

THE FUTURE OF FEDERAL WORK II

HEARING

BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS
OF THE
COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND
REFORM

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The documents are available at: docs.house.gov.

THE FUTURE OF FEDERAL WORK II

Thursday, July 21, 2022

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM
SUBCOMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS
Washington, D.C.

The subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 9:01 a.m., in room 2154, Rayburn House Office Building, Hon. Gerald E. Connolly (chairman of the subcommittee) presiding.

Present: Representatives Connolly, Norton, Davis, Sarbanes, Lynch, Raskin, Porter, Brown, Hice, Keller, Clyde, and Biggs.

Also present: Representative Beyer.

Mr. CONNOLLY. The committee will come to order. Without objection, the chair is authorized to declare a recess of the committee at any time.

I want to welcome everyone to the hearing which seeks to apply lessons learned during the pandemic to strengthen and secure our Federal workforce. And I now recognize myself for an opening statement.

I want to welcome everyone to the hearing dedicated to examining the future of the Federal workforce and lessons learned during this pandemic. To do that, we must reflect on and recognize the heroic work our civil service accomplished during the deadliest parts of the pandemic especially.

These public servants engaged community-based health centers in the distribution of lifesaving vaccines; provided healthcare and services to veterans; delivered the mail, prescription drugs, food stuffs, and COVID tests; administered financial assistance to small businesses and millions of American families to make sure they had food on the table and a roof over their head. And they fought raging wildfires and other climate disasters. They administered financial assistance throughout the country, to state and local governments as well.

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

To support those goals, the Federal Government, including Congress, must work to provide competitive compensation; promote di-

versity, equity, inclusion, and access; support employees' needs for work-life balance; and encourage innovation, engagement, and collaboration among agency leadership and staff to improve agency operations.

Over the past four years, this subcommittee has held hearings that fought to maintain a merit-based civil service, ensured robust collective bargaining rights, honored our frontline Federal workers in the pandemic, explored how to rebuild the civil service guided by the previous administration, examine the future of Federal work and how it holds in store—and what it holds in store for the workforce itself.

At today's hearing, we pull our research together and our first strategic vision for the future of the Federal work. Despite years of efforts, strategic human capital management of the Federal workforce has landed in the government Accountability Office's high-risk list for the 21st consecutive year. GAO notes that myriad items on the high-risk list result from the Federal Government's inability to close skill gaps and higher training staff up critically in-demand skills like cyber, IT, data analytics, and human resources.

Roughly seven percent—seven percent—of the Federal employees are under the age of 30, compared to 23 percent in the private sector. Nearly 30 percent of Federal employees are over the age of 55, with potentially one-third of the Federal workforce eligible to retire over the next several years, threatening what has been referred to as a retirement tsunami for the Federal workforce.

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

If you look at the screen, you will see this discrepancy in detail. The red bar shows the age distribution of employees across all sectors, public and private. Watch as the figures transition to the age distribution to the Federal workforce in blue. Young employees make up a much smaller fraction of the Federal Government than they do in other sectors nationwide.

The workforce is the lifeblood of our Federal Government. Without people committed to public service, taxpayers, vulnerable populations, small businesses, and others will not be able to get the resources and services they need. If we fail to attract and hire the best and brightest in Federal service, our Nation suffers, our constituents suffer.

To avoid that fate, we crafted the NexGen Feds Act, which leverages Federal internships to build a robust cadre of early career talent that reflects this Nation's one tool, but an important tool.

In addition to early career talent, the Federal Government must ensure the current talent can perform its work regardless of the context. Throughout the pandemic, agencies embraced telework and remote working arrangements, and it worked. Agencies delivered critical services across the country, not without problems.

This subcommittee worked, on a bipartisan basis, to help agencies caught flat-footed at the start of the pandemic by investing in technologies that facilitate a continuity of operations. We must heed the lessons learned and maintain the advantages of telework

as laid out in the Telework Metrics and Cost Savings Act, a bill developed in partnership with Mr. Sarbanes of Maryland, and building upon this subcommittee's long history of support for telework, including the Telework Enhancement Act of 2010.

Unfortunately, we learned some pandemic lessons a little too late. An early failure by the previous administration to adopt consistent, clear, and effective safety guidelines led to a number of Federal workers contracting and, tragically in some cases, succumbing to the coronavirus pandemic while serving this Nation.

One of those civil servants was my constituent Chai Suthammanont. Chai worked in the kitchen of the daycare facility at the Marine barracks in Quantico. When the pandemic hit, Chai worked in a tight kitchen space with additional staff, where he was exposed to someone who had coronavirus symptoms. He then tested positive for COVID-19, and within a few weeks he was dead.

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

Further, Congress and the Biden Administration must make sure that every Federal job is a good job. This year, the Administration called for a pay increase of 4.6 percent, the largest annual Federal employee pay raise in 20 years. I implore the Administration, however, to implement a 5.1 percent pay raise consistent with the FAIR Act I introduced earlier this year, which has 60 congressional co-sponsors. This pay raise keeps the Federal Government competitive with the private sector and deals with the inflation rate.

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

Our expert civil service is a crown jewel. Protections are warranted. Actions to remove those protections threaten the civil service and, I believe, the foundations of democratic society. I've introduced preventing a patronage system act to put Congress in charge of which Federal employees receive civil service protection. Enactment of the bill, which was included in the House-passed Fiscal Year 2023 Defense Authorization Act would ensure that data and evidence undergird our policies.

I thank our witnesses for appearing today and look forward to implementing our vision of civil service; empowering to serve individuals, families, communities, states, and this Nation without regard to political affiliation.

With that, I now recognize the ranking member for his opening Statement.

Mr. HICE. Thank you very much, Chairman Connolly. I appreciate you calling this hearing.

And I am grateful to have here joining us the OPM Administrator and deputy director to testify. This is unfortunately, but an all too infrequent occurrence in Congress, as was the case when the IRS Commissioner was here.

I deeply appreciate the chance to ask questions regarding administrative policies to those who are responsible. And so I thank each of you for being here as well today.

Today's hearing is supposed to focus on the future of the Federal workforce of how to make the Federal Government a model employer. Too often, "model employer," that phrase is just, frankly, a catchphrase for treating Federal workers like a privileged and protected class. Looking over the testimoneys, the Biden Federal workforce policies are in many ways just another platform for leftwing agenda and promotion of that type of thing. And I feel it's unfortunate. I want to give some examples.

The emphasis is on creating more perks for Federal workers, increasing pay, shielding them from accountability, and promoting public sector unions.

Raising minimum wage for Federal employers, much less employees, let's be honest, who pays for that? Well, it's the American people? The Biden Administration also never misses an opportunity to promote unions. It seems the attitude is jobs are not good unless it's involving a good quality union.

In the Federal agencies, unions are front and center. And I can say, and I know the chairman knows, that since I came to Congress, I've tried to fight to reduce the amount of time Federal employees spend on union activities. They need to do the jobs they were hired to do. First and foremost, Federal employees are here to serve the public, not organize labor. I have fought through such things as the Accountable Feds Act, for example, to make sure that Federal employees are indeed accountable, so they can face discipline or removal if their performance warrants it. But the Biden Administration, to them and to many of my other colleagues, it seems more important to create knots in the process and obstacles that are designed to ensure that it's just too difficult to deal with poor performers.

I support Schedule F, which ensures Federal employees cannot thwart the policies that the American people voted for if they don't agree with them. Look, these are valid concerns, but Democrats seem to dismiss them altogether.

As we look at retention and recruitment challenges, just common sense tells us that we should not forget that talented workers do not want careers picking up the slack for poor performers. There must be accountability. And not to have it is destructive across the board.

The Biden Administration has also moved to expand alternative working arrangements, like telework and remote work, and to make these things permanent. Never mind—and this is something we've been calling for, for a long time—there has been no assessment of how telework impacts agency performance. Why would we make something permanent that we haven't even checked into as to its effectiveness?

Never mind that in the State of the Union, President Biden said himself that government would lead by example and that Federal workers would soon be back in the office. Well, they're still not back in the office.

When Ranking Member Comer and I wrote asking when Feds would return, OPM stated Federal employees would continue in a mix of in-office and telework arrangements.

So what changed after the State of the Union? Quite frankly, it doesn't appear that anything changed. But I can tell you we continue still hearing from our constituents, and the fact is that many of them could not get services from agencies like the VA or Social Security because no one was in the office. This is inexcusable.

Again, we are here to serve the public, not the other way around. It's a matter of good government to have a grasp on the real and potential impacts that teleworking and remote working would have before we make it permanent. And how do we know that OPM has the ability or the intent to monitor compliance with telework policies? How will we know whether workers have been scattered to the four winds with no intention of returning, and yet they continue to draw locality pay from high-cost areas?

Finally, OPM Director Ahuja says that all employees should be treated with dignity and respect—something that we all agree with—but are Federal workers still subjected to hostile work environments under the guise of racial sensitivity training?

Look, I do have concerns. I do also have areas of agreement. I certainly support more skill-based hiring as embodied in my Chance to Compete Act. OPM and Chairman Connolly also share this view. I also believe we should make military spouses a focus of Federal hiring efforts. But, again, the bottom line, the Federal workforce issues cannot be a one-sided conversation. There has to be accountability, there has to be oversight, not just extra perks, extra pay, and extra protection.

Again, the Federal workforce exists to serve the American public, and the American people do not exist to serve the Federal workforce.

I thank you. I look forward to our time together.

And, with that, Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Thank you, Mr. Hice.

I would like to now introduce our witnesses. Our first witness for today is deputy director for the Office of Management and Budget, Jason Miller. Our second witness is the director of the Office of Personnel, Kiran Ahuja.

If you would both rise and raise your right hand to be sworn in.

Do you swear or affirm that the testimony you're about to give is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the whole truth, so help you God?

Let the record show both witnesses answered in the affirmative. Thank you.

Without objection, your full written statements will be made part of the record.

And, with that, Mr. Miller, you're now recognized for your five minutes of testimony. Welcome.

**STATEMENT OF JASON S. MILLER, DEPUTY DIRECTOR FOR
MANAGEMENT, OFFICE OF MANAGEMENT AND BUDGET**

Mr. MILLER. Thank you.

Thank you very much, Chairman Connolly, Ranking Member Hice, members of the committee. I appreciate the opportunity to be here to speak to you, and I'm proud to be doing so alongside my friend and colleague, Kiran Ahuja.

Director Ahuja and I, with our teams, have worked shoulder-to-shoulder under this Administration to harness the potential of the Federal Government to be a model employer in order to deliver for the American people, and in so doing, to tackle longstanding challenges facing the Federal workforce.

As the deputy director for management at the Office of Management and Budget, I am responsible for overseeing governmentwide management matters, including broad Federal workforce policy. I serve as the chair of the President's Management Council, or PMC, which is composed of the deputy secretaries, deputy administrators of the CFO Act agencies, as well as Director Ahuja, the GSA Administrator, and the Cabinet Secretary. The PMC is particularly focused on the Federal workforce.

I've submitted longer formal testimony for the record. I will highlight several key points.

First, I want to start with the point that should be obvious but has not been a consistent focus across administrations: The Federal Government's greatest asset is its people. The strength of any organization rests on its people. And to deliver for the public, we must systematically approach the Federal workforce and its challenges as critical to our success as a Nation.

The more than 4 million public service servants at home and abroad, including military personnel and more than 2 million Federal civilians, are dedicated and talented. They serve the public regardless of political affiliation or who sits in the White House.

Second, employers are in fierce competition for talent, and the Federal Government needs to compete. Our workforce has chosen public service. We need to retain our workforce. We also need to ensure a strong pipeline that is bringing more talent into government to address attrition and to tap into the skill sets and capacity needed to deliver for the American people.

Third, our Federal workforce faces a number of key challenges, some of which have been highlighted, including demographics, with only eight percent of our Federal civilian workforce under the age of 30, 15 percent currently eligible for retirement today, a further 30 percent eligible for retirement within five years, and with real work to do to ensure that the Federal workforce reflects the diversity of the public we serve.

Employee engagement, which tends to correlate to organizational performance and for which, on average, the Federal Government has lower levels than the private sector. And critical skills, such as technology, cybersecurity, and data analytics, among a number of other key skill sets. Across all three dimensions and others, we need to improve. Improvement will take time. It will take commitment, leadership, and collaboration with the Congress.

Fourth, some have argued the challenges we face require a fundamental overhaul of the merit system that underpins our civil

service. I disagree. The merit system principles remain essential today. The question is how do we hold true to those principles while delivering much needed change on hiring, retention, engagement, pay and benefits, critical skills, early career talent and internships, culture, leadership, diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility, and on the workplace and personnel policies that will help the Federal Government, a mission-driven organization, remain an attractive and competitive employer.

Fifth, the Administration has made strengthening and empowering the Federal workforce the first priority in the President's Management Agenda, or PMA. This central focus on the workforce is a significant action and a significant signal. The workforce efforts of our PMA build on Administration actions taken to date and include four clear strategies: attracting and hiring talent, making every Federal job a good job, building a roadmap to the future of Federal work, and ensuring the strong central personnel system and support required for the Federal Government to be a model employer, all of which is driven by performance, performance of our agencies on behalf of the public they serve.

Before discussing the challenges and opportunities, I want to say thank you to the Federal workforce for choosing to serve your fellow Americans and for stepping up throughout the COVID-19 pandemic when the country leaned on you more than ever, at times at great personal costs. We do not say thank you enough to those who have dedicated themselves to public service at all levels. Thank you.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear here today, and I look forward to your questions.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Twenty-five seconds to go. Great job, Mr. Miller. Thank you. And thank you for recognizing internships, because that's the one piece we can fix fairly swiftly.

Ms. Ahuja, you are recognized for your five minutes of testimony. Welcome.

**STATEMENT OF KIRAN A. AHUJA, DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF
PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT**

Ms. AHUJA. Thank you.

Chairman Connolly, Ranking Member Hice, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to testify today on the future of Federal employment and OPM's work over the past year.

At OPM, we're focused on equipping Federal agencies with the tools they need to make every Federal job a good job, attract top talent, and strengthen Federal personnel practices and policies, all to create a more effective and efficient Federal Government. It is my honor to lead OPM in this important work. I look forward to highlighting our accomplishments over the past year.

First, I want to recognize the entire Federal workforce, both those who worked onsite throughout the pandemic and those who adapted quickly to new ways of working, for their commitment to mission and service to the American people.

I am also pleased that my colleague and friend, Jason Miller, from the Office of Management and Budget, is here today. Jason continues to be a critical and like-minded partner in OPM's efforts to execute its mission.

I want to focus on three important ways OPM serves as a strong, strategic partner to agencies and put the goals of the President's Management Agenda into action. First, promoting retention by making every Federal job a good job. Second, attracting much needed talent to the Federal workforce. And third, strengthening the workforce for now and into the future.

The Federal Government's most important asset is its people. Particularly in the current labor market, government must retain the expertise, commitment, and knowledge of Federal workers. OPM is aggressively working to help make every Federal job a good job and ensure that the Federal Government, as the Nation's largest employer, is adopting employment practices that set the pace for other sectors to follow.

For instance, OPM executed the President's vision on the \$15 minimum wage for Federal employees, immediately raising the pay for more than 67,000 workers, many of whom have been on the front lines throughout the pandemic and have been across this country. We also partnered with USDA and the Department of Interior on key provisions of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law that increased wildland firefighter pay and created a new occupational series. And we issued comprehensive guidance to agencies which outlined actions they should take working with unions to implement Executive Order 14003.

OPM is also working to attract top talent to the Federal Government. We're improving competitive hiring across the government through a focus on skills-based hiring. In May, OPM issued critical guidance to help agencies implement this vision. We're also working closely with agencies to bring on staff needed to implement key provisions of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. I look forward to leveraging the lessons learned to support hiring initiatives across the government. And we're working to implement the President's executive order on diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility.

The Federal Government is at its best when drawing from all parts of society. Our greatest accomplishments often result when diverse perspectives join together to overcome our greatest challenges. This all leads me to what steps we can take to prepare the Federal workforce for the future.

A key lesson from recent years is that workplace flexibilities, such as telework, remote work, and hybrid work schedules, help ensure Federal operations continue in the face of disruptions and improve employee engagement and morale. We look forward to providing agencies with additional resources to chart a path forward.

I also recognize that the Federal Government must capture and promote innovation. OPM hopes to work with this subcommittee to streamline and strengthen existing demonstration project authority to foster further innovation. We also want to work with Congress to develop a governmentwide cyber workforce plan that puts agencies on equal footing and competing for cyber talent.

Additionally, like the private sector, the Federal Government needs flexibility to offer competitive pay to retain and recruit its workforce and execute agency missions. This would include critical pay—critical position pay and incentives for highly skilled experts needed to solve critical agency challenges, flexibility on special pay

rate limitations, and more ability for agencies to determine incentive award levels on their own.

I'm proud of what OPM has accomplished during the past year, and I'm excited about what's to come.

I want to again thank Chairman Connolly, Ranking Member Hice, and the members of the subcommittee, for the opportunity to testify today. I look forward to your questions.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Thank you so much, Director Ahuja, and right on time. Great job.

We're now going to move into members' questions. Because of her schedule, the chair is going to switch with the gentlelady from Ohio, one of the most faithful members of the subcommittee, Shontel Brown, for five minutes of questioning. And, Ms. Norton, then you'll be the next on our side. Thank you.

Ms. Brown, you are recognized for your five minutes of questioning.

Ms. BROWN. Thank you, Chairman Connolly and Ranking Member Hice, for holding this hearing, and my, colleague Congresswoman Norton, for allowing me to switch places here this morning.

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken a toll on workers in every sector. For more than two years, workers have had to constantly adapt to changing circumstances in their personal lives and working arrangements, all while trying to mitigate the dangers of the deadly and ever-changing virus. These circumstances have, in many cases, exacerbated existing challenges that workers face related to their mental health and well-being.

In May, the Office of Personnel Management released guidance for agencies to raise awareness of mental health benefits and services available to Federal employees.

Ms. Ahuja, one of the goals of the President's agenda is for agencies to, quote, raise awareness of available mental well-being, support, and services. Can you explain what some of these available services are and how agencies have been raising awareness following OPM's guidance?

Ms. AHUJA. Thank you, Congresswoman, for that question. And I equally share in the concerns of the well-being of the Federal workforce, their morale, especially during this really trying period. I think more than ever this pandemic has really shone the light on the importance of mental health and well-being.

And so in May, which is Mental Health Awareness Month, we issued guidance that we wanted to share, and we did share, across the Federal Government. In many ways, we do a lot of this through the CHCO Council, which is the great partnership that we have with leaders in H.R. across government, ensuring that agencies have the tools and resources that they need.

In addition, I just wanted to emphasize as well that our Federal health program or health benefits program has for a number of years really pushed for mental health parity and coverage for those services. And the important piece of this is, especially around the time of the pandemic, that we had a number of our Federal employees utilize telehealth, with almost 40 percent using that for mental health counseling. So we continue to see that as an important resource.

Finally, I'd just like to mention that Employee Assistance Programs, or EAPs, are a critical part of the Federal Government services. We are working to revamp that program to ensure that there is continuity and standards of programming and that we are really encouraging agency leadership, as well as Federal Government employees, to utilize these programs.

Ms. BROWN. Thank you, Ms. Ahuja. And how are you making sure the workers are aware of these services that are—and promoting them, the services?

Ms. AHUJA. Well, a big part of the work we're doing, like I mentioned is through the CHCO Council and their leadership. We are encouraging, you know, constant communication by leadership through townhalls, through written communication, through the H.R. departments. There is a separate office within OPM that is focused on mental health awareness and also mental health services across the Federal Government. So a big part of their job is ensuring that our H.R. departments and every agency have those tools.

Again, Congresswoman, I do want to emphasize that I would love to work with you on these Employee Assistance Programs, because I do believe that they are going to be the key to encouraging greater engagement on mental health resources, really removing the stigma that I think at times is often attached to these programs, and would appreciate a partnership and, of course, resources to be able to expand our effort in that regard.

Ms. BROWN. Thank you for that.

And one thing that we've learned from the pandemic is that workers value communication and get clear guidance from the organization. So, Mr. Miller, how is OPM working to ensure that agencies develop, communicate, and implement clear guidance for employees that prioritizes their well-being and resilience?

Mr. MILLER. Congresswoman, thank you for your attention to this issue more broadly. And on the specifics of communication, you're absolutely right, good internal communication is critical, particularly at challenging times, times of change, and those times are definitely right now. This is something that we've been very focused on.

As you know, as I mentioned, the President's Management Council is the chief operating officers, deputy secretaries, and deputy administrators of all of the agencies. The specifics of what Director Ahuja noted around actions that OPM has taken were communicated out to all of the PMC members, with the directions to ensure that they were using that through internal communication channels.

More broadly, we've been encouraging regular communications. We have public information available regarding health and safety protocols, well-being, et cetera, that we made public, but this time of change is critical. It's an area that Federal agencies need to improve. With regards to internal communication, it's absolutely central if we want to focus on the Federal workforce.

Ms. BROWN. Well, thank you. I see my time has expired. I just want to squeeze in that I'm a proud sponsor of the Connolly's bill that would codify well-being and safety procedures for Federal

workforces across the board extending beyond COVID–19 pandemic and any emerging public health crisis.

So, with that, Chairman, I yield back. And thank you again, Delegate Norton.

Mr. CONNOLLY. I thank the gentlelady, and I thank her for her co-sponsorship of that important piece of legislation.

The ranking member, Mr. Hice from Georgia, is recognized for his five minutes of questioning.

Mr. HICE. Thank you very much.

Director Ahuja, in my opening statement, I made reference to the Biden Administration, in my opinion, not taking enough steps and actions to ensure that poor performers within the Federal agencies can be disciplined or removed without undue burden. And look, it's not just me. Year after year, Federal employees themselves say that poor performers are not handled effectively.

So first question, am I missing something? What is the Biden Administration doing to hold poor performers accountable?

Ms. AHUJA. Thank you, Ranking Member Hice. It's good to meet you. Also a fellow Georgian, I might say.

Mr. HICE. Go Dawgs.

Ms. AHUJA. Yes, exactly.

So I share your concern, and I really do appreciate your commitment to the Federal workforce in ensuring accountability and, of course, the welfare. I will say that in the case of concerns around accountability and poor performance, you know, it is a private matter that takes place in agencies. So oftentimes, for example, through the FEVS scores, which I'm familiar with, that is often not a purview that employees, you know, may know about within their particular work unit.

I will also say that, you know, a big part of the work we're doing is to ensure that we're giving managers the tools in order to measure performance, to be more metric-driven in how they are judging performance of their employees, that they are—and also ensuring the level of, you know, engagement. You know, our biggest sort of note here is that when a workforce or a member is engaged and put in the right position with the right set of tools and skills, oftentimes you are managing for that performance.

Mr. HICE. Well, with that, if I could ask, with that information, the data that you're gathering, does any of it show how the inability to deal with poor performers impacts the other good performers?

Ms. AHUJA. Well, I will say, in the most recent FEVS, that the scores actually did—are quite, you know, quite good with employees being recognized for the work that they're doing. So good performers—outstanding performers are being recognized, and that is shown in the FEVS 2020—

Mr. HICE. But no info of how the poor performers impact the good performers.

Let me jump over, Mr. Miller, to you. Are you aware of any assessments that were taken from the Biden Administration, primarily, regarding the impact of telework before it was implemented? I mean, how—did we do any studies to determine how this would impact agencies?

Mr. MILLER. Congressman, thank you for your attention to this. And I completely share your view on performance and account-

ability. That's our North Star, so the performance to Federal agencies through this changing time. The entire labor market is going through a significant amount of change. Part of what we need to manage through is making sure that we're competitive as personnel workplace policies are changing writ large.

One of the things that we undertook last year was a comprehensive strategic planning process—

Mr. HICE. All right. But, please, I only have a few minutes. But my question was, was there any assessment done to determine how teleworking would impact agencies?

Mr. MILLER. We've been managing, and agencies are required to manage and report their annual performance plans of organizational units, including those that roughly half of Federal employees that expanded the use of telework during the pandemic. So managing performance and assessing performance at an agency in an operational unit is something that's been done. That's also something that we've provided guidance on last year in our guidance to agencies in June to both build evidence, plans, and develop data around the performance of the unit, including the use of telework.

Mr. HICE. I'd like to see that data. If you could send it to us, I would like to see what you've determined.

As I mentioned earlier, the President said in his State of the Union that Federal workers were going to return back to work, and that has not been the case. In fact, telework and remote work is expanding, and that's a bit concerning to me.

I don't have much time left. Director Ahuja, let me just ask this. You may or not have seen this, but a recent report claims that as many as one-quarter of HHS employees never even logged into their emails for the first 10 months of COVID. I mean, this has to have an enormous impact on an agency, if these reports are correct. I mean, how in the world can we have Federal employees not even look at their emails for 10 months? What is the American public out there doing while they're waiting 10 months for somebody to even look at an email?

I really want to see the assessment, the data that you've come up with. Is there anything that we know how much work was or was not done by Federal employees during COVID?

Ms. AHUJA. Could I proceed? I know we're—OK. Great. Thank you.

Mr. HICE. Let's let the—Chairman?

Ms. AHUJA. OK. Thank you.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Sorry. The director may respond.

Ms. AHUJA. Thank you.

Can I just say first and foremost, I understand your concern. You know, I would like to really point out the incredible resilience of the workforce across the board. You know, I'm not aware of the particular incident that you mentioned, but I'm sure you're aware more than 50 percent of the workforce during the pandemic and now showed up every single day because that is what their work required to do. So we're talking about a subset of the workforce that are now, you know, utilizing some of these workplace flexibilities in a way, like my colleague Jason Miller has mentioned, in order to optimize customer service and operations, as well as continue to have those employees stay in their organizations.

I will tell you, we have a real competition out there with the private sector because they're employing these same workplace flexibilities. So we need to do it in a way that's going to ensure that we keep, retain, and we recruit, as well as ensure around performance and accountability as you speak to.

Mr. CONNOLLY. The gentleman's time has expired.

But let me, if I may, Mr. Hice, piggyback, Ms. Ahuja or Mr. Miller, I think we have to establish, whether it's fact or not, is it true that 25 percent of the HHS employees did not even respond to a single email for 10 months, the first 10 months of the pandemic?

Mr. MILLER. This is the first I have heard of that instance.

Mr. CONNOLLY. All right. So I would ask respectfully if you could get back to the subcommittee with that one, because it sounds like one of those urban myths, but we certainly want to get to the bottom of it. I thank the gentleman.

Mr. HICE. And that report will be submitted.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Yes, yes, yes. OK. And we will get the response circulated. I thank you for bringing it up.

The Congresswoman from the District of Columbia, Ms. Norton, is recognized for her five minutes of questions. And thank you for your patience.

Ms. NORTON. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for this very important hearing, particularly coming now as we are hopefully coming out of the pandemic.

The pandemic forced agencies to confront outdated workforce policies and legacy information technology systems unprepared to facilitate their execution of their mission. So now is the opportunity for the Federal Government to try to figure out what worked and what didn't during the pandemic.

I understand the private sector is making the same decisions. To remain a model employer and attract and retain the best talent, the Federal Government certainly must adapt.

Mr. Miller, what do you understand to be the state of the Federal workforce, looking at both morale and engagement?

Mr. MILLER. Congresswoman, thank you for that question. Thank you for your focus on the Federal workforce.

As I said at the top, I think we need to start with a recognition that our workforce is our single greatest asset. Prior to this role, as the CEO of the Greater Washington Partnership, a regional organization made up of employers in Maryland, Virginia, and the District of Columbia, the leaders of those organizations across industry, their No. 1 focus was talent, their workforce, how they were retaining talent, how they were attracting talent, how they were building pipelines. It's something that Federal agencies need to focus on more; one of the reasons that we made strengthening upon the Federal workforce the first priority in the President's Management Agenda.

As we've noted, the Federal workforce was called on more than ever during the COVID-19 pandemic, and like many in the country, at great sacrifice. Our workforce has been resilient. Our workforce has faced a high workload. One area, in certain parts of the government, agency leaders are focused on is avoiding burnout risk. And it is clear, both from the data that we've gathered through employee surveys and what we've seen publicly, our work-

force is absolutely dedicated to the mission of serving the American people.

Ms. NORTON. So the morale and the engagement was not affected by the pandemic?

Mr. MILLER. What we've seen in the engagement and one of the things we did was launch the first ever governmentwide pulse survey so that we had regular information from the Federal workforce regarding how they were doing. We've seen sustained employee engagement level across the Federal workforce, showing their resilience, showing the ability to adjust to working arrangements across agencies.

I would note that our employee engagement level, on average, is not where it should be in the Federal workforce. We are below the private sector. That is a risk. That is a risk to retention. That is a risk to performance going forward.

Ms. NORTON. Important to note.

In November of last year, the Biden Administration released a blueprint of the President's Management Agenda, highlighting the need for government to deliver for all Americans by focusing on critical areas of bold transformation.

Ms. Ahuja, President Biden has designated you as a priority area leader for the PMA's first category, strengthening and empowering the Federal workforce. How are you advancing this priority of the PMA to improve the delivery of services to the American public?

Ms. AHUJA. Thank you, Congresswoman, for that question. And I appreciate your leadership.

First, let me just use this as a point of privilege to thank my colleague, Mr. Jason Miller, for his leadership on the President's Management Council. His level of dedication is very awe-inspiring and his commitment. I speak that similar sentiments for the entire President's Management Council; all the deputy secretaries, deputy administrators.

When we set out the PMA, there was no question that we were going to put—first and foremost out in center was the workforce, to strengthen and empower the Federal workforce. I'm excited and really honored that OPM is leading that effort.

You know, I talked about this in my oral statement. I'll just mention again. You know, really, the real pillars of this priority area, one is attracting talent. And, of course, early career talent is really first and foremost. I appreciate Chairman Connolly's attention to these issues. I think it's important, and we have impressed upon our colleagues the importance of building a pipeline.

The second is every Federal job should be a good job. You know, we have huge competition out there, and we really suffer on the lower end and higher ends within the Federal Government in recruiting the kinds of skilled talent that we need.

And, finally, the focus of this particular pillar around strengthening and empowering the workforce is focused on the future of work. We have to be in line with really where every other sector is going. There's a work revolution upon us, and either we're part of it or we're behind it.

Ms. NORTON. Thank you.

Mr. Miller, what is this Administration's vision for investing in the current workforce and for recruiting and retaining the next generation of civil servants?

Mr. CONNOLLY. I would ask the gentleman to return to that subject, but the gentlelady's time has expired.

The gentleman from Pennsylvania, Mr. Keller, is recognized for his questioning.

Mr. KELLER. Thank you, Chairman Connolly, Ranking Member Hice, and to our witnesses for being here today.

During the State of the Union address this year in 2022, President Biden said it's time for America to get back to work. People working from home can feel safe again and begin returning to their offices. So I hope that the President has that same feeling for the people who derive their checks from the taxpayers.

You know, because to the contrary, to the President's statement, agencies within the Federal Government continue to prolong telework policies that have resulted in bureaucratic paperwork nightmares, including a three-year tax processing pileup at the IRS.

So, Mr. Miller, I'll start with a question. How has telework affected the efficiency of Federal agencies?

Mr. MILLER. Thank you, Congressman. And as noted, undoubtedly, the focus for us is performance. That is the North Star, agencies delivering on their mission, and they are delivering for the people that they serve. That we have specific areas—you noted the IRS that has faced challenges to the pandemic. As I understand it, the Treasury Department has been providing regular updates on the progress that the IRS is making, but they need to do more.

One of the challenges that we faced with the IRS is multiple years of chronic underfunding. So then they stepped into a unique situation without the staffing, without the resources, without the flexibility to adjust. We need to make improvements. They're making improvements.

One of the things we did for the IRS, a combination of OMB and OPM, was made sure that they had flexibility and resources and the ability to hire thousands of new employees to try and address the challenges and the backlogs that they were facing.

Mr. KELLER. Well, I will just—you know, we're talking about teleworking. The question I would have is, what was the backlog prior to the pandemic—and everybody's going to say it made it worse—but have we become more efficient? I don't know whether we measure that or not, efficiency in clearing cases.

But, you know, we're going to talk about telework and what we're doing here. You know, Members of Congress don't even have to be in D.C. And if you want to see how inefficient telework can be, particularly when you're dealing with the Federal Government, all anybody has to do is watch the footage of this committee's markup yesterday. Quite frankly, it was pathetic.

It took over two years to pass a bill that will return National Archives records administration employees to the office to process a 600,000 request backlog of paperwork that did not—that had not been digitized. How are current telework policies affecting agencies' customer service abilities? Mr. Miller?

Mr. MILLER. Great. Thank you, Congressman. One of the things that I think is important is, did we have the right systems in place to have flexibility? Did we have digitized records? Did we have digitized processing?

The second pillar, the second priority area of the President's Management Agenda is delivering excellent services and customer experiences. We're increasing the measurement of that. We're reporting that broadly. We have designated 35 high-impact service providers. We work with each of them to improve services. This is a major focus. Some of it is making sure our agencies have the tools to deliver across, across the government, across the public that they serve, and be able to measure it from the experience of the individual, not from the experience of the silo or the bureaucratic organization that is delivering that service.

Mr. KELLER. Well, I guess I just have another question on a concerning note of OPM backlog of unprocessed retirement claims for Federal employees. It recently hit a high of 35,424 backlog in February, according to the OPM data. This problem is hurting Pennsylvania correctional officers and other Federal employees' ability to receive their full annuity upon retirement.

Since we're short on time, I'd like to submit a letter I sent to the Office of Personnel Management back on April 8 into the record.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Without objection.

[The information

Mr. KELLER. Thank you.

Ms. Ahuja, what is the current status of the issue, and what is OPM's plan to resolve the backlog for these records?

Ms. AHUJA. Thank you, Congressman. And let me just first say that I share in the concern around the backlog. Federal retirees and families deserve the best customer service, and that is what I am committed to.

I will mention that we're managing a backlog in the midst of a surge in retirement over the past year. It's really been unprecedented in the numbers. So we're both managing that backlog as well as a lot of the incoming.

I will tell you that we've implemented a number of business improvement processes. We have upped production by 20 percent. We've brought the backlog down by 15 percent. Certainly, we can do more. As well, a big part of this is this particular side of OPM, as you know, we faced a potential merger. In the last Administration, we were underfunded. We don't have the staff in order to manage now a surge in retirement. We appreciate the budgets that we've received over the past couple of years and will look to work with all of you to ensure that we have the staffing.

I will mention also, like Mr. Miller, is that we're working to a process of technological improvements around modernization. We have a new call center that's cloud-based that now we no longer have dropped calls. We have—people get callbacks as well as wanting to bring on the online retirement application.

Mr. KELLER. OK. I will just mention, you know, somebody that's in need of those benefits, really, they want to have an answer. And I just wonder when I can expect to have the response from the OPM—can I expect that in the near future.

Mr. CONNOLLY. The gentleman's time has expired. But let me, on his behalf, request, Director Ahuja, we'd like a more detailed response, I think, to the whole issue of backlog, because it's more than one agency and, obviously, our constituents are affected. So I'd ask you, for the record, to submit a more detailed analysis of what is the problem and what are we doing about it and what's the timeline.

Ms. AHUJA. Absolutely.

Mr. CONNOLLY. I thank you.

Ms. AHUJA. And I would like to mention, Chairman, that we do provide regular briefings to your staff, and we can continue to do that as well.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Great. Thank you so much.

The gentleman from Illinois, Mr. Davis, is recognized for his questioning.

Mr. DAVIS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And I also want to thank our witnesses for being here and for their informative information.

In June 2021, President Biden signed an executive order to strengthen the Federal workforce by promoting diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility. The Biden Administration's vision is to, quote, attract and hire the most qualified employees who reflect the diversity of our country in the right roles across the Federal Government, end of the quote.

Further, the President's Management Agenda outlines three core priorities of this Administration: strengthening and empowering the Federal workforce; delivering excellent, equitable, and secure Federal services and customer experience; managing the business of government.

Mr. Miller, how does a more diverse, equitable, inclusive, and accessible Federal workforce deliver a better customer experience from Federal services?

Mr. MILLER. Congressman, thank you for that question. Absolutely, part of this approach with regards to DEIA in the workforce is about the output that agencies deliver. DEIA both helps us attract the full pool of talent, it helps individuals perform at their best on the job, and it ensures that we have the diversity of the public that we serve, so that our agencies, our operating units can put themselves in the shoes of the customers who are receiving their services and come up with new and innovative ways for how to improve them going forward.

Mr. DAVIS. Thank you very much.

Ms. Ahuja, how do paid internships and fellowships promote diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility in the workforce?

Ms. AHUJA. Thank you, Congressman Davis, for that question and for your commitment to these issues.

So I've talked a lot about how diversity really—in drawing from that diversity makes the Federal Government a much more effective employer, drawing from the vast talent that we have across this country. I will say in particular, we have been talking a bit during this hearing, I know the chairman is very concerned and focused on early career talent. Paid internships are critical to that piece of ensuring diversity.

Listen, not everyone can afford an unpaid internship in Washington, DC, nor should that be the norm. We really should be pro-

viding compensation for those early in their careers. I would like to point out, Congressman, that we issued direct hiring authority focused on post-secondary students who can actually get a good-paying job while they're in school so they can pay for those fees and also build a level of experience.

A big part of also the paid internship—our paid internship focus is also ensuring a focus on skills-based hiring. So certainly this is not just about those who are coming, you know, through schools, colleges, but those who are getting their experience elsewhere that we're really going to benefit and expand the talent pool in so many different ways.

And as you know, the DEIA executive order talks about diversity in very broad ways. We're not just talking—we're talking about communities of color, but we're talking about individuals with disabilities. We're talking about veterans, military spouses, those with economic challenges, whether in the rural or urban areas. So we really are going to benefit from a broad swap of this country, not only in—not only focused on internships and early career talent but across the Federal Government workforce.

Mr. DAVIS. Let me thank you both for your responses. And I also want to take a moment to mention that July is Pride and Disability Month and commend the Biden Administration for making it a large priority to attract individuals to Federal service who otherwise may not have been able to serve. So I thank you very much.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And I yield back the balance of my time.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Thank you, Mr. Davis.

The gentleman from Georgia, Mr. Clyde, is recognized for his questions.

Mr. CLYDE. Thank you, Chairman Connolly and Ranking Member Hice.

We are here today to talk about a very important matter, the future of the Federal workforce. I'm grateful that we're having this hearing, because this issue is a tremendous problem.

You know, as a small-business owner myself, I understand that a company is only as good as its workers. That's truly what make up, you know, what you do and how well you do it. It's the people that you employ and how you hold those people accountable for the job that they actually do.

So, you know, when people do not work in person, then it becomes very problematic for what they're able to accomplish. So I think people need to get back to work.

I know my Democrat colleagues don't necessarily understand these concepts, since many of them are still routinely proxy-voting and tuning into these committee hearings via video conference. And as Mr. Keller mentioned, we had a huge issue with that yesterday.

It's long past time that people return to work in person. It's unacceptable that many Federal employees are teleworking more than 2-1/2 years since the start of COVID-19. You know, even if folks in Washington don't want to recognize it, the rest of the United States has moved on and has returned to work in person.

So I think it's imperative that Federal workers return to work in person, because people are being hurt by the continuation of this

telework. Since the start of COVID-19, for example, our veterans, of which I am one, have suffered greatly by experiencing delays in accessing and receiving their records from the NPRC, which has been doing an abysmal job and has a tremendous backlog.

So this leads to my question. Earlier this summer, it was reported that 25 percent of Federal bureaucrats at the Department of Health and Human Services—this is the Department of Health and Human Services now—failed to log in to their office suites that included their work email during the first 10 months of the COVID-19 pandemic.

And this particular article—and, Mr. Chairman, I would like unanimous consent to submit this for the record.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Without objection.

Mr. CLYDE. All right. It's called "Quarter of Federal Health Workers Failed to Check Email Amid Pandemic." It's an article from the Free Beacon of June 17, 2022.

Mr. CLYDE. Now, mind you, HHS, they employ 80,000 workers, so that's 20,000 employees. And they have a requested mandatory budget of \$1.7 trillion and \$127 billion in discretionary spending. That's huge.

And 25 percent of them for 10 months don't know how to check their email or are unable to or simply don't? How in the world do you do your work? I mean, if we didn't have email, I simply couldn't do my work. How can they do theirs?

So I want to know, do you find this acceptable, Ms. Ahuja?

Ms. AHUJA. Thank you, Congressman Clyde, for that question. And I know we were speaking about that earlier, about this particular issue, and we're certainly going to look into it, as Chairman Connolly had mentioned and asked us to.

I will say that we've talked also a lot about the fact that during the pandemic more than 50 percent of the workforce continued to show up every day.

As you know, this is—embracing workplace flexibilities is happening in the private sector as well. They are restructuring their jobs for telework—

Mr. CLYDE. OK. I just asked the question; do you find that acceptable? "Yes" or "no" would suffice.

Ms. AHUJA. Well, again, we—the workforce has been resilient, and they have showed up, and we have embraced—

Mr. CLYDE. Just answer the question, ma'am. That's all I want you to do.

Ms. AHUJA. We have embraced the telework and remote-work arrangements in a way that I think will utilize and maximize—

Mr. CLYDE. Ma'am, do you find that 25 percent didn't even check their emails for 10 months, is that acceptable or is that not?

Ms. AHUJA. Thank you, Congressman Clyde, for that question.

As we had discussed earlier—

Mr. CLYDE. I've asked it three times now.

Ms. AHUJA [continuing]. We are looking into it, and if that is the case, that would not be acceptable, no.

Mr. CLYDE. OK. Thank you. That's exactly what I want. So that is not acceptable. All right.

Because what I want to know is, what is the Biden Administration's top priority here? Is it giving timely, high-level customer service to the American people?

I mean, you just told my colleague Mr. Keller that OPM is committed to the best customer service. Is that right?

Ms. AHUJA. I did.

Mr. CLYDE. OK. All right. So is that the Biden Administration's top priority? Or is it, as his executive order put out, diversity and inclusion? I mean, what is it? What's the top priority?

Ms. AHUJA. Thank you, Congressman Clyde, for the question.

I think we have multiple priorities that we're focused on—

Mr. CLYDE. Well, what's the top priority? That's what I want to know. What's the top priority?

Ms. AHUJA. We're focused on ensuring that we have a workforce that can deliver on customer service and mission to the American public.

We're focused on ensuring that our workforce engage, that they feel that there's an inclusive work environment so they can excel.

We are focused on the fact that we have to be a part of this future of work. It is also—

Mr. CLYDE. OK. Thank you.

Ms. AHUJA [continuing]. Being—

Mr. CLYDE. I have one more quick question before my time—

Mr. CONNOLLY. No. No. The gentleman's time has expired. The—

Mr. CLYDE. OK.

Mr. CONNOLLY [continuing]. Gentlemen's time has expired.

Mr. CLYDE. Thank you.

Mr. HICE. Mr. Chairman?

Mr. CONNOLLY. Just one second.

Mr. Sarbanes, you are next, but if you'll just suspend for one second.

The chair recognizes the ranking member for a clarification.

Mr. HICE. Thank you.

Yes, just a point of clarification, Director Ahuja. You mentioned a while ago about briefings that you were providing regarding the backlog, to the staff.

Ms. AHUJA. Yes, sir.

Mr. HICE. I've been informed, our staff has not received any briefings. Can you clarify what briefings you're talking about and where are they, why we don't have them?

Ms. AHUJA. It's for the Appropriations Committee, I apologize, not specifically for this committee. But we've been providing briefings for the Appropriations Committee, I believe, on a regular basis.

Mr. HICE. All right. But not to this committee?

Ms. AHUJA. No, sir.

Mr. HICE. With this committee being Oversight, could you provide that to this committee—

Ms. AHUJA. Absolutely.

Mr. HICE [continuing]. As well?

Ms. AHUJA. Absolutely.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Yes, we get a little touchy, as authorizers, when someone invokes Appropriations.

Ms. AHUJA. Yes, I stand corrected. It was for Appropriations.

Mr. HICE. Well, Oversight needs it. That is our role. Thank you.

Ms. AHUJA. Yes.

Mr. HICE. And thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. CONNOLLY. I thank the ranking member for the clarification. Appreciate it.

Mr. Sarbanes, you are recognized for your line of questioning.

Mr. SARBANES. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Director Ahuja and Deputy Director Miller, thank you for your testimony today.

I want to first thank Chairman Connolly for his work on all of these various issues but certainly his commitment to telework. And I was proud to join him recently in introducing legislation that will further enhance our ability to gather data and refine how telework is distributed across our Federal agencies.

We've already had some conversation about the benefits of telework in the hearing today. Obviously, it's a morale booster. It helps with continuity of operations. It helps with productivity within the agencies.

Interestingly, as Chairman Connolly knows and I'm sure our witnesses know, in agencies that take full advantage of telework, we see not only productivity go up among those who are using that resource, but it goes up across the entire agency, because I think it allows them more focus on metrics and performance and other things that can help with the efficiency and effectiveness of these agencies.

I wanted to turn, though, to the recruitment dimension of telework. And maybe each of you could speak for a moment to exactly what that looks like.

How is the availability of telework within Federal agencies being presented to that potential workforce out there? How are you using it in your recruitment efforts? Take me through what that process looks like.

And what's the data showing you on how important the telework opportunity is for Federal workers in that recruitment effort?

And why don't we start with Director Ahuja, and then we can go to Deputy Director Miller. Thank you.

Ms. AHUJA. Thank you, Congressman. And I think you laid out very eloquently the importance of these workplace flexibilities when it comes to productivity, operational ability within an organization.

I think what we're seeing, both in the individuals that we have in the workforce around retention, defining the job based on the set of responsibilities and whether there can be flexibility, both in person and working from home, I think we've learned that employees really do want to be able to have the flexibility to manage their personal responsibilities.

In the context of recruitment, absolutely, what we are seeing is agency-hopping based on where, you know, employees see levels of flexibility. We don't want agencies having to compete with each other, you know, for different, you know, employees within the Federal Government.

We're also seeing that this is the wave of the future in the private sector. The private sector is defining these positions based on

if they can provide more workplace flexibility. They're training their supervisors; they're upgrading their IT. They're working on all these dimensions that we want to be doing in the Federal Government so we can compete for talent.

I think one thing I should mention around recruitment is, we've now expanded the talent pool. You know, more than 80 percent of Federal jobs are outside of Washington, DC. We have ability to recruit in literally every county, every part of this country, in ways that we weren't able to do so before.

Mr. SARBANES. Mr. Miller, I'd love to get your perspective.

Mr. MILLER. Great. Congressman, thank you for your attention to this issue.

The only one item that I would add to Director Ahuja's statement on this topic is that this is a tool that is particularly useful for jobs that are of critical skills. Cybersecurity, IT, data analytics—some of those areas where some of this work can be performed in a telework setting is absolutely critical.

It's an area that we have a gap today. Being consistent with those sectors, with those workers across the country, including in the private sector, that's a major tool for us to make sure that we're filling that gap and addressing it going forward. And it's an expectation, particularly those in early career.

Mr. SARBANES. Thanks very much.

I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. CONNOLLY. I thank the gentleman.

And the gentleman from Arizona, Mr. Biggs, is recognized for his round of questions.

Mr. BIGGS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding this hearing.

Director Ahuja and Deputy Director Miller, thank you for being here today.

Mr. Miller, on your biography, it says you used to work for the Boston Consulting Group. BCG works with the Partnership for Public Service to survey, assess, and rank Federal agencies and their employees to identify the best places to work in the Federal Government.

Are you familiar with that report?

Mr. MILLER. I am, yes.

Mr. BIGGS. Yes. And an agency's score is calculated using a proprietary and weighted formula looking at responses to three different questions. The questions are: I recommend my organization as a good place to work. Considering everything, how satisfied are you with your job? And considering everything, how satisfied are you with your organization? And the more that that question predicts intent to remain with the agency, the higher it is weighted in the score.

Now, the 2021 report was released in the past few weeks. Have you had a chance to look at that, Deputy Director Miller?

Mr. MILLER. I have. And I was at the event where it was released.

Mr. BIGGS. OK. So you're all in on it.

So I found the data startling, myself. The report indicates that employee engagement and satisfaction dropped by 4.5 points from 2020 to 2021. Among large agencies, 16 of 17 dropped; midsize

agencies, it fell from 12 to—12 of 25 agencies; and among small agencies, 17 of 29. I find that startling.

In your written testimony, Deputy Director, you indicate that, quote, “for the first time in the history of the President’s management agenda, we place strengthening and empowering the Federal workforce as the first priority.”

So some of these guys are asking about priorities. That, apparently, is the first priority of the PMA. The second PMA priority focuses on delivering excellent, equitable, and secure Federal service and customer experience.

I am going to correlate the change in the focus on the priority with the decline in worker satisfaction in the weighted survey that I was just referring to.

And the reason I do that is that my experience and past workplace studies over decades have typically indicated that satisfaction in employment is directly correlated to meaningful work. And providing service, topflight service, is considered by many in the private-sector employment field to be meaningful work.

And it seems to me that the PMA gets this absolutely backwards by saying, we’re going to go ahead and focus on happy employees, if you will, but, at the same time, our second priority is going to be service to our customers.

I mean, I’m going to give you a chance to respond to that, because I think it’s only fair to let you respond. But that’s the problem with the PMA, the way I view it. But I’ll give you just a few seconds to respond, because that’s all I’ve got.

Mr. MILLER. Thanks, Congressman.

I think we should be concerned about employee engagement levels, because, today, Federal employee engagement levels are lower than they are in the private sector on average. I think that’s a problem. I think we should aspire to do better. The last two years have been the highest level of employee engagement for a long time, but we’re far from where we need to be.

We do have some agencies—large, medium, and small—that are outperforming the private sector, but, on average, we’re underperforming.

Mr. BIGGS. Yes.

Mr. MILLER. It absolutely is an issue. The reason—

Mr. BIGGS. OK. So I’m out of time. I mean, we might want to extend it sometime when we get more than just 2 or 3 minutes to deal with it. But I would like to hear more of what you have to say on that, because I don’t think it’s fair to just cut you off, but it’s where I’ve got to go.

Are any Federal workers with a D.C. duty station—this is for you, Director Ahuja—still receiving D.C. cost-of-living increases even if they’ve relocated to areas with lower cost of living?

Ms. AHUJA. Thank you, Congressman, for the question.

So, if an employee moves out of a particular area or adjusts and actually takes on a remote-work arrangement, then their duty location changes, according to our guidance, and they take on—

Mr. BIGGS. So I guess—

Ms. AHUJA. They take on the locality pay of that particular area that they’re—

Mr. BIGGS. So you're telling us, then—I'm going to extrapolate from that, you're saying that, no, nobody with a D.C. duty station who's relocated to an area outside of a D.C. duty station is receiving D.C. duty cost of living?

Ms. AHUJA. I was talking generally what happens when—

Mr. BIGGS. I'm not talking generally. I'm talking specifically.

That's the problem with your answers today. They've been generic, 30,000-foot. When people have asked you specific questions, I get an ethereal answer. I have a specific question. It's a "yes" or "no" answer. Generically, I would say, "OK, well, she must mean no," but I don't know what the answer to the question is, because you didn't answer it.

Ms. AHUJA. Well, I apologize if that came across. You know, I was just trying to give the general sense of how—

Mr. BIGGS. I have the general sense.

Ms. AHUJA. OK.

Mr. BIGGS. I'm not an idiot. We do this for a living. I want to know about the D.C. workstation stuff.

Mr. CONNOLLY. The gentleman's time has expired, but the Director is allowed to respond briefly.

Ms. AHUJA. Sure. Thank you, Chairman.

So, right now, the current policy is, if you're in a particular area where you report two days a pay period to your duty location, then you are paid that particular locality area.

Now, we are hoping to work with the subcommittee where we can make changes in the case where actually that person is still within the broader, you know, national capital region but is living much farther beyond but is still able to report to the duty location two days per pay period.

So that's how it stands. That's the current guidance and law as it is. We look forward to working with you—

Mr. BIGGS. So that would be a "yes" to the question I asked, and reform needs to be undertaken. Is that—

Mr. CONNOLLY. The gentleman's time has expired.

Ms. AHUJA. Uh-huh.

Mr. BIGGS. Is that fair?

Mr. CONNOLLY. I thank the gentleman.

The gentleman from Maryland, Mr. Raskin, is recognized for his line of questioning.

Mr. RASKIN. Mr. Chairman, thank you very much.

Our constituents, you know, relay on the USAJOBS website to find out about different employment opportunities and job openings, and that site has been plagued with a lot of difficulties in the past.

I know some improvements have been made. But I'm wondering, Ms. Ahuja, how OPM is working to continue to improve the website and the Federal hiring process so our constituents aren't so frustrated by it.

Mr. CONNOLLY. You need to turn your mic on.

Ms. AHUJA. I think I turned it off when I meant—thank you, Congressman, for that question.

There's been a lot of effort focused on the USAJOBS website. We know it's an important portal that hundreds of applicants go to.

It's really a two-part process. We're improving the platform both in creating career paths on the job site, doing better tagging of the jobs so that if you're looking for cyber positions you can find those readily, easily. We're also working more closely with the agencies around being more responsive to applicants.

So there's the side where you have the agencies and how they're interfacing with the job website and ensuring—you know, one of the complaints we, you know, receive often is applicants being able to get some feedback on where their application is. So, really, that is in the training and encouraging agencies to do that. On the flip side, it's also making the job site much more user-friendly.

We've been doing a lot of training and outreach and webinars with prospective applicants, as well, in order to get them more comfortable with the website.

I should mention that, most recently, we've also created an ability for agencies to tag their positions as remote positions. We see this as a great opportunity, again, to expand the applicant pool, to give agencies a much, kind of, broader breadth in who they're bringing in to the Federal Government.

Mr. RASKIN. I appreciate that.

A couple of—several constituents, actually, have talked to me about the problem of age discrimination. And there's a recent study that showed that 78 percent of older workers experience age discrimination.

I know that older workers are not leaving their age on the USAJOBS website, but, you know, there's still the opportunity to determine their age or roughly what their age is. What steps are you taking to protect older workers from age discrimination in the job-application process?

Ms. AHUJA. Congressman, I appreciate that question.

You know, like you said, we do encourage applicants, again, you know, not listing years of when they graduated, that there is—again, really looking at the set of skills and experience that an applicant has.

You know, as a part of our diversity and equity inclusion and accessibility executive order we have, really, every agency has created their strategic plan to focus on ensuring that they have a fair and equitable way in how they do recruitment and also how they do retention around promotions and development.

And then, finally, I'd like to say, you know, we have a workforce that, you know, skews in the 40's and 50's, and, you know, we do tend to draw in individuals with much more experience who are later in their careers. And Chairman Connolly showed that in his earlier example during his statement. So we do pride ourselves in trying to bring in, you know, a vast diversity of individuals no matter, kind of, their experience or age or their background.

Mr. RASKIN. Thank you.

There are critical skills gaps in a bunch of different Federal positions, like cybersecurity, human resources, and so on.

Mr. Miller, what do you see as the primary skills gaps taking place across the government? And what happens if we're not able to fill those?

Mr. MILLER. Congressman, thank you for the question. Thank you for your attention to your constituents, because I am one of them.

I want to—on this, this is something I am very focused on. We held a convening—the Administration held a convening earlier this week on cyber jobs. This is a challenge across the economy writ large, noting that there's over 700,000 cyber job openings.

This is an area that the Federal Government needs more talent in-house, needs more capability in-house, given the transformation that is underway. OMB released a zero-trust strategy that our agencies are implementing over time. We need the people to be able to do that. Cyber and tech are front and center, and that's an area that we're particularly focused on.

Mr. RASKIN. Thank you very much.

I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. CONNOLLY. I thank the gentleman.

The chair recognizes himself for his questioning.

Ms. Ahuja, I've talked a lot, and you and I've talked privately as well, about using internships as a way to recruit talent and hopefully retain it. And I've shared with you my chagrin at the complete lack of uniformity, any kind of systematic approach.

In fact, in some Federal agencies, it would be better to abolish any internships than continue them, because we have people saying, after they complete an internship, "I'd rather put my head through a pencil sharpener than ever work for the Federal Government." That's how successful internships are.

And when we contrast it with the private sector, as you know, Mr. Miller, it is unbelievably different. I know one firm where, if you—it's a competitive process. It's a prestige thing to do on a college campus. If you are lucky enough to be selected through a rigorous process to be an intern, the chances of a job offer are in the 80th percentile. We're in the single percentile, I think, in the Federal Government.

Ms. Ahuja, just for the record, can OPM tell us the exact number of Federal interns across the Federal Government?

Ms. AHUJA. So we're only able to determine with the authorities that we have—so the Pathways and the direct hire authorities—but we're not able to do that across—

Mr. CONNOLLY. So there's no central data base to know how many interns are there?

Ms. AHUJA. No, there isn't.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Huh.

Second, can OPM determine how many interns are paid or unpaid in the Federal Government?

Ms. AHUJA. With the various programs that exist across the agencies, we're not able to do that, Chairman.

Mr. CONNOLLY. So we don't know how many, we don't know whether they're paid or they're unpaid, and we don't know the mix.

At this time, can OPM determine how many Federal internships are converted into permanent Federal employment?

Ms. AHUJA. And this is also a particular concern for me, because I think the conversion piece is important. And we're able to do that for Pathways and some of the specific authorities, but not across—

Mr. CONNOLLY. Right.

Ms. AHUJA [continuing]. The board, no.

Mr. CONNOLLY. This is unbelievable.

So, Mr. Miller, I like looking at problems that maybe lend themselves to straightforward fixes. Not everything does, but some things do, and it's a start. This one seems, to me, a very fixable problem.

But it requires political will to systematize in order to utilize internships as a tool, a portal, for recruitment into the Federal Government and hopefully retention. But it's got to be a program that I leave feeling it was meaningful, it really gave me an orientation, there's a desire for public service after this exposure because I'm motivated. Apparently, we're not doing any of that.

And Director Ahuja's Office of Personnel Management, which is kind of the HR, you know, focus of the Federal Government, doesn't have the legal authority or the tools to even collect the data that would help us decide what's the problem and how do we fix it.

Would you comment?

Mr. MILLER. Thank you, Chairman.

And, yes, internships are a key tool for most private-sector organizations, most large private-sector organizations, as early career talent. In one of my previous stints in the private sector, the vast majority of our early career talent came through an internship program.

In the Federal Government, it doesn't work that way. It is, most interns do not convert into career hires. That's something that we have talked about at the PMC level. It's a huge problem.

We've made this a focus, including by increasing paid internships because it gives us a mechanism for agencies to both have measurement and accountability. By paying for interns, it also increases the incentive structure in an agency to have a good experience so they're getting a return on investment, including by converting to early career talent.

One additional thing I would note, because it is an area of focus for both Director Ahuja and I, is improving the personnel vetting system. Internships are a way to improve the personnel vetting system by getting people earlier in their career, in an internship, into the national security clearance process.

Mr. CONNOLLY. So what do you think we should do about it? I mean, everything you said is good, but, given Director Ahuja's answers to my three questions about this data, it sounds like everything we're doing is anecdotal, so, "We think this would happen," "We're pretty confident that if we paid this happens."

Mr. MILLER. Yes.

Mr. CONNOLLY. But there's no rhyme nor reason across the Federal Government to internship policies, let alone having some kind of central data bank that allows us rationally to make informed decisions about that program and how best to utilize it.

Mr. MILLER. Absolutely. Improving our H.R. data is something that we need to do writ large. And internships are one example of the problem that we have on centralized H.R. data.

Mr. CONNOLLY. My time has expired, but let me just tell both of you, I'm a dog on a bone on this subject. I've been working on it

for 14 years, and I'm hoping this time's the magic. But I hope I can recruit both of you to cooperate with us to try to really at least fix this part that helps your job of recruitment and retention a little easier.

I thank you both.

I see Mr. Lynch has joined us. The gentleman from Massachusetts is recognized for his line of questioning.

And before I call on you, Mr. Lynch, if you would just indulge us, I would ask unanimous consent that the gentleman from Virginia, Mr. Beyer, be waived on to the subcommittee for the purpose of questioning our witnesses.

Without objection, it is so ordered. Thank you.

Mr. LYNCH.

Mr. LYNCH. All right. Good morning, and thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate you putting this together.

Mr. Miller and Ms. Ahuja, I know that in certain sectors we've had substantial increases in wages. And I will give you a good example. In the healthcare industry, especially direct care within institutions in the eastern part of the United States, we have seen 10-to 15-percent increases over the last two years since 2020 in hospitals among, you know, nurses and staff and therapists and doctors.

I have three VA hospitals in my district, and I know that those individuals are some of our highest performers. And especially during this pandemic, they have been absolutely heroic in the work that they have done in our VA facilities. Their outcomes have been substantially better, I think, in some cases, then private institutions performing similar services.

And I just want to ask you about our ability to retain. And we are in a competitive relationship with the private sector here when we try to hire individuals to come onto the Federal payroll. I want to talk about some of our top performers, our best performers, and what motivates them to stay on the public payroll, working for the Federal Government, serving our veterans in this case, rather than going for higher wages in the private sector.

Could you speak to that a little bit, Mr. Miller or Ms. Ahuja?

Mr. MILLER. I think one of the things that distinguishes our public servants, irrespective of their role, including those who are top performers or bringing specific technical skills, is the ability for impact. It's the public service that they're doing each and every day that is what motivates them.

But, at the same time, we do need to be competitive. It's not just about one individual, but if we look at things like healthcare workers or cyber and tech or other areas, we do need enough flexibility to be competitive.

And we also need to do it in a way that's consistent across the Federal Government. When we have different authorities and different approaches to similar types of jobs and similar types of skills in one agency over another, it creates an imbalance that harms the Federal Government overall and makes us less competitive in the labor market.

Ms. AHUJA. And, Congressman, I'd like to add that, in particular, you know, we have a couple of proposals that we'd love to work

with this committee on around increasing competitive pay for some of these highly skilled experts.

And, also, particularly in the cyber and IT fields, we really do suffer in this area around competition, and we've created competition within and among our agencies. This Congress passed a particular cyber talent program for DHS that has now become, sort of, you know, kind of the king of programs within the Federal Government, and other agencies are having to compete with that.

I will mention that VA just recently passed a bill—or a bill was passed to support some of the VA efforts related to the toxins with burn pits, and they had a number of proposals focused on recruitment and retention and pay that they needed in order to bring doctors and other healthcare personnel into their facilities.

Mr. LYNCH. Well, thank you very much. I'd be happy, and I'm sure the chairman will be happy, to work with you, and the members of this committee, on those incentives in highly competitive areas.

I would like to ask you about cyber and—well, cybersecurity, principally. How are we doing—in the private sector, this area is rich in opportunity. And we seem to be falling farther behind in our efforts to protect the Federal cyber system.

So where are we now? I know we've had some hellacious breaches. I know OPM, there was a major hack a few years ago. We're dealing still with a couple of vulnerabilities, some zero-day breaches.

Where are we in terms of trying to attract personnel that could help us in that area?

Mr. CONNOLLY. In 20 seconds.

Mr. MILLER. So this is a place that is a challenge for the Federal Government; it's a challenge for a lot of employers. There's a shortage across the country.

We're very focused on it. Cyber is an opportunity. We've put a lot of effort in with this release of the zero-trust strategy. It gives us a roadmap. It's been lauded by the private sector.

And giving people the opportunity, whether it's on a permanent basis or on a tour-of-duty opportunity, is a huge, huge place for us to go. But it's going to be a lot of people that we need to bring in.

Mr. CONNOLLY. You sound like the King of Siam Mr. Miller

Mr. LYNCH. Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Thank you, Mr. Lynch.

Everything he said was—frankly, it's a puzzlement. It's a challenge.

And, by the way, we were talking about internships and how successful they can be. You can see, we have succeeded in recruiting the youngest generation.

Camry, welcome to the government Operations Subcommittee. You're a welcome addition.

The gentleman from Virginia, Mr. Beyer, is recognized for his line of questioning.

Mr. BEYER. Mr. Chairman, thank you very much. And thank you for allowing me to waive on to the hearing. It's an honor to be a temporary waived-on member of the Oversight Committee.

Chairman Connolly, historically, the government has served as a model employer in terms of benefits to employees—

Mr. CONNOLLY. What happened?

Mr. BEYER. I keep getting video turned off, but I will try to turn it on again as I failed to start.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Well, could you repeat the question?

Mr. BEYER. Yes, please.

To Ms. Ahuja, how does a lack of paid leave create a burden on Federal employees who have a serious illness, seriously ill family members, or a deployed family member?

Ms. AHUJA. Thank you, Congressman. And just so I understand, you were saying the lack of paid leave and how that impacts an employee?

Mr. BEYER. Exactly, yes. Thank you.

Ms. AHUJA. No, I appreciate that question and your concern about having the support systems for employees. And I think, certainly, we've seen that during the height of the pandemic, where we were able to institute some of those flexibilities to manage illness, to manage exposure.

We have benefited greatly from the paid parental leave, the paid parental leave that Chairwoman Maloney was a real champion for. And that has been a real incentive. Our recent Federal health benefits survey showed that women, females 40 and under see it as a major reason why they stay in the Federal Government.

I would say, for the same reason, there's a real interest in providing broader paid leave. We have the FMLA. We know oftentimes that our employees deal with major illnesses. They certainly can utilize FMLA. They can utilize voluntary leave banks, and I know that's an effort that exists in a lot of agencies.

But, certainly, we're looking, as we've talked earlier, about mental health, about morale, about creating a workforce that is a model employer, that's providing a range of benefits that I think will be a part of the attraction to the Federal Government.

Mr. BEYER. Thank you very much.

Ms. Ahuja, when looking at the future of Federal work, how would providing comprehensive paid family medical leave make the government benefits comparable to those offered by the large private-sector corporations, the ones who are competing with us for that talent?

Ms. AHUJA. And just so I understand, Congressman, you're talking about comprehensive paid parental leave or just paid leave?

Mr. BEYER. Comprehensive paid Federal leave. How would that affect our ability to compete for the talent?

Ms. AHUJA. Well, right now, yes, you know, we have paid, you know, maternity/paternity leave, which has been a huge incentive. I think it allows us to be competitive. You know, we talk about every Federal job being a good-paying job, and a part of that is having a comprehensive set of benefits.

I will tell you, also, in our surveys, that our retirement program, TSP, the annuity that Federal employees get, is a major reason why we have such high retention in the Federal Government.

So I would agree that providing, you know, broader support around leave would only, you know, further add to the commitment that we have from Federal employees.

Mr. BEYER. Thank you.

And one more question. When the President took office, one of his first acts was to sign Executive Order 14003. That reversed several of the policies that took time away from union access to facilities. This executive order allowed unions to better negotiate with management, took away the disaster Schedule F proposal.

Can you walk us through the executive orders? And why do you think President Biden prioritized these?

Ms. AHUJA. Is this to me, Congressman? OK. Yes, of course.

Well, you know, let me first say that I share the President's commitment to a strong partnership with our union partners. They are the voice of employees on the front lines. They provide, you know, broad perspective around ideas around efficiency and how we can be a more effective government. I have certainly see that firsthand.

You know, the President in his first week made it very clear that, you know, we were going to reset the relationships with our union partners, and OPM takes a lot of pride in really being out there, front and center, in supporting agencies and rebuilding those relationships. We serve as a point of escalation. You know, there's 2,000 bargaining units across the Federal Government, and we are certainly working hard to reset those relationships and get on better footing.

I should also say that, you know, we're a part of the Task Force on Worker Empowerment and Organizing, and really trying to set the tone for positive, you know, engagement with unions, how we can ensure that we really are creating a workspace where workers can organize.

Mr. CONNOLLY. I thank the gentleman. His time has expired.

Mr. BEYER. Thank you very much.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Thank you for joining us today, Mr. Beyer.

And let me just say, we just learned that the President of the United States has been diagnosed with COVID-19, underscoring the fact that this pandemic is not over and underscoring the fact that even the highest Federal employee is vulnerable to this virus.

We wish the President well and hope he has a speedy recovery.

Let me just say in closing, I want to thank my friends on this side of the aisle for their cooperative spirit in trying to make sure we get this hearing concluded before votes are called, and we've done that.

I also want to say, I want to thank our two witnesses for their commitment to the Federal workforce and the Federal employees, individually and collectively.

We've hopefully learned a lot from the pandemic, and there's more we've got to learn from. There are going to be changes in the Federal workforce as we go forward, some of them pandemic-driven or—accelerated, some of them not related to the pandemic but just demographics. We've got to recruit and retain the workforce of the future. And we're looking at not a small number of people, as Director Ahuja indicates; we're talking hundreds of thousands of people.

I do believe that, as I said earlier, there are some things, though, that lend themselves to fairly straightforward fixes if we put our mind to it. They're management issues. They're not rocket science.

And I believe trying to make a viable internship program that's a stellar program, like the private sector often has, is one step in

the recruitment and retention challenge we can fix if we have the political will to do it, if we care enough to make that a priority. It is a priority for me, and I hope it will be for both of you. And we look forward to working with you.

We've also had requests for information we want to make sure we followup on. The story in the Free Beacon on not checking emails, we've got to track that down and make sure—hopefully, that's not true, but if it is, what corrective measures we're going to take. And then we're also going to look at briefings that the Appropriations Committee apparently got.

But we very much look forward to working with you. You know, during this pandemic, there are heroic figures in the Federal Government—Federal employees who put themselves at risk to try to make sure the American people are served with vital services every day. And we know that, and we appreciate that. And we want to make sure, as we move forward, that they continue to be protected and honored for their service.

Thank you. This hearing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 10:41 a.m., the subcommittee was adjourned.]

