

# Congress of the United States

## House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

2157 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING

WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6143

MAJORITY (202) 225-5074  
MINORITY (202) 225-5051  
<https://oversight.house.gov>

**Ranking Member Gerald E. Connolly**

**Hearing on “Oversight of Our Nation’s Largest Employer: Reviewing the U.S. Office of Personnel Management”**

**March 9, 2023**

**Today’s hearing is about the federal government’s most important resource—its 2.1 million employees.** The federal workforce’s expertise and experience are the lifeblood of our government. Each day, the Office of Personnel Management—led by today’s witness—Director Kiran Ahuja makes our government an efficient instrument of the public interest by performing critical services for our workforce, including:

- setting governmentwide policies to protect the merit system;
- administering the largest employer-sponsored health insurance program in the world—serving 8 million federal employees, retirees, and family members;
- processing retirement services for 2.5 million federal retirees and survivors; and
- training federal leaders who hold our nation’s most important civil service positions.

This independent agency serves the people who serve the people. Federal civil servants live in every state. They work in every congressional district. In fact, nearly 80% of the federal workforce works outside of the Washington, D.C. area.

If you look behind me, you will see OPM’s heatmap of federal employees showing a headcount of where federal employees work in each state as of September 30, 2022. In just a few examples that might be particularly pertinent to this Committee:

- 24,572 work in Kentucky;
- 84,142 work in Georgia;
- 107,143 work in Florida;
- 143,764 work in Maryland;
- 145,310 work in the District of Columbia;
- 158,121 work in Texas;
- 161,731 work in the Commonwealth of Virginia; and
- 176,909 work in California.

Federal employees build rockets, inspect our food supplies, provide medical care for veterans, help small businesses thrive, support our military, and, as you can see in this photo—they help rebuild communities all over America in the aftermath of natural disasters, which was particularly important to my friend the Chairman—in 2021.

**For too long, OPM and the federal workforce it serves have been the target of baseless political attacks. Upon taking office, Mr. Trump attempted to abolish OPM entirely. As Chairman of the Government Operations Subcommittee, we built bipartisan opposition to that plan – based on both the legality and the**

**policy merits of eliminating the locus of human resources for the federal government.**

**Once their plan to abolish OPM failed, Trump and his allies continued to denigrate federal employees, disparaging them as the “deep state” and fueling violent threats against federal workers. They sought to eliminate collective bargaining rights of federal workers, attacked our federal union partners, and made a mockery of good faith negotiations.**

**These attacks left OPM scrambling to fill critical leadership positions after scores of experienced officials fled the agency, likely resulting in what was recently reported in the press as the problematic hiring of two senior OPM officials. These reports are indeed profoundly troubling at a time when we need to restore the bonds of trust after Trump’s efforts to shut down the government and demonize our own workers.**

**OPM must be the model employer of the federal government and should never be hiring individuals who have well-documented histories of workplace misconduct. I agree with the Chairman and my Republican colleagues that these reports raise important questions about the effectiveness of OPM’s suitability for the public office vetting process. My request for Ms. Ahuja, is that, to the extent you are unable to discuss these troubling personnel decisions in this public forum because of your agency’s ongoing internal probe, you immediately set up time to meet with members on this Committee to find solutions to appropriately address these two particular hires—and, more importantly, to establish procedures and protocols to ensure that this will not happen again.**

**And while I would hope that two problematic hires would not be used to smear the remarkable and indispensable work of our 2.1 million civil servants, I am afraid our colleagues on the other side of the aisle are using this reporting to assign collective guilt and mass punishment on the entire federal work force.**

**At the start of this Congress, for example, House Republicans sought to roll back federal telework to pre-pandemic levels, regardless of evidence and data showing that telework was in place for many years before the pandemic and that it has been a significant success. Telework is work. It worked. And it saved lives. Telework policies also saved the federal government money—approximately \$1 billion in reduced real estate costs for federal buildings and space.**

**Republicans also reinstated the so-called ‘Holman Rule,’ which will empower and enable right-wing extremists in the House to target federal employees by firing them or slashing their pay.**

**They also established the Subcommittee on the Weaponization of the Federal Workforce, of which I am a Member. The creation of this Subcommittee is striking because Republicans want to want to make it seem like they’re preventing a partisan workforce. But their actual policies are completely the opposite—they target particular employees through the Holman Rule and seek to strip protections keeping our civil service professional and non-partisan.**

**The actions of our Republican colleagues strike at the core principles of federal service—principles created by Congress and nourished in bipartisan fashion for 140 years. They attack the nature of what it means to serve the American people.**

**Republicans’ anti-civil service actions threaten to return us to a patronage system, something like in 1881 when President Garfield was assassinated by a man just a few steps from this room. The assassin believed his political loyalty had earned him a coveted patronage position in federal government. In the wake of this event, Congress passed the Pendleton Act in 1883, moving federal government out of a spoils system and into a civil service based on merit, skill, and ability.**

When Congress enacted the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978, it doubled down on its commitment to a non-partisan, expert workforce. In the Conference Report to accompany the Act, the joint House and Senate committees wrote: “Both the public and those in government have a right to the most effective possible civil service; that is, one in which employees are hired and removed on the basis of merit and one which is accountable to the public through its elected leaders.”

Congress enacted the Civil Service Reform Act to empower unions and bolster accountability. The Civil Service Act also created OPM. OPM and the civil service structure are, of course, not perfect and both need constant improvement. OPM’s Inspector General has found that the agency struggles with data security, antiquated information technology systems that create massive backlogs in retirement claims processing, and potentially significant fraud in their Federal Employee Health Benefits (FEHB) program.

The National Academy of Public Administration also released a report, which my Subcommittee commissioned in the National Defense Authorization Act, that offered recommendations for how to rebuild OPM and improve its operations. And today I reintroduce the Strengthening the Office of Personnel Management Act, which seeks to codify these recommendations, including ensuring the Director of OPM is a nonpartisan expert in human resources and requires OPM to more effectively engage its stakeholders.

Federal hiring takes too long and less than 7% of the federal workforce is under 30 years old. We need to recruit future leaders. 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 insufficient staffing, inadequate workforce planning, and a lack of training in critical skills are contributing to their designation of 22 out of 35 other areas as high risk. The federal workforce is the bedrock of our government. We must take steps to build and fortify it.

Improving OPM’s administration of so many consequential federal programs and missions, and helping them build a diverse workforce that meets the needs of this nation is a bipartisan goal.

**In the 116th and 117th Congresses, Democrats led 26 hearings on the federal workforce and marked up 23 bills that grew out of those deliberations. Among those achievements were the creation of paid parental leave for federal employees who are new parents, protections for whistleblowers who help fight fraud and abuse, and protections for the retirement benefits of federal law enforcement officers who are injured in the line of duty.**

**Democrats have already reached across the aisle this Congress on a host of efforts to push the federal government to fight fraud in federal programs and improve federal hiring processes, including the Chance to Compete Act, which I co-sponsored.** The bill encourages federal agencies to develop skill-based hiring and passed the House with overwhelming bipartisan support.

**Ms. Ahuja is a willing and able partner in these goals. She has driven efforts across the federal enterprise to increase skills-based hiring. She has given us the ability to track the hiring of individuals with disabilities, military spouses, those in rural areas, and others by releasing the federal government’s first annual report on Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility. She has led efforts to ensure that every federal job is a good job. She also visited George Mason University in my district last Congress to highlight the importance of getting early career individuals with diverse backgrounds into federal service.**

I look forward to continuing our partnership with Ms. Ahuja, to finding ways to resource OPM so it can tackle program fraud and invest in the IT needed to get rid of retirement services backlogs. I once again ask that we meet to address the more urgent issues surrounding these two very troubling senior hires. **Overall, I look forward to helping OPM find ways to find, recruit, and retain the federal workforce our nation needs to meet current and future challenges and best serve the American people.**

And with that I yield back.

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Contact: Nelly Decker, Communications Director, (202) 226-5181