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EEOC employee morale declines as workload grows

By Alyssa Rosenberg arosenberg@govexec.com March 24, 2009

A survey of Equal Employment Opportunity Commission employees suggests that morale is decreasing as the agency's workload is reaching record levels.

Respondents to a January survey conducted by the American Federation of Government Employees Council 216, which represents EEOC workers, said they needed more support to deal with a rising pile of employment discrimination claims. The union posted the survey on its Web site: 200 employees participated.

Fifty-seven percent of respondents said the number of front-line employees at EEOC was inadequate, and 35 percent said the number was so low it constituted a crisis. Fifty-nine percent of respondents said morale in their office was at the lowest levels possible.

Agency staffing has decreased by 25 percent since 2001, falling from 2,850 to 2,150. Meanwhile, the caseload is growing.

EEOC received 95,402 reports of discrimination from employees in the public and private sectors in fiscal 2008, an all-time high and a 15 percent increase from 82,972 claims in fiscal 2007. The backlog of cases also increased, growing from 54,970 in fiscal 2007 to 73,951 in fiscal 2008. This pushed the wait time for processing a single case from six months to eight months.

Tensions created by the economic downturn and surges of layoffs have contributed to the growing caseload, said Peter Mina, a lawyer who specializes in federal employment discrimination law.

"Financial trouble can lead to cuts at all levels, including rash decisions that could result in legal liability and costly lawsuits," Mina said. "When cuts need to be made, managers should consider it their responsibility to explain the rationale for

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their actions to the affected employees. A lack of communication between managers and employees will only lead to more discrimination complaints."

EEOC funding has remained level for the past five years, making it difficult for the agency to hire more employees to handle the burgeoning workload. But the fiscal 2009 omnibus spending package President Obama [signed in early March](#) includes a \$15 million increase for EEOC.

Gabrielle Martin, president of Council 216, said she hoped EEOC officials would use the extra money to bring the agency closer to its 1994 workforce of 3,000.

"If the increase is used to replace lost front-line staff, then workers who have experienced discrimination should begin to get the help that they need faster," Martin said. "Honestly, more funds are needed to turn around years of damage caused by frozen budgets. However, we are pleased at the down payment Congress is making to support civil rights enforcement."

Christine Griffin, acting vice chair of EEOC, said she and acting Chairman Stuart Ishimaru planned to direct much of the omnibus funding toward hiring.

"We hope this year's actions are signaling where we'll go in the future," Griffin said. "No matter where you go, no matter which office you visit, the issue is we have investigators who are doing intake [of cases] a week or two weeks out of the month. They're saying, 'When do we get the time to do these investigations?'"



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