

Mr. Paul Tewksbury
Director, Office of Employee Assistance
U.S. House of Representatives
Office of the Chief Administrative Officer
Office of Human Resources
House Committee on Appropriations – Subcommittee on the Legislative Branch
“House Wellness and Office of Employee Assistance (OEA) Hearing”
February 18, 2021

Good morning, Chairman Ryan, Ranking Member Herrera Beutler, and Members of the Subcommittee. It is an honor to testify before this distinguished panel, and I thank you for the opportunity to weigh in on issues of great importance to the Office of the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) and the House of Representatives.

For the past six years, I have served with the Office of Employee Assistance (OEA), recently assuming the role of Director following the retirement of Ms. Liz McBride-Chambers. Since its launch three decades ago, the OEA has provided a range of professional and confidential support services designed to enhance the personal and occupational well-being of the House community, including Members, congressional staff in DC and in district offices, and their immediate family members. In addition to assisting individuals, the OEA facilitates retreats to help teams work together more effectively. The OEA is honored to serve staff in House support offices, the Congressional Budget Office, and employees of the U.S. Capitol Police.

Our confidential counseling, supervisory consultation and coaching, trainings, office retreats, critical incident response services, and job transition assistance have positively impacted the health, well-being, and work productivity of generations of Members and staff.

While the bulk of the OEA’s services fall within the domain of mental health, our services are considered ‘therapeutic’ yet not ‘therapy.’ Although each of our professional staff is trained and licensed in a behavioral health-related discipline, as a workplace-based service it is not the policy of our office to provide ‘diagnosis’ or ‘treatment.’ Rather, our core service is to support individuals experiencing mental or emotional distress and to provide comprehensive assessment, short-term solution-focused counseling, referral to specialized care if indicated, and follow-up services to gauge progress.

The OEA and most employee assistance programs (EAPs) are considered a ‘generalist’ practice. Our team is highly experienced in assessing a vast range of personal and work-related concerns and assisting individuals experiencing a wide variety of stressors. A partial list of frequent issues brought to the OEA includes work stress, anxiety and depression symptoms, relationship issues, substance abuse, and various types of trauma reactions. Our counselors utilize a variety of evidence-based counseling techniques, drawing from cognitive-behavioral and psychodynamic perspectives, mindfulness principles, and a strengths-based practice framework.

An abundance of employee assistance outcome research in the past decade shows that EAP services - whether provided in-person, telephonically, or through video - are effective at increasing work engagement, productivity, and well-being, as well as reducing absenteeism and turnover. Detailed information on such studies is available through the Employee Assistance Professionals Association, an international organization educating and supporting employee assistance practitioners.

Our critical incident and trauma response services are informed by the dominant vetted models in the employee assistance field, including Psychological First-aid, Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) and the workplace-specific contemporary model known as Critical Incident Response (CIR). While situations such as the Capitol attack have required a timely and reactive response, OEA services strive to be as proactive as possible, educating individuals, managers, and work teams on healthy resilience-building practices to incorporate into their personal and work lives. Along with our House Wellness Center, the OEA strives to embed a proactive culture of wellness into the experience of work of all whom we service across the House community, the USCP, and the CBO.

Even though OEA services are always voluntary in nature, our office provides a formal referral option for supervisors seeking to connect struggling employees with support. Non-disciplinary by design, this service is designed to be a productivity enhancement resource for employees, their managers, and work teams. While it is generally employees and supervisors who initiate contact with the OEA for either individual or workgroup services, be assured that our staff routinely reaches out to offices and workgroups impacted by large-scale adverse events to assure them of the availability of OEA support, be it a natural disaster, employee death or other significant stressors or hardships a work team may face.

Over the past three decades and to this day, the OEA team collaborates with other employee resources within the House, including the Office of Attending Physician, Office of House Employment Counsel, Office of Employee Advocacy, and the Office of Diversity and Inclusion. While confidentiality is a cornerstone of our services, with an employee's permission we can ally with other resources to help employees navigate situations involving both personal and professional complexities.

Additionally, the OEA team is well acquainted with other EAPs across Capitol Hill, including the Senate and Architect of the Capitol EAP offices. Furthermore, our staff is committed to staying informed about reputable community resources in the domains of mental health and wellness, as to make quality referrals for individuals seeking specialized services outside of the workplace.

The OEA understands that any mental health-related service can be misunderstood or even maligned due to historical stigma. Therefore, all promotional efforts by the OEA are meticulously crafted to be inclusive, to normalize the services for employees, and to invite and embrace diversity of all types. We portray help-seeking as a sign of strength, reminding our customers that emotional and mental health is 'real health,' and describe our services using terms such as 'practical, supportive, and collaborative' in addition to being easy-to-access, confidential and cost-free.

Until 2018, the immediate OEA full-time staff had never exceeded six individuals. Thanks to the generosity of the Committee on Appropriations, Members of Congress, and the support from the Chief Administrative Officer, the OEA significantly expanded its immediate staff in 2018, and helped establish the House Wellness Center, which Wellness Manager Bryan Weiss will elaborate upon later in today's hearing. The increased staffing within the OEA has allowed us to continue to meet the needs of individuals seeking confidential counseling, while also enabling the OEA to increase its delivery of staff retreats more than five-fold in 2019, and to notably enhance delivery of trainings across the House community.

The COVID pandemic that evolved in early 2020 brought about immediate and sweeping changes in service delivery not only within the OEA, but in the greater House community as workgroups of all types were thrust in to a telework posture to prevent spread of the virus. While accustomed to providing face-to-face services to individuals and work teams, the OEA rapidly and effectively met these changing

service demands while addressing the increased support needs stemming from stressors our community experienced due to COVID. Our decades of experience providing telephonic counseling and consultation to district House staff enabled us to smoothly shift all of our counseling services to this model without any lapse in service. During the first six months of 2020, and largely attributed to the pandemic, the caseload for the OEA more than doubled as compared to the same period in most prior years. OEA counselors had more than 3,000 contacts with clients during this time.

Additionally, the OEA counselors' acuity with technology allowed the OEA to provide training sessions to Members, Committees, Leadership, and staff during 2020 by using WebEx, Zoom, and Teams teleconferencing. The OEA reached more than three thousand Members and staff through these virtual training sessions, which included topics such as stress management, compassion fatigue, time management, and best practices for teleworking teams.

While office retreats waned in 2020 due to COVID restrictions, the OEA is now offering full-service, customized virtual retreats, which include communication workshops, team building, operational discussions, and strategic planning sessions. The OEA's online presence has increased and use of the OEA's virtual mental health screening platform continues to be steady.

OEA counselors also created several infographics on compelling topics including stress reduction, mindfulness, and managing in a telework environment in 2020. These documents were shared across the House community and illustrate the OEA's ability to offer information flexibly and responsively.

Over time, while the OEA expects to offer more face-to-face services as the pandemic gradually subsides, our ability to provide services using technology will continue on a significant scale. Our telephonic counseling services have been abundant, convenient for our customers, and effective to meet their needs. Our virtual education sessions and retreats have only elevated the popularity of these services, enabling the OEA to connect with more employees across the Capitol complex, the nation, and territories. Moving forward, reaching our clientele in these numerous ways will allow for more engagement in all of our wellness related offerings.

I join you and your colleagues in recognizing the importance of meeting the emotional and well-being needs of the Congressional community today and beyond. The violent attack on our Capitol on January 6 of this year generated an extraordinary amount of emotional and psychological concern, the likes of which the Congressional community has never seen. The OEA team has a history of responding to the most demanding of critical incidents including the Congressional baseball shooting on June 14, 2017, the assassination attempt of Representative Gabrielle Giffords on January 8, 2011, and the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The team's response to critical incidents underscores the essential role the OEA plays to promote resilience and healing in times of tragedy.

Allow me to take this opportunity to highlight the monumental efforts that our dedicated OEA team has taken in direct response to the horrific events that transpired on January 6, 2021. These actions include:

- Immediately deploying our critical incident response posture to engage the full capacity of our 24/7 services, both in-person and remotely
- Meeting the demands of a very substantial and rapid increase in our confidential counseling and assessment services to the House community

- Leveraging existing contracting mechanisms to secure additional counseling resources to assist with the surge in services, both for the House community and for the USCP specifically
- Creating and disseminating numerous House-wide messages and communications on coping with the aftermath of trauma and the availability of OEA services
- Conducting over 40 live webinars for Members, congressional staff, and supervisors on trauma and resilience, which are now also available on-demand through the Congressional Staff Academy
- Partnering with the Office of the Speaker and the Office of Attending Physician to conduct trauma and resilience briefings and outreach regarding OEA services for Members of Congress
- Providing an unparalleled level of support services to individual employees and managers: individual interactions with employees and managers since January 6 total 1,150, which includes 760 counseling sessions and over 300 individual onsite interactions with USCP personnel thus far
- Actively developing promotional strategies to highlight the culturally competent nature of all services that OEA provides and how to portray this essential messaging most effectively

Additionally, in the immediate days following January 6, our OEA team contacted companies that had employees at the Capitol complex during the attack to (1) determine whether they offer EAP services to their staff and (2) educate them on our internal OEA services. Through these discussions, we were pleased to learn that employers were already providing direct EAP services to their employees who were onsite during the violence. In some instances, these services include counseling for employees who speak English as a second language. Regardless of whether these employing organizations offer EAP services, our OEA team has been providing help and guidance to anyone who reaches out.

Allow me to also highlight that the CAO's commitment to diversity is a top priority. We take great care to ensure that our team recruits and hires talent from a variety of backgrounds. Currently, 50 percent of the full-time counselors on the OEA team are African Americans. In addition, the entire OEA team is professionally trained in, and regularly delivers, culturally competent mental health services to an exceptionally diverse workforce across the House, USCP, and CBO communities. As a practice providing customized resources upon request, the OEA is able to connect employees to bilingual support services.

Based on these responsibilities and accomplishments, our OEA team continues to receive tremendous support from the entire House community. Recent increases to the OEA budget allowed the team to hire more counselors, expand services, and enhance outreach. We are working within the structure of the CAO on a plan that will allow us to fill a vacant manager position and add two new professional staff in 2021. Additionally, we are utilizing available funds to supplement our full-time counseling staff with significant 'surge support' including four onsite crisis counselors dedicated to meeting the needs of the USCP onsite around-the-clock, and three full-time contracted counselors stationed within the OEA.

We are so very grateful for your kind consideration to ensure that the OEA team is positioned to continue providing critical support services across the House community well into the future. Again, I genuinely thank the Subcommittee for the opportunity to testify and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.

###