

Statement of Senator George V. Voinovich
Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the
District of Columbia

The National Security Personnel System and Performance Management in the Federal
Government

June 9, 2010

Good afternoon, and thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Today's primary topic of discussion is an unfortunate one for me and for those like me who want to ensure the Federal government's personnel system is able to appropriately reward those who answer the call to public service.

As my colleagues know, the National Security Personnel System, or the NSPS, was the most ambitious effort yet at improving the way the Federal government manages and rewards its employees. Beginning in 2003, I spent much time and effort working alongside colleagues like Senators Collins, Levin, and John Warner to get this system right.

In many ways, this work required Congress to force the Department of Defense to make course corrections. For instance, in response to stakeholder concerns about their lack of involvement in the development of the NSPS, Congress established a Meet and Confer requirement to provide for stakeholder input.

Congress also worked to slow down implementation of the NSPS and transformed the System's rollout into an event-driven process rather than one that followed arbitrary timelines. Lengthier implementation periods allowed the Department to incorporate lessons learned for new classes of Department employees when their time came to join the NSPS.

Unfortunately though, bipartisan good faith efforts in Congress were not matched by similar contributions from important stakeholder groups. For example, shortly after the Department unveiled the NSPS's final rule, I asked a federal labor union to provide me with a list of ten improvements they would like to see made to the NSPS.

Topping the list I received in return was a proposal to allow bargaining over pay in the NSPS. As my colleagues well know, among executive branch agencies pay has never been subject to bargaining in federal labor relations. When coupled with similar experiences like the disappointing participation of various groups during the Meet and Confer process, I could only conclude that some were never interested in seeing the NSPS succeed.

Now I do not mean to suggest that the NSPS's problems can be attributed solely to early and prolonged opposition from certain quarters. Very real and important implementation flaws existed during the NSPS's short life, including pay disparities correlated to race, gender, and job assignment.

But after only a few years of implementation, the solution to these flaws should not have been the wholesale repeal pursued by Congressional Democrats and the Obama Administration. Rather, increased resources should have been dedicated to training managers and supervisors in properly completing performance appraisals, and in developing oversight mechanisms to discipline the use of pay pool funds.

I understand the Fiscal Year 2010 National Defense Authorization Act provides the Department of Defense with certain personnel flexibilities in an effort to retain some of the positive features of the NSPS. And though I look forward to today's discussion about these authorities, I am not optimistic that this intended capture will occur because already we see past patterns being repeated.

In early March, the Department of Defense's National Security Personnel System Transition Office invited 81 stakeholders to a conference intended to be held in my hometown, Cleveland, Ohio, in mid-April. That meeting was promptly canceled though after certain stakeholder groups objected to the "short notice" provided for this conference, and because of other alleged concerns about the meeting's agenda.

This forum has yet to be rescheduled.

If the Department of Defense cannot assemble a discussion group on possible uses for these new personnel flexibilities, I hold out little hope that the Department will receive the level of constructive dialogue and cooperation necessary to craft a reasonable system for submission to Congress by the October deadline.

Mr. James, you have a difficult task ahead of you. I wish you luck.

There is one positive note on the performance management horizon though. I am hopeful that Director John Berry, who unfortunately could not join us today, will continue to work toward his goal of overhauling the way the Federal government improves employee performance. I, for one, think Director Berry gets it.

Remarks delivered by Director Berry last November at the Maxwell School of Syracuse University accurately capture the plight of an ambitious federal employee under the present performance management system and, more importantly, what is at stake in this discussion. According to the Director:

"Too often, you'll run into an HR system and culture that ... favors red tape [and] inertia over initiative. You'll find that a lot of extra effort may get you a little more reward, but not that much. So you'll get disheartened. You'll either settle for the slower pace, or you'll get restless and leave. If that happens, everybody loses."

This is an unacceptable outcome for federal employees and taxpayers alike. I urge Director Berry to continue his work on this front.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.