

March 4, 2020

Hon. Nita Lowey, Chairwoman
U.S. House Committee on Appropriations
The Capitol, Room H-307
Washington, D.C. 20515

Hon. Kay Granger, Ranking Member
U.S. House Committee on Appropriations
The Capitol, Room H-307
Washington, D.C. 20515

Hon. Tim Ryan, Chairman
Subcommittee on Legislative Branch
Appropriations
The Capitol, Room H-306
Washington, D.C. 20515

Hon. Jamie Herrera Beutler, Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Legislative Branch
Appropriations
The Capitol, Room H-306
Washington, D.C. 20515

Re: Increasing pay for House of Representative staffers

Dear legislators:

On behalf of the undersigned bipartisan group of civil society organizations and individuals, we encourage you to raise the funding levels appropriated toward the compensation of your U.S. House of Representative staffers. As you well know, your staff—both within personal and committee offices—are essential to your carrying out the many functions required of your job. But despite their importance, Congress has offered stagnant and noncompetitive salaries to its aides for decades. As a result, the institution has struggled to retain expert staff, and thus has decreased its own internal capacity to effectively function as a coequal branch of government.

Though there are many reasons aides leave their congressional careers, low pay is the most cited reason by congressional staff for why they depart Congress.¹ The consequences of low congressional pay are especially compounded for D.C.-based staffers given that Washington is one of the most expensive metro areas in the country and aides are increasingly likely to begin their congressional careers owing large student debt balances. Current low levels of congressional pay thus force prospective and current aides to make a choice: serve in Congress or take their skills outside the chamber.

¹ Congressional Management Foundation, *Life in Congress: Job Satisfaction and Engagement of House and Senate Staff*, 2013.

This reality has turned congressional service into a stepping stone toward more lucrative careers in the private sector or within the executive branch. Staffers are quick to recognize that once they establish a baseline of legislative chops and an extensive network of Hill contacts, the private sector is all too willing to provide much more sustainable salary levels, especially for senior level aides. Legislative directors, for example, can expect to make 60 percent more than their congressional salaries, while congressional counsels can see their salaries nearly triple upon leaving the Hill.²

Such low pay, then, results in short tenures.³ Short tenures, in turn, decrease the capacity of Congress to fulfill its role as the primary federal legislative authority and the body responsible for conducting effective oversight of the sprawling executive branch. Short tenures limit the amount of in-house expertise available to individual members and committees. Consequently, novice staffers become increasingly reliant on outside actors—such as unelected executive branch bureaucrats and partisan special interest organizations—because they have more experienced, longer-serving experts studying and researching important issues. Congress simply can't keep up with its own work demands and turns to those who maintain in-house expertise.

We urge you to help reverse this trend of congressional decline, beginning with better compensation for your vital congressional aides. Better pay will immediately help combat the revolving-door problem of aides departing for lobbying shops, help increase staff retention, assist in the recruitment of future capable aides and ensure that Congress can again serve as a coequal branch of government.

Sincerely,

² Casey Burgat, testimony submitted to the Legislative Branch Appropriations Subcommittee, U. S. House of Representatives, April 2, 2019, available at, https://www.rstreet.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/FINAL-Burgat_Leg.-Branch-Approps.-Subcomm-T-estimony-Casey-Burgat.pdf

³ Congressional Research Service, Report R44682, Nov. 9, 2016, available at, https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20161109_R44682_1f7eefde2a58ab7344a6163d3b13b3e48fe35014.pdf

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*Signing on in personal not institutional capacity.