

STAFF MEMORANDUM: PUBLIC SERVICE



This staff memorandum does not represent official findings or recommendations of the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service (“the Commission”). Authored by the Commission’s staff, the memorandum presents preliminary summaries of research and analysis that the Commission may consider as it develops its recommendations for the Congress, the President, and the American public.

Relevant memoranda will be released in conjunction with the Commission’s public hearings. Staff encourages those with views on issues under discussion during the hearings to provide their input to the Commission at www.inspire2serve.gov and stands ready to revise its current understanding of these issues in light of new information as the Commission’s work continues.

Background

The May 15, 2019, public hearings provide an opportunity for public discussion of policy options the Commission is considering with respect to *public service*—defined in the Commission’s mandate as “civilian employment in federal, state, tribal, or local government in a field in which the Nation and the public have critical needs.”

Policy Options

This memo details a series of policy options that generally address two topics:

- (1) Improving basic hiring processes at government agencies*
- (2) Attracting and retaining public service employees, especially those with critical skills*

The policy options described below offer robust alternatives for improvements at the federal level and a range of opportunities for state, tribal, or local governments to consider.

(1) Improving basic hiring processes at government agencies

a. Improve competitive and noncompetitive hiring processes

The difficulty and length of the federal hiring process is a notable barrier for entry-level candidates and deters mid-career individuals who might otherwise seek employment at a federal agency. Alternatives to address challenges in both competitive and noncompetitive hiring processes, as well as catalyze change in agency hiring culture, include:

Modernize recruiting and application processes. Develop and use plain-language, applicant-focused job descriptions and accept standard resumes with an optional cover letter. Also, update USAJOBS to improve interoperability with third-party job boards, allowing hiring managers to easily promote job postings to high-potential candidates and accept and track applications from those sources.

Improve candidate qualification and assessment. Eliminate keyword-based, automated resume reviews and the use of self-assessments; and involve hiring managers and subject-matter experts in recruitment, qualification, and assessment processes for all job openings. Promote the use of advanced assessment tools in combination with resume reviews and interviews conducted by subject-matter experts.

Allow agencies to use an improved version of the ranked-list process, in which candidates are assigned a numerical rating. Instead of limiting hiring managers to the candidates with the highest three passing scores, allow for an expanded pool for selection, such as the top 10 candidates, or all candidates rated above a certain threshold, such as 90 points.

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Streamline and enhance the use of noncompetitive hiring for fellowship and scholarship recipients, national service alumni, veterans, and military spouses. Provide standard documentation and training for how to use hiring preferences for individuals with noncompetitive eligibility (NCE) and former military service members who qualify for the Veterans Recruitment Appointment (VRA). Establish a hiring roster to connect NCE and VRA candidates with hiring managers.

Promote a culture that supports effective practices to meet agency workforce needs. Potential approaches include:

- Base at least 35 percent of Senior Executive Service (SES) and General Schedule (GS) supervisors performance evaluation upon personnel management, recruiting, and human capital responsibilities.
- Establish core, required competencies for all HR employees that could be met through a combination of education, experience, and training.
- Institute a temporary Personnel Transformation Office within each agency front office, reporting to agency leadership, to establish a workforce recruitment and retention plan.
- Direct agencies to manage their blended workforce, including federal employees and contractors, as effectively and efficiently as possible, within budget, without a Full Time Employee (FTE) or headcount limitation.

b. Modernize federal civil service hiring preferences

Hiring preferences create opportunities for some applicants to enter public service employment but limit opportunities for others. Alternatives to simplify and promote consistency in eligibility for preferences, reward service to the nation, and enable agencies to hire highly qualified candidates include:

Expand noncompetitive eligibility for students, interns, fellows, veterans, and national service alumni. Potential approaches include:

- Offer 12 months of NCE to all participants who successfully complete federal internships, fellowships and scholarships, including certain third-party fellowships.
- Extend eligibility for VRA from three years to 10 years after discharge.
- Expand NCE from 12 months—currently for Peace Corps and VISTA alumni only—to three years for all AmeriCorps and Peace Corps alumni.

Modernize veterans' preference to provide opportunities for veterans—especially those recently discharged from the military who are transitioning to civilian employment—to best match their skills and experience with federal workforce needs. Potential approaches include:

- Apply veterans' preference within competitive examining as a tiebreaker between equally qualified candidates.
- No longer allow military retirees to be eligible for veterans' hiring preferences.
- Limit veterans' preference within competitive examining to candidates within 10 years of discharge and for positions up to and including GS-11.
- Limit veterans' preference to individuals who are not currently federal employees or those who are within two years of their civil service career (for example, to obtain an initial job, but not for promotions or transfers).
- Offer agencies that meet veteran hiring goals additional flexibility within competitive examining, such as by suspending the requirement to apply preferences once an agency achieves its goal.

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c. Build a workforce pipeline from higher education to public service

Many agencies—at all levels of government—lack effective systems to hire students and recent graduates. Alternatives to source talent from colleges and universities to bring a new generation to public service and meet workforce needs include:

Revise the Pathways Internship Program to enable hiring high-performing interns after a typical, 10-week, full-time internship. Current rules usually require one year of full-time service before converting an intern to term or permanent employment.

Establish a structured, campus-recruiting process as part of the Pathways Recent Graduates program. This new process would occur during set timeframes that coincide with campus-recruiting season and appropriately leverage technology for online skills assessments and communication.

Establish a Federal Fellowship Center to streamline and expand fellowship programs as a mechanism to source talent for federal agencies. This new center would operate a website with information about every U.S. government fellowship and scholarship program and allow individuals to apply using a common application. Agencies would retain control over candidate selection. The Fellowship Center would also facilitate fellowship programs to meet agency workforce needs, at the request of and with funding from agencies, and award NCE for federal employment to all individuals who successfully complete federal fellowship and scholarship programs.

Revitalize the Presidential Management Fellows (PMF) Program. Remove PMF from the Pathways Programs and allow agencies to design the fellowship to meet their needs. Smaller agencies could receive additional support from the Federal Fellowship Center for design and implementation. In addition to the traditional leadership track, offer a separate fellowship track focused on technical backgrounds, such as science, engineering, and acquisition.

Establish a Public Service Corps, similar to Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC), in partnership with universities to cultivate talent for civil service employment in federal, state, local, and tribal governments. Participating agencies would partner with universities to offer students studying needed fields scholarships, internships, clearances, and employment upon graduation in return for a service commitment.

Create a Public Service Academy, similar to military service academies, to offer higher education programs in exchange for a public service commitment. This academy would offer a tuition-free undergraduate program to prepare students for civil service careers in return for a service commitment.

(2) Attracting and retaining public service employees, especially those with critical skills

a. Increase competitiveness of federal agencies for workers with critical skills

High demand by private-sector employers for workers with critical skills, such as health care, cybersecurity, IT, and STEM, poses special challenges for federal agencies that also need these workers. Alternatives to improve the competitiveness of federal agencies for workers with critical skills include:

Establish a single, modernized personnel system for federal civilian health care professionals. Adopt the recommendation from the 2016 Commission on Care to implement a new Title 38 personnel system to cover all health care providers (for example, doctors, nurses, and pharmacists) and health care support

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professionals (for example, housekeeping and custodial workers, HR specialists, and business analysts). Streamline hiring processes and offer competitive pay and benefits.

Pilot a program to develop a pathway for veterans to become physician assistants at the Veterans Health Administration (VHA). Offer enlisted service members in certain medical fields a specialized, subsidized academic pathway to become physician assistants in return for a service commitment at a VHA medical center.

Increase portability of licensure for federal health care professionals. Strengthen licensure portability for federal employees who deliver care in multiple states as part of their official duties.

Allow any federal agency to adopt the Cyber Talent Management System, the personnel system for civilian cybersecurity professionals managed by the Department of Homeland Security. Enable more agencies to create cybersecurity positions for discrete, short-term projects, hire based on competencies rather than experience, and pay competitive salaries.

Expand IT reskilling pilots to meet agency workforce needs with current employees. Grow the recently established Federal Cyber Reskilling Academy.

Establish technical-skills standards for federal-agency IT employees. Offer training and/or transfer to another occupational series for IT employees who do not maintain current, necessary technical skills.

Build a civilian corps of former federal cybersecurity employees to retain a reserve of critical technical talent in case of emergency. Allow agencies to offer compensation and maintain security clearances for corps members, provide regular training, establish systems and policies to recall corps members to full-time service, and protect reemployment rights with private-sector employers.

Pilot a new personnel system for STEM employees. Allow any agency to adopt a pilot for newly hired STEM employees, allowing for competency-based hiring, flexible classification, competitive compensation, streamlined transfers between agencies, and skills- and performance-based promotion.

b. Increase competitiveness of federal employee benefits

The federal employee benefits package is optimized for individuals who seek long-term federal employment careers and lacks some benefits increasingly offered by private-sector employers. Alternatives to offer competitive benefit options that accommodate workers who value career flexibility include:

Offer newly hired, non-public-safety, federal civil service employees the option to select a new, modernized benefit package with fully portable retirement benefits, flexible time off, paid parental leave, and comprehensive disability-income insurance. Allow new hires to choose between the current benefits and a new package, of equivalent value, that includes a larger agency contribution to the Thrift Savings Plan, disability-income insurance, paid parental leave, and flexible time off but would not include eligibility for the Federal Employees Retirement System annuity or retiree health care.

Implement a cafeteria plan for certain federal employee benefits. Under this approach, grant each employee a fixed agency contribution to divide among certain benefits, such as flexible spending and health savings accounts, and life, dental, vision, and disability-income insurance.

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c. Establish a new civil service personnel system for federal agencies

The foundation of the federal personnel system was established several decades ago to support a predominantly clerical workforce. Experience from incremental adjustments and demonstration projects—including options presented above—could inform longer-term efforts to develop a new personnel system that better accommodates the modern workforce and competitive environment.

Begin a long-term effort to design and implement a new, government-wide personnel system.

Engage Government Accountability Office, Office of Management and Budget, and external parties to evaluate incremental changes and demonstration projects and publish recommendations for a new personnel system for federal-agency civil servants.

d. Improve support for student and first-year teachers

Earning a license to teach in public schools typically includes a student-teaching requirement, usually unpaid, which limits access to this public service career. Alternatives to improve access to the teaching profession while addressing critical teacher shortages include:

Expand stipends for student teachers and cooperating teachers. Offer matching grants to states, school districts, and institutions of higher education that pay such stipends.

Reform the TEACH Grant program to provide more support to new teachers in high-need fields.

Adopt a nationwide, competitive application process, increase financial support for awardees during their studies and student-teaching period, and fund expert teachers to serve as mentors in Title I schools.

Issues to Consider

Many priorities and challenges should be considered when evaluating these policy options, including:

Prudent stewardship of public funds and adherence to merit principles. Government agencies need effective and competitive personnel systems and benefits to hire highly qualified employees to serve the public; these systems and benefits must also offer good value for the taxpayer and maintain high standards of openness and fairness as espoused by the merit-system principles.

Recognition of the importance and value of public servants. Public employees are entrusted with responsibilities—and scrutinized for actions—that impact the rights and well-being of Americans. Governments must balance reasonable oversight with support for the public service workforce to continually improve the ability of government agencies to serve the public, while simultaneously respecting the efforts of all public servants and encouraging Americans to pursue public service careers.

Simplicity, consistency, and equitability of personnel policies. Complexity of personnel systems—while sometimes necessary to meet special needs of agencies, maintain a fair process, or address certain public policy goals—may serve as a barrier to Americans' understanding of public service opportunities and may impede effective, efficient, and fair implementation of personnel systems by governments.

The May public hearings of the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service are intended to generate discussion of issues surrounding public service in America. Feedback can be shared at www.inspire2serve.gov/content/share-your-thoughts.