

**Written Testimony of Kemba Hendrix, Director, House Office of Diversity and Inclusion  
Before the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress  
Re: Recruiting, Empowering and Retaining a Diverse Congressional Staff  
May 13, 2021**

Good morning, Chairman Kilmer, Ranking Member Timmons, and Members of the Select Committee. My name is Kemba Hendrix, and I am the Director of the Office of Diversity & Inclusion (ODI). Thank you for the opportunity to speak today and to share ODI's perspective on diversity, recruitment, and retention of the House workforce. It is an honor and privilege to speak on behalf of, and with the support of, my staff. ODI as a team is newly formed, with a dynamic, diverse, bipartisan group of staffers assembled over the course of the last year. Every day, I feel privileged to work alongside people dedicated to serving the House and who work in support of the critical goals of diversity and inclusion.

Over the past year, the Office of Diversity and Inclusion has worked tirelessly to serve the House. That was possible because Bi-partisan House Leadership and this Committee were committed to and believed in the power of diversity and teamwork. In our inaugural year we executed a comprehensive staffing plan, delivered an operations plan and a diversity plan to House leadership, developed strategies for engaging with House employment offices, colleges, universities, and other stakeholders. Furthermore, the office has completed a novel barrier analysis of the House workforce. Some outcomes of this data collection are shared in the information submitted for the record. We have engaged with over a thousand job seekers, and helped many, many exceptionally qualified and diverse individuals become colleagues.

ODI's exceptionally qualified and diverse staff was recruited through a highly competitive process. Our internal planning, training, and professional development is continually focused on growing our ability to support House Offices as they work to embrace and leverage diversity, as well as expand their own efforts to recruit, develop, retain, and advance exceptional talent that reflects the full scope of the diversity spectrum. In our inaugural year we have worked to harness the benefits and reap the rewards of diversity by working together collaboratively. And it points to the benefits of recruiting, maintaining, and supporting a diverse staff—something that we view as a critical goal. While I intend to discuss our analyses and recommendations today, I would also like to briefly discuss how COVID-19 impacted these findings by using the staff of the Office of Diversity & Inclusion as an example.

The 8 members of my team have worked to support the advancement of diversity and inclusion as goals here in the House. I acknowledge this not because it is unique to the culture of our workplace, in fact, quite the opposite. However, I would like to mention some things that I am aware were happening at the same time. While they continued to work, members of my team, like other members of the House community, lost family members and friends, acted as caregivers to family members, managed virtual school for children experienced medical incidents that required extensive testing and hospitalization, and one is studying for the bar while working full time—all of this on top of a global pandemic, historic civil unrest, and the January 6<sup>th</sup> attack on our place of employment. What we experienced as a team is not unique, but it does represent a microcosm of what has happened here in the House.

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The events of the last year have tested many communities, including the House community. We have faced the stress of the pandemic and social isolation, personal loss, civil unrest, and violence of many kinds. The communities that are disproportionately impacted are exactly those communities that are home to so many of the diverse staffers on the Hill, including, but not limited to, Black/Indigenous/Asian/Hispanic, LGBTQIA, and people with disabilities. We, and I say we, because as a diverse House staff, we are the people living this experience.

House staffers who utilize the Office of Diversity & Inclusion as a resource frequently recommend programming and services, they would like to see us provide. Recently, these recommendations have included ODI-lead staff support groups, ODI-conduct executive coaching for Senior Staff that would include a curriculum on cultural competence, and lead facilitated discussions on race/ bias/ experiencing microaggression in the workplace/ /professional communication/ and team building. While we would like to provide all these services to the House community, some may be beyond our capacity, training, or experience. We also know that other resource offices may be more appropriate, and our recommendations reflect that.

Furthermore, ODI's 2020 Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Barrier Analysis offers insights, support, and relevant data about what staffers believe are substantive hurdles for diverse staffers. The resulting report identifies that staffers from various demographic groups feel "overlooked" in consideration for leadership roles and/or promotion. Many House employees feel the only way to get a promotion is to leave one's current office or the Hill, which makes it increasingly difficult to build a sustainable pipeline for leaders of color, or from non-traditional backgrounds.

The 2020 Barrier Analysis provided anecdotal insight into the thoughts and feelings of the participants, who were House staffers at the time of the focus groups, about the unique hurdles they faced, which may have been exacerbated by the events of January 6<sup>th</sup>. Many staffers, particularly staffers of color, have stated that they do not feel safe at work. Additionally, staffers communicated a lack of awareness of available resources. Compounding the issue, for those staffers aware of the existing resources some expressed feeling those resources do not meet their unique needs. It should be noted that this observation has been expressed anecdotally and may not be the view of all House staffers.

After stating all these challenges for staffers in the House community, I want to circle back to where I began this testimony—speaking about the exceptional and resilient staff of ODI and say this. I believe our staff remains resilient because of our diversity and our concerted efforts at inclusion and belonging within our staff. I am grateful for the opportunity to connect with the Select Committee to testify today on shared, important work to modernize and strengthen the House community. Your thoughtful and sustained attention to these critical issues is making a meaningful and positive difference for the House community specifically, and our country. I thank you for your leadership and the opportunity to contribute to your work.

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**Recommendations:**

- Recommendation: We recommend increasing support office resources, so staffers have access to a robust menu of capabilities to support the trajectory of their career and professional development, in hopes that they will feel supported and that this will lead to greater retention.
  - *(i.e. Office of Employee Assistance, Wellness Center, Office of the Chaplain, Office of Congressional Workplace Rights, Office of the Whistleblower Ombuds, Office of Employee Advocacy, Congressional Staff Academy)*
  - *Training and development menu should have some elements that are mandatory, with other highly suggested elements for office leaders that focus on leadership, management, communication, and cultural competence for leading diverse teams.*
- Recommendation: The Office of Employee Assistance should be allocated increased resources to provide a menu of services that meets the needs of all House employees. While it is known that resources are incredibly limited, with respect to counseling, an individual's perception can have an impact on the effectiveness of the outcomes.
  - *In focus groups conducted for the 2020 Barrier Analysis report, "House employees of color expressed that they hear prejudicial language more often toward staffers of color."*
  - *Likewise, "LGBTQIA+ supervisory and non-supervisory House employees feel fellow employees often show a lack of awareness of the culture of this group (e.g., pronoun disclosure, gender non-conforming acceptance)."*
  - *"Some House employees experience insensitivity to religious differences based on comments from colleagues."*
  - *Microaggressions are frequent: e.g., regularly calling a minority employee by the name of another employee with the same race/ethnicity/religion/etc.*
  - *Pigeonholing in assignments because demographic fits the community. E.g., Hispanic/Latino staffers assigned to immigration/Spanish-speaking community, Black staffers do diversity-related work.*
  - *Advocating for ADA accommodations is exhausting and "emotionally draining."*
- Recommendation: There should be a standardized and centralized Human Resource Hub run by the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) that includes standardized position descriptions, a House-wide mentoring program, and fair and equitable pay bands. Additionally, we recommend the House move away from collecting demographic information by periodic survey and move towards collecting demographic information with a standardized, optional form at hire.
  - *The compensation and diversity study, conducted each Congress, could then provide hiring managers the resources and / tools for setting [fair equitable salary ranges](#).*
  - *Creating or using OPM standard form to collect race/ethnicity information at hire to simplify data collection for employee demographic information (not the mandate*

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*outlined in LEGISLATIVE BRANCH APPROPRIATIONS BILL, 2021, but could get close to capturing information for all new hires).*

**Findings from the 2020 Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Barrier Analysis:**

- 2020 Barrier Analysis report: “Many House employees feel the only way to get a promotion is to leave one’s current office because there [are] only a few leadership positions available.” And this is being borne out in real time as people have left in the past month for private sector and administration jobs.
- 2020 Barrier Analysis report identifies that employees feel that Hispanic/Latino and non-supervisory female staff are “often overlooked” for leadership roles in favor of less-qualified white employees.
- 2020 Barrier Analysis report: “Black and House managers of color feel people of color are frequently overlooked for promotions, and opportunities are not always given due to a lack of formal job requirements and processes.”
- 2020 Barrier Analysis report: “Using networks to recruit and hire is limiting because those networks are mostly made up of wealthy, white, and/or political families or individuals; minorities or individuals from lower socioeconomic classes are often not a part of these networks.”
- 2020 Barrier Analysis report: “Hispanic/Latino House employees expressed that they have to compete with individuals who have an array of previously established networks to which they do not have access, and these networked individuals are often prioritized for opportunities.”
- 2020 Barrier Analysis report: “House employees feel Members often hire staffers who look like them (e.g., white males), and this is often not a woman or person of color given the demographic makeup of current House Members.”
- Many restrooms, parking lots, meeting rooms, buildings are not ADA accessible; for employees with disabilities this is “a significant barrier to performing their job efficiently and/or to advancement,” as the Barrier Analysis found.
- Anecdotal information expressed to or observed by ODI:
  - We are losing staff, particularly women/BIPOC staff in legislative roles, as they head to the private sector and federal government.
  - Women, ethnic/racial minorities, LGBTQIA+ and people with disabilities are severely underrepresented in leadership roles. Both retention and recruitment are a challenge. How do we demonstrate to people they are valued for their skills?
- Illustrative quotes from focus groups included in 2020 Barrier Analysis report:
  - “I do not believe members or staff were actively ‘malicious’ toward people of color; however, I did feel unconscious biases were guiding decision making and incidentally perpetuating racial discrepancies at work.”

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- “We have so many women who are junior staffers and there is no opportunity to move up. In order to move up, they have to leave. They just get replaced and it becomes a cycle.”
- “I think that in my particular office, women of color are not supported and are left to fend for themselves, with the expectation that they understand the nuances of our colleagues, and it’s not reciprocated. No one is attempting to understand the nuance of how we see things in our work.”
- “I believe my disability was at play when I was passed over for a senior staffer position. In the process of interviews, the position description was changed to involve more outreach and thus was given to someone else who could walk, and I do think that was a factor.”
- “Sometimes I avoid going to meetings because the doors are too narrow to get through and sometimes you have to constantly rely on others to open a door for you to get into a meeting, it’s frustrating. There are two bathrooms in my building that I can use. There is not a single bathroom I can use where my boss’s committee hearings are.”
- “We bring on non-traditional staffers, but then they don’t know how to communicate the way that some of the white leaders like ... or sometimes their clothing is different, and they get judged. My transness is tokenized in my office a bit. They often asked me to work on things that don’t make sense – not my portfolio – due to my gender and race.”