

## Room at the Top for More Diversity

By Joe Davidson  
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Diversity within the group of men -- and still only men -- who have been president of the United States will change significantly when [Barack Obama](#) is sworn in next month.

But when he looks across the highest level of civil servants managing the government, he'll see a mixed bag when it comes to improving the diversity of the federal Senior Executive Service. A new report by the [Government Accountability Office](#) says representation of women and people of color in the senior corps grew overall between October 2000 and September 2007, but not at all agencies. Representation at the departments of Agriculture, Education, and Health and Human Services fell in certain categories, and sometimes those dives were steep.

At Education, for example, the percentage of African American men dropped sharply, from 13.3 percent to 4.5 percent. Hispanic men disappeared altogether, from a nearly invisible 1.7 percent in 2000 to zero last year. There were no Latinas among the executives at either point. Black women, however, did experience a significant increase, from 1.7 percent to 7.6 percent.

Chad Colby, a department spokesman, said even a "small variation in our SES pool makes for large percentage changes."

That applies to other agencies as well, but it cuts both ways. Had the small variation gone up instead of down, the department could have been a hero instead of a goat.

In the government as a whole, the presence of SES minorities inched up slightly by just under two percentage points to 15.8 percent, while the ranks of women increased almost six points, to 29 percent.

The report was requested by [Sen. Daniel K. Akaka \(D-Hawaii\)](#) and [Rep. Danny K. Davis \(D-Ill.\)](#). "We must do a better job of reflecting our country's diversity in the senior ranks at all agencies by recruiting talent from a range of backgrounds," Akaka said. "The improvements reported by GAO are good, but agencies and the [Office of Personnel Management](#) need to do more to create a truly diverse corps of senior executives and SES candidates."

You might expect OPM to lead by example on personnel matters like this, but that's not the case. The portion of people of color there fell by almost three percentage points to 16.7 percent; for women it was a nearly four-point fall to 38.1 percent.

At HHS, where the percentage of minorities is down slightly, the number of females is up eight percentage points. Spokesman [Bill Hall](#) said the department is "strongly committed to nourishing diversity across its entire workforce, especially in its executive leadership ranks" and now has "its most

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diverse pool of participants yet."

Davis used the report to push for legislation he and Akaka sponsored "to address the lack of diversity at the federal government's senior levels." The bill is supported by the Senior Executive Association.

William L. Bransford, the association's general counsel, said "what matters most to establish diversity in the SES is a culture of leadership where diversity is valued . . . [I]t takes doing things that make a difference, and it has to be sustained."

If that's the case, then leadership and making diversity a priority is lacking at too many agencies. Now that Obama is about to integrate the [Oval Office](#), let's see what he can do with some of the smaller offices and cubicles around town. Having a black man in the White House is not enough.

### **Cross-examining Blue Cross/Blue Shield**

Federal workers getting the blues from health-insurance issues might want to check out a hearing that Davis, chairman of the House subcommittee on the federal workforce, postal service and the District of Columbia, will hold tomorrow on the [Blue Cross/Blue Shield](#) health plan.

The hearing will examine changes in the insurance company's benefits and premiums for the 2009 Federal Employees Health Benefits Program.

The hearing was scheduled after a Federal Diary column last Wednesday that said patients using the company's standard option next year will pay 100 percent for surgery by an out-of-network physician, up to a maximum of \$7,500 per surgeon, per surgical day. Currently, the rate is 25 percent of what the company sets for a procedure, plus any difference between that and the billed amount.

Premiums for that plan are set to rise about 13 percent, while rates for other plans available to federal employees will remain almost flat.

With more than half of the 8 million federal employees, retirees and dependents in the plan, Blue Cross/Blue Shield is the big foot in the room.

Among those on the witness list are Michael W. Hager, acting director of the Office of Personnel Management, and Stephen W. Gammarino, senior vice president of national programs for the Blue Cross and Blue Shield Association. The hearing is scheduled for 10 a.m. in room 2154 of the [Rayburn House Office Building](#). For more information, contact the subcommittee at 202-225-5147. You can find last week's column through a link on my blog at <http://voices.washingtonpost.com/federal-diary>.

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