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FEW Washington Update February 15-29, 2020

Reaction to Federal Pay Cuts in The President's Budget

President Donald Trump has proposed a 1 percent raise for civilian federal workers next year — an increase that's less than half of what was scheduled.

The White House said in a [message to Congress](#) that the President views the planned 2.5 percent pay increase for federal workers as “inappropriate,” noting that presidents can put in place alternate pay adjustment plans in case of “national emergency or serious economic conditions affecting the general welfare.”

The President's message further stated that “We must maintain efforts to put our Nation on a fiscally sustainable course. Federal agency budgets cannot sustain such increases,” adding that under his plan locality pay rates will remain at 2020 levels. Groups representing federal workers rejected his proposal.

“In just three short years, we have [shattered the mentality of American Decline](#) and we have rejected the downsizing of America's destiny. We have totally rejected the downsizing,” Trump said, according to CNN. “We are moving forward at a pace that was unimaginable just a short time ago, and we are never, ever going back.”

Still, President Trump's proposed 1 percent federal worker raise is [more than he has offered](#) in the past, according to Government Executive, which reports that “in each of the last two years, Trump pushed for a pay freeze before ultimately agreeing to a raise” — with “average 1.9 percent and 3.1 percent increases ... enacted for 2019 and 2020, respectively.”

The President's message to Congress downplayed potential impacts of slashing the planned pay increase. “This alternative pay plan decision will not materially affect our ability to attract and retain a well-qualified Federal workforce,” his message said.

But at least one group representing federal workers rejected that argument. Ken Thomas, president of the National Active and Retired Federal Employees (NARFE) association specifically targeted President Trump's proposed 1 percent raise for criticism, saying it "fails to keep pace with private-sector increases and the raise allotted to military members." According to the Government Executive publication, "military service members ... would receive a 3 percent raise in 2021 under the White House's plan."

In Congress

House lawmakers closed out their work week with a resolution that would eliminate the deadline for ratification of a Constitutional amendment that would prohibit gender-based discrimination. Ratified by both chambers of Congress in the 1970s, the Equal Rights Amendment fell three states short of the 38-state threshold for enactment prior to the 1982 deadline. However, three states legislatures — Nevada, Illinois, and Virginia — have ratified the amendment within the past three years, thus providing it with the necessary support for enactment should Congress vote to remove the deadline. While the measure did earn some bipartisan support in final passage Thursday, February 13 a path forward for the resolution remains difficult due to opposition from the White House and a slew of GOP state attorneys.

Meanwhile, the Senate took up a "War Powers" resolution that would require President Donald Trump to withdraw any troops from military hostilities against Iran within 30 days. The resolution passed after several GOP Senators — including Sens. Susan Collins (R-ME), Mike Lee (R-UT), Rand Paul (R-KY), and Todd Young (R-IN) — voted for the measure. President Trump announced last week that he would swiftly veto the measure, and the effort is not expected to earn enough support in Congress to override his action. Senators also resumed consideration of pending presidential nominations.

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The Equal Rights Amendment (ERA)

The bipartisan vote of 232-183 included votes from 5 Republicans for the **successful passage of HJ Res 79**, the bill to remove the deadline from the 1972 ERA.

FEW is thankful to our leaders in the House, HJ Res 79 Sponsor Representative Jackie Speier, longtime ERA champion Representative Carolyn Maloney and the Leadership for bringing the bill to the floor- Speaker Nancy Pelosi, Majority Leader Steny Hoyer and Chairman Jerry Nadler.

For those of you who were not able to watch the vote or see the press conference, the links are included below.

Watch the ERA vote [here](#)

Watch Wednesday's press conference [here](#)

The effort now moves on to the Senate, with exciting news that Delaware Senators Coons and Carper co-sponsored **SJ Res 6**. The only Democrats not signed onto the legislation are now Sen. Leahy (VT) and Sen. Manchin (WV). We continue to work to gain greater bipartisan support and push for movement in the Judiciary Committee and Senate Floor.

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Sexual Harassment

Following a recent spike in the number of sexual assault and sexual harassment allegations reported by its employees, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) has rolled out mandatory training for its workforce to complete and expects to hire more staff to address the problem.

The numbers reported by NOAA over the past few years pale in comparison to the scope of the [problem at the Interior Department](#), which in 2017 reported that more than a third of its employees has experienced some form of harassment on the job.

In a 2018 report to Congress, NOAA detailed 22 allegations of sexual assault that had occurred since 2015, and its 2019 report released this week included another two assault claims.

Acting NOAA director Neil Jacobs told members of the House Natural Resources Committee that to tackle the problem, the agency needs to get a better handle on its data.

NOAA's law enforcement branch collected data on sexual assault and harassment cases for 2017, but Jacobs said it didn't know where to submit the data. As a result, those numbers first got reported in 2018, which appeared to create a spike in the data.

"We would expect, as we develop and roll out this prevention program, that the numbers may go up before they come down, because a lot of these victims don't exactly know where to report or what the proper process to take is," Jacobs said. "I wouldn't be surprised to see an increase before a decrease. But once the program is fully rolled out, I would expect to see the numbers decreasing, particularly over the next year."

Over the past 12 months, Jacobs said NOAA has done a much better job aggregating these data sets but called on the agency to create a centralized database to force it to

come up with a common format. That, he said, would allow for better analysis in real time.

“Historically, that data exists, but it’s not centralized. It’s not in a common format. If we need the information, we have to go dig it up,” he said. “In some cases, depending on where it’s collected, they may not necessarily know where to report it.”

In response to these reports, NOAA launched a mandatory training course for its employees and supervisors to complete earlier this month. So far, about 40% of its 12,000-employee workforce has completed the online course.

However, Neil Jacobs, the acting head of NOAA, said the agency doesn’t have the authority to require its contracting workforce to participate in that same training and they “probably don’t” know that these resources exist. The agency has about twice as many contractors as it does federal employees.

Members of the committee expressed concern that NOAA’s Workplace Violence Prevention and Response Program, responsible for coordinating harassment and assault reporting and training, only has a single full-time employee.

Jacobs said the agency is in the process of hiring two victim advocates. An additional three employees, he said, have received training but not credentials.

The rest of this work, he added is carried out by contractors. Jacobs said NOAA set up contracts to hire nine additional investigators last July and has driven response times down from a matter of weeks to 48 hours for harassment and assault reports.

Most of the assault and harassment claims have come from fishery observers, employees often stationed on commercial fishing ships and processing plants to collect samples and data for NOAA’s mission.

Rep. T.J. Cox (D-Calif.), chair of the oversight and investigations subcommittee, said many of those observers are recent college graduates just starting their careers.

“Federal law requires their presence on fishing vessel vessels, but that doesn’t mean crew members and captains also appreciate them being there and enforcing regulations,” Cox said.

Julie Dale, the manager of prevention and education at Standing Together Against Rape, has worked with NOAA on this issue for the past four years. She told the lawmakers that fishing crews have hazed observers, making them shuck scallops, measure crabs and even cook for the crew.

This pattern of behavior, Dale said, can escalate into assault and harassment.

“These duties are not part of the observers’ job, and the intent is to remove them from their assigned position, so they’re not able to perform their job functions,” she said. “Therein lies the power and control: If an observer refuses to participate in these behaviors, they’re not part of the team. And if they do participate, the crew then can hold over their heads that they were not at their assigned jobs.”

Failure to do these tasks can escalate this behavior and can lead to observers not having access to food, sleeping quarters, bathroom facilities or the captain’s deck.

“All of these tactics hold power and control over the observers, which contributes to the sexual violence experienced by these individuals,” Dale said.

Retirement and Pensions

Many articles have already been written about the administration’s 2020 budget and the [proposed cuts to federal retirement](#) and benefits. The budget contains a repeat of previous threats from prior budgets submitted by the current and by prior administrations.

One thing that is different this time is that the administration, through Margaret Weichert, the deputy director for management at the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), stated that the changes would only apply to future federal employees; that is, those hired after the changes are implemented.

In the past, Congress was loath to vote to cut benefits for us because they would also be cutting their own. Now, they might be more likely to support the proposed changes.

The proposed changes that will affect retirement are:

- Increasing the contributions employees make towards their FERS retirement;
- Eliminating the Retiree Annuity Supplement for FERS employees who retire at an age younger than age 62;
- Switching from a high-3 to a high-5 for computing FERS annuities;
- Eliminating the COLA from FERS pensions and cutting it by a half percent for CSRS retirees. Apparently, the administration’s pledge that the changes would only apply to future employees does not carry over to future retirees; and
- Lowering the return on the Thrift Savings Plan’s G Fund.

It may be reassuring that these changes (if implemented) will not affect current employees, but these changes are symptomatic of an attack on the institution of retirement that has been ongoing for several decades. There are some in Congress who want to do away with the FERS pension in its entirety, leaving future federal employees to rely on their TSP and Social Security.

Read more [here](#)

Efficient Federal Government

Turnover among non-career employees at United States Postal Service (USPS) fell slightly over 2018-2019 from 42.8 to 38.5 percent but that is still above the target rate of 34 percent and dissatisfaction with supervisors is a main reason, an Inspector General's (IG) report has said.

The report is the latest in a series of studies on the impact of the Postal Service's shift in recent years toward temporary workers who receive lesser pay and benefits than career employees--and are not guaranteed a set schedule. USPS estimates that it saved about \$8 billion in labor costs from fiscal years 2016 to 2019.

However, the IG's latest report, focusing on turnover of non-career employees says that management hasn't developed a single, national strategic plan for recruiting, hiring, and retaining non-career employees.

Those employees who left in 2019 had worked just 81 days for USPS on average, it added. The main reasons they cited in exit surveys were inflexible schedules, dislike of supervisors, and the physical demands of the work. Working too many or too few hours also was cited.

That was consistent with the results of the IG's own online survey, which found the top reason was "supervisors not treating employees with respect/poor management skills" and inflexible schedules. Pay, benefits and lack of advancement opportunities were also cited.

"While management said it paid attention to exit surveys, we found there was little effective follow-up on addressing concerns," says a summary. For example, offices were not provided with guidance on how to use the data from those surveys, and managers at 11 of the 28 district offices and facilities the auditors visited said they had received no training on retention.

However, it credited some facilities and offices for taking steps such as giving employees feedback and a chance to improve performance before being fired, setting standards for onboarding and training, and providing refresher training after two months on the job.

Read more [here](#)

Budget Raises Federal Workforce Concerns

Trump administration budget documents underscore a frequently raised concern about the relatively low numbers of federal employees compared with retirement-eligible employees, a gap that the documents show has widened significantly in recent years.

"The average age in the federal workforce is older than the nation's broader working population [about 46 vs about 41]. About 28.8 percent (604,000) of federal employees are older than 55. At the other end of the spectrum, only 7.3 percent (154,000) are younger than 30, compared to 23 percent of private sector workers," it says.

Those figures differ somewhat from other reports on the same topic but generally paint the same picture of an older workforce--about 15 percent of whom already are eligible to retire--and a shortage of younger employees.

It says that among the 24 CFO Act agencies--Cabinet departments and the largest independent agencies--the cohort in the workforce age 60 and up has grown from 9.4 to 13.8 percent since 2007 while the under-30 cohort has fallen from 7.6 to 6.2 percent.

Among IT workers, it adds, the change has been more significant, with the age 60 and over portion nearly doubling in that time to 14.2 percent while the under-30 portion fell from 4.1 to 2.7 percent.

Read more [here](#)

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Violence Against Women

Kendrick Tate is a mentor coordinator for the YWCA's Game Changers program, and he loves it. "It is a huge passion," he said. His passion is for curbing and preventing violence in all aspects.

"What we do is focus on mentoring to our young men teaching them how to respect women how to prevent domestic violence, sexual assault, dating violence, we teach them about consent and about bystander intervention," he said.

Here is why they started it. One in three women will experience domestic violence in their lifetime. To change that they are challenging young people to think bigger and try to stop the cycle. "It is important that we teach our young men not only how to protect our young women but how to respect them," he said.

The group spends 14 weeks meeting with young men in the community showing them the numbers, walking them through scenarios and challenging them to be and do better.

"You make that difference by being a voice for women and holding other boys and men accountable when they don't hold that Game Changers mystique," Tate said.

Tate said the thought process is to make sure young people understand healthy dynamics before it is even time for them to engage. "I want it to look like love, like value love in the sense of a relationship," he said.

However, that sometimes means answering questions about what they see at home.

"We get those questions they are tough, but it is needed so they understand how to handle that situation," he said. But no matter how tough it is Tate wants his students to know this.

"I always say this no matter where I go you cannot change the game from the sidelines you have to get involved and the way you get involved is you make a difference," he said.

According to the group's website this work has proven to do three things:

- Increase knowledge about domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking.
- Raise awareness about men's ability and responsibility to prevent violence against women and girls. Increase willingness to intervene using safe bystander intervention skills.
- Decrease negative gender stereotypes.

If that's a mission you believe in, Tate said the door to the Game Changers is open. "Come on and get involved in brotherhood and changing the game," Tate said.

You can find more info on how to get involved [here](#).

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General Interest

Military Families

One of the most comprehensive yearly surveys on military personnel finds service members and their families are stressed in key inflection points that the Defense Department is still working to get its hands around.

The 2019 Blue Star Families Lifestyle [survey](#) found for the second year in a row that financial issues are the top stressors for military families. Relocation and isolation are high on the stress scale for families as well, ranking second and third.

The survey also, for the first time, took a deep dive into the education of service members' children, and continued its probe on the reasons and issues behind military spouse unemployment.

“Family life expectations are fundamentally at odds with the unpredictable, and often inflexible, day-to-day military job demands, routine relocations, and many elements of the current defense personnel system,” the survey states. “This year’s survey results continue to illuminate this tension felt by military family respondents as issues related to family stability/quality of life.”

Forty-four percent of service members and 49 percent of spouses who responded to the survey said financial issues were their top concern. Additionally, the inability to reliably earn two incomes was a stressor for 23 percent of service members and 36 percent of spouses.

“There’s several reasons for this stress,” Jessica Strong, senior research manager for Blue Star Families, told Federal News Network. “Spouse unemployment and underemployment, that’s a perennial issue. Out-of-pocket housing costs and out-of-pocket relocation costs were the next to top financial stressors”

Relocation stress hit 44 percent of service members and 46 percent of spouses, and isolation from family and friends was a top issue for 34 percent of service members and 44 percent of spouses.

Those top three issues reflect huge areas DoD is struggling with currently. Last February, [reports](#) of mice, mold, lead paint and other substandard living conditions in privatized military housing went widespread. DoD is working with Congress and the housing companies to improve the housing situation; however, families have had to live in hotels long term, pay for repairs to houses and seek medical care because of the housing conditions.

Relocation stresses are coming as DoD is trying to award a \$2 billion contract that will centralize its household goods delivery, which will pare down the 950 vendors DoD uses to ship service members' personal items down to just one entity overseeing multiple subcontractors by 2021.

A recent DoD Inspector General [report](#) found 41 percent of shipments made by moving contractors and reviewed by the DoD Inspector General were not delivered on time.

The DoD IG states in the report that due to the untimely shipments, "DoD members and families incurred additional costs for lodging, food, and rental or purchase of household necessities, which may be compensated through an inconvenience claim."

The issue is so concerning that more than 107,000 people signed a [petition](#) to hold moving companies accountable.

"Over the last five years, the permanent change of station season has become more and more horrendous to deal with. The major moving companies awarded the contracts often subcontract out to smaller, local companies," the authors of the petition state. "These companies also do a poor job in packing and handling of the household goods."

Finally, the Pentagon is seeing its highest suicide rates since it began tracking numbers. Some experts and military officials think social isolation may be one of the factors for that.

"Military families rely on local friends, family and extended family for support during family separations, during deployments and during trainings," Strong said. "Even though they rely on that support, we found 39 percent said they had no one in their local civilian community who they felt they could talk to, and 35 percent said they had no one they could ask for a favor."

The Air Force alone [lost](#) 137 airmen and civilians to suicide last year.

Read more [here](#)

FEW receives information from the following sources and contacts: Roll Call, GovExec, FedScoop, Bloomberg, The Hill, National Law Review, and Army Times.