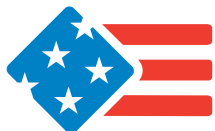SEPTEMBER 2021

Roadmap for Renewing our Federal Government

PARTNERSHIP
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Introduction

Our country, facing a deadly pandemic, economic turmoil and a host of serious domestic and international challenges, needs a federal government that is capable of dealing with our current problems and those looming on the horizon.

This requires rebuilding and revitalizing our government, the nation's most important democratic institution, by improving federal leadership, supporting the federal workforce, promoting innovation, modernizing technology and accelerating collaboration across government and across sectors.

These investments are not about a bigger or smaller government. Bigger is not always better, but neither is an organization that has been starved for critical resources across many administrations. Rather, the focus should be on the people our government serves, and that requires sound decisions to improve its capacity to work more effectively for everyone.

While the pandemic laid bare some of government's most longstanding shortcomings, there were many instances where federal agencies adapted and kept delivering, often in new and better ways. This unexpected grand experiment led to innovative responses to a wide array of urgent problems – from quickly processing loan applications for small businesses to expanding telemedicine to veterans to distributing millions of vaccine doses to the public.

Federal leaders across government rose to the occasion and engaged and supported the workforce in new and creative ways, including providing employees with the technology necessary to do their jobs in remote settings, the flexibility to accommodate their personal circumstances and opportunities for greater collaboration within government and across sectors.

The disruption of old routines and processes provides a once-in-a-generation opportunity for the Biden administration and Congress to build on the improvements that have been made, sort through what worked and what did not, and set the government on a sustained path to renewal. To seize this opportunity, we believe there are four key issues the administration and Congress must prioritize.

Leadership and Stewardship

The Challenge

The federal government is facing a leadership crisis. There are too many political appointees and those who serve are often unprepared for the unique responsibilities of public sector leadership and how to work with stakeholders across government, including Congress. Leadership development opportunities are scattered, if they exist at all, for career executives and both they and political leaders do not fully reflect the diversity of the workforce or the nation. In short, the government is doing an inadequate job of training, supporting and developing leaders at all levels with consistent standards focused on modern competencies and core values of stewardship and public trust.

Recommendations

CONGRESS

Recommendation: Establish a standard for leadership development and performance across government.

Why It Matters: Good leaders get the best out of employees and make organizations more effective. Legislating leadership development and performance objectives for career and political leaders based on four key competencies from the Partnership's Public Service Leadership Model—becoming self-aware, engaging others, leading change and achieving results—will result in a more effective government and better outcomes.

Recommendation: Reduce the number of political appointees and those subject to Senate confirmation, and find ways to make the confirmation process faster and more transparent.

Why It Matters: The sheer number of political appointees and the complexity of the appointment process make it difficult for a new president to get a full team in place quickly. A smaller corps of politically appointed officials, supported by career professionals, will promote professional expertise, stability and accountability.

Recommendation: Encourage, enable and highlight innovation, experimentation and learning across government.

Why It Matters: Many agencies changed how they operated in response to the pandemic, revealing new and more efficient ways to work and to serve the public. Congress can play a critical role in encouraging this forward-thinking culture shift by asking inspectors general or the Government Accountability Office to highlight areas of success and innovation, giving agency leaders room to pilot new ideas, holding hearings on what works and providing resources so new ideas can take root.

ADMINISTRATION

Recommendation: Require political appointees to have specific and measurable performance goals aligned with agency missions. These should include elements dedicated to the health of the workforce, a focus on recruiting and developing highly qualified talent, an understanding of the role that technology plays in mission accomplishment and a commitment to the stewardship of the public trust.

Why It Matters: Performance plans will hold political appointees accountable for their role in executing policy and shaping an agency's organizational culture, increasing the likelihood of better outcomes for the public and improved employee engagement.

Recommendation: Promote diversity in executive-level hiring by making the Senior Executive Service recruitment and selection process more transparent.

Why It Matters: The recruitment and hiring of senior executives is not as transparent as it could be, making it difficult to identify process reforms to promote diversity. From demographic information on SES applicants to the selection, composition and processes of the Qualifications Review Boards that approve most senior executive hiring decisions, greater transparency and an adherence to hiring and QRB best practices are needed to build a more diverse and highly qualified leadership corps.

Recommendation: Promote an enterprise experience for aspiring senior executives by encouraging rotation programs, joint duty assignments and cross-sector collaborations.

Why It Matters: Strategic use of rotational assignments, both within and outside of the executive branch, will help federal leaders develop a broad perspective and an enterprise-wide view of government that can result in better run programs and improved service to the public.

Recommendation: Provide opportunities for senior executives to work across silos in support of government-wide initiatives.

Why It Matters: Bringing together government's career senior executives in support of cross-agency initiatives—like the President's Management Agenda or cross-agency priority goals—will advance critical administration priorities and develop enterprise thinking, collaboration and relationships among senior executives, which proved essential during pandemic response.

AGENCIES

Recommendation: Create an organizational culture that incentivizes and prioritizes learning.

Why It Matters: Promoting a culture of learning and development will help agency leaders actively support new ideas, navigate challenges and bring greater risk tolerance and learning from both successful and unsuccessful efforts. Some agencies—notably NASA and the intelligence community—are known to celebrate creativity and innovation, and view failure as a learning opportunity. Other agencies, like the Department of Defense, mandate after-action reports that outline what worked well, what did not, lessons learned and best practices to be applied going forward.

Recommendation: Recognize and publicize excellence in public service, including promoting a culture of recognition by nominating employees for awards, amplifying stories of government's unsung heroes and using other means to honor and publicize excellent service.

Why It Matters: The public is often unaware of how the government services they value most depend on the work of public servants. Award and recognition programs such as the Presidential Rank Awards and the Partnership's Samuel J. Heyman Service to America Medals highlight the critical work of federal employees, serving as examples of success and increasing trust in our government.

Workforce

The Challenge

The federal government is struggling to recruit, hire and retain diverse talent with the skills needed to meet the complex challenges facing our nation today and in the future. The hiring process is long and complicated, the current workforce is aging and the competition for top talent is fierce. Federal employee engagement lags that of the private sector, agencies do not maximize use of existing hiring authorities and the federal compensation system is not aligned to the broader labor market. Yet as the COVID-19 pandemic placed high demands on the federal workforce, many agencies across government capitalized on a time of national urgency to rethink how they recruit, hire and manage their people. We need that same commitment to talent modernization across government.

Recommendations

CONGRESS

Recommendation: Overhaul the antiquated pay and job classification system.

Why It Matters: The government's 1949 pay and classification system was designed for clerical workers, not today's highly professional, specialized civil service. To meet today's hiring and retention needs, Congress should create a modern, occupation-based, market-sensitive pay system. While the government, in most cases, will not be able to match private sector salaries, it will be better positioned to fill critical skill gaps—in cyber and STEM positions, for example—under a system that allows agencies more flexibility in setting pay.

Recommendation: Build stronger entry-level talent pipelines by identifying and widely using the most successful hiring authorities, easing the ability of agencies to convert interns into full-time positions, and ensuring interns are paid.

Why It Matters: The talent is out there, and government's mission remains more compelling than ever, but agencies are losing out on bringing in a new, diverse and qualified generation into public service because the federal hiring system isn't nimble enough to compete with the private sector.

Recommendation: Infuse government with ideas, knowledge and processes from other sectors through creative means, like talent exchanges.

Why It Matters: Talent exchanges can strengthen agency workforces, support mission-critical work and lead to better collaboration among agencies and with the private sector. More could be done to remove barriers to their effectiveness – for example, Congress could amend the Intergovernmental Personnel Act to allow for-profit entities to participate in IPA-en-

abled talent exchanges involving select agencies and mission-critical occupations on a permanent or pilot basis.

Recommendation: Assess each agency's diversity, equity and inclusion performance and hold congressional hearings on DEI progress, with the practices of "best in class" agencies serving as a model.

Why It Matters: Congressional oversight will foster accountability, transparency and knowledge-sharing with the goal of improving diversity, equity and inclusion across government. Taking steps to ensure workforce diversity by focusing on the recruiting, hiring, career mobility, training and development of groups with less-than-expected participation rates in federal occupations will also help government better serve people with a wide variety of needs and backgrounds.

ADMINISTRATION

Recommendation: Modernize the federal personnel system and hold leaders accountable for attracting and retaining great talent.

Why It Matters: Through strategic priorities, like those typically outlined in the President's Management Agenda, the administration can seize the opportunity to introduce workforce reforms, match or exceed employee engagement in the private sector, and establish government as an employer of choice in the post-pandemic era that offers best-in-class flexibilities.

Recommendation: Make it easier for students and entry-level talent to find—and be found—for federal jobs by creating a federal internship and fellowship database, improving the application process, and ensuring that hiring platforms are easily accessible and mobile-friendly.

Why It Matters: Government will never attract top talent and meet its workforce needs if it doesn't simplify the federal hiring process, employ private sector best practices and make a concerted appeal to bring young people into government.

Recommendation: Share successful DEI implementation strategies across government, including tapping diverse talent sources and aligning recruitment practices with the private sector when possible.

Why It Matters: A commitment to improving workforce diversity, equity and inclusion must be in the DNA of every department and agency in the federal government. This goal will be more attainable if agencies share information about best practices, challenges and strategies.

Recommendation: Use and expand short-term opportunities in government service by making greater use of hiring flexibilities.

Why It Matters: Our current federal personnel system is geared to the model of the lifetime federal employee, and while some federal employees do stay on the job for a career, the government should have flexibility to bring in talented individuals who are willing to serve for shorter durations. This is especially important since younger workers increasingly want more mobility in their careers.

AGENCIES

Recommendation: Strengthen the federal human resources community and engage subject-matter experts in the hiring process.

Why It Matters: Agencies need well-trained and well-resourced HR offices, aided by effective technologies and processes, to effectively recruit, develop and retain talent. Chief human capital officers should have a voice in strategic and budget decisions so that workforce needs and capabilities are considered. But hiring shouldn't be left to HR alone. Involving subject matter experts in the resume review and candidate assessment processes will lead to a more targeted list of qualified candidates for positions.

Recommendation: Focus on employee retention by adopting strategies like robust onboarding programs, mentorship programs, professional development opportunities and cross-agency or government collaboration initiatives.

Why It Matters: The government has a retention problem. Of the full-time employees under 30 who voluntarily quit federal service in 2019, more than 73% did so with less than two years of tenure. It's not enough to improve hiring processes without also focusing on retaining employees. Agencies should have clear performance metrics related to employee development and do more to capture data on why people leave government so that steps can be taken to address retention issues.

Recommendation: Foster equity in promotion opportunities.

Why It Matters: Data shows that people of color and women are well-represented in entry-level federal positions across government, but many lack a career path beyond the GS-13 level, which is designated as the first mid-career grade. Agencies can improve diversity among mid- and senior-level federal employees by being more intentional in developing career paths and providing growth opportunities for those who seek them, particularly when individuals come from groups that are underrepresented in government's leadership ranks.

Innovation and Technology Modernization

The Challenge

Our country needs an effective, innovative government that can meet the demands of a fast-paced, interconnected, technology-driven world, but government often struggles to keep pace. Federal agencies offer few incentives for employees to try new ideas, are saddled with outdated technology and lag behind the private sector in hiring qualified technologists in sufficient numbers for critical leadership and staff positions. This antiquated system is an impediment to the government's ability to meet the needs of today's interconnected, technology-driven world and prepare for the challenges of the future.

Recommendations

CONGRESS

Recommendation: End crisis budgeting and create processes that foster forward-looking planning and sound management, including adopting biennial budget resolutions, more multi-year appropriations and the timely passage of appropriations bills.

Why It Matters: Short-term spending resolutions and government shutdowns impede agencies from engaging in long-term planning and investments, like replacing or modernizing antiquated IT systems.

Recommendation: Conduct a comprehensive review and update of all federal technology management laws, rules and regulations.

Why It Matters: Technologies have evolved rapidly since the adoption of laws such as the Clinger-Cohen Act of 1996 and the E-Government Act of 2002, but the framework for how the government acquires and manages technology has not kept pace with today's needs. Modernizing the technology laws and practices will help bring the government in sync with today's fast-paced digital economy, competitive labor market and evolving customer expectations.

Recommendation: Pass the Federal Agency Customer Experience Act of 2021 and other legislation related to customer service, and make it easier for agencies to collect customer feedback.

Why It Matters: The public deserves user-friendly services from the federal government, and the importance of providing fast and reliable services reached new heights during the coronavirus pandemic. Passing the FACE Act would revise an outdated law that makes it difficult to collect and publish customer experience data and that will allow agencies to collect that feedback and engage in conversations with their customers.

ADMINISTRATION

Recommendation: Set an ambitious goal to improve public confidence in government through better customer service.

Why It Matters: Government needs a customer experience "moonshot"—a bold target that, if achieved, would demonstrate that agencies can deliver modern services that meet public needs and expectations. A customer focus will help agencies meet rising expectations and accomplish their missions as well as improve trust in government, which stands near an all-time low.

Recommendation: Create a government-wide vision and strategy that outlines the "future state" of federal technology.

Why It Matters: The coronavirus pandemic demonstrated that technology is at the center of government's ability to operate efficiently and deliver services. Outlining the steps, resources and roles essential to upgrade technology, while providing flexibility for agencies based on the technology needs of their employees and customers, will help government adapt to rapidly changing demands. Political and career leaders should also have a basic familiarity with technology and cybersecurity issues in order to focus on key priorities and make informed choices across all policy areas.

Recommendation: Expand customer experience guidance to apply to more of government's high-impact services and create consistent standards across government for how the customer experience is managed, measured and reported.

Why It Matters: In 2018, the Office of Management and Budget published guidance for how government's 25 highest impact services should manage, measure and report on the customer experience. The country will be better served by expanding this guidance to additional government service providers, whether they interact directly with the public or provide internal mission-support services.

AGENCIES

Recommendation: Launch internal agency idea competitions.

Why It Matters: By soliciting, selecting and funding proposals that emanate from employees with firsthand knowledge of how their agencies operate, the government can improve the impact and cost-effectiveness of initiatives and programs. Challenge.gov houses extensive resources for developing and running challenges and prize competitions.

Recommendation: Develop procurement innovation coaches to support the acquisition workforce.

Why It Matters: A corps of acquisition workforce members who are empowered to be internal consultants and coaches could improve government's often burdensome procurement process by supporting agency acquisition teams on specific procurements. The Procurement Innovation Lab within the Department of Homeland Security serves as a successful model as does the Digital IT Acquisition Professional Program, which trains acquisition specialists on designing innovative and flexible procurements.

Recommendation: Prioritize improving equity and meeting the needs of government's diverse customer base.

Why It Matters: Some populations face barriers accessing federal services, limiting the scope and effectiveness of federal programs. The implementation of Executive Order 13985 will help agencies understand and address the issues that underserved communities may face, including lack of internet access, language barriers and cultural considerations. Agencies also will be able to share best practices in reaching underserved people as part of cross-agency customer experience work.

Collaboration

The Challenge

Solving major challenges—such as the worst pandemic in 100 years and its severe economic fallout—requires an unparalleled level of cooperation and collaboration among agencies, different levels of government, political parties and the private and nonprofit sectors. Yet, the federal government frequently operates in organizational silos that make it hard to work across jurisdictional boundaries to leverage resources and coordinate efforts to serve the public more effectively. To respond to current and future challenges, there must be increased coordination across government and sectors.

Recommendations

CONGRESS

Recommendation: Fund innovative collaboration models around specific national or global challenges.

Why It Matters: Federal agencies responded to the COVID-19 pandemic in new and innovative ways while navigating complex challenges and collaborating across government. To better deal with current challenges and be prepared for future crises, Congress should build on cross-agency success stories, replicate best practices, take stock of lessons learned, provide sufficient staff, infrastructure and resources for existing and new coordinating capabilities, and create more joint funding opportunities for interagency collaboration.

Recommendation: Educate members of Congress and congressional staff on how the executive branch works and about agency efforts to implement the laws.

Why It Matters: Formalized educational opportunities for lawmakers and staff can enrich their understanding of how policies work in practice, the importance of cross-agency collaboration, and how congressional oversight can help make programs more effective. Opportunities for members and staff could include agency and field visits, fellowships, shadowing programs, presentations and conferences.

ADMINISTRATION

Recommendation: Provide guidance to agencies on best practices for public-private partnerships, including potential types of partners, methods of engagement, ethical considerations and relevant legal authorities.

Why It Matters: Public-private partnerships are a valuable tool for tackling big problems,

but real or perceived barriers can discourage agencies from using them. Administration guidance that taps into the wealth of expertise in each agency and leverages existing resources could be valuable in spurring cross-sector innovation.

Recommendation: Enhance Performance.gov as a tool for sharing information, learning and outcomes.

Why It Matters: The federal government's website for monitoring goals and results is a valuable resource but could better inform future collaboration efforts and support the work of different policy and management councils. For example, information supporting council decision-making, outlining interagency council activities and summarizing lessons learned and outcomes will increase transparency and showcase the impact.

Recommendation: Include more voices—from across government, regional offices, other sectors and the public—in agency decision-making efforts.

Why It Matters: Gathering a wider variety of perspectives, including those of regional employees and program implementors, will result in more informed and better policy decisions. Interagency and policy management councils can enhance their decision-making by engaging stakeholders from regional offices across the country as they discuss issues that impact the workforce.

AGENCIES

Recommendation: Create interagency initiatives to tackle common management challenges.

Why It Matters: Interagency collaboration is essential for an effective federal response to a host of challenges, so it is vital that agencies bring the right people to the table. Implementation teams should have designated leaders, roles and responsibilities, and work together to ensure that outcomes align with the vision of policy and management councils. Career senior executive-level officials should be deployed to help implement cross-agency initiatives to sustain momentum across leadership transitions.

Recommendation: Include evaluation experts in projects, initiatives and policy design efforts.

Why It Matters: As policymakers introduce more data and evidence into decision-making, bringing in employees with evaluation expertise on the front end will help ensure that initiatives and policies are results-driven, meaningful and relevant. This collaborative effort can ensure that lessons learned are captured and shared to inform future work.

Recommendation: Enhance coordination between agencies and constituent service representatives.

Why It Matters: Effective collaboration between constituent service representatives in congressional offices and federal agencies will lead to more timely, accurate and honest communication and have a big impact on how the public experiences government. Agencies should offer orientation services to congressional district or state office staff to foster strong working relationships and ensure that the public is well-served.

Recommendation: Boost regional coordination by providing dedicated funding for Federal Executive Boards.

Why It Matters: Approximately 85% of all federal employees work outside of the Washington, D.C., area. Federal Executive Boards support these employees and played a critical role in helping agencies respond to the pandemic. Funding FEBs through the Office of Personnel Management or the Office of Management and Budget would consolidate oversight, management, priority-setting and implementation of management issues affecting federal regional offices across the country.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic illustrated the importance of having a prepared, agile and well-functioning federal government—and it taught us that good leaders, exceptional employees, modern technology and cross-organizational collaboration are essential. We urge the administration and Congress to meet this moment and prepare for future challenges by investing in our government and the people who serve. The Partnership for Public Service stands ready to assist policymakers in exploring, advancing and implementing these important reforms.

Questions about these proposals may be directed to Kari Rea (krea@ourpublicservice.org) and Troy Cribb (tcribb@ourpublicservice.org) at the Partnership for Public Service.
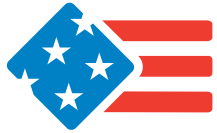
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