

**Testimony by Keenan Austin Reed, Former Chief of Staff and Co-Founder & Chair of the
Black Women’s Congressional Alliance**

**Before the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress
“Recruiting, Empowering and Retaining a Diverse Congressional Staff”**

May 13, 2021

Good afternoon Chair Kilmer, Vice-Chair Timmons, Members of the Committee, staff, and interns. I appreciate the opportunity to serve our institution in this capacity. I am very grateful for the work of this Committee and the intense review and care you are taking to improve Congress and creating a space to advocate for staff.

I am Keenan Austin Reed and I currently serve as Vice President for the Alpine Group. I recently ended my decade-long career as a Hill staffer this past January. Through the end of 2020, I served as Chief of Staff to Congressman A. Donald McEachin of Virginia’s Fourth Congressional District. Before working for Mr. McEachin, I was Deputy Chief of Staff for Congresswoman Frederica Wilson from Florida. I am also a wife to a current chief of staff in the House of Representatives, which beyond my affinity to see Congress as an institution continue to evolve, keeps me closely tied to its success.

In 2018, I co-founded and currently chair the Black Women’s Congressional Alliance, an organization representing over 300 Black women congressional staffers with a goal to increase the number of Black women serving in staff positions in Congress and providing professional and personal support for Black women who are currently on the Hill, particularly as they seek more senior roles. At the time of our founding, there was no Black woman serving as chief of staff to a Democratic senator, and Black women were severely underrepresented in senior positions such as chief of staff and committee director roles.

BWCA was founded with the recognition that critical information about job openings and opportunities to advance are frequently not advertised, so we sought to build our own peer-based network of information sharing that not only discussed the opportunities available. We also prepare our members for how to get the job and advocate for them getting the position.

In doing this work, we have placed dozens of staffers successfully and I have had the opportunity to spend many hours talking to staff as they ready themselves to take the role. I have followed up with the staff and their hiring managers after our members have been in the role a while to see if the staffer is excelling and how they are adjusting to the culture of the office. It is in these conversations that I have been most instructive on how we support, retain, recruit and attract talented staffers.

Capitol Hill is a special place to work and those who choose this work come to it with a purpose to improve their community and better their country. Retaining staff goes beyond what staff are paid, it is about the community and the experience. We choose this work as more than a job; it is a calling. Improving the dynamics of the workplace and hiring can significantly boost job satisfaction and fulfillment.

While there are many longstanding and underlying issues in empowering and supporting diverse staff, the current climate is particularly challenging. For all that love this institution, January 6 was and very much is still unnerving. Staff of color, who felt especially targeted by the hate symbols displayed by the angry mob, continue to feel angry, unsafe, and unprotected. Despite the emotional toll, these staffers continue to serve, allowing the work of Congress to go on largely uninterrupted. Pay disparities, severe underrepresentation at the highest levels, structural inequality, and cultural bias leave staff of color disenfranchised. The Insurrection compounded this. I commend the leaders of staff-led associations, like the Congressional Black Associates and the Senate Black Legislative Staff Caucus, who have supported their peers during this time and challenged Congress to improve.

It is with this in mind, that I make the following recommendations:

- **Professionalize hiring to attract a wider and more diverse talent pool.** I strongly encourage the House to invest in the expansion of our House diversity office to include recruitment staff. Currently hiring managers are tapping into their networks of a select few people of color to produce a diverse candidate pool. This is a strong start and demonstrates the intent to hire beyond the traditional network of candidates, but the burden of hiring people of color should not exclusively rest on people of color to produce candidates from their networks. I, along with many others, have voluntarily supplied resumes and recommended candidates, but this work is hindered by those who do it have other full-time jobs and the reach does not go far or wide enough.
- **Provide specific support for entry and mid-level diverse staff to retain talent.** Frequently after an office makes a push to hire a diverse candidate, once the candidate is in the office the staffer struggles to ascend. When I speak to hiring managers, the ability to adapt to the culture of the office or the staffer is unable to fulfill the obligations of the role are cited as reasons why the candidates do not move up the ladder. When I speak to the staffer, the staffer cites that they feel overlooked for opportunities to expand their role, do not fit in with the culture of the office, and generally feel unseen. For offices making their initial diverse hire or those that have hired diverse candidates in junior roles but never see those staffers transition into the leadership of the office, we need to provide greater support for the cultural competency of that office. It is not enough to hire a diverse candidate, we must make sure that the environment is ready to integrate them

fully into the work of the office. We should also recognize that an environment that has had a homogeneous staff for the majority of its history will need to make some cultural adjustments. To capitalize on the experience and subject matter expertise gained by staff currently on the Hill, it is important that offices look to retain staff and prioritize their growth. Busy congressional offices are overwhelmed with responding to the needs of constituents and demanding legislative schedules, it would be best if an entity external to the office tracks and supports these offices.

- **Establish a DEI point person in each office and giving a compensation adjustment to support the work.** In 2011, I started as a senior advisor to Congresswoman Frederica Wilson, a jack of all trades position that included managing a legislative portfolio and filling in gaps where the Member needed in scheduling, communications, or district events. The Congresswoman's trust in my abilities and judgment allowed me the freedom to learn every role in a House personal office. That foundation would allow me to train, mentor, and advise hundreds of staff, though none of this would have been possible without the guidance of my first chief of staff, Tasha Cole, who challenged me to have a substantive legislative portfolio and identified new ways to push my growth as a Hill staffer. As a Black woman, she understood the barriers I would face as a new staffer of color. It is with this experience in mind that I recommend a diversity, equity, and inclusion point person for each personal office and committee.

The success of diversity, equity, and inclusion principles demand that this ideology be accepted fully in how an office does its work, have Member-level engagement and buy-in, and continuously be prioritized. I recommend a staffer become the internal office support for the Member and chief for these issues, which could include: leading or initiating culturally sensitive conversations, ensuring diverse networks are engaged in the hiring of interns and staff, supporting diverse staff by identifying professional growth and mentorship opportunities and expanding stakeholder engagement to support legislative goals.

- I also support the following recommendations previously made by Members and stakeholders to the Committee:
 - **Expand and innovate the Office of Employee Assessment(OEA).** OEA should be available to contract employees, like food service, and should retain a diverse workforce. OEA needs to provide bilingual services and offer racial trauma services. Rep. Katherine Clark

- **Mandate cultural competency and implicit bias training/ Training for anti-racist work environments.** Issue One and Partnership for Public Service
- **Recruit from community colleges, trade schools, HCBUs, non-traditional sources.** College to Congress, Center New American Security.

Thank you for your consideration of my testimony and I welcome questions and follow-up by the Committee.