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November 12, 2013

The Honorable Katherine Archuleta  
Director  
U.S. Office of Personnel Management  
1900 E Street NW  
Washington, DC 20415

Dear Director Archuleta:

Congratulations on your confirmation as Director of the Office of Personnel Management (OPM). I look forward to a very fruitful relationship as we at the Senior Executives Association (SEA) continue to work cooperatively with OPM to help make government more efficient and effective in these very challenging times.

As you know, SEA represents the interests of career federal executives in government, including those in the Senior Executive Service (SES) and in equivalent positions, such as Senior Level (SL) or Senior Scientific and Professional (ST) positions. In light of recent actions affecting the SES, SEA has an immediate concern with ensuring the integrity and continued excellence of the career Senior Executive Service, and I believe it is SEA's continuing responsibility to bring to your attention developments of particular concern regarding the management of the career senior leadership corps.

As you settle in to your new position, you are no doubt inundated with information and hearing from a variety of stakeholders. While I would prefer not to add to the immense amount of material you are reviewing, I have attached background information on many challenges and issues broadly facing the career leadership corps that threaten the recruitment and retention of talented executives as well as overall government effectiveness.

There are several urgent issues regarding the SES that you face at present; in considering these, I offer myself and SEA as a resource to you. I would like to ensure you have necessary information to make informed decisions, and I am requesting an opportunity to meet with you given their gravity. They are:

#### SES Office at OPM

Of great importance to SEA is the continuation and engagement of the Senior Executive Services and Performance Management (SESPM) office managed by Stephen Shih and his team at OPM. Over the years, SEA has been a strong advocate for centralized leadership at OPM to ensure that agencies consistently adhere to the statutes and regulations governing the SES and that there is one repository for information and expertise on the SES government-wide system. Such an office provides critical services for executive resources management including oversight of Qualifications Review Boards (QRBs), performance appraisal systems and certification, SES data (including ratings, performance awards, and pay). Moreover, the office has the ability to apply appropriate pressure on agencies to ensure they follow the rules and correctly prioritize SES management.

Depending on the administration, this function has been broken up into a variety of offices leading to confusion and unequal application of the SES system. SEA was strongly supportive of Director John Berry's efforts to once again establish a central office within OPM. The primary benefit to such an office is that it provides a centralized approach to SES management and ensures that agencies adhere to a government-wide policy, versus an agency-specific approach, to managing the SES. SEA has continued to advocate for a statutorily required office at OPM with a mission to improve the efficiency, effectiveness, productivity, and professionalism of the SES.

As an example of where the office has served an important role is in the recent attempt by several agencies to ignore statutes and regulations and neglect to provide FY 2012 ratings in a timely manner, if at all. In consultation with the SESPM office, SEA worked to bring this issue to the attention of agencies and to ensure that FY 2012 ratings were issued. The engagement and oversight by OPM and the reminder that certification depends on SES ratings was a key factor in ensuring agency compliance. The combination of OPM's oversight and the certification process is the only tool that ensures that agencies comply with the law and treat their Senior Executives fairly and consistently.

Although agencies have taken issue with the certification process, and more recently the QRB process, as being too rigid and not helpful in allowing agencies to manage their SES corps, SEA firmly believes in the importance of both processes. Consistent with our support for the role the SESPM plays in overseeing consistent compliance with a rigorous performance appraisal system, SEA believes the office serves an equally important role in ensuring the impartiality of QRBs as they follow merit staffing and prevent undue politicization of the SES.

#### PMC SES Initiative

SEA has heard from a number of sources about an initiative by the President's Management Council (PMC) to reimagine the SES for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, including the possibility of removing much of the framework that governs the SES today. SEA is deeply concerned that this initiative is an effort by some agencies to find a way around the rules – many of which were put in place to ensure fair treatment and consistent application of a government-wide system.

SEA believes there is much room for improvement in the SES system and has drafted a set of comprehensive legislative and regulatory reform proposals. We believe large scale changes to the system without the full participation of stakeholders are not a responsible way to implement change. Should the PMC proposals and workgroups move forward, SEA strongly requests to be a participant in any discussions affecting the SES.

#### Suspension of Presidential Rank Awards

Finally, as you may be aware, in June the White House suspended the Presidential Rank Awards (PRA). These awards are given yearly to those Senior Executives and senior level equivalent employees (SL/ST) to recognize long-term excellence that typically culminates in high level programs that directly help taxpayers and save the government millions of dollars. These awards are set forth in statute, although the President may choose not to award them. Over the years, the awardees have exemplified the work that public servants perform and in 2012 alone, the award winners had a collective estimated savings of \$94 billion.

The apparent reason for the suspension of the awards is in large part due to budget constraints and optics. However, the administration did state that it would consider alternative, meaningful forms of recognition to acknowledge excellence. At this point in time, however, no resolution on alternate

forms of recognition has occurred. SEA is on record as favoring continuation of the traditional PRA program for this year, but has offered options for alternate recognition as well. In a recent letter to the President, which has been enclosed for your review, SEA recommended that the Administration take the following steps:

- Host a meeting with the President for the awardees, including a photo opportunity.
- Provide all alternate recognition awardees with a certificate or letter signed by the President.
- Permit OPM to publicize the names of the award winners and allow agencies to publicly recognize awardees and hold appropriate internal ceremonies.
- Confirm that the traditional Presidential Rank Awards program will be resumed upon the end of sequestration and assure that receipt of this year's non-monetary awards will not preclude recipients from consideration for a monetary Presidential Rank Award upon full resumption of that program.

At a time when the public's trust and confidence in government is shaken, it is imperative that stories of how federal employees successfully serve the American people are shared and embraced. Given the short time frame in which to identify and vet nominees, it is critical that plans begin for providing this recognition. I urge you to work with the Administration and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to address this issue. As we stated in our letter to the President, SEA stands ready to assist in this endeavor.

As you can see, there are many issues affecting the SES that are percolating. Although I have listed a few of the most pressing issues above, there are many others requiring the attention of OPM as listed in the attached background material. Additionally, SEA has been working on many initiatives including a mentoring partnership with Young Government Leaders and working with the Asian American Government Executives Association and the African American Federal Executives Association to encourage diversity among the career leadership corps. I'm sure this is an area where OPM and SEA can find further cooperation and engagement. I welcome the opportunity to meet with you in person to discuss all of these issues at your earliest convenience.

In the meantime, on behalf of SEA, I pass along our very best wishes for a successful tenure as OPM Director.

Sincerely,



CAROL A. BONOSARO  
President

Enclosure