

High-Performing Civil Servants Honored at Black Tie Gala

By Alyssa Rosenberg
Government Executive
September 20, 2007

Science and technology took center stage as federal employees were honored at a black tie dinner in Washington Wednesday for their exceptional contributions to the country.

The winners of the nonprofit Partnership for Public Service's sixth annual Service to America medals came from nine different agencies, and were recognized for their work with government-supported scientific research, using technology to make government more efficient and to keep Americans safer, and keeping technology up and running in the service of humanitarian goals.

Drs. Douglas Lowy and John Schiller of the National Institutes of Health were named Federal Employees of the Year for their work on the vaccine against human papillomavirus (HPV), a disease that can lead to cervical cancer.

"I want to thank the National Institutes of Health and the National Cancer Institute for their support of innovative research into so many medical problems," Lowy said. "I don't have any pretensions that what we do is more important, because there are so many dedicated, gifted employees in government service."

Schiller said he was grateful for the award, but felt that his work was far from over. "We're not going to be happy just with this vaccine, because it costs \$360, and most women in the world can't afford that," he told the 600 attendees at the ceremony.

Dr. David Veseley, who received the Career Achievement medal for his work in the Veterans Affairs Department with hormones produced by the human heart that have significant cancer-fighting potential, expressed similar sentiments.

"The clinical trials we hope to start next year, we hope, will cure cancer," he said.

Dr. John Morgan, who accepted the Justice and Law Enforcement Medal on behalf of the President's DNA Initiative team, uses medical science to different ends. Under his supervision, the national database of DNA profiles has grown to include more than 3 million individuals convicted of felonies and other crimes.

"We don't know which neighborhood or which person is not going to be a victim because of the work that we do," Morgan said, "But we do know that we're making people safer because of the work that we do."

Keeping American communities safe was a major theme of Tracy Mustin's work as well. The director of the Office of Second Line of Defense at the Energy Department, Mustin has been responsible for deploying radiological and nuclear detectors at more than 100 border crossings, airports and seaports in countries around the world.

"It's a time of great insecurity; it's a time of considerable angst with respect to terrorism," Mustin said, accepting the Homeland Security medal. "I want to make sure people feel a sense of security with regard to their government."

Dealing with radiological threats of a different kind won Frazier Lockhart the Science and Environment medal. As manager of the Rocky Flats Project and Clean-up Team, Frazier managed to turn the site of a former nuclear weapons facility into a national wildlife refuge. Sen. Wayne Allard, R-Colo., praised Frazier for not only achieving the clean-up of the site, but for doing it 60 years ahead of the projected schedule and \$30 billion under the original budget of \$37 billion.

Anh Duong, winner of the National Security medal, was honored for keeping Americans safe far from home. As a Navy scientist, she and her team developed a new thermobaric bomb, which uses chemicals that mix with oxygen to produce a powerful reaction, in just 67 days, in time for deployment in the war in Afghanistan after the Sept. 11 attacks.

Her service, she said, was motivated by memories of her father's service in the Vietnamese air force and her gratitude to the Americans who fought against communist forces in her native country.

"I came here 32 years ago as a refugee with empty hands and a bag full of broken dreams. My award is not a reflection of my accomplishments, but of this paradise called the United States," Duong told the audience. "I want to do anything and everything I can to make sure our guys come back to their little sister waiting by the gate."

Dinah Cohen was motivated by her parents' experience to do the work that won her the Citizen Services medal.

"My parents were in the Holocaust, and one of the first things they taught me was what an honor it is to work in the federal sector and give back," she said.

As head of the Computer/Electronic Accommodations Program at the Defense Department, Cohen provides assistive technologies to people with disabilities, including members of the armed forces.

Lt. Col. Andrew Lourake credited Cohen with helping him and other disabled veterans regain their chances at a career. He has returned to active duty in the Air Force after his leg was amputated.

"Dinah and her program basically give them hope for the future," Lourake said.

Nicole Faison, the director of the Office of Public Housing Programs in the Housing and Urban Development Department, won the Call to Service medal honoring young federal employees, for her use of technology to a similarly dramatic effect. She designed a program to verify the income of recipients of Section 8 housing assistance, saving HUD \$2 billion in fraudulent payments and moving the program off the Government Accountability Office's high-risk list.

"There's a new generation out there coming for you, just like me," Faison said. "We will make a difference in the federal government."

Edward Messmer, the special assistant to the ambassador to Lebanon, won the International Affairs medal for helping to keep Lebanon's infrastructure up and running during the 2006 war with Israel and

Hezbollah. He negotiated the delivery of energy reserves through an Israeli blockade just as Lebanon's power grid was shutting down.

"It's nice to work for a country that has the resources and the intent and the commitment to do good in the world," Messmer said.

Both honorees and organizers touted the award ceremony's dividends for federal service.

"We need to hear both the good stories and the bad stories, and I am convinced that if we get good stories out, it will increase the public's appreciation of the federal government," said Max Stier, president and CEO of the Partnership for Public Service.

Mustin agreed: "I don't think you can overstate this kind of recognition -- and validation -- of career public servants."