Finding Your Path in Retirement

Open Season Report

The Best Diversity and Inclusion Programs in the Federal Government
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The Association, since July 1970, has been classified by the IRS as a tax-exempt labor organization [not a union]; however, dues and gifts or contributions to the Association are not deductible as charitable contributions for income tax purposes.
In 2021, all federal agencies marked the 10th anniversary of Executive Order 13583: “Establishing a Coordinated Government-Wide Initiative to Promote Diversity and Inclusion in the Federal Workforce.”

The order noted that “a commitment to equal opportunity, diversity, and inclusion is critical for the federal government ... lead by example. Attaining a diverse, qualified workforce is one of the cornerstones of the merit-based civil service.”

As a webpage from the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) notes, “We strongly believe that a diverse workforce in an ... and organizational performance and result in better value to customers, clients, taxpayers, and other stakeholders.”

Many civil servants support these beliefs. A survey from the Government Executive Media Group’s Government Business ... we’ll look at two of the federal agencies with the best diversity and inclusion programs and learn what sets them apart.
Leaders of 2 Top Agencies Share Their Secrets to Success

BY EVERETT A. CHASEN

In 2021, all federal agencies marked the 10th anniversary of Executive Order 13583: “Establishing a Coordinated Government-Wide Initiative to Promote Diversity and Inclusion in the Federal Workforce.”

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As a webpage from the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) notes, “We strongly believe that a diverse workforce in an inclusive environment will improve individual and organizational performance and result in better value to customers, clients, taxpayers, and other stakeholders.”

Many civil servants support these beliefs. A survey from the Government Executive Media Group’s Government Business Council conducted in 2021 found that 72% of respondents “felt that it was important or extremely important for agencies to be diverse and inclusive,” while 69% said “training on the topic was ‘vital’ to an organization’s success, both in the public and private sectors.” In this article, we’ll look at two of the federal agencies with the best diversity and inclusion programs and learn what sets them apart.

Executive Order 14035

On June 25, 2021, President Biden signed Executive Order 14035 to advance diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility (DEIA) in the federal government. The order reaffirmed that the United States is at its strongest when our nation’s public servants reflect the full diversity of the American people.
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The executive order’s goal is to help develop a federal workforce that “looks like America,” in which qualified people from every background and walk of life have an equal opportunity to serve our nation. The order:

- Establishes a governmentwide initiative to advance diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility in all parts of the federal workforce, led by the Office of Personnel Management and the Office of Management and Budget.
- Charges all agencies with assessing the current state of diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility within their workforces and developing strategic plans to eliminate any barriers to success faced by underserved employees.
- Directs agencies to seek opportunities to establish or elevate Chief Diversity Officers within their organizations.
- Expands diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility training throughout the federal workforce.
- Addresses workplace harassment, including sexual harassment.
- Reduces the federal government’s reliance on unpaid internships, which can create barriers for low-income students and first-generation professionals.
- Advances pay equity to ensure that all public servants are fairly compensated for their work and their talents.
- Advances equity in the workplace for individuals with disabilities.
- Advances equity in the workplace for LGBTQ+ public servants.
- Builds a more diverse pipeline into public service through new recruitment partnerships.
- Expands federal employment opportunities for formerly incarcerated individuals.
- Advances equity in professional development.
- Improves the collection of demographic data about the federal workforce.

The executive order was followed by a November 2021 governmentwide strategic plan offering a roadmap for implementing the executive order and laying out key steps agencies can take to strengthen DEIA in their workforce policies, practices and culture. It requires all agencies to develop a strategic plan to advance DEIA within their workforces and to address any barriers to equal employment opportunities at their facilities.

It also lays out a path to elevate the role of chief diversity officers within each agency, who in turn will lead dedicated implementation teams and conduct quarterly updates to track every agencies’ progress toward meeting governmentwide goals. Finally, it offers a roadmap for agency action to improve policies and practices that advance DEIA across the employee experience including hiring, promotion, requests for accommodations and long-term retention.

**Partnership for Public Service Survey**

Every year, the Partnership for Public Service (PPS) ranks the best places to work in the federal government. Their rankings are based on the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey, an annual measurement of federal employees’ perceptions of whether and to what extent conditions characteristic of successful agencies exist at their workplace. Results of the 2021 survey were announced July 13, 2022.
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Based on employees’ responses, the Partnership ranks participating agencies on how much the actions and policies of leadership and management promote and respect diversity. NARFE spoke to diversity officers at the highest-rated agencies in the Partnership’s two largest categories: large agencies (organizations with 15,000 or more employees), and midsize agencies (those with 1,000 to 14,999 employees). Here’s what we learned.

**NASA**

For the past 10 years, NASA has been rated as the best place to work in the federal government among large agencies, including the top ranking for inclusiveness every year in which this issue has been assessed.

“We have had a lot of success here because we have an agency with extraordinary leaders and extraordinary people who care about people in an extraordinary manner,” explains Stephen T. Shih, NASA’s associate administrator for diversity and equal opportunity.

“Our vision is to discover and expand knowledge for the benefit of humanity,” Shih continues. “The work we do is all about learning and being able to share that learning to benefit all human beings, so our missions are truly inclusive. Our focus on diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility is critical to empowering NASA’s workforce and mission accomplishment, and also contributes to the diversity and inclusiveness of our STEM [science, technology, engineering and math] workforce for the entire nation.’

“We have really strong partnerships with a diverse number of affinity groups, professional associations and minority-serving institutions, including historically Black colleges and universities. Many of these associations, affinity groups and partners support and represent underserved communities.”

NASA shares a great deal of information with its partners and stakeholders, including on-the-job opportunities. The agency recruits STEM and other workers through internship programs. Agency ambassadors, including astronauts, visit communities and schools at all levels in underserved communities and elsewhere to inform listeners about job opportunities and encourage them to pursue careers in STEM. Additionally, NASA provides grants to research institutions to help create a diverse national pipeline of future STEM workers, many of whom choose to later work for NASA or other federal agencies.

The agency also provides regular training on DEIA, and is strengthening its analytics capability to provide more robust data to leaders. NASA recently established a new DEIA governance structure to ensure senior leadership commitment and inclusive engagement across the agency at all levels.
This structure starts with the NASA administrator and deputy administrator making DEIA a priority, with support from NASA’s senior leaders and with primary leadership responsibility given to the Shih. Their work is informed by a committee of leaders representing organizations across NASA, supported by DEIA Leadership Councils at each NASA center, and in partnership with NASA’s Employee Resource Groups and the rest of the workforce.

This agencywide prioritization of DEIA has resulted in improved coordination and sharing of best practices across the agency, and the recent development of a new NASA DEIA Strategic Plan. NASA’s current efforts build upon a Unity Campaign launched in 2019 to connect its workforce to the agency’s mission and to each other and a 2018 Anti-Harassment Campaign that enabled NASA to proactively prevent and promptly correct harassment and misconduct.

In 2020, NASA added inclusion to its core values of safety, integrity, teamwork and excellence, which were established decades ago. “That’s really powerful,” Shih explains, “because it signifies to the entire workforce and our stakeholders how much we prioritize and are committed to inclusiveness.” The agency believes DEIA drives innovation and performance, and provides a welcoming, safe and constructive workplace, including for special emphasis programs, special observance programs, and employee resource groups.

Shih noted other recent initiatives, including naming NASA’s headquarters building in Washington, DC, after Mary W. Jackson, the agency’s first African American female engineer. The street in front of the building was renamed Hidden Figures Way, after the work of NASA’s historic West Area Computing Unit, featured in the book “Hidden Figures: The American Dream and the Untold Story of the Black Women Mathematicians Who Helped Win the Space Race,” which also was an award-winning movie. Additionally, NASA is focused on its Artemis mission, which aims to land the first woman and the first person of color on the Moon.

NASA recently issued a new workforce policy statement on DEIA, including equal employment opportunity (EEO), anti-harassment and anti-retaliation. The agency has implemented DEIA performance requirements for all NASA leaders, and has finalized reasonable accommodation procedures, a gender identity and transition guidance, and new anti-harassment procedures to reinforce the agency’s model anti-harassment program.

Finally, following recent political and social unrest in the United States, NASA deployed trained professional facilitators to conduct more than 500 listening sessions, in which more than 10,000 employees have participated. Because of this, Shih believes, “we are able to maintain the unity of our workforce and their effectiveness during a very difficult and potentially divisive period.”

“The reason we’re successful is less about the things we’re doing, and more about the alignment of our values, norms and behaviors to diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility,” he concludes. “Our missions support the well-being of everyone on the planet, and because of that and our vision, we can help inspire inclusion for everyone on the Earth.”

**Government Accountability Office**

“Acknowledging and addressing issues of diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility isn’t new to us,” explains Zina D. Merritt of the Government Accountability Office (GAO), ranked the No. 1 best place to work in 2020 and 2021 among mid-sized government agencies. “Our efforts date back to the 1960s, when we became one of the first federal agencies to establish an equal opportunity program.”

Merritt, special assistant to the comptroller general for diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility, notes that while GAO’s work in this area has gone on for more than half a century, the agency adapts and changes with the times. “We’ve always had our core values of accountability, integrity and reliability. But in 2017 we added three additional ‘people’ values, where we stated that every employee is to be respected, valued and treated fairly, and all are provided opportunities to develop to their full potential.

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The Comptroller General of the United States issues an annual statement reaffirming GAO’s commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility, and his personal commitment to those principles. The agency has long developed strategic implementation plans in this area, but Merritt cites 2019 as a turning point.

“We made a concerted effort to transform our plan and make it more relevant and comprehensive. While we’ve had the concept of diversity and inclusion for a very long time, we recently added the tenets of equity and accessibility because we firmly believe you can have all the diversity in terms of talent you want. You can create a good environment, but if people don’t feel they are being treated fairly, or don’t have access to opportunities for advancement, you’ve failed in the mission.’

“Our approach involves everyone from the head of the agency to our executive committee to employee organizations, which represent almost every demographic category. We even partner with the union on these issues.” GAO also believes diversity and individual differences, and the ability to leverage those differences, are key to achieving the agency’s mission.

Merritt cites training courses offered by GAO’s Learning Center such as inclusive leadership and unconscious bias, as well as the agency’s long-standing mentoring program. “It’s very important to our employees to have mentors, in some cases, who look like them or can help underrepresented groups ascend the ladder, so we’ve incorporated mentoring and coaching into our approach.”

GAO assesses its workforce trends by demographic areas including race, ethnicity, gender, age, veterans preference status and disability status over five years to determine whether gains have been made in those areas. The agency also compares those trends to other federal agencies and to relevant civilian workforces. Performance measures lead to specific action items for improvement. The offices responsible for those actions are identified and timetables for achieving results are established.

“We establish accountability for our efforts by tracking them, and annually reporting to our employees how well we’re doing,” Merritt explains.

GAO not only attends to its own diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility efforts, but it also examines diversity in other agencies as part of its mission to provide Congress, heads of agencies and the American people with information that can be used to improve government. This creates a special responsibility, Merritt acknowledges. “If we’re going to be demonstrating leading practices and examining others’ work, we definitely have to practice the same types of things. We’ve got to be the gold standard; we’ve got to practice what we preach.”

“Gender and racial issues were present when I started my federal career over 30 years ago. Recruiting and retaining racial and ethnic diversity still remains an issue today. And our new employees expect a different work environment, a very supportive work environment,” Merritt said.

GAO trains facilitators to guide employees through informed and educated conversations about societal issues affecting the nation and the places where they live and work, and the agency manages a counseling center to support employees during difficult times.

“We’re all in this journey together,” she concludes. “Our challenges continue, and we need to acknowledge and address them.”

—EVERETT A. (EV) CHASEN is a writer and communications consultant in the Washington, DC, area. He is retired from the Federal Government after 35 years of service.