

Written Testimony for the Record
of
Susan Thaul, Ph.D.
President
Congressional Research Employees Association
Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress
to the
Subcommittee on the Legislative Branch
House Committee on Appropriations

for inclusion in the May 18, 2017 hearing record

I write as President of the union representing nearly 500 non-supervisory employees of the Congressional Research Service (CRS). The Congressional Research Employees Association (CREA) is one of three unions covering Library of Congress employees. My other role at the Library is as Specialist in Drug Safety and Effectiveness in the Domestic Social Policy Division, one of six research divisions, which, along with five administrative offices, make up the Congressional Research Service.

In my 15-month tenure in office, I have worked to build trust between CREA and three key groups: bargaining unit employees, CRS management, and Library management. My work at building those relationships with congressional committees and their staff is in its early stage. I look forward to sharing CREA's concerns with you—and learning yours. My hope is that we can explore approaches to resolving or avoiding obstacles that impede the functioning of CRS and the Library. Thank you for accepting this testimony for the record.

In the context of this subcommittee's focus on FY2018 appropriations, I offer comments on four topics:

- IT centralization across the Library,
- involvement of staff in CRS and Library policy consideration,
- workplace concerns, and
- CRS mission.

IT Centralization

A time-sensitive topic is how the Library is going about its move into information technology (IT) centralization. We do not necessarily oppose centralization; we have concerns about how it might be structured.

What prompts our concern is that while CREA has proposed including non-management perspectives and interests in the Library's initiative to centralize IT resources, authority, and operations, the Library's Chief Information Officer (CIO) and Human Resources Services management, which includes labor relations, have denied our requests.

The Library has contracted with a consultant to recommend several centralized organizational structures. Because that report may strongly influence management's decisions, we believe employee union access to the consultant is essential. The Library has denied the unions access to the consultant and to internal planning discussions.

My hope in bringing our concerns to the subcommittee is that you encourage the Librarian and the Chief Information Officer to

- engage with non-supervisory employees as they assess how best to centralize responsibility for the effective and efficient functioning of IT services for the Library and CRS in particular,
- inform employees (via their unions) which tasks the Library assigned to the contractor,
- modify the consultant's task assignment to include interviews with the three unions, and
- make sure that the contractor interviews managers (and non-managers) in a way that makes interviewees feel safe in expressing opinions that may not coincide with those of their supervisors.

The CRS Office of Information Management and Technology provides seemingly instant help for CRS employees whose work directly supports Congress—a level of timeliness not available to other Library units. Although leadership says mission-critical activities would be maintained, would a centralized management lead to an averaging of resources and attention across Library units? Even if Library management didn't take resources away from CRS, would it allow CRS's technological abilities growth to stagnate while Library management concentrated on improving IT in other units?

I've been told that CRS uses different platforms and programs than the rest of the Library. Although there may be instances where consolidating work or functions makes sense, there are many others where CRS has developed approaches that serve the mission-specific needs that Congress expects and requires of us, including confidentiality, security, and timeliness. Who would be responsible for protecting that?

Involvement of Staff in CRS and Library Policy Consideration

In addition to IT centralization, the Library and CRS are missing other opportunities to take advantage of the expertise and policy experience that Members and committee of Congress rely on every day: CRS's own staff.

If a congressional committee wanted to figure out the best way to reorganize a cabinet department, it could call the CRS experts in the Government & Finance Division; if planning a program to coordinate emergency services and financing after a natural disaster, a Member could call the CRS experts in my Domestic Social Policy Division. Yet the Library and CRS have been slow to engage their own experts and the union that represents them in policy considerations.

A CRS example: When CRS revised its policy on confidentiality in 2015, it issued the final version without first discussing the objectives and procedures with the staff who respond to congressional requests and protect the confidentiality of requesters and the matters that we discuss with them. The objectives of the policy—which I believe we share—may be endangered

by procedures and restrictions that do not serve the interests of Congress. After over a year of discussing this disconnect between CRS management and the practical knowledge of the employees who do the work the policies address, CRS management and CREA are now moving into a better approach. While bargaining unit employees are still not included in policy working groups, CRS now posts its final drafts and invites comments from all staff. I hope this approach yields final policy documents that put forth not only appropriate goals but also feasible procedures that support them.

A Library example: This week nine “tiger teams” began work as part of the Library’s strategic planning activities. The Library did not invite the unions to participate. Neither did it inform us of this activity. Did the Librarian’s Office choose to not include the unions? Or did it not even think to consider our participation?

We like that the Librarian routinely gives kudos to the Library’s staff. Now, we are ready to share our ideas and energy with her and her leadership team.

Workplace Concerns

Although CRS came out well on many measures in the most recent Federal Employees Viewpoint Survey (FEVS), the survey also revealed several areas where CRS staff saw problems and wanted change. The CRS Director has taken some steps—such as setting up advisory groups—to address widespread concerns about communication and diversity and inclusion.

However, she has not engaged in areas that, based on reports from staff and our own observations, CREA knows there are pockets extreme discontent within CRS. We were hoping that FEVS data could corroborate those problems so that management and CREA could work to improve employee morale and repair the group’s functioning. We see how those problems impede CRS’s ability to provide Congress with objective, authoritative, and timely analysis. Despite our concerns, CRS management has refused to share division-specific results with staff or CREA.

Would the subcommittee please consider urging CRS to provide division-specific FEVS results to CREA? That tool, while maintaining individual employees’ confidentiality, could help us—and CRS—focus on these problems.

CRS Mission

In the Library’s FY2018 budget request, CRS proposes hiring GS-11 “junior analysts” in time-limited positions, saying, “The junior analyst model is more flexible and cost-effective in providing expertise in areas that may only be in demand for a short period of time. The junior analysts would gain experience that may result in opportunities for permanent positions should they arise from attrition and succession planning.”

The CRS tradition—backed by many Congresses—has been to provide comprehensive information and analytic support to Members and committees. Our GS-15 specialist positions assert one is “a national expert.” We may “apply new hypotheses and concepts to intractable

problems; define or clarify issues; synthesize complex variables from several disciplines; assess political and institutional constraints; organize and present policy options and analyze their consequences; and anticipate the direction of policy questions.” That’s quite a skill set.

Two recent trends—the retirement of our specialists and budget constraints—are, bit by bit, limiting the scope and depth of CRS expertise. The CRS proposal for the new position of temporary junior analyst is an attempt to find new ways to respond to congressional needs. That may help in the short term. But it moves the full coverage that Congress has enjoyed and expected farther out of reach each year.

The CRS proposal would change the promotion potential of new hires and change the mix of staff. We do not want to defensively oppose a management proposal because it might adversely affect some of our bargaining unit members. We note, however, that Congress has appreciated and depended upon the wide-ranging and in-depth expertise CRS staff make available. How do we find ways to maintain that cadre of expertise and experience in just about every area Congress considers?

We in CREA want to analyze the problem, consider the solution management has put forth, and, using the skills for which you value us, look for options that best serve the needs of all involved. Just as a congressional committee LA talks to industry, academic, and consumer groups in forming a position, so too does CREA suggest CRS do as it considers staffing patterns. Our mid-level managers may contribute useful observations, but many not know the extent or rhythm of how we assist Congress. Ask us.

If you are working with the Library and CRS leadership to tackle questions of scope, quality, and cost in the future of CRS, I ask that you include CREA in those discussions. If you are not currently working on those topics, I urge you to begin and to include CREA.

Thank you for this opportunity to offer my thoughts. I, along with my CREA officer team, look forward to constructive conversations with CRS, the Library, and you.

Susan Thaul, Ph.D.
President
Congressional Research Employees Association (IFPTE Local 75)
Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress
101 Independence Avenue SE, Washington, DC 20540
Thaul—(202) 707-0562, sthaul@crs.loc.gov
CREA—(202) 707-7636, crea@crs.loc.gov



Susan Thaul, Ph.D.

Susan Thaul has served as President of the Congressional Research Employees Association (CREA) since February 2016. Working at the Congressional Research Service as Specialist in Drug Safety and Effectiveness, her portfolio includes drug development and approval, postmarket safety studies and surveillance, drug importation, pharmaceutical promotion to consumers and health professionals, FDA appropriations, and regulatory science. Before joining CRS in 2002, Dr. Thaul worked at the Institute of Medicine of the National Academies, the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, the National Center for Health Services Research (now AHRQ), the Harlem Hospital Prevention of Prematurity Project, and the NYC Health and Hospitals Corporation. She earned a Ph.D. in epidemiology from Columbia University and an M.S. in health policy and management from the Harvard School of Public Health.

Congressional Research Employees Association Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress

The Congressional Research Employees Association (CREA) is a non-profit organization that officially represents nearly 500 CRS professionals and staff who provide direct and indirect service to Congress. CREA is led by elected employee volunteers. The organization is authorized to engage in collective bargaining with CRS and the Library regarding workplace conditions, focusing especially on the quality and fairness of our workplace and matters that may enhance or hinder efforts of employees to provide effective service to Congress.

CREA seeks to ensure that the perspectives of employees are solicited, heard, and considered when administrators and managers evaluate how to serve Congress. In this way, CREA presents the perspective, collective voice, and deep expertise of CRS's employees. We negotiate for effective and fair policies, procedures, and practices that have direct implications for service to Congress.

CREA has represented CRS workers since 1976 and maintains one of the highest membership rates in the federal sector. CREA represents all workers in CRS—analysts, attorneys, clerical staff, information professionals, library technicians, and technical staff. Only supervisors, managers, and confidential employees are excluded.

