



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT
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Testimony of Towanda A. Brooks
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Before the U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform,
Subcommittee on Government Operations

On

“Best Places to Work in the Federal Government”

April 27, 2016

Chairman Meadows, Ranking Member Connolly, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to testify on behalf of the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) regarding the best places to work in the federal government.

I became the Chief Human Capital Officer (CHCO) for the Department of Housing and Urban Development in 2015 and have been a member of the Senior Executive Service since May 2009. As CHCO, I lead HUD’s Office of the Chief Human Capital Officer (OCHCO), and oversee implementation of the Department’s human capital management strategies, policies and initiatives in support of HUD’s mission. I am also responsible for the delivery of HUD-wide human capital programs including the senior executive program; learning and development; recruitment and staffing; employee and labor relations; performance management; and overseeing the shared service provider

HUD’s mission is to create strong, sustainable, inclusive communities and quality affordable homes for all. It is our nearly 8,000 employees who carry out the Department’s mission on behalf of millions of hard-working American families in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, U.S. Territories and the four Insular Areas every day. The link between an employee’s engagement and mission accomplishment is well documented in private and public sector research, as well as in HUD’s own experience. When we use employee engagement as a measure of success for the Department, we make HUD a better workplace and in turn improve outcomes for the American people.

The best available measure for employee engagement in the federal service is the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (EVS). In 2015, HUD was recognized by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) as the most improved agency for employee engagement and by the Partnership for Public Service as the Most Improved Mid-Sized Agency on their annual Best Places to Work in the Federal Government index. The Department improved its EVS scores on 69 out of 71 questions – with an average increase of nearly five percentage points (two points

indicates significant movement). Notably, our Employee Engagement score rose to 61.8 percent, HUD's second highest mark since OPM began keeping records and just short of our all-time high in 2012. HUD also was the most improved agency in the government on "The New IQ," a measure of workplace inclusion and empowerment. HUD increased a full five points, while the government overall only increased 1 point. Employees ranked their leaders and supervisors 6 percent and 5 percent higher than the prior the year, and their overall view of their jobs improved 5 percent. And a record number of employees filled out the survey – HUD achieved its highest participation rate on record, as 74 percent of its employees took the survey. In 2014, HUD's level of participation was just 51 percent. After HUD's 2015 EVS results, the Office of Management and Budget Office of Performance and Personnel Management requested that HUD present to the employee engagement senior accountable officials in order to highlight how the Department increased its FEVS response rate, which was recognized as a best practice.

HUD's improved employee engagement scores are due in large part to the commitment made by HUD's most senior leaders. Secretary Castro and Deputy Secretary Coloretti have made employee engagement a sustained priority, and they have shown employees that their feedback is taken seriously. The Secretary and Deputy Secretary placed a strong emphasis on responding to employees' requests through HUD's internal social media tools, including HUDConnect, which provides ways to directly solicit and receive employee feedback. They also prioritize meeting with employees in HUD Headquarters and in its Regional and Field Offices and through regular town halls. These efforts have provided HUD employees with the opportunity to tell senior leadership about what is working well as well as the challenges and concerns they might face. In addition, the Deputy Secretary is carrying out an ambitious management agenda through a series of collaborative Deep Dive projects aimed at strengthening the Department. Findings and recommendations resulting from the Deep Dive projects are shared with employees so they can see what decisions were made, and more importantly, why they were made.

We also attribute HUD's increase in employee engagement to proactively sharing the 2014 and 2015 EVS results with its employees. We provided opportunities to all HUD employees to access and interpret the EVS results. In particular, we provided detailed briefings for managers, identifying not just areas of strength and opportunity, but appropriate peer offices for comparisons and sharing best practices. As a result, managers were able to learn more about the experiences of their career employees – not just at the agency level, but often at the individual office and division levels. These steps have led to real change in our various program offices. For example, an office within the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) saw that their staff desired more robust communication from managers in order to perform their jobs more effectively. To address this concern, FHA created more avenues for communication, including putting up office white boards to track progress towards office goals, providing information about office-wide updates, and to share some fun information for co-workers.

Currently, HUD is engaged in a planning process that ensures employee engagement will remain a priority in 2016 and beyond. OCHCO is continuing to refine its communication skills and listening approaches to make sure that employees and leadership receive timely, accurate information. OCHCO is the primary point of contact for OPM's administration of the EVS to HUD employees, with responsibility for communications and guidance around employee participation. We are continuing to provide all HUD employees with access to HUD's EVS data

so they understand the opportunities and challenges in their work unit, and how the changes they make contribute to HUD's ability to meet our mission.

I have served 26 years in the federal government, and I know from experience that having a committed workforce is essential to delivering the best service to the American people. One of the most important measures of the quality of a federal workplace is the engagement of its employees. As such, while managing OCHCO operations, I have also championed leadership development, diversity and inclusion, and employee engagement.

Every day, HUD is working to strengthen the housing market to bolster the economy and protect consumers; meet the need for quality affordable rental homes; utilize housing as a platform for improving quality of life; build inclusive and sustainable communities free from discrimination; and transform the way HUD does business. HUD's nearly 8,000 employees are essential to fulfilling our mission. Their success is HUD's success and I am proud to serve them and the American people.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.



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Towanda A. Brooks serves as the Chief Human Capital Officer (CHCO) for the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and has been a member of the Senior Executive Service since May 2009. Ms. Brooks' current responsibilities include leading the Department's human capital management strategies, policies and initiatives in support of HUD's mission. She is also responsible for the delivery of human capital programs to include senior executive program; learning and development; recruitment and staffing; employee labor relations; and performance management. Prior to her current position, Ms. Brooks served as the Deputy Chief Human Capital Officer (DCHCO)/Associate General Deputy Assistant Secretary, for the Office of the Chief Human Capital Officer (OCHCO). While managing the OCHCO operations, she championed leadership development, diversity and inclusion, and employee engagement. Ms. Brooks is also credited with facilitating the Department's recent 1000+ hires and the Strategic Human Capital Plan and the Strategic Workforce Plan. Both plans had not been published in almost 10 years.

Prior to arriving at HUD, from 2009 to 2013, Ms. Brooks has served as the Director for the Human Resources Operations Center (DOCHROC), Office of Human Resources Management, Office of the Secretary, with the Department of Commerce. She led a dynamic team of human resources professionals providing customer-focused, efficient and flexible human resources services to six bureaus within the Department of Commerce. As the Director of a shared service provider organization, she oversaw a comprehensive human resources management program, and led the organization through significant administrative cost savings by reducing her staff footprint and accomplishing their mission with distinction. Ms. Brooks also served as an Executive Sponsor for Organizational Excellence Initiative designed to improve and streamline their human capital programs. She was recognized with a Performance Excellence Award in October 2011 for recognition for outstanding performance in performance management.

Prior to her appointment to the SES at the Department of Commerce, Ms. Brooks has served at the National Nuclear Security Administration, Department of Energy, as the Assistant Director, Office of Human Capital Management Programs; the United States Secret Service, Personnel Division, Department of Homeland Security as the Human Resources Officer and Division Chief; the Library of Congress as the Assistant Human Resources Officer; and the Department of Agriculture as the Branch Chief of the Riverdale/Washington Human Resources Office, Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service.

Ms. Brooks completed HUD's Senior Executive Development Program in 2014 and the Federal-wide Coaching Program sponsored by OPM and HHS. In 2012, Ms. Brooks completed a Certificate Program at Georgetown University in Government Executive Leadership. Ms. Brooks attended the Federal Executive Institute in 2008. She holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in English Writing from George Mason University and a Master's of Arts degree in English Literature from American University.

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