

# USDA Labor Management Forum

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*July 23, 2014 Minutes*

## I. ADMINISTRATIVE ITEMS

The USDA Labor-Management Forum Meeting was called to order at 1:07 p.m.

### Member Roll Call:

Labor and Designated Alternates:	Management and Designated Alternates:
no Labor Co-chair or Alternate were present	Bryan Knowles, DM, Management Co-Chair
Chris Berry, NFFE	Dr. Gregory L. Parham, ASA
Johanna Eckley, NTEU	Robin Heard, OSEC
Cynthia Ross, NAPPQOSE	William P. Milton, Jr.
David Mergen, AFSA	Marilyn Holland, APHIS
Sarah Rehberg, NAAE	Steve Placek, NAD
Stan Painter-AFGE	Edna Primrose, RD
Marcus Washington, AFSCME	Jacqueline Myers, FSIS
	N. Hewitt, OGC (for T. Trost)
	K. Corbett, NRCS
	Kathy Hall, ARS (for J. Park)
	Winona Scott, OASCR
	Morris Tate, OO

**Other Attendees:** Dr. Gregory Parham, ASA-OSEC, Chris Nelson-OSEC, Jamie Edmunds-OSEC, Don Bice-OBPA, Karlease Kelly-OHRM, MaryJo Thompson-OHRM, Curtis Wilburn-OO, Gilbert Stokes-OO, Frank King-APHIS, Frank Gallglos-FSIS, Melissa Baumann-NFFE

**Note Taker(s):** Adrian Lindsey/Randolph Wilkinson/Myron Greenhow

## II. DISCUSSION

**Introduction:** The USDA Management Co-chair **Bryan Knowles** called to order at approximately 1:03 p.m. All members introduced themselves. **Bryan** made a motion to accept the minutes of the previous meeting absent any objections. **Edna Primrose** seconded the motion. The minutes were adopted.

**USDA Secretary's Priorities:** **Bryan** introduced the Assistant Administrator for Management **Dr. Gregory L. Parham**. **Dr. Parham** gave a presentation on the Secretary's Priorities. He noted that USDA is very busy with Farm Bill payments, disaster payments, farmer/rancher payments, 2015 budget considerations, and Sequestration, that may soon be reactivated. **Dr. Parham** noted that the Secretary appreciates all the hard work employees have been doing. USDA is looking to develop a high performing 21<sup>st</sup> century workforce. **Dr. Parham** shared he traveled to a number of locations engaging in employee listening sessions.

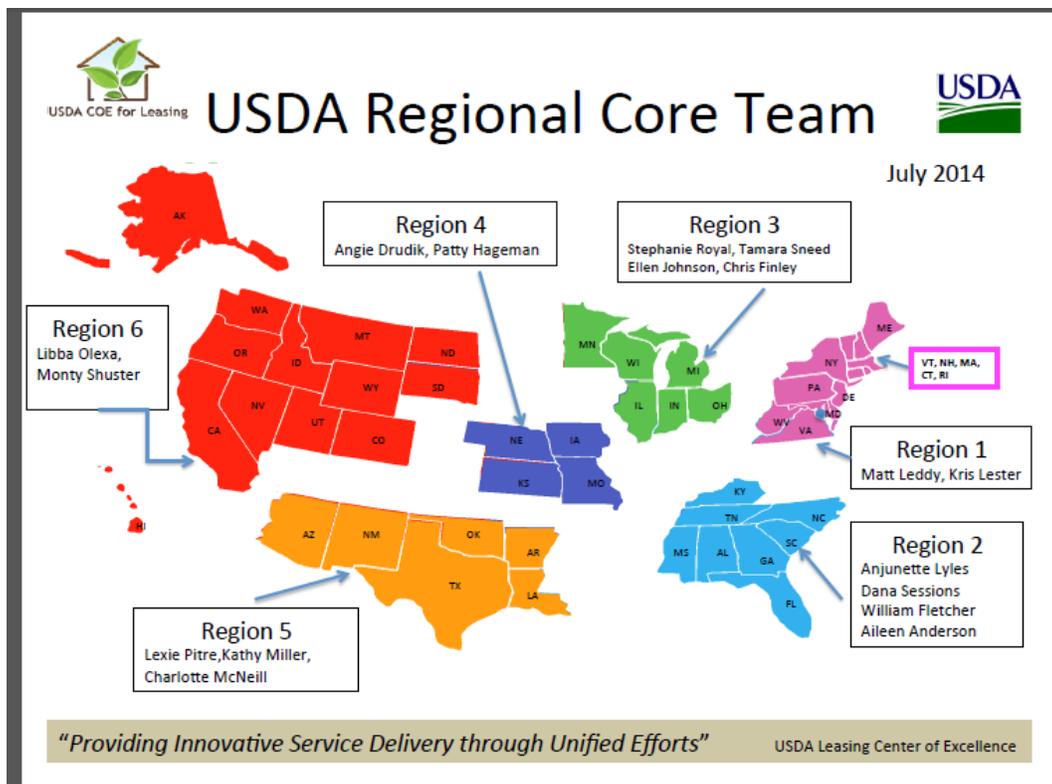
**Dr. Parham** recognized USDA for serving over 10 million lunches this summer and his lunch opportunity with children in November 2013.

**Dr. Parham** envisions USDA developing a Center of Excellence in IT Technology; but knows there are challenges. He acknowledged that cybersecurity is a concern due to outside forces (e.g., computer hacking); network and migration issues all pose challenges we must overcome.

**Leasing Improvement Strategy:** Office of the Secretary's (OSEC) Special Assistant **Jamie Edmunds** gave a presentation on the Department's Leasing Improvement Strategy. A handout containing the following information was shared with the Forum:

The Secretary's priority goal is to eliminate 95% of holdovers by the end of CY 2014 through a two-phased approach.

**Leasing COE Phase 1:** The COE Team members identified a Regionalization Strategy and Holdover Action Plan to bring our USDA leases into a legal status through a phased in approach outlined below which was approved by the COE Governance Board on July 3, 2014.



**Phase 1 Anticipated Outcomes:**

- Manage leases corporately as "USDA COE leases" vs. individual agency leases, accomplish virtually across agencies through the Regionalization Strategy.
- Transition holdovers into legal status through a staggered approach.
- Transition leases expiring in CY 2014 to avoid future holdovers.

- Prioritize and align leases, based on extensions and renewals, to position USDA for the long-term lease management.

**Phase 2:** USDA is in the process of soliciting for Leasing Broker Services, with an anticipated contract award in August 2014. Broker services can provide short and long-term solutions for USDA's leasing portfolio. The COE will work with the SCAs to determine the appropriate workload to be tasked to the broker, given the available staffing and budget resources.

**Jamie** informed us the latest information is available on USDA Connect under Lease Improvement Strategy.

We are partnering with GSA. We are also working across agency lines and this has some employees noticeably happy about the assistance they are receiving. The work is going quite well. We have established teams in various State Offices.

**Jaime** noted that USDA anticipates the Broker Services going out as a blanket agreement.

**Melissa Baumann** wanted to know to what extent this would result in changed office space. **Jamie** admitted that the COE has yet to address office moves; we're concentrating on compliance for now. **Melissa** shared that so far, there have been two office moves and wonders at what point the Union will be notified. **Dr. Parham** noted that this was a valid point. **Chris Berry** wanted to know if workload changes may be experienced due to the Center of Excellence. **Jamie** indicated that some changes might be experienced. **Chris** voiced that acquisition management had been moving things around and it was difficult to follow. **Dr. Parham** indicated this was specific to the Forest Service. He pointed out that an added benefit of the COE will be transparency.

**Dave Mergen** stated he has heard about employees running about measuring cubicles. **Dr. Parham** responded that GSA sets the standard for space presently at 150 square feet for employee cubicles. He noted that the Yates Building offers two to three times that allowed by GSA standards. He further pointed out that there are approximately 10, 200 employees in the National Capitol Region, space cost are over \$50 million dollars a year, but the South Building could house 95% of these employees. The question is how do we obtain up front capital for Improvements to the South Building. We're looking at desk sharing, telework, and other possibilities, but nothing is finite we're still in discussion. **Dr. Parham** shared it could be viewed this way; in real estate, its location, location, location; with space, its money, money, money.

**Budget Update:** With no further questions for **Dr. Parham**, **Bryan** introduced **Don Bice** for an update on the Budget. **Don** noted that legislative movement had ceased regarding the Agriculture and the Interior Bill. As each day passed, consensus on Capitol Hill is that a Continuing Resolution may be utilized to continue funding for the remainder of the year.

**Don**, noted that the Forest Service's funding usually consist of 30% funding for fire, but this year fires have consumed 50% to 60% of their funding. Due to this substantial depletion of

funding, Congress is considering the creation of a disaster cap fund that will be used to respond to disasters instead of Agency Funding.

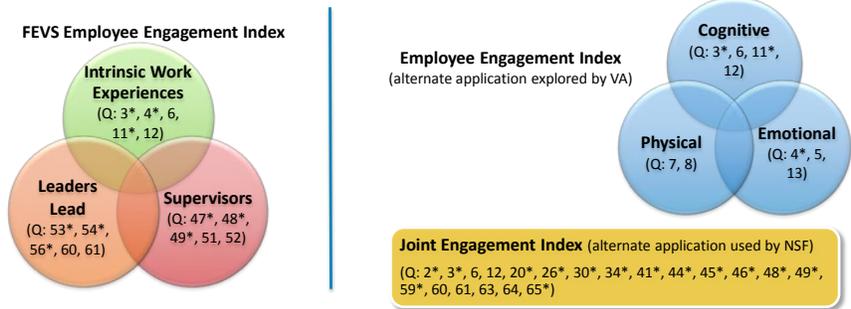
USDA is conducting research into ways to make the leasing process more streamlined; but the emphasis is not reducing the workforce as part of its streamlining. The USDA has reduced its workforce by over 12% in the last few years.

**Barriers and Enablers of Employee Engagement – Update:** Deputy Assistant Secretary for Administration **Robin Heard** updated the Forum on some of the recent efforts of the Working Group on Employee Engagement. This group is a collaborative effort of representatives from the Chief Human Council Officers Council and the National Council on Federal Labor-Management Relations. The Working Group established three focus groups to address, promising practices, barriers and enablers, and measures and incentives. There are tons of resource materials for employee engagement. The following information was shared during the meeting:

## Employee Engagement Measured

There are *multiple ways* to effectively measure Employee Engagement (EE).

- A ‘good’ measure has variability in responses, shares distinct relationships with some measures and not others, and can be translated into actionable qualities.
  - *Example FEVS EE Index items: 3, 4, 11, 47, 48, 49, 53, 54, 56*
- FEVS items can be assessed in multiple ways to provide new insight and ‘deeper dive’ action planning on employee engagement.



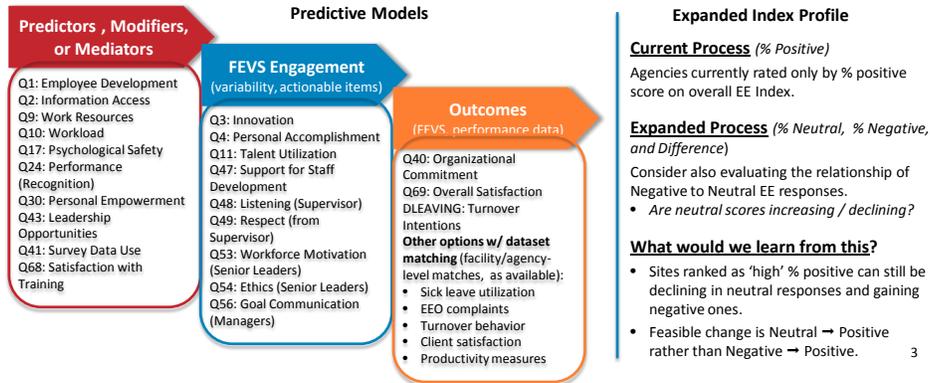
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# Employee Engagement Measured

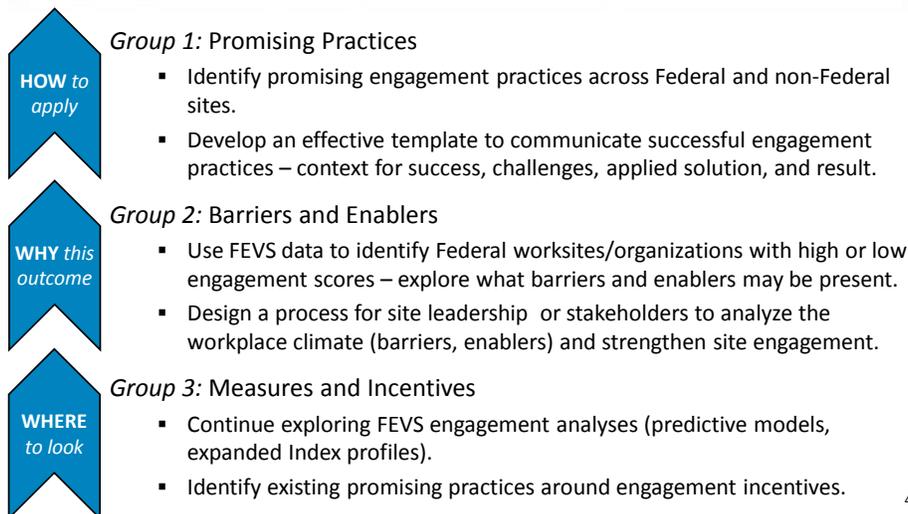
## Proposed Next Steps: Predictive Models and Expand Profile Analyses

There is still more to learn in measuring Employee Engagement (EE).

1. What models predict engagement and measure its outcomes?
2. How can we maximize what we learn from the EE Index composites?



# Employee Engagement Working Groups



The Promising Practices Focus Group will be identifying promising practices across the federal and nonfederal sites. This focus group will also be developing a template to communicate successful practices. **Robin** noted that there have been some success stories in DOD. She will be visiting the Portsmouth Naval Submarine Base in New Hampshire. It is one of the first of

success stories the Group will be visiting. The Barrier and Enablers Focus Group will Use FEVS data to identify Federal worksites/organizations with high or low engagement scores – explore what barriers and enablers may be present. Then take the data to design a process for site leadership or stakeholders to analyze the workplace climate and strengthen engagement. **Robin** asked management and unions to consider whether they would be willing to sponsor a focus groups within their agency. The goal is to have as diverse a representation of the workforce as possible.

**Edna Primrose** pointed out that FNS does a fair job and that she would be willing to share the results of the 2013 focus group. **Frank McDonough** appreciated the accolade noting they were trying to be creative. The Chief Human Capital Officer **William (Billy) P. Milton, Jr.** stated that **MaryJo Thompson** can make available the information received from the Partnership for Public Service. **Bryan** asked if **Robin's** group had reached out to the Partnership for Public Service; **Robin** noted they had. **Bryan** indicated that his office would be sending out all documents received for the Forum meeting.

**Chris Berry** believes employee engagement needs to be defined due to the confusion in his organization. He says that the Union was blown off whenever it sought engagement with management on this subject. **Stan Painter** expressed that he feels as though people will not get involved if their suggestions are not going to be used. He further pointed out that he believes this is why there is not more participation in the FEVS now. **Billy** pointed out that leadership has employee engagement requirements within their individual performance plan, so he encouraged **Chris** and **Stan** to weigh in. **Stan** responded that if I say they have not, they would agree amongst themselves that they have.

**Customer Service Initiative of the President's Management Agenda:** There being no further questions on Employee Engagement, **Bryan** introduced Program Analysts **Chris Nelson**. **Chris** brief the Forum on the Department's Customer Service Initiative in direct support of Executive Order 13571, Streamlining Service Delivery and Improving Customer Service implemented in 2011. As a direct result, the Department developed a Strategic Plan. USDA has over 100,000 employees that touch the lives of Americans every day. It is our intent to improve engagement with our customers as well. Our customer service focus can be very broad and deep. We need to look at what's been working, best practices; and, what needs to be fixed. With that in mind, I have come to the Forum asking for your assistance.

We have planned an August 5<sup>th</sup> meeting to identify best practices. **Dave Mergen** asked what suggestions do you have for making suggestions. **Chris** responded is hard to decipher who is doing what, what we need is to know who is doing what. For example, say you're a Rural Development customer looking for a loan. Does our workforce know to say have you considered option A or option B, and why one is preferable to the other in light of the particular circumstances? **Stan** wanted to know how such an approach would be applied to FSIS. **Chris** asked whom would you consider the customer to be the plant or the consumer. **Stan** stated it would be the consumer. **Chris** asked if we are sharing information in the best way possible when it comes to recalls, for example Walmart. **Stan** contended with that thought in mind, the employee does not have recall authority. FSIS urges the plant to provide a recall notice. They

wait until Friday night; always Friday night. **Chris Berry** stated he believed it makes sense to be tactical.

**Workers' Compensation Program – Return to Work Policy:** **Chris Nelson** also gave the briefing on the Return to Work Policy. **Chris** shared the draft policy went out for PDI to Labor, **Bob Beckley**, a representative of NFFE, was identified and we engaged in the process. A worker is injured for the next several months; what can USDA do that will enable the employee to return to duty commensurate with their limitations. Don't get me wrong, USDA recognizes that there are employees in dangerous jobs, but sometimes it's not just a matter of putting them back to work upon recovery. In those instances, we look to provide work that may be commensurate to their rate of recovery or manageable ability within the Department. Yet we recognize there are various challenges, for example, a firefighter is injured, simply placing them in another position may result in the loss of fire fighter pay. We need to work closely with Labor to ensure this is addressed appropriately. We need to be mindful of concerns like employee morale, budget issues, and other issues.

**Update on FY 2014 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey:** **MaryJo Thompson** noted that the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS) closed on June 13, 2014. Government-wide final adjusted response rate was 46.8%, down by 1.4% from 2013. USDA's 2014 final adjusted response rate was 68.8%, 9.4% higher than 2013, and 22% higher than the 2014 Government-wide rate. Before releasing reports, OPM has approximate 49,000 reports to review and ensure accuracy.

OPM will begin tentatively releasing reports in August 2014 – to include sub-agency comparison reports, annual employee survey reports, and sub-agency breakout reports.

In regards to Action Planning and Employee Engagement, mission areas/agencies will be afforded additional training. The Virtual University (VU) is collaborating with the Partnership for Public Service to conduct another Action Planning Facilitation Training in August 2014. Agencies have provided approximately 20 participants that represent mission areas/agencies, within the Department. We will have approximately 30-33 agency POCs trained to conduct all facets of Action Planning.

The USDA Agency Management Report (AMR) will be released in September 2014. As OPM releases reports OHRM will contact agency POCs to let them know when and what is available. Results will be staggered. **Billy** asked **MaryJo** if the scrub numbers could be shared with the Forum. She agreed to make them available to **Myron** after the meeting. **MaryJo** addressed **Stan's** concern regarding the number of paper copies. **MaryJo** noted that since a complement of employees are without access to a computer, OPM makes use of paper copies. OPM contracted with another office to provide paper copies. Approximately 2000 hard copy surveys were provided, and only 369 were completed and returned.

**Chris Berry** wanted to know if they would have access to the Reporting Tool. **Billy** noted that access is limited due to OPM's capability. **MaryJo** offered to provide the Forum the Points of Contact for the FEVS.

As there were no further questions, the Forum took a break at 2:40 p.m. and the meeting resumed at 2:52 p.m.

**Cultural Transformation Update:** Upon return, **Bryan** introduced **William (Billy) P. Milton, Jr.** **Billy** wanted to follow up on **Dr. Parham's** presentation. Telework continues to be an issue; but remains a priority of the Department. Employees should be allowed to participate to the maximum extent possible. Where you continue to find this an issue, you should contact **Dr. Zina Sutch**. Telework is reported every month, if you need access please contact **Melanie Clemons**.

**Chris** provided two comments, first, telework should not be used as a benefit; and second, greater attention needs to be made in eliminating the confusion over what jobs qualify for telework. At one time, a particular occupation may not have qualified for telework, but as the duties have changed these positions may qualify for telework episodically. **Billy** agreed. With over ten years since the implementation of telework and the Workforce Flexibility Enhancement Act, there is no reason why an agency should not be allowing qualified employees to telework. Let's use FSIS as an example, if a plant shuts down, those employees could be teleworking on an ad hoc basis provided they have access to a computer.

**Melissa** expressed concern that the Secretary does not accord the same degree of concern for Labor law as he obviously has for EEO law. **Billy** noted that the problems in the area of EEO were really a concern. Associate Assistant Secretary **Winona Scott** expressed that the Secretary does not hold one more important as the other.

**Enhanced Security Measures at USDA Headquarters Complex & GWCC:** **Bryan** introduced the Office of Operations Director **Curtis Wilburn**. **Curtis** noticed everyone in the room appeared to have a copy of the Enhanced Security Measures Memo. He noted that employees working in the USDA headquarters complex will be subject to additional security measures. The Headquarters complex accounts for 2.5 million square feet, two blocks of space. There are so many entrances into the facilities that it was necessary to install turnstiles. Turnstiles help us ensure that all employees are accounted for.

Every parking court has multiple access points and there are vulnerabilities. **Curtis** stated that we intend to restrict public access to the parking courts. Employees will be permitted access to the extent they have identification and permission to park within the courts. He expressed his alarm with how USDA has managed space. He believes it is necessary to restrict access to the South Building Attic and some areas within the Subbasement. The conditions in these locations are deplorable. We received a couple of questions regarding the parking courts. The first concerns drivers of car or vanpools, if the driver is not a USDA employee they will not be

granted permission to a parking space. The next question concerns people that use our space as short cuts; this is unacceptable. This practice will stop. All persons will be subject to random searches and magnetometer screening.

**Curtis** noted that even if you come through the turnstiles you still are required to show your badge.

**Bryan** asked if he could walk the Forum through the random search procedure. **Curtis** noted that the turnstiles incorporate a numerical counter that is not controlled by employees. Therefore, every 50 or 100 employees that come through the turnstiles will be stopped and subject to a search. **Bryan** stated this will also be expanded to the parking courts. **Curtis** affirmed that is correct. **Billy** noted that this is going on now. **Curtis** acknowledged that it is, but only to a limited extent.

**Stan** expressed that his problem was with the cards; they get you in, but they won't get you out. Afterwards, they send you down to Wing 4 and treat you like some kind of an outcast. **Curtis** shared that if any security personnel treats an employee like an outcast, this is unacceptable, and we want to know about it. He admitted there are some challenges that still need to be addressed. He introduced Physical Security Specialist **Gilbert Stokes** and stated that such concerns could be brought to his or **Gilbert's** attention. **Curtis** noted that he has discussed this with **Al**, but some cards do work better than others.

**Melissa** wanted to know how we ensure people coming in from the field still have access. **Gilbert** shared that you can email us head of their arrival. **Curtis** informed everyone that he would notify management to let them know ahead of time of anticipated arrivals to ensure this problem will not recur. **Billy** countered that employees subject to discipline or adverse actions will have their badges deactivated.

**Chris Berry** mentioned there was an Active Shooter training in Denver, CO. **Curtis** responded that he was aware of it, and there will be one in here as well.

**Stan** wanted know just how a random search will be done. He wanted to know if they should be prepared to arrive early and if they could expect to be paid. Will this be viewed as what **Billy** considers to be suffered and permitted? **Billy** shared it would not.

**Dave Mergen** expressed that he hopes he will still be able to park his bike in the courtyard. **Curtis** wanted everyone to understand there are challenges. Only one third of the South Building have been modernized the remainder poses challenges. One challenge is the limited workforce and the current spending is another. We are currently spending \$2 million more than we were the previous year.

**Bryan** thanked **Curtis** for the presentation.

**Wrap Up and Confirmation of Meeting Dates:** **Bryan** asked **Dan Kline** for an update on Pre-decisional Involvement being accomplished in the Department. **Dan** informed everyone that the Quarterly PDI Report was being finalized. He also mentioned that a PDI Guidance Memorandum would be issued in the near future. A LRO teleconference would be employed to

address the additional PDI Guidance Memo. **Billy** asked if he would please address some of the confusion. We explained to the Labor Relations Officers (LROs) that forums must identify more than three initiatives in order to qualify for the 5 points. Some have taken this to mean that all they need accomplish for the year is that minimum and they will be credited 5 point for the year. This is not what the policy says. Therefore, we are going to issue a guidance memo and look at whether we need to modify the policy document. **Bryan** noted there has been some push back from a couple of agencies.

After **Bryan** thanked **Dan**, **Billy** stated he had one additional concern. He asked if there was any management representative from the Forest Service, there was no response. He followed up by asking if there was any management representative from FFAS, there was no response. **Billy** suggested this be brought to **Oscar's** attention.

**Bryan** suggested the next Forum meeting should be scheduled for October 22, 2014, he asked for confirmation by next Friday, July 25, 2014.

Before the meeting closed, **Billy** recommended that OBPA provide to the Forum a briefing on the financial situation of the Department and the possibility of a furlough/shutdown.

**Adjournment:** The meeting adjourned at 3:46 p.m.