



COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

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Hearing Statement of Chairman Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS)

Seventeen Years Later: Why is Employee Morale at DHS Still Low?

January 14, 2020

At a similar hearing before this Committee nearly eight years ago, I lamented that 11 years into the Department's existence, it remained at or near the bottom in federal government morale rankings. I am disappointed to say that little has changed in the ensuing years. The Department continues to be plagued with low morale and employee dissatisfaction and remains ranked at the bottom of federal human capital surveys. In rankings recently released by the Partnership for Public Service, the Department is the worst-rated of 17 large federal agencies. The Department also ranks last among large agencies in the following categories: training, teamwork, work-life balance, and support for diversity, among others. Given its mission, this crisis is not just about human capital management. It is about the security of our country. More than 200,000 employees who serve every day at the Department are dedicated in their effort to keep our country safe. They are committed to their mission, and according to Office of Personnel Management survey data 87% believe the work they do is important. This is, ultimately, a failure in leadership.

According to the Partnership for Public Service's analysis, effective leadership is the key driver in overall employee morale. Unfortunately, in 2019, the Department ranked as the worst large federal agency in the "effective leadership" category. And Office of Personnel Management survey data shows that less than half of DHS employees have a high level of respect for the Department's senior leaders. This crisis requires urgent action. In his exit memorandum, former Secretary of Homeland Security Jeh Johnson cited the need "for an aggressive campaign to improve morale and satisfaction at the Department." Yet I am concerned that low morale is not being treated with the necessary urgency. For example, right now, thirteen senior leadership roles throughout the Department are filled by acting officials who have little empowerment to implement the kind of organizational change needed to improve employee morale.

And after three years of slight improvement in morale, the Partnership's data show that employee morale decreased again in 2019. As such, one of the first pieces of legislation I introduced this Congress was the "Department of Homeland Security Morale, Recognition, Learning, and Engagement Act (DHS Morale Act). The bill would create and catalogue leadership development opportunities and would create an Employee Engagement Steering Committee to identify and address issues affecting morale. It also would also authorize the Secretary to establish an award program to recognize employees for significant contributions to the Department's goals and mission. The DHS MORALE Act has been endorsed by the National Border Patrol Council, the National Treasury Employees Union, and the American Federation of Government Employees – unions representing a large swath of the Department's employees.

I was encouraged to learn that the Department recently launched an Employee and Family Readiness Council, made up of representatives from all the Components, to identify and begin to address some of the primary concerns raised by employees. I hope to hear more from Chief Human Capital Officer Bailey about these efforts and see evidence that DHS is treating this morale problem with the urgency it deserves.

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