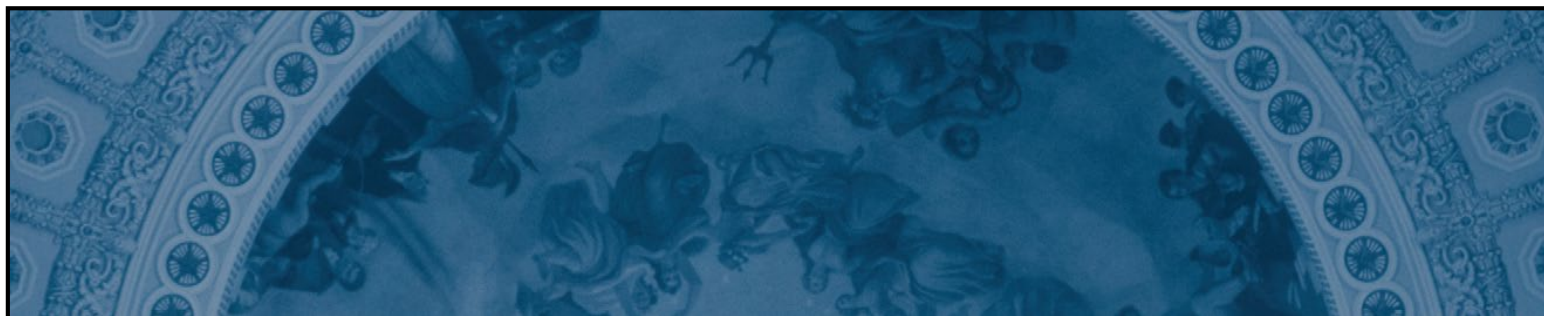


# Closing a Congressional Office



## A Management Brief



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If you have questions about issues not addressed in this management brief, or if you would like to contribute a management technique for closing a congressional office that you found to be effective, contact the Congressional Management Foundation at 202-546-0100 or [CMF@CongressFoundation.org](mailto:CMF@CongressFoundation.org).

# Introduction

Closing a congressional office can be a “nightmare,” recall top Hill aides who have learned the hard way. Alternatively, it can be a relatively smooth transition for the Member and the staff. To make this undertaking easier for everyone involved, the Congressional Management Foundation (CMF) sought the advice of numerous current and former Hill staffers who have closed congressional offices. The following report contains their collective wisdom and provides basic management techniques for making this undertaking easier for all involved.

Because there are several reasons a congressional office might be closing, as well as several different timelines in which to complete the job, a single set of suggestions will not fully meet the needs of every office. Getting notice from your boss that s/he is retiring nine months out is different from losing a bitterly contested general election. So you will need to tailor the following strategies and techniques to the unique circumstances of your office.

This report covers the following:

- Basic Planning Techniques
- Key Issues in Closing an Office
- Managing Staff in Transition
- Helpful Hints from Congressional Staff
- Additional Resources

Our first recommendation, however, is that you collect the wealth of information that is available from a number of internal sources. These include (but aren't limited to) the Committee on House Administration, the House Committee on Ethics, the House Office of History and Preservation, the Library of Congress, the Secretary of the Senate, the Senate Sergeant at Arms, the Senate Historical Office, the Senate Select Committee on Ethics, and the Senate's *Closing a Senate Office Handbook*.

These resources, plus some additional ones, are listed in the Appendix in the back of this report. Whereas these sources tell you in detail what must be done, our objective is to suggest how to accomplish those tasks more easily and efficiently.

## Basic Planning Techniques

"Ideally, planning to close a congressional office should begin the day you move in," a seasoned staffer told us. Staff acknowledge that this is never the reality, but it is not too late to establish a workable plan with a realistic set of goals, action steps, and a timeline to help you handle closing your office. This need not be a long and detailed document, but rather a quick outline of:

- *What* needs to be done.
- *When* it needs to be done.
- *Who* is going to do it.

Whatever form your plan takes, remember the basic rules of planning:

- A good plan is flexible. It should be reviewed and modified as often as necessary to adapt to changing conditions, priorities, and resources.
- All goals should be realistic. Each goal should be broken down into the action steps necessary to achieve it.
- Timelines should be constructed with a close eye on resources. The major resource with which you will be dealing – employees – can be an especially fluid factor.
- All staff members should participate in planning. This will reduce their uncertainty and enhance their commitment to the task at hand. If time does not allow for their active participation, at a minimum provide them the details of the plan, with special emphasis on how it will affect them.

You may wish to include in your plan some of the following strategies that have proven successful for other offices:

- Establish a coordinator to oversee the project in each office, and an overall coordinator.
- Adopt as a goal a successful office closing.
- Break the job into target areas. Assign each to a different staffer, and have each establish a mini-plan for their area of responsibility.

The details of your plan are not as important as having the plan itself. Planning figures prominently into the effectiveness of any organization. It eliminates unpleasant surprises, gives direction, and provides motivation.

# Key Issues In Closing An Office

"If I had only known when I started ...," lamented many Hill staffers we interviewed. The following key issues will give you a head start in developing your plan to close the office.

## **Logistics**

1. When is the Member's last day of work?
2. What date will the office officially close? (In recent years, House offices have been asked to vacate as early as December 1.)
3. Who will be the last person in the office?
4. Does the Member want a hands-on role in the office closing process or a notification when it's over?
5. Who will monitor closing the district/state offices? Will this be handled from Washington or from the field?
6. Will an overall closing coordinator be named?
7. Will an alternative working space be made available to staff after the office has closed? For how long?

## **Files, Gifts, and Property**

1. What is to be done with the office files?
  - If they are going to a library or other designated depository, which one?
  - Has the depository agreed to accept the documents?
  - Does it have special archiving requirements?
  - What must be done to meet these requirements?
  - Does the Member have plans to re-enter politics or to write a book? If so, how does that affect decisions about records and files?
  - The Clerk of the House is responsible for advising Members of Congress on records management issues. The Clerk's Office of History and Preservation (202-226-1300) publishes the *Members' Records Management Manual* (as well as materials specifically for departing Members), facilitates storage and shipment of files and provides individual consultations.
  - The Senate Historical Office (202-224-6900) publishes a *Records Management Handbook* for Senate personal offices (and a separate one for committees), and will provide individual assistance as necessary.
2. What is the plan for archiving the Member's social media presence (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, etc.)?
  - Will the Member continue to maintain the same social media accounts or will they need to be shut down?
  - If the Member wants to continue any accounts, who will be responsible for converting the official accounts to personal accounts (and notifying your followers/constituents)?
  - If you plan to shut down or archive accounts, who will be responsible for these tasks and for notifying your followers/constituents?

- If you have any questions about social media archiving, contact the Committee on House Administration (Republicans: 202-225-8281; Democrats: 202-225-2061) or the Senate Committee on Rules and Administration (202-224-6352).
3. Does the Member intend to make gifts of memorabilia to organizations or individuals? If so, will there be any shipping, moving or mailing charges? Who will pay them?
  4. Does the Member intend to purchase any eligible district/state office equipment? If so, which items? How is the moving of these things to be handled? Does the Member intend to buy his/her desk or chair from the Washington office? How will the large items be moved?
  5. Which items in the office are going to the Member's home?
  6. Which items in the office are on loan from other offices, museums, or district/state organizations?
  7. Are there any items in the office that are not owned by the government that could be donated to a school, charity, or the Library of Congress?
  8. What items are stored outside the office? Where? How should they be handled?

### **Casework, Mail, and Scheduling**

1. How will casework at the end of the term be handled? Will the office conclude all cases, or turn over unfinished work to the incoming Member or appropriate agencies? What will be the final disposition of the casework files?
2. How will the office handle mail (postal and electronic) at the end of the term? Will every last piece of constituent communication be answered? If not, what is the cut-off date? Will the last letters/emails be returned to sender or turned over to the incoming Member? Will the office use a form letter, pre-printed postcard, or auto-reply email to inform correspondents of the disposition of their communication? (Don't be surprised if correspondence and catalogues continue to be sent to the office address for the next year.)
3. How will the Member schedule be affected? Will there be a change in the policy concerning which invitations will be accepted? Will s/he be in or out of Washington more? Will s/he be more or less accessible to the staff?

### **Staff**

1. What policies should be established concerning staff?
2. Will the office replace staffers as they leave or rearrange the workload?
3. Does the office want to encourage staffers to find new employment as soon as possible or does it want to hold the team together for as long as possible?
4. How involved will the Member and Chief of Staff be in placing the staff? Will the Member and Chief of Staff help in the placement of all or just some staff? At what point in the process will the Member or Chief of Staff interject themselves? (Will job leads be identified for staff? Will they make a call to push for an interview, or will they weigh in after the interview?) Will the office offer bonuses to staff to encourage them to stay? If so, how much and to whom? Who will write letters of reference?
  - Be aware that Members and certain staff will be subject to post-employment restrictions on whom they may lobby; on representing, aiding, or advising foreign governments; and on filing

financial disclosure statements. The House Ethics Committee (202-225-7103) has prepared two helpful memoranda detailing post-employment requirements and restrictions – one for Representatives and one for staff. On the Senate side, the Select Committee on Ethics' (202-224-2981) *Senate Ethics Manual* describes post-employment requirements and restrictions for Senators and Senate staff. Information is available on their website ([www.ethics.senate.gov](http://www.ethics.senate.gov)). They can also provide any "Interpretative Rulings" that may contain further details on this topic, as well as answer questions upon request.

### **Member's Future**

1. Are there going to be tribute dinners, statements in the *Congressional Record* or stories in the newspapers honoring your boss's career in Congress? What role, if any, should the staff play in organizing or coordinating these events (for example, gathering press clippings for speeches, scheduling dinners to avoid overlap)? Representatives/Senators who have been in office for many years may be keenly interested in making sure their "legacy" is preserved.
2. What role will the Chief of Staff or other staff members play in helping the Member transition to the next phase of his or her life?

### **Transition**

1. How will the office manage the transition with the Representative-elect/Senator-elect?
2. What equipment, supplies and databases, if any, will be left for the incoming Member? House offices should contact the Committee on House Administration (Republicans: 202-225-8281; Democrats: 202-225-2061); Senate offices should contact Committee on Rules and Administration (202-224-6352).
3. What equipment needs to be returned to the House or Senate (e.g., smartphones) and by what date?
4. Will the Chief of Staff be the only liaison, or will other staff be encouraged to coordinate with the Member-elect?

### **Administration**

1. Have all outstanding balances with every office and internal organization been cleared?
2. Have arrangements been made for the payment of office-related bills that have not yet been received?

# Managing Staff in Transition

## Morale and Motivation

Your employees may respond to the prospect of closing the office in a number of negative ways. Although there is a sense on the Hill that all is temporary, the shock of facing the end of a relationship with a particular team may be traumatic. Even with the increasingly high staff turnover of recent years, there is a decided difference between choosing to move from one job to another and being forced to do so.

While the task at hand is managing the closing of the office, each employee is also wrestling with a variety of personal and professional issues related to the transition. It represents a number of losses in the staffer's life. They are losing financial and emotional security, comfortable work relationships and friends, familiar work, and a known location and system. To maintain morale and productivity, you should support employees, keep communication open, and maintain an active involvement in addressing their concerns. It is important to remember that employees will adjust to change at their own speed.

Because anxiety is often elevated during periods of uncertainty, transition, and change, office stress may be at an all-time high as you move through this process. The more information you can provide employees about the process of closing the office, the benefits to which they are entitled, and the services you will make available to them, the better they will be able to deal with these issues. The House Office of Employee Assistance (202-225-2400) or the Senate Employee Assistance Program (202-224-3902) is available to you and your staff to assist in dealing with stress and the emotional aspects of such transitions. The staffs of these offices are also able to provide general stress management information and can meet with individuals or the office staff as a whole.

According to staffers who have closed offices, the number one reason to remain with a Member until the very end is old-fashioned loyalty. If your organization has practiced good team building or your Member naturally attracts devoted followers, then your problems maintaining sufficient staff to handle the workload – as well as the closing chores – will be greatly reduced. The team will want to complete the job.

But having staff stay until the door is finally locked is only half of the battle. They may be unable to perform their regular tasks because they are so distracted by their uncertain future. Now is not the time to stop practicing good staff management, even if you feel as though it can't possibly make any difference. So continue to:

- Give the staff positive feedback
- Reinforce teamwork concepts
- Continue to set a professional example
- Act on problems before they get out of hand

Finally, each staffer has unique priorities. No single solution is likely to solve all of the morale and motivational problems you will face. Ascertain what will induce the key members of your staff to stay and provide it. Experienced Hill staffers recommend:

- Appealing to their loyalty
- Offering merit bonuses or increased salaries
- Offering elevated responsibilities or an elevated title
- Offer to help identify job opportunities and to aggressively pursue jobs as the end date grows closer



## **Cross-Training**

Cross-training (training each employee to perform the duties of a position other than their own) is one of the best all-around tools a manager can use, regardless of whether an office is in the process of closing down. It creates internal backup for each position in case of the absence or departure of an employee; helps employees evaluate their own jobs; allows managers to “test drive” employees in alternative positions; and provides variety and motivation for those who want to move ahead.

If you have been cross-training all along, you will surely reap its many benefits during the closing period. If you haven't been cross-training, there are two especially good reasons for your office to start. First, you will be creating your own backups for employees who leave your office prior to the end of your term. Second, cross-training is a valuable motivational tool. It is an opportunity for staff to expand their repertoire of skills and knowledge. An employee who is ready to bail out may reconsider if they are given a chance to handle more advanced responsibilities. But do not have people fill a position that is below their current level of responsibility. There is no morale boost in moving backward.

Finally, when cross-training, it is important to monitor changing workloads. Experienced staffers report that the amount of work for any given position may increase or decrease depending on the circumstances surrounding the Member's departure. “Our constituents considered us dead, mangy dogs, pretty much,” reports a staffer who served as Chief of Staff to a Representative defeated in a primary. “Casework and constituent mail really dropped off rapidly.” But this Representative remained active in committees, and the staffer reported an increase in the amount of committee work.

## **Placing the Staff**

Helping the staff find new jobs is one of the most troublesome issues you will face, according to the aides we interviewed. As early as possible, you and the Member should decide what kind of assistance, if any, will be provided to the staff. Some Members do very little, while others make placing their staff one of their highest priorities while still in office.

Congressional staff offer several bits of practical advice. First, don't promise what you can't deliver. Second, helping staff find new jobs can be a very time consuming task, so carefully consider the other demands on your time before offering to do “whatever you can” for your staff. Third, an effective and fair strategy is to offer more assistance to certain key staff in exchange for their commitment to stay longer. Fourth, be aware that some staff may not need or want your help; ask them. Finally, consider the potential for conflict between your interests and those of your staff. As one Chief of Staff told us, “We really wanted to help the staff, but how pushy do you want to be with someone in your network when you may be asking them for a job yourself?”

Regardless of the amount of assistance you and the Member will provide, we suggest a simple set of procedures for dealing with your staff on this sensitive matter. First, meet privately with each employee as early as possible. Discuss the assistance you and the Member can offer, and any bonuses or other compensation you will provide to staff who agree to stay until the office closes. These meetings will also provide you with valuable information, such as: who is likely to leave earlier rather than later, who may be suffering from severe anxiety, and how you can best help staff find new positions. Repeat these meetings whenever you or the staff find it useful. Bear in mind that needs and interests may change.

Second, complete this cycle with an exit interview. Exit interviews provide valuable opportunities to “pick the brains” of employees who have served under your management. Often they can provide insight into the strengths and weaknesses in your management style, and you can offer them advice in return.

Other services that may be offered to departing employees include resume assistance, skills training, and arranging interviews for individuals who may be seeking a position off the Hill. Though these services take time, they can have a positive payback by motivating staffers to stay on to the end.

On the Senate side, staff can call the Benefits Section of the Senate Disbursing office (202-224-1093) to obtain a copy of helpful outplacement materials they offer to Senate staff. In the House, assistance is available through the Office of Employee Assistance (202-225-2400).

### **Payroll and Insurance Issues**

It is important to contact the House Payroll and Benefits Office (202-225-1435) or the Senate Disbursing Office (202-224-3205) to ensure all staff are in good standing, that all records are up to date, and that final paychecks will be sent to the correct addresses. Payroll for staff of Members and Senators leaving the office at the conclusion of the 115<sup>th</sup> Congress will terminate automatically on January 2. It is particularly important to check on employees who were on leave of absence during a campaign.

Advise employees to obtain current information on issues of unemployment insurance and retirement programs by contacting the House Finance Office and the Senate Disbursing Office. If you can't answer a question for an employee, put them in touch with a person who can. Remember: matters of income and medical coverage are never insignificant. You may need to actively encourage staff to take advantage of unemployment insurance benefits. Some people may feel there is a stigma attached, but you and they have been paying into the system and should not be hesitant about using it.

## Helpful Hints from Congressional Staff

1. Utilize interns for some of the closing work. They can sort papers and prepare files for disposition. They can also help pack items to be returned to the Member's home.
2. Contact the Library of Congress Anglo-American Acquisitions Division to donate books and literature to the Surplus Book Program. The Library is not responsible for picking up materials from congressional offices, so the office will need to arrange for their delivery. Books can be brought to the Madison Building, Room B-3 (202-707-9511).
3. Use various colored stickers to separate items that will go to the Member's home, the archives, or to individuals. One staffer recalled his boss promising to give the same photograph of the home state capitol to three different people.
4. Start early if the Member has a large number of gifts from foreign countries to donate. This can be a long and involved process.
5. Use Microsoft Outlook or a large wall calendar to establish deadlines for various tasks.
6. Involve everyone in the job at-hand. Let them be creative in coming up with solutions to problems and methods to get the task completed. Give staffers special titles to help them feel they are making an important contribution.
7. Maintain high expectations for your employees. Don't let them think that producing quality work doesn't matter anymore. Set the tone by maintaining office routines and procedures to the end.
8. Make sure you get support for yourself. Managers tend to be so busy taking care of everybody else during this difficult time that they often forget to provide themselves with the same help. Find a friend to unload on now and then; or contact the House Office of Employee Assistance (202-225-2400) or the Senate Employee Assistance Program (202-224-3902).
9. Staff can pool personal funds to share subscriptions to job placement publications. They might also want to share the expenses on various training manuals and seminars – one can attend and then share information with the others. *NOTE: Official funds cannot be used for outplacement expenses.*
10. Don't rehire as employees leave. Instead, utilize interns wherever possible and use the extra salary to reward people who stay on to the end.
11. Make it clear to staffers that they can't wander off to their new office carrying their chair and their favorite stapler. Those items belong to the office.
12. Check with CRS at the Library of Congress (202-707-5700) early on to determine if there are wayward books checked out to current or former staff. One staffer recalls an extremely unhappy boss who was left holding a \$700 bill for books staff members had borrowed on his account and failed to return.
13. Ensure that the Member and staff have complete contact information for each other so everyone can stay in touch, if desired, after the office has disbanded.
- 14. People will change and things will change. Be adaptable.**



## **U.S. SENATE**

**SECRETARY OF THE SENATE** **202-224-3622** **S-312 U.S. Capitol**

The Secretary of the Senate has jurisdiction over financial and administrative functions, among other things. Many of the offices listed below report to the Secretary of the Senate, making it a good place to get started or to call when you don't know the right place to go for help.

**SENATE DISBURSING OFFICE** **202-224-3205** **127 Hart**

The Senate Disbursing Office works to obtain copies of helpful outplacement materials they offer to Senate staff. This office also operates to ensure that all staff members are in good standing, that all records are up to date, and that final paychecks will be sent to the correct addresses.

**COMMITTEE ON RULES AND ADMINISTRATION** **202-224-6352** **305 Russell**

The committee works extensively to help Senators and staff make a smooth transition in closing their offices. Most questions you have about the process can be directed towards their staff.

**EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM** **202-224-3902** **627 Hart**

The Senate Employee Assistance Program is available to you and your staff to assist in dealing with stress and the emotional aspects of such transitions.

**SENATE HISTORICAL OFFICE** **202-224-6900** **201 Hart**

The Senate Historical Office publishes a *Records Management Handbook* for Senate personal offices – and a separate one for committees – and will provide individual assistance as necessary. This office also offers the *Closing a Senate Office Handbook*, in conjunction with the Sergeant at Arms.

**OFFICE OF EDUCATION AND TRAINING** **202-224-7952** **121 Hart**

The Senate Office of Education and Training offers courses in resume writing, interviewing skills and career management.

**SELECT COMMITTEE ON ETHICS** **202-224-2981** **220 Hart**

*The Senate Ethics Manual* describes post-employment requirements and restrictions for Senators and Senate staff. The Ethics Committee can also provide any "Interpretative Rulings" that may contain further details on this topic as well as answer questions upon request.

**SERGEANT AT ARMS** **202-224-0821** **180 Dirksen**

Like the Secretary of the Senate, the Sergeant at Arms is multi-jurisdictional and is a good source of assistance. The SAA offers the *Closing a Senate Office Handbook* in conjunction with the Senate Historical Office, which will be provided to you.

# About the Congressional Management Foundation (CMF)

Founded in 1977, the Congressional Management Foundation (CMF) is a 501(c)(3) nonpartisan nonprofit whose mission is to build trust and effectiveness in Congress. We do this by enhancing the performance of the institution, legislators and their staffs through research-based education and training, and by strengthening the bridge and understanding between Congress and the People it serves.

## Improving Congressional Operations

CMF works internally with Member offices, committees, leadership, and institutional offices in the House and Senate to foster improved management practices. From interns to Chiefs of Staff to Members themselves, CMF provides services adapted to the unique congressional environment, including:

- **Management Books and Guidance** — CMF has published its signature guidebook, *Setting Course*, for more than 30 years. We also publish *Keeping It Local*, the only comprehensive guide for district/state staff. Through our “Life in Congress” project, we have also produced several reports focusing on Congress as a workplace, including the *Congressional Benefits and Personnel Practices Study* and the *Workflex Toolkit for Congress*. These books and others are provided to congressional offices free of charge.
- **Customized Management Services** — Since 2000, CMF has conducted more than 500 strategic planning or other engagements such as teambuilding and executive coaching with Members of Congress and their staffs. We work with individual offices on a strictly confidential basis to examine and improve internal operations, communications, and teamwork.
- **Staff Training and Professional Development** — We conduct in-person programs and webinars for senior managers in the House and Senate on a range of management topics. We also offer webinars for district/state staff and orientation programming for the aides of Members-elect. More than 1,100 staff from more than 300 congressional offices participate in the training programs CMF conducts annually.
- **Manuals, Forms, Worksheets, and Checklists** — We provide many resources and templates that congressional staff can download and adapt for office use, such as sample job descriptions, sample performance review forms, an event planning checklist, scheduling request form, and several casework and constituent service manuals.

## Enhancing Citizen Engagement

CMF's **Partnership for a More Perfect Union** is dedicated to enhancing citizen engagement and improving communication between citizens and Congress. Based on CMF's research with House and Senate staff, the **Partnership** provides guidance to constituents and advocacy groups on how to best communicate with Capitol Hill. Additionally, CMF has several related programs designed to enhance citizen engagement, including:

- **Communicating with Congress** — Addresses the challenges and frustration felt by citizens and congressional offices due to the changes brought about by online communications. Through this project, CMF has conducted multiple surveys of congressional staff and published several reports.
- **Congress 3.0** — Through a grant from Democracy Fund, CMF facilitated innovative experiments with House and Senate offices to improve their operational effectiveness, enhance their citizen engagement practices, and benchmark Congress-wide attitudes and activities. The resulting research-based guidance was published in an “Office Toolkit,” available on our website.
- **21st Century Town Hall Meetings** — CMF's research on the effects of online town halls showed that a more deliberative and civil dialogue is possible between citizens and elected officials. The Congress 3.0 Project continued this work by conducting research on telephone town halls, which resulted in guidance on how to improve these sessions for constituents.

**For more information, visit [www.CongressFoundation.org](http://www.CongressFoundation.org).**