

Federal Employees Face Uphill Battle to Improve the Worst Agencies

By Mathew B. Tully

There's bad, and then there's really bad.

A majority of federal employees braved the political and economic storms that hit the federal government in 2011 with their job satisfaction and commitment only declining by 1.5 percent, according to an annual survey of over 276,000 federal civil service workers by the Partnership for Public Service. However, employees at the lowest-ranked federal agencies sank deeper into a rut.

The Partnership for Public Service scored federal employee job satisfaction and commitment at 64 out of 100 in its 2011 government-wide index, compared to 65 a year earlier. The Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation emerged as the No. 1 large agency to work for in the federal government with a score of 85.9. It was followed by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission with a score of 79.1 and the Government Accountability Office with a score of 78.9.

The 10 worst federal agencies to work for were as follows (2011 score/2010 score):

Department of Labor (DOL, 60.0/62.3)

Department of Energy (DOE, 59.6/62.9)

Department of Transportation (DOT, 59.5/60.4)

Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC, 58.3/62.0)

Small Business Administration (SBA, 57.9/57.7)

Department of Education (57.8/57.3)

U.S. Agency of International Development (USAID, 57.7/59.8)

Department of Homeland Security (DHS, 56.6/58.6)

Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD, 55.7/57.1)

National Archives and Records Administration (NARA, 53.0/57.1)

These low rankings are no surprise to many federal employee lawyers in the Washington, D.C. area. Despite these agencies' differences in mission, a common thread through many of them is poor leadership. DHS, for example, ranked last in the categories of "effective leadership" and "supervisors." As many federal employees know, poor leadership manifests in

a host of problems. Therefore, it is not surprising to see that NARA ranked last in the “support for diversity” category, SEC ranked last for “performance based rewards and advancement,” and DHS ranked second-to-last for “fairness.”

Job satisfaction and commitment over the year dropped at the lowest-ranked agencies: DHS, HUD and NARA. With job opportunities scarce throughout the federal civil service, retreat is not an option for many employees at these agencies. Many cannot find transfer opportunities to other positions within their agency or even at different agencies.

Federal employees at the worst agencies need to fight individually for a better workplace. They should explore taking some of the following steps to improve their work environments:

Filing an Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) charge if they’ve been subjected to discrimination, harassment, or a hostile work environment;

Challenging an unsatisfactory performance rating through an agency’s internal grievance process or filing a complaint with the applicable body if the appraisal is based on discrimination or another prohibited personnel action;

Appealing an adverse personnel action, such as removal, suspension, reprimand or demotion, to the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB);

Reporting violations of law, rule or regulation, gross mismanagement, gross waste of funds, and/or abuses of authority to the Office of Special Counsel (OSC) or other entity; or

Challenging personnel actions based on illegal reasons.

Federal employees are provided with more avenues to challenge and oppose questionable actions by agencies than typical private sector employees. It is important for federal employees to know and exercise these rights to improve their work environment. There are strict deadlines for pursuing each of these actions, so federal employees should consult with a federal sector employment attorney.

Mathew B. Tully is Founding Partner of Tully Rinckey PLLC

and a medically retired employee of the U.S. DOJ. He concentrates his legal efforts in federal employment and national security law.