New White House team in town: How will it affect feds?

By Nathan Abse

As we at FEND hit our publishing deadlines in mid-November, the near-final official election counts from swing states are matching the major news organizations’ predictions from the previous week, bringing victory in almost every swing state for the challenger, Sen. Joe Biden (D-Del.)—with the notable exception of North Carolina going to President Trump. What all this means of course is that, despite the present moment—a tortuous and slow transition unlike any since at least 2000—come January, we will have a new president.

Career federal employees must keep politics out of the performance of their jobs—and clear of fulfilling the mission of their employing agency. But like any working people—especially now—they want salary and benefits to track with inflation, for management to be competent, and motivation and morale to hang in there. Every administration and era brings challenges and threats to these needs. As this presidential term closes, there are problems—most recently with regard to the Schedule F proposal—that feds are calling out in many ways, telling unions and Congress about their dissatisfaction with the White House efforts to change, arguably illegally, the federal workplace. This week, Nathan Abse interviews Kenneth Warren, political scientist at Saint Louis University and expert on the federal civil service, about this last-gasp try by the outgoing president to revamp the workforce, and what’s in store for feds from the new administration.

Q&A WITH KENNETH WARREN

No matter how rocky the transition, in January a new president will be sworn in. So, bottom line: Will a Biden administration better look after federal workers’ workplace needs and pay?

Warren: Federal workers, overall, are likely to get more—at least more respect and likely more and better pay and benefits—under the new president. Why do I say this? Because the Democrats have always been more favorable to federal and public workers.

With respect to the outgoing president’s latest and very unpopular move with feds, will the new president roll back the Schedule F proposal?

Warren: I would say, yes, he’s very likely to do that. Sen. Biden has shown in the past he has respect for people in Washington, in general, who work for government. The Schedule F EO is not legal or

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Insight

By Mike Causey

Are feds really ‘fire-proof’?

Although I can’t prove it, I suspect that the number one complaint—from ordinary taxpayers—about the federal civil service is that feds are fire-proof: that once in they are installed in their jobs, they are there for the duration. Regardless of how they perform.

Before you march on my mansion on the Potomac, remember I’m not saying that. I’m just saying that’s what other people are saying. Presidents from Roosevelt to Trump have complained about it. Unresponsive, fire-proof feds. Remember Jimmy Carter’s Civil Service Reform Act. The idea was to make the top levels of the government more ‘mobile’ and more ‘responsive’ to political appointees. The current administration has taken it to a whole new level, proposing the Schedule F category which, as one career fed told me, “be like Schedule C on steroids. Thousands more people at the middle and top who were responsive to the politicos alone.” Jobs now held by civil servants that would be converted to the new F schedule where they could be fired at
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If the federal government as a workplace is not badly hurt, can you fine-tune the real picture?

Warren: The point is, your question—and the concern—is a very old trope. That is, “The private sector is better than the public sector,” theme. It doesn’t mean it isn’t sometimes and in places true, but in general it’s just an oversimplification. But if you actually go deeper into the private sector—into all the bankruptcies and troubles they’ve had in the private sector, as I’ve done in some of my work, in my research, then the reality is varied. I can agree that some would say yes to your question, and some polls can show the federal bureaucracy to have a big credibility gap. But there is a perception, despite the reality, about government workers vs. private sector overall. So many companies are troubled. So many companies ask for bailouts. It’s just not accurate to say that the public sector functions or is managed worse than the private sector. There are other layers to the discussion. For instance, much of this perception has to do with the government running things that do not break even. But think of all the things—many are essential services—that the government runs because the private sector could not make a profit off them, and sort of dumped them on the government. For instance, trains and public transportation systems. Some criticize public transportation because it operates at a deficit. I say right back to them: Why do you think the government ended up with these? Because in the old days a bunch of private companies ran public transportation systems, and when the economics of that changed, they went belly up. So, the government ended up running them.

Right, that’s true and an important point: Many needed services can’t make a profit, but neither they nor the government left holding the bag to run them should be denigrated for it!

Warren: You can’t do away with much of it. Not only with public rail systems, but bus systems, all kinds of public transportation. I mean a lot of lower-income people really have no other means to get around. And by the way a lot of wealthier companies rely on public transportation users as workers—who have to get to work, somehow. By and large in this country, most people who use public transportation, well, in most cities, are poorer people.

Back to federal employees, though: The problem remains that many experts on government are sounding the alarm about recruitment and retention for federal jobs—what’s your take?

Warren: There are problems, right now perhaps especially. But go back to public opinion polls about federal employees and the public sector, because they are important. Pollsters ask people their opinion of various institutions. Congress? It gets maybe a 15 percent approval rating. Or lower. Terrible. The President? In the mid-30s to mid-40s. (Of course in some administrations it can run much higher.) Federal courts? Usually higher. Now, if you poll someone on their opinion of “the federal bureaucracy” you’ll get one answer, and it’s likely much higher than Congress, but lower than it would be if you used different words. That’s because “bureaucracy” is of course a negative, a pejorative term to many people.

So you don’t think there is a crisis in respect to recruiting, or the federal brand?

Warren: No. Not for now. Because, if you poll the same person who has a negative view of the “federal bureaucracy” instead about individual agencies, for most agencies you’ll get much higher approval ratings. If you poll on FBI, CIA, State, Defense, State—they all actually do get decent ratings, from feds and the public—and in almost every case, higher than elected officials do. My point is the federal bureaucracy is still competent—and pretty popular, depending on how you ask the question. Public opinion on federal agencies is not as bad as all that. Even among young people, it is not as bad as some make it out to be. That’s my take on this issue. I think that this is true of recruitment, too. That’s not as good as it has been in the past, but not at rock bottom either.
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TRICARE: OPEN SEASON BEGINS
DURING THIS FEDERAL Employees Open Season, don’t forget that it’s TRICARE Open Season too—for those feds already covered by—or eligible for—either TRICARE Prime and TRICARE Select.

Nov. 9 through Dec. 14 is the window for selecting your healthcare coverage plan. You can remain in your current plan—or switch up your options.

The important point is—just like certain other benefits and insurance coverages, if you don’t make your selection during the “open season” period, you can only enroll to these specific programs or make changes to your existing selection under limited circumstances.

“Outside of TRICARE Open Season, you can enroll in or change enrollment to TRICARE Prime or TRICARE Select following a Qualifying Life Event (QLE),” the TRICARE site warns. “A QLE is a certain change in your life, such as marriage, birth of a child, or retirement from active duty, which may mean different TRICARE health plans are available to you and your family members.”

“A TRICARE QLE opens a 90-day period for you to make eligible enrollment changes,” the site continues. “A QLE for one family member creates a chance for all eligible family members to make enrollment changes.”

The TRICARE program has more than 9.6 million enrollees.

To see more about QLE’s, click here.

FREE TUTORING AVAILABLE FOR FED KIDS
FEDERAL EMPLOYEES ARE often out front in bearing the brunt of the pain, with key roles fighting and managing the COVID-19 pandemic—across the usual alphabet soup of agencies, from the Agriculture Department to the Department of Veterans Affairs.

But what about the children of these feds? At present, K-12 education is suffering in America, with a wide range of disruption—anywhere from mild to near-total—in the actual instruction of hundreds of thousands of fed kids.

The Federal Employee Education and Assistance Fund (FEEA) has launched at least one partial solution: in cooperation with partner organizations, the fund is offering free tutoring.

Joyce Warner, executive director of FEEA, explains the ins and outs of the program—including how to apply—in a piece she authored, currently posted on GovExec.com. Employees earning up to $100,000 are eligible for the free tutoring program—and that upper income limit may be moved upward in the months to come, she writes.
“Are you a federal employee with a child in grades K-12, who needs some extra academic support right now?” the FEEA website’s official announcement on the tutoring program states. “If so, you are not alone. We know the added stress of the pandemic and disruptions to the traditional school experience are affecting many families.”

“That’s why we have developed a new program for your children to access academic tutoring online for most K-12 subjects,” FEEA states.

FEEA, in its announcement, credits strong backing from the Federal Long-Term Care Insurance Program (FLTCIP), which sponsors the program. FLTCIP was founded in 2000, and is managed by the Office of Personnel Management.

“The FLTCIP knows that many families are struggling right now trying to balance work and school, and that some children may be falling behind,” FLTCIP says of the tutoring aid program.

The program also includes key partner Tutor.com. Interested feds can research further by consulting the links above, and by applying at FEEA’s application page here.

**INCONSISTENT LEADERSHIP AT DOD COULD HAMPER REFORM EFFORTS**

THE DEFENSE DEPARTMENT has clocked $37 billion in cost savings from reforming business operations, but that could be undercut by a lack of formal processes and leadership uncertainty.

The Government Accountability Office reported Nov. 5 that leadership and organizational changes, namely the future of DOD’s chief management officer role, could hamper long term reform efforts.

“Given the CMO’s key role in reform and uncertainty about the future of the CMO position, ensuring leadership is sustained over the long term may present a challenge,” the GAO wrote.

DOD’s chief management officer has been tasked with realizing the cost-savings through defense-wide business reforms since 2018, but the position’s existence has been the subject of congressional debate.

The House and Senate passed versions of the 2021 National Defense Authorization Act with provisions that would eliminate or significantly restructure the CMO role after lawmakers questioned the role’s efficacy. The bill is headed for conference now.

The GAO report also found that while much of DOD’s reported $37 billion savings were backed up by budget materials, the analysis supporting the findings was lacking.

Inconsistent leadership would be exacerbated without “written policies or formal agreements” solidify-
The report also mentions that DOD may have overstated its claims of cost-savings, particularly related to the defense-wide review initiatives started in 2019. The result was claiming savings that didn’t actually match the Defense Department’s stated definitions and processes for reform because they weren’t clear to begin with.

“Some of the cost savings initiatives were not clearly aligned with DOD’s definitions of reform, and thus DOD may have overstated savings that came from its reform efforts rather than other sources of savings, like cost avoidance,” the report states.

Such cost avoidance includes delaying projects, like military construction, which yields a temporary savings with costs appearing in future years.

GAO recommended DOD create “a formal process that standardizes the development and documentation of cost savings, including any underlying analyses, associated with reform efforts.”

The report also recommends developing clear definitions of reform and consistent adherence to them when reporting cost-savings, and implementing formal reform policies and agreements for collaboration efforts “in order for these efforts to be sustained beyond any leadership and organizational changes.”

OPM VETS BIDEN-HARRIS TRANSITION TEAM

The Biden-Harris Transition has tapped multiple former Office of Personnel Management employees to serve on the landing team at the federal government’s human resources agency.

So far, agency transition teams, announced on Nov. 10, haven’t been able to set up shop inside the government. They’re waiting on Emily Murphy, the top official at the General Services Administration, to “ascertain” the electoral victory by former vice president Joe Biden. Her approval, which is being withheld despite clear indications...
The union finally got into the act and—with people joining it—got some power. The newspaper went on to become one of the best, best-known in the world. Still is. Win-win.

Being able to fire people easily isn’t always the road to excellence in an organization.