

CRITICAL TAKE-AWAYS



Professionalism in Peril? The Exodus of Expertise from Government

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Terry Gerton | Host, Federal News Network; Former President and CEO, National Academy of Public Administration (moderator)

William Resh | Professor of Public Management and Policy, Andrew Young School of Public Service, Georgia State University

Susan Toman-Jones | Former Director, Presidential Management Fellowship Program

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KEY POINTS

- **Project 2025** puts professional public service itself at risk.
- **Public trust** depends on competence, integrity and honest advice.
- **Public servants** are increasingly being treated as targets, not assets.
- **A politicized, unstable** workplace drives talent away.
- **When expertise walks out**, government gets weaker fast.



Project 2025 does not just question how the federal government works. It challenges the purpose of professional public service itself. The result? An exodus of expertise that threatens government's ability to deliver, adapt and earn public trust.

That was the central message of this ASPA webinar, the third in a four-part series on Project 2025, focused on how the mandate and early actions of the Trump administration's second term are reshaping the federal workforce.

Moderated by Terry Gerton, the discussion featured Ed DeSeve, William Resh and Susan Toman-Jones, three leaders who have spent their careers building, studying and defending professional public service. Their concern was rooted in what they are already seeing inside government: whether agencies can still recruit and retain strong people,

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It's about combining technical expertise with ethical behavior in a way that maintains trust in government.
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When you lose early-career talent, you don't just lose bodies. You lose a force multiplier.



Susan Toman-Jones

whether experienced staff feel safe speaking truth to power and whether government can still do the basic work the public expects. As the panel made clear, once expertise begins to leave, the damage is hard to reverse.

DeSeve defined professionalism not as prestige or bureaucracy for its own sake, but as competence, integrity, impartiality and service to the public—the qualities that allow government to function across administrations. “When you condition decisions on what’s most popular or best for the next election,” he said, “you turn your back on public trust.”

He argued that Project 2025 challenges that model by treating career civil servants as part of the problem rather than part of the solution. That mindset, he said, is already visible in broad staffing cuts, decisions made without regard to agency mission and a climate in which public servants feel targeted instead of valued. The result is a workforce less able, and less willing, to provide candid advice or do its work consistently

Resh focused on why people choose public service. “They’re devoting,” he said, “and let’s say foregoing, skills or technical expertise that they would acquire in the general market for the purpose of the specialization needed within government.” Federal employees often accept lower pay because they believe in the mission, value stability and want meaningful work. If those benefits disappear—if the job becomes unstable, politicized or openly hostile—many talented people will stop coming. The effects are long-term: disruptions shrink the talent pool, slow recovery and leave agencies with gaps that can last for years.

Toman-Jones said the same is true for younger workers. Talent pipelines do not refill on their own. If early-career professionals see instability, upheaval and people being pushed out, many will decide public service is not worth the risk.

This is “not something you can turn on and off. It really is a flywheel.” Younger hires often bring the energy, updated technical skills and adaptability agencies most need.

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The panel was not arguing against change. Reform is necessary, but it should strengthen performance, not hollow out the workforce in the name of disruption. Toman-Jones said shutdowns should no longer be routine: “That’s the most visible erosion of trust,” she said, while urging lawmakers to protect career leaders who provide continuity and help prevent policy whiplash. DeSeve closed with a message for those still serving: “Do the right thing. Do what you’re supposed to do. Do it as well as you can.”

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