

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM

2157 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING

WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6143

MAJORITY (202) 225-5051

MINORITY (202) 225-5074

<https://oversight.house.gov>

April 9, 2021

The Honorable Derek Kilmer, Chairman
The Honorable William Timmons, Vice Chair
Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Kilmer and Vice Chair Timmons:

As the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress begins its work for the 117th Congress, I am writing to respectfully propose recommendations to make the House of Representatives more accessible to people with disabilities. If these recommendations should be shared with additional offices, I would be happy to do so.

Last year marked the 30th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the nation's foremost federal civil rights law dedicated to ensuring that people with disabilities achieve full integration in every aspect of society. As you may know, the Congressional Accountability Act incorporates by reference the ADA. *See* 2 U.S.C. § 1302 (a)(3).

As Chairwoman of the Committee on Oversight and Reform and a member of the Bipartisan Disability Caucus, I am strongly committed to making Congress more inclusive by improving access to services, programs, and activities for people with disabilities. While progress has been made, I believe more can be done.

When I became Chairwoman last Congress, I asked Committee staff to review our policies and practices relating to people with disabilities. Based on this review, we identified a number of challenges—as well as opportunities for improvement—within our Committee and across Congress.

First, there appears to be no centralized resource explaining the roles and responsibilities of each office within the House charged with handling questions relating to accessibility issues. A number of different offices play a role in providing accessibility-related services to congressional staff and members of the public, including the Architect of the Capitol (AOC), the Office of Congressional Accessibility Services (OCAS), the Office of House Employment Counsel (OHEC), the Office of Congressional Workplace Rights (OCWR), and the Sergeant at Arms (SAA).

For example, during a previous inquiry, our Committee staff contacted OCWR—the office responsible for assisting “members of Congress, employing offices and employees, and visiting public in understanding their rights and responsibilities under the workplace and accessibility laws”—about how best to accommodate members of the public during hearings. Committee staff subsequently learned that OHEC—not OCWR—is responsible for advising committees on how to provide these services.

Second, the services provided by these offices vary, due to apparent resource constraints. For example, OCAS informed the Committee that although it provides sign language interpreting services for “official Congressional business of House, Senate and Joint entities,” it does not provide interpretive services for members of the public attending official Committee hearings.¹ In other words, OCAS currently provides these services for hearing *witnesses*, but not for *members of the public* attending official hearings.

On a separate occasion, Committee staff contacted OCAS to assist with parking accommodations for hearing witnesses with impaired mobility. OCAS informed our staff that it had no involvement in providing parking accommodations and that staff should contact SAA instead.

Third, before Committee staff engaged in more extensive discussions with these various offices, it was unclear what process should be used to procure accommodation services for witnesses and members of the public, what timeframes were necessary to ensure prompt quality services, and whether the costs of such services were to be paid by the Committee or would be reimbursed in some manner.²

Finally, although we took a number of steps to improve our Committee’s policies and practices, it appears that other committees could benefit from standard best practices in this area. For example, our Committee installed accessibility signage outside each of our hearing rooms, but many committees do not display similar signage. In addition, although OCAS recommends that committees publicize available services for individuals with disabilities in hearing announcements, this practice is inconsistent across the House.³

For these reasons, I submit for your consideration the following recommendations to improve accessibility for people with disabilities in the House of Representatives:

¹ Office of Congressional Accessibility Services, *Sign Language Interpreting Policy* (online at <https://housenet.house.gov/sites/housenet.house.gov/files/documents/Sign%20Language%20Interpreting%20Guidelines.pdf>).

² Committee on House Administration, *Committees’ Congressional Handbook* (Feb. 27, 2018) (online at https://cha.house.gov/sites/democrats.cha.house.gov/files/documents/116th_Committee_Congressional_Handbook_03-28-2019.pdf); Office of Congressional Accessibility Services, *Sign Language Interpreting Policy* (online at <https://housenet.house.gov/sites/housenet.house.gov/files/documents/Sign%20Language%20Interpreting%20Guidelines.pdf>).

³ U.S. House of Representatives, *Accessible Committee Hearings* (online at <https://housenet.house.gov/legislative/committees/accessible-committee-hearings>).

1. Develop a one-stop webpage that summarizes and links all accessibility-related resources and services offered by the House. This could include information about the roles and services offered by AOC, OCAS, OHEC, OCWR, and SAA. It also could include “best practices” for congressional offices to follow in order to promote accessibility for people with disabilities.
2. Provide resources to allow OCAS to provide comprehensive accessibility-related educational and technical support for official committee events, including to members of the public attending official events. If there is a preference to have these services be paid out of committee or personal office budgets, an alternative would be to provide these services through OCAS in order to have a single point of contact and ensure quality vendors, and then have congressional offices reimburse OCAS for these services.
3. Require congressional office websites to include standard, approved language regarding the availability of House accessibility services for individuals with disabilities, including the procedures for requesting such services.
4. Require hearing announcements posted to the Committee Repository to include standard, approved instructions for members of the public to request accessibility services.
5. Require congressional offices to display standard, approved accessibility signage, including information about the availability of and process for requesting accessibility services.

These recommendations are based on our Committee’s experience with these issues, and they are intended to be proposals for your review and consideration. Our staff stands ready to assist you going forward, including with the development and consideration of additional or alternative proposals that serve our shared goal of improving access for people with disabilities. Thank you for your consideration of these requests.

Sincerely,



Carolyn B. Maloney
Carolyn B. Maloney
Chairwoman

cc: The Honorable James R. Comer, Ranking Member