

Written Testimony of Dao Nguyen
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Before the House Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress on “Congressional Staff Capacity: Improving Staff Professional Development, Increasing Retention and Competing for Top Talent”
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Chairman Kilmer, Vice Chair Timmons, and Members of the U.S. House Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress, thank you for inviting me to testify on this important topic today.

My name is Dao Nguyen and I am a principal at Cornerstone Government Affairs. However, today, I appear before you in my personal capacity as a former congressional staffer who proudly served in the U.S. House of Representatives for nearly a decade.

I spent so many of my formative years on Capitol Hill sitting behind Members of Congress at hearings like these. And I never thought in a million years that I would be sitting in front of you all, much less doing it virtually from my home.

In 2011, I bought a one-way ticket to Washington D.C. to start my Hill career with an unpaid internship. Like many other young interns, I never would have found my way here had it not been for financial assistance from my family and my alma mater, the University of California Berkeley. As a first-generation immigrant and the daughter of Vietnamese refugees, I made it my mission to succeed in government and politics – fields in which Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) people were and still are underrepresented.

I soon landed a full-time, entry-level job in a personal congressional office as a Staff Assistant. I went on to hold multiple legislative roles as a Legislative Aide, Legislative Assistant, Senior Legislative Assistant, and Senior Policy Advisor. In these positions, I enjoyed the responsibility of overseeing large policy portfolios, sometimes working on ten to twelve vastly different policy areas such as health care, immigration, environment, small business, and criminal justice. Before leaving Capitol Hill, I had the pleasure of serving as the executive director of the House Future Forum Caucus, a congressional member organization of 50 young Members of Congress dedicated to bridging the divide between young Americans and their government.

Like most congressional staffers, I enjoyed forming long-lasting relationships with the constituents and communities that we represented. I saw first-hand the impact of government each time we met with constituents on issues they cared about, and again when we advanced solutions to problems that were raised. Over time, I am very proud to have worked on legislation that made a meaningful difference in the lives of families just like mine.

But truth be told, the longer that I stayed on the Hill, the harder it became for me to plan for my future – and I know I was (and still am) not the only staffer to feel this way. I felt the rub most as a junior staffer living in Washington, D.C., one of the most expensive cities in the country. As I advanced on Capitol Hill, I found it increasingly difficult to juggle mounting financial and

personal demands on a Hill salary. Like many other congressional staffers, I help to care for family back home, and I also aspire to own a home and have a family of my own someday.

While I loved my time on Capitol Hill, I ultimately made the bittersweet decision to leave at the end of 2020 in part because I was offered a more competitive compensation package in the private sector that would provide me with more financial certainty and stability. And, again, I was not the only staffer to make this calculation.

I want to make it clear that I deeply cherished my time in Congress, and I have nothing but the utmost respect and appreciation for my former employers and colleagues, all of whom are incredible public servants who supported me throughout my career. I was lucky to work in offices where I was paid a competitive salary relative to my peers on Capitol Hill and provided with opportunities for professional development within the confines of what congressional offices were equipped to provide.

My appearance in front of the Select Committee today is not about chastising nor criticizing the institution of Congress. Rather, I am here because I love it and I want to help address institutional problems that often hold Members of Congress back from hanging on to experienced staff with institutional knowledge and expertise, with the ultimate goal of better serving the American people.

To that end, I support the Select Committee's work in finding meaningful solutions to the issue of congressional staff retention and recruitment. I applaud the committee in its work thus far and believe many of the recommendations discussed in the 116th Congress should be considered once again. Based on my experience and the concerns voiced by my peers, I believe the implementation of the following recommendations would make a demonstrably positive impact:

- **Provide a 20 percent increase for the Members' Representational Allowance (MRA), for committees, and for leadership offices to increase staff pay** - In 2011, the Congressional Budget Office's ten-year budget outlook projected House salaries and expenses to rise to \$1.867 billion in Fiscal Year 2021 to accommodate inflation. The actual amount appropriated for this year, however, was only \$1.481 billion – a cut of \$386 million, or 20.7%. This increase would simply return funding for House salaries and expenses to the 2011 inflation-adjusted baseline. An initiative to this effect is being led by Democratic Caucus Chairman Hakeem Jeffries and Majority Leader Steny Hoyer.
- **Establish a nonbinding pay band system in the House that provides a salary floor for each position and accounts for annual cost-of-living adjustments** – Developing a pay band system similar to the General Schedule classification and pay system used by the Executive Branch would provide current and potential congressional staffers with more clarity on what they can expect to be paid and allow them to better plan for their future. A pay band system would also provide staff with an additional resource to advocate for fairer compensation and could also prevent pay discrepancies between congressional offices. This would be especially helpful for junior staff positions.

- **Remove franking-related costs from Member MRAs and move them to a central account with a pre-determined cap for all offices** - Because both staff pay and the high costs of franked mail both fall under the MRA, Members are financially constrained in both the quantity and quality of constituent correspondence and staff pay. Some offices have high franking costs while others do not. This inadvertently becomes a detriment to staff and Members, who are limited by a collective MRA. A central account could be run through the Chief Administrative Officer and offices that reach the pre-determined cap could still utilize the MRA for mass communications.
- **Decouple staff pay from Member pay** – It is critical to retain talented senior staff who have institutional knowledge and can make congressional offices work more effectively on behalf of their constituents. Currently, congressional staff salaries are limited by a Member’s own salary because staff cannot earn more than Members, which has led to senior staff departing for more competitive offers in the Executive Branch or private sector.
- **Provide congressional staff with opportunities to gain certifications** – Providing staff with training opportunities for every role in a congressional office is important to the overall cohesiveness and productivity of an office. Certifications should be offered for the roles of Staff Assistant, Legislative Correspondent, Legislative Assistant, Legislative Director, Scheduler, Press Assistant, Communications Director, Chief of Staff, District Caseworker, and District Director. Access to any of these certifications should be offered to any staffer who seeks them regardless of their title or seniority in order to provide staff with better insight into each other’s work and provide them with the opportunity to learn about new positions.
- **Provide management training for senior-level congressional staff** – Providing management training for senior-level positions akin to those provided in the private sector would help ensure that offices are able to oversee robust congressional operations to the benefit of their constituents.
- **Increase the federal student loan repayment program** - The federal student loan repayment program is an incredibly important and effective tool for retainment. However, offices are currently limited in the overall amount they receive and make available to individual staffers. A significant increase to the program for each office would help congressional offices better retain talented staff.
- **Ensure the U.S. House of Representatives Child Care Center keeps up with current demand** – According to a 2018 Child Care Aware analysis, the cost of child care in Washington, D.C. ranks highest in the country at about \$24,000 for infant care and about \$19,000 for toddler care. The Child Care Center provides a great and affordable service to congressional staff, but day care slots continue to be severely limited and the waitlist remains long. Ensuring that staff can access these services more easily would help improve staff retention.

- **Increase diversity of congressional staff** – Congressional offices should be provided with adequate resources to ensure that they can recruit and retain top talent from communities of color. According to a recent report by the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, “only 13.7% of senior House staff are people of color even though they make up 38% of the U.S. population at large.” Having a congressional workforce that better reflects the rich diversity of the populations they serve ensures that diverse perspectives are taken into account when Congress legislates. It can also vastly improve the ability of Congress to build relationships with their constituents.
- **Require mandatory implicit bias and cultural sensitivity training for all hiring managers** – Ensure that hiring managers are equipped with the information and training to foster congressional offices that provide a welcome and inclusionary environment for congressional staff and the constituents that staff interact with.
- **Issue a regular survey on ways to improve pay, benefits, and quality of life** – Provide staff with a voluntary and anonymous mechanism to voice concerns about pay, benefits, and quality of life at their workplace to glean important future recommendations to address staff retention and recruitment.
- **Ensure the health and safety of every congressional staffer on campus** – The events of January 6 painfully underscored the degree to which congressional staff are vulnerable to security risks. As much as practicable, the institution of Congress has a responsibility to preserve the health and safety of every person on its campus, including congressional staff. The institution should also ensure that adequate resources are provided to protect the health and safety of congressional district staff. Like every Member of Congress, staff must interact with the public on a regular basis to serve their districts well. Ensuring that offices can do so safely is both critical to the work of the Congress and beneficial to the constituents they serve. In addition, congressional staff should continue to have access to robust mental health counseling from the Office of Employee Assistance.

Congressional staff play a critical role in helping Members of Congress deliver for their constituents and districts. Whether they are answering the phones, responding to a high volume of mail, authoring and advancing legislation, cultivating lines of communication with their constituents, serving as a liaison to federal agencies, or overseeing a large team of public servants, congressional staff are fundamental to the work of Congress. Yet, congressional pay and benefits are often not commensurate with the work, the time, and the passion that hard-working staffers invest in Capitol Hill. These are structural issues that can often lead to low morale, high turnover of staff, and the inability of offices to retain and recruit top talent.

Once again, I commend the Select Committee on its work thus far to address these issues and I encourage you to execute on these recommendations and continue to seek input from both current and former congressional staff.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify.