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UNITED STATES GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20548

FEDERAL PERSONNEL AND
COMPENSATION DIVISION

JANUARY 8, 1981

B-201543

The Honorable Arlen Erdahl
House of Representatives



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Dear Mr. Erdahl:

Subject: Federal Agencies' Stress Management
Training Programs (FPCD-81-32)

This report, presenting the results of our evaluation of selected Federal agencies' stress management training programs, responds to your September 5, 1980, request and later discussions with your office. This report relates specifically to internal training on the subject of stress management. Our objective was to report to you on how agencies are providing this training for their employees. In addition to legislative authority and Federal guidelines, we reviewed program cost, course content and objectives, employee participation, and the role of the Office of Personnel Management (OPM).

We discussed fiscal years 1979-80 stress management training programs with officials in the headquarters of the Department of Agriculture, the Federal Aviation Administration, the National Institutes of Health, and OPM. The training programs are a small, low-cost segment of the total training provided by three of these agencies. The Federal Aviation Administration did not provide any training in this area. Stress management training offered by the other agencies was provided under either their training or health services programs. For both of these programs, the head of the agency has legislative authority to provide the necessary services to promote the efficiency and health of his/her work force.

AUTHORITY AND GUIDANCE

Authority for Federal employees' training and health services programs is provided for primarily under two basic laws--the Government Employees Training Act of 1958 (Public Law 85-507) and health services program legislation 5 U.S.C. 7901 (Public Law 79-658). The Government Employees Training

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Act was enacted to increase the efficiency and economy of the Federal work force by providing training relevant to the performance of employees' official duties. This act places responsibility for training with the head of each agency who is authorized and directed to establish needed training. Under 5 U.S.C. 7901, the head of an agency may establish a health service program to promote and maintain the physical and mental fitness of employees under his/her jurisdiction. Under both laws, the head of the agency has the authority to provide these services through the use of in-house or outside resources available.

[OPM's role is to insure that the Federal Government provides an array of personnel services to its employees. Through a range of programs designed to develop and enhance employee effectiveness, OPM supports Government program managers in their personnel management responsibilities.] [OPM, in Federal Personnel Manual Letter 792-9 issued May 23, 1979, recommended that agency counseling service programs extend the services beyond alcoholism and drug abuse problems. Rather than restricting employee counseling to these areas, OPM stated that the counseling program should encompass a wide range of medical, behavioral, and emotional problems. OPM also supports educating employees about these types of problems.] In the Federal Personnel Manual, chapter 410--a compilation of regulations and standards used to govern the training programs under the Government Employees Training Act--OPM, in September 1974, recognized the broad flexibility of the authorities of the act.

"In general, authorities granted by the act are sufficiently broad and flexible to enable an agency to provide whatever training is necessary to develop the skills, knowledge, and abilities that will best qualify employees for the performance of official duties."

OPM'S ACTIVITIES

[OPM's Work Force Effectiveness and Development Group (WED) is involved in several stress management projects. The group is currently developing a policy paper on stress management.] Also, as part of its 1980 supervisory training curriculum for Federal employees, OPM headquarters offers a stress management training course. Additionally, the group is accumulating information on agencies' activities and non-Federal sources of expertise on this subject. WED/Employee Health Services Branch spearheads these projects and works closely with the Office of Training in providing the stress management training course.

Employee Health Services is currently gathering data to finalize the stress management statement on OPM's role in and support for programs to help Federal agencies and employees manage stress. [Some of the basic ideas in the draft include engineering the work environment to encourage productive stress and to moderate the disadvantageous outcomes of distress, teaching coping techniques, and identifying the resulting symptoms of distress.] Issuance of this policy statement is expected in fiscal year 1981.

In announcing its stress training course, OPM states that such training has the potential for increasing job performance and productivity. Upon completion of the course, participants are expected to be able to

- analyze their work environment to identify stress-causing factors (stressors);
- determine which of those stress factors could be prevented, reduced, or eliminated;
- identify the effects and costs of stress to the individual and the organization;
- differentiate between positive and negative stress;
- recognize the individual behavior cues of stress overload; and
- apply a number of stress-reducing techniques to their work environment.]

This 2-day course was developed and delivered by a contractor monitored closely by WED personnel. The cost of the contract is approximately \$4,000.

AGENCIES' ACTIVITIES

Among the selected agencies, a variety of methods are used to educate their staff members on stress management. These methods include the distribution of printed material, noontime lectures, training modules, and 1- to 3-day seminars. The content and depth of material presented vary allowing for the presentation time available. However, the material is designed basically to teach

- the identification of positive and negative stressors and

--techniques for constructively revising stress management styles by minimizing the negative effects of stress.]

In these presentations, the holistic approach of dealing with the overall effects of stress on the individual is used; and in some cases, this material is supplemented with information on stress in the work environment. [Employee attendance and participation are voluntary.]

[The 1- to 3-day seminars deal with the subject of stress management and are usually developed and presented with the assistance of contracted psychologists having expertise in the subject area.] Contract cost for this assistance range from \$300 to \$3,000, for the 1- and 3-day seminars, respectively. These figures include the cost for design and development of instructional material, lectures and course delivery, and handout material for class participants. Due to limited or the lack of expertise in-house, agency officials stated that the use of short-term contract assistance is the most economical method for the agency to provide the service for its employees.

Information in the stress management module presentations is condensed and generally focuses on the recognition of positive and negative effects of stress. These modules are included in other midmanagement training courses, generally for GS-12s and above. [Since lectures for the module presentations on stress are developed with in-house resources and account for only a small portion of the total course cost, officials could not accurately estimate the cost involved for development and delivery.]

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At the request of your office, we did not obtain agency comments on this informational report.

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As arranged with your office, we are sending copies of this letter to the Secretary, Department of Agriculture; the Administrator, Federal Aviation Administration; the Director, National Institutes of Health; the Director, Office of Personnel Management; and the Chairman, President's Commission on Pension Policy.

Sincerely yours,



H. L. Krieger
Director