

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20250

Dear Employees,

February marks the 90th Anniversary of Carter G. Woodson's precursor to African American History Month and the 40th anniversary of the first federally recognized African American History Month celebration in the United States. I would like to use this First Friday message to highlight the achievements of Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights, Dr. Joe Leonard and his motivated team of civil rights professionals in the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights (OASCR). As President Obama remarked during his final "State of the Union" speech last month, "The world respects us not just for our arsenal; it respects us for our diversity and our openness." Nowhere in USDA is this more evident than in the work performed by OASCR.

We've come a long way over the past seven years under Dr. Leonard's leadership. When I arrived at USDA in 2009, there was a significant backlog of discrimination complaints filed by customers and applicants for USDA programs and services. Through hard work and dedication, the OASCR team has reduced the inventory of program civil rights complaints pending final agency decision to the lowest level in five years in FY 2015, and reduced the average evaluation time to accept or dismiss civil rights program complaints by 75 percent. Overall, OASCR has reduced average processing time for new civil rights program complaints from four years to 18 months.

Dr. Leonard has also made the program complaint process more open and user-friendly by creating a simplified form for customers and program participants. The new form helps expedite the process for those who believe they have experienced discrimination by USDA. By capturing all of the information needed to accept a complaint, the form will reduce the time it takes to process complaints.

With Dr. Leonard's guidance, we've increased inclusivity across the Department, ensuring all employees and program customers are treated with dignity and respect regardless of race, color, gender, sexual orientation, national origin, religion, disability or age. In 2013, OASCR formalized customer protections from discrimination based on gender identity and gender expression, and in 2014 issued a Departmental Regulation prohibiting discrimination on the basis of national origin affecting persons with Limited English Proficiency in both conducted and assisted programs and activities. Along with the new Departmental Regulation, OASCR provided guidance to make sure that every agency within USDA expanded its program operations to ensure equal access for LEP persons.

I want to personally thank Dr. Leonard, one of the longest-serving members of my subcabinet, for his tireless efforts to enhance USDA's civil rights record before the American people. On this first Friday of February, please join me in commending the team at OASCR for their work to ensure that our employees, customers, and stakeholders view USDA as a champion of equality, service and opportunity for all. Thank you for all that you do.

Sincerely,

Tom Vilsack