

STATEMENT OF
NANCY H. KICHAK
ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR FOR STRATEGIC HUMAN RESOURCES POLICY
U.S. OFFICE OF PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT

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

STRENGTHENING THE FEDERAL ACQUISITION WORKFORCE:
GOVERNMENTWIDE LEADERSHIP AND INITIATIVES

AUGUST 5, 2009

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

I appreciate this opportunity to discuss with you the Office of Personnel Management's (OPM's) role in leading efforts to strengthen the Federal acquisition workforce. You also asked me to address OPM's views and recommendations regarding S. 736, the "Federal Hiring Process Improvement Act of 2009," particularly as it would affect the acquisition workforce.

Strengthening the Acquisition Workforce

OPM has been in the forefront of the effort to strengthen the Federal Government's acquisition capacity. We have been collaborating for some time with the Federal Acquisition Institute (FAI) and the Office of Federal Procurement Policy (OFPP) at the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) on initiatives related to this effort.

In 2007, OPM designated acquisition as a Governmentwide mission-critical occupation requiring focused attention for recruitment and development. Since then, as part of their annual reporting requirement, agencies have been required to submit data to OPM to assess their acquisition workforce. Generally, agencies track the number of budgeted positions and the number of actual on-board employees they have, and set targets for closing the gap in hiring. The agencies also assess the acquisition competencies required of their workforce, develop strategies to address competency gaps, set targets, and conduct before and after assessments to measure progress. Agencies use FAI assessment results to identify their competency gaps, and OPM's Human Capital Officers (HCOs) assist with the target-setting process, as they do for all mission-critical occupations. The HCOs work with agencies during the year to establish and implement action plans to

meet acquisition targets. Each December, agencies report in their annual Human Capital Management Report the progress made in meeting the targets for closing gaps in resources and competencies within the acquisition workforce.

In collaboration with the FAI, we introduced the idea of the Federal Government working as a unified employer to recruit and hire contract specialists at the entry level. We joined with representatives from the acquisition community and several agencies to implement this concept by—

- Branding and marketing the acquisition profession through a special interactive recruiting Web page;
- Streamlining the application process by trimming job announcements by over 75 percent, writing them in plain language, eliminating written essay-style questions, and simplifying the assessment process so that it takes approximately 15 minutes to complete; and
- Using a centralized hiring approach where appropriate, offering participating agencies the opportunity to share talent across the Federal Government.

Let me elaborate briefly on these initiatives.

Recruitment; Federal Acquisition Intern Coalition

To support its succession planning priorities, the OFPP asked the FAI to develop a Federal Acquisition Intern Coalition, with an emphasis on coordinating recruitment strategies and activities, as well as career development activities for entry-level and mid-level employees. FAI, in turn, sought OPM's assistance in establishing the Coalition by helping to develop tools for agency managers and raise the visibility of acquisition careers.

In partnership with a vendor, OPM created an easily recognizable employment brand that includes messaging, logo, and tagline. OPM helped develop the Coalition's website, which targets job seekers and provides information on careers in acquisition, including testimonials, current job opportunities, intern programs, and current information on the acquisition community.

OPM also helped design and develop recruitment materials, including a brochure, a career fact sheet, a branded banner display, and promotional items. OPM employees staffed career fairs to publicize Federal careers in acquisition. During these fairs, attendees were surveyed on their knowledge of and interest in acquisition careers. OPM staff conducted an evaluation study by gathering the baseline data to show current conditions, holding focus groups, analyzing and tabulating data, and providing a summary report of data. We produced two "Working for America" commercials to showcase careers in acquisition. These ads are posted on the websites of both OPM and FAI. OPM also regularly hosts workshops for the acquisition community on a variety of

topics, such as hiring flexibilities, talent resources, workforce planning, and recruitment strategies. These workshops are webcast. The most recent one took place July 22, and the next one is scheduled for August 13.

Central Register Pilot for Entry-Level Contract Specialists

OPM also worked with FAI to pilot the use of a central register of pre-screened candidates for entry-level contract specialists at the GS-5/7 level or equivalent. We developed a new streamlined vacancy announcement to attract candidates to these positions. Based on the response to this pilot program, we are now providing this central register as a resource to all interested agencies. The central register can enhance their recruitment efforts by providing agencies with targeted lists of applicants who have been screened for basic eligibility and then ranked, using “category rating” procedures.

Here is how it works. OPM posted an open continuous job opportunity announcement for duty locations nationwide. Candidates apply with a resume and are grouped in categories, based on their responses to the on-line assessment questionnaire. Agencies submit their requests for candidates to OPM, specifying the grade level and duty location of the vacancies. OPM issues a certificate of eligibles for the specific grade level and location of each vacancy, using category rating procedures. This means that candidates in the highest qualified group are referred for employment consideration, with veterans who are 30 percent or more disabled placed at the top of the highest group. All others eligible for veterans’ preference float to the top of the appropriate category, based on their responses to the questionnaire. Agencies must select from the top group of eligibles.

Candidates are being referred to multiple vacancies at the same time. A candidate’s name may be referred simultaneously on all certificates for which the individual is qualified and is placed in the highest quality category group, and for which the individual indicated he or she is available. An OPM project manager monitors the referral of candidates and coordinates with the agencies during the selection process.

There are approximately 8,000 candidates on the register for 36 locations. Locations were determined by FAI and participating agencies. Since the pilot began, more than 800 applicants have been referred to 10 agencies and components. Sixty-seven selections have been made and, based on agency feedback, we expect more selections.

Dual Compensation Waivers and Direct Hire Authorities

In addition, I would like to briefly point out two statutory authorities that have been helpful to agencies in their acquisition workforce recruitment efforts. First, Congress authorized heads of Executive agencies to grant dual compensation waivers to acquisition personnel if they are uniquely qualified, the agency is experiencing exceptional difficulty in recruiting, or the agency has a temporary hiring emergency. Currently, more than 20 Federal departments and agencies are positioned to use this authority.

Second, Congress authorized agencies to use direct hire or expedited hiring procedures to appoint individuals in acquisition-related positions when they are experiencing a severe shortage of qualified individuals or a critical hiring need. From the beginning of fiscal year 2008 to March of this year, 207 individuals have been hired into non-Defense agencies under these authorities.

Ongoing Initiatives to Support Acquisition Recruitment and Staffing

In addition to the steps we have already taken, OPM is also proposing to expand the centralized hiring process by establishing central registers for contract specialists at the GS-9, 11, and 12 grade levels, using the streamlined vacancy announcement template. These registers will be used by agencies across the Federal Government to help fill mid-level contract specialist positions for the near term, but do not have the means to continue using the centralized register on an ongoing basis. We are carefully examining various assessment methods and will work with FAI to select the most appropriate tools to help predict candidates' future success on the job.

Another area we have focused on, with our partners in this endeavor, is effective communication and outreach, which are so vital to the development of the Federal acquisition workforce, given the wide dispersal of acquisition professionals across hundreds of organizational components of the Federal Government, each with its own goals, workforce priorities, and human resources policies and processes. FAI continuously reaches out to, and partners with, other agencies and organizations, communicating with, persuading, and serving key stakeholders.

We also need to be vigilant in seeking continuous improvement in our communication with agencies to make sure we are understanding the challenges they face and what will be most useful in their efforts to overcome obstacles.

S. 736

You also asked me to address the "Federal Hiring Process Improvement Act of 2009," S. 736. I appreciate your and Senator Voinovich's leadership in focusing attention on the persistent need to improve our hiring processes in the Federal Government, and your sponsorship of this bill is part of your commendable efforts. S. 736 would make a number of changes aimed at simplifying the Federal employment process and making it more efficient and effective. These changes would not be aimed specifically at the acquisition workforce, but they would apply to the acquisition community just as they would affect the Federal workforce generally.

- First, the bill would require agencies to submit ***strategic workforce plans*** to OPM and include them in agency performance plans. These strategic workforce plans are designed to help agencies identify critical skills shortages and recruitment strategies in order to attract qualified candidates to meet mission-critical needs.

- The bill also includes a number of steps that are intended to ***shorten the Federal hiring process and make it more applicant-friendly***. For example, it provides a plain writing requirement for Federal vacancy announcements.
- In addition, it would create a mechanism to ***allow applicants to store their resumes*** in a central database that could be accessed by executive branch agencies.
- The bill would require agencies to provide job applicants with ***timely updates about the status of their applications***, and it would direct OPM to develop a ***human resources development training plan*** that agencies can use to train human resources specialists across the Government to ensure that these improvements are implemented effectively.
- Finally, each agency would be responsible for reporting to OPM the results of their applicant and hiring manager assessments, which would be used to measure the progress of their recruitment programs.

OPM strongly supports the principles embodied in S. 736 – making the Federal recruiting and hiring process as transparent, efficient, effective, and user-friendly as possible for job applicants and Federal agencies. We are already moving ahead on many of the provisions of S. 736.

OPM has designed templates to streamline job announcements for more than 20 mission-critical and heavily recruited occupations. We will be directing agencies to use plain language in their job announcements. We have streamlined the assessments under the Administrative Careers With America (ACWA) Program, which offers entry-level opportunities at the GS-5 and 7 levels. With these streamlined assessments, it now takes an applicant only 10 to 15 minutes to complete a self-assessment that can be used to apply to many other jobs. As we have described in previous testimony, we developed a “roadmap” of the entire hiring process to make it easier for agencies to streamline their procedures. These initiatives will go a long way toward helping agencies to reform their hiring processes.

OPM supports the intent of S. 736, but we are concerned that mandating good agency practices in legislation may result in agencies losing flexibility and the ability to adapt to change. The Administration recently sent out memoranda to Federal agencies with specific requirements and timeframes for Federal hiring reform. Specifically, agencies are expected, by December 15, to show significant progress in four areas of hiring – timeliness, plain language and streamlined announcements, communication with applicants, and involvement of hiring managers. OPM will be collaborating with OMB to ensure agencies’ success in reforming the hiring process. In short, we believe we can achieve the intended results of S.736 by administrative means, by continuing to exercise leadership through our collaboration with OMB and the agencies. Of course, it is essential that any revisions to the Federal hiring process, whether legislative or

administrative, are consistent with non-discrimination principles and equal employment law, as well as all of the merit system principles.

Thank you again for the opportunity to represent Director Berry in this important discussion. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.