

Anything but Ordinary: A New View of Federal Service

Presidential Management Fellows program offers solution to federal workforce challenge

By Judy H. Watts

Perception does not meet reality when it comes to federal service, and for many who work in federal agencies, the work is anything but ordinary. As Liza Veto, MSW '98, in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), puts it: "People think of the government as old-school, bureaucratic, and boring—anything but cutting edge. But that's an antiquated view."

In truth, say Veto and colleagues in federal service (see box, p. 33), the government has many innovative programs, as well as employees whom Veto calls enormously talented, hardworking, and knowledgeable.

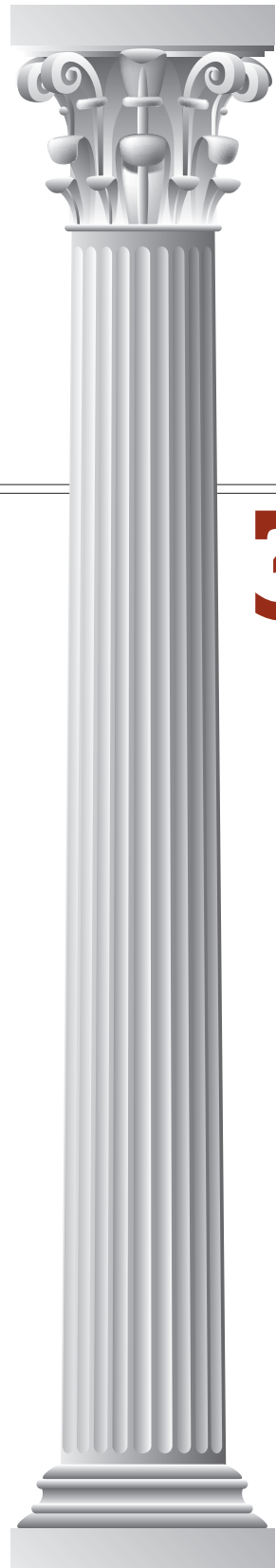
"I'm amazed by the individuals I work with," says Kerry Hill, MSW '01, of the HIV/AIDS Bureau, which is part of Health and Human Services [HHS]. "They are extraordinary human beings."

However, 70 percent of the federal workforce—about 2 million strong, excluding the U.S. Postal Service—will be eligible for regular or early retirement by the year 2010. Therefore, the government's need to acquire a critical mass of highly skilled, creative, and dedicated employees is acute—perhaps particularly so in an era when the country is struggling with issues of national and global security, education, and the health and well-being of its citizens of all ages.

Attracting a rich stream of some of the nation's best minds and hearts to federal service—and ensuring that a large number stay on—is imperative.

Answering the Call: Presidential Management Fellows

Presidential Management Fellows (PMF) is a far-sighted program designed to address the need for stellar federal employees. In 1977, then-President Jimmy Carter established it as the Presidential Management Interns program; its purpose then, as now, was to attract and prepare outstanding men and women to lead and manage public policies and programs in the federal government.



PMFs receive a paid two-year, full-time appointment that includes 80 hours of training a year and broad practical experience through two and sometimes three rotations of several months in any of 30 government offices and agencies.

30 government agencies

In November 2003, President George W. Bush renamed the program, removed its hiring cap, and extended the program to additional agencies.

Program applicants are outstanding master's, law, and doctoral-level students with high leadership potential who are nominated by their deans and then interviewed and selected by a special panel from the government's Office of Personnel Management (OPM). PMFs receive a paid two-year, full-time appointment that includes 80 hours of training a year and broad practical experience through two and sometimes three rotations of several months in any of 30 government offices and agencies, ranging from the U.S. Attorney's office

to the Federal Highway Administration, the National Park Service, the Department of Defense, and the Office of Management and Budget. At the end of two years, the fellows are eligible for conversion to a permanent federal position in their original office or another they may prefer.

With the future in mind, changes are under way such as improvements in pay grades and appointment levels and a new course of training in Action Learning, which aims to develop leadership competencies for executive positions.

In 2004, a total of 3,073 students nationwide were nominated for the 500 to 600 PMF positions available in 2005. Three graduates of the George Warren Brown School of Social Work became fellows that year; overall, 18 PMFs from the Brown School have been accepted to date, according to Carol Doelling, director of career services. "It is an

80 hours of training

elite fast-track management and leadership program—an unparalleled opportunity to develop subject-area expertise and large-scope program-management skills," Doelling says.

The government is attending to the future of federal service in other ways, of course. Two of these are the HHS's successful Emerging Leaders Program and the 2006–2007 inaugural Senior Management Fellows Program for mid-career professionals.

As the PMF program approaches its 30th year, its value to the federal government is virtually unquestioned. "PMF fellows also make up an excellent pool for quick hires, allowing managers to fill open positions," says Krista Thomas, MSW '04, in HHS's Administration for Children and Families. Just as the PMF program exemplifies the strength and promise of federal service, its fellows

FEATURED Fellows



Charita Castro,

Division Chief of the Asia/Europe/MENA Region; Office of Child Labor, Forced Labor, and Trafficking; Bureau of International Labor Affairs; U.S. Department of Labor; Washington, D.C.

MSW '99 (concentration in social and economic development and women's issues; specialization in management). Selected distinctions: Bettie Schroth Johnson Women in Management Scholarship; Doctoral Candidate at George Washington University's School of Public Policy and Public Administration; U.S. Fulbright Scholar to the Philippines for child labor research, 2004–2005; and BS with honors from Tulane University/Newcomb College.



Kerry Hill,

Project Officer for Title I and Title II Grants of the Ryan White CARE Act (including AIDS Drug Assistance Programs), Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration, HIV/AIDS Bureau, Washington, D.C.

MSW '01 Selected distinctions: Graduate Certificate in Urban Family and Community Development, 1999; St. Louis Volunteer Resource Parents (teen parent mentoring) program coordinator; St. Louis City Division of Family Services social worker II; Missouri Division of Youth Services youth specialist.



Krista Thomas,

Regional Child Welfare lead for Wisconsin and the American Indian Tribes in Minnesota and Wisconsin, Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families, Chicago, Illinois.

MSW '04 Selected distinctions: Part of five-person team that received the Administration of Children and Families Assistant Secretary's 2006 Partnering for HHS Excellence Award; Benjamin Youngdahl Scholarship; Student Coordinating Council, Washington University; scholarly publications; Knox College award for honesty, integrity, and competitive excellence in academics and athletics; basketball All-Conference and MVP.



Liza Veto,

Public Health Analyst, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Office of the Director, Washington, D.C.

MSW '98 (concentration in health). Selected distinctions: CDC Honors Award for Excellence in Systems for Program Operations, Emergency Communication Team; certificate in legislative studies, Georgetown University; scholarly publications; BA with honors, Dartmouth College.



Bridget Shea,

Program Specialist, Administration of Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Family and Youth Services Bureau, Health and Human Services, Washington, D.C.

MSW '04 (concentration in social and economic development; specialization in management). Selected distinctions: spoke at the White House Faith-Based and Community Initiatives conference;

service chair for DC Alumnae of Zeta Tau Alpha; starting a Young Survival Coalition community volunteer group; school-based research manager and e-mentoring assistant for Big Brothers Big Sisters of Eastern Missouri.

and program alumni tend to be the kind of people the federal government must find and keep.

Social Work's New Role in Federal Service

To a person, Brown School alumni Charita Castro, MSW '99; Kerry Hill; Bridget Shea, MSW '04; Krista Thomas; and Liza Veto entered federal service as they entered social work: with a strong sense of mission and the desire to make an impact on a large scale. Thomas, a lifelong advocate for social justice who, before entering federal

service, worked with immigrants and children in orphanages, was drawn to the PMF program in order to help make changes on behalf of "people who truly need assistance including runaway and homeless youth, children and families involved in the child welfare and welfare systems, and individuals with developmental disabilities." Noting that the National Association of Social Work's code of ethics includes the idea that one must focus not on front-line work alone but also on policy, Hill is powerfully motivated: "I am here to honor my friends

who I have lost to AIDS and to fight for those who continue to endure the stigma of HIV that persists even today."

All these alumni, including six-year public-service veteran Castro—whose performance, like Veto's and others', has been rewarded with promotions—believe their social work skills and perspective are extremely important in the federal government. Now a supervisor, Castro says her communication skills learned in social work are useful with her staff and in negotiations with other countries and government agencies.

"Another thing I love about having a social work background in my work here is that I can look at populations and individuals in a very holistic manner, realizing that higher institutional levels are at play," Castro adds.

Because of their training, the alumni say they bring a nonjudgmental approach that is important in policy work and also look at programs from the perspective of the people being served. As people trained to build connections and capacity, they network and link best practices. Adds Veto, who for the past three years has helped the Brown School prepare PMF applicants for the process: "Our facilitation skills are extremely valuable; the systems analysis we learned is extremely valuable. Active listening—we need some



"When we interpret the law and translate it into program language and guidances for grantees, we will be creating program expectations from a federal level that will really trickle down through state, county, and city policy and have an impact on our clients' lives."

The rewards of federal service, both in the PMF program and beyond, are many:

- extensive training and professional opportunities;
- dedicated and talented colleagues;
- a government-wide PMF listserv that includes community-service opportunities and fundraisers; and

- a social-work book club for those who want to stay informed about developments in their field.

Brown School alumni working in federal service have made a difference in many lives—and they want to make even greater changes. "I strongly encourage Brown School students to apply to the PMF program," says Shea. "The government needs the vision of the person-in-the-environment—and we lend a strengths perspective!" Adds Veto, with a laugh: "I didn't think this way at the beginning—but some of us must work in the federal government! We expect it to do great things. So I would like some more colleagues!" ☺

"I wouldn't leave this agency for anything at this time. Congress is in the process of reauthorizing the Ryan White CARE Act. Currently, the CARE Act provides over \$2.1 billion in federal dollars for the domestic fight against HIV/AIDS. Once it is reauthorized, I will have the opportunity to sit on Agency and Division committees that will shape HIV programs for the next five years."

Kerry Hill, Health and Human Services



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serious active listening in the federal government."

Of receptivity in the federal workplace to social workers' perspectives, Hill says: "I think our voices are welcome because they tip the scales and make people think." In Shea's program office, "different opinions are definitely encouraged in discussions we have in staff meetings; however, one has to accept working under the constraints of the Administration. One of the best things to do is to find common ground. And that's a social work skill."

In many ways, social workers in policy and management may also be contributing to change simply by their example.

Challenges and Rewards

Many federal employees face frustrations, of course; among these, the often lumbering pace of change. Some alumni are concerned about the escalating use of outsourcing—contracting work to costly private firms. Although MSWs are adept at research and program evaluation, such work—and even program site visits to grantees—is now farmed out in many agencies. And since federal resources are stretched ("Defense is the lion," says one alum), positions can simply evaporate. "In my office," says Hill, "we're all taking on more responsibilities and doing more with less." He worries

that the high-quality job his team does for grantees may become diluted.

"But it's a pendulum," Hill continues. "I like to think that at least in terms of staffing, things will swing back." In any case, he says, "I wouldn't leave this agency for anything at this time. Congress is in the process of reauthorizing the Ryan White CARE Act. Currently, the CARE Act provides over \$2.1 billion in federal dollars for the domestic fight against HIV/AIDS. Once it is reauthorized, I will have the opportunity to sit on Agency and Division committees that will shape HIV programs for the next five years.