

Women veterans recruited for federal border duty

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When it comes to hiring veterans, U.S. Customs and Border Protection has a great track record: Of its 21,000 agents, 28.8 percent are prior military.

CBP also has a lousy history of hiring women, who make up just 5 percent of the workforce.

It's the same story at the Federal Air Marshal Service: Just 5.5 percent of the workforce is women. In the 2011 round of hiring, only 850 of 19,000 applicants identified themselves as female.

Clearly, both of these federal law enforcement agencies are weak when it comes to hiring women. But both say they're trying.

As Chief Patrol Agent in Spokane, Washington, Gloria Chavez helps lead a recruiting team that spends a lot of time at colleges, athletic events and other venues that attract young women.

"Many of them still don't know what they are seeking in a job," said Chavez, who has been with CBP for 20 years.

"So we stress what the job is about. It is outdoors. It is independent. You have to have the confidence in yourself to do your job and do it well."

That message resonated with former Petty Officer 3rd Class Stephanie Anaya, a hospital corpsman surgical tech who signed on as a CBP agent after leaving the Navy in 2007.

She said her military background made CBP seem like a natural choice.

"My training helped me gain confidence — it helped me become a leader," she said. "So for me, it wasn't a matter of being male or female, it was a matter of joining an organization that had a sense of purpose."

Still, Anaya encountered a few surprises when she first came onboard at CBP.

"I did not know at the time that it was so male-dominated," she said. "But what surprised me the most was that there were no different physical requirements for men and women."

Unlike the Navy, which held her to a lesser physical standard, CBP says men and women must work at the same level of physical ability.

That makes sense to Anaya.

"I rely heavily on my partners, and they should be able to rely on me. I should be able to function at the same level they function at," she said.

CBP has sporadic job openings, and when it does, it has been aggressive in seeking to bolster its female headcount — sometimes too aggressive, some might say.

In late 2014, the agency got a special waiver to run a job listing in USAJobs.gov that stated the position was "Restricted to Female Applicants Only." As it sought to fill positions in border states from California to Texas, the agency limited its search to women, with a preference for minorities and veterans. Men were told not to bother applying.

While there were some raised eyebrows in the media at the time, CBP said the move was necessary to make up for the underrepresentation of women in its ranks.

The Federal Air Marshal Service has been a bit more traditional in its approach to encouraging female applicants.

The service routinely reaches out to women through groups such as Women in Federal Law Enforcement, National Women Veterans of America and National Women Veterans United. Much of the messaging centers on the mission and the importance of air safety, just as it does with male applicants.

Navy veteran Stephanie Anaya served as a hospital corpsman surgical tech and signed on as a Customs and Border Protection agent after leaving the service in 2007. She said her military background made CBP seem like a natural choice. (Photo: Agent Shana Zimmerman/Border Patrol)

At the same time, recruiters rely on a personal element to help drive interest among women.

"The most effective technique we have is in utilizing our current employees," said Joe Samuels, a regional recruiting director. "They are the best storytellers for what it is like to be part of the Federal Air Marshal Service. So when we go out to different organizations, we utilize that female workforce to help make that connection."

Supervisory Federal Air Marshal Sukeena Stephens is among those who help tell that story. A New York native, she witnessed the 9/11 attack on the Pentagon and knew she had a mission.

"When they put out the announcement that they would be hiring for this, I immediately submitted my application," she said.

While women may shy away from the role of undercover in-flight security, Stephens said gender can make the job a perfect fit.

"When you think about what a federal air marshal looks like, you are not looking for a female. So it gives me an element of surprise, something we all wish we could have," she said. "When

events happen, people just see you as someone who is being helpful. They don't see you as a law enforcement officer."

She said that as a woman, she finds it easier sometimes to keep a cool head, to bring a situation back down, where a man might tend to escalate. That's a helpful trait to have in a pressurized steel tube at 50,000 feet.

But despite potential advantages, women in general continue to steer clear of these jobs. While the agencies don't like to speculate, it's clear that public perception plays a role. As Stephens noted, people just don't visualize women in these scenarios.

At the same time, social constructs may limit the applicant pool.

"We know that women who apply have the same values as men, but they may have priorities that lean more toward home and family, so they have issues when it comes to rotating shifts and time in the field," Chavez said.

Women who have made the leap say they have found ready acceptance.

"When I am out at my station, my colleagues don't see me as a girl. I am part of the team," Anaya said.

And she is looking for others like her to be part of that same team.

"I have given presentations in schools, and young girls will look at me like, 'Wow, you can do that?' I see their eyes light up."