



Highlights of [GAO-03-604](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

Employees at the Social Security Administration's (SSA) Region X—which covers Alaska, Idaho, Oregon, and Washington—expressed concern about the Region's equal employment opportunity (EEO) process for employment discrimination complaints. GAO was asked to (1) provide information for fiscal years 1997 through 2001 on the composition of the Region X workforce and for personnel actions such as promotions, awards, and adverse actions by EEO group; (2) describe the EEO complaint process in Region X and any changes to it; (3) assess whether the Region's process is consistent with federal regulations and related guidance; and (4) assess the familiarity with the EEO process of the Region's employees and their attitude toward it.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that SSA adopt agency-specific procedures for counselors to use in processing discrimination complaints, so employees have the same process everywhere. GAO also recommends that Region X take actions to enhance its EEO environment to increase trust and, where necessary, address differences in personnel actions across racial, ethnic, and gender groups.

SSA agreed with GAO's findings and cited actions it was taking on two of GAO's three recommendations.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-604](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-604).

To view the full report, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Victor S. Rezendes on (202) 512-6806 or at [rezendesv@gao.gov](mailto:rezendesv@gao.gov).

# EQUAL EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITY

## SSA Region X's Changes to Its EEO Process Illustrate Need for Agencywide Procedures

### What GAO Found

In a geographic area where minorities represent a small portion of the civilian workforce (about 13.5 percent), Region X generally had a higher percentage of each minority group, except for American Indian and Alaska Natives. Moreover, the percentage of minority employees in Region X had increased from about 19 percent in fiscal year 1997 to about 27 percent in fiscal year 2001. Women represented a much higher proportion of SSA's workforce than of the civilian workforce. Differences among racial/ethnic and gender groups for most of the personnel actions reviewed were not statistically significant.

For fiscal years 1997 and 1998, current and former Region X EEO counselors described a process that mirrored the informal stage of the required federal sector complaint process. In fiscal year 1999, Region X changed its EEO process, so that EEO counselors were no longer allowed to talk with managers but were required to submit their questions in writing. In addition, managers were encouraged to routinely have an attorney from the Office of the General Counsel (OGC) review their written responses before these responses were provided to the EEO counselors. After the changes were in place for about a year, SSA headquarters officials held discussions with Region X officials to explain that having written inquiries and OGC involvement in the informal EEO process was not consistent with the intent of resolving issues informally. Beginning early in fiscal year 2001, neither written EEO counselor queries to managers nor OGC involvement was required in the informal process. Region X's former use of written queries and OGC involvement were counter to the spirit of EEO regulations and their related guidance, which emphasize the informal nature of precomplaint counseling.

In doing its work at Region X, GAO found that SSA had issued EEO handbooks for managers and employees, but the handbooks do not contain agency-specific procedures on how EEO counselors are to process complaints of discrimination. Agency-specific procedures are required by EEO regulations. Absent such procedures, components of an agency can use different procedures, as illustrated by Region X, resulting in employees across the country being treated differently.

To gain an understanding of how familiar the Region's employees are with the EEO process and their willingness to participate in it, GAO surveyed all of the Region's employees. Most Region X employees reported having received or seen within the last 2 years written materials about EEO regulations and how to contact regional EEO counselors. Also, almost half the employees reported a willingness to participate in counseling or to file a formal EEO complaint if they believed they had been discriminated against. However, a sizeable portion of employees—about 40 percent—reported being unwilling or uncertain about becoming involved with the processes established for handling EEO complaints.