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Feds slow to increase women and Hispanics in workforce

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The number of women and Hispanics in the federal government is increasing slowly, but fewer are employed in government than in the private sector, according to a new survey by the Office of Personnel Management.

OPM's annual report to Congress on the Federal Equal Opportunity Recruitment Program analyzed the federal workforce in fiscal 2004. Of 1.7 million federal employees, 530,429 — or a little more than 31 percent — were minorities.

The report states that most minority groups are better represented in the federal government than in the private-sector workforce. But women and Hispanics are two groups that are behind.

The survey found that Hispanics represented 7.3 percent of the federal workforce, compared with 12.6 percent in the private sector. The federal government is also slightly behind in employing women. Women hold 44 percent of federal government jobs, compared with 45.5 percent of private-sector jobs.

The news is better, however, for women and minorities in General Schedule levels 13 to 15. The number of minority employees at those pay grades increased from 73,241 in fiscal 2003 to 77,410 in fiscal 2004. The number of women rose from 114,693 in 2003 to 119,631 in 2004.

But women and minorities are barely represented at senior pay levels, according to the survey. At the highest federal pay levels, women represent about 26 percent of employees and Hispanics only 3.4 percent.

No single solution to the pay distribution problem exists, said Carol Bonosaro, president of the Senior Executives Association, which represents 6,000 federal Senior Executive Service workers. "One [solution] is to hire from the outside," she said.

Another is to identify and remove barriers. "The issue always is who is coming up through the pipeline to those senior levels," Bonosaro said.

The hiring problem exists in the public and private sectors, but it is worse in the public sector, said Elena Rios, president of the National Hispanic Medical Association, which represents 30,000 Hispanic doctors. "You have to have a comprehensive approach," she said. "You are not going to see it [change] in three or four years."

If government officials want to increase Hispanic representation, they can find highly qualified candidates for any federal job, said John Palguta, vice president of policy and research at the Partnership for Public Service, an independent think tank.

Some agencies, such as the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Labor Department, have successfully hired more Hispanic employees, Palguta said. The challenges are geographic because

some states have fewer Hispanic residents than others.

Federal officials say they are trying to increase minority hiring. R. Allen Pittman, the Department of Veterans Affairs' assistant secretary for human resources and administration, said offering a telework option would increase the number of American Indians who could work for the VA, even if they did not live near a VA office.

Pittman said he hopes to hire more American Indians. Only 2,100 currently work at the VA. By giving people computers and Internet access, they could work from reservations or rural areas. He said he hopes to start the program in the next six months.

A remote employment program would also help disabled veterans who cannot leave their homes but could telework, Pittman said. "We have to become more competitive and approach work orientation differently now and in the future," he said.