



Looking Back

THE CENTER FOR PRESIDENTIAL TRANSITION'S
PIVOTAL ROLE IN THE 2020-21 TRUMP TO BIDEN
TRANSFER OF POWER

APRIL 2021



PARTNERSHIP FOR PUBLIC SERVICE

CENTER *for* PRESIDENTIAL TRANSITION

The Partnership for Public Service is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that works to revitalize the federal government by inspiring a new generation to serve and by transforming the way government works. The Partnership teams up with federal agencies and other stakeholders to make our government more effective and efficient. We pursue this goal by:

- Providing assistance to federal agencies to improve their management and operations, and to strengthen their leadership capacity.
- Conducting outreach to college campuses and job seekers to promote public service.
- Identifying and celebrating government's successes so they can be replicated across government.
- Advocating for needed legislative and regulatory reforms to strengthen the civil service.
- Generating research on, and effective responses to, the workforce challenges facing our federal government.
- Enhancing public understanding of the valuable work civil servants perform.

Executive Summary

The 2020 presidential election and weeks that followed were unlike any in modern American history. After months of a surging pandemic, economic turmoil and racial inequity resulting in social unrest, the country experienced additional tumult as ballots took four additional days to tabulate, and the president sowed distrust in the results in the weeks following the election. These factors further delayed the federal transition support for President-elect Joe Biden and was followed by a violent insurrection against Congress on Jan. 6, 2021 as it met to officially certify Biden as the winner, challenging the founding principles of our democracy. Yet, on Jan. 20, the world watched as Biden was sworn in as the 46th president of the United States. Despite all of the challenges and turmoil, Biden's presidency got off to a fast start due to the extensive transition planning that began in the spring of 2020, with more than 1,100 political appointees sworn in and nine executive orders signed during his first few hours in office.

Day one activities at this level would not have been possible without extensive preparations, which the Biden team kicked off nearly 10 months before Inauguration Day. In the spring of 2020, the Biden team quietly began an early and extensive effort to lay the groundwork for a potential future administration, which would become one of the most well-planned transitions in history. Behind the scenes, these efforts were supported by the nonpartisan, nonprofit Partnership for Public Service's Center for Presidential Transition®. As the go-to expert on transition planning efforts, the Center shared key insights, historical documents, access to subject-matter experts and extensive research on nearly every key transition topic and workstream, building on our efforts dating back to 2008.

Our work extended well beyond the presidential transition team to support all the key stakeholders involved in a presidential transition. We also collaborated with the Trump administration to support their dual role in 2020: planning for a second term and executing their statutory duties as the incumbent administration if there was a transfer of power. We supported the career agency transition officials across the federal government responsible for preparing materials for a potential new administration and their lead-

ership teams. We worked with Congress to strengthen the legal framework that governs transitions, provide sufficient funding for these activities and support the Senate's role to provide advice and consent on more than 1,200 political appointments. We created Ready to Serve, a comprehensive website for those who want to serve in the administration, but lack the political know-how to competitively apply. The goals of our Ready to Serve initiative include increasing diversity among political appointees and better preparing prospective candidates to help them move through the process quickly.

Building on our efforts from the past three presidential transition cycles, we hosted conferences, meetings and onboarding sessions for transition teams and federal agencies, developed webinars, fact sheets and issue briefs, and conducted research into past practices that highlighted successes and stumbling blocks. We created over 1,000 pages of new resources, provided more than 150 historical documents, engaged nearly 200 subject-matter experts to share their advice and offered wide-ranging guidance to the Biden transition team, Trump administration and career agency officials based on our extensive knowledge of past presidential transitions.

Our work would not be possible without our generous supporters and partners, our dedicated staff and the many volunteers from our network, who are listed at the end of this report. We are especially thankful for Boston Consulting Group's continued support and expertise on this important work.

Despite the challenges and roadblocks along the way, the Biden transition team was able to execute one of the most extensively planned transitions, as well as the first-ever virtual transition. While future research will examine their efforts and highlight best practices, this paper lays out the details of the behind-the-scenes role played by the Center for Presidential Transition to ensure that the winner of Nov. 3, 2020 election would be fully prepared to govern.

This report is divided into six sections: laying the groundwork, the Biden transition team, the incumbent administration, Congress, prospective political appointees, and research and experts.

Laying the Groundwork

PREPARING FOR 2020

We launched the Center for Presidential Transition's 2020 efforts in November 2019, one year ahead of the presidential election. While the Center created numerous materials to support transitions since 2008, we expanded our resources and deepened our connections with key stakeholders during the 2020 transition cycle.

The Center targeted three audiences: presidential transition teams, the incumbent administration and career agency officials. Presidential candidate transition teams play a key role in preparing for a new administration in the pre-election phase as well as post-election. Historically, transition teams have consisted of individuals close to the presidential candidates who have experience managing complex teams and operations. However, they do not always have the knowledge and experience required to effectively prepare for the huge amount of work required. This is where the Center fits in, offering a wealth of information to help transition teams organize their operations and prepare their candidates to govern.

“Transitions are inevitably challenging, difficult, complicated and messy. A lot of that can be mitigated with a much longer planning cycle, which I think now is accepted.”

Mack McLarty, chief of staff to President Bill Clinton, Transition Lab podcast

The Center conducted a thorough review of past practices and identified areas for growth

For the 2020-21 transition cycle, the Center conducted extensive research and analysis on political appointments, provided new resources for prospective appointees and added information for agency review teams.

The Center's team engaged with a variety of transition stakeholders and experts to gain insights and lessons learned from past presidential transition cycles. We also held meetings with every former transition team executive director dating back to Bill Clinton's 1992 election, along with former White House chiefs of staff, senior political appointees and career agency officials with transition experience.

In December 2019, the Center team interviewed Ed Meier, co-executive director of Hillary Clinton's 2016 transition team, and Rich Bagger, executive director of Donald Trump's 2016 transition team, to get feedback about the 2016 cycle and explore ways for the Center to add more value in the year to come. We sought advice on which Center resources and activities were the most useful, where we fell short and what knowledge or resource gaps they experienced. With their guidance, the team in 2020 expanded and improved our resources on transition team operations, personnel planning, the role of Senate committees, appointee onboarding and training, and agency review.

Through this process, we refined our materials and research, set up a structure to field requests and worked closely with the Biden transition team and the White House to provide resources, share best practices and answer questions. We also facilitated an open dialogue with a range of other stakeholders to incorporate lessons learned from previous transition cycles.

The Biden Transition

As a nonpartisan source of expertise and information, the Center worked with all Democratic campaigns at the beginning of 2020 to ensure they began transition planning by the spring. We prepared introductory resources on the need for early planning for the eight major Democratic campaigns and began discussions with the White House in January.

Through April, we maintained a dialogue with Sen. Bernie Sanders' team, whose Democratic primary campaign was still active. As it looked increasingly likely that Biden would emerge as the nominee, we held extensive discussions with his team. These engagements included meetings with the transition leaders, former Sen. Ted Kaufman and former Ambassador Mark Gitenstein, to outline the key operational decisions they needed to consider, discuss a timeline and examine possible goals. The Biden team was keenly aware of the importance of a well-organized transition. When he was a senator from Delaware, Kaufman was the sponsor of two laws that strengthened the Presidential Transition Act of 1963, providing additional federal support

“The transition is so important, and I just saw that there were some obvious things you do to make it better. And then I got a lot of help every step of the way from the Partnership for Public Service. You’re the folks that really keep track of all the data and know who the good people are and prepare all the presentations.”

Former Sen. Ted Kaufman, Transition Lab podcast

and resources. Both Kaufman and Gitenstein attended the Center's initial transition conference in the spring.

The Center hosted its fourth hallmark transition management conference in late spring to initiate transition planning

To assist presidential candidates and encourage early planning, the Center hosted its fourth Presidential Transition Management Conference on April 30 and May 1, 2020. For two days, approximately 30 senior former transition experts from both political parties, representatives from the Biden team, the White House and key government agencies convened online to discuss crucial considerations regarding the 2020 cycle. In preparation for the conference, the Center updated research on past presidential transitions and created a comprehensive virtual resource that was sent to participants ahead of the conference. The 58-page fact pack outlined:

- Key milestones and phases of presidential transition.
- Legislative requirements for presidential transition planning.
- Fundamental operations and fundraising information.
- An overview of presidential appointments.
- Previous transition team structures.

The Biden team accelerated its transition planning following the conference. Throughout 2020 and January of 2021, the Center maintained a highly collaborative and consultative relationship with the Biden transition team, which included responding to requests for research, historical documents and conversations with subject-matter experts.

SETTING UP THE TRANSITION OPERATION

Establishing a transition team requires extensive planning and knowledge on subjects such as legislative requirements, campaign-transition team integration, how to establish and organize a transition team and ways to effectively work in a remote environment.

The Presidential Transition Act requires federal preparation and engagement with transition teams pre- and post-election

The Presidential Transition Act was designed to promote the orderly transfer of power by mandating the federal government provide key resources prior to the election to eligible candidates, including office space, equipment and funding. In March, the Center released a detailed summary of the law and set up conversations with the Biden team. Prior to the major political party conventions, candidates are on their own when it comes to operating and funding their transition efforts. However, six months before the election, the law establishes an early cadence for the federal government transition planning by:

- Instructing the designation of a senior career official at each agency to prepare transition materials and succession plans.
- Requiring the president to establish a White House Transition Coordinating Council to provide guidance to agencies on transition.
- Standing up the Agency Transition Directors Council, co-chaired by General Service Administration's federal transition coordinator and the Office of Management and Budget's deputy director for management, to support an integrated approach to transition across the federal government.

After the political conventions, the General Services Administration allocates federal office space and equipment to the eligible presidential candidate transition teams, but not to an incumbent administration who already has access to government personnel and resources. In addition to providing office space and equipment, the GSA negotiates memoranda of understanding for post-election support with eligible candidates and ensures that agency briefing materials are prepared.

The updated Presidential Transition Act includes requirements regarding transition team ethics

Signed into law in March 2020, the updated presidential transition law requires presidential candidates to implement and enforce an ethics plan should they accept GSA support. The law codified practices adopted by recent transition teams and set general guidelines, including information about how the transition team will address former lobbyists, a prohibition against assigning transition staff to work on matters with clear professional conflicts of interest and a requirement to publish an ethics plan. To support these new conditions, we examined how previous transition teams created their ethics plans and the consequences of those decisions in order to provide an analytical framework so the Biden team could assess its own approach. The transition team's ethics plan was released by the GSA by Oct. 1, 2020, the date specified in the updated legislation.

Early decisions set the tone for a transition team's success

While the Presidential Transition Act provides operational support for transition, it is up to the candidates and their teams to ensure that the infrastructure is in place to take advantage of the opportunities. In addition to setting up a transition operation and ensuring funding, transition leaders must make several structural and procedural decisions. Some key issues identified and shared with Democratic campaigns during January 2020 included:

- Who will be the chair(s) and the executive director(s) of the transition team, and what will be their responsibilities?
- What are the transition team's key goals and milestones?
- What is the transition team's fundraising strategy?
- How will the transition team coordinate with the campaign?
- How will the transition team build a cohesive organization that can scale rapidly as the election approaches?

There is not necessarily a correct answer to these questions, but it is critical for campaign and transition leaders to be aligned around goals, communication and decision-making. The Center explored pain points and challenges associated with integrating the campaign and transition teams following a successful election. After conducting interviews and examining past transition periods, five recommendations emerged from our research:

- Select transition leaders who are trusted by the candidate and can serve as a bridge to the campaign and other key stakeholders.
- Establish clear roles for campaign and transition teams before Election Day.
- Create clear processes for areas in which the campaign and transition team overlap, such as policy and personnel decisions.
- Focus on filling key post-election transition roles early in the process.
- Ensure that after Election Day, the two teams integrate successfully by following merger and transformation best practices.

These recommendations, along with in-depth explanations, were shared with the Biden team in early spring to heighten focus on this important process and encourage awareness when planning the post-election phase of presidential transition.

The first steps in transition planning require establishing a separate transition entity and getting organized

Within the past 10 years, changes in the federal transition law have resulted in additional federal funding, resources and required preparation from agency officials for potential transition. As mandated in the 2010 presidential transition law, a transition team must create a 501(c)(4) organization, separate from the campaign, to prepare for the assumption of the duties of the president if they would like to receive federal government resources. Establishing a 501(c)(4) requires multiple steps, which the Center outlined in its resource, [The Nuts and Bolts of a Transition Organization](#).

In addition to creating the organizational entity to house transition operations, the Biden transition team needed to build a budget and begin fundraising. Due to the timing of the 2020 conventions, the transition team gained access to pre-election federal resources six weeks later than transition teams received them in 2016, meaning the Biden team would need to rely on their private funding and equipment for a longer period of time.

To inform the planning process, the Center provided examples of budgets from past transition teams, shared fundraising strategies and detailed how federal versus private funds can be used. Raising upwards of \$5 million in private donations in a matter of months is a daunting task that requires early planning and close coordination with the

campaign due to the \$5,000 cap per donor. Looking at funding for Trump for America, Inc. in 2016-17, the Center gained insights on the rhythm of fundraising for pre-election transition work.

When reviewing the fundraising timeline for the Barack Obama transition in 2008-09 and the Donald Trump transition in 2016-17, private donations experienced a significant spike following the election. In fact, both teams received the majority of their contributions after the election. In the first 11 days following the 2008 election, the Obama transition team raised \$1.17 million from 1,776 donors.¹ By the time of the inauguration, the Obama transition had raised almost \$4.5 million from 59,609 donors.² In a similar trend, the Trump transition team raised nearly \$5.5 million in private contributions after the 2016 election, but with only 2,977 donors.³ See the graph on page 8 for more information.

By providing this information in late spring, the Center helped to inform the fundraising approach implemented by the Biden transition team.

¹ FactCheck.org, "Cost of Obama's Transition," <https://bit.ly/3fkWx4f>

² Change.gov, the Office of the President-elect, <https://bit.ly/2BtcAqs>

³ GSA.gov, Trump for America 30-day report to GSA, pgs. 3-56, <https://bit.ly/3IKcaMN>

TRUMP FOR AMERICA, INC. CONTRIBUTIONS ⁴			
Month	Donations	Monthly Total	Cumulative Total
June 2016	1	\$50	\$50
July 2016	28	\$121,000	\$121,050
August 2016	56	\$233,600	\$354,650
September 2016	66	\$290,070	\$644,720
October 2016	109	\$207,165	\$851,885
November 2016 (pre-election)	70	\$203,415	\$1,055,300
November 2016 (post-election)	214	\$917,120	\$1,972,420
December 2016	2429	\$3,748,977	\$5,721,397
January 2017	328	\$772,536	\$6,493,933
February 2017	5	\$20,015	\$6,513,948

4 GSA.gov, Trump for America 30-day report to GSA, pgs. 3-56, <https://bit.ly/3IKcaMN>

The coronavirus pandemic significantly altered the 2020 transition cycle

The coronavirus pandemic had a significant impact during the entire presidential transition cycle, with the General Services Administration taking the threat seriously and planning for a completely virtual transition, while continuing physical space preparations in the event the situation improved.

Given the inevitable virtual nature of the work in 2020-21, it was important for the Biden team to adopt a new culture of security. This meant adopting practices like multi-factor authentication across all accounts (professional and personal) and assuming that the transition team would be a target of cyberattacks. Although prior transition teams considered cybersecurity threats, this issue multiplied since almost everyone involved worked from home on different networks. Despite the challenges, the Biden transition team kept its work secure.

“COVID has not impacted (the GSA’s) transition planning. We haven’t missed a beat. We’ve kept up with all our statutory requirements. We have held meetings. Before everything was large gatherings in-person. Now we go to Zoom and Google Hangouts. Our platform is different, but our ability to carry out the mission is not.”

Mary Gibert, Federal Transition Coordinator at the GSA, Transition Lab Podcast

PRESIDENTIAL APPOINTMENTS

A key aspect of a presidential transition is selecting, vetting, appointing and preparing nominees for political appointments. In a new administration, there are slightly more than 4,000 political appointee positions to fill, with about 1,200 requiring Senate confirmation. Regardless of a new administration or second term administration, the Center's message regarding planning early is the same. We strongly advise preparation and dedication of resources to personnel planning. In 2020, the Center analyzed the 4,000 political positions, reviewed federal hiring authorities, prioritized the order of appointments, detailed vetting processes and prepared Senate confirmation resources for the Biden transition team. While there is information and data available on presidential appointments throughout the federal government, a publicly available and easy-to-understand source on this topic was previously not available. We helped fill this information gap by combining available data and resources along with advice from subject-matter experts on federal appointments.

The bulk of appointments do not require Senate confirmation, but are vital to the success of an incoming administration

When previous presidential transition teams prioritized personnel, they tended to focus on positions requiring Senate confirmation. The Center supported these efforts by creating lists of top management positions and highlighting the Senate confirmation process. However, even the best run presidential personnel

operations had fewer than 70 officials confirmed by the Senate during the first 100 days of their administrations. As a result, the Center shifted its personnel approach to a more holistic view of the appointments process for the 2020-21 cycle.

Senate-confirmed positions represent only about a third of appointments made by a new president. The remaining jobs are divided into three categories: presidentially appointed, but not requiring Senate confirmation; non-career Senior Executive Service; and Schedule C jobs. Because individuals named to these jobs are not subject to the confirmation process, they can assume their federal responsibilities quickly.

As a result, we added information on non-Senate confirmed positions to our resource materials, compiling best practices, creative solutions and processes about these key personnel positions. The complex system of federal hiring and various appointment schedules are difficult to understand even for seasoned federal employees. Much of the specific guidance on Schedule C and non-career SES appointments is determined by the Office of Personnel Management. Without the institutional knowledge of each agency, determining where to start is a daunting task. We tapped subject-matter experts to gather the disparate resources and develop comprehensive information on non-Senate confirmed presidential appointments.

Our materials highlighted the specific hiring authorities and speed at which non-Senate

confirmed political positions can be filled as well as descriptions of the appointments process in the agencies to help the Biden transition team craft a strategic staffing approach. We provided expertise on the types of appointments available and the rules and strategies for processing appointments. We engaged former Office of Presidential Personnel staffers to inform our analysis of the permanent and temporary Schedule C appointments available.

To best understand how political appointees at all levels work together to implement the president's agenda, we contacted more than 20 former high-level agency officials to prioritize Senate-confirmed and other politically appointed positions based on their ability to impact policy at the agency quickly. We used their advice to create an agency-by-agency guide offering insights into strategic hiring for maximum impact. The project also highlighted how an administration's policy agenda should and should not shift personnel.

The Center provided resources on vetting potential candidates for political roles

Early in 2020, the Center reached out to lawyers who had worked in previous transitions for advice on the vetting structure and process. A feedback session was held in early April and resulted in a vetting process map for Senate-confirmed political appointees, which was included in our 2020 edition of the [Presidential Transition Guide](#). We also added a suggested timeline for a transition appointments team to follow. Both resources were used

as onboarding documents for new Biden transition team members who worked on appointments.

The Center enlisted the help of experienced lawyers who vet potential nominees to update the 2016 Presidential Appointments Vetting Guide. The [2020 guide](#) is a collection of precedents, authorities and case studies that serve as a reference point for a president's appointments team as it develops its own rules and guidelines. The guide also can be used by advisers for potential appointees to better understand the types of issues that should be considered.

The Center also served as an educational resource on security clearances required for transition team staff and key political appointees. The quick acquisition of security clearances for key staff and nominees is critical to ensuring a smooth presidential transition. The Center provided guidance on the security clearance process, detailing high-level steps for obtaining security clearances pre-election for transition team members and questions the transition's security clearance lead should think about.

Filling more than 1,200 political appointments requiring Senate confirmation is a complex and time-intensive process

Over the years, the Partnership for Public Service has worked to streamline the presidential appointments process to ensure qualified individuals are in place quickly, especially for roles requiring Senate confirmation. In January 2020, the Center released a report entitled, "[Senate Confirmation Process Slows to a Crawl](#)," that revealed Senate confirmations of presidential appointees now takes twice as long as they did during the Reagan administration.

The Center has identified the confirmation process as critical to the success of a new administration. In 2020, a suite of resources was updated, as well as created to help inform the Biden transition team so it could be prepared to quickly send nominees to the Senate. The Center developed overviews of the 17 Senate committees responsible for considering nominees for presidential appointments first created in 2016. Our team built each profile with insight gathered from a series of interviews with committees staff members. The resulting slide deck mapped the key committees with authority to confirm executive branch nominations, highlighted pain points or sensitivities for each committee and noted the average speed of committee consideration for nominees.

In addition, we conducted further analysis

“One thing to keep in mind is there will be committees that have hearings for multiple nominees. So you are stretching the committees to capacity. And then there is the problem of floor time. We were trying to move a legislative agenda, ...so the confirmation process has to be balanced with that. And then the last piece that comes to mind is when nominees become pawns in a policy dispute.”

Phil Schiliro, former director of legislative affairs for the Obama White House, on the Transition Lab podcast

on past nominees who were not confirmed. The Center's research from [Congress.gov](#) on the withdrawn and returned nominations from the George W. Bush, Barack Obama and Donald Trump administrations provided context for roughly 2,000 withdrawn and returned nominations across the three administrations.

Key takeaways from this project on the nominations include:

- Many of the reasons for withdrawn nominations involved issues and controversies from a nominee's past, objections from individual senators who place a hold on the nominee and prevent the confirmation process from moving forward and positions eliminated in statute or through agency reorganization.
- Typically, it is not the end of the road for nominees whose nominations are returned or withdrawn.
 - » More than two-thirds of the returned nominations examined were resubmitted for the same nominee.
 - » The Senate confirmed 47% of nominations in priority agencies on the second, third, fourth or fifth attempt.

The Center compiled resources for the Senate confirmation team and future nominees

Presidential transition teams assign volunteers with extensive Senate knowledge and relationships to help one or more presidential appointees navigate the complex and challenging confirmation process. These volunteers are commonly referred to as “sherpas.” The Center updated our [sherpa “checklist”](#) from 2016, which explains the role and key milestones needed to prepare a nominee. The Biden transition team chose to refer to the volunteers supporting presidential nominees as “navigators,” which is how they are referenced in the rest of this report.

For the 2020 transition, the Center team interviewed former navigators and former confirmation management team members from past transitions to learn best practices and identify what they would have done differently. Those individuals said they wished that they had integrated the navigator teams more fully into the transition operation, including the appointments and vetting processes, and that they had taken a more holistic approach to confirmations, combining Senate, personnel, legal, opposition research and communications skills into one overall confirmation effort.

The Center compiled recommendations for a more inclusive confirmation team operation to support nominees that were adopted by the Biden transition team. These recommendations include establishing a confirmation management team to oversee the confirmation process, standing up navigator teams to lead individual nominees or a group of nominations and having

the navigator teams report to the confirmation management team.

The Center’s confirmation research also included organizational charts and position descriptions. After speaking with former navigators, the Center recommended that the transition designate a director to orchestrate the overall confirmation campaign with a focus on Cabinet confirmations. The Biden transition team implemented this recommendation, setting up a confirmation management team that oversaw various navigator teams.

The Center also proposed guidance for the structure of individual navigator teams. The navigator acts as the team leader and accompanies the principal to all meetings with senators. A navigator team may also include policy and agency review representatives to lead coordination with the president-elect’s immediate staff to ensure harmonization of policy positions in briefing materials. Depending on the nominee, it could also be useful to assign a communications representative, administrative assistant and personal representative, someone that the nominee knows well and is familiar with the nominee’s record and working style.

Building on our work from 2016, we analyzed and categorized questions from the Senate confirmation hearings of the two most recent officials confirmed for each of the selected positions. An overview of the hearing analysis project with the list of positions analyzed and significant topics covered in the hearings is [available here](#). The Center shared this analysis with the Biden transition’s legislative affairs team in October 2020.

While questions from senators tended to focus on a nominee’s background and significant agen-

cy-related issue areas, extracting commitments from nominees to engage honestly and consistently with Congress was a common theme. Regardless of committee, agency or party affiliation, senators asked nominees to pledge compliance in providing documents, witnesses and in-person testimony when requested. In interviews conducted by the Center, Senate staff members elaborated on this point, indicating that committees seek to stress the importance of an ongoing, reciprocal relationship with appointees. After the 2020 election, the Center’s hearing analysis was distributed to the Biden teams preparing nominees for their respective positions.

The Office of Presidential Personnel is responsible for implementing the majority of an incoming administration’s talent goals

The Center spent significant time speaking with former Office of Presidential Personnel directors and White House senior staff to learn of challenges and best practices for the Biden team’s consideration, which built on our research from 2016. Ultimately, our research pointed to three key areas which should be addressed as early as possible during the post-election period: PPO leadership and staff, the mission of the office and decision-making processes between PPO, the White House and agency leadership.

The Center recommended appointing a PPO director with a close personal relationship with the president. Historically, an individual who has already established trust and understanding with the president is in a better position to make the difficult personnel decisions. Addition-

“You’ve got to be the person that says, ‘Okay, here’s my mission to find the very best people to serve this president who are the most qualified and are here to serve something greater than themselves.’ And that is the most critical thing that I tried to really hone in with my team.”

Liza Wright, former director of the PPO under President George W. Bush, Transition Lab podcast

ally, continuity is important because it impacts the administration’s ability to quickly get individuals into political positions. The Center encouraged the Biden team to seek a one-to-two-year commitment from the director to stay in the role.

The PPO generally has been under resourced financially and in terms of staffing because of competing demands within the White House. For example, the Obama PPO had 43 full-time employees with additional volunteers during the first quarter of 2009, and submitted 191 nominations to the Senate, appointed 399 individuals to Schedule C positions and 63 to non-Senate confirmed senior executive jobs. To increase the number of appointments in the early days, the Center recommended that the Biden team explore innovative ways to augment its personnel staff and allocate more PPO funding.

After the inauguration, the PPO’s main responsibilities involve the recruitment, vetting and hiring of thousands of political appointees. However, we recommended that the office also should assume a talent management role. This will require the administration to hire PPO staff with a variety of skills and knowledge, including recruitment and talent management experience. Our recommendations include that PPO establish a separate team to manage appointee onboarding, training and development, succession planning and offboarding in partnership with agencies.

We also recommended that the president-elect vest the PPO director with significant authority to take the lead on vetting and recruitment of appointees. Defining this role early on and communicating this clearly to the White House staff, agency leaders and their teams will enable the PPO to execute an efficient appointments process.

AGENCY REVIEW

Agency review involves collecting information about each major department and agency and providing insights that will be useful to the new administration as it assumes power and pursues its policy agenda. The Center assisted the Biden transition team by sharing data and resources collected through the Partnership’s on-the-ground work at agencies, providing information about best practices and lessons learned from previous agency review teams, and offering advice for the onboarding of new team members. In addition, the Center worked closely with career officials and agencies to prepare briefing materials and establish best practices for engaging with the Biden transition team should there be a new administration, based on our insights from 2016 and close engagement with the Biden team to date.

We created organizational charts for 63 agencies, as well as the White House and the Executive Office of the President, representing about 90% of political appointees

To allow the transition team to analyze the personnel requirements and set their strategy for agency review, we created organizational charts for each agency listed in the 2008 Obama transition team’s chart of agency review teams. With no comprehensive government-wide resource available that has information on each agency’s operations, political appointments and staffing, these charts included:

- Current agency organization.
- Pre-2017 and current organizational chart comparison and analysis.
- Agency budgets and number of personnel.
- Agency total appointments by appointment type.
- Appointments and total personnel by office.
- Priority organizational issues raised in the fiscal 2021 budget.

We combined data and information from across seven resources, including the [2016 Plum Book](#), the Fiscal 2021 Agency Congressional Budget Justification and the President’s Fiscal 2021 Budget. When agency organizational charts or other key data were not publicly available, we conducted interviews with former agency leaders to create comparable information.

These charts provided an invaluable roadmap for the Biden agency review teams, as well as for their personnel and navigator teams.

The Center provided resources and data regarding prior transitions, COVID-19 implications and security clearance process to inform the Biden transition team’s agency review work

To inform the transition team’s approach to structuring and staffing the agency review work, the Center conducted research on former agency review team leaders. In 2008, nearly every agency review team leader had prior government or federal experience, with over half of the team leaders possessing experience in their assigned agencies. Subsequently, 55% of agency review team leaders went on to work in the Obama administration. Among those individuals, about half took on roles in the agencies they reviewed. In the end, 25 review team leads (20% of total) were nominated by Obama to serve in Senate-confirmed positions in 2009 and 2010.

We knew the coronavirus pandemic would have an impact on the agency review process. Since the transition team could not legally speak with agency staff until after the election, the Center gathered data and insights for 38 agencies, including 10 Cabinet-level departments and 28 other priority agencies through conversations and publicly available information on their COVID-19 procedures. At the time we compiled this information in mid-September 2020, 39% of agencies were not conducting in-person meetings.

The Center also examined the security classifications required for team members to participate in agency briefings that would occur post-election, and specifically which agencies would require security clearances and at what level. Through discussions with many agency transition directors

and former agency executives, the Center learned that nearly all agencies created unclassified briefing materials for review team members. Only a handful of agencies from the intelligence community planned to provide limited classified briefings to review team members. Previous transition teams have dual-hatted those individuals – having them prepare materials on more than one agency to decrease the number of team members who need to obtain clearances for the post-election agency review work. Armed with this knowledge, the Biden transition team moved forward with staffing their agency review teams.

PRESIDENT-ELECT SUPPORT

Preparing the president-elect to effectively assume the role of president requires significant planning and decision-making. The 2020–21 presidential transition cycle presented many obstacles, especially regarding post-election planning with the pandemic, the possibility of delayed election results and navigating remote work environments. The Center provided resources and recommendations on this workstream during the summer of 2020.

The president-elect needs a cohesive plan for the 78 days between the election and inauguration

Knowing that the president-elect’s actions and messages will shape the launch of a new administration, we set out to compile key questions for the Biden transition team’s consideration:

- How do you want to use the 78-day transition period to prepare for day one?

- What organization and processes are needed for focused decision-making during the transition?
- How will you ensure ongoing transition planning cohesiveness with campaign leadership?
- How will you integrate campaign personnel into the post-election transition, and how will you communicate that plan?

Additionally, we prepared key objectives to inform the setup of this workstream. The four objectives were:

- Ensure various components of the transition are properly tracked and coordinated.
- Provide the president-elect with the proper team and minimize conflict as the transition integrates with the campaign and expands.
- Provide logistical support for the president-elect, the first lady-elect, the vice president-elect and their families.
- Engage the public and key constituencies to execute the shift from campaigning to governing.

To support these objectives, the Center conducted research on the timing of personnel announcements, past president-elect schedules and public engagement. Historically, there have been notable operational issues associated with convening multiple stakeholders to support the president-elect. The Center examined and categorized these issues into the following buckets: external stakeholder engagement, post-election information flow and president-elect schedule and logistics.

POLICY

Executive actions and midnight regulations affect a new administration's ability to govern effectively

It is important for the president-elect to create a process to quickly issue new executive orders once in office. In August, we completed a study on executive actions and midnight regulations from previous administrations to provide background for the Biden transition as they considered their first actions in office. We reported on the number of executive actions each president initiated during the first 100 days. Clinton had 61, Bush had 64, Obama had 68 and Trump had 90, a 32% increase over Obama's total.

With respect to midnight regulations, it was clear that regulations promulgated by previous administrations in their last year in office were far greater than prior years. For example, the Obama administration's regulatory activity in the last year was about 25% higher than prior years.

We suggested a roadmap on the approach and timelines for preparing executive actions and strategies for overturning midnight regulations. This was based on several interviews with experts who served in previous administrations and on Capitol Hill.

“If you have ever worked in the government, you realize how critically important career employees are.... They are the ones who know how to get things done.

Lisa Brown, co-chair of agency review for the 2008 Obama transition, on the Transition Lab podcast

ONBOARDING

The Center facilitated multiple onboarding sessions for the Biden transition team that focused on the overall transition process. In each session, we discussed key transition milestones, the legal framework for the transition and the two largest workstreams – presidential appointments and agency review. Ample time for questions and discussion was also included.

The Center organized onboarding sessions for agency review team leaders and members

The onboarding sessions for agency review teams consisted of content detailing federal resources and the access agency review members should expect to receive, as well as lessons learned from past agency review team members. Specifically, we emphasized the following practices:

- Create briefing materials for various audiences, such as budget, policy and personnel teams.
- Catalogue all regulations from the previous administration.
- Have an HR liaison on the team to handle onboarding issues.
- Make your introduction to career professionals a priority.

The last recommendation was repeated consistently by the experts. Career officials do an excellent job of facilitating transitions by producing fact-based information. They are committed public servants who likely worked through prior administrations and have prepared for several transitions. Building trust and rapport with career officials is critical to ensuring the success of agency transition efforts as well as the administration's.

To assist the Biden agency review team members, we invited several former career transition directors to share their insights and advice on the process.

The Center produced numerous webinars for those interested in serving in the incoming administration

Following the election, the Center hosted webinars for more than 1,300 former campaign staff with tips and resources on the application process for political appointees and serving in government. Pulling from our [ready-to-serve.org](https://www.ready-to-serve.org) resources, the content included a broad overview of the appointments

process that largely targeted those who would likely have had little or no prior federal work experience.

The Center has continued offering its resources and onboarding for political appointees through its [Ready to Govern program](#), which includes 11

courses for new and seasoned appointees on critical topics such as the federal budget process, ethics and optics and working with the career workforce.

The Incumbent Administration

WHITE HOUSE

To fill the gaps in both publicly available and historical resources on second terms, we developed information on the need for effective planning to ensure adequate time was spent on personal and policy matters ahead of an election victory. In a report entitled, “[Effective transition planning can help presidents have a successful year one and year five](#),” we found that second-term presidents typically experience about a 43% turnover rate of high-level appointees during the first six months of their new term.

A second report, “[Breaking the fifth-year curse](#),” produced in collaboration with the University of Virginia’s Miller Center, expanded on how a second-term administration can plan for expected challenges. The report shows that a second term provides an opportunity for a president to rethink key strategic plans for optimizing the White House and Cabinet, as well as policy priorities.

Our conversations with the Trump administration began in early 2020, when we met with Chris Liddell, deputy chief of staff to President Trump, to discuss ways to approach a second term. Liddell was later tapped to lead the administration’s transition efforts and spent significant time preparing for multiple election outcomes – a clear victory for President Trump, a clear victory for Vice President Biden, a disputed result for a short period of time and a disputed result for a long period of time. The Trump administration, with four years in office, did not need the same level of support as the Biden team. However, when the Trump transition

team was preparing for their first term in office, we provided significant support to them throughout 2016. This time around we provided behind-the-scenes advice and shared historical data and precedence throughout the transition period to support the planning efforts. The White House prioritized these three areas in their transition preparation: policy, personnel and execution of the Presidential Transition Act. In January of 2020, Liddell convened the White House deputies for an off-site to outline the groundwork for the policy initiatives for 2021. Liddell aimed for the White House’s legislative work to flow from 2020 to 2021 and not be a significant disruption. In addition, Liddell believed that

“You’ve been through a transition once; you know that the stakes of the game are as high as they get. And you know that at the end of the day that personnel are key to making sure that you can execute against those challenges.”

Former Obama White House Chief of Staff
Denis McDonough, Transition Lab podcast

high turnover in year five would allow the administration to streamline the structure and processes in the White House to increase efficiency. While the Trump administration was not able to implement their second term plans, they took the necessary steps to set up their next term for success by planning well in advance of Election Day.

The transition law lays out a series of the pre-election steps requiring the incumbent president to prepare for a potential transfer of power

The Presidential Transition Act requires that an incumbent administration take the necessary pre- and post-election planning efforts to prepare for a potential successor. As described previously, Chris Liddell began scenario planning to ensure the Trump administration was prepared for many election results. Liddell did an exceptional job coordinating the Trump White House’s efforts to implement the pre-election requirements of the law. The Trump White House followed the pre-election requirements of the law by establishing the Agency Transition Directors Council and the White House Transition Coordinating Council in April 2020. The agency council began meeting regularly starting in May and the White House council met in July to provide members with an update on transition preparations. The Center’s Agency Transition Roundtables supported this process by offering agency transition directors additional transition guidance.

“President (George W.) Bush was also ready to have a very good transition should he have lost reelection (in 2004)... He was prepared to pass the baton if he had to.”

Former White House Chief of Staff Andy Card, Talking Transitions event

FEDERAL AGENCIES WITH CRITICAL ROLES IN PRESIDENTIAL TRANSITIONS

The Center worked closely with three government agencies that have key transition responsibilities: the General Services Administration, the Justice Department and the Office of Government Ethics.

General Services Administration

Starting in 2019, we worked with GSA’s political and career officials responsible for the presidential transition and developed open channels of communication with Allison Brigati, GSA’s deputy administrator. We also forged strong working relationships with Federal Transition Coordinator Mary Gibert, Deputy Federal Transition Coordinator Dorsy Yoffie and Director of Pre- and Post-election Activities Elizabeth “Liz” Cain. This highly professional and competent team provided exceptional guidance and steady leadership throughout a very difficult transition.

We held biweekly meetings with Gibert and her team starting in May to discuss agency transition issues and to coordinate topics between their agency director’s council meetings and our Agency Transition Roundtables.

Office of Government Ethics and the Department of Justice

We worked with two outstanding government officials who have been collaborating with the Partnership for many years. Both were essential to our understanding of the paperwork required from political appointees. Shelley Finlayson, OGE’s chief of staff, provided countless briefings on the role that the ethics office plays in reviewing financial disclosure information required of Senate-confirmed nominees and determining whether or not a potential appointee faces any ethical issues. We had frequent discussions with Lee Lofthus, assistant attorney general for administration for the Department of Justice, on the department’s role in security clearances and background checks. Lofthus provided helpful information on the responsibilities of the various clearance agencies.

The delayed GSA ascertainment hindered the official transition process, preventing access to critical transition resources

The Presidential Transition Act of 1963 requires that the GSA administrator ascertain the “apparent successful candidates” of the election before the official transition can begin. The ascertainment decision green lights the entire federal government’s preparation for the handover of power. This includes releasing millions of dollars in transition funding and allowing the incoming administration access to current government officials.

Four days after the Nov. 3, 2020 election, the Associated Press and the major news networks, including Fox News, CNN, ABC News, CBS News and NBC News, called the election for Biden. While GSA traditionally ascertains the winner shortly after the election, GSA Administrator Emily Murphy waited until Nov. 23. The delayed ascertainment impeded the official transition process, preventing any conversations between the Biden transition’s agency review teams and federal agency officials, and delaying the disbursement of federal funds. The delay also prevented the FBI from expediting post-election security clearances. Following these challenges, the Center will look closely at the statute that specifies the ascertainment process to identify improvements for future transitions.

“All these media outlets that call the election called it for Joe Biden. And as I said earlier, for Trump to pull it off, he would have to prove these unfounded allegations he’s making about voter fraud. And I just don’t see it happening... I think the winner is pretty clear.”

Former GSA Administrator David Barram before the GSA’s delayed ascertainment decision, Transition Lab Podcast

The Center produced materials to highlight the costs of the transition delay on national security and public health

We led a national dialogue on GSA ascertainment and provided the media and key transition audiences with information on the negative effects of a delayed transition. This included a report listing the [top 15 costs of a delayed transition](#) to reinforce the importance of quick ascertainment. The Center also created a podcast, blog posts and fact sheets for media outlets and the public. The Center director and the Partnership CEO were quoted in numerous publications and interviewed on television and radio broadcasts to explain the implications of the delay. Two days into the delayed ascertainment, we [interviewed](#) David Barram, former GSA administrator from 1996 to 2000, on our Transition Lab podcast. Barram explained why the delayed ascertainment in 2000 during the presidential recount in Florida was not comparable to the one occurring in 2020. The Center continued to create reports on the topic, including how a [delay in the formal transition can hurt national security](#) and how it can [slow the confirmation process for key leadership positions](#).

Most notably, our blog entitled, “[What the 9/11 Commission Found: Slow Confirmations Imperil U.S. National Security](#),” showed that the delayed transition in 2000 resulted in slower nominations and dragged-out confirmations. Ultimately, this meant that critical national security positions were empty on the day of the 9/11 attacks – nearly 43% of the top 123 Senate-confirmed positions at the departments of Defense, State and Justice.

Following ascertainment, the Center highlighted the importance of mitigating the damages caused by the delay. We posted an [after-ascertainment report](#) detailing the resources made available to the transition team and answering frequently asked questions. These resources helped our partners and the public track the impact of the delay and understand upcoming milestones and developments.

SUPPORTING AGENCY TRANSITION PERSONNEL

Every four years, agencies prepare for a possible new administration by creating briefing materials to help onboard new political appointees. The teams charged with creating the resources are led by senior career officials. Since turnover is common in these positions between presidential elections, the Center helped fill the gap by sharing best practices from previous transition cycles. As part of this effort, the Center helped build relationships among the agency transition officials.

Agency Transition Roundtables prepared officials for each milestone during the presidential transition

Building on our efforts in 2016, the Center brought together career officials designated to lead agency transition planning at our Agency Transition Roundtable sessions held on a monthly basis between June 2020 and February 2021. More than 100 agency officials from 65 agencies regularly attended the sessions, an increase of about 100% for individual attendance compared to 2016, and a 50% increase in the number of agencies.

The discussions delivered invaluable information to agency transition directors and other team members on best practices and pain points to avoid. We hosted a series of panels of former agency transition directors, former transition team leaders and other experts. Attendees received tips on successful agency transition strategies, including building teams, drafting succession plans and assembling briefing books.

Federal Transition Coordinator Mary Gibert provided frequent updates on transition requirements and milestones. Guest speakers from the GSA, OGE, OPM and the National Archives and Records Administration provided information on offboarding and onboarding political appointees, and discussed their processes for assisting agencies with ethics, personnel issues and records management. Agency review team leaders from 2008 through 2016 advised agencies on how to plan for initial engagement with transition teams. In early December, attendees met representatives from the Biden transition team and heard about their review team expectations. Our final roundtable prior to Inauguration Day focused on preparation for the new administration.

In addition, we updated our [Agency Transition](#)

[Guide](#) for the 2020 cycle. This is the only resource designed to prepare agency transition directors and their teams for the transition process. In 2020, the guide was downloaded from our website more than 1,500 times and was required reading for new agency transition directors.

We are now collecting best practices and insights from the 2020 transition to better inform our resources and sessions in 2024.

Congress

Congress has two overarching roles in presidential transitions. First, Congress establishes the legal framework for transitions and provides funding for activities under that framework. Second, through its advice and consent role, the Senate considers the nominations for approximately 1,200 government positions requiring confirmation. A smooth, expeditious confirmation process is critical to the stability of the government, especially to ensure national security during vulnerable times for the country.

The Center serves as the premier source of nonpartisan information and resources for members of Congress and committee staff on both sides of the aisle on presidential transitions and the appointment and confirmation processes.

Presidential Transition Enhancement Act

Since passage of the Presidential Transition Act of 1963, Congress has established and regularly updated a framework for presidential transitions. During the past decade, the Partnership has played a significant role in three updates to the law, most recently working with Congress to help shape the bipartisan Presidential Transition Enhancement Act, which incorporated lessons learned from the 2016 transition cycle. The measure was signed into law in early 2020.

The Center provided technical assistance to congressional committee staff as they drafted key provisions of the legislation, including offering suggestions to clarify ambiguities and build on best practices. The new law requires agency representatives on the Agency Transition Directors Council to be senior career employees. It also requires that by Sept. 15 of a presidential election year, every agency must have a succession plan in place for senior political positions so that agencies are prepared for the turnover that will occur during the transition to a new administration or a second term. It also ensures that GSA will provide transition teams with office space and other support for 60 days after the inauguration in order to help the transition team focus on recruiting and hiring in the early days of the administration while White House personnel settle into

their new jobs.

As we have in the past, the Center will gather lessons learned from the 2020-21 transition to determine what went well and what needs to be improved. During the coming months, we will interview dozens of individuals involved with the transition and will share insights and recommendations with Congress.

The Periodically Listing Updates to Management (PLUM) Act of 2020

The Plum Book is the most comprehensive source about officials serving in the federal government. It contains information on more than 4,000 political appointees – 1,200 of whom are subject to Senate confirmation – along with thousands of other jobs filled by senior career officials in the federal civil service. Unfortunately, the Plum Book has been produced largely the same way since 1952. The list is published by Congress in late November or early December of every presidential election year and provides a snapshot of the political positions and appointees who held those jobs that summer.⁵ However, the list is outdated by the time of its release, diminishing its use to the transition team and the general public.

At the beginning of the 116th Congress, the Partnership recommended to the House Committee on Oversight and Reform and the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs that legislation be approved to create an online, regularly updated Plum Book with downloadable and machine-readable data. Both committees advanced legislation, specifically the Periodically Listing Updates to Management Act of 2020 (PLUM Act), although the legislation did not reach final passage.⁶ We will work with the bill's sponsors in the new Congress as they revisit the legislation.

⁵ The 2020 Plum Book was released on December 30, 2020.

⁶ S.3896, introduced by Senator Tom Carper (D-DE) and H.R.7107, introduced by Representative Carolyn Maloney (D-NY).

Vacancies Act Reform

Vacancies in political positions that require Senate confirmations are a challenge that have affected all recent administrations. During the Trump administration, there was a greater reliance on filling some of these roles with acting officials for lengthy periods of time, bypassing the Senate confirmation process. The Center [released resources explaining the Federal Vacancies Reform Act of 1998](#), describing the much-needed updates to the law and examining the wide array of presidentially appointed positions left without Senate-confirmed nominees. The Center also pointed out the ambiguities of the law, including problems regarding leadership succession.

Sharing observations based on our years of monitoring the confirmation process, the Center provided feedback to congressional staff as they drafted legislation to update the vacancies law. Legislation introduced in the House would clarify that the law applies when an official is fired, establish timelines for the reporting of vacancies, and ensure that vacancies in inspectors general positions are filled in an acting capacity by officials from elsewhere in the IG community.⁷

The Center believes several other improvements are needed, including clarification on who qualifies as a “first assistant” under the law; overturning the 2017 Supreme Court decision that upended the interpretation of presidents of both parties that individuals can serve in an acting capacity while also being nominated for the position; and reevaluating the practice of dual- or even triple-hatting officials so that they are performing more than one role in a Senate-confirmed position at the same time. The Center also supports language that would ensure that designation of “first assistants” aligns with agency succession plans required by the Presidential Transition Enhancement Act of 2019.

Engagement with Capitol Hill Staff

The Center plays an important role on Capitol Hill as an educational resource on good government issues. At the request of the House Transparency Caucus, the Center hosted a webinar in September for congressional staff on the presidential transition. The event had about 40 participants from 23 congressional offices. We explained transition legal requirements and discussed the various entities involved in transition, such as the presidential transition teams, the federal agencies and the White House as well as key transition workstreams such as agency review, policy and personnel. We also highlighted resources that Congress can use to track a transition’s progress, such as our [Biden Political Appointee Tracker](#).

The Center plans to continue its engagement with congressional offices, especially regarding Senate confirmation hearings. We developed a series of questions for the 17 Senate committees that consider presidential nominees. The questions focus on topics regarding the nominee’s experience managing large organizations and budgets as well as their leadership competencies. This initiative is designed to encourage senators and nominees to focus on the management aspect of serving in a high-level role instead of solely on policy issues.

⁷ H.R.6689, The Accountability for Acting Officials Act, introduced by Rep. Katie Porter (D-CA).

Prospective Political Appointees

Over the years, many appointees have said they did not have access to critical information necessary to navigate the political appointments process. Those resources have been limited and scattered in different locations. This has made it particularly difficult for non-traditional candidates without insider knowledge, networks and prior federal experience, and has discouraged qualified individuals.

In early 2020, we conducted interviews with more than a dozen political and career senior government officials from the past four administrations, including those from the Office of Presidential Personnel, agency transition directors and White House liaisons. Interviewees gave advice to assist aspiring appointees and helped us identify resource gaps. The Center left these conversations with the goal of tackling two main objectives: better prepare prospective candidates to help them move through the process quickly and increase diversity in future administrations by increasing access to key resources.

“What guided me and guided my career was a passion...for the issues. And quite frankly, [for] the ability to be at tables [for] those that couldn’t be at those tables, I could be there to represent them. I could be there to be [their] voice[s]...”

Melody Barnes, former director of White House Domestic Policy Council under President Barack Obama, Transition Lab podcast

READY TO SERVE

In August 2020, the Center launched [Ready to Serve](#), a comprehensive, one-stop resource for those who want to serve in a presidential administration, but who lack the know-how to competitively apply or complete the extensive paperwork. The audience includes:

- Private sector leaders with no government experience.
- State and local officials.
- Campaign staff.
- Academics.
- Career government employees.
- Former appointees.

To best serve a wide range of audiences with a varying level of government knowledge, we compiled information and materials in a variety of formats, including website content, links to external resources, blogs, podcasts and webinars. From its launch in August 2020 through January 2021, the Ready to Serve site has provided information to more than 164,000 visitors. With Ready to Serve, the Center is demystifying the political appointments process and enabling access to more prospective applicants who would like to serve in a presidential administration.

RESOURCES

Fundamental information and guidance on political appointments

Ready to Serve provides general information about government positions and key steps in the appointments process. The site offers a number of tools to help individuals learn more about potential positions, including a [self-assessment](#) to help determine if federal service is the right fit and [position descriptions](#) for over 400 roles including primary responsibilities, experience, competency requirements and pay.

Ready to Serve was inspired by requests for support that we received in 2012 from Gov. Mike Leavitt, chairman of the Romney transition team. Historically, transition teams are overwhelmed by outreach from prospective appointees before the election even takes place. Applicants want to know where to apply, how to best match their skills with the administration's needs and how to navigate the complex federal hiring process. The Center created Ready to Serve as a resource for transition teams to refer interested individuals to while juggling other timely demands.

Security clearance, ethics and financial disclosure forms

The main factors that frequently hold up the political appointment process are ethics issues and the proper completion of background checks, security clearances, and financial disclosure forms. Based on the guidance from former appointees and vetting experts, the Ready to Serve website offers resources to prospective appointees on completing the forms and addressing possible ethics issues by providing tips and advice, linking key forms and sharing easy-to-understand overviews.

We also produced several blogs and a [three-part webinar series](#) on these important topics.

Sharing content through webinars

As mentioned in the transition team section of this report, we hosted webinars for targeted audiences, including professional organizations for diversity groups, technology-focused individuals and colleges and universities. These live sessions allowed us to answer questions in real time and incorporate those questions into additional resources. In total, we reached more than 2,000 individuals across 11 sessions between September 2020 and January 2021.

“I think what the candidates can do that is very important is... understand the process upfront and the various requirements that exist and the kind of information that they need to gather, and then complete the forms in a prompt, complete and accurate way.”

Leslie Kiernan, former deputy White House counsel,
Transition Lab podcast

Research and Experts

The Center used its research and extensive knowledge to educate the public, the media, Congress and other key stakeholders about the importance and intricacies of the transition. This was accomplished through a comprehensive oral history on transitions through our Transition Lab podcast, engagement with traditional media, the use of social media, our reports and a number of events. The Center also engaged subject-matter experts to bolster our knowledge and inform our research.

RESEARCH

The Center's collection of information, expertise and documents on transitions is unparalleled. Combining original research with historical documents, the Center has become the leading authority on presidential transitions and has drawn attention to transition issues among key audiences.

Transition Lab Podcast

Launched in January 2020, the Transition Lab podcast has served as a unique oral history of presidential transitions. Across 48 episodes, we interviewed subject-matter experts and those with first-hand knowledge of the unique process that happens every four years from all modern transitions – Jimmy Carter through Joe Biden. Through this effort, we were able to collect more than four decades of wisdom and mistakes to inform future transitions, as well as reach a wide audience.

Political Appointee Tracker

In 2016, the Partnership launched a first-of-its-kind political appointments tracker in conjunction with The Washington Post to follow the nominations, confirmations and resignations of President Trump's appointees for more than 750 key positions. During the four years of the Trump administration, the tracker was the preeminent source of information about political appointments and vacancies.

In December 2020, the Partnership and The

Washington Post launched [a new tracker](#) to follow the progress of President Biden's nominees. Positions included in the Biden Political Appointee Tracker include Cabinet secretaries, deputy and assistant secretaries, chief financial officers, general counsels, heads of agencies, ambassadors and other critical leadership jobs.

Historical Documents

The Center's [Publication and Resource Library](#) includes a collection of publicly available documents from past transitions. These documents are available for transition teams, journalists and other key stakeholders to reference, and to inform contemporary transition efforts and developments. The library includes nearly 100 documents from administrations and transition teams dating back to 1980, including resources such as ethical codes of conduct, legal agreements between the transition team and the White House, official memoranda providing guidance, fundraising reports and transition documents, all of which can be used as templates for future transition teams. The Center is in the process of collecting and adding additional historical documents to this collection.

NETWORKS OF SUPPORT

The Center has consistently engaged with other groups and individuals committed to building smooth and effective presidential transitions. In 2020, we assembled multiple coalitions of transition experts and stakeholders to better inform our work and raise public awareness about the importance of the transition process.

Center for Presidential Transition Advisory Board

The Center for Presidential Transition Advisory Board consists of a bipartisan group of former public servants: Josh Bolten, former chief of staff to President George W. Bush; Mike Leavitt, former governor of Utah and former chairman of the Romney Readiness Project; Mack McLarty, former chief of staff to President Bill Clinton; and Penny Pritzker, former secretary of Commerce under President Barack Obama. All four board members brought significant transition experience and expertise to their roles and have publicly elevated the importance of the Center's work. Through the 2020-21 transition cycle, they provided advice and insights on how to approach complicated challenges and maximize potential opportunities.

The advisory board also served as surrogates on the importance of transition planning individually and as a group. In January 2020, they [released an open letter](#) to encourage all presidential candidates to begin preparing either for a new administration or a second term. After the presidential election was called for Biden by all major media outlets, the advisory board [released a statement](#) urging the Trump administration to immediately begin the post-election transition process and the Biden team to take full advantage of the resources available under the Presidential Transition Act. This statement was picked up by multiple media outlets and was one of the first bipartisan acknowledgements of the election results and substantive calls for the formal transition process to begin.

Center Fellows

In January 2020, we assembled the Center for Presidential Transition Fellows, a community of about 40 experts with first-hand knowledge and experience on issues related to presidential transitions and serving in government. This bipartisan group included senior officials with experience running transitions, former

senior White House officials, and those with expertise on vetting appointees and the Senate confirmation process.

Over the course of the year, the fellows shared their experiences and ideas, participated in meetings, collaborated with the Center to create practical tools and templates, and spoke publicly about the importance of transition planning. The fellows have helped strengthen the Center's work on transition operations, appointments, president-elect support and the agency review process, both behind-the-scenes and through public activities. A list of our 2020 fellows is included at the end of this report.

Transition Management Network

The Transition Management Network is a collection of good government organizations set up to support a safe and effective presidential transition. This network was established in 2016 and identified [six management priorities](#) for successful policy implementation for the incoming Trump administration.

In 2020, members reconvened to focus on sharing information about respective transition efforts and connect on issues of mutual interest. Participating organizations, listed at the end of this report, met bimonthly and discussed a range of priority topics, identifying the areas in which each organization's agenda overlapped. These issues included sourcing diverse talent, appointee preparation, effective government management, support for transition teams and ways to improve center of government agencies, including the White House and the Office of Management and Budget. Members will continue to meet in 2021, identifying process improvements for future transitions, supporting the new administration's priorities for management reform and developing a shared agenda for collective impact.

Conclusion

With little continuity of knowledge across administrations, the Partnership for Public Service's Center for Presidential Transition has become the go-to resource for nonpartisan counsel, capacity-building and support for presidential transitions. Throughout 2020, we were able to build trusted relationships and provide critical support to three main audiences – the Biden transition team, Trump administration and career agency officials. Our efforts would not

have been a success without our dedicated staff, volunteers and supporters, who contributed to making this vision a reality.

As we look toward the next presidential transition, we will continue to increase our knowledge, expand our resources and push for legislative improvements to ensure future administrations are as prepared as possible to lead on day one.

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