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Subject: Federal Insider: Outgoing OPM chief hits incoming GOP policies on hiring and firing feds

Outgoing OPM chief hits incoming GOP policies on hiring and firing feds

By Joe Davidson

Beth Cobert, acting director of the Office of Personnel Management, testifies on Capitol Hill in February. (Manuel Balce Ceneta/Associated Press)

Beth Cobert was named acting director of the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) soon after news broke about the cybertheft of personal information belonging to 22 million federal employees, contractors, applicants and their families.

She leaves office this week as the federal workforce faces other potential afflictions — incoming Trump administration policies and increasingly aggressive Republican efforts to plunder workplace protections.

With workplace-related pledges by President-elect Donald Trump looming, coupled with congressional actions and proposals, the federal workforce is bracing for a turbulent term.

Cobert, during an exit interview with Washington Post reporters and without mentioning anyone's name, cautioned against a broad hiring freeze of the kind that Trump has proposed, and she warned about the dangers of congressional assaults on civil service due-process rights.

So while the future gives workers reason to worry, OPM's recent past is a source of pride for Cobert, even if some of it stems from efforts to correct the agency's biggest debacle — the [massive electronic pilfering](#) of personnel records that included Social Security numbers and, in some cases, fingerprints.

“I spent a lot of time on cyber. That was an incredibly important effort,” said Cobert, who took office in July 2015. “We’ve made a ton of progress. We are much stronger, and we’ve taken those lessons and spread them all across government.”

In her [exit memo](#) this month, Cobert said OPM’s “overarching focus has been to modernize the way OPM supports agencies, current and former Federal employees, and their families” to allow the federal workforce to better serve the people. She cited actions to improve employee recruiting, hiring, retention and engagement. In addition to major increases in the employment of veterans and people with disabilities, her memo says, “OPM finalized a new policy to ‘[ban the box](#)’ for [Federal employment](#) by delaying inquiries into criminal history until a conditional offer has been made.”

Those actions might be safe from Republican proposals for change, but workplace protections are not.

The House has already reinstated the largely forgotten [Holman Rule](#), an obscure but potentially treacherous measure that makes no mention of due process while allowing Congress to cut the pay of individual federal employees. Last year, the [House approved legislation](#) sharply undercutting due process for senior executives across the government, mimicking a 2014 law that attacked civil service protections for Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) executives. Rep. Todd Rokita (R-Ind.) said he will soon reintroduce his bill allowing political appointees to fire federal employees for “[no cause at all](#).”

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Cobert says slashing civil protections like this is bad for Uncle Sam's business.

"There is a critical role for due process. There is a critical role for making sure decisions are not politically motivated," she said during the interview, adding that "those underlying principles" have to be maintained. "We need great people to come to work for the federal government."

Cobert said due process protections "make our civil service stronger" by allowing employees to live without "an atmosphere of fear."

Although President Obama was late to stand up for the workplace rights of VA senior executives, his administration called for civil service reform, which would include how employees are held accountable, Cobert said. But nothing came of it. "After lots of conversations we had with the Hill, there was not an appetite to take it up," she said.

There could be fewer great people joining the civil service because of [Trump's promise](#) to impose "a hiring freeze on all federal employees to reduce the federal workforce through attrition," exempting military, public safety and public health, during his first 100 days in office, Cobert suggested.

In addition, she said, "an across-the-board hiring freeze gets in the way of delivering services and also prevents, in my mind, smart decisions on where do we need those people."

She also pushed federal managers to [confront unconscious bias](#) in their hiring and promotion practices. Women and Latinos are severely under-represented in the Senior Executive Service (SES), though the female rate is "significantly higher, about double" the private sector, according to Cobert.

"Probably the most unconscious bias exhibited during the hiring process is the 'like me' bias," Cobert said at a diversity and inclusion summit in April. "The 'like me' bias means leaders and managers typically look to hire or promote people who look like themselves. A white male will select a white male, for example."

She praised the Agriculture Department for significantly increasing the diversity of its SES pool by using a blind review process in which managers initially did not know the race or gender of candidates.

The government has an obligation "to treat people fairly. ... That's just the right thing to do," she added during the conversation with journalists.

Discrimination, explicit or implicit, limits "our ability to bring in talent to do the

important work that needs to be done.”

She added: “We need all the talent we can get here, and when we assume that only some of the people have that talent, we are missing opportunity.”

Eric Yoder contributed to this report.

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