

## **SPEED UP PROGRESS ON DIVERSITY, EEOC TELLS AGENCY**

[By Mollie Ziegler - Federal Times, June 14, 2004]

Agency leaders must aggressively recruit underrepresented groups – including Hispanics and people with disabilities – if they want their work force to mirror the national labor force, personnel experts said.

Agencies made some progress hiring women and Hispanics last year, but are doing a worse job of hiring people with disabilities, according to a May 20 report from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Senior officials from the Office of Personnel Management want agencies to make more progress in attracting diverse employee candidates.

“OPM can only do so much here,” said Ron Sanders, the agency’s associate director for strategic human resources policy. “Hiring is done by agencies – they’re the ones who offer jobs, announce them and fill them.”

Demographic quotas are unconstitutional, so agencies need to focus on aggressive outreach efforts, recruiting a candidate pool that is diverse and then trusting the merit process to work, Sanders said.

“We are looking for specific actions – not just rhetoric – that they are reaching out to minority applicants and potential applicants to encourage them to apply and show them how to apply,” he said.

Nonwhites comprise 13.8 percent of the government’s 15,000 senior pay positions in fiscal 2003, up slightly from 13.5 percent the previous year, according to the commission’s annual report on the federal work force. Senior pay positions are those above the rank of GS-15, including Senior Executive Service, Senior Foreign Service, administrative law judges and top technical and scientific employees.

Diversity in the federal work force contributes to achieving results and improving [it] serves [the] citizens, said Rep. Jo Ann Davis, R-VA.

“Diversity brings different perspectives and approaches to the table, and this is very valuable when we are trying to create and implement good policies,” said Davis, who chairs the House Government Reform subcommittee on civil service and agency reorganization.

Only six pages of the commission’s 356-page report are devoted to the representation of minorities and women in the work place, said Jorge Ponce, co-chair of the Council of Federal Equal Employment Opportunity and Civil Rights Executives. Most of the report analyzes agencies’ processing of discrimination complaints. Ponce said the EEOC considers the complaints process more important than the affirmative action responsibility that agencies have.

Hispanics made up just under 6 percent of the federal work force in 1994. In 2003, that increased to over 7 percent, but only 3.4 percent of the Senior Executive Service. Ponce said

increasing Hispanic representation is a major challenge for agencies. Hispanics comprise about 13 percent of the national work force.

“The main problem is that despite the fact that Hispanics have been underrepresented in the federal government at least for the last 10 years, the federal agencies are still looking for the magic answer,” Ponce said. “Instead of concentrating on taking some proactive steps, they’re trying to find the panacea by writing 200-page reports that just collect dust in agencies’ bookshelves.”

Ponce said increased representation could be achieved with commitment from top leadership. The Homeland Security Department’s work force is almost 23 percent Hispanic, as is 12 percent of the Social Security Administration’s work force.

Agencies should meet with human capital leaders from those two agencies to find out more about their diversity programs, Ponce said. And agencies should embark on a massive recruitment effort, staffed by diverse teams that include Hispanics.

“If you don’t have Hispanics represented in recruitment trips, applicants will get the idea that agencies aren’t very serious about hiring Hispanics.”

Rep. Danny Davis, D-Ill, agrees. The civil service subcommittee’s ranking member said agencies should approach minority groups directly since many minorities have limited understanding of how to apply for federal employment.

“Agencies have to get more proactive if people are going to find federal employment,” he said. “If some groups never get in the door, never know where to go, don’t know how to approach federal employment opportunities, the federal government’s hiring, retention, and promotion will not be diverse.”

Forthcoming regulations from the Office of Personnel Management may help agencies hire more people with disabilities, said Helena Berger, chief operating officer of the American Association of People with Disabilities. The regulatory change would permit agencies to self-certify if someone has a mental or physical handicap and is employable. Currently, certification comes from the Veterans Affairs Department. In 1994, individuals with disabilities comprised 1.2 percent of the federal work force. In 2003, representation had declined to 1.1 percent. In the senior pay levels, individuals with disabilities comprise less than half a percent.

Sanders said the purpose of the new regulation is to free agency personnel from an unnecessary and cumbersome bureaucratic procedure – if they use it.

“OPM can give agencies flexibilities, but they still have to use them. We’re hopeful that if we can put the tool in their hands, they’ll use it,” Sanders said.

Berger said agencies should also reach out to folks in the disability community through organizations such as the American Association of People with Disabilities, Easter Seals, and

the Arc. Job openings posted at these organizations filter down to the grassroots level quickly, she said.

“There hasn’t been a real proactive effort on the part of feds to reach out to the disability community,” Berger said.

She also suggested agencies have people with disabilities represented on recruitment teams.

The career path to the Senior Executive Service is usually internal, so SES diversity has to be addressed elsewhere in agencies’ human capital planning, said Carol Bonosaro, president of the Senior Executives Association, which represents the more than 6,000 senior executives in government. Most senior executives work their way up through the civil service ranks.

“Few people are hired into the SES from outside,” she said. “This is a challenge that has to be dealt with from earlier on.”