

Capitol Punishment: Or, Keeping House is too Expensive

Politico reports on a letter to US Representative and House Ethics Committee chairwoman Susan Brooks (R-IN), from more than two dozen members of the Congressional Black Caucus, requesting an investigation into “the legality and propriety” of lawmakers sleeping in their offices.

Among their complaints are that the free lodging and associated perks constitute a “direct violation of the ethics rules which prohibit official resources from being used for personal purposes,” and that the risk of seeing a naked politician creates a “hostile work environment” for House, um, housekeepers.

It’s hard to disagree with the latter, but before unpacking this let’s observe a moment of grief-laden silence for those poor underpaid members of Congress (base salary: \$174,000 per year plus a quarter of a million for “office expenses” including travel) and their need to maintain two residences (one back home and one in Washington while Congress is in session).

Before leaving Congress last year, Jason Chaffetz (R-UT) proposed an additional “housing allowance” of \$2,500 per month to help cover the costs of that second residence.

I have a better idea.

Marine Barracks Washington DC (“the oldest post in the Corps”) is a little over a mile from the Capitol. The six-acre complex presumably has, or has room for, housing to accommodate the 435 members of the House and their 100 colleagues from the Senate in the same manner as that accorded active-duty military personnel. I’ll leave the question of four-person rooms with private baths versus open squad bays and communal showers to the reader. I’m betting the Corps maintains a pretty good chow hall there, too. And it’s just a 25-minute walk from work!

But back to that \$174,000 salary and lavish travel budget. It seems to me that’s more of a waste of taxpayer money than some extra janitorial costs at the Capitol offices.

I suggest capping congressional salaries (before federal income and payroll taxes are deducted) at the previous year’s national median income (after median federal income and payroll taxes are deducted). Call it an incentive to legislate in ways that keep wages high and taxes low.

As for travel, one coach ticket to DC from the airport in or nearest a congressperson’s district at the beginning of each session of Congress, and one ticket home when Congress adjourns or recesses, with a cap of three round trips per year. If they want to go home each

weekend, they pick up the check themselves.

Members of Congress like to style themselves “public servants,” but the congressional lifestyle doesn’t look much like the lifestyles of the servants who clean their offices. What janitor gets \$174,000 a year and essentially unlimited travel? Or has to try to un-see a naked politician?

Back to you, Congressional Black Caucus.