



PARTNERSHIP FOR PUBLIC SERVICE

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Chairman Kilmer, Ranking Member Timmons, Members of the Select Committee, thank you for the opportunity to share the perspective of the Partnership for Public Service as you plan the Select Committee's agenda for the 117th Congress. I am Kristine Simmons, the Vice President of Government Affairs at the Partnership, a non-profit, nonpartisan organization that strives for a more effective government for the American people. We believe that good government starts with good people, and we work across administrations and with the executive and legislative branches of government to promote collaboration, accountability, efficiency and innovation to help government work better for the people it serves.

To those of you who are returning Members of the Select Committee, we want to acknowledge your exceptionally effective efforts in the 116th Congress. You set a model for collegiality and productivity, passing 97 recommendations on a unanimous basis and seeing a large number of them implemented or on their way to implementation. That is a record which any committee would envy, and your efforts are already making a difference for Congress, its staff and the public.

For those of you who are new to the Select Committee, I applaud you for taking this assignment on top of the many other responsibilities you shoulder as Members of Congress. Few activities are more important than ensuring the American people are well-served by an institution that is equipped to solve problems and help our nation and our people to prosper. We commend you for your service.

I have been asked today to address issues of staff capacity and retention, which are among the most important issues the Select Committee can address. Congress is not a building – it is people. Talented individuals, many of them early in their careers, strive for the opportunity to serve lawmakers and the public as congressional staff. Some of our nation's most knowledgeable and dedicated public servants serve in the legislative branch. It can be one of the hardest and most demanding jobs in government, yet it is also among the most rewarding. There are few other places where it is possible to make a difference in the lives of so many.

Building on Success

As you move forward in the 117th Congress, we encourage you to continue devoting your attention and effort to ensuring that Congress makes progress on past recommendations while looking ahead to the next set of ideas and opportunities to improve congressional staff capacity and retention.

For example, Congress will benefit from the Select Committee's recommendation that the Chief Administrative Officer provide a central human resources HUB for Members and staff. In recommending a capable, professional and well-resourced HR function to serve the House, the Select Committee provided valuable momentum to the CAO's efforts to modernize outdated processes, increase the smart and strategic use of technology, and create efficiencies that bring congressional HR into the 21st century. A central HUB will also benefit job seekers and promote diversity by making it easier to find and apply for legislative branch positions.

Investing in HR resources for congressional staff took on new resonance in the wake of the January 6th insurrection. This event was deeply traumatic for the congressional community, and the House Office of Employee Assistance (OEA) became an essential lifeline for many congressional staff. The OEA, which had already been hard at work serving Members and staff rocked by the pandemic, surged resources to meet the needs of the Capitol Hill community. Between January 6 and February 18, 2021, a diverse team

of counselors conducted over 40 live webinars and over 1150 individual interactions with employees and managers, including more than 760 individual counseling sessions.¹ We applaud Congress for investing in the House OEA and other employee assistance programs in recognition of the important role they play in supporting congressional staff.

The Partnership has been pleased to support efforts to train and further invest in congressional staff through the Congressional Staff Academy. The Partnership has a rich history of providing leadership training to federal employees and has trained thousands of federal leaders since our founding in 2001. Professional development instills not only competence but also a sense of service and stewardship. For this reason, the Partnership was strongly supportive of standing up the Congressional Staff Academy in 2018 and we have been fortunate to work with the Staff Academy to offer courses in leadership to senior House staff. Last year we assisted with curriculum development for management courses being taught in-house.

The Select Committee's recommendation to offer staff certifications upon completion of a Congressional Staff Academy course of study provides a tangible record of acquired expertise and is one that the Partnership strongly supports. Furthermore, this training would help congressional staffers succeed in a workplace that has been forever changed by the pandemic. Many offices will continue with occasional or regular telework or remote work arrangements, even when the Capitol complex is fully open and most offices have returned to in-person work. Managing staff, serving constituents and doing the nation's business in a hybrid model will be most successful if staff members have ongoing access to training and professional development opportunities.

In addition to the Washington-based legislative staff, the Congressional Staff Academy has been a valuable resource for constituent service staff in district offices.

As I noted in previous testimony before this Committee, the Staff Academy shift to providing its offerings online greatly benefited district staff, allowing them to take courses that were previously only offered in-person in D.C.

As we emerge from the pandemic and the House starts to plan for more in-person operations, we would encourage the Congressional Staff Academy to retain and even expand online course offerings to bridge the unnecessary training gap that previously existed between D.C. and district offices. We also encourage the House to advertise Congressional Staff Academy offerings more widely.

In addition to offerings from the Staff Academy, the Partnership has developed a constituent services roundtable and has actively brought those in the district and state offices together on a regular basis to share best practices and build networks across congressional offices. Such interaction is an easy but effective way to share ideas across the institution and better serve constituents across the country.

Insights for Congress from the *Best Places to Work in the Federal Government* rankings

For many, Congress as a career, or even a career-builder, is becoming less attractive. For insights, I would like to share what the Partnership has learned through over 15 years of producing the *Best Places to Work in the Federal Government* rankings, the most comprehensive and authoritative measure of employee engagement in the federal government.

¹ <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/AP/AP24/20210218/111187/HHRG-117-AP24-Bio-TewksburyP-20210218.pdf>

The *Best Places* rankings are based on the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey and other surveys that ask the same index questions we use to calculate the rankings. While the *Best Places* rankings cover primarily executive branch agencies, they do include the Government Accountability Office and a few other legislative branch entities, and we make private sector comparisons where comparable data exist. The insights and findings are relevant to all sectors – public and private.

We rank federal workplaces of all sizes on ten workplace categories² including leadership, strategic management, support for diversity, pay, innovation and work-life balance.

I will note that the rankings are not about “happy employees.” Rather, they are intended to measure and report on the degree to which employees are engaged and performing at their best. The Partnership has been able to correlate high employee engagement scores to organizational performance. For example, at the Veterans Health Administration,³ medical facilities with high employee engagement scores had less turnover, better patient satisfaction and faster call-center responses than their lower-scoring counterparts. In other words – your constituents who rely on the VHA for services are more satisfied with those services when they are delivered by highly engaged employees.

So what are the factors that most contribute to an engaged and high-performing workforce, and what does that mean for Congress?

A significant factor in how federal employees view their jobs is how well they feel that their skills are matched to the mission of the place they work. In short, they want to contribute. For many, doing the nation’s business as a congressional staff member in the world’s most recognized symbol of democracy is a calling. The institution, its traditions and its history are powerful recruitment tools. But keeping talented people in congressional service requires more than an iconic building and a staff badge that offers unique access to our nation’s elected leaders.

One thing that matters to all of us is the desire to be heard – and that is where the federal government as an employer lags the private sector the most. Roughly one-third of federal employees surveyed believe that survey results will be used to improve their workplaces. This compares to two-thirds of private sector employees who believe survey results will be used constructively by their leaders.⁴ Particularly in the wake of a global pandemic, economic turmoil, a reckoning with racial injustice and the insurrection of January 6th, congressional staff members – and particularly staffers who identify as people of color – need a variety of channels to speak to those whose decisions will affect their professional experiences, career paths and even their personal safety. And decision-makers must listen and act on what they learn and hear. We were honored to join with other civil society organizations in the wake of Jan. 6th to launch CapitolStrong (www.capitolstrong.org), an initiative to support and recognize congressional and service staff and to create a safe space for sharing, healing and rebuilding.

² The 10 workplace categories are effective leadership, employee skills-mission match, satisfaction with pay, strategic management, teamwork, innovation, training and development, work-life balance, leadership’s support for diversity and how employees are recognized for performance.

³ https://bestplacestowork.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2019/03/BPTW18_VA-issue-brief.pdf

⁴ <https://bestplacestowork.org/analysis/>

Support for diversity, equity and inclusion continues to have a profound influence on the way that many people perceive and experience their workplaces. Deloitte’s Global Millennial Survey 2020⁵ found that 71% of Millennials and GenZs surveyed believed their employers are doing more to create a diverse and inclusive working environment, and additional data suggest that these efforts are increasing employee loyalty. In other words, increasing diversity, equity and inclusion is not only good for policy outcomes and constituent service, it also improves staff engagement and retention. Our *Best Places* rankings also reinforce the value that employees place on support for diversity from senior leaders.⁶

Another factor that drives employee engagement is pay. In our 16 years of doing the *Best Places* rankings, pay has *never* been the top driver of employee engagement; indeed, it is sometimes not even one of the top three drivers. But it does make a difference, particularly for individuals living in high-cost areas like Metropolitan Washington. Many people are priced out of an entry-level congressional position or an unpaid internship due to the cost of living or student loans. This limits the pool of talent for Congress, creates barriers to diversity and inclusion and makes public service harder for candidates without other means of financial support.

Congress has the authority to offer paid internships and even student loan repayment benefits for staff. We encourage the Select Committee to promote these authorities to ensure that your constituents are served by a talented and diverse staff that is not limited to those who have financial resources outside their congressional salary.

The pay differential between congressional and private sector salaries also comes into play for mid-career employees, many of whom may be starting families, buying homes or saving for educational expenses. Public sector salaries will seldom be able to compete with private sector compensation, especially at more senior levels, but Congress can do more to deploy its other competitive advantages. This includes creating and encouraging professional development opportunities for congressional employees, and recognizing excellent work that has made a difference for the public.

By far the most important factor in employee engagement, however, is whether employees have trust and confidence in their leaders and supervisors. Respect for leaders has been the leading driver of employee engagement every year since the inception of the *Best Places to Work* rankings.

The good news for you as Members of Congress is that each of you – as stewards of the institution, on your committees and in your own offices – are Congress’s secret weapon for attracting, retaining and engaging talent.

Leadership and Stewardship in the Public Sector

Public servants aren’t driven by the bottom line—they’re driven by impact. Instead of asking how they can generate the biggest profits, they ask themselves, “How can we do the most good?”

-from the Partnership’s Public Service Leadership Model⁷

⁵ <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/global/Documents/About-Deloitte/deloitte-2020-millennial-survey.pdf>

⁶ <https://bestplacestowork.org/analysis/categories>

⁷ <https://ourpublicservice.org/our-work/public-service-leadership-model/>

Leading in government is different than leading in the private sector, and the measures of success are different. Instead of being accountable for financial profit, public sector leaders are stewards of the public trust with a duty to the public good. Public sector leaders are temporary custodians, stewards of our democratic institutions until it is time to pass them along – ideally stronger, more effective and more resilient – to the next generation.

As Members of the Select Committee, you have a unique opportunity to drive the conversation about institutional stewardship – and you can demonstrate your commitment every day through your committee and constituent service work, and as leaders within your own offices.

In short, Members of Congress have the biggest influence in shaping the institution. And your staff members are looking to you for leadership.

Members of Congress would be well-served to share their vision of public service with their teams, and to invest in developing a healthy office culture based on shared values and a commitment to public good and institutional stewardship. There is no substitute for your leadership in defining success and rewarding performance through words and actions.

Strengthening congressional staff capacity and effectiveness are essential to your roles as institutional stewards and will also advance your effectiveness as legislators. Congress is a unique institution with its own traditions, processes, and systems that can be perplexing for new Members, even those who previously served in state legislatures. While there are numerous orientation programs to help new Members adjust, there are few opportunities for continuing education as Members progress through their first term and beyond. The Partnership strongly supports the Select Committee’s recommendation to pilot a Congressional Leadership Academy to allow for ongoing professional development and to provide “just in time” training when Members would find it most helpful.

Drawing on the Partnership’s experience of working closely with senior executive branch leaders and the combined expertise of other organizations testifying today, we are confident that offering Members these additional professional training opportunities will allow them to build a stronger, more resilient, and more impactful institution.

Recommendations

The Partnership offers the following recommendations for immediate action that the Select Committee, and individual Members of Congress, can take to improve staff capacity, retention and engagement:

- The Select Committee can encourage investment in proven staff recruitment and retention strategies – including paid internships, student loan repayment, professional development opportunities and recognition for a job well done. Each Member of Congress should be educated on the tools and resources available to increase staff retention.
- To improve employee engagement, Members of Congress should share their vision of public service with their staffs and take an active role in establishing core values and a healthy culture within their offices. This includes defining what success looks like across all activities and responsibilities, from constituent services to committee work.
- Members of Congress should take a personal interest in the professional development and engagement of each member of their staff. It starts with learning the name and job

responsibilities of those on the team, inviting their ideas and input, acting on their suggestions and taking every opportunity to let them know their work is recognized and appreciated.

Conclusion

We are grateful for the opportunity to connect with the Select Committee and the esteemed organizations testifying today on shared, important work to modernize and strengthen the legislative branch. Your thoughtful and sustained attention to these critical issues is making a meaningful and positive difference for our country. We thank you for your leadership and the opportunity to contribute to your work.