

June 22, 2020

Mary Pope Hutson, Chairwoman  
National Park System Advisory Board

Subject: Recommendations for *Healthy Parks, Healthy People, Healthy Organizations*

Dear Chairwoman Hutson:

The Workforce Planning Committee of the National Park System Advisory Board is pleased to recommend specific actions to enhance the National Park Service (NPS) and benefit NPS employees who are entrusted with the care of our Nation's treasures. Specifically, we provide two sets of recommendations related to (1) helping the NPS implement more effective programs for developing supervisors, and (2) helping the NPS improve delivery of health, wellness, and resiliency outcomes.

At this time of pandemic, human health has become a priority. In addition, the concept of healthy organizations has emerged as a major focus in the private sector. With concerns about the NPS perceptions reflected in the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey, it is our privilege to suggest ways to increase employee engagement and foster a healthy organization.

The NPS has initiated a Supervisor Support Initiative that was inspired by the vision that, "Every NPS employee deserves a great supervisor." To support that endeavor, the attached suggestions are intended to adapt the material to better meet the needs of NPS supervision within the Department of the Interior Framework, making the learning opportunities more cost effective, with greater effectiveness for today's employees, and more availability to NPS supervisors, regardless of location.

Our efforts to support the NPS are intended only to enhance the fabled agency and increase public value of our Parks. It is our honor and pleasure to serve the Advisory Board and to develop recommendations for consideration.

Sincerely,

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

## Recommendations for Workforce Development

### **Committee Charge**

Propose curriculum changes, updating Supervisory Skills Essentials to better fit ongoing supervisor development within the framework being developed by the Department of Interior.

### **Recommendations**

1. *Provide training in supervision **before** supervisory duties are assigned.*

The National Park Service (NPS) does not systematically provide supervisory training prior to employees becoming supervisors. Further, when they do take on a supervisory role they may perceive that time and budget constraints serve as obstacles to receiving training. Even a cursory survey can find supervisors who have been in the job for years without basic training in supervision. It appears that many supervisors do not receive the standard preparation.

It is suggested that following the military and private sector practice of learning how to be an effective supervisor before being deployed into action will enhance the standards of NPS supervision and make a positive impact on employee engagement.

2. *Request the media experts at Harpers Ferry Center reformat the current Supervisor Essentials from a PowerPoint with presenter notes to a complete online video format to enable greater availability and effectiveness.*

Such conversion will create two major advantages for NPS supervisors. First, budget issues, travel limitations, and other concerns will impede the custom of providing training via in-person workshops as in the past. Second, an online version will greatly increase accessibility and extend availability of training to more aspiring, new, and current supervisors.

The pandemic has increased emphasis on the resources in on-line learning. The NPS can look to state universities that have developed effective courses and researched retention and impact. Applying private sector practices, elite university methods, and knowledge of effective adult learning can transfer the essential facts that supervisors need to become their everyday habits. Today, there is greater cognizance of the need to facilitate specific learning preferences of adults in ways that depart from classroom methods of the past. The millennial generation is especially sensitive to shorter, concise, and technology savvy presentation of facts.

For the skills portion of the online learning, utilizing video and attaching a narrator will ensure consistency in delivery, rather than depending on facilitator notes and different people facilitating the PowerPoint. Although there is no intention to be critical of the work already done in assembling the essential information, a few modifications may result in major increases in the delivery and retention of facts. The media experts at Harpers Ferry Center will be able to make the needed improvements, such as the following adjustments:

- When referencing illegal or unethical issues, such as in slide 20, it might be more effective to use a fictitious “National Monument, Middle of Nowhere” instead of the specific park where violations have occurred. Not to diminish the seriousness of actions, but when fear is such a huge issue in the NPS culture, continuation of the public flogging may not be productive.
- Some of the current slides contain excessive important information that the experts may be able to convert into a variety of media and/or presentations to enhance effectiveness. For example, instead of using such problematic terms as *judge fairly*, replace with a short video of an exemplary superintendent illustrating in a discussion with an employee what the material attempts to convey, such as in slide 13.
- In slide 48, while reasonable accommodation is a requirement according to statute, it should not be presented as an imposition on NPS or on NPS staff, but rather, as an opportunity to welcome and accommodate a valued employee who happens to have a disability. The approach toward reasonable accommodation used by NPS supervisors and administrators will have a direct impact on productivity of employees with disabilities and others.
- It is also highly recommended that slide 44 be replaced with a more appropriate example of accountability. In this instance, inclusion of the Director in the title can be misconstrued.
- Follow the online sessions with a small group video conferencing format and a facilitator to enhance the online learning, answer questions, and reinforce the experience.
- Offer additional interactive video conferences and encourage peer contacts to develop supportive relationships and knowledge sharing.

Ensure that each participant has access to an online, up-to-date *Supervisor Handbook*, that can be a readily accessible resource for many of the rules, regulations, and processes contained in the PowerPoint of the *Supervisor Essentials*. By maintaining this reference tool online, it can be kept up-to-date and an easy access for all supervisors when they need quick answers to correct processes and procedures. With today’s culture so adept at online research for answers to any questions, this reference tool will be a huge asset for supervisors.

### 3. *Separate the skills focus from the leadership portion.*

The *Department of the Interior Supervisory Development Framework (DOI Framework)* separates technical and human resource skills from leadership in its presentation. Rearranging the Supervisor Essentials to follow that framework will make the learning more cohesive and decrease the possibility that has sometimes occurred when supervisors confuse the appropriate response to performance issues with actions pertinent to behavior or misconduct. In addition, the technical skills are more appropriately delivered as online and reference material. Much of such content is process oriented and can best be presented in relevant formats and with an online reference manual.

The leadership portion can be most effective when presented with personal interactions that enable practice and experiential learning. Arranging separate video and interactive online conferences will make the understanding of leadership and the acquisition of leadership practices far more effective. The current method of attempting to teach the rules and regulations interspersed with a few “soft skills” is not effective and can even produce the opposite of what was intended.

Since supervision in the NPS is often considered to be the first step in moving into leadership, it is essential for beginning leaders to become grounded in the many rules and regulations for Federal government employees. Having mastered these basic tactics, they will then be equipped to move to the strategic areas of leadership. Beyond the critical goal of ensuring every NPS employee has a great supervisor, growing supervisors helps develop the new cadre of emerging NPS leaders positioned to serve as the next generation of superintendents and Senior Executive Service members.

## **Conclusion**

The NPS has assembled extensive information for training supervisors within the DOI Framework. To make this information available to more supervisors, and to train supervisors before they are promoted, the Workforce Planning Committee strongly recommends that the focus of skills and leadership be separated with the resources of media experts at Harpers Ferry Center, and that the supervisor information be converted to an online format, utilizing a reference “handbook” with extensive videos, followed by facilitated video conferencing. Utilization of technology and NPS media experts will captivate supervisors, especially the new ones, and excite them about their opportunities for career growth, making the learning effective, impactful, and with the following results:

- Increased success for new supervisors
- Greater effectiveness in learning the skills and abilities needed for effective supervision
- More engaged employees
- Less dissatisfaction among the supervised employees, and perhaps, fewer complaints and/or grievances that may be reflected in the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey.

## Recommendations for Increasing Health, Wellness, and Resiliency by Reclaiming the NPS Heritage

The Workforce Planning Committee recommends that the National Park System Advisory Board request the National Park Service to revise its mission statement to include the word “health”, and implement subsequent measures to recognize the benefits of the National Park System *as a health resource for all people*, with clear and substantial benefits to the underserved and minority populations who disproportionately suffer from chronic diseases.

The proposed National Park Service Mission Statement would read:

The National Park Service preserves unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values of the National Park System for the enjoyment, education, [health], and inspiration of this and future generations. The Park Service cooperates with partners to extend the benefits of natural and cultural resource conservation and outdoor recreation throughout this country and the world.

The National Park Service (NPS) is overburdened by operational needs that have accumulated over decades including a repairs deficit and understaffing. There is stress, overwork, burnout syndrome, and chronic metabolic disease due to stress within the workforce of the NPS. All of this is compounded by the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown and civil unrest. The addition of “health” to the NPS mission statement, while no panacea, honors our heritage and signals a commitment to recovery and renewal to remedy this growing set of organizational and societal ills during a time where the need is great to realize the benefits of the National Park System as a health resource to the nation in this time of great need for healing.

The NPS has a longstanding mission and dedication to protecting and promoting public health. The original purpose of the National Parks, with the acquisition by Congress of what would become its first park-Hot Springs, Arkansas, was ‘for the health of the nation.’ The mineral springs at Hot Springs were used for healing of multiple medical conditions and Congress and eventually the NPS wanted to preserve this natural resource for the health of the nation. The first Superintendent of Hot Springs National park was a physician from the United States Public Health Service because the intent of the park was for health and healing,

In the very first annual report of the NPS, Stephen Mather, as the first Director of the NPS set forth a statement of policy that identified a set of guiding principles that recognized that the national parks must be maintained in absolutely unimpaired for the use of this and future generations, and that they be set apart for the use, observation, health, and pleasure of the people.

Today, the NPS manages multiple natural and cultural assets that allow for healing and resiliency in a multitude of ways. Each of these parks, trails, monuments, or sites are places where NPS visitors, employees, volunteers, and partners can come together for health and healing. Cultural and societal healing can happen at certain points (Gettysburg National Military Park, Mary McLeod Bethune Council House National Historic Site) or natural healing can happen at certain points (Forest medicine of Great Smoky Mountains National Park or mineral springs of Hot Springs National Park).

As steward of these healing places, the employees of the NPS already have a mission that is greater than the individual- the stewardship of the natural and cultural resources of the United States. That each of these resources are also a place of healing and creating health in the people of the United States makes our mission even greater. There is no other agency better suited to address the healing of the nation than the NPS.

There is strong and growing scientific evidence that the natural resources in the National Parks and Monuments and Trails provide great healing potential in exercise, medical hydrology, forest medicine, and clean air. Outside of the well-known benefits of exercise through hiking, biking, swimming, fishing, running, etc., are the benefits of the healing power of nature (*vis medicatrix naturae*). These natural resources offer great potential for resiliency of NPS employees and the nation. In addition to the positive impacts outdoor settings can provide to promote physical and mental wellbeing, the positive social and emotional impacts of the NPS historic and cultural sites are critical to recognize. Visiting a site or monument can be a source of healing for a family, cultural group (Medgar and Myrlie Evers Home, Frederick Douglas Home, Little Rock Central High School, Path of Marchers from Selma to Montgomery), or nation (Gettysburg, Chickamauga National Military Park) who identify with the site. This is almost unmeasurable but is a well-known benefit of cultural resource healing places. Some examples of resiliency and health benefits that accrue from natural and cultural resources, and volunteerism are provided in Appendix A.

The financial health of the NPS can also be improved by the revision and re-mission of focusing on the health of the nation. Medical tourism, including the use of mineral springs, forest bathing, spa visits, and other forms of healing are a significant source of GDP for nations that focus on medical tourism as a source of revenue. The National Park System already generates revenue, but this can be significantly greater with a focus on the healing aspects of the National Park System. Increased visitation due to seeking the health benefits of the National Parks or increased stay at a National Park or Site leads to increased revenue for local and regional economies also. America can focus on its assets and draw people for healing from here and from abroad in an already five hundred billion-dollar industry of medical tourism.

### **Health and wellness implementation**

The National Park System Advisory Board recommends a ten-step approach for implementing health and wellness as integral to the NPS mission. These recommendations can be acted upon in a relatively short time with relatively small changes across the organization that can improve morale, esprit de corps, and more fully realize the NPS mission. This can be done by:

1. Revision of NPS mission statement to include the word 'health.'
2. Service-wide communication at all levels of this mission revision and the importance of being the caretakers, stewards, and ambassadors of the health and resiliency of the nation.
3. Training and awareness of the health benefits of the national parks for all populations and the role of NPS to advance health promotion for the highest risk populations.
4. Health and Wellness benefits of parks implemented into Supervisory Skills Workshop and New Supervisor Development Program in order to give mission, authority, and responsibility to leaders.
5. Marketing approach to raise awareness of the healing benefits of visiting the healing sites in the NPS, for both internally (NPS employees) and externally (medical tourism).
6. Studies to increase science research into the use of natural and cultural resources for healing, from within the NPS and to those universities that are already examining this.
7. Development of medical tourism by proposing business plan/model, marketing, development, and partnership with vendors.
8. Establish fund source and criteria to support facility maintenance and built environment improvements in parks that address deferred maintenance backlog and promote parks as a health resource (trail enhancement, park housing, visitor centers, greenspace, etc).

9. Reevaluation of NPS organizational structure and alignment in order to focus on mission accomplishment, resiliency, and decreased stress to workforce.
10. Resource allocation to increase capacity of National Park Service Public Health Service providers and Healthy Parks, Healthy People to implement these recommendations in collaboration with partners. Networking is already in place with the DOD, CDC, and other stakeholders who look to the National Park Service's Healthy Parks, Healthy People for leadership and guidance.

## APPENDIX A

### Examples of and health benefits from natural and cultural spaces

#### **Forest Medicine: Simply being in a greenspace.**

1. Improved immune system function
2. Reduce blood pressure
3. Decrease blood glucose levels and hemoglobin A1C
4. Improved autonomic nervous system
5. Relaxed mind
6. Decreased stress
7. Decrease stress hormones
8. Improved heart rate
9. Decrease depression
10. Decrease hostility
11. Improve liveliness
12. Improved activity and increased count of natural killer cells (anti-cancer effect)

#### **Medical Hydrology: Simply being in mineral springs water or a bluespace.**

1. Increase immune function
2. Decrease stress, improve cortisol
3. Improve blood sugar metabolism
4. Respiratory diseases
5. Eczema, psoriasis, and other skin diseases
6. Improve cardiovascular function
7. Reduce blood pressure
8. Decrease pain and inflammation
9. Improved joint health and mobility
10. Rehabilitation

#### **Medical Climatology: Simply being in specific environments.**

1. Improved immune function
2. Decreased stress
3. Improved sinus health
4. Improved upper respiratory health

#### **Medical Geology: Simply being in touch with the earth.**

1. Improved immune system function
2. Improved skin tone
3. Eczema, psoriasis, and other skin diseases
4. Improved cardiovascular health
5. Improved joint health
6. Decreased pain

**Mental Health: Simply being in a greenspace, bluespace, or park.**

1. Decreased stress
2. Decreased anxiety
3. Decreased depression
4. Improved cognitive function
5. Improved memory
6. Improved sense of well-being
7. Increased happiness

**Effects of Heritage Conservation on Social Wellbeing:**

1. Personal enrichment
2. Social learning
3. Increased satisfaction
4. Decreased anxiety about the present and future
5. Increased social wellbeing
6. Improved social values including community, belonging, order, balance, stability, and place
7. Decreased social isolation
8. Enhance quality of life
9. Create mutually supported atmospheres
10. Positively affect physical mental, emotional, spiritual, societal, and environmental health
11. Develop a closer relationship with one's local area or societal or cultural issue
12. Increased sense of community
13. Increased cultural identity

Beyond the healing effects upon the employees of the National Park Service is the healing power of volunteerism.

**Medical Benefits of Volunteering:**

1. Improve overall health
2. Improve overall wellbeing
3. Increase happiness
4. Positive impact on mental health
5. Improve immune function
6. Reduce stress
7. Reduce pain
8. Improved sleep
9. Creation of purpose and meaning
10. Increased involvement in supportive and positive social networks
11. Feel as though part of something bigger than ourselves
12. Become less self-absorbed
13. Become less physically or emotionally isolated
14. Increased brain activity with positive emotions
15. Improved mental health, including decreased depression and less anxiety
16. Create positive feelings during hardships
17. Improve confidence
18. Increased social interaction, itself a powerful healing force