



Blacks In Government
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**Testimony before the Subcommittee on Federal Workforce,
Postal Service, and the District of Columbia,
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform,
House of Representatives**

Diversity at the SES and Equivalent Levels in Legislative Branch Agencies

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to be here today to discuss diversity at the Senior Executive Service and equivalent levels in the legislative branch agencies. My name is Shirley Jones. I am an Assistant General Counsel with the U. S. Government Accountability Office. For the last three years, I have served as the President of the GAO and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Chapter of Blacks In Government. Today, I come before you to share the Chapter's efforts to ensure equal opportunity and to effect change that will lead to increased diversity at all levels but particularly at the SES and equivalent levels. Because GAO is a legislative branch agency, my remarks today will focus on the Chapter's activities at GAO. These views in no way represent the views of the U.S. Government Accountability Office.

Summary of Our Chapter's Purpose and Goals

The GAO chapter received its charter from the national BIG organization in September of 1980 with the purpose of addressing the interests and concerns of African American staff at GAO so that all staff could have an equal opportunity to succeed.¹ Since that time, our chapter has sought to organize around issues of mutual concern and to use our collective energy to address workplace challenges. Through monthly information sharing sessions, regular contact with African American staff at all levels in the agency, representation on GAO's Employee Advisory Council (EAC), memoranda and letters on issues of concern addressed to responsible parties in management, and the creation of professional development programs, we strive to promote excellence and to seek a level playing field. Our goal is not only to be a resource to the staff but also to be an asset to the leaders and managers of our agency as they similarly pursue the purpose of equal opportunity for all staff. Through our efforts our ultimate goal is to help GAO be the model for the rest of the government in ensuring that its greatest assets, its human capital, are all treated fairly and equally.

Chapter Positions and Expression of Concern on Major Issues Impacting Diversity

Comptroller General David Walker previously made a statement regarding diversity at GAO that we support. In his July 24, 2006 CG Chat, he made the following statement:

“America's strength is its diversity. As a public sector employer and as a public servant with public trust, GAO has the responsibility to lead by example and reflect the diversity of this country.”

This quote is particularly noteworthy for two primary reasons. First, it is clear from diversity best practices that if we are to achieve equal opportunity and the level playing field that BIG and African American staff have been speaking out about even before Mr. Walker's tenure, then there must be a strong demonstrated commitment to diversity from top management. And, importantly, if we are to have diversity at the SES and GS 15 levels, this commitment must emphasize not just diversity in recruiting and hiring but also must focus on advancement opportunities and retention efforts.

¹ Historically, the national organization of Blacks In Government (BIG) was conceived in 1975 as a means of preserving and enhancing the work experience of Black civil servants.

The quote was also important because of the context in which Mr. Walker made it. Along with this statement, Mr. Walker also acknowledged that there continues to be a statistically significant difference between the average performance appraisal scores between African American staff and Caucasian staff at GAO. This acknowledgment was particularly important to our BIG Chapter because this is a longstanding issue that our chapter had brought before GAO management even before Mr. Walker's tenure as Comptroller General but particularly in the two years preceding his acknowledgment. As you know, the issue of lower appraisal scores had taken on even more significance for us during that time period because it was during those two years that the restructuring of our Band II for analyst staffs was under consideration and had ultimately taken place.

Prior to the restructuring of GAO's Band II (e.g. Grades 13 and 14 equivalent) – in the two years in which it was being considered and being called a “split” – our chapter wrote a letter in March 2004 to Comptroller General Walker stating our concern that African American staff in particular would be at a distinct disadvantage in the placement decisions. One of the reasons that we specifically noted was that GAO's appraisal data showed that African American employees at all Band levels were consistently receiving the lowest performance appraisal scores. In that letter we recommended that GAO initiate a study to determine why African Americans consistently received the lowest performance appraisals in the agency. Performance appraisal scores for 2003-2005 were ultimately, however, one of three major criteria used to make placement decisions for the restructuring and was the primary criterion that kept a large percentage of staff from being placed into Band IIB.² Moreover, performance appraisal scores were the only criterion that effected staff could not appeal.

In that letter and on numerous other occasions since then, we also voiced our concerns not only about the historically lower appraisal scores for African American staff but also about the staffing practices of GAO teams. We noted that some African American staff had told us that they were being assigned Analyst In Charge (AIC) opportunities infrequently which was preventing them from gaining valuable leadership opportunities that would be vital to their future advancement. Accordingly, we have previously suggested that GAO examine the staffing practices of GAO teams.

So, with a history of expressing concerns about the significantly lower appraisal scores, lack of individual control over staffing assignments, and other issues³ that would prevent African American staff from advancing to Band IIB, Band III and ultimately the SES level,

² After the restructuring, our chapter sent a letter on May 5, 2006, to then GAO Chief Human Capital Officer Jesse Hoskins commenting on the demographic data that had been released agency-wide. We noted our belief that the data did not paint a full picture with regard to the impact of the restructuring on African American Band II analyst staff and requested that additional data be released to increase transparency.

³ We have also voiced concerns about the retention rates for African American analyst staff, noting particular concern for the retention of African American males.

Mr. Walker's acknowledgment was particularly important. I personally believed that it signaled a commitment to initiate change at the agency that would enhance diversity.

Recent GAO Actions Taken that Could Enhance Diversity

During that same chat, Mr. Walker said that the agency planned to take several positive steps to address the issue. He noted that the establishment of a formal mentoring program for a broader array of analysts was in the works. He also committed to specifically monitoring the efforts of various GAO teams. Since that chat, he has also stated that he has a zero tolerance policy for discrimination.

Importantly, Mr. Walker and his Executive Committee agreed with and adopted a suggestion by the Employee Advisory Council (EAC) that an independent outside assessment was needed to examine the factors that may influence ratings differences and in pursuing what additional steps GAO may take to address them. The agreement came after additional concerns were raised by both Mr. Walker and the EAC when the most recent appraisal data reflected similar lower ratings for African American staff with less than 5 years at GAO. On August 16, 2007, GAO awarded the African American Performance Assessment Study contract to Ivy Planning Group (Ivy) of Rockville, Maryland. According to a project overview for the study from Ivy dated October 17, 2007 the next steps are to determine if African Americans and Caucasian staff have the same skills and background when they arrive and what happens to people after they arrive. The last task would be to determine given the quantitative and qualitative data, what GAO should do differently.

Conclusion

I believe the significant difference in appraisal scores and diversity issues in general are of personal concern to Comptroller General Walker just as they are to our chapter of Blacks In Government. I also believe that he and GAO's Executive Committee have signaled a commitment to enhancing diversity and that any delays in responding to our concerns were due in large measure to his belief that efforts previously undertaken early on in his tenure such as development of the Professional Development Program, more consistency in hiring/recruitment practices across teams, and changes to the performance management system would have rectified this issue at least as it relates to staff here less than five years.

Our concern continues to be, however, that this commitment from our top management has to also trickle down and be evident in the actions of front line managers. It is these front line managers who are indeed deciding on appraisal scores, making AIC decisions, staffing individuals to high risk and high visibility jobs, and making other professional development decisions that may disparately impact African American staff. Managers throughout the agency from the top down have to see diversity as a core value and all have to be held accountable to ensure progress.

I also think that Mr. Walker and the agency took a positive first step in rolling out a formal mentoring program that includes more staff. It is clear, however that mentoring

itself is not a cure-all by any means. Rather, as this hearing indicates, in addition to mentors, it is critical that African Americans and other minority staff who share our diverse traits are represented at the SES and upper management levels so that they can in turn serve as sponsors and advocates for other minority staff and positively influence others that are involved in making important decisions that impact diversity and equal opportunity.

Finally, I am encouraged by GAO's decision to bring in the Ivy consulting group to study the differences in appraisal scores for African American staff. And, I applaud the agency for doing the study now rather than later even in the midst of budget constraints and continuing resolutions. I am hopeful that the study will in fact make some actionable recommendations that will ultimately lead to greater diversity at all levels but particularly at the SES and upper levels at GAO where the most important decisions are in fact made.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, this concludes my prepared statement. I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.