

Testimony Related to Strengthening Congressional Casework through requesting a GAO Study on Agency Responsiveness to Congressional Casework Requests, Expanding the CRS Directory of Casework Liaisons, and Initializing a CAO Study on the Potential Establishment of a House Casework Office,

Submitted by Anne Meeker of POPVOX Foundation for the House Appropriations Subcommittee on the Legislative Branch Fiscal Year 2025

Dear Chair Amodei, Ranking Member Espallat, and Members of the House Legislative Branch Appropriations Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony. My name is Anne Meeker, and I am a former House caseworker and Director of Constituent Services. Since leaving my previous position, I am proud to have been part of efforts at POPVOX Foundation to support Congressional modernization and operational innovation, including work to study and support Congressional casework and caseworkers as a critical part of Congress' ability to engage with constituents and carry out its Article One responsibilities of oversight.

I am honored to submit this testimony to emphasize my support for this subcommittee's work to strengthen Congress' ability to provide excellent constituent services to the American people, in particular three requests under the subcommittee's consideration:

- GAO Study on Agency Responsiveness to Congressional Casework Requests
- CRS.gov Expanded Directory of Casework Liaisons
- CAO Study on the Establishment of a House Casework Office

Casework is one of Congress' most underappreciated strengths. Contrary to public perception of Congress as hopelessly dysfunctional and partisan, casework is a universal activity shared by all Members of Congress that provides competent, effective service to constituents in need on a

nonpartisan basis. Casework is effective: end-of-year summaries of casework activities frequently show that casework efforts bring back millions of dollars in delayed and retroactive benefits to local economies and constituents in need. Beyond monetary benefits, casework is also a chance for Congress to demonstrate accountability that rebuilds the American people's trust in the first branch of government. Casework is inherently nonpartisan, and caseworkers from both sides of the aisle frequently collaborate to share information and hold agencies to account. Finally, Member statements from multiple hearings of committees with jurisdiction over public-facing agencies frequently show the value of learning from constituents through casework about problems in federal agencies. Casework is how Congress comes face to face with the human impact of policy decisions, and constituent stories surfaced through casework are often the fuel that moves the engines of legislation in the House.

In previous funding cycles, the House Appropriations Subcommittee on the Legislative Branch has taken concrete steps to strengthen casework and ensure that Members are able to fulfill this vital responsibility to constituents, in particular through supporting the House Chief Administrative Officer to develop casework-specific services and support. Additional work in this funding cycle can continue to create efficiencies for Member office casework teams by removing barriers to providing standout constituent services to the American people.

GAO Study on Agency Responsiveness to Congressional Casework Requests: a recent amicus curiae brief filed in the case *State Dept. v. Muñoz* by 35 Members of Congress notes that casework is a “core function” of Congress, and that casework effectiveness depends on Congress’ ability to obtain case-specific information from federal agencies.¹ However, Congress has never acted to set standards and guidelines for agencies in responding to constituent-related

¹ Greenfield et. al. “Brief for 35 Members of Congress as Amici Curiae,” US Supreme Court *State Department v. Muñoz* (April 2024). https://immigrantjustice.org/system/files/legal-resource-files/2024.03.28_-_congressional_amicus_brief.pdf

requests, leading to a patchwork of different practices, timelines, standards, and expectations: some agencies route inquiries through web forms that provide limited tracking (e.g., Consumer Financial Protection Bureau), others through DC-based Offices of Congressional/Legislative Affairs (e.g., most military branches), others through assigned Congressional liaisons at processing centers (e.g., Social Security, Veterans Benefits Administration), others through local leadership teams (e.g., regional Veterans Health Administration systems), others through customer service teams (e.g., Taxpayer Advocate Service), and more. Different agencies and programs — and even specific personnel within them — have vastly different standards for responsiveness, including both timeliness and quality of responses.

This complex and inconsistent landscape makes it harder for Members of Congress and their casework teams to be effective on behalf of constituents, and creates significant inefficiencies for casework teams in training and continuing education on a myriad of different agency practices. A GAO study on the current state of agency responsiveness to Congressional casework requests would provide Congress with a deeper understanding of the impact of this landscape on staff time and ability to serve constituents. It would also lay important groundwork for future efforts to develop minimum standards for agencies to respond that would create a more predictable and accountable relationship between casework teams and agency liaisons — and uphold Congress' Article One authority to conduct oversight over agency operations.

CRS.gov Expanded Directory of Agency Liaisons

A related problem for casework teams with the patchwork of agency liaison structures for casework is the challenge of finding the correct and most effective agency contact. Many offices have horror stories of sending agency inquiries in sensitive constituent cases by accident to

liaisons who left years ago. Sending to the wrong contact also poses challenges for agencies themselves: with many agency liaison offices overstretched responding to a record caseload, spending valuable time chasing down inquiries sent to the wrong place prevents liaison staff from responding efficiently to requests.

The Congressional Research Service provides an invaluable service to caseworkers in compiling its directory of agency liaisons; it is my understanding that this is one of CRS' most-utilized products. However, the current list is not complete for casework: it focuses only on the primary DC-based agency casework liaisons, which excludes the regional contacts, processing center contacts, and local contacts who are often the more appropriate recipients of casework-related inquiries. In the absence of a centrally created and maintained list, casework teams spend inordinate amounts of time soliciting, tracking, and managing contact lists themselves. New casework teams are especially disadvantaged by having to develop these expanded lists from scratch.

The expanded CRS directory was further included in Recommendation #150 by the House Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress.

CAO Study on the Establishment of a House Casework Office:

The House Chief Administrative Officer's team, especially the Coach Program, has done outstanding work to support caseworkers among other Congressional staff positions. Regular "fly-in" conferences for caseworkers create new opportunities for staff to meet and learn from each other, build relationships that can lead to better collaboration on holding agencies to account, and provide the professional development and mentorship that helps Congress retain talented caseworkers for the long term. Individualized coaching through the CAO also helps

casework teams navigate complex case-specific and agency-specific casework situations.

The consistently high demand for CAO coach support from caseworkers points to specific casework needs that may be properly addressed with a dedicated office within the CAO that can take on additional coordination responsibilities among other CAO teams and vendors and liaison roles between caseworkers and federal agencies. Potential duties of this office could complement existing resources while serving the unique and vital role of casework in Congress: for example, one potential role for this office could be serve as a central point of contact for agencies to distribute timely information to all caseworkers, including coordinating dates for agency caseworker trainings to allow offices to maximize the use of travel budgets to send caseworkers to DC. To this end, we support a CAO study that could evaluate the feasibility and cost-effectiveness of establishing a casework support office under the CAO.

In conclusion, the important work of the Subcommittee on the Legislative branch underscores the importance of modernizing Congressional operations to meet the evolving needs of constituents. Casework, in particular, stands out as a vital function of Congress, providing direct assistance to constituents and offering insights into the real-world impact of policy decisions. However, the current landscape of agency responsiveness and the challenges in accessing the appropriate contacts hinder the efficiency of casework teams. Addressing these issues through the initiatives outlined in this testimony can significantly improve the effectiveness of Congressional constituent services. These efforts not only enhance constituent satisfaction but also contribute to rebuilding trust in the Legislative branch. Therefore, I urge the Subcommittee to prioritize these initiatives in the fiscal year 2025 appropriations to support Congress' essential role in serving the public.