



OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL

Federal Housing Finance Agency

400 7th Street SW, Washington, DC 20219

Summary of Administrative Inquiry

The Office of Inspector General's Review of Allegations that a Senior Agency Executive Asked Job Candidates and Subordinate Employees about Their National Origin and Made Racially Insensitive Comments

The Federal Housing Finance Agency (FHFA) Office of Inspector General (OIG) conducted an administrative inquiry into allegations in an anonymous Hotline complaint that a senior FHFA executive asked candidates for employment and subordinate employees questions about their national origin and made racially insensitive comments. We report our findings below.

Upon joining FHFA, this senior executive received training on FHFA's Anti-Harassment Policy, Procedures, and Responsibilities. The document containing those requirements states, in relevant part:

It is the Federal Housing Finance Agency's ... policy to treat employees with dignity and respect and to promote a professional work environment free from discrimination, harassment, unwelcome or offensive behavior . . .

. . .

Harassment or harassing conduct . . . may include intimidating remarks or unwanted, offensive or malicious behavior that can undermine, patronize, humiliate, intimidate, or demean the recipient.

. . .

Supervisors will display appropriate behavior, as well as cultivate and maintain a work environment that is free from harassment . . .

Subsequent to this anti-harassment training, this senior executive asked a candidate for employment ([REDACTED]), and perhaps other candidates, questions about their national origin. The senior executive's questions, in part, caused one of the candidates to reject an offer of employment from FHFA. Realizing that a mistake had been made, this senior executive reported the matter to the Office of Human Resources Management (OHRM) in September 2020 to avoid a similar mistake in the future. OHRM advised the senior executive, by email, not to question candidates for employment about ethnicity or national origin in the future, and the senior executive responded by email agreeing not to do so. The senior executive

subsequently received training by OHRM and the Office of General Counsel on “[the] kinds of questions [that] are appropriate in a job interview” and reviewed an employment interview training video from OHRM. The accompanying slide deck for this video advised interviewers to avoid asking “legally risky questions” such as “where were you born?,” “are you a U.S. citizen?,” “where are you from originally?,” “what nationality are you?,” and “you have an interesting last name, is it Slovakian?” The senior executive also attended a presentation on unpacking bias, micromessaging, and microaggressions. OHRM then followed-up with a written memorandum to the senior executive that FHFA has called a “letter of caution.”

During the pandemic, this senior executive held virtual lunches with subordinate employees to get to know them. Attendance at these lunches was voluntary. This senior executive regularly asked subordinate employees “where are you from?” which, this senior executive has subsequently acknowledged to us, could be understood as a question about an individual’s ethnicity or national origin. This senior executive continued to pose this question at virtual lunches after attending the four training sessions described above and after receiving the letter of caution from OHRM that included directions not to ask questions about ethnicity or national origin during employment interviews.

Questions about an employee’s national identity, as well as related questions, such as “where are you from?,” have been categorized by some social scientists and psychologists as a “microaggression.” Microaggression is defined as a “behavior or action – whether accidentally or purposefully – that subtly undermines someone’s identity by playing into the stereotypes or historic biases about social groups.” While this senior executive attended a presentation on microaggressions at FHFA, the senior executive claimed to be unaware that asking subordinates, who belonged to a different demographic, “where are you from?” could cause them to feel uncomfortable or alienated. The senior executive agreed that this question should not be asked and stated during our interview that it would no longer be asked during virtual lunches.

We did not substantiate the allegation that this senior executive made racially insensitive comments and created a potentially hostile work environment.

OIG provided its findings to FHFA. FHFA did not provide OIG with a response to them.