events were unfolding on January 6. This decision allowed OEA to engage the full capacity of our services to ensure they were available to staff 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

In a typical year, the OEA team handles about 3,000 individual interactions with employees and managers, though this number almost doubled in 2020 due to the needs presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the six-week period since January 6, the OEA team handled over individual 1,150 interactions with employees, managers, and Members. At this rate, counseling and consultation services in 2021 would increase by 65 percent over 2020 and by 200 percent as compared to more 'typical' recent years.

While the team's initial response to the insurrection is commendable, it soon became evident that the caseload would require additional resources. Fortunately, we were able to leverage existing contracting mechanisms to assist with the surge in counseling needs.

At the peak of our workload, OEA added seven additional contract counselors through two separate arrangements. These counselors are supporting the CAO's eight full-time team members and one full-time Employee Assistant Specialist funded by the U.S. Capitol Police.

The first contract was designed to provide the U.S. Capitol Police with four onsite crisis counselors. This arrangement was initially funded directly by the U.S. Capitol Police through an interagency agreement with the CAO organization starting on January 12. Late last week, the CAO organization starting using our internal funds to support this arrangement. Over the coming weeks, we will continue working closely with the U.S. Capitol Police to monitor the counseling needs of the workforce and determine appropriate requirements for ongoing contractor support.

In addition, the CAO leveraged funding from our Business Continuity Disaster Recovery account to fund three full-time counselors to serve the greater House community. This arrangement with the Federal Occupational Health agency started on February 3. We will continue monitoring utilization trends of these supplemental counselors and make any necessary adjustments as needed.

While the confidential counseling sessions are a large part of the OEA's workload, efforts to communicate and provide services to the House community did not end there.

As Chief Administrative Officer, I sent six House-wide e-Dear Colleague letters in direct response to the January 6 attack, including:

- Four messages to highlight OEA services, which were sent on January 7, February 1, February 11, and February 18.
- Two messages with the Sergeant at Arms to gather direct feedback about the attack from Members and Congressional staff, which were sent on January 11 and 19.

In addition, to these messages, the OEA team:

- Created and disseminated additional marketing materials to highlight coping mechanisms in the aftermath of trauma.
- Developed a short video on trauma and resilience, which is available on HouseNet.
- Sent an e-Dear Colleague to all House Chiefs of Staff explaining OEA services and encouraged them to provide referrals for team members.
- Made direct contact with staff association and affinity groups to provide more background on the office's services.
- Conducted over 40 live webinars on trauma and resilience, which are now available on-demand through the Congressional Staff Academy.
- Partnered with the Office of the Speaker and the Office of Attending Physician to conduct trauma and resilience briefings tailored for Members of Congress.

Finally, even though OEA's mandate is to serve Members, House staff, and employees of the U.S. Capitol Police and Congressional Budget Office, the team called companies that had contract employees at the Capitol complex during the January 6 attack.

Through our outreach, we were glad to learn that some employers were already providing employee assistance services to their staff. Regardless of whether these counseling services exist, our OEA team will provide appropriate referrals to any House contractor who reaches out to them.

Based on everything the House community has experienced since early January, it is apparent that the OEA services are in high demand. Fortunately, the tireless efforts of the team are not going unnoticed. In fact, several Members of Congress have reached out to me directly to express their gratitude for the OEA team and to convey an interest in an expansion of OEA's services. Over the coming months, we will continue evaluating the needs of the OEA and work with members of this subcommittee to determine whether additional long-term resources and support are necessary.

Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member Herrera Beutler, before I conclude my remarks, I would like to speak directly to the 10,000 employees who work at the House of Representatives. If you are experiencing strong emotional or physical reactions to the events of January 6, the ongoing pandemic, or any other traumatic event in your life, please know that you are not alone.

I encourage any Member of Congress, congressional staff, and employee of the U.S. Capitol Police and Congressional Budget Office who is struggling with a personal issue to reach out directly to our Office of Employee Assistance team. They are a dedicated, trained, and skilled group of mental health professionals who are poised and positioned to help.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. Thank you for your continued support and for the opportunity to testify.