

**Written Testimony before the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress
United States House of Representatives**

“Fostering the Next Generation of Leaders: Setting Members up for Success”

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Mr. Chairman, Mr. Vice Chairman, Representative Scanlon and Timmons and the Members of the Select Committee, thank you for inviting me to testify. I have been involved with the task of helping freshman Members successfully make the transition to Congress for the past 30 years. I have done this through my research and writing on the Congressional Management Foundation’s flagship book, Setting Course. In addition, as the former head of the Congressional Management Foundation, and now through my ongoing management consulting for Congress (under the auspices of CMF), I have provided management assistance and facilitated freshman office retreats for dozens of freshman offices over my career. I was asked to address today the question, what can the House do to promote the success of the House freshman Members? Through my testimony, I hope that I can outline some ideas that will help this Committee think through this important question and address the significant problems that freshman Members and their staff routinely encounter in their first term in office.

Just-In-Time Training. Probably the most common complaint -- shared by both freshman Members and their Chiefs of Staff -- is that the freshman orientation experience was “overwhelming.” Many use the analogy that freshman orientation is “like drinking water from a fire hose.” They are inundated with a wide range of information from a wide range of sources. In 2018, the Members-elect were invited to attend orientation programs conducted by the Committee on House Administration, the Harvard/Kennedy School orientation program at Cambridge, the CRS orientation program at Williamsburg and the Heritage Foundation. Overall, for the 2018 freshman class, there were orientation programs provided on 18 of the 57 days they had between their election and swearing in day – nearly a third of their transition days. The primary focus for all of these orientation programs and their dozens of panel discussions is to address the question, “What is the critical information that Members-elect need to know to have a successful first term? The answer to this question leads to the presentation of a massive amount of advice from a wide array of congressional experts.

The problem is that these orientation programs are addressing the wrong question. The question they ought to be addressing is, “What information do the Members-elect need to know to be successful in their first 90 days?” What is the critical information they need to know that will allow them to successfully set up their office and effectively manage their first month in office? Then in late January or early February, they and their staff should be given additional information that helps

them address the challenges of the next 30 or 60 days. In other words, create a range of House training programs and support services throughout the first year that provide freshman Members and their senior management staff **the critical information they need to know when they need to know it**. The private sector refers to this training and support as “just-in-time” training. It operates from the simple understanding that people learn better and perform better when they are not inundated with information and they get to apply what they learn soon after they learn it.

In contrast to this “just-in-time” training model, the current orientation model essentially front-loads the information the trainers believe freshman will need to know in their first term. The model assumes that the freshman will be able to readily access and utilize the information they received in November and December throughout their first term. To the best of my knowledge, after this intensive orientation process, the House does not offer freshman Members any additional training programs during their first-term in office.

There are a number of problems with this model. First, people don’t learn well when they are inundated on a wide range of topics. Second, when confronted with questions or problems they need help with, the model assumes that offices can figure out who to contact to provide them the assistance they need, which is often not the case. Third, in many cases, the aides who are recruited to attend orientation do not become the Chief of Staff or District Director of the office. Consequently, much of the information learned at orientation never gets effectively transferred to the managers who most need the information. For these reasons, freshman Members and their staff frequently struggle mightily from Day 1 and feel unprepared for the onslaught that hits them on January 3. They struggle with setting up effective offices, struggle with the learning curve required to understand how the Congress operates, and struggle with learning how to do their new jobs. It often becomes a humbling, frustrating and exasperating experience for Members and staff alike.

So, my first suggestion for improving the freshman experience would be to rethink the current front-loaded, information-intensive orientation process and replace it with a just-in-time training process that provides ongoing training and coaching to freshman Members as well as their Chiefs of Staff and District Directors throughout their first year in office. This change will provide far greater support to freshman Members and their staff, improve the performance of freshman offices and significantly reduce the amount of time that Members-elect need to spend attending out-of-town orientation programs.

Management Training. I would hope that one of the components of this just-in-time training program would include ongoing management training for Members of Congress and their senior management staff, because the management challenges facing freshman offices do not end with the task of setting up the office. Once that task is completed, the next task is effectively managing the office. This is a critical task for which many Chiefs of Staff and freshman Members lack training and experience. They need help to learn how to improve their management and leadership skills. Unfortunately, for the 30 plus years that I have been working with or for the Congress, the House

failed to develop the training capacity to provide strong management training to its Members or the senior management staff.

Fortunately, over the past year, the House Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) has created this capacity through the creation of a new training office, the Congressional Staff Academy. Hopefully, this new office will now be able to provide critical management training to new and veteran Chiefs of Staff, District Directors and Legislative Directors to help them and their offices operate more effectively. However, the freshman Members, as well as plenty of other veteran Members, would also benefit greatly from receiving leadership training and coaching targeted to the specific needs and challenges of Members of Congress. So, as my second suggestion, I would encourage this committee to work with the CAO and the Committee on House Administration to consider the value of creating a management training programs for Members interested in improving their management skills. Such a program would pay significant dividends for freshman and veteran Members alike and lead to better managed offices and a better managed and more productive House of Representatives.

Creating A House-Wide Human Resources Department. The House has no HR Department that provides a full range of HR services to House office at one location. Consequently, many HR services that are routinely provided in virtually all large organizations -- and are critical for effective operations -- are often not provided to House offices. This lack of HR services impairs operational effectiveness and places the burden of solving a wide range of office operational challenges on each of the 440 personal offices as well as the other House committees and leadership offices. Rather than turning to a House-wide HR office to assist them in addressing management problems, answering personnel questions, providing guidance on staff recruitment, hiring practices, staff compensation, office benefits policies and providing robust training and professional development services to their staff, House offices are expected to do all of this on their own. It takes a great deal of time to do this research and to train staff. Most offices do not have the time or the expertise to conduct effective HR research or to properly train their staff. As a consequence, they often make mistakes or collectively muddle through problems that deserve better and more efficient solutions. And, of course, the offices that suffer the most from this lack of HR infrastructure and support are the freshman offices. They, after all, are the offices that typically have the greatest number of HR questions and problems because they have to build their offices from scratch.

To make life easier for both freshman offices as well as the entire House of Representatives, the House should consider creating a full service HR Department that provides these services on a confidential basis to House offices. Such an HR department would not take any authority or management discretion away from individual House offices. It would simply provide interested office managers expert research and confidential guidance to assist them in effectively managing their offices and addressing the wide range of HR issues that arise.

A central HR Department could also conduct on a regular basis critical House-wide research that would provide valuable data to House offices and the House as an institution:

- data on staff compensation norms in the House to assist offices determine staff pay;
- data on office benefit norms to assist offices develop or modify office benefits policies;
- data on workforce demographics within the House;
- data on staff turnover and guidance on what the House as an institution can do as well as what individual offices can do to increase staff retention.

Comprehensive Assessment of the Freshmen Experience. My fourth suggestion would be to urge the Committee on House Administration to conduct – every two years -- a comprehensive, assessment of the freshman Members’ first term experience. If the House wants to improve the experience of freshman Members and freshman offices, they need to survey the freshman class every two years to learn about their views about orientation as well as their views about their overall first year experience in office. What worked well for them and their office? What did not work well and what additional information or guidance would they have wanted to receive to better support them in their first term? If this valuable customer service data from freshman Members and their staff is not routinely collected and analyzed every two years and used to determine how to improve the freshman experience, it will remain very difficult for the House to improve the first-term experience and better support the careers of freshman Members. Changes in freshman programs and services will be based on anecdote and whim rather than solid data. The CAO collects customer service data from freshman offices on the specific services it provides to House offices in setting up their freshman offices (e.g. furniture, equipment, phone and telecommunication services and district office services). However, the CAO survey does not cover broader topics outside its jurisdiction, like orientation, Member comfort in engaging in legislative activities and assessing the overall freshman Member experience.

Delay the Starting Date for Orientation. My fifth suggestion would be to delay the start of the orientation process for one week. Members-elect are often still exhausted from their campaigns when they show up in D.C. for the start of orientation. They have not had any real time to decompress, spend time with their family or research their options for living in Washington. Delaying the start of orientation by a week, or having the Members-elect come to town two weeks after their elections vs. one week, would also give them additional time to select one or two senior staff (hopefully their Chief of Staff) to attend orientation with them and assist the Member in the office set-up process.

Until 1996, Members-elect came to town for orientation 2 – 3 weeks after the elections. In 1996 the orientation schedule was changed to bring the Members-elect to town one week after the elections. That practice has since become the House norm. I suspect that the rationale for this decision had more to do with supporting a wide range of House interests (creating more time for the room selection process and moving House offices, leadership elections, etc.) than it did with addressing the needs of the Members-elect. While moving up the orientation certainly has made life easier for many in the House by starting the preparation processes for the next Congress earlier, I don’t think it

supports the interests of Members-elect and suspect they would strongly support giving future freshman an extra week at home to decompress and better prepare for the arduous tasks ahead.

Provide Members-Elect A Budget for A Staff Person. My sixth suggestion would be to provide a small budget to every Member-elect that allows them to hire one person to assist them during the 60-day transition period. In addition to attending orientation, this paid staff person would work on setting up both the Washington and the district offices. Currently, Members-elect are left with the options of persuading someone to work pro bono for them during this transition period or to pay them out of campaign funds. Neither option is a good option. Finding someone willing to work for free for two months often means that Members-elect are forced to rely on aides who are affordable but not really up to the task. Ideally, the person they hire to do this critical transition work should become the Chief of Staff or District Director. However, that is often not the case. Paying someone out of campaign funds to perform these official duty tasks creates unnecessary ethical confusion about the propriety of offices accepting outside funding to supplement their official duties. There really is no sound rationale I can think of to explain why a newly-elected official should be forced into considering this option. The Senate allows Senators-elect to hire two aides to assist in this transition period to avoid these types of problems. The House should follow suit.

Promoting Bipartisanship Among Freshman. Another problem that I think contributes to freshman frustrations is the realization that soon after their election, they join an institution that is widely viewed as unnecessarily partisan and they quickly become part of the problem they feel they were sent to Washington to fix. There are very few institutional practices or forums that promote relationship-building across the aisle and freshman Members typically do not have the time, on their own, to develop relationships across the aisle. Instead, they adapt to the current norms of the Congress and grow frustrated that their jobs quickly turn them into partisan combatants rather than helping them become the change-agents for the Congress and the nation many of them hoped to become.

So, in addition to my previous suggestion of providing a wide range of bipartisan freshman Member training programs during the first year in office, I would suggest that the House develop a range of forums for freshman Members to encourage them to spend a minimal amount of time during their first term engaging in collaborative activities that promote relationship-building and bipartisanship within the freshman class. While a number of outside organizations try to promote bipartisanship throughout Congress through programs and dinners for Members of Congress, I don't believe the House -- outside of orientation -- offers any forums for promoting relationship-building within the freshman class. I would argue that the absence of such forums sends an implicit message to new Members and sets a tone that is worth changing.

Possible options for forums or events for promoting bipartisanship in the freshman class might include things like: a freshman dinner speaker series that brings in leaders and experts on a range of topics of interest to the Members, a freshman class retreat, bipartisan programs for Members and

spouses, baseball game tickets to a Nationals game, tickets to the Kennedy Center or special events for Members and spouses at the Smithsonian museums.

The change process for promoting a more effective, more collaborative Congress has to start somewhere. Why not start the process with the new Members every two years? Maybe regularly enlisting new blood and new perspectives (not yet entrenched in the ways of Washington politics) to address this political problem will be instrumental in promoting constructive change over time.