

The Washington Post

A rain-or-shine exercise in exercise

Wednesday, October 28, 2009

Ever the optimist, John Berry didn't seem fazed by the dreary skies, the steady drizzle, the muddy paths and the swampy grass. Resplendent in bright-green athletic shoes, the Office of Personnel Management director braved the weather with fellow federal workers to gather on the Mall at lunchtime Tuesday in the name of physical fitness.

"Who said federal employees aren't tough?" he called to the crowd. "We separated the men and the women from the girls and the boys today, didn't we?" Perhaps the absent girls and boys remembered a critical question many parents ask at some point -- "Don't you have sense enough to come in out of the rain?"

But while the rain undoubtedly kept the crowd size down, those who attended the Feds Get Fit rally, hosted by WHUR (96.3 FM), demonstrated an admirable commitment to fitness. Danielle Ballard, a Labor Department program analyst, responded to an e-mail her agency circulated encouraging attendance at the program, which featured a walk around a portion of the Mall, tables with fitness information and souvenirs, and speakers from several agencies.

Ballard said she's "trying to get fit and healthier. I'm getting a little older, with cholesterol going on, so I wanted to see what was out here." And what did she get out of

the event? "Muddy shoes," she said with a laugh.

Compared with the dull but important business going on in federal office buildings nearby, the fitness rally may have seemed like fluff. But it's deadly serious business -- the "deadly" pun intended.

It's important enough that in June, Office of Management and Budget Director Peter Orszag told agency heads to include employee wellness programs in their budget plans for fiscal 2011.

Saying the Obama administration wants the government to be a model employer, Orszag's memo added: "agencies should submit an inventory of their current wellness activities, including cafeteria and fitness facilities, and health clinics as well as any plans to enhance these programs. As


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examples, plans to: sponsor wellness competitions, open or expand employee fitness facilities, enhance cafeteria and vending machines offerings to promote fruits, vegetables, and heart healthy choices should be submitted. The OMB and the OPM will use these inventories to compile and promote best practices in Federal employee wellness."

In July, Berry announced that the OPM, the Interior Department, the Federal Reserve and the General Services Administration, whose headquarters are near each other, would collaborate to create a work-life campus for their 6,000 workers. That campus would eventually include things such as centralized child care, gardens and a farmers market.

There are larger policy and economic implications for a healthy workforce. Through a letter read by Berry, first lady Michelle Obama told the rally, "as many private companies have demonstrated, making employee wellness a priority can save health care costs down the road and make for a stronger workplace."

No one promotes wellness more than the Hula Hooping, double-dutching, vegetable-growing first lady. "This makes good health sense, it makes good business sense," her letter said.

As concerned as Berry and other officials no doubt are about federal workers, there's

another reason -- increased workplace efficiency -- for bosses to encourage good health. "Healthier employees are happier employees and they are going to be more productive," Berry said during an interview, standing among puddles on the Mall lawn.

He said the campaign is built around four pillars: exercise, nutrition, healthy choices and prevention. Some might wonder if standing around in the rain is a healthy choice, but it didn't seem to weaken the spirit of those determined enough to take action for fitness, no matter the weather.

Agencies and departments will need to increase the number of contracting officers they employ by at least 5 percent next year, according to new guidelines issued Tuesday by the Office of Management and Budget.

President Obama this year vowed to save at least \$40 billion annually by cutting noncompetitive contracts and ending the

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use of contractors to conduct certain government functions.

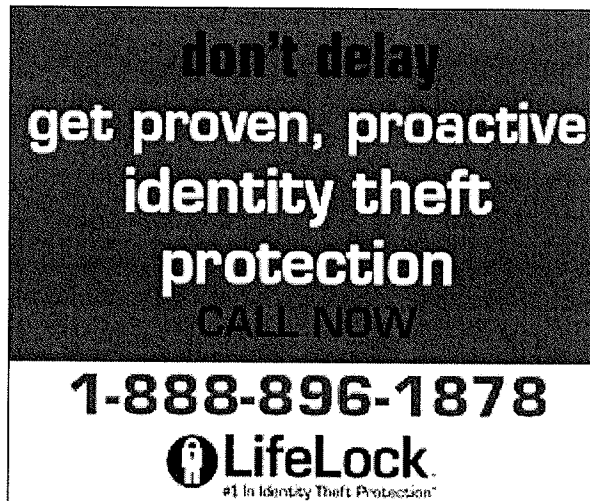
The new guidelines do not define "inherently governmental," the term used to describe functions contractors could no longer conduct. The OMB expects to define the term by year's end, a spokesman said.


The new guidelines -- which, however defined, will cost contractors revenue -- will be the subject of a Wednesday afternoon hearing of the Senate subcommittee on contracting oversight.

Staff writer Ed O'Keefe

contributed to this column.

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