



PARTNERSHIP FOR PUBLIC SERVICE

Max Stier
President and CEO
Partnership for Public Service

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Subcommittee on Oversight, Management and Accountability

Hearing entitled,

“Seventeen Years Later: Why is Morale at DHS Still Low”

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Good afternoon, Chairwoman Torres Small, Ranking Member Crenshaw, and members of the subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to participate in today's important hearing on morale at the Department of Homeland Security. I am Max Stier, President and CEO of the Partnership for Public Service, a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization working to inspire a new generation to serve and transform the way government works through leadership development, government reform and employee engagement.

I want to start by thanking you for holding this hearing on employee engagement and morale, and how they contribute to agency performance. This subcommittee has a history of bipartisan interest in the challenges facing the department's nonpartisan civil service and how Congress can help the department accomplish its varied and difficult missions. Your inquiry today adds to that legacy and contributes to better oversight and a deeper understanding of the management challenges facing the Department of Homeland Security and the rest of our government.

***Best Places to Work in the Federal Government®* and the Importance of Employee Engagement**

The Partnership produces the annual *Best Places to Work in the Federal Government®* rankings in collaboration with the Boston Consulting Group (BCG). The rankings are based on the results of the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS) administered by the Office of Personnel Management, as well as other agency-specific surveys that are comparable to FEVS. We rank agencies by size and analyze the key drivers of employee engagement – in other words, the factors that have the biggest impact on how employees view the agencies in which they work. The rankings also shed light on how agencies fare in different categories that define the employee experience, including effective leadership, pay, training, innovation, and performance-based rewards and advancement.

Employee engagement is not just about happy employees. Higher scores in employment engagement equate to better performance and higher-quality service. According to a Gallup analysis of more than 82,000 business units spanning 230 organizations, those with improved employee engagement scores had 41% less absenteeism, 24% less turnover, 17% more productivity and 70% fewer employee safety incidents.¹ With such an impact on the workforce it is critical for leadership at the political and career levels to be focused on engagement at the agencies they lead. The Best Places rankings provide a mechanism for holding agency leaders accountable for the health of their organizations, serve as early warning signs for agencies in trouble, and shine a spotlight on agency successes that can be replicated elsewhere.

The 2019 Best Places to Work rankings reflect the views of over 880,000 civil servants from 490 federal agencies and their subcomponents on a wide range of workplace topics. Government-wide, 2019 saw a 0.5-point decrease from the 2018 rankings, bringing government's overall engagement score to 61.7 out of 100. This was a modest drop despite a tumultuous time for our nation's public servants – a time when about 800,000 of the 2 million federal employees were affected by a lengthy government shutdown, there were a number of critical leadership vacancies across the government, and many agencies had to deal with a variety of political headwinds.

¹ Gallup, "The Relationship Between Engagement at Work and Organizational Outcomes," 2016. Retrieved from <https://news.gallup.com/reports/191489/q12-meta-analysis-report-2016.aspx>

Despite these circumstances, the data show modest but meaningful improvements government-wide in employee attitudes in 8 of 10 categories that measure the work experience. Government-wide employee views on training and development, and on performance-based rewards and advancement, both rose by 0.8 points. Government-wide scores on effective leadership, which encompasses employee views of their supervisors, senior leaders, fairness in the workplace and individual empowerment, rose by 0.3 points. Categories that declined government-wide were pay, down 0.4 points, and support for diversity, which dropped 0.2 points.

The 2019 rankings also show that the federal government still significantly underperforms the private sector when it comes to employee engagement. In 2019, the government's score lagged 15.3 points behind the private sector engagement score.² Only 11 of the government's 70 large, midsize and small agencies included in the Best Places rankings scored above the private sector average this year, including NASA, the Federal Trade Commission and the Peace Corps.

2019 Rankings for DHS

Based on our methodology, the Department of Homeland Security experienced a 0.8-point decrease from the 2018 rankings (from 53.1 to 52.3 out of 100), and the department ranks 17 out of 17 large agencies in overall engagement, maintaining its dubious distinction as the lowest-ranking large agency since 2012. The department's highest score was 58.6 out of 100 in 2010, which means its 2019 score represents an overall 11% decline from their high mark in 2010. The department also ranks at the bottom in all but one of 14 categories and subcategories that we measure, which include effective leadership, employee skills-mission match, pay, support for diversity, and training and development.

Some good news

Despite areas of concern, a few points of perspective give hope. The 0.8 decline is a small tick down in a survey that was conducted on the heels of a very trying time for the department. Eighty-six percent of the department's employees continued to work without pay throughout the 35-day government shutdown.³ This shows the mission commitment and the resiliency of the workforce, and our nation owes a deep gratitude to these DHS employees who kept their focus and kept our country safe despite the difficult circumstances for them and their families.

Like the government-wide score, the 2019 DHS score is essentially a continuation of the status quo following three consecutive years of improvement that began in 2015. And in the 14 categories we rank, the department did see slight improvements in all but two – employee skills-mission-match and pay, two categories which traditionally, after leadership, are the major drivers of engagement. The department also increased its score by 1.2 points in the category of effective leadership subcategory of senior leaders.

There are several subcomponent successes that should be celebrated:

² The private sector data is based on nearly 6.5 million employee survey responses from organizations in a wide variety of industries, gathered by the employee research firm Mercer/Sirota.

³ Testimony of Angie Bailey, Chief Human Capital Officer, Department of Homeland Security. Hearing on "Solutions to Improve Federal Hiring," Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Subcommittee on Regulatory Affairs and Federal Management, July 30, 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.hsgac.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Bailey%20TESTIMONY1.pdf>

- The Office of Intelligence and Analysis saw a 13.1 point increase in 2019 and the Office of the Secretary jumped 6.9 points.
- U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, which ranks 90 of 420 subcomponents, has an index score of 72.9 of 100 and has improved 14 points from its 2005 low.
- The U.S. Coast Guard improved its score, rising 2.7 points. Of all 420 subcomponents across government included in the rankings, the Coast Guard remains the highest-ranked DHS subcomponent – 85th of 420 subcomponents.
- The U.S. Secret Service is worth highlighting for its 8.9 point jump in 2019 for an index score of 52.9 of 100, a 61% improvement from its 2016 low score of 32.8.
- The Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency has improved in five of the last six years, from 36.2 in 2013 to 51.5 in 2019.

The department should also be commended for its Employee and Family Readiness Initiative, which is a new suite of programs to address employee needs in areas such as stress, mental health, personal relationships, and financial concerns.⁴ Many DHS employees face extremely challenging circumstances in the workplace, which can also create challenges in their personal lives. Helping both employees and their families cope with these challenges should help improve engagement and retention.

The department is also forward-leaning in its approach to hiring, looking for smarter ways to bring in needed talent, while maintaining merit system principles and making it easier for the department to hire veterans. This speaks directly to a major frustration heard in FEVS responses, where only 36.2% of DHS employees agree that their work unit is able to recruit people with the right skills, even lower than the disappointing 41.9% of respondents who agreed government-wide.

Areas of concern

There is clearly much more work to be done, but progress is possible. If every DHS subcomponent in this year's rankings had reached its previous all-time high score, DHS's Best Places to Work score in 2019 would have been approximately 60.0 out of 100 – a 15% improvement upon its actual score this year. DHS would have jumped up to rank 14th out of the 17 large agencies.

Explanations for why DHS morale is low include that it is a large agency, with disparate components, and with a workforce that operates under stressful conditions. These undoubtedly are all major challenges, but they can be overcome. The Department of Veterans Affairs, larger than DHS, ranks 6th among large agencies in the Best Places rankings, with a score of 65.3. The Department of Commerce, also consisting of many distinct components, is the 4th ranked large agency, with a score of 69.6. The Intelligence Community works under stressful conditions and claims the 3rd spot among large agencies, with a score of 69.9.

Areas of concern for DHS in 2019 include:

- The Office of Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction (CWMD), which has a critical mission with no margin for error, ranks at the bottom of all subcomponents across the government – 420 out of 420, with a score of only 18.1 out of 100.

⁴ See Testimony of Angie Bailey, Chief Human Capital Officer, Department of Homeland Security. Hearing on "Solutions to Improve Federal Hiring," Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Subcommittee on Regulatory Affairs and Federal Management, July 30, 2019.

- The Office of the Inspector General declined 4.9 points, Immigration and Customs Enforcement declined 3.7 points, and the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center declined 3.3 points.
- Customs and Border Protection ranks 380th among the 420 subcomponents, and its score declined 2.1 points. The score is up 9 points from its 2015 low, but is still down 22% from its best score of 63.3 in 2010.
- TSA's score dropped 1.1 points, from 45.7 to 44.6. TSA's score is up 9.1 points or 25.6% since 2016, but it has consistently struggled, never exceeding its highest score of 51.3 in 2010.

FEVS responses show that the government, on average, struggles with performance management, and DHS struggles a little more than most. When asked if they agreed that, in their work unit, steps are taken to deal with a poor performer who cannot or will not improve, 27.3% at DHS agreed, compared to 30.2% government-wide. Only 27.5% at DHS agreed that promotions in their unit are based on merit, compared to 36.2% government-wide.

The department also needs to make progress on creating a culture of innovation. The department's score in the Best Places innovation category was up 0.9 but still last among large agencies in this category. For context, DHS lags a full 26.4 points behind NASA, the leader in this category. When asked whether innovation and creativity are rewarded, only 32.7% of DHS respondents agree, compared to 41.4% government-wide. NASA also had the highest score on this question with 70% agreeing.

Also, DHS trails even further behind the government overall on engagement in comparison to the private sector, lagging 24.7 points below the private sector engagement score. This is troubling, given that DHS must compete with the broader labor market for specialized talent in fields such as cybersecurity.

Why is DHS morale low?

You have asked me to comment on why DHS has been consistently low over the entire lifespan of the department. I will focus my response on three areas—performance metrics, congressional stewardship, and leadership.

Data and Performance Metrics

While the FEVS is a valuable resource for leaders— from Cabinet secretaries to front-line supervisors – it is only the beginning of the conversation. The annual survey and the Best Places data highlight areas of success or concern but provide little insight into the root causes for changes in satisfaction or the preferences and motivations of a diverse and multi-generational workforce. John Kamensky of the IBM Center for the Business of Government has similarly noted that agencies have plenty of data but are “information poor,”⁵ meaning data is most helpful when it can be turned into useful insights that inform decision-making.

Also, since FEVS rankings are administered annually they only capture a single snapshot of agency health. The 2019 survey was administered in two waves, beginning May 13th and May 20th,⁶ meaning that

⁵ Kamensky, John. "Government Is Data Rich, But Information Poor." Editorial. Government Executive, June 12, 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.govexec.com/management/2018/06/government-data-rich-information-poor/148914/>

⁶ Office of Personnel Management, “2019 Governmentwide Management Report.” Retrieved from <https://www.opm.gov/fevs/reports/governmentwide-reports/governmentwide-management-report/governmentwide-report/2019/2019-governmentwide-management-report.pdf>

employee responses reflect morale and views during that time and can only measure the questions asked. And agencies typically don't get their FEVS results until many months after the survey.

To fully understand the factors that contribute to employee morale and performance, agency leaders would benefit from a rich and diverse menu of data, measures and information. The FEVS is one tool, but it should be augmented with others like pulse surveys, focus groups, town halls and interviews to better understand the complexities of the employee experience behind the numbers. Exit interviews provide valuable insight into the reasons people leave an organization. Measures of hiring effectiveness provide insight into whether an agency is able to recruit the talent it needs, and demographic information helps determine whether an agency is employing and retaining a diverse workforce. Customer satisfaction data are a valuable indicator of how successfully agencies are serving the public, and trends in budget and spending will reflect areas of investment and emphasis over time. All of this and more should be leveraged to provide leaders with the performance insights needed to make smart decisions for the department and its workforce. It is also important for Congress to use data, in all its forms, to inform oversight and legislative activities.

Links between employee engagement scores and other performance metrics are not always evident to agencies, but when they are, they can be very powerful. For example, in our analysis of data from 150 VA medical centers, over a 3-year period, we found that medical centers with stronger employee engagement had higher patient satisfaction, better call-center performance and lower turnover among registered nurses.⁷ With 89.3% of all federal employees, and 86.9% of DHS employees, believing that their work is important, it stands to bear that employee engagement and customer service are mutually reinforcing.

The VA call centers mentioned in our analysis are one of 25 federal government services that have been identified by the Office of Management and Budget as having a high impact on the public.⁸ DHS provides four of these "high impact" services— airport security checkpoints (TSA), emergency and disaster assistance (FEMA), immigration services (USCIS) and traveler services like the Trusted Traveler Program (CBP). At the VA, strengthening employee engagement has been a critical component of their strategy to improve services to veterans, and partially due to these efforts, trust in the VA among veterans has risen dramatically over the last few years. DHS components have a similar opportunity to look holistically at a variety of data sources to understand how employee engagement scores affect other key performance measures.

In the final analysis, data are a great tool to identify areas of success or concern, and in turn this points agency leaders and Congress where attention is most needed – but data alone does not solve problems. Agencies, agency leaders and their congressional committees need to use the data to take action. This is especially true with respect to the FEVS, where only 35.5% of employees at DHS believe that the survey will be used to make meaningful improvements.

⁷ Partnership for Public Service and BCG, "A Prescription for Better Performance: Engaging Employees at VA Medical Centers," March 2019. Available at https://ourpublicservice.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/BPTW18_VA-issue-brief.pdf

⁸ General Services Administration and the Office of Management and Budget, "Meet 25 of the nation's highest impact service providers," December 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.performance.gov/cx/>

Congressional Stewardship

Congress also has responsibility for federal employee morale through its stewardship of federal agencies.

Again, the overall FEVS score for DHS, with only a slight drop, shows a remarkable resiliency of the department's workforce in the aftermath of a shutdown. Undoubtedly, though, budget instability – shutdowns, threats of shutdowns, and continuing resolutions – are detrimental to agencies.

Since its inception, DHS has been subject to three shutdowns – one of 16 days in fiscal year 2014, one of 2 days in fiscal year 2018, and the 35-day shutdown in fiscal year 2019. The department has also operated under 40 continuing resolutions over the last 10 years,⁹ many of which have come to the brink of another shutdown until Congress extended the life of the continuing resolution at the last minute.

This constant budget instability requires leaders, managers and employees at all levels to divert attention from mission accomplishment and management priorities (including employee engagement) to contingency planning. Continuing resolutions make long-term planning impossible, and even the threat of a government shutdown results in a huge waste of taxpayer dollars as agencies must notify grantees, partners, vendors and their own employees to prepare.

Following the most recent government shutdown, many lawmakers proposed or supported legislation to make government shutdowns a thing of the past. Ideas include automatic continuing resolutions when Congress fails to pass appropriations bills on time, keeping Members of Congress in Washington until appropriations bills are passed or making appropriations bills the only business in order. We encourage you in these efforts and believe that on-time appropriations and predictable funding would improve morale at the department and encourage innovation and mission accomplishment.

The over-abundance of committees with jurisdiction over DHS also complicates the management of the department. With over 100 committees and subcommittees having jurisdiction over the department, its leaders often receive conflicting directives that hinder the functioning of the department. This problem was recognized as early as the 9/11 Commission, which recommended consolidation of jurisdiction, but the oversight of the department today remains as splintered as when its doors opened in 2003.

Leadership

Since the Best Places rankings began in 2003, one thing has been clear – leadership is the number one driver of employee engagement. Good leaders motivate and advocate for their employees, build trust and create the conditions necessary for employees to perform at their best.

In 2019, the Partnership developed the **Public Service Leadership Model**. The model identifies the core values that leaders must prioritize and the critical competencies they must master to achieve their agencies' missions and desired impact. These include setting a vision, empowering others and being accountable for results. We were proud to create this model with a bipartisan group of distinguished

⁹ See Congressional Research Service, "Continuing Resolutions: Overview of Components and Practices," April 19, 2019, pp. 10 - 14, retrieved at <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R42647>. In addition to the continuing resolutions identified in this report, there have been two continuing resolutions in fiscal year 2020.

leaders from the public and private sectors, and in the months to come we hope to work with Congress, the executive branch and others to improve and measure overall leadership effectiveness.

While the DHS Best Places score for effective senior leadership went up 1.2 points in 2019 (to 41.1), the department still ranks below 13 other large agencies in that category. And with a score of 49.3, the department ranks last among its large-agency peers in overall effective leadership (an umbrella category that includes questions on senior leaders, supervisors, fairness, and empowerment).

One factor that may exacerbate the leadership challenges at DHS is the high degree of turnover in Senate-confirmed roles and the fact that many are, and have been, vacant altogether. Currently, DHS has more vacancies in Senate-confirmed positions than any other department, with only 41% of those positions filled by a Senate-confirmed appointee. The department has been without a Senate-confirmed secretary for 266 days, without a Senate-confirmed deputy secretary for 640 days, and without a Senate-confirmed under secretary for management for 280 days, and there are no nominees for these positions. Other key positions that are vacant with no nominee are the general counsel, the under secretary for science and technology, and the director of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. Nominations for several other positions are languishing in the Senate: the chief financial officer (pending since March 2019), the director of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (pending since May 2019), and the administrator of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (pending since October 2019).¹⁰

While concurrent longstanding vacancies in the department's leadership have created a unique situation for the department, unfilled positions are not new. For example, at the time of Jeh Johnson's nomination hearing for DHS Secretary in November 2013, there were 9 vacancies in PAS positions at DHS, including the positions of secretary and deputy secretary.¹¹ Then-nominee Johnson stated that if confirmed, his immediate priority starting on the day he took the oath would be to work with the White House and Senate to fill the vacancies in senior leadership across the department.¹²

The reality is that acting officials— even if they are seasoned and highly regarded individuals — often lack the full perceived authority that flows from Senate confirmation. Many acting officials do not feel like it is their place to make long-term policy, operational or management decisions that will bind their successors.

I often make an analogy to substitute teachers here — they may be skilled professionals who have much to offer the students but they are not perceived by those around them as having the full authority of the teacher, and they do not view themselves as having the right to make decisions with long-term impact. Thad Allen, the former commandant of the Coast Guard, has said that when there is a vacancy, “people who are in an acting capacity feel they do not have the power to make long-term changes and do what

¹⁰ The Senate is scheduled to consider the nomination for administrator of FEMA this week so it is possible that this position will be filled before this hearing.

¹¹ “Statement of Senator Thomas R. Carper,” Nomination of Hon. Jeh C. Johnson to be Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, November 13, 2013. Retrieved from <https://www.hsgac.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Opening%20Statement-Carper-2013-11-131.pdf>.

¹² “Statement of Jeh Johnson, on his nomination to serve as Secretary, Department of Homeland Security.” Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, November 13, 2013. Retrieved from <https://www.hsgac.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Prepared%20Statement-Johnson-2013-11-13.pdf>

they need to do.”¹³ Senior-level vacancies stymie decision-making, divert attention from management issues, slow hiring decisions for other key positions, make employees feel uncertain about the future or importance of their organization, and detract from the mission as acting officials turn their focus to finding temporary replacements to act in their own positions.

The Partnership for Public Service launched the Political Appointments Tracker with the *Washington Post* in 2017 to track roughly 700 key executive branch nominations through the confirmation process. These positions include secretaries, deputy and assistant secretaries, C-suite positions, general counsels and other positions that require Senate confirmation. A look at DHS reveals a history of turnover in key positions, and a grab-bag of nominations submitted and withdrawn, announced but not formally submitted or waiting months for Senate action.

While there are many reasons that positions subject to Senate confirmation may be vacant, it is clear that the process for filling these critical roles has become cumbersome, complex and politicized to the point that many jobs remain empty and talented people are reluctant to serve. Congress, in particular the Senate given its advice and consent role, has an opportunity to improve this process before the next election and we would be pleased to share ideas with the subcommittee if that would be of interest.

Vacancies are not the only leadership challenge in government. Over the years and across the government, political leaders often have kept their focus on policy and not the management of the agencies they lead, which means employee morale is not a top priority. Political leaders typically have shorter tenures in office which do not align to the long-term efforts needed to improve employee engagement or address management challenges.

At the same time, many senior career leaders who are tasked with management and employee engagement are technical experts in their field who lack strong management skills. Government-wide, only 41.8% (and only 33.8% at DHS) believe that leaders in their organization generate high levels of motivation and commitment in the workforce. This underscores the importance of choosing only people who have the desire and aptitude to manage people for executive-level management roles and equipping federal leaders with the tools and training necessary to lead people effectively.

Recommendations

Both the department and Congress have a role to play in efforts to improve employee satisfaction.

For its part, Congress should:

- **Continue oversight** – The subcommittee today is helping to identify long-standing problems with DHS morale and find solutions. We encourage you to make this hearing an annual occurrence. The subcommittee could follow up by holding a hearing on DHS subcomponents that are doing well with employee engagement, to help celebrate success and encourage replication. Members of Congress should also visit the department’s offices, both in the National Capital Region and in the field, to get insight from managers and employees on the front lines.

¹³ Partnership for Public Service, “Government Disservice: Overcoming Washington Dysfunction to Improve Congressional Stewardship of the Executive Branch,” September 2015. Retrieved from <https://ourpublicservice.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Government-Disservice.pdf>

- **Hold leaders accountable**— In addition to holding leaders accountable through oversight, this committee may want to consider the approach taken by the VA Choice and Quality Employment Act of 2017, which requires performance plans for VA political employees.¹⁴ Performance plans for political appointees should include managing their organizations and not just implementing policy, and supporting efforts to recruit and retain highly-qualified talent, develop future leaders, engage employees, and hold subordinate managers accountable for addressing performance.
- **Provide continuity in management positions**— To help provide continuity of operations and a long-term vision for the department, this committee should consider converting political positions responsible for overall management and operations— for example, some of the C-suite positions — to career executive positions to be filled by individuals who are experts in their field, with fixed terms and performance contracts. Another approach would be to change the expectation that certain politically-appointed positions turn over with a change in administration; inspectors general are appointed without regard to political affiliation and in general they are not asked to resign at the end of a president’s term. The IGs provide a useful model for other roles where the duties are management and operations versus policy, and where sustained leadership and institutional knowledge would improve the department’s ability to implement changes over time. The position of under secretary for management is one position that might benefit from a new model. In the span of the last five years, the position has changed hands five times, as leadership has bounced from confirmed to acting leaders. A long-term position, whether by statute or expectation, to span administrations could set the expectation that the officeholder is driving long-term management initiatives and should be insulated to some extent from political whirlwinds. The position of comptroller general at the Government Accountability Office is one such model.
- **Provide budget stability**— Bipartisan legislation¹⁵ introduced by Senators James Lankford and Maggie Hassan would provide for an automatic continuing resolution at prior year spending levels when Congress and the president fail to agree on spending levels before expiration of existing appropriations. The bill would also prohibit official travel and require Congress to prioritize consideration of appropriations until new spending bills are enacted. This bill is an effective mix of carrots and sticks to avoid shutdowns. Congress should also consider other budget process reforms, such as adoption of a biennial budget resolution and multi-year appropriations, to provide more budget stability.
- **Consolidate congressional jurisdiction over DHS**— The leaders of the House and Senate should streamline committee jurisdiction over the department or, at a minimum, initiate a review. A bipartisan review commission was proposed in the last Congress as part of the Department of Homeland Security Authorization Act, which did not see final passage.¹⁶

¹⁴ Pub.L. 115-46, VA Choice and Quality Improvement Act (Aug. 12, 2017), Section 203.

¹⁵ S. 3009, the Prevent Government Shutdowns Act of 2019.

¹⁶ The Department of Homeland Security Reauthorization Act, H.R. 2825, Title VII, 116th Congress, as reported by the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs. Retrieved from <https://www.congress.gov/115/crpt/srpt351/CRPT-115srpt351.pdf>.

- **Modernize the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey**— The statute requiring annual employee satisfaction surveys dates to 2003.¹⁷ Congress should modernize the law to ensure that the FEVS continues, that all agencies participate in the survey and that the data is comparable across agencies and agency components. The survey itself should be easy for federal employees to take, including employees in the field like border patrol agents and TSA screeners, and agencies should receive their data in a timely way that allows them to act on the results before the next survey is in the field.

DHS should:

- **Continue to improve data and metrics**— In its last High Risk update, GAO found that DHS has made progress establishing metrics of success within components’ action plans for addressing employee satisfaction problems. This is never a one-and-done exercise.¹⁸ The department will need to continue to use the data to probe frustrations with workforce processes, technology or norms, including by soliciting feedback from employees and employee organizations. Pulse surveys and exit surveys are also useful tools to supplement the FEVS. Leaders then need to work with managers and employees to translate the vision into action, with a clear and effective communications strategy. And finally, leaders must hold themselves accountable through their performance plans, and celebrate success.
- **Ensure that political leaders are focused on engagement and management**— The department’s senior political leaders should be individuals who have experience managing large organizations and accept responsibility for the performance and operations of the department. They should be held accountable for management, including employee engagement, in their performance plans. The department should also maintain a robust orientation program for new political appointees— some of whom may be new to the federal government. This would improve political appointees’ ability to increase employee engagement, improve retention, enhance performance, and work within and across agencies to achieve results.
- **Enhance career leadership development** — DHS should be commended for its commitment to leadership development efforts such as the DHS Executive Capstone program, training for DHS executives that focuses on the development of key leadership qualities but also looks to broaden the executives’ awareness of leadership decision-making and their role across government. The Partnership is proud to work with DHS in delivering the curriculum for this program. The department should continue to strengthen and invest in leadership training at all levels to improve the skills of existing leaders and develop the next generation of leaders. These efforts should include manager and supervisor training, rotation requirements for aspiring leaders (so that they understand the department as a whole), and other mobility opportunities that give leaders a greater depth of experience.

¹⁷ Pub.L. 108-136, National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2004 (Nov. 24, 2003), Section 1128.

¹⁸ Government Accountability Office, High Risk Series: Substantial Efforts Needed to Achieve Greater Progress on High-Risk Series (March 2019), p.188. Retrieved from <https://www.gao.gov/assets/700/697245.pdf>

- **Create a culture of continual learning, reskilling and upskilling** – The department’s scores on training and development have been trending up since 2015, but once again this is a category where DHS ranks last among large agencies. Only 33.4% of DHS employees are satisfied with their opportunity to get a better job within their organization. Our recent look at reskilling and upskilling in both government and the private sector reaffirms these efforts in the Presidents Management Agenda.¹⁹ Opportunities for rotations, public-private talent exchanges, and other professional development opportunities not only speak to a workforce that increasingly expects mobility in careers, but also helps break down stovepipes.

Both executive and legislative branches should:

- **Work to fill vacancies** – While the President has the responsibility for making nominations, Congress should, where appropriate, convert Senate-confirmed positions to presidential appointments not requiring confirmation, and should work to reduce the overall number of appointments. This would allow the White House to focus on the most important appointees. The Partnership has also recommended that the Senate revisit its “privileged nomination” process to make it the streamlined process it was intended to be for nominations that are not controversial, and to work with the executive branch to streamline the paperwork required of nominees. Congress should also reexamine the Federal Vacancies Reform Act to ensure clarity in the law, including surrounding the interplay of the FVRA and agency-specific succession acts.

Conclusion

As recently as 2017, the Partnership recognized DHS as the most improved large agency in our rankings. With attention to the recommendations discussed today – and with the help and support of Congress – the department could reclaim that mantle and make even further progress. Again, thank you for the opportunity to appear before the subcommittee today. I look forward to continuing to work with both the subcommittee and the department in support of strengthening DHS employment engagement.

¹⁹ Partnership for Public Service and General Assembly, “Looking Inward for Talent: Retraining Employees for Tomorrow’s Jobs,” September 2019. Retrieved from <https://ourpublicservice.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Looking-Inward-for-Talent.pdf>