

Assistant Speaker Katherine Clark
Statement: Select Committee on Modernization
Member Day Hearing

Chairman Kilmer, Vice Chair Timmons, and members of the Committee – thank you for the opportunity to come before you today to share my priorities and thoughts on improving our institution and ensuring we meet this critical moment to create a Congress that truly reflects the people we serve.

Between the global pandemic, a national reckoning on racial justice, and the deadly insurrection on January 6th—we face a defining moment for the future of Congress.

Congress' challenges around equity, staff diversity and retention, and mental and emotional health support services for Members and staff are not new. But they have reached a crisis point, and I believe we are at risk of losing a pipeline of talented personnel in the House absent bold action. We must use this opportunity to rethink and expand our collective commitment to ensuring a modern Congress is an equitable Congress for every single person who visits and works here.

Over the last few years, I have worked with and heard from my colleagues and their staff who have shared their challenges and experiences, some of which have been very difficult and painful. And as Assistant Speaker, I have the privilege of working closely with some of the newest

Members of Congress and directly with many of the district offices across the country.

Out of these conversations and the collaborative work my team and I have undertaken, I offer the following priorities and recommendations:

1. Expand and Innovate OEA

The Office of Employee Assistance has long been a valuable asset that assists Members and staff by provides confidential therapeutic support services. According to the Director of OEA's testimony to the Legislative Branch Appropriations Subcommittee earlier this year, its caseload more than doubled in the first half of 2020. Thanks to the work of our Appropriators and the House Administration Committee, OEA has brought on additional capacity to meet the demand for services.

However, OEA remains constrained in who it serves, and going forward we must expand its capacity even further while ensuring we are intentional about who is providing services to reflect our workforce.

- OEA must be able to directly serve contract employees. Currently, food service contract workers, military liaisons, and others are not eligible for the same level of direct and ongoing services offered by the OEA. We must correct this and ensure that anyone who works in our

Capitol community can get the same level of services offered to Members and staff.

- OEA must retain a diverse workforce that reflects the community. OEA's director testified that over 50% of OEA counselors are African American. While progress has been made, we must ensure our AAPI, Hispanic, and LGBTQ Members and staff are able to seek services from a counselor who can speak to their unique experiences.
- OEA must directly provide bilingual services. Currently, OEA is in the process of providing contract services for those who wish to seek services in languages other than English. While contracted services are an important complementary tool, we should ensure OEA can provide services in the languages most commonly requested as determined by the CAO and House Administration.
- OEA must retain staff who specialize in racial trauma. The mental health and emotional support needs of our nonwhite Members and staff should be reflected in the baseline and permanent services offered by OEA. The trauma faced, relived, and relitigated daily by our Black, brown, and AAPI colleagues across Congress requires culturally competent support.

Many of these specific proposals have bipartisan support, and I thank my colleagues including Rep. Crow and Rep. Ocasio-Cortez for their work on several of these issues that are critical to creating robust services to provide

trauma-informed care to support all who serve the institution.

2. Staff Diversity, Retention, and Wellbeing

The Tri-Caucuses, our staff associations, and the newly established House Office of Diversity and Inclusion have long fought to improve the recruitment, retention, and advancement of diverse staff across Congress. These issues are more important than ever. I wish to call attention to four specific proposals that will have an immediate and meaningful impact on improving staff diversity and supporting staff wellbeing and inclusivity:

- **Providing and Requiring Coverage of Fertility Benefits.** As the House continues to improve family-support services to improve staff retention, we should look to the private sector where many major companies long ago began offering coverage for the full spectrum of fertility benefits and services to employees and families, including genetic testing, IVF, and cryotherapy extraction and storage. As staff seek support for family planning, the high cost for these services often leads them to turn to the private sector where higher pay helps defray those costs. Requiring coverage for these services across health plans offered to Members and staff will keep talented staff who do not wish to choose between their public service and starting or expanding their families.

- Ensuring Availability of Gender-Neutral Facilities Across the Capitol Complex. I was proud to secure a study in last year's Leg Branch Appropriations bill that requires the Architect of the Capitol to examine the current availability of, and feasibility of expanding, single stall restroom facilities across the Capitol building and our office buildings. Our gender nonbinary and gender nonconforming staff and visitors ought to be able to have access to facilities in all our buildings that are safe and reflective of their needs.
- Expanding Employment Eligibility to Dreamers. Currently, DACA/TPS/and DED beneficiaries are explicitly excluded from eligibility for employment as staff in the House and Senate. However, Dreamers already serve our institution as interns and fellows and spend time working in offices and committees only to find out they cannot take the next step and work as staffers. This is a profound loss for our institution. I am proud that the Appropriations Committee included a long-overdue fix for this issue in recent Leg Branch Appropriations bills, and I am grateful to my colleagues including Vice Chair Aguilar, Rep. Kirkpatrick, Chairs DeLauro and Ryan and more for fighting for this change.
- Providing Ongoing Antiracism Trainings and Tools for Managers and Supervisors. We need more formalized and ongoing opportunities to ensure that all managers and supervisors are equipped with the tools they need

to create and sustain actively anti-racist work environments for their staff. In the wake of George Floyd's murder, I was glad to partner with the House Diversity Office to create a discussion guide for Members, chiefs, and managers who needed assistance with understanding how to hold critical but difficult conversations about race and systemic racism. I have heard a real demand from Members, chiefs of staff, and Staff Directors who want more tools at their disposal and more training opportunities that help them do this work in a trauma-informed way.

- So many want to do the right thing, but they want to get it right. We should help them.

Taken together, these policies will help us meet the moment and ensure we are leading by listening. I urge the Committee to examine these proposals and include them in its formal recommendations.