

**Testimony Related to Future-Proofing Congress: A Focus on Ongoing Innovation, Improving Member and Staff Security, and Enhancing the Member Experience**

**Submitted by Danielle Stewart of POPVOX Foundation for the House Appropriations Subcommittee on the Legislative Branch for Fiscal Year 2027**

Dear Chair Valadao, Ranking Member Espaillat, and Members of the House Legislative Branch Appropriations Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony today. My name is Danielle Stewart, and I am a former House Chief of Staff and modernization staffer who is proud to continue supporting the Legislative branch and its workforce in my role with the bipartisan POPVOX Foundation. Our organization is comprised of many former Legislative branch staffers and public servants who are committed to supporting the long-term health of the institution and the Members and staff who work here every day on behalf of the American people.

I am submitting this testimony today to highlight support for the following priority items, which reflect POPVOX Foundation's work to ensure the branch and those who serve are equipped to respond to a rapidly changing environment, both within the halls of Congress and across the nation. The following items support ongoing institutional innovation while focusing on the long-term health and safety of its workforce:

1. Providing continued investment in the Modernization Initiatives Account, funded through the Chief Administrative Officer at \$10,000,000.
2. Strengthening security for Members and staff, funded through the US Capitol Police and the House Sergeant at Arms at \$5,000,000.
3. Enhancing the Member experience by better supporting congressional families in Washington.

## **1. Support Institutional Modernization and Innovation**

The Modernization Initiative Account (MIA) is an important resource that has helped the House address many of the issues identified by Members as ways to improve the institution's efficiency and effectiveness. Created within prior Legislative Branch appropriations bills following the work of the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress, which issued recommendations and conducted hearings and fact-finding on a bipartisan basis during the 116th and 117th Congress, the MIA has supported House-wide projects such as FlagTrack, LegiDex, and Deconflict. Projects in the pipeline that will benefit from continued funding and support include CaseCompass, FlagTrack 2.0, House Digital Signage and Wayfinding, and Constituent Management System Innovation Discovery.

The MIA is a critical piece of the ongoing work to modernize and enhance the effectiveness of the Legislative Branch. These funds were reduced in FY 2026, but should be maintained at the same level as FY 2025 and supported by additional reporting requirements. This would help guide future funding decisions by the Legislative Branch Appropriations Subcommittee, aid in the continued implementation of existing recommendations, and improve oversight by the Committee on House Administration and its Subcommittee on Modernization and Innovation.

## **2. Require Comprehensive Security Training for Members and Staff**

Members of Congress and their staff face an increasingly complex threat environment, ranging from physical security risks in district and DC offices to sophisticated cyber attacks and information security challenges. In 2025, the USCP's Threat Assessment Section (TAS) investigated 14,938 concerning statements, behaviors, and communications directed against

Members of Congress, their families, staff, and their DC or district offices. Those recorded threats have nearly doubled since 2022.

While many security resources are currently available through the CAO and the House Sergeant at Arms, participation in security training is optional and inconsistent across offices. Cybersecurity training is mandatory for staff annually, but there is currently no required physical security and safety training for existing Members, staff, and interns. In 2024, 147 security awareness briefings were provided by the Sergeant at Arms (SAA) in coordination with US Capitol Police (USCP). Though helpful and informative, these trainings are not automatically provided and must be requested by staff or Members. At New Member Orientation, newly elected Members of Congress receive security briefings from USCP and SAA, but there is no official follow-up in the physical offices once the Members are sworn in to prepare staff. Offices are required to have a Continuity of Operations Plan (COOP), and it is often the front office staff who are the point of contact and the individual responsible for sharing information and updating staff lists when needed. Especially for front-office staff and interns who are regularly interacting with constituents and answering office phones, having a standardized tool kit and the most up-to-date resources available would enhance their ability to stay safe and know how to report concerning behaviors or incidents. This tool kit should also include de-escalation training, with verbal and non-verbal techniques for managing a tense or unsafe situation. Security drills are conducted, but they do not address how to deal with vandalism, in-person threats (especially in district offices), threatening phone calls or social media comments, or how to stay vigilant and aware of surroundings when at public events or meetings. A lack of training and information creates gaps in institutional security awareness and leaves offices vulnerable to preventable security incidents.

Additionally, congressional district and state staff play a crucial role in emergency response or disaster relief efforts, working alongside federal agencies to support constituents during crises. These staff members communicate vital information such as relief program application deadlines and shelter locations, prioritize urgent cases through direct Congressional liaisons, and help constituents navigate bureaucratic challenges to access essential benefits and services. Responding to disasters or local emergencies can take a toll on staff and can lead to increased turnover and burnout among casework staff.

Requiring comprehensive security and emergency preparedness training for all House personnel would strengthen the institution's overall security posture, protect sensitive information, ensure continuity of operations, and safeguard the safety of Members, staff, and constituents.

### **3. Supporting Congressional Families**

The start of a new Congress brings an intense period of transition for newly elected Members of Congress and their families. Families of incoming Members frequently arrive in Washington, DC with little institutional support tailored to their specific needs. The 119th Congress has seen a record number of Member retirements, with family needs cited as a major factor for those who leave service. Several recurring challenges exist for Members and their families when arriving in Washington. These include:

- Coordinating House-issued identification for family members, which often falls to official staff, whose time is already stretched during the transition.
- Children accompanying their families during swearing-in and the first week of Congress have few structured or engaging activities available to them, creating disruptions in busy Member offices.

- Families with young children who relocate to the DC area face difficulty identifying safe and reliable child care in a new city, and lack easy access to information about the House Daycare and its waitlist process.
- The heavy police and security presence in the Capitol complex during the start of a new Congress can be unsettling for young children unfamiliar with the environment.

These gaps represent a meaningful institutional opportunity. Establishing a structured, family-focused welcome program, which could include a designated family space in the House Office Buildings or US Capitol, access to food and refreshments, a family photo booth for ID processing, an art and activity station for children, an informational booth staffed by the House Daycare, and a meet-and-greet with US Capitol Police, would ease the transition for Members and their families, reduce the burden placed on official staff, and support Member readiness to serve at the start of a new Congress.

### **Conclusion**

The modernization and innovation progress seen in the House, through the support of this committee and its members, is worthy of recognition and praise. The Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress laid strong groundwork for continued investment in the Legislative branch and its workforce. Ensuring that the branch's workforce has the tools needed to effectively and safely serve the American people must continue to be a priority. Providing an environment that recognizes Members, staff, and their families as an instrumental part of the long term health of the institution will aid in supporting Congressional capacity and effectiveness in the years to come.