

House Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress: Member's Day Hearing
Testimony by Chairman Hakeem Jeffries (NY-08)
Thursday, April 15, 2021 at 12:00pm ET

Modernizing the House to Empower Members, Committees and Staff

Good afternoon, everyone.

I would like to thank Chair Kilmer and the entire committee and staff for convening this critical hearing.

The House is the institution in our constitutional fabric designed to be the closest to the people and must intimately reflect their hopes and aspirations. To keep this sacred constitutional charge, the House must itself advance at the same pace as society. To do so, we must modernize and invest in the House of Representatives to empower Members, committees and staff so that we can all serve at the highest level possible. Accordingly, I respectfully present three recommendations for committee consideration.

To begin, it has become clear that the House of Representatives must increase MRAs and committee budgets to keep pace with the rising cost of operations and other competing pressures.

Increased official funds are needed to supplement staff salaries, growing technology support costs, expensive digital platforms, Member security and continuity of operations plans for instances such as an extended global pandemic. To adapt to an increasingly complex and rapidly changing environment, the House of Representatives should have the most cutting-edge technology, security and advanced digital platforms in our offices. The pandemic has taught us that emergency preparedness should be in place before we are confronted with unprecedented challenges. This preparedness will require significant investment and accountability.

Budget increases would also help offices retain long-term staff and expertise. Compensation and benefits in the House are not competitive with the private sector which leads to high staff turnover rates. Accelerating staff departure trends have long-term implications for the House of Representatives and our constituents back home. When staff leave for other opportunities, Member offices lose institutional expertise and valuable policy experience.

Washington D.C. is one of the most expensive American cities to live in. If staff are not compensated enough compared to the cost of living, it is more difficult for people from working class backgrounds to live and work here while building careers in public service.

The benefits of retaining staff will translate to constituents, because staff will have more experience with respect to district matters, community stakeholders and public policy matters of the importance to the people we represent. There are some Members that have retained staff for

many years, if not decades. I suggest that, in addition to increasing the MRA, the committee identify these Members and hold listening sessions with them to ascertain the best practices that they have used to produce remarkable staff retention. The committee can then generate and distribute a best practices report.

My second suggestion relates to a continuing education program for Members of Congress. Prior to my time in public office, I was a litigator in New York City. In the field of law, attorneys must complete mandatory continuing education to maintain their license to practice. Other institutions across America maintain consistent training and professional development requirements for their leaders as well.

This training ensures that professionals are continuously learning, improving and achieving their full potential. Members of Congress are currently put at a disadvantage due to the absence of structured professional development or continuing education programs. That should change.

Governor Mario once profoundly observed that campaigning is about poetry and governing is about prose. Members of Congress are often elected because they articulate a vision that is compelling, captivating and convincing. But winning an election does not necessarily mean a House Member is equipped to translate that vision into coalition-building, leadership, constituent services and effective governance. Poetry is different than prose.

The House should consider ongoing training in how to be an effective legislator and leader. Subjects could include management, human resources, negotiation, coalition-building, parliamentary procedures and leading on an issue in a body filled with leaders. The scope of these programs could be developed in consultation with non-partisan academics, leadership experts and successful public servants from throughout the ideological spectrum.

My third and final suggestion is that we increase accessibility and capacity when it comes to the Staff Academy and Congressional Research Service. Members rely heavily on staff, so we must make sure that our staff know where to go for professional development and research assistance. Staff programming should be best-in-class and the resources available tailored towards meeting the needs of the 435 plus unique districts and territories. Training may be needed in human resources, policy analysis or social media use to name a few areas. Overall, the goal is to make sure that our staff can operate at the highest possible level.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I look forward to working closely with Chair Kilmer and the entire committee in a bipartisan manner as we undertake the important work of modernizing Congress.