

ADDENDUM TO THE TESTIMONY OF EMILY HOLUBOWICH

Written Statement for the Record of

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Reaching Consensus Across Differences

Before the Joint Select Committee on Budget and Appropriations Process Reform

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Thank you Co-Chair Womack, Co-Chair Lowey, and Members of the Joint Select Committee on Budget and Appropriations Process Reform for the opportunity to submit this statement for the record. We, at Convergence, are honored that the JSC has taken an interest in the Convergence Building a Better Budget Process Project. We appreciate the opportunity for Emily Holubowich and Matt Owens, participants in our Building a Better Budget Process (B3P) project, to provide the Committee with a greater understanding of the consensus proposals they developed. This written testimony is intended as a complement to their testimony, to explain why Convergence undertook this project and our approach to reaching consensus across differences. We hope this information will be useful to the Committee.

My name is Robert Fersh and I am the President and Founder of Convergence, a non-partisan, non-profit organization founded in 2009. Our mission is to convene leaders with diverse or conflicting views to build trust, identify solutions, and form alliances for action on critical national issues. Convergence itself does not take positions on policy recommendations developed by the stakeholders we convene, although we do help them coordinate efforts to move their ideas forward. Over the past nine years, we have successfully addressed such challenging issues as: K-12 Education; Nutrition and Wellness; Long Term Care for Elderly and Disabled Persons; and U.S.-Pakistan Relations. Current national projects also address Economic Mobility, Incarceration and the topic of this hearing, the Federal Budget Process.

We decided to undertake this project on federal budget process reform because of its importance to the nation. The regular failure of Congress to fully explore budget priorities and to establish timely and responsive federal budgets has had negative impacts on our society. It has simultaneously contributed to a loss in public confidence in Congress' ability to function. We hoped that, in combination with the skills and knowledge of our stakeholders, we at Convergence could contribute to designing a more functional and effective federal budget process. We believe we have assembled a unique group of knowledgeable and influential stakeholders who can help Congress make constructive change in this arena. We are grateful that support of the Madison Initiative of the Hewlett Foundation, later supplemented by funding from the Stuart Family Foundation, made this work possible.

Before describing how Convergence does its work, I would add that much of the impetus for me to start Convergence came from my experience working for three different Congressional Committees—the Senate Budget and Agriculture Committees and the House Agriculture Committee. In each instance, I had the opportunity to work on a bipartisan basis to fashion legislative proposals on important issues of the day. From this experience, I came away with an indelible impression that individuals—Members of Congress, their staffs or outside groups – who genuinely wanted to solve problems could find important common ground in service of their goals, if they found ways to constructively engage those who held differing points of view.

The Convergence Process Applied to the Federal Budget Process

Our Building a Better Budget Process project is an excellent example of how the Convergence model works. The project followed the key steps outlined below to reach a set of consensus proposals to improve the budget process.

1. Identify and Research an Issue

The project began with an assessment phase consisting of several meetings to discuss contentious topics in the budget process. Over 100 interviews with stakeholders representing the breadth of ideology and depth of policy issues were conducted. This research provided a frame for a discussion – we found there is widespread agreement across the political spectrum that the federal budget process is not only dysfunctional but it also adversely affects the groups we spoke with, as well as their constituents. As we further defined the goal of our project, we also understood this process would only work if we limited ourselves to process reforms that would not tip the scales one way or another toward the policy preferences of any member of the group. The sweet spot for our conversations was finding process reforms that would truly be policy neutral.

2. Convene Stakeholders and Built Trust

After determining the frame, the project moved to a 16-month facilitated dialogue. During that time, the stakeholders came together for 14 meetings.

The B3P stakeholders are incredibly ideologically diverse and represent the broad spectrum of groups with business before the federal government. Stakeholders came from groups ranging from the Food Research and Action Center, and the Center for American Progress, to the National Taxpayers Union and Americans for Prosperity. Each had their own concerns about the budget process and ideas for how to fix it. However, through this project, stakeholders moved past their entrenched interests and ideas to seek common ground on a set of consensus solutions.

Once participants agreed on the problem, stakeholders discussed underlying interests and values to create a sense of common purpose and deeper understanding of one another. This led to trust among participants and the ability of people to move beyond concerns about one another's motives. The group then developed shared principles for a better budget process, which in turn guided the development of the specific proposals of the group. Both the principles such as the budget process should be comprehensive and predictable and the proposals are included in the group's final report.

The stakeholders work was enhanced by a professional facilitator who is skilled in catalyzing productive and constructive conversation, while also enforcing mutually agreed ground rules. The facilitator created space for every participant to be heard, regardless of their viewpoint or ideology, and the ground rules ensured confidential and civil conversations.

3. Develop Shared Proposals

Through negotiation, innovation, and sustained dialogue, participants considered existing ideas for process reform and created new ones. During the discussions, stakeholders tried on ideas they might have quickly dismissed if not for the freedom to explore these ideas in a safe and confidential setting. To further allow for honest and full exchange, Convergence staff used shuttle diplomacy and small group work, in addition to project meetings, to build consensus on proposals consistent with the project's principles. This effort, coupled with the commitment of the stakeholders to budget process reform, led to agreement on the five proposals discussed during the hearing.

4. Take Action

Our budget project participants finalized their agreement in early February 2018. We are pleased to say that a broad range of our stakeholders remain engaged in promoting the proposals of the group. Since the group reached agreement, it has presented its ideas at a "budget summit" in February hosted by the Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget, met privately with many Members of this Committee and other relevant Congressional offices, and continue to develop new ways to share their proposals with Members, the media, and other outside groups.

The creation of this Joint Select Committee has created a unique forum for the proposals of the B3P group to be heard. Like you, we hope that the deliberations of this Committee will lead to positive, bipartisan reforms in the federal budget process. B3P participants and Convergence stand ready to assist the Committee in any way we can.

Conclusion

We hope that this explanation of the process utilized to form consensus proposals on the federal budget process will prove useful to this Committee. We believe that the approach and the specific steps we have employed to address a wide range of contentious issues can help Congress reach solutions that satisfy competing interests. Our stakeholders have shown that it is possible to find agreement on budget process reform. I urge you to use our example and experience to work together on a package of meaningful reforms.

In closing, thank you for the opportunity to submit this statement for the record and for your consideration of the Building a Better Budget Process proposals. We look forward to following the Joint Select Committee's continued deliberations and remain hopeful that the Committee will reach agreement on meaningful reforms to improve the budget process.