



Statement of

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to Streamline Operations in the U.S. House of
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Chairman Kilmer, Vice-Chair Graves, Members of the Committee: Thank you for opportunity to appear before you today. I am R. Eric Petersen, and I have worked at the Congressional Research Service (CRS) for 19 years as an analyst studying the non-legislative operations of the Congress. This includes everything from how committees are established and funded, what congressional staff do, how long they stay on the job, constituent service activities including casework and service academy nominations, and emergency management in the House and Senate.

You have asked me to address administrative efficiencies in the House, particularly changes in practices that might have resulted in Member office efficiencies over the past decade, along with challenges to improving efficiencies.¹ CRS's role is to provide objective, nonpartisan research and analysis to Congress. As such, CRS does not take a position on the desirability of any specific policies or practices.

A Common Goal, but Achievement is Challenging

Efficiency, the effort to produce the maximum output with available resources, is a foundational aspiration or value in many organizations, and particularly in public institutions like state or local government, federal executive agencies, and the House of Representatives. From Woodrow Wilson during his professorial days in the 19th century,² through your committee's charge to make recommendations on "rules to promote a more modern and efficient Congress," and "administrative efficiencies, including; purchasing, travel, outside services, and shared administrative staff,"³ the promises of enhanced efficiency, and clear, measurable improvement over past efforts can serve as touchstones of organizational success. In that context, it seems as though nobody doesn't like efficiency.

The challenge in that hopeful interpretation is that like most organizations, the House of Representatives is limited in its ability to identify and track the aspiration of efficiency, in part because it can be a process, or an intended or unintended outcome of separate, unrelated processes. Efficiency appears to be dynamic, not a specific event or static state. It can be hard to find, and it may not be readily measured. Moreover, efficiency can look different to different people, since there may be disagreement about what constitutes an efficient process, state, or outcome.⁴

Competition Among Aspirations

Along with concerns about efficiency in isolation is its place as only one of many aspirations in complex organizations.⁵ Other aspirations in public sector organizations might include (in alphabetical order)

¹ My statement today focuses on Member offices and institutional activities that support operations in those settings. While there are undoubtedly connections between what happens in Member offices and the legislative, oversight, and investigative efforts of the House of Representatives, including committee and chamber activities, they are beyond the scope of this statement.

² Wilson, considering the use of efficiency from at least two perspectives, stated, "It is the object of administrative study to discover, first, what government can properly and successfully do, and, secondly, how it can do these proper things with the utmost possible efficiency and at the least possible cost either of money or of energy." Woodrow Wilson, "The Study of Administration," *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 2, no. 2 (June 1887), p. 197.

³ H.Res. 6, Sec. 201(c)(2)(A), and (E).

⁴ There may also be tradeoffs within efficiencies. The advent of email, social media and other forms of rapid, low-cost communication has resulted in dramatic increases in constituent communications with their Members of Congress, enhancing transparency, and open communication through the use of more efficient communications modalities. At the same time, the high volume might reduce the speed and efficiency with which Member correspondence staff are able to respond to those communications.

⁵ See John Pearson, "Efficiency as the Primary Value in Public Administration," *PA Times*, May 16, 2016, <https://patimes.org/efficiency-primary-public-administration/>; and Mark R. Rutgers and Hendriekje van der Meer, "The Origins and Restriction of Efficiency in Public Administration: Regaining Efficiency as the Core Value of Public Administration,"

accountability, autonomy, dedication, effectiveness, equality, equity, expertise, honesty, impartiality, inclusion, incorruptibility, justice, lawfulness, reliability, responsiveness, serviceability, or transparency, among others.⁶ Of particular concern in the House are two aspirations that arguably touch on every facet of chamber activity; representation and deliberation.⁷ Some observers of organizations note that the broad range of public sector expectations may necessitate the implicit or explicit ranking or other classifications of organizational aspirations. In one recent study that attempted to rank public sector aspirations, and which did not include representation and deliberation, efficiency ranked 12th among 20 organizational values.⁸ In that context efficiency is still popular, but may be more likely to be traded off or relegated to a somewhat distant supporting role when in conflict with more highly valued organizational aspirations or public expectations.

Institutional Arrangements Affect Efficiency

In addition to internal competition between aspirations, institutional structures and practices also have effects on the scope and extent of efficiency. In Congress, the long tradition of deference to Members to determine their representational responsibilities,⁹ including how they run their offices, has long been privileged over arguably more efficient administrative approaches. The House deploys a highly decentralized administrative environment to support independent Member decision making within the limits of constitutional authorities, chamber rules, and House-provided resources. Arguably, it is optimized to support Member autonomy, representation, and deliberation as top-level aspirations and values.

House staffing provides insight into the tradeoffs between Member autonomy and efficiency. The House employs approximately 8,600 staff who work for Member employing authorities in personal, committee, and leadership office settings.¹⁰ There are at least 496 Member positions or roles that are authorized to employ staff; 441 Member House personal offices; 23 standing or select committees where the chair is responsible for all staff and other resources allocated by the House, but who typically delegate minority personnel issues to the ranking member, resulting in 46 committee employment authorities, without accounting for subcommittees; and nine leadership offices. In a personal office, a typical distribution of staff is 15, with eight in Washington DC, and seven deployed in district offices. Each office is responsible for identifying, hiring, and establishing the duties and working conditions of staff independently. On its face, this appears to represent a substantial, administrative burden which could be viewed as rife with inefficiency. Arguably, many of the challenges occurring in Member employment settings could be remedied with a centralized human resources process. At the same time, changing current employment

Administration & Society, vol. 42, no. 7 (2010), pp. 755-779.

⁶ Zeger van der Wal, "Value Solidity: Differences, Similarities and Conflicts Between the Organizational Values of Government and Business", (Doctoral Dissertation, Vrije University, 2008), pp. 55-64.

⁷ For similar conclusions in state legislatures, see Alan Rosenthal, "The Good Legislature," *State Legislatures*, July/August 1999, <http://www.ncsl.org/research/about-state-legislatures/the-good-legislature.aspx#representing>.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 70. The entire ranked list of public sector value aspirations was as follows: 1. Incorruptibility, 2. Accountability, 3. Honesty, 4. Lawfulness, 5. Reliability, 6. Transparency, 7. Impartiality, 8. Expertise, 9. Effectiveness, 10. Dedication, 11. Serviceability, 12. Efficiency, 13. Collegiality, 14. Responsiveness, 15. Innovativeness, 16. Social justice, 17. Obedience, 18. Self-fulfillment, 19. Sustainability, and 20. Profitability. For other approaches to categorizing values, see David H. Rosenbloom, "Beyond Efficiency: Value Frameworks for Public Administration," *Chinese Public Administration Review*, vol. 8, no. 1 (June 2017), pp. 37-46; and Torben Beck Jørgensen and Barry Bozeman, "Public Values: An Inventory," *Administration & Society*, vol. 39, no. 3 (2007), pp. 354-381.

⁹ See CRS Report RL33686, *Roles and Duties of a Member of Congress: Brief Overview*, by R. Eric Petersen.

¹⁰ See CRS Report R43947, *House of Representatives Staff Levels in Member, Committee, Leadership, and Other Offices, 1977-2016*, by R. Eric Petersen and Amber Hope Wilhelm.

practices could also alter organizational arrangements in place since the first Representatives took office in 1789, or the arrival of personal staff in the House in 1893. Because the House appears to value Member autonomy and independence over efficiency, for more than 120 years, it has taken no action to remedy apparent staffing inefficiencies.

Improving Efficiency in the House: Potential Examples

In the past decade, there have been a number of administrative efforts that could be seen to have improved the efficiency of House operations, while arguably primarily addressing other organizational demands or aspirations. These include the following:

- Ongoing replacement by the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) of outdated, inefficient technology systems (telecommunications, mobile devices, data management, networking, financial management, and human resources management processes) with newer, more efficient systems.¹¹
- Ongoing service enhancements in support of Member transitions at the end of a Congress and for new incoming Members, including more robust support in informing Members-elect of decision points and timing, and assistance establishing new Member district offices.¹²
- Growing information technology options and support for Member offices, including Congress.gov, a common legislative information system platform supported by the House, Senate, and legislative branch partners, and made available to congressional offices and constituents.
- Establishment in 2011 of a pilot digital mail program that delivers scanned images of tangible mail, enhancing campus security and digital management of correspondence. Following the pilot, enrollment was extended to new Members of the 113th (2013-2014) and subsequent Congresses.¹³
- The deployment by the CAO of a personnel package containing a variety of tax, identification, benefits, and equipment allocations documentation to facilitate the onboarding process of new House employees.
- Since the beginning of the 115th Congress (2017-2018) transitioning Member district offices to voice over internet protocol (VoIP) phone service, to provide higher quality data and voice connections at reduced costs.¹⁴

¹¹ Office of the Chief Administrative Officer, *Semiannual Report, January-June 2011*, 2011, pp. 10-13; Office of the Chief Administrative Officer, *Semiannual Report, July-December 2012*, 2013, pp. 10-11; Office of the Chief Administrative Officer, *Semiannual Report, July-December 2013*, 2014, p. 7; and Office of the Chief Administrative Officer, *Semiannual Report, January-June 2012*, 2012, pp. 6-9. CAO Semiannual reports 2007-present are available at <https://cao.house.gov/semiannual-reports>.

¹² Office of the Chief Administrative Officer, *Semiannual Report, July-December 2008*, 2009, p. 15; Office of the Chief Administrative Officer, *Semiannual Report, July-December 2012*, 2013, p. 5; and Office of the Chief Administrative Officer, *Semiannual Report, July-December 2014*, 2015, pp. 3-4. CAO Semiannual reports 2007-present are available at <https://cao.house.gov/semiannual-reports>.

¹³ Office of the Chief Administrative Officer, *Semiannual Report, July-December 2012*, 2013, p. 8; and Office of the Chief Administrative Officer, *Semiannual Report, July-December 2013*, 2014, p. 9. CAO Semiannual reports 2007-present are available at <https://cao.house.gov/semiannual-reports>.

¹⁴ U.S. Congress, House Committee on House Administration, *House Officer Priorities for 2019 and Beyond*, 116th Cong., 1st sess., April 9, 2019 (Washington: GPO, 2019), pp. 44-45.

- Establishment in 2017 by the House Sergeant at Arms (HSAA) of a District Security Service Center, a “one stop shop” that assists House district offices with district security matters.¹⁵
- Establishment in 2017 by the CAO of a team of customer advocates, assigned to facilitate connections between Member offices and CAO technical, administrative and operational experts to assist with the resolution of office challenges.¹⁶

Potential Opportunities

Some observers argue that there are opportunities to improve House administrative operations and efficiencies. Two areas of particular interest include the use of government travel cards and deployment of specialized administrative and information technology staff who support Member activities.

Travel Card Issues

It is my understanding based on available information that under current House practice, government travel cards are issued to Members and chiefs of staff, but not other staff in personal offices who may be required to travel as part of their jobs. Expanding the travel card program to more staff might result in greater efficiencies in tracking House expenditures or expediting employee reimbursement. Reducing staff outlays may have benefits for more junior staff who won't need to float travel expenses from personal resources, which may not be abundant. At the same time, expanding formal travel procedures might also lead to increased costs to manage the travel card program, or the need to hire new administrative staff to support travel.

Specialized Staffing

An enduring question related to House operations, staffing, security, transparency, accountability, Member autonomy, and efficiency is the matter of shared staff. As House operations become more complex, there has been an increase in the need for specialized understanding of House financial operations or information technology needs in Member offices. Some offices have chosen to assign these responsibilities to staff in addition to their legislative, constituent service, communications, or office support responsibilities. Others have opted to use staff with specific training and credentials to provide specialized knowledge and skills to more than one office. The Committee on House Administration (CHA) and CAO have issued rules and guidelines on the management of shared staff to ensure that the services they provide are appropriate and subject to oversight.¹⁷

At the same time, the decentralized management of shared staff is a source of concern for some. As an alternative, some have argued for creating a cadre of staff trained in House financial and administrative services or information technology management.¹⁸ Potentially placed organizationally in the House outside of individual Member offices, these staff could be available to Members as needed. Unlike shared staff, these resources would not count against staff limitations in Member offices, potentially freeing those offices to allocate resources to other Member priorities. Proponents argue that these arrangements offer

¹⁵ U.S. Congress, House Committee on House Administration, *House Officer Priorities for 2019 and Beyond*, 116th Cong., 1st sess., April 9, 2019 (Washington: GPO, 2019), p. 23.

¹⁶ U.S. Congress, House Committee on House Administration, *House Officer Priorities for 2019 and Beyond*, 116th Cong., 1st sess., April 9, 2019 (Washington: GPO, 2019), p. 36.

¹⁷ See Committee on House Administration, *Member Handbook*, <https://cha.house.gov/member-services/handbooks/members-congressional-handbook#Members-Handbook-Staff-Shared>.

¹⁸ No formal plan for this staffing arrangement has been proposed, leaving some details unaddressed.

efficiency, better security of office records and information technology assets, and potentially reduce the cost of Member office operations.

Conclusion

As with existing administrative changes and evolution, any new efforts to change current House administrative practices for purposes of improved efficiency likely must be weighed in the context of how increased efficiency might affect other aspirations or institutional values, established processes, or the nature of the House. Any administrative proposal is likely to be considered from the perspective that the House is a place of representation and deliberation where Members are typically granted broad discretion to carry out their official duties in the manner they deem most appropriate.

I hope this brief discussion has been of assistance. Thank you again for inviting me to testify. I look forward to your questions.