

September 4, 2020

Mary Pope Hutson, Chairwoman  
National Park System Advisory Board

Subject: Recommendations for Workforce Development

Dear Chairwoman Hutson:

The Workforce Planning Committee of the National Park System Advisory Board is pleased to recommend specific actions to enhance the National Park Service and benefit NPS employees who are entrusted with the care of our Nation's treasures. Specifically, we provide recommendations to

1. *Aid implementation of the Great American Outdoors Act through workforce development.* With Congressional passage and the President's signature on the *Great American Outdoors Act*, the opportunity finally lies before us to reduce our Parks' maintenance backlog and protect our resources. Yet, to reduce the backlog in cultural resources, trained and skilled crafts people who can preserve historical structures and landscapes will be needed to complete the work. The NPS Facilities Maintenance Software System (FMSS) catalogs and prioritizes those preservation needs for brick, earth, stone, and timber, from log cabins in the Great Smokys' Cades Cove to the masonry preservation at Chaco Canyon and the cultural landscape at Valley Forge. It is the Committee's recommendation that the historic preservation work is assured by investing in the maintenance workforce necessary to achieve these specialized tasks.

- The basic courses in historic preservation, documentation, and maintenance that were cancelled in 020 at both the Maryland and Colorado facilities should be rescheduled and expanded as soon as possible. Where necessary, the resources of Harpers Ferry can be utilized to develop video/online courses in order to attract and educate as many employees as possible for the basic learning in a short period of time, especially during the pandemic.
- Tuition for all courses should be reduced to the lowest level in order to remove cost as a barrier to potential crafts people.

NPS leadership in WASO, in the Regions, and at the Park level should encourage and support efforts to train and develop the workforce necessary to properly maintain all types of historic structures. NPS maintenance is not only necessary for roads and campgrounds, but to preserve unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values of the National Park System for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations.

2. *Increase NPS employee satisfaction and engagement through the use of scores and information from the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS).*

Various comprehensive reports, in the 1980's, through the 1991 *Vail Agenda*, and including the NPS Advisory Board's *Rethinking the National Parks for the 21st Century*, all recognized the vital importance of the NPS workforce. Yet, insufficient attention has been paid to developing that workforce. There seems to be a general theme of pride in wearing "the green and the gray" and having such an important job in such a significant place. Regard for the organization, as measured by the FEVS however, is not so picturesque. Although the public holds the iconic

Ranger in esteem, according to FEVS responses, the internal views lack corresponding enthusiasm. When analyzing the negative scores, they echo a longing for leadership of integrity at all levels as indicated in item #53, “In my organization, leaders generate high levels of motivation and commitment in the workforce” that received only a 31% positive response.

One consistently overlooked opportunity for improving internal attitudes is the use of employee feedback from the FEVS. This annual survey measures employees’ perceptions about the factors that influence employee motivation to join, stay, and help the agency meet its mission—the definition of employee engagement. As the FEVS measures employee engagement, it provides an opportunity for employees to influence change by offering feedback. In the past, the agency, has missed the opportunity to take full advantage of the FEVS and the information it offers. Despite consistently low rankings in the bottom quartile of Federal agencies, little attention has been given to ameliorating the employees’ frustrations.

According to the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), the agency that administers the survey, and the Best Places to Work in the Federal Government, published by the Partnership for Public Service, the 2019 NPS survey response rate was a sound 51%, compared to the government-wide response rate of 43%, meaning that many employees are trying to send a message. Even more telling is the response to the survey question, “I believe the results of this survey will be used to make my agency a better place to work.” In 2019, the NPS positive response was only 34%.

It is concerning to trace the annual survey results since 2012 and see that, as much as employees believe in the work they do and are committed to the mission, members of this beloved agency express vexation and low regard for being an employee within organization. For example, item #67 received only a 37% positive response, “How satisfied are you with your opportunity to get a better job in your organization?” If this is truly employees’ view, then it may negatively impact their future and their performance.

In 2016, the Department of Interior published Personnel Bulletin #16-14 with the goal to improve employee engagement. This Bulletin clearly states what is expected of each Bureau relating to the FEVS results. Some Parks have followed this directive with positive outcomes, but unfortunately, not all of NPS leadership has followed the process for improving morale and employee engagement in the total organization.

There could be considerable value in the implementation of DoI Bulletin #16-14. Its specific suggestions for structure and communications would make better use of the FEVS and enable leaders to listen to and respond transparently to employee feedback. Some of the following practices from that Bulletin include.

- Hold NPS leaders at all levels accountable for discussing FEVS results annually with employees and commit to implementing real changes to improve workplace culture.
- Hold leaders at all levels accountable for discussing FEVS results with their employees, and developing plans to address one to three areas for improvement for the year.
- Include training for facilitating employee feedback sessions in the Supervisor Support Initiative.
- All NPS organizations utilize FEVS data to track progress on strategic outcomes and actions.
- Recognize Parks and units that have increased or maintained high FEVS scores.

The results of implementing the above practices will be apparent in improving 2021 FEVS scores, moving the NPS from the bottom quartile to a star agency in the Department of Interior,

and making the NPS a great place to work in a great culture. With the implementation of the resources already in place, we can look forward to a 2021 celebration with the Director when FEVS scores will be at the top of DoI.

Our efforts to support the NPS are intended to enhance the fabled agency and increase public value of our Parks. It is our honor and pleasure to serve the Advisory Board and to develop recommendations for consideration.

Sincerely,  
Zelma Lansford, Ed.D. and Dr. Les Moore  
Co-Chairs, Workforce Planning Committee  
National Park System Advisory Board

September 4, 2020

Mary Pope Hutson, Chairwoman  
National Park System Advisory Board

Subject: Update on Emotional and Mental Health Program Review

Dear Chairwoman Hutson:

The Workforce Planning Committee of the National Park System Advisory Board (Board) is currently working to develop a detailed and robust set of recommendations to help increase the National Park Service's (NPS) ability to provide emotional and mental health support to its employees. We anticipate delivering these recommendations to the Board at its next scheduled meeting in December 2020, however we felt it important to update you on our current efforts and progress as we feel strongly that it is an issue worthy of Board attention.

The NPS is overburdened by a repairs deficit and understaffing which has accumulated over decades that we believe has led to increased stress and decreased morale. Stress, overwork, and traumatic events faced by employees of the NPS can lead to burnout and post-traumatic stress disorder. All of this is compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic and civil unrest. Morale is among the lowest of federal agencies according to the most recent Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey.

The burden for addressing this morale and stress currently falls upon the Director, superintendents, human resources, and the Office of Risk Management in Visitor and Resource Protection, none of whom are professionally trained, prepared, or equipped for the management of suicide prevention and morale monitoring. Other civil service agencies utilize mental health specialists for suicide prevention, morale assessment, resiliency, post-traumatic events, disasters, and grief and bereavement. Many uniformed services – specifically the military and law enforcement agencies – utilize professional chaplains in this role as well. Within the NPS there is currently no full-time mental health specialist assisting with suicide prevention, wellness, and resiliency policy and program development. This is an organizational structure issue that we believe can be remedied with minimal changes.

The Workforce Planning Committee is in the process of assessing the Wellness and Resilience Branch and whether inclusion of a mental health specialist position - or other positions – would be effective and efficient in helping the Director address morale, suicide prevention, health, and traumatic events. We are also examining recommendations to help the NPS build a comprehensive program to focus on a range of health and resiliency issues including: development of policy and guidance; initiatives to build resilience; leadership engagement and supervisory supports; expansion of existing available resources; and development of a network of Federal, state, and local resources.

These are complex but essential issues for the NPS, which is why we are taking additional time to fully develop recommendations for Board consideration. But the immediacy of the issues motivates us to bring our work to your attention without further delay.

Sincerely,  
Zelma Lansford, Ed.D. and Dr. Les Moore  
Co-Chairs, Workforce Planning Committee  
National Park System Advisory Board