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Agencies improve programs to hire more Hispanics

By [TIM KAUFFMAN](#)

Agencies are improving their efforts to hire Hispanics by forging strong partnerships with Hispanic organizations, targeting Hispanics through marketing and recruitment campaigns, offering career development programs and holding managers and supervisors accountable for results, according to a new government report.

Although agencies hired fewer Hispanics overall last year than they did the previous year, Hispanics comprised 7.3 percent of the federal work force as of June 30, compared with 7.0 percent the previous year, the Office of Personnel Management said in its report, "Hispanic Employment in the Federal Government." The report was posted on OPM's Web site Feb. 18.

The percentage of Hispanics increased at nearly every pay grade, including the three highest grades of managers and supervisors.

"Over the past three years, there has been a steady increase in Hispanic representation in the federal government, particularly in higher grades," former OPM Director Kay Coles James said in a Jan. 31 letter to President Bush that accompanied the report.

However, Hispanics represented 9.1 percent of all new hires during the year that ended June 30, compared with 10.0 percent during the previous 12 months.

And despite the overall increase in Hispanic representation, agencies continue to lag other employers. Hispanics comprise 13.1 percent of the national labor pool, according to 2004 data from the Labor Department's Bureau of Labor Statistics. They continue to be the most underrepresented minority group in government when compared with their representation in the national work force.

"At the end of the day, we still have more challenges than we have successes," said Jeffrey Vargas, chairman of the National Council of Hispanic Employment Program Managers, which promotes the hiring of Hispanics in federal government. "But I do believe that, at the highest levels, agencies are committed to taking action to address issues of underrepresentation."

The challenge, Vargas said, is translating that high-level commitment to action on the front lines. He said many agencies consider increasing Hispanic employment a diversity issue and therefore the domain of equal employment opportunity offices, which are walled off from the human resources departments where most hiring policies and activities are centered.

"Hispanic employment is really a human capital issue. If it's treated as a diversity issue, it doesn't get time, attention and focus on the operational level," Vargas said.

Agencies also need to partner with each other more often and leverage their resources to reach potential Hispanic recruits, Vargas said.

One multi-agency program Vargas helped launch last year brought together more than 70 Hispanic high school students in the Washington region for a three-day symposium that focused on leadership development, college preparation and career opportunities in government.

The Greater Washington, D.C., Hispanic Youth Symposium, which is highlighted in the OPM report, helps agencies build connections with students who could become ideal candidates for internships or other hiring programs in a few years, Vargas said. The Environmental Protection Agency awarded 12 scholarships worth a combined \$15,000 to participants in the 2004 program, the OPM report said.

“That’s a little bit of a longer-term approach, but it builds infrastructure for the future,” Vargas said.

Some managers use existing government-wide hiring programs to increase Hispanic employment. The Homeland Security Department’s Customs and Border Protection agency, for instance, used the Student Career Experience Program to appoint 54 students in 2004 — 19 percent of whom were Hispanic — and recruited two Hispanics using the Presidential Management Fellows Program.

But hiring Hispanics isn’t enough, OPM said. Agencies must ensure Hispanic employees have opportunities to advance through participation in senior executive and management development programs. Only 3 percent of Senior Executive Service members are Hispanic, while just 3.6 percent of employees at GS-15 — the main feeder group for senior executive positions — are Hispanic, OPM said.

Agencies also must stress the importance of increasing Hispanic employment by including senior executives and managers in all phases of recruiting and holding them accountable for results, OPM said. For instance, the Energy Department established an agency-wide Hispanic Employment Plan that requires each bureau and agency within Energy to design and execute action plans and measure results.