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Chairman Portman, Ranking Member Carper, Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony. My name is Lorelei Kelly and I work on congressional modernization at the Beeck Center for Social Impact + Innovation at Georgetown University.[1] The Center is a distributed workplace and my colleagues and I collaborate across time zones and geographies using video conferencing every day. Our mission is to find and scale methods for positive social change. To that end, I'm excited to share information about why this virtual subcommittee gathering is a vital milestone on Congress' path to becoming a resilient, 21st century legislature. If we do this right, these institutional steps forward during the pandemic will facilitate Congress joining the rest of society, a move that will benefit everyone.

I have worked on improving congressional capacity for two decades--ten of them here on Capitol Hill. From 1997-2006 I organized a bipartisan national security study group shared by the House and Senate. Although I worked on a House side staff, my partner office here in the Senate was the late Senator Richard Lugar of Indiana. It made perfect sense for him to support our knowledge sharing venue because our main focus was nuclear security.   Over time, our program grew to include the many global threats that were revealed after the end of the Cold War. These challenges and threats are still with us today, including information overload, information weaponization and the decline of trust and legitimacy in governing institutions.

Today we have a chance to begin to remedy these challenges.

First,a Congress that can carry out its duties from a distance is a national security imperative. This institution's information architecture should be considered critical infrastructure. Indeed, a secure communications system for voting and deliberation in the legislative branch is a modern requirement to uphold Article One in our Constitution.   I would never wish it upon us, but this pandemic pause gives us a chance to build momentum for a technology transition that has been a long time coming.   The question is not can we make video conferencing work? It does work. We are watching it happen. The more apt question is how do you want to operate existing technology? And after this roundtable, we will have lessons learned. It is important to remember that we've gone through a dramatic technology transition before. Many of us here today likely have fuzzy memories of the Senate LBB--Life Before Blackberry --when staff could lose a Senator on a site visit or down a long marble hallway. Indeed, September 11, 2001 fundamentally spurred forward operational changes like constant mobile connectivity--that have now become workflow norms.

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[1] Please see the report Modernizing Congress, Bringing Democracy into the 21st Century produced by the Beeck Center for Social Impact + Innovation at Georgetown University, 2019.

Last October, I co authored a memo to the House Select Committee on Modernization. It described the dangerous technology gap in our continuity of Congress planning. In the memo we asked what will we do if movement is prohibited at a time when members are dispersed across the USA? When it is too dangerous or impossible to reconvene in DC? We recommended that Congress prioritize and secure its remote capacity and technology, leveraging its existing district office structure, to prepare for such an event. The pandemic happened just a few months later.

Today the absence of preparation is alarmingly obvious. Both the House and Senate lack emergency rules to allow for temporary remote voting. We have little surge capacity and we still are missing a continuity plan. I believe that we cannot call ourselves a resilient democracy until Members of the House and Senate --actually the entire First Branch--can carry out their duties from afar. But there's good news. This roundtable today shows that we are on the right track. Moreover, building this system will be an incremental but fundamental step forward in restoring the checks and balances in our government. The Executive Branch has an emergency communications system, after all. It's called "First Net." We should all be asking ourselves where is the First Net for Congress? Where is the modern and safe digital infrastructure for the world's most powerful national legislature?

Equally important, if we make video conferencing platforms an option, we will be able to create new methods to improve trust and legitimacy in this governing institution.   A remote system has the potential to reinvest Americans' belief in Congress because it will change who gets to participate regularly in the workflow of the Senate. With remote technology, the range of potential witness invites becomes huge. How often do small businesses in your state get to come testify? How frequently do non profit organizations connect in a meaningful way to the deliberative process? Today funding and time constraints limit who gets called as a witness to a committee hearing. These boundaries make Congress seem insular, exclusionary and even uninterested in the feedback of regular people.   Just think of the real-time situational awareness we could have if local first responders, medical professionals, teachers and health care workers could fill your committee panels during this pandemic.   We know this remote inclusion can happen because we're doing it right now. I'm sitting here talking to you from a horse corral in San Juan County New Mexico. One of the nation's most intense pandemic hotspots is the Navajo Nation, just on the horizon behind me. I'm here because--like everyone else-- I could not drive 4 days back to Washington, DC.

And then there's the Senate itself.   A remote system for voting and participation will bolster this chamber's strong suite--the deliberative process. The Senate is built to provide due diligence in the nation's policymaking. Technology assisted hearings could be the sorting and filtering mechanism required to succeed in today's overwhelming and often weaponized communications environment. The need for improved content moderation is a common challenge in today's world. Fortunately, there is a rigorous discussion and many examples of participation rules and terms of engagement across all sectors from organizations that use digital platforms for broad participatory discourse. Configuring a platform that promotes authentic and productive information exchange is an art and science. We can learn from the moderators themselves, or those who have successfully set up a curated comments section in a newspaper or from Reddit, a popular online discussion forum. We can even learn from and build on Congress' own franking rules--the original content moderation guidelines.

More specifically, it's important to note that the PSI subcommittee is the perfect institutional champion for making progress on the remote technology front. Why? Because the

muscle memory of this committee includes assuring an informed and connected nation. This is the committee that handles Information systems; national connectivity is in its DNA. HSGAC started out as the Postal Committee when the US post office embodied the operational promise of American democracy- -that everyone would be able to communicate and that the US Government would guarantee it.

Today's hearing is one way to build confidence here in this chamber and in the American public that the First Branch of Government is an informed, responsive and effective part of our national leadership during this pandemic. We can look to states for models of progress. Several state legislatures have moved on ahead with remote capacity. But there's more. I recently spent 16 months conducting field research in states to learn how House members are innovating new methods for constituent input into the policy process. Based on that experience, I can tell you that states are more than the laboratories of democracy. Today they are maker spaces for modern civics. New ideas are flourishing. I worked in New Hampshire, Arkansas, Tennessee and Massachusetts. I also have research partners in California and Ohio. I look forward to visiting every one of your states to learn how you, your colleagues and your constituents are innovating to make our government more informed, responsive and effective.

State-based government locations are already being actively discussed as a substitute for congressional activities outside of DC. One recent proposal for remote activities is for Congress to use FBI or military facilities during the suspension of activities in the capital. This is a good idea for now, but it should not suffice as a substitute for our own comprehensive and nationwide communications system. Here's the thing: the most important real estate in our democracy belongs to the First Branch. To be sure, Congress is not geographically contained on Capitol Hill. This institution exists in 900 district offices in every corner of our nation. Nearly half the staff of the Senate are outside of DC. Not only does the First Branch contain the institutional memory of our country's government, it owns the national network that is the Federal Depository Library System. Public and land grant universities are another local entity to leverage for remote processes. The Washington State legislature recently ran a pilot distance witnessing experiment with community colleges, and I'm sure they'd be happy to share the outcomes. Today we should be asking ourselves if there is a way we can experiment now in order to bolster a digital extension capacity through the cooperative extension program. Perhaps one of its modern functions could be to organize, curate and contribute authentic local data during the formative stages of lawmaking.

My most important message here today is that we can do this.

The topic of this hearing sounds technical, but enabling remote functions in the lawmaking process is not really a technical problem. It is, rather, a cultural change. And we've needed it for some time now. I want to stress that I'm not downplaying the importance of showing up in person. Politics is the ultimate human endeavor and convening in person will remain desirable and even imperative. But allowing temporary remote activities like voting and deliberations will not create a distracted "couch potato" legislature. The requirement to repeatedly refresh permission for remote activities is in the Portman/Durbin bill. And other democratic legislatures have already figured out secure remote methods during this pandemic and for use in other circumstances. Despite being convenient, these new methods are not enticing them to do away with in person convening.

And besides, we should all take comfort in knowing that Congress is already on the right track. The House Modernization Committee is a good example of institutional progress on technology recommendations. But there's more. Behind the scenes here on Capitol Hill, the technology gears have been sparking: Congress has been machine readable for several years. Data is available in bulk. Both House and Senate data is consolidated at Congress.gov. A treasure trove of congressional data is now open and available to the public. Paper based systems are slowly transitioning to an integrated, digital workflow.   We've got a solid foundation in place. On top of that, the private sector has decades of experience building secure information sharing systems across time zones and diverse geographies. When we do decide to move forward, we will surely have the benefit of world-class private sector assistance.

 Indeed, let's reflect on what we can learn about national unity from this crisis. This pandemic pause is a chance to re establish a nation-wide common experience. Americans are coming together to help each other in every state. Despite frustrations, Congress has taken vital stabilizing steps to provide relief. As far as remote technology goes, it's likely that every American either knows someone or has personally moved an entire workflow to an online video conference system.   They are having the same experience as we are today. You can be sure that this workspace will be different than what you are used to in the Senate chamber, but you can still get a lot done. And, we know some things already. For example, glitches are inevitable. Lagging will happen--it's hard--and we have to deal with it. We know we need to figure out how to multi task. How about time limits, or raising your hand?   How are you supposed to communicate in confidence with your staff? Figuring out how to answer these sorts of questions is now our challenge.

Most important, we must make sure that voting or deliberation using remote technology is a simple process that everyone can understand. Other democratic countries are sharing lessons learned every day. Please make sure to view the video explainer that the Parliament of Brazil provided for remote member participation.[2]   Finally, we should have confidence that remote functions here on the Hill are doable. This won't be too hard if we work together. The House Veterans Affairs Committee conducted a virtual gathering just two days ago. Moreover, members began piloting new platform methods before the COVID19 even arrived. [3] We need to make sure that we are sharing newly gained knowledge across the Hill during this time of rapid change. I recommend that the leadership of both parties here in the Senate designate staff to create a shared mechanism for lessons learned.

I hope what I have offered here in my testimony today helps build confidence to keep the momentum for remote voting and deliberation going forward. I am positive that today's hearing and the steps that follow will benefit this institution and the American people. To be sure, my endorsement of remote capacity is not extraordinary. What we are discussing here today would be expected of any modern public-facing organization. And thanks to this subcommittee, what I'm saying is not just theoretical. We are at this very moment showing how our institutions can rise to the occasion and how our leaders can begin to build the groundwork for a more capable Congress, a stronger Article One and a more resilient democracy.

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[2] Please see www.crowd.law at NYU for many international examples.
[3] Please see these examples: a member led district level SIDE hearing (Stakeholders, Individuals, Data and Evidence, case study forthcoming from Beeck Center, a collaborative editing platform used by a House Committee to write a bill with individuals distributed across the USA and Elevator, a mentoring app built to assist new members.

I look forward to following up and assisting you with any further information.