

**Alex Prokop, Founder, Verdance LLC**  
**Testimony on the FY 2023 Appropriations Bill for the Senate**  
**Before the Subcommittee on the Legislative Branch**  
**Concerning the Creation of a Congressional Digital Service Task Force**  
**Submitted May 27, 2022**

Chair Reed, Chair Leahy, Ranking Member Braun, Vice Chair Shelby, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on establishing a Task Force to study how and whether Congress should create a Congressional Digital Service.

My name is Alex Prokop, and I am a public interest technologist. I was a software engineer on the team that rebuilt HealthCare.gov in the wake of its technology failure. In 2020 and 2021, I had the opportunity to serve the House Select Committee for the Modernization of Congress as a digital service fellow under Chairman Kilmer and Ranking Member Graves. Last year, I founded a company called Verdance to pursue the mission of making government digital services more adaptable, efficient, and effective.

Over the past two years, Congress has made laudable technology improvements. The Senate Sergeant At Arms developed the e-signature tool Quill that now is successfully deployed in both chambers, making digital signatures on sign-on letters commonplace. Additionally, the Senate has successfully implemented remote and hybrid hearings. The Senate should build on this progress and position legislative branch technology for transformational change.

I urge the committee to establish a Congressional Digital Service Task Force, which also has been recommended by the House Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress<sup>1</sup>. The purpose of this task force would be to assess and evaluate the technology challenges across the entirety of the Legislative branch, to evaluate the various approaches to ensuring Congressional technology evolves at a healthy pace and meets Congress's institutional challenges, and to make recommendations on how best to constitute a Congressional Digital Service that serves the entirety of the Legislative branch.

The list of potential challenges for a digital service team is long, but here are a few:

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<sup>1</sup> *The Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress - 116th Congress Recommendations, 95th recommendation* <https://modernizecongress.house.gov/116th-recommendations>

*A Congressional Digital Service could act as a bridge to create software tools shared by chambers and offices.*

The Senate, House, and support office and agency technology ecosystems are almost completely fractured. Even for broadly comparable needs, the Senate and House develop their own solutions. The rollout of Quill was one bright moment of successful technology collaboration. A properly empowered Congressional Digital Service would ensure that Quill is an exemplar of things to come, and that Congress can share and co-develop technology between the chambers and offices where appropriate, creating cost savings and increasing productivity.

*A Congressional Digital Service could develop a unified cloud services strategy for the Congressional technology ecosystem.*

The Legislative branch currently lacks a consistent and mature approach to cloud hosting of software systems. Cloud hosting offers many cost and efficiency savings over on-premise services and will unlock the development of new, productivity-increasing tools, which is why the private sector and many executive branch agencies have long ago moved many of their systems to the cloud. Despite some progress, Legislative branch offices and agencies have yet to widely adopt cloud hosting services as a leading choice for new systems. A Congressional Digital Service could consult with offices and develop a unified cloud strategy—it is unlikely that one will come to exist otherwise.

*A Congressional Digital Service could assess unserved committee technology needs.*

Committees have inconsistent support concerning putting together their technology toolset. While there are bespoke projects, so far there is not yet a comprehensive look across committee needs to discover where the biggest common pain points and potential solutions are. A Congressional Digital Service could spearhead such an effort and uncover tools to save taxpayer dollars and streamline committee operations.

*A Congressional Digital Service could help fill gaps in legislative processes that are currently unsupported by digital tools.*

The absence of digital tools supporting some Congressional processes wastes valuable staff time and causes avoidable errors. House Majority Leader Hoyer and Leader McCarthy sponsored a Congressional Hackathon in April 2022. At the hackathon, a team of Congressional staff and technologists outlined a list of technology gaps. A

Congressional Digital Service could identify those gaps on an ongoing basis, and ensure that the right bridges are built between offices to handle them.

*A Congressional Digital Service could create a standing, high level technology capacity to support Congress in times of crisis.*

Investment in a modern digital service organization will give the Legislative branch needed standing capacity to solve urgent technological needs as they arise. The U.S. Digital Service was established in the wake of the HealthCare.gov crisis, and serves as a non-partisan home for expert technologists in the executive branch. The injection of talent it provided has kept many tech issues from reaching front-page status across both Democratic and Republican administrations. Last year, many compared the launch of CovidTests.gov to the launch of HealthCare.gov. Where the latter was famously unusable for weeks after launch, the former delivered on its promises from day one, and did not suffer downtime or major glitches. When the urgent need arose, expert U.S. Digital Service staff was already in place to connect the dots between organizations to handle it. Congress will face such moments in the future, and a Congressional Digital Service would bolster this branch with needed high-level technology capacity.

Since the U.S. Digital Service was started in 2014, many states and cities have started their own digital service offices. These digital service organizations are not cure-alls, but on balance and over the long term we have seen government technology capacity increase dramatically since 2014 as a result of digital service offices and initiatives. If properly constituted, empowered, and funded, a Congressional Digital Service could play the same role in the Legislative branch. We believe the committee should create a task force composed of internal and external stakeholders to study how to properly constitute a Congressional Digital Service and make recommendations to you.

We recommend the following report language to accomplish this purpose:

*Congressional Digital Service Task Force.* Congressional operations depend upon technology, but the Legislative branch is often insufficiently empowered and coordinated when it comes to purchasing technology and providing technological services. The Executive branch responded to similar operational challenges by creating the U.S. Digital Service, which hires technologists to build tools that make government work better for the American people. We note with favor the recent creation of the Congressional Digital Service within the House's Chief Administrative Office. A more expansive, sophisticated, and coordinated approach to the provision of technology and technological services across the Legislative branch would help members better serve their constituents.

To address these and other questions, the committee directs the establishment of a Congressional Digital Services Task Force composed of staff representatives of the Secretary of the Senate; the Senate Sergeant at Arms; Member, Committee, and Leadership offices; the Library of Congress; the Congressional Research Service; the Government Publishing Office; the Government Accountability Office; and such other congressional offices as may be appropriate and invites the participation of public stakeholders and representatives from appropriate offices in the House to examine these and any additional issues it considers relevant and to provide a report to the committee within 180 days that also shall be made publicly available.

Thank you once again for the opportunity to provide testimony to the Committee.