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STATE DEPARTMENT

Staffing and Foreign Language Shortfalls Persist Despite Initiatives to Address Gaps

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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.

August 1, 2007

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to be here today to discuss GAO's work on Department of State (State) human capital issues. In recent years, State has undertaken several broad initiatives to ensure it has enough qualified staff in the right places to carry out its mission. These efforts have included State's Diplomatic Readiness Initiative (DRI), designed to hire a reserve of Foreign Service officers (FSO) and civil service employees, support training opportunities for staff, enhance State's ability to respond to crises and emerging priorities, and fill critical skill gaps. In addition, State is currently implementing its Transformational Diplomacy Initiative, which involves, among other things, repositioning overseas staff from locations such as Europe to emergent critical areas, including Asia and the Middle East, and expanding language training efforts.

Today, I will discuss State's progress in (1) addressing staffing shortfalls since the implementation of the Diplomatic Readiness Initiative and (2) filling gaps in the language proficiency of Foreign Service officers and other staff.

GAO has reported on a number of human capital issues that have hampered State's ability to carry out the President's foreign policy priorities and objectives. My statement today is based primarily on our August 2006 report on State human capital issues.¹ Over the course of our work on this report, we examined documentation on State's recruitment efforts; analyzed staffing, vacancy, and assignment data; reviewed the language proficiency data for specific posts, specialties, and grades; and compared the language proficiency of staff in language-designated positions with the requirements for the positions. We met with officials at State's Bureau of Human Resources, Bureau of Consular Affairs, Foreign Service Institute, and six regional bureaus, and also conducted fieldwork in Abuja and Lagos, Nigeria; Sana'a, Yemen; and Beijing, China—posts of strategic importance to the United States that have recently posed various human capital challenges to State. Furthermore, we recently met with the State Department to follow up on its human capital initiatives. We

¹GAO: State Department: *Staffing and Foreign Language Shortfalls Persist Despite Initiatives to Address Gaps*, GAO-06-894 (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 2006).

performed this work in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

Summary

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. Without ensuring that the right people with the right skills are in the right places, these gaps will continue to compromise State's ability to carry out its foreign policy objectives and execute critical mission functions. From 2002 through 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 thus, the desired crises and training reserve was not achieved. In addition, State has placed an increased focus on foreign language training in certain critical areas, which means that staff who would otherwise be working are instead attending language training. According to State officials, outside of the department's consular program and worldwide security upgrade program, State has not received any additional authorized positions since 2004, and officials also told us that they now estimate State needs 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 at historically hard to fill hardship posts,² many of which are of significant strategic importance to the United States, 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. More recently, State made service in a hardship post a prerequisite for promotion to the senior Foreign Service. And, since we issued our report, State has increased its service requirements of staff at hardship posts and has also recently taken additional measures to ensure all Iraq positions are filled. However, State has not evaluated the effectiveness of its hardship incentives, and continues to have difficulty attracting qualified mid-level applicants—or bidders—for some hardship posts. According to State officials, mid-level positions at many posts continue to be staffed by junior officers who lack experience and have minimal guidance. For example, at the time of our last review, the mid-level consular manager

²State defines hardship posts as those locations where the U.S. government provides differential pay incentives—an additional 5 to 35 percent of base salary, depending on the severity or difficulty of the conditions—to encourage employees to bid on assignments to these posts and to compensate them for the hardships they encounter.

positions in Shenyang and Chengdu, China—two locations with high incidences of visa fraud—were held by first tour junior officers. State has not traditionally assigned its limited number of employees to particular posts based on risk and priorities; rather, it has generally assigned staff to posts for which they have expressed an interest. We recommended that State consider using its authority to direct staff to accept assignments, as necessary, to ensure that critical gaps are filled. After our report was issued, State’s Director General publicly indicated he would direct assignments when needed. While State has not yet used directed assignments, State officials told us that the department’s increased willingness to do so has helped convince some qualified staff to accept critical reassignments.

State has made progress in increasing its foreign language capabilities, but significant language gaps remain. State has significantly increased the number of worldwide positions requiring language proficiency and has enhanced efforts to recruit individuals proficient in certain languages. However, State continues to have difficulties filling language designated positions with language proficient staff. Gaps in language proficiency can compromise State’s ability to execute critical duties, including reaching out to foreign audiences central to the war on terror. In April 2007, we testified that inadequate language skills hampered public diplomacy officers’ ability to cultivate personal relationships and explain U.S. foreign policy. Moreover, officials at one high visa fraud post stated that consular officers sometimes adjudicate visas without fully understanding everything the applicants tell them during the visa interview. State officials told us that some language gaps have worsened in recent years due to State’s relocation of some staff positions to critical posts that require so-called “superhard” language skills, such as Arabic or Chinese, that staff do not have. We reported that almost 30 percent of the staff filling language designated positions worldwide as of October 2005 did not meet the language proficiency requirements. The percentage was much higher at certain critical posts—for example, 59 percent in Cairo, Egypt; and 60 percent in Sana’a, Yemen. Moreover, some officers we met with who did meet the proficiency requirements questioned whether the requirements are adequate. For example, embassy officials in Yemen and China stated that the speaking and reading proficiency levels designated for their positions were not high enough and that staff in these positions were not sufficiently fluent to effectively perform their jobs. Additionally, several factors—including the short length of some tours and the limitations on consecutive tours at the same post—may hinder officers’ ability to enhance and maintain their language skills over time, as well as State’s ability to take advantage of those skills and the investment it makes in

training. We also reported a perception among some officers that State's current promotion system discourages officers from specializing in any particular region, making the officers reluctant to apply to posts where they could better utilize their language skills. Since our report was issued, State officials informed us that the department has recently implemented a new initiative that would provide additional language incentive pay for staff if they chose to be reassigned to a posting that would utilize their existing Arabic language skills.³ In addition, in response to our recommendations that State take action to enhance the language proficiency of its staff, State officials told us that the department has placed an increased focus on language training in critical areas and that it is exploring the possibility of longer tours of duty in limited cases.

Background

To address staffing shortfalls, in 2002, State implemented the Diplomatic Readiness Initiative, a \$197 million effort designed to hire 1,158⁴ new foreign and civil service employees over a 3-year period, support training opportunities for staff, enhance State's ability to respond to crises and emerging priorities, improve State's hiring processes to recruit personnel from more diverse experiences and cultural backgrounds, and fill critical skill gaps. As of June 2007, State had about 20,000 American employees, including Foreign Service officers (FSO). About 67 percent of Foreign Service employees serve overseas; of that number, about 68 percent are assigned to hardship posts. A hardship pay differential is established only for those locations that involve extraordinarily difficult living conditions, excessive physical hardship, or notably unhealthful conditions affecting the majority of employees officially stationed or detailed there. Living costs are not considered in differential determinations.⁵

It is more difficult to attract qualified bidders for some hardship posts than for others. In response to severe staffing shortages at such posts, State established the Service Need Differential (SND) program in 2001. Under

³Furthermore, additional language pay incentives are being piloted for employees taking advantage of reassignment who have the proficiency in Arabic required of their position.

⁴State received funding for 1,069 employees.

⁵State pays an additional 15 to 35 percent of salary for danger pay. The danger pay allowance is designed to provide additional compensation above basic compensation to all U.S. government civilian employees, including chiefs of mission, for service in foreign areas having conditions—such as civil insurrection, civil war, terrorism, or war—that threaten physical harm or imminent danger to employees. These conditions do not include acts characterized chiefly as economic crime.

this program, an employee who accepts a 3-year assignment at a post designated for SND is eligible to receive an additional hardship differential—over and above existing hardship differentials—equal to 15 percent of the employee’s base salary.⁶ State’s geographic bureaus initially identified the posts designated to offer SND in 2001 and may add or remove posts once per year.

State’s Foreign Language Requirements

As of June 2007, State had 3,467 positions—approximately 45 percent of all Foreign Service positions overseas—designated as requiring some level of foreign language proficiency. These positions span about 68 languages. State places the required languages into three categories based on the amount of time it takes to learn them.

- *Category I languages* are world languages, such as Spanish and French that relate closely to English. Fifty-five percent of the language-designated positions require proficiency in a world language.
- *Category II languages*, such as Albanian or Urdu, are languages with significant linguistic or cultural differences from English. State refers to such languages as “hard” languages. Twenty-nine percent of the language-designated positions require proficiency in a hard language.
- *Category III*, the “superhard” languages, include Arabic and Chinese, and are exceptionally difficult for native English speakers to learn. Sixteen percent of the language-designated positions require proficiency in a superhard language.

State’s primary approach to meeting its language requirements is through language training, primarily through classes provided at its training arm, the Foreign Service Institute (FSI). In addition, overseas posts offer part-time language training through post language programs funded by the regional bureaus and their posts. Although State’s main emphasis is on enhancing staffs foreign language capability through training, it has special mechanisms to recruit personnel with foreign language skills. For example, applicants who pass the oral assessment can raise their ranking by passing a language test in any foreign language used by State.

⁶Chiefs of mission, principal officers, and deputy chiefs of mission are not eligible to receive SND regardless of the length of their tours. Entry-level employees on 2-year tours directed by the Office of Career Development and Assignments (HR/CDA) are also ineligible for SND.

Additional credit is given to candidates who pass a test in languages that State has deemed as critical needs languages.⁷ Officers hired under this initiative must serve in a post that requires the language for which they were recruited for their first or second tour.

State Has Made Progress in Addressing Staffing Shortfalls but Critical Gaps Remain at Hardship Posts

Since the implementation of the DRI in 2002, State has increased its number of permanent positions and available staff worldwide for both the foreign and civil service, but these increases were offset somewhat by urgent staffing demands in Iraq and Afghanistan and other factors. State hired most of its new staff through the Diplomatic Readiness Initiative, bringing in more than 1,000 new employees above attrition, thus achieving its numerical hiring goals. These employees were hired primarily to allow staff time for critical job training, to staff overseas posts, and to be available to respond to new emerging priorities. However, according to State's Human Resources officials, the initiative's goals became quickly outdated as new pressures resulted from staffing demands for Iraq and Afghanistan. For example, bureaus have had to give up a total of about 300 positions for Iraq. In addition, State has placed an increased focus on foreign language training in certain critical areas, which means that staff who would otherwise be working are instead attending language training. Outside of the department's consular program and worldwide security upgrade program, State has not received any additional authorized positions since 2004. State officials told us that they now estimate they need more than 1,000 new positions to support foreign language training needs and to respond to crises and emerging priorities.⁸

Effectiveness of Hardship Incentives Has Not Been Measured

Beginning in 2001, in an effort to address the growing number of mid-level vacancies at hardship posts, State created a series of incentives—including extra pay and negotiated tour lengths—to attract mid-level employees to hardship posts around the world. For example, the SND Program offers employees an extra 15 percent pay for an additional year of service at the most difficult-to-staff posts. While State has information on the number of officers actually enrolled in the program, it was not able to provide data on

⁷State has deemed the following as critical needs languages: Arabic; Chinese; Korean; Russian; Turkic languages (Azerbaijani, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Turkish, Turkmen, and Uzbek); Indic languages (Urdu, Hindi, Nepali, Bengali, Punjabi); and Iranian languages (Farsi/Persian, Tajiki, Pashto).

⁸It was beyond the scope of this engagement to assess this estimate.

the number of eligible officers who were not. State's Director General and officials from its Human Resources Bureau said that State has not completed any formal evaluations of the incentives; instead, officials from Human Resources meet informally to discuss how well the incentives are working. Without formal evaluations, State has not been able to systematically measure whether the extra hardship pay incentive has had a significant impact on staffing at hardship posts. Senior officials with whom we spoke in Washington, D.C., and FSOs at hardship posts had mixed views on whether the SND program has been effective. In addition, while it may be too early to assess the effectiveness of more recently implemented initiatives, such as negotiated tour lengths, former and current ambassadors stated that this initiative may not benefit posts. In particular, they noted that although negotiating a shorter tour length might initially attract bidders to hardship posts, such frequent rotations diminish a post's ability to carry out the United States' foreign policy goals. Noting the prevalence of 1-year tours in the Muslim world,⁹ a senior official at State said that officers with shorter tours tend to produce less effective work than those with longer ones.

In addition to incentives, State has implemented a new career development program—the Generalist Career Development Program—that stipulates service at a hardship post as a requirement for consideration to promotion to the senior Foreign Service. Officials from Human Resources stated that it was too early to tell whether this new requirement for promotion to the senior Foreign Service will be effective in attracting mid-level officers to hardship posts. Other new requirements include expanded Fair Share¹⁰ rules that require designated FSOs to bid on a minimum of three posts with a 15 percent or higher differential pay incentive in two geographic areas. Further, since we issued our report in 2006, State has shortened the Washington consecutive service limit from 6

⁹According to State, the Muslim world is comprised of 58 countries and territories with significant Muslim populations, many of which are members of the Organization of the Islamic Conference. These countries have a combined population of 1.5 billion people and are located in Africa, Asia, and Europe.

¹⁰According to State, an employee is considered Fair Share if he or she has not served at least (1) 20 months at a post with a combined hardship and danger pay differential of 15 percent or greater or (2) 10 months at a post with a 1-year standard tour of duty during the 8 years prior to the employee's upcoming transfer eligibility date. Previously, serving 18 months of service at a post receiving any hardship differential, even 5 percent, during the previous 8 years prior to an employee's upcoming transfer exempted staff from consideration as a Fair Share bidder.

years to 5 years, which means that more officers will be spending more time in the field to help fill staffing gaps.

State also has created a special assignments cycle for Iraq to ensure that these priority positions are filled to 100 percent as close as possible. In addition, State has negotiated new Iraq staffing incentives, such as allowing 6 months of Iraq service, compared to longer service elsewhere, to fulfill the requirements of the Fair Share rules. State has also recently revised the Iraq Service Recognition Package by (1) increasing language incentive pay for Arabic speakers; (2) allowing, in certain cases, staff who leave their current post of assignment to serve in Iraq to extend service at that post for up to 1 year after returning; and (3) enabling family members to remain at the current post of assignment throughout the duration of the Iraq assignment.

In 2006 we recommended that to enhance staffing levels and skills at hardship posts, the Secretary of State systematically evaluate the effectiveness of State's incentive programs for hardship post assignments, establishing specific indicators of progress and adjusting the use of the incentives based on this analysis. State officials told us that the department has not conducted any such evaluation to date because the large number of factors that staff consider when bidding on assignments makes it problematic to isolate the effects of individual incentives; however, State does plan to add some questions on the impact of incentives to its biannual employee quality-of-life survey.

Staffing Gaps for Key Mid-level Positions Persist; Positions Filled by Junior Officers in Stretch Positions

As of our most recent report, State had a combined deficit of 154 officers,¹¹ with the largest staffing deficits continuing to affect mid-level positions across all career tracks. State officials have said it would take several years for DRI hiring to begin addressing the mid-level staffing shortages because the earliest DRI hires are just now being promoted to mid-level. On average, it takes approximately 4.3 years for a junior officer to receive a promotion to mid-level. State expects to eliminate mid-level deficits by 2010.

¹¹The total deficit decreases to 82 when junior grade level 05 and 06 positions are included. We did not include them in this calculation because we were told that these grades were training positions that are not counted against the deficit

Although bidding for hardship posts with the smallest pay differentials increased slightly in recent years, it remained about the same for posts with the highest differentials, such as those with 20 and 25 percent. Overall, posts in Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia continue to receive the lowest number of bids, averaging about 4 or 5 bids per position, while posts in Europe and the Western Hemisphere receive the highest bids, averaging 15 and 17, respectively. For example, we reported in 2006 that posts in Bujumbura, Burundi; Lagos and Abuja, Nigeria; Riyadh, Saudi Arabia; and Calcutta, India received, on average, between zero and two bids per mid-level officer position and, in the 2005 assignments cycle, 104 mid-level positions had no bidders at all, including 67 positions in Africa and the Middle East. In addition, consular positions in the posts with the highest hardship differential (25 percent) continued to receive some of the lowest number of bids in 2005—on average, only 2.5 bids per position compared with 18 for nonhardship posts. Low numbers of bids at hardship posts have resulted in positions remaining vacant for long periods of time.

In 2006 we reported that consular and public diplomacy positions were the hardest to fill, with 91 percent of the vacancies in these two tracks at the mid-level. Although State has seen an increase in spending on U.S. public diplomacy programs, several embassy officials stated that they do not have the capacity to effectively utilize increased funds. Moreover, these staffing gaps also limit the amount of training public diplomacy officers receive because many officers are sent to fill a position quickly and never benefit from full training, ultimately limiting the success of their public diplomacy outreach efforts. Further, due to staffing shortages in consular sections around the world, there are fewer staff to implement the new interview requirements and screening procedures for visas, contributing to extensive wait times for applicant visa interviews at consular posts overseas. For example, State's data shows that between September 2006 and February 2007, 53 consular posts reported maximum wait times of 30 or more days in at least 1 month, signaling a significant resource problem for State.

Many Mid-level Positions Are Staffed by Junior Officers

In order to fill vacancies, primarily at hardship posts, State sometimes allows staff to bid for a position at either a higher grade than their current grade level (called an "upstretch") or a lower grade (a "downstretch"). Often, upstretch assignments are offered as a reward and career-enhancing opportunity for staff who have demonstrated outstanding

performance, and many officers successfully fulfill the duties requested of the higher grade level.¹² In an effort to compensate for mid-level gaps in Iraq, State will consider entry-level employees with extraordinary skills for mid-level positions there if they have a high-level Arabic language ability, prior military experience, or proven performance in crisis management. However, a 2004 report by State's Inspector General¹³ found that in many African posts, for example, there were significant deficiencies in the ability, training, and experience of FSOs serving in upstretch assignments. At hardship posts we visited in early 2006, we found experience gaps and other staffing shortfalls. In particular, we found that the consulate in Lagos was staffed by a mix of officers, including numerous junior officers in stretch positions. Moreover, many officers in stretch positions at hardship posts continue to lack the managerial experience or supervisory guidance needed to effectively perform their job duties. In addition, junior officers in stretch assignments at the various posts we visited stated that, without mid-level officers to guide them, they many times can only turn to senior management, including the ambassador, for assistance. According to a 2004 State Inspector General report, senior staff, including ambassadors, spend more time on operational matters and less time on overall planning, policy, and coordination than should be the case.¹⁴ Many junior officers also stated that although they were filling stretch positions at the mid-level, they were not allowed to receive management training from State due to their lower grade status. One officer told us she requested management training to help her manage staff in accordance with her role as acting chief of a key section of the embassy but was denied the opportunity because she was not a tenured mid-level officer.

Senior management at posts we visited shared some of these concerns. A former Deputy Chief of Mission in Nigeria stated that it is extremely difficult for junior officers to work in stretch assignments when there are few mid-level officers to guide them. Ambassadors at these posts also stated that, although many junior officers entering the Foreign Service are

¹²According to State the rationale for stretch assignments (upstretches and downstretches) is both system- and employee-driven. Upstretches can be career enhancing or accommodate family needs or staffing gaps. Downstretches may happen to accommodate family needs or be the end result after an employee is promoted when in an at-grade position.

¹³*Strengthening Leadership and Staffing at African Hardship Posts*, U.S. Department of State, Office of Inspector General, Memorandum Report ISP-I-04-54, July 2004.

¹⁴ISP-I-04-54.

highly qualified, they do not have sufficient training to handle some of the high stress situations they encounter and often end up making mistakes. For example, according to the U.S. Ambassador to Nigeria—the third largest mission in Africa with nearly 800 employees—the embassy had only three senior officers at the time of our visit, and public affairs were handled entirely by first tour junior officers. Also, according to U.S. officials in Beijing, the mid-level consular manager positions in Shenyang and Chengdu, China—two locations with high incidences of visa fraud—were held by first tour junior officers at the time of our visit. Moreover, security officers at one hardship post told us that without mid-level staff, they sometimes lack the resources to adequately perform basic duties, such as accompanying the ambassador on diplomatic travel. Former ambassadors with whom we spoke expressed serious concerns about State’s diplomatic readiness and conveyed their belief that a post’s ability to carry out critical duties is significantly compromised when the proper staffing levels, and particularly well-trained officers, are not in place.

State Is More Willing to Use Directed Assignments

Despite chronic staffing shortages at hardship posts, especially at the mid-level, State has rarely directed FSOs to serve in locations for which they have not bid on a position—including hardship posts or locations of strategic importance to the United States—due to concerns about lowering morale or productivity. According to State officials, State’s Global Repositioning Initiative, announced in January 2006, has reallocated a significant number of positions, primarily from Washington and Europe to critical posts in Africa, South Asia, and the Middle East. However, given that there is no guarantee that these positions will be filled because bidding will continue to be on a voluntary basis under the initiative, we recommended that State consider using its authority to direct staff to accept assignments, as necessary, to fill these critical mid-level gaps. After our report was issued, State’s Director General publicly indicated he would direct assignments when needed. While State has not yet used directed assignments, State officials told us that the department’s increased willingness to do so has helped convince some qualified staff to accept critical reassignments.

State Has Made Progress in Increasing Its Foreign Language Capabilities, but Significant Language Gaps Remain

State has made several efforts to improve its foreign language capabilities, including creating additional language-designated positions and enhancing recruiting efforts. Since 2001, State officials told us they have significantly increased the number of worldwide positions requiring language proficiency. These positions span about 69 languages. State has also enhanced its efforts to recruit and hire FSOs with language skills. For example, State's Office of Recruitment has targeted its recruiting outreach efforts to universities with strong language programs and conferences of language professionals, as well as associations and professional organizations (such as the Arab American Institute) that have members already fluent in critical needs languages. In addition, State offers bonus points on the Foreign Service exam to candidates who demonstrate proficiency in critical needs languages. State then requires these officers to serve in positions that will employ their language skills during their first or second assignment. State has also implemented career development criteria, effective January 1, 2005, that require, among other things, foreign language proficiency as a prerequisite for consideration for promotion. In addition to these requirements, State has developed financial incentives for officers with certain proficiency levels in critical languages. Moreover, State has enhanced its overseas language programs through various initiatives, including expanding its use of overseas language schools and post language programs, increasing the number of weeks of training offered in certain critical languages, and providing language immersion courses for officers transitioning to new posts.

State Continues to Have Shortages of Staff Proficient in Foreign Languages

State assesses language proficiency based on a scale established by the federal Interagency Language Roundtable. The scale has six levels—0 to 5—with 5 being the most proficient. Proficiency requirements for language-designated positions at State tend to congregate at levels 2 and 3 of the scale. In our 2006 report, we compared the language proficiency of staff in all language-designated positions with the positions' requirements and our analysis showed that about 29 percent of all worldwide language-designated positions were filled by individuals who did not meet the position's proficiency requirements.¹⁵ Language deficiencies exist worldwide but were among the greatest in the Middle East, where 37 percent of all language-designated positions were filled by staff without the language skills required of their positions. The skills gap was even

¹⁵The percentages are for officers and specialists who met both the speaking and writing requirement for their positions.

greater at some critical posts—for example, 59 percent in Cairo, Egypt, and 60 percent in Sana’a, Yemen. In recent discussions with State officials, they told us these gaps have worsened since we reported on this issue in 2006, primarily because, according to the officials, State has increased the number of worldwide positions requiring language proficiency by over 100 percent since 2001. State has relocated some staff positions to critical posts that require so-called “superhard” language skills, such as Arabic or Chinese, that many staff do not have.

To further illustrate how skill gaps differ among languages of varying levels of difficulty, we analyzed data on superhard, hard, and world-language designated positions. Our analysis showed the greatest deficiencies in positions requiring superhard languages, such as Arabic. Almost 40 percent of superhard language-designated positions worldwide (465 positions) were filled by individuals who did not meet the language requirements of their position; this figure was 30 and 25 percent for hard and world language-designated positions, respectively. Further, the highest percentage—almost 40 percent—of superhard positions filled by officers that did not meet the speaking and reading language requirements were among positions requiring Arabic, Chinese, and Japanese.

Further analysis of Arabic and Chinese, two languages spoken in regions of strategic interest to the United States, showed that the percentage of staff that did not meet language requirements for their positions varied by career tracks. For example, 100 percent of the staff filling positions in the management career track requiring Arabic and 88 percent of the staff filling positions in the management career track requiring Chinese did not meet the language requirements of their positions. In addition, 72 and 75 percent of Foreign Service specialist (staff who perform security, technical, and other support functions) positions requiring Chinese and Arabic, respectively, were filled by staff who did not meet the language requirement. Six of the specialists we met with in Beijing said they did not receive sufficient language training before arriving at post. State officials have acknowledged that Foreign Service specialists have not received the required amount of training, and FSI officials attributed this situation to time constraints. Most specialists only have enough time to participate in FSI’s Familiarization and Short-term Training (FAST) language courses designed for beginners with 2 months or less time to devote to training. State’s Director General, in a cable issued in January 2006, stated that State has been shortsighted in not providing training to specialists, especially office management specialists, and that required training would be available for specialists in the future.

To enhance the language proficiency of FSOs and other staff, we recommended in our August 2006 report that State systematically evaluate the effectiveness of its efforts to improve the language proficiency of its FSOs and specialists, establishing specific indicators of progress in filling language gaps and adjusting its efforts accordingly. State officials told us the department has placed an increased emphasis on language training and that it has developed targets for eliminating proficiency gaps for individual languages, with a particular focus on critical needs languages such as Arabic and Chinese.

Some Question the Adequacy of Their Positions' Language Proficiency Requirements

Some officers whom we met with and who had attained the proficiency requirements for their assignments stated that they were not sufficiently fluent to perform their jobs effectively. For example, consular officers we met with in China who tested at a speaking level of 2 and reading level of 0, the required proficiency level for 50 language-designated, junior officer consular positions at posts requiring Chinese proficiency, said they could ask appropriate questions during consular interviews, but could not always understand the answers. They pointed out that Spanish or French language-designated consular positions require a level 3 speaking and reading language proficiency. Moreover, a survey of junior officers currently serving in China revealed that most officers not interested in serving in China again cited language issues as the primary reason. According to the Deputy Chief of Mission in Sana'a, the level 3 Arabic speaking and reading proficiency requirements for senior officers do not provide staff with the proficiency needed to participate in debates about U.S. foreign policy. He described an instance when he was asked to appear as an embassy spokesperson on an Arabic language media program. The program, which involved a debate format and addressed U.S. politics, was conducted entirely in Arabic. The official said that given his 4+ proficiency in Arabic, he was the only official at the embassy capable of engaging in such a debate. Officials from the Foreign Service Institute explained that language-designated position requirements are set at a level officers can realistically achieve in the limited amount of time available to obtain training.

State's Assignment and Promotion System May Hinder Efforts to Improve Its Foreign Language Capability

Several FSOs we met with said they believe State's current assignment and promotion system may hinder officers' abilities to enhance and maintain their language skills over time and State's ability to take advantage of those skills and the investment it makes in training. For example, State's requirements for tenure stipulate that junior officers work in a variety of regions and jobs to prepare them for careers as generalists, while State's assignment regulations do not allow junior officers and specialists to serve consecutive tours at the same post. As a result, junior officers are often

assigned to second tours that do not utilize the language skills they acquired for their first tour. There is also a perception among some officers that spending too much time in one region can lead to being labeled as too narrowly specialized, which could hinder the officers' careers. However, a senior State official asserted that the belief that regional specialization hurts an officer's career is untrue and, further, that State's new career development plan supports regional specialization.

In addition, the short length of some tours, such as 1-year unaccompanied assignments, may not give an officer sufficient time to master a language. According to State's Inspector General, as long as unaccompanied assignments are restricted to 1 year, officers have little incentive to seek extensive language training.¹⁶ In an effort to make better use of the State's training investment, the FSI has encouraged officers and specialists to take FSI courses to refine their language skills and achieve greater facility when dealing with the local community. But officers in both Yemen and China stated that State's assignment system does not allow for sufficient time between assignments to use FSI's continued language training. Compounding this problem, officers stated that their language skills often diminish when a new assignment takes them to a region requiring different language skills.

We recommended that State consider an assignment system that allows for longer tours, consecutive assignments in certain countries, and more regional specialization in certain areas to hone officers' skills in certain superhard languages and better leverage the investment State makes in language training. State has informed us that it has recently implemented a new initiative that would provide additional language pay incentives for staff if they chose to take a reassignment to use existing Arabic language skills. In addition, State's new Arabic Opportunities Initiative, announced in June 2007, allows select tenured employees to curtail current assignments to take Arabic language training beginning in September 2007. State has only partially implemented our recommendation that it consider an assignment system that allows for longer tours and consecutive assignments in certain countries. State officials told us that the department is currently exploring the possibility of extending tours of duty of some 1-year posts and allowing family members to accompany employees there.

¹⁶Employees assigned to 1-year unaccompanied posts may extend their tours.

Lack of Foreign Language Capability May Adversely Affect State's Operations

State's foreign language gaps may hinder posts' operations. According to the Assistant Secretaries of State for Education and Cultural Affairs and Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, deficits in foreign language education negatively affect our national security, diplomacy, law enforcement, intelligence gathering efforts, and cultural understanding by preventing effective communication in foreign media environments, impeding counter-terrorism efforts, and limiting our capacity to work with people and governments in post conflict zones. We found examples of this negative impact involving a variety of officers and specialists serving in language-designated positions without the required foreign language skills.

- *Consular officers:* Officials at one high visa fraud post that we visited stated that, due to language skill deficiencies, consular officers sometimes adjudicate visas without fully understanding everything the applicants tell them during visa interviews.
- *Economic and political officers:* An economic officer in a country with a superhard language had been conducting several important negotiations in English with foreign government officials over a number of months with few results. When the officials began discussing the same issue in the host country language, the whole tenor of the negotiations changed. According to the officer, one foreign government official who did not understand English, and was therefore silent throughout the initial meetings, had actually been the most valuable source of information yet could only convey that information when the meeting was conducted in his own language. In Beirut, State's Inspector General reported that most of the political and economic officers did not receive the Arabic language training needed to work professionally in Lebanon, limiting opportunities to expand their contacts to the less sophisticated urban areas and into the countryside.
- *Public diplomacy officers:* Officers at many posts cannot communicate effectively with foreign audiences in local languages, hampering their ability to cultivate personal relationships and explain U.S. foreign policy. In April 2007,¹⁷ we testified that many public diplomacy officers in the Muslim world cannot communicate with local audiences as well as their positions require.

¹⁷GAO: *U.S. Public Diplomacy: Strategic Planning Efforts Have Improved, but Agencies Face Significant Implementation Challenges*, [GAO-07-795T](#) (Washington, D.C.: April 26, 2007).

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- *Management Officers:* According to one ambassador we met with, a senior level embassy official, who did not have sufficient speaking and reading language skills for his position met with a prime minister but was unable to participate fully in the top-secret discussion without an outside translator present. However, because the prime minister would not speak freely with the translator present, the meeting was not productive.
 - *Foreign Service specialists:* A regional security officer stated that lack of foreign language capability may hinder intelligence gathering because local informants are reluctant to speak through locally hired interpreters.

Conclusions

Despite progress, critical gaps in staffing at hardship posts and shortages of staff with foreign language proficiency in critical languages continue to impact State's diplomatic readiness. State has recently undertaken more aggressive efforts to ensure that all positions in Iraq are filled and, through other actions and incentives, has made efforts to fill staffing gaps, particularly at hardship posts. State has also increased its focus on language training and instituted other measures to enhance its overall language proficiency, particularly in critical languages such as Arabic. But staffing and language gaps remain. Moreover, State has not fully implemented our recommendation that it consider an assignment system that allows for longer tours and consecutive assignments in certain countries to hone critical language skills and better leverage the investment State makes in language training. Because State does not currently have a sufficient level and mix of staffing and language resources to immediately fill all of its gaps in these areas, choices must be made about priorities, given the risk and strategic interests in particular regions and countries. Without ensuring that the right people with the right skills are in the right places, these gaps will continue to compromise State's ability to carry out its foreign policy objectives and execute critical mission functions, including reaching out to foreign audiences in regions of critical importance to the war on terror.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my prepared statement. I will be happy to answer any questions you or Members of the Subcommittee may have.

Contact and Staff Acknowledgements

For questions regarding this testimony, please call Jess T. Ford, (202) 512-4128 or fordj@gao.gov. Individuals making key contributions to this statement include Michael Courts, Assistant Director; Joe Carney; Martin de Alteriis; Laverne Tharpes; and Melissa Pickworth.

Appendix I: Related GAO Products

U.S. Public Diplomacy: Strategic Planning Efforts Have Improved, but Agencies Face Significant Implementation Challenges. [GAO-07-795T](#). Washington, D.C.: April, 26, 2007.

Department of State: Staffing and Foreign Language Shortfalls Persist Despite Initiatives to Address Gaps. [GAO-06-894](#). Washington, D.C.: August 4, 2006.

Overseas Staffing: Rightsizing Approaches Slowly Taking Hold but More Action Needed to Coordinate and Carry Out Efforts. [GAO-06-737](#). Washington, D.C.: June 30, 2006.

U.S. Public Diplomacy: State Department Efforts Lack Certain Communication Elements and Face Persistent Challenges. [GAO-06-707T](#). Washington, D.C.: May 3, 2006.

U.S. Public Diplomacy: State Department Efforts to Engage Muslim Audiences Lack Certain Communication Elements and Face Significant Challenges. [GAO-06-535](#). Washington, D.C.: May 3, 2006.

Border Security: Strengthened Visa Process Would Benefit from Improvements in Staffing and Information Sharing. [GAO-05-859](#). Washington, D.C.: September 13, 2005.

State Department: Improvements Needed to Strengthen U.S. Passport Fraud Detection Efforts. [GAO-05-477](#). Washington, D.C.: May 20, 2005.

State Department: Targets for Hiring, Filling Vacancies Overseas Being Met, but Gaps Remain in Hard-to-Learn Languages. [GAO-04-139](#). Washington, D.C.: November 19, 2003.

Foreign Affairs: Effective Stewardship of Resources Essential to Efficient Operations at State Department, USAID. [GAO-03-1009T](#). Washington, D.C.: September 4, 2003.

State Department: Staffing Shortfalls and Ineffective Assignment System Compromise Diplomatic Readiness at Hardship Posts. [GAO-02-626](#). Washington, D.C.: June 18, 2002.

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