

Statement of Reginald F. Wells  
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Social Security Administration  
Testimony before the House Committee on Government Reform  
Subcommittee on Civil Service and Agency Organization  
Hearing on Achieving Diversity in the SES Workforce  
October 15, 2003

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for asking me to be here today to discuss the Social Security Administration's (SSA) efforts to achieve diversity in its Senior Executive Service (SES) representation. I am pleased to have the opportunity to tell you about the efforts that SSA has made to develop and recruit a diverse workforce as we also address the challenges presented by the forthcoming retirement wave among career civil servants.

**Who we are**

The Social Security Administration is an agency of 65,000 employees working in 1,500 installations nationwide. We are a workforce that is highly committed to the Agency's mission and values. As Commissioner Jo Anne B. Barnhart has often said, the men and women of Social Security *are* the agency. And I have to confess that I share her view that the Social Security workforce is the best in government.

Our overarching goal is to provide the American people with the service they expect and deserve. To do this we must understand and meet our diverse public's needs. And, if we are to accomplish that, we need a high-performing, well trained, and well-equipped staff, from the front line field office workers to the highest executives.

SSA's workforce is a diverse group—71 percent of our employees are women, and 44 percent are members of minority groups. Diversity is reflected in all of the major components and at all levels, including our Deputy Commissioners, Regional Commissioners, and Associate Commissioners.

There is another important characteristic of the SSA workforce. We are also a very experienced group, with an average of 20 years of service and an average age of 47. And that brings me to the challenges—and the opportunities—that the agency faces as we prepare ourselves for the massive increases in workload that the aging of the Baby Boomers is already starting to create. I would like to discuss some of those challenges before I focus on diversity in the Senior Executive Service (SES), because we believe these challenges carry with them the seeds of opportunity to ensure that we are able to meet our goals for a diverse workforce and a diverse SES corps.

## **Workforce challenges**

According to SSA's own Retirement Wave Study that was published in 2000:

- ◇ SSA retirements will rise steadily and peak in 2007-2010 when about 2,500 will retire each year.
- ◇ 37 percent of overall staff will be eligible for regular retirement through 2010.
- ◇ 60 percent of SES and GS-14/15s will be eligible for regular retirement by 2008; and
- ◇ We will need to replace 24,000 of 65,000 employees over the next 10 years.

We have turned the retirement wave into an opportunity. Over the past four years, we have hired approximately 12,000 permanent employees, and we have focused on equal opportunities for all, including minorities and women.

We attribute our success to several factors:

- ◇ Support from the highest levels of the agency;
- ◇ Strong linkage to the agency strategic plan;
- ◇ Development of a long-term service vision;
- ◇ Analysis and study of potential future losses;
- ◇ A specific workforce transition plan; and
- ◇ National and regional leadership development programs.

SSA has a comprehensive recruitment plan administered by a National Recruitment Coordinator. We filled the position with a career human resources professional who has worked continually with our components and regions, lending consistency and professionalism to the recruitment process.

We are educating our managers on modern, effective recruiting practices. Under the guidance of our Recruitment Coordinator, we have developed a professional marketing strategy that enables us to compete effectively with government and private organizations.

## **Diversity and SSA**

As I noted earlier, SSA has a diverse workforce. By comparison to the 44 percent of our employees who are members of minority groups, minorities comprise 28.5 percent in the civilian labor force and 30.8 percent in the Federal workforce.

I am pleased to report that we employ an increasing number of Hispanics, who now make up 11.9 percent of SSA's workforce compared to 12.2 percent in the civilian labor force and 7.1 percent in the federal workforce. SSA ranks third among federal agencies in this area. Further, SSA is second among major Federal agencies in hiring Hispanic employees. The Office of Personnel Management's (OPM) June 2003 report to the President highlighted SSA as one of the model agencies for Hispanic hiring.

Employees with disabilities represent 8.1 percent of SSA's workforce compared to 7.1 percent in the Federal workforce. SSA ranks third among Federal agencies in staffing and hiring persons with disabilities.

In October 2002, our SES corps of 123 individuals included 41 minority men and women, representing one-third of the total.

SSA has been recognized for its commitment to diversity by the League of Latin American Citizens, National Image, the Office of Personnel Management, Equal Opportunity Publications, Baltimore City, the Ford Foundation, and the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

However, Commissioner Barnhart, and the entire agency leadership, is firmly committed to continuing our efforts to build a workforce that truly reflects the face of our nation as a whole. I would like to take a few moments to discuss some of our agency-wide initiatives because SSA's long tradition of developing leadership from within means that a diverse SES corps depends in large part on a diverse total workforce.

### **Recruiting a Diverse Workforce**

SSA's Office of Human Resources produces a monthly hiring report that cumulatively tracks fiscal year hires on a monthly basis for all EEO groups both at the agency and Deputy Commissioner level. The hiring rates for women and minorities are well above their availability in the national civilian labor force.

On-campus college recruiting is an important source of diverse new hires. First SSA is working with colleges and universities that have large populations of underrepresented groups. SSA regularly recruits at historically black colleges and universities and Hispanic-serving institutions and has cooperative agreements with Native America tribal colleges and universities. SSA also uses the Outstanding Scholar Program to recruit minorities as well as authority granted by OPM to use bilingual registers in hiring.

Further, we are establishing partnerships with national organizations with ties to colleges and universities to help us attract a diverse candidate pool. Such organizations include the National Association of Colleges and Employers, the Association on Higher Education and Disability, and the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities.

SSA's six Equal Employment Opportunity advisory groups assist the Agency in its recruitment initiatives in addition to their primary role of assisting our agency to better address our employees' concerns and to better serve persons with disabilities, women, minorities, and the non-English speaking public. The six employee advisory groups are:

- American Indian and Alaska Native Advisory Council (AIANAC)
- Black Affairs Advisory Council (BAAC)
- Hispanic Affairs Advisory Council (HAAC)
- Pacific Asian Americans Advisory Council (PAAAC)

- National Women's Advisory Committee (WAAC)
- National Advisory Council on Employees with Disabilities (NACED)

Commissioner Barnhart and I believe that SSA's aggressive recruiting efforts will form the basis for a capable and diverse SES candidate pool for the future.

### **Leadership Training**

Among SSA's many comprehensive training opportunities for its employees are the leadership development programs. Our three national development programs are for employees from Grade GS-9 to 15. They cover all positions and will enable the agency to meet the staffing and leadership challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

OPM has recognized SSA's leadership programs for their "best practices", and the programs are considered to be among the best in government. The programs are structured and managed to link performance to results. Key features include a structured selection process using assessment centers based on key leadership competencies, individualized development plans, program evaluations from each participant and assigned mentors for each participant. Ninety-four (94) percent of the most recently completed SES Candidate Development Program class remaining with the agency has been selected for placement in SES positions at SSA. Of the 30 SES appointees from this class, one-third were women and 40 percent were minority.

And the Advanced Leadership and the Leadership Development Programs, for GS-9 to 14 employees, are equally important for a quality, diverse SES corps in the future. In addition to our national programs, we offer numerous regional and component level programs.

### **SSA's Response to the No FEAR Act Requirements**

Before I conclude my testimony, I would like to turn to the Notification and Federal Employee Antidiscrimination and Retaliation Act of 2002, also known as the No FEAR Act, which is one of the topics of this hearing. SSA strongly supports the implementation of the No FEAR Act. We believe it reaffirms the strong public policy commitment to ensure that all federal employees are free to come forward with allegations of wrongdoing or misconduct, by making sure they are aware of their rights and legal protections.

Prior to the October 1, 2003 effective date for the Act, SSA took affirmative steps to comply with the notification provisions of the new Act and to meet the Office of Special Counsel's (OSC) five requirements for compliance with the law, under its Certification Program. Under the program, OSC issues a certificate of compliance, good for three years, to agencies that successfully complete the five-step project.

I am pleased to report that SSA has successfully completed the five steps to inform employees of their legal protections and rights afforded under Federal antidiscrimination and whistleblower protection statutes. SSA completed the following:

- Placed informational posters about prohibited personnel practices and whistleblower protections at its agency facilities throughout the nation to make employees aware of the whistleblower protection laws;
- Provided information about these protections to new employees as part of their orientation process;
- Provided periodic information to current employees about their rights and remedies under the Whistleblower Protection Act;
- Trained supervisors and managers on the whistleblower protection laws and prohibitions against discrimination via an IVT broadcast on September 22, 2002 and
- Created a hyperlink from the agency's intranet website to the OSC website. This hyperlink can be accessed from both the Office of Civil Rights and Equal Opportunity and the Office of Personnel websites.

In addition, SSA has provided written notice to employees, former employees and applicants for employment concerning the agency's policy prohibiting discrimination and advising them of their rights and protections afforded under the antidiscrimination laws.

SSA has a long-standing and consistent policy of taking appropriate disciplinary actions against Federal employees who discriminate against any individual in violation of the antidiscrimination and whistleblower laws. SSA will comply with the spirit of the new Act by continuing to take appropriate disciplinary action against Federal employees who are found to have engaged in discriminatory conduct.

As soon as the guidelines are received from the Equal Employment and Opportunity Commission and the Office of Personnel Management, SSA is prepared to post on its public Website, in the time, form, and manner prescribed under the new Act, summary statistical data relating to equal employment opportunity complaints filed with the agency by employees, or former employees of, or applicants for employment with the agency.

## **Conclusion**

In closing, I'd like to emphasize SSA's pride in its workforce and its efforts to promote diversity among its employees. Thank you and I will be glad to answer any questions you may have.