



March 2019

DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Integrated Action Plan Could Enhance Efforts to Reduce Persistent Overseas Foreign Service Vacancies

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-19-220](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

State staffs Foreign Service employees to more than 270 embassies and consulates worldwide to advance U.S. foreign policy and economic interests. In 2009 and 2012, GAO identified ongoing Foreign Service staffing gaps.

GAO was asked to review State's Foreign Service staffing. This report examines (1) vacancies in State's Foreign Service staffing at overseas posts, (2) reported effects of Foreign Service vacancies on diplomatic readiness, and (3) State's efforts to address Foreign Service vacancies. To address these objectives, GAO analyzed State's Global Employment Management System data as of March 2018. The system includes information on Foreign Service and Civil Service positions, including the total number of authorized Foreign Service positions and whether each position is filled or vacant. GAO also reviewed its relevant prior reports and State workforce planning documents. In addition, GAO interviewed State staff at 10 overseas posts, selected on the basis of large numbers of Foreign Service vacancies and diversity in the types of Foreign Service positions that were vacant at these posts, among other factors.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that State develop an integrated action plan that defines the root causes of persistent Foreign Service vacancies at overseas posts and suggests corrective measures to reduce such vacancies. State concurred with our recommendation and noted that it will take steps to develop an integrated action plan.

View [GAO-19-220](#). For more information, contact Jason Bair at (202) 512-6881 or bairj@gao.gov.

March 2019

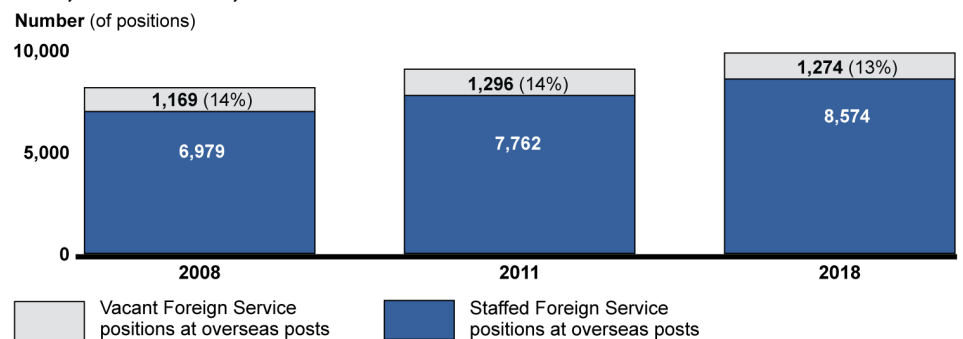
DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Integrated Action Plan Could Enhance Efforts to Reduce Persistent Overseas Foreign Service Vacancies

What GAO Found

The Department of State's (State) data show persistent Foreign Service vacancies at overseas posts since 2008. According to the data, 13 percent of overseas Foreign Service positions were vacant as of March 2018. This percentage is similar to the percentages GAO reported for 2008 and 2012, when 14 percent of these positions were vacant. In addition, State's data show persistent vacancies at overseas posts in generalist positions that help formulate and implement U.S. foreign policy and in specialist positions that support and maintain the functioning of overseas posts. State's data also show persistent Foreign Service vacancies at overseas posts with State's highest foreign policy priorities and in regions with security risks that could threaten U.S. foreign policy interests.

Number of Vacant and Staffed Overseas Foreign Service Positions as of September 2008, October 2011, and March 2018



Source: GAO analysis of Department of State Global Employment Management System (GEMS) data. | GAO-19-220

According to staff at overseas posts, Foreign Service vacancies adversely affect State's ability to carry out U.S. foreign policy. Staff at overseas posts told us that vacancies increase workloads, contributing to low morale and higher stress for Foreign Service staff and that vacancies in Political and Economic positions—20 percent and 16 percent, respectively—limit the reporting on political and economic issues that posts are able to provide to State headquarters. Notably, officials also stated that vacancies in specialist positions may heighten security risks at overseas posts and disrupt post operations. For instance, some overseas post staff said that vacancies in Information Management positions had increased the vulnerability of posts' computer networks to potential cybersecurity attacks and other malicious threats.

State described various efforts—implemented by multiple offices in the department—to help address overseas Foreign Service vacancies, but these efforts are not guided by an integrated action plan to reduce persistent vacancies. An example of State's efforts is the "Hard-to-Fill" program, which allows Civil Service staff an opportunity to fill a Foreign Service vacancy on a single overseas tour. According to GAO's 2017 High-Risk Series report, an agency should design and implement an action plan—integrated across its relevant offices—that defines the root causes of all skills gaps and suggests corrective measures. However, State has not developed such an action plan for reducing persistent overseas Foreign Service vacancies. Without developing an integrated action plan, overseas Foreign Service vacancies may persist. As a result, State's ability to achieve U.S. foreign policy goals and help ensure secure and efficient operations could be adversely impacted.

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Abbreviations

AF	Bureau of African Affairs
EAP	Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs
EFM	Eligible Family Member
EUR	Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs
GEMS	Global Employment Management System
LNA	Limited Noncareer Appointment
NEA	Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs
OIG	Office of Inspector General
SCA	Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs
State	Department of State
USAID	U.S. Agency for International Development
WHA	Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs

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March 6, 2019

The Honorable Amy Klobuchar
United States Senate

The Honorable Brian Schatz
United States Senate

To advance U.S. foreign policy and economic interests, the Department of State (State) had staffed Foreign Service employees to about 9,850 overseas positions at more than 270 overseas posts worldwide as of March 31, 2018.¹ Those Foreign Service employees play a critical role in achieving U.S. foreign policy goals. However, as we reported in 2009² and 2012,³ State has faced challenges in meeting its overseas staffing needs, resulting in Foreign Service staffing gaps that put diplomatic readiness at risk.⁴

We were asked to review staffing for State’s Foreign Service at overseas posts.⁵ In this report, we examine (1) vacancies in State’s Foreign Service staffing at overseas posts, (2) reported effects of Foreign Service vacancies on diplomatic readiness, and (3) State’s efforts to address Foreign Service vacancies.⁶

¹For the purposes of this report, we use the term “overseas posts” to collectively refer to U.S. embassies, consulates general, consulates, branch offices, and missions other than embassies.

²GAO, *Department of State: Additional Steps Needed to Address Continuing Staffing and Experience Gaps at Hardship Posts*, [GAO-09-874](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 17, 2009).

³GAO, *Department of State: Foreign Service Midlevel Staffing Gaps Persist Despite Significant Increases in Hiring*, [GAO-12-721](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 14, 2012).

⁴State defines diplomatic readiness as its “ability to get the right people in the right place at the right time with the right skills to carry out America’s foreign policy.”

⁵This review was conducted in response to a 2015 request from Senator Brian Schatz—then Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Legislative Branch, Committee on Appropriations—and Senator Amy Klobuchar—to identify gaps in State’s Foreign Service staffing, among other things.

⁶For the purposes of this report, we use the terms “vacancies” and “vacant positions” interchangeably. An overseas Foreign Service position is considered vacant when that position is listed as vacant in State’s Global Employment Management System (GEMS).

To address these objectives, we analyzed State’s personnel data on Foreign Service staffing at overseas posts from State’s Global Employment Management System (GEMS) as of March 2018. We also interviewed State officials from the Bureau of Human Resources and the Bureau of Consular Affairs, as well as State officials representing the Offices of the Executive Director for State’s six regional bureaus. In addition, we interviewed staff at 10 overseas posts.⁷ We conducted interviews in person with staff at 3 of these posts—the U.S. Embassy in Beijing, China; the U.S. Consulate in Shanghai, China; and the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi, India—and conducted telephone interviews with staff at the other 7 posts—the U.S. Embassies in Abuja, Nigeria; Bogota, Colombia; Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo; Kabul, Afghanistan; Mexico City, Mexico; and N’Djamena, Chad; and the U.S. Consulate in Frankfurt, Germany. We also reviewed State workforce planning documents and budget documents, such as State’s *Five Year Workforce and Leadership Succession Plan: Fiscal Years 2016-2020*⁸ and *Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review*.⁹ We did not assess whether the total number of authorized overseas Foreign Service positions was appropriate or met State’s needs.

In addition, we reviewed State Office of Inspector General (OIG) reports as well as our 2012 and 2009 reports on human capital challenges at State and effective strategic human capital management across the federal government. In particular, our 2017 report *High-Risk Series: Progress on Many High-Risk Areas, While Substantial Efforts Needed on Others* states that strategic human capital management is a high-risk issue across the federal government, and lists five key elements as a

⁷We selected a nongeneralizable sample of 10 posts to interview staff based on (1) the number of Foreign Service vacancies at post; (2) diversity in types of vacant Foreign Service positions at post; (3) the importance of the post to U.S. economic, national security, and other foreign policy interests; and (4) diversity in geographic location of posts by State region. To help determine the importance of the post to U.S. economic, national security, and other foreign policy interests, we, in part, considered the findings of State’s Overseas Staffing Model process. Through this process, State assigns each embassy to one of seven categories based primarily on the level and type of work required to pursue the U.S. government’s diplomatic relations with the host country at post. State’s Overseas Staffing Model rankings are closely associated with State’s foreign policy priorities; the higher the category, the greater the resources needed to conduct the work of the overseas post and the higher the post’s foreign policy priority.

⁸Department of State, *Five Year Workforce and Leadership Succession Plan: Fiscal Years 2016-2020* (Washington, D.C.: September 2016).

⁹Department of State, *Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review* (Washington, D.C.: 2015).

road map for agency efforts to improve and ultimately address such issues.¹⁰ For our third objective, we assessed whether State's efforts to address vacancies were guided by a corrective action plan that identifies the root causes of persistent Foreign Service vacancies at overseas posts and suggests corrective measures to reduce such vacancies. Appendix I contains a more detailed description of our objectives, scope, and methodology.

We conducted this performance audit from August 2017 to March 2019 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Background

State is the lead agency involved in implementing American foreign policy and representing the United States abroad. According to State and USAID's joint strategic plan for fiscal years 2018 through 2022, State's goals are to (1) protect America's security at home and abroad, (2) renew America's competitive advantage for sustained economic growth and job creation, (3) promote American leadership through balanced

¹⁰GAO, *High-Risk Series: Progress on Many High-Risk Areas, While Substantial Efforts Needed on Others*, [GAO-17-317](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 15, 2017). This report identifies five key elements as a road map for agency efforts to improve and ultimately address high-risk issues, including strategic human capital management: (1) *leadership commitment*—demonstrated strong commitment and top leadership support; (2) *capacity*—agency has the capacity (i.e., people and resources) to resolve the risk(s); (3) *action plan*—a corrective action plan exists that defines the root cause and solutions and provides for substantially completing corrective measures, including steps necessary to implement solutions we recommended; (4) *monitoring*—a program has been instituted to monitor and independently validate the effectiveness and sustainability of corrective measures; and (5) *demonstrated progress*—ability to demonstrate progress in implementing corrective measures and in resolving the high-risk area. Addressing some of these elements leads to progress, while satisfying all of them is central to removal from the High-Risk List. For our current review, we assessed whether State had addressed the third key element (action plan) in addressing vacancies in Foreign Service staffing at overseas posts. We determined that this key element was most applicable to the scope of our review.

engagement, and (4) ensure effectiveness and accountability to the American taxpayer.¹¹

State's Foreign Service employees serve in a variety of functions at overseas posts as either generalists or specialists.¹² Foreign Service generalists help formulate and implement U.S. foreign policy and are assigned to work in one of five career tracks: consular, economic, management, political, or public diplomacy. Generalists at overseas posts collect information and engage with foreign governments and citizens of foreign countries and report the results of these interactions back to State headquarters in Washington, D.C., among other functions. Foreign Service specialists abroad support and maintain the functioning of overseas posts and serve in one of 25 different skill groups, in positions such as security officer or information management.¹³ Specialists at overseas posts play a critical role in ensuring the security and maintenance of the posts' facilities, computer networks, and supplies as well as the protection of post staff, their family members, and local staff, among other functions.

State may require Foreign Service employees to be available for service anywhere in the world, as needed, and State has the authority to direct Foreign Service employees to any of its posts overseas or to its headquarters in Washington, D.C.¹⁴ However, as noted in our 2012 report, State generally does not use this authority, preferring other means of filling high-priority positions, according to State officials.¹⁵ The process

¹¹Department of State and U.S. Agency for International Development, *Joint Strategic Plan: FY 2018-2022* (February 2018).

¹²According to State officials, Foreign Service generalists are commissioned officers in the Foreign Service and are therefore also known as Foreign Service officers. For the purposes of this report, we use the term "Foreign Service employees" to refer collectively to both Foreign Service generalists and Foreign Service specialists.

¹³According to State officials, Foreign Service specialists are described in the Foreign Service Act of 1980 as "Foreign Service personnel, United States citizens appointed under section 303 [22 U.S.C. § 3943], who provide skills and services required for effective performance by the Service." GEMS data reflect 25 specialist skill groups, many of which include small numbers of other, noncareer employees.

¹⁴According to State officials, State requires Foreign Service employees to be available for worldwide service at the time of their entry into the Foreign Service; however, if a Foreign Service employee later has limited (or even no) availability for overseas service, the employee can continue to be a member of the Foreign Service.

¹⁵[GAO-12-721](#).

of assigning Foreign Service employees to their positions typically begins when they receive a list of upcoming vacancies for which they may compete. Foreign Service employees then submit a list of positions for which they would like to be considered, known as bids, to the Office of Career Development and Assignments and consult with their career development officer. The process varies depending on an officer's grade and functional specialty, and State uses a variety of incentives to encourage Foreign Service employees to bid on difficult-to-fill posts.

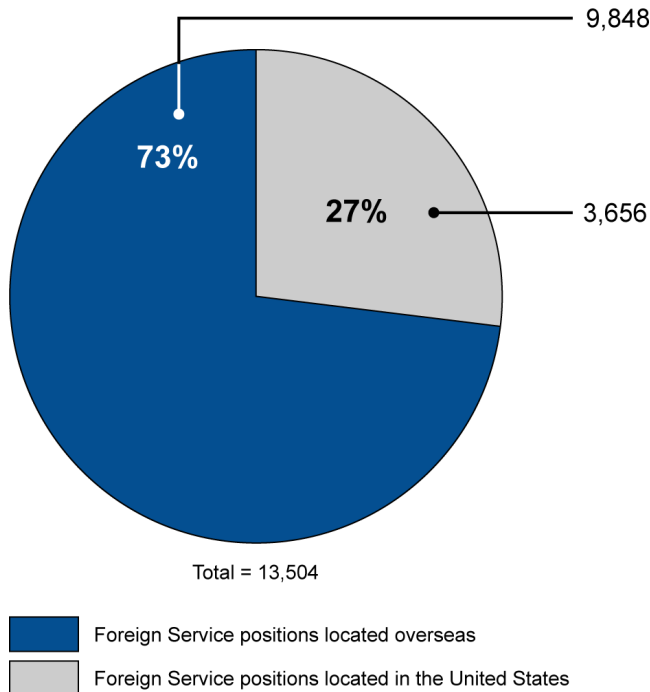
State groups countries of the world—and corresponding U.S. overseas posts in these countries—into areas of responsibility under six geographic regional bureaus:

- Bureau of African Affairs
- Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs
- Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs
- Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs
- Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs
- Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs

Overseas posts report to State headquarters through their respective regional bureaus. For example, because the Bureau of African Affairs has responsibility for developing and managing U.S. policy concerning parts of the African continent, U.S. overseas posts in Nigeria report through the bureau to State headquarters.

According to State officials, State maintains personnel data on State employees in its GEMS database. GEMS includes information on Foreign Service and Civil Service positions; in particular, it shows the total number of authorized Foreign Service positions at State and whether each position is currently filled or vacant. As displayed in figure 1, the GEMS data show that the majority of Foreign Service employees (73 percent) work in positions at overseas posts. However, some Foreign Service staff (27 percent) are assigned to positions in the United States, where they may complete required language or other training, serve as desk officers for the regional bureaus, or work in other functions at State headquarters.

Figure 1: Percentage and Number of Foreign Service Positions at Overseas Posts and in the United States as of March 31, 2018



Source: GAO analysis of Department of State (State) Global Employment Management System (GEMS) data. | GAO-19-220

Note: The GEMS data contained an additional 1,205 Foreign Service positions located in the United States, which we did not include in our analysis because we were unable to determine the precise number of positions in this category that were staffed as of March 31, 2018. According to State officials, these 1,205 positions are in the GEMS data for planning purposes to reflect demand.

Overseas Foreign Service Vacancies Have Persisted over Time

While Overseas Foreign Service Staffing Has Increased, Staffing Gaps Persist

According to State data, the number of both staffed and vacant overseas Foreign Service positions increased between 2008 and 2018. As shown in figure 2, the number of positions staffed grew from 6,979 in 2008 to 8,574 in 2018—a more than 20 percent increase. Despite the increase in the number of positions staffed, our analysis found that as of March 31,

2018, overall, 13 percent¹⁶ of State's overseas Foreign Service positions were vacant.¹⁷ This vacancy percentage is similar to the percentages of vacancies in overseas Foreign Service positions that we reported in 2012 and 2008. In 2012, we reported that 14 percent of State's overseas Foreign Service positions were vacant as of October 31, 2011,¹⁸ and we reported that the same percentage of overseas Foreign Service positions—14 percent—were vacant as of September 30, 2008.¹⁹

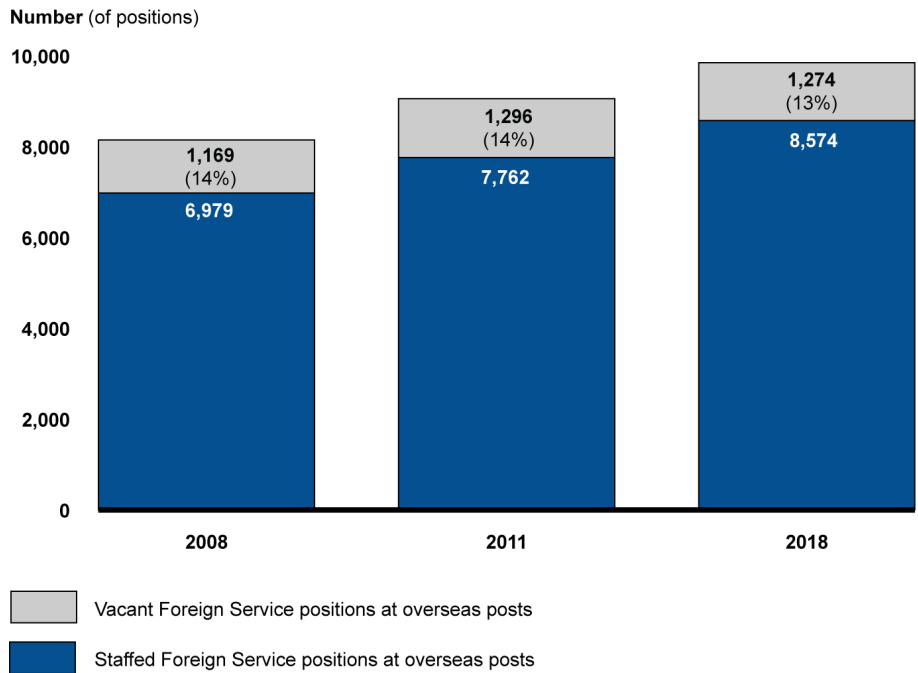
¹⁶According to State officials, the number of vacant generalist positions at overseas posts listed in GEMS may be overstated because State has not yet decided to remove some of these positions from its database. State officials also said that the GEMS data show larger numbers of vacant Foreign Service positions at posts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan than actually were unstaffed at these posts because State relies heavily on shorter-term assignments to fill Foreign Service positions at these locations. These shorter-term assignments are not reflected in GEMS, and the positions therefore appear vacant.

¹⁷Our analysis does not include the number of staffed and vacant positions at overseas posts in Libya, Syria, and Yemen, which according to State officials were in suspended operations status at the time of our review, or in U.S. Mission Somalia, which was operating under special circumstances at a different location.

¹⁸[GAO-12-721](#). Our 2012 report used State staffing data from October 31, 2011 and September 30, 2008. For our 2012 report, we analyzed GEMS data as of October 31, 2011, which included only Foreign Service positions filled by career full-time permanent Foreign Service employees. For our current review, we analyzed GEMS data as of March 31, 2018, which also included Foreign Service positions filled by nonpermanent Foreign Service employees, such as Consular Fellows and other noncareer employees. As a result, our analysis of GEMS data as of March 31, 2018 shows approximately 392 positions staffed by nonpermanent Foreign Service employees. If these positions were excluded from our analysis, the vacancy rate would be slightly higher, with 13.5 percent (1,274 of 9,456) of State's overseas Foreign Service positions vacant as of March 31, 2018.

¹⁹[GAO-12-721](#).

Figure 2: Number of Vacant and Staffed Overseas Foreign Service Positions as of September 30, 2008; October 31, 2011; and March 31, 2018



Source: GAO analysis of Department of State Global Employment Management System (GEMS) data. | GAO-19-220

According to State officials, State’s ability to hire Foreign Service employees to fill persistent vacancies has been affected by factors such as reduced appropriations. For instance, according to State officials and State’s *Five Year Workforce Plan*, because of funding cuts enacted in fiscal year 2013, State could only hire one employee for every two leaving the Foreign Service.²⁰ From fiscal years 2014 to 2016, funding for State’s annual appropriations supported hiring to replace Foreign Service employees projected to leave the agency, according to State officials. These officials indicated, however, that Foreign Service hiring was again impacted from January 2017 through May 2018 by a hiring freeze. As a

²⁰Department of State, *Five Year Workforce and Leadership Succession Plan: Fiscal Years 2016-2020*. According to State officials, because of the effects of the 2013 sequestration and funding cuts enacted in fiscal year 2013, State was not able to hire to attrition for certain types of Foreign Service positions.

result, State hired below levels required to replace full projected attrition of Foreign Service employees.²¹

State's Data Show Higher Vacancy Rates in Foreign Service Specialist Positions Compared to Foreign Service Generalist Positions

While State's data show persistent vacancies in both generalist and specialist positions at overseas posts, specialist positions remain vacant at a higher rate. State's data show that 12 percent (680 of 5,660) of overseas Foreign Service generalist positions were vacant as of March 31, 2018, a slight decrease from the 14 percent of overseas Foreign Service generalist positions that we reported vacant in 2012.²² State's data also show that 14.2 percent (594 of 4,188) of all overseas Foreign Service specialist positions were vacant, close to the 14.8 percent vacancy rate that we reported in 2012.²³

Foreign Service Generalists

State's data show persistent vacancies in Foreign Service generalist positions responsible for analysis, engagement, and reporting at overseas posts. As shown in table 1, among Foreign Service generalist career tracks, the political, economic, and "other" tracks had the largest percentage of vacant positions, with, respectively, 20 percent, 16 percent, and 14 percent of positions vacant as of March 31, 2018. Our 2012 report noted vacancies in the same three career tracks.²⁴ Political officers at overseas posts are responsible for collecting and analyzing information on political events, engaging with foreign governments, and reporting back to State headquarters. Economic officers at overseas posts work with foreign governments and other U.S. agencies on technology, science, economic, trade, and environmental issues. The "other" generalist career track includes positions designated as "Executive" or

²¹According to State officials, not hiring Foreign Service employees needed to replace those annually leaving the Foreign Service has created an overall deficit of Foreign Service employees, affecting State's ability to fill vacancies in positions at overseas posts. This deficit has carried over from one year to the next.

²²[GAO-12-721](#). As previously mentioned, our analysis of GEMS data as of March 31, 2018 includes approximately 392 positions staffed by nonpermanent Foreign Service employees. If these positions were excluded from our analysis, the vacancy rate for overseas Foreign Service generalist positions would be slightly higher, with 12.7 percent vacant (680 of 5,343) as of March 31, 2018.

²³[GAO-12-721](#). As previously mentioned, our analysis of GEMS data as of March 31, 2018 includes approximately 392 positions staffed by nonpermanent Foreign Service employees. If these positions were excluded from our analysis, the vacancy rate for overseas Foreign Service specialist positions would be slightly higher, with 14.4 percent vacant (593 of 4,111) as of March 31, 2018.

²⁴[GAO-12-721](#).

“International Relations,” which, according to State officials, may be filled by generalists from any of State’s five career tracks.

Table 1: Percentage and Number of Vacant Positions in Generalist Career Tracks at Overseas Posts as of March 31, 2018

Generalist career track	Percentage of vacant positions	Number of vacant positions	Total number of vacant and filled positions
Political	20	225	1,121
Economic ^a	16	121	738
Other ^b	14	96	683
Consular	9	175	2,009
Management	7	31	466
Public Diplomacy	5	32	643
Total for generalist career tracks	12	680	5,660

Source: GAO analysis of Department of State (State) Global Employment Management System (GEMS) data.

^aThe “Economic” generalist career track includes positions in the “Science Officer” staffing skill group.

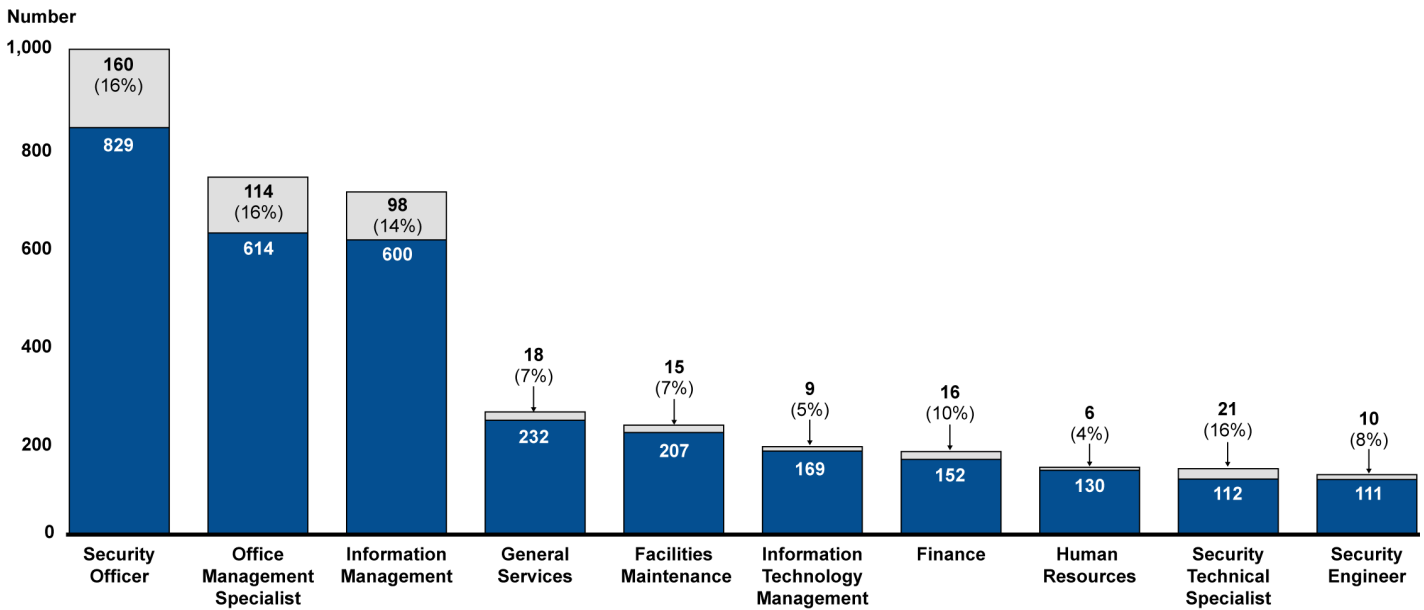
^b“Other” includes positions designated as “Executive” or “International Relations,” which, according to State officials, may be filled by generalists from any of the five career tracks. “Other” also includes one position in GEMS that was not assigned to a specific generalist career track.

Foreign Service Specialists

State’s data show persistent vacancies in Foreign Service specialist positions that support and maintain the functioning of overseas posts. Among the 10 largest Foreign Service specialist skill groups, security officer, office management specialist, and information management had the largest percentages of vacant positions. As shown in figure 3, in these three groups, respectively, 16 percent, 16 percent, and 14 percent of positions were vacant. The vacancies in these three specialist skill groups are persistent; in 2012, we reported that the same three groups had the largest numbers of vacant positions.²⁵ Security officers are typically responsible for responding to various threats to the physical security of overseas posts and for ensuring the protection of post staff, their family members, and local staff. Office management specialists provide professional management and administrative support. Information management staff are typically responsible for maintaining and ensuring the security of State’s computer networks and communications systems at overseas posts.

²⁵GAO-12-721.

Figure 3: Total Number of Positions and Vacancies in the 10 Largest Specialist Skill Groups at Overseas Posts as of March 31, 2018



Vacant positions at overseas posts
 Filled positions at overseas posts

Source: GAO analysis of Department of State Global Employment Management System (GEMS) data. | GAO-19-220

Note: GEMS data reflect 25 specialist skill groups, many of which include small numbers of other, noncareer employees. The 10 groups shown are those with the largest numbers of Foreign Service employees.

State Faces Challenges Recruiting Personnel to Fill Some Foreign Service Specialist Positions That Often Require Specialized Skills and Competencies

State officials said that State has had difficulty in recruiting and hiring Foreign Service employees to fill specialist positions in some skill groups at overseas posts. According to State officials and staff at overseas posts, some vacant specialist positions are more difficult to fill than others because candidates for these positions must often possess skills in fields such as medicine or information technology that tend to be highly sought after in the private sector. According to staff at overseas posts, it is not uncommon for specialist candidates in these fields to choose higher-paying jobs in the private sector rather than specialist positions in the Foreign Service. Additionally, in some circumstances, State must compete with other federal agencies to recruit specialists from the same limited pool of talent. Consequently, according to State officials, State has been unable to attract and retain personnel with the skills necessary to fill

some Foreign Service specialist positions, which has led to persistent vacancies in specialist positions.

Vacancies in Foreign Service specialist positions at overseas posts present additional challenges because specialized skills and competencies are often required to perform the work of these positions. According to State officials, because Foreign Service generalists may be assigned to work outside of their career tracks, in some circumstances, State has more flexibility in filling a generalist vacancy than a specialist vacancy. For example, generalists outside the consular career track can serve as a consular officer for one or more tours of duty.²⁶ However, specialist positions often require specialized skills or experience that generalists may not possess. In addition, according to staff at overseas posts, it is generally not possible for a Foreign Service specialist from one skill group to perform the work of a Foreign Service specialist from a different skill group.²⁷ For instance, a Foreign Service specialist assigned to the medical section at a post will not be able to help address the workload of a vacant position in the information management section. Thus, according to staff at overseas posts, vacancies in specialist positions at the posts may create greater challenges than vacancies in generalist positions.

²⁶An overseas tour for Foreign Service employees is an assignment to a specific overseas post that typically lasts from 1 to 3 years, with a 2-year tour being the most common. Some posts allow Foreign Service employees to extend their tour for an additional year. Between overseas tours, Foreign Service employees often have to complete required training (particularly language training) at State headquarters.

²⁷According to State officials, Foreign Service specialists in particular skill groups typically work in the same section of post throughout their Foreign Service careers. For example, it is common for a Foreign Service employee assigned as an Information Management Specialist to work tour after tour in the Information Management section at an overseas post.

State's Data Show Persistent Foreign Service Vacancies at Overseas Posts with State's Highest Foreign Policy Priorities

According to State's data, as of March 31, 2018, overseas posts with State's highest foreign policy priorities had the highest percentages of vacant Foreign Service positions. Using its Overseas Staffing Model process, State assigns each embassy to one of seven categories based primarily on the level and type of work required to pursue the U.S. government's diplomatic relations with the host country at post.²⁸ As we previously reported, the rankings are closely associated with the department's foreign policy priorities; the higher the category, the greater the resources needed to conduct the work of the overseas post and the higher the post's foreign policy priority.²⁹ For example, the highest-level category, level 5+, includes the largest, most comprehensive full-service posts, where the host country's regional and global role requires extensive U.S. personnel resources. The lowest-level category includes small embassies with limited requirements for advocacy, liaison, and coordination in the host country's government. As shown in table 2, according to State's data, as of March 31, 2018, overseas posts in the "Embassy 5+" category had the highest percentage of vacant positions. The results of this analysis were similar to those we reported in 2012.³⁰

²⁸State uses the Overseas Staffing Model, which it updates every 2 years, to ensure that the department's personnel resources are aligned with its strategic priorities and foreign policy objectives. The model uses a variety of inputs—such as the priority level of overseas posts, visa processing requirements, and security needs—to estimate the required Foreign Service staffing levels at each overseas embassy. The model includes seven categories of embassies based primarily on the level and type of work required to pursue the U.S. government's diplomatic relations with the host country.

²⁹[GAO-12-721](#).

³⁰[GAO-12-721](#).

Table 2: Vacancy Rates and Total Number of Foreign Service Positions at Overseas Posts as of October 31, 2011, and March 31, 2018, by Overseas Staffing Model Category^a

Overseas Staffing Model category	As of October 31, 2011 ^b		As of March 31, 2018	
	Percentage of overseas Foreign Service positions vacant at posts	Total number of overseas Foreign Service positions at posts	Percentage of overseas Foreign Service positions vacant at posts	Total number of overseas Foreign Service positions at posts
Embassy 1 or 2	10.8	742	9.0	720
Embassy 3	12.9	1,407	10.5	1,780
Embassy 3+	10.0	1,718	10.9	1,638
Embassy 4	10.2	509	10.7	475
Embassy 5	9.3	814	9.1	876
Embassy 5+	20.9	2,074	19.2	2,306
Non-embassy	16.4	1,621	12.7	1,884
Post not included in Overseas Staffing Model ^c	20.8	173	18.3	169

Source: GAO analysis of Department of State (State) Global Employee Management System (GEMS) data.

^aState's Overseas Staffing Model assigns embassies a ranking of 1 through 5+, based on the requirements of the embassy. These levels are closely associated with the department's foreign policy priorities, with higher numbers representing higher foreign policy priorities. Because non-embassies are provided functional rankings that are not necessarily associated with a location's priority, we included them as a separate group.

^bWe eliminated 207 positions (about 2 percent) from our analysis of the October 31, 2011 data because we could not clearly or completely identify where the positions were located.

^c"Post not included in Overseas Staffing Model" includes posts listed in the GEMS data that State intentionally excluded from Overseas Staffing Model categorizations.

State's Data Show Higher Vacancy Rates in Regions with Security Risks That Could Threaten U.S. Foreign Policy Interests

While State has Foreign Service vacancies worldwide, as of March 31, 2018, the highest percentages of vacancies were in the South and Central Asian Affairs Bureau (SCA) and Near Eastern Affairs Bureau (NEA)—bureaus representing regions with heightened security risks that could threaten U.S. foreign policy interests, according to State. SCA, which includes countries such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India, faces a host of security and stability challenges that could threaten U.S. interests, according to a February 2018 report from State's Office of

Inspector General.³¹ NEA includes countries, such as Egypt, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia, which have faced numerous security threats in recent years that could also threaten U.S. interests overseas.³²

As shown in figure 4, among State's regional bureaus, as of March 31, 2018, SCA and NEA had the highest percentages of overseas Foreign Service vacancies at 21 percent (238 of 1,115 positions) and 18 percent (234 of 1,279 positions), respectively.³³ In 2012, we reported that these two bureaus also had the highest percentages of overseas Foreign Service vacancies among regional bureaus.³⁴

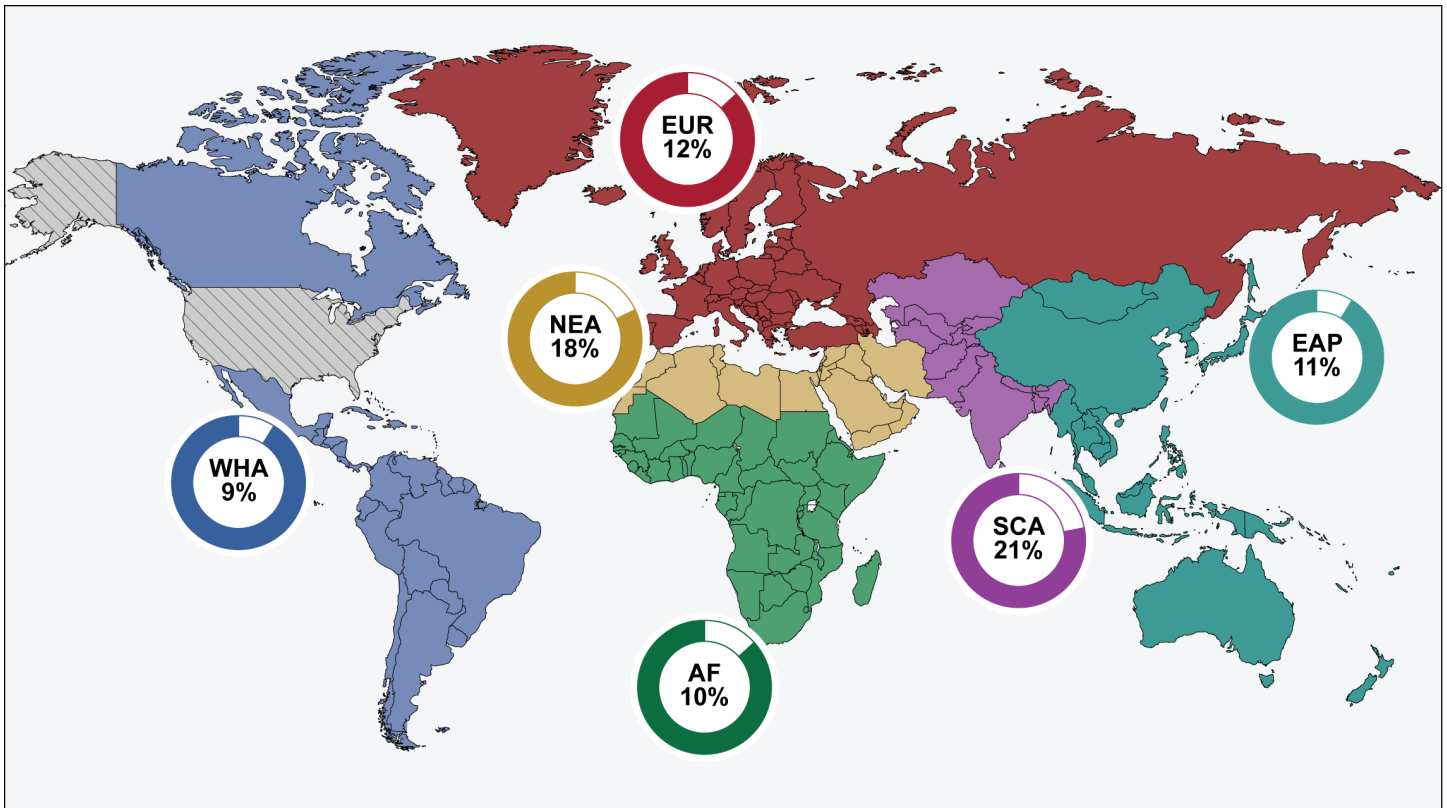
³¹Department of State, Office of Inspector General, *Inspection of the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs* (February 2018). Foreign Service employees assigned to positions located at overseas posts where dangers or hardships are more common are eligible to receive danger pay as well as hardship pay as additional compensation. Employees at certain posts in the South and Central Asian Affairs Bureau are eligible for danger pay as well as hardship pay.

³²NEA includes posts where Foreign Service employees are eligible for danger pay as well as hardship pay.

³³According to State officials, the GEMS data show larger numbers of vacant Foreign Service positions at posts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan than actually were unstaffed at these posts because State relies heavily on shorter-term assignments to fill Foreign Service positions at these locations. These shorter-term assignments are not reflected in GEMS, and the positions therefore appear vacant.

³⁴See appendix II for an overview of the analysis of vacant Foreign Service positions at overseas posts in various categories (as of March 31, 2018).

Figure 4: Vacancy Rates for Overseas Foreign Service Positions at Department of State Regional Bureaus as of March 31, 2018



Legend: WHA = Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs; NEA = Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs; EUR = Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs; SCA = Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs; AF = Bureau of African Affairs; EAP = Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs.

Source: GAO analysis of Department of State (State) Global Employment Management System (GEMS) data. | GAO-19-220

Note: According to State officials, the GEMS data show larger numbers of vacant Foreign Service positions at posts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan than actually were unstaffed at these posts, because State relies heavily on shorter-term assignments to fill Foreign Service positions at these locations and because these shorter-term assignments do not appear in GEMS.

Overseas Foreign Service Vacancies Have Adverse Effects on State’s Diplomatic Readiness

Vacancies in Overseas Foreign Service Positions Increase Workloads and Affect Employee Morale, According to Staff at Overseas Posts

Vacancies in Foreign Service positions at overseas posts increase workloads and adversely affect the morale of Foreign Service employees. According to State officials in headquarters and staff at overseas posts, when a Foreign Service position at an overseas post is vacant, Foreign Service employees at that post are generally responsible for covering the workload of the vacant position. Further, Foreign Service employees at some posts—particularly posts with fewer Foreign Service staff—may be responsible for covering the workload of multiple vacant positions. For example, at two African posts we heard examples of Foreign Service employees covering the workload of multiple vacant Foreign Service positions. As a result of increased workloads, Foreign Service employees are also more likely to have less time available to perform some important functions, according to staff at overseas posts. According to staff at overseas posts, such functions include training and supervising entry-level Foreign Service employees, local staff, and eligible family members (EFM); reducing the risk of fraud, waste, and abuse; improving and innovating processes at post that could reduce inefficiencies; initiating and implementing projects that could enhance various diplomatic efforts; and conducting maintenance of systems.

In addition, according to staff at overseas posts, vacancies adversely affect staff morale. Staff at multiple posts said that vacancies and the resulting increased workloads had created substantial stress and increased “burnout” of Foreign Service employees at the posts. They noted that these levels of stress and burnout had contributed to Foreign Service employees’ ending their overseas assignments early for medical or personal reasons. These curtailments, in turn, had increased the overall vacancies and their effects at overseas posts.

Vacancies in Overseas Foreign Service Generalist Positions, Especially in the Political and Economic Career Tracks, Adversely Affect State’s Diplomatic Readiness

According to staff at overseas posts, vacancies in Foreign Service generalist positions at overseas posts adversely affect State’s diplomatic readiness. Among Foreign Service generalist career tracks, the political and economic career tracks had the two largest percentages of vacant positions—20 percent and 16 percent, respectively—as of March 31, 2018.

According to staff at overseas posts, vacancies in political and economic positions at overseas posts—particularly posts with fewer Foreign Service employees—limit the amount of reporting on political and economic developments that posts are able to submit back to State headquarters. For example, Foreign Service employees from three posts in Africa told us that persistent, long-term vacancies in those posts’ political and economic positions had constrained their abilities to provide full reporting on political and economic developments in their host countries. According to staff at overseas posts, reporting on political and economic developments in other countries—submitted by overseas posts back to State headquarters—is essential for State to make informed foreign policy decisions. Foreign Service employees from two posts in large countries in East and South Asia also told us that vacancies in these sections had limited their capacity to engage with host government officials on important, strategic issues for the United States, such as reducing nuclear proliferation or enhancing trade and investment relationships with the United States. Vacancies in the political and economic career tracks at overseas posts could adversely affect State’s ability to achieve two of the goals in State and USAID’s joint strategic plan for fiscal years 2018 through 2022—(1) renew America’s competitive advantage for sustained economic growth and job creation and (2) promote American leadership through balanced engagement.

Vacancies in Overseas Foreign Service Specialist Positions May Heighten Security Risks at Overseas Posts and Disrupt Post Operations

According to staff at overseas posts, vacancies in Foreign Service specialist positions at overseas posts may heighten the level of security risk at the posts and disrupt post operations. Among Foreign Service specialist skill groups with the highest number of vacant positions, security officer, office management specialist, and information management had the largest percentages of vacant positions—16 percent, 16 percent, and 14 percent, respectively—as of March 31, 2018.

Security Officer

According to staff at overseas posts, vacancies in security officer positions at overseas posts reduce the amount of time that security staff can spend identifying, investigating, and responding to potential security

threats to the post. Security officers are also responsible for identifying and analyzing host-country intelligence-gathering efforts at their respective overseas posts—and post staff told us that, because of vacancies in these positions, some security officers had been unable to complete this work for their posts, potentially increasing the risk of foreign government officials gaining access to sensitive information. Also, post staff told us that security officer vacancies limit the amount of time that security officers present at posts can devote to important security oversight activities, including regular training, drilling, and supervising of local guard forces and security contractors. Post staff noted, for example, that security officers at overseas posts should conduct regular training and drilling exercises to evaluate their local guard force's effectiveness in searching a vehicle entering the post compound for explosive devices. According to post staff, when these important security oversight activities are not properly and regularly conducted, the level of security risk at these overseas posts may increase.

Information Management

According to State officials in headquarters and staff at overseas posts, as well as reporting by State's OIG, vacancies in information management positions at overseas posts have increased the vulnerability of posts' computer networks to potential cybersecurity attacks and other malicious threats. State officials told us that the Foreign Service had faced chronic shortages of information management staff available to fill these positions worldwide. According to State officials, because of ongoing information management vacancies, some required tasks—such as conducting planned network maintenance—were performed infrequently or not at all. In another example, staff at overseas posts said that because of vacancies, information management staff had been unable to regularly check their computer system logs to ensure that security breaches had not taken place. Post staff added that, if a breach did occur, vacancies could increase the amount of time needed to identify an attack and deploy countermeasures, further increasing the risks to posts' computer networks. Inspections conducted by State's OIG from fall 2014 to spring 2016 found that information management staff at 33 percent of overseas posts had not performed various required information management duties.³⁵ According to State's OIG, neglect of these duties may leave the department vulnerable to increased cybersecurity attacks.

³⁵Department of State's Office of Inspector General, *FY 2017 Inspector General Statement on the Department of State's Major Management and Performance Challenges*, OIG-EX-18-02 (Washington, D.C.: November 2017).

Office Management Specialist

According to staff at overseas posts, the office management specialist position at overseas posts has evolved considerably over time; these specialists increasingly play a critical role in ensuring that the work of overseas posts is effectively completed. Post staff said that office management specialists provide administrative and other support services to other Foreign Service employees and are assigned to various sections of post. For example, staff at one post noted that office management specialists assigned to the Security Officer sections at overseas posts reduce the workload of security officers by completing more routine security tasks and allowing the security officers to focus on more challenging or involved tasks necessary to secure overseas posts. Post staff told us that vacancies in office management specialist positions reduce the amount of work that can be completed by other Foreign Service employees at overseas posts. For example, when office management specialist positions assigned to the Security Officer or Information Management sections of posts are vacant, these vacancies further exacerbate the higher number of vacancies that already exist in these sections. According to staff at overseas posts, higher numbers of office management specialist vacancies require other Foreign Service employees to spend a significant amount of time on administrative tasks, reducing the amount of time these staff can spend on mission-critical activities.

State Described
Various Efforts to
Address Overseas
Foreign Service
Vacancies, but These
Efforts Are Not
Guided by an
Integrated Action Plan
to Reduce Persistent
Vacancies

State Officials Described
Various Efforts to Help
Address Vacancies

Officials in headquarters and at overseas posts described various State efforts to help address overseas Foreign Service vacancies. According to State officials, Foreign Service vacancies at overseas posts are a complex problem that multiple offices within State address on an individual basis.

Filling Vacant Foreign Service
Positions with Non-Foreign
Service Staff

State operates two programs that may be used to fill vacant Foreign Service positions with non-Foreign Service staff, according to State officials and staff at overseas posts:

- **“Hard-to-Fill” Program.** This program allows individuals outside of the Foreign Service, such as Civil Service staff, to bid on certain vacant Foreign Service positions at specific posts for a single Foreign Service tour.³⁶ According to staff at overseas posts, some overseas posts that have had persistent difficulties filling certain Foreign Service vacancies have used State’s “Hard-to-Fill” Program with the

³⁶State utilizes Civil Service staff via Limited Noncareer Appointments (LNA). State’s human capital rules enable Civil Service employees (and other non-Foreign Service employees) to serve as LNAs, normally for up to 5 years. Rules governing LNAs are covered in State’s *Foreign Affairs Manual* (3 FAM 2290) and federal law (22 U.S.C. §§ 3943, 3949). According to State documentation, Civil Service assignments to overseas Foreign Service positions have been an important part of State’s human capital programming for many years, helping to meet critical overseas staffing needs while providing a unique career development opportunity for Civil Service personnel. Civil Service employees on a “Hard-to-Fill” assignment participate directly in overseas missions and experience life and work at a U.S. embassy or consulate.

approval of their applicable regional bureaus. According to State officials, the Hard-to-Fill Program is managed by State's Office of Career Development and Assignments. According to State officials, this program was used to fill 11 positions in fiscal year 2015, 16 in fiscal year 2016, and 15 in fiscal year 2018. The program was not active in fiscal year 2017. We have previously identified a number of key challenges that arise when assigning Civil Service employees to overseas positions.³⁷ For example, State officials indicated that it is often difficult to match Civil Service employees' qualifications with the requirements of the vacant Foreign Service positions. They also noted that Hard-to-Fill positions are typically in less desirable locations, which they said contributes to limited interest among qualified Civil Service employees.

- **Consular Fellows Program.** Through this program, State hires applicants from outside the Foreign Service to perform duties and fulfill responsibilities similar to those of entry-level career Foreign Service consular officers.³⁸ According to State officials in headquarters and staff at overseas posts, to help respond to vacancies in consular positions, the Bureau of Consular Affairs created the Consular Fellows Program in fiscal year 2012, and continues to utilize it. Our review of GEMS data as of March 31, 2018 found that consular fellows were filling over 200 Foreign Service consular positions that otherwise would be vacant. According to State staff, while the use of consular fellows has helped to cover the consular workload at overseas posts, State may lose these employees' institutional knowledge and experiences after their limited appointments end.

Addressing Increased Workloads Resulting from Overseas Foreign Service Vacancies

State officials also described other efforts to help alleviate the increased workload resulting from Foreign Service vacancies at overseas posts. These include:

- **Assigning Foreign Service staff for temporary duty.** According to staff at overseas posts, different parts of State have sent Foreign Service employees on temporary duty to meet the needs of overseas posts experiencing Foreign Service vacancies. For example, regional bureaus, such as the Bureau of African Affairs, or relevant functional

³⁷GAO-12-721.

³⁸As mentioned earlier, State utilizes Civil Service staff through LNAs. Consular Fellows may serve in these positions for up to—but no longer than—5 years.

bureaus, such as the Bureau of Consular Affairs, have also sent Foreign Service employees on temporary duty from State headquarters to posts experiencing vacancies. Similarly, according to staff at overseas posts, under Chief of Mission authority, staff have temporarily been moved from one post to another within the same country that was experiencing Foreign Service vacancies.³⁹

- **Hiring retired Foreign Service and Civil Service employees.** According to staff at overseas posts, different parts of State have hired retired Foreign Service and Civil Service employees to help respond to workforce gaps at overseas posts. State may reemploy retirees in a full-time, part-time, temporary, or intermittent capacity. State's intermittent appointment program allows such employees to work for no more than 1,040 hours each year and on appointments that cannot exceed 1 year. In addition, State has hired some Foreign Service retirees for temporary, part-time work. These retirees work on a "When Actually Employed" schedule and are an important means of helping to address workforce gaps, according to State officials.
- **Employing eligible family members (EFM).** In recent years, according to staff at overseas posts, posts have widely employed EFMs to supplement Foreign Service employees and, in certain cases, to take on the duties of Foreign Service positions that are vacant.⁴⁰ According to State staff, overseas posts are typically responsible for creating and filling EFM positions at the posts, which are distinct from Foreign Service positions. Some staff at overseas posts noted that using EFMs provides significant advantages. For example, post management can generally create EFM positions and fill them with qualified EFMs more quickly than they can complete the lengthy and cumbersome process of requesting, hiring, training, and receiving a new Foreign Service employee at the post. However, overseas staff said that employment of EFMs at overseas posts is limited to posts that allow EFMs. Moreover, according to the overseas staff, EFMs are sometimes not available because Foreign Service

³⁹In these situations, staff are assigned on temporary duty to an overseas post experiencing a vacancy.

⁴⁰Regardless of country of citizenship, an EFM may be a spouse or domestic partner of the employee; an unmarried child of the employee under the age of 21, or unmarried and incapable of self-support regardless of age; or parents, sisters, or brothers who are at least 51 percent dependent on the employee for support and are listed on the employee's OF-126 (Dependency Report) or the employee's official travel orders. See 3 FAM 7121 and 3 FAM 1610.

employees are unable to bring family with them during their tour.⁴¹ Overseas staff also noted that employment of EFMs can be further limited by family members' willingness to fill vacant EFM positions at post, since some EFMs may decide to work outside the post (depending on the rules on outside employment in the host nation) or choose not to work at all while overseas. Staff at overseas posts also noted other challenges of relying too heavily on EFMs to help address Foreign Service vacancies. For example, some EFMs may lack the skills, qualifications, training, or interests needed to fill vacant staffing needs at post. Staff at one post stated that vacant EFM positions in the Information Management section had gone unfilled for over a year because interested or qualified EFM candidates could not be found.⁴²

- **Expanded Professional Associates Program and Consular Affairs Appointment Eligible Family Member Program.** According to State officials, State headquarters has also taken steps to further develop the use of family members at overseas posts. For instance, in recent years, State headquarters developed the Expanded Professional Associates Program to create a more specialized type of family member position that has stricter requirements and qualifications and higher pay than a typical family member position.⁴³ In addition, according to State officials, State's Bureau of Consular Affairs developed the Consular Affairs Appointment Eligible Family Member Program to allow family members to fill some vacancies in consular positions at overseas posts. Through this program, successful applicants are able to retain their security clearances when they transfer from one overseas post to another and are granted the ability to adjudicate visas for foreign nationals in consular positions at overseas posts, according to officials.

⁴¹An overseas post on authorized or ordered departure status because of U.S. national interests or imminent threat to life is likely to have an even more restricted pool of family members present at post able to fill EFM positions.

⁴²Additionally, according to staff at overseas posts, delays in receiving security clearances can prevent EFMs from starting work at a post for several months to a year or more. Staff reported to us that in May 2016, State created the Foreign Service Family Reserve Corps, which allows EFMs with security clearances to retain their clearances when they transfer to new posts. According to staff at overseas posts, the Foreign Service Family Reserve Corps has helped reduce the need for EFMs to complete the security clearance process each time they transfer to a new post.

⁴³According to State officials, State's bureaus determine if Expanded Professional Associates Program candidates are qualified, and then overseas posts select from the qualified candidates.

State's Efforts to Address Overseas Foreign Service Vacancies Are Not Guided by an Integrated Action Plan to Reduce Persistent Vacancies

State's various efforts to address overseas Foreign Service vacancies are not guided by an integrated action plan to reduce persistent vacancies. Our 2017 High-Risk Series report calls for agencies to, among other things, design and implement action plan strategies for closing skills gaps.⁴⁴ The action plan should (1) define the root cause of all skills gaps within an agency and (2) provide suggested corrective measures, including steps necessary to implement solutions. This report also emphasizes the high risk that mission-critical skills gaps in the federal workforce pose to the nation.⁴⁵

While various State offices have implemented the efforts we identified, State lacks an action plan that is integrated—or consolidated—across its relevant offices to guide its efforts to address persistent overseas Foreign Service vacancies. Moreover, some staff at overseas posts acknowledged that the efforts State has taken to help address vacancies have not reduced persistent Foreign Service vacancies, notably in specialist positions. In response to our inquiry about an action plan, State officials said that the agency does not have a single document that addresses Foreign Service staffing gaps at overseas posts. Instead, State officials directed us to State's *Five Year Workforce Plan: Fiscal Years 2016-2020*, stating that it was the most comprehensive document that outlines State's efforts to address Foreign Service vacancies at overseas posts.⁴⁶ The workforce plan notes that it provides a framework to address State's human capital requirements and highlights State's challenges and achievements in recruiting, hiring, staffing, and training Foreign Service

⁴⁴[GAO-17-317](#).

⁴⁵As noted in [GAO-17-317](#), skills gaps impede the federal government from cost-effectively serving the public and achieving results, regardless of whether the shortfalls are in government-wide occupations, such as cybersecurity, or in agency-specific occupations.

⁴⁶Department of State, *Five Year Workforce and Leadership Succession Plan: Fiscal Years 2016-2020*. Notably, State's workforce plan acknowledges that vacancies in mission-critical positions may adversely affect State's ability to achieve its goals and mission. State considers all Foreign Service positions to be mission-critical, because the Foreign Service workforce is the primary means by which State carries out its core worldwide diplomatic and consular operations. All of the Foreign Service vacancies we identified at overseas posts are in mission-critical positions.

staff.⁴⁷ However, in reviewing the portions of the workforce plan that State indicated were most relevant, we found that the workforce plan does not include an integrated action plan that defines the root causes of the persistent overseas Foreign Service vacancies we identified or suggest corrective measures to reduce vacancies in these positions, including steps necessary to implement solutions.

State officials also noted that they frequently meet to discuss and address workforce issues. For example, they said they convene a multi-bureau planning group that meets biweekly to discuss strategic workforce issues such as hiring needs based on attrition and other issues. However, according to State officials, this group has not developed an action plan to reduce persistent Foreign Service vacancies at overseas posts.⁴⁸

State lacks an integrated action plan to guide its efforts to address persistent Foreign Service vacancies that includes corrective measures to address the root causes of the vacancies. Without defining the root causes of persistent Foreign Service vacancies at overseas posts and identifying appropriate corrective measures, overseas vacancies may persist and continue to adversely affect State's ability to achieve U.S. foreign policy goals.

Conclusions

Foreign Service generalists and specialists at overseas posts are critical to advancing U.S. foreign policy and economic interests abroad. However, for at least a decade, the Foreign Service has had persistent vacancies in both generalist and specialist positions at overseas posts. In particular, large numbers of vacant positions have persisted over time in certain overseas Foreign Service positions, such as information management and security officer positions. These vacancies in critical

⁴⁷[GAO-12-721](#). As noted earlier, in response to our 2012 recommendation, State included in its workforce plan for fiscal years 2013 through 2017 a strategy for addressing mid-level experience gaps. While this strategy targeted and may have helped alleviate mid-level experience gaps—the focus of our review at the time—it was not focused on reducing persistent overseas vacancies across the Foreign Service.

⁴⁸In addition, according to State officials, the group discusses matters related to assignment rotations, position deficits or surpluses, and training requirements. Officials noted that the group includes representatives from State's Bureau of Human Resources, Bureau of Information and Resource Management, and Foreign Service Institute; and is chaired by a Deputy Assistant Secretary in State's Bureau of Human Resources, who oversees State's workforce analysis and planning, resource management, compensation, and pay, among other responsibilities.

positions at overseas posts have adversely affected State's ability to carry out its mission effectively and threaten State's ability to ensure the security and safety of its employees, their families, and post facilities. While State has made some efforts to address Foreign Service vacancies, addressing chronic vacancies in critical positions at overseas posts requires a thoughtful, coherent, and integrated action plan that defines the root causes of persistent Foreign Service vacancies at overseas posts along with suggested corrective measures to reduce such vacancies, following what was called for in our 2017 High-Risk Series report. Developing such an action plan would help State address its persistent staffing gaps, improve its ability to achieve U.S. foreign policy goals, and help ensure secure and efficient operations.

Recommendation for Executive Action

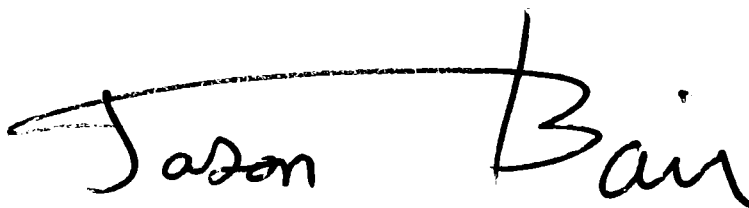
The Secretary of State should develop an integrated action plan that defines the root causes of persistent Foreign Service vacancies at overseas posts and provides suggested corrective measures to reduce such vacancies, including steps necessary to implement solutions. (Recommendation 1)

Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to State for review and comment. In its comments, reproduced in appendix III, State concurred with our recommendation. State also noted that it has taken actions and identified some causes of vacancies, but acknowledged that it lacks an integrated action plan and will take steps to develop such a plan. State also provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate.

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Secretary of State, and other interested parties. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at <http://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-6881 or bairj@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report are listed in appendix IV.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jason Bair". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal stroke over the word "Jason".

Jason Bair
Acting Director, International Affairs and Trade

Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

This report examines (1) vacancies in the Department of State's (State) Foreign Service staffing at overseas posts, (2) reported effects of Foreign Service vacancies on diplomatic readiness, and (3) State's efforts to address Foreign Service vacancies.

To address these three objectives, we interviewed State officials from the department's Bureau of Human Resources and Bureau of Consular Affairs as well as State officials representing the Offices of the Executive Director for State's six regional bureaus. We also interviewed staff at 10 overseas posts. We conducted in-person interviews with staff at 3 of these posts—the U.S. Embassy in Beijing and the U.S. Consulate in Shanghai, China, and the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi, India. We conducted telephone interviews with staff at the other 7 posts—the U.S. Embassies in Abuja, Nigeria; Bogota, Colombia; Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo; Kabul, Afghanistan; Mexico City, Mexico; and N'Djamena, Chad; and the U.S. Consulate in Frankfurt, Germany. We used the following criteria to select overseas posts for interviews: (1) posts with larger numbers of Foreign Service vacancies; (2) posts with diversity in the types of Foreign Service positions that were vacant; (3) posts with higher relative importance to U.S. economic, national security, and other foreign policy interests; and (4) posts in a range of geographic locations by State region.¹

To examine vacancies in State's Foreign Service staffing at overseas posts, we analyzed State's personnel data on Foreign Service staffing at overseas posts from the department's Global Employment Management System (GEMS), as of March 2018. Our analysis of the GEMS data includes Foreign Service positions filled by permanent Foreign Service employees as well as positions filled by nonpermanent Foreign Service employees, such as Consular Fellows. This analysis does not include the number of staffed and vacant positions at overseas posts in Libya, Syria, and Yemen, which, at the time of our review, were in suspended operations status, as well as U.S. Mission Somalia, which was operating under special circumstances at a different location.

¹To help determine the importance of the post to U.S. economic, national security, and other foreign policy interests, we, in part, considered the findings of State's Overseas Staffing Model process. Through this process, State assigns each embassy to one of seven categories based primarily on the level and type of work required to pursue the U.S. government's diplomatic relations with the host country at post. As we previously noted, the rankings are closely associated with State's foreign policy priorities; the higher the category, the greater the resources needed to operate the work of the overseas post and the higher the post's foreign policy priority.

To calculate vacancy rates, we divided the total number of positions by the number of positions listed as vacant in GEMS. For example, a post with 10 positions and 2 vacancies would have a vacancy rate of 20 percent. We calculated vacancy rates for each of the following categories: type (i.e., generalist or specialist), function (e.g., consular or information management), regional bureau (i.e., Bureau of African Affairs or Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs), and embassy and nonembassy rankings from State's Overseas Staffing Model (i.e., Embassy 3+ or 5).

According to State officials, the data in GEMS have a number of limitations:

- The number of vacant positions at overseas posts listed in GEMS may be overstated, because State has not yet decided to remove some of these positions from its database.
- Some of the vacancies in GEMS are short-term or temporary. Foreign Service employees periodically rotate out of their positions at their overseas posts, sometimes creating temporary vacancies until the positions are filled by incoming Foreign Service employees.
- The GEMS data show larger numbers of vacant Foreign Service positions at posts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan than actually were unstaffed at these posts. According to State officials, this discrepancy results from State's relying heavily on shorter-term assignments to fill Foreign Service positions at these locations. These shorter-term assignments are not reflected in GEMS, and the positions therefore appear vacant.
- The GEMS data may not reflect Foreign Service employees who have been temporarily reassigned from one overseas post to another.
- The GEMS data may show positions as filled although the Foreign Service employee filling the position has not yet arrived at post.

To assess the reliability of the GEMS database, we asked State officials whether State had made any major changes to the database since our 2012 report, when we assessed the GEMS data to be sufficiently reliable. State officials indicated that no major changes had been made. We also tested the data for completeness, confirmed the general accuracy of the data with officials at selected overseas posts, and interviewed knowledgeable officials from State's Office of Resource Management and Organizational Analysis concerning the data's reliability. We found the GEMS data to be reliable for the purpose of determining the numbers and percentages of vacant Foreign Service positions at overseas posts. We

did not validate whether the total number of authorized overseas Foreign Service positions was appropriate or met State's needs.

We also reviewed State workforce planning documents and budget documents, such as State's *Five Year Workforce and Leadership Succession Plan: Fiscal Years 2016-2020*² and *Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review*.³ In addition, we reviewed State Office of Inspector General reports as well as our previous reports on human capital challenges at State and effective strategic human capital management across the federal government. In particular, our report *High-Risk Series: Progress on Many High-Risk Areas, While Substantial Efforts Needed on Others* notes that strategic human capital management is a high-risk issue across the federal government and lists five key elements⁴ as a road map for agency efforts to improve and ultimately address such issues.⁵ For our third objective, we assessed whether State's efforts to address vacancies were guided by a corrective action plan that identifies the root causes of persistent Foreign Service vacancies at overseas posts and suggests corrective measures to reduce such vacancies, including steps necessary to implement solutions.⁶

We conducted this performance audit from August 2017 to March 2019 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

²Department of State, *Five Year Workforce and Leadership Succession Plan: Fiscal Years 2016-2020* (Washington, D.C.: September 2016).

³Department of State, *Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review* (Washington, D.C.: 2015).

⁴[GAO-17-317](#). As noted earlier, this report identifies five key elements as a road map for agency efforts to improve and ultimately address high-risk issues, including strategic human capital management: (1) *leadership commitment*—demonstrated strong commitment and top leadership support; (2) *capacity*—agency has the capacity (i.e., people and resources) to resolve the risk(s); (3) *action plan*—a corrective action plan exists that defines the root cause and solutions and provides for substantially completing corrective measures, including steps necessary to implement solutions we recommended; (4) *monitoring*—a program has been instituted to monitor and independently validate the effectiveness and sustainability of corrective measures; and (5) *demonstrated progress*—ability to demonstrate progress in implementing corrective measures and in resolving the high-risk area.

⁵Since the early 1990s, our high-risk program has focused attention on government operations with greater vulnerabilities to fraud, waste, abuse, and mismanagement or that are in need of transformation to address economy, efficiency, or effectiveness challenges.

⁶We determined that the third key element (action plan) was most applicable to the scope of our review.

Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Appendix II: Analysis of Vacant Foreign Service Positions at Overseas Posts in Various Categories as of March 31, 2018

Table 3: Staffed, Vacant, and Total Positions and Percentage of Vacant Positions at Overseas Posts, in Various Categories, as of March 31, 2018^a

	Staffed positions at overseas posts	Vacant positions at overseas posts	Total positions at overseas posts	Percentage of vacant positions at overseas posts
All overseas Foreign Service positions	8,574	1,274	9,848	12.9
Generalists	4,980	680	5,660	12.0
Specialists	3,594	594	4,188	14.2
Generalist career tracks at overseas posts				
Political	896	225	1,121	20.1
Consular	1,834	175	2,009	8.7
Economic ^b	617	121	738	16.4
Other ^c	587	96	683	14.1
Public Diplomacy	611	32	643	5.0
Management	435	31	466	6.7
10 largest specialist skill groups at overseas posts				
Security Officer	829	160	989	16.2
Office Management Specialist	614	114	728	15.7
Information Management	600	98	698	14.0
General Services	232	18	250	7.2
Facilities Maintenance	207	15	222	6.8
Information Technology Management	169	9	178	5.1
Finance	152	16	168	9.5
Human Resources	130	6	136	4.4
Security Technical Specialist	112	21	133	15.8
Security Engineer	111	10	121	8.3
Regional bureaus^d				
African Affairs	1,185	135	1,320	10.2
East Asian and Pacific Affairs	1,484	178	1,662	10.7
European and Eurasian Affairs	2,019	273	2,292	11.9
Near Eastern Affairs	1,045	234	1,279	18.3
South and Central Asian Affairs	877	238	1,115	21.4
Western Hemisphere Affairs	1,821	189	2,010	9.4

Appendix II: Analysis of Vacant Foreign Service Positions at Overseas Posts in Various Categories as of March 31, 2018

	Staffed positions at overseas posts	Vacant positions at overseas posts	Total positions at overseas posts	Percentage of vacant positions at overseas posts
Overseas posts by Overseas Staffing Model category^e				
Embassy 1 or 2	655	65	720	9.0
Embassy 3	1,594	186	1,780	10.5
Embassy 3+	1,459	179	1,638	10.9
Embassy 4	424	51	475	10.7
Embassy 5	796	80	876	9.1
Embassy 5+	1,864	442	2,306	19.2
Non-embassy	1,644	240	1,884	12.7
Post not included in Overseas Staffing Model	138	31	169	18.3

Source: GAO analysis of Department of State (State) Global Employment Management System (GEMS) data.

^aThis analysis does not include the number of staffed and vacant positions at overseas posts in Libya, Syria, and Yemen, which were in suspended operations status at the time of our review, as well as U.S. Mission Somalia, which was operating under special circumstances at a different location.

^bThe "Economic" generalist career track includes positions from the "Science Officer" staffing skill group in the GEMS data.

^c"Other" includes positions designated as "Executive" or "International Relations," which, according to State officials, may be filled by officers from any generalist discipline. "Other" also includes one position in GEMS that was not assigned to a specific generalist career track.

^d170 Foreign Service employees were not staffed to one of the six regional bureaus.

^eState's Overseas Staffing Model assigns embassies a ranking of 1 through 5+, with 5+ being the highest ranking, based on the requirements of the embassy. These levels are closely associated with the department's foreign policy priorities, with higher numbers representing higher foreign policy priorities. Because non-embassies are provided functional rankings that are not necessarily associated with a location's priority, we included them as a separate group. "Post not included in Overseas Staffing Model" includes posts listed in the GEMS data that State intentionally excluded from Overseas Staffing Model categorizations.

Appendix III: Comments from the Department of State



United States Department of State

Comptroller

Washington, D.C. 20520

FEB 13 2019

Thomas Melito
Managing Director
International Affairs and Trade
Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20548-0001

Dear Mr. Melito:

We appreciate the opportunity to review your draft report, "DEPARTMENT OF STATE: Action Plan Needed to Reduce Persistent Foreign Service Vacancies at Overseas Posts" GAO Job Code 102206.

The enclosed Department of State comments are provided for incorporation with this letter as an appendix to the final report.

If you have any questions concerning this response, please contact Stephanie O'Neill, Program Analyst, Office of Policy Coordination, Bureau of Human Resources at (202) 485-2852.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jeffrey C. Mounts".

Jeffrey C. Mounts (Acting, Comptroller)

Enclosure:

As stated

cc: GAO – Jason Bair (Acting)
DGHR – Carol Z. Perez
OIG - Norman Brown

Department of State Comments on GAO Draft Report

**DEPARTMENT OF STATE: Action Plan Needed to Reduce Persistent
Foreign Service Vacancies at Overseas Posts**
(GAO-19-220, GAO Code 102206)

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the GAO draft report “*Department of State: Action Plan Needed to Reduce Persistent Foreign Service Vacancies at Overseas Posts.*”

Recommendation 1: The Secretary of State should develop an action plan that defines the root causes of persistent Foreign Service vacancies at overseas posts and provides suggested corrective measures to reduce such vacancies, including steps necessary to implement solutions.

Department Response: The Department agrees with the intent of the recommendation. The Department has developed actions and plans, implemented new programs, e.g. Consular Fellows and Expanded Professional Associates Program (EPAP), and has identified many root causes, most notably the expansive growth of consular positions, the 2013 sequestration, insufficient funding from 2014 onward to hire at the attrition rate, and the 2017/2018 hiring freeze. However, there is no one integrated action plan document outlining all the root causes of Foreign Service vacancies and the strategies employed to reduce such vacancies, so the Department will take steps to consolidate, integrate, and enhance this information.

Appendix IV: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

Jason Bair, (202) 512-6881 or bairj@gao.gov

Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, Godwin Agbara (Assistant Director), Ian Ferguson (Analyst-in-Charge), Anthony Costulas, Natalia Pena, Debbie Chung, Chris Keblitis, Reid Lowe, Justin Fisher, and Alexander Welsh made key contributions to this report.

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