



Highlights of [GAO-07-1154T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia; Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

GAO has reported in recent years on a number of human capital issues that have hampered the Department of State's (State) ability to carry out U.S. foreign policy priorities and objectives, particularly at posts central to the war on terror. In 2002, State implemented the Diplomatic Readiness Initiative (DRI) to address shortfalls in the number and skills of State employees. This testimony addresses State's progress in (1) addressing staffing shortfalls since the implementation of DRI and (2) filling gaps in the language proficiency of Foreign Service officers and other staff. To accomplish these objectives, GAO analyzed staffing and language data and met with State officials.

What GAO Recommends

We made a number of recommendations in our August 2006 report to the Secretary of State to address staffing gaps and foreign language shortfalls. State generally agreed with our recommendations and has made some progress in implementing them.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-1154T.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Jess T. Ford at (202) 512-4128 or fordj@gao.gov.

STATE DEPARTMENT

Staffing and Foreign Language Shortfalls Persist Despite Initiatives to Address Gaps

What GAO Found

State has made progress in addressing staffing shortages since implementing the DRI in 2002; however, the initiative did not fully meet its goals, and staffing shortfalls remain a problem. From 2002 to 2004, the DRI enabled State to hire more than 1,000 employees above attrition to respond to emerging crises and allow staff time for critical job training. However, according to State officials, much of this increase was absorbed by the demand for personnel in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the desired crises and training reserve was not achieved. State officials told us that they now estimate they need more than 1,000 new positions to support foreign language training needs and respond to crises and emerging priorities. In an effort to address staffing shortfalls, particularly at critical hardship posts, State has implemented various incentives, including offering extra pay to officers who serve an additional year at these posts and allowing employees to negotiate shorter tours of duty. State has also taken steps to ensure all Iraq positions are staffed. While State has not yet used its authority to direct staff to accept assignments, it has in several cases identified qualified staff and convinced them to accept reassignments. However, despite these and other efforts, mid-level positions at many posts are staffed by inexperienced junior officers with minimal guidance. An experience gap at critical posts can severely compromise the department's diplomatic readiness and its ability to carry out its foreign policy objectives and execute critical post-level duties.

State has made progress in increasing its foreign language capabilities, but significant language gaps remain. State has increased the number of worldwide positions requiring language proficiency since 2001 and has enhanced efforts to recruit individuals proficient in certain languages. However, State continues to have difficulties filling some positions with language proficient staff. State officials told us these gaps have worsened in recent years. In response to our recommendations to enhance the language proficiency of State's staff, officials told us that the department has placed an increased focus on language training in critical areas. State has recently implemented a new initiative that would provide additional pay incentives for staff if they chose to be reassigned to use existing Arabic language skills. Continuing gaps in language proficiency can adversely affect State's diplomatic readiness and ability to execute critical duties. For example, officials at one high visa fraud post we visited stated that consular officers sometimes adjudicate visas without fully understanding everything the applicants tell them during the visa interview. Moreover, we were told that officers at some posts cannot communicate effectively with foreign audiences, hampering their ability to cultivate personal relationships and explain U.S. foreign policy.