

Aging Federal Workers Cause Concern

WASHINGTON, Oct. 22, 2001

A wave of retirements set to spread across the federal government in the next few years could seriously hamper the war on terrorism.

Some of the agencies most crucial in fighting terrorism - the Defense, State and Transportation departments, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency - could lose up to 45 percent of their workers through retirements in the next five years, according to the General Accounting Office.

"If we are going to win the war, we have got to have the people," said Sen. George Voinovich of Ohio. He's the ranking Republican on the Senate Governmental Affairs subcommittee on oversight of government management and is trying to draw attention to the "human capital crisis."

Voinovich said the federal government must find ways to keep its best workers while recruiting new staff with the skills to address new missions. It's the difference, for example, between having a Defense Department loaded with Russian-speaking workers when today's war against terrorism requires people who speak Arabic, Farsi and Pashto.

"It's not just how many, but what kinds," said Frank Cipolla, senior consultant to the National Academy of Public Administration's Center for Human Resources Management.

The terrorist attacks have helped focus attention on the problem, but the looming shortage was identified long before Sept. 11.

Last winter, the GAO, the investigative arm of Congress, placed "strategic human capital management" - identifying key jobs and filling them - on its list of federal programs and operations identified as "high risk." And last March, former Defense Secretary James Schlesinger and retired Adm. Harry D. Train told Congress that national security is "on the brink of an unprecedented crisis of competence in government."

"The maintenance of American power in the world depends on the quality of U.S. government personnel - civil and military - at all levels," they said in a statement. "We must take immediate action in the personnel area to ensure that the United States can meet future challenges."

Last week, President Bush unveiled the Freedom to Manage Act that would give departments more flexibility in hiring and offering bonuses. It also would encourage agencies to identify government rules that make it harder to manage employees so Congress can consider ending the restrictions.

Joseph Nye, dean of Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, calls government hiring "a quiet crisis."

"The problem with a quiet crisis is you can't get anyone to do anything about it," he said. "I think the key is how do we find ways to make government more attractive."

Nye is helping to organize a series of meetings starting next month at which government officials and private-sector experts will discuss the problem and brainstorm for solutions.

The GAO already has suggested three broad fixes: better pay and benefits; more active recruitment of young

people; and reform of antiquated management practice that complicate hiring and fail to address needed skill areas.

For example, it can take up to a year for a federal agency that has decided it needs someone with a certain skill to actually get the clearance to hire the person. Many times, the government's top choice already has accepted another position by then.

The American Federation of Government Employees says the best way to find and keep government workers is to boost pay.

"Recruiting is one way to step up our efforts to get the best and the brightest," union spokeswoman Diane Witiak said. "The real concern is you are going to get a student who is going to come into government for one or two years and then go into the private sector and make twice as much."

Voinovich plans to introduce legislation Tuesday that would place a human capital officer at each federal agency to oversee the retirement-replacement transition, give agencies more flexibility in hiring and allow workers to qualify for a broader array of paid training.

Tennessee Sen. Fred Thompson, senior Republican on the Senate Governmental Affairs Committee, plans to offer legislation providing enhanced student loans and training to people recruited for national security positions.

There has been a surge in interest in government jobs since the terrorist attacks. Job inquiries for the armed services and law enforcement have been particularly high. The CIA, for example, went from about 500 employment inquiries a week to more than 10,000 in the two weeks following the attacks.

Voinovich said the increase is encouraging, but probably short-lived unless Congress takes action.

"Our current crisis has identified some of our needs in areas as diverse as airport security to language experts in law enforcement agencies," he said. "Now is the time to act."

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