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# The Washington Times

The Official Newspaper of 2012

## Congressional staffers, public shortchanged by high turnover, low pay

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The Washington Times

Wednesday, June 6, 2012

The most powerful nation on Earth is run largely by 24-year-olds.

High turnover and lack of experience in congressional offices are leaving staffs increasingly without policy and institutional knowledge, a Washington Times analysis of a decade of House and Senate personnel records shows — leaving a vacuum that usually is filled by lobbyists.

Most Senate staffers have worked in the Capitol for less than three years. For most, it is their first job ever. In House offices, one-third of staffers are in their first year, while only 1 in 3 has worked there for five years or more.

Among the aides who work on powerful committees where the nation's legislation takes shape, resumes are a little longer: Half have four years of experience.

When Americans wonder why Congress can't seem to get anything done, this could be a clue. It's also a sharp difference from the average government employee: Unlike many state and federal workers with comfortable salaries, pensions and seemingly endless tenures, those in the halls of power are more likely to be inexperienced and overworked.

Low pay for high-stress jobs with less-than-stellar prospects for advancement takes a toll on institutional memory and expertise.

While senators make \$174,000, staff assistants and legislative correspondents — by far the most common positions in the Senate — have median pay of \$30,000 and \$35,000, respectively, significantly less than Senate janitors and a fairly low salary for college graduates in a city as expensive as Washington.

Historical pay records were transcribed from book form by the website Legistorm.

The size of committee and members' staffs have remained the same over the past decade, and salaries have often not risen with inflation — or at all.

The average legislative counsel in the House made \$56,000 last year, less than in 2007. While pay for parking-lot attendants in the House increased from \$26,000 to \$49,000 in the past decade, pay for staff assistants, who make up the bulk of the House's workforce, rose from \$26,000 to \$30,000. That puts them in the bottom fifth of the region's college-educated workforce.

It means that young workers have proximity to enormous power while surviving on a meager budget — dual forces that come together to push congressional staffers through the "revolving door" to highly paid K Street lobbyists. In the revolving door, former congressional staff and members use their personal connections and insider knowledge to attempt to pull the levers of power on behalf of a paying client. A former congressional staffer is among the most valuable assets a company desiring legislative change can buy.

But it also means that staffers are often forced to rely on lobbyists while they still work for Congress, sometimes for the purest of reasons: While lobbyists with decades of experience in energy policy or other arcane areas are common, such depth of experience is nearly nonexistent on Capitol Hill. Though 10 years of experience in a home-state office, which handles constituent services and other less stressful concerns, is not rare, a person with a decade of experience is few and far between in Washington.

### **Without a foundation**

"Who are congressional staff going to turn to?" asked Daniel Schuman, a former Congressional Research Service (CRS) lawyer who now studies policy at the nonpartisan Sunlight Foundation. "The experienced staff aren't there. But lobbyists and think tanks are beating down the door: 'Here's the legislation, here are the research materials and I've got the co-sponsors lined up.'"

As policy questions more frequently hinge on the nuances of technical matters, members of Congress are operating without the researchers and topical experts on which they have relied to cast informed votes.

With the shuttering of the Office of Technology Assessment, a 200-member congressional support agency that closed in 1995 under House Speaker Newt Gingrich, members who are largely lawyers and rhetorical masters are asked to differentiate between competing proposals that only scientists might be able to evaluate effectively.

The technology office researched and summarized scientific and technological matters, ranging from acid rain to wireless phones, for members who, with an average age of 64 in the Senate and 58 in the House, are legislating on matters such as the Internet, which most spent much of their lives without. Typical of its work products was a decades-ago warning on the effect of technology on copyright law, a question lawmakers contentiously grappled with this year.

"It helped us to ... better oversee the science and technology programs within the federal establishment," said then-Rep. Amo Houghton, New York Republican, who served nine terms before retiring in 2005. The role of

CRS, which provides research on topics beyond science and technology, has also been rolled back.

Brian Darling, a former Senate staffer who is now senior fellow for government studies at the conservative Heritage Foundation, said he strongly supports smaller government, but sometimes symbolic cuts can backfire.

"Cutbacks at CRS to me don't make a lot of sense, with their institutional knowledge. They put out a great nonpartisan work product. When crafting the legislative branch appropriation bill, members of Congress are trying to show they want to cut spending, but there can be repercussions," he said.

Though it seems paradoxical, a lack of knowledge and resources by congressional staffers can make for waste, Mr. Schuman said, citing an inability to conduct oversight, agency regulations that are left unchallenged, loopholes slipped into laws that are giveaways for special interests and poorly implemented programs.

He pointed to the creation of the Department of Homeland Security.

"The department is a mess because people didn't understand what would happen when you merge so many different agencies with different cultures," he said. "It is bloated, inefficient and maladroit."

A failure by Congress to "understand the laws it passed" and "innovations in the private sector" also led ultimately to a huge crunch and the massive bailouts with taxpayer money, he said.

## Up and out

Consider the class of 2005. Of 186 Senate staff assistants who started that year, 82 percent had left by last year, 13 percent were still in the same position and the remaining 5 percent have moved up a notch. Of Senate legislative correspondents starting the same year, 83 percent have departed and the rest moved up.

In the House, of 105 people who started as legislative assistants, four made chief of staff in six years. Seven out of 10 left, and almost all the rest got other promotions.

As that group has come or gone, multiple other layers of congressional staff have been churned through. Among staffers who moved on from Congress in early 2010, three-quarters of departing staff assistants and legislative correspondents had two years or less under their belts.

Even policy wonks in the most nonpolitical of positions, "professional staff" in the Senate committees where most legislative work gets done, last only five years on average, from the time they got their first job in Congress to the time they found a new employer.

"When people get married or have kids, around 35, you either jump up in pay by \$50,000 or you get out of there because you can't make it anymore. Making that money for 10 years puts people behind for the rest of their lives in terms of retirement," Mr. Schuman said.

Most college-educated workers in the D.C. area earn \$81,000 or more, with an average salary of \$93,850, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. For college grads under 30, the median salary is \$42,000.

Some 300 staffers who started in 2005 or 2006 are already registered federal lobbyists, a Times review of records indicated. They are preparing detailed policy papers, and in some cases drafting proposed legislation, for their former colleagues, and they have the time and resources to do a more thorough job than those still

there — though one that has a slant in favor of their new, more generous employer.

"Staff are incredibly vulnerable to this. They're trying to do a very complicated job with limited resources," Mr. Schuman said.

As the federal government has grown dramatically over the decades, the Congress in charge of overseeing it has stayed the same or shrunk. A recent 10 percent reduction to congressional offices' budgets is the latest major reduction.

"When times are going bad, lawmakers say we have to cut Congress. But when things are going great, no one says it's time to hire more staff. You get the Congress you pay for," Mr. Schuman said.

Mr. Darling acknowledged that salaries made it nearly impossible for Congress to have many workers with significant experience. But he likened the limitation to "term limits" for staff. He decried the deferred compensation system that inspires some Hill staffers to make next to nothing for a few years so they can cash in big as a lobbyist afterward, but praised the idealists who toiled there.

"There's a perception that government workers are underworked, and that's far from the case in Congress. In fact, they tend to burn out and leave for higher-paid positions," said Mr. Darling. Executive-branch bureaucrats could take a lesson from their grueling workload, he added.

"The way Congress runs is the way the federal government should run."