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POLITICS AND POLICY

EEOC to Downgrade 8 Offices, Drawing Enforcement Worries

By GARY FIELDS

Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission plans to downgrade several of its district offices in a reorganization that reduces the number of senior attorneys in the field, drawing criticism that the move will hamper enforcement of workplace antidiscrimination laws.

The commission, acting on the findings of an outside study and internal review that its field-office structure wasn't keeping up with U.S. population and employment shifts, is proposing to downgrade eight of its 23 regional district offices into offices that wouldn't have authority to recommend matters for litigation to EEOC headquarters in Washington. Regional attorneys in district offices review cases brought to them by lawyers in field offices to determine if the charges and evidence merit being litigated.

Under the plan, district offices in Baltimore, Cleveland, Denver, Detroit, Seattle, New Orleans and San Antonio would become field offices, falling under the jurisdiction of one of the remaining districts. The Milwaukee district office would be downgraded further, to an area office.

The proposed reorganization is to be discussed at a public forum at the commission today. "Going to smaller offices without litigation authority means less civil-rights enforcement," said Theodore Shaw, director-counsel and president of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, one of several civil-rights and labor groups protesting the plan.

"I'm not going to quarrel with their need to do reorganization," but there are questions about why offices in communities with large minority populations were chosen for reduction, said Jocelyn Frye, legal director for the National Partnership on Women and Families, a nonpartisan advocacy group, and chairman of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights' job-discrimination committee.

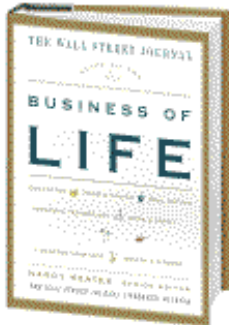
EEOC deputy general counsel James Lee said he understands concerns about the plan, but predicted that complainants would see no change in the service they receive. The shift of additional responsibility to the remaining 15 district offices is "well within their capacity," he said. No office is being eliminated, he added, and two field offices are being opened, in Las Vegas and Mobile, Ala., two fast-growing employment centers.

Randy Johnson, vice president of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, said employer groups also are studying the proposal. The EEOC's "budget is tight and they are trying to be more efficient and move more resources to the front line," he said. The Chamber would like to see the agency name an ombudsman to address

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business concerns more, but "we did send out this [reorganization] plan to our members and no one had any complaints."

The EEOC annually receives about 80,000 complaints from individuals alleging workplace discrimination based on race, age, sex or disability. The agency finds enough evidence of violations to file about 350 lawsuits against employers a year.

With fewer attorneys in district offices assessing charges, critics say some cases with merit might be passed over.

The EEOC had planned to vote on the proposal last month, but delayed action after receiving complaints over lack of public review. If the commission approves the plan, as expected, Congress has 15 days to respond. Without congressional action, the plan takes effect automatically.

Mr. Lee says in the current budget environment, with Iraq and homeland security taking top priority in Congress, the EEOC has to "work smarter with less."

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