

WRITTEN STATEMENT OF
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COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM
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Chairman Connolly, Ranking Member Hice, and distinguished Members of this Subcommittee:

Thank you for inviting me to testify at today's hearing on the importance of a smooth transition of power from one Presidential Administration to the next.

My name is Lisa Brown. I served as Co-Director of Agency Review for the Obama/Biden transition. My responsibility during the transition was agency review, which is what I have been asked to focus on today. Since then, I have participated in nonpartisan, confidential convenings organized by the Partnership for Public Service to brief Presidential campaigns on the importance of an effective transition, and what that entails. These meetings included representatives of each of the Democratic and Republican Presidential campaigns. I have also been on the other side of a transition when, as Counsel to Vice President Gore, I helped oversee an orderly transition out of the White House after Vice President Gore conceded the 2000 election to George Bush.

Presidential Transitions are times of vulnerability for our country. Not only is there a change in President, there is simultaneously a change in leadership at every single executive branch agency (though not necessarily at independent agencies). Risks range from delays to oversights to errors, and on the national security front, to being caught flat-footed by a savvy adversary with ill-intent.

It is therefore vital that the transition of power from one Presidential administration to the next be as seamless as possible. No business – no corporation, no university, no non-profit – would ever choose to have their entire leadership leave on one day. The only reason the executive branch of the federal government is able to do so successfully every four or eight years, including during times of depression or war, is because of the cooperation of the outgoing administration and the professionalism and expertise of career civil servants. This is not a partisan issue; this is about the efficient and effective functioning of government for the people it serves. This is only more true in times of crisis, when the stakes can be as high as life or death depending on the government's ability to act expeditiously and effectively.

Any transition is a daunting task and a massive amount of work, even when one has the full allotment of time between election day and inauguration day. The Obama/Biden transition had 77 days, and that wasn't enough. It will never be enough time, which is why it is essential both that transition work start well before the election, and that the outgoing administration engage collaboratively and holistically with the transition team for the incoming administration. The federal government is a complex bureaucracy, and managing a transition is an enormous management challenge even in the best of circumstances.

The transition from President Bush's administration to that of President Obama – which occurred in the midst of an economic crisis – was successful because of the extensive cooperation between the two, something for which President Obama has often said he was grateful. President Bush set the tone for collaboration from the President and his White House staff to Cabinet Secretaries and agency heads and their political and career staffs. President Bush's Chief of Staff had

established a relationship with the transition teams for both campaigns prior to the election, and worked closely with the Obama/Biden transition team after the election.

Agency review is a formidable organizational endeavor. We were tasked with establishing a structure to review over 100 executive Departments, Agencies and Commissions (“agencies”). That structure involved over 500 people with three co-directors, an 11-person working group that oversaw the review of ten clusters of thematically related agencies, and teams for each agency with an identified team leader and team members with assigned responsibilities; the working group and team leaders in turn coordinated with the policy and personnel arms of the transition. We prioritized agencies into three tiers and developed specific work products to be produced by the agency review teams on a designated schedule. Final memos on each agency were due by early to mid-December depending on the agency priority, with drafts shared with principals earlier as needed.

Thanks to the strong working relationship with the White House, the members of our agency review teams had received security clearances prior to the election, and we had agreed on a process enabling teams to go into the agencies within days of the election to begin meeting with agency officials. I met with the GSA transition team the day after the election, starting the official process, and our teams then spent days meeting with career agency officials who were consummate professionals and indispensable to the efficient and smooth transition. I cannot say enough about the centrality and importance of career civil servants whose expertise and dedication are essential to a successful transition. If we ran into any glitches, we were able to raise them with the Executive Director of the transition, who resolved them expeditiously with his White House counterpart, the White House Deputy Chief of Staff.

Why does all of this matter? The goal of agency review is to complete a timely and thorough review of the key agencies, as well as the White House, to provide the President-Elect, Cabinet appointees and their key advisors with the critical information needed to begin governing the minute they take office. The information collected informs the policy and budget planning process and personnel selection during the transition, and ensures that they can “hit the ground running” the day after inauguration. All this information must be collected in a timely and organized fashion if it is to be useful.

Agency review ensures that new appointees know what they will immediately confront when they walk in the door and helps them prioritize their work – what pressing matters will require immediate action so they don’t drop any balls or miss an opportunity to act. Are there imminent legislative, litigation, regulatory or programmatic deadlines to be met or decisions to be made? What are the critical policy decisions to be made? What changes need to be made quickly? What are the major budgetary or procurement issues? Are there organizational issues in urgent need of being addressed?

Agency review also identifies key opportunities to begin implementing the President-Elect’s policy priorities at each agency. What are the major commitments made by the President-Elect with regard to that agency and what steps can be taken quickly and over time to further them? What are the budget needs and cost-savings opportunities to inform the budget decisions that a

new Administration must make early on? What are the key positions to be filled at the agency and what qualifications are needed? What other agencies are necessary partners in the work, and how does that collaboration get started?

This work – which must occur at every agency and within each of their major departments – is critical to protecting and serving the American people without unnecessary delays, gaps, or, in a worst case scenario, errors. The challenges facing the country today are even more daunting than those we faced in 2008, making cooperation between the outgoing and incoming administrations more important than ever. For example, the nation needs the President-Elect and his team to be fully briefed on COVID response plans before they take office so they can seamlessly step in on January 20 to maximize the effectiveness and timeliness of the government's response. The health and economic security of our country depend on that. The global challenges facing America similarly warrant robust information-sharing about national security matters. Incoming Administration officials need to be brought up to speed on classified diplomatic, military and counter-intelligence programs before taking office so they can respond quickly, thoughtfully and effectively to developments and threats that arise post-inauguration. During the Obama/Biden transition, the incumbent agency officials sat side by side with their successors-to-be as they worked through a tabletop on a national security threat to enhance just such information-sharing.

The essential nonpartisan nature of a transition was demonstrated by my own personal experience. I was named Assistant to the President and Staff Secretary during the transition. I entered the White House on the afternoon of the Inauguration, and found an office that had little more than furniture and a computer with a wiped hard drive. New staff were walking around trying to figure out whose offices were where. I was expected to start work immediately, preparing nominations and appointments and putting together the President's briefing book for the next day. My ability to do this seamlessly was due to the fact that, during the transition, I had met with Raul Yanes, Staff Secretary at the end of the Bush Administration, and his predecessor, then-Judge Kavanaugh, as well as John Podesta and Todd Stern, Staff Secretaries for President Clinton. All had been gracious with their time, forthcoming and helpful in advising me how to navigate my new job. They continued a long tradition of nonpartisan information-sharing and advising that, through many Administrations, has benefitted both new office holders and the country they serve.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify and for considering my views.