

Written Testimony of Gregg Orton, former Chief of Staff, Rep. Al Green (D-TX)

**Before the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress
Hearing on “*Recruiting, Empowering and Retaining a Diverse Congressional Staff*”
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Good morning, Chair Kilmer, Vice-Chair Timmons, Members of the Select Committee. My name is Gregg Orton, I previously served as Chief of Staff for Congressman Al Green. While I currently serve as the National Director of the National Council of Asian Pacific Americans (NCAPA), the leading coalition of 37 of the most prominent Asian American, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (AAPI) civil rights organizations in the country, I am here today in my personal capacity to share my thoughts on the current state of diversity of staff in Congress. Thank you for the opportunity to join you today, and thank you for this important work, which is near and dear to my heart.

Before I begin, I would note that my very presence here is an example to what is possible when a Congressional office is meaningfully and authentically committed to diversity, equity and inclusion. I simply would not be in the position I am today, drawing on my experience as a former staffer, if not for Congressman Al Green, and his former Chief of Staff, the late Jacqueline Ellis. For them to both take a chance on a then-young Korean American adoptee, give him the chance to make mistakes, learn, and eventually build a skill set that served not only the constituents of the 9th District of Texas, but now the national AAPI community, is a remarkable and humbling thing. Congressman Green’s office has consistently provided opportunities to men and women of color, which illustrates that greater diversity and inclusion on Capitol Hill is absolutely possible—but it requires practice more than rhetoric.

Recruitment of Diverse Staff

The educational arms of the Tri-Caucus provide all the evidence needed to make the argument that Congress, as an institution, should explore ways to invest in creating more on-ramps for young people of color to work in Congressional offices. Years ago, I was lucky enough to be selected as a Fellow with the Asian Pacific American Institute for Congressional Studies (APAICS), which is the sister organization to the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation and the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute. Countless staffers of color can trace their starts to one of these organizations, and many of them have become long-time staffers—and/or mentors to current staffers. These pipelines could be scaled if Congress itself were to commit resources to building them as well.

Increase or create MRA supplement/increase to support individual office intern programs

Within the last few years, Congress increased Members’ Representational Allowances (MRAs) to account for increased security concerns. This is an entirely legitimate purpose—why not do the same so that offices can recruit diverse intern candidates to work in their offices? This could serve a dual purpose of both building a pipeline of new talent on Capitol Hill, but also allow individual

offices to identify and cultivate talent from their respective districts or states. These funds should be used solely for this purpose and should be protected against manipulation by offices who might seek to simply use it as a revenue infusion.

Build relationships with Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs)

As Congressional diversity initiatives consider building partnerships with minority serving institutions (MSIs), it is crucial that AANAPISIs are not excluded. AANAPISIs make up a small percentage of institutions of higher education; however, they enroll over 40 percent of the AAPI undergraduate student population. Member offices should be encouraged to connect with AANAPISIs in their respective districts or states as well.

Empowering and Retaining Staff

When I became Chief of Staff, there might have been five AAPI Chiefs in the House. When I left, there were around nine. While this was welcomed progress; many of my recent conversations with AAPI staffers, who would certainly qualify for consideration for senior staff positions, are far too often about how do they gracefully exit. My observations have been that many of these staffers are already burnt out, or become burnt out trying to make the case that they are ready to take on coveted senior roles.

To be very clear, I firmly believe that working in Congress is a privilege; and we should not rush individuals into leadership roles until they are ready. However, I also believe that the majority of staffers of color who choose this profession, do so because they are driven by a desire to better their communities. These are the staffers we should want to keep and uplift—and there are a number of changes or improvements that Congress could make towards this end.

Staff diversity transparency

While hearings like this are encouraging, Congress should be bold in acknowledging that diversity and inclusion efforts to date, are still coming up short. Institution-wide reporting should no longer be reliant upon third-party nonprofit organizations. This is critical transparency, and there should be no reason that Congress itself cannot commit resources to report on its own diversity.

Reporting should also occur on an individual office and committee level as well. Light should be shone to expose and encourage more meaningful commitments to inclusion. To put this into context, up until recently, the Congressional Management Foundation awarded the “Golden Mouse” for offices with the best websites, which I know many offices took seriously in the name of constituent accessibility. Surely, staff diversity would be an equally important objective for every Member.

Staff salaries and MRA usage

While I can appreciate as much as anyone, the importance of attempting to keep public service as a grounded profession, staff salaries should be low on the list of factors driving any disconnect between Congress and the public.

A standard exist survey for staffers could actually be quite useful to determine staffers' attitudes and views of the work environment. But even without it, I suspect that many would agree that one of the leading reasons for staffers leaving the Hill is because of the lack of reasonable pay. For this reason, Congress should institute a minimum total salary floor on spending for offices and committees. Alternatively, Congress could consider adopting a "use it or lose it" principle on the staff salary side of MRAs. Every office should have the right to exercise fiscal discipline, it just shouldn't come at the expense of staff who face very real challenges meeting the cost of living in Washington, DC.

Speaking as a former hiring manager, the lack of pay transparency would help many offices, and should be an easy fix for Congress. Chiefs of Staff and Members should be able to have pay per position data readily available, so that they can make informed decisions about setting salaries for their own offices. Returning to an earlier point, Congress could take this one step further and set a minimum pay standard for various office roles in both DC and district offices.

Support staff community spaces

When I first began on the Hill, there were only a handful of AAPI staffers—so few that when you crossed paths with another in the halls or in the cafeterias, a simple nod was enough to communicate the shared struggle of being one of the few representatives of your community. Community, for staffers of color, is crucial for long-term success and sustainability.

Spaces like the Congressional Asian Pacific American Staff Association (CAPASA) will create themselves in the absence of institutional support, but that doesn't mean that they should. A community support system is crucial to thriving on the Hill. There is a painful and telling irony that underpaid staffers must currently fund and support these spaces themselves. Congress could easily provide a modest amount of funding to staff organizations, which would result in far more resources than they could generate otherwise.

These community spaces also serve an important function of connecting junior staff with potential mentors. Of all the things I enjoyed about my time working in Congress, it is the mentoring opportunities that I miss the most. Capitol Hill is such a remarkable place to work, with boundless learning opportunities, but it can be incredibly lonely without a support network. Many AAPI staffers, are exposed to microaggressions that can make our experience even more isolating. Some elicit amusement, while others sting a much more.

For example, most AAPI staffers will groan and laugh with one another when they are mistaken for each other—or even a Member of Congress. It speaks to a relatively minor transgression, but one that happens far too often in broader society as well. On the other hand, I will never forget riding in an elevator during protests over the Affordable Care Act and being told by a protester that they "couldn't believe they let foreigners work in Congress."

I've shared this experience with many of the young staffers of color I've met with when they express frustration or concern about how alienated they feel working in Congress. I can only imagine how AAPI staffers have felt over the last year, navigating the COVID-19 pandemic. As staff, we are taught to take verbal punishment with grace in service to constituents, but the anti-

Asian rhetoric that has been politicized must carry weight for many of them. If not for themselves, then for their fear for parents, grandparents or elders who have become targets for violence and hate.

While I believe Congress should do more to support staff of color, I do not want my remarks to be construed as equating the creation of safe space for the sake of identity politics. Staffers of color are as resilient as they are brilliant. To choose to work in a space, surrounded by every day reminders that “you don’t belong”—and to then use those reminders as motivation to work harder—is precisely why Congress should be doing everything it can to promote greater diversity, equity and inclusion. So many of us watched our families or community struggle and want to make government work better for them. Washington, DC could use more of that these days.

It is a privilege to work in Congress, but it shouldn’t be exclusive to those who are privileged. I hope Congress continues to work with this spirit in mind.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I look forward to answering any questions.