Hire a transparency director, maybe?

There's been a major culture change in government over the last four years toward transparency through technology. I'm going to propose one way that Member personal offices can take the lead in this change.

So a little about me. For the last eight years I've been running GovTrack.us, which is a free legislative tracking tool. It's a little like Congress.gov. I was also the CTO of POPVOX, and I've written a lot about transparency.

The culture change in transparency has mostly been lead by the executive branch, with Data.gov and numerous policy statements. There's been a lot of good work in the House, but I would dare say no one has really taken the lead, publicly at least.

Transparency is already a part of Member office responsibilities but it is spread across the many roles in each office. LCs communicate with the public. An LA might have responsibility for government reform bills. And so on.

Imagine a new hypothetical staff position. You have LDs and LAs and LCs. What would be the responsibilities of a TD, a transparency director? Now, I know that MRAs aren't what they used to be. This may be impractical right now. It's a hypothetical.

A TD would share or taken on some existing responsibilities. He or she might coordinate with the LAs on open government bills. Or with LCs and sysadmins on using newer technology to get through constituent mail faster.

The TD would bring a certain type of expertise as well. Just like press secretaries are expected to have experience with social media, TDs would be expected to have experience with government data mashups or open government policy.

So let me be more concrete, drawing on some examples of what some Member offices are already doing. A TD can coordinate a new project to publish an explanation for every vote your boss makes, like how Representative Amash publishes vote explanations on his Facebook page.

The TD can also identify transparency-related bills that your boss may want to cosponsor. There are bills on both sides of the aisle, like Issa's DATA Act and Quigley's Access to Congressionally Mandated Reports Act. Just as an LA might bring subject matter experience to the job, so would the TD for open government policy.

The TD might spearhead putting your boss's daily schedule online, like Senator Gillibrand does. Or the TD might collect your boss's official correspondence with federal agencies and post them in some way on your website. These projects help build trust with the public.

And a TD would be familiar with some radical technology that your boss might want to try, such as MADISON, an online tool built by Issa's staff that lets constituents comment on draft legislation.

There are potential transparency directors out there waiting to be hired. Code for America, a nonprofit working with city governments, is churning out new fellows each year who would have just the right experience. So, again, I know a full time TD isn't exactly practical, but I thought it was an interesting idea and I hope you did too.