The Honorable Derek Kilmer
Chair
U.S. House of Representatives Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable William Timmons
Vice Chair
U.S. House of Representatives Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress
Washington, DC 20515

RE: Recommendation to establish a House Technology Working Group

Chairman Kilmer, Vice-Chairman Timmons, and Members of the Select Committee: thank you for the opportunity to share my views with the committee today. My name is Kevin Esterling and I'm a professor of Public Policy and Political Science at the University of California, Riverside, where I am also the director of the Laboratory for Technology, Communication and Democracy (TeCD-Lab).

Last year, the select committee's final report listed several proposals "for future consideration," and among them was a proposal to establish a House Technology Working Group (p. 287). This was a recommendation developed by my subcommittee of the American Political Science Association's Congressional Reform Task Force and I urge you to make the Working Group a formal recommendation of your committee for this year.

It might come as no surprise that our APSA subcommittee found that the House currently does not make optimal use of technology in its day to day operations -- from simple things like the CRMs many of you use in your offices to more ambitious uses of technology such as those described just now by Profs. Neblo and Novek for constituent engagement. The primary barrier, it turns out, is a lack of any central repository of expertise and best practices. Unlike other institutions of the size and scale of the House, there is no central information technology (IT) office that is responsible for deploying technology across the chamber. Instead, each office, committee and support agency is essentially on its own to make technology decisions.

Our proposed House Technology Working Group would allow for coordination and information sharing about technology in a way that fits with the culture, traditions, and practices of the House. Clearly, a standard IT office -- such as the one at my university or the one at the hospital where my wife works -- would not be feasible in the House as no operations office can tell committee chairs what technologies they can use in their committees or members in their offices.

Instead, the Working Group would be composed of tech-savvy members and staff from across the chamber and would serve as a forum for collaboration, information sharing, consultation with outside experts, implementation of pilot projects, and dissemination of technology best practice

recommendations. The Working Group would focus on particular areas such as cybersecurity, member office technology, district office technology, committee technology, remote technology and the like—and their work would be overseen by a member-led council that could set priorities and ensure that the task forces have adequate staff and funding. Importantly, the Working Group only would consult and make recommendations and would not have authority to mandate technologies in these areas.

If established, the House Technology Working Group would provide a focal point for new ideas and serve as a forum for knowledge-sharing. We believe our recommendation is a practical, simple, and low-cost way to truly modernize Congress and I hope that the Select Committee makes the House Technology Working Group one of its recommendations in a future report. I'll be glad to answer any questions.

Bio. Kevin Esterling is Professor of Political Science and Public Policy, and the Director of the Laboratory for Technology, Communication and Democracy (TeCD Lab), at the University of California, Riverside. His research focuses on institutional design for communication in democratic politics, and he has interests in Bayesian statistics, experimental design, and science ethics and validity.

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Appendix: Original recommendation from the APSA Task Force, Subcommittee on Technology and Innovation

Proposal to Establish a House Technology Working Group

Recommendation to the House Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress

Submitted by: Claire Abernathy, Ph.D., Kevin Esterling, Ph.D., and Marci Harris, J.D., LL.M.

Technology is essential to the functioning of a modern legislature. The House employs a variety of technologies across 441 legislative offices, 20 committees, and numerous support and operations offices. Each of these units has developed technology to serve its own needs, often in separate silos with limited opportunities for coordinating, evaluating and optimizing technology for the institution as a whole.

THE PROBLEM:

This distributed and disconnected architecture for House technology is no longer tenable. A modernized Congress requires the ability for its component parts to operate in a coordinated way, leveraging technology to realize greater efficiencies, free up staff time for higher value tasks, and contribute to greater satisfaction for lawmakers and staff, and the constituents and stakeholders who interact with Congress.

THE OPPORTUNITY:

The decentralized nature of Congress offers the potential to leverage individual offices and committees as tech laboratories, identifying what works best in different circumstances and allowing offices to learn from each other. However, effective decision-making around technology in Congress requires a balance between centralization and decentralization. Some degree of central coordination enables information sharing and collaboration to resolve shared technology problems, but the current decentralized decision-making about congressional technology does not offer opportunities for this collaborative effort. Better coordination will require an approach that respects the autonomy of the different offices within Congress and taps into their expertise to support effective technology modernization efforts.

RECOMMENDATION:

Authorize the creation of a House Technology Working Group (HTWG) as an umbrella entity for all who work with technology within the House to collaborate on technology modernization efforts for the chamber. The HTWG will provide a clearinghouse for information and expertise about technology in Congress while respecting the decentralized structure of the House. As a central hub the HTWG will facilitate information sharing about technology in Congress that is not possible today.

To more effectively manage the wide-ranging work of modernizing congressional technology, language authorizing HTWG should:

- ***Identify priority areas for House technology and establish task forces to focus on each.*** Task forces would operate in effect as subcommittees of the working group, with each task force consisting of at least one lawmaker from the majority and minority, and representatives from support agencies or other relevant offices (for example, the task force on committee technology would include at least one representative from each committee). Recommended initial task forces include: (1) Digital and Cyber Security task force; (2) Legislative Office Technology task force; (3) District Office Technology task force; (4) Committee Technology task force; and (5) Congressional Support and Operations task force.
- ***Establish an internal House Technology Leadership Council to oversee and coordinate the task forces,*** consisting of representatives from each of the task force teams, one representative from each legislative support office or agency (i.e. CAO, Clerk, Parliamentarian, etc.), and the chair and ranking member of the Committee on House Administration. To set priorities, coordinate the work of the task forces, and make recommendations to relevant committees and leadership.
- ***Authorize an external advisory group***, similar to the Defense Innovation Board (https://innovation.defense.gov/) to connect outside experts with the HTWG's efforts to bring in new ideas and perspectives and support the working group's progress.
- ***Authorize support staff*** for the HTWG, including a dedicated HTWG coordinator and project managers for each task force.

The HTWG and its task forces should approach their modernization efforts by consulting widely to identify needs, evaluating different technologies, and making clear and actionable recommendations that would improve congressional technology. Operationally, the HTWG should gather input from relevant stakeholders, individuals, data and experts to guide their decisions and coordinate systematic efforts to examine different available or emerging technologies that could be used in Congress. To support this work, the HTWG should follow this modernization process:

- Step 1: Identify areas that would benefit from new technology or process upgrades.
- Step 2. Evaluate potential solutions to identified problems.
- Step 3. Support pilots of new technology in individual offices and committees.
- Step 4. Develop best practice recommendations for use of technology in Congress.
- Step 5. Refine through a continuous iterative process.

This proposed modernization process for the HTWG emphasizes information from a diverse set of sources, supports evidence-based decision-making about organizational changes, and embraces experimentation to evaluate solutions to specific institutional needs of Congress. Importantly, *this process institutionalizes an ongoing approach to modernization and improvement through an inclusive working group*.

Technological modernization in Congress has often been constrained by uncertainty around how technology would work in the congressional context. The HTWG addresses many of these challenges that are unique to Congress:

- **Lack of central hub of expertise and technical advice.** HTWG would provide systematic evaluation of new technologies, a centralized resource hub for information about best practices, and a forum for House-wide communication and coordination.
- **Lower-level and short-term staffers most familiar with technology and its challenges lack decision-making power.** The HTWG process emphasizes direct engagement with front-line staff, tapping into their expertise to identify pain points in congressional technology and to evaluate potential solutions and inform areas of focus for the working group.
- **Congressional functions not amenable to outsourcing.** The recommended process deploys pilot projects to test the viability of new technologies within the context where they will be used in Congress. Through pilot projects, new technologies are essentially vetted to ensure that they support the specific work of the institution.
- **Difficult to reach consensus on problems to be solved.** HTWG should solicit input from a range of sources to identify technology priorities for the institution. While consensus may not emerge, the careful effort to engage interested parties in problem definition can build confidence that the working group will focus on widely-shared challenges.
- **Difficult to change culture.** Uncertainty about the effects of new technology often leads members to default to the status quo. The proposed process focuses on gathering evidence, allowing institutional actors to feel confident in adopting new tools and technologies, and ongoing efforts to improve the institution based on that evidence.

The HTWG overcomes these key challenges, serving as a new central resource hub for information about technology best practices and ensuring that technology adoption in Congress is based on evidence about what tools work best in the unique congressional setting.