

>> The Social Security Administration deals with Americans as they age; its workforce tends to be aging also. One reason is people tend to stay at Social Security – they like the mission. But you might be surprised to find that the largest group of employees are not the oldest. I spoke with Chief Human Capital Officer Reggie Wells.

>> We're a workforce of about 63,000 federal employees, and that's stationed between our headquarters and our ten regional offices across the country. Have a very broad footprint that most people are very familiar with. Our workforce is composed of all generations. We have – our largest group, our Generation X, it's about 45% of our workforce. Our Baby Boomers are about 35% of our workforce. And then our Millennials, or Gen X, is about 20% of our workforce. So we have a very small traditionalist group. They're small but mighty. They, as you might imagine, hold the most institutional memory, so we do treasure them as a group. But they are moving off into much deserved retirement, as they deserve. And then the Baby Boomers are starting to make that same move.

>> So you're not really this ancient workforce that sometimes it gets characterized by if you got, you know, Generation Y is 45%, and the Millennials are 20%, that's two-thirds that are still going up through the ranks.

>> That's correct. And it's a pipeline that we're very proud of. We do tend to have people who come to the agency get really committed to the mission if they didn't – weren't committed at the outset, and do stay for a career. We, you know, do lose people, of course, to some competition, and deciding that perhaps this is not the work for them, because it is very challenging work serving the public very directly as we do, as a fairly unique federal agency in

that regard. But we do have a lot of dedicated folks who we hope will be here for a long time.

We tend not to hire – and the people that come into the organization, we do hire, you know, all ages coming in. And with our veterans' hiring being such a prominent part, these are pretty seasoned workers by the time they get to us. So the average age of our new hires is somewhere in the mid-30s, I believe.

>> And so, I guess maybe one of the reasons for the appeal of so many people that are young is that the agency has moved way beyond its original mission of a retirement program and is really a comprehensive social services and benefits agency.

>> I think that's a good deal of it. The work that we do is far more complex than, I think, most people realize. It is both a national and, at times, international workload. And we have moved well beyond the earliest visions for the program. We have a very large disability program and survivor benefits program. So it is complex. And of course, we play a significant role working with other federal agencies because of our rather broad footprint and our ability to reach the public where they live.

>> And so what does the future retirement profile look like, what do you expect to be happening over the next, say, three to five years?

>> Well, as I think you know from prior stories on us, you know, last few years, we did have the perfect storm. We were seeing many more people coming to us for both retirement benefits and disability benefits, and that's usually the case when there's an economic downturn. And now that we're coming out of some of those periods, the cases coming to us are slowing down

some. It's still daunting and it's still challenging. And at the same time, we're not able to – you know, our resources are such that we have to hire modestly to replace our losses. We lose about 3,000 folks a year. And haven't always had, in these various tight budget years, the ability to replenish at the rate that we lost folks, but then there have been – in the last couple of years, we have been able to replace one to one in many instances, and so that is helping us, you know, address that public workload.

>> In the '70s, '80s, '90s, a lot of agencies, including Social Security, were developing much more comprehensive automation systems as the PCs came in and more and more end users had computers, and so that was a way of replacing people that you couldn't replace or replacing the functionality that you couldn't replace with people is with automation.

>> Well, that's correct.

>> Have we pretty much run out of the course of being able to do that at this point?

>> Well, you know, that's an interesting question. I believe I would leave it to our CIO to really give you the – sort of the details on that, because it's one of those questions of, you know, how much will automation lighten the load on the workforce that you have. And I think we saw the greatest gains in that regard, as you're suggesting, a decade or two ago, as we went from paper to a more paperless-driven processing of cases. I'm not – from my vantage point, I think it's going to be difficult to squeeze more out of automation, although I do believe that we're going to modernize in some ways that will make it easier for the public to access our services, and I

think that's where the real gains will be made. But I would leave it to Rob Klopp to share the details of some of that. It is certainly on our drawing board.

>> Sure.

>> We're making advances in that regard. And we want to serve the public the way the public wants to be served. And I think our Acting Commissioner Colvin has the right idea with her Vision 2025 strategic approach. It's basically creating a superior customer experience for the public. And so for those who need to come into a field office, they will be accessing our services that way. But many more people are very comfortable going online. And so we've had a tremendous response, particularly where retirement services are concerned. So I think your question is a good one. It's, however, a complex one, because I think we've – you know, we used to be about 83,000 strong, I think is our largest number of employees, and so we're down about 20,000 from that. And I think that is largely due to tight budgets and automation.

>> And describe some of the highlights of jobs that are not related to the production of getting checks out and so forth, where a lot of that automation has come into play. I mean, actuarial offices, research and so forth, but what are some of those key functions. Because a lot of people don't realize they go on, and yet they're really important for making sure the agency is where it needs to be long into the future.

>> Well, yeah. And I appreciate the question. It is an opportunity for me to make a pitch for those who really have a desire to serve the public want to make you know, the experience of our citizens and others better than it's ever been. We do – we are a full-service organization in

the sense that there are many lines of business other than what most people get see in the field office with what we call Operations. Or our disability determination areas. We have, as you're alluding to, actuaries who basically look out long-term and short-term and give us professional projections on what the population is going to be doing with regard to work and disability, you know, onset of disability. We have a full range of policy positions that look at social insurance policy as it relates to the U.S. and we have an international office that looks at workers who come into this country and then go back home. We have totalization agreements with other countries and work through embassies to deliver services to them. We have, of course, the full range of HR professionals here, as we see it, caring for the workforce that cares for the public. We have budget finance management positions, quality assurance work that we do. The IT is a very big area where we're modernizing our IT functions and looking toward the future on how we can serve the public better, as I alluded to. You know, you name it, we have professionals in those areas. And we hopefully will always replenish those with very talented people.

>> And what percentage of the workforce is part of bargaining units and how do you – what's the strategy there?

>> Well, we have three major Unions, the largest of which is the American Federation of Government Employees, and they represent, I think, somewhere in the neighborhood of 45,000 employees. We have National Treasury Union, which basically represents a lot of our attorneys, and they are our next largest union. And then we have the IFPTE, which is the International Federation of Professional and Technical Engineers, and they represent our administrative law judges. I think they are about 1,600 strong right now. So we have those major Unions. And we

have what I think is a very good relationship with them. We hold monthly Labor-Management forums pursuant to the President's Executive Order 13522, and basically engage them in discussions, do pre-decisional involvement with them, seek their advice on various changes we're making in both our service delivery, our visioning for the future. You know, it's a very robust relationship, I would say.

>> We're speaking with Dr. Reginald Wells, he's Deputy Commissioner for Human Resources at the Social Security Administration, also its Chief Human Capital Officer and its Chief Diversity officer. Tell us about the workforce strategy planning that you have at Social Security.

>> Well, we've actually – because of our focus on the workforce, because that is our most valuable asset as an organization, as is true for any organization, especially an organization that is as service-oriented as we are. We make it a point to have a workforce that mirrors the public. In order to make sure we are able to do that, of course, it requires paying attention to who we hire, the approaches we take to hiring and where we feel we're going to have challenges in hiring. And I am pleased to say that we have done quite well over the years, even through those years where there was concern about hiring people to the federal government. We've really always had very good success in recruiting and hiring. Part of that is because we do pay a lot of attention to recruitment. We have a national strategy for recruiting and, of course, have the kind of footprint that allows you to recruit locally. We have a cadre of people across the country who work out of the regional offices and, in some cases, some of the smaller office settings, who really do know how to tap into their local communities and draw the best of the talent to the agency. So we've done quite well there. We're at parity with the civilian labor force

numbers relative to our diversity. We're unique in one sense that we're sort of the mirror-image of the Defense side of government, and that two-thirds of our workforce are female, which, you know, really does bode well, I think, in terms of the service ethic and service commitment. About 15% of our workforce are veterans. We have a pretty aggressive strategy in making sure that we bring veterans into our workforce. About 10% of our employees are – have – present with disabilities. Very proud of the fact that over 2% are people with targeted disabilities, and we're really working hard to become an employer of choice of employees with disabilities, given that such a large part of our work responsibility is with people who are disabled or have health issues. 53% of our employees represent as belonging to a minority group. 30% are African American, 15% are Hispanic, about 6% are Asian, Pacific Islanders about 1%, and American Indian and Alaskan Natives about 1%. So we have a very diverse workforce, and we're very proud, of course. Of course, we also have, you know, good geographic representation given that we have the field offices across the country and the regional offices that they report up through. So we're, I think, in a position to really serve the public well. We speak among our employees. We speak over a hundred dialects and languages and make sure we have contracts in place to fill in where we may not have people who speak the language that some folks have as their first language, so that we can make sure that we are taking their claims in an accurate and precise way.

>> And given the mission that you have and the ability to offer stable federal employment, you feel that you are also in a position to, say, go to the campuses and encourage minority students and so forth to pursue careers in finance, in actuarial science, and some of those professions that perhaps they didn't think of in the first place?

>> That's correct. And we do a lot of college recruiting. As you might imagine, we try to have a really good relationship with the VA, and make sure that we are tapping into the veteran pool as well as anybody. We actually go below the college level. We try to have a presence in public schools, because, you know, some of those folks are going to go on to college and we want them to think about considering Social Security as a employment destination at some point in their careers.

>> And the other end of this is succession planning. That's one thing about to ingest the right workforce and to get them trained. I want to talk about training in minute. But what about cessation planning, especially at the SES levels? How do you handle that?

>> Well, we believe we handle it pretty well these days. We have a commissioner who has been adamant that she wanted to have the most robust list of candidates for vacancies in the agency. And we have made sure that through our development programs, we have been grooming, internally, leaders of the future. And, of course, most agencies these days – and actually not only because they have to, but I think it's a healthy practice to have folks who take an interest externally and come in from the outside to help fill those gaps that we may have that happen very naturally. One of the challenges and reasons that it's important to do all of that, of course, is that you know because of the way we are funded, very often we have gaps in our pipeline. There are years where it's very lean in hiring, and so you don't always have an even flow in even though we have a fairly predictable flow out of folks who retire or move on to other agencies or other work. The ability to replenish them isn't always evenly distributed over the budget years. So we often have to go external to find the specific talent that we need, but

that's actually not a bad thing. You can't necessarily always groom everything you need internally. But we do spend a lot of time communicating with our senior executives and those who have an interest in becoming senior executives, and we have development programs that help them and those programs do invite people who are external to Social Security, people who didn't grow up here to come over and be involved in our development programs for purposes of being considered at the end of that process for vacancies we have. We are placing about 80% of those who graduate from our development program or SES Candidate Development Program, which is, I think a very good number for federal agencies, so I'm very pleased about that. But we spend a lot of time focusing on leadership in the agency, and we were very encouraged by the President's Executive Order on strengthening the Senior Executive Service. I was fortunate enough to be one of the 24 who were invited to come together and advise the President on the Executive Order particulars. And you know, we're looking forward to implementing it very aggressively here at Social Security with regard to revamping our onboarding and making sure that we're paying attention to our senior executive cadre.

>> And talk about some of the quality of life programs for all employees. I know that you got some money, I believe this year, to fix up some tired facilities, which probably will help morale a little bit. But what else is going on?

>> Well, we have a – you know, one of the things that is very, very clear – in fact, Dorothy and I were talking about that a moment ago in preparation for this conversation with you, the work we do to attract Millennials, to attract a new generation of federal employees. And they have a heightened emphasis on work-life balance and so we're attempting to do things that would be

attractive not only to them but to all of our employees. That's something that I think all federal agencies are paying a lot more attention to in this era, making sure that we have telework used effectively within our organization. We're even extending it into our field operations, which at one time there was a thought that that couldn't be done because of the nature of the, you know, the public contact, the nature of that work. But we're able to work the work in such a way that it allows us to offer telework even to those who are involved in the field operations these days. It actually is getting, you know, rave reviews, both in terms of its effectiveness, the effectiveness of the work, which of course they are always very focused on, but also the morale as you're suggesting it. So we are pleased that we've been in the top ten of best places to work. We've been hovering at six for about six surveys now. I, of course, would love to get higher, but it's a function of how your employees perceive their work experience. And so, we keep working hard to try to enhance their perceptions of it, but you know, I think we do pretty well with being at number six.

>> And with respect to that dialogue between, say, the rank and file and management, that's always a key indicator, the quality of that kind of communication tends to drive these federal employee viewpoint scores. So it sounds like you have got a pretty robust program there too.

>> Well, we put a lot of – the Commissioner has been very, very, very, very adamant about the importance of doing all we can to enhance the engagement of our workforce and the engagement of our leaders, and so we have been doing a lot of analysis to understand what they're telling us and trying to tell us. We've tried to be responsive and report back to them when we are doing things in direct response to their feedback. And we have plans across the

agency. Every component has an initiative to improve employee perceptions, improve engagement. And we're getting a pretty good response, you know, so I think we are putting our attention into the right kinds of things trying to have a dialogue with employees. Sometimes it requires doing focus groups to try to understand exactly what the concerns are. And then when we are able to identify a concern, we can address – we try to address it.

>> And what about your relationship as the Chief Human Capital Officer with OPM and other CHCOs throughout the government? Is there kind of a flow of best practices and information there?

>> Well, there is. The initiatives around engagement are actually – we appreciate being driven, you know, from the highest levels of government. I think the President is very interested in this issue and wants the, "All ships arise relative to engagement." So there has been a lot of discussion, I think, at the highest levels about how agencies might improve their engagement of their workforce. And we try to take the best practices from others. That's one of the beauties of the C Suite groups. I think that bringing Chief and the Capital Officers together to share best practices, to have dialogue around these kinds of broad issues effecting the federal government, has only been a positive thing, I think, for the federal government and the workforce. So, yeah, I mean, we try to – there's a competition among us, I guess, in trying to make our environments the best they can be. There's a desire to have our numbers reflect the work we're trying to do with the workforce, and I think at the end of the day we've been able to drive the needle up in many, many ways. It is always a constant struggle, because there are always challenges. Agencies, you know, I am sure they all agree, they never get quite the

budgets they would like, ideally. They never have as many people as they might need to do the heavy lifting of the agency. But we do, I think, a good job with the resources we're given. And one way to be good stewards is to make sure we're paying attention to what our employees are telling us.

>> Reggie Wells is Chief Human Capital Officer at the Social Security Administration. To share this interview with colleagues, go to FederalNewsRadio.com/FederalDrive, and click "Share with friends."