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TESTIMONY

of

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FEDERAL WORKFORCE, POSTAL SERVICE, AND THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
SUBCOMMITTEE OF THE HOUSE OVERSIGHT & GOVERNMENT REFORM
COMMITTEE

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Chairman Davis and Distinguished Members of the Subcommittee:

The Senior Executives Association (SEA), the professional association representing the interests of members of the career Senior Executive Service and those holding equivalent positions, appreciates the opportunity to testify about the important topic of the lack of diversity in the senior ranks of government and what to do about it. We applaud your oversight of diversity in the career Senior Executive Service (SES) and other senior positions in government. SEA seeks to work with you, the Subcommittee on the Federal Workforce, Postal Service and the District of Columbia, and others who care about this issue, to assure that the SES of the future represents fully the diversity of America. It is not only the right thing to do, but achieving diversity will pay dividends by producing a government led by executives who are better able to respond to and provide services to all Americans.

The current record is not good enough. The 2003 Government Accountability Office report on this subject showed that women and minorities were significantly under represented based upon their overall representation in the federal workforce. The latest data from OPM's fedscope section of its website shows that little, if any, improvement in diversity has been made over the last few years.

The upcoming retirement tsunami presents an excellent opportunity to get it right with respect to diversity in the SES. OPM projects that 90% of the current SES will retire over the next 10 years, with the largest number retiring in 2009. This is a chance to change the culture of the federal workplace to one that promotes diversity more effectively.

SEA sees four areas where the government could dramatically improve diversity. First, improved, accessible and clear data needs to be developed. This can tell us what groups are under represented, and show how access to resources can be improved and barriers can be eliminated. Second, specific work needs to be done on building pipelines for career development to assure that minorities and women are actually in a place to be promoted to the Senior Executive Service. Third, the merit system needs to be respected and must be a complement assuring that the SES of the future is the best it can be rather than a crutch against change. Finally, and necessary for any other factors to work, agencies must adopt a culture of leadership that emphasizes being fair to and inclusive of all employees.

Improving Data

In most agencies, data on diversity remains in the realm of the agency EEO office. Promoting diversity needs to be a team effort, with the entire organization knowing where it stands, the challenges in its way, and how it plans to get there. In the most basic of terms, an agency cannot reach goals if it does not know where it currently stands. Agencies need to know where they stand by having good data on diversity shared throughout the organization.

This data can be even more valuable in identifying problems if agencies look at it in the context of other diversity issues, such as EEO complaints and dead-end positions that stifle advancement. Agencies should work with associated interest groups to crunch and develop this data in ways that identify areas ripe for improvement. This will enable agencies to recognize where their diversity problems lie. Is the agency hiring a diverse workforce? Is a diverse workforce is being promoted through the ranks? Finally, are there bottlenecks or barriers to minorities being promoted?

Identifying Barriers and Improving the Pipeline

This is only the beginning, though. Diversity cannot be achieved without appropriate data, but once these issues are identified through good data and collaboration, agencies can better tailor their hiring, training, and promotion to support diversity. Pipelines to the SES need to be identified and diverse qualified, quality candidates must be placed in that pipeline. Good data helps accomplish this. Leadership, as discussed below, makes it happen. Genuine opportunities must be available to minorities in the workplace. Resources must be directed in a manner that is consistent with promoting the values of diversity. Training and development pipelines should advance a workforce that reflects America.

The Merit Systems

Promoting a diverse leadership is more easily said than done. This brings us to our third point. As it stands now, promoting diversity in the federal workplace is often not perceived as something that is necessarily rewarded. Quite conversely, many senior personnel are confounded by the EEO system and work to avoid complaints, not to promote diversity. An atmosphere of “gotcha” seems to pervade some federal workplaces and causes many managers to believe that higher levels of management will not support them.

But in this environment, the merit system remains paramount. The basic notion that the best candidate should be promoted has not changed, nor should it change, as we seek a more diverse workforce. But the development of a qualified and diverse workforce does not in and of itself violate the merit system. Agencies need to reward managers who promote an environment where diversity can become a reality and at the same time assure well-intentioned and fully trained managers of higher level support when dealing with the complex employee complaint, grievance and appeals system.

Leadership That Promotes Diversity

Our final point is about leadership for diversity. Gathering data, creating talent pipelines, dispelling myths, and training leaders are all small steps on a longer journey. Those small steps will succeed more easily if accompanied by a transformational change that comes from top-level agency leaders. In an ideal workplace, holding diversity as a value must be acknowledged, promoted and rewarded.

The best way to move beyond the status quo is to encourage agency heads and individuals in leadership to champion diversity. These champions must identify diversity as a real value of importance instead of the lip service that it sometimes receives. Managers at all levels must act and speak diversity everyday. If higher level political appointees do it, lower level managers will know that promoting diversity is to be rewarded.

By individual champions at the highest levels of government holding up diversity as a key value and promoting the notion that those at lower levels insist on a fair and inclusive workplace, our civil service can model a senior government leadership that reflects the America of today and into the future.

This must be a genuine effort that continuously identifies problems, eliminates barriers and communicates the values of diversity throughout government. With perseverance and commitment, we believe a diverse civil service—from the top to the bottom—can be achieved.

I thank you again for the opportunity to testify before this Subcommittee. SEA looks forward to continuing to work with this committee and with agencies on what our organization sees as one of the most important matters facing our members. We hope to continue to be an effective voice of the federal government career executive leadership on this and other matters about the civil service.