



KABUL INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

AMERICAN INGENUITY

CONGRESSIONAL CASEWORK
IN THE AFGHANISTAN
WITHDRAWAL

written by Anne Meeker



February 2024

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the US military withdrawal from Afghanistan, Congressional casework staff responded to thousands of urgent requests for support from at-risk Afghan citizens and family members who had served with the US military or contractors or otherwise assisted the US government. Congressional staff from offices in both parties and both chambers worked around the clock for weeks in close collaboration with federal agencies and nongovernmental organizations to identify thousands of at-risk Afghans to the State Department, help allies already in the immigration process identify options and move cases forward, and coordinate evacuees' dangerous passage through the airport. Like many civil servants, veterans and other advocates touched by what became "Operation Allies Welcome (OAW)" and is now called "Enduring Welcome," these Congressional caseworkers experienced the unfolding crisis in real time, demonstrating resilience, persistence, and creativity — but at significant personal cost.

The experience of Congressional caseworkers in the Afghanistan withdrawal is only a small piece of the larger story of the US military involvement in Afghanistan. However, as a case study, it illuminates an often overlooked area of nonpartisan collaboration and public service. For institutionalists and modernizers invested in strengthening the legislative branch, it is also an important example of the human toll of Congress' underinvestment in its own capacity — and one that points to the strength, creativity, and dedication of the Congressional workforce.

This report presents a narrative account of Congressional casework in the Afghanistan withdrawal, and points to ways that Congress can tap into its strengths to evolve in the 21st century and beyond.

Key Findings

01 The burden of Afghanistan-related casework was unevenly spread across Congressional offices.

Some offices received thousands of inquiries, while others received very few. This was especially challenging for new offices and caseworkers with less expertise in handling immigration and military casework. While this was exaggerated in the Afghanistan withdrawal, it reflects ongoing challenges for Member offices in handling casework surges, particularly in disasters.

02 A "doom loop" of agency chaos created challenges in responding to Congressional offices.

A lack of timely public information from the State Department and others drove the "spillover" engagement with Congressional offices. Agencies' inability to respond adequately and in a timely manner to Congressional requests drove caseworkers to escalate their responses by going outside or around established channels, creating additional problems for the agencies in responding to a challenging on-the-ground situation.

- 03 In response to these challenges, caseworkers developed new ways to self-organize in broad, fiercely nonpartisan networks spanning both chambers, and developed new methods of collaborating with external organizations.

Systems and networks created by caseworkers to manage information and collaboration in the Afghanistan withdrawal persist as methods of coordinating today.

- 04 Despite their professionalism, caseworkers faced an extraordinary mental health burden in handling this casework, symptoms of which persist today.

Key Recommendations

- 01 The House Digital Services' Data Aggregator Pilot should receive funding at the direction of the House Legislative Branch Appropriations Subcommittee in conjunction with the Committee on House Administration.

The House Digital Service, at the recommendation of the House Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress, is in the process of scoping and prototyping a national casework data aggregator that would provide Congress with a real-time overview of constituent problems with federal agencies. This tool would be invaluable for casework teams and for oversight activities, and should receive funding to support its development.

- 02 Congress should develop minimum baseline standards for agency timeliness and best practices in responding to Congressional inquiries on behalf of constituents.

Exploratory work toward establishing these standards should also examine agency staffing and technology needs to meet minimum standards.

- 03 Caseworkers need specific mental health support to mitigate the risks associated with work with traumatized populations.

While the House and Senate Employee Assistance Programs have done outstanding work in supporting caseworkers, there is ongoing demand for trauma-informed support and resources that specifically address the challenges of casework. Accordingly, the Committee on House Administration and the Senate Rules Committee should direct the appropriate institutional offices to provide expanded resources to help staff cope with these circumstances.

- 04 The House should establish a nonpartisan Casework Liaison Office tasked with supporting casework and casework staff to promote the House's ability to provide excellent constituent services.

Starting in the House may provide the opportunity to capitalize on existing modernization momentum, and allow later expansion to the Senate.

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INTRODUCTION

In August of 2021, US military forces withdrew from Afghanistan in a chaotic scene that left the Taliban in control of the Afghan capital, government, and Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA). Fearing retribution, Afghan citizens who had served with the United States military and contractors or otherwise assisted the US government were desperate to escape the country with their families. Media footage showed the panic at the airport, with scenes of people clinging to departing aircraft, and frantically appealing to US Marines on the airport walls.

In the context of the military withdrawal, Congressional offices received thousands of calls for help from Afghans on the ground in the country, their family members in the US and Afghanistan, and service members and veterans frantically trying to assist their interpreters, supporters, and friends. While these inquiries were way outside the realm of normal constituent communication, they were still funneled through the group of legislative staffers tasked with routine problem-solving on behalf of individual constituents: Congressional caseworkers.

“Casework,” also known as constituent services, is the practice whereby Members of Congress and their staff work on behalf of constituents to resolve problems with federal agencies, in accordance with the law.¹ Casework is far from the most well-known or prestigious staff role in Congress: Caseworkers handle some of the most technically and emotionally demanding front-line constituent engagement in Congressional service, and are based primarily in state and district offices, far from Washington, DC. From tracking down missing tax returns and delayed VA benefits to resolving Social Security overpayments, contradictory immigration notices, and more, caseworkers deliver tangible impacts for constituents through deep knowledge of agency programs and processes, but they are rarely central in the policymaking process. They are the duct-tapers and gap-fillers of the federal government, the safety net’s safety net — usually the “hail-Mary” option of last resort for constituents when normal customer service channels in government fail. Caseworkers’ work is also often central to Members’ (and challengers’) messaging about their dedication and connectedness to their districts and states.² It is also one of the few areas of Congressional service characterized by almost exclusively nonpartisan collaboration between offices to directly serve constituent needs.

In the withdrawal and continuing over the last two years, caseworkers worked to triage and support American allies in life-or-death situations. Afghanistan casework pushed casework teams to their limits with never-before-seen volumes of inquiries, higher-than-ever stakes, and broken or rapidly-breaking agency inquiry processes. It also pushed caseworkers to find new ways of self-organizing, sharing information, collaborating with broad coalitions, and produced tangible results with thousands of Afghan allies reaching safety due to their combined efforts. For the caseworkers most deeply involved, the Afghanistan withdrawal was a clear nadir in

1 [“Casework Basics: Definition and Rules,” POPVOX Foundation](#) (March 2023)

2 For recent samples, see:

- [Sen. Rick Scott’s Award-Winning Constituent Services Team Hosts Office Hours Events in All 67 Florida Counties](#)
- [Rep. Williams: Monthly Update on Constituent Services](#)
- [How do NJ members of Congress deliver constituent services?](#)
- [Johnson Awarded Democracy Award for Outstanding Constituent Service](#)
- [Poor constituent services make for bad politics](#)
- [Opponents line up amid criticism, but Omar stands by views on Israel and cease-fire](#)
- [Lights off, no one home at Santos’ office](#)

Congressional service — and simultaneously some of their most meaningful and rewarding work. As former Rep. Keating [D, MA] caseworker Jessica Bradley Rushing put it:

“*The thing to highlight is that what happened with Afghanistan is a single incident, but it will happen again. It wasn't a one-time thing. We have the ability to learn lessons and improve processes if we take the opportunity presented to us. As we look forward in time, we won't be faced with fewer crises. Taking the bull by the horns while we have the chance to fix these things — so in the future we're not reactive but have put in place structures to allow us to be proactive in these crises — is financially responsible, morally responsible, and the right thing to do.*”

Afghanistan casework was a small piece of the tragedy of the Afghanistan War and subsequent withdrawal. For institutionalists and modernizers invested in strengthening Congress, it is an important example of the human toll of Congress' underinvestment in its own capacity — and one that points to the strength, creativity, and dedication of Congress' workforce. This report presents a narrative account of that effort, and points to ways that Congress can tap into its strengths to evolve in the 21st century and beyond.

This report has two goals:

01 Recognize the efforts of the dedicated Congressional caseworkers who worked to support American citizens and Afghan allies during the Afghanistan withdrawal.

While other after-action reports from the Afghanistan withdrawal exist, they have largely focused on the actions of senior officials in the Executive branch. This report focuses on the Afghanistan withdrawal specifically from the perspective of Congressional caseworkers tasked with responding to Afghanistan-related inquiries from Americans, allies, and their families and supporters from 2021 to present.

02 Provide targeted recommendations to strengthen Congressional casework and support caseworkers.

Addressing problems with Congressional casework will allow the House and Senate to more effectively serve constituents, support vital front-line staff, and uphold Congress's Article One responsibilities. Using the Afghanistan withdrawal as a case study for where current institutional support for casework may be improved, this report presents a vision for casework that leverages modern technology to strengthen Congressional effectiveness in constituent service.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

Between April 2023 and January 2024, the POPVOX Foundation team interviewed caseworkers from both sides of the aisle and both chambers who handled casework related to the Afghanistan withdrawal. Interviewees were recruited through the author’s existing network of casework relationships and referrals. Interviewees were granted anonymity to share their experiences with candor, and are identified in this report only by chamber and party, with some exceptions where the interviewee had been previously quoted in the media. Additional materials, including hearing transcripts and journalistic accounts of the Afghanistan withdrawal, are cited where relevant. While no report can capture the full breadth of experiences of caseworkers handling the Afghanistan withdrawal, research for the report aimed for a balanced group of experienced caseworkers who could speak to the specific challenges of this crisis in a broader context.

POPVOX Foundation has been at the forefront of research and modernization efforts around Congressional casework since its founding in 2021. POPVOX Foundation’s Casework Navigator program³ provides resources to support caseworkers and elevate casework expertise as a vital component of Congress’s oversight responsibility. POPVOX Foundation Deputy Director Anne Meeker also previously testified to the House Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress on constituent services,⁴ and has written extensively on Congressional casework and pathways for modernization.

This report is a product of the POPVOX Foundation. Its contents and recommendations are not endorsed by any Congressional office or entity.

The author would like to thank multiple people who provided feedback and input on previous drafts and recommendations, including staff from the Committee on House Administration, House Office of the Whistleblower Ombuds, House Chief Administrative Officer, Senate Sergeant at Arms, Project on Government Oversight, The Levin Center for Legislative Oversight and Democracy, and colleagues at POPVOX Foundation.

About the Author

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3 Accessible at popvox.org/casework

4 House Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress (hearing), “[Constituent Services: Building a More Customer-Friendly Congress](#)” (July 14, 2022)

PART I: WHAT IS CONGRESSIONAL CASEWORK?

As then-Speaker of the House Kevin McCarthy noted in September of 2023,⁵ casework is one of the few commonalities among every Member of Congress, in both chambers, and any party. In a relatively gridlocked Congress, many departing Members cite casework as one of the most rewarding parts of serving in Congress, as well as one of the areas where they can have the greatest impact.⁶

As defined in both chambers' Ethics manuals,⁷ casework is the practice of “assisting in the resolution of the problems that are an inevitable by-product of government regulation, [serving] as a facilitator, or an ombudsman.” The House Ethics Manual (2008 edition) puts a finer point on what this means when it notes that:

“

Pursuant to long-standing guidance, it is generally permissible for Members (and staff acting on their behalf) to:

- *Request information or status reports;*
- *Urge prompt consideration of a matter based on the merits of the case;*
- *Arrange appointments;*
- *Express judgment on a matter—subject to the ex parte communication rules; and*
- *Ask for reconsideration, based on law and regulation, or administrative and other decisions.*

”

In addition to these formally outlined responsibilities, caseworkers also help constituents understand agency policy and communications, proactively communicate policy deadlines and updates, refer constituents to other levels of government, and provide a listening ear to serve as the human, accessible face of a large bureaucracy.

While caseloads vary between Members, every senator and representative has at least a portion of their staff dedicated to constituent services.⁸ These staff are almost exclusively based in district and state offices where they can be directly accessible to constituents as opposed to legislative and communications staff who are almost exclusively based in DC. Although each chamber sets general ethical guidelines for casework and provides general support and training resources, caseworker hiring and training is handled by individual offices, leading to a significant degree of variability in casework practices.⁹

5 Anne Meeker, “[Congressional casework is ready for innovation](#),” *POPVOX Foundation* (October 2, 2023)

6 Mark Sobol and Leonard Steinhorn, “[Congress at a Crossroads](#),” *US Former Members of Congress Association* (July 2020)

7 “[Casework Basics: Definition and Rules](#),” *POPVOX Foundation* (January 9, 2023)

8 Anne Meeker. “[Casework: What We Do and Don’t Know](#),” *POPVOX Foundation* (April 27, 2023)

9 Sarah Eckman and R. Eric Petersen, “[Casework in Congressional Offices: Frequently Asked Questions](#),” *Congressional Research Service* (January 25, 2021)

Resources to carry out casework in Member offices come from Members’ personal office budgets (the Members’ Representational Allowance or MRA in the House, and the Senators’ Official Personnel and Office Expense Account or SOPOEA in the Senate). The last several decades have seen a decline in staffing levels for Congressional offices relative to the rapid growth of the US population: each House office represents 760,000 constituents, with a staff of at maximum twenty people, and the Senate remains fixed at 100 Senate offices to serve 331 million constituents.¹⁰

In general, offices perform casework only for their own constituents, although Members have discretion to determine who counts as a constituent for the purposes of casework, especially in the case of foreign citizens who request assistance.¹¹ Caseworkers serve constituents regardless of political party or citizenship status, and frequently build working relationships with other casework teams within their state or regional delegations or across the country — a rare instance of truly nonpartisan collaboration in Congress.

Caseworkers handle inquiries on any agency or independent office in federal jurisdiction, but most casework inquiries center around the most high-volume federal agencies and programs: Social Security, the IRS, the Veterans Administration (VA), and the handful of agencies involved in the immigration process usually make up the bulk of offices’ caseloads. By sending formal inquiries to agencies to call attention to aspects of a particular case, obtain information on a constituent’s case, and help constituents understand programs and their rights and responsibilities, caseworkers are often able to help cut through bureaucratic “red tape” and achieve substantial successes on behalf of constituents.

“

The burden is off my shoulders, you know, I feel so much relief.

—Veteran describing the experience of working with a Congressional office in the Afghanistan withdrawal to *WBZ News*¹²

”

Offices generally organize casework in one of two ways: either hiring casework specialists who handle all inquiries related to a certain agency or issue area, or hiring casework generalists who handle any incoming case, regardless of agency. Caseworkers are normally trained by senior district staff within their own offices, supplemented by programming from the House Chief Administrative Officer, Senate Education and Learning, Congressional Research Service, and federal agencies themselves.

Even for generalist offices, the complexity of both VA/military and immigration casework mean that these two areas require some specialization among caseworkers. As one caseworker in a Democratic House office quipped:

“

You can’t be a jack-of-all-trades and do immigration casework.

”

Anecdotally, both of these types of casework often attract caseworkers with personal connections to constituents served by them, including immigrants, children of immigrants, veterans, and family members of veterans.

10 Kevin Kosar, “[What is Congressional Capacity and Why Does it Matter?](#)” *Understanding Congress* (podcast) American Enterprise Institute (December 4, 2023)

11 “[Casework in Congressional Offices: Frequently Asked Questions](#),” *Congressional Research Service* (January 25, 2021)

12 “[Veteran Credits Rep. Seth Moulton for Family’s Rescue in Afghanistan](#),” *WBZ News, Boston* (September 1, 2021)

Casework Pre-Afghanistan

By the beginning of 2021, caseworkers responsible for VA/military and immigration portfolios had already handled some types of cases that would prove relevant to Afghanistan casework, notably:

Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) cases

Visas for Afghans who served with the US military, covered in more detail below.

Asylum and refugee cases

Cases for constituents in and out of the US regarding refugee and asylum claims. Cases often include liaising between the agencies and petitioners (and family members) to coordinate details, including documents and appointments.

Repatriation cases

Facilitating the return of American citizens to the US. Repatriation cases involve liaising with the State Department to identify and locate American citizens in the crisis area, and helping coordinate with those constituents and the department to facilitate their exit from the country.¹³

Military cases

Casework involving members of the military and military families, including reserves and National Guard. These may include anything from military discipline, military pay and benefits, promotions, basic training, travel orders, whistleblowing, records, commendations, and more. While the content of individual cases is hugely varied, many caseworkers working on military cases are either military veterans themselves or connected to the military in some other way (e.g., children or spouses of veterans).

Disaster casework

handling support for a state or district in the midst of a natural disaster (or man-made crisis like a government shutdown). These cases may include helping communicate available disaster benefits, tracking and monitoring disaster claims, and helping serve as a central clearinghouse for reliable information on multiple agency programs at different levels of government.¹⁴

In addition to these specific experiences, the COVID-19 pandemic was also a high-pressure test for casework teams. Unique in its own right, pandemic casework taught offices to pivot on the fly, rapidly responding to high-volume, high-urgency inquiries from constituents attempting to access pandemic benefits and programs, seek or verify information on the COVID-19 crisis, and liaise with agencies that were also foundering in the midst of a chaotic switch to remote work.

13 [“Casework Basics: Supporting Constituents in Overseas Crisis Situations,”](#) POPVOX Foundation (July 2023)

14 Kathy Goldschmidt and Bradley Sinkaus, [“The Future of Constituent Engagement: Coronavirus, Congress, and Constituent Communications.”](#) Congressional Management Foundation (August 13, 2020)

Normally, a significant geographic and operational disconnection between state-based casework teams and DC-based legislative teams can be a hindrance to effective collaboration.¹⁵ However, for some casework teams, the COVID-19 pandemic represented a high-water mark for their relationships with DC counterparts. The volume and urgency of pandemic casework meant that some DC-based legislative staff were internally detailed to assist with casework for the first time, developing a greater appreciation for the programmatic and emotional skills required to do good casework. The sudden widespread adoption of video conferencing tools like Zoom and asynchronous communications platforms like Microsoft Teams, Slack, and others contributed to a widespread shift in norms within Congress toward methods of communication that were more accessible for distributed casework teams.

The pandemic-related shift to Zoom and Teams also saw the development of new ways to coordinate between offices. Prior to 2020, caseworkers primarily coordinated between offices through 1:1 relationships, text chains, or on the House side, through large listservs of hundreds of caseworkers. These listservs were places for caseworkers to ask general questions, solicit advice, or share contact information for agency liaisons. However, they were often clogged with repetitive requests and reply-alls. The widespread adoption of Teams allowed offices to develop more responsive group chats to share information without email.

But while the pandemic was a learning experience for casework teams, it also compounded some preexisting problems. High caseloads, high-stakes casework, and agency chaos meant that by the summer of 2021, many experienced caseworkers had already been operating at or above normal capacity for a year and a half, experiencing personal burnout and compounded trauma and fatigue.¹⁶ Worsening political tension, made especially visible in the wake of the January 6th attack on the Capitol, also led to more negative interactions with constituents. Anecdotally, caseworkers reported a distinct worsening in the tenor of many constituent interactions, with constituents being less patient, more likely to escalate quickly, and more likely to be rude, abusive, and threatening over the phone.¹⁷

For new offices and new caseworkers, disruptions to Congressional office workflows during the pandemic also exacerbated the uneven playing field of training for new casework hires. Not being able to learn from experienced caseworkers in person or attend in-person agency training conferences was a major setback to many offices and caseworkers' professional development. In some offices, that further increased the burden on experienced staff to more closely manage or pick up extra cases from new and inexperienced caseworkers.

15 Even on the timing of the legislative calendar challenges intra-office collaboration: DC-based teams are busiest when Congress is in session, but district-based teams are busiest when Congress is out of session and the Members return to their states and districts for local events and convenings.

16 “[Casework Basics: Burnout and Care](#)” (webinar), *POPVOX Foundation* (July 28, 2023)

17 Sean Newhouse, “[Angry callers are threatening Congress. These interns are on the front lines.](#)” *RollCall* (July 28, 2022)

PART II: WHAT HAPPENED IN AFGHANISTAN?

Spring/Summer 2021

The Doha Agreement, negotiated with the Taliban by the Trump administration, originally set the date for withdrawal of American military forces from Afghanistan on May 1, 2021. In April 2021, President Biden announced that the withdrawal would proceed per the agreement, but moved the deadline to September 11, 2021, later revised to August 31, 2021.¹⁸ A rapid drawdown of US forces and equipment started in May, as the Taliban and Afghan army continued to clash throughout the country.¹⁹ The original plan was that the US Embassy would stay open after the US military withdrawal to continue to process immigration cases — a plan founded on the assumption that the Afghan government would remain in power for some time, maintaining a level of safety for applicants to complete their paperwork and obtain required documentation.²⁰

Afghans with different levels of involvement with US personnel are served by different immigration pathways, but an illustrative example is the Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program. SIVs are a unique category of visa available to people who worked directly or indirectly with the American government — and were therefore more likely to have American supporters in a position to contact Congress. The State Department recognizes several tiers of priority groups for SIV eligibility, with interpreters and translators (especially those with combat experience) in the first tier, direct hires in the second tier, and additional tiers covering indirect hires, contractors, logistics personnel, and more.²¹ The SIV program was authorized under Section 602(b) of the Afghan Allies Protection Act of 2009 to create a legal immigration pathway for Iraqi and Afghan nationals who had served directly with US and allied forces, and faced threats to their personal safety as a consequence of that employment.²²

By 2021, the SIV program was already notoriously opaque and difficult to navigate: vetting for SIV applicants was complex and lengthy, requiring applicants to obtain verification of their military employment and pass security checks,²³ and many applications had been stalled for multiple years. As of April 2021, the Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program for Afghans who had served with the US military was already taking 800 days to process on average, leaving a large number of pending applicants still remaining in the country.²⁴ One veterans’

18 Franklin Foer, [“The Final Days,”](#) *The Atlantic* (August 29, 2023)

19 Ibid.

20 Michael Shear, et. al, [“Miscue after Miscue, US Exit Plan Unravels,”](#) *The New York Times* (August 21, 2021)

21 [“Priority for SIV Application Processing,”](#) #AfghanEvac (n.d.)

22 [“Special Immigrant Visas for Afghans - Who Were Employed by/on Behalf of the U.S. Government,”](#) *US Department of State* (n.d.)

23 [“SIV Application Vetting and Approval Process,”](#) #AfghanEvac (n.d.)

24 According to the International Refugee Assistance Project (IRAP), discovery in *Afghan and Iraqi Allies v. Pompeo* indicated that the State Department’s reported waiting periods for SIVs were incorrect, and most applicants waited four years or longer. [“Processing Delays in the Special Immigrant Visa Program,”](#) *IRAP and Freshfields, Bruckhaus, Deringer* (May 2020)

group mobilized to support Afghan allies estimated the number of translators still in Afghanistan in May 2021 at 18,000—or 70,000 including translators’ eligible family members.²⁵

In the spring of 2021, Members of Congress on both sides of the aisle, especially veterans who had served in Iraq and Afghanistan,²⁶ repeatedly raised concerns about the number of American citizens, legal permanent residents, and allies who may be facing imminent danger from the Taliban as US forces started to withdraw from the country.²⁷ Given the scale of the backlog and awareness of the stakes, Members attempted to pressure multiple entities involved in handling the visa process for solutions, including expediting the SIV program to address the substantial backlog, providing additional resources to support refugees, and authorizing additional visas.²⁸ Other floated proposals from Members of Congress called for alternative evacuation plans, including establishing safe pickup points for Afghans and allies to be airlifted to Bagram Air Force Base and then transported out of Afghanistan to complete their immigration processing.²⁹

In response, the State Department increased staffing for processing visa applications for Afghan citizens. On June 21, Secretary of State Anthony Blinken noted that 18,000 Afghans had expressed interest in the SIV program, and 9,000 were already in the process.³⁰ The Afghanistan policy team at the Department of Defense also shifted into strategic planning for the withdrawal by the spring of 2021, working to create linkages between the DOD and State that allowed the DOD to directly submit names into the State Department’s refugee referral system.³¹

However, as the end-of-August deadline drew closer, the first case-specific inquiries to Congressional offices began, often directed to offices that were either headed by a military veteran with service in Iraq and Afghanistan or in communities with large populations of veterans, active-duty service members, or National Guard. As one caseworker in a Republican Senate office put it:

“

There was never exactly an ‘oh shit’ moment.

”

Instead, offices had a rapidly growing awareness that the volume of people who would be seeking to escape from Afghanistan was likely to exceed the State Department and Department of Defense’s ability to handle the influx, even with additional staffing.

Calls coming into Congressional offices from Afghanistan in the first weeks of August 2021 were from applicants in all stages of the approval process, but in particular from those in the later stages, including applicants who had been granted SIVs but not received their passports back from the US Embassy in Kabul — as the Em-

25 Jacqueline Feldscher, “[‘Guam or Bust’: America’s Helpers May Need a Halfway Destination as Afghanistan Pullout Nears](#),” *Defense One* (May 20, 2021)

26 Laura Seligman, “[Lawmakers frustrated over White House’s ‘total lack’ of urgency in helping Afghan interpreters](#),” *Politico* (May 18, 2021)

27 Jacqueline Feldscher, “[‘Guam or Bust’: America’s Helpers May Need a Halfway Destination as Afghanistan Pullout Nears](#),” *Defense One* (May 20, 2021)

28 Laura Seligman, “[Lawmakers frustrated over White House’s ‘total lack’ of urgency in helping Afghan interpreters](#),” *Politico* (May 18, 2021)

29 Jacqueline Feldscher, “[‘Guam or Bust’: America’s Helpers May Need a Halfway Destination as Afghanistan Pullout Nears](#),” *Defense One* (May 20, 2021)

30 Deirdre Shesgreen, “[Biden administration will relocate thousands of Afghan interpreters who worked with US military](#),” *Des Moines Register* (June 24, 2021)

31 “[Honoree Details: Hila Hanif, Umid Khikmatov and the Afghanistan Policy Team](#),” *Partnership for Public Service, Service to America Medals* (2022)

bassy began destroying sensitive documents, including passports, on August 13.³²

As would become a theme in Afghanistan casework, caseworkers remembered taking questions from Afghans and supporters seeking advice and information in the absence of guidance from other agencies: “if I have not received my passport with my SIV, but I am concerned for my safety if the Taliban takes Kabul, should I leave the country without it?” “If I have my SIV but have not yet received guidance on whether my family is eligible to join me, should I stay and hope to be evacuated anyway, or should we cross the border to another country?”

Recommendation I: Fund the House Digital Service's Casework Data Aggregator pilot

While every office dedicates significant resources to casework, Congress has few ways to assess the overall impact on its overall institutional capacity. Individual offices keep separate records of casework, and there are no ways for offices to share data on what types of cases they are handling. This means that there are no reliable datasets on constituent requests for assistance that come to Congress related to specific agencies and programs — let alone a way to observe these casework requests in real time to surface emerging problems that may require corrective legislative action. In 2022, the House Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress made efforts to address this in its recommendation that:

“*The House should develop an optional system to allow offices to share anonymized constituent casework data and aggregate that information to identify trends and systemic issues to better serve constituents.*”³³

The Afghanistan withdrawal underscores the need for this early warning system. In early 2021 and before, the ability for Congress to observe in real time the length of time SIV cases were taking to process through an independent source of data could have provided additional impetus for proactive oversight on the SIV program. In the first days of the withdrawal, the first calls could have also provided an early “canary in the coal mine” signal to help offices plan for triage and crisis processing.

Progress is already under way toward a solution: the Committee on House Administration Subcommittee on Modernization has identified creating a casework data aggregator as a top priority, leading to the creation of a House Digital Services (HDS) pilot that is currently recruiting offices to participate in a scoping and development process. (As of this report’s publication, there is currently no analogous effort in the Senate.)

To support this project for the long term, **the Committee on House Administration and the House Legislative Branch Appropriations Subcommittee should direct funding from the House Modernization Fund to support HDS’ continued work on the Data Aggregator Pilot.**

In the future, the HDS could seek to partner with the Senate Sergeant-at-Arms to explore expanding the pilot to Senate offices as well.

32 Franklin Foer, “[The Final Days](#),” *The Atlantic* (August 29, 2023)

33 “[Final Report: Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress](#),” *House Select Committee on Modernization of Congress, the 117th Congress* (December 2022)

Flood

In the second week of August, the Taliban captured a string of provincial capitals, driving many US allies toward Kabul. Memories of violence at the hands of the Taliban after the Russian withdrawal in 1992 were front of mind for those on the ground in Afghanistan.³⁴ American citizens, legal permanent residents, and US allies seeking to enter the immigration process were increasingly pressed to leave before the Taliban gained full control, with local media and social media offering dire predictions for the consequences of Taliban rule for those who had supported the US, as well as women and ethnic or religious minorities.³⁵ On August 15, Taliban fighters entered Kabul without resistance from Afghan forces, and President Ghani fled the country. The US Embassy closed and relocated to an outpost at HKIA. With limited US forces available to secure the capital, the US de facto ceded control of access and security, including the outer perimeter of HKIA, to the Taliban.³⁶

As Kabul fell, Congressional offices were quickly flooded with requests for urgent assistance. These requests became less specific and more desperate: fewer specific visa questions, and more general “please help me escape,” or “what can you do to get my interpreter out of there” phone calls.

The volume and nature of calls varied dramatically. At first, many of those calling were American service members and veterans, nonprofit leaders, and family members of Afghans still in the country calling the Members of Congress with whom they had direct connections. As some offices jumped into action to assist, those offices and individual caseworkers’ names and contact information started to spread through WhatsApp groups, social media, and complex networks of veterans, service members, allies, NGO staff, and Afghans on the ground. This meant that while some offices received no Afghanistan-related casework, others went from a normal caseload volume to hundreds and thousands of inquiries in the span of just a week. At the height of the flood, some offices received spreadsheets from military-associated personnel on the ground with thousands of names and details.

For offices handling a high volume of requests, triage was difficult: which were the most urgent cases, or people with the best chance of meeting criteria for getting out and highest risk of harm if they stayed? Gathering enough information to make that call required casework staff to listen to frantic and harrowing stories of threats, retribution, and violence at the hands of the Taliban. Offices without extensive experience in immigration casework found themselves disproportionately lost and overwhelmed.

Because all offices set their own policies, different offices took different approaches: some allowed interns to help with this work, and others did not, out of concern for the sensitivity of these cases as well as the interns’ mental and emotional health. One Member switched some of his staff to operate on Kabul time, and others operated around the clock, sleeping in short stints.³⁷ Some caseworkers used apps like WhatsApp and Signal to text with people on the ground, including Marines on the gates of HKIA and Afghans and US citizens trying to leave, and some kept interactions strictly to office phones and emails. In the aftermath of the suicide bombing at HKIA on August 26th, some caseworkers reported receiving graphic photos of the incident.

34 Matthieu Aikins, “[Inside the Fall of Kabul](#),” *The New York Times Magazine* (December 10, 2021)

35 Franklin Foer, “[The Final Days](#),” *The Atlantic* (August 29, 2023)

36 Ibid.

37 Rebecca Beitsch and Laura Kelly, “[How lawmakers aided the Afghan evacuation](#),” *The Hill* (September 15, 2021)

The single biggest need for caseworkers was up-to-date and reliable information: keeping up with both the rapidly changing situation and the increasing volume of calls was a double challenge. Members in leadership or on relevant committees receiving non-classified briefings from the State Department on the state of the withdrawal and non-combatant evacuation operation were often able to provide their own casework teams with more accurate or timely information. Some reportedly allowed caseworkers to join briefing calls that were ostensibly “Members only,” or to share login information for briefing calls with other caseworkers.

“*Those coordinated briefings were supposed to be Members only, but you’d hear names of people asking questions, and it’s easy to figure out Congressional emails so you could reach out and say, hey, where did you get that, you mentioned another meeting, can you send login info?* —Caseworker, Republican Senate office

”

Caseworkers noted that it took a while for legislative staff to understand the scale and urgency of the situation, although many caseworkers expressed gratitude for their legislative counterparts who jumped in to help, including helping route inquiries through higher-level agency staff or the White House. While staff of committees of jurisdiction — such as House Foreign Affairs, House Armed Services, Senate Foreign Relations, and Senate Armed Services — were steeped in the details of the withdrawal, they were largely unfamiliar with casework and the granular information required to be responsive to casework requests. Some caseworkers also described several interactions where their professionalism and expertise in their issue areas were called into question out of ignorance of casework operations, being accused of policy “moonlighting:”

“*I’m not the type to speak out of turn, but there were a few times when it was like, don’t make me go over your head. Don’t make me call [Member] to ask for the same info. No one knew what casework was. [...] People [on the committee] were thinking I was trying to solve the war or prevent the coup, when I was just trying to find out where a passport physically was[...]. Those staffers were like a brick wall.* —Caseworker, Republican Senate Office

”

Recommendation II: Casework and oversight staff should be trained together to facilitate and encourage collaboration and information sharing.

As noted by caseworkers handling the Afghanistan withdrawal, the geographic and cultural distance between casework staff and legislative or committee staff creates barriers to collaboration — even though both share an interest in holding agency programs and staff accountable to Congress and its constituents, and often have similar portfolios.

In the Afghanistan withdrawal, more familiarity with casework on the part of legislative staff could have led to proactive briefings ahead of the withdrawal on expected agency challenges, allowing offices to better plan and deploy staff to cope with the challenge. Better insight from caseworkers routed in a systematic way back to legislative and committee staff could have enabled additional focused oversight.

Existing oversight-focused trainings have seen great reception from district staff. For example, the House Office of the Whistleblower Ombuds reports that more than half of the respondents to their annual year-end survey were from district offices. The Office of the Whistleblower Ombuds also regularly offers private trainings for office staff that combine district- and DC-based staff, creating training efficiencies as well as opportunities to develop working relationships and shared technical expertise between district and legislative staff.³⁸

Internal and civil society organizations currently offering in-depth training to Congressional staff on oversight should continue to explore ways to co-train casework and oversight staffers — for example, by offering more programs virtually, advertising specifically to casework staff, and encouraging offices to “pair” their casework and legislative staff to attend oversight-focused trainings together.

Agency Response

While caseworkers were attempting to grasp the situation, a key question was what to do next. Immigration pathways available to Afghan allies and supporters involve complicated processes distributed among several agencies, most notably the Department of Defense, Department of Homeland Security, US Customs and Immigration, and the Department of State.

Detailed policy critique of the Administration’s preparedness for the US military withdrawal from Afghanistan is out of scope for this report. However, the fact of the Afghanistan withdrawal was that caseworkers were stuck in a “doom loop” with the agencies involved. First, a chaotic response drove Afghans and allies to Congress seeking information and support. When Congressional caseworkers reached out to the State Department for assistance, a combination of internal chaos and inadequate structures for managing cases prevented the agency from adequately responding to casework asks (both on timing and quality of responses). When caseworkers were unable to get adequate agency responses, they escalated requests and sought other sources of information and support, further complicating the agencies’ efforts to complete the withdrawal.

Despite frustrations, caseworkers acknowledged that State Department and DOD personnel on the ground in Afghanistan or helping to coordinate the relocation and resettlement from other postings were dedicated public servants working as hard as possible in an impossible position. As one former caseworker put it:

“*Nobody at State did this out of malicious intent or lack of care. There was no way to be prepared, to be quite honest, with the scope and scale of what happened here.*”

However, examining this “doom loop” helps to identify possible efforts that may strengthen federal agencies’ ability to respond to Congressional caseworkers seeking support for their constituents in future crises.

38 Shanna Devine, Rebecca Jones, and John Whitty, “[Office of the Whistleblower Ombuds 2022 Annual Report](#),” *House Office of the Whistleblower Ombuds* (January 2023)

State Department Chaos

Under ordinary circumstances, the standard approach to casework for Congressional offices has distinct steps: the office solicits written permission from the constituent, sends a formal inquiry to the relevant agency asking for a status update, consideration, reconsideration, or whatever else the case may require; the agency then returns a response and takes any action required as a result of the inquiry.

However, returning an accurate and timely response with required action requires the agency team responsible for Congressional requests to be able to access a source of truth on a specific case, and this was extremely difficult in the withdrawal.

On the ground in Afghanistan, the US Embassy (which would ordinarily be responsible for a wide range of actions related to visa and immigration processing) was scrambling to evacuate its American staff and relocate and destroy sensitive documents. On August 17, the Department of State tapped the former US ambassador to Afghanistan to manage the evacuation, because the current Ambassador was not “able to function at the level that was necessary” to complete the operation.³⁹

Further staff changes also complicated the withdrawal, with so many staff on the ground in Afghanistan meeting each other for the first time and lacking the deep location-specific expertise of the departing crew.⁴⁰ This was evident to caseworkers trying to get answers: as a caseworker in a Republican Senate office noted:

“Specifically with Afghanistan, the folks at the State Department, USCIS, Homeland — nobody had case-specific or area-specific knowledge that would have been helpful to use [...] Nobody knew what they were talking about, and those that did could not talk or could not give info to Congressional offices, especially to lowly caseworkers.”

The State Department’s DC-based Congressional liaisons were also in the dark, and increasingly overwhelmed, trying to keep up with a rapidly-changing policy environment as the backlog of Congressional inquiries grew. As one caseworker in a Democratic House office put it:

“There were a few weeks where immigration law got fuzzy [...] We were trying to get PRM [Population, Refugees, and Migration] to brief on refugee processing for a year. In the meantime, we were working off 2018 slides, not sure if they were accurate. [...] Part of the problem was agencies going out of their way to avoid putting things in writing.”

39 Franklin Foer, “[The Final Days](#),” *The Atlantic* (August 29, 2023)

40 “[After Action Review on Afghanistan](#),” *US Department of State* (March 2022)

But with fuzzy internal policies, vulnerable Afghans and their supporters were left seeking sources for reliable information, including reaching out to Congress. For example, many requests for help were asking for support on pathways to flee the country. As one caseworker in a Republican Senate office recalled:

“*At the time, we didn’t know what was legit or not—we can’t tell someone what to do when their personal safety is at risk. We can’t say “yep, it’s safe to cross to Uzbekistan.” It would have been helpful to have that from State.*”

Motivated to help ensure the safety of Afghan allies, caseworkers felt they had to find a way to be responsive to similar inquiries, even without forthcoming information from the State Department.

Challenges with Congressional Responsiveness

State Department personnel responding to Congress were quickly inundated. As one caseworker in a Republican House office put it:

“*State was just overwhelmed with thousands of inquiries a day. It was just a cluster-fuck—there’s no other word to describe it.*”

For a sense of the scale of Congressional inquiries, Secretary of State Antony Blinken, in an appearance before the House Foreign Affairs Committee on September 13, 2021, displayed a stack of 26,000 inquiries from Congressional offices, and said that State had responded to 21,000 of them.⁴¹ However, for the caseworkers on the receiving end of those responses, the quality of the information received was lacking:

“*State’s info was way outdated when they got it — like flights were leaving from one airport, then the other airport closed, and State would say, ‘stop sending inquiries about airport A.’ We’re like, we knew that a week ago, how are you just getting that now? It was causing issues for the caseworkers who weren’t in the sharing groups or weren’t on the briefing calls that a lot of us were. —Caseworker, Republican Senate Office*”

In addition to receiving outdated information, caseworkers often felt that they were receiving boilerplate language rather than specific information that could be helpful to the case:

“*They love to say that everything is case specific, which is not helpful — A, we know that inherently, and B, this case is life or death. I’m trying to stress that this person’s case is unusual, unique, needs to be addressed as soon as possible, and they’re like, “thanks for making us aware, we can’t share any information.” This person might be separated from their family, or when the bomb went off someone might have died, and we need to figure that out. —Caseworker, Republican Senate Office*”

41 [“Afghanistan 2001- 2021: Evaluating the Withdrawal and U.S. Policies – Part 1”](#) (hearing), House Foreign Affairs Committee Democrats (September 13, 2021)

Caseworkers also acknowledged that there were real national security risks associated with sharing potentially sensitive information,⁴² but felt that State could have threaded a needle to help provide accurate information in a way that helped caseworkers and also helped the process for eligible Afghans:

“ I don’t fault anyone for keeping secure matters secure, but when you’re not providing an alternative — it’s a horrible metaphor, but I didn’t need a 3-course meal, just an appetizer. Something so that I’m not guessing, or going in blind, or putting bad info out there that could risk the security of operations. —Caseworker, Republican Senate Office ”

In its After Action Report, the State Department itself identified technical hurdles preventing the Department from adequately responding to Congressional inquiries:

“ The lack of a centralized case management system to track and collate inquiries and a number of other communications and information management challenges added to the difficulties the Department faced.⁴³ ”

A lack of interoperable software between the multiple agencies responsible for handling complex immigration cases — including the ability to jointly track changes on a document in preparation for release to Congress or the public — may have further hindered the Department’s ability to effectively proactively communicate. Again, this was clearly visible to caseworkers when they received responses that showed how multiple pieces of the immigration system didn’t talk to one another:

“ I got an email back from an inquiry from August 20 or 21, they finally replied back nine months later. At this point, the person had moved to four different countries. It’s like thanks for the reply, but it’s unhelpful. I had already submitted paperwork to transfer the SIV to the next embassy, four countries later. You [State] are just replying to acknowledge, and the NVC [National Visa Center] file where I submitted hasn’t connected with you. It’s all State Department. Why those systems don’t talk to each other in real time is infuriating. —Caseworker, Republican House Office ”

But where the Department of State was frustrated by its internal technical ability to respond to individual requests, caseworkers were also frustrated that the State Department appeared to prioritize responding to individual requests rather than proactively sharing more up-to-date information in email bulletins or caseworker-specific briefings.⁴⁴ Caseworkers were hungry for any information that would have let them answer questions more quickly, preventing them from having to submit formal responses in the first place. As one caseworker put it:

“ It’s ‘help me help you’ for the agencies—give us an infographic, help us tell people which categories are ready for travel. —Caseworker, Democratic House Office ”

42 Laura Seligman, et. al, [“U.S. officials provided Taliban with names of Americans, Afghan allies to evacuate,”](#) *Politico* (August 26, 2021)

43 [“After Action Review on Afghanistan,”](#) *US Department of State* (March 2022)

44 For example, as it had done during the early days of the pandemic, when caseworkers received daily briefing emails with lists of repatriation flights from multiple countries and the amount of American citizens repatriated.

But the State Department and other federal agencies face challenges in proactively reaching caseworkers. All federal agencies, not just the Department of State, have limited options to contact Congressional caseworkers directly: there is no publicly-available directory of Congressional staff, or an analog accessible by federal agencies. While some agencies purchase Congressional staff lists yearly or once per Congress from third-party vendors, the frequent rate of staff turnover means that these are almost immediately outdated, and most services do not identify caseworkers by area of speciality. This meant that in the Afghanistan withdrawal, there was no formal email or bulletin method for updating caseworkers; instead, State had to rely on caseworkers themselves to share information about relevant briefings, and caseworkers had to essentially crowdsource the inconsistent, outdated information provided in response to specific case inquiries. To get on the State Department’s email lists, caseworkers had to specifically request that the correct person in their office be included.

Finally, committees of jurisdiction over the State Department and the Afghanistan withdrawal (the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Senate Foreign Relations Committee, House Armed Services Committee, and Senate Armed Services Committee) had existing relationships and priorities established to ensure that the State Department was briefing Committee members and staff on the withdrawal and overarching policy concerns. However, there is no corresponding entity with responsibility for arranging briefings for casework staff on the granular details that would have allowed them to be more responsive to requests for help. The first briefing for caseworkers from the Department of State was on September 15 from Consular on the Hill, two weeks after the US completed its military withdrawal. Subsequent briefings from USCIS on humanitarian parole did not take place until mid-October. In interviews with caseworkers in both chambers and on both sides of the aisle, it is striking how each caseworker was aware of or attended a different set of available briefings and support events from this period.

Consequences of Inadequate Response

The lack of timely and accurate information available often had direct negative consequences for caseworkers’ and the State Department’s ability to operate effectively in the withdrawal. One clear impact was the spread of incomplete information. For example, one House office described a crisis evacuation request form passed from one caseworker to another without clear instructions on who should fill it out. When caseworkers sent the form to Afghan allies awaiting relocation and resettlement, the form crashed from the enormous number of requests. State later clarified that the form was solely for US citizens; the unclear instructions meant that the form was now unusable to the specific people it was intended to serve. A similar episode happened when the State Department provided caseworkers with visa certificates intended for specific SIV or other legal permanent residents’ family members, but the certificates contained little to no identifying information — meaning that they could be widely shared beyond their intended recipients in WhatsApp groups on the ground.

In its After Action Review of the Afghanistan withdrawal, the State Department expressed concern and frustration over Congressional involvement:

“The Department proved unable to buffer those on the ground in Kabul from receiving multiple, direct calls and messages from current or former senior officials, members of Congress, and/or prominent private citizens asking, and in some cases, demanding that they provide assistance to specific at-risk Afghans. Responding to such demands often placed Department employees at even greater risk and hindered the effort to move larger groups of people out.”⁴⁵

45 “[After Action Review on Afghanistan](#),” *US Department of State* (March 2022)

While caseworkers acknowledged these challenges, they largely felt as if there were no good options: they received the volume of calls for help because the State Department was unable to handle the volume of inquiries directed its way. They received little guidance from the State Department, other agencies, or committees of jurisdiction on the information that they should be collecting from Afghans seeking assistance, but clear and grounded fears of imminent harm from people on the ground in Afghanistan. Given the stakes of the situation, caseworkers felt that they had to figure it out themselves, understanding that their efforts were based on incomplete information, and may ultimately be counterproductive.

Improvement Post-Afghanistan

Since the Afghanistan withdrawal, subsequent large-scale repatriation efforts demonstrate that the State Department has made efforts to improve its responsiveness to Congressional requests. As one caseworker put it, it’s “night and day” between the Afghanistan response and the rush to repatriate American citizens from Israel and Gaza, with the State Department providing more frequent briefings, updates, and timely and accurate responses.

Consular on the Hill (which handles Congressional liaison responsibilities for the State Department’s consular affairs) has even gone so far as to proactively reach out to specific caseworkers who had prior cases involving Lebanese constituents to solicit suggestions and contacts for Lebanese groups and constituents to share peremptory briefings on the security situation in Lebanon. This level of willingness to recognize caseworkers’ extensive networks of local contacts and to partner to proactively share information is a welcome sign for many caseworkers, especially those who went through the Afghanistan withdrawal.

But Afghanistan-related casework continues to move extremely slowly, if at all: processing time and standards for some common Afghanistan-related cases have continued to decline. One caseworker noted that SIV processing has changed dramatically for the worse, where in some cases the only response they can hope for is an acknowledgement that the case is in progress, no matter how hard they push.

Recommendation III: Congress should develop minimum baseline standards for agency timeliness and best practices in responding to Congressional inquiries

As the caseworkers interviewed for this report acknowledged, State Department employees handling the crisis were in an impossible position. However, caseworker frustration at the timeliness and quality of responses from the State Department are only one instance of a more widespread problem where federal agencies have not been directed or supported to prioritize responsiveness to Congressional casework inquiries.

There are currently no standards codified in law or regulation for how agencies should respond to Congressional casework requests, meaning that agencies have wide latitude to decide how and how quickly they will respond. Some agencies route inquiries through web forms that provide limited tracking (e.g., Consumer Financial Protection Bureau), others through DC-based Offices of Congressional/Legislative Affairs (e.g., most military branches), others through assigned Congressional liaisons at processing centers (e.g., Social Security, Veterans Benefits Administration), others through local leadership teams (e.g., regional Veterans Health Administration systems), others through customer service teams (e.g., Taxpayer Advocate Service), and more. Different agencies and programs — and even specific personnel within them — have vastly dif-

ferent standards for responsiveness, including both timeliness and quality of responses.

This patchwork of different avenues and expectations for response creates significant barriers for casework teams to effectively respond to constituents, and broad inefficiencies with training new caseworkers and establishing new offices' casework teams.

In part due to the geographic and cultural distance between legislative and casework operations, casework responsiveness has not frequently been a topic of Congress's formal oversight measures. In recent years, Congress has made one attempt to influence how agencies respond to Congressional casework, with limited success: the 2019 CASES Act required agencies to accept digital signatures on Privacy Act Release Forms authorizing the release of casework information to Member offices. However, a 2022 GAO review found that agencies interpreted the law considerably differently than its original intent, and have not prioritized its implementation.⁴⁶ Today, caseworkers still report inconsistent responses from agencies on digital signature policies.⁴⁷

To address these problems, Congress should take action toward establishing a set of minimum standards for all agencies to meet when responding to Congressional casework inquiries and implementing those standards. These standards would need to account for different standards for different types of cases, but could improve overall responsiveness by indicating target baselines for effective communication. Establishing these standards may also require critical attention to how agencies assign personnel and technical resources to casework inquiries.

These actions may include:

01 The Committee on House Administration Subcommittee on Modernization should request a report from the Government Accountability Office on agency responsiveness to Congressional casework, including recommendations for minimum standards and agency personnel needed to ensure timely and accurate responses.

We suggest that this request direct the GAO to:

- i. Survey current agency practices for responding to Congressional casework requests, including data gathering and analysis on response timeliness and feedback.
- ii. Offer recommendations for minimum standards and best practices for agencies to respond to Congressional inquiries.
- iii. Assess the feasibility of designating a Chief Casework Liaison at the agencies handling the highest volume of Congressional casework requests, tasked solely with managing response to Congressional inquiries and providing regular briefings and training for Congressional casework staff. Precedent for a similar position exists in the form of agency Inspectors General, as well as the Taxpayer Advocate, and international analogs like the Swedish Parliamentary Ombudsmen (JO).⁴⁸

46 [“GAO-23-105562: CASES Act Implementation,”](#) *Government Accountability Office (GAO)* (December 20, 2022)

47 [“Casework Basics: How do we fix this? Championing implementation vs. policy,”](#) *POPVOX Foundation* (November 16, 2023)

48 [“About JO,”](#) *JO - Riksdagens Ombudsmän* (March 24, 2023)

- iv. Assess the feasibility of establishing a unified casework portal to facilitate communication between Congressional offices and agencies, including tracking case progress.
- v. Assess the current state of agency compliance with the CASES Act directing federal agencies to accept digital Privacy Act Releases, and suggest paths forward to increase adoption.

02 The House and Senate Oversight Committees and/or committees of jurisdiction over the major casework agencies should consider holding annual or biannual hearings on casework resolution, focused on issues identified as national trends through the casework data aggregator.

Members of committees of jurisdiction already widely use illustrative examples from their offices' casework in hearings.⁴⁹

03 Committees of jurisdiction should consider hosting annual hearings on agency responsiveness to casework.

Committees' Member Services teams could solicit feedback from caseworkers, including caseworkers for Members not on committees of jurisdiction, on experiences interacting with the agencies, and compare response times between agencies to showcase best practices.

Recommendation IV: The Congressional staff directory should include caseworker issue areas, where applicable, and be made available to agency liaisons

As caseworkers noted, updates from the State Department on relevant briefings in the Afghanistan withdrawal were frequently not shared with all caseworkers handling Afghanistan casework. However, this was partly an issue of access to contact information: There is currently no centrally-maintained real-time list of Congressional caseworkers, meaning that both internal support offices and agency liaison staff cannot easily send vital updates to all staff who may need them. Agency staff need access to a real-time updated list of caseworkers, with issue areas where applicable, to enable a more proactive partnership with caseworkers.

The House Chief Administrative Officer is already working on developing a legislative branch-wide staff directory, updated with legislative staff issue areas. **The CAO should also consider including casework staff issue areas, and making the directory available to federal agency liaisons.**

Casework Organizing

In the absence of coordination from State, caseworkers found new ways to coordinate that led to significant breakthroughs.

On the House side, immigration caseworker for (since-retired) Congressman John Yarmuth [D, KY], Elizabeth Peña, who was not on any committees of jurisdiction related to Afghanistan, quickly noticed that the best information about the situation in Afghanistan was coming from other caseworkers. She set up a Teams chat and invited a few of the House caseworkers that had been posting to the listserv to join. The response was overwhelming, eventually creating a fully nonpartisan group where caseworkers were rapidly sharing any information they could obtain. Peña noted that the chat made her feel less alone and more confident that she was doing everything she could to help the vulnerable Afghans on her caseload.

Similar immigration-focused chats were established in the Senate, offering an opportunity to share substantive information, to orient caseworkers new to the Afghan situation, and to offer support. As relationships and trust were built, some caseworkers also used the chats to vent about the emotional weight of handling these dire cases, or to create smaller “support chats” with others working through similar issues. As one caseworker in a democratic House office put it:

“One of the few silver linings of this experience has been being able to connect and work with my peers in other offices. The Teams thread that caseworkers organized to share best practices, ask questions, etc. was a tremendous resource and all of the offices I reached out to to compare notes individually were incredibly gracious with their time and expertise. Someone else said this but I agree wholeheartedly: I wish I’d never had to meet these people but I’m very glad I did.”

For outside observers, caseworkers’ ability to organize was an astonishing counterweight to portrayals of Congress as terminally partisan and dysfunctional. As #AfghanEvac founder Shawn VanDiver put it:

“It’s really remarkable to think about how, eight months after January 6th, a bipartisan, bicameral, nonpartisan group of Congressional staff came together. And I thought the coalition would fall apart, we thought that Hill caseworkers would fall apart, and it hasn’t — they keep working together on a bipartisan basis to get this done.”

The volume of these chats let some of the more experienced caseworkers take on informal leadership roles to do several things:

01 Identify patterns in State Department responses and optimize limited briefing time

Multiple caseworkers described the process of figuring out State processes and rules as a process of “throwing everything at the wall to see what sticks.” The group chats as a forum for caseworkers to share what had worked (e.g., what specific combination of visa qualifications and credentials made someone eligible for a flight manifest,⁵⁰ or which type of ID was accepted by checkpoint guards) and when it had most recently worked or stopped working allowed experienced caseworkers to sort through a larger volume of information to identify and share patterns. Sharing these patterns allowed other offices to attempt to replicate these successes, creating a method for caseworkers to validate their understanding of State’s rules.

These chats also helped identify some people who had reached out to multiple Congressional offices, allowing offices to streamline who was working on which cases to avoid duplicate requests.

The limited opportunities for caseworkers to join State Department briefings highlighted caseworkers’ inconsistent experience levels; meaning that these essential briefings could be overwhelmed by basic questions from caseworkers unfamiliar with agency resources. Organizing to help answer basic questions on the listservs and save briefing time for difficult questions was a vastly more efficient and effective use of limited time with agency leadership.

While helpful, Teams chats had limitations: the platform is unwieldy and difficult to search, with limitations on the number of participants built into the software. The sheer volume of the traffic was almost another full-time job to moderate, without any designated staff support. Additionally, there was no way to make the chat bicameral: caseworkers in each chamber were limited to relying on email to communicate with delegation colleagues.

02 Organize to ask for needed mental health resources

A number of caseworkers individually contacted the Senate Employee Assistance Program (EAP) and House Office of Employee Assistance (OEA) and scheduled one-on-one sessions to talk about the experience of doing this casework and to process and define the limits of what they could do with the information they had at the time. Unlike private sector therapists, Employee Assistance counselors have experience with the unique aspects of the Congressional workplace, and in this context, they were hearing from caseworkers around the country who were suffering similar trauma from the Afghanistan cases and burnout from the months of high volume casework throughout the pandemic.

In this context, Rebecca Crosswaith, Immigration Constituent Liaison for Senator Blumenthal [D, CT], suggested that the Senate EAP schedule a Zoom meeting for caseworkers to debrief the experience of working through the Afghanistan withdrawal. With information shared to all

50 For an example of how complicated these cases could be, see the Department of State Flight Manifest Eligibility [infographic](#) from #AfghanEvac. (Before these infographics were created and verified, caseworkers were attempting to identify and categorize these cases on their own.)

offices by email, and amplified on the Teams chat, the first session was well attended by a fully bipartisan group of 75 attendees from around the country. EAP counselors were there to frame the discussion and talk about managing trauma and the importance of self-care. They were also able to set some guardrails to keep the discussion centered. The Senate EAP also hosted a separate session specifically for veterans on Senate staff to discuss the Afghanistan withdrawal in the context of their own military service. The EAP's trusted status within the Senate made it much easier for caseworkers to participate than potential similar offerings from outside groups.

The on-camera conversation was rich and vulnerable, and the meeting chat was filled with comments from caseworkers who shared and acknowledged similar feelings. With the need for this support so evident, Crosswaith worked with EAP and a small leadership team to create a format for future monthly sessions. The first of these on-going sessions was attended by 31 participants, and participation has grown and been sustained over time. Importantly, the topics are chosen by caseworkers and typically involve two to three volunteer caseworkers presenting their experience or insight on topics like self-care, handling difficult cases, integrating interns into casework, caseload volumes, and more.

Senate EAP continues to offer staff support to both the caseworker and the director forums, typically assigning one counselor to the discussion and another to moderate the chat. The forum is often “off camera” as it provides a space where caseworkers can eat lunch or multi-task while still creating and maintaining connections in the caseworker community making the chat a lively source of conversation or support. Kristin Welsh-Simpson, Director of the Senate EAP, notes that the consistently high attendance at the Senate Caseworker sessions are atypical among offerings for other Congressional staff positions, and demonstrates both the need and the commitment of participants and value of the forum. She also points to the increasing numbers of attendance and participation from a diverse group of caseworkers throughout the country as a sign of trust developing among participants.

Recommendation V: Facilitate information-sharing among caseworkers

In the Afghanistan withdrawal, caseworkers were able to essentially crowdsource the limited information released from the State Department and other agencies to support constituents and American allies, as well as make organized requests for support from internal House and Senate offices. This required the activation of a distributed network of caseworkers, and the ability to share and vet information in real time using remote asynchronous collaboration tools. While this effort was impressive, it was stymied by limitations to the tools themselves.

The House Chief Administrative Officer and Senate Sergeant-at-Arms should explore additional technical solutions to facilitate asynchronous caseworker knowledge sharing.

This builds on and expands Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress recommendation 148, which calls for the CAO to facilitate opportunities for staff that work directly with constituents to connect and share best practices. The Select Committee's final report notes this recommendation is partially implemented, citing expanded in-person conferences for district staff but noting continued scope to bring district staff together in virtual seminars.

Technical solutions may take several different directions. For example:

01 The House CAO could consider asking Microsoft to increase the number of people who can participate in a Teams chat for the House Caseworkers Assistance forum in the House’s Microsoft enterprise contracts.

Previously, some caseworkers in the House could not participate because of limits in the size of a chat. This would allow all offices to equally participate in House-side Teams discussions. If Teams is not an appropriate technical solution, the House CAO could examine other federally approved certified platforms, such as Slack. The House CAO may also consider hosting a directory of official Teams chats by topic or position to enable new caseworkers to more easily plug in to ongoing conversations and knowledge-sharing.

02 The Committee on House Administration could direct the House Digital Service, possibly in collaboration with the Congressional Research Service, to explore options for establishing a caseworker-wide collaborative internal website for caseworkers to asynchronously share knowledge.

One such model is a wiki, which is a crowdsourced encyclopedia-like directory of topics. Specialized wikis are widely used by public groups, private companies, and government agencies to manage real-time knowledge-sharing, including sensitive knowledge like intelligence work product.⁵¹ Wiki sites may be created using commercially available off-the-shelf software or open source code — and new products integrating AI tools promise to make this type of platform even more efficient and streamlined. A casework wiki could help caseworkers contribute, vet, and organize knowledge by topic, creating a long-standing resource independent of individual caseworkers’ Microsoft accounts. There are other knowledge-sharing platforms that could also be considered.

03 The CAO could consider making a program like Slack for Government available on a pilot basis to casework teams in a specific delegation.

Slack is already widely used in the House and Senate, and Slack offers specific products for government use that meet enhanced security requirements. Slack’s format would supplement a caseworker wiki by providing a forum for caseworkers to discuss specific cases and share time-sensitive agency updates like scheduled trainings and briefings. Unlike current Teams chats, a Slack maintained by the CAO would not be tied to a specific user account, and would therefore be more resilient in the case of staff turnover. Caseworkers could nominate or elect experienced caseworkers to moderate agency- or program-specific channels—performing the same functions that experienced caseworkers already fulfill in existing Teams chats. Limited access could even be granted to agency liaisons to post updates or answer screened questions in some channels, or select committee staff to tap into caseworker expertise and insights.

51 For example, “[Intellipedia](#),” a set of shared wikis at different clearance levels available to members of the intelligence community.

Both a caseworker wiki and a caseworker Slack could be tied into the Casework Data Aggregator system to encourage greater participation by allowing access to knowledge-sharing platforms only for offices that opt in to the data aggregator.

As with the Casework Data Aggregator, participation could eventually be expanded to include Senate casework staff.

External Resources

In normal circumstances, caseworkers usually do not work directly with outside organizations: House and Senate Ethics rules are strict about appearing to endorse private businesses, and the danger of referring a constituent to incorrect or misleading information is in general too high.

However, as the relocation and resettlement effort unfolded, networks of external stakeholders and coalitions began to emerge. Since 2001, 775,000 US service members who served tours of duty in Afghanistan, retained strong relationships with Afghan allies, including interpreters. Many veterans and non-veterans groups organized quickly, leveraging their connections within the US government and with active-duty military members still involved in the operation.⁵² In addition to “stakeholders” with military or government roles, many of these groups saw an outpouring of civilian support, and rapidly began to organize volunteers willing to help support Afghan allies and refugees.

Makeup of these networks was critical for being able to help monitor and direct the flow of information in a chaotic situation. Many veterans and current or former diplomats, intelligence community members, and civilians involved in these networks had access to real-time information not available through standard agency and Congressional channels, and the ability to press multiple agencies for support and answers, both publicly and privately. Non-official networks were also able to more easily collaborate with external governments like Qatar for evacuation efforts, including charter flights for those ineligible for State Department transport. Over time, groups like #AfghanEvac formed larger coalitions, vetting coalition members for their willingness to adhere to legal methods and willingness to collaborate to share information and partner.

In desperate need of information, some Congressional caseworkers, despite restrictions, turned to these groups for assistance, balancing the urgent need for information with ethical concerns and the potential risks of misinformation. As one caseworker in a Republican Senate office put it:

“ 1,000 million percent it was easier for outside groups to get info from the agencies. ”

In September of 2021, caseworkers handling the Afghanistan withdrawal became aware of the #AfghanEvac coalition, and reached out to make contact and raise awareness of the work of Congressional caseworkers. The

⁵² This included agencies not directly involved with the Afghanistan withdrawal, including the Department of Veterans Affairs: The VA crisis line received a surge of outreach from veterans experiencing mental health challenges during the Afghanistan withdrawal, and moved to provide specific mental health support for veterans who served in Afghanistan.

For example, see:

- [VA ensures access to health care as 9/11 anniversary nears](#)
- [VA Secretary Denis McDonough’s statement on Afghanistan to Veterans, their families, survivors, and caregivers](#)
- [Coping with current events in Afghanistan](#)

#AfghanEvac coalition was already receiving weekly briefings from the State Department on granular policy affecting Afghan allies seeking to leave Afghanistan, and offered to host briefings for Congressional caseworkers to pass on information from State.

Given Congressional Ethics rules around collaborating with outside organizations, establishing a formal working relationship was complicated. Eventually, after a significant back-and-forth, the House Ethics Committee gave approval for several caseworkers, including Jenna Jaffe (caseworker for Rep. Jerrold Nadler [D, NY]) and Jessica Bradley-Rushing (then-caseworker for Rep. Bill Keating [D, MA], now at the Department of State CARE Team), to be officially listed on the #AfghanEvac website as “Points of Contact,” which identified their leadership role in helping coordinate caseworker briefings.

Starting in late September of 2021, these #AfghanEvac briefings, together with readouts from caseworkers attending briefings from the House Foreign Affairs Committee, became a vital information source for caseworkers on various topics, from security vetting to refugee programs — for example, creating easy-to-reference infographics that clearly laid out immigration pathways to help caseworkers understand and communicate Afghans’ cases and options. As one caseworker in a Republican House office put it, quoting #AfghanEvac founder Shawn VanDiver:

“

[#AfghanEvac] was able to unfuck the fuckery of information.

”

As the months went on, this information largely stood as correct (or quickly updated in response to changing conditions), and became a central source of information for caseworkers continuing to handle Afghanistan case-work — with weekly briefings continuing for a year, and biweekly briefings continuing after. On some level, the comprehensiveness of #AfghanEvac information freed up even internal State Department resources, as one caseworker noted:

“

I don’t fault them, but months later it should have been cleaned up and tidied up and had a process in place. #AfghanEvac did that for them, and State just used it instead of coming up with their own.

”

The State Department eventually gave formal recognition to the role that #AfghanEvac played with a formal Memorandum of Understanding⁵³ establishing a working relationship to coordinate volunteers to assist in the relocation process in August 2022. Secretary of State Blinken spoke at a recognition ceremony⁵⁴ in June of 2023 at the renewal of the MOU to thank the coalition for its ongoing work.

53 [“Secretary of State Blinken Participates in a Memorandum of Understanding Signing Ceremony with the #AfghanEvac Coalition,”](#) US Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson (June 9, 2023)

54 Antony Blinken, [“At a Memorandum of Understanding Signing Ceremony with the #AfghanEvac Coalition,”](#) US Department of State (June 12, 2023)

Beyond the substantive collaboration of making information accessible, caseworkers also described the value of camaraderie with the extensive network of volunteers in the coalition. The ability to talk to experts who spoke like “real people,” and the availability of specific resources for caseworkers and other volunteers working on relocation efforts through #AfghanEvac (including counseling and regular calls) was cathartic and validating. According to a caseworker from a Democratic House office:

“*#AfghanEvac has been an invaluable resource. As both a source of information, support, and solidarity, I can say without exaggeration that I would not have lasted this long on the Afghan docket without them.*”

VanDiver noted in a separate conversation the importance of making sure that recognition extends to the case-work staff who were a vital part of the effort, and responsible for the successful relocation of “thousands” of American citizens and Afghan allies:

“*The really unique thing about this was that it was a shared experience: I had the privilege to have seen that the volunteers working on this, Congressional case-workers, and within the federal government, the entrepreneurial, expeditionary bureaucrats — they’re all experiencing same feeling of helplessness, the drive to do better, the same desire that other stakeholders would do more faster, smarter, better, and the deep anguish when you feel like you’ve failed even though you didn’t fail. I’ve been trying to figure out how to make sure people see that shared experience. [...] This was so unique and different, and should be a badge of American ingenuity. Look at what these people all did together.*”

Recommendation VI: Permit caseworkers to cohost events with or refer constituents to local nonprofit organizations

The speed with which the Afghanistan crisis unfolded and the equal speed with which outside groups were organized to provide support is certainly a special case — but it points to difficulties for caseworkers in understanding the rules around collaborating with and referring constituents to outside groups.

The Members’ Congressional Handbook states that “Official resources may not be used to advertise for any private individual, firm, charity, or corporation, or imply in any manner that the government endorses or favors any specific commercial product, commodity, or service.”⁵⁵ However, casework teams are regularly approached for questions that are out of their scope, including questions about locating local resources like food banks, domestic violence shelters, veterans’ services, and elder care. The Congressional Management Foundation noted in a report about the role of Congress in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic that in a crisis, Congress is often the only entity in the federal government providing a local, on-the-ground source of trusted information across all federal agencies and programs.⁵⁶ While government employees may be able to easily make the distinction between different levels of government jurisdiction and private

55 “[Members’ Congressional Handbook](#),” *US Committee on House Administration of the 118th Congress*

56 Kathy Goldschmidt and Bradley Sinkaus, “[The Future of Constituent Engagement: Coronavirus, Congress, and Constituent Communications](#),” *Congressional Management Foundation* (August 13, 2020)

entities, constituents are rarely similarly equipped.

To address these challenges, the Committee on House Administration and Senate Rules Committee should explore allowing House offices flexibility to cohost events with or refer constituents to nonprofit organizations.

The Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress addressed these challenges in two separate recommendations:

- 153 Recommendation 153 recommends that the House update and provide clear ethics guidelines for casework teams on making referrals to appropriate community organizations, resources, and services.
- 154 Recommendation 154 recommends that the House provides flexibility within House Rule 24 to allow district offices to cosponsor constituent service events with non-governmental organizations to provide information and resources.⁵⁷

Ultimately, Members and staff are responsible for developing detailed working knowledge of the landscape of resources in their districts and states. In light of these demands, the Congressional Research Service or support offices like the Sergeant-at-Arms or Congressional Staff Academy may consider providing guidance to offices on how to develop local resource guides that provide constituents with multiple well-vetted options for a particular need rather than choosing a specific organization for a direct referral.

HKIA

As the airport became the last viable option to leave Kabul, helping American citizens, visa-holders, and citizens of partner nations access the airport through the Taliban-controlled outer gates and the US Marine-controlled inner gates became a primary casework “ask.” This involved determining eligibility for US or charter evacuation flights, identifying eligible Afghans, and facilitating their gate passage.

From the third week of August, the Taliban controlled the area outside HKIA between the outer perimeter checkpoint and the airport premises, forming checkpoints to control access to the outer gates. However, the Taliban soldiers were not prepared to handle the array of identifying documents that the US required to identify eligibility for flights, and frequently shut down access, or changed the types of documents they would accept.⁵⁸ Direct negotiations with the Taliban were largely in the hands of high-level officials with the DOD.⁵⁹ The State Department and Department of Defense had little room to maneuver to try to clarify what credentials would be acceptable to the Taliban — as later reporting noted, it was fairly frequent that the Taliban would open the gates in the morning, close them around midday when the fighters on the checkpoints got hungry and irritable, and then reopen them later in the afternoon⁶⁰ — or open them at irregular times for people with the resources to

57 [“Final Report: Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress,”](#) *House Select Committee on Modernization of the 117th Congress* (December 15, 2022)

58 Franklin Foer, [“The Final Days,”](#) *The Atlantic* (August 29, 2023)

59 Ibid.

60 Ibid.

negotiate a bribe.⁶¹ Afghans and others attempting to enter the outer perimeter often faced tear gas and beatings as gate guards struggled to maintain control.⁶²

Even with the inconsistent entries into the outer perimeter, the area between the outer gates and inner gates was quickly overwhelmed with crowds. As a staffer in a Democratic House office quoted in *The Hill* put it:

“ I had to make the decision to send women and children that I had to prioritize, to the airport, where they—something could happen to them—in order to potentially maybe get them through the gate. And I always really struggled with that. Are they going to be able to sit there for two or three days, if they need to? Do they have extra cell phones? Do they have food, water? And again, it feels like it didn’t have to be this way.⁶³

Once through the gates, the challenge was matching individuals with credentials to get on an American plane with Marines who could verify the credentials and let them pass. Again, offices with large networks of active-duty military or veterans were more likely to be able to directly connect with the individual Marines on the airport gates, sending photos or descriptions of Afghans and their documentation, and guiding Afghans to the right gate and the right Marines over Signal or WhatsApp. Some caseworkers were on the phone with constituents as they spoke with both Taliban fighters and US Marines, helpless to intervene.

The risk of violence was ever-present, either from the crowd becoming a mob in frustration while watching people plucked seemingly at random for entry, or as was eventually tragically borne out, from a suicide bomb that killed 13 US service members and more than 150 Afghan civilians on August 26.⁶⁴ Caseworkers who were in direct contact with Afghans in that crowd described the sudden silence from previously-reliable contacts, with no way of telling who had been killed or injured and whose cell phone had died.

Many caseworkers had stories of the deeply improbable connections that worked, and these were some of the stories that made it to the US media. Rep. Darrell Issa’s [R, CA] team was recognized in local media for their efforts on behalf of several dozen Afghans, including American citizens who had served as translators, an elderly couple with ties to the district, and a pregnant American woman who had to leave behind her Afghan husband.⁶⁵ The office of Congressman Seth Moulton [D, MA] coordinated a rescue for the family of a US interpreter, using the code word “Tom Brady” to connect the group to contacts who could safely shepherd them to the airport.⁶⁶ Other stories that did not make the media nonetheless reflected sheer determination and good luck. Caseworkers described frantic efforts to help Afghans waiting in the crowd find a piece of identifying clothing that they could hold up to catch the attention of particular Marines, like a polka dotted umbrella.

When the last scheduled plane departed Afghanistan, teams that had seen successful relocations struggled to take credit for them, knowing how many people were left behind. Caseworkers were still handling high volumes of calls and emails from and on behalf of the people still seeking to leave the country. And casework teams had to catch up on non-Afghanistan-related casework requests that had been triaged during the peak of the crisis.

61 Rebecca Beitsch and Laura Kelly, “[How lawmakers aided the Afghan evacuation](#),” *The Hill* (September 15, 2021)

62 Matthieu Aikins, “[Inside the Fall of Kabul](#),” *The New York Times Magazine* (December 10, 2021)

63 Rebecca Beitsch and Laura Kelly, “[How lawmakers aided the Afghan evacuation](#),” *The Hill* (September 15, 2021)

64 Lolita Baldor, “[Pentagon orders new interviews with service members present at Kabul airport attack amid continued criticism](#),” *PBS News Hour* (September 15, 2023)

65 Andrew Dyer, “[Rep. Darrell Issa helps more Americans evacuate Afghanistan](#),” *The San Diego Union Tribune* (September 18, 2021)

66 “[Veteran Credits Rep. Seth Moulton for Family’s Rescue in Afghanistan](#),” *WBZ News, Boston* (September 1, 2021)

Recommendation VII: Explore options to provide surge capacity for casework teams in crisis

The Afghanistan crisis was only one of several high-volume repatriation crises in the last several years. Member offices during the 118th Congress have handled repatriation efforts from Israel and Gaza, Sudan, and other smaller-scale conflicts, and during the 117th Congress, Member offices handled all of the above, the Afghanistan withdrawal, and the Ukraine war. In addition to international crises, casework teams are also on call for disasters closer to home: In 2023 alone, the US saw 25 domestic disasters with more than a billion dollars in losses.⁶⁷ In local disasters, casework teams see sharp rises in requests for help from constituents, businesses, and municipalities on navigating government benefits, safety net benefits, and coordinating among local and state stakeholders.

The House Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress addressed this challenge in recommendation 151, which recommended that the House provide resources and staffing flexibility to district offices in responding to a federally declared disaster. The ModCom final report notes that implementing language was included in the National Defense Authorization Act for FY23, and CAO laid out options for increases to the staff cap in a December 2021 report. The report notes that responsibility rests with the Committee on House Administration to assess paths forward for adjusting staff caps in these circumstances.

Given the relative number of local disasters facing casework teams, the Committee on House Administration should prioritize developing a method to surge emergency staff capacity to Congressional offices experiencing a local disaster to assist with emergency intake, triage, and proactive public education.

The House should additionally broaden the scope of the Modernization Committee recommendation to provide surge capacity to any office experiencing a spike in casework demand above a certain threshold (as reported through the data aggregator).

This would provide support for offices receiving a disproportionate number of requests due to factors like international conflict and disasters that do not meet the threshold of a federally-declared disaster declaration.

67 [“Billion-Dollar Weather and Climate Disasters,”](#) *National Centers for Environmental Information, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration* (December 8, 2023)

Impact on Caseworkers

Although caseworkers had been handling pandemic-era crisis casework prior to August of 2021, and many had been through other natural or man-made casework disasters, no one was prepared for the volume and the emotional toll of casework in the wake of the fall of Kabul.

For many of the caseworkers interviewed for this report, there was a deeply personal connection to the withdrawal: one was a military veteran, one was a military spouse whose husband had served in Afghanistan, one had a close friend in the country seeking to leave, and others had been handling SIV cases for years, building up close relationships with US translators and their families who had risked their lives to support US troops.

The fact that some caseworkers and Congressional offices had existing connections to the conflict meant that the initial burden was extremely uneven across Congressional offices. Afghans, even those legally qualified to come to the United States, are not necessarily “constituents” — a term that usually comprises all residents, regardless of citizenship status, as well as citizens abroad registered to vote in the district or state. This meant it was entirely at the discretion of the casework team and the Member whether the office took those cases, and there was no geographic filter that would have naturally distributed demand.

Instead, within delegations, some offices became immediately known as Afghanistan operations, and less-experienced or less-willing teams referred people out. While caseworkers who did handle Afghanistan cases took pride in their willingness to help and their effectiveness where possible, this unevenness nonetheless contributed to a sense of unfairness and disproportionate burden on some caseworkers.

“

There are good offices that just take an out to send casework to [our] team. They knew that I was super effective, so instead of having somebody start from scratch, they'd send them to me. It just didn't cross my mind to tell anyone to stop.

”

The perception of effectiveness and success also at times felt uneven and unpredictable: the lack of clear information on what was happening and how caseworkers should be helping meant that success sometimes felt “random.” Some caseworkers described the experience of seeing limited successes reported in the media as heartening (demonstrating that it was possible to help get people out) and disheartening (what was their team doing wrong, or not doing?) at the same time.

The offices that stepped up had the burden compounded when caseworker contact information was shared on the ground in Afghanistan. While different offices established different rules and boundaries around constituent contacts (including giving out office or personal cell phones, and/or connecting with Afghans on Signal or WhatsApp), the flood of calls had a way of finding caseworkers in their personal lives anyway: as one put it, “People were finding me on LinkedIn, on Facebook.” As individual caseworkers’ contact information spread, the volume increased. One described an eerie experience on the phone with an American veteran seeking help for his interpreter who told her that he had a dream where he prayed for escape and “God told me to ask for [caseworker’s name].”

Operationally, caseworkers in offices that did step up were working around the clock to handle the massive volume of cases coming in, and to be available on Afghanistan time to be in contact with Afghans and on-the-ground personnel. They described feeling physically almost unable to leave their computers or cell phones, for

fear that they would miss an urgent case or a rare response from someone on the ground who could help. The sense of pressure, especially for staffers coordinating on-the-ground efforts to connect Afghans directly with Marines at the airport, was overwhelming:

“*If I made one mistake, that group would not get in and I wasted all that time, I wasted their time, I got their hopes up.*⁶⁸”

Vicarious trauma, which the National Center for PTSD defines as “the cognitive, emotional, social, and behavioral changes that may occur while working with traumatized individuals,”⁶⁹ is a well-recognized occupational hazard for first responders and other positions.⁷⁰ The contacts coming in from Afghans were traumatizing: caseworkers described receiving photos and videos of violence, and hearing stories of threats, killings, beatings, and more. The emotional impact of these traumatic experiences continues today:

“*I was useless to my team during the NEO [Noncombatant Evacuation Operation]. Thankfully they were able to pick up the ball and run with it, covering for my absence. Since then, I’ve gradually gotten better at managing the stress and emotions associated with the Afghan casework but there have been times when I’ve not been fully engaged because I’ve been distracted or when I was shorter with someone than I meant to be because I was in a bad headspace.* —Caseworker, Democratic House Office”

All of the caseworkers interviewed for this report described the impact in physical terms — feelings of physical frustration, nausea, headaches, insomnia, phantom pains, and more. One caseworker who was pregnant at the time described the fear of what the high stress would do to her pregnancy. Several caseworkers talked about turning to alcohol to manage the emotional intensity, and others mentioned weight gain.

As the military withdrawal took place while most Congressional offices were still working from home in the pandemic, the evacuation was also an experience not just for caseworkers, but for their families. Several expressed gratitude for supportive partners and family members who supported them through the process, making sure they ate and their families were taken care of, or covering for them when they missed family events.

Two caseworkers we spoke to eventually got to a point where management in their offices forced them to disconnect and take involuntary personal leave, both out of fear for the caseworkers’ physical and mental health and the sense that the long period of prolonged intensity was impairing their judgments:

“*My peers and leadership were incredibly supportive both technically — helping me field constituent emails, prepare submissions to the various agencies, and taking non-Afghan work off my plate — and emotionally, giving me a safe place to vent my frustrations. At the end of the NEO one of my senior leaders also saw I was close to an emotional break and ordered me to take some personal leave.* —Caseworker, Democratic House Office”

68 Rebecca Beitsch and Laura Kelly, “[How lawmakers aided the Afghan evacuation](#),” *The Hill* (September 15, 2021)

69 “[Provider Toolkit](#),” *National Center for PTSD* (n.d.)

70 C. Roberts, F. Darroch, A. Giles, and R. van Bruggen, “[You’re carrying so many people’s stories: vicarious trauma among fly-in fly-out mental health service providers in Canada](#),” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Health and Well-Being* (December 17, 2022)

In this context, the ability of caseworkers to connect with each other and with fellow-travelers like the #AfghanEvac coalition members was absolutely critical. Several caseworkers noted that they avoid talking about the experience with anyone who didn't handle Afghanistan casework, even (or especially) with non-casework Congressional staff. Part of this is the complexity of the cases themselves, with offices juggling primary and derivative benefits in multiple programs, each with their own complex rules and program structures — one caseworker who was leaving the office on planned medical leave said that it was impossible to transfer these cases to another staffer, so the office could only put them on hold until she returned. However, a larger piece was the sense of shared trauma from handling these calls and cases. There is a strong sense that this experience was so intense, so overwhelming, that you had to “be there” in that specific, unique casework role to really understand it.

In addition to the Senate EAP forums detailed above, caseworkers also mentioned in particular the House Employee Assistance caseworker forums, individual counseling from House and Senate Employee Assistance,⁷¹ ongoing briefings and individual counseling from #AfghanEvac, and a webinar from the House Chaplain Margaret Grun Kibben (an Afghanistan veteran herself) titled “Mad at God” on finding meaning in the disaster. At one point, #AfghanEvac briefings regularly drew three hundred to four hundred caseworkers from both chambers and both sides of the aisle, and still continue to draw thirty to forty caseworkers today.

A second theme that emerged from conversations with caseworkers was a strong sense of betrayal, or moral injury. The Afghans attempting to flee were at risk directly because of their service to the United States or involvement with US-sponsored democracy programs. A survey of Afghanistan veterans found that extremely high proportions of service members felt “betrayed” or “humiliated” or angry about the conditions of the withdrawal,⁷² and the VA's crisis line saw a surge in outreach from veterans for mental health support during the Afghanistan withdrawal.⁷³ The same can be clearly felt in conversations with caseworkers. No matter which side of the aisle, all caseworkers interviewed for this report noted strong feelings of anger and outrage on behalf of the Afghans they worked with, as well as guilt and frustration at not being able to do more to help.

For many caseworkers, the Afghanistan withdrawal represented an extreme example of the uncomfortable tension of casework: Caseworkers are ostensibly close to the power of policymaking, and yet often feel helpless to intervene in the face of a policy failure. As one caseworker powerfully put it:

“When the Afghan government fell, it was caseworkers on the front lines, not Members.”

While caseworkers live vicariously through the policy failures that impact the constituents they serve, they are also often in the uncomfortable position of having to speak for those policies. For example, a recurring problem is the definition of extended family for derivative benefits: One caseworker noted that while the US government does not recognize a brother-in-law as “immediate family” and therefore eligible for a derivative visa, the Taliban certainly recognizes a brother-in-law as immediate family by Afghan standards, and therefore as a target of reprisal. Having to explain to a US translator or other ally that their family was not eligible to join them was a significant source of pain. Some noted that this experience required them to reframe success: as a caseworker

71 In 2021, the House OEA saw record demand for requests for support; however, this span of time encompasses both the Afghanistan withdrawal and the aftermath of the January 6 attack on the US Capitol. Megan Mineiro, “‘Angels on campus’: Record number of Capitol staff seek counseling in year after Jan. 6,” *Roll Call* (January 5, 2022)

72 William Galston, “Anger, betrayal, and humiliation: How veterans feel about the withdrawal from Afghanistan,” *Brookings* (November 12, 2021)

73 Patricia Kime, “There’s Been a Surge in Veterans Contacting the VA Crisis Line Since Afghanistan Collapse,” *Military.com* (August 31, 2021)

in a Democratic House office put it, “the job is finding ways to navigate the least harmful pathway through a system designed to harm.”

This sense of casework as representing an existing failure is not exclusive to the Afghanistan withdrawal, but it was exaggerated in it. The ordinary bureaucratic hurdles of Social Security benefits and tax liabilities and VA programs can have major impacts on constituents’ lives, but the stakes in the Afghanistan withdrawal — and the consequences for failure — were literally life or death. As one caseworker in a House Democratic office said:

“There are so many things that I think, down the line, we’ll find out that could have gone better or we could have done differently. But I’m grateful for the people that were on the ground there — the Marines, even the State Department officials, everybody from DOD that was on the ground — that were literally not sleeping, [working] around the clock trying to figure this out, and it’s just disappointing that it feels like we didn’t stand up for them. We didn’t do it right for them. We did it right as much as we could, but things could have gone better.”⁷⁴

A third theme was a deep shock to caseworkers’ understanding of their professional role and effectiveness. For caseworkers whose role is to access, filter, and relay information from federal agencies, the inability to get accurate and helpful information was devastating. Why did the informal Signal chat groups and nonprofits seem to have more information than the Congressional liaisons in the federal agencies? Caseworkers are ordinarily effective because of their ability and inclination to get deep into the weeds of program rules and processes — good caseworkers in any portfolio, but especially immigration and military casework are able to rattle off forms and statutes and statuses and processing center information at the drop of a hat. But for many, Afghanistan started to feel like a case of blind luck, where seemingly identical cases could have such different outcomes. The disappearance of normal “rules of the road” also left caseworkers with a lingering sense of guilt and uncertainty at what they were able to accomplish. Did they go far enough, or try hard enough? Should they be asking their bosses to charter a plane? Should they be sending the Afghans a safe passage letter? How should they prioritize among their own list of names — often in the thousands? One caseworker aptly describes this dilemma:

“It very much felt like choosing who would possibly live and who would certainly go into turmoil and possibly die. Send the women on their own? Keep families together? Who has all girl children? Who has the youngest kids? Who’s furthest along in their immigration process? Pure chaos and should never be the responsibility of a caseworker. And therefore, in some cases, we overflooded the system.”

For managers and other casework mentors, the problem was not only doing casework but also supporting people continuing to do casework. Several casework managers described efforts to shift non-essential casework off staff handling Afghanistan casework (like one casework manager who took on passport cases for the first time to free up capacity for her colleague handling Afghanistan cases), or to try to find other ways to be supportive. One noted the challenges of trying to keep morale high in the face of the crisis:

“It’s reiterating to people that they’re doing a good job, they’re not doing something wrong — [I tell them] you’re not fucking it up, that’s not why you’re not getting answers.”

74 Rebecca Beitsch, and Laura Kelly, “[How lawmakers aided the Afghan evacuation](#),” *The Hill* (September 15, 2021)

Recommendation VIII: Continue to prioritize and expand casework-specific mental health and training resources

While Afghanistan is an extreme example, it illustrates the specific types of experience that set casework apart from other Congressional roles: Because of the nature of programs caseworkers tend to handle, they also frequently do casework for constituents in traumatizing situations, including foreclosure, eviction, medical emergencies, mental health emergencies, death of a loved one, and more. These types of cases not only expose caseworkers to trauma, but also require specific technical and skills-based training to support interactions that may carry a risk to caseworkers' safety, or where caseworkers can learn from best practices in fields with similar public interactions.⁷⁵

The responsiveness and sensitivity of staff in both the Senate and House Offices of Employee Assistance to casework needs in the Afghanistan withdrawal is heartening, and represents a high point for many caseworkers of feeling supported and valued by the institution they serve.

The Committee on House Administration and the Senate Rules Committee should work with their respective Employee Assistance programs to ensure that they have the resources and flexibility to continue to prioritize casework-specific mental and emotional health supports.

What Now?

As of this report's publication, efforts to relocate and resettle Afghans have not ended. Many offices are still handling hundreds of open cases for Afghans in the legal pathways to immigrate to the US, while staying in refugee camps around the world or living in fear in Afghanistan under Taliban control. Recent events in Afghanistan, including the country's massive earthquakes and mass deportations of Afghan refugees from Pakistan have compounded the sense of suffering of many US allies. As one caseworker in a Democratic House office described current cases:

“Although the volume has dropped off somewhat, I still spend a significant amount of time receiving relocation requests, assessing the best available options, and steering individuals towards the best available options. Afghan casework also represents a significant portion of my caseload, where I am tracking a significant volume of SIV, P2, and Humanitarian Parole applications, as well as attempting to connect applicants with qualifying claims to relocation options through CARE.”

Since 2021, caseworkers have also handled urgent requests for repatriation from American citizens and legal immigrants from the war in Ukraine, conflict in Sudan, and conflict in Israel and Gaza. Some mentioned that each of these breaking news stories comes with a moment of panic that it will turn into another Afghanistan “flood.”

⁷⁵ Anne Meeker, [“What Congress can learn from social workers about workplace safety,”](#) POPVOX Foundation (April 27, 2020)

For all the trauma and heartbreak of the Afghanistan cases, some caseworkers have done extraordinary personal work to find meaning in the experience. Almost all talked about regularly using mental health and counseling resources through the House and Senate Offices of Employee Assistance, as well as through #AfghanEvac.

Many spoke about balancing the positives with the negatives: One caseworker described having a wall in their office with photos of positive outcomes over the years, and the few pictures of Afghans who were able to make it to America make her happy — even as those successful pictures remain in contrast to a mental wall of cases where the office was not successful. Another caseworker described the experience of meeting an Afghan mother she helped relocate for lunch in her district, and how both ended up crying. The pride when she spoke about how well the family was settling into the US was palpable.

Worth noting is that these complex feelings are not limited to caseworkers, but also in many cases to the Members who were working alongside their teams. This sentiment is underscored by then-Ranking Member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee Michael McCaul [R, TX] in *The Hill*:

“There’s a bit of ... let’s say guilt. We had a big role to play. We did save a lot of lives. But it was very emotionally stressful — when you’re making life and death decisions and pleading with people on the ground at the airport itself to let these people in [...] Because you know if they get in, they will escape. And if they don’t get in, they will die.”⁷⁶

Other caseworkers speak glowingly of the relationships they fostered with other caseworkers, especially across the aisle.

“For me to be able to message [caseworker in another party] when her boss has been in the news to say hey, thinking of you — that’s nice [...] It’s nice to have that camaraderie with the other side in the district.”

These relationships have also allowed for ongoing methods of organizing and support. As the regular Senate EAP Caseworker forums matured and the immediate urgency of the Afghanistan crisis passed, caseworkers have continued to play a central leadership and organizing role in evolving these new forums for communicating and mutual support. There are now sessions with regional breakout groups, and a steering committee that meets to discuss and plan for future topics and facilitate the forums. The steering committee meets a couple of weeks ahead of the scheduled forum to identify topics of current or ongoing interest and choose a format and a presenter. For example, one session in 2023 focused on passports was attended by forty-six participants. These issue-specific sessions complement agency-hosted briefings. According to Elise Britton, Director of Constituent Services for Senator Maggie Hassan:

“The conversation was about identifying the unique issues each office is facing with the high volume of passport cases and best practices they are utilizing to handle them. There was a lot of sharing frustrations, strategies, how to set expectations with constituents, resources, etc.”

76 Rebecca Beitsch and Laura Kelly, “[How lawmakers aided the Afghan evacuation](#),” *The Hill* (September 15, 2021)

This model allows caseworkers to support each other and problem-solve without putting agency partners on the defensive.

Another regular monthly forum included a casework directors' breakout session. The attendance and quality of the discussion at this session demonstrated the need for separate monthly sessions exclusively for casework directors and managers to facilitate more open conversations about the management of caseworkers and the unique challenges they face while managing not only their own caseloads, but also entire casework teams. Like the caseworker forum, this group continues to meet regularly.

While these organizing wins are clear successes, for many caseworkers, the complex effects of having handled Afghanistan casework still live on. When asked how she was doing, one caseworker answered:

“

I'm... fine, with a question mark at the end?

”

Professionally, three of the caseworkers we spoke with have progressed to more senior-level positions within their offices, where they do less (if any) casework today — including two who have been able to leverage their deep expertise on the immigration system in a policy or leadership role. Beyond just getting to use these hard-won skills in new contexts, that recognition itself is crucial: as one promoted caseworker said:

“

As a caseworker, I often exist in this weird liminal space where I'm critical to the office when I'm needed for something or someone important, and invisible every other moment. I feel like there is a disconnect between leadership needing casework to be done well vs lacking incentive to retain institutional knowledge and talent. There is very little investment in caseworkers, limited options for promotions, and just not a lot of job opportunity in general. If we want people to become and stay caseworkers, there needs to be a viable model for what success looks like in the profession.

”

But that same caseworker also reiterated their dedication to continuing to do casework:

“

At the end of the day, the bullshit I've dealt with is for the right reasons. I can sleep at night.

”

Recommendation IX: Establish a nonpartisan Casework Liaison Office

Federal agencies and Congressional support offices regularly point to the importance of establishing a “beachhead,” or a physical space to be present and accessible on a daily basis to Congressional staff on the Hill. To make sustainable, lasting progress to improve the effectiveness of Congressional casework, caseworkers themselves need a beachhead in Washington, with a central liaison tasked with acting as a “caseworker for caseworkers.”

The Committee on House Administration should act to establish and the Legislative Branch Appropriations Subcommittee should consider providing funding to support a nonpartisan Casework Liaison Office within the Chief Administrative Officer tasked with supporting casework and casework staff to support the House's ability to provide excellent constituent services.

Establishing this office would facilitate other recommendations outlined in this report by creating dedicated capacity and ownership to push them forward. Responsibilities may include acting as a central liaison point between caseworkers, agencies, and internal and external stakeholders, and partnering with existing support offices in the House to support caseworkers' specific needs.

Specific duties may include:

- 01 **Serve as a central point of contact for agencies to distribute timely information to all caseworkers**, including coordinating in-person training dates to allow offices to make more efficient use of limited budgets for staff travel.
- 02 **Serve as a liaison/ombuds between caseworkers and agencies to resolve widespread problems.** The Casework Liaison Office (CLO) could be tasked with resolving common difficulties between casework teams and agency liaison offices by promulgating best practices for resolving casework issues for both Congressional staff and agency liaison teams.
- 03 **Partner with other Congressional support offices to raise awareness among caseworkers of existing resources and develop new trainings, events, and resources to specifically support caseworkers.** The CLO could play a concierge role to connect caseworkers to the wealth of resources offered by the House's internal support offices.
- 04 **Partner with other Congressional resources to assist new Member offices and departing Member offices with standing up, winding down, and transitioning casework operations.**
- 05 **Partner with HDS and SAA to support long-term development and maintenance of the casework data aggregator dashboard.** As noted in the Roadmap for Casework Data report from POPVOX Foundation,⁷⁷ the Casework Data Aggregator project underway with House Digital Services will require long-term buy-in and support from caseworkers, including to develop and maintain a system for categorizing casework. The CLO would be perfectly positioned as a partner in product management with HDS to support the development of this tool, and in the long term serve as a partner to see it deployed for Senate offices as well.
- 06 **Provide nonpartisan briefing materials to committees of jurisdiction on common casework issues.** The CLO could develop materials to inform committees of jurisdiction on the categories and volumes of casework in their issue areas, combining data from the Data Aggregator with caseworker insight into the causes of specific problems. These materials could be tailored in format and frequency for each committee, as helpful.
- 07 **Assist with moderation for a casework wiki or shared Slack (see above).**
- 08 **Manage surge capacity for casework teams experiencing local or regional crises (see above).**

77 Anne Meeker, "[Roadmap for Congressional Casework Data](#)," *POPVOX Foundation* (July 7, 2023)

There is recent precedent for a similar organization. The House has had recent success standing up similar offices with the House Office of the Whistleblower Ombuds and the House Intern Resource Office, both of which were established to share best practices and resources to improve overall congressional operations and service to constituents. In particular, the Office of the Whistleblower Ombuds has noted striking success in its first few years of operation, with large majorities in the House utilizing their four core services, including large proportions of district staff. For a sense of financial scope, funding for the House Office of the Whistleblower Ombuds in the FY 2024 Legislative Branch Appropriations bill is set at \$1.25 million, and funding to establish the House Intern Resource Office was set at \$350,000 in the FY 2023 Legislative Branch Appropriations bill.

Starting in the House may provide the opportunity to capitalize on existing modernization momentum, and allow later expansion to the Senate.

This recommendation is differentiated from previous recommendations to support casework by establishing a casework assistance office (for example, as outlined in CRS' report to the the Joint Committee on the Organization of Congress in 1993⁷⁸) by siting the office within the CAO, and limiting its scope to providing general and technical assistance and liaison services to casework teams located in Member offices — not performing casework outright.

In the future, establishing parallel offices in the House and Senate with a mandate to cooperate would lay a solid foundation for additional expansion and development.

78 Congressional Research Service, Congressional reorganization: options for change: report of the Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress to the Joint Committee on the Organization of Congress, US Government Publishing Office (1993)

PART III: REIMAGINING CASEWORK

Casework in the US withdrawal from Afghanistan was only a small piece of a larger story. Beyond the final weeks of the withdrawal, caseworkers in Congressional offices have been handling the impact of the US involvement in Afghanistan and the global war on terror for decades. These cases include citizens serving in the military, veterans seeking care and benefits, American allies seeking safety, and family members of those wounded or killed seeking solace in information and support. There is no alternate history of how pieces of institutional reform could have perfectly avoided what would always be a difficult episode in American history and governance. Casework is how Congress comes face to face with the human impact of its legislative actions.

Since the development of the American administrative state, Congress has had to balance between prioritizing direct response and advocacy on behalf of individual constituents (casework) with maintaining its own capacity to absorb information and produce policy. In an environment where resources for the Legislative branch have been constrained, this has been seen as a zero-sum game: an increase in one side has resulted in a decrease in the other.

But for all of the dire warnings about Congress' declining capacity to legislate, Members continue to send a clear signal of belief in casework and its value by continuing to allocate significant amounts of their limited resources to constituent service. Several former Members quoted in a report from the US Former Members of Congress Association underscore the great personal value they place on being able to provide this type of service:

“ I learned at an early age that elected officials are public servants, and I never forgot that. So, when I ran for Congress and got elected, I brought my experience of focusing on helping constituents to my new job,” said one Member. Said another, “Where you really make a difference is in constituent services.” One described his job as “not just about going to Washington and voting yes or no. It’s about being that conduit between the public and their government.” As one observed, “Those things are big back home, and your constituency doesn’t forget about that.” Another put it this way: “I didn’t go there expecting to find a high functioning body, so that’s not really the reason. The service component and helping people, constituents, and meeting with people has been very rewarding. That was the motivation for me.”⁷⁹ ”

It is perhaps in part because of this clear value of casework to Members and constituents that previous efforts to reform its position in Congress have been unsuccessful.

The Afghanistan withdrawal crisis points to ways that casework works, balanced on the dedication, creativity, and labor of the thousands of public servants in Congressional district offices handling constituent services. But it also points to ways that casework can be modernized and better supported to contribute to both halves of Congressional capacity: providing excellent constituent services while leveraging casework to strengthen Congress' legislative and oversight capacity.

79 Mark Sobol and Leonard Steinhorn, “[Congress at a Crossroads](#),” *US Former Members of Congress Association* (July 2020)

These questions of capacity have always been existential for Congress' status as the First Branch of American government, but perhaps no more so than right now: In the next few years, Congress must adapt faster than ever before to keep pace with rapidly-changing developments in technology that will fundamentally reshape American society and government. New technologies and internal efforts to envision a Congress that works for the 21st century may unlock new ways to maintain the effective pieces of current casework, while finding new ways to translate caseworker expertise into action.

So what's next?

Over the next year, POPVOX Foundation plans to convene stakeholders, including caseworkers, constituents, Members, support staff, historians, oversight experts, and more to begin answering this question. Forthcoming work will be published at popvox.org/casework.

PART IV: LIST OF RECOMMENDATIONS

01 Fund the House Digital Service's Casework Data Aggregator pilot

- The Committee on House Administration and the House Legislative Branch Appropriations Subcommittee should direct funding from the House Modernization Fund to support HDS' continued work on the Data Aggregator Pilot.

02 Casework and oversight staff should be trained together to facilitate and encourage collaboration and information sharing

- Internal and civil society organizations currently offering in-depth training to Congressional staff on oversight should continue to explore ways to co-train casework and oversight staff to build relationships and encourage staff to collaborate on shared issue areas.

03 Congress should develop minimum baseline standards for agency timeliness and best practices in responding to Congressional inquiries

- The Committee on House Administration Subcommittee on Modernization should request a report from the Government Accountability Office on agency responsiveness to Congressional casework, including recommendations for minimum standards and agency personnel needed to ensure timely and accurate responses.
- The House and Senate Oversight Committees and/or committees of jurisdiction over the major casework agencies should consider holding annual or biannual hearings on casework resolution, focused on issues identified as national trends through the casework data aggregator.
- Committees of jurisdiction should consider hosting annual hearings on agency responsiveness to casework.

04 The Congressional staff directory should include caseworker issue areas where applicable, and be made available to agency liaisons

- The House Chief Administrative Officer is already working on developing a legislative branch-wide staff directory, updated with legislative staff issue areas. The CAO should also consider including casework staff issue areas, and making the directory available to federal agency liaisons.

05 Facilitate information sharing among caseworkers

- The House Chief Administrative Officer and Senate Sergeant-at-Arms should explore additional technical solutions to facilitate asynchronous caseworker knowledge sharing.
- The House CAO could consider asking Microsoft to increase the number of people who can participate in a Teams chat for the House Caseworkers Assistance forum in the House’s Microsoft enterprise contracts.
- The Committee on House Administration could direct the House Digital Service, possibly in partnership with the Congressional Research Service, to explore options for establishing a caseworker-wide collaborative internal website for caseworkers to share knowledge.
- The CAO could consider making a program like Slack for Government available on a pilot basis to casework teams in a specific delegation.

06 Permit caseworkers to cohost events with or refer constituents to local nonprofit organizations.

- The Committee on House Administration and Senate Rules Committee should explore allowing House offices flexibility to cohost events with or refer constituents to nonprofit organizations.

07 Explore options to provide surge capacity for casework teams in crisis

- Given the relative number of local disasters facing casework teams, the Committee on House Administration should prioritize developing a method to surge emergency staff capacity to Congressional offices experiencing a local disaster to assist with emergency intake, triage, and proactive public education.

08 Continue to prioritize casework-specific mental health and training resources

- The Committee on House Administration and the Senate Rules Committee should work with their respective Employee Assistance programs to ensure that they have the resources and flexibility to continue to prioritize casework-specific mental and emotional health supports.

09 Establish a nonpartisan Casework Liaison Office

- The Committee on House Administration and Legislative Branch Appropriations Subcommittee should act to establish a nonpartisan Casework Liaison Office within the Chief Administrative Officer tasked with supporting casework and casework staff to promote the House's ability to provide excellent constituent services. Specific duties may include serving as a central point of contact for agencies to distribute timely information to caseworkers; serving as a liaison between caseworkers and agencies to resolve widespread problems; partnering with other Congressional support offices to help connect caseworkers to existing training and support resources; partnering with other Congressional support offices to assist with standing up or winding down casework operations; providing long-term development and product management for HDS' casework data aggregator; etc.
- Starting in the House may provide the opportunity to capitalize on existing modernization momentum, and allow later expansion to the Senate.

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