

**Statement of the Honorable Christine A. Merdon, P.E., CCM
Acting Architect of the Capitol and Chief Operating Officer**

**Oversight of the Architect of the Capitol's Human Resources Policies
United States Senate Committee on Rules and Administration
December 6, 2018**

Chairman Blunt, Ranking Member Klobuchar and members of the committee, I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you this morning in my new role as Acting Architect of the Capitol.

It is an honor to lead a group of employees who support, manage and serve more than 18 million square feet of facilities, including 190 structures, 6,600 offices, 79 hearing rooms, 2,000 bathrooms, 337 elevators and 46 escalators. This same group preserves approximately 4,800 trees and more than 40 water features, 570 acres of grounds, 14 miles of sidewalks, 7 miles of streets and drives, and also inspires more than 5 million visitors annually through our campus tour programs.

The Architect of the Capitol (AOC) serves Congress and the Supreme Court, preserves America's Capitol and inspires memorable visitor experiences. The agency is the steward of the United States Capitol, Library of Congress buildings, U.S. Supreme Court, U.S. Botanic Garden and surrounding office buildings, grounds and other facilities. We recognize this is an awesome responsibility and it is an honor and a privilege to work here.

During my time at the Architect of the Capitol, we've had some amazing successes. The Capitol Dome restoration was delivered on time and within budget; the meticulous conservation of the Grant Memorial bronze statues revealed the subtle details of the original sculpture; the Statue of Freedom was painstakingly cleaned and inspected; the Russell Senate Office Building courtyard rehabilitated to its former glory; Bartholdi Park was improved to provide a safe and accessible route for disabled veterans trying to reach the adjacent American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial; the Brumidi Corridors were restored and uncovered as much of the original design layer as possible; we've also completed several other repairs and maintenance projects to address multiple needs across the Capitol campus.

Those successes have paved the way for even greater growth in responsibilities for our agency. We have acquired and now manage the O'Neill House Office Building, we are building an additional campus on Fort Meade to house the ever-growing library collection and we will add the Thurgood Marshall Building to our portfolio by 2024. Furthermore, we are exploring opportunities to better serve the space and support needs of Senate staff.

In my new role, I am learning even more about the needs of the agency, the needs of Congress and the overall Capitol campus. When I think of the things that I want the agency to accomplish

during my watch, I am confident that those ideas will come to fruition with your help and support.

I truly care about the protection of the people of our agency, our colleagues throughout the legislative branch and constituents from across this great nation. With your input and encouragement, I also plan to lean on my previous leadership and management experiences of iconic and highly visible national design and construction projects, to ensure a safe and secure campus.

In addition to safety decisions, the AOC faces further challenges: attracting and retaining talented employees who are engaged and passionate about their work; supporting projects that are forward-focused and incorporate a broad view of and the growing needs of the Capitol campus; and ensuring the agency remains an authority on historic preservation so that future generations take pride in the facilities and art under our care. I think of these challenges as the three Ps: people, projects and preservation. I am committed to turning these challenges into opportunities.

At the request of the committee, today I am going to focus on our most valuable agency asset – the people of AOC.

The AOC has some of the most talented and widely admired craftsmen, tradesmen, artists, architects, engineers and scholars. Our work touches almost every person in the nation in one way or another – whether it is through a visit to a member of Congress’s office in Washington, D.C., submitting research questions to our agency online, viewing our facilities as backdrops on the evening news, touring our grounds and arboretum, or participating in one of our educational programs. And our team does a good job of providing the service and support that Congress and the Supreme Court needs. But there are areas that we need to improve.

Every two years, our agency voluntarily participates in the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS) administered by the Office of Personnel Management. We use these results to measure staff satisfaction. We encourage all full-time, part-time temporary and seasonal Architect of the Capitol employees to participate in the survey because we truly want to hear from our team. More than 85 percent of AOC employees responded to the survey. We are busy analyzing the results and feedback, but in general, we are committed to continued progress on broader priorities of reducing bureaucracy and increasing accountability and fairness in recognition, advancement and hiring.

Previous FEVS scores have resulted in a variety of staff development at the AOC. Most recently our training has emphasized employee civility including etiquette, diversity awareness and cultural sensitivity; developing current and future leaders through the Supervisors Academy, and supporting the Architect’s Mobility Program to empower employees to learn a new trade or skill.

I anticipate tweaks to training curricula and potentially the addition of other development programs following this year's FEVS analysis. My staff is scheduled to provide the committee with a full briefing on the results next week. I am looking forward to the opportunity to discuss the results with you at that time.

Even without the final analysis of FEVS, we know that attracting and retaining employees is one of our biggest challenges. The Senate Committee on Aging released a report last year that stated, "by 2026, aging workers will make up nearly one quarter of the labor force." Already, nearly half of AOC employees are 50 years old or older which is higher than the federal employment rate of 45 percent. Many AOC employees are retirement-eligible and many more will become eligible over the next few years. These significant changes to the makeup of the national workforce will present tremendous opportunities and challenges. Challenges from which the AOC is not immune.

Much of our work is very specific and highly specialized. Surveys indicate that for the skilled trades – welders, electricians, machinists and others that are prevalent in construction and facilities management – the shrinking talent pool is likely to become more acute. Recruiting and retaining skilled trades and craftsmen is increasingly competitive, particularly in this market. The Washington D.C. Economic Partnership recently reported a sixth consecutive year of growth in the area's construction market – an increase of 30 percent since 2012. While that's good news for the metro area, it makes our jobs more difficult to attract and retain employees.

As the Chief Operating Officer, and through my work on the transition to Acting Architect, I visited projects, offices and shops across campus, talked to hundreds of employees and supervisors, and spent a lot of time getting different perspectives. I am working with my executive team to further develop and implement action plans designed to attract, empower and retain staff.

We already know that some of our ongoing initiatives are successful. And we plan to build on those successes.

Andy Alleyne, an Army veteran, was hired as a night laborer. His job included sweeping, mopping and polishing floors in the Capitol Building. Andy was committed in career development and had a background in electronics engineering, so in 2014, Andy transferred to a job as an elevator mechanic helper. The position, was a career ladder wage-grade 5 with the potential of rising to a 12. Andy took full-advantage of this opportunity – he participated in on-the-job training and took courses offered by our human resources team. Today, he is a full-fledged elevator mechanic and an inspiration to others to work hard and utilize agency-offered training to advance their own careers.

Andy isn't the only employee to take advantage of these types of opportunities. Elizabeth Ward, a former gardener for Capitol Grounds, had an interest in sustainability practices and was interested in building her career around that field. Today, she is a sustainability program analyst

where she uses her experiences and expertise to improve facility project plans for the Senate Office Buildings. She has become a trusted and valuable asset to the AOC team.

These are two examples of employees who have propelled their careers forward with the support of the AOC. Yet I know we can and must do better. Since becoming Acting Architect of the Capitol, I have directed our Human Capital Management Division to review all of our current policies to determine those that need to be updated or withdrawn. I am committed to ensuring our policies better reflect the needs and requirements of our agency and follow the Architect of the Capitol Human Resources Act.

When benchmarked against other federal agencies, the Architect of the Capitol regularly ranks in the top quarter of Best Places to Work in the Federal Government. Even so, more work needs to be done. I truly believe that pursuing a career with the AOC is an honorable and worthy cause. In discussions with the committee, I believe you and your staff recognize and share a tremendous appreciation for our work and our team.

Over the years, our agency has earned a well-deserved reputation as an agency with a “can-do” attitude. We have taken on new responsibilities and are committed to meeting ever-increasing workloads. I appreciate the committee’s interest in our efforts to attract, empower and retain the very best public servants to support the needs of Congress and the Supreme Court so that we can fulfill our legislatively mandated duties.

Our agency traces its origins to 1793. That year George Washington selected the site for the Capitol Building and laid the cornerstone. Now, more than 225 years later, our agency strives to uphold the unified and symbolic vision for the Capitol campus inherited from the nation’s founders.

Supporting our nation’s “grand experiment” requires commitment from all of us. We need your help. Thank you again for the opportunity to talk about the people of the AOC. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.