



## NATIONAL COMMISSION ON MILITARY, NATIONAL, AND PUBLIC

### MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

**Subject:** Federal Employees at the Denver Federal Center  
April 20, 2018

The following is a record of a facilitated discussion with federal government employees and members of the Commission. The discussion took place on April 20, 2018, at the Denver Federal Center. Commissioners present included Chairman Heck, Vice Chair Wada, Mr. Barney, Dr. Davidson, Ms. Skelly, and Mr. Allard. Commission staff observed the session. Member A, Executive Director of the Denver Federal Center, provided an introduction. Member B, the senior Office of Personnel Management employee in Denver, also participated for part of the session. Other participants in the session are set out below. Please note that this memorandum is not a verbatim transcript of the discussion.

In addition to Members A and B, nine federal government employees [ranging from GS-4 to GS-9] participated in this session. The agencies represented included:

- Defense Health Agency
- Interior Business Center
- Federal Emergency Management Agency

#### **Key Takeaways:**

The discussion included the following topics of interest.

- Participants noted difficulties in obtaining federal employment, to include concerns about the usability of the USAJOBS system and lack of transparency.
- Participants identified ways to encourage more young people to consider jobs in the federal government, including by highlighting the impact of federal service, the benefits and training opportunities, and job stability.

## Meeting Discussion:

*What led you to work for the federal government?*

Two employees highlighted the **flexibility** of federal government work. One noted it was particularly helpful given his duties as part of the selected reserve. Another employee also mentioned flexibility; he specifically liked the ability to change jobs and move around the country, having worked in Illinois for USDA and now in Colorado for the Bureau of Land Management. He cited the ability to take his benefits with him as he changes jobs and locations, including his TSP. He started in federal government service at the age of 27 and was drawn to public service in part because of his mother, who served 8 years with the Peace Corps.

Four employees emphasized **stability**. One had restarted her career and wanted to work somewhere with a chance of moving up the ladder; the federal government provided that sort of opportunity. She was also influenced by her mother, who worked at the Interior Business Center (IBC) for 23 years before retiring. The second noted that she had worked as a contractor with NASA and was laid off in a furlough. Stable employment is a huge benefit to her. The third employee started full-time with IBC about six months ago. She found her job after working 11 years as a contractor, 10 of which she also spent seeking federal employment. She was drawn to federal government because of job stability—she has little children—and the potential for job growth. Yet another federal employee stated she was looking for her niche when she started working as a contractor for IBC. After a stint in Texas, she returned, in part because there was an opportunity to work as a full-time IBC employee with the security of benefits, pay, and career opportunity.

Two employees mentioned **service to country**. One noted that his parents are immigrants and he and his brother served in the military. After his military service, he still wanted to serve the country in some capacity and found that opportunity with FEMA. The other spent 11 years in the military [his wife remains on active duty]. When his military service ended, he wanted to serve the country in a different capacity. He found that in the federal government, but he remains a term employee. It is important for him to get hired into a permanent billet.

One employee explained she grew up in a military town, Colorado Springs. At 17, she wanted to join the Navy but was rejected due to an eye condition. She tried unsuccessfully to enlist in the Navy reserves in 2011. She then began working as a contractor for Defense Health Agency (DHA), and took advantage of an opening for full-time employment as an accountant with DHA. She noted that it was a hard and long path to becoming a federal employee. Her opportunity arose because someone in her current position retired.

Finally, Member B then explained his path to the federal government. He served as a police officer and then in municipal government, before entering the private sector. He started contracting with the federal government—with OPM specifically—and in 2006 joined OPM as an employee doing work similar to what he had been doing as a contractor.

*Did you view working for the federal government as a way to give back or serve your country, or as a job?*

One employee said his federal service began as a job and then became more of a mission once he understood what his agency (then the USDA in Illinois) was doing, and he became more of an advocate for the government. He described a disconnect between what the government is doing and public perception. In his current role at the Department of the Interior (DoI), he feels that if more people can see what the mission is and what tasks the federal government is undertaking, it would help a lot with public perception.

Another said he has a similar experience at IBC. He works in benefits. He sees the work he does as having an effect on individuals. He said that it is hard to sell people on government service when they come in at the GS-4 or GS-5 level, because the salaries are low, but once you invest time in government employment, you start to see the payoff.

A HR benefits specialist then compared working with the government versus the private sector. His view is that with the government, you are working for the betterment of everybody (instead of just a small number of people) even if people do not know or understand what it is that you do.

*What are the barriers to service as a federal government employee?*

A veteran discussed his experience in trying to break into the federal government. He had developed good skills as an intelligence analyst with the military. He wanted to work in personnel security but found it difficult. IBC—part of DoI—offered him a GS-4 position, despite his 11 years of experience. The **absence of credit for military service** was a big barrier for him – and also something he described as a “slap in the face.” He said that at the Department of Defense, he likely would have entered three grades higher (GS-7) for the same type of work. Working at the GS-4 level was not viable for him because he has three kids to support, so he continued to pursue a higher entry paygrade. Ultimately, IBC brought him on at a higher grade due to a service-connected disability, not because of his military experience in the field, but he noted that the lack of clarity on where he would “fit” was frustrating and almost caused him to look elsewhere. He felt many people in his place would have been turned off by the GS-4 offer and turned away.

He continued, discussing working as a term employee. One upside is that he does not need to wait 52 weeks to get hired into a different position. In other words, if a position opened, he could take it today rather than wait until he has served a full year in his current position. Working in a term position has the downside of **uncertainty**, which is particularly difficult given his family situation; in addition to his three kids, he and his wife are not able to move to a different part of the country—mobility could be a benefit of having a term position—since his wife is in the Denver area on military orders.

A non-veteran employee noted that the veteran’s benefit “cuts both ways.” While she was very supportive of military service, she also noted that the extra points that veterans received in the hiring process often meant that **non-veterans were essentially excluded**. She felt on more than one occasion that a less qualified veteran could apply for the same position she had and the veteran would get the job and she didn’t have a chance.

*What are some of the challenges associated with moving from a contractor to a government employee position?*

One employee talked about the frustration she felt working 11 years as a contractor. At one point, she had a decade's-worth of experience in her job, and the government hired someone else into a similar position instead of her. Ironically, her recent hire was to handle a completely different function than she handled as a contractor. She mentioned that she has a lot of family members who worked with the government and was attracted to full-time government employment as a way to care for her two children.

Another former contractor had a similar experience of trying for years to transition to government employee. She had been a contractor for NASA and had developed knowledge during that time but could not get a position anywhere.

*How do you engage younger people to become interested in federal government employment?*

Employees emphasized the importance of showing the connection of the work to the broader mission. One HR benefits specialist recommended advertisements and other ways to show the public what agencies and bureaus do, what their employees are doing for the American people, and why.

Another individual agreed. She views her role, in payroll, as helping firefighters and others so they do not have to deal with human resources issues and can focus on their job. She knows that she is helping people through her work. She noted that when she started, she viewed it as "just a job" but now views her work as helping others.

One employee said that it is necessary to promote the federal government and recruit people to it. He said there is an influx of college students now, and particularly if you want to attract those under 30, you will have to actively promote and recruit.

*How do other people perceive you being a federal employee?*

One individual noted she was perceived with curiosity. A second employee agreed, saying in curiosity was high in particular when he worked at a USDA lab in Illinois.

One employee said people are a little more guarded, and some people do not want to be associated with him. Another said some people ask her "why" or ask her questions about whether there really is job security. Some people make comments about "lazy" government employees. Other people conflate political and non-political employees, mistakenly thinking all government employees are appointed by the presidential administration.

*What does OPM do well and where is there room for improvement?*

One employee praised the training opportunities available through OPM. He feels these give employees the tools to do their jobs and get a leg up, but the training opportunities are not well publicized.

*Is there a sense that the federal civilian government, as distinguished from the military, is not seen as representing society? How would you recommend improving the “brand” of the federal civilian workforce?*

One employee talked about the hiring process. He noted the lack of feedback provided to job applicants who do not receive positions. He said the federal government takes an average of 258 days to hire a new federal employee. The lack of feedback and the long process makes it difficult for prospective new employees who have tons of student loan debt.

Another mentioned the Pathways Program as a way to get into federal employment. She noted that most college kids do not know about it.

Addressing the Pathways Program, another employee said the Program is available to recent graduates and also provides internships. He said the Program should be considered distinct from the federal government’s direct hiring authority. He then talked about USAJOBS, which provides information on direct hiring authority. He, like one of his fellow workers, recommends more feedback to job applicants.

Several employees spoke of college reimbursement. One employee recommended some form of reimbursement for college tuition for those who serve the federal government but not in the military. Another added that the Public Student Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) program is an existing way in which the federal government assists with college loans, noting that the program is not well advertised. Another employee agreed and recommended that the federal government use the PSLF program as a selling point.

**Dr. Davidson** noted that the PSLF program seems like something the federal government should raise with new federal employees during onboarding as a benefit of government service.

Member B explained that the government is reducing the size of human resources offices in all agencies, which limits their ability to educate new employees on various programs available.

Several participants noted issues with the current application process, which requires applicants to complete a series of narrative statements [questionnaire] relating to knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs). The current process weeds out any applicant who does not answer each KSA in the right way. One employee added that the current KSA approach does not seem to add value, and applicants merely need to know how to answer the questions in the right way to break into the system. She felt the form and process encouraged people to “lie” in order to get a screening interview.

Another participant recommended that the federal government work with the military and redirect individuals not qualified for military service to serve their nation in a different way.

One individual suggested that the government should pay more attention to contractors since there are a lot of young people who work as contractors who are trying to obtain full time employment with the federal government.

Two employees raised concerns about nepotism. One stated he was aware of individuals hired into GS-14 or GS-15 positions based solely on connections. Another agreed, noting that there are a lot of relatives employed in his office.

One participant discussed several problems with the USAJOBS site. The system times out after five minutes and applicants must begin again with their application. Once one knows how to use the system, it is easy to submit resumes to lots of jobs, which leads to flooding agencies with applications. He noted that agencies have different standards, and they are not clear to applicants; he heard from one that it would not consider a resume in excess of one-and-a-half pages.

*How would you motivate and help people serve in the U.S. government?*

One employee recommended emphasizing the benefits of government employment: flexibility; the ability to work anywhere in the country (not just in Washington, D.C.); benefits; the ability to impact a lot of people. He thinks USAJBOS should be organized by federal agency and should explain to applicants how each job fits into the broader mission of that agencies. He thinks USAJOBS can do a much better job of this.

Another recommended to “show what it is” – show people what the federal government does, what its impact is.

One individual recommended that the government do better advertising to college kids. It should also highlight the training opportunities available to employees. Another agreed and suggested more on-campus recruiting and an effort to make young people aware that the U.S. government does everything and has all kinds of jobs available.

A third employee noted that the U.S. government is competing with lots of other employers for the same individuals. The government must do better communicating what each agency does, what impact employees have, what the benefits are, and other tangible things that make federal government employment unique.

One employee recommended an effort to get more 17-18 year olds invested and interested in the federal government, perhaps through summer opportunities. He supported a recommendation of creating something like a GI Bill for government employment that would pay for part of college.

One employee recommended that the government highlight the benefits of federal service, as well as the fast-paced nature of the work and the ability to learn a lot of things. Another emphasized that teleworking is an important benefit.