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House of Representatives

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Opening Statement of Chairman Gerald E. Connolly Hearing on “The Future of Federal Work II” July 21, 2022

I want to welcome you to this hearing dedicated to examining the future of the federal workforce. To do that, we must first reflect on and recognize the heroic work our civil service accomplished during a deadly pandemic. These public servants: engaged community-based health centers in the distribution of life-saving vaccines; provided healthcare and services to veterans; delivered the mail, prescription drugs, food stuffs, and covid tests; administered financial assistance to small businesses; and fought back raging wildfires and other climate disasters.

While so much has changed over three years, the importance of our civil service remains indomitable. With that in mind, two essential pillars drive today’s hearing: first, we must renew our efforts to foster the current federal workforce to ensure they have the resilience and resources necessary to accomplish agency missions; and second, we need to adopt policies that educate, attract, and onboard the next generation of federal employees.

To support these goals, the federal government, including Congress, must work to provide competitive compensation; promote diversity, equity, inclusion, and access; support employees’ needs for work-life balance; and encourage innovation, engagement, and collaboration among agency leadership and staff to improve agency operations.

Over the past four years, this Subcommittee has held hearings that: fought to maintain a merit-based civil service; ensured robust collective bargaining rights; honored our frontline feds in a pandemic; explored how to rebuild a civil service gutted by the previous administration; and examined what the future of federal work holds in store for the workforce.

At today’s hearing we pull our research together and offer a strategic vision for the future of federal work.

Despite years of effort, strategic human capital management of the federal workforce has landed on the Government Accountability Office’s (GAO) High Risk List for the 21st consecutive year. GAO notes that myriad items on their High Risk List are a result of the federal government’s inability to close skill gaps and hire, train, and staff up critically in-demand skills like cyber, IT, data analytics, and human resources.

Roughly 7% of federal employees are under the age of 30, compared to 23% in the private sector. Nearly 30% of federal employees are over the age of 55, with potentially one-third of the federal workforce eligible to retire over the next few years, threatening a “Retirement Tsunami”.

These numbers are staggering. And data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics shows that the private sector seems to have cracked the early career talent recruitment code, providing a roadmap for the federal government.

If you look at the screen, you will see this discrepancy. The red bars show the age distribution of employees across all sectors – public and private. Watch as the figure transitions to the age distribution of the federal workforce, in blue. Young employees make up a much smaller fraction of the federal government than they do in other sectors

nationwide.

The workforce is the lifeblood of our federal government. Without people committed to public service, taxpayers, vulnerable populations, small businesses, and others will not be able to get the resources and services they need. If we fail to attract and hire the best and brightest to federal service, our nation suffers. To avoid that fate, I crafted the NextGenFeds Act, which leverages federal internships to build a robust cadre of early-career talent that reflects this nation.

In addition to early career talent, the federal government must ensure that current talent can perform their work regardless of the context. Throughout the pandemic, agencies embraced telework and remote-working arrangements. And it worked. Agencies delivered critical services across the country.

This Subcommittee worked on a bipartisan basis to help agencies caught flat-footed at the start of the pandemic by investing in technologies that facilitate a continuity of operations. We must heed lessons learned and maintain the advantages of telework as laid out in the Telework Metrics and Cost Savings Act (H.R. 7951). This bill, developed in partnership with my friend from Maryland Mr. Sarbanes, builds upon this Subcommittee's long history of support for telework, including Mr. Sarbanes's Telework Enhancement Act of 2010.

Unfortunately, we learned some pandemic lessons too late. An early failure by the Trump administration to adopt consistent, clear, and effective safety guidelines led to many federal workers contracting, and tragically in some cases, succumbing to the coronavirus pandemic while serving this nation. One of those civil servants was my constituent, Chai Suthammanont. Chai worked in the kitchen of the daycare facility at Marine Corps Base Quantico. When the pandemic hit, Chai worked in a tight kitchen space with additional staff where he was likely exposed to someone who exhibited coronavirus-related symptoms and then tested positive for COVID-19. A few weeks later, Chai was dead.

This morning, I introduced an updated version of the Chai Suthammanont Act, which seeks to codify safety procedures for the federal workforce across the board, extending beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the bill would require the heads of each federal agency to: establish a plan containing procedures and policies for the safety of federal employees, contractors, and subcontractors physically present at any covered worksite during a nationwide public health emergency declared for an infectious disease; and ensure that employees are made aware of expectations, procedures, and policies that can protect them.

Further, Congress and the Biden Administration must make sure every federal job is a good job. This year, the Administration called for a pay increase of 4.6%, the largest annual federal employee pay raise in 20 years. I implore the Administration, however, to implement a 5.1% pay increase, consistent with my FAIR Act, which has 60 cosponsors. This pay raise keeps the federal government competitive with the private sector and deals with the inflation rate.

Finally, we must ensure that our civil service is vested with expertise and not populated by political sycophants. A Sharpie should not dictate how our federal agencies allocate first responders in the aftermath of a hurricane. We must not ignore the blazing evidence of climate change destroying communities and taking lives all across the globe, even as we speak.

Our expert civil service is a crown jewel. Protections are warranted. And actions to remove those protections threaten the civil service, and I believe, the foundations of democratic society. My Preventing a Patronage System Act (H.R. 302) puts Congress in charge of which federal employees receive civil service protections. Enactment of this bill, which was included in the House-passed FY23 NDAA, would ensure that data and evidence undergird our policies.

I thank our witnesses for appearing today and look forward to implementing our vision of a civil service

empowered to serve individuals, families, communities, states, and this nation.

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