

Testimony before the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress

United States House of Representatives
“Modernizing the Congressional Support Agencies to Meet the Needs of an
Evolving Congress”

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House Committee on Oversight and Reform
September 28, 2021

Thank you, Chairman Kilmer, Vice Chair Timmons, and other Members of this Select Committee for inviting me here to testify today on ways to improve Congress’s service agencies. I want to start by saying thank you to each of the witnesses from our first panel. We could not perform our constitutional duties without the hard work of your staffs.

I understand that I have been asked to testify today because of my unique perspective on the Congressional Research Service (CRS). I proudly served Congress as a nonpartisan CRS analyst for nearly a decade, working on issues related to how the executive branch of government operates. It was my first position after graduate school, and frankly, it was my dream career. I aspired to work at an organization where I could research and analyze social science data and evidence and share it with decision makers and elected officials to assist policymaking.

Today, I’m a user of CRS’s services, as the Staff Director of the Committee on Oversight and Reform’s Subcommittee on Government Operations. I proudly serve Chairman Gerald E. Connolly and this nation by conducting oversight of the operations of the entirety of our federal government — as well as state and local governments. An incredibly talented people directly reports to me. But with a jurisdiction so vast and limited staff, I rely on CRS, the Government Accountability Office (GAO), and the Congressional Budget Office to help me perform the almost insurmountable oversight needed to ensure our government runs smoothly and effectively.

My testimony today represents my own personal thoughts and not those of the Subcommittee, the Full Oversight and Reform Committee, Chairman Connolly, or the Members of the Committee. As was discussed with the Select Committee staff prior to this hearing, neither my testimony nor my responses to any questions will touch on any specific matter the Oversight Committee has investigated, the Oversight Committee’s investigative practices, nor any specific matter that I worked on as an analyst at CRS. Instead, I will be limited to providing observations and recommendations to improve the services of CRS and the other agencies that support congressional staff.

I will make three main points about how I believe CRS could take straightforward steps to modernize and dramatically improve its service to Congress.

1. CRS must revamp its product line and how its products are distributed to Members, congressional staff, and the public;

2. CRS must transform its culture to one that is focused on customer service; and
3. CRS must refocus its efforts on accomplishing its core mission.

First, CRS must revamp its product line and how its products are distributed.

The quintessential CRS products are its long-form reports. When I served as an intern on the Hill, I remember taking as many paper copies as possible from the basement distribution room of the Library of Congress before widespread use of the internet to disseminate and access reports. But times have changed and so have the demands on staff and the technologies available to send and receive information.

Thirty, forty, seventy-five page reports will not be read by most congressional staff. This statement is worth repeating — they *will not be read* by most congressional staff. These reports are daunting and can confuse many staff more than help them. More recent innovations like the shorter legal briefs and policy analysis products are more helpful, but they often fail to speak to one another. Why should a staffer have to go to three, four, or five unique products to cobble together the information they need? CRS should be able to produce a single product that combines legal and policy analysis clearly and concisely. I know that CRS has the expertise among its staff to do this and do it well.

Also, did you know that CRS has podcasts? I didn't. And when I found out about them, I went searching on the website for them. They're impossible to find. But they apparently exist. Why isn't CRS distributing these podcasts, which are not confidential products, on the popular channels where a listener typically finds them? Why don't congressional staff know that these podcasts exist?

Most of the videos on the website are more than an hour long. You do not have to be a TikTok user to know that more than 10 minutes is too long to hold the audience. As any staffer will attest, anything longer than five minutes is rarely useful to staff who fight to find time to eat lunch. Videos should be short, educational, and engaging.

The CRS search engine often populates a seven-year-old, stale product at the top of my search when there is a brand new, more relevant product tucked at the bottom of the search response. And, if I attempted to perform a CRS search of products on my iPhone, there is a reasonable chance my phone would laugh at me. Nonetheless, this is not a laughing matter. Most of the day, I am on the move, and I need to rely upon my mobile device to find information.

Every Monday morning, I pull together an update for my team of their anticipated responsibilities for the week. The memo includes available training opportunities and new reports of relevance to our Subcommittee's work and jurisdiction. Each week, I comb through GAO reports, CRS reports, and other relevant trade publications to find information that can help us improve our work for the American people. And every week, I slog through at least four separate CRS landing pages to find relevant products that are not available in a single location. As a former CRS analyst, it pains me that CRS research is not more easily located by decision makers.

I wonder each week why CRS is not generating newsletters targeted to each Committee and Subcommittee with new products that are likely of relevance to them? Why is CRS just posting and praying that Congress will notice their work? The biggest news outlets and think tanks in town provide targeted newsletter services on a daily basis. Why isn't CRS following their lead? Or even better, finding new, innovative ways to share knowledge with Congress.

CRS can and must do a better job of meeting Members of Congress and their staff where they are. That means creating products for interns, for staff assistants, for legislative directors, chiefs of staff, professional staff, and staff directors. There are 535 different bosses who expect something unique from CRS. It's a difficult order. But with more than 500 people on staff, this mission can be accomplished. CRS must take care to create products for Members and staff at every point of their congressional journey — from intern through long-time staff director. The products must speak directly to the needs of each of these clients. The way to make that possible is to consistently ask them what they need. GAO constantly surveys staff for feedback. I think the only time that I have been asked for feedback related to CRS was when the House Administration Committee contacted me. Why is CRS waiting for its oversight Committee to do its client engagement work? It is missing critical opportunities to learn how to better serve Congress and the people it represents.

Moreover, CRS could again take a page from GAO and allow its staff to serve details in personal offices and on committees. Serving in an office or on a Committee would give CRS analysts first-person experience as a Hill staffer. Then these experts would better understand which products work for us and how to more effectively provide authoritative information in a timely fashion to meet the needs of Congress.

CRS must take steps to think about the users of their products, employing user-centered design strategies. CRS leadership needs to put themselves in our shoes. Such practices are not evident in their current web design, in their product creation, nor in their willingness to allow staff to detail to the Hill. To stay relevant, however, CRS must adapt. With the public dissemination of many of their products now permissible, CRS must use distribution channels much more effectively to remain relevant. And it must employ practices that help them better understand the needs of Congress and other decision makers.

Second, CRS must evolve its culture to one focused on customer service

It is an honor to serve at CRS. You are offered incomparable access to our nation's most prolific policymakers. This opportunity should be met with both humility and drive. In so many cases, however, CRS staff are not trained how to effectively engage congressional customers. CRS's mission is to serve Congress, yet when we call CRS analysts and attorneys, we are sometimes told that our research question is the wrong one, or that it cannot be answered.

I have had occasions when a response to my request resulted in 14 separate emails that were screen shots of a database result. I was uncertain how to engage the material and too frustrated to re-engage the specialist who sent the emails. On other occasions, I have been told that my request is not a priority for CRS.

Other times I have requested confidential memoranda and been asked instead to accept a verbal briefing — knowing those are less work and less aggravation because they do not require going through the sometimes Byzantine formal review process. I have had to contact analysts and attorneys several times to track down outstanding requests, seeking updates on why they are delayed. In one such recent case, CRS had an existing report that directly answered the question I asked, but none of the analysts to which I was referred knew of the report — and it was a month before I was sent the year-old product. On another request, I was told that my request was too “in the weeds” for consideration. CRS is designed to help Congress with the weeds.

I admit, my requests can be complicated and difficult to answer. But those are the places in policymaking where CRS should be of greatest help to Congress. The questions that keep congressional staff up at night are the ones CRS analysts should strive to research and answer. Often, however, I find that Members and staff must convince CRS to go on the policymaking journey. It should not be a staffer’s job to sell CRS on providing assistance.

There are a few simple ways CRS leadership could take critical steps toward better customer service. And these small steps might start the more difficult revolution toward a new customer-focused culture.

First, CRS should consider incorporating customer service metrics into performance reviews. I know this idea would need to be negotiated with the union. And I encourage those conversations, including a conversation about training current and new staff on how to engage clients more effectively. After an interaction with a CRS analyst, a congressional staffer should receive a voluntary follow-up survey asking them questions about the quality and value of the service they received. Also, in addition to keeping metrics on how often a particular report is accessed by Members and staff, CRS should be following up with clients to ask what was helpful in the report or how the analyst or attorney might improve it.

Next, CRS analysts and attorneys should take the initiative to place an electronic calendar hold on staff calendars for consultation appointments. Simply taking that responsibility off congressional staffers’ plates is an incredible help to staff.

Third, CRS must do better in helping its staff adapt to new online platforms. Virtual briefings and remote work are the future of federal work. And CRS was well behind the curve in adopting virtual platforms. Analysts and attorneys often struggle to access our conversations. Even when this pandemic is in our nation’s rear-view mirror, virtual briefings are here to stay. CRS analysts cannot fall back on excuses about an inability to use new communication platforms. Instead, it must be proactive and train its staff constantly on the technologies most used by the House and Senate. CRS needs to get technology right.

Finally, another simple fix is for analysts and attorneys to be trained in connecting Members and staff directly with the expert and or experts they need. Oftentimes, staff will call a CRS analyst directly — as we are encouraged to do — only to discover that our question requires the expertise of a different CRS employee or a group of CRS experts. We are often then sent on a goose chase, trying to track down the appropriate team of experts who can help us research answers. Building the correct coalition of CRS experts should be a primary responsibility of

CRS managers and staff — not staffers. But there is currently a culture of “this is not my issue” across CRS that forces congressional staff to track down the expertise they need.

Third, CRS must refocus its efforts on accomplishing its core mission

CRS has one of the greatest missions in government:

To serve Congress with the highest quality of research, analysis, information, and confidential consultation to support the exercise of its legislative, representational, and oversight duties in its role as a coequal branch of government.

CRS, at times, allows its focus to stray or atrophy. In one example, I asked CRS for assistance only to be told that the individual with the appropriate expertise would be unavailable for a significant time to develop a Federal Law Update — a course on what has changed in federal law that provides attorneys on the Hill credit to maintain their credentials. While the Federal Law Update is a popular CRS offering, it is not the core mission. Responding to Member and staff requests, on the other hand, is central to CRS’s mission. I waited more than six months for a response to that request. I received the answer well after it was helpful. Timeliness is critical, and sometimes CRS forgets that component of their mission.

This case is not uncommon. CRS should be anticipating the needs of Congress. Yet, in many cases, reports on pertinent legislative and oversight issues are released days after the relevant hearing. CRS must observe and follow the rhythms of congressional needs — and prioritize their research and analysis in ways that meet those needs. Such a change in CRS culture will require leadership buy in and support from managers.

Additionally, CRS must encourage its staff to engage in the academic and policy debates outside of its own corridors by incentivizing analysts and attorneys to participate in public forums and by attending academic conferences. Publishing within an expert’s field of study, in peer-reviewed journals, should be encouraged and supported. Without these moments to look up, refresh, and catch up on the latest research, the work of CRS becomes repetitive and stale. Congressional staff may often call an analyst with a policy idea only to be told it is not a good idea because it was attempted three decades ago and did not work. But the CRS analyst frequently fails to factor in changes to the social context, the political environment, or even the rules of Congress. Ideas unsuccessful in one moment can win the day easily in another. CRS attorneys and analysts either prevented from or uninterested in evolving, however, cannot provide Members and staff the “highest quality” of research, analysis, and information — as is required by the agency’s mission.

Finally, I cannot emphasize enough that for CRS to accomplish its core mission, staff at all levels must reflect the diversity of our nation. This means that CRS must utilize diverse hiring panels and recruit from diverse talent pools. Just as importantly, CRS must provide all employees with equal and fair opportunities for advancement within the organization. No employee should be made to feel as though they need to leave CRS because they have risen as far as they could within in the organization as a person of color or as a woman. That this circumstance continues

to occur is a disservice both to CRS employees and the Members and congressional staff who rely on CRS to help solve issues for the American people.

Similarly, departing employees who provide feedback on diversity and inclusion in their exit interviews should not be dismissed as merely making excuses for supposed underperformance. CRS management must look inward and ask themselves if women and employees of color are placed in positions where they can thrive within the organization. They should consider whether CRS's decisionmakers take seriously the current initiatives aimed at improving diversity and inclusion, or if they are just in place to check a box.

I want to restate my high regard for all the congressional support agencies, particularly CRS. These agencies must strive to be the most effective they can be to help Congress serve this nation. Without them we repeat errors, we miss nuances, and we would simply be too overwhelmed to function. We must evolve and improve together, leveraging technologies and refocusing resources to pack the most punch for this nation.