

I thank Chairman Kilmer, Vice Chairman Timmons and the rest of the select committee members for inviting me to speak before you today. I spent the better part of my career—almost 30 years—working for the House of Representatives primarily at the Committee on House Administration. Currently, I work to assist and provide guidance to congressional offices through my position as the head of Congressional Programming for the Congressional Management Foundation (CMF).

First, let me say I'm quite happy about the Committee's focus on district offices, as they can many times be neglected and forgotten when most of the legislative activity and focus is on Washington D.C. Over the last several years, they have faced enormous challenges as much of the work related to the pandemic fell on the shoulders of the district staff to deal with a groundswell of pandemic-related questions and casework from constituents. Anecdotally, CMF has heard that total numbers of casework requests doubled in 2020 and 2021. Not surprisingly, CMF has found those offices that have the best dialogue and connections between their DC and district offices are typically the most successful and most well-managed offices, and they're usually the best suited to deal with unanticipated challenges because they are good at anticipating and planning in advance for contingencies.

It's these challenges that make for very constructive lessons learned that would not only apply to the pandemic but would be useful in any unanticipated situations moving forward. The areas on which I will focus break into three categories. They are: staffing; security; and transition and technology, particularly for freshman offices.

The lessons I learned from working all those years in Congress lead me to the conclusion that creating policies that are creative, flexible, and can meet unexpected challenges were always most likely to serve individual offices and the institution. One example of this was when the Committee on House Administration had to examine House communications policies during natural disasters. As you know, the House mandates certain communications functions be ceased running up to an election, so that incumbents do not have an unfair advantage in a campaign. However, what happens when a sudden natural disaster hits one or more districts during that time period? How do Members communicate with constituents vital public safety and resources information? At that time the Committee decided to modify the policy to allow Members to communicate specific information related to the natural disaster to enable constituents to get vital assistance and information during a critical time of need. It's that logic and lesson learned that I believe can apply to staffing.

Over the last several years, district staff have been met with unexpected challenges. In addition to their normal volume of constituent casework, offices fielded questions about pandemic assistance for families and workers and relief funding for small businesses trying to stay afloat. They were also dealing with supply needs for their first responders and hospitals having sufficient personal protective equipment (PPE). Congressional offices were forced to deal with the challenge of how to manage this unanticipated but urgent surge of work in the district office. If you're an office that is at full capacity or close to the cap, you had very few options other than reallocating your DC staff to help relieve some of the load on the district staff. It

became apparent that offices would be well served by having the ability to hire additional personnel when they are confronted with a public emergency.

Currently the Members' Representational Allowance (MRA) regulations that govern Representatives' personal office budgets provide for offices to hire temp agency personnel. However, those additional staff have counted towards the staff ceiling cap. It would make sense to examine a carve out to exempt temp agency staff during times of crisis. CMF has been an advocate of lifting the staff ceiling entirely and allowing Members to hire based on their office needs. The recent House Inspector General report also recommended an eventual removal of this staff ceiling cap. I would recommend having an interim measure that would exempt offices in times of crisis and provide for additional temporary employees during times of need as an interim step. This would alleviate the strains placed on the district staff during such times when phones may be ringing off the hook with requests for assistance. This crisis time period could still have limits, as it could be predicated on a formal determination by leadership or the Chair and Ranking Member of the House Administration Committee. CMF has also previously advocated the possibility of creating other exemptions to the staff ceiling for specific groups for which you would want greater representation such as interns, individuals who would fall under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), wounded veterans, etc. This may not be an easy task as it may require a statutory change, but it could be worthwhile for the institution and a win-win situation for everyone.

Also at issue during an emergency, but also a significant challenge to day to day operations of both Members and constituents, is the uneven access to mobile and broadband Internet. Though it may be outside the purview of this Committee, the fact that there are many areas of the country that still lack both reliable high, speed mobile and broadband Internet access significantly hinders representation, especially in large and at-large districts and those far from Washington, D.C. where it is difficult to reach all constituents physically. Especially during crisis, such as the pandemic that shut down travel and in-person meetings, and you leave a lot of Americans without access to necessary emergency information and services.

Another area I would recommend examining is casework. This topic could probably fill a whole hearing on its own, so I am just touching on the concept of digitization. The House has already started to digitize forms and processes with the finance office, and I believe many of those principles can apply to casework and should be examined as such. Currently, congressional staff are spending significant amounts of time entering information into forms and seeking privacy releases from constituents. Each agency has its own processes and requirements. Having some type of portal, either created by the executive branch or by the House where constituents could securely provide their information and provide digital signatures, has the possibility to free up staff to do the more substantive work of engagement with the executive branch agencies and bringing successful casework results to constituents.

The next area I would recommend examining is security for district offices. While security is not my expertise, I would recommend having the authorizing committee, the Committee on House Administration, work with the Sergeant at Arms to see if the process for security expenses can

be reformed. Currently, many expenses are paid for from the MRA where Members are weighing budgetary constraints and needs against the security of their staff.

Based on past incidents and events, the Committee on House Administration previously took steps to authorize central funding for certain district office expenses through consultation with experts such as the Sergeant at Arms. I would recommend a process whereby security needs are examined and recommended by the Sergeant at Arms and entirely paid through a centralized funding mechanism with the appropriate oversight and sign off by the Committee on House Administration. Security is always about balancing access of your constituents with making sure Members and staff are safe at all times. If a Member office wanted to go beyond what was recommended by the security experts, this process could still allow Member offices to pay for those expenses from the MRA with some process for final approval, either at SAA or CHA. This solution would minimize having the Member weigh security decisions against other factors within the overall MRA budget.

Another area related to security funding is how the House is billed for federal office space. When I worked here, GSA billed in a manner where security expenses were distributed amongst all of their tenants. This meant Members were sharing costs for enhanced security expenses required by other tenants of the building. The judicial branch, which may need enhanced security for their proceedings, is an example. As such, the cost of securing federal space by House Members could be cost prohibitive, due to those additional costs shared amongst all the federal building tenants. It may be worth examining whether Members could pay a more proportional cost in their rent based on their basic security needs versus potentially subsidizing enhanced security measures that do not apply to them.

As a related issue, this Committee may wish to focus particular attention to enhanced security protocol education and best practices for freshman offices. The Sergeant at Arms provides helpful guidance in the manuals they provide offices. However, in many instances, freshman offices have new district staff who may never have dealt with groups of protesters coming to their office or with angry or threatening constituents or extra security that may be necessary at official events. I would also recommend some additional educational handholding and enhanced protocols focused on new staff as a whole, but particularly in freshman offices. I remember once asking veteran offices if every person in their office was aware of where the emergency gathering points and protocols were for the office, and many times the newest staff and/or interns were overlooked and uninformed about important emergency procedures.

The last area I'll focus on deals with how transitions take place, with particular attention to incoming freshman district offices. Currently Members and the House are not allowed to expend any funds for incoming Members' new district offices until the Congress begins. In contrast, in Washington outgoing Members of Congress are required to vacate their offices in December so that they can be refurbished in time for the new Congress in January. The result is that Members get the keys to their D.C. offices, which are fully operational on swearing-in day, but district offices could take up to two months to be fully operational with full internet services and necessary security. This is especially important every ten years after redistricting,

when significant changes to district lines require Members to move district offices. After the last decennial redistricting in Pennsylvania, nearly every Member of the delegation maintained a district office outside of their new district lines. This situation is likely to repeat itself after the 2022 elections.

I would recommend the House be allowed to, at the direction of the incoming Members, pay for certain components or installations to accelerate the establishment of district offices. It may require the House to engage in short-term leases to access the properties prior to swearing-in day. And I'm sure this would be a challenge for institutional offices. However, this would create a degree of parity between district offices, and the D.C. offices so that Members are fully operational on January 3.

With that, I'll conclude my remarks, and again I thank the Select Committee for providing me with this opportunity to speak before you today.