



TESTIMONY BY

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BEFORE

**THE HOUSE SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE FEDERAL
WORKFORCE, POSTAL SERVICE, AND THE DISTRICT
OF COLUMBIA**

REGARDING

JOBS, JOBS, JOBS: TRANSFORMING FEDERAL HIRING

MAY 19, 2010

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

On behalf of the National Association of Government Employees (SEIU/NAGE), and the more than 100,000 workers we represent, including more than 50,000 employees of the federal government, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Subcommittee about transforming the federal hiring process.

The federal government is in dire need of hiring reform. The current process that is used by federal agencies is too cumbersome, too confusing, and takes too long for the process to be completed. The unfortunate result is that federal agencies often fail to attract the best possible candidates for the available positions. This ultimately hurts agency productivity and the value federal government agencies provide to the American people.

At no point in decades has hiring reform been so critical. Our country is currently faced with two major crises that an improved federal hiring system can help alleviate. The first is the economic crisis our country, and nations throughout the world, are facing. Due to the economic downturn, unemployment stands at 9.9 percent. Although some of the early indicators suggest we may be turning the corner on the biggest recession this country has seen since the Great Depression, American workers have not really begun to see the jobs landscape improve all that much. Times are still tough out there. We need jobs.

But an improved federal hiring system can help put Americans back to work. The federal government currently has tens of thousands of vacancies that are unfilled. At any one time, USAJobs.com has 40,000 vacancies listed. These

are good-paying jobs that are already on the books and have already been appropriated for. They are just sitting there waiting to be filled. If we can shorten the time it takes for a vacancy in the federal government to be filled, we can put tens of thousands of Americans to work, at a time when this country needs it the most. This is very low-hanging fruit.

The second crisis we are facing is not as visible, but just as real. The federal government is going to experience a tidal wave of retirement in the coming years. Baby boomers are becoming eligible for retirement, and the federal government will be hit harder than other sectors of the workforce. The federal government needs to be prepared to expeditiously replace the workers that it is going to lose. We simply cannot allow for it to take six months or more to fill critical vacancies. The federal government will not be able to function this way. Federal hiring reform needs to happen in a matter of months, not years.

SEIU/NAGE is very pleased to see the White House and the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) take interest in this critical issue. Just last week, President Obama issued an executive memo to federal agencies instructing them to make some much-needed reforms to their hiring processes. It is clear that the Administration has an appreciation for the fact that the workers are what makes federal agencies perform. The federal government simply cannot function effectively without a knowledgeable, motivated workforce. Finding the right people, with the right skills, in a reasonable period of time, is critical to recruiting and maintaining that workforce.

The Need is Great

Hiring reform is necessary now. The Baby Boom Generation is reaching or already at retirement age. The Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB) called the impending wave of retirement a “crisis” in its 2008 report on hiring. The retirement wave is in addition to a natural rate of turnover that occurs at federal agencies. It is a very serious concern for which the federal government must prepare.

Among the more than 50,000 federal employees represented by SEIU/NAGE many are employed in the nursing, police, and emergency service fields. Having enough workers on call in those critical professions can literally be a matter of life and death.

The Department of Veterans Affairs estimates it will need to hire over 40,000 health care workers within the next couple years. Delays in hiring could render the VA ill-prepared to provide quality care to veterans. A shortage of nurses can cause unsafe patient-to-staff ratios at our VA hospitals, and high patient-to-staff ratios have proven in numerous studies to adversely impact patient outcomes. We need to be able to hire expeditiously at the VA.

The Department of Defense projects that more than half of the police officers guarding our military facilities will need to be replaced within the next two years. We need to be able to replace these federal police officers in a timely fashion, or we risk experiencing a lapse in security at our Defense installations. We must be able to hire expeditiously to replace federal police officers.

The Obama Administration's Efforts on Hiring Reform

SEIU/NAGE believes that President Obama and OPM Director John Berry are moving in the right direction with hiring reform, but we will wait until their initiative has been implemented before we will form our full opinion on the effort. The outline of their plan is good, but it will take follow-through by the agencies to be a success. We hope very much that the Administration's hiring reform will accomplish some of the program's key goals, and we stand ready to help the Administration make their plan work.

The American people deserve an effective hiring system. Today, hiring federal workers takes too long. It takes an average of about five months to fill a federal vacancy. That is way too long a period of time. The hiring process is also very difficult to navigate. The federal hiring process is foreign to most applicants that have not held a previous position in the federal government. Many well qualified applicants give up before finding a suitable job. This limits the pool of applicants to only the most determined. SEIU/NAGE shares the goal of implementing reforms that will enhance the federal workforce and the services they provide the American people.

Resume-Based Hiring

SEIU/NAGE applauds Director Berry's move toward a resume-based hiring system. The lengthy "knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs)" essays will be a thing of the past, and in our opinion, they will not be missed. KSA are used by very few employers outside of the federal government. They have been a

nothing more than barrier toward getting the best candidates for federal positions. A resume-based application, which is far more appropriate for hiring in this day and age, will suit the federal government far better.

Category Hiring

The White House proposal to abolish the “rule of three” could also streamline the hiring process. Being arbitrarily forced to narrow the choices to just three candidates both delays the process and excludes many highly qualified candidates from consideration. Opening consideration to a larger number of “well qualified” applicants will allow better hires to be made more quickly. However, managers will have to be properly trained to ensure that the reformed process is fair and open.

Bringing in Managers

Bringing operational managers and supervisors into the hiring process earlier and more fully is common sense change that will potentially improve the hiring system substantially. It is often difficult for Human Resource officers to fully understand the details of work performed in the field. Bringing in people who are more involved with and responsible for the services an agency provides will almost definitely lead to better and faster hiring decisions.

As I mentioned, managers will need to be well trained in changes to the hiring process. SEIU/NAGE will be monitoring training programs as reforms are implemented. We also hope that details of the training will be a part of the

reports President Obama has ordered agencies to produce by November 1 of this year. It is easy to see how a lack of proper manager training could result in a less fair and open hiring process. Legislation may be necessary to ensure that such training takes place.

Insourcing

Over the past decade, too many federal jobs have been outsourced to the private sector. Creating an easier and faster hiring process will promote insourcing. Agencies will often use the difficulty and length of the competitive hiring process to delay insourcing. Reforming the hiring process will render such excuses invalid. Bringing formerly outsourced jobs back under the public sector will save money. The Defense Department has estimated it will save an average of \$44,000 for every federal position that is insourced. This is an important consideration in light of the federal deficit our nation has experienced in recent years.

Federal Career Intern Program (FCIP)

With all of the problems and delays in the current hiring process it is no surprise that many agencies use the Federal Career Internship Program (FCIP) to fill vacancies. A 2008 report from the MSPB found that the FCIP had become the preferred method of hiring entry level employees. The direct hiring authority granted by FCIP allows managers to bypass the current process and place pre-selected candidates quickly and with little oversight. SEIU/NAGE believes this

program is too often used to bypass competitive selection and veterans preferences. We are pleased that the Administration has taken steps to examine FCIP more closely. We hope that the reforms we are discussing today will help move toward limiting the government's reliance on the FCIP.

Conclusion

SEIU/NAGE welcomes a faster, more open, and friendlier federal hiring process. I greatly appreciate the Subcommittee's decision to hold this hearing. I thank the Subcommittee for the opportunity to provide this testimony.