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MARKETPLACE

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HEADLINE: Restructure of EEOC possibly due to Republican agenda

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BODY:

DAVID BROWN, anchor:

At age 40, the EEOC is going through what some are calling a midlife crisis. The Bush administration wants a comprehensive restructuring of the agency that serves as the nation's workplace discrimination watchdog. The plan includes peeling back layers of management, updating technology, making operations more cost-efficient. But MARKETPLACE's John Dimsdale reports some worries such laudable intentions may disguise a more troublesome plot.

JOHN DIMSDALE reporting:

The EEOC's 2,000 employees gather, investigate and mediate some 80,000 complaints of discrimination in American workplaces every year. But the Bush-appointed head of the commission, Cari Dominguez, says the agency needs a facelift. She says workplace demographics have changed since the EEOC was established by the Civil Rights Act of 1964. As workers move south and west into rural areas, her agency is stuck with 51 field offices in large cities--too many of them in the Northeast and Midwest, she says. In September, Dominguez chaired a commission meeting on restructuring her agency.

Ms. CARI DOMINGUEZ: While the world and the workplace have changed dramatically, our service delivery infrastructure has remained virtually unmodified. The time has come for a good look-see at the agency.

DIMSDALE: An outside review calls for replacing some field offices with a national call center to handle discrimination complaints. But worker rights groups such as 9 to 5, the National Association of Working Women, claim that would be a disaster. They say there's no way a remote call-in center can replace the localized, personal skills needed to take in job discrimination claims.

Ms. ELLEN BRAVO (9 to 5, National Association of Working Women): To us, what's going to happen is death by 1,000 cuts.

DIMSDALE: Nine-to-five's Ellen Bravo points out the financially strapped has already endured a hiring freeze and struggles with a lengthy backlog of cases.

Ms. BRAVO: We disagree that this is the time to streamline. The premise is the need to save money. We don't think discrimination is the area to save money. We think this is instituting the agenda of the Bush administration to downsize and privatize government.

DIMSDALE: Critics of the Bush administration say efforts to reorganize the EEOC mirror plans at other agencies with missions that differ from the White House's conservative, pro-business agenda. They point to similar streamlining proposals for regulatory agencies from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration to the Environmental Protection Agency. The director of American University's congressional and presidential study center, James Thurber, says President Bush has plenty of tools to blunt the effectiveness of government agencies he disagrees with. From budget downsizing to executive orders overturning regulations to appointing new executives.

Mr. JAMES THURBER (American University): He can appoint people that can redirect things within broad parameters at these agencies, especially when they're not highly visible. And he's done it with the FCC, and he's done it to OSHA, and he's done it at EPA.

DIMSDALE: And he's done it at the EEOC where four of the five commissioners are Bush appointees. But Thurber says these tactics are used by all presidents.

Mr. THURBER: Democrats and Republicans both use all of these powers--appointent power, budget power, regulatory power--to get what they want.

DIMSDALE: The EEOC has taken preliminary steps to open a national call center, although no field offices have been closed. Chairman Dominguez denies any agenda to blunt the commission's effectiveness. On the contrary, she believes streamlining will mean quicker resolution of workplace discrimination claims. In Washington, I'm John Dimsdale for MARKETPLACE.

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