



Testimony of Dr. Brian Pugh, Executive Director John C. Stennis Center for Public Service Training and Development

Good morning Chairman Valadao, Ranking Member Espaillat, and members of the Subcommittee. I am Dr. Brian Pugh, Executive Director of the John C. Stennis Center for Public Service Training and Development (“Stennis Center”). I am honored to speak to you today about the Stennis Center’s \$430,000 appropriations request that funds our Congressional Programs.

History and Mission

The Stennis Center was established in 1988 by Public Law 100-458¹ with the statutory mission to 1) promote public service to young people and to get them interested in a career in public service, 2) to provide training and professional development opportunities to state and local elected officials and their staff, and 3) to provide training and professional development opportunities to Congressional staff.² We are overseen by a Board of Trustees that are required by law to be appointed by House and Senate leadership.³

Our programs that meet the third prong of our mission – to provide training and development opportunities to Congressional staff – are known as our Congressional Programs. Because the Stennis Center’s request is for expenses related to these programs, I will focus on discussing those.

Congressional Programs

The Stennis Center has multiple ways that it meets its mandate to provide training and development opportunities to Congressional staff. Our flagship program is the Stennis Congressional Staff Fellows Program (“Stennis Fellows Program”). Established during the 103rd Congress, the Stennis Fellows Program is a year-and-a-half-long program that focuses on the challenges to Congress as an institution of American democracy and the role that Congressional staff play in meeting those challenges.

¹ Codified at 2 U.S.C. §1101 - 10.

² 2 U.S.C. § 1104.

³ *Id.* at §1103(b).

The Stennis Fellows Program occurs every Congress and selects 30-34 bipartisan, bicameral senior Congressional staff members to engage in professional development designed to help them be better managers and leaders, as well as be more productive staff members. The program includes roundtable discussions of relevant topics such as polarization, managing across a generational divide, staff capacity, and separation of powers. We also host overnight stays at a university such as Princeton University as well as the National Conservation Training Center.

Once a Stennis Fellow completes the program we then “graduate” them to Senior Stennis Fellows. These Senior Fellows play a vital role in the rest of our Congressional programming and our ability to meet the other two prongs of our mission. Given that these Senior Fellows are current or former staff, they have expert levels of knowledge and understanding about key facets of Congress. They are committed to public service and the institution of Congress specifically, and they can play a wide range of roles in the rest of our programs. Senior Fellows can speak on topics such as the Appropriations process or managing a Congressional office. They can mentor young staff to help them grow as a Congressional staffer and stay longer on the Hill. They can explain the legislative process to interns who are interested in becoming full-time staff. And they can share their personal experiences to show that public service can come from all walks of life. There are currently over 400 Senior Stennis Fellows and in the 118th Congress we had almost 100 opportunities for them to volunteer their time to our programs.

Another of the Stennis Center’s Congressional Programs is the Emerging Congressional Staff Leaders Program (“Emerging Leaders Program”). This is a one-on-one mentoring program where we pair a junior or mid-level staffer with a Senior Stennis Fellow. Though this, too, is a bipartisan, bicameral program, the Stennis Center strives to match mentees with a mentor who shares similar political ideology, issue area expertise, and, when appropriate, the same chamber of Congress. In addition to one-on-one mentoring, this program provides participants with roughly four group sessions to discuss topics such as advancing a legislative agenda, parliamentary procedure with the House and Senate Parliamentarians, and other relevant topics. The Emerging Leaders Program runs in the second half of every Congressional session.

Our final Congressional Program is the Stennis Program for Congressional Interns (“Stennis Intern Program”). The Stennis Intern Program is a bipartisan, bicameral program that hosts roughly 30 students every spring, summer, and fall for five two-hour sessions on institutional aspects of Congress. These sessions are led by experts – typically Senior Stennis Fellows – about a specific topic and provide the interns with an opportunity to ask questions and network with these experts. We also provide them with a small group project where they are tasked with advising a fake Member of Congress and then are paired up with a Senior Stennis Fellow to discuss the finer points of being a legislative staffer.

In addition to these Congressional Programs, we have a quarterly journal called *Public Service Review*, which is dedicated to the publication and dissemination of young people’s

reflections and experiences in the public service sector through professional or volunteer opportunities. The purpose of the journal is to acknowledge and influence the important and substantive work carried out by young people in local, state, and federal government entities, universities and colleges, and nonprofit organizations across the United States. Participants selected for the Stennis Intern Program are required to write an article about their experience in *Public Service Review* and, in some cases, interns volunteer to serve on the journal's editorial board. Senior Fellows and Emerging Leaders may also provide content for *Public Service Review*.

FY 2026 Budget Summary

The Stennis Center for Public Service is requesting level funding, which is \$430,000. The Stennis Center strives to present the highest quality programs for congressional staff at the lowest possible cost. The Stennis Center has been operating on the same funding level for multiple years now. The appropriations request for FY 2026 is essential to enable the Stennis Center to continue to provide training and development opportunities to congressional staff as mandated by its authorizing legislation. Without the appropriation, the highly successful Stennis Congressional Staff Fellows Program, Emerging Congressional Staff Leaders Program, and Stennis Program for Congressional Interns would be severely reduced, if not eliminated.

Budget Request Details

Congressional Staff Programs (by Program Activity)

Stennis Congressional Staff Fellows Program	\$300,000
Emerging Congressional Staff Leaders Program	25,000
Stennis Leadership Program for Congressional Interns/Students	60,000
Civil-Military Leadership Program for Members and Staff	20,000
Senior Stennis Congressional Staff Fellows Program	<u>25,000</u>
Total	\$430,000

(by Object Classification)

Personnel	\$243,500
Direct Program Costs (including speakers, facilities, travel, food and lodging)	159,700
Office Lease and Utilities	20,500
Printing, Copying and Postage	1,300
Equipment and Supplies	<u>5,000</u>
Total	\$430,000

Cost Saving Measures and Increased Program Participation

As I noted, the Stennis Center is requesting level funding for fiscal year 2026. This is the same amount of funding that we have requested in previous years. The Stennis Center has been able to keep level funding despite increased costs because of two main strategies.

The first strategy has been to consistently evaluate ways that we can save money without substantially impacting the quality of our programs. The money saved can then be used in other ways that improve our programs or – as has been the case in recent years – offset rising costs. One of my proudest cost saving measures has been our recent move to the Library of Congress. At the beginning of the 2025 fiscal year, the Stennis Center moved from a leased space in a private office building to the Adams building at the Library of Congress. If you factor in the savings from services such as utilities and parking, the total yearly savings is almost \$50,000, which is the equivalent of 11.5% of our budget request.

However, this is not the only benefit to moving to the Library. Because it is so much larger than the Stennis Center, the Library can potentially provide us with services that would otherwise cost us exponentially more if we were to contract out on an ad hoc basis. These conversations are currently on going, but we hope to have other examples of our fruitful relationship with the Library of Congress in the years to come.

While our move to the Library is the most noteworthy example of cost savings, I would like to provide a couple examples of how we have adjusted our programs to save costs while maintaining their high quality. One example is the cost of food and refreshments for the Stennis Intern Program. While I am a big believer in southern hospitality and always having food for your guests, we decided in 2022 to cut back on the food that we provided to the program.⁴ This allowed us to go from hosting the Stennis Intern Program once a year to three times a year. Because we utilize event space in the Capitol Visitor Center for this program, we were ultimately able to increase the number of participants threefold at no additional cost. Similarly, we were able to cut the cost of event space for the Stennis Fellows program by moving our roundtables to the Hill Center at the Old Naval Hospital. The Hill Center at the Old Naval Hospital is considerably cheaper than other options in D.C. because it is run by a nonprofit organization. These cost savings allowed us to expand the number of roundtables from four to six.

The second strategy that the Stennis Center has employed to limit programmatic costs is that we have created a system where our programs can build upon themselves without adding costs to the Stennis Center. What this means in practice is that once someone has gone through one of our programs, they are much more likely to volunteer their time to give back to us and the institution of Congress. While this is difficult to quantify into an actual dollar amount, it does mean that we can have expert panelist speakers, seasoned veterans

⁴ The Stennis Center is authorized pursuant to 2 U.S.C. §1108(a)(7) to make “expenditures for meals, entertainment and refreshments in connection with official training sessions or other authorized programs.”

to mentor young staff, and even interns serving on the editorial board of our *Public Service Review* journal all on a volunteer basis.

Finally, I would like to close by briefly bragging about our Congressional Programs. Despite the level funding, interest in our programs continues to increase. Over the course of the 118th Congress, we had 248 individuals participate and complete their respective programming. Further, the number of applicants to our programs has increased significantly. As an example, the number of applicants for the 119th Stennis Fellows program was 122. This is a 27% increase from the number of applicants in the 118th Congress and almost a 200% increase from the ten-year average.⁵ We believe that these kinds of statistics show that congressional staff value our programs and we plan to continue to provide them at the highest quality possible.

Thank you for allowing me to speak to you today about the Stennis Center's appropriation request and our Congressional Programs. I look forward to any questions you may have.

⁵ This includes five application periods for the 114th Congress through the 118th Congress.