

FINAL Remarks

Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations' remote Oversight Hearing on Diversity, Equity, And Inclusion at The Department of The Interior.

Thursday, September 17, 2020 at 2:00 PM EDT

Introduction and Background. Good Afternoon, my name is Sändra Washington. I am the Secretary of the Board of Trustees for the National Parks Conservation Association, a 100-year old organization dedicated to protecting the unparalleled places and spaces of the national park system. I am also a National Park Service retiree. Over the course of my nearly 25 years with the agency, I worked as a community planner, park superintendent, chief of planning and training manager. When I retired in December 2014, I was serving as Associate Regional Director, National Park Service, Midwest Region, with responsibilities for park planning, line-item construction, cultural resources, environmental & historic preservation compliance, policy, communications, legislation & congressional affairs.

Why I am Compelled to Testify. I have been in love with the out-of-doors since I was a young girl, and was lucky enough to grow up with woods, ravines and creeks nearby. I committed myself to a career in natural resources knowing I'd have to prove myself capable of handling not just the academics or the work, but the social tests. In the beginning, at forestry camp and in the Youth Conservation Corps, It was scary and lonely to always be the only black kid and most often, the only minority present, and one of only a few women. By the time I got to college, I was well-versed in how to own my presence:

- assuring professors, I was in the correct class,
- assuring potential employers, I understood the job included field work, and
- quieting the skepticism of co-workers that I was qualified for the job I was hired to do, not simply a check in the affirmative action box.

On the first day I reported to work for the National Park Service, there were two incoming employees, me and a 19-year veteran of the agency, who had started on a trail crew in high school and worked his way up to district ranger. When we were introduced to each other and our supervisor, the first thing he asked was my grade/step. Caught off guard, I told him – 11/1. Then he asked, how long I'd worked for NPS. When I told him it was my first day, he said, "that's impossible!" Our supervisor watched the interchange without saying a word, so after a beat, I explained that I came with five years of pertinent experience and an advance degree. If this had been a one-off remark, I might have forgotten it, but my white colleague brought it up frequently. I was black, female, an agency rookie and yet, somehow I'd gamed the system to earn the same amount of money he was earning after paying his dues for almost 20 years.

Within the year, the regional maintenance and design program recruited and hired a 20-something, licensed engineer, African-American male, who moved to the area for the job. Aside from scheduled check-ins and evaluations, his supervisor and colleagues pretty much left him alone for the next 12 months, when he resigned and went to work for someone else. His supervisor wanted to know what I thought the problem was, if perhaps he was uncomfortable with the field work. I asked how often they'd invited him to lunch or anything social, and he said "they didn't know what he liked and didn't want to offend, so they figured he'd say if he wanted to hang out. After putting in the time and effort to hire, move, and train a new employee, that failed in onboarding.

=====

1. Recruitment/Hiring/Onboarding.

Problem Statement. I believe the committee is well aware that a survey, of best places to work in terms of diversity, found the Department of the Interior ranks below the middle in comparison with other federal government departments, and among DOI agencies, the National Park Service ranks 11 out of 12.

There continues to be an incorrect narrative that people of color don't visit national parks/refuges/forests, and so wouldn't be interested in careers in conservation. By holding onto this narrative, we give federal land agencies an excuse to not invest in sincere efforts to recruit and hire from a diverse pool of talent, incorporate new hires into their organizations in ways that are sincere and effective, and retain the talents of those already in the Department.

I have been asked repeatedly, how can we best recruit minority candidates? What's the secret? There is no secret. You go to where the students are. You invest your time in building relationships, you develop programs with mentors and a buddy system, so you leave no one out on their own. The work of building a workforce representative of America is a long-game, so initiatives that crave fast results, often fail.

Programs that Work.

The Student Academy (NPS, Midwest Region) serves as a career-oriented employment and professional development program designed to recruit and retain an outstanding diverse workforce. It pairs new recruits with their own champion (mentor) for two years, and when possible, places two recruits at the same park or in close proximity.

Pathways is tailored to provide meaningful training and career development opportunities for individuals at the beginning of their Federal service. Includes an Internship Program for current students; a Program for people who have recently graduated from qualifying institutions, and

the Presidential Management Fellows Program for those who have recently obtained an advanced degree.

=====

In tough budgetary times, Federal agencies are hard pressed to keep the staffs they have, so the challenge for the Department is even greater now than it was when I retired 5 years ago, but even if agencies had the budgets to hire the staff necessary to carry out the mission, organizational policies and attitudes that perpetuate a culture of exclusion would still need to be addressed.

2. Culture and Social Change.

Problem Statement. Federal lands and agencies are not separate from the racial inequity that vexes America; they are not islands, neither ecologically, culturally or socially. The United States encompasses Minneapolis and Kenosha just as sure as it includes Acadia, Yellowstone and Everglades, the Lincoln Memorial, Independence and Cesar Chavez National Monument.

National parks, Fish & Wildlife Refuges and other federal lands exist within the social context of their geography. Because of this, it is imperative that we strive, alongside our gateway communities, and with the help of local and state chambers of commerce to make these magnificent places welcoming to all.

Focus on Mission.

If there is a sincere commitment to the departmental mission of conserving and managing these places for all Americans, and fully honoring the Nation's trust responsibilities and special commitments, then we had better find a way to recruit, hire and capitalize on the diverse talents of America.