



Office of Compliance

Do as Congress says—and sometimes as it does: the Office of Compliance turns 20

For twenty years, a little known independent agency in the Legislative Branch called the Office of Compliance (OOC) has advanced workplace rights for congressional staff and helped make offices on Capitol Hill safer places to work and visit. These achievements were made possible by a Congress sharply divided along partisan lines on most issues, but surprisingly bipartisan when it came to answering one important question: Should Congress and legislative branch agencies finally be subject to the same workplace rules that lawmakers had imposed on private and executive branch employers?

The Congressional Accountability Act of 1995 – passed nearly unanimously and as part of the Contract with America – placed some 30,000 congressional workers and their offices under important workplace laws that in some cases had been around for decades, but had never been extended to the very offices from where these laws emerged. Beginning in 1995, congressional workers were covered by anti-discrimination and harassment laws, workplace safety and health protections, overtime and labor laws, and public access rights under the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Congress created the Office of Compliance to administer the Act, educate and train members and staff on their rights and obligations, and safeguard the Act's protections through independent investigations and enforcement. The Office of Compliance carries out its broad legislative mandate with a small staff and a part-time Board of Directors. Before the OOC opened its doors in 1996, Capitol Hill buildings had not been subject to even the most basic building codes or regulations. The first inspections led to the discovery of serious fire and other safety hazards in House and Senate buildings and around the Capitol. Each year, since those first inspections, at the urging of the OOC, Congress has abated thousands of serious hazards, reduced numerous barriers to access for individuals with disabilities, and thus dramatically improved the overall safety and accessibility of the Capitol Hill campus. In a post-9/11 world, the OOC's focus has expanded to promoting safe emergency evacuation plans, ensuring adequate alarm and warning systems, and promoting staff training.

While far from a perfect piece of legislation, the Congressional Accountability Act of 1995 and establishment of the Office of Compliance has presented Congress with the opportunity to lead by example and not edict.

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