

## ***Older workers are turning to government for second careers***

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Laid off in her late 50s from a telecommunications company, Diana Byrd felt the frustrations familiar to older workers hunting for jobs. "It was hard even to get an interview. I had never had difficulty before, but this time was different," she said. "No one actually said it was because of my age, but I felt it."

Then Ms. Byrd discovered a federally funded senior employment program that places people older than 55 in assignments at the Environmental Protection Agency. "It's been a perfect match," she said.

For two years, Ms. Byrd has been a data coordinator tracking the progress of environmental cleanup projects for the EPA's regional office in Dallas. The job has rekindled the passion she had for environmental causes when she worked for the Sierra Club years ago.

Like Ms. Byrd, older workers who have been downsized or disenchanted with corporate America are turning to governments for secure jobs with good benefits and a sense of mission.

Their new employers are grateful for their experience and maturity. "Everyone stands to benefit from this," said Max Stier, president of the Partnership for Public Service, a national initiative that's recruiting aging boomers for the federal government.

"The boomers get a second career where they can earn a living and do something meaningful, and our government gets the talented people it needs to fill looming labor shortages," he said.

The federal government expects to lose 550,000 employees, or about a third of its full-time permanent workforce, due to retirements and resignations over the next five years.

The oldest boomers are turning 62 this year, and many are retiring. The federal workforce is older than the private sector's, so it will feel the "age wave" earlier and with greater force than other employers.

Government personnel analysts say some agencies may be hit especially hard: 40 % of the Social Security Administration's workers and 47 % of the Federal Aviation Administration's employees will become eligible for retirement by the end of this decade.

Besides encouraging older employees to stay, the government will need to persuade experienced workers from the private sector to join its ranks, said Helen Dennis, a consultant on older-worker issues.

"This matter of an aging workforce cuts across the entire economy," she said. "The government should lead by example and serve as a role model for how employers engage and keep older workers."

The federally funded Senior Environmental Employment Program has 1,500 full- and part-time participants.

The National Older Worker Career Center, a nonprofit group that helps run the program, has recruited clerical staff, data administrators, engineers and inspectors, all 55 and older.

### *Reconnecting*

Some have lost their jobs or spouses and need the paycheck, while others have grown tired of retirement and just want to reconnect, said Michael Durkin, a field coordinator in Dallas. "Our people often end up as mentors for the EPA's younger staff members," he said. "They're valued for their experience, even temperament, sound judgment and strong work ethic."

The National Older Worker Career Center manages a similar program for the Agriculture Department and has discussed helping other federal departments and agencies find older workers.

Ms. Dennis said many older workers still aren't aware of the job opportunities in government. "The public sector needs to spread the word that it has good jobs with good benefits," she said.

The Internal Revenue Service and the Small Business Administration's Office of Disaster Assistance have begun working with AARP to raise their profile with older adults as members of its National Employer Team.

"We pick employers for our team who are committed to recruiting, hiring and retaining older adults, and then we connect our members with them," said Deborah Russell, AARP's director of workforce issues.

Job seekers can visit the team's Web site – [www.aarp.org](http://www.aarp.org) – to learn about the kinds of positions available at the IRS and the Office of Disaster Assistance and how to apply.

### *Looking beyond*

Older workers are also looking beyond federal departments and agencies to state and local governments, where retirements will create many vacancies in social services and health care.

Thirty-one percent of Texas' state government workforce is now older than 50, according to the state auditor. "We're approaching the edge of a cliff with so many baby boomers on the verge of retirement," said Diane Rath, chairwoman of the Texas Workforce Commission.

At the Dallas County district clerk's office, four generations work side by side, including a number of middle-age and older employees who have launched second careers after leaving corporate jobs or the military.

### *Customer service*

District Clerk Gary Fitzsimmons said he has found that his older workers are experts at customer service. "When things get busy, they don't get rattled," he said. "In fact, customers treat them with more respect."

Marsha Bills went to work as an executive assistant in the clerk's office in her late 50s, after the corporate communications business she owned couldn't support her and her health care costs anymore.

She now pays \$22 a month for group health coverage, 90 % less than her previous policy's cost. "At 59, I can't overemphasize the importance of a full-time job with health benefits," she said. "I'm the happiest I've been in years."

Dennis Damp, author of *The Book of U.S. Government Jobs*, said the advantages of government work far outweigh the drawbacks. "There's more job security than in corporate America, and the benefits are often more generous," he said. "Federal workers, for example, can keep their health insurance when they retire," he added.

Working for the federal government seldom requires retraining, Mr. Damp said. "People looking to change jobs in their 50s and 60s don't necessarily want to change professions," he said. "With 1.9 million civilian jobs, the government has something for almost every occupation."

Likewise, five of six federal jobs are outside the Washington area, so newly hired workers usually don't need to relocate, Mr. Damp said. North Texas has 44,000 federal employees.

### *Patience, perseverance*

Still, applying for a government job demands patience and perseverance. "The drawn-out application process scares away people," said Renae Perry, director of the Senior Source's employment program, which helps adults older than 50 find jobs in the Dallas area.

Unlike the succinct résumés that private employers prefer, the federal résumé may be six or seven pages long because it expects detailed information from applicants, career counselor Sandra Marling said.

The partnership has been working with agencies to streamline their hiring process so they don't miss out on talented candidates. It's also encouraged more flexible work schedules, which are a priority with boomers.

At the EPA, Ms. Byrd has been able to arrange her workweek into four 10-hour days, sliding into her cubicle about 6:30 a.m. most days. "That flexibility has given me the will to keep working for a long time," she said.

Mr. Stier hopes other older workers will reach the same conclusion and help government head off a brain drain. "Assuming we remove the obstacles, we'll be able to attract boomers who may have considered public service earlier in their careers but had to say no because of family responsibilities," he said.

"Now that they're empty nesters and looking to leave a legacy, maybe they'll say yes to that call to service."