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Nuclear Regulatory Commission Ranks as Top Workplace

By Stephen Barr
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The Nuclear Regulatory Commission was dubbed the No. 1 large government agency to work for in rankings released by a nonprofit group yesterday.

The NRC, which has headquarters in Rockville, got high marks from employees in several categories, including effective leadership, training and development, teamwork and support for diversity.

Dale E. Klein, the NRC chairman, said the top ranking reflected the "culture of being an open agency" and management's focus on improved communication with employees. Having a physical fitness center in the building also helped boost the rating, a senior staff member joked.

In remarks at a luncheon, Klein said the agency encourages managers to talk and listen to employees on a regular basis.

The NRC, which regulates commercial nuclear power plants and safe handling of radioactive materials, has about 3,400 employees. With a resurgence underway in the nuclear industry, the commission has been on a hiring binge since October 2005 and plans to add 400 workers this year. About 10 percent of the staff has worked at the NRC for less than three years.

The rankings -- compiled every other year -- are produced by the nonprofit Partnership for Public Service and American University's Institute for the Study of Public Policy Implementation. The partnership runs programs aimed at getting more young people interested in working for the government, and the AU program conducts research in how agencies can more effectively carry out policy decisions.

For 2007, the partnership and AU refined the ratings and created three groupings -- large agencies (2,000 or more employees), small agencies (100 to 1,999 employees) and agency subcomponents (regions, divisions, bureaus and offices).

Under this approach, the NRC ranked No. 1 among large agencies and the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service was the top small agency. The Treasury Department's office of inspector general was the top-ranked subcomponent.

The FMCS, which helps resolve labor-management disputes, has less than 300 employees. "You can't work here very long before being overwhelmed by a contagious spirit of helpfulness and teamwork," said Arthur F. Rosenfeld, the agency's director.

Max Stier, president of the partnership, said the data showed that employee satisfaction, on a governmentwide basis, remains about the same as in 2005. But he said that the spread in scores between the top-ranked and lowest-ranked agencies has increased, suggesting that "the best are getting better and the worst are getting worse, and that's a problem."

An employee satisfaction and engagement index, created by the Hay Group consulting firm for the "Best Places to Work" rankings, showed that the government lags behind the private sector when it comes to creating an environment that engages workers and improves productivity.

The government scored 61.8 on a 100-point scale, compared with a score of 71 for large, private-sector companies, the partnership said.

Robert M. Tobias, who heads the AU program, moderated a panel discussion at the luncheon that saluted the Social Security Administration as the "most improved" large agency because of a 10 percent increase in its score from 2005 and the State Department for a 15 percent jump in its score since 2003.

He also thanked Deidre Lee, head of management at the Federal Emergency Management Agency, for her willingness to take questions at the luncheon as a representative of a "challenged agency."

FEMA's score dropped 13 percent from 2005, ranking it 211th of 222 subcomponent agencies. Lee said the agency's merger into the Department of Homeland Security, Hurricane Katrina controversies and persistent criticism in the media have taken a toll on FEMA employees.

She said FEMA is hiring to fill vacancies, improving communications with employees and taking other steps to turn the agency around.

For a second time, the Department of Homeland Security is near the bottom of the "Best Places" rankings, and the poor showing was discussed yesterday at a hearing held by the House Homeland Security management subcommittee. The "Best Places" data showed that the department's headquarters scored lower than even FEMA -- 215th of 222 subcomponents in the rankings.

Rep. Bennie G. Thompson (D-Miss.) said the department "cannot continue to score last or near last in leadership, performance, talent and satisfaction on the job." He and other subcommittee members, worried that the department may be plagued with a morale crisis, urged the department to take steps to improve employee attitudes.

A full listing of the 2007 "Best Places" listings can be found at <http://www.bestplacestowork.org>.