



PARTNERSHIP FOR PUBLIC SERVICE

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Introduction

Chairman Thompson, Ranking Member Katko, and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to share the views of the Partnership for Public Service as you consider the steps needed to help the department accomplish its varied and difficult missions. This past year the federal government overcame unprecedented challenges in order to serve and protect the American people during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is especially true of the workforce at the Department of Homeland Security. Our statement will highlight the importance of employee engagement and morale for overcoming present and future challenges facing the agency and the rest of our government.

The Partnership for Public Service is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that strives for a more effective government. We work to improve the performance of the federal government and those who serve through an array of programs, research and policy initiatives. One of the ways we promote these values is through the annual *Best Places to Work in the Federal Government*[®] rankings we produce 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.

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 shed light on how agencies fare in different categories that define the employee experience, including effective leadership, pay, teamwork, innovation, and recognition.

The importance of employee engagement and morale

Employee engagement and morale are essential to the overall performance of an agency. Higher scores in employment engagement lead to higher productivity, less absenteeism, greater retention and overall better performance.¹ An engaged workforce also equates to higher-quality service. For example, in an analysis of performance data from nearly 150 VA hospitals across the country, the Partnership for Public Service found that higher patient satisfaction, better call center performance and lower nurse turnover were all associated with a more satisfied and committed workforce.²

With such an impact on the federal workforce and the people it serves, it is critical for leaders—both career and political—to be focused on engagement. The Best Places to Work rankings serve as a mechanism for holding agency leaders accountable for the health of their organizations, serve as early

¹ Gallup, “State of the American Workplace Employee Engagement Insights for U.S. Business Leaders.” 2013. Retrieved from <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/238085/state-american-workplace-report-2017.aspx>. U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, “Federal Employee Engagement: The Motivating Potential of Job Characteristics and Rewards.” 2012. Retrieved from

<https://www.mspb.gov/netsearch/viewdocs.aspx?docnumber=780015&version=782964>.

² Partnership for Public Service, “A Prescription for Better Performance: Engaging Employees at VA Medical Centers.” 2019. Retrieved from https://ourpublicservice.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/BPTW18_VA-issue-brief.pdf

warning signs for agencies in trouble, and shine a spotlight on agency successes that can be replicated elsewhere.

Employee engagement and morale at DHS

Overall, the Department of Homeland Security's 2020 Best Places to Work employee engagement score is 61.1 points out of 100. That is 7.9 points lower than the government-wide engagement score in 2020, 8.8 points below the median score for large agencies, and 15.9 points below the private sector engagement score. While DHS ranks 17 out of 17 among large agencies and has been the lowest-ranking large agency since 2012, there are signs that the agency has made progress in engaging its employees in an especially challenging year.

Bright spots

Despite its last place ranking among large agencies, there are several bright spots that should be celebrated. Although DHS trailed the government-wide Best Places to Work engagement score by 7.9 points in 2020, the gap has narrowed in recent years. In 2019, DHS trailed the government-wide score by 9.4 points. Further, in 2020 the agency received many high marks from its employees on how it navigated the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, 77.5% of survey respondents at DHS agreed that their supervisors supported employee efforts to stay healthy and safe while working. 83% of respondents said their work unit met the needs of its customers during the pandemic, 82.1% agreed that their work unit adapted to changing priorities, and 82.1% believed that their work unit achieved its goals.

Other successes from DHS subcomponents include:

- Employees gave FEMA a score of 90.3 out of 100 in a new workplace category measuring how effectively agencies supported employees and navigated the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, FEMA moved up 36 places in the Best Places to Work subcomponent rankings in 2020. The Partnership's profile of FEMA's engagement efforts during the pandemic is attached to this testimony.
- The Science and Technology Directorate (S&T) saw its 2020 Best Places to Work engagement score ranking improve by 150 spots. In the COVID-19 employee well-being subcategory—which measures the extent to which employees felt their organization supported their mental and physical well-being during the pandemic—S&T was ranked number 33 out of 393 subcomponents.
- The United States Coast Guard registered a Best Places to Work engagement score of 77.1, topping both government overall and the private sector. Engagement scores at the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center and the Science and Technology Directorate also exceeded the government-wide score in 2020.
- Several DHS subcomponents saw big jumps in their 2020 engagement score ranks. Customs and Border Protection and the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency both climbed 52 spots; the Office of Operations Coordination rose 60 places; and Immigration and Customs Enforcement climbed 33 spots in the subcomponent rankings.

Areas of concern

There is still much more work to be done. Explanations for why DHS morale is low could include a range of nuanced factors, such as the size of the agency, its disparate components, a workforce that operates under stressful conditions, and recent high turnover and vacancy rates in key appointee positions.

Areas of concern for DHS in 2020 include:

- The Department of Homeland Security trailed government in all eight workplace categories in the 2020 Best Places to Work rankings. DHS's largest deficit came in the innovation category, registering a score 12.4 points below the government-wide tally. In the employee recognition category, DHS trailed government by 10 points, and in the effective leadership workplace category, DHS lagged government by 7.1 points.
- Just 54.2% of survey respondents at DHS agreed that they feel encouraged to come up with new and better ways of doing things; 53.3% believe that employees are recognized for providing high-quality products and services; and 41.4% believe that the results of the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey will be used to make their agency a better place to work.
- U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, which ranked 90 of 420 subcomponents in 2019, is now ranked 339 out of 411 with an engagement score of 62.9 out of 100.
- Customs and Border Protection ranked 392 out of 393 subcomponents in the COVID: Employee Well-Being subcategory, which assesses how employees feel about their organization's efforts to support their mental and physical well-being during the pandemic.
- The Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction Office's 2020 engagement score (45.7 out of 100) ranks 26.2 points below the subcomponent median (71.9 out of 100). The office no longer ranks dead last in government subcomponents, though, now ranking 403 out of 411 subcomponents. (In 2019 it ranked 420 out of 420).

Looking forward

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

Since the Best Places to Work rankings began in 2003, leadership has consistently been identified as the number one driver of employee engagement. Leaders must be held accountable through oversight, and 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.

For these reasons, we applaud the recent passage of the DHS MORALE Act in the House and encourage the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs to quickly approve this measure on a bipartisan basis. This legislation takes steps to hold the department's leaders accountable for strengthening and investing in leadership development and employee engagement, which can improve the skills of existing leaders and develop the next generation of leaders.

Also, the work that this committee is doing to revisit DHS's authorizing statute to clarify roles and responsibilities of leaders, improve the accountability and transparency of agency oversight, and strengthen the management of the department generally is very important to helping the department attract and retain the workforce it needs to carry out its missions.

And finally, we note that the department should also be commended for its Employee and Family Readiness Initiative, which is a suite of programs to address employee needs in areas such as stress, mental health, personal relationships, and financial concerns.³ DHS's Inclusive Diversity Strategic Plan⁴ also shows the department's commitment to ensuring an inclusive workforce that prioritizes the well-being of all employees. 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.

Conclusion

We know from our research that employees who are engaged in their work add tremendous value to their organization. As the federal agency tasked with the mission as critical as protecting and securing the homeland, it will be important for DHS to recruit and retain a highly engaged and motivated workforce that can ensure future safety of the American people.

Thank you for the opportunity to share the Partnership's views on strengthening DHS employee engagement.

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.

⁴ Department of Homeland Security, "Inclusive Diversity Strategic Plan." 2020. Retrieved from https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/20_1230_ochco_dhs-inclusive-diversity-strategic-plan_fy21-24_1_1.pdf

APPENDIX: FEMA AGENCY PROFILE

FEMA employees weathered the pandemic, the hurricanes and the wildfires with strong backing from the agency⁵

Federal Emergency Management Agency employees received strong backing from their agency in 2020 as they responded to the worst public health crisis in a century and simultaneously dealt with a record number of natural disasters and the most active Atlantic hurricane season in history. Employees gave FEMA a 2020 Best Places to Work in the Federal Government[®] score of 90.3 out of 100 in a new workplace category measuring the support they received during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

FEMA exceeded the government-wide COVID-19 response score of 86.1 and outperformed the government average on pandemic-related issues dealing with employee well-being, the provision of job resources, agency performance and supportive leadership. The agency also far outpaced its parent, the Department of Homeland Security, which registered a COVID-19 score of 80.0, and it did better than all but two of the DHS subcomponents on this issue.

At the onset of the pandemic, FEMA moved to a hybrid work model, held daily videoconference calls to communicate important information, sent telework kits to every employee and steadily increased usage of virtual collaboration tools.

Ray Acurso, the senior director in FEMA's Office of the Chief Administrative Officer, said the agency was able to "give people a feeling of connectivity even though we were further apart. We were actually communicating more."

At the regional level, FEMA officials said communication with staff members scattered across the country and with state and local partners was critical to keep employees engaged, informed and prepared to handle a never-ending string of public emergencies.

"We utilized our technology and our screens. Our connectedness to our FEMA Integration Teams – what a success that was for us," said Bonnie Garfias, FEMA's Region VIII senior advisor. The FEMA Integration Teams provide on-site technical and training assistance to state partners.

FEMA also quickly ensured that workers on the frontlines felt supported and safe. The agency was one of the first to implement COVID-19 testing, and it organized responder lodging camps with medical support and quarantine areas on-site.

During 2020, there were 230 presidentially declared emergencies, passing the previous high of 128 declarations in 2011. FEMA's National Response Coordination Center was activated for a record 314 days, and more than 5,300 staff members were deployed to support the pandemic response activities that included the nationwide delivery of critical medical supplies.

⁵ See the online profile here: <https://bestplacestowork.org/analysis/profiles/federal-emergency-management-agency/>

In addition, FEMA deployed more than 5,000 employees to support both Atlantic and Pacific hurricane responses while also dealing with the largest wildfire in Colorado's recorded history and five of the 10 largest wildfires in California's history.

Although FEMA received high marks for its COVID-19 response, its 2020 Best Places to Work engagement score measuring employee overall satisfaction with their jobs and organization was 66.9 out of 100, 2.1 points below the government-wide score of 69.0. This gave FEMA a ranking of 286 out of 411 agency subcomponents, an improvement of 36 spots from 2019 when it ranked 322. DHS, FEMA's parent agency, remained in last place among 17 large agencies with a Best Places to Work engagement score of 61.1.

On the specific workplace issue of effective leadership, employees gave FEMA a score of 63.6 out of 100, with senior leaders rated at just 57.6.

Nonetheless, 85.7% of FEMA employees surveyed agreed or strongly that their agency is successful at accomplishing its mission, 85.1% said the people they work with cooperate to get the job done and 87.6% said they know how their work is related to agency goals.

"If you can tie someone's day-to day-action to the purpose of FEMA's mission, it gives them a feeling of accomplishment when they are done. It gives them a sense of drive and purpose while they're going through the actions," Acurso said.

Deanne Criswell, confirmed in April as the new FEMA administrator, said she is committed to improving employee job satisfaction and commitment, putting "people first" and capitalizing on some of the lessons learned during the pandemic.

Criswell said FEMA's leadership team is "taking actions that will contribute to an environment where people want to come to work and where they feel like they have a safe environment to not just do their work, but to be innovative, creative and contribute to helping people before, during and after disasters."

She said this includes a commitment to employee career advancement, recognition for good work and diversity and inclusion.

"I think that we have the most amazing workforce in the federal government," Criswell said. "It's the most dedicated group of professionals that are truly committed to our mission."

This profile was written by Partnership for Public Service staff member Heather Gunter.