

STATEMENT OF
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before the

SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT OF GOVERNMENT MANAGEMENT, THE
FEDERAL WORKFORCE, AND THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES SENATE

on

PROTECTING ANIMAL AND PUBLIC HEALTH: HOMELAND SECURITY AND
THE FEDERAL VETERINARIAN WORKFORCE

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Chairman Akaka, Senator Voinovich, and Members of the Subcommittee:

I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today about the Federal Government's veterinarian workforce and what the Office of Personnel Management is doing to alleviate shortages within this critical occupation.

Most Americans probably do not realize that veterinarians are a vital part of the Federal workforce. But we know that veterinarians are critically important to ensuring the safety of our Nation's food supply by preventing the spread of disease among animals, and, ultimately, to humans. So the fact that we are experiencing a shortage of veterinarians in some agencies is a real concern to OPM, as well as to the agencies that employ veterinarians.

I assure you we have been working on this problem for some time. OPM continuously reviews workforce data from Federal agencies and engages with them to identify challenges and develop strategies to meet them. We continuously scan a wide variety of data sources for indicators of potential problems affecting mission-critical occupations. These data sources include media reports, information from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and agency requests for staffing flexibilities like direct-hire authority and waivers of salary offset for reemployed annuitants, among many other sources.

One important source of data we monitor is the human capital metrics gathered under OPM's intensive program of oversight and assistance to agencies on workforce planning. OPM regulations require each agency to undertake strategic workforce planning in a

specific, documented manner. Agency workforce plans are used to make decisions about structuring and deploying the workforce. Under our regulations, agencies also must identify and document “mission-critical” occupations and competencies and provide a baseline of information to develop strategies to recruit, develop, and retain talent needed for program performance. Agencies must demonstrate that they are meeting these standards for workforce planning and other elements of strategic human capital management. OPM annually reviews the results of agencies’ human capital management programs and assesses agencies’ workforce planning systems against these standards. We use agency workforce plans to identify issues and determine what guidance is needed or what policy changes may need to be considered.

We recognize, however, that solving a problem like the veterinarian shortage is necessarily a shared responsibility, because those who work at the sites where services are delivered are most often in the best position to identify effective remedies. In this spirit, we have worked extensively with the Department of Agriculture (USDA), beginning several years ago, to understand their needs concerning the staffing of veterinarian positions. Our efforts included convening focus groups of veterinarians and visiting numerous slaughterhouses where most of the veterinarians employed by the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) work. This collaboration led to OPM’s issuing updated qualifications and classification standards for veterinarians, in April 2006 and February 2007, respectively. The new standards incorporate the agency’s current veterinarian responsibilities and include specialty titles to assist in precisely identifying workforce needs. In revising these standards, we raised the entry-level grade to GS-11.

We have also worked with USDA over the last several years on direct-hire authorities for veterinarians and food safety inspectors. “Direct hire” is an authority agencies can use to quickly hire individuals into competitive civil service jobs when there is a severe shortage of candidates or a critical hiring need. It allows agencies to offer immediate employment to qualified candidates, as long as public notice requirements are met.

There are two types of direct-hire authority: Governmentwide and agency-specific. OPM can grant a Governmentwide direct-hire authority when we decide, either on our own initiative or in response to requests from agencies, that a severe shortage of candidates or a critical hiring need exists for certain occupations throughout the Government. Agency-specific direct-hire authority is granted when OPM makes this same determination with respect to one or more specific positions in a particular agency. The agency must provide evidence to support a request for direct-hire authority. Once direct-hire authority is granted, managers can use it to appoint qualified candidates directly to jobs covered by the authority, without following traditional competitive procedures.

OPM has approved requests for direct-hire authority involving veterinarians. One of the earliest uses of this authority, after Congress made it available at the end of 2002, was our approval, very shortly after our implementing regulations took effect in 2003, of a direct-hire authority to help USDA deal with animal illnesses and their impact on the food

supply. OPM also approved an agency-specific direct-hire authority for FSIS last November for 150 Veterinary Medical Officer positions at the GS-11 and 12 grade levels.

On February 12, we issued a **Governmentwide** direct-hire authority for veterinarians. Because this authority is Governmentwide, it will allow any of the agencies employing veterinarians to appoint them in the civil service without following competitive appointing procedures.

Another tool we have used to assist the FSIS is delegated authority to reemploy Federal retirees without offsetting their pay by the amount of their retirement annuity, as otherwise required by law. Last May, for example, OPM granted a request from USDA to reemploy 15 retirees as Veterinary Medical Officers to assist with the protection of the public health and food supply.

On a Governmentwide basis, OPM has taken steps to streamline the entire Federal hiring process in ways that should help improve veterinarian staffing. For example, we worked intensively with agency Chief Human Capital Officers to improve hiring through the use of better vacancy announcements and the End-to-End Hiring Roadmap. The Roadmap was a joint project of OPM and the CHCO Council aimed at providing both Federal agencies and Federal job applicants with a more effective and positive experience. The Roadmap provides agencies with comprehensive, step-by-step implementation instructions of the five strategically-integrated components of the hiring process, which are workforce planning, recruitment, hiring, security and suitability, and finally, orientation. The End-to-End Hiring Roadmap establishes key measures that will guide agencies in making sure they are actually implementing more effective hiring processes.

OPM will provide training on workforce planning to all agencies next week to support their implementation of the End-to-End Roadmap. OPM's Human Capital Officers will continue to provide technical assistance to agencies as they fully implement the workforce planning component of the Roadmap.

OPM has been actively engaged on issues concerning veterinarian staffing for several years, but we are not finished. We plan to convene a forum of agencies that employ veterinarians to review their needs and explore additional options. We have approached USDA about making veterinarians a featured position on the USAJOBS website. We will produce a streamlined job announcement for veterinarians, as part of our broader effort to streamline, standardize, and simplify Federal vacancy announcements to attract a broader pool of quality applicants. We have already issued templates for these simplified announcements for entry-level positions in a number of occupations, including secretary, accountant, accounting technician, contract specialist, criminal investigator, law enforcement officer, management program analyst, and human resources specialist.

The limited number of veterinarians graduating each year makes the recruitment of these personnel an ongoing challenge. We note that USDA has made effective use of other recruitment and retention tools that are available to agencies Governmentwide, in order to attract candidates from the limited available pool. We are available to assist USDA with

a review of alternative ways to structure some of the jobs that have the most serious recruitment and retention challenges. We remain committed to working with USDA and other agencies to make sure their needs are fully met.

Thank you again for inviting me here today. I would be happy to respond to any questions you may have.