

MEMORANDUM

TO: PARTNERSHIP FOR PUBLIC SERVICE
FROM: HART-TEETER
DATE: OCTOBER 10, 2002
RE: ATTITUDES TOWARD THE DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY:
KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS

On behalf of the Partnership for Public Service, Hart-Teeter conducted two focus groups on September 9, 2002, in Alexandria, VA, among federal government employees slated for inclusion in the proposed Department of Homeland Security. One session was conducted among managers and supervisors who hold GS 11 positions or higher, and the other one was conducted among employees holding GS 4 to 10 positions. The focus groups were convened to explore federal employees' perceptions of the proposed Department of Homeland Security, as well as their general attitudes toward federal employment. This memorandum presents the sessions' key findings. The limitations of this research are that, in exploring the attitudes of federal employees, only two sessions were conducted and in only one location.

1 Lack of information leaves federal workers with more questions than answers about the proposed department's impact on them. With little more information than what is in the news media, federal workers do not know what kind of impact the new department will have on them. Panelists also predict that they will be left in the dark until Congress works out the details.

"I think we know what we've been able to read in the press. I don't think individually any of the agencies really know until Congress gets done with what they're going to do. Whether we're in, whether we're out, how much we're in, how much we're out . . ."
– Man, GS 14

"Well, first of all we don't know what the legislation is, so how well informed could we be? And then the other thing is, what's the implementation of the legislation going to be? I mean, the law doesn't tell the whole story."
– Woman, GS 12

"I think I can answer on behalf of a lot of people. The White House and the agencies are withholding tons of information. I don't think they're going to disclose any information until the department gets created. I think people are going to be left in the dark as long as possible."
– Man, GS 9

"Communication is just not out there."
– Woman, GS 6

The questions federal workers most want answered focus on the proposal, including what specifically will be achieved by the mega-merger, what will be the responsibilities of individual agencies under the new department structure, and who would lead the department. Workers also have practical concerns about the workplace, including job security, how information systems

would be integrated, how employee grading would be standardized across departments, and what the department's budget would be. Lower-level employees tend to focus on the latter concerns.

"Who's in charge? One person, Ridge, or...?"

– Man, GS 9

"What would the new agencies do within that department?"

– Woman

"What Congressional committees have oversight?"

– Woman, GS 12

"What's going to happen to all the people? How are they going to meld or merge agencies that have different grade structures doing the same work. Do you downgrade people or do you upgrade people?"

– Man, GS 14

"Are they going to do it in one fell swoop?"

– Woman

"I want to know what the White House plans to do to integrate all these different accounting and information systems under one agency."

– Man, GS 9

"I guess, what is the budget going to be like? Will I have a job?"

– Woman, GS 6

2 Federal workers recognize the importance of fostering employee morale and human capital during a transition. Federal workers raise issues pertaining to both human resources and civil service. Panelists' are concerned that experienced and skilled employees potentially could be lost in the transition and that the amount of uncertainty workers face could negatively affect morale. Participants also note that it will be important to resolve any existing civil service issues.

"My biggest concern at that three-year point was that not enough attention was paid to the human capital. It all looks fine on paper, and they're told to go do this and that, but it wasn't a smooth transition for the worker bees."

– Man, GS 14

"At my agency, it's a very popular topic. But I think it's really affected morale, the people there."

– Man, GS 9

"People are afraid because they don't know. This homeland security agency is an uncertainty to us. We know minimum information about it. We know it's going to happen, and we know there's going to be 170,000 employees. But, eventually, I may even get drafted into that agency, a couple years down the line. People are just afraid of the uncertainty."

– Woman

"I told you not to eat your young. The changes you make, they caused a lot of good, experienced people to leave, and you brought in a lot of less experienced people."

– Man, GS 14

"I think it's a big issue just from the sheer number of people that it's going to affect."

– Man, GS 14

"I think, just if you look at this group, you have to conclude it's a huge issue because, when you ask people why they join the federal government, I think the overwhelming number said

because of the security issue. Well, if you join for security, then you've got to be concerned with this is an issue."
– Woman, GS 12

3 Attitudes toward the proposed Department of Homeland Security are divided. Federal workers who are favorable toward the proposed department see its creation as an important step in enhancing communication and cooperation among federal agencies. They also recognize that such a department would give the public peace of mind. On the other hand, need for the department is not inherently evident to some participants, indicating that a clear case for its role has yet to be made internally. Several workers report feeling that the proposal has not yet been fully thought out.

"If it works, it'll improve communication and cooperation amongst all the different entities, where that hasn't been the keynote or key word."
– Man, GS 14

"It's going to improve communications, it's going to stop the duplication amongst interdiction, it's going to spend the American taxpayers' dollars more wisely, and it's going to have one person, one person, accountable to Congress and the citizens of this country instead of the head of the FBI, the head of the Justice Department, the head of INS, the head of Customs."
– Man, GS 13

"I think what it's going to do for the country is give a perceived sense of security, and maybe that people will get on with their lives, get back to what this country really is and what it's about."
– Man, GS 14

"I think there's too much spread out around in other agencies that everybody's doing the same type of thing that should be done in one place."
– Man, GS 14

"I think the concept is good, but it's a huge undertaking. So, reality versus the concept, who knows."
– Woman, GS 13

"It's a huge change, and I think it's complex and it really needs to be thought through more."
– Woman, GS 12

"I think definitely there should be sharing of information, coordinating information. Apparently, it needs to be improved. I'm not entirely positive the Department of Homeland Security is going to do it."
– Man, GS 9

"...I think what is good about the idea is that it is an effort to create more coordination, which I think is a lot of problems for the government response, information management. But I don't know that creating a 170,000-person agency is the best way to go about it."
– Man, GS 9

4 Federal workers warn that plans for the new department must balance short-term and long-term gains. Panelists are apprehensive about the cost-and-benefit ratio of such an undertaking. They caution that the administration must assure them that the new department is not just a response to the attacks of September 11, but that it will provide a sound governmental structure that can stand the test of time and protect Americans from future attacks.

Workers are particularly concerned that this major reorganization will not result in better protection for the American public.

"[I get] the feeling that it's more of a knee-jerk reaction, political football, put ourselves in the headlines and stay there for a while as though we're really doing something significant, which if it works would be great. But, it needs a lot more planning, a lot more thinking. It's not something they're going to do overnight."

– Man, GS 14

"...whether Bush is reelected in '04 or not, this transition is going to outlast his administration, very long-term consequences are being made by people who are looking for short-term gain."

– Man, GS 9

"I think you could end up spending a lot of time and money for not such great achievements."

– Woman

"I guess my question would be, what will be achieved by this massive reorganization that couldn't be achieved maybe more efficiently by incremental changes?"

– Woman, GS 12

5 **Job security remains a primary motivation to work in the federal government, and as a defining characteristic of the federal workplace, it limits the appeal for young workers.** Most panelists cite job security as the primary or secondary reason for their having sought federal government employment. Younger federal workers do not, however, consider the bureaucratic and tenure-based environment that fosters such job security an advantage. Many participants also suggest that the private sector offers better opportunities for people who are just starting a career, people to whom job security is not as important as it is for older adults.

This reinforces earlier findings about the challenges facing the federal government in attracting and recruiting young and highly skilled workers. As federal workers did not differentiate between employment opportunities with the proposed Department of Homeland Security and other areas of federal government, the proposed new department will most likely face the same recruitment challenges.

"I don't think it's a good place to start because everybody mentioned the security, and you could get ensnared by that security. I think it's good to come in like mid-career to have some experience outside."

– Woman, GS 12

"Get that experience and then, when you have a family or you need the commitment and security, then come into government, especially in my field."

– Woman, GS 13

"Academically, I have a lot of interest with the government. There's a lot of interesting stuff going on in the government right now. But what keeps [me from rating my satisfaction higher] is, as a young person, I really hate the tenure system. I'd prefer a more merit-based system of government for employees."

– Man, GS 9

"Being a young person, I guess, they always say we expect to move up too fast. But you just get tired of sitting still, especially if you went to school or you have a college degree. You feel like, I shouldn't have to sit in this position. You feel like you should really be able to do more than what you're doing."

– Woman, GS 6

