



Testimony of Dr. Brian Pugh, Executive Director John C. Stennis Center for Public Service Training and Development

Good morning Chairman Amodie, Ranking Member Espallat, and members of the Subcommittee. I am Dr. Brian Pugh, Executive Director of the John C. Stennis Center for Public Service Training and Development (“Stennis Center”). I am honored to speak to you today about the Stennis Center’s \$430,000 appropriations request and our Congressional Programs.

History and Mission

The Stennis Center was established in 1988 by Public Law 100-458¹ with the statutory mission to 1) promote public service to young people and to get them interested in a career in public service, 2) to provide training and professional development opportunities to state and local elected officials and their staff, and 3) to provide training and professional development opportunities to Congressional staff.² We are overseen by a Board of Trustees that are required by law to be appointed by House and Senate leadership.³

The Stennis Center has a variety of programs to help us meet this three-pronged mission. Our Student Programs are aimed at college students and recent graduates who are featured in the Stennis Center’s quarterly journal *Public Service Review*, which is dedicated to the publication and dissemination of young people’s reflections and experiences in the public service sector through professional or volunteer opportunities. The purpose of the journal is to acknowledge and influence the important and substantive work carried out by young people in local, state, and federal government entities, universities and colleges, and nonprofit organizations across the United States.

Our programs that meet the third prong of our mission – to provide training and development opportunities to Congressional staff – are known as our Congressional Programs. Because the Stennis Center’s request is for expenses related to these programs, I will focus on discussing those.

¹ Codified at 2 U.S.C. §1101 - 10.

² 2 U.S.C. § 1104.

³ *Id.* at §1103(b).

Congressional Programs

The Stennis Center has multiple ways that it meets its mandate to provide training and development opportunities to Congressional staff. Our flagship program is the Stennis Congressional Staff Fellows Program (“Stennis Fellows Program”). Established during the 103rd Congress, the Stennis Fellows Program is a year-and-a-half-long program that focuses on the challenges to Congress as an institution of American democracy and the role that Congressional staff play in meeting those challenges.

The Stennis Fellows Program occurs every Congress and selects 30-34 bipartisan, bicameral senior Congressional staff members to engage in professional development designed to help them be better managers and leaders, as well as be more productive staff members. The program includes roundtable discussions of relevant topics such as polarization, managing across a generational divide, staff capacity, and separation of powers. We also host overnight stays at a university such as Princeton University as well as the National Conservation Training Center.

Once a Stennis Fellow completes the program we then “graduate” them to Senior Stennis Fellows. These Senior Fellows play a vital role in the rest of our Congressional programming and our ability to meet the other two prongs of our mission. Given that these Senior Fellows are current or former staff, they have expert levels of knowledge and understanding about key facets of Congress. They are committed to public service and the institution of Congress specifically, and they can play a wide range of roles in the rest of our programs. Senior Fellows can speak on topics such as the Appropriations process or managing a Congressional office. They can mentor young staff to help them grow as a Congressional staffer and stay longer on the Hill. They can explain the legislative process to interns who are interested in becoming full-time staff. And they can share their personal experiences to show that public service can come from all walks of life. There are currently almost 400 Senior Stennis Fellows and in the 118th Congress alone we have already had over 50 of them volunteer their time to our programs. Stennis Fellows are also periodically featured in *Public Service Review*.

To give a sense of the people who have participated in the Stennis Fellows Program, who we now call Senior Fellows, I will just mention a few notable alumni: Jennifer Homendy the Chair of the National Transportation Safety Board, Cheryl Johnson the former Clerk of the U.S. House of Representatives, Mike McCord the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller), Elizabeth McDonough the Senate Parliamentarian, Colleen Shogan the Archivist of the United States, Kristine Svinicki the former Chairwoman of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, Andrew Wheeler the former Administrator for the Environmental Protection Agency, and Shalanda Young the Director of the Office of Management and Budget.

Another of the Stennis Center’s Congressional Programs is the Emerging Congressional Staff Leaders Program (“Emerging Leaders Program”). This is a one-on-one mentoring

program where we pair a junior or mid-level staffer with a Senior Stennis Fellow. Though this, too, is a bipartisan, bicameral program, the Stennis Center strives to match mentees with a mentor who shares similar political ideology, issue area expertise, and, when appropriate, the same chamber of Congress. In addition to one-on-one mentoring, this program provides participants with roughly four group sessions to discuss topics such as advancing a legislative agenda, parliamentary procedure with the House and Senate Parliamentarians, and other relevant topics. The Emerging Leaders Program runs in the second half of every Congressional session.

Our final Congressional Program is the Stennis Program for Congressional Interns (“Stennis Intern Program”). The Stennis Intern Program is a bipartisan, bicameral program that hosts roughly 30 students every spring, summer, and fall for five 90-minute sessions on institutional aspects of Congress. These sessions are led by experts – typically Senior Stennis Fellows – about a specific topic and provide the interns with an opportunity to ask questions and network with these experts. We also provide them with a small group project where they are tasked with advising a fake Member of Congress and then are paired up with a Senior Stennis Fellow to discuss the finer points of being a legislative staffer. Participants selected for the Stennis Intern Program are required to write an article about their experience in *Public Service Review*.

FY 2025 Budget Summary

The Stennis Center for Public Service is requesting level funding, which is \$430,000. The Stennis Center strives to present the highest quality programs for congressional staff at the lowest possible cost. The Stennis Center has been operating on the same funding level for multiple years now. The appropriations request for FY 2025 is essential to enable the Stennis Center to continue to provide training and development opportunities to congressional staff as mandated by its authorizing legislation. Without the appropriation, the highly successful Stennis Congressional Staff Fellows Program, Emerging Congressional Staff Leaders Program, and Stennis Program for Congressional Interns would be severely reduced, if not eliminated.

Budget Request Details

Congressional Staff Programs (by Program Activity)

Stennis Congressional Staff Fellows Program	\$296,000
Emerging Congressional Staff Leaders Program	37,500
Stennis Leadership Program for Congressional Interns	37,500
Congressional Related Programs for Members and Staff	19,000
Senior Stennis Congressional Staff Fellows Program	<u>40,000</u>
Total	\$430,000

(by Object Classification)

Personnel	\$245,000
Direct Program Costs (including speakers, facilities, travel, food and lodging)	131,800
Office Lease and Utilities	48,900
Printing, Copying and Postage	1,300
Equipment and Supplies	<u>3,000</u>
Total	\$430,000

Possibility for Growth and Future Challenges

While the Stennis Center has not asked for an increase in funding for the next fiscal year, I want to note a challenge that our organization currently faces. Over the last 2 years, we have seen an increase in the interest of our Congressional Programs compared to years prior. For example, the number of applicants for the 118th Stennis Fellows cohort was 96. This is a 75% increase over the previous ten-year average of applications.⁴ Similarly, our Emerging Leaders Program saw a 53% increase for the 118th group compared to the same ten-year period in average applications. Furthermore, we have had triple the number of yearly participants in our Intern Program, going from 30 a year to 90.

I note this is a challenge because the number of participants that we can accommodate has stayed roughly stagnant for each cohort in our various programs. If we continue to have an increase in demand, then we will face the problem of telling more qualified people that they cannot participate in the programs that we have to offer. I believe that to meet our mission to provide training and professional development opportunities for Congressional staff, we must always look for ways to engage with those who want our programming.

To underscore this point, I want to give you an example. Because our Fellows Program is for senior staff, we advise our selection committee to view “senior” as having at least ten years of government experience. Due to the increased number of applicants for the 118th Congress, our average years of government experience for those selected was 15.8. Roughly two-thirds of the 96 applicants were qualified as senior staff, meaning that a third were left out despite being qualified due to the simple fact that we did not have enough room for them in the program.

The Stennis Center has tried to accommodate this increased demand in a few ways. First, we expanded our Intern Program from once every summer to three times a year. We were initially able to do this in 2021 by hosting the program virtually. While not as effective as an in-person discussion, this change was due in large part to the Capitol building closure during COVID-19. Once we were able to move back to in-person programming in the

⁴ This includes five application periods for the 113th Congress through the 117th Congress.

Capitol building, we were able to spread the yearly cost of the program to three groups a year by cutting the catering costs of snacks and refreshments we provide to participants during those sessions.⁵ Because the cost of catering was cut, the meeting space that we utilize is free, and our speakers are volunteers, the only other major cost for the Intern Program is the staff salaries involved in running it. Therefore, we were able to triple our program's reach on a similar budget to previous years.

We were also able to find savings for the Fellows Program by utilizing event space at the Hill Center at the Old Naval Hospital. Prior to the 117th Congress, the Fellows Program consisted of four half-day roundtables, two of which were connected to a visit to a university and two were in Washington, D.C. We were able to expand the number of roundtables in D.C. to six by being more mindful of the cost of event space.

The Hill Center at the Old Naval Hospital is considerably cheaper than other options in D.C. because it is run by a nonprofit organization. Over the years we have found that our Fellows are much more engaged if we take them off the Hill for these roundtables, and the Old Naval Hospital provides us with an incredibly cost-effective option. While this does not enable us to have more participants in each cohort, it does allow us to have more roundtable discussions per cohort. We believe this has made an already effective program stronger.

I mention these cost-saving measures in conjunction with increased demand to acknowledge that while we can maintain our programs at the requested level of funding, our cost-saving measures have made it very difficult to find new ways to meet this demand. We would be happy to work with the Subcommittee or the Committee at large to find new ways for us to meet our mission.

Thank you for allowing me to speak to you today about the Stennis Center's appropriation request and our Congressional Programs. I look forward to any questions you may have.

⁵ The Stennis Center is authorized pursuant to 2 U.S.C. §1108(a)(7) to make "expenditures for meals, entertainment and refreshments in connection with official training sessions or other authorized programs."