

Testimony of

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Hearing on “Recruiting, Empowering and Retaining
a Diverse Congressional Staff”
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Chair Kilmer, Vice-Chair Timmons, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the invitation to appear at today’s hearing to share my thoughts and recommendations on promoting staff diversity within Congressional offices. I also want to express my thanks to the Committee staff for their dedicated service and assistance throughout this process.

I believe I was invited today because of the combination of my past experience as a Hill staffer and my current professional focus on training diverse public service professionals to be more skilled and empowered leaders. Having the opportunity to serve as a Congressional staffer was the highlight of my career. I am also grateful that it led me to yet a new way of being able to continue my service by helping to develop the next generation of public sector staffers.

Last year, I was honored to be invited to participate in a discussion this Committee hosted on building internal expertise in Congress. In the remarks I shared, I encouraged the Committee to continue its focus on examining how Congress invests in one of its greatest resources – the staff who serve in the wide range of positions that enable you to function daily. My voice was by no means the only one on this issue, and as I have continued to follow your Committee’s work, I have been heartened to see your ongoing attention to creating a better and expanded infrastructure for Congressional staff to operate in.

Throughout these hearings, you have heard from a myriad of speakers and expert witnesses who each bring their own unique perspectives on how best to modernize Congress. While it may not be explicit, I do believe there is a common theme that runs through our remarks and recommendations. We, I believe, share a belief in the institution of Congress as well as our commitment to supporting it and the people who contribute to maintaining and strengthening our democracy.

There is a saying that institutions are only as strong as the people who run them. Congress is no exception. While you, the Members, are clearly the faces and voices of the American people within our structure of government, I believe that you will agree, your staff make it possible for you to enact the vision you set before those who sent you to office. The makeup of current and

future workforces is not an ancillary issue but integral to how well Congress does or does not function.

Recently, I launched a social enterprise called We Are The People. I derived its name from the opening words of the Preamble to the Constitution, “We the People of the United States in order to form a more perfect union.” While I may not look like what our founding fathers had in mind, I do believe that those who have committed to public service are the people who will help our Union be more responsive to and representative of all who make up our great country.

The idea for this effort came from a dozen years spent on Capitol Hill working in a range of positions from my first job answering phones to serving as a senior staffer in leadership offices. Additionally, I spent nearly a decade more in other public service positions. It was during my last job on the Hill where I served as director of the Senate Democratic Diversity Initiative for nearly six years, that I had the opportunity to look at how to connect the multitude of dots that are necessary to create a truly diverse, inclusive, and well-trained talent force in Congressional offices.

We Are The People supports our democratic process by training and building the leadership capacity of those who work within our institutions impacting policy and politics. We do this through developing relevant empowerment trainings for staff; creating sustainable inclusion plans for institutions and organizations; and promoting careers in public service particularly for diverse professionals.

This is not simply a theoretical approach. I have trained Congressional staff enough to see the results of the benefits of providing the support and tools for them to become more successful in their positions and service to their offices.

Last year along with Laura Maristany, another former Congressional staffer, and under the auspice of Representative Democracy, a coalition that recognizes the strength of diversity to our institutions of government, I co-authored a guide to provide specific and actionable advice to hiring managers in House and Senate offices on how to have a more diverse staff and an office that fosters an environment of inclusion and ultimately build a working environment that promotes the concept of belonging. We started the process with the underlying belief that this was a worthy and important goal for “the people’s house”.

As a first step, our guide encourages managers to “be intentional” with regards to developing a diversity plan. By that, we mean for the Member and Chief of Staff to be on the same page as to what the office means by diversity. I recognize that there is a lot of discussion about the different types of diversity that exist be it gender, age, military service, or socio-economic background among other experiences or points of identity. I wholeheartedly support any office’s deliberate and intentional outreach to job candidates that reflect underrepresented voices, however, I want to stress that these efforts cannot cloud the issue that the largest racial and ethnic groups in this country are still underrepresented at the staff level in Congress particularly in senior level positions. This lack of representation, in turn, has real implications when creating national policy.

Here, I would like to add a side note. Building true inclusion involves creating offices and talent forces that also are welcoming and accommodating of those with disabilities. This is not my area of expertise, but there are many who are leading the advocacy and awareness needed to make workplaces accessible for all, and I would encourage this Committee to look at the issues of disability staffing.

In the private sector, human resource professionals regard diversity as merely the first step of an ongoing process of creating and nurturing inclusive talent forces. While it is easy to focus on resume searches as the main component of a diversity hiring strategy, this approach alone will not lead to real and sustained results. To make the process successful requires it to be holistic approach that in addition to recruitment includes a plan for training, retaining, and promoting staff through the ranks.

Hiring, onboarding, and managing a staff in a very demanding and fast-paced work environment is a challenge to even the most talented and seasoned managers. For those who are new to the positions these tasks may seem like overwhelming additions to an already unsurmountable to-do list. While I believe our guide can be a very helpful tool, it alone is not enough to equip managers with the skills and know-how to build well-functioning and inclusive offices.

Change begins at the top, and thus, I support the Committee's proposal for new-Member orientation to be more comprehensive and nonpartisan. To it, I add my recommendation that this training formally include addressing human resource issues to help Members understand their role as chief executives within their offices. While understandably, Members of Congress usually are not involved in the day-to-day management of staff, they are, in fact, the ones who set the tone for the office culture and the staff who serve them. Additionally, I strongly recommend that this training include addressing how offices can address issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion, not as a partisan issue, but as an approach that helps Members better serve their constituents.

Secondly, the Committee has made recommendations to boost Congressional capacity by providing more comprehensive training options for staff including creating certifications and a formal onboarding process.

Again, I support these recommendations and propose an expansion of them to include a formal structured training for all chiefs of staff, staff directors, and any others who manage staff. A managerial certification program that can be completed over the course of one Congress will have positive ripple effects on how well an office functions. Here, too, I would add that all the training must address how build and manage a diverse staff as a critical skill for managers to attain.

While the civil service program does not offer parallels for all staffing issues on the Hill, I believe the Candidate Training Program which prepares professionals to enter federal managerial positions through Senior Executive Service can provide some guidance. Among the core competencies they prepare future managers for is "Leading Change", "Leading People", and "Building Coalitions" which are all applicable to the requirements of senior Hill staff.

Finally, expanding training budgets and training opportunities is critical not just to recruitment but equally important staff training. A recent survey by an online community supporting career development in the tech sector found that “94% of employees would stay in their current role longer if they felt the organization invested in their professional development.” The private sector findings may not be identical for the Hill, but I believe, if asked, Congressional staff would voice their strong support for expanded training. It is simply more effective to retain and promote staff whenever possible. Providing professional development opportunities is an investment, not just in the individual, but in the level of service they deliver to constituents.

Again, thank you for this opportunity to voice my support for your Committee’s efforts to look for ways Congress can expand the capacity of its staff as a means of developing the future workforce that will serve you the Members and the American people. Intertwined with each of the issues you are addressing is the need to create both policies and processes to ensure that those who are afforded the opportunity to serve as Congressional staff are reflective of who we are as a nation.

Many of us are called to public service by the needs we see in our communities, creating a welcoming environment to harness that desire and talent will enable you, our elected representatives, to create a more perfect union for all.