



Highlights of [GAO-09-141](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

The Department of Justice's Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) is responsible for the custody and care of more than 202,000 federal offenders with approximately 35,000 employees, almost half of whom are correctional officers, dispersed across BOP's 114 correctional facilities in 6 regions. In response to a request, GAO identified whether BOP had policies and procedures and how it assessed the management of those policies and procedures for (1) employee-requested lateral transfers of BOP employees between correctional facilities and (2) day-to-day changes in correctional services or temporary assignments of BOP employees within a correctional facility. GAO reviewed available documentation on BOP's policies and procedures on lateral transfers and temporary assignments. GAO also interviewed officials from BOP's central and regional offices and seven facilities selected on the basis of the number of staff; at least one facility was selected from within each of BOP's six regions.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that BOP (1) develop and implement specific policies and procedures for administering employee requests for lateral transfers and (2) systematically assess temporary assignments. BOP agreed with GAO's findings, disagreed with the first recommendation, and agreed with and plans to take action on the second. GAO continues to believe written policies would help ensure consistency across BOP.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-09-141](#). For more information, contact George H. Stalcup at (202) 512-9490 or [stalcupg@gao.gov](mailto:stalcupg@gao.gov).

## BUREAU OF PRISONS

### Written Policies on Lateral Transfers and Assessment of Temporary Assignments Needed

#### What GAO Found

BOP does not have written policies and procedures on lateral transfers of staff. Each correctional facility evaluates requests for lateral transfers on a case-by-case basis. Typically, when an employee requests a lateral transfer to another facility, the warden at the employee's current facility determines whether to forward the request to the desired facility's warden. The processes for requesting a lateral transfer and the criteria for forwarding, granting, or denying such requests varied across the facilities GAO reviewed, and generally no documentation on decisions reached or actions taken was maintained. Further, BOP does not systematically review decisions concerning these requests at any level. As a result, BOP cannot determine the number of requests for lateral transfers, the outcome of these requests, or whether requests were handled consistently within or among facilities. GAO has previously reported that agencywide policies and procedures help ensure consistent treatment of staff when agencies have geographically dispersed locations. Other Department of Justice law-enforcement components have written policies, procedures, and a review process concerning requests for lateral transfers.

Unlike lateral transfers, BOP has written policies and procedures on how facilities are to temporarily assign staff to fill in for absences or to meet other needs that arise in a facility. However, BOP has not systematically assessed how facilities are managing temporary assignments. As part of a cost-reduction strategy affecting temporary assignments, in 2005, BOP designated mission critical posts, that is, assignments that were deemed essential for the safe and secure operations of its facilities and that would be vacated only in rare circumstances. The mission critical post initiative was intended to reduce facilities' reliance on overtime and non-correctional services staff, who had typically been used for temporary assignments. A memorandum from the Assistant Director of Correctional Programs described how each facility was to gather information for 6 months on overtime and staffing under the mission critical post initiative and how BOP would evaluate the effectiveness of the initiative. However, BOP conducted no such evaluation. BOP officials also generally do not review temporary assignments at any level, including the effect of leaving mission critical posts unassigned.

According to the *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, federal agencies are to employ internal control activities, such as top-level review, to help ensure that management's directives are carried out and to determine if agencies are effectively and efficiently using resources. Without assessing its mission critical post initiative and data on temporary assignments, BOP does not know whether it is efficiently and effectively using staff for temporary assignments or achieving the desired cost savings. Also, without reviewing the effect of leaving mission critical posts unassigned, BOP cannot assess the effect, if any, of unassigned posts on the safety and security of its facilities.