

Statement of Mary B. Mazanec
Director, Congressional Research Service
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Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress
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Chairman Kilmer, Vice Chairman Timmons, and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this hearing on the modernization of congressional support agencies, and to inform the committee's examination of how the Congressional Research Service (CRS) can optimize the services it provides to an evolving Congress. Ensuring that our products and services continue to meet the needs of Congress is a bedrock objective for CRS and one that serves as the basis underlying every aspect of the Service's strategic and operational decision making. With today's testimony, I look forward to highlighting for the Committee the many initiatives CRS has undertaken to ensure that it continues to provide exceptional research, analysis, and information to a 21st century Congress. In addition, I will outline several challenges CRS faces with respect to its ability to keep pace with the evolving needs and demands of Congress and offer the Service's thinking regarding future priorities.

SERVICE TO CONGRESS: CRS'S ENDURING MISSION

Since its establishment in 1914, the mission of CRS has been driven by service to Congress. Reflecting that legacy, our mission today is clear:

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 as a co-equal branch of government.

While our mission to serve Congress has remained the same, fulfilling this responsibility for more than a century has required the Service to adapt its products, services, and operations to meet the changing needs of Congress. Consequently, what began as primarily a reference service for the Congresses of the early 20th century has evolved into a unique institutional resource offering the full range of research, analytical, and information services, and consultative expertise to address increasingly complex public policy issues before today's Congress.

Today, CRS supports Congress during every stage of the legislative process across the full spectrum of timely public policy issues including: agriculture; international trade; border security; cybersecurity and data privacy; foreign affairs; climate change; prescription drug development and distribution; and healthcare reform. CRS experts also provide assistance on questions related to oversight, legislative procedure, executive branch operations, constitutional law, federal agency rulemaking, judicial nominations, and the budget and appropriations process.

While final fiscal 2021 numbers are not yet available, thus far, CRS experts have responded to over 68,000 congressional requests; prepared over 1,000 new products; updated over 2,300 existing products; and conducted 250 seminars that were attended by approximately 11,000 congressional participants. As in previous years, the Service provided support to almost every Member and committee office through the provision of its products and services.

CRS's response throughout the COVID-19 pandemic vividly illustrates the Service's continuing commitment to adapt its operations and service offerings to meet the changing needs of Congress. In March of 2020, as news of the impending pandemic grew increasingly dire, CRS worked quickly to execute the CRS pandemic plan to ensure that it would continue to support Congress's needs during any prolonged pandemic event. Within 24 hours, the Service transitioned its entire operation, expanding existing workplace flexibilities to enable staff to work remotely full-time. As a result, CRS was well positioned to provide Congress with timely analysis, information, and consultative support as it considered the plethora of issues presented by this public health crisis. From March 2020 through August 2021, CRS has prepared and regularly updated over 1,100 new products on COVID-19-related issues. To enable expedited access to these products, a COVID-19 resource page was developed on the CRS.gov and Congress.gov websites, organizing CRS-prepared material under 26 issue areas, covering topics ranging from the temporary moratorium on evictions provided under the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act to frequently asked questions regarding testing for COVID-19. Several of these products incorporated custom CRS graphics. In addition, CRS experts have responded to over 10,000 COVID-related inquiries. CRS continues to support Congress as the issues presented by the pandemic evolve.

MEETING THE NEEDS OF AN EVOLVING CONGRESS

It is indisputable that the Congress of the 21st century operates in a markedly different environment than that of its predecessors. Policy issues have grown more complex and multifaceted and carry national and, in many cases, global implications. Technological innovation has provided Congress access to more information sources than at any prior time in its history and has enabled virtually instant communication to and from constituents and congressional support staff. These innovations have created expectations on the part of congressional users that the information and analysis they require from CRS will be readily available and accessible whenever and wherever they wish to retrieve it. Moreover, there is a continuous influx of new Members and staff, who often have changing preferences for how information and analysis is communicated and presented to them. CRS is keenly aware of the implications these developments present for its service to Congress, and has undertaken a number of initiatives to ensure that service offerings and operational capabilities are aligned to meet the needs of a contemporary Congress.

Feedback from Congressional Users

Capturing feedback from congressional stakeholders has been an important step in assessing CRS's progress in meeting the needs of Congress. Most recently, in fiscal 2020, CRS contracted with Gallup, Inc., to conduct a survey of congressional staff designed to gauge the value and utility of various research products and consultative services offered by CRS, as well as to gather information about how such products and services are used by Congress. Gallup contacted over 13,700 congressional staff from early February through mid-March 2020 and received survey responses from over 1,300 district, state, and DC-based staff members. In addition, the Service has developed tools to assess the use of CRS products and services and to provide insights on congressional interests. A major area of data collection has involved understanding CRS.gov usage by congressional users. These efforts include the capture and analysis of search terms utilized on CRS.gov and use analysis of general pages on the site, topic pages, and CRS products.

Beyond assessment of website use, CRS has developed prototype data analytic tools to reflect the scope and depth of CRS service to Congress. These tools have been used by CRS

management to anticipate and evaluate work demands, understand the range of clients receiving consultative services and help ensure that CRS reaches all Members and committees. CRS continues to explore new data available from congressional and public use of CRS products, websites, and services.

Products and Services

CRS is constantly examining its product offerings to ensure that its information and analysis is presented in a manner that is most useful to congressional users. In response to the demand for products that provide a rapid response to emerging issues and developments, the Service expanded its product line to include the CRS In Focus, the CRS Insights and Legal Sidebar, and short reports, all of which provide more abbreviated examination of such topics.

In September 2017, CRS launched its line of podcast products to enable Members and staff to access the Service's expertise at their convenience. The product line currently consists of 30 podcasts, providing discussions of timely topics of interest to a congressional audience. The podcasts are intended to provide a concise overview of an issue and its congressional context. CRS developed this product in recognition of the growing variety of ways congressional users are engaging multimedia platforms to obtain information relevant to their work.

CRS is leveraging data visualization tools and technology to implement a pilot project to support the publishing of interactive graphics to CRS.gov. While still in its preliminary stages, CRS successfully added interactive graphic capability to CRS.gov this past spring with plans to expand interactive product offerings over the next fiscal year. In addition, CRS piloted an instructional video series of products to help explain the Budget Control Act.

Congress authorized the development of a legislative information retrieval system to "reduce the cost of information support for the Congress by eliminating duplication among systems which provide electronic access by Congress to legislative information." (2 U.S.C. §180) In response, Congress.gov was created and launched in 2012. CRS's Congress.gov team works collaboratively with the Legislative Branch Bulk Data Task Force, and House Clerk technology teams to modernize processes used to exchange data between CRS and its data partners in the House and Senate chambers. These efforts will better safeguard congressional data by retiring less secure legacy data processing workflows. CRS Bill Summary authors are part of a pilot

group, led by the Office of the House Clerk and House Office of Legislative Counsel, to develop tools and data standards that are critical to analyzing the impact of proposed legislation on current law.

Increased Analytical Capacity

CRS has expanded its capacity to address science and technology issues as part of its holistic approach to policy analysis. The Service created 12 additional positions in multiple divisions in order to strengthen and deepen analysis of multidisciplinary policy topics where science and technology issues have a substantive component. This has included energy, environment, and natural resources positions, as well as positions focusing expressly on innovation, technology, and the role of science and technology in society. Selection of the best qualified candidates for these positions is ongoing, and several have come onboard in FY2021. In addition, to support Congress in its consideration of topics with a science or technology component, CRS provides programming in the form of webinars, including a series of webinars on domestic energy production and transmission, telecommunications issues, and others.

IT Modernization

CRS continues to work with the Library's Office of the Chief Information Officer (OCIO) to modernize its IT infrastructure with the deployment of new tools and software to enhance support to Congress. The Integrated Research and Information System (IRIS) initiative is a multi-year effort to update the Service's mission-specific information technology to provide CRS staff with the best resources to create and deliver products and services to Congress. CRS and OCIO are currently implementing several major work streams. These efforts include updating the congressional request management system, implementing an enhanced taxonomy and search engine to enhance discovery of CRS products, and modernizing the text analysis program to provide greater ease of conducting legislative analysis and comparisons. These improvements are in varying stages of development and implementation.

CHALLENGES AND FUTURE PRIORITIES

Supporting an evolving Congress necessarily requires addressing the challenges that it faces. As noted above, today's Congress grapples with an ever-increasing workload of complex public

policy issues, often with limited institutional resources. Moreover, although the 21st century Congress enjoys access to a wealth of information, not all sources are authoritative or without bias. CRS's greatest asset in successfully supporting Congress in addressing these challenges is the cadre of dedicated professionals who work in concert across the organization to carry out its mission. As such, maintaining a highly motivated, well-trained workforce to support the diverse needs of Congress is a priority for the Service and will require resources to bolster and replenish analytical capacity. In recognition that it serves a Congress that represents a broadening range of interests and diverse constituents, CRS is committed to building and maintaining a diverse and inclusive workplace and one that respects the diversity of people, views, and ideas. The Service is implementing a number of strategies to improve the diversity of applicant pools for CRS positions and to foster a more inclusive working environment.

In addition, preserving the institutional resources and knowledge that CRS contributes to inform Congress's work is an important component to the Service's continued support. Currently, CRS is developing strategies to manage the knowledge and resources that it relies upon so heavily to provide exceptional service to Congress, including efforts to ensure the capture and timely transfer of the tacit knowledge held by senior analysts, attorneys and information professionals.

Finally, CRS's experience working remotely over the last 18-months has demonstrated how critical, reliable, state-of-the-art IT capability will be to effectively serve the Congress going forward. Working in partnership with the Library's Chief Information Officer (OCIO), CRS must keep pace with the latest enhancements in technology to ensure that it is capable of supporting Congress in any operating environment.

CONCLUSION

On behalf of my colleagues at CRS, thank you for allowing me to contribute to this discussion on the modernization of Congress. CRS relishes its role in support of the important work of Congress. Each day, the Service strives to carry out its mandate to provide Congress with timely, authoritative, non-partisan, and objective support to inform the legislative debate. Fulfilling this responsibility necessarily involves adapting operational capabilities to meet the needs of

Congress in an ever-changing environment. I look forward to working with the Congress to identify additional steps that can be taken to accomplish this important objective.