

Testimony of Congresswoman Betty McCollum (MN-04)
The Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress Member Day Hearing
Thursday, April 15, 2021

Chairman Kilmer, Vice Chairman Timmons, and other Members of the Select Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you. I appreciate the Select Committee providing this opportunity for Members to bring our legislative priorities and concerns before you today.

I would like to address a subject that impacts every Member in this hearing and every office in this governing body – the issue of staff salaries and staff retention, and how this impacts the quality of all of the work we do for the American people, from the constituent services we provide to the legislation we pass.

Like all of you, I rely on my staff for support with all the responsibilities we have as Representatives, including Committee work, crafting legislation, and serving the immediate needs of my constituents in Minnesota's Fourth District. Personal staff provide an invaluable service not only to the Member they work for but to the constituents they serve, yet it has become increasingly difficult to recruit and retain expert staff.

The typical congressional staffer is under 40 years old, works 50 hours a week, and earns less than \$40,000 a year. As we know, an average legislative staffer is typically tasked with two to six issue portfolios, and expected to interact with and evaluate information from well-paid, experienced lobbyists who often focus on single issues. This, combined with salary stagnation, has caused high burnout rates and created barriers for lower-income and underrepresented individuals to work in Congress.

On average, Congressional staffers spend barely 3 years on the Hill. With that kind of turnover, it is difficult to build expertise within our staff, or for staff to build a true career doing the people's work. According to the Brookings Institute, 43 percent of staffers intend to leave for the private sector, and 46 percent of those intend to work in lobbying.

Despite inflation, the median salary for most staff has fallen or remained constant since 2009. Increasing the amount of funding available to congressional offices could allow Members to recruit and retain staff with the experience to best serve their constituents and will enable Members to engage in legislative activity more effectively.

In addition to raising the Member's Representational Allowance, I believe it is crucial that we invest in more resources to expand the staff on Legislative Counsel so that they may better inform congressional offices on crafting high-quality legislation in a timely manner.

Congress is stretched thin in its ability to retain experienced staff or get the assistance they need internally. This opens the door for lobbyists to draft legislation that is advanced without significant review, simply because Members and staff do not have enough resources to adequately evaluate it. The Center for Public Integrity and USA Today have exposed how thousands of such bills have passed through State Houses throughout the nation with the efforts of groups like ALEC and other corporate representatives. We cannot allow the U.S. House of Representatives to fall prey to the same influence campaigns because of a lack of experienced, career staff.

I am calling on this Committee to recommend an increase in the Members' Representational Allowance to – at a minimum – the FY2010 level adjusted for inflation, so that Congress may bolster staff retention, open the door to those who have been systemically shut out of

congressional work, and introduce thoughtful, impactful, and lasting legislation.

Mr. Chairman, I thank you for the time, and I look forward to working together on these priorities in the 117th Congress.