



May 2024

NATIONAL NUCLEAR SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

Actions to Recruit and Retain Federal Staff Could Be Improved

Accessible Version

GAO Highlights

View [GAO-24-106167](#). For more information, contact Allison Bawden at (202) 512-3841 or bawdena@gao.gov.

Highlights of [GAO-24-106167](#), a report to the Committee on Armed Services, House of Representatives

May 2024

NATIONAL NUCLEAR SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

Actions to Recruit and Retain Federal Staff Could Be Improved

Why GAO Did This Study

NNSA is responsible for the nation's nuclear weapons stockpile and nonproliferation efforts. Its federal workforce of about 1,800 staff oversees the more than 55,000 management and operating contractor employees that support NNSA nationwide. In 2023, NNSA's Administrator testified before Congress that NNSA faces challenges recruiting and retaining its staff, including a limited applicant pool and high attrition.

House Report 117-397 includes a provision for GAO to review issues related to recruiting and retention at NNSA. This report examines (1) the staffing levels NNSA has identified it needs to perform its missions and the extent to which NNSA's budget requests have reflected those levels, and (2) NNSA's actions to recruit and retain federal staff and how NNSA is addressing challenges it faces.

GAO reviewed NNSA's budget requests for fiscal years 2013–2025, information on NNSA's use of hiring authorities and incentive payments, and NNSA policies. GAO also interviewed agency officials.

What GAO Recommends

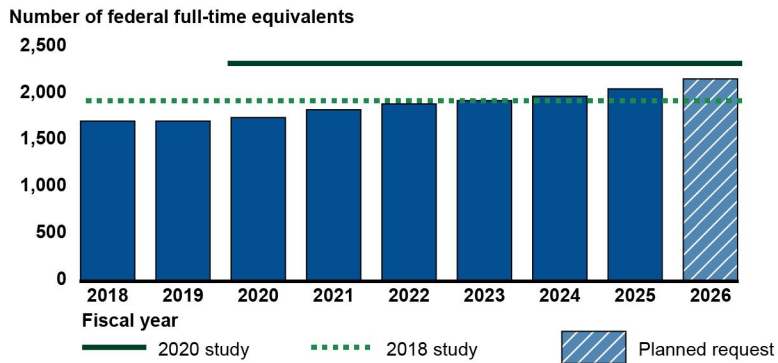
GAO is making three recommendations, including that NNSA (1) develop a process to systematically analyze and share information agencywide regarding challenges it faces recruiting and retaining staff and (2) regularly assess the results of its recruitment and retention actions using performance measures. NNSA agreed in principle with GAO's recommendations and described actions it plans to take to address them.

What GAO Found

Since 2018, the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) has completed two studies that found it needs additional federal staff to perform its missions, but these staffing levels have not been fully incorporated into the budget requests for the agency. NNSA's requested staffing levels reached the overall levels identified in its 2018 study. However, planned budget requests through fiscal year 2026—including in the fiscal year 2025 request—

remain about 200 positions below the staffing levels identified in the 2020 study. This leaves a gap between NNSA’s workload and the number of federal staff to manage the work. This is, among other reasons, because, according to agency officials, NNSA has not fully integrated detailed workforce planning into its budget requests. NNSA developed a workforce planning process to inform future budget requests. NNSA officials expect the process will allow the agency to make a stronger business case for staffing needs, with the goal of having future budget requests better reflect identified needs.

NNSA’s Requested Staffing Levels Compared with Staffing Needs Identified in Two Studies



Source: GAO analysis of National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) data and staffing studies. | GAO-24-106167

Accessible Data for NNSA’s Requested Staffing Levels Compared with Staffing Needs Identified in Two Studies

Fiscal year	Number of federal full-time equivalents
FY 2018	1715
FY 2019	1715
FY 2020	1753
FY 2021	1836
FY 2022	1898
FY 2023	1934
FY 2024	1980
FY 2025	2060
FY 2026 (planned request)	2166
2020 Study	2,369
2018 Study	1,928

Source: GAO analysis of National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) data and staffing studies. | GAO-24-106167

NNSA has taken a number of actions to address challenges it faces recruiting and retaining staff, such as increasing its participation in recruiting

and outreach events and offering incentive payments to both recruit and retain staff. However, the actions NNSA has taken do not fully address its recruiting and retention challenges. NNSA's actions to recruit and retain staff could be hindered because:

- NNSA has not established a continuing process to systematically analyze and share information about its recruitment and retention challenges to inform its actions. By systematically analyzing information, such as the reasons **why staff leave the agency**, and sharing it agencywide, NNSA would be better positioned to understand its recruitment and retention challenges and address them.
- NNSA has not regularly assessed the outcomes of its actions to address its recruitment and retention challenges. For example, NNSA has not assessed which recruiting and outreach events yield the most candidates. Regularly assessing the results of the agency's actions could help decision-makers determine whether NNSA's actions are achieving the desired results or whether other actions are needed.

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Abbreviations

CEPE	Cost Estimating and Program Evaluation
DOE	U.S. Department of Energy
FEVS	Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey
FSE	Federal Salaries and Expenses
FTE	full-time equivalent
M&O	management and operating
NNSA	National Nuclear Security Administration
OHR	NNSA Office of Human Resources
OPM	U.S. Office of Personnel Management

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May 29, 2024

The Honorable Mike Rogers
Chairman
The Honorable Adam Smith
Ranking Member
Committee on Armed Services
House of Representatives

The National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA)—a separately organized agency within the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE)—is responsible for the nation’s nuclear weapons stockpile and nonproliferation efforts, among other missions. To conduct these efforts, NNSA relies on a federal workforce of about 1,800 scientists, engineers, program and project managers, acquisition personnel, and support staff. NNSA’s federal workforce is also responsible for overseeing the more than 55,000 management and operating (M&O) contractors that perform work for NNSA at national laboratories and other sites across the U.S.¹ Those contractors are responsible for performing research and development, producing nuclear weapons, refurbishing or replacing nuclear weapons’ aging components, and undertaking other work for NNSA.

Our prior work has found that NNSA did not have a sufficiently sized federal workforce with the right skills it needed to effectively carry out the agency’s critical missions and oversee M&O contractors. For example, in March 2021, we found that NNSA did not have a process to determine the appropriate number of staff needed to award and oversee the

¹50 U.S.C. § 2501(6), (7), (9). The Federal Acquisition Regulation defines M&O contracts as agreements under which the government contracts for the operation, maintenance, or support, on its behalf, of a government-owned or government-controlled research, development, special production, or testing establishment wholly or principally devoted to one or more of the major programs of the contracting agency. 48 C.F.R. § 17.601. NNSA awards M&O contracts to private firms, universities, and others with the scientific, manufacturing, and engineering expertise needed to carry out its mission. For more information on why NNSA uses these contracts, see GAO, *Department of Energy: Actions Needed to Strengthen Acquisition Planning for Management and Operating Contracts*, [GAO-16-529](#) (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 9, 2016).

agency's M&O contracts.² We also found in December 2018 that an independent analysis of NNSA's oversight of contractor work for a major project determined that NNSA staff did not recognize cost and schedule problems early enough during contractor work.³ NNSA eventually terminated the project due, in part, to these shortcomings in contract oversight.

Since 1990, we have designated aspects of acquisition and program management at DOE as a high-risk area because DOE's record of inadequate management of contractors left the agency vulnerable to waste, fraud, abuse, and mismanagement.⁴ One aspect of the high-risk designation relates to agencies' capacity—staff and resources—and we have regularly reported in biennial updates on NNSA's needed capacity improvements as a high-risk area.

Additionally, others have found that NNSA faces challenges recruiting and retaining staff. In October 2023, the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States reported on the growing challenges of recruiting and retaining the staff needed to sustain the current nuclear force and transition to modern weapon systems.⁵ According to the Commission, recruiting for science, technology, engineering, and math fields and technical areas is particularly competitive. NNSA competes with its M&O contractors, DOE, the Department of Defense, and the defense industrial base for staff with the skills it needs to effectively carry out its missions. The Commission noted

²GAO, *High Risk Series: Dedicated Leadership Needed to Address Limited Progress in Most High-Risk Areas*, [GAO-21-119SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 2, 2021). As part of our subsequent review in November 2021, we compared DOE's—including NNSA's—workforce planning processes for its acquisition workforce with the leading practices for strategic workforce planning. See GAO, *Department of Energy: Improvements Needed to Strengthen Strategic Planning for the Acquisition Workforce*, [GAO-22-103854](#) (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 16, 2021); and *Human Capital: Key Principles for Effective Strategic Workforce Planning*, [GAO-04-39](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 11, 2003).

³GAO, *Project Management: DOE and NNSA Should Improve Their Lessons-Learned Process for Capital Asset Projects*, [GAO-19-25](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 21, 2018).

⁴GAO, *High Risk Series: Efforts Made to Achieve Progress Need to Be Maintained and Expanded to Fully Address All Areas*, [GAO-23-106203](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 20, 2023).

⁵*America's Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States* (October 2023). Congress established this Commission to examine the long-term strategic posture of the United States. National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2022, Pub. L. No. 117–81, § 1687, 135 Stat. 1541, 2126 (2021).

that NNSA faces retention challenges, as many experienced staff have left NNSA for higher paying or more attractive industries.

NNSA's Administrator also provided congressional testimony in March 2023 noting that NNSA faces challenges recruiting and retaining staff.⁶ The Administrator stated that NNSA must compete for top-tier talent with the private sector. Many of the skills NNSA needs are in high demand for both established and emerging industries, all of which are drawing from a limited pool of applicants. The Administrator also noted that high attrition remains a concern for NNSA. As of fiscal year 2023, about 19 percent of NNSA's federal staff was eligible to retire, a number that NNSA expects to rise to about 34 percent by fiscal year 2028, according to the testimony.

House Report 117-397 includes a provision for us to review issues related to recruitment and retention at NNSA.⁷ This report focuses on NNSA's federal staff, and we completed related work focused on NNSA's M&O contractor staff.⁸ This report examines (1) the staffing levels NNSA has identified it needs to perform its missions and the extent to which NNSA's budget requests have reflected those levels, and (2) NNSA's actions to recruit and retain federal staff and how NNSA is addressing challenges it faces.

To address our first objective, we reviewed NNSA's budget requests for fiscal years 2013 through 2025 and enacted budgets for fiscal years 2013 through 2023. Specifically, we reviewed and summarized data in NNSA's annual congressional budget justification materials, such as the requested number of federal full-time equivalents (FTE) and spending by appropriation account. In conducting this review, we focused on NNSA's federal staff funded through the agency's Federal Salaries and Expenses

⁶House Committee on Armed Services, Subcommittee on Strategic Forces, Fiscal Year 2024 Request for Nuclear Forces and Atomic Energy Defense Activities, 118th Cong. (Mar. 28, 2023); Testimony Statement of Jill Hruby, DOE Under Secretary for Nuclear Security and NNSA Administrator.

⁷H.R. Rep. No. 117-397, at 395 (2022).

⁸GAO, *National Nuclear Security Administration: Improvements Needed for Overseeing Contractor Workforce Recruitment and Retention Efforts*, [GAO-24-106861](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 29, 2024).

(FSE) appropriation, which funds the salaries and benefits of most of NNSA's federal staff.⁹

In addition, we reviewed a joint workforce study that NNSA and the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) completed in 2018 and a workforce study that NNSA's Office of Cost Estimating and Program Evaluation (CEPE) completed in 2020 to identify recommended staffing levels and the potential impacts associated with understaffing. We examined the methodologies for the studies and reviewed documentation of prior interviews with NNSA officials involved in developing the studies at the time and determined that the studies were methodologically sound. While NNSA conducted other workforce studies prior to 2018, we focused our review on the 2018 and 2020 studies because they were the most recent studies at the time of our analysis for determining NNSA's staffing needs across the organization. We compared staffing needs identified in the 2018 and 2020 workforce studies with NNSA's actual number of FTEs during those fiscal years. We also compared staffing needs identified in the two studies with NNSA's requested number of FTEs for fiscal years 2013 through 2025, as well as NNSA's planned request for fiscal year 2026 presented in its fiscal year 2025 budget materials. Finally, we reviewed NNSA's annual appropriations for the FSE account from fiscal years 2013 through 2023.¹⁰

To address our second objective, we reviewed the laws that specify the hiring authorities available to NNSA. We also reviewed NNSA policies that describe its recruitment and retention actions, such as NNSA's policies for offering recruitment and retention incentives and making student loan repayments as an incentive.¹¹ We obtained information on how often NNSA has used hiring authorities and made incentive payments for fiscal years 2013 through 2022. We also obtained other pertinent information, such as information on NNSA internship programs. In addition, we interviewed officials from NNSA's Office of Human

⁹For this review, we excluded NNSA's federal staff from the Office of Naval Reactors and the Office of Secure Transportation because the salaries and benefits of those staff are funded by appropriations other than NNSA's FSE appropriation.

¹⁰Full-year appropriations for fiscal year 2024 were not available at the time of our review.

¹¹NNSA, Business Operating Procedure 322.1, *NNSA Recruitment, Relocation, and Retention Incentives Program* (Dec. 27, 2005), canceled by Supplemental Directive 322.1-2, *Recruitment, Relocation, and Retention Incentive Program* (Apr. 26, 2023); Business Operating Procedure 322.3, *NNSA Student Loan Repayment Program* (Aug. 5, 2010), canceled by Supplemental Directive 322.1, *Student Loan Repayment Program* (May 20, 2022).

Resources (OHR) and each of the 23 offices whose federal staff are funded through NNSA's FSE account to understand the challenges NNSA faces recruiting and retaining federal staff and how NNSA is addressing these challenges.

To further understand the challenges NNSA faces, we obtained and reviewed NNSA's 2022 OPM Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS) results, the most recent available at the time of our review, and information on steps NNSA offices were taking in response to those results.¹² We also obtained information on the results of recent NNSA exit surveys.¹³ We compared NNSA's actions with leading practices for strategic workforce planning and *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*.¹⁴

As part of our work, we obtained and analyzed data on NNSA's federal staff, including information on NNSA's number of hires and losses and its use of hiring authorities and incentive payments. To assess the reliability of these data, we performed electronic testing of the underlying data to ensure completeness and accuracy and interviewed cognizant officials. Based on this testing and our interviews, we determined that the data were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of describing trends in NNSA's hires and losses and its use of hiring authorities and incentive payments from fiscal year 2013 through 2022.

We conducted this performance audit from August 2022 to May 2024 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.

¹²FEVS is a survey offered by OPM that provides insights into federal staff's perceptions of whether, and to what extent, conditions characterizing successful organizations are present in their agencies.

¹³Exit surveys allow individuals who leave an organization the opportunity to provide feedback on what they liked about their organization and why they left. The exit survey information we reviewed covered the period March 2021 through December 2022. We also reviewed additional information that NNSA provided on its exit survey process that covered through April 2024.

¹⁴See [GAO-04-39](#); and GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, [GAO-14-704G](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 10, 2014).

Background

NNSA's Missions and Organization

Established by Congress in 1999, NNSA is responsible for the nation's nuclear weapons, nonproliferation, and naval reactors programs.¹⁵

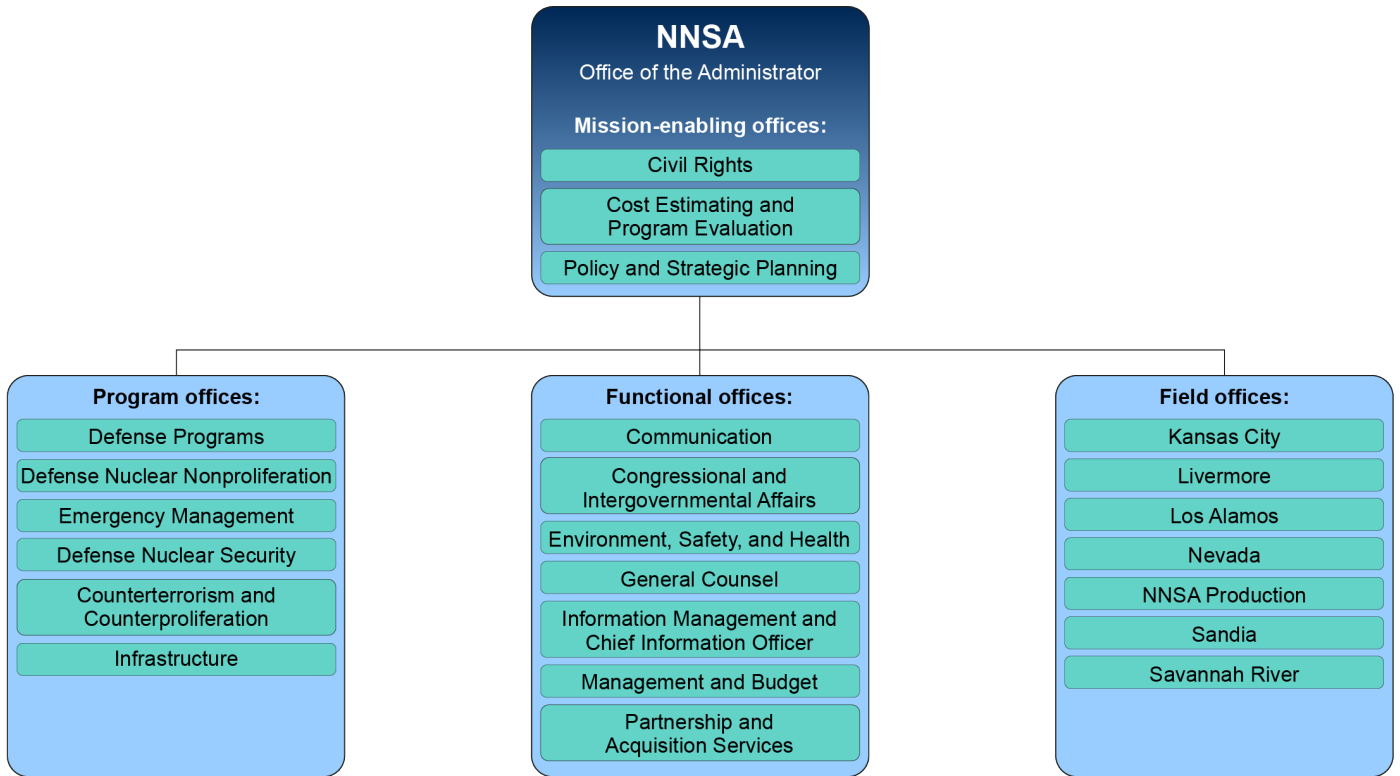
NNSA's missions include

- maintaining the safety, security, and effectiveness of the U.S. nuclear weapons stockpile through application of science, technology, engineering, and manufacturing;
- responding to nuclear and radiological emergencies in the U.S. and abroad;
- preventing nuclear weapons proliferation and reducing the threat of nuclear and radiological terrorism around the world; and
- providing the U.S. Navy with militarily effective nuclear propulsion plants and ensuring their safe, reliable, and long-lived operation.

NNSA is organized into headquarters-based program, functional, and mission-enabling offices, and field offices (see fig. 1).

¹⁵National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2000, Pub. L. No. 106-65, § 3211, 113 Stat. 512, 957 (1999) (codified as National Nuclear Security Administration Act at 50 U.S.C. §§ 2401-2484) (NNSA Act).

Figure 1: Organizational Structure of Selected National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) Offices, as of January 2024



Source: GAO analysis of NNSA information. | GAO-24-106167

Note: We excluded NNSA's Office of Naval Reactors and Office of Secure Transportation because the salaries and benefits of staff in those offices are not funded by NNSA's Federal Salaries and Expenses appropriation.

Within these offices, NNSA's federal staff are responsible for providing the strategy and framework for accomplishing NNSA's missions. They also manage NNSA's portfolios, programs, and projects—including budget, funding, acquisition, and contracts—and oversee the M&O contractors that perform work for NNSA. To accomplish this, NNSA's program, functional, mission-enabling, and field offices have different, but complementary, roles:

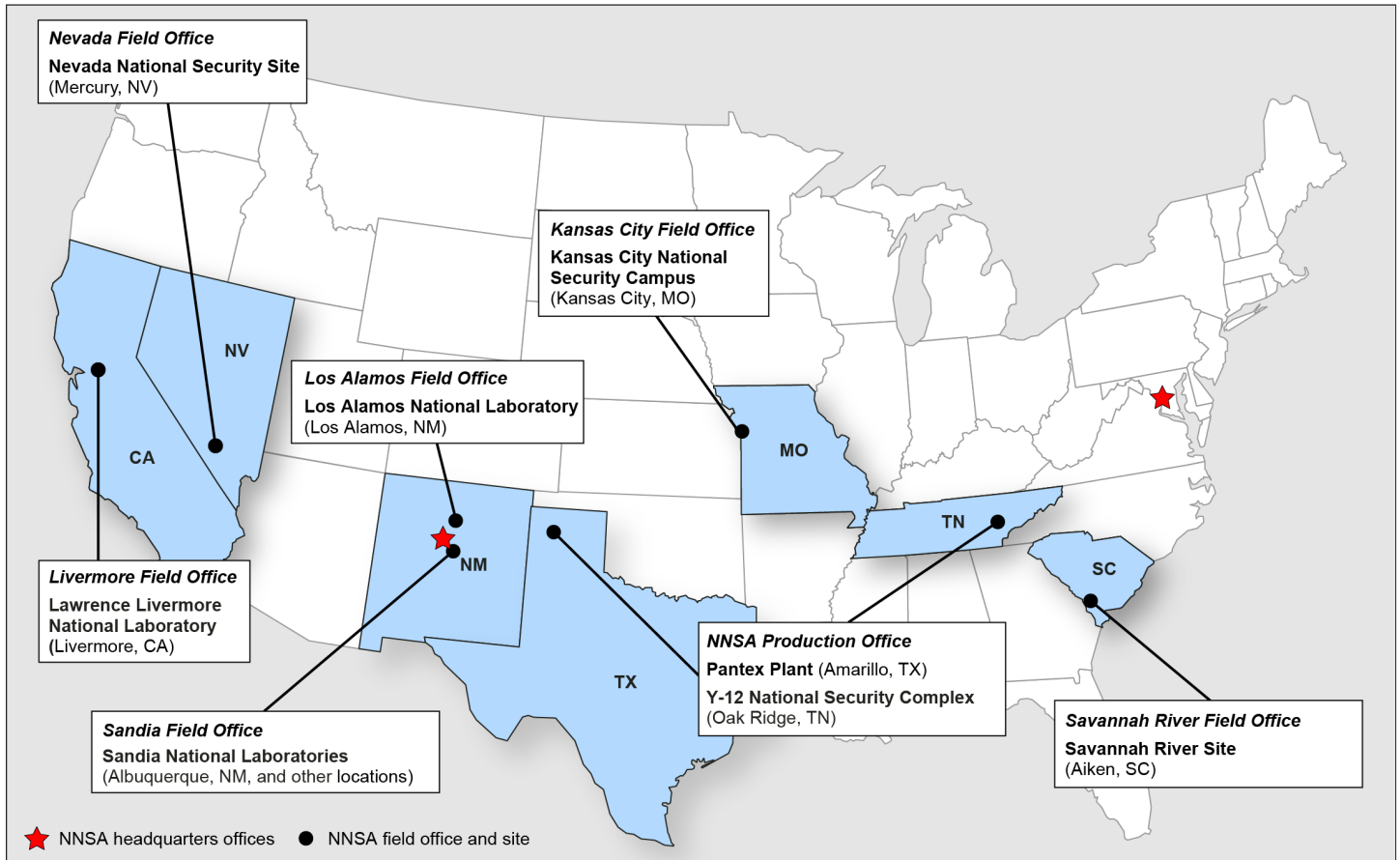
- **Program offices** are responsible for managing mission-related activities and integrating these activities across the multiple sites performing the work.
- **Functional offices** provide budget, legal, information technology, and other support to program offices, field offices, and NNSA as a whole.

- **Mission-enabling offices** are located within the Office of the Administrator. These offices directly support the NNSA Administrator and other NNSA offices in areas such as cost estimating and program evaluation.
- **Field offices** provide a federal presence at NNSA's sites and are responsible for multiple functions at the site level, such as contract management and security oversight.

NNSA's headquarters offices are in Washington, D.C.; Germantown, Maryland; and Albuquerque, New Mexico. NNSA's field offices are generally co-located with the eight M&O contractor-managed and -operated sites that comprise the nuclear security enterprise (see fig. 2).¹⁶

¹⁶The nuclear security enterprise comprises three national security laboratories where nuclear weapons are designed—Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, Los Alamos National Laboratory, and Sandia National Laboratories—and five nuclear weapons production and testing facilities—the Kansas City National Security Campus in Missouri, the Pantex Plant in Texas, the Savannah River Site in South Carolina, the Y-12 National Security Complex in Tennessee, and the Nevada National Security Site in Nevada.

Figure 2: National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) Headquarters Offices and Nuclear Security Enterprise Field Offices



Sources: GAO presentation of NNSA information; Map Resources (map). | GAO-24-106167

OHR, which is located within NNSA’s Office of Management and Budget, is responsible for overseeing the agency’s human resources activities. OHR is also responsible for managing and executing the operational aspects of NNSA’s day-to-day human resources activities, such as hiring, staffing, position management, performance management, benefits, and pay. Each program, functional, mission-enabling, and field office is responsible for identifying its staffing needs and working with OHR to take action to address those needs. This includes, for example, working with OHR to complete steps in the agency’s hiring process, such as determining the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed for a position and interviewing and selecting candidates for positions.

NNSA's Funding Sources

Congress primarily funds NNSA's work through four appropriation accounts:

- **Weapons Activities.** The Weapons Activities appropriation includes funding for specific programs, projects, and other activities that support the nation's defense posture. NNSA's programs provide for the maintenance and refurbishment of the nation's nuclear stockpile; continued investment in the scientific, engineering, and manufacturing capabilities and infrastructure to sustain the stockpile; and the manufacture of nuclear weapon components. NNSA's weapons activities programs also provide for the safe, secure transport of nuclear weapons, weapon components, and material throughout the nuclear security enterprise.¹⁷
- **Defense Nuclear Nonproliferation.** The Defense Nuclear Nonproliferation appropriation includes funding for programs that help provide policy and technical leadership to prevent or limit the spread of weapons of mass destruction-related materials and technology; develop technologies to detect nuclear proliferation and secure or eliminate inventories of nuclear weapons-related materials and infrastructure; and ensure that trained emergency management personnel are available to respond to nuclear and radiological incidents and accidents domestically and abroad.
- **Naval Reactors.** The Naval Reactors appropriation includes funding for U.S. Navy nuclear propulsion work, beginning with reactor plant technology development and design, continuing through operation and maintenance, and ending with the final disposition of spent nuclear fuel.¹⁸
- **Federal Salaries and Expenses (FSE).** The FSE appropriation includes funding for the salaries, benefits, travel, training, support services, and other expenses for most NNSA federal staff who

¹⁷NNSA's appropriations structure includes accounts that fund program activities and that fund "program direction," the latter of which is available to fund federal salaries and expenses, as described in DOE's budget justifications. NNSA's Weapons Activities appropriation account includes program direction funding that funds the salaries and expenses of the agency's secure transportation workforce.

¹⁸NNSA's Naval Reactors appropriation account includes program direction funding that funds the salaries and expenses of the agency's naval reactors workforce. The Navy funds its staff that work at the Office of Naval Reactors through its own appropriations.

oversee and manage its Weapons Activities and Defense Nuclear Nonproliferation programs.

Information on the President's proposed budget request for NNSA is included in the request for DOE. DOE's supporting budget materials include a budget justification volume with detailed information on the portion of the request related to NNSA for each of NNSA's appropriation accounts. For example, the section of the budget justification for NNSA's FSE appropriation includes information such as the amount requested by category (salaries and benefits, travel, training, support services, and other expenses) and the number of FTEs requested by site.

NNSA Has Not Requested Staffing Levels That Fully Reflect Its Identified Needs but Has Developed a Workforce Planning Process to Better Inform Future Budget Requests

NNSA Studies Concluded That the Agency Needs Additional Staff to Perform Its Missions

NNSA completed studies of its staffing needs in 2018 and 2020 that found that NNSA needed additional federal staff to effectively perform its missions.¹⁹

- In 2018, NNSA and OPM completed a joint study that reviewed NNSA's workloads and federal staffing levels to determine the staffing levels needed to execute its missions.²⁰ The study concluded that NNSA did not have enough federal staff to meet its mission requirements. Specifically, the study found that NNSA needed a total of 1,928 FTEs to execute the workload at that time, an increase of 320 FTEs (20 percent) compared with NNSA's actual number of FTEs in 2018.
- In 2020, NNSA's CEPE completed an evaluation of NNSA staffing needs based on current and future mission requirements. The study

¹⁹NNSA has completed other staffing studies. We focused our review on the 2018 and 2020 studies because they were the most recent studies at the time of our analysis for determining NNSA's staffing needs across the organization.

²⁰OPM, *Workload and Organizational Analysis Findings and Results for the National Nuclear Security Administration* (Washington, D.C.: June 2018).

concluded that the optimal level for NNSA's federal staff was 2,369 FTEs by fiscal year 2026, an increase of 684 FTEs (41 percent) compared with NNSA's actual number of FTEs in 2020.²¹

These two studies identified the potential effects on NNSA's programs from being understaffed. For example, the 2018 study indicated that the Office of Defense Programs had faced various challenges due to understaffing, including inadequate training on essential skills and poor staff morale. In addition, the 2020 study noted that the predecessor to the Office of Infrastructure did not have sufficient staff to oversee and manage current and planned capital asset projects, such as the plutonium pit production project at the Savannah River Site.²²

Many NNSA officials we interviewed agreed with the studies' findings and told us that the agency's federal workforce is understaffed, leading to challenges completing work and retaining staff.²³ For example, officials from the Office of Defense Nuclear Nonproliferation stated that the office has faced challenges retaining staff in science and other technical positions due to the overwhelming workload caused by not having enough staff. In addition, officials from the Office of Partnership and Acquisition Services said that not having enough staff has made it challenging to provide adequate contract oversight, which is critical to program success.

Similarly, an April 2020 NNSA internal review found that NNSA program offices were not adequately resourced to provide effective technical and programmatic oversight of contractors for two nuclear weapon

²¹The 2020 study provided a total number of additional FTEs needed by fiscal year 2026 and did not provide year-to-year goals.

²²NNSA is currently developing pit production infrastructure at the Savannah River Site in South Carolina. The project will include a main pit manufacturing building and equipment, along with collocation of plutonium analysis capabilities, production support capabilities, security infrastructure, and other support facilities. The agency plans to complete the project by 2038, but this schedule is preliminary. In addition, NNSA will be assuming oversight of the Savannah River Site contract starting in 2025 based on a transition from DOE's Office of Environmental Management, although additional NNSA staffing needs at the site were not reflected in the 2020 study because DOE had not made the decision to transfer oversight of the site to NNSA at that time.

²³We interviewed NNSA officials from OHR and each of the 23 offices whose staff are funded through NNSA's FSE account.

modernization programs.²⁴ According to the review, the staff's limited capacity to evaluate contractors' technical decisions led to incomplete risk mitigation and contributed to failure of a key electrical component related to the two programs.

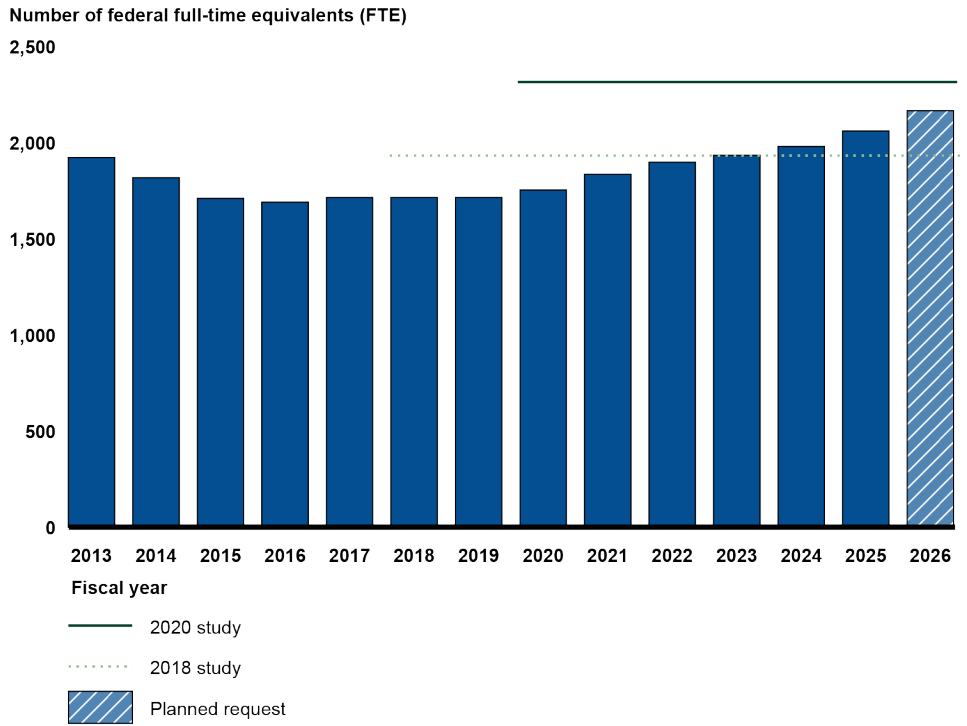
NNSA Has Not Fully Reflected Identified Staffing Needs in Its Budget Requests

While NNSA's studies identified that the agency needs additional staff to perform its mission, NNSA has not fully reflected those needs in its proposed budget requests (see fig. 3). NNSA's requested staffing levels for federal employees have increased by 345 FTEs from its fiscal year 2019 request to its 2025 request and have reached the overall level identified by the 2018 study. However, the requests through fiscal year 2025 remain more than 300 FTEs below the overall staffing levels identified in the 2020 study.²⁵ The request for fiscal year 2025 included information on NNSA's planned FTE request for fiscal year 2026. NNSA plans to request 2,166 FTEs in fiscal year 2026, which is about 200 FTEs below the staffing levels identified in the 2020 study.

²⁴NNSA Independent Review Team, *Independent Review: B61-12 Life Extension Program and W88 Alteration 370 Technical Issue* (April 2020). This work was done at the direction of Congress.

²⁵The 2020 study provided the total number of additional FTEs needed by fiscal year 2026 and did not provide year-to-year goals.

Figure 3: National Nuclear Security Administration’s (NNSA) Requested Staffing Levels Compared with Levels Identified by NNSA’s 2018 and 2020 Studies, Fiscal Years 2013–2026



Source: GAO analysis of NNSA data and staffing studies. | GAO-24-106167

Accessible Data for Figure 3: National Nuclear Security Administration’s (NNSA) Requested Staffing Levels Compared with Levels Identified by NNSA’s 2018 and 2020 Studies, Fiscal Years 2013–2026

Fiscal Year	FTEs Requested
FY 2013	1922
FY 2014	1817
FY 2015	1710
FY 2016	1690
FY 2017	1715
FY 2018	1715
FY 2019	1715
FY 2020	1753
FY 2021	1836
FY 2022	1898
FY 2023	1934

Fiscal Year	FTEs Requested
FY 2024	1980
FY 2025	2060
FY 2026 (Planned request)	2,166
2020 Study	2,369
2018 Study	1,928

Source: GAO analysis of NNSA data and staffing studies. | GAO-24-106167

Note: NNSA completed staffing studies in 2018 and 2020 that found the agency needed additional FTEs to meet its mission requirements. NNSA’s studies provided the total number of additional FTEs needed by fiscal year 2018 and fiscal year 2026, respectively, and did not provide year-to-year goals.

According to officials from NNSA’s Office of Management and Budget, NNSA’s budget requests have not fully reflected identified staffing needs due to certain factors.

- Statutory cap.** During fiscal years 2014 through 2022, NNSA was subject to a statutory cap on the total number of federal FTEs for each fiscal year. Congress and the President established a statutory cap in fiscal year 2013 that limited the total number of NNSA FTEs in the Office of the Administrator to 1,825 by October 1, 2014, decreased that number in fiscal year 2015 to 1,690, and amended that number again to increase it to 1,890 beginning in fiscal year 2020.²⁶ Although NNSA had the authority to exceed the number of FTEs set by the statutory cap, the agency requested fewer FTEs than the overall cap during several budget cycles. For example, in fiscal year 2020, NNSA requested 1,753 FTEs despite the cap being set at 1,890 FTEs. The statutory cap on NNSA’s FTE levels was removed in fiscal year 2023.²⁷
- Budget limits.** Officials said that the President’s budget request for NNSA is constrained by certain budget limits established by DOE and

²⁶National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2013, Pub. L. No. 112-239, § 3111, 126 Stat. 1632, 2168 (2013) (excluding from the cap employees in the Offices of Naval Reactors and Secure Transportation and certain other employees) (codified at 50 U.S.C. § 2441a); Carl Levin and Howard P. “Buck” McKeon National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2015, Pub. L. No. 113-291, § 3116, 128 Stat. 3292, 3888 (2014) (amending 50 U.S.C. § 2441a and clarifying that the cap applies to employees funded through the NNSA FSE appropriation account); National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020, Pub. L. No. 116-92, § 3111(a)(1), 133 Stat. 1198, 1949 (2019) (amending 50 U.S.C. § 2441a). NNSA could exceed the number of FTEs in the cap by submitting to the congressional defense committees a report justifying such excess. 50 U.S.C. § 2441a(a)(2) (2019).

²⁷James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023, Pub. L. No. 117-263, § 3117, 136 Stat. 2395, 3054 (2022). The statutory cap was removed after NNSA submitted its budget request for fiscal year 2023.

the administration through the White House Office of Management and Budget. These limits specify the amounts that can be included in the budget request for NNSA, including amounts for the FSE account—the account used to pay for the salaries and benefits of most of NNSA’s federal staff—in accordance with the President’s relative priorities for programs.²⁸ Therefore, according to NNSA officials, the budget request for NNSA has not been able to include the full amount that it has identified it requires to meet staffing needs. NNSA officials said that they try to increase the amount of the salaries and benefits portion of the FSE budget request slightly each year, resulting in small cumulative increases in the number of FTEs for NNSA over time.

- **Challenges in hiring and training a large number of staff.** According to NNSA officials, the agency cannot hire all the people it needs in one year due to challenges in hiring and training such a large number of staff. The officials said they develop budget justifications that include a reasonable increase in FTEs each year. According to these officials, NNSA plans to address the shortfall of staff by increasing FTE requests over time. Specifically, NNSA’s budget justifications reflect an increase of 186 FTEs to a total of 2,166 FTEs from fiscal years 2024 to 2026, or a 4 to 5 percent increase in FTEs each year over that period.

Additionally, while NNSA has conducted ad hoc studies in the past, according to NNSA officials, the agency has not fully integrated detailed workforce planning into the budget process. For example, an official from the NNSA Office of Defense Programs said that NNSA needs to better understand the factors driving its workload and use that information to inform the staffing levels included in its budget requests. Additionally, officials from the NNSA Office of Defense Nuclear Nonproliferation indicated that, with additional information on workforce needs, NNSA could better justify its resource needs to Congress.

In addition to budget requests for NNSA not fully reflecting identified staffing needs, NNSA’s appropriations for the FSE account were generally slightly less than the President’s requests in fiscal years 2013 through 2023. For example, in fiscal year 2019, NNSA’s appropriation for the FSE account was about 3 percent less than the amount requested. According to NNSA officials, because appropriations for the FSE account have generally been less than the budget request, it will take many years

²⁸The FSE account includes funding for federal salaries and benefits, travel, support services, and other related expenses.

for the agency to reach the staffing levels recommended by the 2020 study.

NNSA Developed an Ongoing Process That Officials Expect Will Provide Additional Data to Inform Future Budget Requests

In March 2023, CEPE initiated a workforce planning process that is intended to provide additional data on staffing needs on an ongoing basis to help inform budget requests, starting with the fiscal year 2026 budget request. Specifically, CEPE is working with the program, functional, mission-enabling, and field offices to

- identify the key drivers of NNSA's workload,
- determine how to align NNSA federal staff to the workload, and
- develop workforce plans that will inform the allocation of FTEs through the budget process.²⁹

CEPE officials said that the workforce planning process will provide additional data on staffing needs across NNSA's offices—including identifying changes in staffing needs from year to year—that will help NNSA better justify the staffing levels and corresponding resources needed to support those levels in the President's budget request. For example, the objective of the workforce planning process is to identify the full set of mission requirements at the office level. According to officials from NNSA's Office of Management and Budget, identifying these requirements at the office level would allow NNSA to make a stronger business case around staffing needs and the trade-offs involved in making resource decisions, with the goal of having future budget requests better reflect identified needs.

NNSA also has another initiative in place that may have implications for the roles and responsibilities of its federal workforce. Specifically, in September 2022, NNSA finalized an internal report titled *Evolving the*

²⁹According to CEPE officials, the process is informed by the workforce planning principles in a November 2022 OPM Guide. One of the key principles in the guide is conducting an analysis of the workforce to identify current and future skill gaps—consistent with GAO's workforce planning principles. A skill gap can result from an agency having an insufficient number of staff to complete its work, such as not having enough contracting officers, or an agency having individuals without the appropriate skills, abilities, or behaviors to successfully perform the work. See OPM, *Workforce Planning Guide*, November 2022.

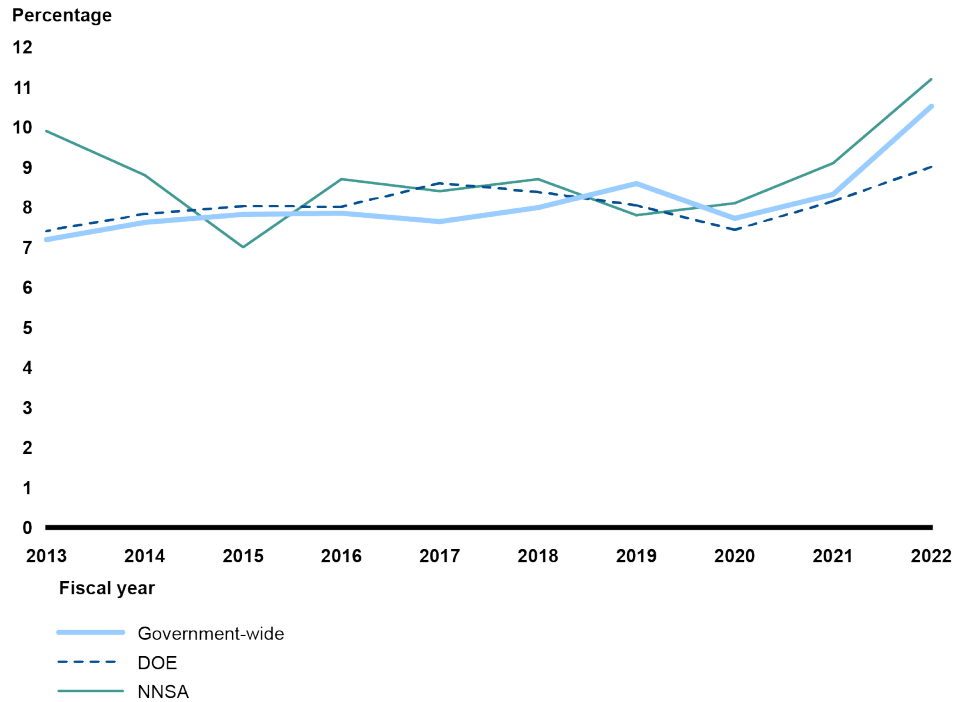
Nuclear Security Enterprise: A Report of the Enhanced Mission Delivery Initiative. The report made several recommendations that involve potentially reducing federal staff's direction of contractors. For example, the report recommended that NNSA should consider delegating greater decision authority to M&O contractors for operations. While the ultimate effect—if any—of this initiative on NNSA's federal workforce, including its workload, is unclear, NNSA officials said they will consider the results of the initiative in carrying out the broader workforce planning process.

NNSA Is Taking Some Actions to Address Challenges Recruiting and Retaining Federal Staff but Is Not Fully Addressing Its Challenges

NNSA Faces Challenges Recruiting and Retaining Staff

Based on our analysis of NNSA data and interviews with officials from OHR and 23 NNSA offices, NNSA faces several challenges recruiting and retaining staff. For example, data on NNSA's federal staff show that from fiscal years 2013 through 2022, NNSA's rate of agency-level attrition has generally been higher than either DOE's rate of agency-level attrition or the government-wide rate (see fig. 4). Agency-level attrition indicates the percentage of staff who left federal employment and staff who transferred to a different federal agency.

Figure 4: National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA), Department of Energy (DOE), and Government-Wide Agency-Level Attrition Rates, Fiscal Years 2013–2022



Source: GAO analysis of NNSA and Office of Personnel Management (government-wide and DOE) data. | GAO-24-106167

Accessible Data for Figure 4: National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA), Department of Energy (DOE), and Government-Wide Agency-Level Attrition Rates, Fiscal Years 2013–2022

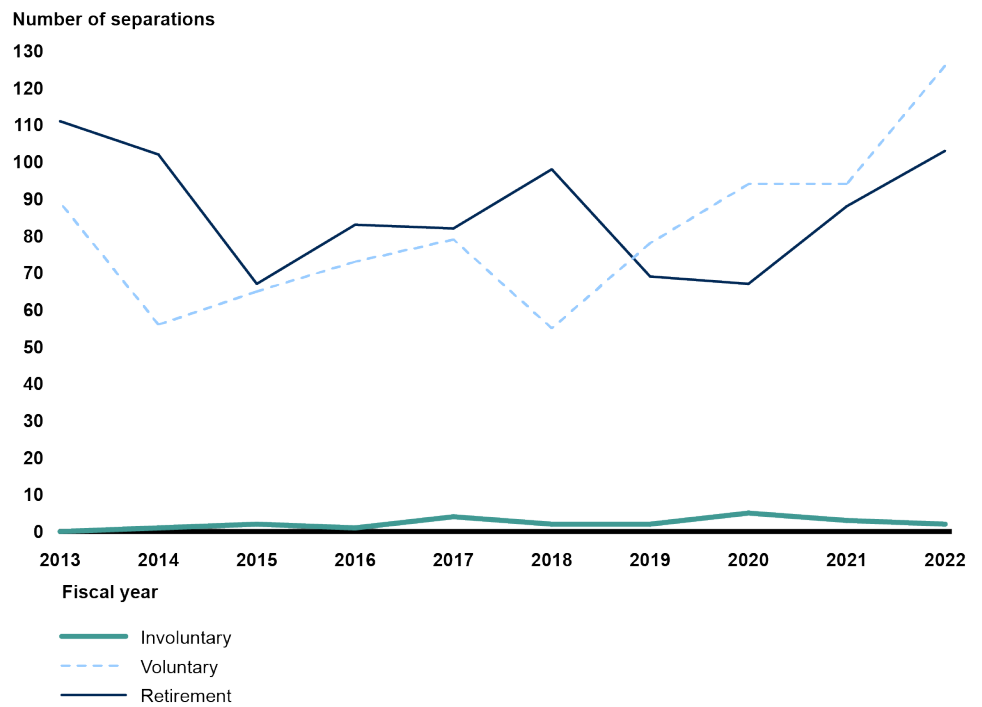
Fiscal Year	Government-wide	DOE	NNSA
2013	7.19%	7.41%	9.90%
2014	7.62%	7.83%	8.80%
2015	7.82%	8.03%	7.00%
2016	7.85%	8.01%	8.70%
2017	7.64%	8.60%	8.40%
2018	7.99%	8.38%	8.70%
2019	8.59%	8.05%	7.80%
2020	7.72%	7.44%	8.10%
2021	8.32%	8.15%	9.10%
2022	10.52%	9.01%	11.20%

Source: GAO analysis of NNSA and Office of Personnel Management (government-wide and DOE) data. | GAO-24-106167

Note: Agency-level attrition indicates the percentage of staff who left federal employment and staff who transferred to a different federal agency.

NNSA data also show that an increasing number of federal staff are leaving or separating from NNSA voluntarily rather than due to retirement. Specifically, NNSA data show about 1,700 staff left the agency in fiscal years 2013 through 2022. About half (51 percent) of those staff retired. The others separated from NNSA either voluntarily (48 percent) or involuntarily (1 percent).³⁰ Since fiscal year 2018, the number of staff who voluntarily separated from NNSA has been increasing and began exceeding the number of staff who retired during fiscal year 2019 (see fig. 5).

Figure 5: National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) Separations, by Reason, Fiscal Years 2013–2022



Source: GAO analysis of NNSA data. | GAO-24-106167

³⁰Involuntary separations include removal based on unsatisfactory performance, misconduct, delinquency, suitability, or failure to qualify for a conversion to a career appointment. This includes staff who resign upon receiving notice of action based on their performance or misconduct. Voluntary separations include all other separations that are not involuntary or retirements.

Accessible Data for Figure 5: National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) Separations, by Reason, Fiscal Years 2013–2022

Fiscal Year	Involuntary	Voluntary	Retirement
2013	0	89	111
2014	1	56	102
2015	2	65	67
2016	1	73	83
2017	4	79	82
2018	2	55	98
2019	2	78	69
2020	5	94	67
2021	3	94	88
2022	2	126	103

Source: GAO analysis of NNSA data. | GAO-24-106167

Note: Involuntary separations include removal based on unsatisfactory performance, misconduct, delinquency, suitability, or failure to qualify for a conversion to a career appointment. This includes staff who resign upon receiving notice based on their performance or misconduct. Voluntary separations include all other separations that are not involuntary or retirements.

In addition, during our interviews, officials told us they face several challenges recruiting and retaining staff. These challenges include workload and staffing challenges, difficulty matching the compensation and benefits other employers offer or competing for certain skills, and challenges associated with recruiting and retaining staff at certain locations.

Workload and staffing challenges. Recent results from NNSA’s FEVS suggest some employees have concerns about workload and staffing level. Specifically, survey items related to continually changing work priorities, the reasonableness of staff’s workload, and the pressure staff are under to meet work goals were among the most negatively rated, and the agency’s report cites these areas as challenges.³¹

Documentation OHR provided from NNSA’s recent exit surveys also indicates that some staff who recently left NNSA reported not having enough personnel in program areas to accomplish the mission and a lack

³¹FEVS is a survey offered by OPM that provides insights into federal staff’s perceptions of whether, and to what extent, conditions characterizing successful organizations are present in their agencies.

of work-life balance due to inadequate staffing levels.³² During our interviews, officials from more than half of NNSA's offices also cited workload or staffing challenges as factors that make recruiting and retaining staff challenging for NNSA.

Difficulty matching the pay and benefits other employers offer or competing for certain skills. Officials from more than half of the 23 NNSA offices we interviewed told us matching the pay and benefits other employers offer is difficult or has contributed to recruitment and retention challenges. Officials from NNSA's offices identified positions that can be challenging to recruit, which ranged from specialized and technical positions to attorneys and support staff. NNSA officials told us they compete with the high-tech sector for qualified staff and that it is difficult to recruit and retain staff for positions that are in demand across the federal government. Officials also told us too few candidates apply for certain positions or offices and that they have been unable to fill some positions due to not having enough qualified candidates.³³

Challenges associated with recruiting and retaining staff at certain locations. Officials told us it has been challenging to recruit and retain staff at certain NNSA offices due to their location. Factors such as the cost of living at Los Alamos, New Mexico, and Livermore, California, and the inability to offer remote work at locations due to the nature of aspects of NNSA's work contribute to recruitment and retention challenges, according to NNSA officials.

NNSA Is Taking Some Actions to Address Its Recruitment and Retention Challenges

Based on our interviews with OHR and NNSA officials, NNSA's actions to address these challenges have focused on using its excepted service hiring authority, offering incentive payments, increasing participation in

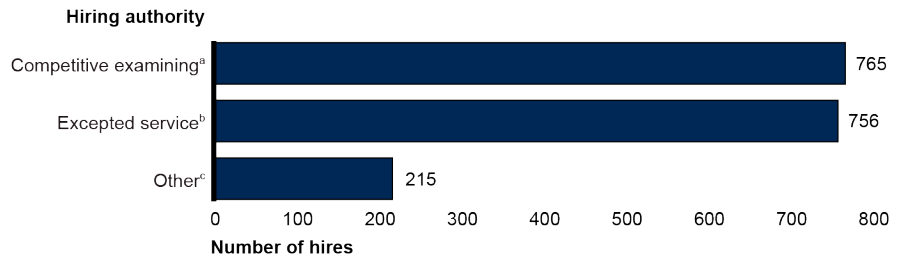
³²The exit survey information we reviewed covered the period March 2021 through December 2022. NNSA described these concerns as overarching comments on why staff have left NNSA but did not indicate how many staff shared these concerns.

³³We have previously testified that staffing shortages not only affect individual agencies but also cut across the entire federal workforce in areas such as cybersecurity and acquisition management. See GAO, *Human Capital: Improving Federal Recruiting and Hiring Efforts*, [GAO-19-696T](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 30, 2019). See also [GAO-23-106203](#).

recruiting and outreach events, using internship programs, and emphasizing the importance of NNSA’s mission.

Using NNSA’s excepted service hiring authority. In fiscal years 2013 through 2022, NNSA hired 1,736 staff for federal positions funded from its FSE account. NNSA used competitive examining (765 positions) or other government-wide hiring authorities (215 positions) to fill 56 percent of the positions, or slightly more than half, and its excepted service hiring authority (756 positions) to fill the others (see fig. 6).³⁴ NNSA’s excepted service hiring authority allows NNSA to hire staff without having to adhere to certain competitive examining procedures, among other civil service requirements.³⁵

Figure 6: National Nuclear Security Administration’s (NNSA) Use of Hiring Authorities, by Type, Fiscal Years 2013–2022



Source: GAO analysis of NNSA data. | GAO-24-106167

Accessible Data for Figure 6: National Nuclear Security Administration’s (NNSA) Use of Hiring Authorities, by Type, Fiscal Years 2013–2022

Hiring Authority	Number of hires
Competitive Examining ^a	765

³⁴A hiring authority is a law, regulation, or executive order that allows an agency to hire an individual into the federal civil service. Hiring authorities determine the rules that agencies must follow throughout the hiring process, such as whether a vacancy must be announced, who is eligible to apply, and how applicants will be assessed. Competitive examining is generally viewed as the traditional method for federal hiring. The competitive examining process requires agencies to notify the public that the government will accept applications for a job; screen applications; apply selection priorities such as veterans’ preference; and assess applicants’ knowledge, skills, and abilities against job-related criteria to identify the most qualified applicants. Other government-wide hiring authorities include, for example, authorities that allow for certain exceptions from the competitive examining process for hiring persons with disabilities and veterans.

³⁵50 U.S.C. § 2441.

Hiring Authority	Number of hires
Excepted Service ^b	756
Other ^c	215

Source: GAO analysis of NNSA data. | GAO-24-106167

^aCompetitive examining is generally viewed as the traditional method for federal hiring. Vacancies are open to the public and candidates are ranked and selected based on their qualifications. Veterans' preferences apply.

^bNNSA's excepted service hiring authority allows it to establish up to 1,200 positions in specific occupational series without adhering to certain civil service requirements and competitive examining procedures. 50 U.S.C. § 2441.

^cIncludes government-wide hiring authorities for hiring persons with disabilities and veterans, among others.

NNSA's excepted service authority allows it to establish up to 1,200 positions in contracting, program management, scientific, engineering, and technical occupational series and appoint candidates to those positions.³⁶ NNSA periodically reviews the occupational series covered by this authority and can revise the list of occupational series that are eligible for excepted service appointments. NNSA last revised this list in 2021, when it added the Environmental Protection Specialist series and the Security Administration series to its list of eligible occupational series. NNSA's authority also allows it to pay staff commensurate with their experience and qualifications, with a rate of basic pay (excluding locality pay) up to Level IV of the Executive Schedule pay scale.³⁷

Offering incentive payments. NNSA has offered recruitment, relocation, and retention incentive payments to recruit or retain staff, as allowed for under law.³⁸ NNSA policy allows for the use of incentive payments when the agency determines traditional recruiting efforts have been or are likely to be unsuccessful in yielding a competent and qualified staff.³⁹ OHR officials told us NNSA makes incentive payments for positions it

³⁶In December 2023, Congress increased the number of positions NNSA could establish using this authority from 800 to 1,200. National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2024, Pub. L. No. 118-31, § 3114, 137 Stat. 136, 790 (2023) (codified at 50 U.S.C. § 2441).

³⁷The Executive Schedule includes many of the most senior positions in the federal government. It is composed of five pay levels, which as of January 2024 range from Level I (\$246,400 annually) to Level V (\$180,000 annually). Under NNSA's authority, the maximum rate of basic pay (excluding locality pay) is \$191,900, which corresponds with Level IV of the Executive Schedule pay scale for 2024.

³⁸See 5 U.S.C. §§ 5753, 5754; 5 C.F.R. pt. 575, subpts. A, B, C.

³⁹NNSA, Supplemental Directive 322.1-2, *Recruitment, Relocation, and Retention Incentive Program* (Apr. 26, 2023).

determines are difficult to fill, such as contracting, cybersecurity, and information technology positions, among others. To be eligible to receive an incentive payment, individuals must meet certain eligibility criteria specified in NNSA policy and sign a written service agreement to complete a specified period of employment with NNSA.

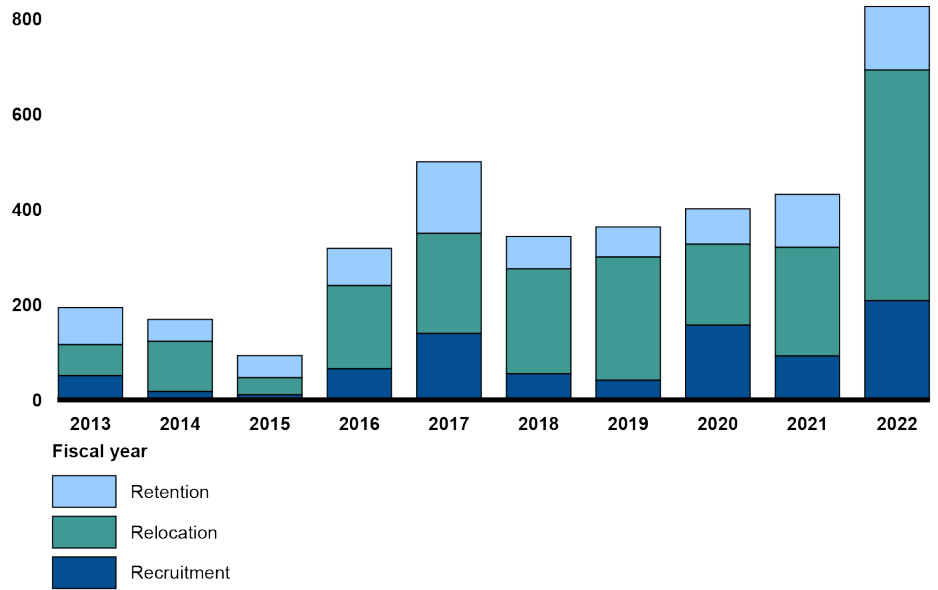
NNSA funds incentive payments from the agency's FSE account, and payments may be made as either a lump sum or in installments. NNSA may make incentive payments of up to 25 percent of an individual's annual rate of basic pay, or more than 25 percent with authorization from OPM.⁴⁰

Based on our analysis, NNSA's use of incentive payments increased from fiscal year 2013 to 2022 and almost doubled from fiscal year 2021 to 2022 (see fig. 7). During this time, NNSA paid a total of more than \$3.6 million in incentive payments to its staff. Almost half (47 percent) of the total amount went to NNSA staff working at the agency's field offices, with staff at the Los Alamos Field Office accounting for 22 percent of the total amount. According to NNSA officials, recruiting and retaining staff at Los Alamos has been challenging due to its remote location, among other challenges.

⁴⁰NNSA may make recruitment and relocation incentive payments of up to 25 percent of an individual's annual rate of basic pay in effect at the beginning of the service period multiplied by the number of years in the service period (not to exceed 4 years). With OPM approval, this cap may be increased to 50 percent (based on a critical agency need), as long as the total incentive does not exceed 100 percent of the individual's annual rate of basic pay at the beginning of the service period.

Figure 7: National Nuclear Security Administration’s (NNSA) Spending on Incentive Payments, by Type, Fiscal Years 2013–2022

Dollars (in thousands)
1,000



Source: GAO analysis of NNSA data. | GAO-24-106167

Accessible Data for Figure 7: National Nuclear Security Administration’s (NNSA) Spending on Incentive Payments, by Type, Fiscal Years 2013–2022

Fiscal Year	Recruitment	Relocation	Retention
2013	50.0	65	77.8
2014	16.7	105.3	46.3
2015	10	35.5	46.8
2016	64.2	174.9	78.2
2017	138.6	210.1	150.3
2018	53.8	220.5	68.0
2019	40.4	258.7	63.1
2020	155.8	170.3	74.3
2021	91.4	227.9	111.4
2022	207.5	484.0	133.5

Source: GAO analysis of NNSA data. | GAO-24-106167

Expanding eligibility for student loan repayments. NNSA has also used its student loan repayment program as an incentive to recruit

candidates and, beginning in 2022, to retain staff. According to NNSA policy, NNSA's goal is to use its student loan repayment program in a judicious manner and with the intent of recruiting candidates or retaining staff that have high or unique qualifications.⁴¹ According to OHR officials, NNSA processed 16 requests for student loan repayments for fiscal year 2022, and 45 requests for fiscal year 2023, following expansion of its program.

For an individual to receive a student loan repayment, both the individual's supervisor (or requesting official) and OHR must determine that a student loan repayment is appropriate, and NNSA must approve the request. Payments are paid directly to the individuals' lender on a biweekly basis. Participants in the student loan repayment program must sign a service agreement of 3 to 5 years, depending on the amount of the payment. Agreements can be extended up to a maximum allowable amount of \$60,000 per staff member.

Increasing participation in recruiting and outreach events. NNSA has increased its presence at recruiting and outreach events in recent years to highlight to the public the work the agency does. NNSA established a recruiting team in 2020 and has participated in dozens of events over the last 3 years, according to OHR officials. This includes participating virtually and, beginning in 2022, in person at science, technology, engineering, and math conferences and career fairs, events focusing on historically Black colleges and universities and other minority serving institutions, and regional events at local colleges and universities. According to OHR officials, participating in these events allows NNSA to interact directly with thousands of potential job applicants each year.

Using internship programs. NNSA has used its internship programs as a tool to recruit staff. NNSA offers multiple programs for students and young professionals, including the NNSA Graduate Fellowship Program, which was established in 1995, and recruits master's and doctoral students from colleges and universities nationwide.⁴² The program provides participants with technical and policy experience for a career in

⁴¹NNSA, Supplemental Directive 322.1, *Student Loan Repayment Program* (May 20, 2022).

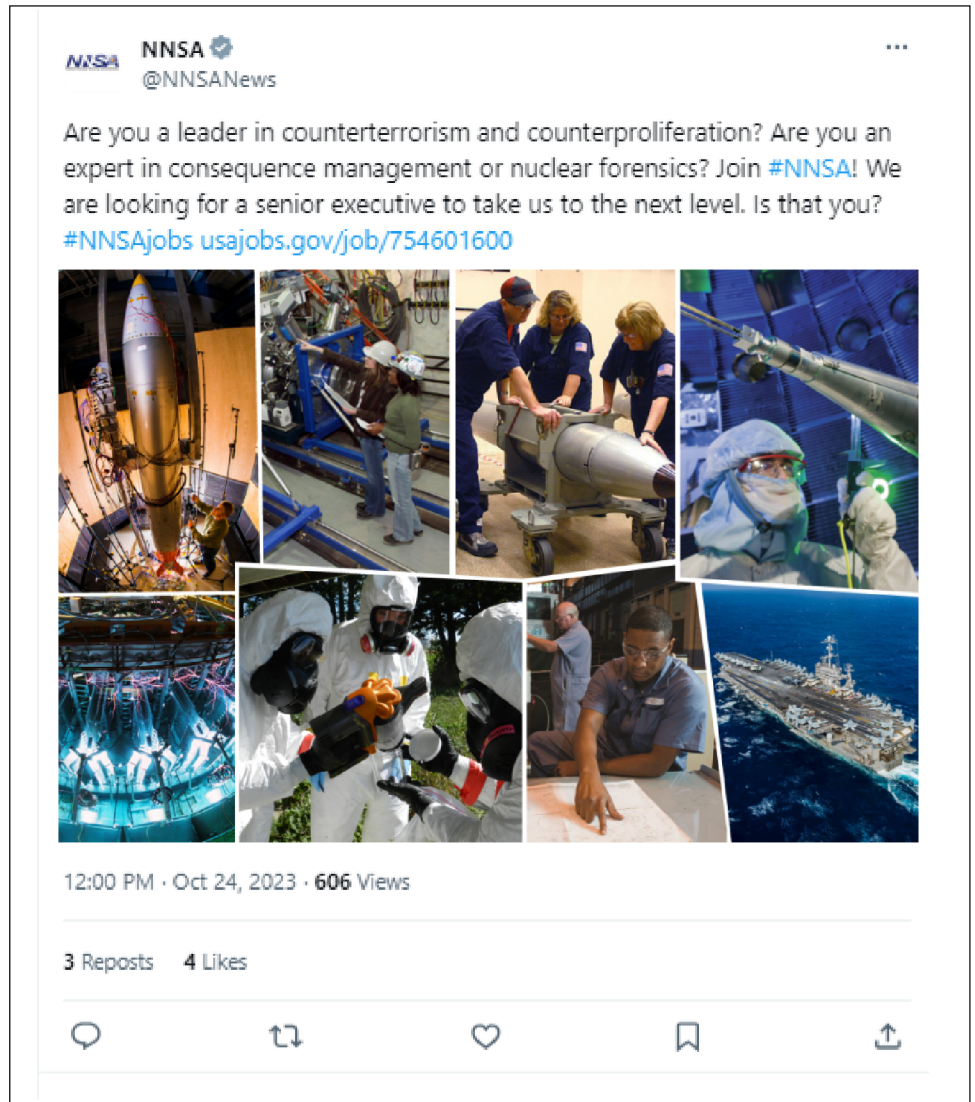
⁴²The Pacific Northwest National Laboratory, which is a government-owned and contractor-operated national laboratory, administers the NNSA Graduate Fellowship Program on behalf of NNSA.

national security.⁴³ For the last three cohorts of the program, about 35 percent of the participants accepted federal positions with NNSA. The majority of the others accepted positions with the M&O contractors or entities with ties to national security, such as the Departments of Defense or State. In 2022, NNSA also established an internship program that focuses on minority serving institutions, such as historically Black colleges and universities, Hispanic-serving institutions, and tribal colleges and universities. About 90 interns participated in the inaugural class, and NNSA expects participation in the program will grow in future years.

Emphasizing the importance of NNSA's mission. OHR officials told us that NNSA has emphasized the importance of its mission when recruiting. For example, officials told us NNSA ensures that its recruitment materials and job postings prominently feature NNSA's missions to enhance national security through the application of science and technology and that senior leaders actively participate in recruiting and outreach events. Additionally, NNSA has emphasized this message as part of other recruitment actions, such as social media posts (see fig. 8). According to officials, these actions help emphasize to potential applicants the importance of the work NNSA does.

⁴³This includes NNSA and its M&O contractors, the International Atomic Energy Agency, the Departments of Defense and State, and the National Security Council, among others.

Figure 8: Example of National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) Social Media Post That Emphasizes the Importance of Its Mission When Recruiting



Source: NNSA X, formerly known as Twitter, account. | GAO-24-106167

NNSA Is Not Fully Addressing Its Challenges Because It Does Not Leverage Some Available Information

Although NNSA is taking a number of actions to address its recruitment and retention challenges, it is not fully addressing its challenges because it does not leverage some information that is available to the agency.

Specifically, NNSA does not always share information about its recruitment and retention challenges across the agency, regularly assess the outcomes of its actions to address its challenges, or ensure the effectiveness of action planning to address its challenges.

Not always sharing information across the agency. NNSA may not be fully addressing its recruitment and retention challenges because NNSA offices are not always aware of the challenges the agency faces. According to OHR officials, NNSA's program, functional, mission-enabling, and field offices share responsibility with OHR for addressing the agency's recruitment and retention challenges. NNSA officials also told us each office can face its own unique challenges and these challenges may require different strategies to address them. However, information on those challenges is not always shared across the agency to help ensure that both NNSA offices and OHR can address them.

Specifically, OHR has information that NNSA obtains from exit surveys regarding the agency's recruitment and retention challenges and why staff leave the agency. NNSA's exit surveys collect information from staff who leave the agency regarding why they are leaving and what they liked about the agency, among other things. OHR officials told us about half of departing staff respond to these surveys and that OHR reviews the responses it receives quarterly. As discussed previously, NNSA's recent exit surveys indicate that some staff who recently left NNSA reported not having enough personnel in program areas to accomplish the mission and a lack of work-life balance due to inadequate staffing levels.

OHR provides agencywide results of the exit surveys to the offices quarterly, with additional information for the specific office when an office has at least four surveys completed. However, based on our interviews, officials involved with recruiting and retention in the offices were not always aware of the information from the exit surveys. For example, officials from some offices told us they have not received any information from NNSA's exit surveys or have had to rely on anecdotal information to understand why staff have left the agency. According to one official, his office must guess why staff have left because they do not receive such information from OHR.

Additionally, NNSA offices may have information on the agency's recruitment and retention challenges or why staff leave the agency that has not been shared with OHR. For example, an official from one office told us he initiated office-specific exit interviews with staff that leave his

office to understand why. However, the information he collects is not shared with OHR, where it could be aggregated and analyzed.

Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government states that management should use quality information to achieve an entity's objectives, and management should internally communicate the necessary quality information to achieve the entity's objectives.⁴⁴ Further, we have previously found that agencies can benefit from establishing a continuing process for systematically analyzing and sharing information on recruitment and retention challenges and why staff leave to help address those challenges.⁴⁵ If NNSA developed such a process for sharing information on challenges related to recruiting and retaining staff, both NNSA offices and OHR—who share responsibility for recruiting and retention—would be better positioned to understand those challenges and implement effective solutions to address them.

Not regularly assessing outcomes of actions to address challenges.

NNSA also may not be fully addressing its recruitment and retention challenges because it has not regularly assessed the outcomes of its actions to address those challenges and determined if the agency's actions have been effective. Specifically, NNSA has established and uses some recruitment- and retention-related performance measures. Most of those measures focus, however, on the outputs or what NNSA produces because of its actions, rather than the outcomes. For example, OHR tracks information on

- the number of people NNSA hires from within and outside of NNSA,
- the number of net agency hires (people hired from outside NNSA minus losses),
- the number of personnel or hiring actions in progress,
- how long it takes to hire new staff, and

⁴⁴[GAO-14-704G](#).

⁴⁵In 2018, we found that U.S. Customs and Border Protection did not have a systematic process for capturing and analyzing information on law enforcement officers who were leaving the agency. As a result, the agency did not have important information it could use to address retention challenges. The agency subsequently took steps to implement an agencywide exit survey, use that survey to collect and analyze data on why staff left the agency, and align agency initiatives to address its recruitment challenges with the key reasons staff cited for leaving the agency. See GAO, *U.S. Customs and Border Protection: Progress and Challenges in Recruiting, Hiring, and Retaining Law Enforcement Personnel*, [GAO-18-487](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 27, 2018).

- offices' staffing levels.

OHR officials also told us they track information on NNSA's use of incentives and the number of resumes NNSA collects at the events it attends, among other things. However, beyond these metrics, NNSA has not assessed the outcomes of all the actions it is taking—such as the return on investment of using incentives—to address its recruitment and retention challenges on a regular and recurring basis.

Our prior work has shown that high-performing organizations measure both the outcomes of their actions and how those outcomes help accomplish their missions.⁴⁶ Those assessments should be done on regular and recurring basis. Regularly assessing the results of the agency's recruitment and retention actions using outcome-based performance measures could help decision-makers determine whether NNSA's actions are achieving the desired results or whether other actions are needed.

Not ensuring the effectiveness of action planning. NNSA has not taken steps to ensure the effectiveness of the action plans that offices develop to address concerns raised in their FEVS results and that can lead to retention challenges. As discussed previously, NNSA's recent FEVS results suggest some staff view continually changing work priorities, the reasonableness of their workload, and the pressure they are under to meet work goals as challenges. Following the administration of the 2022 FEVS, NNSA's Office of Learning and Career Management provided NNSA offices with recommendations to address their FEVS results.⁴⁷ It also requested, but did not require, that NNSA offices develop action plans or update plans they had completed the previous year to help address their results. To further assist offices, the Office of Learning and Career Management also provided NNSA offices with a template that could be used to develop action plans with specific, measurable actions;

⁴⁶See [GAO-04-39](#). In addition, we have previously found that agencies can benefit by establishing such measures. See, for example, GAO, *Quantum Technologies: Defense Laboratories Should Take Steps to Improve Workforce Planning*, [GAO-24-106284](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 5, 2023); *State Department: Additional Actions Needed to Address IT Workforce Challenges*, [GAO-22-105932](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 12, 2022); and *FDA Workforce: Agency-Wide Workforce Planning Needed to Ensure Medical Product Staff Meet Current and Future Needs*, [GAO-22-104791](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 14, 2022).

⁴⁷The Office of Learning and Career Management is located within NNSA's Office of Management and Budget.

due dates with realistic time frames for completing actions; and measures that define success.

Based on our review of offices' action plans, we found that some plans did not address elements of the template provided, such as identifying actions, time frames for completing actions, or measures that define success. Some plans also had not been updated from the previous year. Office of Learning and Career Management officials told us they took steps to follow up with offices by scheduling meetings to discuss challenges offices face and the resources available to support them. However, the Office of Learning and Career Management does not monitor offices' progress implementing action plans, and at the time of our review, we found that few offices were taking steps to implement their plans.

Action planning is a strategic tool that agencies can use to help address retention challenges. To assist agencies following the administration of the FEVS, OPM provides a communication guide that offers ideas and resources that represent a collection of widely accepted approaches and best practices across federal agencies.⁴⁸ This includes creating or updating an action plan and monitoring progress. DOE has also issued a guide that notes the importance of creating an action plan and monitoring progress in response to the FEVS.⁴⁹ DOE's guide states that it is critical to, among other things, capture staff's responses to improvements. However, NNSA cannot accomplish this because it has not established a process to monitor offices' progress taking action to address staff's concerns.

We have previously found that agencies can benefit from establishing processes to ensure that action planning is effective in response to their

⁴⁸OPM, *OPM Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey Communications Guide Part II: Post Survey and Action Planning* (Oct. 12, 2022).

⁴⁹DOE, Office of Talent Management: *Employee Engagement Playbook* (September 2019).

FEVS results.⁵⁰ According to officials from the Office of Learning and Career Management, they do not have enough people and resources to follow up on the status of offices' actions and monitor their progress. Officials told us they hope to hire an additional staff member to support these efforts. However, a process to monitor offices' progress does not necessarily require additional people or resources. Such a process could be established, for example, by tracking initiatives or discussing the status of initiatives during regularly occurring meetings on other workforce issues that officials responsible for implementing the initiatives already attend. Without establishing a process to monitor offices' progress toward implementing their action plans, concerns that NNSA staff have expressed about their jobs and their work experience may persist. Not establishing a process could also exacerbate the agency's retention challenges because staff may feel that NNSA is not addressing their concerns.

Conclusions

NNSA's federal workforce is responsible for overseeing tens of thousands of contractors that help carry out work related to the nation's nuclear stockpile and nonproliferation efforts. Like other entities in the federal government, NNSA faces challenges recruiting and retaining the staff it needs to accomplish its missions. However, offices within NNSA are not always aware of the full scope of challenges the agency faces recruiting and retaining staff because information is not always shared across the agency. Developing a process to systematically analyze and share that information could help ensure that the offices responsible for addressing those challenges—NNSA's OHR and the program, functional, mission-enabling, and field offices—can implement effective solutions.

While NNSA has undertaken a number of actions to address its recruitment and retention challenges, it has not assessed the outcomes of its actions using outcome-based performance measures on a regular and

⁵⁰In 2021, we found that the Department of Homeland Security had not taken sufficient steps to ensure that its action planning was effective, in part because the department had delegated action planning efforts to its components and did not follow up. As a result, the department did not have a process to ensure its components were taking action. The department subsequently took steps to issue written guidance that includes, among other things, the mechanisms the department will use to monitor the implementation of action plans. See GAO, *DHS Employee Morale: Some Improvements Made, but Additional Actions Needed to Strengthen Employee Engagement*, [GAO-21-204](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 12, 2021).

recurring basis. By regularly assessing its actions using outcome-based performance measures, NNSA could better understand whether its current actions are achieving the desired results or whether others are needed. Further, while the Office of Learning and Career Management has provided offices with information that they could use to develop action plans to help address staff's concerns, it has not monitored their progress in taking action. If NNSA offices are not doing their part to ensure their actions are addressing staff's concerns, such issues may persist and could exacerbate the agency's retention challenges and negatively affect staff morale.

Recommendations for Executive Action

We are making the following three recommendations to NNSA:

The Director of the NNSA Office of Human Resources should collaborate with relevant stakeholders—including program, functional, mission-enabling, and field offices—to develop a continuing process for systematically analyzing and sharing information agencywide on challenges recruiting and retaining staff. (Recommendation 1)

The Director of the NNSA Office of Human Resources should regularly assess the results of NNSA's recruitment and retention actions using outcome-based performance measures. (Recommendation 2)

The Director of the NNSA Office of Learning and Career Management should establish a process to monitor offices' progress implementing actions to address the results of their Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey results. (Recommendation 3)

Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

We provided a draft of this report to NNSA and OPM for review and comment. NNSA provided written comments, which are reprinted in appendix I and summarized below. In its comments, NNSA stated that it agreed in principle with our three recommendations and described the actions that NNSA plans to take to address the recommendations. NNSA and OPM also provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate.

Regarding recommendation 1 that OHR should collaborate with relevant stakeholders to develop a continuing process for systematically analyzing and sharing information agencywide on challenges recruiting and retaining staff, NNSA stated that OHR will review its communication and distribution processes to identify potential opportunities to enhance awareness and use of available information.

We are encouraged by NNSA's planned efforts to identify opportunities to improve its existing processes for sharing information agencywide on challenges recruiting and retaining staff. We continue to believe that developing an agencywide process for analyzing and sharing this information is important. As our report states, NNSA offices are not always aware of the information that OHR has and NNSA offices also may have information that has not been shared with OHR. We continue to believe that implementing our recommendation will better position both OHR and NNSA offices to understand those challenges and implement effective solutions to address them.

Regarding recommendation 2 that OHR should regularly assess the results of NNSA's recruitment and retention actions using outcome-based performance measures, NNSA plans to document its strategies for using performance measures to assess the results of its recruitment and retention actions and develop standard operating procedures for recruitment. We are encouraged by NNSA's plans and continue to believe that regularly assessing the results of NNSA's recruitment and retention actions using outcome-based performance measures could help NNSA determine whether its actions are achieving the desired results or whether other actions are needed.

Regarding recommendation 3 that the Office of Learning and Career Management should establish a process to monitor offices' progress implementing actions to address the results of their FEVS results, NNSA stated that it is taking action to establish a more structured process for monitoring the implementation of offices' actions and will work to identify additional opportunities to document more fully and enhance its existing processes. We look forward to seeing the outcomes of NNSA's efforts.

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Administrator of NNSA, and the Acting Director of OPM. In addition, this report is available at no charge on the GAO website at <http://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff members have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-3841 or bawdena@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 significant contributions to the report are listed in appendix II.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Allison Bawden". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Allison Bawden
Director, Natural Resources and Environment

Appendix I: Comments from the National Nuclear Security Administration

**Appendix I: Comments from the National
Nuclear Security Administration**



Department of Energy
Under Secretary for Nuclear Security
Administrator, National Nuclear Security Administration
Washington, DC 20585



April 30, 2024

Ms. Allison B. Bawden
Director, Natural Resources
and Environment
U.S. Government Accountability Office
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Ms. Bawden:

Thank you for the opportunity to review the Government Accountability Office (GAO) draft report "National Nuclear Security Administration: Actions to Recruit and Retain Federal Staff Could Be Improved" (GAO-24-106167). The Department of Energy's National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) continues to be proactive in addressing the challenges we face with recruiting and retaining the highly skilled federal workforce needed to accomplish NNSA's nuclear security missions. NNSA appreciates the report's acknowledgement of the strategic actions NNSA has taken to address these challenges while balancing resource requirements and other operating constraints, including ongoing actions that will help support future decisions and direction, such as the Strategic Workforce Planning Assessment.

The enclosed Management Decision outlines the specific actions taken and planned to address GAO's observations and recommendations, which highlight potential opportunities to enhance existing processes. NNSA's subject matter experts have also provided technical and general comments under separate cover for your consideration to improve the clarity and accuracy of the report. If you have any questions about this response, please contact Dean Childs, Director, Audits and Internal Affairs, at (202) 836-3327.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jill H".

Jill Hruby

Enclosure

Enclosure

NATIONAL NUCLEAR SECURITY ADMINISTRATION
Management Decision

**“National Nuclear Security Administration: Actions to Recruit and Retain Federal Staff
Could Be Improved” (GAO-24-106167)**

The Government Accountability Office recommends the Department of Energy’s National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA):

Recommendation 1: Collaborate with relevant stakeholders—including program, functional, mission-enabling, and field offices—to develop a continuing process for systematically analyzing and sharing information agencywide on challenges recruiting and retaining staff.

Management Response: Agree in Principle. NNSA’s Office of Human Resources (OHR) has an established process to systematically analyze and share recruitment and retention information agency wide. Since 2021, OHR has used an automated exit survey tool to capture comprehensive data from departing employees who elect to complete the survey. General agency-wide results are provided to all NNSA elements, while organization specific data is also provided to offices with at least four departing employees during the survey period. The reports are issued quarterly and provide benchmarks for the rest of NNSA and the government as a whole to help program offices develop their recruitment and retention strategies and address any workplace opportunities that may be revealed. NNSA’s written exit survey process also encourages all supervisors and managers to directly solicit feedback and to promote employee participation in the exit survey process, along with utilizing both program-specific data and NNSA-wide data in their internal strategic discussions. Where supervisors directly solicit and obtain feedback from employees, those results may be forwarded to the survey coordinator for inclusion in Departmental results. OHR also sends out bi-weekly staffing reports to agency leaders which outline key information such as onboarding and offboarding statistics, attrition rates for other than retirements, status of open recruitment actions, and the utilization rate for various hiring authorities.

While NNSA has a robust process in place, OHR will review its communication and distribution processes to identify any potential opportunities to enhance awareness and use of available information. The estimated date for completing these enhancements is September 30, 2024.

Recommendation 2: Regularly assess the results of NNSA’s recruitment and retention actions using outcome-based performance measures.

Management Response: Agree in Principle. OHR has established measures for determining performance outcomes for NNSA’s recruitment and retention efforts, which capture information on the use of recruitment events, incentives, internship programs, and various other strategies. For example, these measures were used to assess the best mechanisms for targeting critical skill sets for potential talent pools and to demonstrate which recruitment events have been successful by yielding the best outcomes (e.g., return on investment, impact on hiring). However, OHR will fully consider the observations in the report to evaluate any potential new metrics and will

**Appendix I: Comments from the National
Nuclear Security Administration**

Enclosure

more formally document its strategies for using performance measures to assess recruitment and retention. This will include strategies for: a) use of hiring authorities and incentives; b) assessing which recruitment and outreach events yield the most viable candidates and applicants for NNSA; and c) working with the Office of Learning and Career Management (LCM) to gauge the success or growth of the internship programs and their impact on permanent hires. OHR is also developing specific recruiting standard operation procedures which will include outcome-oriented goals and measures. The estimated date for completing these actions is December 31, 2024.

Recommendation 3: Establish a process to monitor offices' progress implementing actions to address the results of their Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey results (FEVS).

Management Response: Agree in Principle. In fiscal year 2024, NNSA established a more structured process for monitoring implementation of actions to address FEVS results. Annually, from October to December, LCM shares FEVS results with field offices and program leadership as they become available. Each January, LCM meets with organizations to review results and provide recommendations to improve organizational culture, especially in areas below target feedback scores. From February to March, organizations provide updated FEVS action plans to LCM and NNSA leadership. Finally, in July of each year, LCM closes the loop with each organization to obtain current status updates in preparation for the next FEVS cycle. The importance of organizational action plans was reenforced in an agency wide "Connect" message from the Principal Deputy Administrator in January 2024. As demonstrated, NNSA takes the FEVS results very seriously and will work with relevant stakeholders to identify additional opportunities to more fully document and enhance existing processes. The estimated date for completing these actions is September 30, 2024.

Accessible Text for Appendix I: Comments from the National Nuclear Security Administration

April 30, 2024

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U.S. Government Accountability Office
Washington, DC 20548

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Sincerely,

Jill Hruby

Enclosure

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For example, these measures were used to assess the best mechanisms for targeting critical skill sets for potential talent pools and to demonstrate which recruitment events have been successful by yielding the best outcomes (e.g., return on investment, impact on hiring). However, OHR will fully consider the observations in the report to evaluate any potential new metrics and will more formally document its strategies for using performance measures to assess recruitment and retention. This will include strategies for: a) use of hiring authorities and incentives; b) assessing which recruitment and outreach events yield the most viable candidates and applicants for NNSA; and c) working with the Office of Learning and Career Management (LCM) to gauge the success or growth of the internship programs and their impact on permanent hires. OHR is also developing specific recruiting standard operation procedures which will include outcome-oriented goals and measures. The estimated date for completing these actions is December 31, 2024.

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Appendix II: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

Allison Bawden, (202) 512-3841 or bawdena@gao.gov

Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, Hilary Benedict (Assistant Director), Wesley A. Johnson (Analyst in Charge), Lidiana Cunningham, Anthony Fernandez, Cindy Gilbert, Ying Long, Caroline Prado, Caitlin Scoville, Joseph Shir, Sara Sullivan, and Linda Tsang made key contributions to this report.

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