

Written testimony of Casey Burgat
Senior Governance Fellow, R Street Institute
Before the House of Representatives
Legislative Branch Appropriations Subcommittee
April 2, 2019

Chairman Ryan, Ranking Member Beutler and members of the Legislative Branch Appropriations Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony in support of increased funds and attention toward the employees that are essential to executing much of the work done on Capitol Hill, including the convening of this very hearing: congressional staffers.

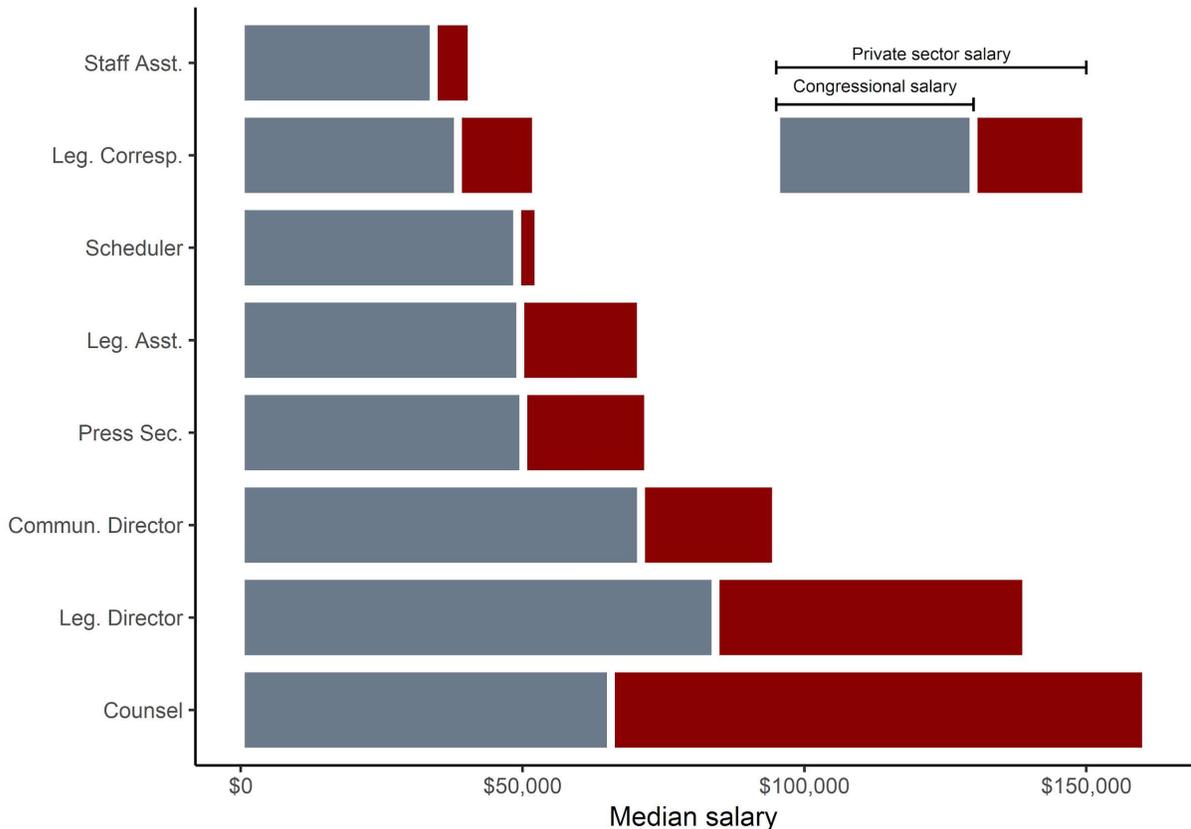
As a senior governance fellow at the R Street Institute, I work to identify ways for Congress to reassert itself as the First Branch of government. Much of my career, including my previous service at the Congressional Research Service (CRS) and the completion of my Ph.D. in American Politics at the University of Maryland, has been spent studying and writing on the importance and impact of congressional aides.

As you all know better than most, your staff are essential to carrying out the many demands of your elected office. Yet, despite their acknowledged importance, congressional aides experience a litany of frustrations that ultimately result in short tenures on Capitol Hill. When your staffers flee Congress after a few short years, Congress' capacity to fulfill vital congressional functions, including lawmaking and effective oversight, is limited. Furthermore, their quick turnover cedes power to unelected special interests and the comparatively well-resourced Executive Branch, both of whom maintain issue area expertise.

To this end, I would like to call your attention to two principal staffer frustrations and reasons for their departure or decision not to serve in the first place: inadequate compensation and problems of diversity in the workplace. Though these are but two of the myriad problems that require attention from lawmakers, they serve as important touchstones because they are so regularly identified by staffers themselves as serious problems in the institution.

First, compensation. It is no secret that congressional aides are poorly paid given the importance of their work, the harsh demands of the job and the high cost of living in Washington. But, low levels of pay become far more apparent when compared with similar jobs within the private sector, which staffers quickly fill after short stints on the Hill. Please see Figure 1, which shows the congressional median salaries for several common positions as well as the private sector equivalent compensation.

Figure 1. Private sector pay gap within congressional staff positions



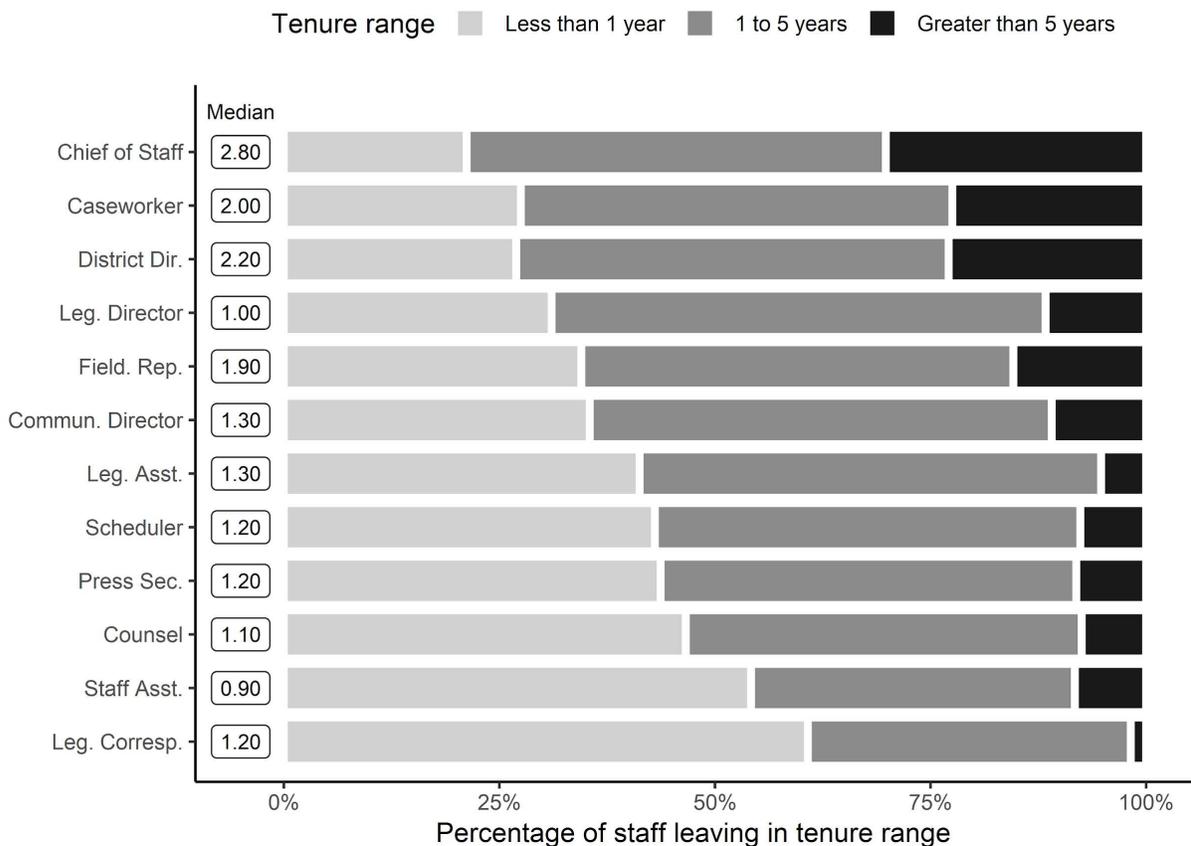
Private Sector Salary Source: PayScale.com Salary Comparisons, Washington D.C.

For entry-level positions, such as staff assistants and legislative correspondents, these pay gaps may not look daunting at first glance. But staff assistants in the private sector can make 20 percent more than their congressional counterparts, and Correspondents can command over 35 percent more. What’s more, these pay gaps occur for staffers early in their working lives, when they are more likely to carry student debt. As a result, young staffers who show up to the Hill dedicated to making a difference are forced to choose between more lucrative jobs outside of Congress, or scraping by in an expensive city, delaying savings and bunking up with multiple roommates just to pay the bills.

And of course, these private sector pay gaps become more problematic as aides move up the congressional ladder. In more powerful positions, such as legislative director and counsel, the pay gaps reach 65 percent and 145 percent, respectively. These salary differences have proven over and over again to be too appealing to pass up, as capable aides take their experience and congressional networks to the private sector and special interest groups. This is a big reason why no congressional position has a median tenure length of longer than four years, much to the detriment of the institution (see Figure 2).¹

Figure 2. Median tenures within congressional staff positions

¹ Congressional Research Service, Report R44682, Nov. 9, 2016, available at, https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20161109_R44682_1f7eefde2a58ab7344a6163d3b13b3e48fe35014.pdf



A second common frustration among staff is a genuine lack of diversity—including ethnic and gender discrepancies—within top level positions in personal offices and within committees.

Women and racial minorities see and feel unspoken glass ceilings on their congressional careers. These limits on advancement often push staffers to look for jobs in the private sector after reaching a respectable number of years of congressional experience, or even worse, deter capable and committed aides from joining the ranks as staffers in the first place, because they know their advancement rates are far slower than those of their white male counterparts.

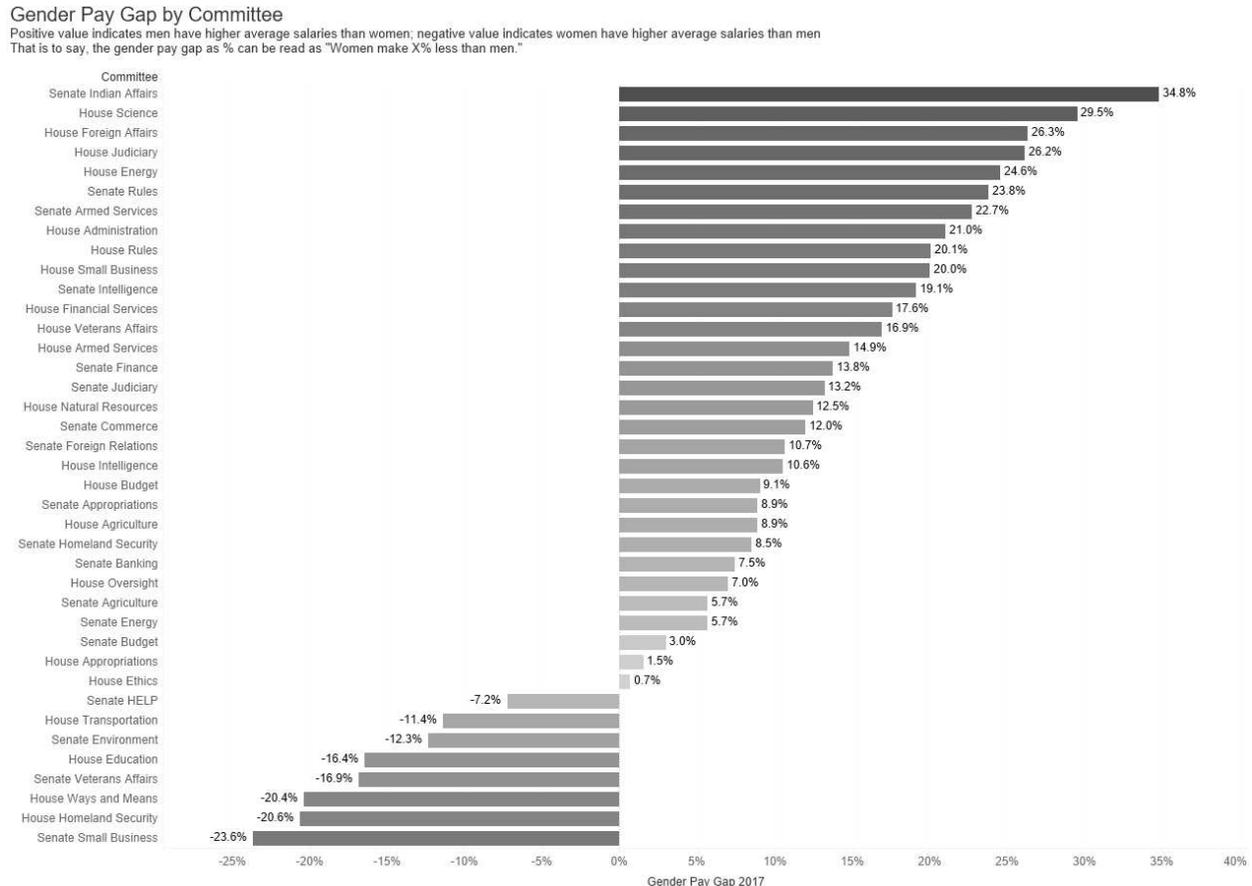
Let's turn to specifics. Women, for example, constitute over 50 percent of congressional aides. But hidden behind this statistic is the reality that top-level jobs and policy portfolios disproportionately go to men, while women are far more likely to hold administrative positions like scheduler and staff assistant.²

And even when women do attain coveted committee and personal office positions, they often face a payment gap that constitutes yet another barrier to equality. Consider Figure 3, which highlights the pay discrepancies between men and women for staffers serving on each House

² For more detailed statistics, please see Casey Burgat, "Among House staff, women are well represented. Just not in the senior positions", *Washington Post*, June 20, 2017, available at, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/06/20/among-house-staff-women-are-well-represented-just-not-in-the-senior-positions/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.016eb7e220ca

and Senate committee. On 31 of the 39 committees for which data was available³, men made more than woman on average, with 10 of those committees having gender pay gaps of over 20 percent.

Figure 3. Gender pay gap by committee

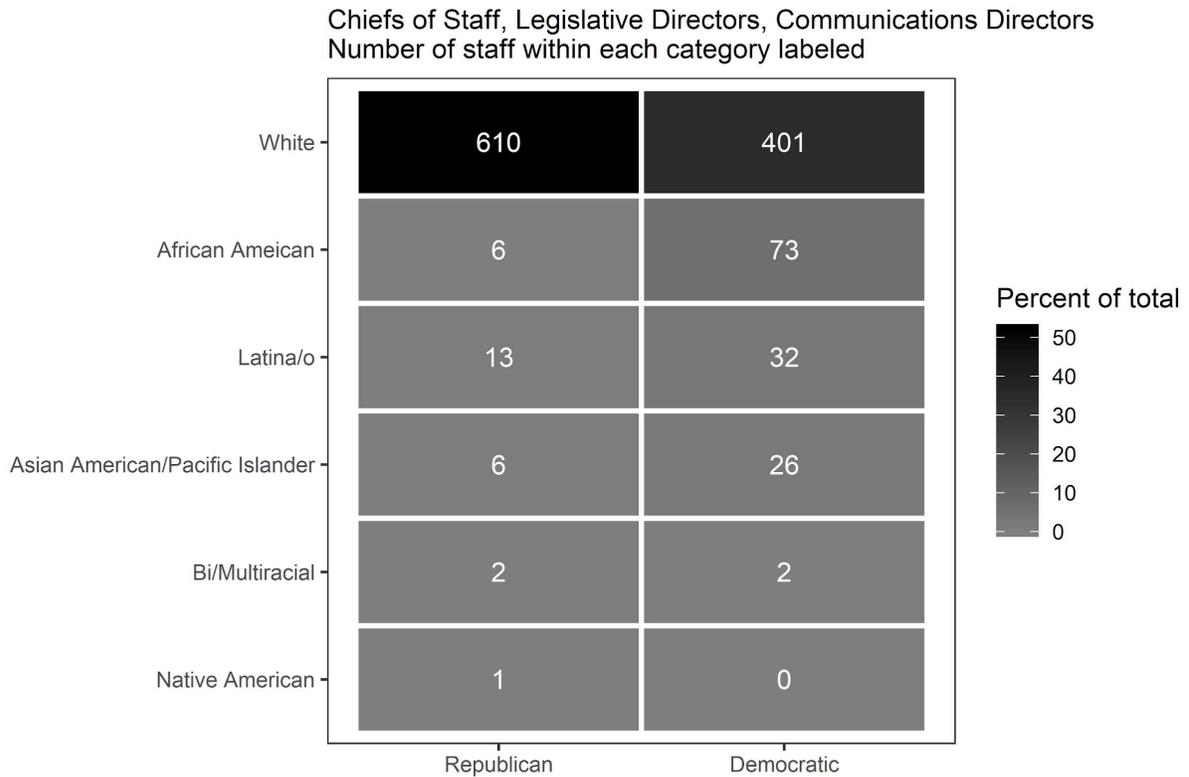


Racial minorities face a similar attainment gap, particularly in top positions within House personal offices. Please see Figure 4, which itemizes by race the number of staff serving as Chiefs of Staff, Legislative Directors or Communications Directors. Clearly, white aides dominate such positions within both parties, often dwarfing the proportions of each race in the general population. African-Americans, for example, make up 13.4 percent of the U.S. population⁴ but only 6.7 percent of top House staffers and less than 1 percent within the Republican party.

³ For information regarding data sources, as well as a deeper look at congressional committee staffing, please see Casey Burgat and Ryan Dukeman, "Who's on the Hill: Staffing and Human Capital in Congress' Legislative Committees", R Street Institute, March 2019, available at <https://2o9ub0417chl2lg6m43em6psi2i-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/March-2019-Final-Committee-Sheet-Report.pdf>

⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, July 2017 Quick Facts, available at <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045217>

Figure 4. Racial minorities within top House positions



Source: Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, 'Racial Diversity Among Top U.S. House Staff', Sept. 2018.

I highly encourage the subcommittee to devote attention and increased funds to these very real staffer frustrations. Doing so will help Congress attract and retain committed aides within its own hallways rather than lose them and their talents to better paying private sector jobs. These improvements will benefit the institution rather than special interests and the Executive Branch.

Congress should recognize and take steps to rectify its own shortcomings in regards to gender and racial discrepancies within its staff ranks. The people's house should reflect the people.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I would be happy to answer any questions the subcommittee or its staff may have, including any follow-ups regarding the data and conclusions drawn in this testimony.