

DEPARTMENTAL ADMINISTRATION

Written Statement of  
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Before the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity  
Committee on Veterans' Affairs  
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Madam Chair Herseth-Sandlin, ranking member Boozman, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to come before you to discuss veterans' preference and the success the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) is having in recruiting and retaining veterans in its workforce.

USDA is a leader in America's food and agricultural systems, helping the farm and food sectors operate in a highly competitive marketplace to respond to changing consumer demands for high quality, nutritious, and convenient food and agricultural products. USDA also carries out a wide variety of services and activities related to the management, research, and conservation of the Nation's agricultural resources. In carrying out its mission and achieving its goals, USDA's human capital – its employees – is its greatest asset.

As the Department's Chief Human Capital Officer, I have a duty to assure USDA has the workforce capable of carrying out the Department's mission. With a growing retirement eligible workforce, USDA is compelled to design and implement a multi-faceted approach to succession planning and recruitment that will ensure the continued existence of the mission-critical talent pools. The challenge of an aging workforce is exacerbated by an increase in competition for skilled employees and an increasingly

technical environment. The demand for people with expertise in information technology, public health, and science-based technologies requires more attention toward effective recruitment, training, retention, and knowledge transfer strategies. At USDA, we use these strategies to fill the more than 340 different job series that include everyone from firefighters to research scientists, agricultural economists to food inspectors, veterinarians to procurement and human resources professionals. Almost any career a veteran could imagine is possible at USDA.

### **Veteran Preferences**

As you are well aware, veterans' preference laws were initially enacted by Congress as early as the Civil War to prevent veterans seeking Federal employment from being penalized for their time in military service. Veterans' preference recognizes the economic loss suffered by our citizens who have served their country in uniform, restores veterans to a favorable competitive position for Government employment, and acknowledges the larger obligation owed to our veterans and particularly those who were injured in their service to our country.

Preference has been reserved for those who were either disabled or who served in combat areas. Veterans' preference in its present form comes from the Veterans' Preference Act of 1944, as amended, and is now codified in various provisions of title 5, United States Code. Preference applies to hiring for virtually all Federal jobs, whether in the competitive or excepted service. In addition to receiving preference in competitive appointments, veterans may be considered for special noncompetitive appointments for which only they are eligible.

## **Appointment Authorities**

There are three ways veterans can be appointed to jobs in the competitive civil service: by competitive appointment through a list of eligibles developed by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) or agency equivalent, by noncompetitive appointment under special authorities that provide for conversion to a permanent appointment, or by Merit Promotion selection under the Veterans Employment Opportunities Act (VEOA).

A competitive appointment is one in which the veteran competes with other candidates on an OPM list of eligibles (or agency equivalent under delegated examining authority). This is the normal entry route into the civil service for most employees. Veterans' preference applies in this situation, and those veterans who qualify as preference eligibles have an additional 5 or 10 points added to their passing examination score under traditional rating and ranking or are listed ahead of non-preference eligibles within a category under category rating and ranking.

A noncompetitive appointment under special authority is one such as the Veterans Recruitment Appointment (VRA) authority (formerly known as the Veterans Readjustment Appointment authority) and the special authority for 30 percent or more disabled veterans. Eligibility under these special authorities provides veterans a significant advantage in that an agency may simply appoint the eligible veteran to any position for which he or she is qualified (limited to the GS-11 grade level, or equivalent, and below for VRAs.). There is no red tape or special appointment procedures. However, use of these special authorities is discretionary with the agency. Veterans' preference applies when making appointments under these special authorities if there are two or more candidates and one or more is preference eligible. These authorities provide

for noncompetitive conversion to the competitive service after a suitable period of satisfactory service.

A Merit Promotion selection under the VEOA is one in which the veteran competes with current federal employees under an agency's merit (or internal) promotion procedures. The VEOA allows preference eligibles or veterans to apply under an agency merit promotion announcement open to candidates outside the agency. However, agencies do not apply veterans' preference when considering individuals under merit promotion procedures or under the VEOA. Selection under this special authority, as with other authorities, is discretionary with the agency. A VEOA eligible who competes under merit promotion procedures and is selected will be given a career or career conditional appointment.

### **Recruitment Activities**

To attract a diverse, highly skilled workforce, USDA markets itself as the “Employer of Choice” in the Federal government. All USDA job opportunities, including announcements identifying noncompetitive appointing authorities and merit promotion authorities for veterans, are posted on the OPM’s USAJobs.gov website. All vacancy announcements post the name and telephone number for applicants to contact if they want to obtain reasonable accommodation for any part of the application process. Vacancy announcements are sent weekly to State Employment Services, various Veterans’ organizations, and rehabilitation agencies to help alert veterans to career opportunities with USDA.

As a large, decentralized agency, USDA has implemented a myriad of recruitment efforts through its individual agencies. The Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS),

for example, often advertises vacancies in the Vet Forum and Veteran's Life magazines. In 2006, FSIS entered into a partnership with Virginia's Department of Rehabilitative Services (DRS) and provided training to DRS employees and other affiliated organizations on special hiring authorities for persons with disabilities, as well as guidance on resume writing and interviewing. The Rural Development State office in Maine developed a relationship with the local Department of Defense military installations, forwarding vacancy announcements directly to them. They also e-mail all vacancy announcements to the American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars to ensure that local veterans are aware of job opportunities through state-wide newsletters and bulletins.

On behalf of the entire Department, I have become personally involved in the "Coming Home to Work" initiative sponsored by the Department of Veterans Affairs' Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program (VR&E). This Initiative places a special emphasis on assisting Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom service members.

Through the "Coming Home to Work" initiative, civilian work experience is made available to VR&E eligible service members, pending their medical separation from active duty at major military treatment facilities. Participants work with a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor to obtain unpaid work experience in a Federal, State or local government facility. The goal of this program is for VR&E eligible service members facing medical separation to gain or sharpen civilian job skills at a point in their recovery when they are deemed "work-ready" by a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor. The types of work may include administrative, clerical, professional, technical, or wage

grade positions. Work assignments are dependent on the aptitudes, interests, and abilities of the participant.

This program assists veterans in establishing an employment history and expands their ability to hone the skills developed under their vocational rehabilitation plans. It provides exposure to Federal employment opportunities and the special Federal hiring authorities for which veterans qualify.

While USDA has already randomly used this program in our Departmental Human Resources Division, we are in the process of expanding the Department's involvement with the program. USDA is developing administrative, human resources, and procurement position descriptions to meet the specific talents and needs of those participating in the "Coming Home to Work" initiative. Through these positions, we hope to provide not only interim work opportunities to our Nation's veterans, but a stepping stone to a permanent position in the Federal workforce.

USDA Human Resources offices continue to use various electronic national resume databases to establish contact with a variety of veterans programs and organizations as well as to participate in veteran targeted job and career fairs. However, in many instances, we find that our own veteran employees are our best recruiters. Through their associations with veteran organizations, our current veteran employees serve as conduit to the veteran community to promote employment opportunities throughout USDA.

I am pleased to report that of the 108,840 USDA employees, 11,517 or 10.6 percent are veterans, of which 6,776 occupy positions at the GS-9 salary level or above. In 2006, USDA hired 21,023 new, full-time employees of which 1,332 were disabled

veterans. More than 10 percent of the disabled veterans employed by the Department are 30 percent or more compensable.

Statistics and recruitment efforts, however, only tell a portion of the story. In 2003, Steven Dickerson was just completing his masters program in social work at the University of Nevada at Reno when he came to the attention of the Forest Service who was interviewing candidates under the Government's Workforce Recruitment Program (WRP). The WRP, co-sponsored by the Department of Labor and the Department of Defense, is a program that identifies college students with disabilities to work as interns for federal government agencies in summer and permanent jobs. As a result of WRP, DOL recently announced the availability of a national database of students with disabilities who have expressed interest in working for the Government.

Mr. Dickerson, a Vietnam veteran, was injured during the war in an aircraft incident resulting in him being both blind and using a wheel chair for mobility. In spite of these injuries, he returned to school and earned his undergraduate degree in Paralegal Studies – *summa cum laude* – and went on to graduate school to complete his Masters degree, as well.

Gerry McGaughran, the Person's With Disabilities College Recruitment Liaison for the Forest Service, recognized Mr. Dickerson's potential value to the agency and referred him for consideration for vacancies within the agency. Later that same year, Mr. Dickerson was competitively selected by the Forest Service's Intermountain Regional Office as the Region's Employee Assistance Program Coordinator in Ogden, Utah.

As a member of the Forest Service civil rights staff, Mr. Dickerson's duties include administering the Region's alternative dispute resolution and employee assistance programs where he mediates workplace disputes and trains other agency mediators. He has also enhanced the region's employee assistance program, which is now available 24 hours and day – seven days a week. He also counsels other veterans and people with disabilities having workplace issues. In order to perform his job, Mr. Dickerson uses a number of technical accommodations including a docking pen that interfaces with a computer to download messages and voicing software that converts text to speech.

Steven Dickerson is a valuable member of the USDA family, not just because he's a veteran, but because of who he is, what he has accomplished, and what he continues to contribute to the mission of our agency.

At USDA, veterans' preference is not only the law; it is an honor and a commitment we make to our national heroes who have sacrificed so much to keep our Nation free and safe.