

Hiring

National Parks, Public Land Agencies Told to Beef Up Diversity Efforts

Federal agencies that administer national parks and public lands must take additional steps to ensure diversity in their workforces, President Barack Obama said in a Jan. 13 memorandum.

Training on unconscious biases and beefed-up professional development opportunities are among the actions these agencies should be taking, the president said in his memo to federal agency heads.

The memo applies to the Interior Department; the Forest Service; the Office of the Assistant Secretary of the Army for Civil Works, which oversees the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers; and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Diversity is defined broadly in the memo to include national origin, language, race, color, disability, ethnicity, age, religion, sexual orientation, gender and gender identity, socioeconomic status, veterans status and family structure.

In addition to increasing diversity internally, the agencies should conduct “outreach” to encourage more diversity among those visiting national parks and public lands—“particularly minority, low-income, and disabled populations and tribal communities,” Obama wrote.

“The purpose of this memorandum is to ensure that all Americans have the opportunity to experience and enjoy our public lands and waters, that all segments of the population have the chance to engage in decisions about how our lands and waters are managed, and that our Federal workforce—not just the sites it manages—is drawn from the rich range of the diversity in our Nation,” he wrote.

‘Additional Actions’ Required. Obama said in the memo that Executive Order 13,583, issued in August 2011, required all federal agencies to take steps to diversify their workforces. But he called on agencies named in the memo “to pursue additional actions that create and maintain a diverse and inclusive Federal workforce.”

Actions to be taken by park service and land management agencies include:

- voluntary interviews with a “representative cross-section” of agency employees to find out why they’re staying in their agencies and to let them know about workplace policies and professional development opportunities;

- optional exit interviews or surveys for all “departing personnel”;

- the collection of information about ways to attract diverse employees; and

- the expansion of “professional development opportunities that support mission needs,” including programs to identify and train future federal executives.

Agencies should “reward and recognize efforts to promote diversity and inclusion”—including by involving senior leaders in diversity efforts and offering training on unconscious biases, the memo said.

Obama also called on the agencies to collect more information on who’s visiting national parks and to take a number of steps, including partnerships with state and local governments and with groups that receive federal funding, to encourage more diversity among visitors.

Tough Ask for Underfunded Agencies. Jeff Ruch, executive director of Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, told Bloomberg BNA Jan. 13 that recent—and well-publicized—allegations about sexual harassment problems “suggest that the national parks have an inclusion problem.”

But it’s unclear how the agencies will pay for the efforts described in the president’s memo, he said.

Some parks don’t have their own managers because of funding shortfalls, while others “have combined pools of staffs” to cut down on personnel costs, Ruch said. In this environment, it’s hard to see where the agencies will find the funding needed to implement the actions called for by the memo, he said.

“These agencies aren’t funded to do this work and a lot of these directives appear to go beyond their ability to comply,” Ruch said.

PEER, a nonprofit based in Silver Spring, Md., describes its mission as protecting federal employees who work in environmental agencies.

The White House Office of Management and Budget didn’t respond Jan. 13 to a request for comment from Bloomberg BNA.

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