

# A legacy of objectivity

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Federal statistical agencies are keenly aware of the need for data objectivity, which requires that data be accurate, reliable, and unbiased and that they be presented in an accurate, clear, and unbiased manner. To be trusted, they need to be presented in a clearly non-partisan manner. No one realized this more nor did more to advance the reputation for objectivity of the critical employment, price and wage data produced by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) than its tenth commissioner, Janet L. Norwood. Dr. Norwood passed away from complications of Alzheimer's disease on March 27, 2107 in Austin, Texas at the age of 91.

During her career at BLS and in years after her service as Commissioner, Janet Norwood had many platforms for advancing the quality, integrity, reliability and objectivity of Federal statistics. She came up through the ranks at BLS, mainly in the Bureau's price programs and was Deputy Commissioner when, in May 1979 after 16 years in BLS, she was confirmed as Commissioner following the death in office of Julius Shiskin and a short period of service as Acting Commissioner. Only one other commissioner had previously come up through the ranks, and until Janet Norwood, no Commissioner had been a female – though one female had served as acting commissioner in the 1960s. Other firsts marked her career. She was appointed by a Democratic President (Carter) and twice reappointed by a Republican (Reagan).

As Commissioner of Labor Statistics, with service from 1979 to 1991, her public contribution to the objectivity of the data centered around monthly open testimony on the jobs report, usually on the first Friday of each month, before the Joint Economic Committee of Congress. These monthly employment reports are among the earliest, most closely watched and politi-

cally charged of the federal government's indicators of the health of the economy. The hearings had an ignoble beginning, introduced in 1971 during the tenure of her predecessor, Geoffrey Moore when the then-Secretary of Labor dictated the end of monthly press conferences at which the Commissioner explained the data. The Joint Economic Committee stepped into the breach and began this series of monthly testimonies to give the Commissioner a platform for an impartial discussion of the statistics. Janet Norwood took full advantage of the opportunity to go to the Congress and the public each month, eventually logging 137 hearings over her 12-year tenure. Her analysis in these hearings was precise and crisp and she took pains to avoid interpretation that might be perceived as political in tone, often side stepping efforts by members of one party or the other to add flavor to the data releases. Many considered these monthly appearances as being dry, technical affairs, but the jousting over the meaning of the data often made for high theater. She excelled at walking a fine line and sticking to the story that the data told. Her nonpartisanship and demeanor engendered trust, and that trust extended to the data themselves, even though on a month-to-month basis, the estimates sometime looked wacky and were hard to explain.

More than surviving and enhancing the hearings however, she made her mark on the Bureau by initiating programs to protect and enhance the quality and scope of the Bureau's core programs. She did it despite widespread budget cuts during most of her tenure. Her major contribution was in the significant improvements made to the sensitive Consumer Price Program (CPI) during her years. It was a time when inflation was rising substantially and great attention was paid to the CPI. There was much controversy over the techni-

cal merits of the Consumer Price Index. In this time of heightened interest, she was able to implement revisions in the homeownership component of the CPI that improved its quality.

Throughout her career in BLS, she came down on the side of impartiality and in support of the independent public-service role of the Bureau in tackling often-difficult technical problems. On the substantive side, she expanded information available on minorities and women.

She served as elected President of the American Statistical Association in 1989 while serving as Commissioner, and in the years after she stepped down as Commissioner in 1991, continued to remain active in statistical bodies and in public service. As a senior official at the Urban Institute, she wrote papers and testi-

fied before Congress about various political issues. She served on and chaired a number of study panels for the National Academies Research Council's Committee on National Statistics (CNSTAT) and was active in panels for the National Academy of Public Administration (NAPA). She chaired the Advisory Committee on Leading Indicators at the NY Conference Board and served as a member of the Executive Committee on the Board of Directors of the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago. In another first, she was the first woman elected as President of the prestigious Cosmos Club in Washington.

She leaves a legacy of commitment to objectivity, integrity and quality of the federal government's data that lives on today in the BLS and throughout the government.