HOUSE SELECT COMMITTEE ON MODERNIZATION OF CONGRESS

Hearing on Administrative Efficiencies: Exploring Options to Streamline Operations in the United States House of Representatives

Testimony of Drew Willison
Former Sergeant at Arms
United States Senate

Friday, November 15, 2019

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Vice Chairman, and Members of the Select Committee, thank you for inviting me to testify today. In my testimony, I share a variety of examples of efforts undertaken to upgrade and modernize the operations of the United States Senate Sergeant at Arms organization during the years I spent as both the Deputy Sergeant at Arms and also the Sergeant at Arms from 2007 until 2015.

The role of the Senate Sergeant at Arms is somewhat broader than the House Sergeant at Arms. The Senate Sergeant at Arms has responsibility for most of the non-legislative back-of-the-house functions of the Senate, in addition to the security operations that overlap with the House Sergeant at Arms. 800 employees. A budget over $200 million. A broad portfolio of activities that includes Senate Information Technology, Senate contacting functions, security and

emergency preparedness (including the Capitol Police Board), human resources, the media and public galleries, the Employee Assistance program, the Protocol Office, the Doorkeepers, the Page Program, printing, graphics, and direct mail, the photo studio, the Senate Post Office, parking, and education and training.

Information Technology

In a perfect world in the Senate, all information technology, hardware, software, and security would be centrally procured, operated, maintained, and updated. As a general rule, the more far-flung the decision makers and the hardware, the more vulnerability there is. However, we do not live in a perfect world, so we always did the best we could given the demands of 100 highly particular bosses. All IT procurement is done centrally through the Sergeant at Arms. As a rule of thumb, Members are allowed a full refresh of their technology twice within a six year term, subject to some restrictions late in the term. As long as it meets specifications, Members have a lot of flexibility in terms of what systems they use, generally from an approved list. The centralization of these purchases saves the Senate (and the Members) a lot of money. It also helps the Sergeant at Arms to ensure that all of the

technology being deployed is up to security standards to reduce vulnerabilities for Members, Committees, and the Senate.

The Sergeant at Arms has had less best practices success is in convincing Members (and, more specifically, their staffs) to surrender a certain level of control over their networks and data. Most Senate offices, both Member offices and Committee offices employ IT managers internally who run the networks. In a perfect world, the Senate would not run several hundred separate networks and would allow for centralized operation of them. However, the SAA has always encountered resistance to this concept. Members and staff like their "stuff" and data where only they have control over it. This is perfectly understandable up to a point in a political environment, but it is not a best practice because it creates so many additional points of vulnerability. Progress on this will be slow.

Perhaps a dated example best illustrates the need for a robust and centralized IT operation. When iPhone technology was still young, most Members carried Blackberries, but it did not take long for them to jump onto the Apple bandwagon. The problem is that early iPhones did not come anywhere close to meeting Senate IT security standards. Our IT shop spent a small fortune to develop security patches for iPhones

purchased through the Senate (obviously, not for phones used for campaign purposes) before we would allow them into the approved catalogue. A completely decentralized system would not allow for our shop to be nimble and solve a problem facing the entire body.

A final IT example of trying to drive efficiencies up and costs down is in the area of our (relatively) new Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP) telephone system. The Senate badly needed to upgrade its phone system during the years I spent in the organization. The easiest thing to do would have just been to select a traditional telecom company to upgrade the existing system. However, we decided that a somewhat more expensive (initially) VOIP system made better sense and would more seamlessly integrate with our other systems. Nor surprisingly, implementing a completely new system took longer than expected (by a lot) and ran over budget (by a bit). This did not make our oversight committee, nor our appropriations subcommittee, happy. However, it turned out to be the right choice and the system works great. I have no particular insights into how your telecom system works in the House, but I offer this up as an example of how significant change or modernization often comes with enhanced risks. If they are calculated

properly into the decision making process, it can be worth it to make the bigger leap.

Printing, Graphics, and Direct Mail

Another leap we made out of an absolute necessity was the modernization of our printing, graphics, and directly mail (PGDM) operation. For decades, nearly all aspects of PGDM was done inside the Dirksen building, regardless of size or scope. It was always a labor intensive process and had not kept up with an evolving digital world. At a time when traditional mail counts were falling dramatically, electronic communication was soaring and the Senate was struggling to use systems that were designed to respond to thousands of pre-printed post cards in a world suddenly awash with email and other electronic communications.

Our decision, after months of back and forth with our oversight committee and the appropriations committee was to invest nearly $10 million in an offsite printing facility that would handle all jobs that had a deadline of 24 hours or more and focus our efforts in the Dirksen Building on fast turn-around projects, including the ubiquitous floor posters. We were able to reduce staffing by 25 percent and entered into

a long-term lease for space in a much less expensive part of the

Metropolitan area. We have been able to process and send Member

mail out substantially more quickly and the new technology has allowed

us to pre-sort the mail for the US Post Office in a way that saves the

Senate $1 million or more per year. For all intents and purposes, the

capital investment has already been recovered after seven years

through efficiencies and cost savings.

We also were able to get ourselves out of the offset printing business

more quickly than the GPO. We like to think we inspired them.

State Office Leases

In some ways, there is no magic to state office leases for Senators.

Members have relatively wide discretion to pick their state offices

within their budget and subject to some universal requirements. We

negotiated the leases centrally according to GSA reimbursement rates

and with an eye towards making sure the spaces were adequate to

needs and to make sure that everything was done properly. This saves a

lot of time and effort for the Members and their staffs.

Returning to my perfect world scenarios from earlier, out default

position, when asked, was and is that Members should be in

government space whenever possible, particularly in federal buildings or courthouses that have a lot of existing security in place. This is not feasible in some cases, either due to the paucity of such buildings in some parts of the county or a solid Member preference to not put a lot of security between them and their constituents (or both). In those instances, we offered the Members and their staff the ability to request a full comprehensive security assessment of any commercial space they were considering. This was some of the best money we ever spent as it is an absolute best practice.

Final Thoughts

By now, you have probably gathered that I am an advocate for centralizing non-legislative functions and services wherever possible, primarily for the sake of convenience, cost savings, and security. Our basic goal in the Sergeant at Arms organization was to make sure our Members had everything they needed to be able to do their jobs and that, on our best days, no one would even realize we were there. As such, we tried to make everything as easy as possible for Members and staff. They got to worry about legislating and constituent services and we worried about the other stuff. At least that was the goal. Our

experience was that the best, safest, most efficient, and most cost effective way to do that was to centralize functions within our shop and make as many choices and options available as we could. We were pretty good at it when I was there and I am sure they are doing even better now. It is a great team and I was honored to lead them.

Thank you again for allowing me to testify today. I am happy to answer any questions you may have and will provide any follow-up materials that you may require.