RPTR WARREN  
EDTR CRYSTAL  
  
  
BUSINESS MEETING TO CONSIDER  
PROPOSED RECOMMENDATIONS  
Thursday, July 29, 2021  
House of Representatives,  
Select Committee on the   
Modernization of Congress,  
Washington, D.C.

The committee met, pursuant to call, at 9:04 a.m., in Room HVC‑210, Capitol Visitor Center, Hon. Derek Kilmer [chairman of the committee] presiding.

Present: Representatives Kilmer, Cleaver, Lofgren, Perlmutter, Phillips, Williams, Timmons, Davis, Latta, Reschenthaler, Van Duyne, and Joyce.

The Chairman. The committee will come to order.

In accordance with rule 3(e) of our committee rules, the chair notes the presence of a quorum.

Without objection, the chair is authorized to declare a recess of the committee at any time.

This business meeting of the Select Committee is to consider a set of 20 recommendations to increase staff capacity, diversity, and inclusion; strengthen internships and fellowships; and expand accessibility to Congress.

I now recognize myself for 5 minutes to give an opening statement.

So today the Select Committee is taking up its sixth package of recommendations to improve the way Congress works on behalf of the American people. These recommendations are the first set the committee has taken up in the 117th Congress, and they reflect the hard work of the committee's new roster of members.

Most of these recommendations focus on congressional staff, and there is a simple explanation for why that is. It is because Congress' ability to effectively uphold its Article I responsibilities absolutely depends on the hard work of staff to ensure that Members are able to do the jobs they were elected to do.

Staff are the first people our constituents encounter when they reach out to the Federal Government for help. They also help Members work through complicated policy questions and help Members ensure that their constituents' views are reflected in the policymaking process.

Members can't do their jobs without the support of staff, and that is exactly why Congress needs to do more to support them.

This committee spent a lot of time listening to and learning from current and former staff in order to understand why the typical staffer leaves the Hill after just three or four years. From these conversations, we know that many staffers are passionate about public service and they love what they do.

We also know that a long‑term career on the Hill can be tough to manage. The pay isn't great, certainly compared to what staff can make elsewhere, in private industry or even in the executive branch. The benefits aren't keeping up with what the private sector offers. And finding a healthy work‑life balance can be incredibly challenging.

Modern organizations understand that investing in the kinds of programs and benefits that employees want and increasingly expect is a key to maintaining a high‑performing and stable workforce.

Congress needs to shake off its longstanding tendency to view these kinds of investments solely as expenses. Investing in staff pays off, and the returns are exponential. Staff with long‑term institutional knowledge, with deep ties to the communities that we serve, and who reflect the diversity of our country are essential to making Congress work better for the American people.

The recommendations we are taking up today address some of the staffing challenges Congress faces. Today's recommendations look to improve employee benefits and training and mentorship so people can do their jobs and stay in them; to improve staff diversity; and to provide more opportunities for those looking for opportunity to enter the door of public service.

There is still work to do on this front, and this is an issue that deserves ongoing consideration. The committee will continue to do its part to support staff.

Another issue that deserves ongoing consideration is equal access to Congress.

Last year, members of this committee sponsored and passed a resolution that included language to address the equal access challenges persons with disabilities face when working for, visiting, or interacting with Congress.

Since then, the House has made progress toward making the proceedings and functions of Congress accessible to all Americans.

But there is more work to do here. Constituent access to Congress is not universal. The physical barriers to access are many and vary across the Capitol complex.

Digital accessibility is also a challenge. Individuals who are visually or hearing impaired currently cannot access congressional websites and livestream proceedings in any consistent way.

The recommendations the committee will take up today address some of the specific challenges we heard about from our colleagues and partners in the disability community.

A modern Congress is one that welcomes and accommodates every American, and that should be our goal.

I would like to thank Vice Chair Timmons for all of the work he has done in helping develop and bring these recommendations forward, and I now recognize him for an opening statement.

Mr. Timmons. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I am going to begin by just saying how much I enjoy working on this committee. I have enjoyed being on it in my first term.

And it really is important for us to think about where we have come from. The 116th Congress, we were given what was really an eight‑month opportunity, and we worked really hard and we made a lot of progress, but there was still work left to do.

We got a lot done in our first year. But we were fortunate enough to be given another year. And we got a lot done last Congress, almost 100 recommendations. And I think that, as we make sure they are implemented, we will see change for the better for this institution. I think that is fantastic.

But we were also frustrated last year, our second year, by the pandemic. So we were fortunate enough to be given a full Congress.

So we are a quarter of the way through our work. And we began with an incredibly important part, which is staffing. And these recommendations are fantastic. We have worked hard to get to where we are.

Last Congress we did a lot of the low‑hanging fruit. We always talk about that. But we are going to be tackling more challenging issues. So we found staffing was the best place to start because there is the most agreement.

We have 20 recommendations here. We are unanimous on most of them, and we have worked through the ones that we are not. But there are some concerns, and I see those concerns. But I do think that overall these are great recommendations.

And we have got some more on staffing that we are going to be working on for the remainder of this Congress. And I hope that we can come to agreement on other staffing recommendations.

But I cannot impress upon this committee how important the next 16 months will be. We are going to be talking about civility a lot. We are going to be talking about institutional changes that will facilitate collaboration. I think that that is going to be some of the most important work that we will do this Congress.

And I just want to thank everyone. We have come so far just in the last 6 months. We have an incredible team at the committee staff level. We have all the people in the right places. And we are developing the relationships within the committee and within the cohort to really tackle some big, big issues here in the next 16 months.

So I am very pleased that we have these recommendations that we are about to vote on. And I just really appreciate the chairman and all of our committee members' work to get to this point. And I am really excited about the months ahead.

So with that, Mr. Chairman, I will yield back.

The Chairman. Thank you.

I do want to recognize and appreciate the hard work that all of the members of this committee have done to pull these recommendations together.

And speaking of the importance of staff, I also want to recognize the terrific work of the hardworking staff here.

This committee is really fortunate to have an engaged group, and I appreciate everyone taking the time to participate in the process.

So, with that, I now move to vote on the recommendations contained in the committee materials provided to the members. I now ask unanimous consent for en bloc consideration of Recommendations 1 through 15.

I now call on the clerk to read Recommendations 1 through 15.

The Clerk. Recommendation 1: Personalized Job Training and Management Skills. Supervisors should receive formal management training that includes management skills, cultural competency, and how to support an inclusive work environment.

Recommendation 2: Real Time Payroll Information. The House should create a searchable database of anonymized average staff compensation information, by position, using available information on staff salaries and payroll data.

Recommendation 3: Mentorship Match Program. The House should initiate and facilitate a formal mentorship program for matching more experienced staff with less experienced staff.

Recommendation 4: Professional Certifications. The House should allow Member, committee, and leadership offices to pay for certain professional development opportunities for staff that include a certification.

Recommendation 5: Onboarding Information. The Chief Administrative Officer should provide offices with an expanded standard onboarding packet that includes comprehensive information on available resources and benefits for staff.

Recommendation 6: Talent Acquisition Software. The Chief Administrative Officer should provide access to industry‑leading talent acquisition software to assist House offices in managing their recruitment and hiring processes.

Recommendation 7: Collecting Demographic Data. The Chief Administrative Officer should work with the Office of Diversity and Inclusion to improve the collection of anonymized demographic data through an optional form provided to staff at onboarding.

Recommendation 8: Assessing Intern Cost of Living. The Chief Administrative Officer should provide information to congressional offices on the cost of living for interns to help inform intern stipend levels.

Recommendation 9: Intern and Fellowship Program Office or Coordinator. The House should establish an Intern and Fellowship Program Office or Coordinator that helps with onboarding, developing educational curriculum, professional development, and training for office coordinators.

Recommendation 10: Fellows' and Detailees' Use of Equipment. Congress should clarify rules to allow fellows and detailees to receive the same resources as professional staff.

Recommendation 11: Remote Internships. The House should study the feasibility of permanently allowing remote internships.

Recommendation 12: ADA Drop off and Pick up Zone. The House should designate a drop off and pick up zone near an accessible entrance for members of the public with mobility impairments and develop a clear process for accessing the new drop‑off point.

Recommendation 13: Security Screening for Persons With Disabilities. Visitors and staff with disabilities should have access to information on the security screening techniques they will encounter upon entering the Capitol complex.

Recommendation 14: Doorway Accessibility. The House should prioritize the installation of additional automatic doors and replace door hardware that is difficult to grasp with one hand.

Recommendation 15: Accessible Websites. The House should promote awareness of accessibility requirements for Member and committee websites and provide training and tools for staff to help them properly maintain and update those sites.

The Chairman. You nailed that. Thank you.

With that, all in favor of recommendations 1 through 15, say aye.

All those opposed to recommendations 1 through 15, say no.

In the opinion of the chair, two‑thirds being in the affirmative, the ayes have it.

I now ask unanimous consent for en bloc consideration of Recommendations 16 through 20. I now call on the clerk to read Recommendations 16 through 20.

The Clerk. Recommendation 16: Tuition Assistance. The House should expand the Student Loan Repayment Program to include tuition assistance.

Recommendation 17: Update and Align Staff Benefits to Increase Retention. The House should establish and maintain a "Task Force on the House Workforce," led by the Chief Administrative Officer and comprised of other House offices, to make ongoing policy recommendations on updating staff benefits.

Recommendation 18: Assistance for Contract Employees. The House should work with contractors that provide Capitol campus employees with services comparable to those offered to congressional staff by the Office of Employee Assistance.

Recommendation 19: Supporting the Office of Employee Assistance. The Office of Employee Assistance should seek to retain a diverse workforce, offer access to bilingual services, and retain staff capable of providing various forms of trauma services.

Recommendation 20: Committee Internship Stipends. Committees should be provided a program allowance, separate from their budget, for compensation of interns.

The Chairman. If anyone would like to speak, I would invite a request for unanimous consent to speak out of order.

Ms. Van Duyne. I would like to request to speak out of order.

The Chairman. Without objection.

Ms. Van Duyne. Thank you very much, Chairman.

I appreciate all the hard work that this committee has put into all these recommendations. I know that we have met a number of times. Both the chair and the ranking member have been very gracious with allowing members to speak, share their mind. It has been one of my joys actually as a freshman being in Congress to see how this committee can work together and see how the staff is so supportive.

I request to speak out of order just to explain my vote that will be against some of these recommendations.

I have worked in the public sector, I have been an elected official now since 2004. I believe that in the private sector you have got a certain job and in the public sector it is completely different. I don't think the two should compete.

First of all, there is never going to be enough money in the public sector to be able to compete with jobs in the private sector, and we shouldn't try. We can't spend money on signing bonuses, on retention bonuses, on performance bonuses like they can in the private sector. There will never be enough money. And if that is what we start competing on, we will lose.

I think it is one thing in the private sector to be able to pay for that, but in the public sector we also need to understand that it is not our money that we are spending, it is public dollars, and they need to be spent as much as possible on public work.

When I was mayor, we had this come up. We had an employee who was a great employee. But, unfortunately, we compared his salary with a private sector salary. We ended up giving him over a 300 percent bonus.

And as a result, later on it became very political, and folks who voted for that ended up getting voted out of office, and the gentleman who had that position ended up being fired. It was not pretty.

I understand what people are saying, that it is very expensive to live in D.C., and therefore we need to pay that higher rate.

I think if we look at housing rates across the country, if that is what we are trying to solve for, we need to look at housing rates across the country and what is going into the high cost, recognizing that in areas like D.C., California, and others 40 percent of the housing costs in many cases are caused by government ‑‑ government permitting fees, government taxes, government regulations.

And we are Congress. If we are serious about fixing that, it is a systemic issue, and we should be doing that not just for the people that work for us, but for all the people that we work for.

And, finally, I would argue the biggest issue why the public sector should never compete with the private sector is it is a completely different entity.

I am here, and I know a lot of my staff are here, people that I have worked for, recognize that it is an honor and it is a privilege to work for the American people. It is an honor and privilege to have these positions. They were never meant to be permanent. And as a result, I think it is a completely different mindset.

When you have got the power grid that goes out in Texas in February, you don't want people who are saying, "Oh, I hit my 40 hours." You want people whose minds, heads, spirits, souls are into helping others. And I just think it is a difference when you start comparing dollars and benefits.

So I appreciate the work that this committee has done. We have got great staff. I look forward to working with all of you on ways to make Congress more efficient and more effective.

Thank you very much for allowing me to make those comments. And I yield back.

The Chairman. Thank you, Representative Van Duyne.

Without objection, I recognize myself for 5 minutes.

Listen, I appreciate, Congresswoman Van Duyne, you sharing with us your position on these five recommendations. I would like to say just a few words about why I think these recommendations are valuable.

Let me start by noting that this committee's mandate specifically tasks us with investigating, studying, holding public hearings, and developing recommendations on staff recruitment, diversity, retention, and compensation and benefits.

We have held more hearings on this topic than on any other. We have sought the expertise of current and former staff. We have heard from private sector HR and diversity specialists. We have talked to experts from top‑rated organizations to learn how they successfully recruit and retain a diverse workforce.

We have done all of this because the committee recognizes that recruiting and retaining talented staff provides value to the American people.

Congress is better served by staff who have the institutional and policy expertise that is gained through years of service. There is no doubt that Members ‑‑ and especially new Members ‑‑ benefit from having staff who know how to set up an office, who understand how to manage constituent communications, who know how floor and committee procedure work, and who grasp complex policy issues.

Our constituents expect us to know these things, and we are reliant on staff to help us be the best Representatives we can be. That is why these recommendations matter.

For example, expanding the Student Loan Repayment Program to include tuition assistance and updating staff benefits are effective and cost‑efficient ways to improve staff retention.

This is the kind of smart investment that modern organizations in private industry and Federal agencies make to recruit, train, and retain a strong workforce.

The services the Office of Employee Assistance provides the staff are critical. Congress is a notoriously tough place to work, particularly earlier this year.

But the people who work here believe in the mission of the institution, and that is why what they do matters to the lives of the American people. The institution is lucky to have people who want to work here.

But as an institution, Congress often burns out its best employees. Many staff ‑‑ and, frankly, many of the our fellow Members ‑‑ are still struggling with the events of the last year. Unaddressed, the stress and trauma that it had accrued will not go away on their own and will lead to larger problems for Congress' employees and for the institution.

Unsurprisingly, access to employee assistance programs leads to improved productivity and increased retention.

We have seen the value also of providing a foot in the door through internship opportunities, and internship opportunities in committee settings will help that, too.

And providing stipends means that those opportunities won't simply be open to those from wealthy families. We heard about this in more than one hearing.

The bottom line is this: Congress' ability to uphold its Article I responsibilities depends on the people who work here. Our job as Members is to give voice to our constituents and to represent their views in the policymaking process and ensure that Congress acts as a coequal branch of government.

The institution needs strong staff to do all of these things well. Investing in staff retention is smart. And the recommendations we are taking up today represent months of intensive research, meetings, multiple vettings, and countless conversations. This committee's process has and will continue to be deliberately thoughtful.

I know it is a lot of work, but I think the effort we have made leading up to the vote today has been well worth it, and that is because we are taking important steps toward supporting our staff who do so much to support us in making Congress work better for the American people.

Congressman Timmons, do you wish to be recognized?

Mr. Timmons. Briefly.

The Chairman. Without objection.

Mr. Timmons. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I want to begin by thanking the Congresswoman for her thoughts and for spending the time with me over the last few weeks discussing them. I definitely hear where she is coming from.

I began my service in elected office in the State senate and I think ‑‑ I hate to say it ‑‑ my thoughts have changed in that time.

When I was in the State senate, I actually didn't have anyone on my team. I didn't have anyone that worked with me. And coming to Congress, it was incredible, just the amount, the bandwidth that you increase having a team, having people that are like‑minded, that are working, pushing in the same direction.

And in the 116th Congress I was pleased to find out that I was one of the top 20 offices in Congress for staff retention.

Fast‑forward. In the last 6 months, I am going to be in the bottom 10 percent. We have had enormous turnover in the district office. And we just found out two days ago that my deputy chief, acting chief, is going to be leaving to go and make more than double what she is making now.

So I want to invest in people. I do not want to have this be a job that you cannot make a livable wage on, that you cannot pursue a very worthy objective of trying to help this country stay on the right track.

We have $30 trillion in debt. The future of our country causes me concern. So investing in staff to make sure that we have the bandwidth to engage in all of our important work is a no‑brainer, it is a rounding error on our budget, and it is something that I think is very worthwhile.

So while I appreciate the Congresswoman's concerns, I do think that these recommendations are a step in the right direction.

Now, honestly, I think we need to do more. I think that we need to do more to make sure that we keep the most talented people in these incredibly important roles as we consider spending trillions and trillions and trillions of our taxpayer dollars.

I appreciate her thoughts. And I thank the chairman for the opportunity to speak.

And with that, I yield back.

The Chairman. I see that Congresswoman Williams has asked to be recognized.

Ms. Williams. I will be brief, Mr. Chairman.

I just want to thank you for all of the work and thank the committee for the work that we have put into these very thoughtful recommendations.

When I came to Congress, I was a little shell‑shocked because, like Mr. Timmons, I came from the State senate, and, y'all, I was a staff of me, myself, and I.

And so it has made a tremendous difference to have knowledgeable staff with the knowledge of how this body works. And no offense to anyone who is doing this work as a lobbyist or professional, but it makes a difference to have staff who is really committed to the people and not a specific special interest.

And so I appreciate the work that we have done on this committee because, as I look around the room, I want this room to be more diverse. And the more we continue to make sure that we are digging into the issues that we have done with this work and this committee, which I am proud to be a part of, the more diverse our government is going to be, the more efficient we are going to be in serving our constituents, which is why we are all here.

So thank you so much to my committee members and Mr. Chairman and Vice Chairman for the work that we have done to get it this far.

The Chairman. Okay. With that, we will vote on these recommendations.

All in favor of Recommendations 16 through 20, say aye.

All those opposed to Recommendations 16 through 20, say no.

Ms. Van Duyne. No.

The Chairman. In the opinion of the chair, two‑thirds being in the affirmative, the ayes have it.

I now move that the committee vote to adopt the committee report containing these 20 recommendations and report it favorably to the House.

All in favor of adopting the committee report, say aye.

All those opposed to adopting the committee report, say no.

In the opinion of the chair, two‑thirds being in the affirmative, the ayes have it.

Okay. Pursuant to rule 5(a) of this committee, a report summarizing the approved recommendations will be compiled and submitted to the House.

Without objection, committee staff are hereby authorized to make technical and conforming changes to the report approved today.

In accordance with rule 5(a) of this committee, Members shall have three days from the time of the approval of the compiled report to submit supplemental or additional views, which shall be included as part of the report.

Before we conclude our business today, I want to again thank the members of this committee for engaging in this process and putting together and passing our sixth set of recommendations. We have got more to do.

I also want to thank our staff on the great job today. You had the hard part.

I also want to just quickly shout out to the Veterans' Affairs Committee for allowing us to use their fancy room.

I would also like to note that we have got a full agenda ahead of us. We will plan to use the August recess to iron out the committee's fall work plan. I look forward to your input and to continuing our work over the next several months.

And with that, I promised you that we would land the plane before 9:30 and I delivered.

We are adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 9:29 a.m., the committee was adjourned.]