FROM VOICEMAILS TO VOTES

A human-centered investigation by The OpenGov Foundation into the systems, tools, constraints, and people who drive constituent engagement in Congress.

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FOREWORD

SEAMUS KRAFT
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
THE OPENGOV FOUNDATION

The United States Congress is stuck between a rock and a hard place, squarely lodged between the paper-based past and the growing demands of our digital age. As House Republican Conference Chair Cathy McMorris Rodgers puts it:

> *"What we're seeing is a 19th century institution often using 20th century technology to solve 21st century problems. We need to change that."*

We wholeheartedly agree. This report is a lever to help extricate Congress from its current morass and get our representative democracy moving again on a steady arc of positive change.

Contained in these pages is proof that a better Congress is possible. But it will not be easy. Congress faces countless complex and interlocking problems that have grown over decades, on everyone's watch. The research, insights, and opportunities in this report are published freely and openly so that everyone can see what we see. If more know about the challenges facing Congress, more have the opportunity to help fix them.

If you take one thing away from this report, take this: While the quality of Congress' critical systems, training, and technology may be in doubt, the quality of its hardworking people never should be. Every day they give life and meaning to government of, by, and for the people. They are the glue that binds our representative democracy, performing a half-dozen minor civic miracles before lunch, while helping countless people have a voice in the critical decisions that impact their lives, families, and businesses.

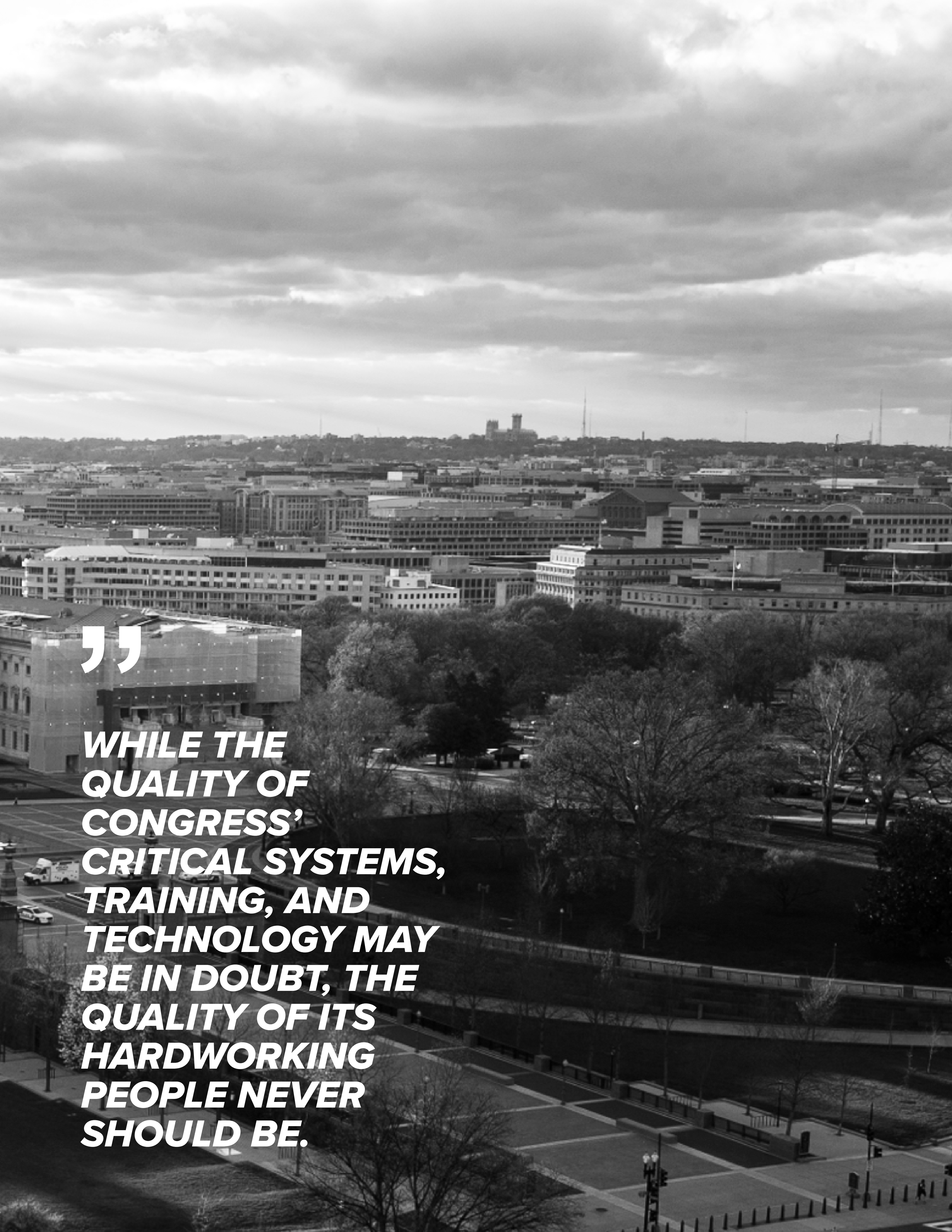
I had the honor of serving as a House staffer from 2009 to 2013. I would have given all the money in the world to have a report like this. It is our humble contribution towards creating a Congress that can tackle 21st century challenges, evolve with the times and the technology, and be for all Americans what it was for me and thousands of others—a truly remarkable and rewarding place for public service.

Serving those who serve the people is why The OpenGov Foundation exists. And that's why you're now reading this report. I hope you enjoy using it, reusing it, and adding to it as much as we have enjoyed building it for you.

All the best,

Seamus B Kraft

Seamus Kraft
Executive Director
The OpenGov Foundation
December 2017



WHILE THE QUALITY OF CONGRESS' CRITICAL SYSTEMS, TRAINING, AND TECHNOLOGY MAY BE IN DOUBT, THE QUALITY OF ITS HARDWORKING PEOPLE NEVER SHOULD BE.

SECTION 1. PROJECT OVERVIEW

Mapping the processes, technology, and human experiences behind the scenes of Congress' constituent engagement operations.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

”

THANKS FOR CALLING THE OFFICE OF CONGRESSPERSON______. SORRY, WE CAN’T GET TO THE PHONE RIGHT NOW.

After the Presidential election of 2016, our country experienced a rising tide of citizen engagement. New apps and tools were invented seemingly overnight to reduce friction in contacting Members of Congress, and advocacy organizations new and old activated hundreds of thousands of Americans to speak up. Quite suddenly, Congress faced reportedly the largest uptick in constituent input in recent memory.

Amidst this flurry of civic engagement, stories emerged of overflowing voicemail boxes, woefully understaffed congressional offices, and bitter, disgruntled constituents.

Meanwhile, on the other side of D.C., organizations such as 18F and the U.S. Digital Service have been busy sharing lessons from the private-sector technology industry with federal agencies, successfully helping redesign and rebuild core public services. Thanks to these efforts, veterans have been able to access their VA healthcare more seamlessly, processing time of green card renewals has dropped, and hundreds of digital services have migrated to secure, modern cloud-hosted platforms.

At The OpenGov Foundation, our mission is to serve the teams inside Congress who serve the American people. We are technologists with a love of efficiency and innovation, and our purpose is to reimagine and improve the hard and thorny sides of governance. As we witnessed the challenges facing congressional teams in this new era of civic engagement, we knew this was a key moment to call upon lessons of other user-centered, 21st century digital transformation efforts.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

UNDERSTANDING OUR USERS

Taking a page—the very first page—out of the **U.S. Digital Service Playbook**,[1] we sought to start at the beginning: to deeply understand, from the experience of the people inside Congress, the authentic, day-to-day challenges, pain points, needs, and limitations facing those on the other side of the phone. What happens after we the people leave a message, send an email, or post to social media? What technology do staff use to keep track of it all? What do they do with all those messages anyway? Are there openings for new approaches or solutions? Who is leading creative and interesting ways of engaging with constituents?

During the late summer of 2017, The OpenGov Foundation undertook a first-of-its-kind effort to apply a human-centered design/user research approach to investigate the systems, tools, constraints, and human drivers that fuel congressional constituent correspondence processes.

This report holds the findings of our work.

1. *Available at* http://playbook.cio.gov/

OUR DRIVING QUESTIONS

In order to frame and guide our user research of congressional teams, we developed three themes around which this report is organized:

1. *How do congressional teams manage the process and operations of constituent engagement?*
2. *How does constituent input shape actions and decisions?*
3. *What capacity do congressional teams have for change?*

We invite you to join us in exploring insights and visualizations from this work, read stories from the people answering your calls and letters, and begin to imagine concrete opportunities for building a responsive, people-centered 21st century Congress.

”

QUITE SUDDENLY, CONGRESS FACED REPORTEDLY THE LARGEST UPTICK IN CONSTITUENT INPUT IN RECENT MEMORY.

1.1
SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

EMERGENT THEMES AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONGRESSIONAL STAFF, ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICES, TECHNOLOGY VENDORS, AND SUPPORTING NON-PROFITS.

KEY FINDINGS

THE PROCESS

1	The average system by which a Member of Congress' team receives input, organizes, and responds to constituents is heavily manual and time-consuming, supported by limited technology that is slow to evolve.
2	The current process was designed around postal correspondence and has yet to adapt to new tools people use to engage with their Members of Congress—and vice versa—on the Internet and via social media.

USING THE INFORMATION

3	While quality and responsiveness are higher priorities for some Members and teams than others, constituent correspondence is consistently delegated to the most junior staffers, whose turnover, experience, and capacity inhibit innovation.
4	Constituent input is used most universally to back up existing policy agendas. Some Members look to their constituents for guidance, influenced most by powerful human stories. Others find little decision-making value in the opinions of their constituents.
5	High-effort, high-reward: Staff and Members value high-touch, personal contact over low-effort apps and tools that facilitate easy engagement but provide little meaningful information about constituents.

KEY FINDINGS

CAPACITY FOR CHANGE

6	Offices are underwhelmed and often frustrated by the tools available to them, but they often lack time, resources, and appetite to experiment with new tools or invest in large-scale process innovation.
7	For most offices, the most significant limitations are human hours and financial resources.
8	Teams feel constrained by the rules and entities that regulate technology use, as well as their own limited experience buying and using modern tools. In addition, the lack of a competitive vendor marketplace means tools come at a high cost, and vendors aren't pushed to provide innovative or forward-thinking solutions.
9	Innovation and experimentation—with tools, approaches, and processes—most often happen in teams lead by Members or senior staff with vision and passion for improvement, and with Party leadership teams that are willing to invest their expanded resources into paving new paths for themselves and their colleagues.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Opportunities The OpenGov Foundation has identified to directly address pain points experienced by Members and staff, breakdowns in the system, or failing approaches.

1

Invest in improving the user experience (UX) within approved constituent relationship management systems (CRMs).

2

Build a simple, accurate, and straightforward means by which all of Congress can verify constituents.

3

Update congressional CRMs to integrate social media input for better tracking and engagement on these platforms.

4

Automate and streamline core administrative tasks.

5

Test and adopt more proactive approaches to gauging constituent sentiment, using strategic and modern data analysis tools.

6

Train staff on customer service best practices.

7

Rethink the division of labor.

8

Expand the budget for staffing and technological improvements.

9

Revise administrative regulations to support technological improvements.

10

Create spaces where offices are encouraged to try new processes and technologies in an iterative manner.

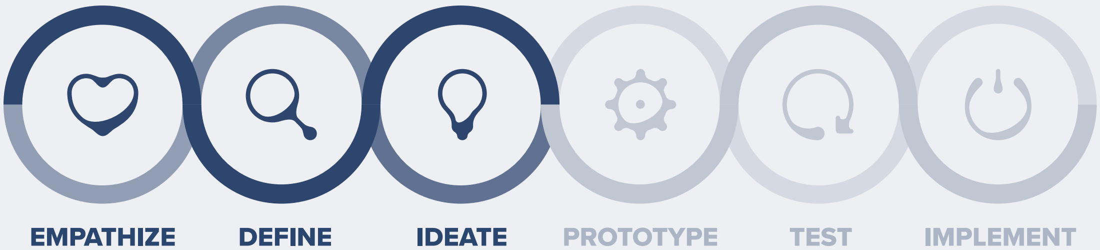
”

HUMAN-CENTERED DESIGN ALLOWS US TO EXAMINE THE CONSTITUENT ENGAGEMENT PROCESS IN A UNIQUE WAY: WITH THE NEEDS AND EXPERIENCES OF CONGRESSIONAL STAFFERS AT THE FOREFRONT.

1.2 METHODS

A HUMAN-CENTERED AND SYSTEMS DESIGN APPROACH FOR CONGRESS.

Our research followed a human-centered design methodology, an approach to product and service innovation that combines two elements: 1) an understanding of the human experience of a system—the capacities, behaviors, drivers, and needs—and 2) the development of technical solutions, which we design and test with real people. This approach allowed us to qualitatively understand the current state of correspondence systems and identify opportunities for improvement.



HUMAN CENTERED-DESIGN.
THIS REPORT REPRESENTS THE EMPATHIZE, DEFINE, AND IDEATE STEPS.

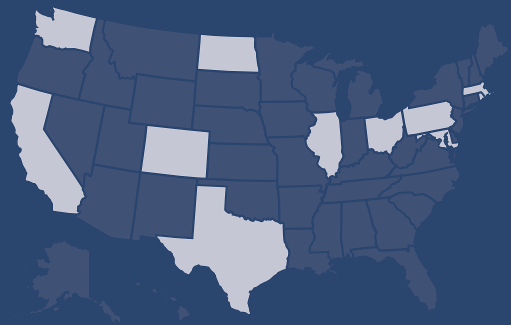
Human-centered design allows us to examine the constituent engagement process in a unique way: with the needs and experiences of congressional staffers at the forefront.

While the vast majority of research done on Congress to date has relied on self-reporting and academic surveys, this approach emphasizes on-the-ground observation and in-context conversation. Spending time embedded with congressional staffers as they processed constituent correspondence, for example, allowed us to capture a rich firsthand perspective on the process, assess both reported and observed gaps and opportunities, and surface themes that emerge across staff roles, offices, and systems.

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

We intentionally recruited participants who represent a diverse spectrum of staff roles, party affiliations, and district locations to help us understand what might change congressional teams' relationship to their constituents based on any of these factors.

We interviewed House and Senate staffers, ranging from chief of staff to legislative director, and from legislative assistant down to interns. Our research partner offices included a strong mix of Republicans and Democrats, junior and senior Members, party leaders, and niche issue advocates.



PARTICIPATING CONGRESSIONAL OFFICES REPRESENTED 11 STATES ACROSS THE U.S.

100+
HOURS OF FIELD RESEARCH

58
RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

17
CONGRESSIONAL OFFICES

11
STATES, INCLUDING

4
DISTRICT OFFICES

FIELD ACTIVITIES

CONTEXTUAL INQUIRY

Our research team conducted qualitative, conversational in-person interviews with staffers in both D.C. and district offices in an effort to map the de facto processes involved in constituent engagement. We explored the steps of their operations, tools they used, and staff pain points. We targeted our conversations around process and best practices, as well as the cultural context unique to Congress. This helped us understand mental models for using constituent input in decision-making and teams' capacity for innovation.

PROCESS OBSERVATION

In order to observe tactical aspects of constituent engagement, members of the research team shadowed frontline staff in D.C. offices as they answered calls, responded to mail, and sifted through social media. Insights from these shadowing sessions allowed us to understand the nuances of working on Capitol Hill during periods of high and low call volume, for example, and to identify where potential solutions may fit into existing processes.

Observing operations on the ground in district offices was important for developing a 360-degree perspective of constituent engagement, particularly the role of helping constituents resolve problems with government programs in the form of "casework" (e.g., veterans' benefits and immigration application challenges).

WE EXPLORED THE STEPS OF THEIR OPERATIONS, TOOLS THEY USED, AND STAFF PAIN POINTS.

SECTION 2. PROCESS

Mapping the process for receiving, understanding, and responding to constituent input.

PROCESS

In this section, we will illustrate the process of constituent engagement. This includes the basic flow of tasks, staff members and their roles, and a detailed visualization of how House and Senate teams receive, organize, seek to understand, and respond to all manner of constituent input.

We will then highlight where the constituent engagement process breaks down, what the users of this system—the staff—need to be able to complete their tasks, and the technological underpinnings of the operation.

HIGH CALL VOLUMES STRAIN LIMITED HUMAN AND TECHNOLOGICAL CAPACITIES TO—AND BEYOND—THE BREAKING POINT.

KEY FINDINGS

1

The average system by which a Member of Congress' team receives input, organizes, and responds to their constituents is heavily manual and time-consuming, supported by limited technology that is slow to evolve.

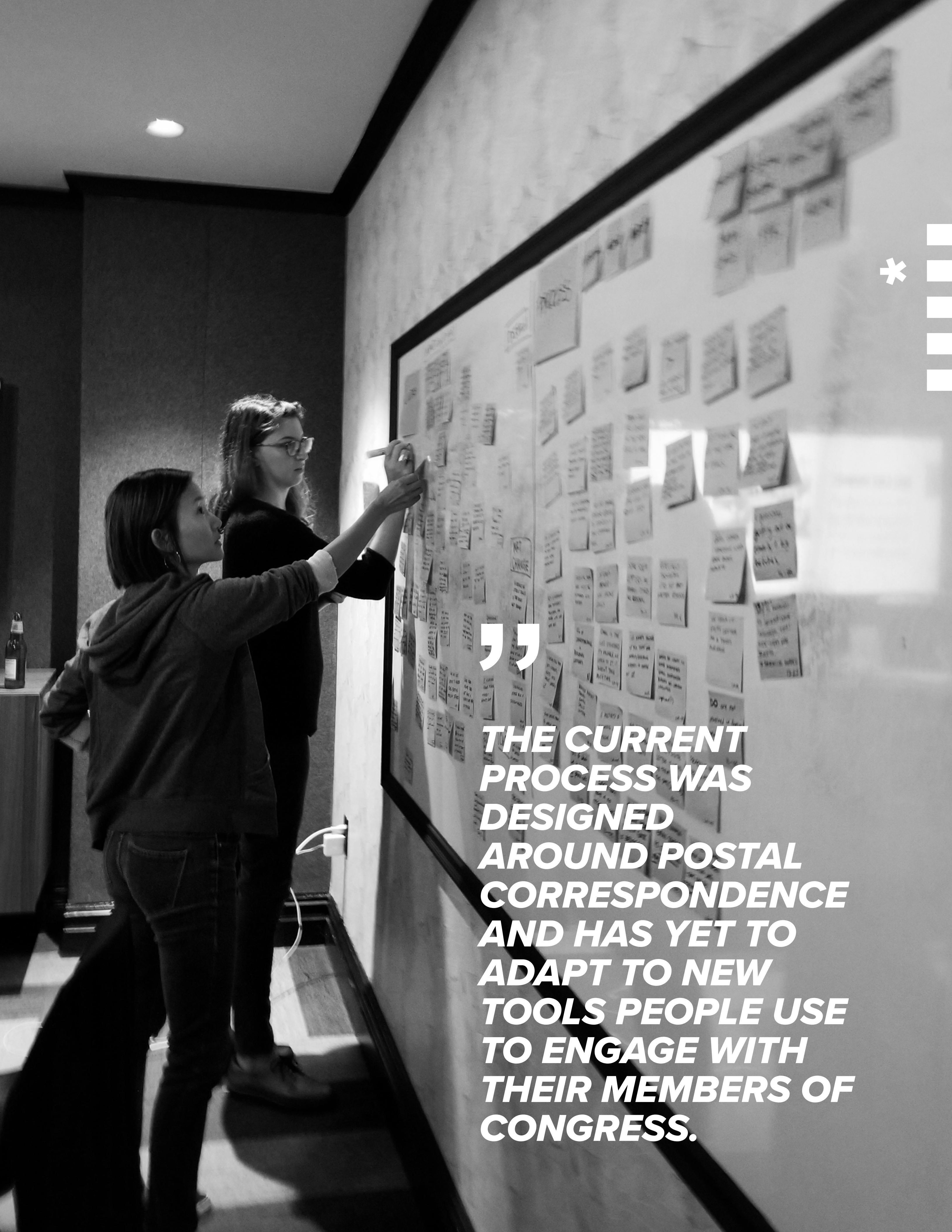
2

The current process was designed around postal correspondence and has not yet adapted to meet the growing ways in which people are seeking to engage with their Members of Congress—and vice versa—on the Internet and various social media platforms.

PROCESS

COMMON BREAKDOWNS

- Verifying whether someone is a constituent is an imperfect, and at times blocking, step.
- Social media engagement is handled inconsistently and doesn't yet translate to the same formal tracking as other channels.
- High call volumes strain limited human and technological capacities to—and beyond—the breaking point.
- Organizing correspondence—also known as "batching"—within constituent relationship management systems (CRMs) is manual, uniformly imprecise, time consuming, and commonly loathed.
- Teams often lose track of unresolved constituent communications due to confusing technology design.
- Correspondence tools clumsily handle the most time-consuming steps of the process: review, revision, and approval of new outgoing messages to constituents.
- Frontline phone intake is handled exclusively by junior staff and unpaid interns whose ability to accurately understand, log, and organize messages shapes how the office will or will not respond.



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THE CURRENT PROCESS WAS DESIGNED AROUND POSTAL CORRESPONDENCE AND HAS YET TO ADAPT TO NEW TOOLS PEOPLE USE TO ENGAGE WITH THEIR MEMBERS OF CONGRESS.

2.1 PEOPLE AND WORKFLOW

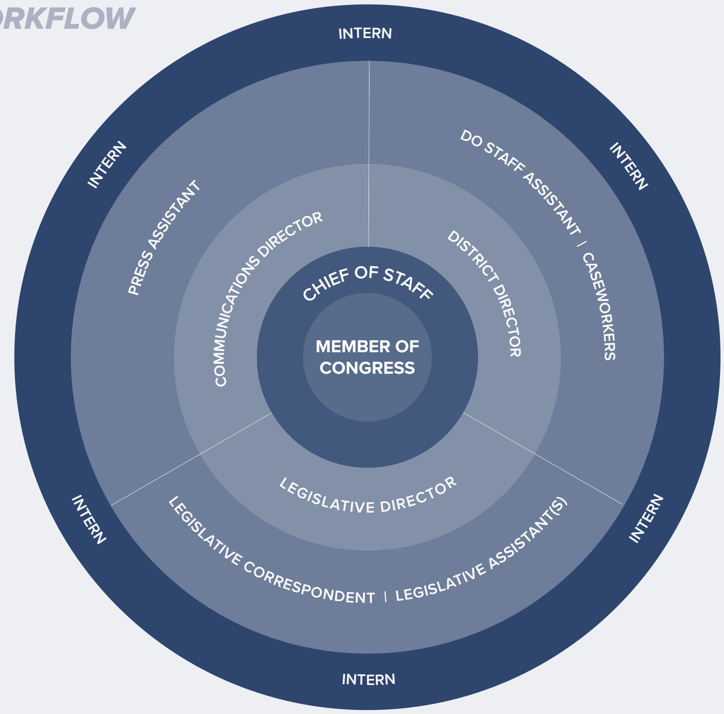
WHO DOES THE WORK, AND HOW DO THEY RECEIVE, UNDERSTAND, AND RESPOND TO CONSTITUENT INPUT?

THE ACTORS

Congressional offices are traditionally divided into primarily three groups:

- A legislative team, which handles formal constituent correspondence and policy direction;
- A communications team, which is responsible for all public-facing communication;
- The district office (DO), which handles all constituent casework and in-district activity.

Each step of the correspondence process is carried out primarily by members of the legislative teams. While each office organizes responsibilities with some variation, generally unpaid seasonal interns, staff assistants, and legislative correspondents hold the most substantial roles in the constituent engagement process. Contact with constituents that pertains to what offices call "casework" (i.e., primarily troubleshooting problems with government programs) are directed to the district office.



TYPICAL CONGRESSIONAL OFFICE DISTRIBUTION

THE STEPS

Offices design their teams and systems with some nuance, but constituent engagement is handled relatively uniformly along six common steps:

1. Receive constituent contact.

Receive phone call, email, postal letter, fax, message/post on social media, or in-person visit.

2. Verify contactor is a constituent.

Confirm contactor resides within the Member's district (using some combination of address, zip code, or state).

3. Identify nature of contact.

Categorize message as a constituent service request (e.g., a flag request), request for assistance with a federal program (e.g., veterans' benefits), meeting request, or sharing input on and/or looking to learn the Member's stance on a specific issue.

4. Log, categorize, and assign.

Recapture the message in the office's system, "batch" together with similar messages, and assign to a staffer for review and follow-up.

5. Develop a response.

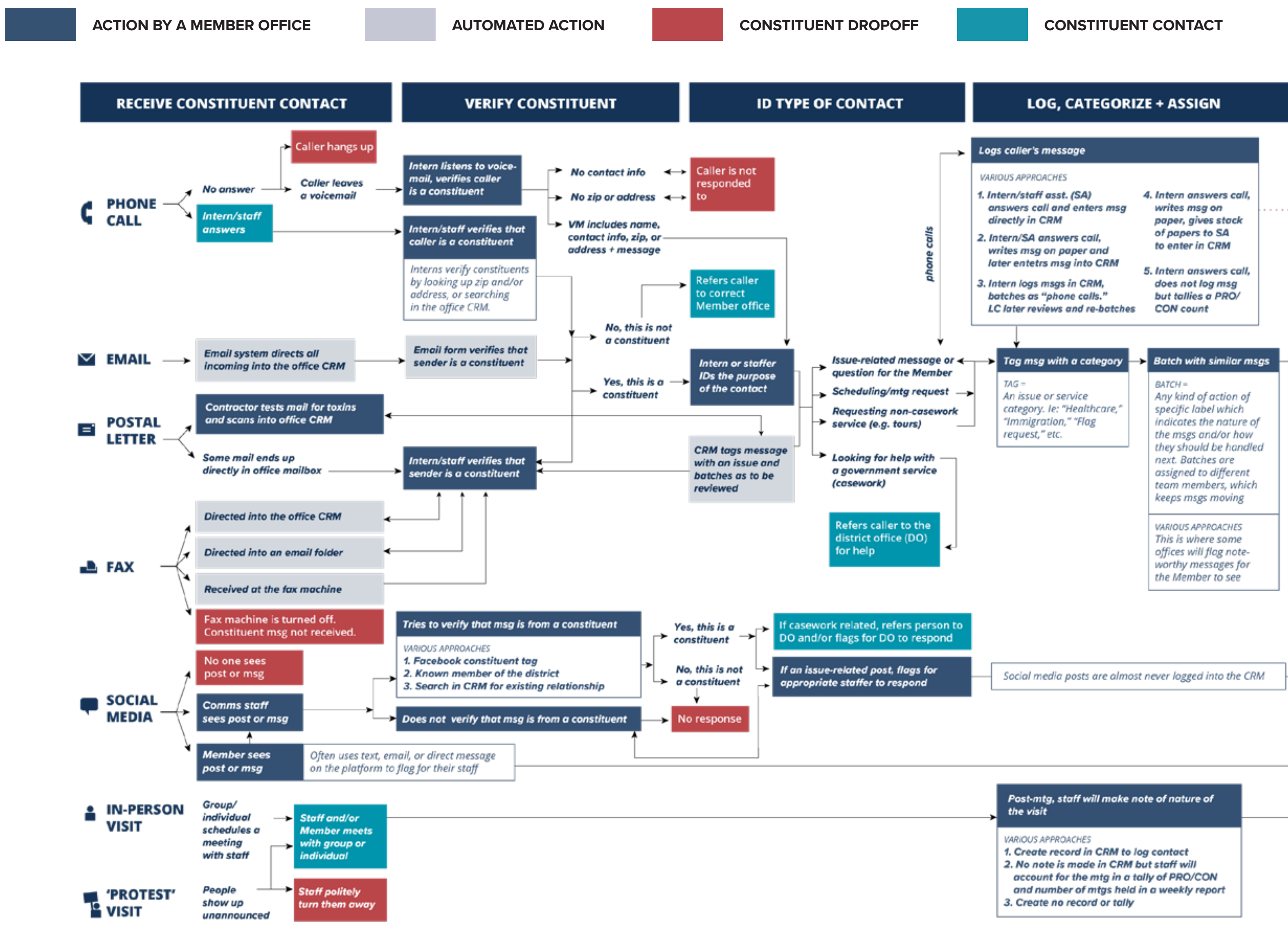
Locate an existing response to this topic or draft a new one.

6. Respond.

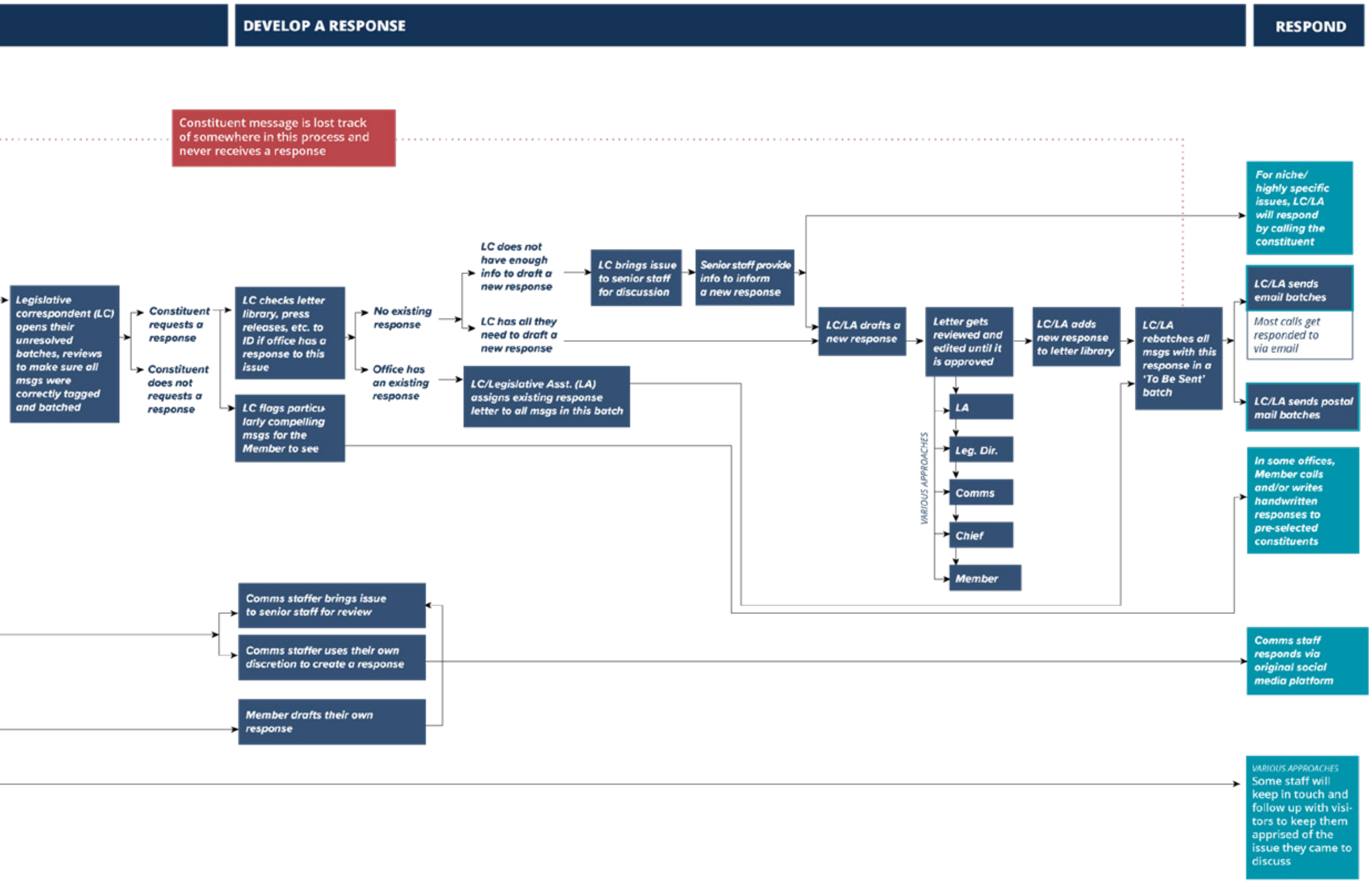
Follow up with the constituent via the original channel or whatever form of contact information is available.

THE WORKFLOW

By observing correspondence teams, we developed a picture of the general workflow for processing constituent input from all channels—phone, postal mail, email, and social media. The **process diagram**[2] illustrates the path from receipt to response.



2. *Available at https://files.opengovfoundation.org/v2v-processmap.pdf*



DEVELOP A RESPONSE
RESPOND
Constituent message is lost track of somewhere in this process and never receives a response
Legislative correspondent (LC) opens their unresolved batches, reviews to make sure all msgs were correctly tagged and batched
Constituent requests a response
Constituent does not requests a response
LC checks letter library, press releases, etc. to ID if office has a response to this issue
LC flags particularly compelling msgs for the Member to see
No existing response
Office has an existing response
LC does not have enough info to draft a new response
LC has all they need to draft a new response
LC brings issue to senior staff for discussion
Senior staff provide info to inform a new response
LC/Legislative Asst. (LA) assigns existing response letter to all msgs in this batch
LC/LA drafts a new response
Letter gets reviewed and edited until it is approved
VARIOUS APPROACHES
LA
Leg. Dir.
Comms
Chief
Member
LC/LA adds new response to letter library
LC/LA rebatches all msgs with this response in a 'To Be Sent' batch
For niche/ highly specific issues, LC/LA will respond by calling the constituent
LC/LA sends email batches
Most calls get responded to via email
LC/LA sends postal mail batches
In some offices, Member calls and/or writes handwritten responses to pre-selected constituents
Comms staffer brings issue to senior staff for review
Comms staffer uses their own discretion to create a response
Member drafts their own response
Comms staff responds via original social media platform
VARIOUS APPROACHES
Some staff will keep in touch and follow up with visitors to keep them apprised of the issue they came to discuss

1. RECEIVE CONSTITUENT CONTACT.

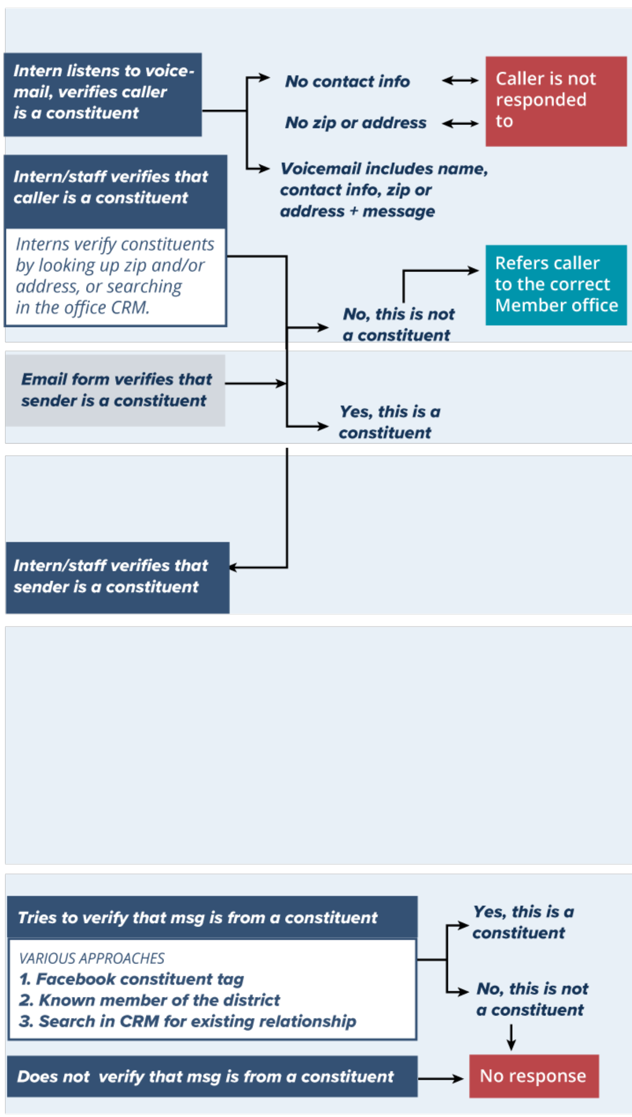
Receive phone call, email, postal letter, fax, message/post on social media, or in-person visit.

STEP 1: RECEIVE CONTACT	BREAKDOWNS
PHONE CALL → No answer → Caller hangs up / Caller leaves a voicemail **PHONE CALL** → Intern/staff answers	• Limited size of voicemail inboxes means inboxes fill up quickly when phones lines are busy. • Autodialed calls jam phone lines and keep staff from talking to real constituents. • Offices can only answer as many calls as they have staff to handle. Physical space limits the number of staffed assigned to answering phones.
EMAIL → Email system directs all incoming into the office CRM	
POSTAL LETTER → Contractor tests mail for toxins and scans into office CRM **POSTAL LETTER** → Some mail ends up directly in office mailbox	• The handwritten letter transcription scans are often confusing/hard to understand so staff open and read the original.
FAX → Directed into the office CRM **FAX** → Directed into an email folder **FAX** → Received at the fax machine **FAX** → Fax machine is turned off. Constituent msg not received.	
SOCIAL MEDIA → No one sees post or msg **SOCIAL MEDIA** → Comms staff sees post or msg **SOCIAL MEDIA** → Member sees post or msg → Comms staff sees post or msg (Often uses text, email, or direct message on the platform to flag for their staff)	• The criteria is for what warrants a response on social media is inconsistent and does not map to other forms of correspondence.
IN-PERSON VISIT → Group/individual schedules a mtg w staff or Member → Staff and/or Member meets with group or individual **'PROTEST' VISIT** → People show up unannounced → Staff and/or Member meets with group or individual / Staff politely turn them away	

2. VERIFY CONTACTOR IS A CONSTITUENT.

Confirm contactor resides within the Member's district (using some combination of address, zip code, or state).

STEP 2: VERIFY CONSTITUENT



BREAKDOWNS

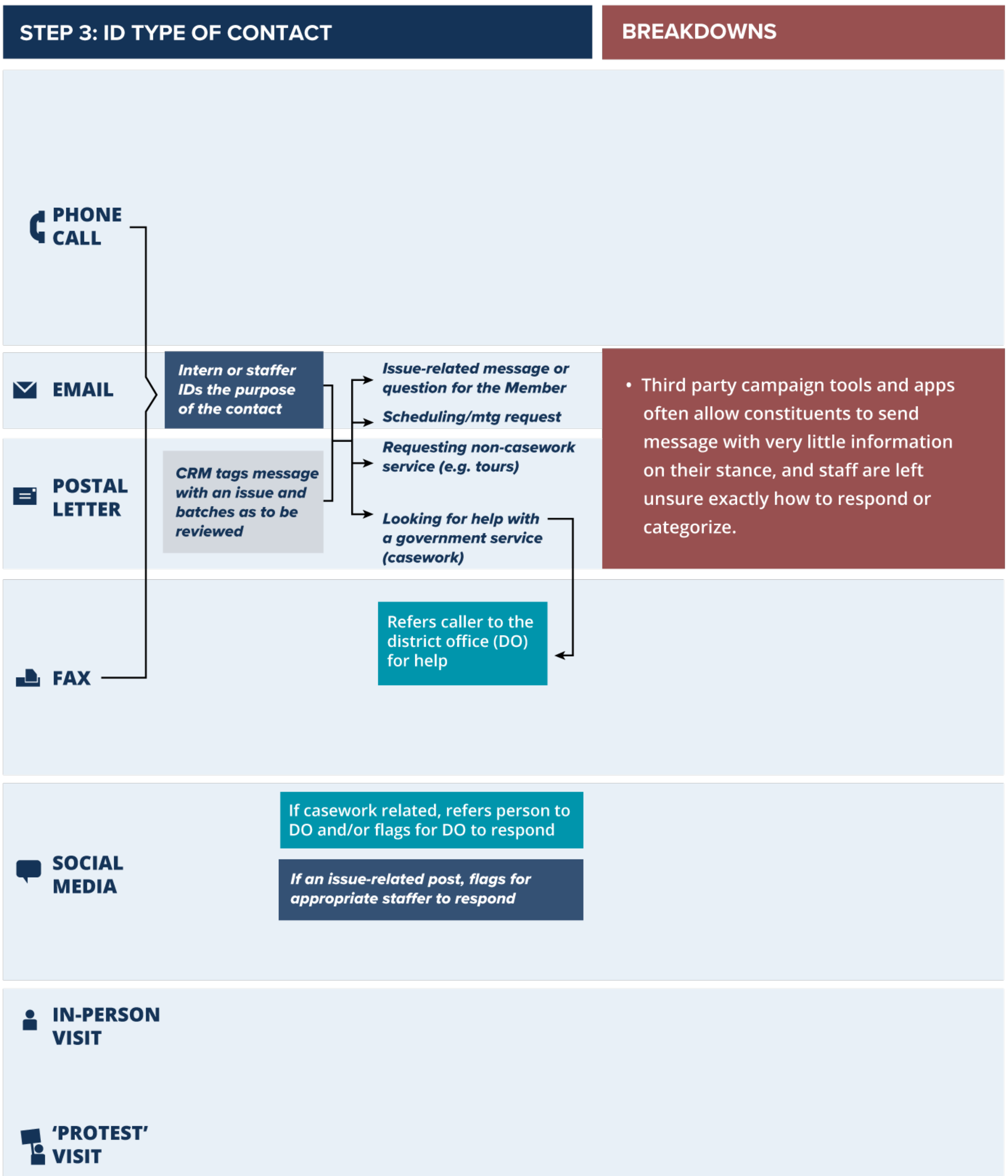
- Constituents often don't know what baseline information offices need to know about them, so when leaving voicemails they often do not leave enough to get a response or be verified.
- There is no way to identify non-constituent voicemails, so staff must listen to and verify all messages.
- Manual listening to voicemail does not scale well at high call volumes.

- Verifying constituents on social media is very challenging. Some staff appreciate the new Facebook constituent tag, while others feel it's unreliable.

- Verifying constituents, regardless of communication mode, is unscientific and time-consuming.

3. IDENTIFY NATURE OF CONTACT.

Categorize message as a constituent service request (e.g., a flag request), request for assistance with a federal program (e.g., veterans' benefits), meeting request, or sharing input on and/or looking to learn the Member's stance on a specific issue



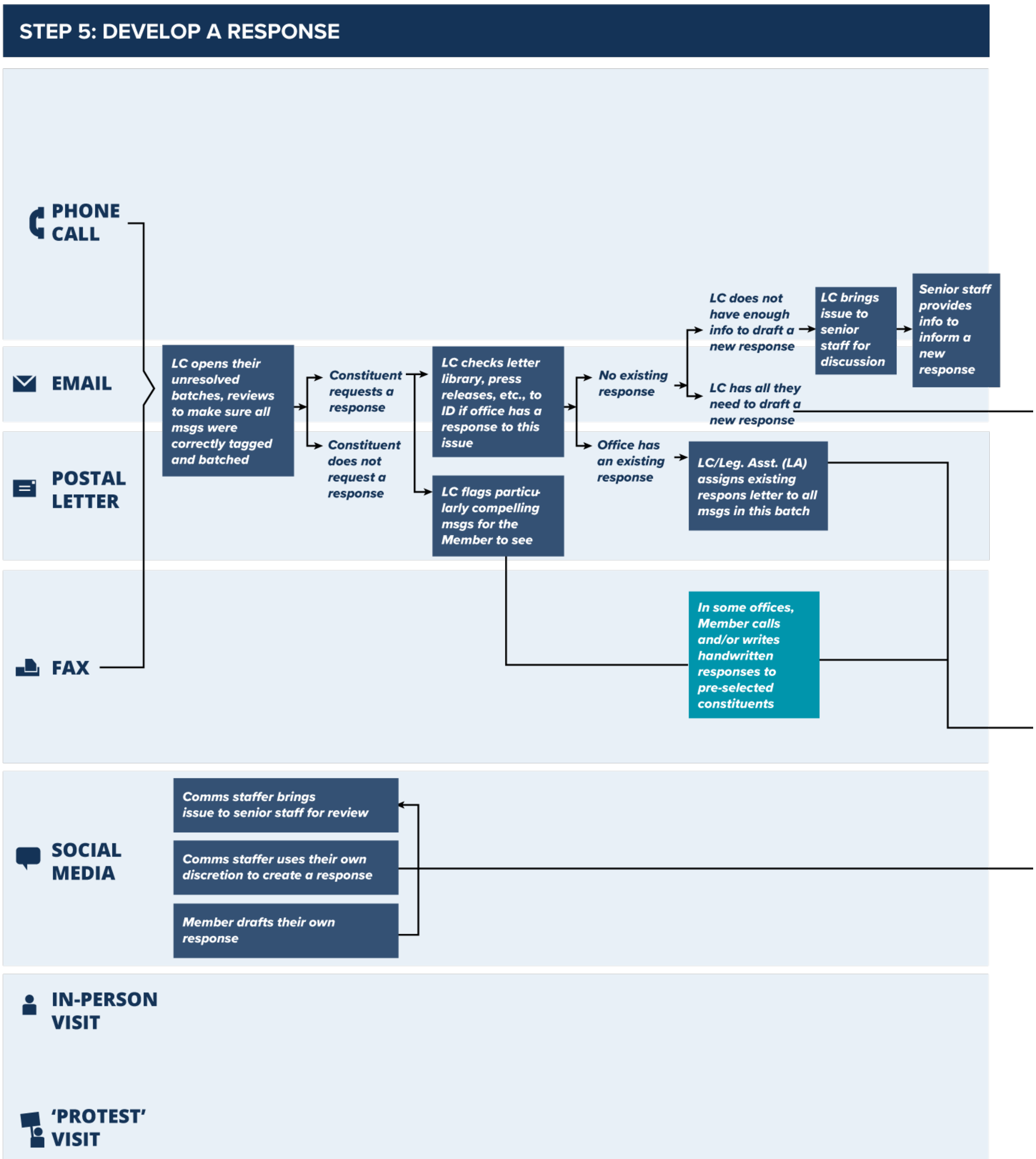
4. LOG, CATEGORIZE, AND ASSIGN.

Recapture the message in the office's system, "batch" together with similar messages, and assign to a staffer for review and follow-up.

STEP 4: LOG, CATEGORIZE + ASSIGN	BREAKDOWNS
Logs caller's message VARIOUS APPROACHES ***1. Intern/staff asst. (SA) answers call and enters msg directly in CRM*** ***2. Intern/SA answers call, writes msg on paper and later entetrs msg into CRM*** ***3. Intern logs msgs in CRM, batches as "phone calls." LC later reviews and re-batches*** ***4. Intern answers call, writes msg on paper, gives stack of papers to SA to enter in CRM*** ***5. Intern answers call, does not log msg but tallies a PRO/ CON count***	• Logging/tagging/batching of calls is manual, slow and time-consuming. • Interns do not always have CRM access because of cost of subsriptions, or staff do not trust them to use the system properly. • Success depends on interns being trained well in how to batch. If they get it wrong, messages get lost, and the systems don't catch it.
Tag message with a category → ***Batch similar messages*** → ***LC opens their unresolved batches, reviews to make sure all messages were correctly tagged and batched*** *TAG = An issue or service category. Such as: "Healthcare," "Immigration," "Flag request," etc.* *BATCH = Any of action or specific label which indicates the nature of the messages and/or how they should be handled next. Batches are assigned to different team members, which keeps messages moving* *VARIOUS APPROACHES This is where some offices will flag note-worthy for the Member to see*	• LCs handle batching of email/mail, which they often described as "painful" and can occupy 40-60% of their time. • Staff don't trust the CRM or interns to tag and batch messages correctly, so there's a good deal of double checking and duplicate work. • Messages seem to get regularly hopelessly lost in CRMs. It's common for correspondence to get unknowingly lost in the system, then found during a backlog clearout, which adds to staff stress.
Social media posts are almost never logged into the CRM	• Social media interactions aren't captured as formally as mail/email/phone (if at all), and thus the insight they offer is highly anecdotal.
Post-mtg, staff will make note of nature of the visit VARIOUS APPROACHES ***1. Create record in CRM to log contact*** ***2. No note is made in CRM but staff will account for the mtg in a tally of PRO/CON and number of mtgs held in a weekly report*** ***3. Create no record or tally***	

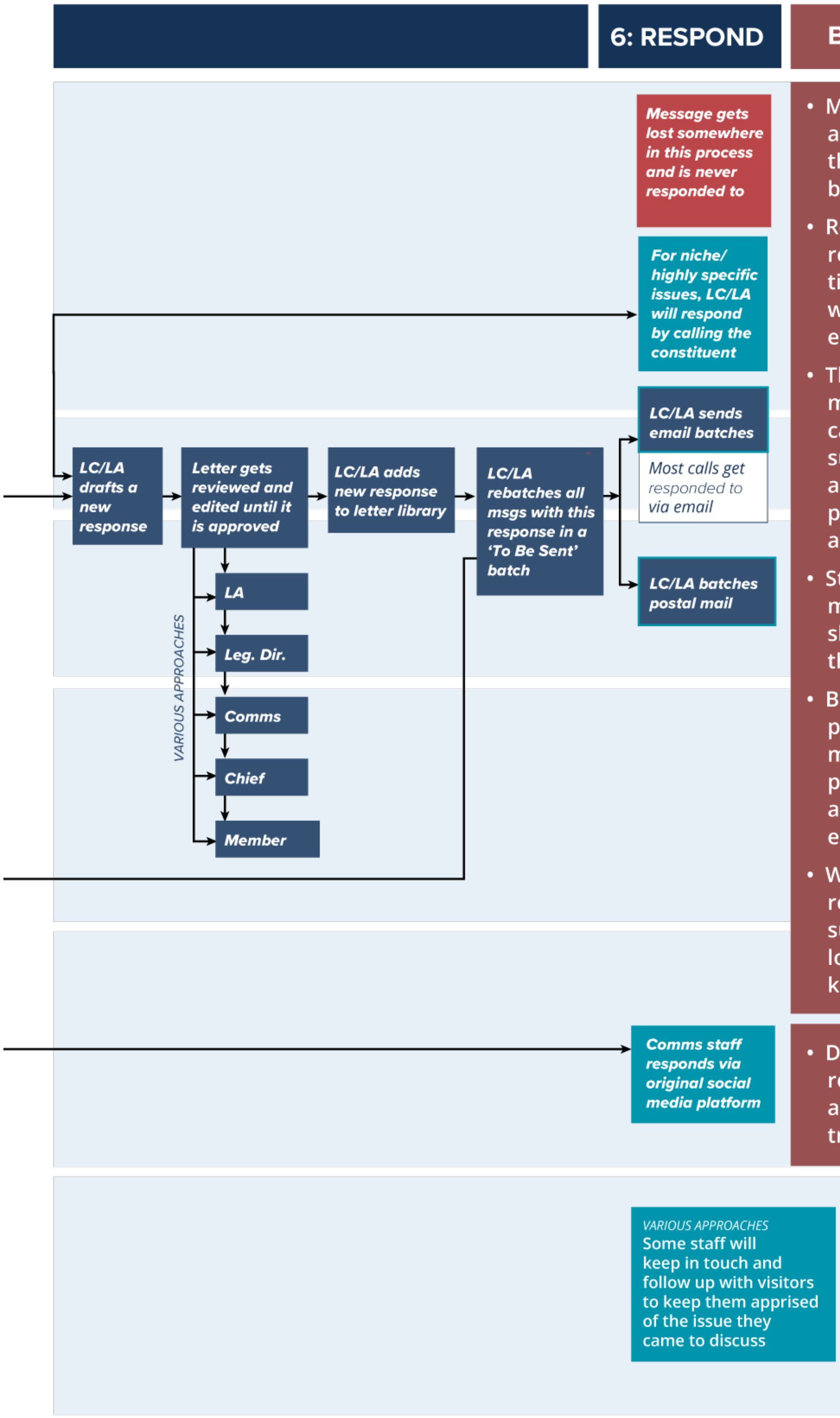
5. DEVELOP A RESPONSE.

Locate an existing response to this topic or draft a new one.



6. RESPOND.

Follow up with the constituent via the original channel or whatever form of contact info is available.



BREAKDOWNS

- Many complaints about poor search and difficulty in updating contacts in the CRMs, which slow down/add burden to response time.
- Review and approval of new written responses can be very involved and time-consuming, especially for offices where the Member wants to sign off on every letter going out.
- The CRMs don't have integrated ways to manage document review, and offices can't officially use collaboration tools such as Google Drive (though many do anyway). LC/LAs have to run a review process usually over long email threads and tracked changes with Word docs.
- Staff in offices where the Member is more hands-on feel frustration with slower turnaround time (often due to the approval process).
- Because generating responses to phone, email, and mail input is such a manual process, backlogs can easily pile up due to staff turnover, vacation and sick days, shifting legislative focus, etc.
- When the volume of input increases, response times slow and quality suffers. Often, offices prioritize sending lots of boilerplate responses just to keep up.

- Discussion/review of social media responses seems to be handled at a much more rapid rate than traditional responses.

2.2 USER NEEDS

UNDERSTANDING THE "USERS" OF CONGRESSIONAL CONSTITUENT ENGAGEMENT OPERATIONS.

Correspondence teams are users of both the workflow and technical systems that make engagement possible, and constituents are users of the engagement itself. In order to envision products, tools, and services that support and improve existing processes, we must first have a robust understanding of the needs and behaviors of the system's users.

To help create and improve tools used by staff, we've identified nuances of the role each staff member plays in the process of engaging with constituents, and what they need to successfully do their work.

These qualitative insights about the people who make up the system are derived from both contextual conversation with staff and observation of how they perform their roles.

INTERN

HOW I FIT INTO THE PROCESS

Constituent Contact, Verify Constituent, Identify the Type of Contact

When someone calls our office, I am typically the first to answer the phone. My primary responsibility is to handle phone calls and capture the information my team needs. Often, the staff assistant shares this task with me. This work includes finding out if the caller is a constituent and identifying why they are calling. I do not always have full access to the CRM or other systems and am often assigned a very specific piece of the intake tasks.

I sit with other interns in a designated part of the office—sometimes we share a desk, a corner, or even a closet. As we wait for calls, we discuss current events, check our email, and use social media.

Log, Categorize, and Assign

As I speak to a caller, I am responsible for noting the constituent's contact information and their message to the congressperson. Once a message is received, there are typically two ways we log information for later use by other staffers: 1) record a constituent's message with pen and paper or on a digital document (e.g., spreadsheet, Word doc); or 2) enter it directly into our CRM. We use our discretion and rely on office process norms.

WHAT I NEED TO BE SUCCESSFUL

- I need a consistent process and access to the team's systems when transferring constituent messages to the appropriate staffers.
- I need to be trained on best practices for customer-centered phone service.
- I need to be trained on how to use the systems and tools—and be entrusted to be knowledgeable about the district I am serving, as well as to have all necessary contact information to verify constituents.
- I need to be paid a living wage for my mission-critical services.

STAFF ASSISTANT

HOW I FIT INTO THE PROCESS

Constituent Contact, Verify Constituent, ID Type of Contact

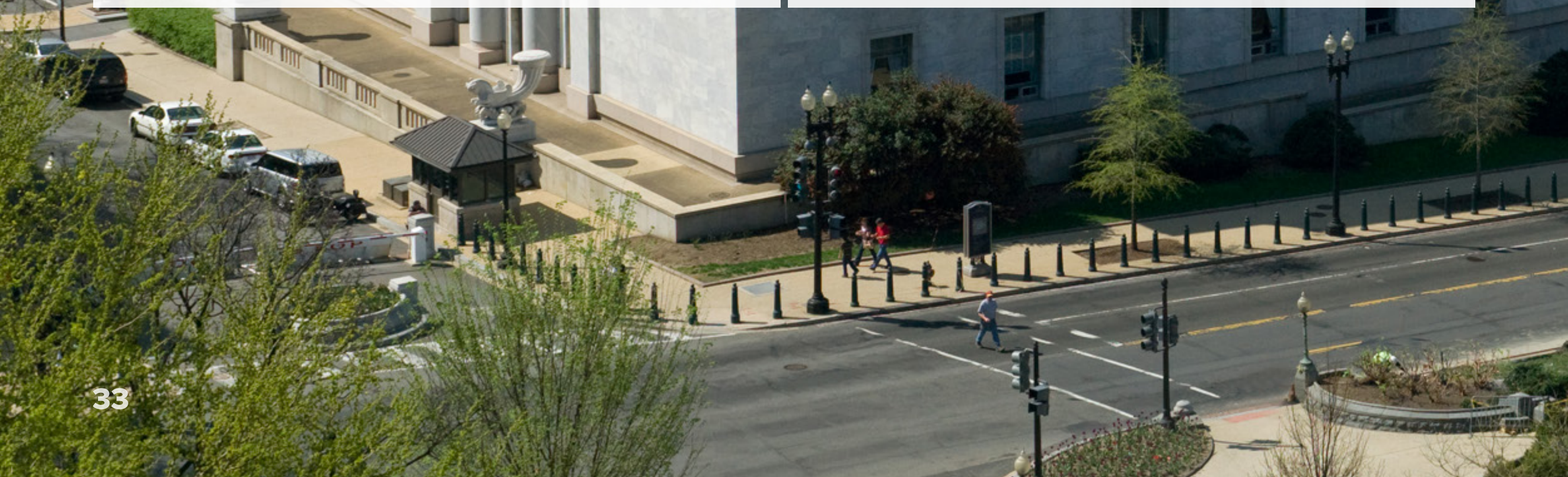
In addition to answering phones alongside interns, I am also typically one of the first points of contact for those meeting with the Member of Congress in person, whether scheduled or impromptu. I typically receive and sort postal mail and transfer calls. My role at times overlaps with a legislative correspondent as both of us can be the primary source filtering incoming mail in our CRM.

Log, Categorize, and Assign

At this point, I am entering the constituent's contact information and their message to the congressperson. Often an intern is also doing this. Once a message is received, there are typically two ways we log the information for later use by another staff member: 1) record the constituent's message with pen and paper or on a digital document (e.g., spreadsheet, Word doc), or 2) enter it into their CRM. As a staff assistant with full access to the CRM, I typically log the information directly into the system instead of first recording with pen and paper. We use our discretion and rely on office protocol as we discern appropriate next steps.

WHAT I NEED TO BE SUCCESSFUL

- I need to be able to react quickly to a multitude of situations, such as an impromptu visit from an important constituent or other Member, or a sudden increase in constituent communications volume because of my Member's position on an issue. I also need tools that allow me to work with multiple documents simultaneously, do not have aggravating lag times, and help simplify the many different processes for which I am responsible.
- I need a consistent process when transferring information from message intake to appropriate staffer.
- I need a repeatable, effective way to quickly leverage the capacity of a new round of interns.
- I need a way to systematize my work so that I can seamlessly hand over operations when I likely move to a different office or am promoted.



LEGISLATIVE CORRESPONDENT (LC)

HOW I FIT INTO THE PROCESS

Log, Categorize, and Assign

Organizing and responding to constituent input is my primary responsibility. I shepherd the sorting and batching of each piece of incoming correspondence in our CRM, including messages from phone calls, emails, postal mail, and faxes. I often train and oversee interns, instructing them how to handle handoff of phone messages, which I later categorize and assign. Sometimes, I flag special or interesting messages for senior members of our team, and at times for the Member themselves.

Develop a Response

I typically manage the response process—from drafting to approval and final delivery. I look through our library of form letters (contingent on how long the Member has been in office) or draft a new response. I work with more senior staff members to gather data to inform how our team wants to respond. As a response is developed, my colleagues and I often circulate various iterations via email attachment.

I continue to usher outgoing drafts to ensure they reach the appropriate senior staffer during the approval process. In some offices, it's my job to get final sign-off from the Member, who may give detailed edits. This process is manual and happens outside our CRM.

Finally, I make sure all responses are sent accordingly.

Since I'm often inundated by the mail process, I make mental note of opportunities for change but rarely have the bandwidth to instigate change.

WHAT I NEED TO BE SUCCESSFUL

- I need an easier way to batch and mail into categories/assignments that does not require such manual, time-intensive focus.
- I need a way to flag and keep track of important messages that my boss will want to review or respond to, and/or which may influence their decision-making.
- I need a resource of all approved language—not just form letters—that I can use to build upon previously approved language when crafting new responses.
- I need the ability to edit and collect feedback collaboratively, preferably directly within the CRM.
- I need a simple method of tracking where a response is throughout its various stages to simplify the editing process for my colleagues.
- I need contact information for constituents to be able to respond to them on the channel in which they reached out to us.

LEGISLATIVE ASSISTANT (LA)

HOW I FIT INTO THE PROCESS

Develop a Response

I enter the process during the drafting of new responses by pulling talking points, drafting the initial response, and/or digging through our archives if our library of form letters is robust and useful. I sometimes share responsibilities with the LC in ushering review and approval of new letters.

I ultimately hand off new responses to the LC, who will ensure they are sent.

WHAT I NEED TO BE SUCCESSFUL

- I need clean and clear handoffs from my LC and streamlined approval processes.
- I need a search function in our CRM that allows me to find exact letters/responses without friction.
- I need a CRM that processes information quickly; I currently spend a lot of time waiting on load time, such as loading a document to a constituent's profile.
- I need an easy way to pull reports on volume and turnaround time to share in a weekly update to my team.

LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR

HOW I FIT INTO THE PROCESS

I am ultimately responsible for our correspondence operations, including its responsiveness, usefulness, and success. I oversee team members who staff the process, as well as make decisions about the technology we use for correspondence and mentality with which we approach political issues. I sometimes share these responsibilities with my chief of staff.

Develop a Response

I typically act as a sounding board when the legislative correspondents and legislative assistants need guidance on policy-related responses throughout the correspondence process.

Approval

I am at times the final stage of approval before a reply is sent to a constituent. In other circumstances, I am the last stage prior to final approval from either the chief of staff or Member of Congress.

WHAT I NEED TO BE SUCCESSFUL

- I need better information about how the process is working in order to lead change and make improvements.
- I need a CRM tool that allows me to easily find, review, and edit new correspondence awaiting my approval.
- I need a CRM that tracks mail from intake to delivery and a method that will help monitor volume, turnaround time, bottlenecks, and other correspondence operations.
- I need to be able to easily get data on our correspondence operations: turnaround times, intake and response volumes, bottlenecks, etc.

COMMUNICATIONS TEAM

HOW I FIT INTO THE PROCESS

Constituent Contact, Verify Constituent, ID Type of Contact

I monitor social media platforms for incoming constituent messages. When there are direct messages or posts, I try to identify if the user is a constituent and determine the nature of their contact. I direct casework issues to the district office and look into policy-related questions and opinions myself.

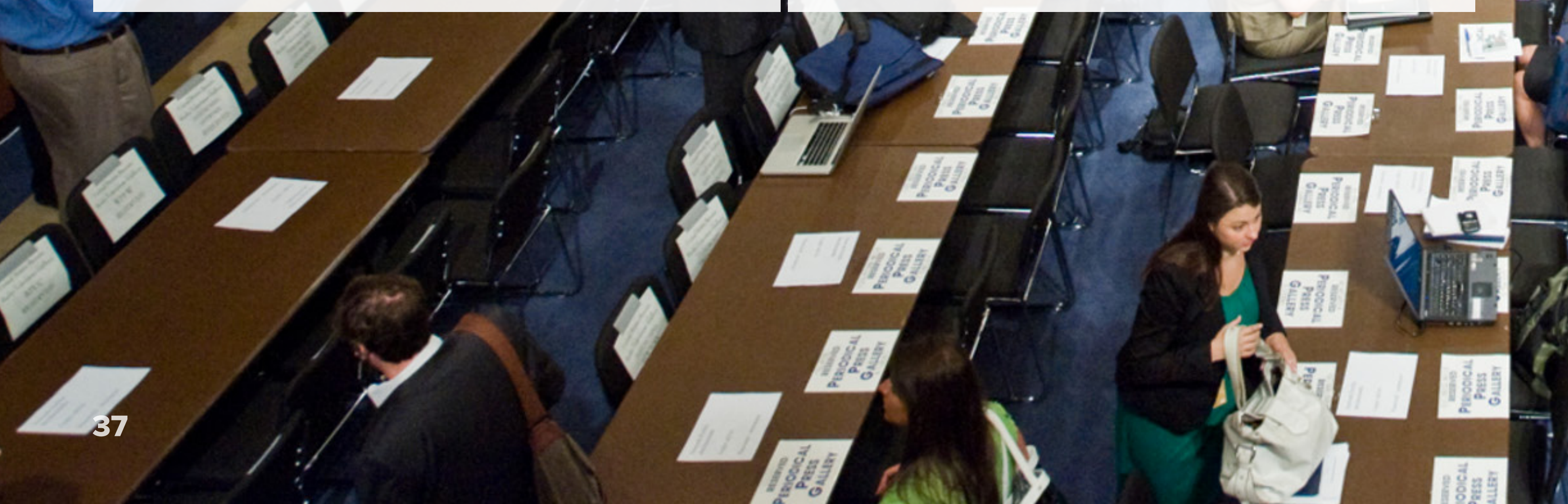
Develop a Response

For social media, I respond at my discretion to posts and messages, sometimes in collaboration with other team members or our boss.

For mail, email, and phone input, I am brought into the process primarily for assistance developing responses, when staff know that our reply will be available to the wider public or when we have issued public statements on a topic around which they are drafting a new response.

WHAT I NEED TO BE SUCCESSFUL

- I need a better way to sort through the overwhelming quantity of comments and interactions online to be able to more easily distinguish constituents from non-constituents.
- I need tools that allow me to track social media engagement and more systematically capture and relay constituent input to the rest of my team/my boss.
- I need a CRM tool that allows me to easily find, review, and edit new correspondence awaiting my input.



CHIEF OF STAFF

HOW I FIT INTO THE PROCESS

I am the ultimate decision maker when it comes to technology procurement, process redesign, and office culture with regard to constituent engagement and operations. I engage with and connect both the legislative and communications teams.

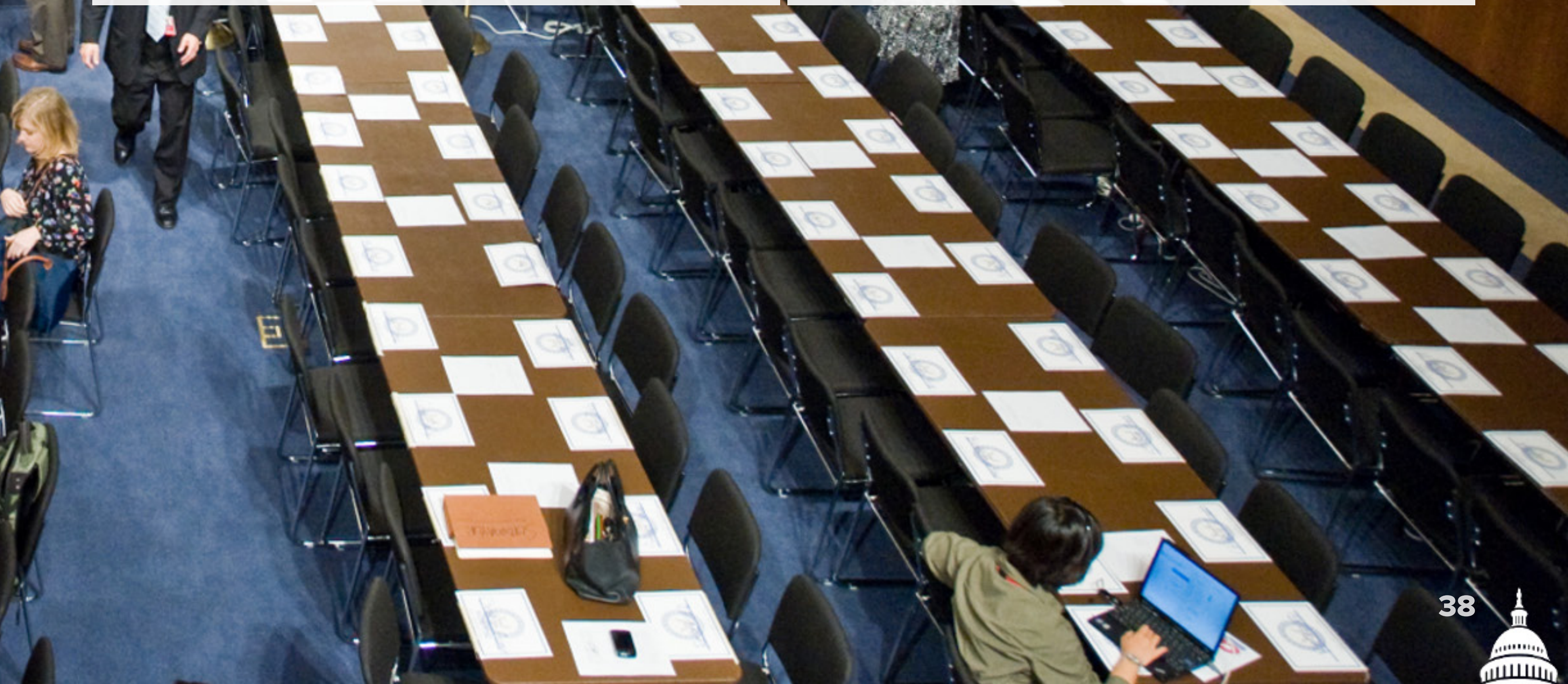
Develop a Response and Approval

If I am involved at all, I finalize and sign off on new responses to constituents.

Often, I sign all outgoing mail.

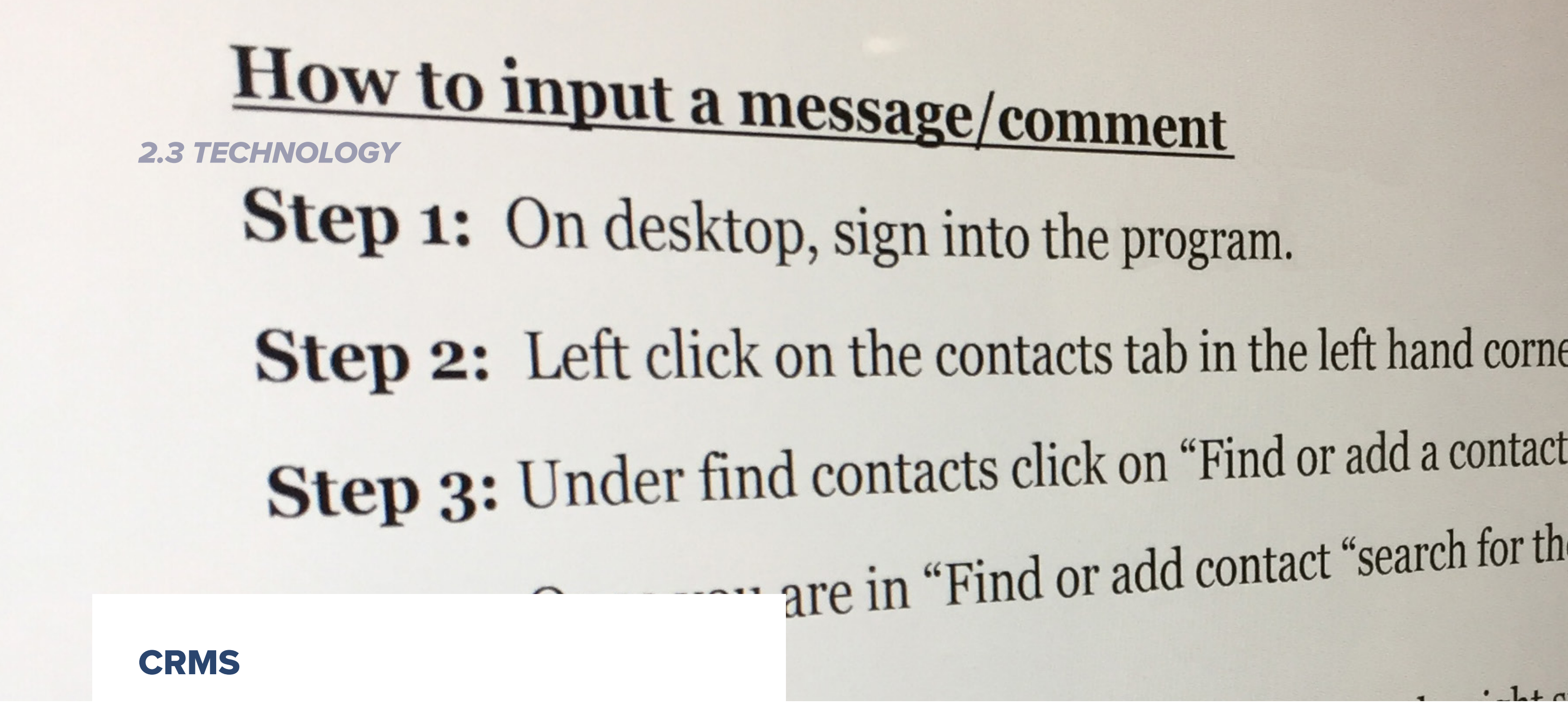
WHAT I NEED TO BE SUCCESSFUL

- I need a streamlined editing and approval process, which allows me to easily find, review, and edit new correspondence awaiting my input.
- I need data about constituent sentiment, interactions, and volume of input.
- I need insight into the productivity and efficiency of my staff.
- I need a more holistic understanding of the features and specifications of new technologies in order to make informed decisions about what product would work best for my team.
- I need to understand the costs and benefits of making process and technology changes that will impact my team's operations.



2.3 TECHNOLOGY

A NUMBER OF PRODUCTS AND PLATFORMS UNDERPIN THE CONSTITUENT ENGAGEMENT PROCESS; THE MOST COMMONLY DISCUSSED WITH OUR TEAM WERE CRMS, COLLABORATION SOFTWARE, AND SOCIAL MEDIA TOOLS.



CRMS

The core piece of software used by congressional teams to manage constituent contact is a constituent relationship management system (CRM), which is generally designed around the mail intake and response workflow.

A CRM is a common off-the-shelf tool used across industries to categorize a database of people. Congressional teams have formal authority to use a handful of third-party CRMs, which have been designed specifically for the congressional mail process—sometimes also referred to as contact management systems (CMS) or constituent service systems (CSS). Email and mail arrive automatically in these systems (email via each Member’s website email form and mail via the congressional letter scanning center). All other input must be entered manually, or custom functionality must be built by the vendors.

The constituent correspondence process is supported by a small set of formally approved CRMs, which most of our research participants would describe as fair to terrible.

There are fewer than 10 authorized CRMs primarily used by offices. Two of these are far more commonly used than the rest due to quality and level of support. While both regularly update their platforms and take feature requests, there are common challenges—and a few standout positive features—across the board:

CRM PAIN POINTS

Authorized CRMs run on servers hosted on-site in D.C., making for painfully slow load times for district offices—especially those on the other side of the country.

> "I once watched one of our caseworkers open the software, then leave her desk, go get a cup of coffee, come back, and wait a few more minutes for a folder to open."

Attempts to automate the highly manual process of batching similar incoming messages for next steps do not work well enough to save staff the manual efforts.

> "There's some language detection stuff but it's about six to eight years behind, so there's no confidence among our staff in the quality of that, and you end up kind of manually going through and checking this."

Staff sometimes end up spending hours on painstaking manual interactions that can, in fact, be handled within the CRM, but are obscured by poor design.

> "There is a distinct step where we have to manually attach a form letter to each record in the batch." [There is an 'apply to all' feature the staffer didn't know about.]

Losing track of records and correspondence is cited as a regular problem.

> "I have trouble finding things that I know are in the database."

> "It's bad, but we often lose records within the system."

The drafting and review of new responses is time-consuming, involves multiple team members, and is not supported in a usable way within the CRM.

> "It lacks any kind of revision/approval tools and forces us to do manual handoff of documents via endless email threads and tracked changes in Word docs."

HELPFUL CRM FEATURES

Real-time dashboards and analytics allow staff to easily manage their constituency and workload simultaneously.

> "The ability to see who on your team has the most pending mail—and thus who is contributing to a backlog—is helpful (if sometimes a bit misleading as some letters just take more work to respond to)."

> "It allows us to gauge voter/constituent demographics within a campaign/issue/batch."

Detection and auto-grouping of campaign/petition emails, as well as identification of source of campaign, are imperfect but helpful.

> "I really like the way they group campaign email so I don't have to manually find and respond to the same thing 500 separate times."

COLLABORATION SOFTWARE

Many offices complement their CRMs with semi-approved and/or entirely unapproved collaboration tools, which allow them to work together in real time, in a swifter and more responsive manner.

> "We use Google Drive, which isn't [approved] since it's not in the network."

> "Slack is a common means for effective communication between DO and D.C."

> "Internally we only use Slack and don't do any email—it's increased our efficiency tremendously."

> "We supplement our process with Google Drive since we can't use [our CRM] off site."

> "Google Docs and Excel Sheets are often used to track response process for both DO and D.C."

> "Eventbrite is occasionally used by DO for marketing and events."

> "We probably use a dozen off-the-shelf technologies, which help us do all of the tasks we need to accomplish on any given day."

SOCIAL MEDIA TOOLS

Social media is, and will continue to be, a critical tool in any congressional office. It affords offices a real-time and authentic view into their constituency, and offers constituents insight into the workings, opinions, and personality of their Members of Congress.

> "I get a lot of insight into constituents from social media via their comments and their feedback—and now Facebook has a new feature where we can see what people are talking about and sharing within a geographical area, which is helpful."

> "We use social to show the human side of our boss—so people don't just see a suit in D.C., but what his day-to-day life is like, to humanize him."

> "This year we saw a huge increase in civic engagement from people who were not previously engaged—both in email and online in social media."

> "It really feels like Facebook and Twitter are becoming increasingly more active among our constituents."

> "Social media allows us to reach out to and bring more people into government, which we think is a good thing."

Offices aren't yet approaching the operational aspects of social media consistently, as many are still experimenting with what works best for their needs.

Tracking social media comments into formal reporting mechanisms—such as a CRM—is done differently from office to office, if at all.

> "We don't track any of the contact that we have with people online."

> "Social interactions are tracked manually (but not in our CRM) and included in weekly press reports."

> "Comments from social media are tracked, but I'm not sure who ultimately ends up seeing this or if/how that info is used."

SOCIAL MEDIA TOOLS

Members of Congress' involvement with social media authorship and engagement varies widely across offices.

> "Our boss looks at Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc., all the time. He sends staff screenshots of things to respond to and uses it to get a sense of what people in his district are talking about."

> "The Press Secretary has full discretion to post on our official Twitter and Facebook accounts. The Member has his own accounts, which he posts to personally."

Furthermore, congressional CRMs don't yet support social media—and it's not clear how to do this, even if they did.

> "Social media is a burden to track because it doesn't fit cleanly into the CRM—nothing is pulled in automatically."

> "Our CRM doesn't really let us do anything with regard to social media tracking. We have to do it all manually if we want it."

> "I'd like to have one integrated platform that can handle inputs from different channels, such as comments from Facebook and Twitter."

> "Incoming social media engagement doesn't get logged in our CRM because... how would I even log that?"

It's unclear how staff would use current methods to process social engagement, as it is more nuanced and complex than traditional inputs.

> "We don't really know how to systematically handle social media engagement. Is a comment the same as message? Is it the same as a 'like' or retweet?"

> "How would I log a tweet or a post? Is it in support or opposed? What if it's posted with no comment? Or what if it has snark like a post with only the caption 'Sad!'? How do I know what that means or how to respond?"

2.4 OPPORTUNITIES TO IMPROVE ENGAGEMENT OPERATIONS

1

INVEST IN IMPROVING THE USER EXPERIENCE (UX) WITHIN APPROVED CONSTITUENT RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS (CRMS).

Many pain points we observed staff experiencing with their core technology—their CRMs—indicated that these tools, while showing signs of improvement, were not designed to best support the human needs of a staffer quickly maneuvering in and around these systems. Features such as language detection, batching, and document review proved particularly troublesome and could benefit from UX evaluation and redesign.

- Conduct usability tests and focused user research on the workflow, processes, technical capacities, and constraints of congressional CRM users.
- Identify core pain points and user stories for prioritizing fixes.
- Hire UX professionals to redesign, test, and refine existing and new core features.

2

BUILD A SIMPLE, ACCURATE, AND STRAIGHTFORWARD MEANS BY WHICH ALL OF CONGRESS CAN VERIFY CONSTITUENTS.

Critical steps of the constituent correspondence process, such as constituent verification, must be done manually, using unreliable data files and constituent self reporting. Developing an accurate and reliable system based on information shared between federal agencies will enable Member offices to save money on procuring voter files and free up staffers' time.

- Develop a constituent database supported with data from entities such as the U.S. Postal Service (USPS) and Internal Revenue Service (IRS), which is shared among federal agencies.
- Build an internal shared constituent database to minimize duplication of work per office.

Anyone undertaking this work should be fully aware of the potential privacy, security, and ethical challenges inherent in the collection of this data.

3

UPDATE CONGRESSIONAL CRMS TO INTEGRATE SOCIAL MEDIA INPUT FOR BETTER TRACKING AND ENGAGEMENT ON THESE PLATFORMS.

Member offices are missing critical insight from their constituents due to overlooking the informality of social media. Rather than having social media feedback live exclusively with press teams, consider ways vendors can incorporate it into CRMs to allow staffers to develop daily engagement reports and share meaningful constituent conversations with the same rigor as other forms of input. Some concrete ideas for this include:

- Integrating cross-channel social media input into existing CRM systems.
- Connection of social media profiles with existing constituent contact cards in CRMs for a more comprehensive understanding of each constituent's interaction with the office.
- Filter for trolling comments that allows for a focus on meaningful engagement with concerned constituents.
- Create the ability to view daily/weekly social media report in CRM for review by staff.

4

AUTOMATE AND STREAMLINE CORE ADMINISTRATIVE TASKS.

Overwhelmed congressional teams feel their biggest limitation to better engaging with constituents is a lack of people and resources. Tasks such as scheduling meetings, responding to informational inquiries, and responding to constituent service requests consume much of skilled staffers' time, preventing them from dedicating more time and energy to engaging with constituents and tackling legislative issues. Possible solutions:

- Automatic responses for informational queries, such as voting history.
- Order tracking system for flag requests and other constituent services.
- Scheduling tool that allows staff assistants to process public meeting requests and manage calendars with ease.
- Electronic signatures for documents shared between Member offices—for example, collecting co-sponsor signatures.

OVERWHELMED CONGRESSIONAL TEAMS FEEL THEIR BIGGEST LIMITATION TO BETTER ENGAGING WITH CONSTITUENTS IS A LACK OF PEOPLE AND RESOURCES.

SECTION 3. BELIEFS

How do congressional teams value constituent input, and what approaches to public participation do they find most meaningful?

BELIEFS

In this section, we explore congressional teams' beliefs surrounding constituent engagement, including their attitudes toward the work, how they value input, and their thoughts on which tools best get voices heard. We'll then share some initial ideas about how the institution could evolve its approach based on these findings.

COMMON PAIN POINTS

- Staff do not have access to scientific means of understanding the pulse of their district. Input volume is only one indicator, which, to some, is not meaningfully representative of district sentiment.
- Low-effort, third-party contact tools inundate offices but rarely provide useful data points for staff, especially those that allow constituents to expend very little effort or personalization to communicate pro/con stances or add their name to stock petitions or campaigns.

"

CONSTITUENT INPUT IS USED MOST UNIVERSALLY TO BACK UP EXISTING POLICY AGENDAS.

KEY FINDINGS

1

While quality and responsiveness are higher priorities for some Members and teams than others, correspondence is delegated to the most junior staffers, whose turnover, experience, and capacity inhibit innovation.

2

Constituent input is used most universally to back up existing policy agendas. Some Members look to their constituents for guidance, influenced most by powerful human stories. Others find little decision-making value in the opinions of their constituents.

3

High-effort, high-reward: Staff and Members value high-touch, personal contact over low-effort apps and tools that facilitate easy engagement but provide little meaningful information about constituents.

3.1 ATTITUDES TOWARD THE WORK

A LOOK AT THE LEVELS OF EFFORT AND FOCUS CONGRESSIONAL TEAMS PUT TOWARD ENGAGING AND RESPONDING TO THEIR CONSTITUENTS.

FINDINGS

Some congressional teams take constituent correspondence very seriously and approach it with heart; others do only what is necessary.

For many offices, meaningful constituent engagement is a deeply held value.

Strongly held ethos come directly from the Member:

> "Our boss is strict that constituents get priority; she always wants to meet everyone coming through the door."
>
> "Our boss sends handwritten note cards to constituents who've shared moving stories with us. She loves this part of her week."
>
> "We put an hour on our boss's calendar every week for him to call constituents who've reached out to us with a powerful statement. He really values getting to surprise them with a phone call, and hearing their voices himself."

Staff take pride in doing right by those they serve:

> "There can't be anything more frustrating for a constituent when they think they've contacted their congressperson and don't ever get a response."
>
> "There's no interaction that is too small."
>
> "Some offices ignore campaign emails. We don't. It's good to respond to the campaigns, you know. It's still engagement."
>
> "I made the determination that if someone took the time to find and call us, that those constituents wanted to talk to a human—and we'll do our best to make sure they get a human."

FINDINGS

For many others, constituent correspondence—both conducting and improving the process—takes a back seat to efforts perceived to be higher priority.

> "When I first started, I was always trying to strategize around a smarter mailing system. However, I'll admit that once I was promoted—and away from the cumbersome nature of the mailing process—I didn't follow through on any of that, focusing on policy-related matters instead."

> "We didn't send any mail for the first four months we were in office because there were so many other important things to get set up."

> "Offices often lose track of mail and panic when the backlog is insurmountable."

> "When Congress is in session, we can't keep up with mail due to all the other things that need to be tended—pushing out bills, committee meetings, etc."

Frontline work is conducted by the most junior staff and considered a stepping stone to more prestigious roles. These staff generally aren't given much authority or training, but are ostensibly carrying a great responsibility of the office.

> "The junior-most members of congressional teams are responsible for talking to constituents, while more senior team members rarely engage directly with constituents and the constituent correspondence system."

> "There is high turnover built into these junior roles, and thus these staffers are often entrusted with very little access to information, tools, etc."

> "We don't give interns access to the CRM because it takes time to train them, and if they enter the information wrong, it will get lost and we'll never be able to find it."

> "We put this work at the bottom of the ladder, and it is a grind. It is actually one of the most important jobs, but we treat it as a low-level thing."

> "We need to redo the org charts to change the position. When you treat the work as entry level, you don't get the quality to do it well."

FINDINGS

District offices (DOs) feel they have a richer, deeper connection with a Member's constituents, who, in turn, engage more familiarly than with D.C. offices—but D.C. offices are the brains of the operation.

District offices tend to have a more personal relationship with constituents and a finger on the pulse of the district.

> Constituents tend to engage with DOs in a more intimate and familiar manner, and caseworkers, in turn, have insight into the specific needs and general attitudes of constituents.

Though uptick in volume is detected by both district and D.C. offices, the D.C. office determines action steps and talking points to address shifts in intake (and subject matter).

The D.C. office typically detects uptick in call volume first, then shares this observation with the district office. The communications director may help draft talking points if the volume persists.

> "We [D.C. office] also make sure district offices are able to defend every single word, and we mean every single word."

D.C./DO check-ins typically tend to focus on operations and human resources above strategy and policy, reflecting a relational dynamic that sets D.C. offices at the helm.

> "Check-ins between DO and D.C. are common; however, issue-specific dialogue is not as prevalent."

> "We attempt to drive casework towards legislative changes. The biggest challenge is communicating the weight of the challenge with the D.C. office."

3.2 VALUE OF CONSTITUENT INPUT

INSIGHT INTO THE EXTENT TO WHICH INPUT FROM CONSTITUENTS SHAPES THE ACTIONS OF OUR MEMBERS OF CONGRESS AND THEIR TEAMS.

FINDINGS

While offices generally place some value on engaging meaningfully with their constituents, this does not always translate to de facto use of constituent input in shaping policy or legislative action.

Many offices—and staff in particular—do not hold constituent input in high regard and are relatively candid about how it does not influence policy-making.

Constituents aren't insightful or informed enough to be helpful:

> "Just to be honest, a lot of times our constituents are super under-informed. They don't engage on a national or international level, and most of their feedback isn't informing our decisions around national policy and legislative strategy."

> "Sometimes constituents want us to do something we already did or already support. If they reach out and this is the case, then we suggest tangible action steps that won't necessarily impact policy-making. The intent is to make constituents feel like they're a part of the process."

Constituent input does not weigh on policy decision-making:

> "My boss voted 66 times to repeal Obamacare. He's not going to change his mind now, no matter what this constituency thinks."

> "The boss rarely changes his mind based on high input volume—that's just not part of the picture."

> "My pain point is not, 'I wish I knew what our constituents were thinking,' when it comes to politics and legislation. Their views aren't informing our big-scale decisions."

> "There's not always an overlap with what's going on the Senate floor and what people contact us about. That's a little frustrating."

> "It's a rare day that we're able to change a Member of Congress' mind based on high input volume."

FINDINGS

However, there are two common instances in which some Members turn to constituent input: 1) as an informative datapoint when shaping policy decisions, or 2) as a datapoint to help advance an existing stance on a policy issue.

> "When there's an issue the Member is unsure about, she or the LD will want to know what constituents think about the topic to help her have a more informed decision-making process."

> "We use constituent input to bolster our existing policy efforts (e.g., use intake of constituent correspondence on X issue to support X bill that has already been positioned prior to considering constituent correspondence)."

> "Constituent input allows us to get a better sense of what's getting constituent attention and what constituents are fixated on. The Member likes to know about this in times of big policy fights."

Some feel input loses value because the current approach for collecting and making sense of constituent sentiment is unscientific and thus misleading.

> "We hear so much from the same people over and over. And there's so many people we don't hear from. It's hard to know what to do with that sometimes."

> "I don't feel like constituent correspondence is the best representation of our district. Let's say suddenly we get 500 people reaching out to us about one issue—that might feel like a lot in that moment, but that's really a small percentage of the entire district."

WE HEAR SO MUCH FROM THE SAME PEOPLE OVER AND OVER. AND THERE'S SO MANY PEOPLE WE DON'T HEAR FROM. IT'S HARD TO KNOW WHAT TO DO WITH THAT SOMETIMES.

3.3 STAFF PERSPECTIVES ON THE BEST WAYS TO GET HEARD

THE CHANNELS, TOOLS, AND STRATEGIES THAT GET ATTENTION AND INFORM THE OPINIONS OF CONGRESSIONAL TEAMS.

FINDINGS

Staff generally felt that in-person visits, personal letters, and, increasingly, social media were the best tools for being heard by Members of Congress.

The more effort a constituent puts in, the more engagement and impact they can expect.

> "The more effort a constituent puts into their correspondence with us, the higher the likelihood the Member will respond themselves."
>
> "We give more attention and weight to those who take many steps towards change."

The correspondence that makes its way to Members is subjectively hand-selected, with an eye to resonant personal stories.

> "I have a folder on my desk of unique, moving, personal stories for the Member to review and respond to by hand."
>
> "I hold onto [personal letters] so that our boss can call them back or write a handwritten letter."
>
> "In our district, student and kid stories carry a lot of weight."
>
> "Especially thoughtful letters get handwritten responses from someone on the team. The more original and organic, the more valuable it is to us."

In-person contact remains the most meaningful and valued form of engagement.

> "The truth is that more weight is given to groups of constituents who show up in person. I hate to say that people have to fly across the country, but it really does have more of an effect."
>
> "People in Congress are starting to want less tech and miss face-to-face."
>
> "In-person engagement is always going to be better than online."

FINDINGS

Many staff increasingly reported that constituent engagement is much swifter on social media, but is handled very differently from mail/phone/email correspondence.

> "The [communications] team handles the social media engagement and is at least three to four times faster at responding to constituents than the [legislative] team."

> "It's definitely much easier/better to reach us on social media but we don't want to tell people this because we'll get bombarded, and we don't quite know how to handle that."

Universally, staff were frustrated by "low-effort," third-party strategies—often in the form of apps or digital tools—that make it easy for constituents to contact Congress without sharing much insight into their opinion or request.

"One-click" style apps degrade the conversation.

> "These apps that constituents use to contact their representative degrade quality of conversation. These are low effort, and they have low impact."

> "Fax is the original spam. It's useless to us."

> "These apps that auto send messages... it almost creates a false sense of urgency around a given issue and [provides] no context to the constituents."

FINDINGS

These tools provide a kind of constituent data that staff don't fully know how to meaningfully use.

> "Every time we make it easier for people to engage, it makes it harder for us because we are not equipped with the right tools, enough bandwidth, and know-how."

> "Some of these are just too low effort—I don't get to learn anything about the sender, sometimes even where they are or who they are."

> "[This app] is like Tinder for bills—people swipe but they don't know any content about the bill. It tells us basically nothing about what the constituent wants."

Personal voice gets lost in "campaign" emails and petitions.

> "If something is thoughtful and not a campaign, we will try to give it a personal response. Otherwise, a form letter gets a form response. That's how it is."

> "If you want your voice to be heard, use your own voice."

> "Even just writing your own message in a petition is better than adding your name with no personalization."

> "Petition/advocacy organization campaigns carry less weight for us—it's just too easy for someone to click a button in an email. It doesn't mean much."

3.4 OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

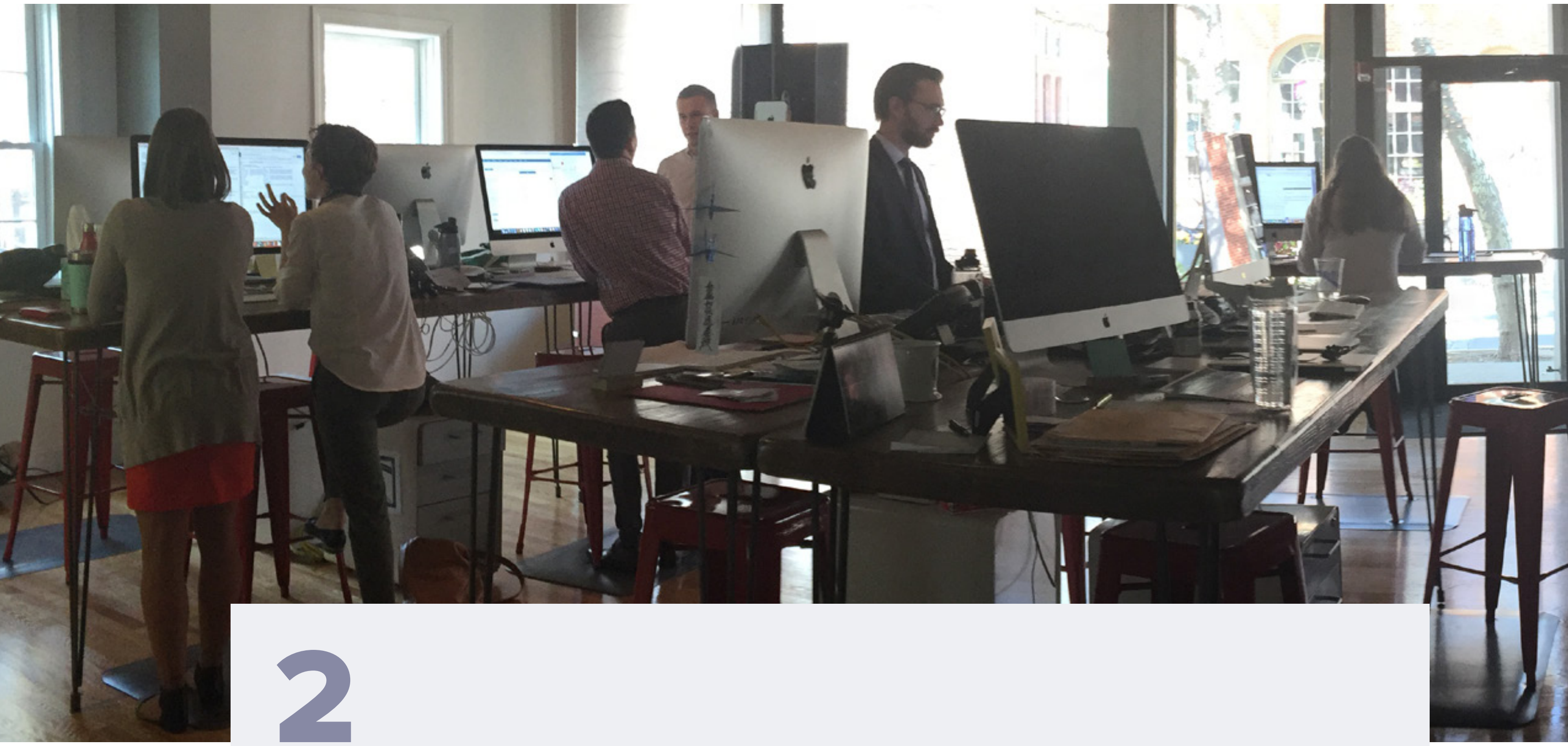
BIG-PICTURE IDEAS FOR CONGRESSIONAL TEAMS TO EVOLVE THEIR UNDERSTANDING OF ENGAGEMENT WITH CONSTITUENT NEEDS AND VIEWS.

1

TEST AND ADOPT MORE PROACTIVE APPROACHES TO GAUGING CONSTITUENT SENTIMENT, USING STRATEGIC AND MODERN DATA ANALYSIS TOOLS.

The current approach for making sense of constituent sentiment and tracking engagement is unscientific and sometimes misleading. Developing tools to better track how constituents engage with an office and respond to legislative action will help legislative and communications teams make more informed, data-driven decisions that are in tune with their district needs and opinions. By partnering with industry data scientists and vendors, these tools can be built into existing systems, with which staffers are familiar.

- Work with data scientists to develop a more scientific approach to gauging constituent sentiment.
- Work with vendors to build reporting and tracking functions for correspondence by volume, issue area, etc., into existing CRMs.
- Map correspondence data by issue and volume to particular geographical regions of the district.
- Gather data on how constituents engage with proactive correspondence, such as newsletters and social media posts, which will help inform future strategies.



2

TRAIN STAFF ON CUSTOMER SERVICE BEST PRACTICES.

Some congressional teams take constituent correspondence very seriously and approach it with heart; others do only what is necessary. Training staff who would not traditionally engage with constituents on the process will help them empathize not only with their peers, but also with the people they serve.

- Conduct field trips for staff involved in constituent engagement operations to world-class organizations with renowned customer service, with the aim of modeling what's possible and teaching best practices.
- Test a rotation model so that more senior staffers have opportunities for front-facing engagement with constituents on a regular basis.
- Expand training to better equip staff in all roles to understand fundamentals of customer service.

3

RETHINK THE DIVISION OF LABOR.

Offices currently focus the majority of their staff resources on legislative issues and media-facing communication, leaving constituent engagement to more junior staffers. Prioritizing this work would give staffers developing policy and drafting legislation greater insight into their constituents' views, who would, in turn, be more likely to feel heard by their representatives.

- Set up "model" offices responding to real constituent input to test new staffing models and division of labor.
- Investigate hiring trained customer service professionals onto correspondence teams to train and lead frontline service.
- Rethink the division of labor between communications teams and legislative correspondence teams and test how responsibilities might evolve to meet the rise of social media engagement.
- Budget the ideal salary commensurate with the level of experience teams need to provide top-of-the-line constituent services and engagement.

SECTION 4.
CAPACITY FOR CHANGE

A look inside institutional constraints and opportunities for congressional teams to improve constituent engagement approaches.

CAPACITY FOR CHANGE

In the final section of our findings, we share insights into the mental models and institutional factors limiting innovation, and we offer ideas for overcoming inertia around change.

KEY FINDINGS

1

Offices are underwhelmed and often frustrated by the tools available to support their constituent engagement work, but often lack the time, resources, and appetite to experiment with new tools or invest in large-scale process innovation.

2

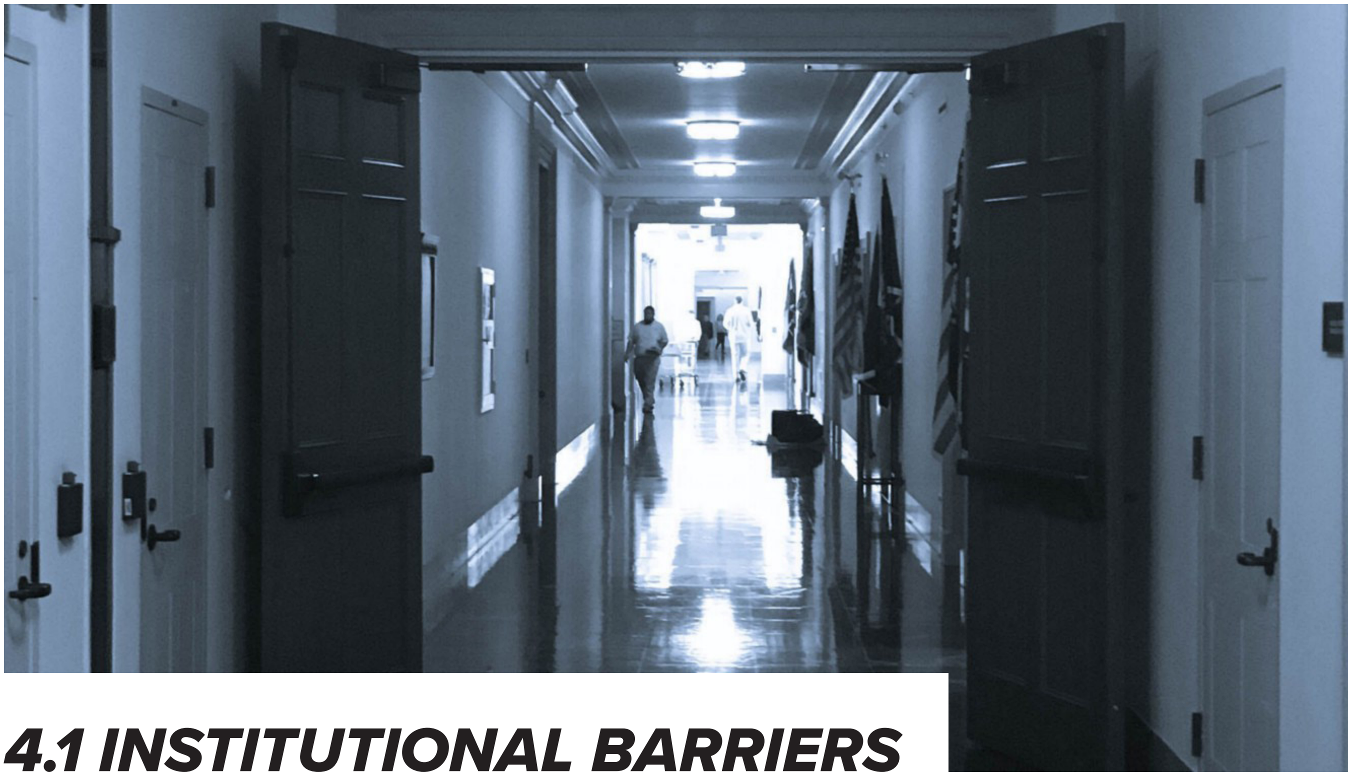
For most offices, the most significant limitations are human hours and financial resources.

3

Teams are constrained by the rules and entities that regulate technology usage, as well as their own limited experience buying and using modern tools. In addition, the lack of a competitive vendor marketplace means that tools come at a high cost, and vendors aren't pushed to provide innovative or forward-thinking solutions.

4

Innovation and experimentation—with tools, approaches, and processes—most often happen in teams lead by Members or senior staff with vision and passion for improvement, and with Party leadership teams that are willing to invest their expanded resources into paving new paths for themselves and their colleagues.



4.1 INSTITUTIONAL BARRIERS

STRUCTURAL LIMITATIONS ON IMPROVING CONSTITUENT ENGAGEMENT, AS WELL AS AREAS OF OPPORTUNITY.

FINDINGS

Collectively, congressional teams do not have expertise in the buying—and often using—of tools they need for their daily functions. As a result, they pay too much and are stuck with pay-for-feature models.

Staff teams don't have experience buying technology—or know how much to pay for it.

> "90% of staffers don't know that some of these tools exist and/or how to possibly integrate them into their workflow."

> "We often specifically look for tools that are not designed for Congress, but I think we might be more into tech and private-sector innovation than a lot of others."

> "When it comes to our office websites, staff don't have training or experience in writing good web content and making user-friendly web pages."

> "Staff lack in-house expertise to build—and sometimes use—technology. No one understands what is and is not reasonable to pay for these services."

Staff feel stuck using cumbersome tools from vendors who charge for modest customization.

> "The sites they give us have major limitations—they are a really weird version of [of the software] with all of these strange customizations that meet edge cases but don't allow us to use basic plugins, which we then have to get [congressional IT] approval to install. It's very frustrating."

> "The websites are terrible—they're designed for pushing PR content, not actually helping people find information or get help."

FINDINGS

There is a view among staff that the vendor complex—inclusive of congressional technology offices (IT) and vendors permitted to serve congressional teams—is woefully under-equipped to help modernize correspondence systems.

In the opinion of many offices, congressional IT lacks vision and technical expertise, and discourages changemaking.

> "Staff and Members are very open to change, but know that [congressional IT] will say no. Some have stated that the primary reasons holding [congressional IT] back from approving certain tools are terms of use in addition to security issues."

> "[Congressional IT] isn't working to modify the Terms of Service for the tools we want to use or create their own versions of these for us."

> "[Congressional IT] lacks experience in sourcing the best products."

> "They discourage challenging the status quo."

> "A result of [having] strict rules is that the rules get broken."

Current approved vendors are limited in number and technical ability.

> "Many of the vendors are political hacks who don't know about technology, but saw an opportunity to make money."

> "They don't come in and try to understand the process and our needs—they just say, 'Okay, here's the thing you're getting,' and we have to call and have them fix every little thing later on."

> "The vendors lock us out of any customization, so that we have to pay them exorbitant amounts for simple work done poorly and that takes way too long."

> "There is no requirement that the vendors provide any training to staff, so many people don't always know the full capacity of the tools they're using."

> "In my opinion, none of the current approved vendors have any business providing these tools for us."

FINDINGS

Party leadership teams are uniquely set up to experiment, push the envelope, and encourage innovation among their colleagues.

Leadership teams have larger budgets and staff sizes, which give them the flexibility to test new tools and adopt more modern collaborative practices. They're often willing to push harder for exceptions and improvements, which then gives them the ability to make headway for other Member offices (of their party).

> "We're in the unique position where we have the leadership office and the Member office. We have a bigger team and more talent so we can find these integrations and tools."
>
> "In 2015, we started adding people—especially those who did not come from the Hill track, but were freelancers or from tech companies—and over time they started adding new tools. You gradually start realizing the breadth and depth of new tools out there."
>
> "Office space is obviously a cosmetic issue, but after our boss traveled to see tech companies across the US, she decided she wanted to create a similar model for her office. We had to fight the architect tooth and nail to get permission to use bright colors and chalkboard paint. Now whiteboard and chalkboard are standard paint colors for any office to use."

4.2 MINDSET ON MAKING CHANGE

HOW CONGRESSIONAL STAFF PERCEIVE THEIR ABILITY TO AFFECT THE HANDLING OF CONSTITUENT ENGAGEMENT.

FINDINGS

With such a steady stream of work, teams rarely take interest in making process changes. They also hesitate to change systems due to upfront costs of team training and fear of losing data, even if they're deeply frustrated with their current setup.

With a strong inertia for the status quo, teams are wary to invest in new ideas or tools because transitions feel risky and time-consuming.

> "We're working the way we do because it's the way we've always done it. Until there's a solid alternative, it will continue."
>
> "I know there are tools out there I'd like to explore. I don't have the time to really invest in figuring out if or how we could use them."
>
> "We like to experiment and test different tools, but we are rare—most teams won't invest the time in trying things out."
>
> "We ultimately didn't procure this one tool we were considering for a while because we didn't have an internal lead to handle the transition. And really, we didn't want to spend the money just to have it not work."
>
> "A few times when I've identified a tool that I think we could make use of, we do a demo and test it out, but then we decide the cost is too high to risk switching to it knowing that it might not work for us."

FINDINGS

Switching tools is a time and training investment few are willing to make.

> "The sense of long transition to a new system and a difficult learning curve keeps people from moving off of CRMs that aren't working for them."

> "There is a sharp learning curve to get to a point of comfort. Changing tools would be more difficult now [that there is an existing system in place]."

> "We chose [our CRM] because it's what the [legislative director] was comfortable with and had experience using, [not because we found that it was the best tool for our needs]."

> "Switching platforms was the sh**tiest process, ever. We did this at the beginning of the new Congress. I used to be the LC with zero backlog [and switching platforms changed that—mail was backed up for ages when we got set up]."

> "Our caseworkers have been using [our CRM] for 20+ years—changing now would be a big burden and risk."

Even among those with an appetite for tech solutions, there is a distrust of over-automation and a widely-held belief that some processes just require a human hand or a change in attitude.

Some feel tools won't help—that these jobs require humans to be done right.

> "You need a person to go through the mail; a machine can't do it. They'll always mess it up."

> "Regardless of what number of innovative tools we use, at the end of the day, we still can't ease a Member's schedule."

> "Tools are important, but the actual person doing the job is more important."

FINDINGS

Others, with a more critical view of the way Congress currently handles constituent engagement, believe even the best tools won't solve what is ultimately a culture change and values problem.

> "The best tools in the world won't change the way constituent engagement is prioritized as long as lobbyists from downtown continue to get more time than our constituents."

> "We can provide the perfect tech stack, but people have to be willing to change—and truth is, not everyone is. Most are not."

Overwhelmed congressional teams feel their biggest limitation to better engaging with constituents is a lack of people and resources.

Frontline staff are underpaid and undervalued, so few in these roles remain invested in the quality and improvement of constituent contact work.

> "The Hill has always had a lot of turnover, but it's obviously gotten worse. I have to think a lot of that is [due to] people running into roadblocks everywhere and being ill equipped [to troubleshoot]. How, as an institution, are we going to fix that?"

> "If you had higher pay scale, then a different demographic would be applying for jobs on the Hill shifting the makeup of congressional staffers."

> "A veteran's case had changed hands a number of times without progress (due to staff turnover), and he was very frustrated."

> "...because constituent interaction is managed at that [legislative correspondent] level, and it's long boring work—your goal as a [legislative correspondent] is to not spend very long at that job."

FINDINGS

Many offices feel the constraints on staff capacity is what keeps them from better constituent engagement.

> “We can only answer as many calls as our interns can handle, and we can only have as many interns as can fit in that corner of the office.”

> “With limitless capacity, we could really talk to all these people, but we only have a handful of people with the time to really engage with people.”

Teams led by senior staff with vision and interest in innovation or technology are far more likely to experiment and see advances in their systems and processes.

> “A value that our boss presses upon all of us is to question why the rules exist. If someone says ‘no’, she’ll tell you ask why five times. This approach trickles into the whole staff, how and what we’re willing to push for.”

> “I’ll always take meetings with vendors—even if we’re happy with what we have, it helps me to know what else is out there and what is possible.”

> “Our boss is an entrepreneur—he really encourages that spirit in us to solve problems and take new approaches. He wants us to push to think more creatively.”

"

THE BEST TOOLS IN THE WORLD WON'T CHANGE THE WAY CONSTITUENT ENGAGEMENT IS PRIORITIZED AS LONG AS LOBBYISTS FROM DOWNTOWN CONTINUE TO GET MORE TIME THAN OUR CONSTITUENTS.

4.3 OPPORTUNITIES TO ENCOURAGE IMPROVEMENT AND CHANGEMAKING

IDEAS TO FOSTER THE RELENTLESS PURSUIT OF IMPROVEMENT, INNOVATION, AND DEEPER ENGAGEMENT WITH CONSTITUENTS WITHIN CONGRESSIONAL CULTURE.

1

EXPAND THE BUDGET FOR STAFFING AND TECHNOLOGICAL IMPROVEMENTS.

Many non-leadership offices eager for change are unable to accomplish their goals due to financial restrictions. Increased budget would allow them to invest more in the team that engages with their constituents and the tools to optimize their workflow.

IDEAS FOR IMPACT

- Advocate for change in rules and regulations limiting access to financial resources by non-majority, non-leadership offices.
- Allocate more resources within the congressional budget towards staff openings.

2

REVISE ADMINISTRATIVE REGULATIONS TO SUPPORT TECHNOLOGICAL IMPROVEMENTS.

Where Member offices may be willing to change their workflow to better engage with constituents, administrative regulations often block their path. There are also opportunities in increasing shared services among staff offices, development of best practices, and formalized knowledge-transfer practices.

IDEAS FOR IMPACT

- Rework Franking regulations with modern communication patterns in mind.

- Publish a manual outlining best practices and existing resources to be used by incoming offices in minimizing startup time.

3

CREATE SPACES WHERE OFFICES ARE ENCOURAGED TO TRY NEW PROCESSES AND TECHNOLOGIES IN AN ITERATIVE MANNER.

Encouraging all offices to experiment and use new technologies is vital for the health of the future congressional office. Creating spaces where offices have access to financial resources, newly approved technologies, and the in-house support necessary to deploy new processes will encourage growth and stimulate change from within.

IDEAS FOR IMPACT

- Create labs or model office environments where offices can test new technologies with expensive onboarding or risky, time-intensive transitions.
- Expand the tech innovation fellowships model and develop a more robust talent pipeline to support the growing technical needs of Member offices.
- Develop a fellowship program removed from party leadership to act as an in-house incubator for technological and constituent engagement innovation.
- Establish a digital services team to serve Congress, similar to role of the U.S. Digital Service and 18F for the executive branch.

SECTION 5. DESIGNING FOR PEOPLE-CENTERED OPERATIONS IN CONGRESS

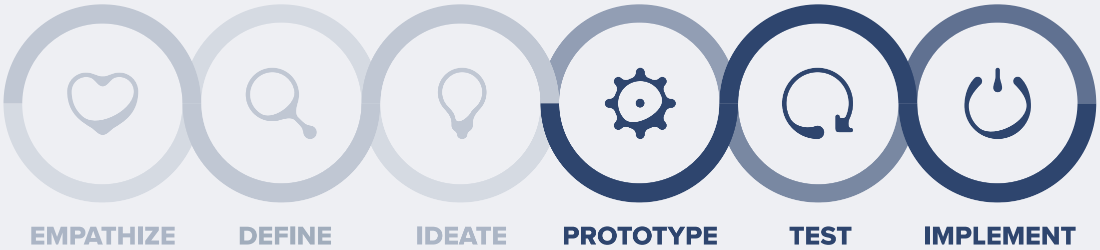
Opportunities for The OpenGov Foundation and our partners to expand upon this project.

DESIGNING FOR PEOPLE-CENTERED OPERATIONS IN CONGRESS

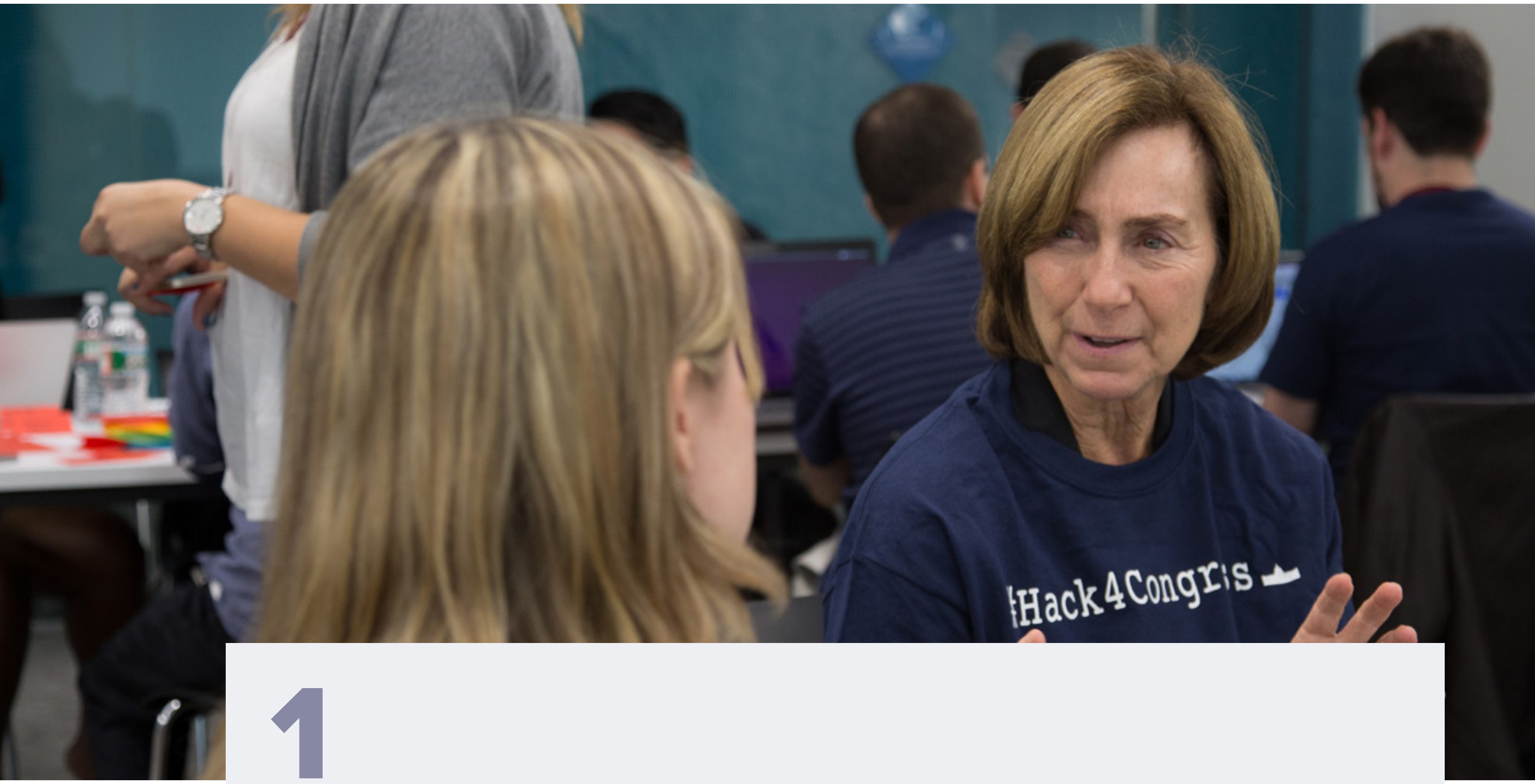
WE NOW NEED TO EXPERIMENT, DESIGN NEW IDEAS, AND GATHER FEEDBACK ITERATIVELY TO IDENTIFY THE BIGGEST OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPACT.

Human-centered design leans heavily on the very kind of people and systems-focused research we've just shared with you. But this is just the start. Capturing a rich understanding of constituent engagement operations is but one early step to reimagining how our democracy can evolve into the 21st century. We now need to experiment, design new ideas, and gather feedback iteratively to identify the biggest opportunities for impact.

To chart where to go from here, we suggest a few concrete directions for this work:



HUMAN-CENTERED DESIGN.
MANY OPPORTUNITIES EXIST TO USE TECHNOLOGY TO SOLVE THESE CHALLENGES.



1

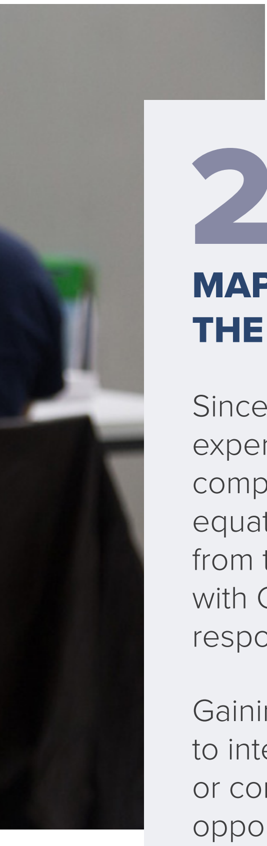
PRIORITIZE, DESIGN, AND EXPERIMENT WITH IMPROVEMENTS TO CONSTITUENT RESPONSE OPERATIONS.

- Conduct workshops with congressional staff to further articulate pain points and prioritize areas of opportunity.

- Collect and map real-time costs required for transitioning to new software systems and tools, with the aim of providing concrete data for teams' consideration. This will provide a clearer sense of what's involved and reduce concern about risk.

- Design and test ideas for areas of opportunity with congressional staff, congressional administration offices, vendors, and adjacent organizations.

- Prototype, with these partners, a "model office" to test and experiment with technology, processes, and approaches. This alleviates pressure on current staff to take on risk and creates a learning lab to see real solutions applied in real time.



2

MAP THE EXPERIENCE OF ENGAGING WITH CONGRESS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF CONSTITUENTS.

Since this project is aimed at “backstage” operations, with a focus on the experiences, needs, and capacities of staff inside congressional offices, complement this study with a similar investigation into the constituent side of the equation: What does it feel like to call your congressperson, or a receive a letter from them, or engage online? How do constituents perceive their interactions with Congress on social media? What are people’s appetites for automation, form responses, etc.?

Gaining an understanding of these, and related lines of inquiry, will offer focus to internal improvement efforts. Knowing where people are most frustrated or confused can provide clarity on where and how we should be addressing opportunities internally.

FRONTSTAGE: PUBLIC EXPERIENCE

BEFORE ENGAGING WITH CONGRESS What motivates people to reach out?	REACH OUT TO MEMBER OF CONGRESS How do people reach out?	POST-CONTACT What is the experience after someone reaches out? What are the expectations?				
	RECEIVE CONSTITUENT CONTACT	VERIFY CONSTITUENT	ID TYPE OF CONTACT	LOG & ASSIGN	DEVELOP RESPONSE	RESPOND

BACKSTAGE: BEHIND THE SCENES

3

EXPAND UPON THIS STUDY WITH A FOCUS ON PROACTIVE CONSTITUENT ENGAGEMENT AND A DEEPER DIVE INTO DISTRICT OFFICE WORK.

This project was primarily dedicated to constituent input response operations, only one slice of the full suite of engagement activities, which include outreach, communications, events, and casework. Each of these areas would benefit from a more focused exploration.

4

APPLY A HUMAN-CENTERED DESIGN AND RESEARCH APPROACH TO OTHER CRUCIAL ASPECTS OF CONGRESSIONAL WORK.

Constituent engagement is only one piece of the work of congressional teams, and myriad other workstreams and responsibilities would benefit from more user-centered tools and processes. Conducting similar kinds of design and research activities on legislative tracking, communications and press, internal administration, etc., would yield similarly meaningful opportunities for enhancing Congress' work.

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