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NOVEMBER 4, 1983

RELEASED

The Honorable Patricia Schroeder  
Chairwoman, Subcommittee on Civil  
Service  
Committee on Post Office and  
Civil Service  
House of Representatives

Dear Madam Chairwoman:

Subject: Reassignment of Senior Executive Service Members  
at the Department of the Interior (GAO/GGD-84-19)

On February 17, 1983, you requested that we examine reassignments of Senior Executive Service (SES) members under the Department of the Interior's Career Enhancement Program. Specifically, you asked that we track the reassignments made and examine the stated reasons for each reassignment in light of other alleged motivations. The program, which began December 21, 1982, and concluded September 30, 1983, executed a new Interior policy of reassigning SES members between agency bureaus. You indicated that several groups expressed concern to the subcommittee that reassignments might be misused to punish or isolate career executives who have been most effective in administering programs to which the Administration is hostile.

We found that very few involuntary reassignments were made during the program. However, there appeared to be confusion among some reassigned members over how the program worked. In addition, possibly as a result of this confusion, several senior executives had negative attitudes towards the program.

We discussed the Career Enhancement Program with Department of the Interior officials and reviewed documentation announcing and implementing the program. We also conducted telephone interviews with all 22 SES members who had been reassigned as of September 30, 1983. Our review was performed in accordance with generally accepted government audit standards.

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The purpose of the Career Enhancement Program was to promote executive mobility, professional development, and cross-training of managers. The program was started because top Interior officials, including the Secretary, believed the agency's bureau executives had become too staid over the years. The officials viewed interbureau reassignments as a way of unifying the agency's diverse operating groups into an organization more capable of carrying out its mission. Additionally, they believed that moving SES members between bureaus would help enhance the members' careers and better balance management resources throughout the agency.

Under the Career Enhancement Program, the Assistant Secretary, Policy, Budget, and Administration (PBA), in conjunction with the program Assistant Secretaries, assigned each bureau a target number of executives to be reassigned by September 30, 1983. These targets were based on the number of reassignments that had occurred in the past and the Secretary's overall reassignment goal of 25 to 35 percent. By September 30, 1983, 31 of the Department's 113 eligible executives<sup>1</sup> (27.4 percent) were to have been reassigned; however, only 22 (19.5 percent) reassignments actually occurred. Six involved geographic moves.

The Assistant Secretary (PBA) told us that the number of reassignments anticipated under the program were about the same as would have occurred without the program. However, before the program, moves occurred more frequently within, rather than between, bureaus. The Career Enhancement Program, he explained, gave department-level support to reassignments between bureaus. For example, 14 (64 percent) of the 22 reassignments that occurred involved interbureau moves. He stated that before the Career Enhancement Program, interbureau moves accounted for only about 25 percent of the Department's reassignments.

Based on our interviews with the 22 reassigned SES members, we found that 3 considered their reassignments to be involuntary, and 19 accepted reassignment without protest. Eight of the 19 had actually sought out reassignments. All but 4 of the 22 reassignees believed the reasons given by management for

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<sup>1</sup>According to Interior officials, exclusions to the program were made in attorney positions, positions in the Indian service filled through Indian preference, and positions requiring specialized scientific and engineering qualifications.

their own personal reassignments were satisfactory and that there were no punitive reasons involved. The four believed they were being reassigned for political or punitive reasons.<sup>2</sup>

While most reassignments under the Career Enhancement Program were voluntary, the Assistant Secretary (PBA) stated that members choosing not to accept reassignments placed themselves in jeopardy of being removed from the agency or having to accept a lesser position. One Washington-based SES member, for example, declined a geographic reassignment. He was subsequently offered, and accepted, a GS-15 position with Interior in Washington, D.C. A second member retired rather than accept a geographic reassignment.

Our review of the 22 positions vacated by the reassignees showed that 6 had been abolished; 1 was transferred to another agency; 1 was transferred to another bureau; 5 remained vacant; and the other 9 were filled by 2 noncareerists, 2 limited emergency appointees, and 5 career appointees.

Although there were only three involuntary reassignments during the period reviewed, there appeared to be confusion among reassigned members as to how the Career Enhancement Program actually worked. Agency officials described the program as a process whereby SES members were to submit resumes outlining their desired career goals. However, SES members' responses to our questions indicated that this process was not generally followed. For example:

- Three said they had submitted resumes in conjunction with the Career Enhancement Program.
- Ten told us they had expressed no desire to change positions for career development, or any other reason, prior to their reassignment.
- Eleven did not know their reassignments were made under the auspices of the Career Enhancement Program.
- Four mentioned career development as a reason for their reassignment.

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<sup>2</sup>Three of the four individuals were involuntary reassignees; the fourth had accepted reassignment without protest. Two of the four involved geographic relocation.

Executive mobility is an important goal of the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978. It can benefit both the SES member, through career development, and the agency, through the ability to match jobs with executive talent. However, in the case of Interior's Career Enhancement Program, most of the executives we talked to did not view professional development--a stated goal of the program--as the reason for their reassignments.

Eight reassignees had negative comments about the Career Enhancement Program. Thirteen felt positively about the program, and one had no opinion. The negative comments included perceptions that the program was used in the agency as a disciplinary tool and that certain aspects of the program, such as a lack of SES member input into the reassignment process, could discourage candidates from joining SES. Some SES members told us they wanted to have more influence in choosing their career paths--especially considering their executive level. Increased communication between program administrators and SES members concerning career choices might have helped alleviate the negative feelings some executives had about reassignments.

As requested by your office, we did not obtain comments from Interior on this report. As arranged with your office, unless you publicly announce its contents earlier, we plan no further distribution of this report until 5 days from the date of the report. At that time, we will send copies to interested parties and make copies available to others upon request.

Sincerely yours,

*W. J. Anderson*

William J. Anderson  
Director