

GSA Firings Asked for 'Political' Hiring

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The U.S. Civil Service Commission recommended yesterday that four top General Services Administration officials be fired and four others suspended for allegedly circumventing the merit system in the hiring of about 400 well-connected Republicans for GSA jobs.

Yesterday's commission action resulted from its discovery last year of a special job referral unit within GSA which, the commission charged, gave special consideration to politically influential job applicants and even cre-

ated jobs especially tailored for some of these applicants.

A commission spokesman said he could not recall the last time that such drastic penalties had been recommended for violations of the civil service law.

Some of the GSA officials recommended for disciplinary action are in the so-called "super grades" of GS 16 to GS 18, with salaries in the \$30,000-plus bracket, the very top of the civil service salary structure. All of those charged are GS 14 and above, earning more than \$24,000 a year.

Neither the Civil Service Commission nor GSA would reveal the identities of the of-

ficials recommended for dismissal or suspension. The charges formally brought against them by the commission's staff have yet to be reviewed by the commission's administrative law judge and by the three presidentially appointed Civil Service Commissioners.

Sources said the special referral unit was established in 1969, sometime after the Nixon administration took office. The unit gave preferential treatment to the job applications of about 400 persons, the sources said. A "significant number" of these job applicants, they said, were referred by the White House

personnel office, the Committee for the Re-election of the President and the Republican National Committee. Other referrals were made by influential GOP senators and congressmen, sources said.

One source familiar with the commission's investigation said, "Certainly in every administration there are people referred from various sources to departments and agencies. What was wrong in this case . . . is that these people were systematically given preference in the hiring process. There was a fairly determined and systematic effort by the

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referral unit to hire certain people."

In response, GSA Administrator Arthur F. Sampson said in a statement yesterday that the proposed disciplinary action was "totally disproportionate to the charges."

"The charges are based largely upon the participation of the individuals in the special referral process—an activity . . . the agency (GSA) maintains was a long estab-

lished and legitimate follow-up process to assure responsiveness to referrals from congressional and administration officials," Sampson said.

GSA, the government's landlord and leasing and purchasing agent, has long been known as a haven for political appointees.

Last year, the commission ordered GSA to abolish the referral unit which, sources said, was never manned by more than three or four officials at one time. In a report issued in

October, the commission said that the referral units efforts to place certain applicants in jobs were "perceived by operating and personnel officials as unmistakable pressure on them to take extraordinary steps to find jobs and assure placement of the candidates referred."

The referral unit, the report said, worked in several ways. Some applicants were appointed to jobs created especially for them, some were given "emergency or limited appointments" until permanent jobs could be arranged and some were given jobs during "freeze" periods when there was an official moratorium on hiring.

"And almost all were appointed to positions without any real consideration being

given to other qualified applicants who were entitled or should have been given an opportunity to compete for the vacancies because they were well qualified," the report said.

The Civil Service Commission's staff, under executive director Bernard Rosen, began its investigation in June during a routine examination of the GSA's personnel practices. After a four-month investigation, the commission reported that of 20 cases reviewed, 16 indicated favoritism in hiring. The commission then gave GSA to Nov. 22 to abolish the referral unit.

All eight of the employees recommended for disciplinary action have 15 days to file a written response to the charges.

The commission said that seven of the officials work in GSA's Washington headquarters and one in GSA's Third Region, which includes the states of Maryland, Virginia, Delaware, Pennsylvania and West Virginia. Of the four recommended for suspension, the staff proposed that two be suspended for 90 days, one for 60 days and one for 30 days.

A 90-day suspension for a GS14 earning about \$24,000 a year would amount to a \$6,000 fine.

The referral unit, a source said, received almost 1,000 applications during the approximately five years it was in business. Some of these, a source said, came from Democrats, but none of these applicants were accepted for the special referral treatment.