



Policy Agenda 118th Congress

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The Senior Executives Association (SEA) has been the voice and advocate for the integrity and sustainment of the federal government's career Senior Executive Service (SES) corps since 1980. SEA is a nonpartisan, non-profit professional membership association which actively supports a federal career leadership corps that is highly qualified, accountable, and focused on ensuring agencies meet their missions. SEA's mission is to:

1. Promote good government initiatives and practices that empower senior executives and federal leaders for mission success;
2. Advocate for legislation and policies in the interests of the federal career senior executive service;
3. Facilitate networking opportunities for, and with, federal governmental leaders, and
4. Connect current, rising, and aspiring leaders with continuous professional development opportunities.

In over four decades since Congress created the SES with the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978, very few meaningful federal workforce reforms have passed into law. Those changes that have been enacted have created greater divisiveness and confusing federal personnel policy, creating haves and have nots amongst agencies. The result is a federal government that demands its career workforce deliver 21st century results while operating from 20th or even 19th century statutory frameworks. As society and the government emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic, it is increasingly clear that the government must continue focusing on modernizing all aspects of operations, including how the federal workforce is selected, developed, and assessed.

SEA's policy agenda reflects the looming concern held by many career federal leaders about the federal government's challenges to execute agency missions if Congress and the Administration do not mitigate [accumulated organizational debt](#) created by an archaic personnel management system.

As the voice of career government leaders, SEA is dedicated to overall civil service modernization to ensure the capability of the federal workforce at all levels. SEA is committed to advancing the principles of good government resulting in taxpayers more willing to trust our federal government to deliver services equitably and effectively, independent of partisan political influence. SEA is committed to engaging with lawmakers who want a more effective and efficient government.

In the 118th Congress SEA will pursue the following legislative goals:

INVEST IN THE CAPABILITY OF THE FEDERAL WORKFORCE

Despite spending over \$400 billion per year on employee compensation and benefits, the federal government faces significant [systematic risks and mission failure](#) due to lack of attention to cultivating its workforce over the past several decades. The governance of federal human capital management needs a reboot. Reimagined attention to the workforce by every congressional committee can drive improvements to management quality and mission delivery.

- Modernization in technology, data, and management practices will not come without sustained investment in the federal workforce. Congress should commit a minimum value of 2% of agency payroll to protected annual federal employee development accounts.
- Strengthen Public Service Leadership - Establish dual tracks for career progression into technical fields and management. The government must prioritize support for its supervisors, managers, and executives by ensuring their ongoing training and professional development.
- Address pay compression. Pay compression skews the risk-reward trade-off for employees advancing in their federal careers. At a certain point, the risks of advancing in management continue to grow but the rewards do not keep pace, causing top talent to leave government service. Too many federal managers, executives, and other subject matter experts do not receive full compensation due to statutory pay caps. In 30 locality pay zones across the country, employees hit the pay caps of the General Schedule in the mid GS-15 range.
- Decouple SES pay from Executive Schedule. Enable agencies to more appropriately compensate executive and other mission-critical talent.
- Conduct a government-wide talent development study to understand what is working in agencies, what is being spent overall, as well as to identify duplicative programs and those that should be eliminated. [Agency practices vary widely](#).

END THE WAR ON EXPERTISE AND COMPETENCE IN PUBLIC SERVICE

Non-competitive appointment of unqualified individuals into the Executive Branch as political appointees threatens the effectiveness of federal agency operations, responsible stewardship of taxpayer funds, and ultimately diminishes Presidential control over the Executive Branch.

- Pass legislation to protect the constitutional role of the civil service as Congress's tool for maintaining the impartial and apolitical role of government services. The SES serves as a buffer between the political priorities of the executive and the law as written by Congress. Congress should pass legislation, such as the Saving the Civil Service Act, that prevents the reclassification of civil service leaders into political positions because doing so would erode the constitutional role of the SES and public trust in an impartial government.
- Enhance agency stability by designating senior mission support positions as SES career-reserved, consistent with [Joint Policy Agenda on SES](#) by SEA, Partnership for Public Service, and the Volcker Alliance.
- Reduce the number of political appointees overall & in certain positions that should be reserved for career officials.
- Require political appointees to have individual performance plans, consistent with requirements in GPRAMA Modernization Act of 2010 (GPRAMA).
- Reevaluate the necessity of all Presidentially Appointed, Senate-confirmed positions.

- Save taxpayers \$1 billion over 10 years by eliminating 1,000 unnecessary political appointments, especially in operational and mission (non-policy) roles.¹
- Engage a study on the total number, type, cost and benefits of political appointments below the PAS level.

ENSURING EMPLOYEE ACCOUNTABILITY

Employees are best held accountable, for both positive and negative actions, through ensuring they understand the systems that govern the workforce and by ensuring necessary tools are made available to train, develop, and oversee performance. Numerous barriers often prevent federal supervisors from dealing effectively with poor performing and problem employees. The following proposals are designed to reduce or remove these barriers, providing supervisors the tools necessary to ensure accountability:

- Mandate a program to provide “onboarding” for all new political appointees to include information on ethics, agency functions, SES and other workforce performance management systems, etc.;
- Hold political appointees accountable for the timely administration of SES performance management, including ratings and performance plans;
- End the abuse of administrative leave during personnel actions. Conduct oversight of lack of regulations issued by OPM for the Administrative Leave Reform Act of 2016;
- Require ongoing annual professional training for all executives, managers and supervisors;
- Create a Federal Employee Court of Appeals to eliminate the multiplicity of appeal forums currently available to employees;
- Expand the probationary period to two years for those jobs that require extensive training periods;
- Support managers taking actions to effectively address with poor performers through the Federal Managers Fairness Act;

REVITALIZE THE MERIT SYSTEM

For over 130 years, the policy of the United States government has been to hire career civil servants on the basis of merit. The merit system is in desperate need of attention, and the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) currently has no authority nor oversight over the majority of federal personnel systems.

- Strengthen the capacity and independence of the OPM. Elevate the OPM Director to a Cabinet-level position and who serves as the Federal Chief People Officer. For more information on strengthening OPM, please review the SEA report on [Transforming the Governance of Federal Human Capital Management](#).

¹ [Axing the Appointees - Government Executive \(govexec.com\) \(2010\)](#)

- Enact a version of the Federal IT Acquisition Reform Act for HR – apply oversight model and statutory focus on workforce to reform federal HR.
- Strengthen and expand whistleblower protections.
- Restore whistleblower rights to VA Senior Executives by amending 38 U.S.C. § 713.
- Conduct a study on Inherently Governmental Functions – what roles and decisions must be the responsibility of civil servants versus contractors and consultants?
- [10 Considerations for Civil Service Modernization](#) – eliminate internal bureaucratic red tape that holds dedicated civil servants back and inhibits innovation.

MODERNIZE HIRING, REBUILD TALENT PIPELINE & EXPAND SERVICE OPPORTUNITIES

Union-initiated lawsuits hamstrung the government’s young talent pipeline when the Federal Career Internship Program (FCIP) was discontinued in 2010. The hiring programs that have replaced the viable internship program, FCIP, have largely been ineffective, and the government workforce under age 30 is now a paltry 8%. The Biden Administration is making important investments to hire 35,000 interns in 2023, but action from Congress is needed to help repair the government’s talent pipeline and modernize its approach to recruitment and hiring.

- Improve competitive service hiring by adopting the Chance to Compete Act.
- Take skills-first approach to hiring, including by eliminating unnecessary degree requirements and recognizing the value of certificates, boot camps, micro-credentials, and the like.
- Pursue implementation and passage into law of recommendations of the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service (H.R. 6415, Inspire to Serve Act of 2020).
- SEA identified a subset of these [recommendations for policymakers to prioritize](#).

REFORMING SES PAY AND PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

The SES performance management system is the basis for determining pay levels, performance awards and annual ratings for each Senior Executive. The current system requires reform to ensure that it is applied consistently, fairly, and transparently. Reforms to the system would restore the confidence of employees and Congress that the system is holding Senior Executives accountable for individual and organizational performance. SEA proposes several solutions:

- Require political appointees to be subject to same performance standards as the workforce.
- End the separation of senior level pay systems to ensure consistent application across government;
- Increase transparency in the ratings process, including explanation of ratings levels and requiring agencies to publicly post ratings and performance data;
- Restore locality pay and delink SES pay from the Executive Schedule to provide an annual increase based on the General Schedule increase;
- Assure increase of base salary for new entrants into the Senior Executive Service.

OVERHAUL THE FEDERAL BUDGET PROCESS

During the modern budget era, Congress has only been able to fully fund the government on-time with the rules it sets for itself *four* times, and has shut down the government *four* times in the past decade. Constant Continuing Resolutions (CRs) and the inability to address issues by portfolio dramatically limit the effectiveness of investing taxpayer dollars. SEA encourages Congress to enable agencies to manage and execute funds for the full year.

- Congress restoring a functioning budget process is key to driving real change in the federal government. The First Branch of Government doing its job to fund government enables career leaders to execute the laws of this nation.
- Move to biennial budgeting, provide agencies with workforce funding target levels to facilitate planning and investment.
- Multi-year budgets that allow agencies to manage long-term, strategic budget and contracting decisions to ensure the most effective use of funds.
 - SEA believes agencies could re-allocate one third of their procurement, finance, and legal staff to other mission-focused activities simply by Congress and the Administration passing governmental budgets on-time, every-time. Uncertainty and chaos wastes money.
- [Mobilize capital investment](#) to accelerate government modernization.
- Reimagine the budget process and agency/program structure. Does every Department need each of its bureaus to have their own fully staffed HR, IT, Finance, Procurement mission support operations? *Consider a FITARA type law for each of the mission support functions.*
- Address duplication, fragmentation and overlap in programs and organizational structure, using GAO's report as a guide.
- Create within OMB a Human Capital cross-cutting RMO that looks at human capital spending and policy across the entire federal government to ensure alignment and effectiveness across the enterprise and at individual agencies as well as at the traditional civil service oversight agencies.

SEA will vigilantly oppose legislation that unjustly targets federal employees, including broad pay freezes, changing annuity calculations from a High-3 to High-5, and broad workforce reductions.

Contact SEA

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