



## Federal workers, a resource not a target

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Partisan gridlock, high unemployment, record budget deficits, Wall Street bailouts -- the litany of unsettling news has led to growing anger toward our federal government.

A national poll taken this month found that 67 percent of the public was either dissatisfied or angry with how government is working, the most negative score in 16 years.

Unfortunately, some politicians, commentators and activists have sought to capitalize on these troubling times by perpetuating myths about federal employees -- public servants who are on the frontlines every day protecting our national security, caring for veterans, safeguarding our food and medicine supplies, and providing countless services needed and expected by the American people.

To be certain, the [federal government](#) has its faults and there is room for improvement, but facts matter. Here are five pervasive myths about federal workers.

**Myth:** The federal government workforce is too big and is growing out of control.

**Fact:** Since the end of the Korean War, there has been a steady decline in the federal civilian workforce as a share of the U.S. population. The number of full-time federal civilian workers is expected to be at 2.1 million this year -- smaller than in 1967 when [Lyndon Johnson](#) was president. And today, we have 107 million more Americans than four decades ago. Of all civilian workers, 1.1 million, or just over 50 percent, are employed by the Departments of Defense, Homeland Security and Veterans Affairs.

**Myth:** Federal workers are overpaid and make far more than people in the private sector.

**Fact:** Direct comparisons show most professionals in government such as engineers, scientists, computer specialists, lawyers, managers and public health workers routinely make less than their private-sector counterparts, especially at higher levels within departments and agencies. The federal workforce has fewer minimum wage jobs, is older and more educated than the private sector, making aggregate pay comparisons across the sectors misleading. Fifty one percent of federal employees, for example, have at least a college degree compared to 35 percent in the private sector.

**Myth:** The federal government = Washington, D.C.

**Fact:** The nation's capital may be the center of federal power, but 85 percent of all federal civilian government jobs are outside of Washington, with public servants working in every state to serve their fellow citizens and neighbors. Federal employees work at our nation's borders, in our national parks and forests, at federal research laboratories, in approximately 1,300 Social Security offices, and in embassies and at U.S. military bases in this country and around the world.

**Myth:** When times are tough, we can save money by cutting back on the government workforce.

**Fact:** Reducing the federal workforce through hiring freezes has been done in the past. The outcome was debilitating skill gaps that undermined the ability of federal agencies to protect the public and deliver services efficiently. Workforce reductions without a corresponding reduction in government services have

led to increased dependence on private contractors, often resulting in higher costs for taxpayers and the outsourcing of jobs that are inherently governmental. In times of war, economic turmoil and terrorist threats as we face today, the demands on government are growing, not diminishing. The need is greater, not less, for nurses and doctors at veterans' hospitals, bank and securities regulators, border police and intelligence officers.

**Myth:** Feds are not innovative.

**Fact:** Yes, there is red tape in government like many large private-sector enterprises, but there are amazing stories of creative federal workers and programs. There is Eileen Harrington, who at the Federal Trade Commission created the National Do Not Call Registry to stop annoying telemarketing calls for 200 million Americans; Thomas Waldmann of the National Institutes of Health, whose cutting-edge discoveries led to significant advances in the treatment of cancer and AIDS; Don Burke and Sean P. Dennehy of the CIA, who developed a Wikipedia-like clearinghouse for intelligence sharing; and Frazer Lockhart of the Department of Energy, who not only managed the successful cleanup of the Rocky Flats nuclear weapons facility 60 years ahead of schedule and \$30 billion under budget, but also saw the site turned into a nature preserve.

Concerns about the size of government and caricatures of federal workers have been recurring themes in American history, but whether government is big or small, public servants are vital to our nation's health, welfare and security. Trust in our government is essential for public servants to meet today's challenges, and rebuilding that trust needs to be a priority for the administration, Congress and the American people.

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