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Testimony

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House Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress

“Congress Back Home: Modernizing District Office Operations”

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Chairman Kilmer, Vice-Chair Timmons, and Members of the Committee, thank you for having me testify today. As the District Director for Congressman Guy Reschenthaler, I am honored to share my experience and insight to help better operations in Congressional districts across the country.

My tenure with Congressman Reschenthaler began during his time in the State Senate and then transitioned to his Congressional Staff in 2019. It was evident from day one that it would be a challenge to establish offices for a freshman Congressman. Pennsylvania was in a unique position from the beginning because the state had just gone through a non-decennial redistricting. Happening outside the normal timeline, there was much confusion regarding offices start-up. We did not have the luxury to receive guidance from an outgoing member or their staff. We would have to rely on our own experience and instincts as we found no person or entity to guide us through this process. The following are my recommendations to make the new office process smoother for not only new offices, but offices that are coming into newly formed districts.

Provide guidance in choosing an office location

Selection for a brand new office in a newly established district is challenging when there is uncertainty about finding the best-suited location, necessary office amenities, or acceptable and available furnishings. While the House Ethics provided general internet needs, pricing allowances, and the lease, most basic logistics lacked guidance. Should a new office be established near other government buildings; should consideration be given to available security or safety features; is it more feasible to have separate staff offices; should a conference room area be considered are all questions facing a new director. Freedom should be given to each office to fit their needs but information of what those needs may or may not be would be critical in making the first decisions of the office and alleviate possible issues in the future.

Breakdown of technology set up

In a new office, one of the biggest hurdles we encountered regarding the installation of technology was disseminating between the multiple sources offering contrasting views on what was needed and how it should be installed; there is no one-stop-shop. In many cases, the guidance was sometimes confusing. Although familiar with technological systems, their installation, and their use, I found the process to establish service to be both cumbersome and complicated. Acronyms are used excessively, which can be very confusing without proper explanations. Definition of terms like WAN and flagship are just some that we had to decipher on our own. If given a breakdown of what each term or contact is; time would be saved from jumping around to the wrong resources.

Streamline the Flagship and Satellite office decisions into one

There are major differences as to how the flagship—or main office—is to be set up versus a satellite office. Having one office designated as the main site gave us little decision-making for its setup. Everything from the internet to the phone contracts was made for us. While this was a welcome assistance, a satellite office requires staff to not only determine the needs, but also contact a provider and oversee the installation. Due to differing providers, office staff – not the House technical staff - must contact providers to repair, maintain, or replace equipment or service. Finances are separate for the multiple district offices but the set up should be more connected when both offices, in the end, need the same thing.

Allow agencies and outgoing offices to pass along cases to new offices

It was found that transitioning constituent casework was more difficult than initially anticipated. Inquiries filed by the departing office became lost or delayed in processing at the federal agency when the original office was no longer a proper contact. For many constituents, recreating a previously filed inquiry delayed the receipt of Social Security or Veteran benefits. While understanding the need for separation of districts, having immediate access to casework and regional contacts for the federal agencies would allow staff to be better equipped to help new constituents.

These challenges when opening an office would be alleviated with more communication and direct outreach from knowledgeable established House staff from the beginning of the office. Once the office is open, we have come across other challenges that make day to day operations more difficult than necessary.

Technology partners and Federal agencies need an agreement for digital signatures

Over time, there has been an uptick in remote and alternate office work for the district office and our federal agency partners. While some accommodations were implemented, other issues were more complex and resulted in a slower response time. One suggestion to initiate quicker response times was to have digital signatures. This would eliminate the time-consuming mailing, printing, and returning of agency-required privacy forms. However, it was found that numerous agencies do not accept the digital format. A service that we would utilize to help constituents was not feasible due to the agency placed limitations that we have been told should not exist.

Clear guidelines for partnership with other government and non-governmental organizations

Events throughout the district pose problems when working with other entities. Often, it is found that state and federal agencies have their own set of guidelines and practices. We frequently shy away from participating in events due to differing ethics rules. Clearer guidance regarding ethical practices for these events would be helpful. For example, events targeting similar interested groups would make more sense done in conjunction with other agencies and organizations. While we can host and invite other groups this causes limitations for everyone else in advertising and funding.

Make DC resources and opportunities available to District staff

While technology has made the DC to district disconnect less of an obstacle, there still seem to be areas that technology has not or cannot help. Amenities offered to DC employees are often not available to district staff. Examples like fitness center and childcare, while they are easily implemented on Capitol Hill, they still would be appreciated and utilized by district staffers. Many groups and organizations for professional development seem to be easily found and passed along to DC staff. These organizations sometimes find District staff but more often than not the connections aren't made quickly. These connections not only assist staff in their personal and professional lives, but they broaden their outreach.

Thank you for allowing me to shed light on district operations and the challenges that have come up from the start of the office to today.