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Ensuring equal opportunity: Hispanic Employment Program makes progress

By HARRY SALINAS

The mission of the government's Hispanic Employment Program is to provide information on employment and career advancement opportunities to Hispanic Americans, help managers develop a viable Hispanic employment program, and assure that Hispanic Americans are represented in the federal government.

The program is vital and integral to agencies' mission to ensure diversity and quality of life in the workplace. It helps managers at all levels carry out their equal employment opportunity and diversity responsibilities and to refer alleged incidents of discrimination in the workplace to the appropriate authorities. It also organizes and sponsors activities such as conferences, workshops and meetings supporting employment, training and education.

The Hispanic Employment program does not seek preferential treatment for Hispanic Americans, but rather seeks to ensure equal opportunity and access to employment opportunities and equal treatment in the workplace.

While the overall representation of Hispanic Americans in the federal government increased to 7.3 percent over the last 30 years, the federal government has failed to keep up with Hispanics' increasing representation in the civilian labor force — over 13 percent. The under representation of Hispanic Americans is even more evident when we review their representation by job categories, such as leadership and policy-making positions, midlevel management and the Senior Executive Service.

For the most part, agency and department heads have major challenges ahead in increasing the representation of Hispanic Americans in the workplace and reaching parity in the federal government.

The success or failure of establishing, implementing and enforcing federally mandated programs to emphasize the hiring of women, people with disabilities and Hispanics reflects a lack of leadership in agencies and departments.

There have been endless efforts by the appointed Hispanic Employment Program managers to promote federal employment and career advancement opportunities by cultivating productive relations with professional and minority organizations and educational institutions. Despite this, many qualified Hispanic Americans interested in federal employment still have negative experiences when they submit their employment forms along with the required knowledge, skills and abilities as requested by the vacancy announcement. These negative experiences are due to a lack of feedback and customer service by agency human resources offices on the status of applications, as well as vague interviewing procedures. After numerous inquiries over a long period by the Hispanic applicants, they learn that someone else was selected for the position. In other situations, agencies re-advertise vacancy announcements without notifying the applicants. And with few exceptions, selecting officials avoid inquiries from the candidates who weren't selected to discuss the million-dollar questions: Why was I not selected? Where did I fail? What do I need to do to improve my status? This lack of communication leads to more allegations of discrimination.

The bottom line is that the heads of federal agencies, senior managers, supervisors, human resources managers, employees, special-interest group leaders and union representatives can all take an active role in an agency's Hispanic Employment Program to ensure Hispanics and other Americans are treated with respect and are included and represented in every aspect of the mission.

How? By doing the right thing as federal employees and entrusted public servants. Communicate and collaborate with your agency's Hispanic Employment Program manager. Share opportunities on employment, training and education with Hispanic Americans and professional organizations. Reach out to and partner with Hispanic-American communities and associations. Ensure that Hispanics, along with other Americans, are represented in the federal workplace.

Harry Salinas is a retired Hispanic Employment Program manager for the Agriculture Department.