

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM

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Opening Statement

Chairman Gerald E. Connolly

Hearing on “NextGen Feds: Recruiting the Next Generation of Public Servants” September 25, 2019

The need to build the next generation of federal employees has never been greater. According to the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), in 2017, 69 percent of the federal workforce was over the age of 40 while only 54 percent of the total civilian labor force in the United States fell in that age range. And when it comes to recent graduates, the federal workforce is woefully behind. At the end of 2018, only six percent of the federal workforce was under the age of 30, while nearly a quarter (24 percent) of the civilian U.S. labor force was under 30.

This means agencies across the federal government are at risk of losing institutional knowledge as older employees retire and agencies find themselves unable to find new recruits for the next generation of civil servants. It means the federal government will lack experienced leadership because agencies are currently failing to find and train people in their twenties and thirties who can fill leadership and management roles in 15 to 20 years. It means that taxpayers will end up paying the price due to a widening skills gap in critical occupations across the federal government, hindering agencies’ abilities to fulfill their missions.

Today’s hearing will focus on what the federal government can do to attract the next generation of federal employees to public service and discuss how the federal government as an employer can compete with the private sector for top talent.

In this Congress, the Committee on Oversight and Reform – and this Subcommittee in particular – has conducted extensive oversight on programs that have gone awry and have either endangered the safety and security of our nation or have wasted taxpayer dollars. We have examined missteps related to the 2020 Decennial Census, mismanagement of veterans’ health care (including at the District of Columbia VA Medical Center), the waste caused by the Department of Defense’s financial mismanagement, and agency failures in IT management and acquisitions. Each of these areas is on the Government Accountability Office’s (GAO) 2019 High Risk List and GAO cites critical workforce skills gaps as factors that have led to their placement on that list.

It is unsurprising that strategic human capital management has been on the GAO High Risk List since 2001. “Post and pray” – posting a job vacancy and praying that qualified individuals apply – is not a viable human capital strategy for long-term success. Given the age distribution of the current federal workforce and the continuing changing nature of work, the federal government as a whole must do a better job of attracting and retaining top young talent in the civil service.

Note that I did not say keep them for a “career.” A lot of young people these days may not want a 30- or 40-year career in public service. The federal government must adapt to this new normal or it stands to miss out on a generation of talent.

The federal government should look to private sector practices when it comes to establishing a pipeline to public service, especially those companies that compete for the same talent that agencies are looking for to fill current skills gaps. For example, agencies could better use current internship programs to identify and recruit qualified individuals for jobs in the civil service. In 2011, I introduced the Federal Internship Improvement Act to generate awareness of federal internships available to students, to provide data on the efficacy of the federal government’s internships, and to provide a mechanism for agencies to find qualified interns seeking full-time employment. The 2012 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) implemented a portion of my bill by requiring OPM to publish online a list of internship coordinators at agencies and the application procedures and deadlines for all internship programs.

That same year the Obama Administration established the Pathways program to boost recruitment of diverse, entry-level hires into the federal government through internships, recent graduate hiring, and the Presidential management program for students with graduate degrees. However, participation in the Pathways program and agency use of the program as a pipeline to fill skills gaps is disappointingly low. For fiscal year 2014, the last year in which OPM published data, only 15 percent of competitive federal government hires were Pathways appointments who had the option to convert to permanent federal positions.

The federal government must also do more to compete with the private sector in terms of benefits and leave policies to fill gaps in highly skilled positions in critical sectors such as information technology, cybersecurity, and financial management. In a Harris Poll published earlier this year, the U.S. government’s reputation ranked last in comparison to 100 top companies. Simply put, individuals graduating from top schools are not attracted to federal service. This is partly because the federal government has struggled to offer the workplace flexibilities and work-life balance in federal service that are available in the private sector.

In 2019, the federal government still does not offer paid family leave to its employees, including maternity and paternity leave. As of March 2019, 18 percent of private-industry workers reported some access to paid family leave through their employer. The availability of paid family leave is even more prevalent among professional and technical occupations and industries, full time workers, and workers in large companies. Many companies the federal government competes with for talent, such as Deloitte and Amazon, offer a minimum 16 weeks of paid leave to male or female employees for childbirth, adoption, and other family medical care. Agencies are facing situations where an employee leaves their agency to start a family, only to show up again as an employee for a contractor or consultant hired by the agency to do similar work. Federal employees have training and expertise, and we benefit as a nation when we attract, retain, and foster this knowledge.

I am also concerned that the federal government continues to fall behind the private sector in terms of telework opportunities. Telework allows an employee to work from an alternative location, thereby reducing commute time and allowing employees to work during weather events. OPM has found that the availability of telework is fundamental to the recruitment and retention of the next generation of federal workers. OPM also found that compared to other generations, millennials are most likely to prioritize telework when making employment decisions. Yet instead of expanding the use of telework, this Administration is rolling it back. In the past two years, the Departments of Agriculture, Education, and Interior have changed their policies to limit the number of days employees are permitted to work. For example, USDA employees formerly could telework for up to four days a week. Since January 2018, however, employees at these agencies have been limited to one day a week.

The federal government can do much more to attract and develop the next generation of federal employees. I look forward to discussing the issues I have highlighted as well as other opportunities such as training, work-life balance, and any other incentives agencies can offer a young and ambitious workforce looking to serve our nation.