

General Assembly Compensation Commission

From: Michael Lore, MDGA Senate Staffer

Re: Personal Testimony for the General Assembly Compensation Commission

Date: January 3, 2022

Mr. Chair Marco T. A. Priolo and Commission Members,

It is my honor to provide insights for this commission as a Maryland Senate staffer who has served three distinguished Senators over the past decade. Compensation should serve the goal to attract the best people, from the most diverse backgrounds (including race, gender, wealth and geographic locations) so that all Marylanders have access to state policymakers. The compensation dynamic that you are exploring should extend to staffers as well because legislators and their personal staff work hand and glove to serve constituents together. Ignoring the dynamic of staff compensation is not only inappropriate but offensive, as we don't have a voice in any other forum to express these concerns. Of course we must be at-will employees so our bosses have full control, but your pool of willing workers is limited to people who can afford to be paid peanuts, and those who use this job as an opportunity to get training and become a much higher paid lobbyist. This should be a concern.

Prior to serving as a staffer, I worked with Common Cause, which may help explain my angle here beyond getting a higher salary. In fact, I'm embarrassed by how much I get paid relative to House staffers without an advanced degree, because we largely do the same job. Staff and legislators are inextricably intertwined during the legislative process and for constituent service, however, pay discrepancies between Senate and House staffers, as well as high turnover for obvious reasons, handicaps members' ability to be as effective a legislator as their potential would otherwise allow. When a part time legislator doesn't have staff that is able to do research and prepare legislative initiatives, they are at the mercy of high priced lobbyists who hold the keys to jobs and influence that staffers and legislators covet. .

Moreover, salary is an indicator of value for the services provided and the status of an individual as a professional. In the Maryland General Assembly, it is uncomfortably clear to me that staffers as well as legislators are undervalued relative to the importance of the policy decisions they help determine. The dynamic encourages a drift toward representing the interests of those who already have access to the levers of power, over individual constituents' interests in some cases. Crucially, staffers and some legislators find it difficult to find supplemental employment that allows a long absence during session. As the criminally convicted lobbyist Jack Abramoff explained, ***"[T]he 'best way' to get a congressional office to do his bidding - was to offer a staffer a job that could triple his salary."***

Finally, with more duties and the emotional toll related to COVID issues, including but not limited to unemployment insurance, staffers are not satisfied with a 3% COLA when we have a 100% increase in stress. There is more we can do to serve constituents and help with the legislative process, but no one can afford to stay around long enough to learn the ropes, pay off student debt and raise a family. My approximation is most staffers in the House are working their first or last job, and the Senate isn't much different. This should be a dream job, not a means to an end, or a luxury for the few.