

Summary of Public Hearings – Public Service

On May 15, 2019, the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service hosted two public hearings at the Partnership for Public Service in Washington, D.C. Each hearing featured expert panelists who gave opening statements and answered questions from Commissioners. Time at the end of each hearing was reserved for members of the public to offer comments. Complete hearing materials, including a recording of the hearing, the preparatory memos drafted by Commission staff, and panelists' written testimony are available at: <https://inspire2serve.gov/content/hearings>.

Improving Basic Hiring Processes

The morning hearing addressed ways to improve the federal government's basic hiring processes by gathering insights from the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), a federal employee union, a veteran service organization, a non-profit dedicated to more effective government, and a stakeholder from higher education attempting to build more robust pathways for college graduates to enter government.

Kimberly Holden, Deputy Associate Director, Employee Services, Talent Acquisition, and Workforce Shaping, OPM, detailed the Presidential Management Agenda's workforce goals and outlined updates to government hiring practices and processes. She described improvements to the time-to-hire for applicants and quality of certification lists to employers through increased investment in technology and more robust applicant assessment tools such as those available through USA Hire, stronger up-front skills gap identification and strategic workforce planning, training of HR professionals, more accurate and clearly defined position descriptions, and increased participation of hiring managers. She discussed updates to USAJOBS that improved the customer experience, such as a new mobile-friendly website, a revised application process, and streamlined search tools and information. Ms. Holden presented the Pathways Programs as the government's core pathway to access young talent, but noted that the Programs have underperformed compared to their predecessors.

Jacqueline Simon, Public Policy Director, American Federation of Government Employees, advocated for the retention of competitive, merit-based hiring practices and the preservation and enhancement of existing benefits. Ms. Simon dismissed changes to veterans' preference and expansion of direct-hire authority and noncompetitive eligibility as violations of the merit-system principles. She advocated for preserving OPM as the central authority to ensure adherence to the merit system. She dismissed modifying Title 38 for health care professionals, arguing that doing so would lead to the privatization of veteran healthcare. She further argued against a cafeteria-style benefits plan, contending that providing a comprehensive benefits package rather than an either-or option would improve public service competitiveness. She did not support or reject developing a new government-wide personnel system but argued that the current administration is ill-suited to oversee such a significant change.

Melissa Bryant, Chief Policy Officer, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA), commented on veterans' success in entering public service, with veterans now comprising approximately one-third of the federal workforce. However, she noted that spouses and women veterans face greater unemployment rates, and cited IAVA's member survey which found that 37 percent of respondents felt underemployed—in part because many employers do not recognize certifications earned in the military or understand and utilize veterans' military experience in their civilian responsibility. Ms. Bryant supported proposals to expand VRA from three to ten years after discharge, modernize veterans' preference to better match veteran skills and experiences with federal workforce needs, and improve pathways for veterans to become physician assistants at the VHA. She further advocated for the inclusion of military spouses in DoD's Transition

Assistance Program and for training HR professionals to better understand the experiences of servicemembers and their families.

Max Stier, President and CEO, Partnership for Public Service, contended that fixing the federal hiring process required simplifying hiring authorities, changing direct-hire authority for hard-to-fill positions to reflect a shortage in “highly qualified” candidates, improving the USAJOBS interface, training HR professionals, and a greater commitment to strategic hiring and workforce diversity—particularly among the SES. He underscored the importance of organizational leadership in effecting these changes. Mr. Stier also emphasized the need to leverage educational institutions and use internships as a talent pipeline and argued that the government could increase propensity for public service by leveraging its purpose-driven mission and creating a culture of recognition such as through the Partnership’s *Service to America Medals*, promoting employee engagement, providing avenues for continuous learning and leadership development, and ending crisis budgeting and the use of government shutdowns.

Brett Hunt, Executive Director of Public Service Academy, Arizona State University (ASU), described the Public Service Academy, initiated at ASU in 2015 to develop the next generation of public service leaders to meet the nation’s needs. The Academy is comprised of three programs: the Next Generation Service Corps (NGSC); the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC); and the Veterans Scholar Program (VSP). The program chooses students from diverse academic and socioeconomic backgrounds, aims to mitigate the civil-military divide, and exposes participants to leadership coursework and internship opportunities across the public, private, and non-profit sectors. The Academy graduated its first class of participants in 2019 and looks to serve as a model for other public universities to adopt; however, inadequate means for participants to enter federal service remains a barrier to expansion.

Critical Skills and Benefits

The afternoon hearing focused on ways to address the challenges associated with attracting, hiring, and retaining highly skilled employees in high-demand fields, including cybersecurity, IT, healthcare, and STEM, and improve the competitiveness of federal-employee benefits.

Terry Gerton, President and CEO, National Academy of Public Administration (NAPA), said NAPA released two reports over the past two years discussing necessary changes to the government personnel system. The reports found that the federal government sharply reduced the number of entry-level positions, resulting in a top-heavy personnel structure and the outsourcing of entry-level jobs. She added that Title 5, created before the age of the internet, is a poor fit for the digital age, as evidenced by the number of agencies requesting exemptions from it. She recommended transforming today’s Title 5-based personnel system into a talent-management system capable of hiring and advancing people based on the competencies they bring to the position rather than on hiring people who fit OPM’s predetermined, classified positions.

Eddie Hartwig, Deputy Administrator, U.S. Digital Service (USDS), said technologists often do not consider public service due to the low pay relative to the private sector. However, he also noted that the government creates barriers for interested technologists, including federal restrictions around legal prior drug use. He added that USDS seeks to reduce the traditional barriers to entry by using a quick application that can be completed in under two minutes, not requiring a long resume or cover letter, and assigning candidates a “guide” who can fill as much paperwork as possible on behalf of the applicant. He argued that the federal hiring system’s emphasis on fairness, in part through rigid position descriptions and self-assessments, has created challenges for recruiters and suggested that emphasizing fairness should not be the topmost priority. Instead, he advocated for recruiting with a compelling mission-driven narrative; more involvement of hiring managers and subject-matter experts in recruiting, qualification, and assessment; and

better assessment tools. He also argued that improving the thoroughness of the qualification process would avoid problems caused by the application of veterans' preference to candidates who are not truly qualified.

Travis Hoadley, Senior Advisor, Office of the Chief Human Capital Officer, U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), noted that the personnel systems that govern hiring and recruitment, particularly the General Schedule (GS), which relies on pre-defined positions, self-assessments, and standardized, inflexible pay rates, are not fit for 21st century work. He offered a set of principles for redesigning these systems, including focusing on mission and making civil service accessible, understandable, and satisfying. He said DHS is preparing to launch a new personnel system based on those principles, the Cybersecurity Talent Management System (CTMS), later this year, which will proactively target desired candidates and candidate groups; utilize up-to-date, field-specific hiring assessments; and accommodate individuals who may move between the public and private sectors, among other goals.

Jessica Klement, Staff Vice President of Advocacy, National Active and Retired Federal Employees Association (NARFE), described two challenges facing public servants: a lack of awareness and respect for the vital role public servants play to support the nation, as evident by the much of the public's willingness to accept the recent government shutdown, and the growing skills and age gaps that currently exist within the federal workforce. She noted that federal retirement and health benefits offset federal employees' lower pay and recommended highlighting those benefits as a recruitment and retention strategy. She also suggested adding paid parental leave to the federal benefits package and expanding efforts to counter ignorance of who federal employees are and what they do, in part through a greater emphasis on civic education.

Dr. Elizabeth Kolmstetter, Director of Talent Strategy and Engagement, Office of the Chief Human Capital Officer, National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), said NASA has recently completed a study of its personnel authorities, finding significant barriers to its recruitment, deployment, and retention efforts. She then called for creating a simplified and flexible talent-based hiring system, which would allow NASA to hire talented people for unspecified positions rather than strictly fill the positions articulated under the classification system, proactively seek out the best and brightest rather than wait for them to apply for open positions, and reward employees on the basis of their performance and impact rather than their longevity. She also recommended piloting a new personnel system that covers all employees within an agency and supports interagency collaboration.