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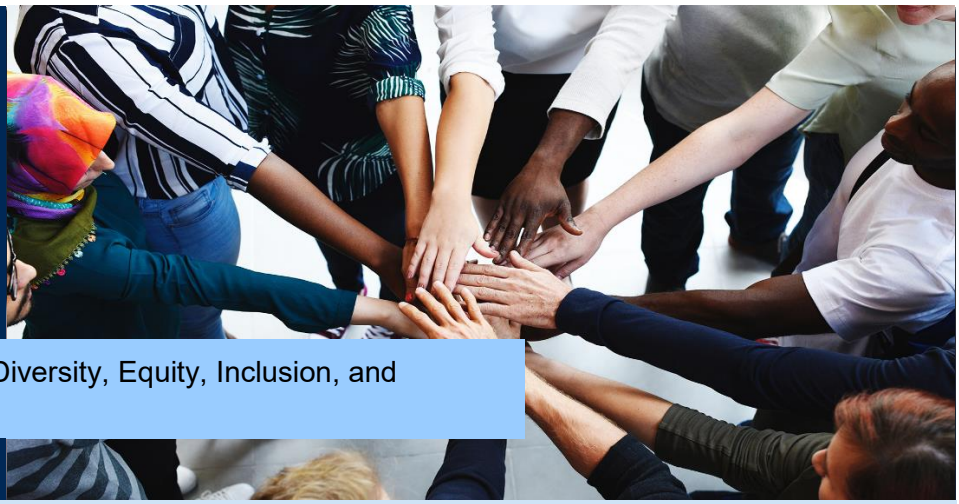


Federal Workforce: Strengthening Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility

GAO- 23- 106254, January 2023

Diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility efforts can help foster a positive work environment where all employees can maximize their contributions and strive to reach their full potential. We have reported on federal efforts to increase diversity in the workforce, ensure equity, enhance inclusive environments, and improve reasonable accommodations for people with disabilities.

The Big Picture

As the nation's largest employer, the federal government strives to be a model for diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) and, according to Executive Order 14035, to cultivate a workforce that draws from the full diversity of the nation. In this Snapshot, we highlight selected findings and recommendations we have made between 2017 and 2022 to enhance DEIA in the federal workforce.

What GAO's Work Shows

Our prior work identified nine practices for creating and maintaining a positive work environment, where the similarities and differences of individuals are valued and contribute to an organization's goals and objectives. These practices are important for federal agencies to advance DEIA in their workforces.

Leading Workforce Management Practices

Top leadership commitment—a vision of diversity demonstrated by top-level management.

Diversity as part of an organization's strategic plan—a diversity strategy aligned with the strategic plan.

Diversity linked to performance—this is often referred to as an organization's business case for diversity.

Measurement—a set of quantitative and qualitative measures of the impact of diversity programs.

Accountability—the means to ensure that leaders are responsible for diversity.

Succession planning—an ongoing, strategic process for identifying and developing a diverse pool of talent.

Recruitment—the process of attracting qualified, diverse applicants for employment.

Employee involvement—the contribution of employees in driving diversity.

Diversity training—organizational efforts to inform and educate about diversity.

Source: GAO. | GAO-23-106254

Diversity

The practice of including the many communities, identities, races, ethnicities, backgrounds, abilities, cultures, and beliefs of the American people, including underserved communities.

Federal agencies have had mixed success in increasing workforce diversity. For example, from fiscal years (FY) 2011-2019, the Intelligence Community's workforce had slight increases in the proportions of women, racial or ethnic minorities, and persons with disabilities, but the proportions were below federal workforce benchmarks for FY19. At the United States Agency for International Development, we found specific groups were underrepresented in promotions.

✓ We recommended that these agencies work to enhance accountability for DEIA workplace goals.

The U.S. Department of State told us it is planning to develop performance measures for DEIA-related goals, and was taking additional steps to identify diversity issues that could indicate potential barriers within its workforce.

✓ We recommended that the State Department establish performance measures for DEIA-related goals in the workplace and develop processes to evaluate progress.

Equity

The consistent and systematic fair, just, and impartial treatment of all individuals, including individuals who belong to underserved communities that have been denied such treatment.

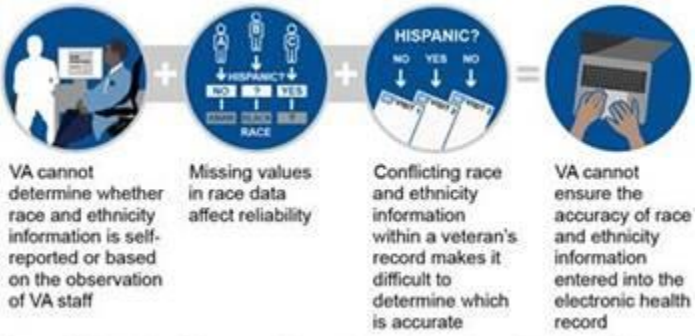
Equity challenges continue to exist in veterans' health care. According to Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) researchers, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) veterans may experience higher

rates of depression and more frequent thoughts of suicide. However, VA does not collect sexual orientation or self-identified gender identity data to analyze the health of the LGBT veteran population.

Also, VA medical centers are unable to readily identify and address disparities in health care outcomes by race and ethnicity due to data limitations.

- ✓ We recommended that VA consistently collect data to better assess health care outcomes. VA is still working to address data issues with LGBT veterans and has improved racial and ethnicity data.

Limitations with VA Race and Ethnicity Data



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Veterans Affairs' information. | GAO-23-106254

Additionally, we found that while the pay gap between men and women in the federal government is smaller than in the entire U.S. workforce, studies show that pay disparities still exist.

The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) analyzes agencies' pay gap data and data on promotions by gender, race, and ethnicity. However, we found these data to be incomplete.

- ✓ We recommended that EEOC assess the quality of the promotion data it collects and address data discrepancies, which EEOC has implemented.

Inclusion

The recognition, appreciation, and use of the talents and skills of employees of all backgrounds.

From fiscal years 2016-2018, Federal Air Marshal Service (FAMS) employees filed at least 230 discrimination complaints. FAMS had adopted an action plan to address discrimination allegations, but did not fully implement the plan.

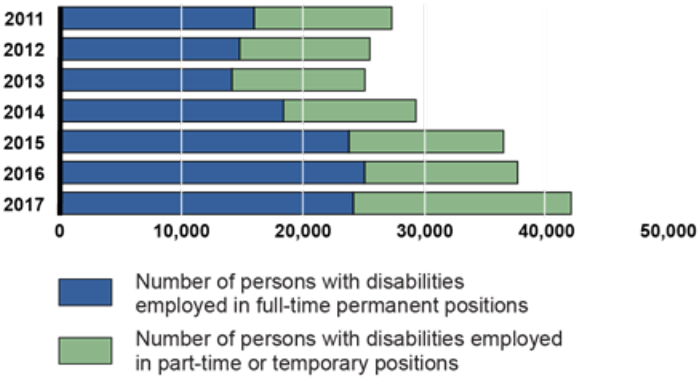
- ✓ We recommended that FAMS reaffirm and strengthen efforts to prevent discrimination.

Accessibility

The provision of accommodations and modifications to ensure equal access to employment and participation in activities for people with disabilities, and the reduction or elimination of physical and attitudinal barriers to equitable opportunities.

The overall number of persons with disabilities hired by agencies increased between fiscal years 2011-2017. However, large numbers of persons with disabilities depart federal employment within 2 years. The reasons they do so are unclear because of a lack of data.

The Number of Persons with Disabilities Hired by the Federal Government, Fiscal Years 2011 through 2017



Source: GAO analysis of Office of Personnel Management data. | GAO-23-106254

Data table for The Number of Persons with Disabilities Hired by the Federal Government, Fiscal Years 2011 through 2017

Year	Number of persons with disabilities employed in full-time permanent positions	Number of persons with disabilities employed in part-time or temporary positions
2011	15970	11306
2012	14782	10703
2013	14157	10914
2014	18379	10879
2015	23757	12708
2016	25039	12575

- ✓ We recommended that the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) track and report additional retention data, which OPM has implemented.

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Sources: Rawpixel.com/stock.adobe.com (cover photo); Executive Order 14035 (definitions)