

Focus shifts to recruiting older workers

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As the federal government faces a retirement wave, nonprofits, lawmakers and think tanks are looking to recruit older, more experienced workers for public service. These efforts come in addition to long-standing attempts to rebrand federal employment for an entire new generation of workers.

"The need is more acute for older, experienced workers," Max Stier, president of the nonprofit Partnership for Public Service, said on Jan. 17 at the kickoff for the FedExperience Transitions to Government pilot program. It is designed to help experienced IBM workers who are looking for second careers to move to senior positions at the Treasury Department.

Stier sees no contradiction in recruiting older and younger professionals at the same time, especially when much of the urgent need is for those who can fill mid- and senior-level positions left vacant by retirements and a 1990s hiring freeze.

"The new generation is older and younger people who haven't been in federal service but now have an opportunity to pursue federal service," Stier said. "The workforce has to be diverse in all respects."

His call to arms was joined by Sen. Herb Kohl, D-Wis., chairman of the Special Committee on Aging.

"The federal government will be affected heavily by the retirement of the baby boomers. However, we also know that more and more older Americans are interested in second careers in public service," Kohl said. "We are hopeful that with supportive federal policy, and exemplary leadership from organizations like the Partnership for Public Service, we can turn this into a win-win situation for older workers and the federal government."

Kohl said he planned to introduce two bills in the coming months to address issues driving older workers out of the federal workplace or keeping them from entering it. He is working with the committee's ranking member, Gordon Smith, R-Ore., on the first piece of legislation, which would remove financial penalties for workers nearing retirement who want to move to part-time schedules. The second bill will be based partially on the Partnership's FedExperience report and on hearings Kohl will convene in the spring.

Sen. Daniel Akaka, D-Hawaii, inserted a provision in the 2008 Defense authorization bill to allow some federal annuitants to come back to government without losing their annuity payments, but President Bush vetoed the legislation in late December.

Marc Freedman, chief executive officer of Civic Ventures, a think tank in San Francisco, said focusing on legislative barriers to service was important.

"Policy-makers must get rid of vestiges of the old deal, the barriers and disincentives discouraging work and penalizing individuals for continuing to contribute," he said. "This means changes in Social Security, pension rules, health coverage and other areas where old policies have not yet caught up to the new realities."