



JULY 2021

# Serving the People

Congressional Staff Perspectives



ALLIANCE  
FOR CONGRESS

# About the Authors

## About the Alliance

The Partnership for Public Service's Alliance for Congress supports a more effective Congress that better meets the country's diverse needs and interests. The Alliance will build on the Partnership's two decades of experience working with the federal workforce and government agencies to increase collaboration, accountability, efficiency and innovation. In working with Congress, the Alliance will promote the importance of public service and stewardship, and champion common sense, nonpartisan improvements to make Congress a more capable and effective institution.

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# Executive Summary

Congress has an essential role to play in American democracy. It's in Congress that all federal laws are created and passed, where executive branch oversight happens and where the public has a platform to voice its needs and concerns. Congress, as an institution, is the ultimate forum for compromise, healthy political conflict and alliance-building. And when it lives up to its ideals, it has the power to transform people's lives. Congress is at its best when it demonstrates a problem-solving mind-set that helps government work better and delivers results on issues that matter to the public.

Yet, gridlocked, dysfunctional, polarized and hyper-partisan are only a sampling of the adjectives used to describe Congress today. [It's not trusted by the public. It seldom invests in its capacity to listen, legislate and lead.](#) And it [doesn't represent the diversity of the people it serves.](#) Moreover, the recent shocks to American democracy—the pandemic, the recession and the Capitol insurrection—have left the institution in a fragile state.

But the future of Congress doesn't have to be a grim one.

The Alliance for Congress is a new initiative of the nonpartisan, nonprofit Partnership for Public Service that will work to build a forward-looking Congress that functions more effectively and is capable of tackling big problems for the people it serves. This initiative is an extension of the Partnership's mission to build a better government and to make our democracy stronger. Over time, the initiative will seek to answer two broad questions: "What does a healthy Congress look like?" and "How do we build it?"

This first Alliance study focuses on these questions from the perspective of individuals who make up the backbone of Congress: the staff who work for senators and congressmen and on Senate and House committees. This report's purpose is twofold: 1) To offer a glimpse into how the staff who work on Capitol Hill view the health of Congress and its potential and 2) To highlight how a commitment to public service by House and Senate staff has contributed to the institution's strengths and enabled it to create pockets of success where Congress lives up to its mission to serve the public.

We found that Capitol Hill staff, who have a [substantial role in the policymaking process](#) and are central to helping Congress become an effective organization, see it as a poorly functioning institution. When it comes to its ability to adapt to change, to seize opportunities and to be an inclusive, diverse and representative institution, they say Congress faces a major gap between today's reality and its potential.

Our interviews also revealed that congressional staff are passionate about their jobs, want to see the institution become more efficient and effective, and are committed to public service.

This study identifies key components of organizational health that have enabled congressional successes and notes where and why those attributes are not systemic. And it looks to the future by highlighting areas of opportunity for growth and improvement.

# Serving the People

**W**hy should organizational health matter for an institution like Congress? While organizational health is not a traditional measure for Congress—lawmakers tend to measure their success by number of bills passed, the number of hearings held or days spent in session—an assessment of performance that goes beyond output is crucial if the institution is to become more effective and efficient. Through our work, we hope to spark a conversation about the health of Congress and what it will take to make the legislative branch a better functioning institution of our democracy.

In the private sector, the concept of organizational health is a common one: businesses often measure their ability to clearly communicate vision, mission and strategy, and to adapt to change and seize opportunities. Performance audits enable organizations to manage their work as well as to renew and transform themselves. Some of these models can be adapted and applied to create a more holistic understanding of Congress as an institution, its challenges and how it can overcome them.

For the purposes of this study, organizational health of Congress was measured through an amalgamation of [different sources](#)' approach to the topic, and it looks at the health of Congress through three broad markers:

1. The extent to which there's **alignment around a common vision, mission and values.**
2. The extent to which Congress is **able to execute on that vision and mission.**
3. The extent to which Congress **adapts to change and is connected to the needs of the people it serves.**

During the course of three months, we interviewed current and former staff from member offices and committees. We spoke to staff from all career levels and both sides of the aisle, and asked them about what the institution does well and what it would take for the legislative branch to thrive and better serve the public.

We recognize the answers to the three markers vary depending on an individual's relationship with Congress. And while members, the public, congressional support staff and other stakeholders have a different understanding of the health of Congress, we focused on staff for three reasons: 1) Because of the crucial support role they play, staffers are directly impacted when Congress isn't performing like it should; 2) Congressional staff have been directly affected by the [systemic disinvestment in congressional capacity](#) for the last 40 years; and 3) The pandemic and the Capitol insurrection have affected congressional staff in ways that should be captured, understood and remedied if we want to make Congress healthier. Ultimately, congressional staff are a crucial component of any effort to make Congress a better and stronger institution.

# Congressional staff and the challenges they face

**B**eing a Capitol Hill staffer means working long hours and juggling multiple issues at any given time. The more than [17,000 congressional staffers](#) working in the House and the Senate draft laws, help constituents navigate the complexities of the federal government and ensure their bosses have the information and knowledge they need to best represent the diverse interests of the public. From corresponding with constituents and monitoring the legislative schedule, to building and maintaining open lines of communication with the public and being in charge of specific policy or oversight issues, congressional staff are behind-the-scenes changemakers.

Staff are often directly impacted when Congress, as an institution, isn't healthy. Today, the lack of institutional health partially stems from the fact that Congress has not invested in its staff in ways that match the value they add. The [lack of investment](#) translates into declining staff levels, diminishing institutional knowledge and policy know-how, and challenges such as outdated technology and a general lack of resources. Total congressional staffing levels, committee staffing levels and staffing levels at the Congressional Research Service and the Government Accountability Office also have all [declined](#) over the last four decades.

From an organizational health perspective, Congress must have a talented, engaged and diverse workforce that has the resources to help lawmakers deal with a wide array of challenging and complex issues. Yet, congressional staff often don't represent the diversity of the people members of Congress serve, can't afford to take unpaid internships or do not have salaries that match the expertise required for their jobs. Moreover, staff don't have the resources they need to do their jobs or, when the resources are available, they don't have the time or the support of their bosses to take advantage of those resources. Finally, the pandemic and the events of January 6 have added a whole new set of challenges for staff, ranging from work-life balance to mental health and safety.

## Lack of congressional staff diversity

While today's Congress is [more diverse than it's ever been](#), congressional staff remain [largely white](#). The barriers to entry for potential employees of color are still high, thus locking many people out of the opportunity to work on Capitol Hill. "I have friends who were the only person of color in a white member's office and there are a lot of members who have no people of color in their office," a House committee staffer said.

[Research](#) from the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies from 2020 shows that although 40% of the U.S. population is non-white, only 11% of all top staff members working in Senate offices were people of color. On the House side, [another study](#) showed that only 13.7% of top House staff members were people of color. Many staffers we interviewed spoke about the difficult hiring process and how their race made it harder for them to get a job: "It's very difficult to get a job in the Senate, and it's very, very difficult to get a job in the Senate as a Black person," a Senate staff assistant said. This lack of equitable access to jobs on Capitol Hill impacts the congressional talent pipeline further down the line, too, as the [numbers show](#): While Blacks make up 13.4% of the U.S. population, only 3.1% of the top Senate staff members are Black.

This lack of diversity—which is an issue among lawmakers, too —often means that the indi-

viduals who get to influence and shape policymaking do not always reflect the diversity of experiences and backgrounds of the people they serve. “If you look at the members, there’s only ever been a few Black senators.

The House is a little bit better, but the kind of people that you want running for office are not always the kind of people who are running for office,” a communications staffer said. She continued: “There was a quote that I read the other day that said: ‘Real people, with real struggles, should be the ones closest to real power,’ and it’s kind of cheesy, but I think that’s very true and that’s not really the case right now.”

The challenge of diversity, equity and inclusion is compounded by the fact that there isn’t a systemic way for the House and the Senate to collect demographic data on congressional staff. Beyond the surveys from the House Office of Diversity and Inclusion and the Senate Democratic Diversity Initiative, there isn’t a central repository of data to help guide efforts to make the workforce more diverse. If Congress can’t tell what the makeup of its workforce is, it can’t fully address the challenges of diversity and inclusion.

## **Racial and economic inequalities for legislative interns**

Internships—the [most common](#) entry point for junior staff on the Capitol Hill—are also a barrier for staff of color and, in general, those without the financial means. The long hours and low pay in a city with high living costs such as Washington, D.C., often means that young people without an economic safety net are either automatically locked out of the chance at having an internship or must go the extra mile to apply for stipends or scholarships. A [recent report](#) from the group Pay Our Interns found that the average total stipend per intern was approximately \$1,986.75 in the Senate and \$1,612.53 in the House. For reference, Pay Our Interns estimates the cost of living for a Senate internship to be \$4,438 (which usually lasts 5 weeks) and \$6,514 for a House internship (which tends to last 7 weeks).

And even after great strides were made to make paid internships the norm, the disparities persist: The same report from Pay Our Interns also found that 76% of the people with paid internships on Capitol Hill were white, while 6.7% were Black and 7.9% were Latino. Finally, the report also found that “students who attended private universities were better represented in Congress than students at public universities relative to the number of students attending each type of university nationally.”

## **Low, uncompetitive pay**

Another challenge faced by many congressional staff is pay, which often renders a career in Congress a temporary pursuit or one that has to be supplemented by a [part-time job](#).

After some time spent in Congress, many staff take jobs in the private sector where their skills are more highly valued. [Research](#) shows that former Capitol Hill staffers with several years of relevant experience can, within a year of switching jobs, make substantially more money by becoming lobbyists. When describing what it’s like to be a congressional staffer, a committee staffer sums it up: “These people work long hours, have limited technological support and make little money.”

[Studies in the private sector](#) as well as the Partnership’s [Best Places to Work rankings](#) show that beyond pay, factors such as engagement and commitment to a mission are key to employee retention. Nonetheless, in the case of Congress, low pay is a central barrier to long-term service in Congress.

From 2001 to 2019, median pay for staff in House offices [largely declined](#). While the decline is not as dramatic for Senate staff, between 2001 and 2020, for example, the median pay for press secretary decreased by 23.35%. The low pay makes living in an expensive city like Washington, D.C. challenging, and often leads to staff pursuing other, better-paying jobs. In 2019, the average tenure for staff on Capitol Hill was [3.1 years](#).

Brian Greer, who worked in Congress as defense advisor for over a decade, said that the lack of competitiveness in salaries with the private sector “gets extremely challenging as you get older. If you want to do the adult stuff like buy a house, have a family, pay for childcare, it’s very hard to afford that on a congressional staffer salary”.

The low pay and high turnover rate are, in turn, reflected in the ability of Congress to live up to its mission to serve the people it represents. It takes time to learn about the rules, procedures and the many complex issues on which Congress must legislate. When congressional staff leave their jobs, they take institutional knowledge with them, and loss can hamper congressional effectiveness and institutional health.

## **Lack of resources**

A [survey](#) conducted by the Congressional Management Foundation found that only 15% of congressional staff are satisfied with their chamber’s performance in the realm of “staff knowledge, skills and abilities,” which are key to supporting members’ official duties.” Wilsar Johnson, who was the director of digital strategy at the Congressional Black Caucus, put it simply: “Congress is always running out of breath to catch up and it should be the opposite. Congress has too much responsibility without enough resources or money or people to meet those goals. The math doesn’t add up.”

This gap stems not only from the high turnover rate, but from the barriers faced by staff regarding professional development. “For younger staff,” a House committee staffer said, “I would say there’s really no talent pipeline for how to do stuff..You have to really take initiative or else you’ll feel like you’re letting down your member and the community they serve. While professional development is very important, there’s little support.”

Even when resources are made available, many interviewees spoke of not having enough time to take advantage of workshops and training sessions offered by staff associations, the Congressional Staff Academy or other organizations. That’s the case for staff as well as members themselves, as a professional staff member puts it: “I just don’t have time... Or when I have a supervisor who I think could really use a training on leadership or on how to give feedback, they don’t have time for that either. They’re running all around.” Alternatively, some staff were unaware of the existing resources to support them in their roles.

## **New challenges from the pandemic and January 6**

In addition to the challenges around diversity, equity, pay and professional development, the COVID-19 pandemic created a new set of challenges for staff during the past year. On top of some initial technological hurdles due to quickly having to move congressional work to a virtual environment, interviewees mentioned struggling to have any work-life balance when the lines between work and personal life were blurred. For many, a commitment to not letting the pandemic prevent them from working for the public kept them going during a very difficult year.

While the pandemic was a huge challenge for staff and Congress as a whole, the events of January 6, 2021, when a mob stormed the Capitol in a violent protest over the 2020 presidential election, have added a layer of stress and struggle for many and, in particular, for staff of color.



When asked about what kinds of resources were made available in the aftermath of the insurrection, most mentioned some therapy and counseling sections, but were also quick to highlight that they often had to choose between taking care of their mental health and showing up for work. Others talked about appreciating the opportunity to have free counseling, but said the support offered to them wasn't as all-encompassing as they would have liked.

Another staffer mentioned that conversations about what safety looks like are still ongoing, but that it's still hard to see people not "being held liable or accountable" for what happened.

## Why do they serve?

**A**lthough workplace issues were of paramount concern to the congressional staffers, all of those interviewed expressed a deep passion for what they do. Much like employees in the executive branch, congressional staff also showed a high degree of commitment to public service.

While every office, committee and political party may diverge on the means to achieve that mission, the clarity on what Congress is meant to do was nearly unanimous: To serve the people. From an organizational health perspective, this shared sense of mission has been key to the ability of Congress to do its job and has been particularly important when the institution has been paralyzed by disagreement.

Congressional staffers' commitment to public service, a passion for learning and the desire to make a difference are some of key reasons they have sought to work on Capitol Hill.

### A commitment to public service

Democratic and Republican staffers at all levels spoke of a commitment to giving back. For many, their immigrant, military or first-generation college graduate backgrounds propelled them to pursue a career in public service by working in Congress.



**"I loved, I loved working there. The pace was intense, but it was great to be doing something that matters."**

Wilsar Johnson, former director of digital strategy, Congressional Black Caucus

**“I never met anybody there who was there for the wrong reasons.”**

Alex Gallo, former professional staff member with the House Armed Services Committee



**“A passion for public service, integrity, excellence, responsibility, teamwork. I think that’s what’s really driving people in Congress. It’s a passion to work in public service.”**

Former Republican communications director

### **An opportunity to learn from others and to work with the best**

Interviewees talked about being surrounded by talented individuals at work, and about how a career in Congress is an education in and of itself. For them, it was an opportunity for hands-on learning about the complexities of the legislative process from experienced people, and to work with individuals committed to the mission of making people’s lives better.

**“My boss is a terrific legislator... And another thing that makes me so excited to come to work is my immediate supervisor. She’s so smart. She knows so much, she’s a really good mentor.”**

Congressional communications staffer

**“It was an absolute pleasure to work there. I didn’t want to leave. I would do it again in a heartbeat.”**

Jason Schmid, former minority budget director and Subcommittee on Strategic Forces staff leader



**“It was chance to make an impact and to work for somebody I really respected and knew I could learn from and do productive and important work with. At the end of the day, there’s no greater honor than being able to serve the public in some way.”**

Will Quinn, former professional staff member, Senate Armed Services Committee

## A chance to make a difference

Because of the complexity and magnitude of responsibilities, congressional staff are often in the unique position to help craft laws that can be transformational to people’s lives. Interviewees told stories about the people they met, the meetings they were part of and the instances when they presented opportunities to their bosses to act that led to real, tangible changes.

**“Something that keeps me motivated is being able to help an agency become more effective through an appropriations bill so they can start investing in their capacity and do their job better. It seems like a small thing, but I know that down the road it could make a big difference, and that’s really cool.”**

Professional staff member

**“It was the most incredible time. I got to witness incredible moments of history in the making, and I got to work on and pass 4,000 pages of legislation.”**

Gabriel Noronha, former special assistant for the Senate Armed Services Committee



**“Regardless of your political party or your philosophy about governing, members and staff come to Congress to make people’s lives better, to improve the country as a whole.”**

Ananda Bhatia, clerk and research associate for the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress

# When Congress works

**A** shared vision and values are not enough to make Congress a healthy institution. After all, agreement on the purpose of Congress or even a deep commitment to public service does not automatically yield successful performance. For Congress to be a healthy institution, members and staff must work and successfully execute on that shared vision and mission. They must seize opportunities and be flexible enough so they can adapt to change.

The four examples below show what a healthy Congress looks like at a micro level from the perspective of congressional staff. Unfortunately, these success stories are the exception rather than the rule in Congress today. Yet, they shine a light on the types of models, processes and attitudes that could be scaled and systematized across the institution.

When Congress works, leaders put their egos aside to lead change by being self-aware and by engaging with staff as experts. When leaders become champions of diversity, equity and inclusion, they also can open doors to new voices and perspectives, thus making the work stronger and more representative of the diversity of the public.

Major legislative wins are still possible when bipartisan and bicameral collaboration are at the core of the lawmaking process. And overcoming times of high uncertainty and instability becomes possible when the institution and its people are open to embracing change through innovation or technology modernization.

The result are pockets of organizational health where alignment on vision, mission and values meet a desire to make the institution work.

## Leadership & Stewardship

Beyond their willingness to serve the public, many of our interviewees mentioned their bosses—members as well as other staff—as one of their top reasons for committing to a career in public service. [Research](#) shows that having a good manager is a key factor for an employee’s job satisfaction, and that’s no different for congressional staff. In fact, when talking about instances where Congress works, interviewees talked about leaders who:



- **Exhibited self-awareness** and explicitly communicated their commitment to working for the public and “fostering an environment where bipartisanship was an underlying value of how they did their work.”
- **Engaged** staff in ways that were meaningful, such as in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd, the 46-year-old Black man killed by a Minneapolis police officer while being arrested on suspicion of using a counterfeit \$20 bill. Several staffers mentioned an earnest effort from their bosses (members and chiefs of staff) to listen to those who needed a space to talk about what his killing meant to them. Even though she was no longer in Congress then, for Wilsar Johnson, watching Congress respond to what happened to Floyd was important: “It wasn’t just about George

Floyd. It wasn't just about Black people. It was about all minorities in this country and how Black people have been suffering for so long in this country. I saw Congress react and introduce the George Floyd policing bill and I think that was a space where Congress was seeing an opportunity to listen to people.”

- **Achieved results** by being entrepreneurial with legislation, finding “windows of opportunity” and empowering staff to pursue policy opportunities. When staff and members achieve these results, a senior staffer said, “it’s exhilarating to get that win! It’s so re-energizing,” said former House staffer Brian Greer. With support from his boss, Greer was empowered to work with members on both sides of the aisle to draft a bill that guaranteed paid parental leave for federal government employees. The bill became law in 2019 and today all federal employees are entitled to 12 weeks paid parental leave for the birth, adoption or placement of a new child.
- **Led change** by prioritizing reform through the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress with an overwhelming bipartisan vote in the 116th Congress. The committee’s [mandate](#) is to “investigate, study, make findings, hold public hearings, and develop recommendations to make Congress more effective, efficient, and transparent on behalf of the American people.” After two years, the committee approved [97 recommendations](#) to improve the technology, human resources, onboarding process and accessibility of the House. In the congressional staff realm, the committee [proposed changes](#) that included creating a voluntary pay band system with a salary floor; expanded access to health insurance for congressional staff members; increased professional training through the Congressional Staff Academy; adoption of staff telework policies; upgrading technology used by staff to serve constituents; and standardized onboarding training for new employees. In March 2020, [H. Res. 756](#), the nonbinding Moving our Democracy and Congressional Operations Towards Modernization Resolution passed the House with 29 of the 97 recommendations. During the 117th Congress, the committee is continuing to hold hearings, speak with experts and release recommendations on a rolling basis.

## Talent

Congress must have the talent and expertise required to solve the biggest problems facing the country today. “It takes recruiting, a good mentor and a good manager who is willing to take a chance on you, to push you out there. It takes an institution to invest in you and to see you as the future of that institution,” said former House staffer Brian Greer.

While Congress has many shortcomings when it comes to how it manages its workforce, there are some promising developments and existing resources that seek to:



- **Develop and nurture talent** through recruiting, training and offering career development and networking opportunities for young staff. Organizations like the Congressional Staff Academy and staff associations are examples of how Congress as an institution recognizes the importance of investing in talent and giving staff the resources they need to do their jobs well.

- **Invest in talent** that's diverse and representative of the nation. While the road to a more diverse, equitable and inclusive congressional workforce is still a long one, staff spoke of changes they saw in their members' individual offices and committees. "The House Armed Services Committee workforce is becoming a little bit more representative of the armed forces," said former House staffer Jason Schmid. "And I think that's a good thing, especially how we're seeing lots and lots more women veterans, which I think is very important."
- On a broader level, the [House Office of Diversity and Inclusion](#), works to "direct and guide House employing offices to recruit, hire, train, develop, advance, promote, and retain a diverse workforce." The [Senate Democratic Diversity Initiative](#) does similar work by assisting "Senate Democratic offices in building a diverse workforce."
- **Manage talent** by having a core of best human resources practices. A promising development on the House side has been the upcoming launch of a central hub of best human resources practices. The House [Chief Administrative Officer](#), in collaboration with the House Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress, the Appropriations Committee and the House Office of Diversity and Inclusion, is working to develop tools, tips and guides for member offices to better manage their staff. In addition to the CAO's [existing work](#) to support offices and staff, the hub will include resources such as resume banks, information on how to vet references, draft offer letters, and much more.

## Collaboration

Gridlock and unwillingness to compromise are common terms used to describe Congress today. But year in and year out, bipartisan and bicameral collaboration leads Congress to pass a major piece of legislation: The National Defense Authorization Act. For [60 consecutive years](#), the NDAA has authorized defense appropriations. It's also a major success story of Congress coming together to fulfill its mission.

For staff who have the opportunity to work on the NDAA, there's something unique and special about the process. Through a yearlong exercise in building trust, members and staff from both sides of the aisle come together and, as Gabriel Noronha put it, "It's stunning how successful it is." The success is so well-known that Armed Services committee staff tend to share best practices with other House and Senate committee staff. This success, according to staff, largely stems from three factors:



- **A strong foundation of trust** between the committee chairs and the staff, as well as an understanding from all the parties involved that the work is bigger than they are. "On both sides of the aisle, I had a very good experience working with folks that truly take the national security and defense of the nation and those who serve very seriously." It's "a replicable cycle that builds trust between the parties," a committee staffer said. Because it happens every year, there's an understanding that while someone's party may be in control for that year, that's a temporary situation. That, in turn, creates an incentive for all participants (members and staff) go about the process in good faith.

- **The effectiveness of the legislative process**, which has a strong foundation in rules and procedures (such as placing a premium on regular order) and shies away from showmanship by keeping key parts of the process behind doors. The reputation that this effectiveness generates, as a result, tends to attract talented individuals. Some interviewees mentioned that, based on their experience, these individuals end up serving on the Armed Services committees for a long time.
- The **high level of staff expertise** and the **strength of the staff relationships** are able to develop with one another. These two factors are crucial to well-functioning committees and successful legislation.

## Innovation and Technology Modernization

Rapid technology modernization along with demographic and cultural developments requires Congress to adapt to change so it can continue to fulfill its mission. While most staffers interviewed recognized the slowness at which Congress embraces change and incorporates it into its rules and processes, they were also quick to point out how the pandemic triggered a series of innovations throughout offices and committees.

“We know that Congress is capable of change because we’ve seen it happen. I think one of those bright spots is the way Congress adapted to the pandemic...people got creative, everyone started working from home right away,” said Ananda Bhatia, a clerk and research associate for the House Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress. During the past year and half, Congress adapted to and embraced change by:



- **Providing technology resources** in the early days of the pandemic when everything shut down, making it possible for Congress to continue doing its job after its workforce was no longer in the office. Although there were some technological issues during the first few days, Jason Schmid, a former House subcommittee staffer, highlighted how quickly the IT department responded: “I have to give the House IT folks credit. They did a remarkable job of putting all that together in a very short amount of time. I think they did a very good job of adjusting very quickly.”
- **Adapting process and procedures** to the new realities of the virtual world. Innovations such as proxy voting and electronic signatures were crucial to a smooth transition. Remote hearings also allowed for a much more diverse pool of voices to testify before Congress. Some of these changes, which many staff said they never thought would happen, will become part of how Congress conducts its job moving forward. That’s the case with electronic signatures: [Quill](#) is a new online tool that will allow member offices to share letters, collect supporting signatures and track the progress of the letter signing process from start to finish. “In response to acute crises, Congress can rise to the occasion and adapt reasonably well. It’s actually rather remarkable when you look at what it has done in relation to COVID-19,” said Will Quinn, a former staffer on the Senate Armed Services Committee.
- **Establishing innovation networks** where staff worked together to develop work-from-home guides for staff on systems and policies when offices on Capitol Hill transitioned to a fully remote work environment. When members and staff could not interact with each other face-to-face—which many agreed made the work much harder—congressional staff were crucial to the institution’s functioning during a time the people needed it the most.

# Conclusion: Invest in congressional staff

**A** skilled and motivated workforce is a first necessary step toward creating a healthier Congress.

Looking ahead, Congress has an opportunity to better prepare, equip and invest in its professional workforce, and take steps to retain seasoned staff members who possess valuable expertise.

House and Senate staff members interviewed were unanimous in their belief that a career in Congress must be made affordable to everyone—as opposed to only the wealthy and well-connected. They said congressional staff also should be recognized for their commitment to public service and their work. And they asserted that leadership should play a key role in ensuring that staff members have the support, the training and the resources they need, and that the workforce become more diverse to reflect the nation’s population. Good, systemic data collection to inform those efforts is also key.

Parallel to staffing improvements, our interviews found that in order for Congress to become a healthier institution, it should be more open to change and resist the urge to stick with the status quo by proactively addressing operational, managerial and human resource challenges.

The COVID-19 pandemic created many new challenges for lawmakers and staff alike, but also forced unexpected innovations. This included use of technology for remote work and congressional hearings, for proxy voting and for electronic signatures that enabled lawmakers and House and Senate aides to do their jobs more efficiently and in a safe way.

Congress should learn lessons from the pandemic experience and expand on the use of modern technology and other innovations that occurred out of necessity. On issues of leadership and stewardship, talent and collaboration, the success stories outlined in this report also offer a glimpse of what is possible.

Congress has the ability to change, improve how it functions to better serve the public. A key to reaching those goals includes providing increased support for its professional staff.



# Methodology

During the course of two months, we interviewed 15 current or recently departed congressional staff members. We sought to identify individuals from different professional levels, offices and backgrounds who worked in House and Senate offices and on committees. Interviews were approximately one hour-long and interviewees had the option to speak on the record, anonymously or on background. These interviews are not intended to be representative of all staff but instead to highlight themes worthy of additional exploration. In addition to the interviews, we conducted a literature review on topics related to Congress and congressional capacity as well as organizational health and management.

# Acknowledgements

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