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Committee on Ethics

Testimony before the Committee on House Administration

November 30, 2011

Good afternoon Chairman Lungren, Ranking Member Brady, and members of the Committee. We appreciate this opportunity to provide you with an overview of how the Committee on Ethics has used its budget in the 112th Congress, and how we anticipate the Committee will operate next year in light of possible budget changes.

As Chairman Bonner stated and as we both noted when we appeared before you earlier this year, we are a unique Committee. As approximately 95 percent of our budget is spent on staff salaries, that must be the focus of any budget conversation.

Let me begin by stating how much both of us and our fellow Committee Members appreciate our staff and their incredible work. The Committee's success depends on our talented nonpartisan staff.

As has been noted, in addition to hiring a new staff director earlier this year, we had to fill a number of other vacancies. However, we have not been able to hire to our full staff allocation, even though our workload has continued to increase, so our staff and the Committee has had to do more with less.

Although public attention to the Committee's work often focuses on investigations, much of our work is serving the House in other areas, and our work in all of these areas is on the rise.

In the last Congress, the House increased the Committee's staffing allotment in light of an increase in our investigative work and the creation of the Office of Congressional Ethics. There is no indication that that our workload in this area will decrease.

In the area of advice, the Committee has issued nearly 500 confidential advisory opinions to Members and staff so far this Congress – an increase of more than 10 percent from the same period in the last Congress. We also continue to build on the improved turnaround time for those requests.

Those formal advisory opinions do not include the many informal requests the nonpartisan staff field by phone, email, and in-person visits. We estimate that the Committee fielded more than 15,000 telephone calls and 3,000 email requests for advice between January 1 and October 31 of this year.

The Committee's privately sponsored travel workload has increased even more, by more than 20 percent over the same period in the 111th Congress. We received over 1,700 requests for approval of travel between January 1 and October 31 of this year.

The Committee's financial disclosure workload has also increased. So far this year, the number of financial disclosure filings is up by about 20 percent over the same period in the 111th Congress. More than 5,600 financial disclosure statements have been filed so far this year. All of these must be reviewed, and many of these have been pre-screened by our staff before filing, a service offered to any filer.

Finally, the Committee continues to provide training to more than 10,000 House Members, officers, and employees each year, and to review their certifications for satisfying the House's mandatory training requirements.

The Committee's staff is handling this increased workload with excellence and professionalism, even though we have handled last year's budget cut by stopping short of our maximum staff slot allowance.

In addition to hiring fewer staff, the Committee also handled the budget cut by foregoing other investments.

Most significantly, we postponed a possible major investment in new financial disclosure software. Such software could have allowed online filing, which would have had benefits to filers and the public alike, and may have made the financial disclosure process less expensive in the long run.

In addition, we put off an investment in making our database of public documents more accessible to the House and the public. We also put off an investment in improving the Committee's database of internal documents, many of which predate the digital age, which could have ensured greater consistency and efficiency in our advisory functions.

Although we were able to make substantial investments in technology in the last Congress to make the Committee and its work more efficient, we have postponed further investments at this time. I continue to think that these are worthwhile investments that would help the Committee better serve the House and the public, and I hope that we will be able to pursue them in the future.

Finally, our outside counsel contract is vital to ensuring our Committee, our colleagues, and the public, that we will resolve this matter with the utmost care, diligence, and integrity. The Committee concluded that hiring an outside counsel would allow for an independent review and a faster resolution than if the Committee staff were to handle it alone. We await the outside counsel's recommendations for our consideration so the Committee can complete the matter as quickly as possible and ensure that the Committee's work comports with the highest standards of integrity.

For these reasons, I join with the Chairman in presenting our joint request for our 2012 authorization, as the Chairman described. Thank you again, and we look forward to your questions.

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