

Statement of Senator Daniel K. Akaka  
Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal  
Workforce, and the District of Columbia  
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs

“Ensuring Diversity at Senior Levels of the Federal Government and the  
U.S. Postal Service”

April 3, 2008

I want to thank Chairman Davis for leading this joint hearing on diversity in the senior executive service (SES) and his leadership in this area. I am pleased to partner with him both on this hearing and in legislation to improve diversity in the senior ranks of the federal government. I also want to thank him for joining me yesterday to introduce a resolution honoring all public servants during Public Service Recognition Week this year.

Diversity of race, gender, heritage, and experience provides any organization with a valuable range of perspectives and ideas that can improve its effectiveness. When an agency is developing new policies and initiatives, a diverse workforce helps ensure a cultural understanding that can lead to new, creative directions or avert unintended problems before they arise.

Unfortunately the number of minorities and women in the SES across the federal government has not reflected the diversity of the Nation nor the diversity of the federal workforce as a whole. In 2003 the Government Accountability Office evaluated data from 2000 on diversity in the SES. At the time, the report showed 67 percent of senior executives were white males; 19 percent were white females; and about 14 percent were minority males and females. According to GAO's testimony last year, using 2006 data, there were small improvements made in the overall representation of women and minorities over the past six years, but gains were inconsistent among the 25 federal agencies analyzed and offset by losses of women and minorities at nine agencies.

The door to diversity seems to be narrowing even as the American workforce becomes more diverse and federal retirements continue to increase.

In its 2003 report, GAO speculated that 55 percent of the SES would retire and diversity of the SES would improve given the diversity of the talent pool. The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) in its response to

GAO insisted that increasing diversity in the senior ranks was a top priority, but OPM's own numbers prove it wrong.

While 63 percent of the SES has retired since 2000, the potential gains estimated by GAO and OPM to improve diversity have not been made. We need to examine why more minorities and women are not becoming part of the SES and how to improve the shortfall. With an estimated 90 percent of federal executives eligible to retire in the next ten years agencies must take this opportunity for agencies to bring in a new group of diverse and talented leaders.

One way that Congressman Davis and I propose we address this issue is through enactment of the Senior Executive Diversity Assurance Act. Our legislation would create a panel of diverse employees responsible for reviewing candidates for merit appointments and passing them along for further review. Too many executive candidates are accepted into the SES without a woman or minority ever looking at the available pool of applicants. Our bill requires that diversity be incorporated in to the process of review, but not in the standards of the review.

The standards are high for entry into the SES, and we need to continue to ensure that the Merit System Principles are supported in the process of candidate review. However, diversity is not at odds with merit system principles, and we believe that our legislation supports merit principles while promoting diversity.

Furthermore, our legislation reestablishes the Senior Executive Resource Office, which was dissolved by OPM's reorganization in 2003. This Office would be responsible for ensuring diversity within the SES through strategic partnerships, mentorship programs, and more stringent reporting requirements.

New cultures bring new ideas, and in our civil service -- America's workforce -- we need leadership that reflects those varied cultures and backgrounds.

I want to thank our witnesses for being here today to discuss this critical issue and I look forward to hearing your thoughts on improving diversity in the senior leadership of the Federal government.