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Pages of the United States Congress: History and Program Administration

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Summary

For more than 180 years, messengers known as pages have served the United States Congress. 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.

Senator Daniel Webster appointed the first Senate page in 1829. The first House pages began their service in 1842. Women were first appointed as pages in 1971.

In August 2011, House leaders announced the termination of that chamber's page program.

Senate pages are appointed and sponsored by Senators for one academic semester of the school year, or for a summer session. The right to appoint pages rotates among Senators pursuant to criteria set by the Senate's leadership. Academic standing is one of the most important criteria used in the final selection of pages. Selection criteria for House pages was similar when the page program operated in that chamber.

Prospective Senate pages are advised to contact their Senators to request consideration for a page appointment.

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History and Background

The United States Congress is served by a group of young adults known as pages. Pages have been employed since the early Congresses, and some Members of Congress have served as pages. Today, congressional pages include students who are juniors in high school and who may come from all areas of the United States and its territories.

The page system is formally provided for in law,¹ although the rationale for the page service or for using high school students is not. Since the earliest accounts of pages, it has been widely noted in debates and writings within Congress that pages provide needed messenger services:

From the origin of the present government, in 1789, to the present time, they [messengers] have been under the orders and resolutions of the House, and experience has attested to the necessity of their services. The use of boys or pages, was introduced at a later period; but from the first session of Congress held at the city of Washington [1800], they have continued to be employed by the House, with the approbation of the House.²

Being a page provides a unique educational opportunity, affording young adults an opportunity to learn about Congress, the legislative process, and to develop workplace and leadership skills.

Over the years, there has been concern about 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. Later, they were as old as 18. At various times, congressional actions related to employing pages have addressed the lack of supervised housing as well as pages' ages, tenure, selection, education, and management. Far-reaching reforms in the page system were implemented in 1982 and 1983, following press reports of insufficient supervision, alleged sexual misconduct, and involvement in the trafficking of drugs on Capitol Hill. Most reports of misbehavior were later found to be unsubstantiated.³

As a consequence of the allegations, however, both the House and Senate for the first time provided supervised housing for their pages; established separate page schools and took over the education of the pages, which had been provided under contract by the District of Columbia school system;⁴ and developed more educational and recreational opportunities for their pages.

In the 110th Congress (2007-2008), at the request of then House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Republican Leader John Boehner, the House inspector general (IG) conducted an inquiry into the

¹ 2 U.S.C. 88.

² U.S. Congress, House Select Committee on Contingent Expenses of the House, *Contingent Expenses of the House*, 27th Cong., 2nd sess., H.Rept. 27-30 (Washington: 1842), p. 6. Although the Senate employed older messengers starting in 1789, it is believed that Senator Daniel Webster of Massachusetts arranged for the appointment of the first Senate page in 1829. See Robert Dole, "The First Senate Page," in *Historical Almanac of the United States Senate*, S. Doc. 100-35, 100th Cong., 1st sess. (Washington: GPO, 1989), pp. 72-73.

³ U.S. Congress, House Committee on Standards of Official Conduct, *Report by the Committee on Standards of Official Conduct Pursuant to H.Res. 518*, 97th Cong., 2nd sess., H.Rept. 97-965 (Washington: GPO, 1983); U.S. Congress, House Committee on Standards of Official Conduct, *Report of the Committee on Standards of Official Conduct on the Inquiry Under House Resolution 12, 98th Congress, 1st Session Into Certain Narcotics Investigations by the United States Capitol Police*, 98th Cong., 1st sess., H.Rept. 98-205 (Washington: GPO, 1983); U.S. Congress, House Committee on Standards of Official Conduct, *Report of the Committee on Standards of Official Conduct on the Inquiry Under House Resolution 12, 98th Congress, 1st Session*, 98th Cong., 1st sess., H.Rept. 98-297 (Washington: GPO, 1983); U.S. Congress, Speaker's Commission on Pages, *Report to the Speaker*, committee print, 97th Cong., 2nd sess. (Washington: GPO, 1982); and "Congressional Pages," in *Congress and the Nation, 1981-1984*, vol. VI (Washington: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1985), pp. 809-810.

⁴ 60 Stat. 839.

supervision and operation of the House Page Residence Hall, and subsequently issued a confidential report recommending changes. In 2008, an independent study, conducted by consultants to the House, was conducted. In response to the findings of those efforts, the House implemented new policies to enhance the safety and supervision of the pages and oversight of the page program. These changes followed investigations of allegations related to the page program participants, including the exchange of inappropriate communications between a Member of the House and former pages,⁵ and of misbehavior by a few pages in the 109th and 110th Congresses.

A follow up review of the page program was carried out in the summer of 2010 by the same independent consultants. According to House leaders, concerns raised in 2008, including costs and the need for the program, remained. In August 2011, Speaker John Boehner and Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi announced the termination of the House page program effective August 31. In a Dear Colleague Letter, the leaders cited both changes in technology obviating the need for most page services, and the program's costs as reasons to discontinue the program.⁶

In the 112th Congress, (2011-2012), H.Res. 397, entitled Reestablishing the House of Representatives Page Program, was introduced by Representative Dan Boren. The resolution would have created an advisory panel to make recommendations for the operation of a reestablished page program. The House page program would have been reestablished in the first school semester after the advisory panel submitted its recommendations to the Committee on House Administration. Membership of the nine-person advisory body would have been composed of three Members of the House from the majority party of the House, three Members of the House from the minority party, and three individuals who were not Members and who had served as House pages. The measure was referred to the Committee on House Administration, and no further action was taken.

Duties

Pages serve principally as messengers. They carry documents between the House and Senate, Members' offices, committees, and the Library of Congress. They prepare the Senate chamber 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, they sit near the dais where they may be summoned by Members for assistance. In the House, pages also previously raised and lowered the flag on the roof of the Capitol.

Senate Pages

There are 30 Senate page positions, 16 for the majority party and 14 for the minority party. The office of the Sergeant at Arms supervises the Senate page program.

The Senate page program consists of four quarters, two academic year sessions and two shorter summer sessions. It is administered by the Senate Sergeant at Arms, the Senate page program director, and the principal of the Senate page school. Senate pages are paid a stipend, and

⁵ U.S. Congress, House Committee on Standards of Official Conduct, *Investigation of Allegations Related to Improper Conduct Involving Members and Current or Former House Pages*, 109th Cong., 2nd sess., H.Rept. 109-733 (Washington: GPO, 2006).

⁶ Dear Colleague Letter from John Boehner, Speaker of the House, and Nancy Pelosi, Democratic Leader, "Important Message from Speaker Boehner and Leader Pelosi," August 8, 2011. For additional information on the history of the House page program, see U.S. House of Representatives Page Program, "Page Program History," at <http://pageprogram.house.gov/history.html>.

deductions are taken for taxes and residence hall fee, which includes a meal plan.⁷ Pages must pay their transportation costs to Washington, DC, but their uniforms are supplied. The uniforms consist of navy blue suits, white shirts, red and blue striped tie, dark socks, and black shoes.

The Senate provides its pages education and supervised housing in the Daniel Webster Page Residence near the Hart Senate Office Building. The Senate Page School is located in the lower level of Webster Hall. 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.

House Pages

The House page program was administered by the Office of the Clerk, under the supervision of the House Page Board. The board, established in statute, is composed of two Members from each party, including the chair, as well as the Clerk and the Sergeant at Arms of the House, a former House page, and the parent of a House page.⁸

Participants in the House page program typically served for one academic semester during the school year, or during a summer session. House pages received a stipend for their services, and deductions were taken from their salaries for federal and state taxes, Social Security, and a residence hall fee, which included a meal plan.⁹ The pages were required to live in the supervised House Page Dormitory near the Capitol. They were responsible for the cost of their uniforms—navy jackets, dark grey slacks or skirts, long sleeve white shirt, red and blue striped tie, and black shoes—and transportation to and from Washington, DC.¹⁰

During the school year, pages were 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, offered a junior-year high-school curriculum, college preparatory courses, and extracurricular and weekend activities. Classes were usually held five days a week, commencing at 6:45 a.m., prior to the convening of the House.

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⁷ “Senate Page Withholding” (S.Res. 78), *Congressional Record*, vol. 129, March 2, 1983, p. 3526.

⁸ 2 U.S.C. 88b-2m 2 U.S.C. 88b-3(a).

⁹ “Establishing A Revolving Fund For the Page Residence Hall and The Page Meal Plan” (H.Res. 64), *Congressional Record*, Vol 129, February 8, 1983, p. 1878.

¹⁰ U.S. Congress, House, Office of the Clerk <http://pageprogram.house.gov>.

Acknowledgments

Mildred Amer, formerly a Specialist on the Congress, was the original author of this report. The listed author has updated material, and is available to respond to questions from congressional clients about congressional page programs.