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Pages of the United States Congress: History, Background Information, and Proposals for Change

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Summary

For more than 175 years, messengers known as pages have served the United States Congress. Currently, approximately 100 young men and women from across the nation serve as pages at any given time. Pages must be high school juniors and at least 16 years of age. Several incumbent and former Members of Congress as well as other prominent Americans have served as congressional pages.

Pages must be appointed and sponsored by a Member of Congress for one academic semester of the school year, or a summer session. They are appointed on a rotating basis pursuant to criteria set by the House and Senate leadership, which determines the Members eligible to sponsor a page. Academic standing is among the most important criteria used in the final selection of pages.

Over the years, there have been areas of concern about the problems posed by having young pages serve Congress. In the 1800s and early 1900s, some House pages were as young as 10 and Senate pages as young as 13. Most of the concerns and subsequent congressional actions addressed the lack of supervised housing, as well as issues such as age, tenure, selection, education, and overall management of the pages. The most recent and far-reaching reforms in the page system occurred in 1982 and 1983, following press reports of insufficient supervision, alleged sexual misconduct, and involvement in the trafficking of drugs on Capitol Hill. Most of these reports were later found to be unsubstantiated.

The page program has again come to light following recent allegations involving improper emails between a former Member of the House and former House pages. Currently, the House Committee on Standards of Official Conduct is investigating these allegations. In addition, current and former Members of Congress as well as former congressional pages are discussing possible ways to reform the current congressional page programs.

This report provides a brief history of the congressional page programs, background information, and proposals for change. It will be updated as needed.

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Pages of the United Congress: History, Background Information and Proposals for Change

History

Serving Members of the United States Congress is a group of young adults known as pages. Pages have been employed since the early Congresses, and 11 Members of the 109th Congress are former pages. Today, they include males and females, who are juniors in high school and who come from all areas of the United States.

The term “page” is of Middle English origin. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term dates from the 15th century when it meant a youth employed as a personal attendant to a person of rank. In the 16th century, the term also applied to a boy or lad employed as a servant or attendant.

The page system is formally provided for in law (2 U.S.C. 88; P.L. 91-510), although the rationale for the page service or for using high school students is not. It has been widely noted in debates and writings within Congress, however, that pages provide needed messenger services while at the same time providing a unique educational opportunity for the select few chosen. In recent years, Congress has determined that juniors in high school are at an optimum age to be a page and are most suited for the services provided Members of Congress. At the same time, being a page has been seen as offering a young adult an opportunity to learn about Congress and contributing to developing leadership qualities in these young men and women.

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As a result of the allegations, however, both the House and Senate established Page Boards to supervise the page program in their respective houses. In addition, the House and Senate, for the first time, provided supervised housing for their pages, took over the education of the pages from the District of Columbia school system and established separate page schools, and developed more educational and recreational opportunities for their pages.

Pages are not unique to the United States Congress. A majority of state legislatures and some foreign legislative assemblies employ messengers similar to congressional pages.

Duties

Pages serve principally as messengers. They carry documents between the House and Senate, Members' offices, committees, and the Library of Congress. They also prepare the House and Senate chambers for each day's business by distributing the *Congressional Record* and other documents related to the day's agenda, assist in the cloakrooms and chambers, and when Congress is in session, sit near the dais where they may be summoned by Members for assistance. House pages also raise and lower the flag on the roof of the Capitol. Senate pages perform special duties every four years when they take part in the ceremony counting the electoral votes after a presidential election. Two pages, usually one from each party, carry the wooden boxes containing the ballots from the Senate to the House chamber where the votes are tallied.

House Pages¹

Currently, there are 72 House pages, 48 of whom are selected by the majority party and 24 by the minority party. The House page program is administered by the Office of the Clerk and supervised by the House Page Board, currently chaired by Representative John Shimkus (R-IL). Members of the Page Board include Representatives Shelley Moore Capito (R-WV) and Dale Kildee (D-MI), as well as the Clerk and the Sergeant at Arms of the House.

In the 108th Congress, the Page Board established new criteria for the appointment of House pages. These include requirements that Members select applicants from their home states, a limit to page service for one semester, and the creation of an admissions panel (composed of the Clerk of the House, staff from the Page School and dormitory, and floor staff representing both parties), which interviews all prospective pages. The House leadership has final approval of all students selected for the program.

House pages are paid at the annual rate of \$18,817. Automatic, monthly deductions are taken from their salaries for federal and state taxes, Social Security, and a residence hall fee of \$400, which includes five breakfasts and seven dinners per week. The pages are required to live in the supervised House Page Dormitory near the Capitol. They are responsible for the cost of their uniforms — navy jackets, dark grey slacks or skirts, long sleeve white shirt, and black shoes — and transportation to and from Washington, DC.

¹ For further information, please refer to [<http://pageprogram.house.gov>].

During the school year, they are educated in the House Page School located in the Thomas Jefferson Building of the Library of Congress. The page school, which is accredited by the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, offers a junior-year high school curriculum, college preparatory courses, and extracurricular and weekend activities. Early morning classes are usually held five days a week prior to the convening of the House.

Senate Pages

There are 30 Senate pages, 18 of whom are selected by the majority party and 12 by the minority party. The Senate Sergeant at Arms supervises the Senate page program along with the Secretary of the Senate, the two party secretaries, the Senate page program director and the principal of the Senate Page School.

Senate pages are paid at the annual rate of \$20,491. Automatic deductions are made from their salaries for taxes and Social Security as well as the \$600 residence hall fee, which includes breakfast and dinner seven days a week. Pages must pay their transportation costs to Washington, DC, but their uniforms are supplied. The uniforms consist of navy blue suits, white shirts, dark socks, and black shoes.

The Senate provides its pages supervised housing and education in the Daniel Webster Page Residence near the Hart Senate Office Building. Pages, who serve during the academic year, are educated in this school, which is also accredited by the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools. The junior-year curriculum is geared toward college preparation and emphasis is given to the unique learning opportunities available in Washington, DC. Early morning classes are held prior to the convening of the Senate.

1982-1983 and Subsequent Changes and Reforms

House of Representatives

In mid-July 1982 following unfavorable press reports concerning congressional pages, the Speaker and the Republican Leader of the House of Representatives appointed a Page Commission to study all aspects of the House page system, including whether it should be continued, the need for supervised housing, and the need, if any, for improved education.² The commission was directed to report recommendations as soon as possible.

The commission held hearings in July and August 1982 during which some Members of Congress, current and former pages, and congressional officials testified.³ In mid-August 1982, the commission delivered its report to the Speaker,

² *Congressional Record*, vol. 128, July 20, 1982, p. 17041.

³ U.S. Congress, House Speaker's Commission on Pages, *Hearings Before the Speaker's* (continued...)

recommending continuation of the House page system with modifications. These included requiring pages to be juniors in high school and at least 16 years of age, placing responsibility for the page program with a page board; developing a code of conduct for pages; centralizing housing for the pages with supervision by resident counselors and security provided by the U.S. Capitol Police; improving the page education and recreation program; developing reasonably standard selection criteria; and prohibiting employees of Members or committees from serving in the page system.⁴

By the end of 1983, many of these recommendations had been implemented, including the appointment in November 1982 of the first House Page Board.⁵ In September 1983, the House cancelled its contract with the District of Columbia Board of Education and hired its own teachers to operate a new school for its pages. By 2001, the House had moved its pages from temporary supervised housing and moved them into a residence facility newly renovated for them.

Senate

Early in the 97th Congress (1981-1983), the Senate Management Board, composed of the Secretary and the Sergeant at Arms of the Senate, the Architect of the Capitol, and the staff directors of the Senate Rules and Administration Committee and the Legislative Branch Appropriations Subcommittee, directed its staff to conduct an extensive review of the Senate page program in an effort to identify elements of the program which should be improved.

In July 1982, the Management Board recommended to the joint Senate leadership certain changes in the Senate page program, including limitation of page appointments to high school juniors, a more innovative academic program with better facilities, encouragement of Senators to appoint as pages individuals with outstanding academic credentials, a supervised single housing unit for Senate pages, and consolidation of responsibility for Senate pages.⁶

By the end of 1983, most of these recommendations had been implemented. Senate pages were required to live in the same supervised facility as the House pages, they were provided better overall supervision, meal service, and organized recreation. The Senate also voted to limit pages to 11th grade students.⁷ In addition, the Senate formalized the longstanding practice of having the Sergeant at Arms and the two party secretaries administer the page program. Subsequently, the Senate established its own Page Board composed of the Secretary of the Senate and the Sergeant at

³ (...continued)

Commission on Pages, part 1, 97th Cong., 2nd Sess., July 22-24, 1982, Aug. 4, 1982 (Washington: GPO, 1982), 381p.

⁴ U.S. Congress, House Speaker's Commission on Pages, *Report to the Speaker*, committee print, 97th Cong., 2nd sess. (Washington: GPO, 1982), 54p.

⁵ *Congressional Record*, vol. 128, Nov. 30, 1982, p. H20831.

⁶ U.S. Congress, Senate Management Board, *Memorandum*, July 14, 1982, 3p.

⁷ *Congressional Record*, vol. 129, 1983, p. 21646.

Arms.⁸ In 1995, the Senate pages moved into their own supervised housing (separate from the House pages), Daniel Webster Hall, which is located on the Senate side of the Capitol. At the same time, in 1995, the Senate cancelled its contract with the District of Columbia School System and opened its independent page school in Webster Hall.

Recent Developments and Proposals for Change

On October 5, 2006, the House Committee on Standards of Official Conduct “voted unanimously to establish an Investigative Subcommittee regarding any conduct of Members, officers, and employees of the House related to information concerning improper conduct involving Members and Current and Former [congressional] Pages.”⁹ This action followed the resignation of a Representative on September 29, 2006, after reports of alleged improper communications between the Member and a former congressional page. The FBI and Justice Department are also investigating the allegations. In addition, the Speaker of the House reportedly has asked Representative Shimkus, the chairman of the House Page Board, to investigate to “make sure all of our pages are safe and our page system is safe.”¹⁰

As a result of these events, Representatives, former pages, and others are reexamining the page system and considering changes and alternatives. Some Members have called for a suspension of the House page program until a full evaluation is completed.¹¹ One suggested the assistance of outside congressional scholars to review the program.¹² Others have proposed creating a process for investigating alleged misconduct involving a minor, having former Members of Congress as co-chairs of the House Page Board, or having equal party representation on the House Page Board.¹³

One former page has recommended “getting Congress out of the page business” with the creation of a single congressional page board composed primarily of former pages.¹⁴ The board would have offices in the House and Senate, and have the ability

⁸ According to the office of the Senate Sergeant at Arms, other Senate officials responsible for the Senate page program attend the meetings of the Senate Page Board.

⁹ [http://www.house.gov/ethics/Press_Statement_Page_Subcomm.html], and *Washington Post*, Oct. 6, 2006, pp. A1, A4.

¹⁰ *Washington Post*, Sept. 30, 2006, p. A1.

¹¹ John McArdle, “LaHood: Send The Pages Home,” *Roll Call*, Oct. 5, 2006, pp. 1, 23; Steve Tetreault, “Porter Urges Suspension of House Page Program,” *Las Vegas Review Journal*, Oct. 4, 2006, p. 4A.

¹² John McArdle, “LaHood: Send the Pages Home,” pp. 1, 23.

¹³ Rep. Mark Kirk, “Congress Must Remember Kids Come First,” *Roll Call*, Oct. 10, 2006, p. 8; [http://www.house.gov/list/speech/il10_kirk/houserules.html]; and Rep. Tom Davis, “Don’t Punish Our Pages — They Are Not the Problem,” *Roll Call*, Oct. 10, 2006, p. 10.

¹⁴ Jonathan Turley, “Get Congress Out of the Page Business,” *New York Times*, Oct. 4, 2006, (continued...)

to report any wrongdoing involving the pages directly to the two congressional ethics committees, which would be required to investigate the complaints. According to this former page, “... the greatest resource and protection for the page academy can be found in its alumni. Former pages now hold considerable power throughout the legal, business and media worlds.”¹⁵

Another proposal has been for the creation of a United States Page Foundation to help fund “the page program” and offer support to current and former pages.¹⁶ The importance of the page program is underscored in statements similar to the following from one Senator who stated, “[o]f one thing we may be certain, as we watch our young friends go about their daily tasks here: the Senate could not function very well without them.”¹⁷

Any major changes to the page program, especially changes that would suspend or replace it, could have an impact that reaches far beyond the program itself. Eliminating the program could reflect negatively on Congress. In addition, there would be a need to address the necessity of the duties currently performed by the pages, as well as who would perform those duties in their absence, and at what cost. The disposition of the buildings currently used to house and educate the pages would likewise need to be assessed. In debating the future of the page system, former pages and others in and out of government agree that being a page is a rewarding chance for high school students to view government in action and participate in a leadership building experience.¹⁸

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¹⁴ (...continued)
p. A27.

¹⁵ Jonathan Turley, “A Page Protection Act: The Path to Saving a Historic Program,” *Roll Call*, Oct. 5, 2006, p. 13.

¹⁶ Rep. Tom Davis, “Don’t Punish Our Pages — They Are Not the Problem,” p. 10; and Turley, “A Page Protection Act: The Path to Saving a Historic Program,” 13.

¹⁷ Robert C. Byrd, *The Senate 1789-1989, Addresses on the History of the United States Senate, Volume Two (Bicentennial Edition)*. S. Doc. 100-20, 100th Cong., 1st sess. (Washington, GPO, 1989), p. 390.

¹⁸ Rep. Tom Davis, “Don’t Punish Our Pages — They Are Not the Problem,” p. 10; and Turley, “Get Congress Out Of The Page Business,” A27.