

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

September 26, 2023

The Honorable Stephanie Bice
Chairwoman
Committee on House Administration
Subcommittee on Modernization
1309 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Derek Kilmer
Ranking Member
Committee on House Administration
Subcommittee on Modernization
1216 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairwoman Bice and Ranking Member Kilmer:

Thank you for your important work on the Committee on House Administration’s Subcommittee on Modernization. The herculean task of reforming Congress is a noble endeavor that will ensure the institution is equipped to handle the future policy challenges we face as lawmakers.

One of the ways that we must modernize the institution is to ensure that Congress’ support agencies – the Congressional Research Service (CRS), Congressional Budget Office (CBO), and Government Accountability Office (GAO) – can meet Congress’ current and future needs. Members of Congress and our staff rely on the information provided by these support agencies to make well-informed public policy decisions. However, the decades-long absence of another of Congress’s support agencies – the Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) – has led to a significant gap in relevant and unbiased science and technology (S&T) support for Members and our staff.

The speed and breadth of technological innovation have been astonishing, while creating both new opportunities and great dilemmas for the American public. Most recently, the notable success of ChatGPT has prompted a frenzy among lawmakers to address the promise and peril of artificial intelligence (AI).¹ Crafting policy to address the impacts of AI technology and future developments in S&T will require a sophisticated anticipation and understanding of the technological landscape. Gaps in members’ technical expertise provide an easy opportunity for the corporate sector to fill the S&T support role – a role that we believe must remain unbiased, independent, and non-partisan.

The need for authoritative and comprehensible S&T products that can be completed in line with the rapid tempo of legislative session and incredibly fast-paced S&T advances was underscored in the “Science and Technology Policy Assessment: A Congressional Directed Review,” a 2019 report by a panel of the National Academy of Public Administration (NAPA).² This report identified gaps in networking support, consultative support, short-to-medium term reports, and

¹ Gopal Ratnam, “Congress, White House race to get arms around AI systems,” Roll Call, June 21, 2023. <https://rollcall.com/2023/06/21/congress-white-house-race-to-get-arms-around-ai-systems/>.

² National Academy of Public Administration, *Science and Technology Policy Assessment: A Congressionally Directed Review*, October 31, 2019. https://napawash.org/uploads/Academy_Studies/NAPA_FinalReport_forCRS_110119.pdf.

horizon scanning reports. The report recommended “enhancing existing entities and creating an advisory office” to solve these gaps. Since the report’s release, only the enhancement of existing entities has been enacted, with the House Committee on Appropriations increasing funding to CRS and GAO for S&T assistance.³

The House Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress (Select Committee) also attempted to solve Congress’ S&T gaps with multiple recommendations in their reports from both the 116th and 117th Congresses.^{4,5} In the 116th Congress report, the Select Committee took a different approach than NAPA, making a recommendation specific to the need for an Office of Technology Assessment:

“Reestablish an improved Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) to study and recommend emerging technologies, provide nonpartisan information and policy analysis to Member offices, support legislative branch agencies in their examination of new technologies, focus on general oversight and policy, and facilitate peer reviews of potential new technologies.”

In the progress update provided by the Select Committee’s 117th Congress report, this recommendation was considered “Open – Partially Implemented,” noting that “GAO’s Science, Technology, Assessment, and Analytics (STAA) mission team generates assessments, primers, and training for staff on emerging technologies, but full implementation would require a policy decision to create an office more dedicated to testing of House technology.”

We appreciate the House Appropriations Committee, CRS, and GAO’s efforts to increase S&T staffing and assistance. However, we are concerned that gaps identified in the NAPA report are not being fully addressed by simply enhancing CRS and GAO’s ability to respond to Congress’ S&T needs. The American public has watched Congress struggle to keep pace with recent S&T developments, including social media, data privacy, cryptocurrency, and more.

The Subcommittee on Modernization is well-suited to facilitate answers to questions on what remains to be resolved among these gaps and how best to resolve them. During your upcoming hearing regarding GAO Modernization and as your subcommittee considers broader modernization of all congressional support agencies, we respectfully urge you to examine the gaps in current levels of S&T support and explore alternative options beyond GAO for enhancing Congress’ S&T support and capabilities, such as OTA, which may be better equipped to fulfill particular roles.

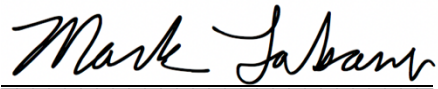
Thank you again for the work that the Subcommittee on Modernization has accomplished. We look forward to working collaboratively with the Subcommittee to ensure that Congress has the S&T expertise necessary to respond to some of society’s most pressing challenges.

³ House Committee on Appropriations, *Legislative Branch Appropriations Bill, 2023*, June 24, 2022, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CRPT-117hrpt389/html/CRPT-117hrpt389.htm>.

⁴ House Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress, *Final Report, 116th Congress*, October 27, 2020, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-CRPT-116hrpt562/pdf/GPO-CRPT-116hrpt562.pdf>.

⁵ House Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress, *Final Report, 117th Congress*, December 15, 2022, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-CRPT-117hrpt646/pdf/GPO-CRPT-117hrpt646.pdf>.

Sincerely,

Handwritten signature of Mark Takano in black ink, written in a cursive style.

Mark Takano
Member of Congress

Handwritten signature of Bill Foster in blue ink, written in a cursive style.

Bill Foster
Member of Congress

Handwritten signature of Sean Casten in black ink, written in a cursive style.

Sean Casten
Member of Congress

Handwritten signature of Donald S. Beyer, Jr. in black ink, written in a cursive style.

Donald S. Beyer, Jr.
Member of Congress