

December 2, 2020

Mary Pope Hutson, Chairwoman
National Park System Advisory Board

Subject: Recommendations on Suicide Prevention, Resilience, and Morale Improvement

Dear Chairwoman Hutson:

The National Park Service (NPS) is concerned about the risk of employee suicides and strongly supports initiatives promoting wellness, resilience, and morale improvement within its workforce.

The National Park System is overburdened by a repairs deficit and understaffing which has accumulated over decades and has led to increased stress and decreased morale. There is stress, overwork, burnout syndrome, and chronic metabolic disease due to workplace stress within the employees of the NPS. There are traumatic events that are faced by NPS employees of the National Park System that lead to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). All of this is compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic and civil unrest. Suicide - an extreme response to the emotional stressors listed above - is the 10th leading cause of death in the United States (and the 4th leading cause for adults between the ages of 35 and 54), and rates have increased in almost every state over the last 20 years. NPS staff are not immune to these trends. Morale is among the lowest of Federal agencies with NPS scoring only a 51% positive Work/Life Balance Index score from the 2019 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey - eight percentage points lower than the Department of the Interior and a full 12 percentage points lower than the Federal government as a whole

The burden for this morale and stress currently falls upon the Director, senior leadership, superintendents, human resources employees, Office of Risk Management employees in the Visitor and Resource Protection Directorate, and others, none of whom are professionally trained, prepared, or equipped for the management of suicide prevention and morale monitoring. All of the other uniformed services, law enforcement agencies, emergency services, and healthcare organizations utilize mental health specialists and professional counselors/chaplains for suicide prevention, morale assessment, resilience, post-traumatic events, disasters, and grief and bereavement. There is currently no mental health specialist within the NPS, for example, assisting with suicide prevention, wellness, and resilience policy and program development. This is an organizational structure issue that can be remedied with minimal changes.

The Workforce Planning Committee of the National Park System Advisory Board proposes the expansion of the Wellness and Resilience Branch and the creation of several positions including a mental health program manager, professional counselor/chaplain, and a body of other specially trained personnel to assist the Director in morale, suicide prevention, health, and response to traumatic events housed within the Wellness and Resilience Branch. This will allow the Director to delegate these responsibilities to trained professionals. Health specialists and professional counselors/chaplains are highly trained professionals with advanced degrees who assist with morale, mental and emotional health, trauma, post-trauma issues, stress, healthcare issues, and suicide prevention.

Mental health specialists, professional counselors/chaplains, and other specially trained personnel play an important role in helping employees cope with personal issues and stress in the workplace and in improving morale. Their supportive consultation can enhance morale and decrease staff burnout, thus reducing employee turnover and the use of sick time. In addition, they are involved in the assessment, diagnosis, and treatment of distress and mental health issues, cultural competency, employee clinical care, staff support, grief, and bereavement.

There is strong evidence that mental health specialists, professional counselors/chaplains, and other specially trained personnel are effective in improving morale, wellness and resilience. Benefits and duties of these positions include:

- Developing an integrated care team of support, guidance, nurture and encouragement
- Assisting employees to cope with the psychological, social and spiritual aspects of their stress, trauma, illnesses and difficulties arising from them
- Offering counseling services related to problems/issues that employees might share with a mental health specialist or a professional counselor/chaplain such as fear of death, guilt, anxiety, depression, and forgiveness Inviting employees to express feelings and explore the meaning of their experience, such as about an illness, trauma, mental health, loss of a loved one, or other life stressors

Exploring spiritual and mental health resources for rehabilitation, healing and growth

- Assisting supervisors to support employee morale and handling of other stressors.
- Establishing a training function for those staff interested in personal development in the area of psycho-social-spiritual concerns
- Facilitating groups of employees for team building and debriefing
- Helping other professionals identify and attend to their own needs and issues, by providing staff support and valuing their particular contribution
- Serving as an intermediary or resource person in some of the complex situations of park management
- Serving as a resource for those addressing the complex ethical issues involved in making decisions related to employees
- Assistance in crisis response

Implementation

Implementation of this can be accomplished in a short time with minimal changes and only a revision of the organizational structure of the NPS to build capacity of the Office of Risk Management's Wellness and Resilience Branch as described below.

1. Revision of the NPS organizational structure to create a position of mental health specialist and professional counselor or chaplain within the Wellness and Resilience Branch; expansion of the Wellness and Resilience Branch to include additional positions that support employee morale, wellness, and resilience; and better coordination among staff of the Wellness and Resilience Branch in order to develop policy and guidance; initiatives to build resilience; leadership engagement, supervisory supports; expansion of resources and development of a network of Federal, State, and local resources;

- communication initiatives to end stigmas associated with suicide and mental illness; development of tracking systems; and program evaluation.
2. Creation of a Mental Health and Resilience Program within the Wellness and Resilience Branch and maintenance of the Employee Wellness Program.
 3. Utilization of US Public Health Service commissioned officers and mental health specialists as appropriate.
 4. Expansion of mental health specialists, regional counselors or chaplains, and other specially trained personnel to assist superintendents through the CARES Act Ready Reserve Corps of the USPHS. This is all-volunteer and composed of commissioned officers who can be available beginning as early as Spring 2021. Expansion and focus on a peer support program for suicide awareness and prevention for peer awareness and encouragement.
 5. Communication at all levels of the organization on the importance of suicide prevention, resilience, and morale monitoring.
 6. Training and awareness of the health benefits of mental health services and counseling.
 7. The utilization of mental health specialists and professional counselors/chaplains for resilience and morale by superintendents/program managers and other key leaders implemented into Supervisory Skills Workshop and New Supervisor Development Program.
 8. Reevaluation of NPS organizational structure and alignment in order to focus on mission accomplishment, resilience, suicide prevention, and decreased stress to workforce. This will require structural alignment and coordination between the Visitor Resource Protection Directorate's Offices of Risk Management and Office of Public Health, and the Workforce Inclusion Directorate with staff leadership from the Wellness and Resilience Branch.
 9. Improve employee fitness and morale through granting time during the workday for fitness and other wellness activities.
 10. On-going coordination and communication of program successes and achievement of shared goals among programs and Directorates.

It is our honor to serve the National Park System Advisory Board and to develop recommendations for consideration.

Sincerely,

Zelma Lansford, Ed.D. and Dr. Les Moore
Co-Chairs, Workforce Planning Committee
National Park System Advisory Board