CHA Oversight Hearing
Thursday, June 16, 2011, 10am

Hearing entitled:

"Modernizing Information Delivery in the House"

Chairman Gingrey, Ranking Member Lofgren, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for allowing me to testify today.

This hearing, "Modernizing Information Delivery in the House," is extremely broad because we Members receive information from many sources.   This information is developed within the House by the Clerk's organization, the committees and others along with their Senate counterparts. Official legislative information is prepared and disseminated mainly through documents delivered in electronic and printed form by the Government Printing Office (GPO).

There have been bills introduced that would cut back or eliminate most congressional printing. That begs the question, is Congress ready to go paperless? While I wish the answer were yes, I am extremely doubtful that old ways can be changed on a dime. We saw with the recent autopen signature of a bill by President Obama that not everyone is ready to bring our legislative process into the current century. We are also not a society that likes to read and analyze everything digitally. We like to receive information digitally and then print electronic documents, sometimes multiple copies. When it comes to GPO documents, such as bills and reports, it may be more expensive to eliminate GPO prints, leaving offices with only electronic copies that are printed at a higher rate.   According to GPO, it costs taxpayers 7 cents for a Members office to print a single sided document. GPO can copy or print that same document for 5.5 cents, and if a press were being used, it would cost taxpayers only about 1 cent.

Also, these bills assert that they would save money and the estimates used are often inflated. During a recent hearing that we held in the Legislative Branch Appropriations Subcommittee, I was surprised to learn that, according to GPO, approximately 68% of the cost of producing the Congressional Record would be incurred whether copies were printed or not. This is the prepress cost which is used to create the electronic file from which they upload online and also print. Again, 68% of the cost is incurred before the very first copy is printed. And GPO has made progress on using technology to cut down the amount of Congressional Records that it needs to print. When GPO started offering online access in 1994, about 18,000 copies of the Record were printed daily. Today GPO prints 3,600 copies, about 900 of which are sent to local libraries and reading rooms in communities across the nation for our constituents to access. GPO has surveyed the House and Senate for their continued need for print copies of the Record along with other print documents like the Federal Register—the first survey of its kind. For those offices that told GPO they want to opt out of the Record, they stopped those deliveries.

The goal of some of these bills, to decrease Congress' paper usage, is laudable. I believe every Member can support moving towards a more paperless Congress as technology allows. And I would join my colleagues on both sides of the aisle in finding ways to restructure our processes

so that we can eventually get to a point where less and less paper is needed for this body to properly function. However, we're just not there yet. For example, when a Member submits a document to the body, whether it is a bill, extension of remarks, or an amendment, he or she is required to sign that document as verification for the Clerk that it is the official document that the Member intended to submit. There certainly is technology out there that would allow for Members to provide an electronic signature for these documents, but to my knowledge, the House has no infrastructure in place for using this technology. Furthermore, any efforts to modernize the House's way of doing business would also have to be joined by the Senate. It would be impractical for the House to send the Senate digitally signed copies of bills, and for the Senate to still send us paper copies. Again, the goal of some of these bills to decrease Congress' paper usage is creditable, but we must caution ourselves against imprudently going paperless without putting the necessary infrastructure in place that would allow us to reach those goals in a constructive way.

So as we explore ways to modernize congressional printing, let's make sure we don't somehow treat GPO as villains, or deprive the agency of the tools they need to support us in what we do. The men and women of GPO are truly our partners in the legislative process. At this time, we could not function without the Congressional Record every morning, in both printed and electronic form, and other congressional documents too. Those are the principal ways Members receive official information for their work, and GPO assists us in our work. Also Members should know that GPO does not print anything that is not required or requested by Congress. The House Clerk, Senate Secretary, and the Congressional Committees are the drivers of many of our and GPO's practices. If we want to make it a priority to become a paperless Congress then we need to start in-house and GPO will follow whatever business practice Congress wants.

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