



In a news conference, President Donald Trump claimed without evidence that the FAA was “actively recruiting workers who suffer severe intellectual disabilities and psychiatric problems and other mental and physical conditions under diversity and inclusion hiring initiatives.” CHIP SOMODEVILLA/GETTY IMAGES FILE

Disabled workers fear for jobs after Trump remarks

President puts blame on DEI without evidence

Jessica Guynn
USA TODAY

As divers searched the Potomac River for bodies from the collision of a passenger jet and a military helicopter, President Donald Trump blamed the Federal Aviation Administration’s diversity policies and hiring of disabled Americans.

In a news conference about the worst air crash in the United States in two decades, Trump claimed the agency was “actively recruiting workers who suffer severe intellectual disabilities and psychiatric problems and other mental and physical conditions under diversity and inclusion hiring initiatives.”

The remarks, made without evidence, touched off anxiety and frustration among federal employees with disabilities, many of them military veterans, who spoke with USA TODAY on the condition of anonymity for fear of retaliation.

Eighteen people from agencies across the federal government and around the U.S. said that Trump’s remarks are a troubling sign that his administration does not share the federal government’s longstanding commitment to remove discriminatory barriers and give people with disabilities an equal crack at federal jobs for which they are qualified.

“Blaming disabled individuals for a plane crash speaks to a mentality of not believing disabled people are suited to valuable work,” a disabled National Park Service staffer said.

In a push to establish what the president calls a “colorblind and merit-based” society, the White House said it is targeting federal hiring practices compromised by the Biden administration’s “woke” diversity, equity and inclusion policies.

Hiring and promotion decisions should be based on merit and not on disability or other “DEI-related factors that favor some Americans over others,” the White House told USA TODAY.

See **TRUMP**, Page 6A

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American Association of People with Disabilities president and CEO

Inside

- DOGE sets its sights on U.S. Department of Education. **7A**
- Trump, Netanyahu view Gaza’s future similarly. **7A**

Trump

Continued from Page 1A

"President Trump is a leader for all Americans," the White House said in a statement. "The Trump-Vance administration values the contributions of government employees with disabilities and believes they should be recognized and rewarded based on the merit of the work."

Like elsewhere in the federal government, disabled employees at the FAA undergo the same medical, security and aptitude screening as anyone else, a disabled FAA employee said.

He and other federal employees told USA TODAY that federal job standards for people with disabilities are based on merit. In fact, they say military veterans and disabled employees often have to work harder to prove their worth.

"People look at us as not being able," said an employee of the Environmental Protection Agency who is hearing impaired. "Nobody wants to feel less than. For somebody to make us feel like that, especially the president, the guy whose picture I see on the wall every day, it's a kick in the teeth."

Some disabled employees in the federal government agree with the president, according to one visually impaired veteran who responded to USA TODAY on Reddit. "I didn't use veterans preference to apply. I got my job based on merit. Non-discrimination is important," the veteran wrote. "There's lots of us who feel that way, we're just not screaming about it."

'Huge' losses in opportunities feared

For decades, the federal government has prided

itself as a model employer of disabled Americans who have historically faced high rates of unemployment and high levels of on-the-job discrimination, from bias in the hiring process to inaccessible work environments.

Previous presidents have prioritized hiring disabled Americans and military veterans, helping qualified workers land jobs they might not have.

About 9.4% of the federal workforce identified as disabled in 2022, though a large percentage of the federal workforce did not identify their disability status and some estimates put that number higher.

"I have worked at several agencies, and I have always been impressed by the number of people with disabilities who work there and they do excellent jobs. They exceed expectations. They are able to move into fields that would have been very difficult on the outside because of prejudices within the system," said one disabled scientist who works for the FDA. "If those opportunities go away, I don't think they will ever come back, and they certainly won't be matched by the private sector."

Federal employees and disability advocates warn the damage has already begun.

One disabled Navy veteran who works for the Department of Homeland Security said some veterans have already stopped applying for federal jobs.

If the government career path that helps disabled Americans find stable employment and lead independent lives becomes inaccessible, more Americans will suffer, said Maria Town, president and CEO of the American Association of People with Disabilities.

As the U.S. population has grown and aged, the



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number of Americans with a disability has increased. More than 1 in 4 American adults has a disability, government data shows.

"I am really worried that we will see huge losses in employment opportunities for people with disabilities and that we will see many employees with disabilities essentially be forced to leave their jobs because the accommodations that have allowed them to be successful are no longer in place," Town said.

Worry over loss of remote work

One of the main accommodations under threat is a flexible telecommuting policy. Employment rates for disabled Americans soared during the COVID-19 pandemic as remote work became more common.

Federal employees with disabilities who rely on flexible work arrangements to perform their duties say they are alarmed by Trump's threat to terminate any federal employee who doesn't return to the office.

They say working from home helps them manage

stress and chronic conditions and adjust their office environment to their disability such as using non-fluorescent lights or having privacy to manage medical needs. They also avoid commutes on public transportation or driving that can exacerbate health problems.

A former Army combat medic said he is afraid he will lose his job with the Department of Veterans Affairs that allows him to care for his fellow soldiers and his own family. The VA employee says he suffers from PTSD from serving in Iraq and Afghanistan, which makes it impossible for him to work in the office.

"From the start of my career in the VA, I have met and exceeded expectations in providing services to veterans," he said. "All of the sudden with the change of administration, I feel our hard work is being invalidated and demonized."

A recent report from the Office of Personnel Management, which oversees the federal civilian workforce, found that remote work - full-time work outside the office - helped increase employment opportunities for 14,000 disabled workers.

Telework - a hybrid situation - helped increase employment opportunities for 131,000 disabled workers.

Some disabled staffers already had reasonable accommodations to work from home. Others told USA TODAY they are scrambling to file requests.

The Americans with Disabilities Act requires employers provide reasonable accommodations to employees with qualifying disabilities. Those accommodations can include screen readers or magnification tools for visually impaired workers or more accessible desks for workers in wheelchairs.

The process to qualify for a reasonable accommodation was already lengthy and challenging, federal employees say. Some worry that requests will not be granted in the current political climate or that they will be targeted simply for making the request.

"I have employees who are frankly scared to even ask for a reasonable accommodation based on a disability because they fear they will be flagged for that in a negative way," said a disabled su-

pervisor who works for the Department of Homeland Security.

Anxiety strikes disabled workers on probation

That stress was compounded when the Office of Personnel Management directed agency heads to turn over a list of staffers who are on probation.

On that list are employees hired through Schedule A, a hiring authority federal agencies use to expedite the hiring process and tap into a diverse talent pool including veterans and other workers with disabilities.

Schedule A employees have a two-year probationary period in which they are at-will employees with fewer civil service protections, twice as long as other federal employees, to make sure they are a good fit for the position.

One disabled Forest Service employee hired under Schedule A after years of seasonal work said she is five months from becoming a career federal employee. Others in her office are in the same boat and stress levels, she said, are "off the charts."

She said she and her colleagues - many of them first responders in natural disasters like wildfires - work for low wages because they feel a calling to protect Americans and the nation's public lands. Now they are terrified they will lose their jobs through no fault of their own.

"It's horrible that the most vulnerable - veterans and people who are disabled - are being targeted," she said. "People are having panic attacks. They are extremely fearful and anxious. We are just trying to block it all out and get our work done because we are dedicated."

Disabled federal employees insist this is not a partisan issue. Like many Americans, they welcome reforms to make the government more efficient and accountable to taxpayers. But they said firing disabled employees won't accomplish that goal.

A disabled employee at the Interior Department told USA TODAY he has dedicated most of his professional life to public service. Now he wonders if it was all a waste.

"This is not a Democratic or Republican issue. This is a moral issue," he said. "You do not target people with disabilities."

Contributing: Jayme Fraser, USA TODAY

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