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Public Service Hearing: Critical Skills and Benefits

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Thank you to the committee for inviting me to speak about the United States Digital Service, for your interest in what we have accomplished, and for your willingness to hear the point of view of our small but impactful team.

USDS was founded in response to the shortage of design, product management, and engineering experience in government that led to the near failure of the Affordable Care Act rollout. Following the healthcare.gov recovery, the president founded USDS to mitigate and potentially avoid the failure of the many other government services that millions of people rely on every day.

The driving force behind our mission is a team of technical recruiters and talent managers who attract and retain technologists from both the private and public sectors to serve a tour of duty as short as three months and up to four years. Our talent team is also responsible for working with subject matter experts to adapt USDS' core competencies over time, ensuring we meet the nation's evolving technical needs.

But why would technologists join government? Government does not pay salaries commensurate with much of the technology sector. It has restrictions around prior drug use that run contrary to state laws where many of technologists live. It rarely offers modern equipment or software tools. There are certainly no tech-sector perks like massages, oil changes, or free food. In fact, it is difficult to pay relocation or even bonuses. My employees, who are limited to a four-year maximum-term, cannot even vest a government pension. What government has is the most important mission in this country. And as it turns out, the mission is often enough. So our strategy is to travel the country and convince senior technologists that delivering on our promises to veterans, immigrants, and other at-risk groups is more important than building the next great app or feature.

In short, the way we recruit technical talent is to lead with the mission, to focus on diversity, and invest the time needed to hire and empower great people.

The first contact is usually in the form of a story about our work, told by a friend, seen at a conference, read in the press, or linked on social media. From there, it is in the hands of our talent team to guide each and every candidate—first to apply, then through a series of gated interviews run by subject matter experts and onto a fit and resiliency interview. Each touchpoint is an opportunity for USDS to learn about the technical and interpersonal skills of the candidate by using honest, real-world examples of our work. This is important because we are also communicating to the candidate about the work do. We are looking for fit on both sides. The process is rigorous but we strive to reduce the burden on applicants at every step. For example, you can apply online in under 2 minutes. You don't need a cover letter or a 10-page government resumé. You are assigned a guide who remains in regular contact, our team files as much paperwork as possible on your behalf, and we strive to complete the interview process within a few weeks, expending more than 30 hours of effort on every recruit.

We're building a diverse team that is empowered to step up, speak up, and build products that work for the American public. A crucial aspect of our approach is that we represent the people we serve. As we build, a diverse team is the best way we know of to combat bias and ensure we leave no one out of the solution. To be successful, we have established metrics and collected data to use as a baseline. We take direct actions like speaking and recruiting at conferences with more diverse audiences and we refuse to participate in events or on panels that lack diversity. We hold fast to a 'Rooney Rule' when and we conduct all interviews by phone to reduce bias and eliminate the barrier of travel costs. We pay based on well-defined competencies rather than seniority and our published values recognize the value of everyone speaking up and telling the truth, even when it is uncomfortable. To be held accountable, we now publish bi-annual reports on our website so that the public can judge for itself if we are meeting our goals.

I'm happy to say this strategy of focusing on mission and diversity works. USDS has successfully recruited and onboarded 379 designers, product managers, engineers, contract specialists, and talent professionals in under five years. Nearly 50% of our team self-identifies as female and women make up more than 60% of all leadership positions. Only 27% of our staff identifies as a minority. This is most apparent in the engineering field, an area we are working to improve. As a result of dedicated efforts to improve diversity, the products we build work well, work for everyone, are transparent, and have the capacity to be improved

over time so that any mistakes or biases we may have inadvertently inserted can be identified and mitigated by future generations of technologists.

I recognize that USDS enjoys unique benefits that many other government agencies lack. We have a specific hiring authority. We have a unique budget situation. We have the autonomy to hire a team comprised almost exclusively of GS15 employees. We have strong executive support at all levels and more. This may lead one to believe that what we have accomplished is not relevant outside of our set of circumstances. But USDS is not an anomaly. Our most effective tools, such as active recruiting, focusing on candidate experience, asking subject matter experts to assess candidate's technical qualifications, and making interviews a two-way conversation about the work, are available to every hiring manager in government today. Given that half of all delegated examining certificates and two-thirds of all IT GS12+ certificates result in no candidate being selected, I would go so far as to say that we are wasting effort by not focusing more on the candidate experience and robust quality review. Which is why we began an effort this year to better understand how to possibly improve the competitive hiring process.

What we learned by researching the competitive hiring process and running a series of pilot projects within agencies, is that the competitive process is inherently flawed. USAJobs doesn't reach the wider audience of interested candidates, job descriptions are unrecognizable to many new recruits and are often not a true depiction of the actual job being hired for. Overall, the process of searching USAJobs, self-certifying, and copying and pasting requirements into lengthy resumés, is skewed towards people with experience in the process of applying for federal jobs rather than experience in the job's required skillsets.

If we could offer only one piece of advice, it would be that focusing on strong quality controls—preferably with subject matter experts reviewing resumés and conducting interviews—earlier in the process is more important than relief regarding veteran and other preferences. An accurate technical assessment before an applicant is considered qualified, and thus preference is applied, is far more important than who gets preference overall. I know this represents an initial investment of time but if we are ultimately to succeed, we must refine and improve the competitive hiring process to a level where we can compete with the private sector for top talent without resorting to exceptions like direct hiring authority.

I want to be clear, hiring isn't easy for us either. USDS successfully on-boards only one out of every 209 people we actively recruit. The worst-case scenario—which happens far too

often—is that we invest weeks of work in candidates only to be ghosted for better salaries or less-restrictive work environments. We must also focus significant resources on staff morale and employee retention through transparent communication, community events, and quarterly community health surveys that occupy a significant portion of leadership's attention. All are necessary steps to retain great talent, especially in the absence of other perks.

When I was drafting these remarks, I asked for a lot of feedback on what to say and a few things stood out. First, I was asked if I really wanted to talk about how much effort goes into hiring so few people at USDS. "Wouldn't that make you look inefficient?" I was also asked, "do you want to point out that you have such a large team of recruiters? No one else does that." It was extremely helpful feedback, because that is exactly what I want to say. We need to rethink how we hire, and invest more in active recruiting, not just relying on a more passive HR approach. I think we need to talk more about mission and increase investments in people, not just salaries, but focus on the candidate experience, morale, and well-being.

What does that investment look like? Nearly 10% of our team members are dedicated talent professionals. In addition, each and every person at USDS spends approximately 10% of their time on public speaking, recruiting, interviewing, and mentoring candidates. Likewise, leadership spends more than 10% of their time on talent acquisition, placement, and support in order to maximize the team's impact. Administrators, team leads, and directors all continue to interview new candidates in our individual fields of expertise, just like everyone else. Simply put, hiring isn't an HR function at USDS, it's everyone's job.

I would argue that a significant up-front investment in building a diverse, mission-driven workforce will deliver immediate returns. I did some quick math and USDS has expended approximately 215,000 hours on recruiting. That is an average of about 22 years of labor per year spent on talent acquisition and retention since USDS was founded. On the other hand, we estimate that the workforce productivity gains from the projects we have completed have redirected over 421 labor years of work toward higher value work each year, tasks such as manual retyping or scanning of documents that are now done by a computer instead of a human, freeing people's time for higher value tasks.

That higher productivity includes USDS helping agencies sign more than 20 million people up for healthcare, digitizing half of all immigration paperwork by volume, and easing the burden for military families as they change duty stations. We helped Veterans Affairs redesign the

VA.gov to focus on veterans' needs and helped millions of veterans understand and access their benefits. We helped the SBA reduce the public burden of registering a small business by as much as 100 hours per business, helped student borrowers manage their debt, and reduced the burden for doctors participating in Medicare, as well as more than one hundred other successful projects. This, in addition to saving the government more than one billion dollars.

Speaking on behalf of my colleagues it is an honor to serve our country. Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the discussion and for your efforts to make it easier for others to serve alongside us. I look forward to your questions.