

JSC keeps the Star

By Lisa Tidwell

The VPP Star flag still flies over Johnson Space Center. Created by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), the Voluntary Protection Program (VPP) is a cooperative program among employees, unions, management and OSHA to achieve a safer, healthier work environment beyond the requirements of OSHA standards.

The Center earned the honor of becoming a Star site in 1999 and, last month, JSC successfully became NASA's first site to renew its Star designation. The Sonny Carter Training Facility (SCTF) and Johnson Engineering at SCTF both have the honor of being NASA's newest Star site and NASA's newest contractor Star site, respectively.

Preparing for the initial VPP Star assessment in 1999 "required a substantial change in mindset – a very steep uphill climb," said Elmer "Bubba" Johnson, Special Assistant for JSC VPP.

"With this (recent) reassessment, it was very evident that over the last three years the Center has grown to the point that the philosophies of VPP are an accepted way of doing business," he said.

Kevin Rockwell, the VPP Audit Team Leader, commended the Center for its professional, well-coordinated and successful bid to retain its OSHA VPP Star rating.

Rockwell noted that the OSHA team was able to complete its audit a day ahead of schedule because of the superb preparation and attention to detail that JSC employees put into their safety training and VPP awareness programs.

Employees at JSC, led by Johnson, prepared for last month's VPP audit for nearly

two years. "There were approximately 200 folks around the Center who were directly involved in the audit and many, many more indirectly involved," Johnson said.

The final VPP audit reported that JSC had five 90-day contingency items, while SCTF and Johnson Engineering each had one 90-day contingency item. Three of the 90-day contingency items were fixed shortly after the audit concluded, and the final items will be corrected no later than 90 days from the end date of the VPP audit.

All of the sites were also given VPP Recommendations, which will be addressed in the near future. A VPP Recommendation is merely a suggestion that would reflect "above and beyond compliance," which is the philosophy behind the Voluntary Protection Program.

Sean Keprta, an Occupational Health Officer, said he was thankful that potential hazards were identified before they became a problem and JSC was given the opportunity to implement corrective measures.

During the VPP audit debriefing, Sue Garman, JSC Associate Director for Management, thanked the visiting auditors and congratulated JSC employees on the successful completion of this audit.

While keeping the Star is a victory, there is still work to be done. Johnson said that all three sites "must keep focused on continual improvement."

He added, "While it is initially desirable to take a step back, take a deep breath and relax, we must maintain focus and be vigilant."

The VPP auditors will return to the Center in 2005 to continue the assessment of JSC's Safety and Total Health Program. ♦

Politically active? Know the Hatch Act!

By Lisa Tidwell

The Hatch Act of 1939 restricts the political activity of federal government employees and certain state and local government employees. The Hatch Act was substantially amended in 1993 with support from Senator John Glenn, giving federal employees greater freedom to be politically active.

However, Johnson Space Center employees must still know the guidelines. To learn about all the rules and regulations, visit the U.S. Office of Special Council (OSC) Web site at: <http://www.osc.gov/hatchact.htm> or call 1-800-85-HATCH.

"If JSC employees wish to be politically active, they need to know when, where and how since there are disciplinary repercussions for violations of the Hatch Act," said Dan Remington of the JSC Legal Office.

The Hatch Act only applies to federal employees as it relates to disciplinary matters. However, it affects everyone who works at JSC as it relates to the use of Center time and resources. "All persons in a federal workplace are subject to the regulations of government facilities, resources and time usage," Remington said.

The 1993 amendment to the Hatch Act defined a separation between the accepted political activities of Senior Executive Service federal employees and those at grade GS15 and below. The amendment opened the door for employees, GS15 and below, to be more politically active.

All federal employees can run for office in nonpartisan elections, such as those for the school board, city council or city official. They can participate in partisan and nonpartisan elections with some restrictions. In running for nonpartisan positions, employees still need to ensure that they don't create the appearance of a partisan election. This happened in the last City of Houston mayoral election. Both major parties lined up behind the two leading City of Houston mayoral candidates, creating the appearance of a partisan election.

This also recently occurred in the Fairfax County, Va., school board election. According to a press release from the U.S. Office of Special Counsel (OSC) in July 2002, the OSC has filed a petition for disciplinary action against a Department of Defense employee.

According to the petition, the employee took actions in his race for the school board that resulted in a partisan candidacy, despite the fact that candidates' names were placed on the ballot without any party designation.

The employee was cited for soliciting, accepting and advertising the endorsement of the local partisan party's district committee, engaging in political fund-raising, and soliciting and accepting volunteer services in a partisan election. To add insult to injury, the individual apparently lost in his election effort.

"Federal employees cannot run in partisan elections, participate in partisan fund-raising or use their title or position to influence people," Remington said. "But they can support party candidates and donate to a political party."

As mentioned above, the regulations for Senior Executive Service level employees are much tighter, and employees above GS15 cannot be as politically active. According to the OSC, these employees can still "register to vote as they please, join a political party and express opinions about candidates or issues."

The OSC provides advisory opinions on the Hatch Act and also enforces the provisions of the Act by filing petitions for disciplinary action. Violations of Hatch Act provisions applicable to federal employees are punishable by removal, or a minimum 30-day suspension without pay.

For more information, contact the JSC Legal Office at x33021 or (281) 483-3021.

A CLOSER LOOK: HATCH ACT RULES

Federal employees may:

- ✓ be candidates for public office in nonpartisan elections
- ✓ register and vote as they choose
- ✓ assist in voter registration drives
- ✓ express opinions about candidates and issues
- ✓ contribute money to political organizations
- ✓ attend political fund raising functions
- ✓ attend and be active at political rallies and meetings
- ✓ join and be an active member of a political party or club
- ✓ sign nominating petitions
- ✓ campaign for or against referendum questions, constitutional amendments and municipal ordinances
- ✓ campaign for or against candidates in partisan elections
- ✓ make campaign speeches for candidates in partisan elections
- ✓ distribute campaign literature in partisan elections
- ✓ hold office in political clubs or parties

Federal employees may not:

- ✗ use official authority or influence to interfere with an election
- ✗ solicit or discourage political activity of anyone with business before their Agency
- ✗ solicit or receive political contributions (may be done in certain limited situations by federal labor or other employee organizations)
- ✗ be candidates for public office in partisan elections
- ✗ wear partisan political buttons on duty
- ✗ engage in political activity while:
 - on duty
 - in a government office
 - wearing an official uniform
 - using a government vehicle

For more information on your rights and limitations visit: <http://www.osc.gov/hatchact.htm>