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Subject: Federal Insider: Beware: Chaffetz committee plans broad agenda affecting federal workers

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By Joe Davidson

House Oversight Committee Chairman Jason Chaffetz (R-Utah) leaves a Republican conference meeting with Vice President-elect Mike Pence in November. (Photo by J. Lawler Duggan/For The Washington Post)

Feds should watch out.

With Capitol Hill Republicans empowered and emboldened by the coming presidency of Donald Trump, federal employees should get ready for a range of potentially significant changes being prepared in the House.

That even could include good news for some, but many others better beware.

Rep. Jason Chaffetz (R-Utah), chairman of the [House Oversight and Government Reform Committee](#), plans a broad and far-reaching committee agenda that includes measures to fire feds faster, pay some feds more and change the retirement system for new hires, of whom there would be fewer.

He even wants agencies to consider locating more government operations outside the nation's capital in an effort he dubbed "Divest DC," a moniker sure to turn the stomachs of local officials.

Let's look at each of these items and few more he discussed with reporters Monday.

Fire feds faster: This was urged by top Trump advisers during the campaign. Chaffetz plans to specifically target employees who have engaged in sexual

harassment and misconduct. He said those issues should be better defined and the penalties more clearly articulated. Chaffetz recalled several hearings where managers complained of being unable to fire people who engaged in sexual misconduct. He called for disciplining staffers “in a much swifter manner.”

While he focused on sexual misbehavior, Chaffetz indicated civil service protections generally “allow far too much leniency to go out for far too long.” As the incoming chairman two years ago, he told me the law slashing workplace appeal rights for Department of Veterans Affairs senior executives [should be extended to all feds](#).

Federal employee retirement: Chaffetz wants retirement plans for new federal employees to move away from pensions, or “defined benefit” programs that rely on employer contributions, and lean more on employee funding through a system in which the government would make a “defined contribution.” Uncle Sam could even chip in more than he does to the 401 (k)-like personal investment program for federal staffers. Utah adopted this, he said, saving “billions and billions of dollars.” That may be good for Uncle Sam’s bottom line, but it probably means that individual workers would pay more out of pocket.

Hiring freeze: Trump has promised to [freeze federal hiring](#) during his first 100 days in office. He’ll find a partner in Chaffetz. “We have good-quality federal workers,” he said, “but we have too many of them.” Compared with the nation’s population, however, the size of the workforce has declined significantly since the 1960s. Chaffetz is considering legislation that would allow agencies to hire only one employee for every two or three who leave. But he said some agencies, such as the Secret Service, are understaffed.

More than [100 Democrats sent a letter to Trump](#) on Monday asking him to reconsider his hiring freeze plan because it “would decrease transparency, efficiency, and accountability in the federal government,” said a statement from the office of Rep. Stephen F. Lynch (D-Mass.), who led the letter.

Federal pay: This is one item of good news for a limited segment of federal employees. “There are some areas where we are probably going to have to pay people more money,” he said, citing in-demand workers such as cyber experts in a very competitive market. Last year, Congress approved his legislation to provide back pay for previously [uncompensated Secret Service overtime](#).

Other items on Chaffetz’s agenda include:

Divest D.C.: Chaffetz suggested that Congress could easily pass a measure pushing agencies to do a cost-benefit analysis comparing the costs of placing operations in the District with other locations. This, he added, could lead to a “more reflective government” and save money because the District is expensive, while helping local economies elsewhere.

“Everything in the federal government doesn’t need to reside in Washington, D.C.,” he said. Of course, everything doesn’t. About [85 percent of federal employees](#) are outside the greater Washington area.

Postal changes: Chaffetz is optimistic that a bipartisan restructuring measure to aid the financially struggling U.S. Postal Service will see action in the first 90 days of the newly installed Congress.

Hillary Clinton: Having lost the election to Trump, she is gone from the national spotlight, but not forgotten by Chaffetz. He will continue “full throttle” to seek State Department documents related to her tenure as secretary of

state.

Israel: Although the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee generally doesn't tackle foreign affairs, Chaffetz said he may use the vast reach of his panel to examine the Obama administration's decision to abstain from a United Nations resolution against Israeli settlements. The abstention, he said, "seems fishy at best," although did not say what was fishy about it.

But how does the U.N. vote fit into the mandate of his committee? Chaffetz's answer is telling:

"We can investigate anything anytime."

Read more:

[\[The faulty logic behind Trump's plan to freeze federal hiring\]](#)

[\[Chaffetz, incoming committee chair, seeks to fire 'bad apples' in federal workforce\]](#)

[\[The troubled lives of Secret Service agents\]](#)

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