

The Washington Post

[Back to previous page](#)

Top 10 stories in the federal workforce in 2012

By [Lisa Rein](#), Published: December 26

It was a rancorous year in Washington, with Democrats and Republicans raising their swords over taxes, spending and the role of government amid a presidential campaign. The government came close to going over a fiscal cliff of spending cuts and tax increases. The employees who are central to the federal mission made mistakes and enjoyed victories as they landed in the crosshairs of these debates.

Here are the top 10 stories in the workforce in 2012.

10Hacking at the Thrift Savings Plan. More than 120,000 employees and other account holders in the government's 401(k)-style retirement plan had personal information, including Social Security numbers, accessed in what officials called a "sophisticated cyberattack."

The TSP notified the affected employees and monitored their accounts for suspicious activity. The savings plan said there is no evidence the data was misused. But the attack reflected the government's ongoing concern over information security incidents that put sensitive data at risk and are likely to keep happening.

9Electronic monitoring of employees. The case of the Food and Drug Administration's spying on agency scientists who complained about approvals of what they believed were dangerous medical devices opened a window on monitoring of all federal workers.

Government agencies, prompted by the WikiLeaks scandal and concerns over unauthorized disclosures, are secretly capturing a far richer, more granular picture of employee communications. Privacy advocates are citing the potential for abuse. Experts say that personal devices are monitored when they are used to access government communications, although there is debate over whether personal e-mails can legally be caught in the net.

8The disability claim backlog for veterans. An influx of veterans, new rules that make it easier to file claims — including for Agent Orange-related conditions and post-traumatic stress — and growth in the number and complexity of medical conditions that are claimed make this the biggest challenge to government services for veterans.

When President Obama took office in January 2009, the number of pending claims at the Department of

Veterans Affairs was 391,127. As of November, it was nearly 900,000. About two-thirds of those have been pending more than 125 days.

The administration has added staff to process the complaints, but it could be years before veterans get speedy service.

7FEMA's performance after Hurricane Sandy. In its biggest test since Hurricane Katrina, the Federal Emergency Management Agency got high marks for a relatively efficient response to Sandy, helping thousands of displaced residents. The agency also confronted its own limitations — the bureaucratic hurdles and slow utility companies that the federal government cannot control — and the reality that after a major storm, recovery rarely goes as quickly as victims wish it would.

6Continuing pay freeze. After two years without a raise — although automatic step increases continued — the president and Congress agreed to extend the freeze until a spending plan is passed. The White House made it official last week, issuing an executive order extending the freeze until a stopgap budget lapses March 27.

Obama had recommended a 0.5 percent boost next year, but there is no guarantee that will happen. Members of the military are on track to get a 1.7 percent raise in 2013.

While Obama has said that federal employees have already made “significant sacrifices as a result of a two-year pay freeze,” he has called on the workforce to be part of the “tough choices” to keep the country on a path to fiscal health. While raises for federal workers tend to be modest, the continued freeze has angered unions and many employees.

5Increased retirement contributions. Congress passed and the president signed legislation requiring that those newly hired into the government in 2013 and after and those with less than five years of federal service pay an additional 2.3 percent of their paychecks toward their retirement benefit. The total contribution is now 3.1 percent.

The change, like the pay freeze, reflects a consensus that federal workers will need to do more to help finance deficit reduction. The Obama administration has twice proposed increasing the contribution for all employees.

4The Secret Service scandal. In April, the agents and military personnel who protect the president lured almost two dozen women working as prostitutes to a hotel in Cartagena, Colombia, during a night of carousing.

The incident, complete with explosive photos, overshadowed Obama's trip and his efforts to strengthen economic ties in Latin America. The scandal prompted Senate hearings, and despite assurances from administration officials that it was an isolated mistake, many lawmakers questioned the agency's culture.

3Protection for federal whistleblowers. Congress approved and the president signed a law that advocates had been pushing for more than a decade that protects employees who expose government wrongdoing from retaliation by their supervisors.

The law overturns court decisions that narrowed protections for whistleblowers, protects some employees who are not currently covered, including Transportation Security Administration officers, and restores the authority of the Office of Special Counsel to seek disciplinary actions against supervisors who retaliate. It does not do everything advocates wanted, but it comes close and counts as a major victory.

2U.S. Postal Service crisis. The agency continued to stagger toward financial collapse, although Congress

and policymakers could not find consensus on a solution. The USPS, reeling from billions of dollars in losses from plummeting mail volume, defaulted on two payments to fund benefits for future retirees.

In an effort to downsize, mail-processing hubs began to close and hours were cut at thousands of post offices. Thousands of employees, from postmasters to mail clerks, took buyouts. The agency also may eliminate Saturday delivery, although Congress has not agreed to such a substantial change.

Legislation to stabilize postal finances were passed by the Senate in the spring but did not make it through the House, where a bill demanding more aggressive cost cutting could not get the support of rural lawmakers.

1And the biggest headline of 2012 goes to. . . **The General Services Administration scandal**, in which the agency that handles the government's real estate was found to have sent 300 employees in its West Coast offices on a Las Vegas spending spree.

The GSA chief was forced to resign and more than a dozen managers and employees were fired or demoted after the agency's inspector general reported that an \$823,000 training conference in 2010 was little more than an entertainment junket, complete with a mind reader and parties in loft suites. The episode was an embarrassment for the Obama administration, which has led a campaign against government waste.

The scandal resulted in a criminal investigation of the conference organizers and a ban or severe cut to travel at most agencies. That has saved millions of dollars but denied valuable training and networking to many employees. The episode also revealed a free-spending culture at the GSA, whose new leadership has begun reforms to increase accountability and efficiency.

Sponsored Links

5 Signs of Alzheimer's

Doctor: Know These 5 Warning Signs You May Get Alzheimer's Disease.
www.newsmax.com

"Teachers HATE Him!"

Doctor reveals 1 weird trick to Speak any Language in 10 days! See h..
PimsleurApproach.com

Today's Hot Stock Pick

Experts Predict Huge Gains for This Play in 2013--Find Out More!
www.OTCStockPick.com

[Buy a link here](#)

© The Washington Post Company