

SOLUTIONS TO IMPROVE FEDERAL HIRING

HEARING

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON
REGULATORY AFFAIRS AND FEDERAL
MANAGEMENT

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON
HOMELAND SECURITY AND
GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES SENATE

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SOLUTIONS TO IMPROVE FEDERAL HIRING

TUESDAY, JULY 30, 2019

U.S. SENATE,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON REGULATORY,
AFFAIRS AND FEDERAL MANAGEMENT,
OF THE COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY
AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS,
Washington, DC.

The Subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 2:20 p.m., in room 342, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. James Lankford, Chairman of the Subcommittee, presiding.

Present: Senators Lankford, Scott, Sinema, Carper, and Rosen.

OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR LANKFORD¹

Senator LANKFORD. Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to today's Subcommittee hearing titled "Solutions to Improve Federal Hiring." We are here today to address the hiring crisis in the Federal Government. It takes too long to fill vacancies, causing agencies to miss out on top talent. I am sure that is a shock to all the people that are at this front table. They have never heard that before.

This is not a new problem. It is a universal problem, and it is growing, unfortunately, and as we talk about it we do not seem to be solving it. So today is going to be focused a lot on solutions, how we can get the best and brightest candidates, and how they will not have to wait around for 3 or 4 months to be able to actually get into the process, and how we can help human resources (HR) folks, as well, address the issues with the best possible hiring authorities that they may need at that spot.

So let me defer to my Ranking Member, Senator Sinema, for her opening statement.

OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR SINEMA

Senator SINEMA. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate you holding today's hearing with these witnesses.

Improving Federal hiring and retention is an important topic, and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) play critical roles in taking care of Arizona veterans and protecting our constituents. The first step toward accomplishing this mission is having the right workforce.

¹ The prepared statement of Senator Lankford appears in the Appendix on page 29.

I have a longer statement that I will submit for the record.¹ I apologize, I may need to leave early to attend a signing ceremony at the White House, but I want to thank all our witnesses for being here today and I look forward to today's conversation.

Senator LANKFORD. Thank you. We also have votes going on at 2:45, and so there are a few things happening this afternoon, but we want to make sure that we get as many things as possible on the record as quickly as we can. So at this time I want to proceed with the testimony from our witnesses, because that is why we came, to be able to go through this.

Yvonne Jones is the Director of Strategic Issues Team for the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), where she manages teams analyzing Federal Government human capital issues. Prior to joining GAO in 2003, Ms. Jones worked at the World Bank where she led the implementation and evaluation of economic development projects in the education, commercial, debt reduction, and finance sectors. Thank you for being here.

Angela Bailey is the Chief Human Capital Officer (CHCO) at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, where she has served since January 2016. Prior to DHS, Ms. Bailey worked at Office of Personnel Management (OPM) as the Chief Operating Officer (COO), Deputy Associate Director for Recruitment and Hiring, and the Chief Human Capital Officer. Thank you, as well, for your experience and for being here.

Dan Sitterly is the Assistant Secretary for Human Resources and Administration at the Department of Veterans Affairs, a post he has held since January, so you are the long-term veteran of the group here. Prior to joining the VA, Mr. Sitterly served as the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Air Force for Manpower and Reserve Affairs. He began his career in the Air Force as an enlisted member in 1976. Thanks very much for that service.

It is our tradition in this Subcommittee to swear in our witnesses, so if you would not mind standing, please, and raise your right hand.

Do you swear the testimony you are about to give before this Subcommittee will be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you, God?

Ms. JONES. I do.

Ms. BAILEY. I do.

Mr. SITTERLY. I do.

Senator LANKFORD. Thank you. You may be seated. Let the record reflect all the witnesses answered in the affirmative.

We are using a timing device, just to be able to help track. We will give you about 5 minutes for oral testimony, if you can stick as close to that as you possibly can. There is a wonderful button that says "talk" in front of you, and you push it when it is your turn to talk, because that will turn that microphone on. We are very grateful to receive your testimony.

Ms. Jones, you are first.

¹The prepared statement of Senator Sinema appears in the Appendix on page 31.

**TESTIMONY OF YVONNE D. JONES,¹ DIRECTOR, STRATEGIC
ISSUES TEAM, U.S. GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE**

Ms. JONES. Thank you. Chairman Lankford, Ranking Member Sinema, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity today to discuss what can be done to close mission-critical skills gaps and to improve Federal hiring. As we have long reported, strategic human capital management plays a critical role in maximizing the government's performance and assuring its accountability to Congress and to the Nation.

The Federal Government faces long-standing challenges in strategically managing its workforce. For that reason, strategic human capital management has been a GAO high-risk area since 2001. Since then, Congress, the Office of Personnel Management, and some agencies have made progress toward addressing these challenges.

Skills gaps caused by insufficient number of staff with critical skills and inadequate workforce planning contributed to adding strategic human capital management to the high-risk list. Skills gaps affect individual agencies but also cut across the entire Federal workforce in areas such as cybersecurity and providing health care.

Insufficient numbers of staff with critical skills can also be due to staff retirements, and if not carefully managed, anticipated retirements can widen skills gaps or open new ones. GAO analysis has shown that more than 31 percent of Federal employees on board at the end of fiscal year (FY) 2017 would be eligible to retire in the next 5 years.

Agencies' missions have evolved and employees' expectations of work and the workplace are changing. Further, an increasingly volatile world makes understanding and responding to evolving issues and trends essential. In March 2019, we reported on key talent management strategies that can help agencies better manage the workforce. Here are some selected practices we identified related to recruiting, hiring, and engaging the Federal workforce.

One, recruit continuously and start the hiring process early in the school year. Hiring students is critical to ensuring that agencies have a range of experience levels for succession planning and providing a talent pipeline. Agencies facing early fiscal year funding uncertainties can overcome this timing challenge by recruiting continuously and starting hiring processes early in the school year.

Two, write user-friendly vacancy announcements. We have found that some Federal job announcements were unclear to applicants and delayed hiring. When hiring managers partner with human resource staff, agencies can develop more effective vacancy announcements.

Three, strategically leverage available hiring and pay flexibilities. To help ensure agencies have the talent they need, they should explore all existing hiring authorities. A variety of special pay authorities can help agencies compete for top talent. The GAO has found that agencies use them for only a small number of employees.

¹ The prepared statement of Ms. Jones appears in the Appendix on page 33.

Four, encourage rotations and other mobility opportunities. Agency chief human capital officers have said that in some cases lateral mobility opportunities such as rotations and opportunities to gain experience in other sectors can help employees gain new skills more cost-effectively than training, particularly for rapidly changing skill sets. However, few employees move horizontally because managers are sometimes reluctant to offer opportunities that may result in employee transfers.

In conclusion, OPM has instituted numerous efforts to assist agencies in addressing mission-critical skills gaps within their workforces. However, as of December 2018, OPM had not fully implemented 29 of our recommendations since 2012, relating to this high-risk area. We will continue to monitor OPM's efforts to implement our recommendations.

Finally, we note that without better talent management strategies the Federal Government's ability to address the complex challenges facing the country may be compromised.

Chairman Lankford, Ranking Member Sinema, this completes my prepared statement. I would be pleased to respond to any questions you may have at this time.

Senator LANKFORD. Thank you, Ms. Jones. Ms. Bailey.

TESTIMONY OF ANGELA BAILEY,¹ CHIEF HUMAN CAPITAL OFFICER, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY

Ms. BAILEY. Chairman Lankford, Ranking Member Sinema, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the Department of Homeland Security's efforts on hiring and retention.

DHS employees are on the front lines, executing our mission each and every day, performing extremely difficult work under some of the most challenging circumstances and conditions. At the same time, our employees are performing these incredibly important duties, the approximately 240,000 men and women that make up the Department worry about the same things that all Americans worry about, including student loan debt, making it on time to pick up their children from daycare or school, and missing yet another family vacation due to work obligations.

During the partial shutdown earlier this year, 86 percent of the DHS workforce continued to work without pay, and most of those employees were our frontline law enforcement officers and agents who face danger each and every day. They put on their uniforms, drove long distances in some cases, came to work, and performed their duties to the best of their abilities, despite concerns about pay, child care, transportation, and other stresses.

A little-known fact and often overlooked statistic in the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS) results is that 94 percent of DHS employees said that they were willing to put in extra effort to get the job done, and almost 90 percent said that the work they do is important.

Given their dedication and all that DHS employees face, my job is to help DHS achieve its mission by keying in on two very impor-

¹The prepared statement of Ms. Bailey appears in the Appendix on page 51.

tant areas—hiring and retention. Our focus in both areas is forward-leaning.

First, we begin with workforce planning, determining the types of skills we need, not only for today but 5 to 10 years from now as well. Next, we have devised a multi-pronged recruiting strategy that takes into account how and where best to “buy or build” the talent we need, drawing on all segments of society. This is coupled with an innovative and streamlined hiring process that has seen a 34 percent reduction in time-to-hire across DHS, down to an average of 107 days.

The reason these strategies are so important is that by ensuring our positions are filled with the right leaders and technically skilled and competent personnel, we can drive down overtime, shorten deployments, and create a better work-life balance for our employees—all of which our employees have told us through the FEVS and other focus groups they desire.

Our hiring strategies actually help us retain our talented workforce. However, filling positions is not enough to retain our employees. We also need to provide them with the tools necessary to deal with all that the job and life throws their way.

As a result, we have put a special emphasis on taking care of our employees and their families as the cornerstone of our retention strategy. Our initiatives include programs and training to assist with general stress, dependent care, personal relationships, mental health, and financial concerns.

These programs, coupled with our traditional retention strategies, such as cyber retention pay, special salary rates, student loan repayments, child care subsidies, alternative work schedules, and employee engagement help round out the overarching DHS retention strategy.

Despite these efforts, there is always more that can be done. One way for Congress to help us is to champion our legislative proposal, the Department of Homeland Security Enhanced Hiring Act. DHS seeks to use this authority in an effort to streamline and simplify the agency’s hiring authorities in a manner that ensures the Department is able to expeditiously hire the best-qualified candidates for mission-critical positions and sustain our exemplary record of hiring veterans. I respectfully request that Congress expeditiously take up and pass our legislation.

I cannot stress enough the commitment of DHS employees to the mission and the difficult nature of their work. My goal is to do everything we can to lessen the burden on our employees and retain our highly-skilled, mission-driven workforce. We will continue to identify efficiencies and retention initiatives and implement them smartly across the Department.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today. The Department would not be successful without your support and the support of our brave men and women who sacrifice each day to make our country safe.

I look forward to your questions.

Senator LANKFORD. Thank you. We look forward to asking you questions, as a matter of fact.

Mr. Sitterly.

**TESTIMONY OF DANIEL R. SITTERLY,¹ ASSISTANT SECRETARY
FOR HUMAN RESOURCES AND ADMINISTRATION, U.S. DE-
PARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS**

Mr. SITTERLY. Chairman Lankford, Ranking Member Sinema, Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss the Department of Veterans Affairs' view on ways to modernize the hiring process and to retain our ability to be a competitive employer in the health care industry. As a 34-year veteran of the United States Air Force (USAF) I have both a personal and a professional interest in ensuring we get this right at the VA.

As the operator of the largest integrated health care delivery system in America, VA successfully attracts and retains high-quality talent, and VA's overall workforce has continue to grow. This growth is directly responsive to an increased demand for services, which is the result of improved access, reduced wait times, improved quality, enhanced veteran satisfaction, and overall mission growth.

Most of the additional staffing in the VA has been in the clinical occupations. VA appreciate the work Congress has done to provide flexibilities to support the recruitment and retention of talent to care for our Nation's veterans. That said, VA still contends with challenges presented by the complexities of multiple pay and personnel systems, and compounded by the changes in market play allowed in Title 38.

As health care demand increases, and shortages of health care workers grow, private-sector employers are quick to adjust to changes in local labor markets and modify starting salaries and total compensation packages to attract top talent. While VA recruits employees and applicants who are willing to accept lower compensation to be a part of an organization with such a noble mission, VA faces challenges in our ability to attract and then retain quality health care professionals.

Recruitment and retention efforts for physicians are often challenged by the pay limitations in statute. For example, the San Francisco Medical Center is in one of the highest cost-of-living markets. Highly specialized surgeons in that market receive more than \$500,000 in compensation, which the VA salary cannot match.

Despite challenges, VA employs a variety of tools to attract and retain quality talent. These tools include a powerful mission of service to veterans and their families, a robust training pipeline for a majority of our Nation's physicians, strong employee engagement, direct hiring authorities, and strategic workforce planning for hard-to-fill occupations and medical center directors. VA strategically allocates monetary incentives to close skill gaps and provide greater flexibility in the recruitment, relocation, and retention—the three R's—of highly qualified VA professionals. In fiscal year 2018, VA spent more than \$50 million on these incentives.

VA joined efforts with the Department of Defense (DOD) to recruit transitioning service members. We launched a direct marketing campaign to target military medical professionals currently transitioning out of the military. VA has also partnered with the Department of Defense to hire military spouses through the Mili-

¹The prepared statement of Mr. Sitterly appears in the Appendix on page 56.

tary Spouse Employment Partnership. We made significant progress in filling medical center director positions through a vigorous national recruitment strategy.

Outcomes show that the VA is on the right track. Veterans are well served and are receiving the same or better care at VA medical centers than patients at private sector hospitals. Veterans who are admitted for heart attacks, severe chronic lung disease, heart failure, and pneumonia have a better chance of survival beyond 30 days after discharge from a VA hospital than non-VA hospitals.

According to a study in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, VA average wait times are shorter than those in private sector for primary care. VA recently reached a telehealth milestone, achieving more than one million video telehealth visits last year. At the same time, almost 90 percent of the 1.5 million veterans surveyed said they trust the VA.

As one of the top ten largest employers within the Federal Government, VA continues to enhance employee engagement. In April, Secretary Wilkie approved VA's first-ever employee engagement enterprise-wide plan which emphasize the principles of servant leadership, in which leaders are encouraged to seek feedback year-round.

As I like to say, "happy, engaged, empowered employees make for a positive veteran experience, and also helps mightily with retention."

We at the VA also appreciate Congress' continued support to recruit, hire, and retain a high-quality workforce that provides the best possible care to veterans. The competition for talent in the health care industry is increasingly competitive. Shortages abound nationwide for both physicians and nurses, and those shortages are projected to increase.

Private hospitals and medical schools use innovative and progressive solutions to address recruitment and retention challenges. We must be creative in our approach to recruiting and retaining. We at the VA want to be the leaders, or be very fast followers, of the best human capital practices in the Federal Government and the health care industry.

We look forward to working with the Committee on opportunities to enhance VA's ability to attract top talent. I am prepared to respond to any questions you may have. Thank you.

Senator LANKFORD. Thank you. I want to defer to Senator Sinema for first questions.

Senator SINEMA. Thank you so much, Mr. Chairman. Thank you again for being here.

I want to start with a global question and then ask a couple of more specific questions for each of our agency witnesses.

Human capital management has been listed on the GAO high-risk list since 2001, and over that time GAO has made many good recommendations on how agencies can improve. But a lot of the feedback I have received on this issue over the years is that hiring and retention challenges are often cultural. In order to fix the problem, leadership at the agency must want to fix it and make improvements a priority.

For our DHS and VA witnesses today, Ms. Bailey and Mr. Sitterly, what steps can you point to that show your agency is making better human capital management improvements a priority?

Mr. SITTERLY. I will take that first, Senator. Thank you for the question. I appreciate it.

We are doing lots of things in using the authorities that Congress has given us. Recruiting is a challenge because of the shortages. We have partnered with HBCUs to increase the number of interns that we bring in. We have robust programs across all of the intern programs.

We have 122,000 students and residents that come through our VA medical centers every year. We increased the behavioral health specialists that we have in the VA by a net 1,000 this past year, by targeting specifically the interns, the students, and the residents that we have in our facilities.

We also have worked to increase the talent of our HR professionals. I will tell you, ma'am, with all due candor, that you have been more than gracious with the authorities that you have given the Federal Government for hiring, but they are really, really difficult. When I worked at the Department of Defense I thought Title 5, Title 10, Title 38 were very difficult to manage with part-time, full-time, Reserve, and Guard personnel. It is even more complicated in the VA between Title 5, Title 38, hybrid Title 38. I recently went to my own HR training seminar to learn how to do pay-setting for nurses. It took me an entire day, and I have been doing HR for over 40 years.

We are using a lot of the authorities to include the education debt reduction program. We have scholarship programs. One thing that I would ask you to help us with, with the national shortage, ma'am, is to be able to grow our own VA doctors, using the Department of Defense's Uniformed Services University (USU). We, in the Air Force, don't go to the airlines to hire fighter pilots. We train fighter pilots.

We should not, in the VA, go to private industry to hire doctors. We should create our own doctors. And so we are using the authorities that you have given us to bring those doctors on, and then to retain the doctors, and then we would like to attempt to grow our own as well.

Ms. BAILEY. Thank you. For starters, within DHS, I think one of the main things that we have done, from the beginning, is really just stopped admiring the problem and actually started talking about solutions. We see this as a team sport, the entire leadership team along with the HR specialists, the personnel security specialists, our medical professionals, as well as our hiring managers. We come together as one team to actually approach what the issues are.

A few years ago we actually embarked on expediting the temporary job offer process because you hear all the time that we cannot make job offers on the spot. As a department, we have made close to 1,800 tentative job offers on the spot. By bringing the power of all of DHS together and making sure that we can vet people, interview people, and do everything at one time, we have been able to make quite a few tentative job offers that is one way.

The second thing that we have done is we have taken a look at all the data that we have. We have analyzed all that data. We know exactly where we have our recruiting events, exactly how much it costs to go to those recruiting events, whether or not there is a return on investment for the recruiting events. Then we also do things like shared certificates. Meaning if we put out a job announcement for one location or one component, we are actually able to share those certificates across all the different components so that we can make use of that and not basically throw away qualified candidates.

This is just a smattering of examples of some of the things that we have done. In addition, we have looked at the entire hiring process. We break it down by the different components. We have rearranged the hiring process. We have cut out certain steps. We have looked at the way we do our polygraphs. We have looked at the way we do our background investigations. As a result of that, we have seen, as I said earlier, a 34 percent reduction in our time to hire.

It is critically important that this is viewed as a team sport and it is not just an HR issue or an HR problem. As a result we are starting to make significant progress. Last year, as an example, was the first time in 6 years that we have ended the year with more Border Patrol agents than we have lost. That is all attributed to having everyone at the time exploring the issues and just tackling them one at a time.

Senator SINEMA. Thank you. My next question is for Mr. Sitterly. My staff and I have been in continual contact with our Arizona VA medical centers, and hiring challenges continue to be a focus of our conversations.

One of the specific challenges that the Northern Arizona VA Medical Center runs into is an inability to hire housekeeping staff. Housekeeping staff at a VA medical center have critical functions, such as cleaning and sanitizing operating rooms and patient rooms, but they are categorized and paid at the same level that housekeeping staff maintaining an office building are. And our veteran service organization partners brought to my attention that VA downgraded the General Schedule (GS) level for these and 18 other Title 5 positions a few years ago.

So my question is twofold. How do we fix the clear discrepancy with operational staff such as housekeepers, and why did the VA choose to downgrade these positions?

Mr. SITTERLY. Thank you for that question, Senator. I, too, as my first 6 months at the VA, have traveled around and hear that question quite often. I am happy to report, in part, thanks to Dr. Jones' GAO report that she did recently, we have been addressing that with OPM and they were willing to look at our housekeepers and to put them into a different authority to work with us to look at different pay scales and such. So we are making progress in that front.

I cannot answer why the classification was changed and they were downgraded, but I will tell you that it is something very important to us—maintaining the satisfaction, the safety, and the security of our hospitals, and we will continue to address that.

Senator SINEMA. I want to continue talking about the VA. In Arizona, the VA health system covers a lot of rural areas. This represents an additional challenge to recruiting and retaining employees. My office has an outstanding request to VA's Central Office to learn more about locum tenens. So how is VA using that, and to what degree is or can it help to fill gaps in staffing, and is this something that we can talk about now?

Mr. SITTERLY. I am not familiar with it, your outstanding request, Senator, but I would be happy to come over to your office and have that conversation. We have a lot of different ways that we can address the shortages, a lot of different ways we are addressing rural medicine as well—telehealth, community care, and several other initiatives. I am very happy to come over and speak with you on that.

As a result of one of our recent all-employee surveys we discovered that employee satisfaction is highest when we have students and residents in our facilities. We do have a few facilities where we did not have them, so we will look at placing them throughout all of our facilities in an attempt to continue to retain those people.

Our turnover rates within the Veterans Affairs department is less than commercial industry, according to the Bureau of Labor (BOL). It is less than the Federal Government. Overall, once we get the employees we tend to retain those employees.

However, we do have a very high turnover rate for our food service workers and for our housekeepers, because we bring a lot of them in at a lower pay rate, and so we will continue to address both of those questions, Senator.

Senator SINEMA. I would like to follow up on this specifically. Northern Arizona, which is Prescott, is a rural community, but the cost of living is actually higher there than it is in some of our urban areas because it is so difficult to get there. And we have had a very difficult time being able to hire and retain highly qualified individuals in remote areas such as Northern Arizona.

Mr. SITTERLY. Senator, I would love to transition all of our Veterans Health Administration (VHA) employees to Title 38, which gives us more authorities to set market pay, as you know. We have some of our clinicians who provide direct care in a hybrid Title 38. We have roughly a third of our employees in Title 5, a third in Title 38, and a third in hybrid 38. So every time we have a market pay issue in a particular region we have to go to OPM to reset those pay, special salary rates, etc.

Under Title 38, Secretary Wilkie has the authority to do that based on the actual market rate, and we have more flexibility as things change. In a perfect world, the entire VHA would be in Title 38—our clinicians and care providers, if you will.

Senator SINEMA. We will follow up on this. This is important for us.

Mr. SITTERLY. Thank you, ma'am.

Senator SINEMA. We are also finding that hiring and keeping our staffing in rural areas is difficult as it relates to DHS. As you know, many of our DHS employees live in very remote and rural areas in Arizona. So what programs and tools have you identified through DHS that can help address some of these hiring and retention challenges in very remote parts of our State?

Ms. BAILEY. Yes, Senator. We did some research with regard to the rural areas. I think we have close to 9,000 employees that are actually located within Arizona and our attrition rate within Arizona runs roughly around 6 to 7 percent, which is on par with the rest of DHS.

Some of the things that we look at, from a very tactical level, is we actually go in and look to see, because these areas are so remote we have spouses that are, in many cases, unable to get employed, it takes 2 hours to get to a dentist office, etc., so one of the things that we deployed is special salary rates.

We have also deployed retention incentives for individuals working in many of those border locations. The third thing we have done is created a rotations program, so that we can actually give the folks the opportunity to rotate out of those particular areas and go into a more urban area in which it is not just good for them but it is good for their families as well. We have found, by deploying those three things, that it is actually helping us keep our attrition down and keep our vacancies filled.

In our rural States, we actually have a 98 percent fill rate, if you exclude D.C. And so that is on par with where we are with the rest of the Department as well. We are much like the VA. Once we get folks into DHS they have a tendency not to leave DHS.

Senator SINEMA. Thank you. I could ask questions all day but I understand our time is closing in.

My next question is also for you, Ms. Bailey. Much of the DHS workforce in Arizona is going through a challenging time. The crisis at our Southern Border has led to long hours and difficult conditions, and many of the agents and officers I have spoken with have told me about their concern about the impact that this period is having on them and their fellow employees. Some of these men and women are working up to 16-hour shifts a day, multiple days in a row. It is not just in Arizona. This is happening everywhere on the border.

What is it that DHS is doing right now to help the workforce get through this challenging surge period, and how can we work together to retain this workforce over time?

Ms. BAILEY. That is actually quite a concern for us as well. In fact, just a few weeks ago, I was down on the border myself. I went to Douglas and Tucson, to both stations, and I had the opportunity to meet with our Border Patrol agents as well as some of our DHS volunteers that were down there.

You are absolutely right. The emotional toll this has taken on our workforce, you can see it. You can see it in everyone's face.

Some of the things that we have done is we have put a concerted effort into employee and family readiness. We are investing in mental health strategies. We are investing in their personal relationships by delivering training for them, not just for the employees but also for their spouses as well. We are providing financial literacy programs as well. We are also doing what is called mindfulness or resiliency training.

We are trying to deploy a multitude of things, including dependent care, really looking into that as well, because as you know, and I say this all the time, our folks cannot say, "Hey, it's 5," to the drug cartel. "I have to go pick up my child." They do not get the

opportunity to do that. As a result, we are trying to figure out ways that we can actually help them be able to have dependent care where they actually need it, or on-demand dependent care.

It is a concerted effort on our behalf. It is not just a headquarters issue. It is actually across all the components that are involved in this, in making sure that we address their individual needs. We are using peer support, chaplaincy programs, anything that we can actually do to help provide them the support that they need, both on the job and in their own personal lives. Because both of them impact the other quite significantly, and we recognize that.

And so I think that we are on the right path.

Senator SINEMA. Thank you so much. Thank you so much for holding this hearing, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate it.

Senator LANKFORD. Thank you. Senator Rosen.

OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR ROSEN

Senator ROSEN. Thank you. I appreciate you holding this hearing. I appreciate all of your work in streamlining, trying to attempt to streamline the behemoth organizations you have, in the hiring process. It is always a work in progress.

I would like to speak a little bit about cybersecurity workforce. The GAO has released a report in March of this year finding that accurately categorizing information technology (IT), cybersecurity, and cyber-related functions is crucial for Federal agents to be able to identify critical staffing needs. The GAO found that most agencies have likely mischaracterized IT and cyber positions, which means they do not have reliable information for workforce planning.

Ms. Jones, maybe can you explain a little bit why and what the mischaracterization of the IT positions or cybersecurity positions are and why it might be so common across Federal agencies?

Ms. JONES. Thank you, Senator. Yes, I did take a look at that. So there were a number of reasons why a number of the agencies miscategorized these positions. So our work found that actually 10 agencies simply made a mistake in terms of characterizing the work roles of people. This is particularly in the 2210 IT specialist occupational category.

Thirteen agencies had not completed validating or defining that 2210 position. That is why they miscategorized some of the positions. Seven agencies applied their own standards to defining these positions. So some of them decided that they would not code a position as cybersecurity related if a person in that position did no work on cybersecurity for a certain percentage of the time. And 12 agencies Stated that OPM guidance—they did not feel that OPM guidance was clear on whether the 2210 IT management positions should be assigned a work role code as compared to the IT specialist position. So those are some of the reasons.

Senator ROSEN. You have made recommendations to OPM. Can you tell us how that is going, and responding to what your recommendations are and what you feel that you might need from us, if anything, in order to get these positions characterized properly and filled?

Ms. JONES. Right. Since the report was only issued in March, I would not expect that OPM would have made a lot of progress

since then. But this is an issue with which OPM is already familiar, I think, and has been working with agencies.

I think that OPM would just need to make sure that their guidance to the agencies is very clear, and then to be able—if there are any other concerns, for example, about positions which are both IT-related and cybersecurity related, where there seemed to have been some confusion about the work roles, that OPM work very carefully with the agencies. Agencies can also talk to each other about this. There is a Chief Human Capital Officers Council, where when there are problems that cross agencies they can develop work groups or task forces to help each other.

Senator ROSEN. Thank you. I also want to talk to you a little bit about a GAO report that was released today on human capital. GAO writes that agencies should leverage existing hiring and pay flexibilities in order to fill critical vacancies.

Ms. JONES. Yes.

Senator ROSEN. With so many open positions in important areas, like you said, cybersecurity, this makes sense. However, we need to balance the need for streamlined hiring practices with the importance of maintaining a diverse and talented career civil service, where taxpayer funds are spent to hire the best qualified, not necessarily the best connected.

So the concern about giving more latitude in hiring is that it can, to a closed system, it really can be very tough when the system is closed, where crucial government positions can be filled based on who knows who rather than who is the best and the brightest, and in that case, diversity suffers.

I have introduced some bipartisan legislation to address some of these things across Federal agencies. We have a Junior ROTC Cyber Training Act that is going to prepare high school kids, a Cyber Ready Workforce Act, a Building Blocks of STEM Act. I am hoping that all of these will come to the floor and be passed and this might help.

In addition to passing that legislation, what can OPM do to ensure there is an open, accessible hiring process with access to a pipeline of diverse talent, even when agencies use flexible hiring authorities to fill critical vacancies?

Ms. JONES. Well, Senator, we have not found that it was necessary to make a tradeoff between having a diverse workforce and following all of the statutory obligations for competitive hiring and for ensuring that people who are hired have the requisite qualifications.

So a number of things that agencies can do, and of which OPM is already aware, they can reach out to a wide range of educational institutions that are training students in the required skills. So that means, universities, technical colleges, all kinds of post-high school institutions. They can reach out to career and professional organizations representing diverse ethnicities, races, veteran status, disabilities, gender. They can identify a wide range of existing hiring authorities that can both expedite hiring and make hiring more flexible, yet at the same time continuing to follow their statutory obligations under a competitive hiring system and also choosing people with the right qualifications.

Once agencies have found these people and hired them, these agencies need to make sure they undertake the appropriate activities to make them want to stay in the agencies.

Senator ROSEN. Thank you. I see my time is up. I will yield. Thank you.

Senator SINEMA [Presiding.] Thank you, Senator Rosen. Senator Carper?

OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR CARPER

Senator CARPER. Yvonne Jones, how are you?

Ms. JONES. I am fine, sir.

Senator CARPER. We have an Yvonne Jones in Delaware. She is wonderful. When I saw your name it brought a smile to my face. We are happy to know there are two Yvonne Joneses. But I think there is only one Angela Bailey.

I am going back in time. I am trying to recall. Did you start your current job in January 2016?

Ms. BAILEY. I did, sir.

Senator CARPER. OK.

Ms. BAILEY. Yes.

Senator CARPER. Tom Coburn, who was Senator Lankford's predecessor, and I worked for a number of years, as you may recall, in this Committee with our colleagues to try to respond to concerns that were shared with us by Jeh Johnson, who had been the Secretary of the Department, and Ali Mayorkas, who was the Deputy Secretary. And one of the problems they shared with us is they were having a hard time hiring and retaining cyber warriors.

And it sort of reminded me of when I was privileged to serve as Governor of Delaware. We used to have folks who were IT people, and they were in the department that we now call the Department of Technology. But we hired people, trained them, and these were pretty junior, and just when they started to get pretty good they would be hired away by the private sector and we would lose them because they would pay more money. So what we tried to do was to pay them more money and change the way we took them outside the merit system and created the ability to provide the kind of resources for the department and keep those folks, rather than just train them and then see them leave for bigger and better things.

I just want to ask if you can give us some feeling of the changes that Dr. Coburn and I worked on, in terms of, expediting hiring authority for folks who work in—I guess it is Cybersecurity Information Sharing Act (CISA) now, to ask if DHS needs any additional authorities to further improve cyber hiring. How are you doing? Are you using the provisions that you inherited, literally, as somebody new on the job, and what more do you need?

Ms. BAILEY. Thank you, Senator, and I actually want to really thank you for Title 6, which is what you passed to give to the Department. We have made tremendous progress with regard to Title 6. One of the things that we are doing right now is we are actually working with all of our subject matter experts to put together exactly what it is that they need from both technical and leadership skills. We are building state-of-the-art assessments right now, as we speak.

We have created a brand new portal in which these folks will actually be able to apply for these jobs which is unlike anything we have seen before. What we have taken what you have given us and treated it almost like our ability to do civil service reform. So we have looked at everything and completely redesigned the entire system.

We will have a brand new way of recruiting folks, which will include actually looking at people and what their skills are and what they can bring to the table, instead of announcing just a GS, 2210 that nobody knows what that really is. Instead we will go out and say DHS is looking for digital forensics. Send in your resumes. We will take a look at that. And then we will have the ability to match that up against projects or work that needs to be done, and then we will place people where the work actually is, instead of trying to make them fit into our little neat GS system.

We have looked at the pay. We are going to use market-sensitive pay across the board. And so with that we have been investing in the different economic surveys so that we will be very clear as to what we are going to pay our folks, and it will not just be simply based on the former GS system that we have today.

We have looked at all the different ways of compensation. We have agreed that we are going to put money into—up to probably \$40,000—training for these individuals. We are going to have the ability to go to Black Hat and some of the different conferences and be able to recruit directly and make job offers directly to those folks, out of those different technical conferences and things like that.

So we have really dove into this and we are taking full advantage of what you gave us. By the spring of 2020, all of our regulations should be through the clearance system and we should have our first hires within the spring or the summer of 2020.

So we are very excited about this. We have full support from the leadership, from the top on down. I just had the opportunity to brief our acting deputy secretary the other day, and he is fully supportive of this. OMB is fully supportive of this as well.

I think what you will find is that you gave us something that is just spectacular and we did not waste it. And that is what I am really most proud of: we did not just simply dink around the edges and add another step or something. We actually blew up everything that had to do with the current way of recruiting, hiring, and paying folks, and we are just going to start from scratch and build a 21st Century hiring system.

Senator CARPER. Well, that is great. It reminds me of the parable in the New Testament where the landlord or the boss had like three servants. And he gave one of them 10 talents, and said, "Go out and make something out of this," or 5 talents. He gave another—maybe it was 5 talents—and then he gave another one of them 2 talents, and another one 1 talent. And the one that got 5 talents went out and created 5 more talents. The one that got 2 talents went out and created 2 more. The one that got 1 talent did nothing with it. And it sound like you have taken the 5 talents and the 2 talents and really done something with it. If Tom Coburn were here I think he would come out and we would both give you a high five. Thank you.

Ms. BAILEY. We would be more than glad to come up and brief you personally on it—

Senator CARPER. Would you be willing to travel to Oklahoma where Tom Coburn is now?

Ms. BAILEY. Sure.

Senator CARPER. I am kidding. I will let him know what you are doing.

Ms. BAILEY. OK.

Senator CARPER. But good work.

A real quick question, if I could, for Mr. Sitterly. GAO and others have identified critical skills, gaps, as you know, in areas such as cybersecurity, which have been talking about, auditing, human resources, and procurement, to name just a few. I would just ask, how are you working to ensure that individual hiring decisions are in line with long-term needs of your agency, including tackling those areas identified as critical skills gaps? Please. And just briefly, because my time is about to expire.

Mr. SITTERLY. Thank you for the question, Senator, and thank you for the authorities that you have given us. We are using what we call the three R's—recruiting incentives, retention incentives, relocation incentives—where we have rural areas or hard-to-hire areas. We are using those authorities.

We have scholarships. We are offering education debt forgiveness for both recruiting and retention. Bringing the people to us is not as hard as keeping the people, especially in HR, once we have them. And it is not all about the pay and compensation, quite frankly. The bill that the House, in the Armed Services Committee, just brought forward, with the paid parental leave, I think is something that we need to look at. The Department of Defense has the best paid parental leave policy in the Federal Government, for those in uniform. Every other Federal agency has the worst paid parental leave program.

I would love for the VA to be a pilot program, because I think 60 percent of the VA is women. We have a younger workforce than most of the rest of the Federal Government, and I think we could both recruit and retain workers if we had a paid parental leave program.

Senator CARPER. Thank you all for being here today and thank you for your testimony. Thanks, Madam Chairman.

Senator SINEMA. Senator Carper, we have a few moments. If you have more questions you are welcome to ask a few more.

Senator CARPER. I am supposed to be in three places right now. You probably are too.

Senator SINEMA. Yes, that is true.

Senator CARPER. As a veteran myself, retired Navy captain, thank you very much for all you guys and gals are doing.

Mr. SITTERLY. Thank you, sir. Thank you for your service.

Senator SINEMA. Thank you, Senator.

I have another question for Ms. Bailey. As you have noted, hiring is a complex issue and so is retention. In Arizona, many of our Customs and Border Protection (CBP) employees commute long distances to work in order to live in a larger community and have access to schools or job opportunities for spouses, you mentioned earlier.

These long commutes are not unique to Arizona—I know that they occur in Texas, for sure—and they do cost our border workforce time with family and money for travel. What can we do to help address this specific challenge of the long commute that many families are doing every day?

Ms. BAILEY. We actually did talk about that with the Border Patrol. It is something that is really pretty disconcerting to us, because, to your point, it is like some of them are on the road up to 2 hours, and then whenever they get there, they have to change into their uniforms, and it just makes for an incredibly long day. It is a dangerous day because of how many working hours that they are putting in, and then the commute at the end of the day.

Some of the things that we need to just really kind of think these through, but are there ways for us to create housing, if you will, in those areas, in those border areas. And maybe we can change the shifts in such a way that folks would actually have the opportunity to work kind of like a fire department, where it is four days on, four off shifts.

So those are just some of the innovative things that the Border Patrol is taking into consideration. We will need to work with our unions as well, and with Border Patrol agents, with the leadership, to see if it is even feasible. But, I just want you to know that it is always in the back of our minds to just think of ways that we can address this very complex issue.

Senator SINEMA. Thank you. My next question is for Mr. Sitterly. Under the VA Choice and Quality Employment Act of 2017, the VA is required to conduct exit interviews of outgoing employees and provide that data to Congress. But in reviewing these reports I was interested to see that the number one reason employees left was to move to a new job opportunity. Retirement was second and management issues was third.

So pay was one of the least common reasons, but it often seems we talk about pay first when it comes to retaining employees at the VA. How are you using this data and other data from additional sources to inform your program and policies for attracting and retaining employees?

Mr. SITTERLY. Great question, Senator. Thank you for that. We have our All Employee Survey, which we just completed. We not only have the exit surveys, we have entrance surveys. I just swore in a new class of 31 people this week. More than half of them were returning VA employees.

When you look at the outside and you compare pay, benefits, all of the compensation, it is not always about the opportunity to get paid more. It is often about the opportunity to advance in grade, advance in rank. And so part of our challenge, I think, is onboarding people as they come back, to bring them back into the organizations that they left. And also to make sure that we have a good workforce plan to allow them to grow into the jobs that they have.

Often times we find that the exit surveys are the most immediate way for people to share feedback when they are walking out the door. It is not always pay and compensation but it is advancement. And so as we look at cybersecurity, for an example, when we look at the classification system that we have within the Federal

Government, it is 70 years old. It is a proxy for pay and allowances.

Under Title 38, we hire the person, and we call it rank and person. We hire them according to the specialization that they have—the education, the experience and the talent that they have. With Title 5, we hire to the position; whatever is in the org char.—it could be a GS-12, I would tell you it is very difficult to recruit and retain talent in things like cybersecurity or some of those other shortage fields when you are using that pay structure that we have.

So, yes, the exit surveys tell us that people leave for upward mobile promotions, and/or jobs. Sometimes it is tied to pay and compensation, and sometimes it is not.

Senator LANKFORD [Presiding.] So the ongoing vote is happening, and so I sat down for the first vote and ran back, and then we will pepper you with questions and then I will run back for the second vote and we will see if we can get it in, and other Members may come in and out.

Dr. Jones, let me start with your comment. Since 2001, this has been on GAO's high-risk list. Give me a quick snapshot of what you think is going better and what has made no progress. And if anything is worse, you can say that. I would hope that nothing is worse. But what is better since 2001?

Ms. JONES. I think that since 2001, I think that many agencies and OPM have become much more aware of the need to have strong strategic workforce planning, and to be able to identify the kinds of critical skills that they need to achieve their agencies' missions.

I would say that agencies sometimes are more aware of a need to look at results-oriented management, needing to begin to devise systems to collect information. How shall I say it? A range in agencies' ability to do that, also including OPM.

I think agency leaders have perhaps become more aware of their role in both setting the tone and devising agency policies to improve the management of their workforces, including identifying what kinds of skills they need now and in the future.

I would just say that there is a range in the ability of agencies, not only to do this but to devise systems to measure what they are doing, to analyze data and see how effective the measures that they take are, and then to be able to do it with continuity over time.

Senator LANKFORD. So you think trendline is correct? I am trying to read into what you are saying. There are obviously 29 areas unaddressed currently by OPM. Trendline is improving or trendline is not getting better? Addressing some issues but obviously new issues come.

Ms. JONES. I would say that I think the trendline is getting better, but that we at GAO would like to see some of the changes that we have recommended take place with greater speed. If we were able to do that, while at the same time ensuring that the actions that agencies are taking are well justified and that the agencies are actually understanding any differences, positive differences or any mistakes that they are making.

Senator LANKFORD. OK. So quick story time with James. My very first job was working at Baskin-Robbins, 31 flavors, if you remember that theme that was the deal all the time. I am a teenager wearing a pink and brown polka-dotted outfit. It was great character building for a teenage boy. But I distinctly remember when people walked in with 31 flavors it took forever to pick one, and by default, the majority of the people went to vanilla, the most popular flavor, with 31 options.

We have how many hiring authorities now in the Federal Government?

Ms. BAILEY. 102.

Senator LANKFORD. 102? I have heard as high as 120, depending on the agency if you have additional specialties.

But by default, folks go back to the two or three they like using the most. You had mentioned before, Dr. Jones, about people need to be able to use all of the authorities that are out there, and they are not using all of the authorities.

So the challenge that we have is, there are over 100 different hiring authorities out there, but almost every agency that comes to us says, "We want direct hiring authority. That is what we really want."

So what I need to hear from the two of you, especially, that do this all the time, and for you, Ms. Bailey, especially, coming from OPM and in this position in DHS now, is what do we do to be able to fix the hiring piece, as practical as you can be, especially with all the various hiring authorities that do not work because people just default to the two or three that they know? How do we solve this for your HR folks?

Ms. BAILEY. For starters, one of the first things I would say is please do not give us any more hiring authorities. We just do not need any more.

Senator LANKFORD. You do not need a double chocolate raspberry variation?

Ms. BAILEY. I do not. You can even put sea salt on top of it and I still do not need it, OK?

So what we really need to do is boil this all down, even our veterans' hiring authorities. A lot of time folks will say, that veterans have preference and we can hire veterans this way. But, even for them, there are three or four different ways to hire a veteran, and not all veterans are actually treated the same way, even within the hiring process.

So one of the things from a DHS perspective that we have done, and we have actually introduced the legislation to Congress, is to have our DHS Enhanced Hiring Act consolidate all the hiring authorities for veterans into just one non-competitive hiring authority where we could walk into any military transition center, any university, any place that we would find a veteran, and we would have the opportunity to make them a job offer. That would be extremely helpful for us. It would be helpful for the veterans as well, because they would not have to worry about what their percentage was, or what their rating was, or if they had a campaign badge or not. It would just be beneficial for everyone.

The second thing that we have introduced within our legislation is for our mission-critical positions, as long as our agency is main-

taining 20 percent or higher veterans on board—and right now we are close to 30 percent—and maintain that 30 percent—that we should be able to go out to any source to recruit military spouses, students, people with disabilities, technical skills such as mechanics and things like that.

We need the ability to actually hire people. There is no corporation in the world that has 102 different ways to hire somebody, so it is no wonder that we obviously default to the few that are on the books. It is not because there are favorites. It is just because it is probably the go-to thing for us, and it just makes it easier, because it is all about getting people on board.

So my ask is that we just stop all of this nonsense and just boil it down to a veteran's hiring authority, and a hiring authority that I can use to hire everyone else. And, honestly, it would probably take 6 to 8 weeks, immediately, off the beginning part of the hiring process, if we could even just do that.

Senator LANKFORD. So let me give you the challenge that we have around this desk, and when I walk over to the other building to be able to vote. Some Member of Congress saw some need for some group to get some attention and they passed a bill to give that hiring authority. And it may be named after them or it may be something that was a proud bill they passed, to be able to go back to them and to say, "We are not going to do that anymore. We are going to clean this up because it is overly complicated, has its own political implications on that." That is my problem and I have to deal with that.

Ms. BAILEY. Right.

Senator LANKFORD. Your challenge is that everyone is also going to look at you and going to say, "Does everyone have a competitive shot? Are certain groups going to get more of an opportunity to be able to get in?" You talk about recruiting on a college campus. Mr. Sitterly, you talked about going to where active duty military are and trying to be able to recruit them before they leave, even, to consider VA. That gives college students a detriment to those members of the military that are there, because they are not there on that base. It may be on a college campus there are not as many veterans that are on that college campus, or maybe a percentage but not as many.

Every place you go, some group is going to say, "Yes, but, did my group get the opportunity to be able to engage with this?" What is a way that we can put a system in place to be able to say to DHS or VA or any entity, to say, we expect you to have a workplace as diverse as your environment that you work in, and we expect you to be able to maintain that and be able to reach out to all aspects of the community without having to be heavy-handed in this process? How do we balance that?

Ms. BAILEY. I think one of the ways would be for us to actually measure the results of this. So today DHS, for example, is 47 percent diverse. We have the highest level of diversity within any Federal agency. We are 10 percentage points above the entire Federal Government when it comes to diversity.

Where we fall behind is with women, especially within our law enforcement areas. Today, I have to go to OPM and request a special hiring authority to hire just women. If we were given this au-

thority, I could then create a women-only hiring event and be able to drive up the numbers that I have within our law enforcement community, from a gender perspective.

I think the key to all of this is to measure it and to report it out in a very transparent way. Every agency should be able to report out where they are with regard to all of its diversity numbers. I think we keep track of that. We have plenty of oversight already that keeps track of these kinds of things. But report it out in a very transparent manner. If we are not meeting what we think is a reasonable expectation for an agency when it comes to diversity goals, then we would go back in and revisit it at that point in time.

For me, the problem is that we have all these hiring authorities, we have this incredibly complicated system, and we are not that diverse anyhow. So we ought to try something new and just see if it is going to work, because I would almost bank on the fact that we would probably drive a higher diversity if we had the ability to target the areas that we wanted to, to be able to drive the kinds of numbers that we really want, in order to be able to accomplish our mission.

Senator LANKFORD. OK. Mr. Sitterly, where is she right? Where is she wrong? What would you add to it?

Mr. SITTERLY. Yes. Well, in all fairness, Mr. Chairman, we HR people hang out at the same watering holes in Washington, so it is hard to disagree with her. I absolutely agree. Maybe you start by putting a moratorium on any additional hiring authorities, and you keep the ones we have. OPM, quite frankly, is doing a good job today of collecting data, and we have not had the ability to make evidence-based decisions on data in a long time.

Once we start looking at that data and figure out where the authorities are working best, then you can bring it back to your colleagues and show them where they can be the sponsor of the consolidated personnel pay and authority, if that is what we want to do. They could put their name on it.

But we simply cannot continue to have the complexities in the pay and personnel system that we have. And every time we add a new one, I feel like an HR specialist needs to have graduated from law school in order to implement it. Connecting Title 5 changes with Title 38 changes, with hybrid Title 38 changes, there is always some disconnect.

We have over 600 podiatrists in the VA today who are not getting paid properly, because of just the legal complexities of having changed it from a hybrid Title 38 to a Title 38. We are fixing it, but we have lost the trust and confidence from some very critical people.

I will give you a quick anecdotal story, if I may, Mr. Chairman. In my previous job I was responsible for the day-to-day operations of our front office of 10 people. We had 10 different authorities, 10 different systems that we hired the 10 people in my front office, everything from a political appointee, Senate-confirmed assistant secretary to a career Senior Executive Service (SES), to an acquisition demo, to an intel, to an active duty military, to a Guard, and a Reserve. There were 10 different systems.

And it is not just the hiring authority that is complex. They all have a different assignment policy. They all have a different bonus

structure. They all have a different performance plan. They all have a different retirement plan.

My boss used to beat me up because I spent all the time in the HR business and little of the time doing the policy for a 680,000-person force. And that is the complexity that we face today.

We do, to your point, Mr. Chairman, use those things that we are most familiar with, and we are not using all of the authorities that we have—in many cases. And when we do, we are making mistakes and we are not connecting pay. I would suggest, sir, if I may, that we can work with you and OPM, Dr. Jones, to maybe put a moratorium on anything additional, and then go back and see what it is that we can consolidate.

Senator LANKFORD. So a simple “make it stop”——

Mr. SITTERLY. Make it stop, sir, please.

Senator LANKFORD [continuing]. And then try to figure out how to be able to turn that around.

You mentioned, in your testimony, you used the term “we must be creative in our hiring.” Tell me what you mean by that.

Mr. SITTERLY. The classification system that we use for general GS employees is 70 years old, like I mentioned. We cannot continue competing using old pay scales. It becomes a proxy for pay and compensation. To Senator Rosen’s point, first we have to determine what is a cyber skill that we need, and separate those from coding and software specialties, and infrastructure specialties; that is difficult enough. And then as we recruit for these jobs we get the people that come in, but when they look at our offerings for pay and compensation, particularly at the entry level, we cannot compete.

So throw away the GS system as a proxy for pay and compensation. Go to a Title 38. Put everybody under a Title 38-like structure, where we are paying you for the skill that you bring, we are paying you for the experience that you bring, and putting you into the right job, versus where you are in the hierarchy.

Senator LANKFORD. Right. Especially regionally.

Obviously there are quite a few Federal offices that are in lower cost of living areas, and some that are in extremely high cost of living areas. You mentioned, as well, some of your Border Patrol and some of the difficulties there. If Senator Heitkamp was sitting here she would talk about Northern Border and the difficulty of pay for the Northern Border as well, and the isolation of that.

So how does that fit into what you are saying?

Mr. SITTERLY. Sir, in Title 38, the beauty is there are three components of the pay. It is base pay, it is market pay of that area that you are in, and then it is performance pay. You will see that for a lot of people, their pay will not change, because they are getting paid according to the region that they are in. Some places it will increase, but I believe that if you reduce the turnover and the retraining of their skills that there is a business case to be made to do it with that particular formula.

Senator LANKFORD. Ms. Bailey, there has been a challenge for Federal workers in any agency, leaving, going to the private sector, working in the private sector 10 years, gaining experience, and then coming back into Federal service. How do we fix that?

Ms. BAILEY. First of all, what I would say is that it is kind of a revolving door for some of these folks, and in some specialties,

quite frankly, we are OK with that. In the cyber world, I do not really expect anybody to come in and be a 30-year employee.

Senator LANKFORD. Right.

Ms. BAILEY. I really do expect them to come in and out.

So, one of the things that we are doing is creating, especially with our cyber personnel management system, and the Title 6 that Senator Carper and Senator Coburn have given us, is the ability for folks to come in and out and not be tied to the grade.

As you said, today—and this is pretty insane—you are a GS–11, you leave, you go out to private sector, you might solve all kinds of things, do all kinds of good things, get your Ph.D., come back in, and, well, congratulations, you are a GS–11.

What we have done with our new system is created the ability for them to come back in and pay them at the level at which they actually have brought back in additional experience, additional education, etc.

And so having that ability will be a game-changer for us, because we will be able to keep track of these folks and almost have like a DHS alumni program, if you will, and the ability to keep track of them, and then encourage them to come back in, in a non-competitive way. We should not make them have to compete for the job again as well.

Senator LANKFORD. Ms. Jones, is that something that we should have across all of government?

Ms. JONES. I certainly think, yes, we do need to look at that. We have said, in many different reports for different agencies, that we need to look at ways to make hiring or rehiring Federal staff more flexible, so long as the agency has thought about the policies that they need to do it, or they are testing or measuring the impact that the change in the policy would make, and that they keep a good eye on it so that if something changes in the benefit to the agency over time they know that it is changing, and that they continue to meet the statutory requirements. But yes, more flexibility.

Senator LANKFORD. Ms. Bailey, the USAJobs website is a really beautiful website. When you look at it, just the way it is laid out, very simple, very straightforward. What is the problem with USAJobs? Does it work for you?

Ms. BAILEY. There is not a problem with USAJobs it is basically an electronic jobs board. Back in the day, when I got hired, you went to the Unemployment Office and you pulled something off of a board on the wall. Now it is like an electronic board, right?

The problem I see with USAJobs, is not the technology, but we have a post-and-pray system. So we post something on USAJobs and we just pray somebody finds it, and we pray that they understand what the job announcement says. We pray that they know what a 2210, 13 is.

As a result, it is not conducive to the way people actually interact and find jobs. In the private sector, while they do use these posting on these job boards, they also have the opportunity to go hold a conference, or hold a training session, to network, to do different things and have different approaches to recruiting, to be able to actually get folks to apply for their jobs.

Senator LANKFORD. So you are saying both/and, at this point?

Ms. BAILEY. Yes. I think it is both/and. Because I would not really want to throw out USAJobs because it does have—it has a means, but I also want the ability to go to a Black Hat conference, as an example, and be able to seek out cyber talent, ask for their resumes, get those resumes in, take a look at them, maybe interview them that night, in the lobby, and be able to offer them a job. We need that capability to be able to do that.

USAJobs, though, certainly serves a purpose for some of our other positions, or even that position as well, because it just gives us, to your point, an “and.”

Senator LANKFORD. Mr. Sitterly, do you want to add to that?

Mr. SITTERLY. Mr. Chairman, I agree. I think there is a use for it as a bulletin board. I think the problem with USAJobs is our own problem internally, that when people apply for jobs we are not communicating back that they were considered and not found eligible, they were considered and referred, and so on.

Senator LANKFORD. Is that agency to agency?

Mr. SITTERLY. That is agency to agency. In all fairness, there are jobs that you will get thousands, I mean, literally thousands of applicants for, which is one of the problems about an open and continuous recruiting. You have to be careful with that because you will get the same people that apply for every job out there.

Senator LANKFORD. But that opening, that listing, or the posting is there, let's say, 2 weeks. It will say it is closing today, or it is closing whatever day it is. What is wrong with an automatic email going out to everybody saying, “Hey, thanks for doing this. The consideration will be made. The decision be made. At this point you will be notified,” and then when people are notified that that agency selects this group, and then another email goes out saying “you were not picked for this?”

Mr. SITTERLY. That would be ideal, sir.

Senator LANKFORD. Does anyone do that?

Mr. SITTERLY. I think they do, depending on the hiring authority, and looking, again, are you using the veteran's preference? Somebody has to go through that list to make determination whether or not the individual is in a particular group or not?

Senator LANKFORD. Dr. Jones, do you know if that is done by any of the agencies on a consistent basis, just be able to notify individuals?

Ms. JONES. I am not sure about that.

Senator LANKFORD. It is a common courtesy that if you took the time to be able to go through the process you are not left out there on the line just waiting to be able to find out what happens, and I would assume would get more people actually engaged if they applied, and they engage, and then someone actually engaged back with them. Even if it is a form letter, just to say what is happening, it would certainly be helpful for those individuals, even to know it is closed; you did not get it, is a helpful notice, and most of them never even hear “you did not get it.” It is just hanging out there for months. So that may be one thing we will want to talk about in the days ahead.

Senator LANKFORD. They have called the second vote. You all are so lucky, because I have about 45 other questions to go. But we will follow up on them and we will go through these. The key thing is

that I want to make sure as many practical ideas as you have, that you are willing to be able to share with us. Because we have to move from staring at and marveling at the problem to actually solving the problem.

This Committee has talked the problem to death, and we have to get to what are the practical things to be there. You all know the things we get hung up on. It is veterans preference, it is competitive, it is allowing everybody to be engaged in the process, making sure no one is excluded, making sure agencies are trying to be as diverse as possible, to be able to reach out to as many different people as possible, and to be able to get a hiring process that does not take 107 days to be able to go through this straightforward process.

Our concern is that everyone's interest is being fulfilled except for the applicants and except for the agencies. And if the agencies take this long to be able to get an applicant, people are not going to do it.

I do not think I have shared with you all yet, but this all started for me about 5 years ago when I talked to the folks in McAlester, at the Army Ammunition Depot, and they were trying to hire forklift operators. And they were competing with the warehouses in town.

And for the folks that are going to be a forklift operator, they cannot take 4 months to be able to get an answer if they are going to get a job working a forklift. Three warehouses in town have already offered them a job that afternoon, and when we finally call them back and say, "We want you to do it," they are just loyal enough to their employer, they are not going to quit to come work at the Ammunition Depot, because this new person has hired them and trained them and they are committed to be there now.

So it makes something overly hard that should not be that difficult. And so we want to see if we can actually move this to a faster pace.

Anything that you all want to get on the record right now, before I have to be able to break us, and so I can run and go vote?

Ms. JONES. There is one thing. You talked about diversity. All of the major agencies have to fill out a form, MD-715—it is an EEOC form—every year. They have to look and determine if there are any triggers which are limiting their ability to hire a diverse workforce. Then they have to identify barriers, and they have to look for solutions to any barriers that are impeding them from hiring people with particular characteristics.

There are no targets except for people who have rather severe targeted disabilities. So you mentioned the problem of an agency wanting to hire a diverse workforce but then having to respond to the American public about whether I got my fair chance?

So this is a process in which they compare the demographic characteristics of their agency employees to the demographic characteristics of the relevant civilian labor force. So it is not the whole labor force. It is the one which can be compared, or ones that can be compared to the labor force of the agency.

So they have to do it. If someone comes to them and says, "We did not get our fair chance," they can at least say that they went through this process and they are aware of where, perhaps, maybe

they are not getting as many representatives of a particular demographic group as the relevant civilian labor force has.

So it is not going to necessarily satisfy everybody, but it is an analytical exercise that if done properly, can help them figure out how to diversify their labor forces.

Senator LANKFORD. OK. Thank you.

Ms. BAILEY. Just real quick, three things. One, I could not agree with you more. I just want to see us stop admiring the problem and actually tackle the solutions. Two, I would love to work with you and have you champion our DHS Enhanced Hiring Act so that we can simplify this process, because I think it is well worth it. And three, the DHS workforce deserves our full support. They have an incredibly hard mission and some really pretty difficult and challenging times. And so anything we can do to work together to make sure that we support them and their families is very much appreciated.

Thank you, Chairman.

Senator LANKFORD. Thank you.

Mr. SITTERLY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I will just add that this Congress gave the Department of Defense pilot authority to certify their own qualification review boards (QRBs) for their senior executives. When a senior executive under Title 5 applies for a job they have to submit three documents—their CV or their resume, their technical qualifications, and then what is called executive core qualifications (ECQs).

Presently, those all go to OPM to be graded. Most organizations hire contractors, or the candidate hires a contractor to do it. It is a writing test, whether or not you can spell. I would ask that you consider giving the other Federal agencies some authorities on a pilot basis to do our own certification of the QRBs, as well. Thank you.

Senator LANKFORD. Do you think, by the way, most of those applicants actually write their own stuff, or they are hiring someone to write their materials for them?

Mr. SITTERLY. Sir, most of the Federal Government hire contractors to help them write, at government expense, and, frankly, it is a barrier to getting people from outside of the Federal Government in. The answer is no, they are not writing it.

Senator LANKFORD. That whole process itself, I think, is a problem.

Mr. SITTERLY. So, sir, you gave the DOD a 50-person pilot. We would love to have the same one. That will help expedite the hiring of some of our medical center directors as well.

Senator LANKFORD. OK. Alright. That is very fair. Quite frankly, it is one of my great frustrations that we all pretend that is a document that everyone is writing, and we all quietly wink and nod and know it is not. So I want to be able to try to get that done.

Let us keep the ongoing conversation. We have very good staff that engages on these areas and we are trying to gather it out. We will go through the proposed legislation that you have gone, to be able to look at the enhanced hiring from DHS, to be able to see what fits there, or what could be a broader experiment for the entire Federal Government.

But we have to be able to move this. And any ongoing dialogue that we can have, both with OPM, colleagues on both the Republican and Democrat side, would be exceptionally helpful, because this is not a partisan issue. This is all of government. It is not new in this Administration. It has been growing and has been an issue for a long time. So we will try to be able to work together see if we cannot solve this.

That does conclude today's hearing. I do want to thank all of you for your testimony. I do appreciate very much the work that you put into preparing for this and being a part of this dialogue today.

The hearing record remains open for 15 days until the close of business on Wednesday, August 14, for the submission of statements and questions for the record.

This hearing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 3:35 pm., the Subcommittee was adjourned.]

A P P E N D I X

Opening Statement Hearing before the Regulatory Affairs And Federal Management Subcommittee, Tuesday, July 30th at 2:30 PM

- Good afternoon and welcome to today's Subcommittee hearing titled "Solutions to Improve Federal Hiring."
- We are here today to address the hiring crisis in federal government—it takes too long to fill vacancies causing agencies to miss out on top talent. This is not a new problem. It is universally acknowledged that 106 days is too long to hire someone.
- The best and the brightest candidates will not wait around for three and a half months and our strategy cannot rely on hoping that they do.

- We all agree there is a problem and yet it continues year after year.
- The point of today's hearing is to talk about solutions.
- From our agency witnesses, I want to know what you are doing to reduce the time to hire in your agency and ensure the best candidates are filling open positions.
- From GAO, I want to know how your open recommendations would improve this process.
- I want to move on to discussing solutions, so with that, I recognize Ranking Member Sinema for her opening remarks.

Sen. Kyrsten Sinema
 Opening Statement for the Record
 July 30, 2019
 RAHM Hearing - Solutions to Improve Federal Hiring

The Federal workforce plays a critical component in ensuring each federal agency can meet its mission. The Federal government employs nearly two million full-time, non-seasonal workers. The Departments of Homeland Security and Veterans Affairs are among the largest employers of the federal agencies, and play a critical role in taking care of Arizona's veterans and keeping its citizens safe. Without strong human capital management, these agencies cannot do their jobs – the VA cannot provide medical support and benefits to veterans. DHS cannot properly protect our borders.

Arizona is home to over 500,000 veterans. These veterans are spread out across urban, suburban, and rural areas, and our VA Medical Centers are tasked with recruiting and retaining the best talent to serve these veterans. Especially in rural areas, hiring and retaining staff is very challenging. The Department of Homeland Security faces similar challenges with agents and officers often working in highly remote locations with challenging workloads.

Not only do we need to be sure these agencies have the right tools to recruit and retain their workforces, but it is imperative that agency leadership recognize and prioritize the development of exceptional human resources personnel. In many of the conversations my office has had to better define the challenges with federal hiring, it is clear that a large factor determining the success of a human capital management program is the culture of an agency and the priority that leadership places on good hiring and retention.

Human Capital Management has been included on the Government Accountability Office's (GAO) High Risk List since 2001. GAO has put out countless reports with many good recommendations to address the challenges both government-wide and agency-specific. Some of these recommendations have been implemented, many have not. Regardless, the federal human capital management system continues to need attention. The average hiring time for a federal employee is 106 days. For some, such as law enforcement personnel with DHS, this process can take much longer. This lengthy hiring process is a huge disincentive for qualified, talented individuals seeking a career in civil service. With 32 percent of all federal employees eligible to retire by 2022, it is even more imperative that the agencies prioritize developing and implementing a strategic plan for hiring and retaining employees.

In Arizona, we see this need every day. Along the border with Mexico, Arizona's ports of entry remain chronically understaffed which impacts crossing times and our trading relationships with other nations, as well as unsustainable overtime and burnout for officers. For the VA, our Arizona medical centers are struggling to fill vacant positions, whether those positions be for medical professionals or facility support personnel. These positions are critical to ensuring safe, effective, and efficient care for Arizona veterans.

Federal agencies must identify their workforce needs for the short and long-term, and prioritize filling the gaps that currently exist. Active recruitment must be a part of that plan, but, more broadly, the agencies must look at innovative solutions that provide flexibility in recruiting and retention. Agency leadership must embrace such efforts.

For an employer of nearly two million people, to the federal government simply can't be complacent while knowing that their human capital management strategies are not adequate. I am interested in

focusing on solutions that the agencies must invest in, as well as the legislative support that Congress can lend.

For far too long, human capital management and the professionals that lead this mission across the federal agencies have not been prioritized. The agencies should independently and collectively strive to achieve the most efficient, effective, and innovative federal workforce possible, and I am committed to supporting that effort.

United States Government Accountability Office



Testimony

Before the Subcommittee on Regulatory
Affairs and Federal Management,
Committee on Homeland Security and
Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

For Release on Delivery
Expected at 2:30 p.m. ET
Tuesday, July 30, 2019

HUMAN CAPITAL

Improving Federal Recruiting and Hiring Efforts

Statement of Yvonne D. Jones, Director,
Strategic Issues

GAO Highlights

Highlights of GAO-19-696T, a testimony to the Subcommittee on Regulatory Affairs and Federal Management, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

Strategic human capital management plays a critical role in maximizing the government's performance and assuring its accountability to Congress and to the nation as a whole.

GAO designated strategic human capital management as a government-wide, high-risk area in 2001. Since then, important progress has been made. However, retirements and the potential loss of leadership and institutional knowledge, coupled with fiscal pressures, underscore the importance of a strategic and efficient approach to acquiring and retaining individuals with critical skills. As a result, strategic human capital management remains on GAO's High-Risk List.

This testimony is based on a large body of GAO work issued from May 2008 through May 2019. This testimony, among other things, focuses on key human capital areas where some actions have been taken but attention is still needed by OPM and federal agencies on issues including: (1) addressing critical skills gaps and (2) recruiting and hiring talented employees.

What GAO Recommends

Over the years, GAO has made numerous recommendations to agencies and OPM to improve their strategic human capital management efforts. Agencies have taken actions to implement some of these recommendations, but many remain open. GAO encourages OPM and the agencies to fully implement the recommendations.

View GAO-19-696T. For more information, contact Yvonne D. Jones at (202) 512-6806 or yjones@gao.gov.

July 30, 2019

HUMAN CAPITAL

Improving Federal Recruiting and Hiring Efforts

What GAO Found

GAO, along with the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) and individual agencies, has identified skills gaps in numerous government-wide occupations. According to GAO's 2019 analysis of federal high-risk areas, skills gaps played a role in 17 of the 35 high-risk areas. Causes vary but these skills gaps often occur due to shortfalls in one or more talent management activities such as robust workforce planning. Staffing shortages and the lack of skills among current staff not only affect individual agencies but also cut across the entire federal workforce in areas such as cybersecurity and acquisition management. Additionally, the changing nature of federal work and the high percentage of employees eligible for retirement could produce gaps in leadership and institutional knowledge, and threatens to aggravate the problems created from existing skills gaps. For example, 31.6 percent of permanent federal employees who were on board as of September 30, 2017, will be eligible to retire in the next 5 years with some agencies having particularly high levels of employees eligible to retire.

GAO's work has identified a range of problems and challenges with federal recruitment and hiring efforts. Some of these problems and challenges include unclear job announcements and a lengthy hiring process. Further, the federal workforce has changed since the government's system of current employment policies and practices were designed. Strategies that can help agencies better manage the current and future workforces include:

Manage the timing of recruitment. To address issues of funding uncertainty at the beginning of the fiscal year, agencies should recruit continuously, starting the hiring process early in the school year.

Write user-friendly vacancy announcements. GAO has reported that some federal job announcements were unclear. This can confuse applicants and delay hiring. OPM stated that when hiring managers partner with human resources staff, agencies can develop more effective vacancy announcements.

Leverage available hiring and pay flexibilities. To help ensure agencies have the talent they need, they should explore and use all existing hiring authorities. A variety of special pay authorities can help agencies compete in the labor market for top talent, but GAO has found that agencies only use them for a small number of employees.

Increase support for an inclusive work environment. An increasingly diverse workforce can help provide agencies with the requisite talent and multidisciplinary knowledge to accomplish their missions.

Encourage rotations and other mobility opportunities. Upward and lateral mobility opportunities are important for retaining employees, but few employees move horizontally because managers are sometimes reluctant to lose employees.

Without these measures, the federal government's ability to address the complex social, economic, and security challenges facing the country may be compromised.

United States Government Accountability Office

Chairman Lankford, Ranking Member Sinema, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to be here today to discuss the state of the 21st century federal civil service and what can be done to improve federal hiring and close mission-critical skills gaps. The government's system of current employment policies was designed generations ago for a workforce and type of work that largely no longer exist. Much has changed since the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 and the Classification Act of 1949 laid the foundation of much of today's federal personnel system.¹ Agencies' missions have evolved and employees' expectations of work and the workplace are changing. Further, an increasingly volatile world makes understanding and responding to evolving trends and issues essential.² As we have long reported, strategic human capital management plays a critical role in maximizing the government's performance and assuring its accountability to Congress and to the nation as a whole.

Strategic human capital management has been a GAO high-risk area since 2001. Since then, Congress, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), and some individual agencies have made progress towards addressing the government's human capital challenges. As we reported in March 2019, although progress has been made toward improving the government's human capital efforts, the area remains high-risk because more work is needed to address government-wide mission critical skills gaps. As our 2019 analysis of all federal high-risk areas shows, skills gaps played a role in 17 of the 35 governmentwide high-risk areas we have identified.³

In December 2016, OPM finalized revisions to its strategic human capital management regulation that include the new Human Capital Framework.⁴

¹ Civil Service Reform Act of 1978, Pub. L. No. 95-454, 92 Stat. 1111 (Oct. 13, 1978) and Classification Act of 1949, Pub. L. No. 81-429, 63 Stat. 954 (Oct. 28, 1949).

² Our latest strategic plan for 2018-2023 explores eight key trends that will have a major impact on the nation and its government. See GAO, GAO 2018-2023 Strategic Plan: Trends Affecting Government and Society, GAO-18-396SP (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 22, 2018).

³ GAO, *High Risk Series: Substantial Efforts Needed to Achieve Greater Progress on High Risk Areas*, GAO-19-157SP (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 6, 2019).

⁴ Personnel Management in Agencies, 81 Fed. Reg. 89357 (Dec. 12, 2016) (*codified, as amended, at 5 C.F.R. pt. 250, subpt. B*).

This framework is to be used by agencies to plan, implement, evaluate, and improve human capital policies and programs. Additionally, the revised regulation provides that agency human capital policies and programs must monitor and address skills gaps within government-wide and agency-specific mission-critical occupations by using comprehensive data analytic methods and gap closure strategies. The revised regulation, which became effective on April 11, 2017, also requires that agencies conduct a quarterly, data-driven review process known as HRStat,⁵ which, as we reported in 2015, could be an important tool in reviewing key performance metrics related to closing skills gaps.

This statement among other things focuses on key human capital areas where some actions have been taken but attention is still needed by OPM and federal agencies on issues including (1) addressing critical skills gaps, and (2) recruiting and hiring talented employees. The statement is based on our large body of work on federal human capital management issued primarily between May 2008 and May 2019. More detailed information on our objectives, scope, and methodology for that work can be found in the issued reports. We conducted the work on which this statement is based in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

OPM and Agencies Need to Strengthen Efforts to Identify and Close Mission-Critical Skills Gaps

The federal government faces long-standing challenges in strategically managing its workforce. We first added federal strategic human capital management to our list of high-risk government programs and operations in 2001.⁶ Because skills gaps within individual federal agencies—as well as across the federal workforce—can lead to costly, less-efficient government, the issue has been identified as the focus of the Strategic Human Capital Management GAO high-risk area since February 2011. Our experience has shown that the key elements needed to make

⁵OPM established HRStat as a pilot in May 2012 whereby agency Chief Human Capital Officers (CHCO) would hold quarterly review sessions to assess progress against performance metrics that contribute to agency human resources goals. This pilot built on the quarterly data-driven reviews that were required for agency (and cross agency) priority goals under the Government Performance Results Act Modernization Act of 2010.

⁶GAO, High Risk Series: An Update, GAO-01-263 (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 1, 2001).

progress in high-risk areas are top-level attention by the administration and agency leaders grounded in the five criteria for removal from the High-Risk List, as well as any needed congressional action. The five criteria for removal are: (1) leadership commitment, (2) agency capacity, (3) existence of a corrective action plan, (4) program monitoring, and (5) demonstrated progress.

Although Congress, OPM, and individual agencies have made improvements since 2001, federal human capital management remains a high-risk area because mission-critical skills gaps within the federal workforce pose a high risk to the nation.⁷ GAO, along with OPM and individual agencies, has identified mission critical skills gaps in numerous government-wide occupations. These skills gaps both within federal agencies and across the federal workforce impede the government from cost-effectively serving the public and achieving results. For example, the difficulties in recruiting and retaining skilled health care providers and human resource staff at Veterans Health Administration's (VHA) medical centers make it difficult to meet the health care needs of more than 9 million veterans. As a result, VHA's 168 medical centers have large staffing shortages, including physicians, registered nurses, physician assistants, psychologists, physical therapists, as well as human resource specialists and assistants.

In October 2017, we reported that the VHA, within the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), has opportunities to improve staffing, recruitment, and retention strategies for physicians that it identified as a priority for staffing, or mission-critical.⁸ For 2016, the top five physician mission-critical occupations were primary care, mental health, gastroenterology, orthopedic surgery, and emergency medicine. However, VHA was unable to accurately count the total number of physicians who provide care in its VA medical centers (VAMC). Additionally, VHA lacked data on the number of contract physicians and physician trainees. Five of the six VAMCs in our review used contract physicians or physician trainees to meet their staffing needs, but VHA had no information on the extent to

⁷A skills gap may consist of one or both of the following: (1) a staffing gap, in which an agency has an insufficient number of individuals to complete its work; or (2) a competency gap, in which an agency has individuals without the appropriate skills, abilities, or behaviors to successfully perform the work.

⁸GAO, *Veterans Health Administration: Better Data and Evaluation Could Help Improve Physician Staffing, Recruitment and Retention Strategies* GAO-18-124 (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 19, 2017).

which VAMCs nationwide use these arrangements. We also reported that VHA had not evaluated the effectiveness of its physician recruitment and retention strategies. One such strategy—hiring physician trainees—was weakened by ineffectual hiring practices, such as delaying employment offers until graduation.

In February 2018, we reported that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) had taken actions to identify, categorize, and assign employment codes to its cybersecurity positions, as required by the Homeland Security Cybersecurity Workforce Assessment Act of 2014; however, its actions were not timely and complete.⁹ While DHS has implemented four of our six recommendations from this report, two recommendations remain open. For example, DHS has not yet completed its efforts to identify all of the department's cybersecurity positions and accurately assign codes to all filled and vacant cybersecurity positions. Further, it has not yet fully developed guidance to assist DHS components in identifying their cybersecurity work categories and specialty areas of critical need that align to the National Initiative for Cybersecurity Education framework. Without ensuring that its progress in identifying and assigning codes to its positions is accurately reported and it has guidance to fully assist components, DHS will not be positioned to effectively examine its cybersecurity workforce, identify its critical skill gaps, or improve its workforce planning.

In March 2019, we reported that 24 federal agencies generally assigned work roles to filled and vacant positions that performed information technology, cybersecurity, or cyber-related functions as required by the Federal Cybersecurity Workforce Assessment Act of 2015.¹⁰ However, most agencies had likely miscategorized the work roles of many IT positions. Until agencies accurately categorize their positions, the agencies may not have reliable information to form a basis for effectively examining their cybersecurity workforce, improving workforce planning, and identifying their workforce roles of critical need.

Skills gaps caused by insufficient number of staff, inadequate workforce planning, and a lack of training in critical skills are contributing to our

⁹GAO, *Cybersecurity Workforce: Urgent Need for DHS to Take Actions to Identify Its Position and Critical Skill Requirements*, GAO-18-175 (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 6, 2018).

¹⁰GAO, *Cybersecurity Workforce: Agencies Need to Accurately Categorize Positions to Effectively Identify Critical Staffing Needs*, GAO-19-144 (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 12, 2019).

designating strategic human capital management and other areas as high risk. (See table 1.) Skills gaps affect individual agencies but also cut across the entire federal workforce in areas such as cybersecurity and acquisition management. As our 2019 analysis of federal high-risk areas shows, in addition to Strategic Human Capital Management, skills gaps played a role in 16 of the other 34 high-risk areas we have identified.¹¹

Table 1: Skills Gaps Related to High-Risk Areas

High-risk area	Examples of skills gaps and causes
2020 Decennial Census	Staffing: Lack of staff to oversee the \$886 million contract for integrating the Information Technology (IT) systems needed to conduct the 2020 Census.
Strengthening Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Management Functions	Workforce Planning: Lack of guidance on how to identify critical cybersecurity and acquisition skills needed to support its new IT delivery model. Training: Insufficient technical skills to support its biometric identification services program.
Department of Defense (DOD) Business Systems Modernization	Workforce Planning: Incomplete assessment of the extent to which DOD personnel meet IT management knowledge and skill requirements. Staffing: Slow and inefficient hiring processes have led to challenges in recruiting and retaining qualified chief information officers (CIO) and IT personnel. Training: Statutorily required guidance and training for cross-functional team members and presidential appointees not completed.
DOD Financial Management	Staffing: Financial management staff remains insufficient in number, qualifications, and expertise.
DOD Contract Management	Staffing: Challenges in recruiting talent for acquisition management.
Department of Energy's (DOE) Contract Management for the National Nuclear Security Administration and Office of Environmental Management	Workforce Planning: Unmet critical staffing needs and evidence that the agency is understaffed across all functions. Staffing: Competing agency priorities and limited hiring have contributed to critical staff shortages to manage and oversee strategic materials programs.
U.S. Government's Environmental Liability	Training: Lack of information to evaluate overall project and program performance, including number of staff and skills needed to meet its environmental management cleanup mission.
Improving Federal Management of Programs that Serve Tribes and Their Members	Staffing: Lack of expert staff to review proposals for wind and solar projects, or petroleum engineers to review oil and gas proposals. Additionally, shortages of health care providers, including physicians, nurses, midwives, dentists, and pharmacists. Training: Limited funding and lack of a safety training plan contributed to incomplete training to protect Bureau of Indian Education schools.
Management of Federal Oil and Gas Resources	Workforce Planning: Lacks plan for identifying key oil and gas positions and their respective technical competencies. No evaluation of the effectiveness of its recruitment and retention incentives as well as its student loan repayment program. Training: No evaluation of its training needs, training effectiveness, or opportunities for its bureaus to share training resources.

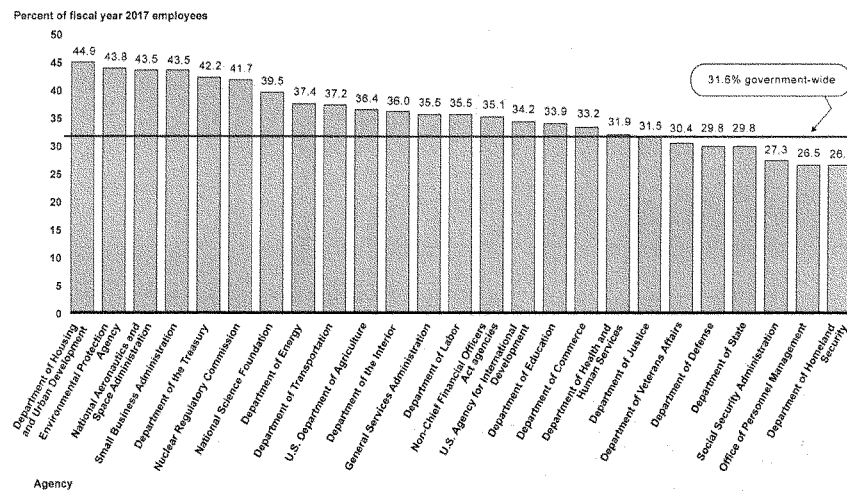
¹¹GAO-19-157SP.

High-risk area	Examples of skills gaps and causes
National Aeronautics and Space Administration Acquisition Management	Staffing and Skills: Lacks staff or staff with skills in the areas of avionics, flight software, systems engineering, business management, software development for certain acquisition projects, as well as gaps in areas such as cost estimating and earned value management capabilities.
Protecting Public Health Through Enhanced Oversight of Medical Products	Staffing: At times, significant gaps in staffing still remain during the time staff complete necessary processes to be stationed overseas.
Improving and Modernizing Federal Disability Programs	Staffing: The Social Security Administration's disability appeals plan calls for increased hiring to reduce disability appeals backlogs and improve timeliness, and VA has not completed hiring and planning efforts to ensure it has the capacity to comprehensively update its disability eligibility criteria.
Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Acquisition Management	Training: Lack of training for contracting officers.
Managing Risks and Improving VA Health Care	Workforce Planning: No annual tracking and reviewing of data related to IT skills needed in the future. Staffing: Insufficient number of community care staff and medical support assistants. Training: No assessment of the training needs or monitoring of completed training for patient advocate positions.
Ensuring the Cybersecurity of the Nation	Staffing and Training: The administration's June 2018 government reform plan includes recommendations for solving the federal cybersecurity workforce shortage, including prioritizing and accelerating efforts to reform how the federal government recruits, evaluates, selects, pays, and places cyber talent.
Improving the Management of IT Acquisitions and Operations	Workforce Planning: None of the 24 major federal agencies had IT management policies that fully addressed the role of their CIOs. The majority of the agencies minimally addressed or did not address their CIO's role in assessing agency IT workforce needs, and developing strategies and plans for meeting those needs.

Source: GAO analysis of high-risk areas. | GAO-19-696T

Insufficient numbers of staff with critical skills can be related to staff retirements as well as to inadequate recruitment and hiring. Moreover, if not carefully managed, anticipated retirements could widen skills gaps or open new ones, adversely affecting agencies' capabilities. As shown in figure 1, more than 31 percent of federal employees on board by the end of fiscal year 2017 will be eligible to retire in the next 5 years.

Figure 1: Percentage of Federal Employees on Board as of September 30, 2017, Eligible to Retire in the Next Five Years by Agency



Agency

Source: GAO analysis of Office of Personnel Management's Enterprise Human Resources Integration database as of September 30, 2017. | GAO-19-496T

Note: Our calculations include permanent federal employees. "Eligible to retire" is defined as when a person is eligible to retire with an unreduced annuity. The graphic is a snapshot in time of fiscal year 2017 employee's retirement eligibility and is not a prediction of future eligibility rates. For example, the graphic does not take into account employees that may enter or leave the agency in the next 5 years.

Key Strategies and Practices for Recruiting, Incentivizing and Engaging the Current and Future Federal Workforce

In March 2019, we reported on key talent management strategies that can help agencies better manage the current and future workforce.¹² Below we focus on nine selected practices we identified related to recruiting, incentivizing, and engaging the federal workforce:

Cultivate a diverse talent pipeline. In our prior work, we have noted the importance of active campus recruiting that goes beyond infrequent outreach to college campuses.¹³ Active campus recruiting includes developing long-term institutional relationships with faculty, administrators, and students. In addition, OPM guidance emphasizes that agencies should develop an inclusive approach to their talent acquisition strategies. This includes developing strategic partnerships with a diverse range of colleges and universities, trade schools, apprentice programs, and affinity organizations from across the country.

Recruit continuously and start the hiring process early in the school year. The ability to hire students is critical to ensuring that agencies have a range of experience levels for succession planning and a talent pipeline to meet mission requirements. One of the key challenges agencies face in recruiting students is managing the timing of recruitment.¹⁴ The federal fiscal year begins on October 1—about when private sector firms we interviewed start recruiting on campus. Frequently, however, federal agencies have been unable to hire at this time of year because of the limitations of budget uncertainty. Yet if agencies wait to start the recruiting and hiring process until they receive funding, many graduates will have taken other job opportunities.

Agencies can overcome these timing challenges by recruiting continuously and starting the hiring process early in the school year. To recruit continuously, Chief Human Capital Officers (CHCOs) from the U.S. Departments of Agriculture and Homeland Security said that they advertise funding-conditional positions throughout the year.¹⁵

¹²GAO, *Key Talent Management Strategies for Agencies to Better Meet Their Missions*, GAO-19-181 (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 28, 2019).

¹³ GAO, *GAO Human Capital Management: Efforts Taken to Ensure Effective Campus Recruitment*, GAO-11-615T (Washington, D.C.: June 21, 2011).

¹⁴GAO-19-181.

¹⁵GAO-19-181.

Write user-friendly vacancy announcements. We previously reported that some federal job announcements were unclear. This can confuse applicants and delay hiring.¹⁶ In July 2018, OPM officials stated that agencies can develop more effective vacancy announcements when hiring managers partner with human resource (HR) staff. According to OPM, hiring managers can work with HR staff to identify the critical competencies needed in the job, develop a recruiting strategy, and ensure the job announcement accurately and clearly describes the required competencies and experience. To promote collaboration between hiring managers and HR staff, OPM is training agencies on the role of hiring managers in writing vacancy announcements, according to OPM officials.

Strategically leverage available hiring and pay flexibilities. To help ensure agencies have the talent they need to meet their missions, we have found that federal agencies should have a hiring process that is simultaneously applicant friendly, sufficiently flexible to enable agencies to meet their needs, and consistent with statutory requirements, such as hiring on the basis of merit.¹⁷ Key to achieving this is the hiring authority used to bring applicants onboard.¹⁸

In March 2019, we reported that CHCOs cited the complex competitive examining process as a cause of the lengthy hiring time.¹⁹ This has been a long-standing concern. In our 2002 report on human capital flexibilities, we noted that for many years prior, federal managers had complained that competitive examining procedures were rigid and complex.²⁰ Agencies can use a number of additional hiring authorities beyond competitive examining. These authorities can add flexibility to the process and CHCOs have expressed a desire for more. However, we previously found that agencies relied on only a small number of available

¹⁶GAO, *Human Capital: Transforming Federal Recruiting and Hiring Efforts*, GAO-08-762T (Washington, D.C.: May 8, 2008).

¹⁷GAO, *Federal Hiring: OPM Needs to Improve Management and Oversight of Hiring Authorities*, GAO-16-521 (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 2, 2016).

¹⁸A hiring authority is the law, executive order, or regulation that allows an agency to hire a person into the federal civil service.

¹⁹GAO-19-181.

²⁰GAO, *Human Capital: Effective Use of Flexibilities Can Assist Agencies in Managing Their Workforces*, GAO-03-2 (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 6, 2002).

authorities.²¹ In fiscal year 2014, of the 105 hiring authority codes used in total, agencies relied on 20 hiring authority codes to make around 90 percent of the new appointments.

We recommended in 2016 that OPM use information from its reviews of agencies' use of certain hiring authorities to determine whether opportunities exist to refine, consolidate, or expand agency-specific authorities, and implement changes where OPM is authorized, including seeking presidential authorization or developing legislative proposals if necessary. OPM agreed with our recommendation and has made progress in these areas, although more work is needed to follow through on planned actions to streamline authorities.

For example, in December 2018, OPM said that it continues to research and examine streamlining opportunities, such as those identified in its July 2018 study on excepted service hiring authorities. However, OPM did not provide a time frame for implementation. In addition, in its March 2019 Congressional Justification for the Fiscal Year 2020 Budget Request, OPM included legislative proposals for new hiring authorities, such as authority for short-term appointments to allow agencies to appoint and compensate highly qualified experts to help agencies meet critical needs as well as a change to the criteria for granting direct hire authority.

A variety of special pay authorities can help agencies compete in the labor market for top talent, but agencies only use them for a small number of employees. In fiscal year 2016, these incentives were used for less than 6 percent of employees. In December 2017, we reported that agencies can tap an array of special payments when they need to recruit or retain experts in engineering, cybersecurity, or other in-demand fields.²² These payments include, for example, incentives for recruitment or retention, or higher rates of pay for critical positions. We found that agencies reported that these payments were helpful, but few documented their effects, and OPM had not assessed their effectiveness. Further, in our March 2019 report, we found that less than 5 percent of employees

²¹GAO-16-521.

²²GAO, *Federal Pay: Opportunities Exist to Enhance Strategic Use of Special Payments*, GAO-18-91 (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 7, 2017).

received payments for recruitment or retention annually in the past 10 years.²³

In December 2017, we made three recommendations to OPM, including for it to track the effectiveness of special payment authorities. OPM partially concurred with this recommendation, saying that agencies are in the best position to take this action. In December 2018, OPM stated that it established a baseline to measure changes in the use of special payment authorities over time, and that it is focused on government-wide, mission-critical occupations to help identify trends where there may be recruitment and retention difficulties. However, documents OPM provided gave no information on actions taken on this recommendation. We will continue to monitor OPM's actions to implement this recommendation. This is one of 18 priority recommendations in GAO's Priority Recommendations letter to OPM.²⁴

Use relevant assessment methods and share hiring lists. In March 2019, we reported that CHCOs and OPM officials we interviewed stated that roadblocks to hiring the right skills include issues with assessment methods.²⁵ Specifically, agencies may use methods that are less relevant for assessing the desired skills or agencies may experience issues incorporating multiple assessments in the hiring process. For example, one CHCO we interviewed said that her agency uses multiple-choice questions to assess candidates, but essay questions more effectively assess the skills she seeks. OPM issued guidance to agencies on how to use additional assessment methods, including how to rank applicants.

Additionally, federal employee and management group representatives we spoke with said agencies could reduce the time of the assessment process by sharing hiring lists.²⁶ The Competitive Service Act of 2015

²³Not all employees are eligible for special payments. We calculated the percentage of employees who received recruitment incentives as the number of recruitment incentives in a fiscal year divided by the total number of hires in a fiscal year. We calculated the percentage of employees who received retention incentives as the number of retention incentives divided by the average count of permanent employees at the beginning and end of the fiscal year.

²⁴GAO, *Priority Open Recommendations: Office of Personnel Management*, GAO-19-322SP (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 3, 2019).

²⁵GAO-19-181.

²⁶GAO-19-181.

allows agencies to share hiring lists, but agencies have only started to pilot the practice within departments, according to OPM officials we spoke with for our March 2019 report. OPM and agencies discussed sharing hiring certificates with the CHCO Council, and OPM is planning virtual training sessions on this topic. However, one federal employee group representative noted that to be consistent with merit principles, agencies may need to refresh the list every 2 to 3 months to give new candidates the opportunity to enter the application pool.

Highlight agency mission and link to employees' work. Agencies can help counter negative perceptions of federal work by promoting their missions and innovative work, according to experts and CHCOs we interviewed for our March 2019 report.²⁷ For example, DHS's CHCO told us that DHS provides "Day in the Life" information on its work to promote public awareness of how its everyday tasks tie in with its mission of protecting the United States.

In addition, we have previously reported that high-performing organizations create a "line of sight" between individual performance and organizational results by aligning employees' daily activities with broader results.²⁸ Agencies can motivate and retain employees by connecting them to their agency's mission, according to human capital experts and federal employee and management group representatives we interviewed. Employee responses to Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS) indicate the federal government appears to be performing well in this area. In 2017, 84 percent of employees knew how their work related to the agency goals and priorities.²⁹

Increase awareness of benefits and incentives, such as work-life programs. As shown in figure 2, the majority of federal employees were satisfied with compensation, and employees who participated in work-life programs were satisfied with those incentives.³⁰ However, OPM's 2018

²⁷GAO-19-181.

²⁸GAO, *Results-Oriented Cultures: Creating a Clear Linkage between Individual Performance and Organizational Success*, GAO-03-488 (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 14, 2003).

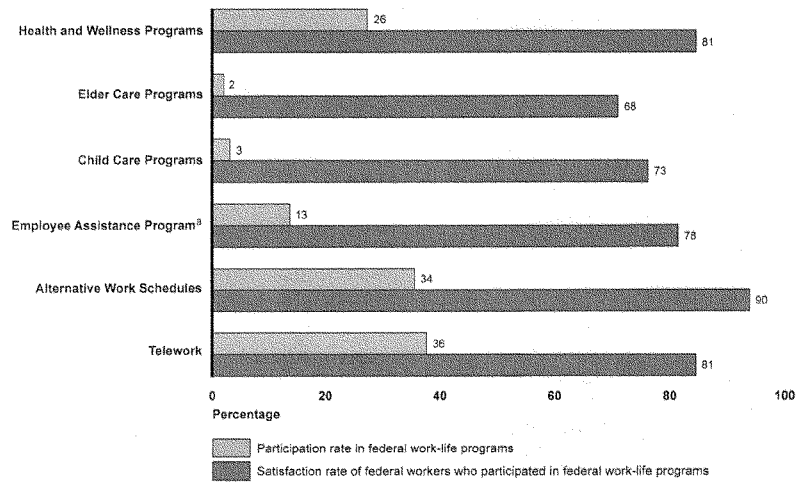
²⁹GAO-19-181.

³⁰The 2017 FEVS is based on a generalizable sample of 1,139,882 employees. Unless otherwise noted, the margin of error for all estimates was within +/- 1 percent. Responses to satisfaction with work-life balance programs were recoded as missing if the respondent did not participate in the work-life balance program.

Federal Work-Life Survey Governmentwide Report found that one of the most commonly reported reasons employees do not participate in work-life programs is lack of program awareness among employees and supervisors.³¹

Figure 2: Fewer Than Half of Survey Respondents Participate in Federal Work-Life Programs, but Those Who Participate Are Satisfied, 2017

Federal Work-life Programs



Source: GAO analysis of Office of Personnel Management Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS) data. 1. GAO-19-696T

Note: Responses stating that work life programs were not available ranged from 5 to 20 percent. Neutral responses on satisfaction ranged from 6 to 30 percent. The margin of error for all estimates was within +/- 1 percent. For more details, see appendix I in report GAO-19-181.

^aThe employee assistance program is a voluntary program that offers free counseling and assessments to employees who have personal or work-related problems.

³¹See Office of Personnel Management, *Federal Work-Life Survey Governmentwide Report* (Washington, D.C.: March 2018).

Increase support for an inclusive work environment. An increasingly diverse workforce can help provide agencies with the requisite talent and multidisciplinary knowledge to accomplish their missions.³² In January 2005, we reported fostering a diverse and inclusive workplace could help organizations reduce costs by reducing turnover, increasing employee retention across demographic groups, and improving morale.³³ We also reported that top management commitment is a fundamental element in the implementation of diversity management initiatives.

Encourage details, rotations, and other mobility opportunities. In March 2019, we stated that CHCOs, human capital experts, and federal management groups said upward and lateral mobility opportunities are important for retaining employees.³⁴ CHCOs also said that in some cases, lateral mobility opportunities such as rotations, details, and opportunities to gain experience in other sectors can help employees gain new skills more cost-effectively than training, particularly for rapidly changing skill sets such as those related to the sciences. Further, we previously reported that effective interagency rotational assignments can develop participants' collaboration skills and build interagency networks.³⁵

However, according to OPM data, few employees in 2017 moved horizontally because, according to federal manager group representatives and our previous work, managers are sometimes reluctant to lose employees. (See table 2.)

³²GAO-19-181.

³³GAO, *Diversity Management: Expert-Identified Leading Practices and Agency Examples*, GAO-05-90 (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 14, 2005).

³⁴GAO-19-181.

³⁵GAO, *Interagency Collaboration: State and Army Personnel Rotation Programs Can Build on Positive Results with Additional Preparation and Evaluation*, GAO-12-386 (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 9, 2012).

Table 2: Few Permanent Employees Moved Horizontally, 2017

Horizontal movement	Percent of permanent employees
Details	0.01
Interagency transfers	0.6

Source: GAO analysis of Office of Personnel Management Enterprise Human Resources Integration (EHR) Data. | GAO-19-696T

Notes: EHR captures details to state or local governments, international organizations, and higher grade positions or positions with promotion potential. Interagency transfers do not include Senior Executive Service transfers or transfers due to career assistance programs.

We calculated the number of permanent employees using the average count of permanent employees at the beginning and end of the fiscal year.

We have previously made recommendations that could help address these challenges. For example in 2015, we recommended that OPM determine if promising practices, such as providing detail opportunities or rotational assignments to managerial candidates prior to promotion, should be more widely used across government.³⁶ OPM partially concurred with this recommendation and agreed to work with the CHCO Council to explore more government-wide use of rotational assignments. However, OPM noted that agencies already have authority to take these actions. In June 2019, OPM officials told us they had discussed the scalability of promising practices for supervisors—specifically, details and rotational assignments and a dual career ladder—with members of the CHCO Council. OPM found these practices were being used at some agencies, but has not determined if these practices may be beneficial to other agencies.

In conclusion, OPM has instituted numerous efforts to assist agencies' in addressing mission-critical skills gaps within their workforces. This includes providing guidance, training and on-going support for agencies on the use of comprehensive data analytic methods for identifying skills gaps and the development of strategies to address these gaps. However, as of December 2018, OPM had not fully implemented 29 of our recommendations made since 2012 relating to this high-risk area. We will continue to monitor OPM's efforts to implement our recommendations. Further, we have reported on numerous talent management strategies that can help agencies better manage the current and future workforce. Without these measures, the federal government's ability to address the

³⁶GAO, *Federal Workforce: Improved Supervision and Better Use of Probationary Periods Are Needed to Address Substandard Employee Performance*, GAO-15-191 (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 6, 2015).

complex social, economic, and security challenges facing the country may be compromised.

Chairman Lankford, Ranking Member Sinema, and Members of the Subcommittee, this completes my prepared statement. I would be pleased to respond to any questions you may have at this time.

If you or your staff have any questions about this testimony, please contact Yvonne D. Jones, Director, Strategic Issues, at (202) 512-6806 or jonesy@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this statement. GAO staff who made key contributions to this testimony are Clifton Douglas, Jr., Assistant Director; Christopher Falcone; Karin Fangman; Cindy Saunders, Alan Rozzi and Katherine Wulff.



STATEMENT OF

ANGELA BAILEY

Chief Human Capital Officer
U.S. Department of Homeland Security

FOR A HEARING ON

"Solutions to Improve Federal Hiring"

BEFORE THE

United States Senate
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
Subcommittee on Regulatory Affairs and Federal Management

July 30, 2019

Introduction

Chairman Lankford, Ranking Member Sinema, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's (DHS or the Department) efforts on hiring and retention.

I am Angela Bailey, the Department's Chief Human Capital Officer. I joined DHS in January 2016 as a career federal executive and have more than 38 years of service, 32 of those in human resources.

DHS was created just over 16 years ago by combining parts of existing agencies into one agency. Each of our Components has its own distinct homeland security mission, including their own history. Although we are a "young" agency of many organizational heritages, we are unified and steadfast in our goal – to, with honor and integrity, safeguard the American people, our homeland, and our values.

Our employees are on the front lines, executing our mission each and every day, performing extremely difficult work under some of the most challenging circumstances and conditions. They interact with the American public and people from around the world to prevent terrorism; enhance security; secure and manage our borders; administer and enforce our immigration laws; safeguard travel; monitor and secure cyberspace; respond to and provide relief from disasters; protect our national leaders; and prevent drug and human trafficking.

At the same time our employees are performing these incredibly important duties, the approximately 240,000 men and women that make up the Department are also mothers and fathers, husbands and wives, neighbors, and engaged members of their community. They worry about the same things other Americans worry about including student loan debt, making it on time to pick up their children from daycare or school, and missing yet another family vacation due to work obligations. Adding to these concerns is the possibility of future government shutdowns, meaning our employees may work without pay, for some period of time, due to lapsed appropriations.

During the partial shutdown earlier this year, almost all of our employees – 86 percent of the DHS workforce – continued to work without pay, and most of those employees were our front-line law enforcement officers and agents who face danger each and every day. DHS employees put on their uniforms, drove long distances in some cases, came to work and performed their duties admirably despite concerns about pay, childcare, transportation, and other stresses.

A little-known fact and often overlooked statistic in the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS) results is that 94 percent of DHS employees said they are willing to put in the extra effort to get the job done, and 89 percent said the work they do is important. Given their dedication and all that DHS employees face, as I see it, my job is to help DHS achieve its mission by keying in on two very important areas – hiring and retention. Our focus in both areas is forward-leaning.

Hiring

Due to DHS's critical mission, we are fortunate to have an abundance of applicants for many of the jobs we post. In order to serve both the applicants and DHS well, we have worked to innovate and streamline our hiring practices to reduce time-to-hire and get people onboard as fast as practical. Today, our time-to-hire is down to 107 days, a reduction of 34 percent from our rate five years ago, and we continue to look for more efficient and innovative practices every day. While DHS hiring strategies include time-to-hire, hiring hubs, and hiring events, they start with DHS thinking about not only our requirements for today, but also five to ten years from now. Determining how many and what type of employees we will need is a critical first step, followed by a discussion of the kind of skills and abilities we need, as well as where we will find such talent. Based on these discussions, strategies concerning how best to "buy or build" talent, including partnering with local schools, universities, industry, the military, and our local communities, are developed. These strategies are coupled with examinations of our hiring process, finding ways to streamline the hiring process and making it less arduous for those applying for our positions, and identifying technology advancements that can integrate our hiring systems making the process more efficient. For example:

1. U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) continues to make significant strides in hiring. They have leveraged new procedures, systems, and practices to speed up hiring timeframes and improve the applicant experience. CBP's proactive improvements have direct, positive impacts on hiring the right employees who are highly qualified and prepared for the difficult work. Their hard work paid off, and for the first time in years, CBP ended Fiscal Year (FY) 2018 by exceeding their hiring goals for both Agents and Officers.
2. U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has also experienced success with implementing new hiring strategies. ICE recognized the need for more female law enforcement officers to carry out certain law enforcement functions. The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) granted ICE a "women-only" hiring authority, followed by a July 2018 "Women in Law Enforcement Hiring Event" held in Arlington, Texas, where they had identified a high number of female veterans resided. The event yielded a significant number of highly qualified women to fill ICE's law enforcement positions; important, not just for the workforce, but also the community ICE serves.
3. The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) recognized that their entry-level positions had a high turnover rate, and that often turnover was related to employee pay not being as competitive as some local restaurants in urban high cost areas such as Los Angeles, CA. Surveys and focus groups revealed that Transportation Security Officers (TSOs) were very interested in staying within TSA and DHS, but did not believe they had a career path to do so. To address this issue, TSA is presently working with other DHS Components to develop a 'gateway' or career-pathing effort to help reduce attrition and improve the talent attracted to both TSA and other components. An important element of retaining and improving a workforce is establishing transparent career progression with predictable timing of advancement inducements. TSA established a Career Progression Program for all entry level TSOs, where advanced training and qualifications are prerequisites for advancement within a pay band and for promotions to higher bands. Initial data indicates that retention incentives being used by TSA have an immediate

impact on attrition, and TSA continues to explore alternatives to address attrition and retention.

The reason these hiring strategies are so important is that, by ensuring our positions are filled with the right leaders and technically skilled personnel, we can drive down overtime, shorten deployments, and create a better work-life balance for our employees – all of which our employees have told us through the FEVS and other focus groups that they desire. Our hiring strategies help us retain our talented workforce. However, just having positions filled is not enough to retain our employees, or more importantly, to ensure that while they are carrying out their missions they have the tools necessary to deal with all that the job and life throws their way. As a result, we have put a special emphasis on taking care of our employees and their families as the cornerstone of our retention strategy.

Retention

DHS established an Employee and Family Readiness Council, made up of representatives from all of the Components. As part of our Employee and Family Readiness initiative, the Council identified the top five challenges to address in 2019. The top challenges were derived from the FEVS, discussions with employees, and our Council's expertise. The initiatives chosen to address these challenges are based on extensive research by our workforce health and safety professionals. Our goal is to ensure employees and their families have the resources to manage their day-to-day stressors, while being fully prepared to manage emergency events or unexpected crises. The challenges and initiatives follow:

1. **General Stress** – To help employees manage the inevitable stress that comes with their challenging duties, DHS provides mindfulness resilience and stress reduction training across DHS. This training helps our employees, in particular the law enforcement community, stay in the present, let go of negative experiences, and increase resilience to adverse life events. Component representatives participate in the trainings, and many will become certified mindfulness training instructors, able to teach the practice of mindfulness to their peers. Research shows a 35 percent reduction in worker stress after taking mindfulness resilience training.
2. **Dependent Care** – Based on research conducted by OPM, by 2021, 43 percent of DHS employees will have childcare responsibilities and 32 percent will have adult care responsibilities. To ensure that DHS makes the correct resource decisions on this topic, we are undertaking a nationwide workforce needs assessment that will allow DHS to accurately identify both the current needs of the workforce with regards to dependent care, as well as the projected needs five to 10 years in the future. The Department is also exploring dependent care programs for employees who work non-traditional hours in collaboration with existing centers operated by the Federal Aviation Administration and the General Services Administration.
3. **Personal Relationships** – DHS is using a two-pronged approach to address personal relationships, to include Stronger Bonds training and counseling through Employee Assistance Programs. When participants were asked before taking the course how confident they were in their ability to care for their relationship, 32 percent said they were able to do so. After training, 99 percent were more confident in their ability to care for and communicate in their relationships, both on the job and at home.

4. **Mental Health** – DHS launched a public-facing website to provide information in a user-friendly format that is available to employees and families. The information is life-event based with a focus on encouraging help-seeking behavior to address these concerns. The overarching message is that there is no stigma in reaching out for help.
5. **Financial Concerns** – The Financial Literacy Campaign, Invest in Your Financial Health, provides helpful information and accessible financial resources, addresses common concerns, and directs employees to internal programs that can promote financial wellness.

These programs noted above are coupled with other traditional retention strategies, such as cyber retention pay, special salary rates, student loan repayments, childcare subsidies, and employee engagement, to round out the overarching DHS retention strategy.

Despite these efforts, there is always room for improvement. Additionally, a way for Congress to help us is to support our legislative proposal, the *Department of Homeland Security Enhanced Hiring Act*. DHS seeks to use this authority in an effort to streamline and simplify the agency's hiring authorities in a manner that ensures the Department is able to expeditiously hire the best-qualified candidates for mission-critical positions and sustain its record of hiring veterans. This legislative proposal would enhance the current noncompetitive hiring authorities for veterans and establish other important hiring authorities. I respectfully request that Congress expeditiously takes up and passes such legislation.

Conclusion

I cannot stress enough the commitment of DHS employees to the mission and the difficult nature of their work. Our goal within the Department, and in particular my goal, is to do everything we can to lessen the burden on our employees and retain our highly-skilled, mission-driven workforce. We will continue to identify efficiencies and retention initiatives and implement them smartly across the Department.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today. The Department would not be successful without your support and the support of our brave men and women who sacrifice each day to make our country safe. I look forward to your questions.

STATEMENT OF DANIEL R. SITTERLY
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 HUMAN RESOURCES AND ADMINISTRATION /
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 DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
 BEFORE THE
 UNITED STATES SENATE
 HOMELAND SECURITY AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS
 SUBCOMMITTEE ON REGULATORY AFFAIRS AND FEDERAL MANAGEMENT

July 23, 2019

Chairman Lankford, Ranking Member Sinema, and Members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) ability to be a competitive employer in the health care industry, including any impacts of the rising labor costs and the provider pay structure, as well as the impact of previous hiring and retention related efforts.

Competitive Employer in the Health Care Industry

As the operator of the largest integrated health care delivery system in America, VA successfully attracts and retains high quality talent and VA's overall workforce has consistently grown by approximately two to five percent annually over the last five years. This growth is responsive to an increased demand for services, which is the result of improved access, reduced wait times, improved quality, enhanced Veteran satisfaction, and overall mission growth. Most of the additional staffing capacity needed in VA in the past 5 years has been in clinical occupations, which accounts for 81 percent of overall growth in VA. VA has consistently maintained turnover rates at or below 9.5 percent for the past decade, which is low when compared with other large Cabinet-level agencies that average 11 percent (as published by OPM, Fed Scope), or with health care industry turnover rates of 20-30 percent (per Bureau of Labor Statistics).

Impacts of the Rising Labor Costs

VA is extremely appreciative of the work Congress has done and continues to do in providing flexibilities to support the recruitment and retention of talent to care for our Nation's Veterans. The White House has also made it clear that the inflexibility of the existing pay structure is a barrier to appropriately compensating mission-critical employees and top performers. However, VA still contends with ongoing pay challenges presented by the limitations of multiple pay systems and compounded by the rising labor costs. While VA utilizes many incentives available under statute to recruit and retain talent successfully, these incentives provide only a short-term solution. In many situations, existing flexibilities are insufficient to support a strategic approach to attracting and retaining talent. Incentives do not necessarily eliminate salary disparities with competing employers and therefore, do not address long-term gaps in pay. As labor costs continue to increase, private sector employers are nimble enough to adjust quickly to changes in local labor markets by modifying starting salaries and total compensation packages, as needed, to attract top talent. Meanwhile, VHA and other Federal employers are restricted by Federal statutes and regulations regarding the establishment of pay rates, and often require years of pay disparities to exist before lengthy processes can respond to market changes. This leaves Federal agencies at a disadvantage when competing for talented employees. While VA has employees and applicants who are willing to accept a lower salary to be part of an organization with such an important mission, VHA faces increasing challenges in its ability to attract or retain quality health care professionals when the salary gap continues to increase.

The General Schedule (GS) is the predominant pay scale for Federal employees and is based on the level of difficulty, responsibility, and qualifications required for the position. By law, GS base rates are adjusted annually based on average increases in private sector salaries as measured by the Employment Cost Index, except as otherwise provided under a Presidential alternative plan. Annual locality pay adjustments for GS employees are also provided by law, but are subject to a Presidential alternative plan. As part of the FY 2020 budget, the President has

proposed that no increases in GS base rates or locality rates be made in January 2020. The Administration supports reforming the GS pay system so that it is more performance-based and so pay levels and adjustments are targeted to address occupation-specific pay disparities. As a first step, the Administration has proposed legislative changes that would slow the frequency of GS longevity-based step increases and make funding available to provide targeted performance-based pay increases for mission-critical occupations. To request Special Salary Rates (SSR) or adjustments to these scales, VA must prepare comprehensive documentation on market conditions and submit the request to the Office of Personnel Management for approval, which coordinates special rate requests with other agencies employing the same type of employees. The Federal Wage System (FWS) is a uniform pay-setting structure that covers Federal blue-collar hourly employees. The Office of Personnel Management oversees this pay system, with the support of the Department of Defense, which has responsibility for conducting wage surveys and coordinating special rate requests. These existing pay systems do not meet the fluid and dynamic nature of today's market. VHA's volume of positions to hire is tremendous, reaching more than 45,000 new hires in FY 2018 to replace workers due to turnover and grow the workforce to meet Veteran demand. As a result, it is necessary for the pay structure to support VHA's ability to hire qualified candidates as quickly as possible to support access to care for Veterans.

In addition to the limited flexibility in establishing new locality areas and the overall pay structure, the GS pay system and the FWS require the use of antiquated rules and formulas that do not provide for market driven pay-setting latitude. GS employees are entitled to locality pay, which is a geographic-based percentage rate that reflects pay levels for non-Federal workers in certain geographic areas as determined by surveys conducted by the United States (U.S.) Bureau of Labor Statistics. Those localities that do not fall under a specified locality pay schedule are placed on the Rest of United States (RUS) schedule covering all other localities not otherwise having a specified schedule. VHA facilities serve multiple local labor markets, to include heavily populated cities, suburban towns, and low populated rural areas. Many of these areas receive locality pay under the RUS schedule because they do not meet the criteria for a

separate locality pay area or as an area of application to a locality pay area by being adjacent to the metropolitan statistical area or combined statistical area comprising the basic locality pay area and having 2,500 or more GS employees. VHA facilities in smaller counties and rural towns generally offer salaries significantly lower than the local labor market because they do not have enough GS employees to be considered for their own locality pay schedule.

Provider Pay Structure

VHA currently functions under multiple personnel systems (title 38, Hybrid title 38, and title 5), each with multiple pay systems that contain distinctive variations and complexities. VHA hires health care providers under title 38 and associated health professionals under Hybrid title 38 (i.e. employees are covered under title 38 for appointment, advancement, and some pay structures, but for all other purposes are covered under title 5). Both authorities allow the Secretary of VA broad flexibility in setting pay based on both the individual's qualifications and conditions in the local market. VHA hires non-clinical employees under Government-wide title 5 authorities, with pay set under the GS and FWS.

VHA needs the ability to offer competitive salaries to recruit and retain employees in various occupations that have much higher rates of pay in the private sector, particularly in larger cities and rural areas. VHA is in the process of developing a comprehensive legislative package that would provide additional flexibilities for its workforce.

Impact and Success of Previous Hiring and Retention Related Efforts

Despite the above challenges, VA employs a variety of tools to attract and retain quality talent. Those tools include direct hiring authorities, recruitment and retention flexibilities, hiring initiatives, improved employee engagement, workforce planning, targeted recruitment of service members transitioning from DoD, national recruitment

programs for hard-to-fill occupations and specialties, and strategies for filling medical center director positions.

The VA Maintaining Internal Systems and Strengthening Integrated Outside Networks (MISSION) Act of 2018 authorized or expanded several programs intended to recruit and retain health care providers in VHA, to include an increase in the maximum amount of student loan debt that may be reimbursed under the VHA Education Debt Reduction Program (EDRP); authorizing designated scholarships for physicians and dentists under the VA Health Professional Scholarship Program (HPSP); establishing the VA specialty education loan repayment program to incentivize VHA employees to pursue education and training in medical specialties for which VA determines there is a shortage; and establishing a pilot program for the Veterans Healing Veterans Medical Access and Scholarship program.

VA strategically allocates recruitment, retention, and relocation (3R) incentives to close skills gaps and provide greater flexibility in the recruitment, relocation, and retention of highly qualified VA professionals. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2018, VA spent \$52.4 million on 3R incentives. Of that total, \$41.2 million (78.6 percent) was directed toward VHA shortage occupations (i.e. the 10 clinical and 8 non-clinical occupations identified by facilities as shortage occupations via the VHA workforce planning cycle).

VA uses EDRP to secure health care providers in specific, difficult to fill positions for up to 5 years by providing student loan payment reimbursements. Positions eligible for EDRP are prioritized based on local recruitment and retention requirements to meet specific staffing needs. In FY 2018, VA spent \$44 million on EDRP. Section 302 of the MISSION Act enhanced EDRP by increasing the maximum award amount from \$120,000 to \$200,000, not to exceed \$40,000 per year. Additionally, section 306 ensures clinical staff working at Vet Centers are eligible to participate in EDRP.

During FY 2018, VA awarded 1,071 new scholarships in the Employee Incentive Scholarship Program and supported 3,133 employees actively participating in the

educational phase of their scholarship with funding totaling \$29 million. The top five scholarship-funded occupations were: Registered Nurse, Licensed Practical/Vocational Nurse, Social Worker, Physical Therapist, and Medical Technologist/Medical Records Technician. The VA Learning Opportunity Residency program allows nursing, pharmacy, and medical technology students who have completed their junior year in an accredited clinical program to gain valuable clinical experience at a VA health care facility for up to 800 hours, with pay. From FY 2015 through FY 2018, VA funded 339 student salaries for nurses, pharmacists, and medical technology students for a total of \$4.2 million. VA also awarded \$5.2 million new and continuing awards to 201 nursing, physical therapy, and physician assistant participants in the HPSP. HPSP awards scholarships to students receiving education or training in a direct or indirect health care services discipline to assist in providing an adequate supply of such personnel for VA and the U.S.

Targeted hiring initiatives have proven to be an extremely effective way of hiring talent where it is needed most. In 2017, VA introduced a Mental Health Hiring Initiative, committing to hiring 1,000 new mental health providers by June 30, 2019 as part of VA's number one clinical priority to eliminate Veteran suicide. By January 31, 2019, VA surpassed its goal by hiring 3,956 mental health providers resulting in a net gain of 1,045 additional mental health providers. This initiative included VA's inaugural virtual trainee hiring fair where 85 facilities participated to connect, match, and place interested candidates into mental health positions across VHA. Through the trainee hiring fair, 74 mental health trainees accepted job offers at a matched location after completion of their training. This initiative laid the groundwork for a permanent trainee hiring capability in VHA.

Hire Right Hire Fast (HRHF) is a hiring model initiated in 2017 for the medical support assistance occupation. The goal for HRHF was to reduce time to hire and fill open positions within this occupation. This was achieved by developing applicant registers and implementing specific actions integral to hiring success. This program drove time-to-hire to under 60 days (formerly 180 days) and reduced open positions to

9.4 percent. Based on the preliminary results, HRHF will be extended to the Housekeeping Aid occupation. The HRHF model was found to be most impactful in occupations that exhibit few requirements to entry (e.g., no licenses, no certifications, etc.); high loss rates; and large onboard full-time employee equivalent requirements.

VHA's Workforce Planning Cycle places direct emphasis on optimizing VA's most vulnerable professions. During this process VHA identifies staffing shortage occupations; assists with current and future workforce planning efforts; and challenges, and other workforce planning activities. In response to requirements in the VA Choice and Quality Employment Act of 2017, the workforce planning cycle was redesigned to provide a structured, data-driven approach for identifying clinical and non-clinical shortage occupations at the health care system level. Each year, VHA publishes a staffing shortage report that identifies the results from the Workforce Planning Cycle. During the FY 2018 cycle, recruitment challenges were selected as the primary drivers for 64 percent of the shortage occupations and specialties, while the remaining 36 percent were primarily associated with retention challenges. The most commonly cited root causes for shortage occupations included competition with other health care employers and a limited supply of candidates. The most commonly cited strategies to address staffing challenges included non-competitive hiring flexibilities and utilization of recruitment and retention incentives.

As a subset of the military to civilian transition, DoD and VA have combined efforts to recruit transitioning service members into vacant positions within VA. In a 2015 study of over 8,500 Veterans, active duty Servicemembers, National Guard and Reserve members, and military dependents, 55 percent of the participants identified "finding a job" as their most significant transition challenge. The goal of this effort is to create an additional candidate pipeline for entry level job opportunities. Beginning in FY 2018, VHA launched a direct marketing campaign to target military medical professionals currently enrolled in the transition process for recruitment into VHA employment. VHA uses the VA-DoD Identity Repository data to identify service members, their time of discharge, and their military occupational specialty or specialty

codes. In FY 2018, VHA's total Veteran hires increased by 36 percent, totaling over 17,000. VA is also partnering with DoD to support hiring military spouses for mission-critical and hard to fill positions. Military spouses represent a robust pipeline of talent for health care and science, technology, engineering, and mathematics occupations nationwide. Through the Military Spouse Employment Partnership, VA will have direct access to points of contact at military installations to share job opportunities and access resumes of qualified candidates for noncompetitive employment.

The VHA National Recruitment Program (NRP) provides a small in-house team of skilled professional recruiters employing private sector best practices to the Agency's most critical clinical and executive positions. The VHA-NRP works directly with VHA Office of Rural Health and other national program offices, Veterans Integrated Service Network Directors, VAMC Directors, clinical leadership, and local VAMC Facility Recruitment Liaisons to develop a comprehensive, client-centered recruitment strategy that addresses both current and future critical needs.

VHA has made significant progress in efficiently filling medical center director (MCD) positions through the implementation of a vigorous national recruitment strategy which includes the following: use of existing legal authorities to fill MCD positions such as the Senior Executive Service authority and title 38 physician hiring authorities and leveraging critical pay authority to adjust the rate of pay up to \$201,900 (as of January 2019) for 39 Complexity Level 1A MCD positions. In addition, the Agency has adopted a 120-day time-to-fill standard for MCD positions. The result has been a significant reduction in the MCD opening positions from as high as 25 percent in FY 2015 to 11 percent in FY 2018.

Improved outcomes show that VA is on the right track and that Veterans are being well served. Recent studies have reported that Veterans are receiving the same or better care at VAMCs as patients at private sector hospitals. Since 2014, the number of annual appointments for VA care is up by 3.4 million, with more than 58 million appointments scheduled in VA facilities last fiscal year. According to a study in the

Journal of the American Medical Association, VA average wait times are shorter than those in the private sector for primary care, as well as two out of three specialty care areas. VA recently reached a telehealth milestone, achieving more than 1 million video telehealth visits in FY 2018, a 19 percent increase in video telehealth visits over the prior year. This technology gives Veterans access to the timely, quality care they deserve, without having to travel great distances to a distant VA facility. As published in a March 2019 article in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*®, Veterans who choose VA for their health care have a greater chance of survival beyond 30 days after hospital discharge, if they were admitted for heart attacks, severe chronic lung disease, heart failure and pneumonia as compared with non-VA hospitals.

In FY 2018, 86.4 percent of 1.6 million Veterans surveyed said they trust VA, with an overwhelming majority (92.1 percent) of VAMCs improving in that trust score from fall of 2017. Additionally, in December 2018, the Partnership for Public Service released its Best Places to Work in the Federal Government rankings where VA ranked 6th out of large Federal agencies. As one of the top ten large agencies to work for in the Federal Government, VA continues to enhance employee engagement, focusing on multiple touchpoints to receive employee feedback. VA's Employee Engagement Council periodically meets to address and implement solutions. In April, the Secretary approved VA's first ever Employee Engagement Enterprise-Wide Plan which emphasizes principles of servant leadership. Leaders at all levels seek feedback year-round, in person and online, to ensure the Agency continues making progress. High employee engagement at VA will positively impact the customer service Veterans receive daily.

In summary, VA is very appreciative of the numerous recruitment and retention authorities granted by Congress to help support a high-quality workforce providing the best possible care to Veterans. However, the competition for talent in the health care industry is increasingly competitive. Shortages of physicians and nurses abound nationwide. Medical schools and private hospitals are implementing innovative and progressive solutions to address these deficits both in the short and long term.

VHA has fallen significantly behind private sector health care recruitment and compensation practices, which are aggressive and effective at targeting an array of new employees from entry levels to experienced professional staff. VHA has struggled with staying competitive and being an employer of choice with the limitations placed on the Agency under the current pay systems and with the increased demands to hire additional staff quickly to meet patient needs and support our Veterans. We look forward to working with this Committee on opportunities to enhance VA's ability to attract top talent. This concludes my testimony. I am prepared to respond to any questions you may have.



U.S. GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE

441 G St. N.W.
Washington, DC 20548

September 18, 2019

The Honorable Kyrsten Sinema
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Regulatory Affairs and Federal Management
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
United States Senate

Subject: Responses to Questions for the Record; Hearing Entitled "*Solutions to Improve
Federal Hiring*"

This letter responds to your August 15, 2019 request that I address questions for the record related to the Subcommittee's July 30, 2019 hearing on federal hiring. Enclosed are GAO's responses. If you have any questions about the responses to your questions or need additional information, please contact me at (202) 512-2717 or Jonesy@gao.gov.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Yvonne D. Jones".

Yvonne D. Jones
Director, Strategic Issues

Enclosure

Senator Kyrsten Sinema
Post-Hearing Questions for the Record

Submitted to Ms. Yvonne D. Jones, Director Strategic Issues Team, U.S. Government and
Accountability Office
Hearing on “Solutions to Improve Federal Hiring”

Tuesday, July 30th, 2019

Question 1: I continue to be concerned about staffing shortages both nationally and specifically at our Arizona VA Medical Centers. Staffing shortages also impact the mission of DHS. In your oversight role, what challenges to addressing staffing shortages has GAO identified and what solutions has GAO recommended or found to be most effective?

Response: To help agencies address skills gaps (staffing shortages), we previously recommended that OPM (1) work with the CHCO Council to develop a core set of metrics that all agencies should use to close mission-critical skills gaps, among other HR goals; and (2) coordinate with the interagency working group that identified the list of skills gaps to explore the feasibility of collecting necessary information during a CHCO-led review of HR goals.¹ In March 2019, OPM stated it had addressed the recommendation by developing a multifactor model consisting of core metrics. This model included quit rates and retirement rates. OPM said that it provides the model to agencies for identifying mission-critical occupations and those agencies should have the autonomy to determine which human capital metrics are important for achieving their missions. While this is an important step forward, to close the recommendation, OPM needs to provide evidence that agencies are using the multi-factor model as a common set of metrics to close mission-critical skills gaps, regardless of other agency-specific metrics.

Specifically, regarding VA, we will issue a report in the fall that assesses the extent to which VA’s succession planning is consistent with key leading practices. This report will include a number of findings and recommendations aimed to improve VA’s succession planning for leadership and mission critical occupations. We would be happy to provide your staff with a copy of that report when it is published.

Question 2: The private sector is one realm we can look to for examples of innovative solutions to hiring top talent. Can you describe examples of a federal agency successfully using innovation in their hiring or retention initiatives?

Response: Our work on key talent management strategies has identified a number of successful efforts to effectively hire and retain employees. For example, to combat negative stereotypes about federal work, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) provides “Day in the Life” information on its work to promote public awareness of how its everyday tasks tie in with its mission of protecting the United States, according to the DHS CHCO. The DHS CHCO stated

¹GAO, *Federal Workforce: OPM and Agencies Need to Strengthen Efforts to Identify and Close Mission-Critical Skills Gaps*, GAO-15-223 (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 30, 2015).

that promoting agency mission can be done while cultivating a talent pipeline and assessing applicants' abilities. For example, the department holds recruitment events where potential candidates can participate in law enforcement-related activities such as fitness testing.

In addition, agencies can improve employee engagement and performance through analysis and sharing of promising practices.² Employee engagement is generally defined as the sense of purpose and commitment employees feel toward their employer and its mission. We previously reported that what matters most in improving engagement levels is valuing employees by authentically focusing on their performance and career development. Specifically, our prior work found that the strongest drivers of engagement were similar across age groups and include constructive performance conversations and communication from management, career development and training, inclusion and involvement in decisions affecting employees' work, and work-life balance.³

Question 3: During the hearing, the timeline to hire in the federal government was brought up repeatedly. It is clear that often the federal hiring process, currently averaging 106 days, takes too long. The longer the government takes, the higher the risk of losing top talent. Are there models or best practices that you can point to that federal agencies can adopt from either the private or public sector to improve their timeline to hire? What are common the bottlenecks in the system that Federal Agencies employ?

Response: To acquire top talent, agencies need a hiring process that is applicant friendly, flexible, and meets policy requirements, such as hiring on the basis of merit.⁴ As we reported in July 2019, agencies can employ key talent management strategies to help better manage the current and future workforce.⁵ These strategies included cultivating a talent pipeline, recruiting continuously and starting the hiring process early in the school year, writing user-friendly vacancy announcements, and strategically leveraging available hiring and pay flexibilities.

In August 2016 we reported on selected agency strategies for improving the effectiveness of their hiring efforts.⁶ Selected agencies reported on the following strategies that, among other things, helped save time in the hiring process:

- **Actively recruit, particularly among preference groups such as veterans, to direct qualified applicants to the job announcement.** Hiring managers at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the Department of Energy (DOE) said they used professional networking sites, university contacts, and professional organizations to target potential applicants who may not be actively searching for a new employment

²GAO, *Federal Workforce: Lessons Learned for Engaging Millennials and Other Age Groups*, GAO-16-880T (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 29, 2016) and *Federal Workforce, Additional Analysis and Sharing of Promising Practices Could Improve Employee Engagement and Performance*, GAO-15-585 (Washington, D.C.: July 14, 2015).

³GAO-16-880T and GAO-15-585.

⁴GAO, *Federal Hiring: OPM Needs to Improve Management and Oversight of Hiring Authorities*, GAO-16-521 (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 2, 2016).

⁵GAO, *Human Capital: Improving Federal Recruiting and Hiring Efforts*, GAO-19-696T (Washington, D.C.: Jul. 30, 2019).

⁶GAO-16-521.

opportunity. For example, hiring managers at NIH reported using LinkedIn to identify and send potential job applicants to specific vacancy announcements for hard-to-fill Information Technology (IT) positions. Sometimes these applicants would be eligible for excepted service hiring authorities. NIH officials said it enabled them to hire them more quickly than through a competitive examining process.

- **Use global job announcements when possible to reduce duplication of effort and to share quality applicant lists.** Officials from DOE and NIH said that using global or open vacancy announcements allowed hiring officials to make multiple selections from a single vacancy announcement. For example, NIH uses an agency-wide recruitment strategy for commonly filled positions across the institutes. Hiring managers at NIH told us that this strategy saved them the time of creating multiple, similar announcements. It also allowed them to review a large number of resumes to find quality applicants.

In March 2019, we also reported on additional key strategies for acquiring talent, such as improving the security clearance process.⁷ The security clearance process can contribute to onboarding delays, according to CHCOs we interviewed at the time. For example, at one agency, the CHCO said it takes applicants more than 400 days to receive their security clearances. Also, our previous work found that 98 percent of agencies did not meet the 60-day timeliness objectives for initial secret clearances in fiscal year 2016, an increase of 25 percentage points since fiscal year 2012.⁸

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) CHCO said in our March 2019 report that DHS navigates this challenge by onboarding talented, qualified applicants as soon as possible, then, while waiting for their high-level clearance, assigning them tasks that do not require the clearances. She also said that DHS has issued more interim clearances and has redesignated some positions so they can be held by employees with a lower clearance classification.⁹

In June 2018, we reported that U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) had improved its hiring process as demonstrated by two key metrics—reducing its time-to-hire and increasing the percentage of applicants that are hired.¹⁰ Although CBP's time-to-hire decreased from fiscal year (FY) 2015 through 2017, the hiring process remained lengthy. For example, in fiscal year 2017, CPB officer applications took more than 300 days, on average, to process. Certain factors contributed to the lengthy time-to-hire, including process steps that can be challenging and time-

⁷GAO, *Federal Workforce: Key Talent Management Strategies for Agencies to Better Meet Their Missions*, GAO-19-181 (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 28, 2019).

⁸GAO, *Personnel Security Clearances: Additional Actions Needed to Implement Key Reforms and Improve Timely Processing of Investigations*, GAO-18-431T (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 7, 2018). The Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004 required the development of a plan to reduce the length of the personnel security clearance process. To the extent practical, the plan was to require that each authorized adjudicative agency make a determination on at least 90 percent of all applications for a personnel security clearance within an average of 60 days after receipt of the completed application by an authorized investigative agency, including no longer than 40 days to complete the investigative phase and not longer than 20 days to complete the adjudicative phase. Pub. L. No. 108-458, tit. III, § 3001(g)(2)(A), 118 Stat. 3638, 3709 (Dec. 17, 2004) (codified at 50 U.S.C. § 3341(g)(2)(A)).

⁹GAO-19-181.

¹⁰GAO, *U.S. Customs and Border Protection: Progress and Challenges in Recruiting, Hiring, and Retaining Law Enforcement Personnel*, GAO-18-487 (Washington, D.C.: Jun. 27, 2018).

consuming for applicants to complete—such as the polygraph exam—as well as CBP’s reliance on applicants to promptly complete certain aspects of the process—such as submitting their background investigation form.

Question 4: In my first question during the hearing, I asked the agency witnesses to outline what steps they are taking to demonstrate they are making strides to improving human capital management. Can you please share from your perspective other agencies that are successfully making this a priority and seeing results? What are they doing that is contributing to their success?

Response: While we have conducted a wide range of reviews in the area of strategic human capital management, there is limited information about agencies that are successfully prioritizing human capital management. However, we would highlight three examples of efforts in workforce planning and hiring:

- Federal Protective Service (FPS) officials told us that in fiscal year 2015, they standardized their performance work plans, which identify critical core competencies and associated performance standards for each mission critical position. FPS also had a *Human Capital Plan* that describes human capital strategies to help FPS build and sustain a workforce that can carry out its mission, such as producing a career development plan for employees to facilitate leadership development. FPS also planned to leverage internal and external partnerships to attract talent and have training courses to equip staff to address current and emerging threats to federal facilities. In response to our recommendation to identify time frames for developing human capital performance measures and aligning targets to stated human capital goals, in 2018 we confirmed that FPS revised its goals and developed performance measures and other indicators that explicitly aligned to the goals.¹¹
- In June 2018, the Department of Defense (DOD) addressed a 2014 report recommendation that called for aligning DOD’s strategic workforce plan with budget and management workforce initiatives that address recruiting, retention, and readiness issues associated with declining morale. DOD issued a Human Capital Operating Plan that seeks to improve the quality of budgetary and financial information valuable for managing DOD and rebuild military readiness through recruitment and retention of highly skilled staff, which includes strategic workforce planning, skill gap closure strategies, and competency and proficiency assessments. DOD stated that it will also identify gaps and overlaps in hiring authorities and recommend changes to help it acquire talent.¹²

¹¹GAO, *Federal Protective Service: Enhancements to Performance Measures and Data Quality Processes Could Improve Human Capital Planning*, GAO-16-384 (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 24, 2016).

¹²GAO, *Human Capital: DOD Should Fully Develop its Civilian Strategic Workforce Plan to Aid Decision Makers*, GAO-14-565 (Washington, D.C.: Jul. 9, 2014).

- For an August 2016 report, we selected the Air Force Materiel Command, Department of Energy, and National Institutes of Health for review and reported on their hiring strategies, which included: (1) institute formalized recruitment meetings with human resources staff and hiring managers to discuss recruitment strategy; (2) use specialized experience statements to help ensure a better fit between the applicant and the position; (3) actively recruit, particularly among preference groups such as veterans, to direct qualified applicants to the job announcement; (4) use global job announcements to reduce duplication of effort and to share quality applicant lists; and (5) include subject matter experts in the assessment process to filter out applicants who are not qualified.¹³

Question 5: We did not have a chance to discuss the performance review system at this hearing, but these reviews are an important part of retaining and incentivizing high performers while holding low performers accountable and offering support and tools for improvement. This being said, I have been told by stakeholders that the performance review system is broken. GAO has published a number of reports, including one pertaining to VHA, on the challenges of the process. What is your impression of the performance review process in the federal government generally? What changes need to be made to make this a more effective system? Are there examples of agencies that are doing this right?

Response: We have previously reported that managing employee performance has been a long-standing government-wide challenge and the subject of numerous reforms since the beginning of the modern civil service. Without effective performance management, agencies risk not only losing (or failing to utilize) the skills of top talent, they also risk missing the opportunity to effectively address increasingly complex and rapidly evolving challenges.¹⁴

Several practices that we have noted to improve performance management are:

- **Improve selection and training of supervisors and managers.** Agencies can improve employee engagement by having a strong management team that can provide constructive performance conversations and deal with poor performers. This can be done by selecting managers who (1) are inclined toward and interested in supervision, and (2) have the ability to coach staff and provide constructive performance feedback. One way agencies can ensure they are selecting managers who want to manage is to establish a dual career ladder structure, which allows advancement opportunities for employees who have technical skills but are not inclined to manage.
- **Link agency's mission and employees' work.** We have previously reported that high-performing organizations create a "line of sight" between individual performance and

¹³GAO-16-521.

¹⁴GAO, *Federal Workforce: Improved Supervision and Better Use of Probationary Periods Are Needed to Address Substandard Employee Performance*, GAO-15-191 (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 6, 2015).

organizational results by aligning employees' daily activities with broader results.¹⁵ Further, agencies can motivate and retain employees by connecting them to their agency's mission, according to human capital experts and federal employee and management group representatives we interviewed.

- **Implement meaningful rewards programs.** We have previously reported that high-performing organizations seek to create effective incentive and reward systems that clearly link employee knowledge, skills, and contributions to organizational results.¹⁶ However, agencies sometimes struggle to allocate limited resources between mission requirements and recognition, according to CHCOs and representatives of one federal management group. According to the representatives, some managers may not implement reward programs because they are time intensive, and managers may not understand the importance of reward programs to motivating the workforce.
- **Share innovative approaches to performance.** In November 2018, we found that opportunities exist to share innovative approaches to performance management.¹⁷ We recommended that OPM work with the CHCO Council to develop a strategic approach for identifying and sharing emerging research and innovations in performance management. Examples of innovations OPM has found include changes in performance ratings models and setting goals that are focused on growth. We also recommended that OPM develop and implement a mechanism for agencies to share promising practices, such as focusing on performance conversations and recognition to increase engagement and performance. OPM agreed with our recommendations and reported that it planned to formalize its processes for sharing emerging research and soliciting views from the CHCOs.

¹⁵GAO, *Results-Oriented Cultures: Creating a Clear Linkage between Individual Performance and Organizational Success*, GAO-03-488 (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 14, 2003).

¹⁶GAO-03-488.

¹⁷GAO, *Federal Workforce: Opportunities Exist for OPM to Further Innovation in Performance Management*, GAO-19-35 (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 20, 2018).

Question#:	1
Topic:	Improving Staff
Hearing:	Solutions to Improve Federal Hiring
Primary:	The Honorable Kyrsten Sinema
Committee:	HOMELAND SECURITY (SENATE)

Question: The hearing featured discussion of the importance of offering training programs to improve and empower the human resources operations of federal agencies.

For your agency, what are some of the training and workforce improvement strategies that have been most effective in improving your human resources staff?

Response: DHS has a multi-pronged approach to improving the training and workforce strategies for the Department's human resources (HR) staff. First, DHS begins with workforce planning, including the requirements for HR staff themselves. The Department has made a concerted effort to ensure HR staff is in place to meet the President's Executive Orders to increase both U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) by 15,000 positions, including requesting and receiving direct hire authority from the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) for HR specialists.

Next, the DHS Office of the Chief Human Capital Officer (CHCO) has full insight and approval authority regarding the top HR positions filled within the Components. This ensures the HR leadership has the requisite technical skills, as well as expert leadership abilities in leading the HR community. Further, DHS has invested in the training and development by establishing the DHS HR Academy. The HR Academy is designed to provide a career path for all HR professionals, provide just-in-time training in the key disciplines (e.g., labor and employee relations, staffing, classification, benefits, etc.), promote best-practices, share information, collaborate, and network in order to develop the HR professionals.

Future initiatives include an internship program designed to recruit entry level employees, train them across the disciplines and Components, and then place them into future job opportunities. Through this effort, DHS can ensure it is building a cadre of HR professionals with a "one DHS" focus.

Question: How does DHS promote continuing education for your human resources professionals and what programs do you offer to provide continued professional growth?

Response: DHS supports continuing education for its employees and offers various opportunities for HR professionals to continue their professional growth. The Department's joint development program, for example, provides the opportunity to seek out positions in different Components (or outside of DHS) and disciplines to grow a specific skill set that is outside of the HR profession. Furthermore, the Department's

Question#:	1
Topic:	Improving Staff
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rotational programs provide the ability to rotate into different Components to learn specific disciplines such as law enforcement retirement. Mentoring and coaching programs provide HR professionals with the opportunity to seek out mentors from across DHS to help them succeed in their current positions. DHS leadership development programs train HR professionals prior to and during their supervisory/leadership positions to ensure they have the requisite skills to lead their HR operations. The Department recently offered two Academic and Professional Development Symposiums and Education Fairs featuring both “brick and mortar” institutions and online learning colleges and universities to its employees, including HR professionals. These symposiums provided employees with opportunities to learn about certificate and degree programs often offered at reduced tuition rates for federal employees. In addition, DHS encourages employees to create Individual Development Plans that outline each employee’s professional development and training goals and provides opportunities for employees to take training all year long. Finally, the HR Academy invested in a Career Path Tool to identify knowledge, skill, and experience gaps and link the user to available courses or activities that can help close those gaps.

Question: Which programs are most effective?

Response: The most effective training programs align learning objectives with an employees’ knowledge or skill gaps. Most people learn best by applying concepts to everyday work and receiving objective, real-time feedback on performance. As previously stated, DHS’s investment in an online HR Career Path Tool – through HR Academy – is one example where gaps are identified and learning objectives are linked to what HR practitioners need on an individual basis. In other words, one size does not fit all, and DHS has found that each program is effective for the intended individual’s learning/career path.

Question#:	2
Topic:	Tentative Job Offers
Hearing:	Solutions to Improve Federal Hiring
Primary:	The Honorable Kyrsten Sinema
Committee:	HOMELAND SECURITY (SENATE)

Question: In our discussion at the hearing, you discussed DHS efforts to increase its ability to make tentative job offers to highly-qualified candidates. I would appreciate more data on this effort:

Which efforts show the most promise for decreasing time to hire and effectively getting strong candidates into the federal workforce?

Response: Departmental efforts to decrease time to hire include applicant care programs, centralized law enforcement officer hiring hubs, and focused Department-wide recruiting and hiring events, all of which streamline and combine steps in the hiring process. DHS actively uses direct hire authorities granted by OPM to expedite the hiring of over 20,000 mission critical and support positions, as provided for by Executive Order.

The Department developed Applicant Care Centers that assist applicants through each step of the hiring process, to include test and interview scheduling and answering hiring-related questions. The result is expedited applicant processing times, reduced dropout rates and, increased hires. At hiring hubs, DHS conducts background and fitness screening steps at a single location, increasing the number of doctors, nurses, and polygraph specialists on staff to streamline the vetting process.

Lastly, DHS developed an innovative approach to recruit, interview, and hire by conducting enterprise-wide recruiting and hiring events with operational Components and Headquarters offices. These one-stop events have hiring managers, recruiters, HR, and security all in one place at one time to streamline the hiring process. Hosting these large-scale, department-wide events has enabled the Department to:

- Reduce the time to hire by six to eight weeks;
- Brand DHS as an employer that has multiple job opportunities across Components; and
- Fill over 1,500 vacancies for cyber professionals, students, veterans, and women in law enforcement.

Question: What type of job series does DHS focus on for these tentative job offers?

Response: DHS uses enterprise-wide hiring events where direct hiring authorities are used to fill critical vacancies across the Department including, but not limited to cyber, law enforcement, mission support, and intelligence analysis vacancies.

Question#:	2
Topic:	Tentative Job Offers
Hearing:	Solutions to Improve Federal Hiring
Primary:	The Honorable Kyrsten Sinema
Committee:	HOMELAND SECURITY (SENATE)

Question: Please provide the number of tentative job offers that DHS has made using this authority in the past year, as well as how many individuals accepted the offers.

Response: In the last three years, the Department has hosted events focused on cyber, veterans, and women in law enforcement.

DHS hosted our most recent department-wide event in June 2018 with a focus on women in law enforcement. As of March 26, 2019 – the date of our final official report – the Department issued approximately 853 tentative job offers that 553 individuals accepted. Of the 853, three declined the position and 292 offers were withdrawn. The withdrawn candidates did not meet one or more of the requirements of the pre-employment process that can include entrance/medical exams, physical fitness tests, polygraph, drug testing, and a background investigation.

Question#:	3
Topic:	Attending Job Fairs
Hearing:	Solutions to Improve Federal Hiring
Primary:	The Honorable Kyrsten Sinema
Committee:	HOMELAND SECURITY (SENATE)

Question: In our discussion, we talked about the importance of DHS attending and participating in job fairs to find candidates.

What guidance does DHS offer its sub-agencies and its own human resources professionals regarding whether DHS should prioritize and attend a job recruiting opportunity such as a job fair?

Response: DHS coordinates outreach and recruitment to premier conferences and events with a focus on our primary mission critical occupations. The Department also conducts annual recruitment planning sessions to prioritize events and ensure alignment with workforce planning and diversity analysis to meet or exceed hiring goals. As a result of these planning sessions, DHS has developed micro-targeted strategies and coordinated events to fulfill the Department's needs.

Question#:	4
Topic:	Rural Area Retention
Hearing:	Solutions to Improve Federal Hiring
Primary:	The Honorable Kyrsten Sinema
Committee:	HOMELAND SECURITY (SENATE)

Question: When discussing rural area retention you mentioned several efforts that DHS uses such as special salary rates, retention pay, and a rotations program that have proven effective.

Based on DHS analysis of such efforts, which of those has proven to be the most effective and how do you determine what to use where?

Response: DHS Components determine which retention initiatives to employ based upon the unique requirements of their missions and the particular challenges of the location. Challenges can include high cost of living, quality of life issues, and competition from private sector and other governmental agencies. Examples of effective strategies Components currently use to address these rural area challenges include:

- The United States Coast Guard (USCG) uses incentives such as permanent change of station (PCS) and setting of initial pay rate based on superior qualifications or special agency need to attract and retain talent in high-cost remote locations. A blanket approval for PCS entitlements was authorized for remote locations such as Hawaii and Alaska. In 2018, OPM also authorized a 12 percent pay differential for USCG Federal Wage System employees in specified remote areas of Alaska, bringing wages into alignment with those of their Department of Defense counterparts.
- In 2017, CBP determined that one of the primary reasons for agents' departure was lack of mobility due to location considerations. In an effort to address this concern, the United States Border Patrol Operational Mobility Program was created, funded, implemented, and executed. This program provides nationwide reassignment opportunities to agents. Since the implementation of this highly successful program, 234 employees have relocated at a cost of \$3 million.
- In response to significant competition from the commercial aviation market and in recognition of a world-wide pilot shortage, OPM authorized a 35 percent special salary rate supplement (effective in May 2019) in place of lower locality payments for CBP's Air Interdiction Agents (pilots), grades 11 through 15, including those stationed in many rural areas across the nation. The special salary rates are anticipated to have a positive impact on stabilizing staffing levels, which had dropped by roughly 14 percent between 2014 and 2018.
- To reduce turnover in remote locations, TSA pays retention incentives to employees at their 53 smallest airports.
- CBP's Office of Field Operations' (OFO) use of recruitment incentives aides OFO to recruit new employees into hard-to-fill (HTF) and critically understaffed locations,

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but it also helps to stabilize attrition, and retain employees for a 3-year service period. Since OFO started offering a recruitment incentive in July 2015 only 176 of the 1,554 applicants who entered on duty with incentives have either reassigned to another port (39), thereby forfeiting the incentive, or have left the agency (52-resigned; 36-terminated; 12-transferred to another federal agency).

- The type of recruitment incentive is a group incentive for 1895s and 0401s in hard-to-fill, or critically understaffed ports with inadequate applicant pools to meet frontline staffing goals.

CBP's OFO also uses a relocation incentive to attract experienced and seasoned officers to HTF and hard-to-retain ports, thereby retaining officers for the duration of a 3-year service period. Without these incentives, the locations would expend excessive amount of overtime and experience a severely weakened operational posture in fulfilling the agency's mission. For example, the Alaska Ports of Entry relocation incentive is for 4 years. We currently have 11 CBPOs and 1 Agriculture Specialist receiving the relocation incentive in Alaska. 28 CBPOs are under the 3-year service agreement.

A review of the ports staffing and attrition/loss levels are reviewed over a 3-year of period, to determine if the port is hard-to-fill or critically understaffed. It is essential to ensuring that seasoned officers will continue to apply and accept offers of employment to these hard-to-fill (HTF) and hard-to-retain (HTR) ports, and stay for the duration of the 3 or 4-year service period. Without these incentives, these Ports of Entry can expend excessive amount of overtime and experience a severely weakened operational posture in fulfilling the agency's mission.

DHS continues to pursue strategies to address retention challenges in rural areas and is exploring several additional solutions such as childcare subsidies and elder care options to help employees meet their family needs.

Question#:	5
Topic:	Mental Health Care
Hearing:	Solutions to Improve Federal Hiring
Primary:	The Honorable Kyrsten Sinema
Committee:	HOMELAND SECURITY (SENATE)

Question: During our discussion of the stressed workforce at DHS due to the ongoing border crisis, you talked about how DHS prioritizes mental health care for its workforce.

Please provide additional information on what programs and strategies that DHS has used to promote, protect and improve the mental health of its border workforce during this crisis?

Response: DHS established, in April 2018, an Employee and Family Readiness Council, made up of representatives from all ten DHS Components. As part of our Employee and Family Readiness initiative, the Council identified the top five challenges to address in 2019. The top challenges were derived from Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey, discussions with employees, and the Council's expertise. The initiatives chosen to address these challenges are based on extensive research by our workforce health and safety professionals. Our goal is to ensure employees and their families have the resources to manage their day-to-day stressors, while being fully prepared to manage emergency events or unexpected crises. The challenges and initiatives are as follows:

- **Mindfulness Training:** To help employees manage the inevitable stress that comes with their challenging duties, DHS provides mindfulness resilience and stress reduction training across DHS. This training helps our employees, in particular the law enforcement community, stay in the present, let go of negative experiences, and increase resilience to adverse life events. Component representatives participate in the trainings, and many will become certified mindfulness training instructors, able to teach the practice of mindfulness to their peers. Research shows a 35 percent reduction in worker stress after taking mindfulness resilience training. DHS plans to deliver mindfulness resiliency training on site at various southwest border locations, targeted to DHS employees supporting the border crisis, as well as working to integrate mindfulness resiliency training into the curriculum of the various DHS law enforcement academies, beginning with a current pilot at the Border Patrol Academy.
- **Relationship Training:** DHS is using a two-pronged approach to address personal relationships: Stronger Bonds training and counseling through Employee Assistance Programs. When participants were asked before taking the course how confident they were in their ability to care for their relationship, 32 percent said they were able to do so. After training, 99 percent were more confident in their ability to care for and communicate in their relationships, both on the job and at home.
- **Mental Health Resources:** DHS launched a public-facing website to provide information in a user-friendly format that is available to employees and families. The

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Primary:	The Honorable Kyrsten Sinema
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information is life-event based with a focus on encouraging help-seeking behavior to address these concerns. The overarching message is that there is no stigma in reaching out for help, an especially important message for our DHS law enforcement officers. Also on the website is information for DHS employees such as improving sleep, suicide prevention, parenting, mindfulness, nutrition, cardiovascular fitness, posttraumatic growth, etc. The primary focus of the website is education, awareness, and stigma reduction through frank discussions about the importance of seeking help, and the Department's commitment to providing this assistance.

- **Financial Literacy:** DHS has taken action to ensure that all employees become more aware of agency resources already in place to help them improve their financial health and habits. The Financial Literacy Campaign, Invest in Your Financial Health, provides helpful information and accessible financial resources, addresses common concerns, and directs employees to internal programs that can promote financial wellness and reduce financial stress.
- **Dependent Care:** Based on research conducted by OPM, by 2021, 43 percent of DHS employees will have childcare responsibilities and 32 percent will have adult care responsibilities. To ensure that DHS makes the correct resource decisions on this topic, we are undertaking a nationwide workforce needs assessment that will allow DHS to accurately identify both the current needs of the workforce with regards to dependent care, as well as the projected needs five to 10 years in the future. The Department is also exploring dependent care programs for employees who work non-traditional hours in collaboration with existing centers operated by the Federal Aviation Administration and the General Services Administration. CBP offers a Child Care Subsidy Program. This program benefits employees working in intense positions with long and often non-traditional hours. CBP has also recently raised the total adjusted family income rate to make the child care subsidy benefit available to more employees, which increased program participation from 11 participants to over 550. Additionally, CBP offers employees Back-up Care that provides a last-minute option for child or elder care for employees in the event their plans for care fall through.
- **Peer Support:** DHS deployed Traumatic Incident and Events Response Teams during times of crisis to assist employees in dealing with traumatic events, including those they continue to encounter on the border. The teams are comprised of Peer Support and Chaplaincy members who deploy with a licensed clinician and interact with employees and families in group and individual sessions. Peer support and Chaplaincy programs are also available across the various DHS operational Components to support employees during difficult times. These types of programs are highly successful in law enforcement agencies to bridge the gap on recognizing

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employees in crisis, offering support to them through a familiar, safe, and trusted environment, and can encourage the next level of care if determined necessary.

- **Employee Assistance Program (EAP):** EAP is a key tool that provides support to employees and their family members in a wide variety of circumstances. EAP provides immediate access to mental health counseling to both employees and to members of their household and provides support to employees facing issues where practical support is needed such as financial education, legal referrals, child care searches, college financial aid resources, and relocation support. Eligible family members of DHS employees can access these services independently and many of the services are free of charge to the employee, such as the mental health counseling and financial education pieces.

Question: What programs and strategies have been the most effective?

Response: All of these programs are integral to supporting DHS employees, particularly the frontline personnel and those currently supporting the border crisis. DHS considers employee and family readiness a top priority and will continue to promote the multi-faceted approaches outlined above. The goal of the Department is to do everything we can to lessen the burden on our employees and retain our highly-skilled, mission-driven workforce. We will continue to identify resources and approaches to aid in employee and family readiness and implement them smartly across the Department.

Question#:	6
Topic:	Hiring Process Bottlenecks
Hearing:	Solutions to Improve Federal Hiring
Primary:	The Honorable Kyrsten Sinema
Committee:	HOMELAND SECURITY (SENATE)

Question: During the hearing, you pointed to some steps that you have taken to reduce hiring times significantly within DHS.

What steps in the DHS hiring process tend to take the longest?

Response: For our law enforcement positions, the Department has found that it can take close to six months or longer to fill these positions, mainly due to the extensive vetting process. For example, our agents and officers require, in addition to the standard hiring assessments, medical and fitness exams, background investigations, and in some cases polygraphs. While these take time, they are essential to ensure DHS acquires the right talent in these critical positions.

Question: Where are the greatest bottlenecks and what steps has/is your agency taking to overcome them?

Response: Our extensive vetting process for law enforcement positions is the greatest bottleneck. The Department has implemented hiring hubs in central locations and increased the number of doctors, nurses, and polygraphers on staff to ensure the applicants are able to move through the process as efficiently as possible. Steps taken include: increasing HR staff and contractors at hiring centers by over 25 percent; implementing short, but equally effective polygraphs; and eliminating or combining steps that were not value added. In addition, DHS is identifying and removing redundancies to ensure best-qualified applicants move through the process quicker by investing in technology advancements that integrate hiring systems to make applying easier. In FY18, DHS-overall time to hire for all positions was 107 days, compared to 114 days the prior year. This number was a 6 percent decrease and below the 110 days target. Border Patrol Agents (BPAs) and Customs and Border Protection Officers (CBPOs) overall time to hire has remained steady during the same period, despite the number of BPAs and CBPOs hired increasing 70 percent.

Question#:	7
Topic:	Agency Needs
Hearing:	Solutions to Improve Federal Hiring
Primary:	The Honorable Kyrsten Sinema
Committee:	HOMELAND SECURITY (SENATE)

Question: Given the size of DHS, your human resources professionals have quite a mission to fulfill.

What steps is your agency taking at the national and local level to ensure that your hiring professionals understand the needs of the agency and have the tools and experience they need to do their jobs?

Response: Each DHS Component has a human capital support organization focused on unique missions and critical occupations. The development of the Human Capital Leadership Council is one of the most important steps DHS has taken to ensure HR professionals have the tools and experience required to support the Department. The Council is comprised of senior leaders from all DHS organizations and chaired by the DHS Chief Human Capital Officer. The HCLC is a vital part of the DHS Human Capital enterprise. All Components are represented on the HCLC to ensure any concerns or requirements are addressed. The Council works together to prioritize human capital strategic initiatives and strengthen the HR workforce. For example, one of the Council's highest priorities is the HR Academy, "built by DHS for DHS," mentioned above. HR Academy is designed to provide a career path for all HR professionals, including providing just-in-time training in the key disciplines (e.g., labor and employee relations, staffing, classification, benefits, etc.). HR Academy promotes best-practices, sharing of information, and collaboration among specialists, and provides HR professionals with a network of peers. Additionally, virtual HR Town Halls are held on a quarterly basis to provide key updates to the DHS HR professionals.

Question#:	8
Topic:	TSA Recruitment and Retention
Hearing:	Solutions to Improve Federal Hiring
Primary:	The Honorable Kyrsten Sinema
Committee:	HOMELAND SECURITY (SENATE)

Question: We did not have a chance to address hiring specific to the Transportation Security Administration during the hearing, but this is an area within DHS that I am concerned about. There is a great deal of turnover in these ranks. Stakeholders point to the low salary as a primary factor. What is DHS doing to improve recruitment and retention of TSA Officers?

Response: There are a number of activities that were recently completed or underway aimed at improving Transportation Security Officer (TSO) retention and reducing attrition at all categories of airports.

- In August 2018, TSA implemented a TSO Career Progression program, which established a clearly defined and transparent career path with pay increases tied to enhanced skills and training.
- TSA recently underwent a third-party “Blue Ribbon Panel” study that made a number of recommendations currently being evaluated. The Blue Ribbon Panel recommended that TSA leverage Aviation and Transportation Security Act (ATSA, Pub. L. 107-71) flexibilities to develop a unique pay process for the TSO workforce, providing more effective means of advancing TSOs through pay bands.
- From FY18 to FY19, the number of duty stations receiving retention incentives to reduce attrition and improve officer retention increased from 50 airports to 75 airports, many of which were smaller airports. TSA provides such incentives to augment TSO pay at duty stations that experience retention and recruitment challenges due to markets with better employment opportunities, low unemployment, and high costs-of-living. TSA is currently evaluating additional duty stations that may merit use of retention incentives in FY20.
- TSA is in the process of validating a new Job Compatibility Assessment (JCA), developed with the support of the Office of Personnel Management, to integrate into the TSO selection process in calendar year 2020. The JCA will assist TSA in identifying candidates likely to engage in counterproductive work behaviors, as well as those likely to support the TSA mission, early in the hiring process. By ensuring job compatibility prior to selection, TSA expects a reduced attrition rate and an increase in the overall duration of time new hires remain in the officer ranks.
- Earlier in 2019, TSA permitted Category X airports to increase their number of full-time TSO positions. These positions afforded incumbent part-time officers

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the opportunity to convert to full-time. TSO attrition for full-time officers is lower than what is observed for part-time officers.

- The FY19 Comparability Equivalent Increase (CEI) went into effect on March 17, 2019 (retroactive back to January 6, 2019). The CEI is the annual federal employee pay increase, which is based on the Executive Order that authorizes annual pay increases for civilian federal employees. This increased all officers pay and increased the TSO starting pay. In 2019, a 1.4 percent across the board increase was approved, in addition to a .5 percent locality pay increase amounting to a 1.9 percent increase for TSA employees.
- TSA recently instituted the requirement for TSO candidates to view the TSO Realistic Job Preview video prior to attending Airport Assessment. This effort is designed to make prospective TSO candidates more aware of the position's responsibilities and duties.
- Effective FY20, TSA is implementing a new Model Officer Recognition initiative to help us better reward and recognize excellence in our Officers. The Model Officer initiative consists of monetary and non-monetary awards throughout the year and a pay increase for the top 5 percent of the Officers once a year.
- Effective FY20, TSA is simplifying performance management by transitioning to a two-tier (meets standards/ does not meet standards) performance rating system to reduce administrative burden on the screening workforce, which will allow the supervisors to reinvest the time in meaningful, continuous engagement with the employees.

Question: What have the outcomes of these efforts been so far?

Response: TSA has been successful in getting most airports to their full staffing authorization prior to the peak summer travel months. Many of the larger markets where TSA has seen recruitment and retention challenges (e.g., Seattle, Denver, and Boston), have experienced reduced attrition with the implementation of retention incentives and increased compensation.

Question: What impact would moving the TSA Officer position to the GS pay scale have on recruitment and retention of these positions?

Response: Exit interviews show that pay is just one of the factors TSOs provide as reasons for leaving TSA. The authorities provided under the ATSA allow the Administrator to tailor TSA's personnel management policies and practices, including pay and compensation, to respond to TSA's unique requirements. TSA continues to explore workforce solutions, which would be much more challenging to implement under

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the General Schedule pay system. Additionally, the Blue Ribbon Panel recommended that TSA further leverage ATSA authorities, rather than convert to the General Schedule, to develop a unique pay process for the TSO workforce, providing more effective means of advancing TSOs through pay bands.

Department of Veterans affairs (VA)
 Questions for the Record
 Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
 Subcommittee on Regulatory Affairs and Federal Management
 United States Senate

July 30, 2019

Questions for the Record from Senator Kyrsten Sinema

QUESTION 1: The hearing featured discussion of the importance of offering training programs to improve and empower the human resources operations of federal agencies. For your agency, what are some of the training and workforce improvement strategies that have been most effective in improving your human resources staff?

VA Response: A blended learning approach has proven effective in several of VA's Human Resources (HR) learning programs. For example, the Technical Career Field Program (TCF), which is an intensive internship/apprenticeship program for several career fields including HR, and the New Talent Development Program (mandatory core training for all new HR Specialists) both use multiple modalities to effectively enhance the HR workforce. Longitudinal data for the TCF program indicate >80 percent retention at approximately 5 years and >90 percent retention at 3 years. VA is beginning to track effectiveness at this level for other programs as well. Additionally, the full implementation of pre- and post-learning assessments with all technical training has provided a means to evaluate training delivery, as well as VA's use of the Talent Management System to track completion of VA-sponsored courses, even those that are face-to-face. This allows VA to provide location specific information regarding their HR staff who attend training. This approach has been well-received by HR personnel.

Question 1a: How does VA promote continuing education for your human resources professionals and what programs do you offer to provide continued professional growth? Which programs are most effective?

VA Response: All new Veterans Health Administration (VHA) GS-201 HR Specialists are provided training, which is now mandatory and includes a blended learning approach: self-paced, virtual, and face-to-face. In the annual HR Development Customer Survey, the preferred method of announcing upcoming courses for this training is through email solicitation to the field. VA is an approved provider by the Society for Human Resources Management (SHRM) for issuing continuing education credits, which allow HR Specialists to improve their VA-specific HR training while also maintaining this HR professional credential. VA tracks training completion, effectiveness, and evaluates delivery of training programs to constantly update resources for continual growth and development.

QUESTION 2: During the hearing and in response to one of my questions, you highlighted VA's partnership with DOD and expressed a desire for VA to "grow its own clinicians." What steps need to be taken to make this a reality?

VA Response: VA is considering and evaluating a legislative proposal to allow VA to sponsor U.S. Public Health Service commissioned officers as students at the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences (USUHS). VA would fund the officer's medical education in exchange for a commitment to serve in VA Medical Centers (VAMC) or clinics. If enacted, this would provide a continuous pipeline of new physicians directly to VA and a guaranteed source of clinicians who can be directed to rural and under-served regions treating Veterans.

Question 2a: What actions can be done through your existing authorities and what actions require legislative support?

VA Response: Clinicians are hired under the VA title 38 or Hybrid title 38 personnel system which is designed for recruitment of candidates outside of the normal competitive process. Title 38 and Hybrid title 38 personnel systems use public notice announcements to recruit through professional boards, medical journals, social media platforms, college campuses, and targeted career fairs to identify qualified candidates. Additionally, under existing authorities, VA has partnered with the U.S. Public Health Service (USPHS) to identify commissioned officers to serve in VA after they have completed their education. However, affirmative legal authorities are required that would allow VA to pay the expenses of training students attending the Uniformed Services University of USUHS prior to hiring them as VA employees.

QUESTION 3: In our discussion at the hearing, you mentioned a number of new initiatives to recruit interns to the VA. This included partnerships with HBCUs and targeted engagements with other academic affiliates. How are you tracking the efforts of these recruitment programs to: 1) determine which are most effective and 2) identify longer-term success of these programs with a goal of retention of interns as they advance through residency and beyond?

VA Response: VA invests significant resources in the training of health care providers as part of VA's statutory mission. We realize the trainees who care for our Veterans are a potential pipeline of future clinicians for VA. VA recognizes trainees who experience formative educational activities in VA clinical environments are more inclined to be recruited to work in VA settings. VA needs a greater diversity in its clinical staff and more clinicians who are experienced in Veteran-centric care. VA has affiliations with more than 1,800 unique colleges and universities including several Minority Institutions (as identified in the Higher Education Act), Hispanic-Serving Institutions, and four Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) medical schools.

House Report 114-497 directed VA to sponsor a symposium between HBCU health professions schools and VA officials at the national, regional, and local levels. In response, VA's Office of Academic Affiliation (OAA) hosted VA's Diversity and Inclusion Summit on June 28-29, 2017, at Meharry Medical College in Nashville, Tennessee. Participants included representatives from each of the HBCU medical schools, officials from the Association of Minority Health Professions Schools, members of the Diversity and Inclusion Subcommittee of the National Academic Affiliations Council, experts from the Association of American Medical Colleges, and VHA leadership at the local, regional, and national levels. Discussions at the Summit included exploring opportunities for educational collaboration, expansion of graduate medical education training in rural and underserved areas, improving diversity in the healthcare workforce, and encouraging leadership at VAMCs and HBCUs to purposefully work together.

To ensure that all feasible academic affiliation opportunities with HBCUs are explored, OAA launched a pilot initiative to geo-map Primarily Minority Serving Institutions (PMSIs) that sponsor health professions education programs in geographic proximity to VA facilities that can support clinical trainees. To date, several PMSI health professions programs located near VA teaching facilities without active affiliation agreements have been identified. This initiative shows promising potential to maximize VA's academic affiliations with PMSIs and HBCUs. Such programs may include education for nurses, physical therapists, and physician assistants, which were reported by the Office of the Inspector General to be VA critical shortage occupations.

Section 304 of VA's Maintaining Internal Systems and Strengthening Integrated Outside Networks Act of 2018 (MISSION Act), Public Law 115-182, created a pilot program to support the education of 18 medical students who are Veterans in exchange for 4 years of service at VA after completion of residency; eight of those students will come from HBCU schools of medicine. Section 301 mandates that at least 50 medical or dental students are provided with educational support in exchange for 3-6 years of service at VA following completion of post-graduate training. Section 303 is a loan repayment program provided during residency training that requires service at VA. Both programs authorize preference to applicants who are Veterans. The programs described in sections 301, 303, and 304 have rigorous monitoring and reporting requirements that will determine the number of recipients (preferably Veterans and applicants training for critical shortage occupations) who will be providing service at VA following training.

VA's All Employee Survey (AES), indicates that approximately 65 percent of physicians currently working in VA received some of their pre-employment training at VA. The Trainee Satisfaction Survey from the academic year 2017-2018 indicated that approximately 73 percent of trainees would consider working at VA following training compared to 53 percent prior to their VA experience. VA is utilizing its authority for directly hiring current and former trainees, and we formed a collaborative workgroup to review the hiring and recruitment processes.

VA recently hosted two virtual, national VA Trainee Recruitment Events (VA-TREs) to connect, match, place, and retain Health Professions Trainees (HPT), which resulted in 134 accepted offers by mental health HPTs at matched facilities. Because of the success of the first two pilots, VHA is committed to making VA-TREs a permanent part of our health care recruitment strategy portfolio. The third VA-TRE is currently in progress, with plans for an annual calendar of national events to leverage previous and current HPTs.

Question 3a: What processes are already in place to track interns and residents as they transition to a long-term career at the VA and what processes need to be put in place?

VA Response: VA conducts a robust strategic recruitment campaign to fill health care vacancies by targeting VA HPTs, which include students, interns, residents, and fellows. This initiative includes 1) VA-TREs that connect and match trainees to VAMC vacancies; 2) a multi-faceted marketing campaign called TakeACloserLook@VA; 3) sustained HPT outreach efforts; and 4) ongoing partnerships with VA's OAA, VHA national clinical program offices, local VAMC training directors and hiring officials, and academic affiliates.

VA relies on a combination of internal workforce data, HPT training data, and the VA AES data to track the number of HPTs who transition to careers with VA. VA is currently exploring additional HPT-tracking capabilities. In addition, VA is piloting the use of "Stay Interviews" for HPTs who are permanently hired at facilities through VA-TREs to monitor satisfaction with placements and do everything possible to retain these employees.

Additionally, interns appointed under the Pathways Program (Internship, Recent Graduates, and Presidential Management Fellows) are provided with opportunities to work in agencies and explore Federal careers while enrolled in school and while gaining invaluable work experience. Upon successful completion of their specific program requirements, interns are eligible to be converted to a permanent position within VA. VA currently has in place a Pathways Program Administrator at the headquarters level to work with each VA Administration to track the number of interns as they transition out of the Pathways Program. In the future, for tracking and reporting purposes, VA may utilize the personnel processing system to provide metrics on the number of interns that convert out of the program and into permanent positions.

QUESTION 4: From my vantage point, hiring into the federal government seems to be largely reactive. Yet the private sector is very proactive in recruiting their workforce to help ensure they are hiring a talented and diverse workforce. You provided some examples of active recruitment efforts at VA through academic affiliates. What are other innovative programs, such as exchange programs, sabbaticals, or flexible schedules to allow for private practice, that VA employs to recruit and retain clinicians?

VA Response: VA employs a mix of innovative recruitment programs and strategies to meet healthcare staffing needs. VA's Transitioning Military Personnel (TMP) program targets transitioning military clinicians in mission critical and/or staffing shortage occupations for employment consideration with VA once separated from military service. VA leverages national health care recruitment consultants in the National Recruitment Service (NRS), which functions as VA's internal search firm, to aggressively recruit practicing patient care clinicians for vacant practice opportunities. NRS partners with national program offices, Veterans Integrated Service Networks (VISN), and local VAMCs to develop tailored recruitment and retention strategies to support mission-critical clinical occupations and specialties. VA also utilizes local Facility Recruitment Liaisons who work closely with NRS and conduct in-house recruitment and onboarding efforts. VHA's Recruitment Marketing and Advertising (RMA) division uses digital and traditional sourcing platforms to ensure national visibility of practice opportunities to patient care providers in hard-to-recruit occupations.

VA uses Federal workplace flexibilities such as remote telemedicine, flexible scheduling, condensed work weeks, "block scheduling," job sharing, dual appointments, and part-time appointments to appeal to a broader provider market. VA continues full utilization of incentives to recruit and retain physicians such as: 1) Recruitment/Relocation Incentives; 2) Retention Incentives; 3) Permanent Change of Station Relocation Benefits; 4) Education Debt Reduction Program (EDRP); and 5) Student Loan Repayment Program.

Additionally, in partnership with the Department of Defense (DoD), VA is actively recruiting transitioning service members and military spouses through the DoD Skillbridge Program and Military Spouse Employment Partnership respectively.

Question 4a: If these types of exchange programs do not exist, what do you see as the impact of creating such a program in recruiting and retaining medical professionals and support staff?

VA Response: Exchange programs currently exist through Memoranda of Understanding and Intergovernmental Personnel Act agreements. VA believes that developing an interagency or intergovernmental program unique to recruiting and retaining medical professionals and support staff would have a positive impact on patient access, especially in rural and/or underserved areas.

QUESTION 5: In the VA's opening statement, you mentioned that private hospitals are using innovative approaches to recruitment and retention and VA needs to do the same. What are some approaches that the private sector is using that VA would like to explore?

VA Response: While VA utilizes some of the same strategies and innovations as its private sector counterparts, it remains at a comparative disadvantage in the

following areas: health care compensation and incentives, signing bonuses, hiring flexibilities/timelines, Continuing Medical Education (CME) reimbursements, funding for candidate interview and site visit-related expenses, the ability to sponsor family member travel or job-finding assistance as part of the recruitment process, paid parental leave, and full tuition reimbursement or loan repayment for family members/dependents.

VA is using many innovative approaches to improve health care recruitment and retention. VA's NRS maintains an active partnership with the Association for Advancing Physician and Provider Recruitment (AAPPR), the industry-leading professional association for physician and provider recruitment and retention. This relationship allows NRS real-time access to private sector best practices, benchmarking data, and meaningful networking relationships, and it informs and enhances VA strategic recruitment efforts. VA's NRS also leads the AAPPR's Federal Recruitment Shared Interest Group and is directly involved with developing the health care recruitment competency model that will become the national industry standard for recruitment staff and leaders. VA recognizes that developing robust talent pipelines of health care professionals is key to meeting ongoing staffing needs. VA created chartered workgroups focused on improving hiring rates for VA HPTs and TMP.

Question 5a: What barriers are in place that are keeping VA from doing this?

VA Response: The approaches, mentioned in the previous response, used in the private sector would require specific statutory authority for VA to do the same.

QUESTION 6: In our discussion regarding specifically housekeepers at VA, you mentioned that VA is working with OPM to address the current GS classification and place them into another authority. I would like more information on the how OPM and VA are addressing this, what is the timeline for implementation, what solutions specifically are being considered, and what support is needed (if any) from Congress?

VA Response: Housekeeping Aids are currently covered under the Federal Wage System (FWS). FWS is a uniform pay-setting system that covers Federal appropriated fund and non-appropriated fund blue-collar employees who are paid by the hour. VA is considering and evaluating a legislative proposal that would allow for Housekeeping Aids to be appointed under 38 United States Code 7401 (3) like hybrid-covered occupations. This would allow greater flexibility in the candidates who are initially considered (no longer restricted only to preference-eligible applicants) and would support the development of special salary rates that could be approved by the Secretary rather than the lengthy process required now under FWS that must be processed through Office of Personnel Management (OPM) and DoD.

QUESTION 7: During the hearing, I asked specifically an outstanding request from our office to learn more about locum tenens as one mechanism for addressing shortages in hiring, particularly in rural communities. How is VA using this (if at all) and to what degree can it help fill gaps in staffing?

VA Response: Any VA facility may use a commercial locum tenens company if there is a contractual agreement with that company. This arrangement is less than ideal because it generally takes weeks, not days, to train a non-VA provider on VA's electronic record and policies and procedures. Our former internal locum tenens program was inadequate to meet the vast needs of our organization and has been transitioned to a Gap Coverage program called the Clinical Resource Hubs. These VISN-level Hubs act as a virtual medical center to direct in-person and virtual care to areas of highest need in Primary Care and Mental Health. Each Hub has a timeline for implementation with a priority being placed on those "underserved" areas that Section 401 of the MISSION Act seeks to address.

Question 7a: What other methods does VA find most effective to recruit and retain in rural settings?

VA Response: VA finds that the most effective methods to recruit and retain in rural settings include Employee Referral programs; VA Partnership with National Rural Recruitment and Retention Network, which provides visibility of VA practice opportunities to the rural patient care provider market; exhibiting at regional health care career fairs and professional conferences to create awareness of and engagement with providers; Health Professions Scholarship Program; targeted use of EDRP; the TMP program; and continued use of flexible work schedules. VA is also participating in a recruitment pilot program with Department of Health and Human Services to share referral lists/certificates of highly qualified applicants for hiring consideration. Additionally, these other methods are most effective:

- Offering competitive salaries;
- Student loan repayment program;
- Sign-on and retention bonuses;
- Ensuring adequate support staffing for providers to reduce burnout;
- Giving trainees rural health experience during their VA rotations; and
- Providing the opportunity to telework when appropriate.

QUESTION 8: During the hearing, you mentioned implementation of an all-employee survey that is acting as an entrance survey for the agency. What is VA learning from these surveys and how is VA integrating these data with those from the exit surveys to inform their recruitment and retention strategies overall?

VA Response: VA has two separate surveys: the AES conducted annually to assess the engagement and satisfaction of the overall workforce and an open Entrance Survey sent to newly hired employees around the time of onboarding. Both surveys are

voluntary and anonymous. VA is working to update the Entrance Survey to provide more actionable information for our recruitment efforts. The current Entrance Survey primarily asks respondents to rate their most and least satisfying experiences with the hiring process (e.g., timeliness, communication, orientation, application), their primary reasons for choosing VA as an employer, and the source for finding out about the job opportunity. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2018, the most satisfying aspects of the hiring process were Friendly/Helpful People (27 percent) followed by the Position/Job/VA (17 percent). The least satisfying aspects were Timeliness (27 percent) followed by Paperwork (25 percent). The most frequently selected benefits and recruitment programs were Health Insurance (35 percent), Retirement (33 percent), and Thrift Savings Plan (19 percent). The top three reasons for choosing VA as an employer were Benefits (19 percent), Career Opportunity/Advancement (19 percent), and Mission/Serving Veterans (14 percent). The survey also asks respondents to indicate the source for how they learned about the job opportunity; the top responses were USA Jobs/OPM (25 percent), VA Careers Web site (19 percent), and VA Employees (19 percent).

The information from the Entrance Survey is only one part of how VA recruitment strategies are determined. Based on these findings, we are developing a total rewards brochure for specific occupations that provides a detailed summary and actual dollar-value estimates of the entire benefits package to include leave, retirement, health insurance, etc. This brochure will be an excellent recruitment tool to help applicants better understand all that VA has to offer. Additionally, VA is working to improve the timeliness and paperwork elements of the hiring process by automating processes where possible.

VA also has a standardized Exit Survey for employees who leave VA service. In response to Section 211 of the VA Choice and Quality Employment Act of 2017, Public Law 115-46, VA consulted with external entities on best practices and completed a thorough review and revision of the VA Exit Survey to solicit more actionable information and obtain granularity surrounding reasons for leaving to include retirement. The new VA Exit survey was released on August 1, 2019. Analysis of the FY 2018 data from the VA Exit Survey showed that nearly 25 percent of respondents choose retirement as the primary reason for leaving followed by workplace issues (23 percent), personal/family reasons (22 percent), and advancement opportunities (22 percent). The new survey will help identify why people are retiring and the extent to which pay/compensation and other factors may have played a role, even if it wasn't the primary reason for leaving. This information will help in the distribution and use of recruitment, retention, and relocation incentives as well as other areas for improvement.

QUESTION 9: During the hearing we discussed the importance of advancement opportunities as a common incentive for employees. How is VA investing in career training and continuing education opportunities for all VA employees?

VA Response: VA hosts several formal and informal pathways to obtain career and professional development for employees interested in advancing their leadership skills. A broad, self-led resource is the Profiles in Leadership series available to any VA employee interested in building leadership skills development from basic (Emerging Leader) to advanced (Senior Leader) proficiency levels. More formal, faculty-led leadership training sessions typically require employee application and selection. At the national level, formal programs are tailored to develop VA field-based executive health care leadership skills through the HCLDP: Health Care Leadership Development Program, as well as executive skills to serve in other VA Program Office and Administration leadership positions through LVA: Leadership VA, and the Senior Executive Service Corporate Development Program.

Continuing education for current leaders is also available through programs run by partner organizations such as OPM's Senior Executive Assessment Program and Federal Executive Institute, the Partnership for Public Service's Excellence in Government Fellows Program, the White House Leadership Development Program, and the President's Management Council Interagency Rotation Program.

The Employee Education System (EES) helps VA employees achieve their training and continuing education goals by providing purchased training at every employee level. EES supports VA in offering clinical professionals extensive continuing medical education (CME) to meet licensing requirements. To date in FY 2019, 271,098 VA medical professionals received more than 2.8 million hours of CME credits for free.

QUESTION 10: How does VA promote continuing education for human resource personnel? What programs do you offer to provide continued professional growth? Which do you find to be most effective?

VA Response: All new VHA GS-201 HR Specialists are provided training, which is now mandatory and includes a blended learning approach: self-paced, virtual, and face-to-face. In the annual HR Development Customer Survey, the preferred method of announcing upcoming courses for this training is through email solicitation to the field. VA is an approved provider by SHRM for issuing continuing education credits, which allow HR Specialists to improve their VA-specific HR training while also maintaining this HR professional credential. VA tracks training completion, effectiveness, and evaluates delivery of training programs to constantly update resources for continual growth and development. The blended learning approach is most effective: virtual pre-sessions leading into a face-to-face workshop.

Question 10a: Along these lines, my office has asked for more information on the School at Work and LIGHT programs. Specifically, I am interested in learning more about their scope, utilization and outcomes for VA staff and the overall success of these programs to develop VA staff internally.

VA Response: We regret that we do not have national data on these programs.

QUESTION 11: Given the size of VA, your hiring managers have quite a mission to fulfill. What steps is your agency taking at the national and local level to ensure that your hiring professionals understand the needs of the agency and have the tools and experience they need to do their jobs?

VA Response: We agree that VA's hiring managers have very challenging jobs, and the complexities of our hiring authorities across Title 5, Title 38, and Hybrid Title 38 make it challenging for both managers and HR professionals to navigate the system and requirements. For our managers involved in the hiring process, we offer introductory self-paced training on hiring requirements in our TMS covering topics such as Veteran hiring authorities, Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act requirements, concepts around Merit Systems Principles and Performance Management, and Prohibited Personnel Practices. Locally, HR offices provide training for hiring managers to assist them in navigating the hiring process. A supervisory toolkit and reference intranet site for general HR matters is also available. As mentioned above, VA HR professionals are provided in-depth HR professional training which is mandatory within the first year of entry into the position. HR professionals are also required to receive ongoing training on HR legal authorities and flexibilities. As part of HR Modernization, VHA is developing a new training model to assist HR professionals in developing their competencies as strategic business partners. This transformation will enhance the ability of VHA's HR professionals to provide both long-term and short-term strategic workforce management consultation to VAMC facility leaders in support of local and national priorities.

QUESTION 12: During the hearing, the timeline to hire was brought up on a few occasions. While OPM's goal for hiring is 45 days, the average timeline in the Federal Government is 106 days. This is too long. What steps in the VA hiring process tend to take the longest? Where are the bottlenecks and what steps are your agencies taking to overcome them?

VA Response: OPM's recommended goal to Federal agencies for time-to-hire is 80 days from the date the hiring need is validated until the employee enters on duty (EOD), with approximately 26 days dedicated to onboarding which is defined as the timeline from tentative offer to EOD. VA instituted this 80-day model for our Title 5 Competitive Service positions, which include most non-medical positions. VA also mandated the use of the online onboarding platform in the USA Staffing system for all new hires. This allows new hires to complete and submit most new employee paperwork

online, allowing HR offices to work in a more paperless environment as well as working pre-employment processes concurrently.

VA created a new 100-day time-to-hire model specific to Title 38 Excepted Service which includes most medical/clinical hires. Title 38 hiring is more complex than that of Title 5 as it includes requirements for VA health care professionals to meet credentialing and other pre-employment checks. This 100-day model allows additional time for the necessary steps required to onboard clinicians and to create associated metrics and goals specific to Title 38 hiring. The full 100 days should be necessary only when competitive processes are used to recruit (primarily job announcements). When non-competitive sourcing is used, the timeline can be reduced significantly. The overall goal for clinicians is to reduce the onboarding time to 45 days.

Question 12a: Are there examples you can point to, whether locally, regionally, or nationally, where the timeline has been substantially reduced? What steps were taken to reduce the timeline?

VA Response: Over the past 3 years, VA has implemented an approach called Hire Right Hire Fast (HRHF) to swiftly and effectively recruit and onboard Medical Support Assistants (MSA). This process includes establishment of an ongoing recruitment pipeline that effectively reduces the time-to-hire to solely the onboarding portion. Using this HRHF approach for MSAs, VA reduced the average time-to-hire to approximately 60 days. This approach is most effective for entry-level occupations with low barriers to entry and higher turnover. VA is expanding HRHF to other occupations to including Food and Nutrition Service and Housekeeping Aids.

Title 38 Excepted Service authority allows VA to appoint noncompetitively. VA can improve the hiring timeline in many instances by using this authority to hire clinicians noncompetitively. VA has developed models and best practices for both physician and nurse recruitment, which include maximizing noncompetitive authorities and concurrent processing of preemployment activities and the streamlining of onboarding procedures. VA will have an intensive focus on this approach in FY 2020 for physicians and nurse recruitment.

QUESTION 13: During my conversations with stakeholders about hiring and retention, there was a great deal of discussion about the gaps in the performance review process. In fact, GAO issued a report in 2017 identifying severe gaps in VHA's performance management systems and made multiple recommendations for improvements. Stakeholders that we talked to also scoffed at the idea that performance is being measured in terms of quality and instead is being measured by quantity—for example the number of claims completed (VBA) or number of patients seen (VHA). How is VA reviewing and improving its performance assessment process to ensure that it is merit-based and emphasizing quality metrics over quantity, skills development, and management performance (in the case of managers)?

VA Response: VA is implementing in FY 2020 an enterprise-wide performance management that will allow us to develop standard qualitative measures and subsequently perform the analysis of its effectiveness. This will allow us to recognize excellence and share best practices across the Department.

In the interim, VHA has deployed an automated performance management system called ePerformance to 65,000 employees and forecasts having more than 125,000 employees using ePerformance by the end of FY 2020. Then all pilot facilities will be invited to start using the functionality for Nurse and Clinical proficiency. This automation system simplifies the employee performance planning and appraisal process through:

- Automated assignment of performance elements and standards;
- Ability to cascade and align goals across the organization to drive a transparent culture in which employees will work toward the same vision of success together;
- Library of vetted performance plans that allow for standardization and quality metric-oriented performance standards;
- Online storage of comments and notes so employees and supervisors can pull up the data quickly and easily for self-assessment or final narratives;
- Automatic email reminders for HR, employees, and supervisors to complete their tasks, helping to keep the performance management process on schedule;
- Online storage and accessibility to view all plan activities from Performance Plan creation through finalization and electronic signature;
- Online view for designated HR staff to oversee performance management milestones and conduct technical reviews;
- Reporting that provides insight into major performance management milestones such as plans issued, progress reviews completed, final ratings issued; and
- Automatic transmission of annual performance appraisal forms into the employee's electronic Official Personnel Folder.