

Testimony of Carlos Mark Vera

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Before the House Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress, On Access to Equitable Internships

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Chair Kilmer, Vice Chair Timmons, and Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to testify on this important issue today. My name is Carlos Mark Vera and I am the co-founder and Executive Director of Pay Our Interns, and a former House intern. Pay Our Interns was created with the goal of ensuring equitable access to paid professional opportunities to all those starting their careers or pivoting to new industries and are in need of professional experience.

Internships have long been an essential aspect of career growth for young people looking to work in Congress. The lack of dedicated funding for committees and livable wages for personal offices—combined with the unpaid internships many offices previously offered—have served as barriers for those looking for internships and fellowships on Capitol Hill. This has excluded working-class communities from these opportunities, particularly low-income students and people of color.

Back in 2017, our goal was convincing Congress to create a paid internship program. Few thought this was realistic given the increase in polarization, lack of data around Hill internships, and because few offices responded to our request to meet. For six months, a small team of three people went to all 541 offices to collect data on internships.

In June 2017, Pay Our Interns released a report titled, “Experience Does Not Pay the Bill: Why Congress Should Pay their Interns.” Our findings showed that less than 10% of House members offered paid internships.¹ In our report, we listed issues facing intern equity *as well as* potential solutions.

One of our recommendations was for a line-item where each office would receive a fund to pay interns. This was intended to emulate the Lyndon B. Johnson Congressional internship program which existed in the House from 1974 to 1994. We are happy to have worked with a bipartisan group of legislators to accomplish this in 2018. We are proud of how far this work has come along. And we are thrilled to say that, **in under three years, paid internships in House Offices went from 10%² to 90%³. Nevertheless, there is still much we need to address.**

¹ Vera, Carlos Mark and Daniel Jenab. 2017. “Experience Doesn’t Pay the Bills: Why Paid Internships are a Must in Congress.” Washington D.C.: Pay Our Interns.

² Vera, Carlos Mark and Daniel Jenab. 2017. “Experience Doesn’t Pay the Bills: Why Paid Internships are a Must in Congress.” Washington D.C.: Pay Our Interns.

³ Jones, James R., Tiffany Win and Carlos Mark Vera. 2021. “Who Congress Pays: Analysis of Lawmakers’ Use of Intern Allowances in the 116th Congress.” Washington D.C.: Pay Our Interns.

Now is the time to shift the conversation from paying interns to examining intern compensation and who exactly is benefiting from the House paid internship program. Below are recommendations that will ensure offices can have more equitable programs.

Pay Our Interns recommends the Select Committee:

- **Increase Fund Allocations**

The average total stipend amount per intern in the House (\$1,612.53) is not enough to travel to and live in DC.⁴ These stipends do not cover the minimum cost of living in the DC area, which is \$6,514 for a House internship.⁵ The stipend amount must increase.

- Support increased funding for the House Paid Internship Program each year. For FY22, allowances for interns should be no less than **\$40,000** in a calendar year for each House office.
- Ensure offices can compensate two part-time interns at \$15 per hour for the full year and the rest can be allocated to stipend other need-based applicants.
- Lift the monthly \$1,800 cap for intern compensation, which limits an office's ability to provide their interns a living wage.

- **Create Dedicated Committee Funding**

Committees should have dedicated funding to compensate interns the same way personnel and leadership offices do. Currently there is no dedicated funding for Committee Internships.

- Support the FY22 proposal to create the appropriated funds of \$1,470,000 that would grant an allowance of \$70,000 per House Committee.

- **Broaden Recruitment**

Congressional offices must be more intentional and dedicated in conducting outreach to minority-serving institutions and public colleges in their districts, so we can have more racially and socio-economically diverse intern classes. Moving forward:

- Expand outreach to community colleges, Historically black colleges and universities, and minority-serving communities.
- Allow DACA students to be eligible for the paid internship program.

- **Increase Equitable Access**

- Explicitly state that internships are paid. A 2019 review conducted by Pay Our Interns found that 30 percent of House offices omitted information about salaries on their websites and 61 percent of House offices advertised that they did not offer paid internships.
- Advertise internships on social media platforms like Twitter and Instagram.
- Share the posting on Members' website.

⁴ Jones, James R., Tiffany Win and Carlos Mark Vera. 2021. "Who Congress Pays: Analysis of Lawmakers' Use of Intern Allowances in the 116th Congress." Washington D.C.: Pay Our Interns.

⁵ Jones, James R., Tiffany Win and Carlos Mark Vera. 2021. "Who Congress Pays: Analysis of Lawmakers' Use of Intern Allowances in the 116th Congress." Washington D.C.: Pay Our Interns.

- **Support the Creation of House Intern Resource Office**
 - Creating an office to provide support for interns will foster a stronger, more equitable, and more diverse internship pipeline on Capitol Hill.

- **Expand Remote Use**
 - Location should not be a barrier for getting an internship on the Hill. If the candidate possesses the skills to perform the duties but, for whatever reason, cannot be present in D.C., they should be given the same chance. During the pandemic, Congress and the rest of the country proved it can work from home and make the necessary adjustments.
 - Currently interns are only able to work remotely in cases of a disaster or an emergency and there has been a new push to make the rules permanent, so offices can have remote interns even after Congress resumes operations as they were pre-pandemic.
 - Remote internships allow a greater pool of applicants to apply for congressional internships, since they are not limited by the high costs of living in Washington, D.C.

- **Provide Intern Housing**
 - There is a building formerly used for the House Page program that could be repurposed for congressional intern housing for interns from working-class backgrounds.
 - In an increasingly expensive city and region, low and unpaid internships present challenges to students seeking to live and intern.
 - Provide assistance for interns around housing and living in Washington, D.C.