



Federal firings continue to drop: Lower grades, TSA fired the most

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FEDERAL FIRINGS DROPPING

Fewer feds in overall numbers and as a percentage of the workforce were fired in 2013 than any other point in the last five years.

Fiscal year	No. fired	Total workforce	Percentage fired
2009	11,564	2,025,681	0.57%
2010	11,733	2,100,124	0.56%
2011	10,373	2,117,136	0.49%
2012	9,980	2,054,175	0.49%
2013	9,513	2,054,175	0.46%

SOURCE: OPM AND FEDERAL TIMES RESEARCH

JOHN BRETSCHNEIDER/STAFF

As lawmakers call for federal workers to be fired for falsifying wait lists and delaying patient care at the Veterans Affairs Department, the number of firings is lower than at any point in the last five years.

The percentage of federal workers fired every year by agencies fell from 0.57 percent in fiscal 2009 to 0.46 percent in 2013, according to data from the Office of Personnel Management and compiled by Federal Times.

The private sector fires nearly six times as many employees — about 3.2 percent — according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and whether the government fires too few people or just not the right people is the subject of continued debate.

But while fewer federal employees are being fired, some are fired more than others. Transportation Security Administration employees account for 15 percent of all firings even though they represent about 3 percent of the federal population.

But that shouldn't be a surprise, according to John Palguta, vice president for policy at the Partnership for Public Service, who said TSA employees were not granted the same due process rights of other feds to contest firings.

"TSA is relatively quick to terminate TSA employees for a wide range of offenses that for other federal employees might only result in a letter or warning or a suspension," Palguta said.

Issues such as participating in an office betting pools, falling asleep on the job or not following established protocols could all trigger termination, he said.

Employees on the lower end of the General Schedule pay table also bear the brunt of terminations. Employees GS 1 to 6 represent 30 percent of all those fired but only 11 percent of the population. Those at the top of the scale — GS 11 to 15 — account for only 15 percent of those fired despite representing 45 percent of the workforce. Only seven senior executive service employees were fired out of the more than 7,100 employed by the federal government in fiscal 2013.

But it's just easier to document the shortcomings of lower grade workers, according to Palguta. Clerical workers can be measured on forms processed or documents completed while welders can be judged on the quality of the welding.

"It's harder to document that a policy analyst is a lousy analyst, that a researcher is doing poor quality research, or that a manager is incompetent as a manager," Palguta said.

Higher level employees are also more likely to have the financial resources to contest termination by hiring a lawyer, he added.

Lawmakers have introduced many bills to make it easier to fire particular groups of federal employees. Legislation being considered by Congress would make it easier for the VA secretary to fire high-level executives. Congress is also considering legislation that would make it easier to fire federal employees who are behind on their taxes.

Chris Edwards, the director of tax policy studies at the Cato Institute, said the federal government fires fewer employees than the private sector. The number of federal employees fired for poor performance — as opposed to disciplinary problems or other issues — is much lower than the private sector.

It's hard to fire federal employees for poor performance, so many who are bad at their jobs stick around for years getting raises even when those who try to do a good job are rewarded about equally, he said.

“It’s a real problem for the federal employees who work hard and do their jobs well. Poor performers drag down the morale of the whole team,” Edwards said.

Congress should work to institute a pay-for-performance system that allows managers to remove poor performers while preventing indiscriminate firings from a new administration, he said.

“There is a balance between providing a shield so that the incoming parties in power don’t try to do politically oriented firing and stack the civil service with cronies, but on the other hand I think we have gone too far in the other direction and that federal workers have far too much protection,” Edwards said.

J. David Cox, the president of the American Federation of Government Employees, said the firing rates are troubling because they disproportionately affect the lowest paid workers who have the least amount of resources to find a new job.

The above-average firing rate for TSA employees also shows the agency fires far too many compared to the rest of the government.

“This disparity in removals is a waste of government resources because of the time and training each employee receives to perform their duties. If TSA employees had the same due process rights as other federal employees, the removal rate would not be as high.”

William Dougan, the president of the National Federation of Federal Employees, said lower level employees might be placed under more scrutiny by managers trying to weed out poor performers early.

“And eventually, once employees rise high enough in the ranks of an agency, management typically elects to shuffle under-performing employees rather than firing in an attempt to boost their performance,” Dougan said.