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House of Representatives

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Opening Statement of Chairman Gerald E. Connolly Hearing on “The Future of Federal Work” December 1, 2021

I want to welcome you to this hearing, requested specifically by Ranking Member Hice earlier this year as part of our work together on the Chai Suthammanont Remembrance Act (H.R. 978), a bill that would help ensure that federal workplaces remain safe amid and following a pandemic. And while efforts on that bill have currently stalled, I trust that my Ranking Member remains steadfast in his commitment to Floor consideration of this critical legislation.

In September 2019, just a few months prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States, this subcommittee held a prescient hearing on how to build an effective federal workforce in the 21st century. What a difference two years makes in how we think about work, the workplace, employment, and employees.

In December 2019, Congress—led entirely by the Democratic majority—enacted the Federal Employee Paid Leave Act (H.R. 1534), which, as of October 2020, provides up to 12 weeks of paid leave to new parents.

Then, in early Spring 2020, the pandemic served as a cudgel for many federal agencies to embrace telework. Government simply had to adapt to ensure the continuity of government operations and services to the American people at the time they needed government the most.

What we learned in these last two years is that federal employees continue to serve this nation no matter how difficult the circumstances.

And while so much has changed in two years, some things remain stalwart. First, the need to educate, attract, and onboard the next generation of federal employees has never been greater.

- Only about 6.9% of federal employees are under the age of 30, compared to 23% in the private sector.
- Nearly 30% of federal employees are over the age of 55, with potentially one-third of the federal workforce eligible to retire over the next few years.

These numbers are staggering. Yet, data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics show that recruitment of early career individuals is not that difficult to achieve in the private sector.

If you look at the screen, you will see this discrepancy. The red bars show the age distribution of employees nation-wide. Watch as the figure transitions to the age distribution of the federal workforce, in blue. Young employees make up a much smaller fraction of the federal government than they do nationwide.

The workforce is the lifeblood of our federal government. Without people committed to public service, taxpayers, vulnerable populations, small businesses, and others will not be able to get the resources and services they need. If we fail to attract and hire the best and brightest to federal service, our nation suffers.

Despite years of effort, strategic human capital management of the federal workforce remains on the Government Accountability Office’s (GAO) High Risk List. GAO notes that myriad items on their High Risk List are a result of the federal government’s inability to close skill gaps and hire, train, and staff up particularly critical federal

staff.

Some of those critical skills gaps involve the financial management of the Department of Defense's weapons system acquisition workforce, the enforcement of our federal tax laws, ensuring the cybersecurity of our most sensitive information, effective vetting of our national security workforce, purchasing agile information technology to deliver federal services to the public, and providing accessible and quality health care to our veterans.

At this hearing we will focus on three areas that, taken together, will help government find and onboard early career talent, retain high-performing employees, and ensure that the federal government equitably serves all communities. These initiatives include:

- More effectively leveraging federal internships as talent pools for early career civil servants;
- Offering greater workplace flexibilities and benefits to attract top-level talent to federal service—including telework flexibilities; and
- Ensuring that the federal workforce reflects the communities it serves—at all levels of government.

The federal government provides only 4,000 formal paid internships at any given time. And even those individuals struggle to move into federal service at the culmination of their internship.

Meanwhile, the federal government's private sector competitors offered jobs to approximately 96% of their interns in the last three years. Nearly all those who received offers, accepted.

In a Harris poll published in 2019, the U.S. government's reputation ranked last in comparison to 100 top companies. Last. Simply put, individuals graduating from top schools are not attracted to federal service. We need to change this.

As a foundational component of my efforts to attract and onboard early career individuals into government, today I will introduce the Building the Next Generation of Federal Employees Act, or the NextGen Feds Act. The bill codifies existing successful internship programs and brings uniformity and basic best practices to other federal internships across the government.

This legislation will:

- Require agencies to incorporate agreed-upon best practices into their internship programs, including mentorships and exit interviews;
- Establish a federal internship and fellowship center within the Office of Personnel Management;
- Direct the creation of an online federal government internship platform for use by agencies and those seeking internships as a one-stop shop for all information and internship applications;
- Establish a pilot program to recruit potential federal employees in underserved markets and underrepresented demographics;
- Foster diversity and inclusion by requiring federal agencies to pay their interns; and
- Provide hiring advantages to interns who successfully complete at least one year of federal internship service.

The bill is endorsed by the National Active and Retired Federal Employees organization, represented by Mr. Thomas on the witness stand today, as well as the International Federation of Professional & Technical Engineers, and the National Federation of Federal Employees.

I want to highlight particularly important provisions in this bill. As I noted, the bill seeks to ensure that all federal interns are paid. These provisions ensure that internships are not only available to students whose parents can afford to pay for them to live and work near federal agencies. Also, importantly, paying interns ensures they have protections against discrimination and workplace harassment, and protections against discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. Amazingly, unpaid interns have to pay to work and receive no

workplace protections against harassment and discrimination. My bill will vest them with these essential protections.

This hearing will also explore the expectations of our current and future federal workforce in terms of job flexibilities and benefits. Preliminary findings show that the move to telework largely increased employee productivity. A March 2021 Department of Defense Inspector General survey of more than 56,000 personnel found that 91.1% of employees said their productivity either remained the same or improved while teleworking during the pandemic.

The Office of Personnel Management's Fiscal Year 2019 Report to Congress on the Status of Telework in the Federal Government shows that teleworkers are more engaged in and satisfied with their jobs.

Just more than a week ago, the Biden Administration released telework guidance to assist agencies as they design their post-pandemic telework plans. The guidance encourages agencies not to return to a pre-pandemic telework posture, and instead to build off the successes of telework across the federal space.

The federal government must employ these lessons, particularly if we seek to build a generation of public servants who reflect the communities, businesses, and families they serve.

We also eagerly await the Administration's pending 2020 telework report to provide data and evidence that demonstrate the increased use and increased benefits of telework.

And I plan to soon introduce the Telework Metrics and Cost Savings Act, which would, among other things, prohibit agency leaders from unilaterally prohibiting telework and require agencies to quantify and report on the costs savings incurred through increased telework.

We also want to ensure that the federal workforce—at all levels—reflects the people it serves. People of color make up only 47% of the professional federal workforce, 33% of our senior level positions, and 23% of our Senior Executive Service.

The figure on the screen shows the percentage of people of color at each grade on the federal pay scale—from entry level to senior executive. It's abysmal.

We also have a lack of gender diversity in our senior-level positions.

As the slide shows, women make up 58% of all full-time, entry-level employees, but only 36% are Senior Executives.

Government must reconsider the ways in which it attracts and supports individuals from all backgrounds—and provide them the appropriate career tools and training to grow to leaders within their organizations. And while 85% of the federal workforce lives outside the beltway, increasing telework opportunities could further help the government hire outside of urban centers and better reflect all congressional districts—including more rural communities like those served by the Ranking Member and other members on this Subcommittee.

Federal agencies must be clear-eyed about meeting young people, government's future leaders, where they're at. It is ridiculous to think that anyone can walk up to a graduating student and invite them to a 30-year position with the government—and the student will accept. That is just not how things work anymore.

I look forward to working with my colleagues to enact my internship legislation as well as other forthcoming bills to enhance telework opportunities and foster a more diverse and equitable federal workforce.

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