

February 4, 2025

Sent via e-mail

Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
United States House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Comer, Ranking Member Connolly, and members of the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform:

I write to share the views of the National Active and Retired Federal Employees Association (NARFE) regarding the “Rightsizing of the Federal Government.”

Introduction

NARFE is an organization dedicated to advocating for the interests of active and retired federal civil servants. We believe a well-functioning federal government is essential to serving the American people, and that requires a thoughtful and strategic approach to agency organization and workforce management, rather than arbitrary cuts or politically motivated restructuring.

What we cannot afford is abandoning the rule of law by failing to employ trained and experienced individuals to enforce it; to threaten the delivery of critical government services to Americans without the individuals to provide them; and to put at risk the basic safety of the American people if no one is available to respond to emergencies, prevent crimes or terrorist attacks, or ensure safe food, water and air.

Our Perspective

We understand the need for fiscal responsibility and efficient government operations. However, we believe the term “right-sizing” is often used as a euphemism for workforce reductions that can negatively impact agency effectiveness and morale, ultimately harming the public we serve. We caution against approaches that prioritize cost-cutting over the critical missions federal agencies fulfill. A smaller government is not necessarily a better government. Instead, we advocate for a focus on *smart-sizing* – a process that involves careful analysis, stakeholder input, and a commitment to maintaining a skilled and dedicated federal workforce.

Unfortunately, the administration’s efforts to substantially reduce the size of the federal workforce rely on false assumptions regarding its size and growth. The reality is that the workforce has decreased in size by 2.8 percent since 1968, while the total labor force in the United States has increased by 140 percent, and the U.S. population has increased by about 77 percent. To the extent the workforce serving the federal government has grown, that growth originated from an increase in government contractors, which are nearly double the number of federal employees. In some cases, increasing the size of the

federal workforce and reducing the number of contractors could reduce costs and increase efficiency, and result in true “rightsizing.”

Key Concerns

Impact on Mission Delivery

Reductions in staff can severely hamper an agency's ability to carry out its mandated responsibilities. We have seen firsthand how staffing shortages lead to backlogs, delays in services, and diminished capacity to address critical national needs and protect the American public. Before any right-sizing initiative is implemented, a thorough assessment of its potential impact on mission delivery must be conducted and made transparent to Congress and the public. Unlike our private sector counterparts, our work is motivated by service to the public rather than turning a profit –often at consumer expense. There is no place for privatizing core government services as a motivation in this exercise.

Loss of Institutional Knowledge and Expertise

Experienced federal employees possess invaluable institutional knowledge and specialized skills that are essential for effective governance. Federal employees are not interchangeable parts. Each of us has specialized skills and unique experiences that distinguish us in our profession, from scientists at the National Institute of Health (NIH) spearheading research into cures for cancer to Transportation Security Administration (TSA) agents keeping the air traveling public safe. Reductions-in-force (RIFs) and buyouts often lead to the departure of these seasoned professionals, creating a “brain drain” within agencies that can take years to recover from. We must prioritize retaining our highly skilled federal workforce.

Morale and Productivity

The constant threat of job cuts and agency restructuring creates a climate of uncertainty and anxiety within the federal workforce. This negatively impacts employee morale, productivity, and ultimately, the quality of service provided to the American people. A stable and supportive work environment is crucial for attracting and retaining top talent in public service. The merit-based competitive service first established when President Chester Alan Arthur signed the Pendleton Civil Service Act in 1883 has served us well, eliminating the spoils system of cronyism and political favors that preceded that law nearly 150 years ago.

Contractor Reliance

Often, workforce reductions are justified by the argument that work can be outsourced to contractors. However, this can lead to increased costs, decreased accountability, and a loss of control over critical government functions. We must carefully evaluate the long-term implications of contractor reliance and ensure that core government functions are performed by qualified federal employees. It is the federal government, not the private sector, that is imbued with the duty to deliver services to every eligible American as the law may set out.

Lack of Transparency and Stakeholder Input

Too often, right-sizing decisions are made without meaningful consultation with federal employees, unions, and other stakeholders. This lack of transparency undermines trust and leads to poorly conceived policies. We urge the Committee to ensure that any right-sizing initiative includes robust stakeholder engagement, and that racing to change is fraught with unforeseen peril that can result in irreparable damage.

Recommendations

Comprehensive Workforce Planning

Instead of reactive cuts, we need proactive workforce planning that aligns agency staffing with long-term mission needs. This includes investing in training and development to ensure federal employees have the skills necessary to meet evolving challenges.

Data-Driven Decision-Making

Right-sizing initiatives should be based on rigorous data analysis, not political agendas. Agencies should be required to conduct thorough cost-benefit analyses and assess the potential impact on mission delivery before implementing any workforce reductions.

Invest in Federal Employees

Federal employees are dedicated public servants who are committed to serving the American people. We must invest in their professional development, provide them with the resources they need to succeed, and recognize their valuable contributions.

Transparency and Accountability

The right-sizing process must be transparent and accountable. Congress should exercise its oversight responsibilities and ensure that agencies are implementing changes in a responsible and effective manner.

Focus on Efficiency, Not Just Size

True right-sizing should focus on improving efficiency and effectiveness, not simply reducing the size of government. This requires a commitment to process improvement, innovation, and the use of technology to streamline operations.

Conclusion

We believe that a strong and effective federal government is essential for the well-being of our nation. Day-in and day-out federal employees work with little fanfare to ensure our national defense, protect our citizens from terrorism and other crime, care for our veterans, deliver our mail, run indispensable programs such as Social Security and Medicare to provide income and health security in retirement, provide critical information regarding the weather and relief to those devastated by it, ensure the water we drink and the air we breathe is clean, and much more. They are an essential part of the solution to the challenges facing our government and our nation. We ought not to treat them as expendable through benefit cuts, mass layoffs or otherwise, when they are anything but that.

We urge the Committee to approach the issue of agency right-sizing with a focus on smart-sizing, data-driven decision-making, and a commitment to investing in the federal workforce. We stand ready to work with the Committee to ensure that any reforms are implemented in a way that strengthens our government and serves the best interests of the American people.

Thank you for your consideration of our views. If you have any questions or concerns about this request, please contact NARFE Staff Vice President for Policy and Programs John Hatton at jhatton@narfe.org or 571-483-1267.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "William Shackelford". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized "W" and "S".

William Shackelford
NARFE National President