

House Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress

Panel 2

Congressional Staff Development and Retention

Witness Testimony by Fran Peace

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Good afternoon Chairman Kilmer and members of the committee. My name is Fran Peace, and I come to you today as a retired District Director for 26 years from Northern California. Thank you for holding this hearing today and for allowing input from a former district director.

I was asked to comment on congressional staff recruitment, development and retention. Before I get started on what I believe to be the nuts and bolts of district operations, let me first state that my background is from the private sector focusing primarily on customer service as a scheduler for a major retail chain, insurance claims work, Realtor and chief administrative officer for a financial investment company. Working with people and meeting deadlines was my strength.

Staff Recruitment:

Recruiting personnel in the district is unlike Washington, D.C., where Member offices have access to a likely pool of candidates from the House Vacancy and Placement Service and various resumé banks. In the district, quite often we seek a blind ad in the local newspaper advertising for a “Customer Service” representative. Bold as this may sound, we attracted a wide variety of potential candidates who had excellent customer service credentials. I was raised in an environment where the “customer is always right.” This attitude served our office well in congressional work, especially as it applies to constituent casework. We also looked at community service and whether the candidate devoted time to community service organizations.

This is key to determining a service beyond-self attitude.

It is important to note that hiring staff in Washington, D.C., and in district offices differs in many respects. On Capitol Hill, resumé building is key for many Hill hopefuls. The short tenure of a Hill staffer is sometimes a reluctant, but accepted practice for Member offices. In the district, we hire our constituents. In many instances these individuals are from the local business sector looking for gainful full-time employment and excellent benefits. Qualified applicants are not always political science majors or recruited from the Member’s campaign. For example, I have found that the best district caseworker is one who has life experience and has worked in the “customer service” industry. Field Representatives may have come from the communications, public relations industry or from local government.

I was always sure to disclose during prospective employee interviews the tenure for Members of Congress—every two years they must stand re-election, and there is no guarantee of employment beyond that. There has been more than one occasion where a prospective employee expressed uneasiness with this concept.

Being on the frontlines, understanding what constituent service representatives experience on a daily basis is important not only to your district but why Congress exists in the first place--- to “serve the people who elected you.” Once elected to Congress, your offices and personnel are there to serve everyone. It doesn’t matter if you’re Republican, Democrat, Libertarian, Green or Natural Law Party. You now represent the entire district. Service is the only commodity or product you have to sell. As Members of Congress, each of you need to be engaged with staff. It is important to understand what they go through each and every day. Shadow them and be their intern for a day.

Staff Development:

Staff development is a broad term and deserves attention. Being a part of a dedicated team is paramount to staff development. A teamwork approach is key to keeping staff interested and motivated.

A basic new staff orientation at the local level can be helpful in preparing your district office for what lies ahead. A thorough explanation of the demands upon a district office and staff is the first step in preparing staff to be better prepared to handle the ever-changing daily menu. District leadership become peers to junior staff. It is important for district leadership to understand the challenges presented by outside influences. Pressures from constituents whether it be from angry callers or visitors, written inquires, or protests from angry groups become an unstable and stressful environment for staff.

Listening to your staff, offering support, encouragement and praise can go a long way to handling difficult assignments.

District staff must be able to respond to emergencies such as natural disasters whether it be wildfires, floods, earthquakes, tornadoes, etc. Helping constituents during a natural disaster is an emotional experience and staff must be trained to handle work in crisis situations. During a disaster, almost overnight congressional staff are expected to become disaster coordinators in order to help their Members maneuver the myriad of local, state and federal services while at the same time directing constituents to seek appropriate assistance. A strong foundation in crisis management and frontline preparedness can prepare staff for unforeseeable events.

Staff Retention:

Once you've hired your dream team, it's up to the district director to retain some continuity of focus and dedication in the field-of-service. Building strong relationships within your team should be a principal focus.

Retention of personnel depends on how well we work together. District Directors must be able to work with many different personalities and be able to recognize internal conflicts between staff. Implementing regular staff meetings, mini-staff retreats, potlucks and other special occasions are helpful in getting to know one another. We celebrated birthdays and bring your dog to work days (more than once per year), which contributed to a more family atmosphere. We implemented a trauma team to help resolve difficult casework issues. We would share casework problems and how to resolve the sometimes impossible. Like doctors, we consulted, made recommendations and deliberated on the final outcome to see what worked and what we should have done differently. Caseworkers are the bread and butter of any district operation. Being accountable to your constituents cannot be overstated. Excellent follow-up and timely responses are critical.

Salaries and benefits are critical in the retention of personnel. Regular increases are necessary to retain dedicated hard-working staffers. District staff should also understand that increases in salaries is commensurate with service and performance. It is a privilege to work for a Member of Congress. There are generous benefits associated with the Thrift Savings Program and the federal matching package, health care availability, student loan assistance and other standard benefits.

There are a number of considerations that should contribute to the discussion of district office salaries versus offices in metropolitan areas. In rural areas, the cost-of-living is not as expensive. For district staff, we can be joined by young career-seeking individuals just out of college looking to gain experience. Other job-seekers are individuals with long-time family history in the area or those seeking to add a second income to the family budget.

To be fair, it is important to make sure salaries are competitive with the local area. While district offices attract more career seeking staffers, thoughtful consideration must be given to the value of institutional knowledge and memory from professional staffers. District knowledge preservation should be important to a Member of Congress. Capturing and maintaining institutional knowledge has proven to increase productivity by reducing time and resources spent on training new staff. There are other value-added benefits such as understanding of the history and culture of a Member's district.

District directors should work with staff to seek balanced solutions to work life and family life. Maintaining a healthy lifestyle contributes to a happy work environment. Learn to recognize

when staff may be going through an especially difficult life experience and assist and refer as appropriate to specific House Personnel agencies. Your district operation depends on it.

Finally, it is of utmost importance that the Chief of Staff and District Director get along – not only get along, but sincerely enjoy working with each other and appreciate mutual respect. During my tenure, I served with only two Chiefs (COS) in 26 years. I was fortunate to have worked with caring and thoughtful leaders. We had a more than compatible relationship and together we worked towards a common goal. The Member of Congress needs to recognize the importance of this relationship and encourage and build upon the qualities of this connection. Everything else depends on it.

Finally:

Managing a congressional office is much like managing a major league baseball team. The manager of a professional ball team must be able to recruit players who gel with existing team members. The bullpen is where we develop new staff recruits. We attracted interns from our local colleges with some becoming regular staff members. The team leader or coach must also manage individual personalities, recognize pitfalls from internal conflicts and work to head off any potential problems.

In order to win the World Series Championship, a manager or coach must be able to build a strong team. A team that respects one another, one that respects and encourages one another and a team that can work together under the most difficult of circumstances.

The Covid pandemic has given Congress opportunities to begin again. Congress has experienced a year hiatus from the ordinary or business as usual operations. Covid-19 has given each of Member a unique opportunity to rethink how we can do business post Covid for the benefit of our sacred institution. My desire and wish for you is to understand and support your district staff. They are truly the nuts and bolts of your success.

Recommendations to Consider:

As a former district director, I have developed a “wish list” of recommendations for Members to consider when building a new operation or working to improve upon their existing organization.

Recruitment:

It would be beneficial to have a dedicated “staff/employee” account to pay for occasional employment agency fees. Not every candidate can afford these fees on their own, especially if they are unemployed.

Consideration is in order for the ability to hire more part-time staff with the flexibility to move into full-time work. In the district, young employees are looking to build experience and may be finishing college, doing graduate work, etc. Even a part-time staffer can fill a full-time position if flexibility from both sides is maintained.

Recruiting personnel from the state and federal government would be ideal such as social security caseworkers, immigration services, etc., but Members simply do not have that kind of budget to pay and compete with GS wages.

An option to recruit qualified district staff would be to seek individuals from within the community who already know the culture and make-up of the district. Seeking a pool of field reps for example from the agricultural community, business community such as the chamber of commerce, real estate even local government such as counties or cities require that district office salaries be competitive with these industries.

Staff Development:

An employee under stress may not feel comfortable in seeking services from the OEA. I believe these services have a purpose, but training the DD on how to better assist in-house is a consideration. Staff are more comfortable talking to the DD rather than going outside the office to Capitol Hill.

CRS or another organization should sponsor a “boot camp” for new District Directors and other staff. This can be done within the Member’s district with professional consultants in order to keep travel costs down of always send staff to D.C. This is not criticism of CRS, as their services are quite helpful to new staff in the beginning. CRS does outline the services that are available to district staff and hearing from the various federal agencies and congressional liaisons are very helpful in the beginning. However, this is textbook information. District staff need training on how to sometimes be “caregivers” when the need arises.

The ability to telecommute and utilize Zoom, Google Duo, etc., is more available now thanks to the pandemic. This concept can be invaluable in selective circumstances such as staff meetings, working with branch district offices, etc. Webinar training, panel discussions and motivational speakers would go a long way in training district staff.

Staff Retention:

It’s not always better pay that keeps staff happy. Consideration should be given to more flexible work hours for salaried staff. Working 4 days/10 hours per day with a three-day weekend is a good incentive for staff assistants and caseworkers. Field staff should be also given flexibility to have the freedom of flex hours. Field staff are expected to cover large districts in rural areas. Many times, we are in the field for days at a time.

Consideration should be given to splitting the MRA and allowing a separate budget for District offices that include payroll, leasing office space, hiring personnel and normal office budgeting. Increasing the MRA is not necessarily a pre-requisite, however better allocation of existing funds and fine tuning the budget to better reflect district operations is a better approach.

There is concern for key field staff who must pay expenses while traveling. In sprawling districts, there are no Metro systems. The mileage reimbursement for a personal car never seem to match the initial cost of an automobile, insurance, maintenance and fuel costs, especially in states like California. Members have a car allowance, but more often than not, these cars are parked at the airport sometimes 90+ miles away.