



FEDERAL WORKFORCE

Actions Needed to Improve Recruitment and Retention in Alaska, Hawaii, and U.S. Territories

Report to Congressional Requesters

October 2024
GAO-25-106527
United States Government Accountability Office

Accessible Version

GAO Highlights

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Highlights of [GAO-25-106527](#), a report to congressional requesters

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Why GAO Did This Study

Federal agencies' ability to address the nation's social, economic, and security challenges relies on a workforce that can ensure service delivery to the public across the country, including areas distant from the mainland in Alaska, Hawaii, and the U.S. territories.

GAO was asked to review recruitment, hiring, and retention of federal employees in the noncontiguous states and territories. This report examines (1) federal employment trends in the noncontiguous U.S. compared to the contiguous U.S., and (2) challenges and successes selected federal agencies experience, and opportunities to enhance existing efforts.

GAO analyzed Office of Personnel Management data from 2018 to 2023 to identify trends, reviewed related documents and interviewed agency officials. GAO interviewed officials from FEMA, FWS, NPS, SSA, and TSA about their efforts to recruit, hire, and retain employees in Alaska, Hawaii, and five U.S. territories. GAO selected these agencies to represent a range of agency size and mission. GAO conducted site visits to Alaska, Hawaii, American Samoa, and Puerto Rico.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making 12 recommendations, including that selected agencies evaluate their strategies and efforts on hiring, recruitment, and retention to make any needed improvements; and ensure access to live training. FWS, NPS, SSA, and TSA agreed. FEMA agreed with the training recommendation and stated that no further action is needed for two recommendations related to recruitment. GAO maintains that these actions are needed.

What GAO Found

Overall federal government employment trends between 2018 and 2023 were similar across the U.S. but varied by noncontiguous location. For instance, during fiscal year 2022, more federal hiring occurred in the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, Hawaii, and Alaska than in American Samoa, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Guam, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Attrition rates slightly increased during the period, with attrition rates in the noncontiguous U.S. being higher than the mainland. Retention rates for federal employees were generally similar in both the noncontiguous U.S. and the mainland.

Five selected agencies described a variety of socioeconomic, administrative, and geographic challenges that affect recruitment, hiring, and retention of employees in the noncontiguous locations. **Socioeconomic challenges** include the high costs of living and relocation, limited opportunities for local career growth, and lack of quality services and infrastructure. **Administrative challenges** commonly cited include difficulty with the federal application process, the effective use of hiring authorities and incentives, and headquarters' staff understanding the needs of staff involved

with hiring in these areas. **Geographic challenges** included limited local candidate pools and limited access to training in Hawaii and the Pacific territories.

Bethel, Alaska



Bethel, Alaska

View flying into Bethel, Alaska. Bethel is a city with a population of 6,500 that is not connected to Alaska's road system and is only accessible by airplane or boat. The photo shows the edge of Bethel's road system.

Source: GAO. | GAO-25-106527

Accessible Data for Bethel, Alaska

View flying into Bethel, Alaska. Bethel is a city with a population of 6,500 that is not connected to Alaska's road system and is only accessible by airplane or boat. The photo shows the edge of Bethel's road system.

Source: GAO. | GAO-25-106527

Selected agencies have made efforts to overcome these challenges. However, GAO identified many instances where the agencies' actions could be improved. For example, staff involved with hiring for the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), National Park Service (NPS), and Transportation Security Administration (TSA) cited challenges with their mainland offices understanding the needs in these geographic areas. By examining how they solicit and use information on staff experiences, agencies will be better positioned to resolve their concerns. Also, FEMA, NPS, and the Social Security Administration (SSA) commonly cited challenges with access to live virtual training at a reasonable time for employees in Hawaii and the Pacific territories. Without reasonable access to training, agencies may be limiting meaningful and engaging opportunities for their staff, which could affect staff job performance.

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Abbreviations

- ANILCA Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act
- CFO Act Chief Financial Officers Act
- CNMI Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands
- COLA Cost of Living Allowance
- EHRI Enterprise Human Resource Integration
- FEA Federal Executive Associations
- FEB Federal Executive Boards
- FEMA Federal Emergency Management Agency
- FWS Fish and Wildlife Service
- FY Fiscal Year
- GS General Schedule
- HR Human Resources
- JAO Joint Administrative Operations
- NAREAA Non-Foreign Area Retirement Equity Assurance Act
- NPS National Park Service
- OPM Office of Personnel Management
- RUS Rest of U.S.
- SSA Social Security Administration
- The Stafford Act Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act
- TSA Transportation Security Administration
- USVI U.S. Virgin Islands

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441 G St. N.W.
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October 15, 2024

The Honorable Jamie Raskin
Ranking Member
Committee on Oversight and Accountability
House of Representatives

The Honorable Ed Case
House of Representatives

The Honorable Stacey E. Plaskett
House of Representatives

The Honorable Aumua Amata Coleman Radewagen
House of Representatives

The Honorable Gregorio Kilili Camacho Sablan
House of Representatives

Federal agencies' ability to address the nation's social, economic, and security challenges relies on a workforce that can ensure service delivery to the public across the country, including areas distant from the mainland in Alaska, Hawaii, and the U.S. territories. Hiring individuals who have the knowledge, skills, and abilities to address both long-standing and emerging issues is critical to helping agencies achieve their missions and better serve the public interest across the globe.

However, the federal government continues to struggle to compete for workers with the skills needed to address the nation's challenges, including in the noncontiguous U.S. states and territories. These locations are faced with navigating substantial time zone differences, considerable geographic distance, and language diversity.

In our prior work, we have identified recruiting, hiring, and mission critical skills gaps as challenges facing the federal human capital system. These issues have also been on our High-Risk List since 2001.¹

You asked us to review recruitment, hiring, and retention of federal employees in the noncontiguous states and territories. This report examines (1) employment trends related to hiring and retention of federal employees in the noncontiguous states and territories compared to the contiguous U.S., and (2) selected federal agencies' experiences with recruiting, hiring, or retaining federal employees in the noncontiguous states and territories, and what opportunities exist to enhance agencies' efforts.

To address the first objective, we analyzed personnel data captured in the Office of Personnel Management's (OPM) Enterprise Human Resources Integration (EHRI) database. We analyzed data for fiscal years 2018

¹GAO, *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).

through 2023—the most recent 6 years of data to identify trends— across the 24 agencies cited under the Chief Financial Officers (CFO) Act to identify employment trends in the noncontiguous U.S. states and territories and compared those trends to the contiguous U.S. states. We included within our scope noncontiguous states and territories Alaska, Hawaii, American Samoa, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), Guam, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI). We assessed the reliability of the EHRI data by, for example, testing for missing data, outliers, and errors. We determined the data were sufficiently reliable for the purpose of our reporting objectives.

To address the second objective, we selected five agencies as case illustrations—the Federal Emergency Management Agency and Transportation Security Administration from the Department of Homeland Security, the Fish and Wildlife Service and National Park Service from the Department of the Interior, and the Social Security Administration. We selected large, medium, and small agencies across the 24 CFO Act agencies that have a presence in Alaska, Hawaii, and the U.S. territories.² Although these agencies do not represent the experiences of all agencies across government, they provide illustrative examples of experiences that agencies have with recruiting, hiring, and retaining individuals in Alaska, Hawaii, and the U.S. territories.

To examine selected agencies' experiences, and any actions they are taking to ensure they can recruit, hire, and retain federal employees, we conducted site visits to Alaska, American Samoa, Hawaii, and Puerto Rico, and interviewed management and non-management staff identified by the selected agencies in these locations as well as CNMI, Guam, and USVI. This totaled over 60 interviews. In addition, we engaged with the selected agencies' headquarters or centralized administrative offices to obtain their perspectives. We also spoke to relevant entities present in these regions—Federal Executive Boards (FEB) and Federal Executive Associations—to learn about their experiences and perspectives.³ In addition, we reviewed selected agencies' documentation related to human capital management, such as strategic workforce planning, and relevant trainings for agency staff involved with hiring.⁴ We also reviewed applicable federal laws, regulations, and guidance. For more detailed information on our scope and methodology, see appendix I. For additional information on the individual states and territories in our scope, see appendix II.

We conducted this performance audit from January 2023 to September 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.

²For the purpose of this report, we categorized agencies that had a presence in the noncontiguous U.S. as large if they had 5,000 or more employees; medium if they had 1,001 to 4,999 employees; and small if they had 1,000 employees or fewer.

³Federal Executive Boards (FEB) are administered by the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) and are divided into four distinct regions: Western, Central, Southern, and Eastern. Each FEB serves as a strategic hub, linking federal agencies to one another and to communities, supporting federal initiatives and collaboration. Federal Executive Associations exist in small metropolitan areas without FEBs and serve the same purpose as FEBs but are not part of OPM.

⁴For the purpose of this report, we refer to agency staff involved with hiring to describe agency officials in the noncontiguous states and territories who work in the recruiting and hiring process in some capacity, whether formally or informally.

Background

OPM’s Human Capital Support to Federal Agencies

OPM provides leadership and support for human capital management across the federal government. For example, OPM provides policy direction on various federal human capital topics and approves agency requests to use certain authorities and higher payment limitations for incentives to assist with recruitment, hiring, and retention. OPM also manages USAJOBS—the official website for posting federal job opportunities across the government— and government-wide federal pay and leave systems, including developing and communicating policies for those systems.⁵

Additionally, OPM provides oversight for the network of 28 FEBs located in areas with significant federal workforce populations across the U.S. FEBs were established to provide a forum for the coordination of federal activities at the regional level. FEBs perform certain activities set out by OPM, such as conducting emergency operations, providing interagency trainings and development opportunities, and supporting agencies’ recruitment efforts.⁶

Overview of Common Federal Hiring Authorities

Federal agencies have a variety of authorities available to them when hiring job applicants. Specific hiring authorities are provided through law, executive order, or regulation that allow agencies to hire individuals into the federal civil service.⁷ OPM is responsible for overseeing the hiring authorities and managing federal civilian personnel data. Selected agencies in the noncontiguous U.S. use a range of hiring authorities, including those listed in table 1.

Table 1: Examples of Federal Hiring Authorities Available Government-Wide

Hiring authority	Description
Pathways Internship and Recent Graduates	Targets students at qualifying educational institutions, or individuals who have recently received a degree or certificate from a qualifying institution, or completed a qualifying career or education program. After meeting certain conditions upon completion of the program, individuals are generally eligible for non-competitive conversions to competitive service. ^a
Veterans’ Recruitment Appointment	Allows agencies to appoint eligible veterans up to the General Schedule (GS) 11 or equivalent level without regard to competitive examining procedures. Appointees are converted to competitive service after 2 years of satisfactory service.

⁵OPM’s human capital support also extends to labor relations, training, workforce planning, personnel management, and employee well-being.

⁶OPM is in the process of restructuring the organization of FEBs, with a goal to standardize the FEB staffing model, including the creation of permanent director positions, and expanding the scope and geographic areas of responsibility of the FEBs.

⁷Competitive examining has been the traditional method for making appointments to competitive service positions in the federal government. Through authority delegated by the President, OPM has authorized excepted service appointment authorities for when it is not feasible or practical to use competitive examining. There are government-wide personnel management laws and related provisions that outline the rules agencies must follow to hire employees, such as the competitive examining hiring authority. See *Federal Hiring: OPM Needs to Improve Management and Oversight of Hiring Authorities*, [GAO-16-521](#) (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 2, 2016).

Hiring authority	Description
Direct Hire Authority	Allows agencies to fill positions for which the Office of Personnel Management has determined a severe shortage of candidates, or a critical hiring need exists without regard to certain ranking, rating, and veterans' preference requirements. Public notice is required. ^b

Source: GAO analysis of Office of Personnel Management documentation. | GAO-25-106527

^aThe federal civil service generally consists of the competitive service, excepted service, and Senior Executive Service. Appointments to the Pathways Program occur under the excepted service. However, a Pathways participant who is converted to the competitive service may acquire competitive status, which would allow the individual to be promoted, transferred, reassigned, reinstated, or changed to a lower grade without having to go through the competitive examining process.

^bAccording to agency officials, most of FEMA's employees in the noncontiguous U.S. are temporary employees hired under the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act (the Stafford Act), for which Direct Hire Authority is not applicable. The Stafford Act allows for the hiring of temporary personnel without regard to the provisions of title 5 governing appointments in competitive service. 42 U.S.C. § 5149.

Common Human Capital Flexibilities Available to Federal Agencies

Federal agencies can use financial incentives in the form of compensation-based human capital flexibilities to help recruit and retain qualified personnel.⁸ According to OPM, federal agencies have broad discretionary authority to address human capital challenges through the use of financial incentives such as recruitment, relocation, and retention incentives. The common incentives used in the noncontiguous U.S. are listed below.⁹

- **Recruitment incentives.** Paid to a newly appointed employee if the agency determines that the position is likely to be difficult to fill without such incentive.¹⁰
- **Relocation incentives.** Paid to a current employee who moves to a new position in the same geographic area under certain circumstances, or who must relocate to accept a position in a different area if the agency determines that the position is likely to be difficult to fill without such an incentive.¹¹
- **Retention incentive.** Paid to a current employee (or group of employees) if the agency determines that the unusually unique qualifications of the employee (or group) or a special need of the agency for the

⁸In this report, we use "human capital flexibilities" to include recruitment, relocation, and retention incentives, as well as hiring authorities.

⁹These incentives are available for agencies to use in all locations, including but not limited to the noncontiguous U.S.

¹⁰A recruitment incentive may not exceed 25 percent of the employee's annual rate of basic pay in effect at the beginning of the service period, multiplied by the number of years (including fractions of a year) in the service period (not to exceed 4 years). This cap may be increased to up to 50 percent with OPM approval, based on a critical agency need, as long as the total incentive does not exceed 100 percent of the employee's annual rate of basic pay. 5 U.S.C. § 5753(d) and (e); 5 C.F.R. § 575.109.

¹¹A relocation incentive may not exceed 25 percent of the employee's annual rate of basic pay in effect at the beginning of the service period multiplied by the number of years (including fractions of a year) in the service period (not to exceed 4 years). With OPM approval, this cap may be raised to up to 50 percent (based on a critical agency need), as long as the total incentive does not exceed 100 percent of the employee's annual rate of basic pay at the beginning of the service period. 5 U.S.C. § 5753(d) and (e); 5 C.F.R. § 575.209.

employee's services makes it essential to retain the employee. The employee (or group) must also be likely to leave their position(s) without such incentive.¹²

Cost of Living Allowance and Locality Pay

Depending on their circumstances, federal employees may receive certain types of additions to their base pay, including a Cost of Living Allowance (COLA) and locality pay.¹³ Prior to 2010, employees working in certain areas in the noncontiguous U.S. received COLA but did not receive locality pay. The Non-Foreign Area Retirement Equity Assurance Act of 2009 (NAREAA) began the transition from COLA to locality pay in these areas, with locality pay phased in over 3 years beginning in 2010 and COLA phasing out over time.¹⁴

- **Cost of living allowance.** COLAs are provided as additional compensation in consideration of higher living costs in the local area compared to the Washington, D.C. area.¹⁵ The federal government pays a residual amount of COLA to white-collar civilian federal employees in Alaska, Hawaii, CNMI, Guam, Puerto Rico, and USVI. COLA does not count toward retirement calculations and is not subject to federal income tax.
- **Locality pay.** Locality pay is not based on living costs.¹⁶ The purpose of locality pay is to reduce the pay gap between federal and nonfederal employees when there is a pay disparity that is greater than 5 percent.¹⁷ This adjustment counts toward retirement calculations and is subject to federal income tax. There are 58 separate locality pay areas across the country, each of which corresponds to a locality pay rate. Locations in the U.S. and its territories and possessions that are not located within a locality pay area are grouped into the "Rest of U.S." (RUS) category.

NAREAA also extended locality pay to American Samoa and other non-foreign territories and possessions of the U.S. where no COLA rate applied.¹⁸ As a result of NAREAA, American Samoa, CNMI, Guam, Puerto Rico,

¹² An agency must establish a single retention incentive rate for the employee, expressed as a percentage of the employee's rate of basic pay, not to exceed 25 percent. With OPM approval, this cap may be increased to 50 percent based on a critical agency need. An agency may pay the retention incentive to an employee if the unusually high or unique qualifications of the employee or a special need of the agency for the employee's services makes it essential to retain the employee and if the employee is likely to leave the Federal service or for a different position in the Federal service without such incentive. Also, an agency may pay a retention incentive of up to 10 percent of basic pay (or up to 50 percent with OPM approval, based on a critical agency need) to an eligible group or category of employees if the agency determines that the unusually high or unique qualifications of the group or a special need of the agency for the employees' services makes it essential to retain the employees. There must also be a high risk that a significant number of employees in the group would leave the federal service in the absence of a retention incentive. 5 U.S.C. § 5754(e); 5 C.F.R. § 575.309.

¹³When provided, federal white-collar employees covered by the General Schedule (GS) pay system receive an annual pay adjustment comprised of two components: (1) an across-the-board pay adjustment, which is the same for each employee to keep the GS base pay schedule in line with salary growth in the general labor market; and (2) a locality-based pay adjustment. See 5 U.S.C. §§ 5303-5304. For the purpose of this report, we are focusing on the locality pay component.

¹⁴See Pub. L. No. 111-84, tit. XIX, sub tit. B, §§ 1912, 1914, 123 Stat. 2190, 2619-2627 (2009). This 3-year transition applied to the phase in of the relevant locality pay over time using a method designed to eliminate any reduction in take-home pay for impacted employees, according to OPM. COLA has not yet been completely phased out in the noncontiguous areas.

¹⁵See 5 U.S.C. § 5941; 5 C.F.R. § 591.202.

¹⁶See 5 U.S.C. § 5304.

¹⁷5 U.S.C. § 5301. See also GAO, *Human Capital: Administration and Implementation of the General Schedule Locality Pay Program*, [GAO-22-104580](#) (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 30, 2021).

¹⁸Pub L. 111-84, tit. XIX, sub tit. B, §§ 1912, 1915, 123 Stat. 2190, 2619, 2621-22 (2009). See also Office of Personnel Management, *Memorandum CPM 2009-27: Nonforeign Area Retirement Equity Assurance Act* (Dec. 30, 2009).

and USVI are in the RUS and therefore receive the RUS locality rate, while Hawaii and Alaska each have their own locality pay area that cover the entire state.¹⁹ See table 2. This transition changed both take home pay and the base pay that is included in retirement.

Table 2: Cost of Living Allowance and Locality Pay Rates in Noncontiguous U.S.

Noncontiguous area	2009 Cost of Living Allowance (COLA) Rates (%)	2009 Locality Rates (%)	2024 COLA Rates (%)	2024 Locality Rates (%)
Anchorage, Fairbanks, & Juneau, Alaska	23	0	1.69	31.96
Other Alaska	25	0	3.21	31.96
City and County of Honolulu, County of Kauai, & County of Maui, Hawaii	25	0	8.90	21.79
County of Hawaii	18	0	3.15	21.79
Commonwealth of Puerto Rico	14	0	2.63	16.82 ^a
U.S. Virgin Islands	25	0	12.04	16.82 ^a
Guam & Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands	25	0	12.04	16.82 ^a
Other Possessions	0	0	0	16.82 ^a

Source: GAO analysis of Office of Personnel Management data. | GAO-25-106527

^aThe Rest of U.S. (RUS) receives a locality rate of 16.82 percent.

Note: The percentages represent an increase of employees' base rate of pay. "Other Possessions" refers to American Samoa and other nonforeign territories and possessions of the U.S. This table starts in 2009 because that is the year that preceded the Non-Foreign Area Retirement Equity Assurance Act of 2009 implementation.

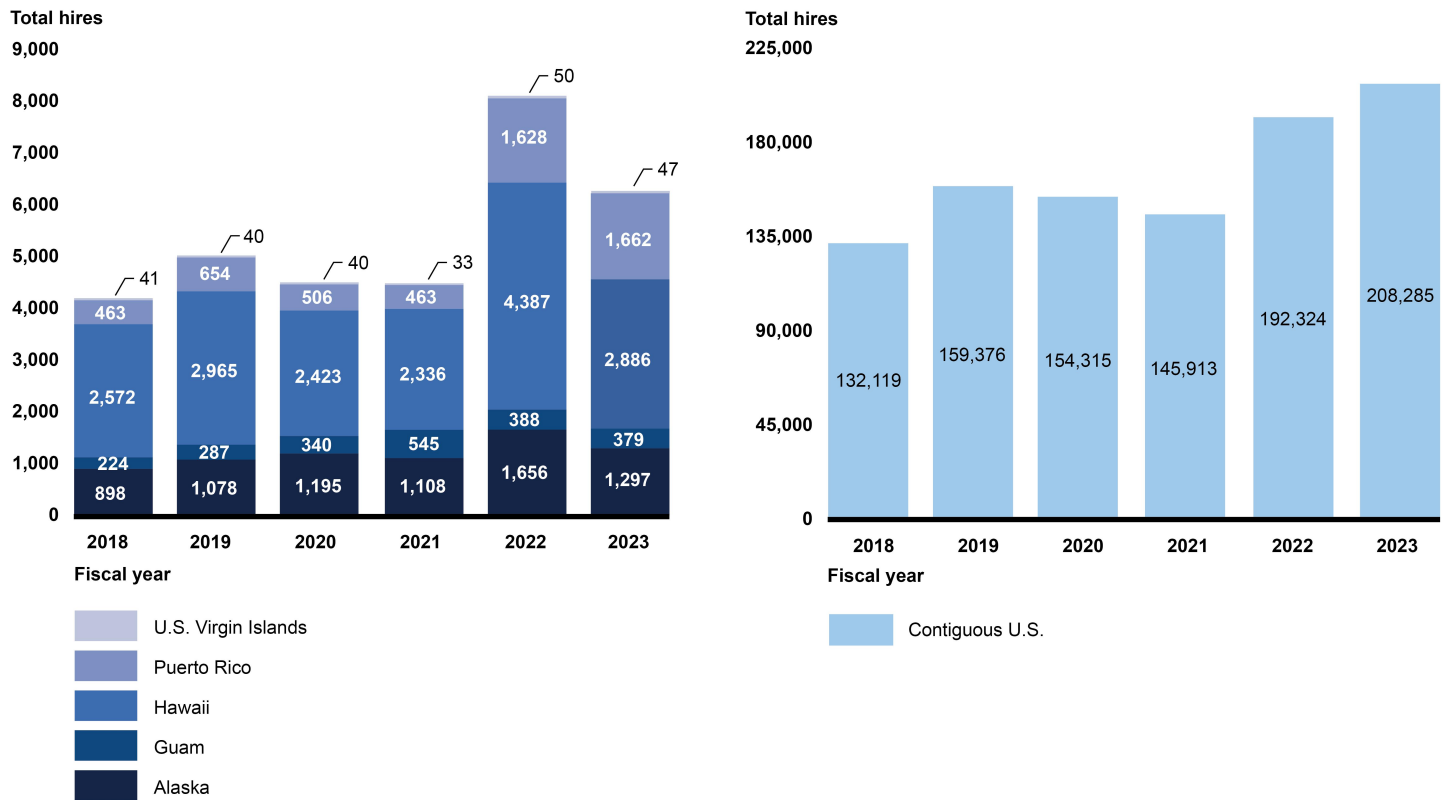
Overall Employment Trends Were Similar across the U.S. but Varied by Noncontiguous Location

Federal Hiring Fluctuated Throughout 2018 to 2023

As shown in figure 1, for both the noncontiguous areas and contiguous U.S., the number of hires fluctuated from year to year, but generally increased from fiscal years (FY) 2018 to 2023.

¹⁹Under the NAREAA, to the extent that a pay disparity in Alaska, Hawaii, or any of the territories including American Samoa, Guam, CNMI, Puerto Rico, and USVI exceeds the pay disparity under the RUS locality pay area, the President's Pay Agent should take appropriate measures to provide that they be treated as a separate locality pay area. Pub. L. No. 111-84, tit. XIX, sub tit. B, § 1915(a)(4), 123 Stat. 2190, 2622 (2009). Designated by the President, the Pay Agent is comprised of the Secretary of Labor and the Directors of OMB and OPM and is responsible for establishing and modifying locality pay areas, among other things.

Figure 1: Federal Hiring Activity in the Noncontiguous and Contiguous U.S., Fiscal Years 2018 through 2023



Source: GAO analysis of Office of Personnel Management’s Enterprise Human Resources Integration data. | GAO-25-106527

Accessible Data for Figure 1: Federal Hiring Activity in the Noncontiguous and Contiguous U.S., Fiscal Years 2018 through 2023

Fiscal Year	U.S. Virgin Islands	Puerto Rico	Hawaii	Guam	Alaska
2018	41	463	2,572	224	898
2019	40	654	2,965	287	1,078
2020	40	506	2,423	340	1,195
2021	33	463	2,336	545	1,108
2022	50	1,628	4,387	388	1,656
2023	47	1,662	2,886	379	1,297

Fiscal Year	Federal hiring Activity in Contiguous U.S.
2018	132,119
2019	159,376
2020	154,315
2021	145,913
2022	192,324
2023	208,285

Source: GAO analysis of Office of Personnel Management's Enterprise Human Resources Integration data. | GAO-25-106527

Note: These graphics depict the number of full-time, non-seasonal, permanent federal employee hire records for each year in the contiguous and noncontiguous U.S. The number of hires does not necessarily correspond to the number of new employees, as the number of hires may encompass appointments of existing employees through transfers and conversions.

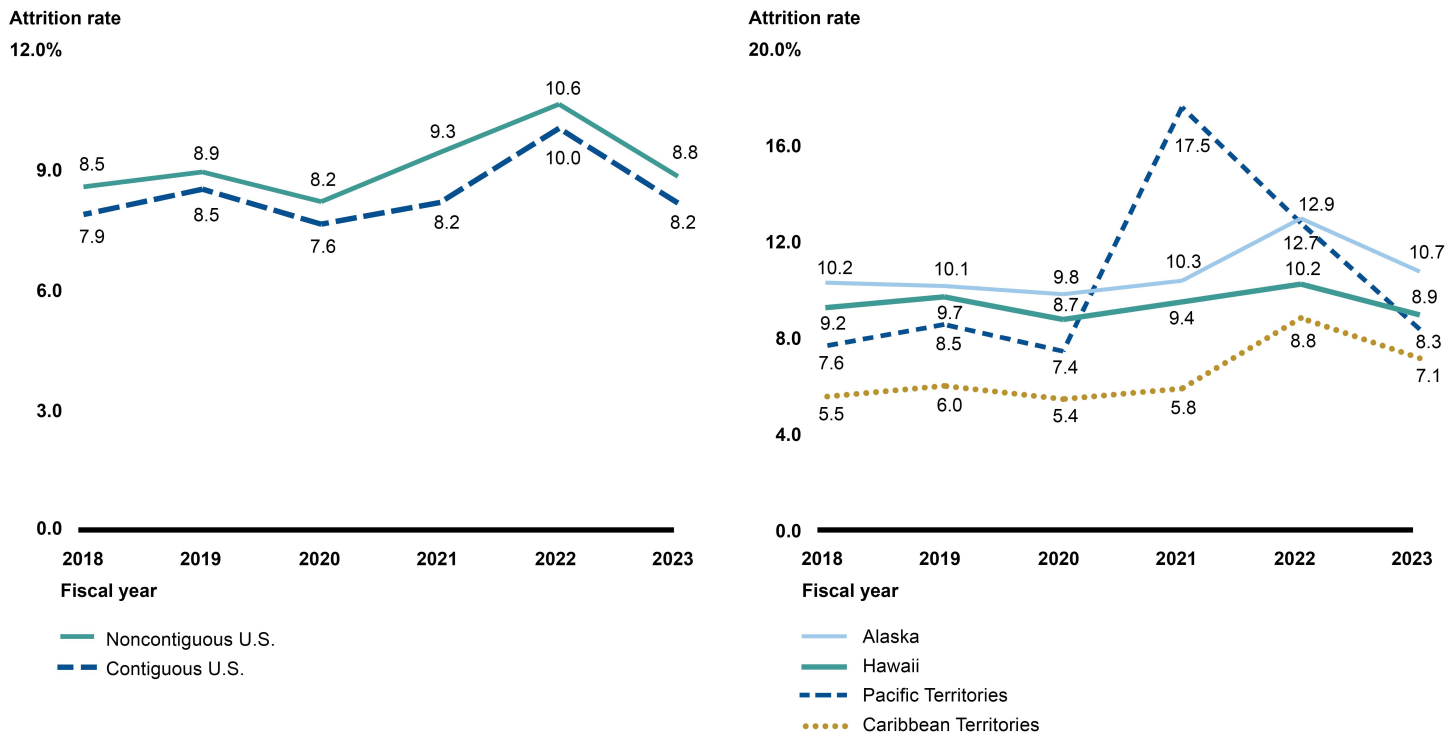
Attrition Rates Increased between 2018 and 2023

Attrition of federal employees in the U.S. slightly increased between FY 2018 and FY 2023.²⁰ While federal employee attrition in the noncontiguous U.S. was higher than the mainland, both rates follow a similar trend over this time period (see fig. 2). Among the noncontiguous areas, the Pacific territories experienced a steep increase in attrition in FY 2021, followed by a decline in attrition in FY 2022 and FY 2023.²¹

²⁰For this report, attrition is defined as the separation of employees from an agency for any reason (voluntary or involuntary), including resignation, termination, death, retirement, or transfer to another federal agency. These data capture the number of federal employees who left federal service or their agency employers. Rates of attrition are calculated using 2-year moving averages of the agency's number of employees. The data do not capture the number of federal employees who relocate between contiguous and noncontiguous areas but remain with the same agency. For example, the attrition data would not include an employee who moved from Hawaii to California but stayed employed at the same agency. According to some noncontiguous agency officials we spoke with in Hawaii, these types of relocations contribute to retention challenges.

²¹The spike in FY2021 attrition in the Pacific Territories is mainly driven by a large transfer of Department of the Navy employees to the Department of the Air Force, according to OPM officials.

Figure 2: Federal Attrition Rates in the Noncontiguous and Contiguous U.S., Fiscal Years 2018 through 2023



Source: GAO analysis of Office of Personnel Management's Enterprise Human Resources Integration data. | GAO-25-106527

Accessible Data for Figure 2: Federal Attrition Rates in the Noncontiguous and Contiguous U.S., Fiscal Years 2018 through 2023

Fiscal year	Contiguous U.S.	Non-contiguous U.S.
2018	7.9	8.5
2019	8.5	8.9
2020	7.6	8.2
2021	8.2	9.3
2022	10.0	10.6
2023	8.2	8.8

U.S. Territory	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Alaska	10.2	10.1	9.8	10.3	12.9	10.7
Hawaii	9.2	9.7	8.7	9.4	10.2	8.9
Pacific territories	7.6	8.5	7.4	17.5	12.7	8.3
Caribbean territories	5.5	6.0	5.4	5.8	8.8	7.1

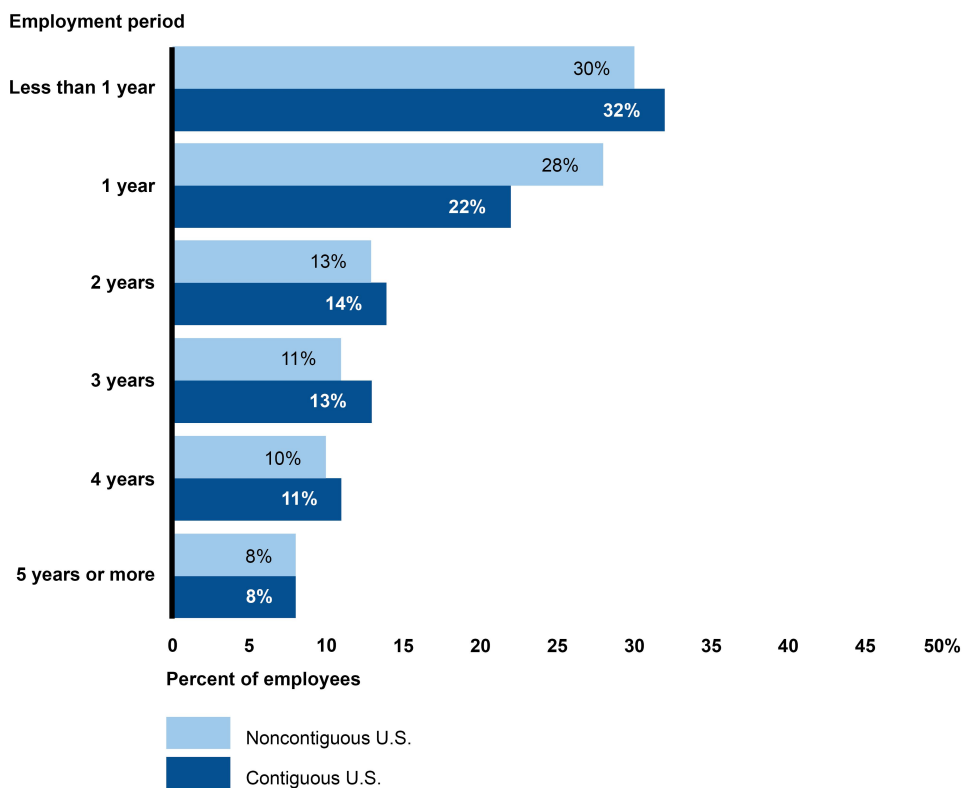
Source: GAO analysis of Office of Personnel Management's Enterprise Human Resources Integration data. | GAO-25-106527

Note: The right-hand graphic includes two broader categories, Caribbean Territories (including the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands) and Pacific Territories (including American Samoa, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), and Guam). We combined the noncontiguous territories into these categories because some data counts were too small, thereby requiring suppression to ensure privacy. For instance, federal employee attrition data for American Samoa and CNMI fell below the threshold for presenting the data here individually, but could be reported when combined with attrition data for Guam. Attrition rate is calculated using 2-year moving averages of an agency's number of employees. These data are limited to full-time, non-seasonal, permanent federal employees at the 24 Chief Financial Officers Act agencies.

Retention of Hires Was Similar in the Noncontiguous and Mainland U.S.

Retention of federal employees hired from FY 2018 to FY 2023 was generally similar in the noncontiguous and contiguous U.S.²² For example, a similar proportion of hires in noncontiguous and contiguous areas left their positions within a year. Figure 3 depicts the lengths of time that FY 2018 to FY 2023 hires stayed in their positions—30 percent of noncontiguous hires and 32 percent of contiguous hires stayed less than 1 year.

Figure 3: Length of Retention of Federal Employees Hired in the Noncontiguous and the Contiguous U.S. from Fiscal Years 2018 to 2023



Source: GAO analysis of Office of Personnel Management's Enterprise Human Resources Integration data. | GAO-25-106527

²²For this report, retention of hires compares the date that federal hires in the noncontiguous U.S. started their job to their separation date (if applicable). As described above, hires include full-time non-seasonal permanent employees which may encompass appointments of existing employees through transfers and conversions. Separations include employees who quit, were terminated or laid off, retired, died, or transferred to another federal agency. Separations do not include employees who relocated between contiguous and noncontiguous areas but remained with the same agency.

Accessible Data for Figure 3: Length of Retention of Federal Employees Hired in the Noncontiguous and the Contiguous U.S. from Fiscal Years 2018 to 2023

Time Period in Non-contiguous U.S. Territories	Percent of Employees
Less than 1 year	30%
1 year	28%
2 years	13%
3 years	11%
4 years	10%
5 years or more	8%

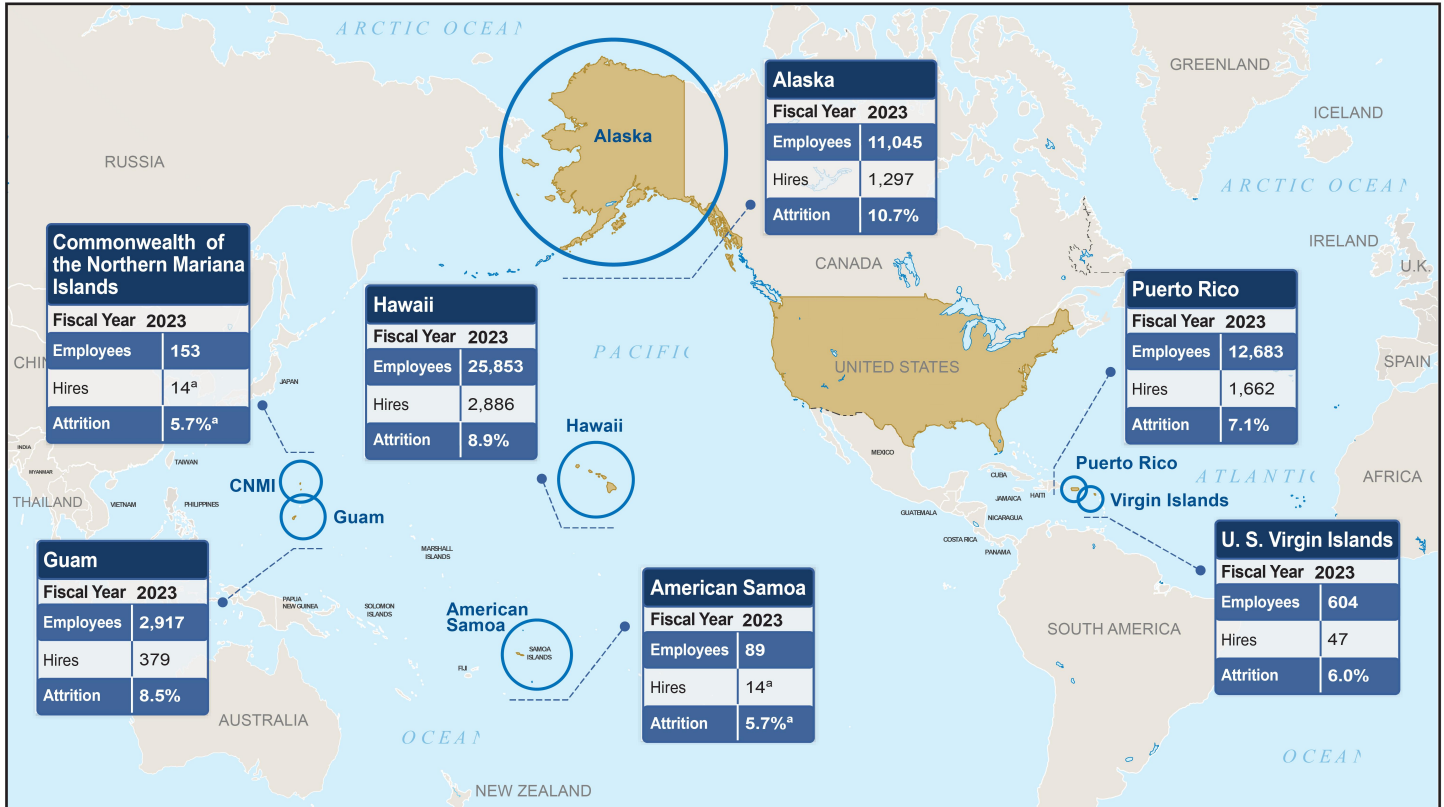
Time Period in Mainland U.S.	Percent of Employees
Less than 1 year	32%
1 year	22%
2 years	14%
3 years	13%
4 years	11%
5 years or more	8%

Source: GAO analysis of Office of Personnel Management's Enterprise Human Resources Integration data. | GAO-25-106527

Note: To determine how long hires were retained before they left their position, we compared the dates that Fiscal Year 2018 through 2023 hires in the noncontiguous U.S. started their jobs to their separation dates (if applicable). Hires include full-time non-seasonal permanent employees, which may encompass appointments of existing employees through transfers and conversions. Separations include employees who quit, were terminated or laid off, retired, died, or transferred to another federal agency. Separations do not include employees who relocated between contiguous and noncontiguous areas but remained with the same agency.

For a snapshot of federal employment data in the noncontiguous U.S. for FY 2023—including the number of federal employees, hiring, and attrition—see figure 4.

Figure 4: Fiscal Year 2023 Snapshot of Federal Employment Data in Alaska, American Samoa, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Guam, Hawaii, and the U.S. Virgin Islands



Source: GAO analysis of Office of Personnel Management’s Enterprise Human Resources Integration data and GAO Map Resources image. | GAO-25-106527

Accessible Data for Figure 4: Fiscal Year 2023 Snapshot of Federal Employment Data in Alaska, American Samoa, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Guam, Hawaii, and the U.S. Virgin Islands

Alaska

Category	FY 2023
Employees	11,045
Hires	1,297
Attrition	10.7%

American Samoa

Category	FY 2023
Employees	89
Hires	14 ^a
Attrition	5.7% ^b

Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands

Category	FY 2023
Employees	153
Hires	14 ^a
Attrition	8.3% ^b

Hawaii

Category	FY 2023
Employees	25,853
Hires	2,886
Attrition	8.9%

U.S. Virgin Islands

Category	FY 2023
Employees	604
Hires	47
Attrition	6.0%

Fig 4 Puerto Rico

Category	FY 2023
Employees	12,683
Hires	1,662
Attrition	7.1%

Fig 4 Guam

Category	FY 2023
Employees	2,917
Hires	379
Attrition	8.5%

Source: GAO analysis of Office of Personnel Management's Enterprise Human Resources Integration data and GAO Map Resources image. | GAO-25-106527

Note: These data are limited to full-time, non-seasonal, permanent federal employees at the 24 Chief Financial Officers Act agencies and located in the U.S. states and territories. The number of hires does not necessarily correspond to the number of new employees, as the number of hires may encompass appointments of existing employees through transfers and conversions. Attrition is the separation of employees from an agency for any reason (voluntary or involuntary). These data capture the number of federal employees who left federal service or their agency employer. The data do not capture the number of federal employees who relocate between contiguous and noncontiguous areas but remain with the same agency. Attrition rates are calculated using a 2-year moving average of fiscal years 2022 and 2023 number of employees and should not be compared with number of employees listed in this figure.

^aHires and attrition data were combined for American Samoa and CNMI because these data were too small and were suppressed.

For more information on the unique characteristics and challenges and successes selected agencies experience in these locations, see appendix II.

Selected Agencies Experienced Socioeconomic, Administrative, and Geographic Challenges, and Have Made Some Efforts to Alleviate Them

Staff from selected agencies in the noncontiguous U.S. described a variety of challenges that affect recruiting, hiring, and retaining employees in the noncontiguous locations, including socioeconomic, administrative, and geographic challenges.²³ Socioeconomic challenges included the cost of living and availability of medical care. Administrative challenges included an applicant's experience while navigating the federal hiring process. Finally, geographic challenges included the isolated physical location of the work and the small local population size.

Socioeconomic Challenges Can Hinder Recruitment and Retention

Selected agencies in all the noncontiguous regions cited high costs of living and relocation, limited opportunities for local career growth, and lack of quality services and infrastructure as challenges affecting employee recruitment and retention.

High Cost of Living and Relocation

Agencies emphasized that high cost of living—including housing, education, gas, and groceries—is a significant financial strain for employees, and particularly for lower paying positions. This cost has contributed to deterring some applicants from accepting a position, or employees choosing to leave. According to one official, this can be taxing when agencies have paid relocation incentives to these staff and spent significant resources training them.²⁴ For example, one National Park Service (NPS) official in Hawaii shared that new employees relocating from the mainland U.S. often do not fully understand how the high cost of living in Hawaii will affect them. As a result, many non-local hires withdraw their applications or leave their positions after a short time—in as little as 1 year, according to some officials.

As discussed previously, locality pay is designed to close gaps between federal and non-federal employee pay in an area. In contrast, the COLA accounts for the higher living costs in noncontiguous areas compared to Washington, D.C.²⁵ As noncontiguous areas transitioned from COLAs to locality pay, the portion of an

²³This section highlights the experience of selected agencies in the noncontiguous U.S. Agencies within the contiguous U.S. may encounter similar challenges. The information included in this section covers the experiences of staff in our selected agencies in the noncontiguous U.S., regardless of full-time, part-time, or temporary status.

²⁴Note that a relocation incentive may be paid only if the employee maintains residency in the new geographic area for the duration of the service agreement. 5 C.F.R. § 575.205(b).

²⁵According to OPM, to set COLA rates the agency surveyed the prices of over 300 items, including goods and services, housing, transportation, and miscellaneous expenses. OPM conducted these surveys in each of the areas receiving a COLA and in the Washington, D.C., area.

employee's pay consisting of the COLA decreased, while the portion consisting of locality pay increased. As a result, changes to pay are less directly responsive to the local costs of living.²⁶

The U.S. territories in our scope are assigned to the Rest of U.S. (RUS) locality pay area, which provides a locality payment of roughly 17 percent of an employee's salary in 2024.²⁷ This is the same locality pay that applies to many mainland U.S. locations. The RUS locality pay area provides the lowest locality rate of all 58 locality pay areas. In comparison, Alaska and Hawaii's locality pay areas provide a 32 percent and 22 percent locality payment, respectively.²⁸

We heard from federal employees in American Samoa, CNMI, Guam, Puerto Rico, and USVI that these areas have a very high cost of living. Similarly, agency staff in Alaska and Hawaii say there is a discrepancy between pay and cost of living, particularly in more rural areas. As an example of the cost of certain basic goods, we observed grocery prices in one remote Alaskan town—one gallon of milk, shown in figure 5, cost more than \$12.²⁹

²⁶According to OPM, "locality pay rates are based on comparisons of General Schedule (GS) pay and non-federal pay at the same work levels in a locality pay area rather than on any consideration of local living costs. Relative living costs may indirectly affect non-federal pay levels, but living costs are just one of many factors that affect the supply of and demand for labor, and therefore labor costs, in a locality pay area. A comparison of living costs between geographic areas is not permitted under the locality pay law, but even if it were, it would not be a reliable indicator of local labor costs." 88 Fed. Reg. 78631, 78632 (Nov. 16, 2023).

²⁷OPM officials told us that the entity responsible for recommending locality pay areas, the Federal Salary Council, has been monitoring the pay disparity between private and federal employees in Guam, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands for several years. However, the Council has not found that the pay disparity in these areas is high enough to warrant the creation of a separate locality pay area. Officials also told us that the data needed to identify a pay disparity are not available for the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands.

²⁸Both the state of Alaska and the state of Hawaii pay areas encompass the entire states of Alaska and Hawaii, respectively. For example, a federal employee working in urban Anchorage, Alaska would receive the same locality pay rate as one working in remote Kotzebue, Alaska.

²⁹During our review, data were not readily available to make a reliable comparison of the cost of living in the contiguous U.S. to the territories. In May 2024, we reported on gaps in federal data for the U.S. territories. See GAO, *U.S. Territories: Coordinated Federal Approach Needed to Better Address Data Gaps*, [GAO-24-106574](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 9, 2024).

Figure 5: Grocery Prices in a Remote Town in Alaska

Examples of grocery prices observed at a supermarket in a remote town in Alaska in August 2023.



Source: GAO. | GAO-25-106527

Accessible Text for Figure 5: Grocery Prices in a Remote Town in Alaska

- Bottled milk on shelves with price tag displayed below
- Bagged apples and oranges with price tag displayed below

Source: GAO. | GAO-25-106527

Agency staff cited the high cost of living relative to pay as a barrier to recruitment and retention. As the example above illustrates, federal employees in these locations, given their current pay, may struggle to afford basic goods.

In addition to groceries, agency staff we spoke with in noncontiguous areas cited high housing costs or limited supply of housing as a significant challenge to recruitment and retention in some locations. For example:

- One NPS official in Hawaii shared that hiring fee collectors is a persistent struggle because the salary offered cannot cover housing costs in the local area. According to another NPS official, rental housing

prices in Guam are often based on amounts provided for military service members and their families for housing. However, NPS employees who do not receive these provisions cannot afford the corresponding rental costs.

- In Alaska and Puerto Rico, agency officials stated that many homes have been converted to short-term vacation rentals, which affects housing availability and increases costs.³⁰
- Transportation Security Administration (TSA) officials in Alaska told us they have trouble filling vacancies at remote airports, in part because of the extremely high cost and often sub-standard quality of housing in these locations. For example, agency officials in Bethel noted that local housing was of low quality. TSA officials reported that the agency is currently exploring how it might provide housing for its staff at a variety of Alaska locations as part of a broader agency effort.

In addition to high living expenses, such as groceries and housing, agency officials told us that the high cost of moving to the noncontiguous U.S. can often deter mainland hires from accepting a position. According to selected agency officials, the overall moving costs to some noncontiguous areas can range from \$10,000 to \$150,000.

Agency officials told us that relocation assistance is important for recruitment but is not always available to offer applicants.³¹ According to NPS, Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), and TSA officials, relocation assistance may be available depending on the position type and location. NPS officials told us they face budget limitations that prevent them from covering much, if any, of the relocation expenses for employees. TSA recently started offering expanded relocation incentives for staff that sign a 12-month service agreement at hard-to-hire airports. According to FWS, the agency also pays relocation expenses for employees returning to the contiguous U.S. after 2 years of service.³²

Examples of efforts agencies have taken to try to alleviate challenges:

Offering housing: The National Park Service and the Fish and Wildlife Service offer housing to staff in some areas with limited suitable supply.

Hiring locals: Agency officials across locations shared the view that hiring locals can be an effective strategy because residents have already adapted to high costs or have a cultural practice of living in multigenerational homes.

Pay incentives: The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) has provided retention incentives in certain cases, when possible. According to TSA officials, these retention incentives are temporary pay increases that are determined semi-annually. TSA also implemented its pay equity program, which generally increased wages across all locations to equalize pay with employees at other federal agencies.

Source: GAO analysis of interviews with selected agency staff in noncontiguous U.S. | GAO-25-106527

Limited Opportunities for Local Career Growth

According to NPS and TSA staff, a lack of positions above entry level in the noncontiguous areas contributes to recruitment and retention issues. Higher-level positions may exist (General Schedule (GS) 12 equivalent),

³⁰We previously reported on issues of housing availability for Coast Guard staff, finding that these federal employees may experience challenges accessing affordable housing in remote areas, including in Alaska, and those with a high proportion of housing dedicated to vacation rentals, including in Hawaii and Puerto Rico. GAO, *Coast Guard: Better Feedback Collection and Information Could Enhance Housing Program*, [GAO-24-106388](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 5, 2024).

³¹For the purpose of this report, relocation assistance refers to both relocation incentives under 5 U.S.C. § 5753 and relocation expenses under 5 U.S.C. § 5722.

³²41 C.F.R. § 302-3.300.

but entry-level staff may need additional education or experience at a mid-level position to qualify. According to agency officials, at times the employee must relocate to another site or transfer to the mainland to gain the mid-level experience needed to qualify for the desired position.

Without mid-level positions, staff have limited opportunity for promotion and salary growth.³³ For example, an NPS official shared that one park in Hawaii experiences retention issues because its mission requires mostly entry-level and more senior staff. Agency staff told us that without career growth opportunities, employees may have to leave to move up or make more money, which negatively affects the agency's retention. For example, according to FEMA officials, staff in noncontiguous areas who wish to advance their careers must often transfer to the mainland to gain these experiences. FEMA staff attributed this issue to a general lack of remote work opportunities.

Examples of efforts agencies have taken to try to alleviate challenges:

Mentorship: Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) staff in the U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI) shared that mentoring has helped improve retention because it helps staff grow and develop, particularly for local hires.

Providing learning opportunities: FEMA staff in Puerto Rico and USVI stated that the agency promotes learning opportunities for staff, such as temporary detail assignments to different types of work or in other locations to encourage retention.

Source: GAO analysis of interviews with Federal Emergency Management Agency staff in noncontiguous U.S. | GAO-25-106527

Lack of Quality Services and Infrastructure

Agencies across all noncontiguous areas cited a lack of quality services, such as internet, reliable shipping and delivery, healthcare, education, childcare, and infrastructure as impediments to recruitment and retention. Many noncontiguous areas have relatively smaller populations and are physically separated from more populous areas. As a result, the availability or quality of these services can be limited.

In some cases, we heard that a lack of services in an area can affect agencies' ability to conduct their work. For example, Social Security Administration (SSA) staff in Guam stated that unreliable internet access can impact their ability to serve the public and complete their mission.³⁴ The limited delivery services available in the noncontiguous U.S. is another challenge for selected agencies, which can delay onboarding procedures and affect recruitment. For example, FWS and NPS officials in American Samoa expressed concerns and frustrations with delivery services, stating that they have had problems ordering drug tests and uniforms, and obtaining other necessary onboarding or routine supplies from agency headquarters.

We also heard from federal employees that the lack of quality services and infrastructure in some noncontiguous locations affects their personal lives in a way that contributes to recruitment and retention issues. For example, staff at NPS, TSA, and SSA told us that they must fly to a more developed city or the mainland to receive quality medical care, incurring substantial travel costs.

³³According to the Office of Personnel Management's salary tables for 2024, a GS-5 employee at Step 5 in Hawaii would have an annual salary of \$46,760. A GS-9 or GS-12 employee at Step 5 in Hawaii would have an annual salary of \$70,853 or \$102,748, respectively.

³⁴According to the Office of Insular Affairs officials within the Department of the Interior, a lack of reliable internet access impacts the use of office equipment with Interior's security control.

Obstetrical Care Availability in Rural Alaska

In 2022, we reported that there is no obstetrical care available in more than 73 percent of Alaska's rural counties.^a

A Bethel health center, a regional hub in a town that we visited that services 58 communities across 75,000 square miles, requires its maternity patients in surrounding communities to travel to Bethel a month prior to their respective due dates. This travel helps minimize potential health risks, as patients can only reach Bethel by plane or boat. The Bethel health center houses these patients in a dedicated facility until they give birth.

^aGAO, *Maternal Health: Availability of Hospital-Based Obstetric Care in Rural Areas*, [GAO-23-105515](#) (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 19, 2022).

Source: GAO review of local hospital information web pages. | GAO-25-106527

NPS officials told us that few health care providers in American Samoa, CNMI, and Guam accept the most popular federal health insurance plans. According to agency staff in USVI, dentists on the island do not accept the federal dental insurance. As a result, employees must either pay out-of-pocket or, for example, fly to the mainland to receive covered treatments.

For federal employees with families, finding quality childcare and education can also be a challenge, according to agency officials. For example, NPS staff in remote Alaska noted that there are no childcare facilities in their area, which can lead to federal employees having to move when they decide to have children. We heard from agency staff in Puerto Rico that the quality of public schools is poor. As a result, many employees pay to send their children to expensive private schools. Education costs can become a deciding factor for current or prospective employees.

In addition to services, access to basic infrastructure such as roads, running water, and electricity also poses challenges to everyday living in some noncontiguous locations. For example, in rural Alaska many areas have limited or no internet access, reliable electricity, or running water, according to agency staff in Alaska. TSA officials cited difficulties their employees have in Bethel, Alaska with everyday basic living conditions, including safe sources of water in their homes. We heard from agency staff that in Hawaii and Alaska, some national park sites and communities are not accessible by roads and can only be reached by plane or boat. Figure 6 shows a remote community in Alaska where TSA provides security for a local airport that is only accessible by plane or boat. NPS staff explained that even when employees can adapt to such challenging living conditions, they can be discouraging to employees' spouses and children.

Figure 6: Bethel, Alaska

View flying into Bethel, Alaska. Bethel is a city with a population of 6,500 that is not connected to Alaska’s road system and only accessible by airplane or boat. The photo shows the edge of Bethel’s road system.



Source: GAO. | GAO-25-106527

Accessible Text for Figure 6: Bethel, Alaska

Aerial view of flat landscape that includes man-made structures

Source: GAO. | GAO-25-106527

Social Effects of Remoteness

For agency staff who do leave behind families and friends for federal employment in noncontiguous areas, the isolation of some noncontiguous locations, as well as cultural differences, can contribute to retention issues. According to agency staff, due to the remoteness of many noncontiguous areas, it is often expensive and time consuming for mainland hires to travel back home to family and friends. Agency staff shared that these challenges have led to mainland hires resigning within a year. For example, FWS officials in Puerto Rico said that most new hires in remote areas face challenges adapting to a different culture and stay approximately 6 to 12 months.

Agencies Face Administrative Challenges with Their Hiring Process

Staff from selected agencies in the noncontiguous U.S. commonly cited administrative challenges as barriers to effectively recruiting, hiring, and retaining employees in the noncontiguous U.S. This includes challenges with the federal application process, the effective use of hiring authorities and incentives, and headquarters understanding the needs of staff involved with hiring.

Application Process

Selected agencies across all the noncontiguous areas experienced challenges with getting applicants through the USAJOBS application and hiring process. In our prior work, we reported that unclear application processes and long wait times for job offers were identified as factors contributing to the federal government's workforce deficiencies in certain areas and job categories.³⁵ Agencies shared that USAJOBS can be intimidating to local candidates. For example, applicants may find the job descriptions unclear and federal jargon confusing.

Agency officials across the locations we visited cited difficulties getting through the federal application process, including the time it takes to apply for a position, which dissuades candidates. In addition, various agency officials in Hawaii and Pacific territories shared that cultural barriers affect the application process. For example, Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islander culture places great importance on humility, and, therefore, may not be comfortable labeling themselves as experts in their respective fields despite having the qualifications, according to agency officials. This cultural difference can prevent certain applicants from moving forward in the process.

As the steward of USAJOBS, Office of Personnel Management (OPM) has guidance and resources to help job seekers complete federal applications, including step-by-step tips on how to complete tasks in USAJOBS and a YouTube page with videos about navigating USAJOBS. OPM also assesses user experience through usability testing, focus groups, and analysis of data on questions submitted to the USAJOBS help desk. OPM has taken several actions to address feedback from these assessments and improve the user experience. OPM also provides resources online, such as a help center, quarterly virtual trainings, and a resume builder. In addition, OPM's Federal Executive Board (FEB) offers webinars to help applicants through the federal application process.

FEMA, NPS, TSA, and SSA have demonstrated efforts to help applicants navigate the federal hiring process. For example, FEMA held application seminars and resume workshops in Hawaii and USVI, and it hosts monthly virtual resume writing workshops. Its job announcements provide links to USAJOBS resources, including how to use the USAJOBS Resume Builder and direct applicants to the USAJOBS Resource Center for information on the federal employment application process. TSA hosts events that bring in potential hires to walk them through the application process. While onsite, they build USAJOBS profiles, take the computer-based test, schedule the medical appointment, and sometimes interview all in one day.

While selected agencies reported processes in place for assisting applicants with the federal hiring process, as shown in Table 3, FWS and NPS staff in the noncontiguous U.S. still cited challenges with prospective

³⁵See GAO, *USAJOBS Website: OPM Has Taken Actions to Assess and Enhance the User Experience*, [GAO-21-31](#) (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 13, 2020).

applicants having trouble navigating the federal application system, such as the complexity of the application and how long it takes to complete.

Table 3: Selected Agency Efforts to Communicate Support to Applicants and What Issues Remain

Agency	Agency Action(s)	Issues Remain
Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS)	<p>FWS (Hawaii) created a group to support and mentor locals, which has positively benefitted retention efforts, according to officials. Historically, the agency did not understand the local culture or the native Hawaiian perspective, and this effort created the opportunity for the agency to learn about the cultural differences, while applying it to the onboarding process, according to agency officials.</p> <p>FWS Joint Administrative Operations (JAO) —a national team that provides standardized administrative support services for FWS—cited that the agency has a greater opportunity to interact with applicants about eligibility or how to submit applications when an excepted hiring authority is used. According to FWS officials, they often refer potential applicants to online resources provided on USAJOBS.</p>	<p>According to FWS JAO, there is not an agencywide strategy to help applicants navigate the federal hiring process. FWS officials we spoke to in the noncontiguous U.S. expressed it is difficult for local applicants to get through the federal application process, and the hiring process does not account for cultural differences, particularly in Hawaii and the Pacific territories.</p> <p>While the efforts made in Hawaii are positive, they are not reflected in broader agency strategy across the noncontiguous U.S.</p>
National Park Service (NPS)	<p>NPS’s national recruitment team conducts training with candidates twice a month to share information on navigating the USAJOBS platform and federal resume writing.</p> <p>NPS (U.S. Virgin Islands) has hosted public events on navigating the federal hiring process and resume writing classes. They were able to request human resources staff from the mainland to help with workshops on writing effective resumes and navigating USAJOBS, according to agency officials.</p> <p>NPS (Hawaii) has used native Hawaiian employees for outreach to the local communities to help address the cultural barriers.</p>	<p>Despite current efforts, NPS officials in the noncontiguous areas cited challenges with getting prospective applicants through the federal application process. For example, NPS officials in Hawaii cited challenges around the length of time it takes to apply for jobs. Several staff members said it took hours to apply for a position, which can be a deterrent and as a result, staff said this can make recruiting and hiring difficult.</p>

Source: GAO analysis of documentation and interviews with selected agency staff in noncontiguous U.S. | GAO-25-106527

Notwithstanding the information resources OPM and FEB have made available to support the federal application experience, agency officials we spoke with in the noncontiguous U.S. cited that applicants still have difficulties navigating the federal hiring process. Federal agencies have a shared responsibility to ensure that prospective job applicants are aware of, and understand, these OPM information resources and the application process.³⁶ According to *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, management should monitor or examine the effectiveness of its systems—in this case, agencies’ efforts to help individuals through the application process. Management should also communicate quality information—in this case, information to help support applicants in the federal hiring process—so that the agencies can help applicants achieve its objectives and address related risks, particularly around human capital needs. Without FWS and NPS examining their efforts to provide support to applicants during the application process, the challenges of

³⁶ This is consistent with the Office of Management and Budget and the Office of Personnel Management’s Memorandum M-24-16 *Improving the Federal Hiring Experience* (Aug. 14, 2024), which encourages agencies to prioritize improving the experience of applicants throughout the hiring process to attract and hire from a qualified and diverse applicant pool.

applying to jobs in the noncontiguous U.S. and territories could continue to be a deterrent to qualified applicants.

Human Capital Flexibilities

Selected agencies had varied success effectively using human capital flexibilities. Four out of five selected agencies cited examples of successfully using certain hiring authorities—including direct hiring authority, special hiring authorities for veterans, and COVID-related hiring authorities.³⁷

Examples of agencies' successful use of Hiring Authorities

- In American Samoa, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, U.S. Virgin Islands, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Guam, and Hawaii, selected agency officials stated that the direct hiring authority has been effective for recruitment and hiring efforts. It allows agencies to expedite the typical hiring process associated with competitive hiring. This ultimately helps agencies efficiently hire more locals, who tend to stay at their job longer and are trusted as members of the local community, according to agency officials.
- National Park Service (NPS) officials in Alaska said that Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act local hiring authority is the agency's most useful recruitment tool in the region. It gives selection preference to eligible local applicants who have special knowledge or expertise concerning the natural or cultural resources of public lands and their management. This creates a good opportunity for native Alaskans to enter the federal workforce and help establish ties between the government and native Alaska communities.
- NPS and Fish and Wildlife Service officials both cited the Pathways Programs as a successful way to bring young candidates into their agencies in multiple noncontiguous locations. Individuals who successfully complete a Pathways Program may be eligible for conversion to a term or permanent job in the competitive service.

Source: GAO analysis of interviews with selected agency staff in noncontiguous U.S. | GAO-25-106527

Despite these successes, selected agencies cited two main challenges associated with effectively leveraging human capital flexibilities: (1) a limited ability to effectively leverage the full array of existing hiring authorities, including Direct Hire Authority; and (2) staff involved with hiring not having an awareness of or clearly understanding how to utilize existing flexibilities.³⁸ Four out of five of our selected agencies viewed Direct Hire Authority as a useful tool to help them hire locals more effectively. According to agency officials we spoke with in the noncontiguous U.S., locals typically have higher retention rates, because they are more accustomed to living in these locations. Officials from FWS and NPS expressed their desires to have access to more hiring

³⁷ Direct Hire Authority allows for appointments without regard to competitive rating and ranking procedures and veterans' preference. Importantly, agencies must comply with public notice requirements with respect to any position an agency seeks to fill using direct hire authority. 5 U.S.C. § 3304(a)(3); 5 C.F.R. § 337.203. Special hiring authorities for veterans include Veterans' Recruitment Appointment, which allows agencies to appoint eligible veterans up to the General Schedule 11 or equivalent level without regard to competitive examining procedures. Appointees are converted to competitive service after 2 years of satisfactory service. 38 U.S.C. § 4214; 5 C.F.R. pt. 307. COVID-19 related hiring authorities allowed for the use of excepted service appointments to address the need for hiring additional staff on a temporary basis in response to COVID-19. Office of Personnel Management, *OPM Memorandum Coronavirus Schedule A Hiring Authority* (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 20, 2020).

³⁸ There are two methods under which OPM issues Direct Hire Authority: (1) certain agencies may submit a written request to OPM for specific positions; or (2) OPM may decide independently that a "severe shortage of candidates" or a "critical hiring need" exists for specific positions in some or all locations and issue authority either governmentwide or for specific agencies and/or locations. NPS officials cited Direct Hire Authority as one example of a hiring authority that is confusing for hiring officials. FWS officials said there should be more hiring authorities targeting local applicants, similar to the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act local hiring authority. According to FEMA officials, Direct Hire Authority does not apply to FEMA's temporary employees in the noncontiguous U.S. who were hired under the Stafford Act.

authorities to help them hire local candidates.³⁹ Selected agency officials shared that local applicants were not always making it through the competitive hiring process, which also includes the application of veterans' preference.

Selected agencies also faced a variety of challenges related to utilizing existing hiring flexibilities—such as recruitment, relocation, and retention incentives or hiring authorities. For example, NPS officials explained that special hiring authorities and incentives could improve recruitment and retention in Hawaiian national parks, but they feel these authorities and incentives are often too difficult and time consuming to leverage in practice. There is also no guarantee of approval, and they said they receive inconsistent guidance from their human resources (HR) office. Similarly, FWS officials in Alaska shared that there is a high administrative burden to successfully utilizing hiring authorities and incentives, which can be difficult for newer staff to understand. However, NPS and FWS both have centralized websites with this information on it, among other resources.

Soliciting Input from Staff Involved with Hiring in Noncontiguous U.S.

Agency officials across the noncontiguous U.S. cited challenges related to their relationships and communications with their respective agencies' centralized HR staff. The selected agencies in our review have taken steps to create opportunities to hear feedback from staff involved with hiring. For example, SSA reported using OPM's Hiring Manager Satisfaction Survey to gauge satisfaction with the hiring process. These results are included in the agency's Office of Personnel's quarterly performance metrics that is provided to agency leadership.⁴⁰ However, other selected agencies experience challenges related to a lack of consistent communication around human capital flexibilities, such as hiring authorities, and recruitment and retention incentives.

While agencies do have processes in place to obtain feedback about hiring, recruitment, and retention practices from staff in field offices, efforts to use this feedback and improve the process prove to be inadequate in four of our five selected agencies. Staff from FEMA, FWS, NPS, and TSA cited challenges with their headquarters office understanding their needs (see table 4).

³⁹In 2016, we reported that it is critical to understand if and which authorities are meeting agencies' needs. This would help OPM better manage the suite of hiring authorities. We made a priority recommendation that OPM determine whether opportunities exist to refine, consolidate, eliminate, or expand agency-specific authorities to other agencies and implement changes where OPM is authorized. OPM agreed with this recommendation, and while it has taken actions, this recommendation remains open. To fully implement it, OPM needs to analyze the authorities and determine where to implement changes and, as appropriate, develop legislative proposals in consultation with the Chief Human Capital Officers Council. See GAO, *Federal Hiring: OPM Needs to Improve Management and Oversight of Hiring Authorities.*, [GAO-16-521](#) (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 2, 2016).

⁴⁰OPM's Hiring Manager Satisfaction Survey was developed in partnership with the Chief Human Capital Officers Council to capture hiring manager satisfaction with the hiring process. It also includes questions asking if respondents knew about different hiring flexibilities and incentives.

Table 4: Selected Agency Efforts to Solicit and Use Input from Staff Involved with Hiring and What Issues Remain

Agency	Agency Action(s)	Issues Remain
Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)	<p>FEMA Region 9—which covers Arizona, California, Hawaii, Nevada, and the Pacific U.S. territories—launched the Shape Our Future initiative in November 2023, which includes engaging with all members of the workforce on a variety of topics, including recruitment, hiring, and retention.</p> <p>Agency guidance on hiring authorities is communicated to all offices and regions through 3 channels: Human Capital Community of Practice, a Hiring Toolkit, and consultation with a human resources (HR) specialist where managers discuss job vacancies. This includes monthly meetings to facilitate communication and guidance on how to utilize hiring authorities and incentives.</p>	<p>Despite agency efforts, FEMA staff in the noncontiguous U.S. cited challenges they experience due to their headquarters office not fully understanding their human capital needs. According to FEMA’s headquarters, the agency does not regularly survey staff involved with hiring.</p> <p>Agency officials in the noncontiguous U.S. who are responsible for hiring said they could use more guidance, procedures, or training on the resources available for recruitment and hiring, including information about human capital flexibilities.</p>
Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS)	<p>Gathers information from hiring managers, senior leaders, and other stakeholders through direct feedback sessions, focus groups, and employee climate surveys.</p> <p>FWS Joint Administrative Operation (JAO) provides training sessions on federal hiring and the associated hiring authorities. The agency has a centralized website for hiring information.</p>	<p>Despite efforts to incorporate feedback from staff involved with hiring in the noncontiguous areas, these managers continue to encounter obstacles. According to agency officials in the noncontiguous U.S., agency HR staff are unresponsive and there is a lack of coordination with staff involved in hiring. FWS officials said they feel disconnected from HR support because they are not physically present in some of the Pacific locations.^a All communication is handled through the JAO office, which is a challenge since turnover is common in this office, according to agency officials.</p> <p>Agency staff involved with hiring also experienced barriers to using hiring authorities and incentives, which are difficult for new staff to understand, according to officials in Alaska.</p>
National Park Service (NPS)	<p>Evaluates HR professionals’ support to NPS hiring managers, management, and employees as part of their Human Resources Division assessments. HR professionals are also required to have hiring officials complete the Chief Human Capital Officers Hiring Manager Satisfaction Survey. They use the data on overall selecting official satisfaction to initiate conversations about improvements at the HR Division Team levels.</p> <p>U.S. Virgin Islands staff shared that headquarters staff recently visited their region and met with local staff to discuss their concerns.</p> <p>Provides information and guidance on its intranet site regarding hiring authorities and flexibilities that are available for use across the service, including the noncontiguous U.S. Examples include NPS’ Hiring Flexibility Guide.</p>	<p>Staff involved in hiring in the noncontiguous U.S. continue to experience difficulties with their level of support from their headquarters, despite the agency’s efforts to obtain feedback. Testimonial evidence from four noncontiguous locations indicates that many staff needs are not being met. For example, staff involved with hiring experience inconsistent responsiveness and a lack of standardization of hiring processes.</p> <p>Officials in multiple locations expressed that they received inconsistent guidance from HR. Officials in Puerto Rico shared that communication and guidance from agency-level HR is inconsistent and interpretation of rules varies by person and by region. Managers are often changing and follow different procedures.</p>

Agency	Agency Action(s)	Issues Remain
Transportation Security Administration (TSA)	<p>Its human capital office hosts weekly sessions for hiring managers to ask process, systems, or support-related questions and voice concerns. They host weekly field conference calls for hiring managers to discuss process or system updates and ask questions in a group forum.</p> <p>Conducts training on hiring authorities for headquarters and field HR specialists. During these training sessions, TSA highlights various policy documents including hiring policies.</p>	<p>Despite efforts to obtain and incorporate feedback from staff involved in hiring, staff in the noncontiguous areas continue to encounter obstacles. TSA officials in multiple locations shared that communication with HR can be a challenge. Specifically, they cited long wait times for a response, or sometimes no response is provided to questions. Headquarters staff explained that their live phone agent help desk closed during COVID-19 and transitioned into email-based support, which could have contributed to responsiveness challenges.</p>

Source: GAO analysis of documentation and interviews with selected agency staff in noncontiguous U.S. | GAO-25-106527

³The Department of Interior went through a reorganization in 2019 and officials explained that they recently reorganized how they assign HR staff. In the past, HR staff were assigned to a particular region and often had a physical presence in a park or regional office. As a result, these individuals developed expertise on hiring in the region and provided consultations with helpful insights specific to the region. However, HR staff have been centralized and by 2024, there will be no “regional” staff.

Notwithstanding the feedback efforts and information resources the selected agencies have provided, there is a disconnect between that and what support the staff involved with hiring feel they have.⁴¹ As such, this may contribute to difficulties in recruiting and hiring employees in the noncontiguous locations.

According to *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, management should use evaluations to monitor the design and effectiveness of its internal systems—in this case, agencies’ current feedback efforts. Management should also receive quality information about the entity’s operational processes—including HR processes and hiring practices—that flows up the reporting lines from personnel, such as staff involved with hiring, to help it achieve the entity’s human capital objectives. In addition, our prior work highlights that agencies should conduct regular surveys to gauge hiring manager satisfaction levels with the hiring process and its results.⁴² Without FEMA, FWS, NPS, and TSA examining how they solicit and use information on the experiences of staff who are intricately involved in recruitment, hiring, and retention, agencies are missing opportunities to identify pain points and explore potential solutions.

Selected Agencies Have Responded to Geographic Challenges, but Not All Leverage Existing Strategies to Broaden the Pool of Qualified Local Candidates and Improve Training Experiences

Selected agencies in all seven of the noncontiguous locations identified geographic barriers to recruitment, hiring, and retention. Specifically, agencies cited limited local candidate pools and training accessibility as challenges. Selected agencies have made efforts to address these geographic challenges but not all have not

⁴¹This is consistent with the Office of Management and Budget and the Office of Personnel Management’s Memorandum M-24-16 *Improving the Federal Hiring Experience* (Aug. 14, 2024), which encourages agencies to improve the hiring manager experience and empower human resources professionals.

⁴²GAO, *Human Capital: Transforming Federal Recruiting and Hiring Efforts*, [GAO-08-762T](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 8, 2008). In addition, we previously reported that agencies should develop competency and staffing requirements, and regularly assess competency and staffing needs. See GAO, *State Department: Additional Actions Needed to Address IT Workforce Challenges*, [GAO-22-105932](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 12, 2022).

leveraged or strengthened recruitment strategies to broaden the pool of qualified local candidates or improved training experiences in all hard-to-fill noncontiguous areas.⁴³

Limited Candidate Pools

Officials from all five selected agencies generally highlighted small local populations as a major challenge for recruiting qualified local candidates. According to Census Bureau data as of 2020—the most recent available census data—the population within the noncontiguous U.S. ranges from about 47,000 in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) to 3.3 million in Puerto Rico. Based on this information, the noncontiguous U.S. makes up approximately 1.73 percent of the total U.S. population, which is a significant difference in the readily available talent pool.

Selected agencies also struggle to find qualified local candidates within the local commuting area due to limited employment, training, and educational advancement opportunities available. According to FEMA officials in Alaska, there is a lack of qualified applicants because there are limited relevant employment and training opportunities to gain the necessary experience for the job.⁴⁴ In addition, officials in both FWS and NPS cited challenges with applicants meeting educational requirements due to limited higher education opportunities.⁴⁵

Moreover, selected agencies face competition from other employers, which further affects the available pool of qualified local candidates. For instance, SSA staff said the available talent pool experiences a “brain drain” when local young professionals prefer to work in the mainland, reducing the number of qualified local candidates. TSA staff in Guam and Alaska also noted that they face strong competition when recruiting locally because of the limited local pool of talent.

In response to the challenges described above, table 5 shows that selected agencies have taken actions to try to improve the available pool of qualified local candidates, but issues remain.

⁴³For the purpose of this report, “hard-to-fill noncontiguous areas” refers to areas where agencies typically have difficulty recruiting candidates with the required experience.

⁴⁴According to an official, there are fewer opportunities to gain disaster relief experience in Alaska. FEMA’s federal disaster workforce is uniquely designed to scale up or down depending on the timing and magnitude of disasters. FEMA augments its workforce if a disaster or emergency exceeds FEMA’s capacity, such as with local hires and contractors, among others.

⁴⁵The President issued an Executive Order in June 2020, calling for the increased use of valid, competency-based assessments as an alternative to the reliance on education credentials in determining applicants’ qualifications for federal jobs. Exec. Order No. 13932, *Modernizing and Reforming the Assessment and Hiring of Federal Job Candidates*, 85 Fed. Reg. 39457 (July 1, 2020). OPM has also recently issued guidance that builds on the President’s Executive Order, aiming to have federal agencies expand the use of skills-based hiring to measure candidates’ ability to perform the job. Office of Personnel Management, OPM Guidance Release - E.O. 13932, *Modernizing and Reforming the Assessment and Hiring of Federal Job Candidates* (Washington, D.C.: May 19, 2022). For this review, we did not assess the extent to which selected agencies were following this executive order.

Table 5: Selected Agency Efforts to Broaden the Pool of Qualified Local Candidates and What Issues Remain

Agency	Agency Action(s)	Issues Remain
Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)	<p>FEMA’s strategic recruitment plan discusses broad efforts to diversify the candidate pool, such as through partnerships with minority serving institutions or colleges, for example.</p> <p>Officials in Guam said the office works with local government partners to communicate job announcements and to organize job fairs.</p> <p>Officials in Region 9—which covers Arizona, California, Hawaii, Nevada, and the Pacific U.S. territories—stated that they established the Maui Recovery Office in Hawaii to connect with local community members. Per officials, the office’s recruitment strategy includes strategies to leverage local resources and broaden the candidate pool. Examples include connecting to the Maui high school college counselor network to reach regional college representatives and hosting pop-up events, including one at a local rugby community.</p> <p>According to FEMA officials, the agency utilizes different partnerships in Puerto Rico. For example, FEMA OCHCO partners with multiple campuses of the University of Puerto Rico to advertise vacancies and promote recruitment.</p> <p>Officials stated that each FEMA region has an assigned recruiter who supports efforts to fill vacancies, such as by leveraging any local relationships.</p>	<p>Despite agency efforts, officials in U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI) continue to cite difficulties finding local staff with the required technical background or experience. For example, staff in USVI stated that their small population size makes it difficult to find qualified candidates. It is difficult to find local staff with the required technical background or leadership experience. FEMA often has to attract talent from the mainland for USVI positions because FEMA needs highly qualified specialists in these areas, according to agency staff.</p> <p>According to agency reported data as of June 3, 2024, 63 percent of FEMA positions in USVI are filled. FEMA’s current efforts are focused on other regions and issues remain in USVI.</p>
Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS)	<p>Officials in Puerto Rico and USVI said they worked with local universities and shared job announcements with professors and university networks.</p>	<p>Officials in USVI continue to cite challenges related to the small pool of local candidates and a lack of competitive applicants with advanced degrees in the region. According to agency staff, this affects their ability to hire locally in USVI.</p> <p>Efforts to leverage local resources and partnerships are currently limited to Puerto Rico and USVI.</p>
Social Security Administration (SSA)	<p>The agencywide strategic plan outlines recruitment initiatives, with a goal to diversify the candidate pool by working with minority-serving institutions. For example, SSA uses Direct Hire Authority (when available) and conducts targeted outreach to minority-serving institutions, such as Historically Black Colleges and Universities.</p> <p>Officials in USVI said they use university announcements to advertise vacancies.</p> <p>Officials in Hawaii said they publicize jobs locally using word of mouth, employee referrals, job fairs, and online job boards.</p> <p>Officials in American Samoa stated that they typically advertise positions in the local 2-year community colleges or rely on word of mouth.</p>	<p>Officials from Hawaii, Guam, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), and USVI continue to cite challenges related to the small local pool of available candidates. For example, staff in CNMI said that recruitment and retention is a complex problem, and the region tends to yield a small pool of local candidates.</p> <p>Efforts to leverage local resources and partnerships are limited to Hawaii, American Samoa, and USVI.</p>

Source: GAO analysis of interviews with selected agency staff in noncontiguous U.S. and agency documentation. | GAO-25-106527

Although selected agencies have taken actions to improve the available pool of qualified local candidates, we found that recruitment efforts from most select agencies were on an ad-hoc basis and limited to certain noncontiguous states or territories. NPS and TSA have generally leveraged local partnerships and resources in hard-to-fill noncontiguous areas. For example, NPS' recently established national recruitment team leveraged community relationships with local colleges, Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Chambers of Commerce, and other federal agencies when conducting hiring fairs in the Southeast Region, which includes Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI), according to officials.

By contrast, FEMA, FWS, and SSA do not fully leverage existing recruitment strategies in all the noncontiguous areas that could help broaden the pool of qualified local candidates.⁴⁶ Examples of existing strategies that could be expanded to other noncontiguous areas include establishing partnerships with local or regional entities (e.g., Federal Executive Boards, Federal Executive Associations, non-profits, universities, government entities, etc.), participating in or hosting local job fairs, or posting job openings in the local papers or job boards. We have previously reported that agencies should develop strategies to recruit highly specialized and hard-to-fill positions by building relationships and developing strategic partnerships with a range of institutions and organizations.⁴⁷ In addition, our past work has cited the importance of agencies reevaluating and reprioritizing its business, including the management of the federal workforce, such as decisions to hire, retain, train, contract, and collaborate.⁴⁸ Evaluating current recruitment strategies and efforts to broaden the pool of qualified candidates could help FEMA, FWS, and SSA identify opportunities to strengthen recruitment, hiring, and retention in the noncontiguous locations.⁴⁹

Access to Training

Selected agencies identified access to training as a challenge to retention in the noncontiguous U.S. According to selected agency officials in the Pacific territories, the geographic location and significant time zone differences with agency headquarters staff limit access to live online training.

In response to these access to training challenges, FEMA, NPS, and SSA have attempted to address training needs by offering online training options, but issues remain.⁵⁰

⁴⁶Strategies to help broaden the pool of qualified local candidates refer to agency efforts to educate and engage more locals about existing opportunities more broadly. These strategies are not intended to include the use of hiring authorities but rather the extent of agency outreach and use of local resources for regional recruitment.

⁴⁷[GAO-08-762T](#). Also see GAO, *Federal Workforce: Key Talent Management Strategies for Agencies to Better Meet Their Missions*, [GAO-19-181](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 28, 2019).

⁴⁸[GAO-19-181](#).

⁴⁹In May 2023, we reported on steps FEMA has taken to address staffing gaps and highlighted opportunities for the agency to better monitor and evaluate its hiring efforts. GAO, *FEMA Disaster Workforce: Actions Needed to Improve Hiring Data and Address Staffing Gaps*, [GAO-23-105663](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 2, 2023).

⁵⁰According to interviews with officials, TSA and FWS did not cite access to training as a challenge in the noncontiguous U.S. Agency officials were generally satisfied with training according to our interviews. However, one of our prior reports discusses TSA's training challenges for transportation security officers at other locations in the mainland. GAO, *Aviation Security: Transportation Security Administration Could Further Improve Officer Engagement*, [GAO-24-106052](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 27, 2024).

Table 6: Selected Agency Efforts to Make Training More Accessible and What Issues Remain

Agency	Agency Action(s)	Issues Remain
Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)	<p>According to officials, FEMA’s Office of the Chief Human Capital Officer offered webinars or virtual trainings to staff covering various performance management topics.</p> <p>Headquarters officials said that human capital staff offered leadership, supervisor, and career development courses while considering west coast and Pacific time zones.</p> <p>Human capital staff traveled to regional offices and provided live supervisor training, according to officials.</p>	<p>Trainings are not consistently available in time zones suitable to Hawaii and the Pacific territories. For example, certain webinars offered for performance management trainings for calendar year end 2023 were based on Eastern Standard Time (10am, 11am, or 1pm), which are times outside of working hours for staff in the Pacific territories given the significant time difference.</p> <p>Agency officials in Region 9—which covers Arizona, California, Hawaii, Nevada, and the Pacific U.S. territories— said training schedules are primarily driven by East Coast work hours, such as for onboarding trainings, for example. Officials said there have been multiple instances of new employees taking onboarding trainings in Hawaii at 3am or 4am local time, depending on daylight savings time.</p> <p>Staff in both the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) and Guam stated that there is substantially less support, training, access to important meetings, and other opportunities for staff in the territories.</p> <p>According to officials in Region 9 the cost to attend in-person training on the mainland and lack of available travel funds for staff limits attendance, thereby affecting staff readiness and morale. Staff traveling from the Pacific regions may face costs that can exceed \$3,000 for a round trip, according to agency staff.</p>
National Park Service (NPS)	<p>According to officials from headquarters, NPS has provided various live webinar training options for agency staff in remote areas like the Pacific territories.</p> <p>Other actions taken, according to officials, include adjusting work hours from their Learning and Development office to ensure availability to employees. In addition, the Pacific West Region Human Resources office conducts online live trainings on an as-needed basis.</p>	<p>Officials stressed that access to training was a serious issue in Guam and CNMI. This has led to staff not feeling valued, causing morale and retention issues.</p> <p>According to officials, recorded trainings that are offered do not provide the same benefit as a live training because staff are deprived of live interaction and the ability to ask questions. Virtual trainings are often in the middle of the night for locals due to time differences. For example, an official in Guam was required to attend a training from 2am to 6am in the morning and then report to work that same morning.</p> <p>Officials also stated that travel is expensive from the territories to the mainland to attend in-person trainings.</p>
Social Security Administration (SSA)	<p>Headquarters officials stated that they provide pre-recorded on-demand training options for staff in remote areas like the Pacific territories.</p> <p>Officials said that operating regions have attempted to provide training at times that consider different time zones. Examples include having trainers adjust work shifts and in certain cases, onsite training.</p>	<p>Staff in Puerto Rico, Alaska, Hawaii, American Samoa, CNMI, and Guam said that online training can be confusing and overwhelming, and lacks meaningful interaction. Officials said that this has even caused some staff to leave the agency before completing the training.</p> <p>According to officials, the recorded trainings do not provide the same benefit as a live training because staff are deprived of live interaction and the ability to ask questions.</p>

Source: GAO analysis of interviews with selected agency staff in noncontiguous U.S. and agency documentation. | GAO-25-106527

Despite agency efforts described above, we found that FEMA, NPS, and SSA do not provide access to live virtual trainings at a reasonable time for employees in Hawaii and the Pacific territories, which has affected employee morale and retention in certain cases, according to agency officials.⁵¹ Consequently, staff may be unable to attend some live trainings, which contributes to them feeling under-valued by their headquarter-based counterparts, officials said. TSA and FWS did not cite access to training as a challenge in the noncontiguous U.S.

Our *Guide for Assessing Strategic Training and Development Efforts in the Federal Government* states that when considering the options of mechanisms for delivering training, agencies need to consider essential issues such as goals and objectives for the training, the type of audience intended for the training, the nature of the training content, the availability of technology and resources, and the timing for delivering the training. The report also states that it is important for agencies to consider how hiring, training, staff development, performance management, and other human capital strategies can be aligned to eliminate gaps and improve the long-term contribution of critical skills and competencies that have been identified as important for mission success.⁵² By not offering live trainings that are within the business hours of agency participants, FEMA, NPS, and SSA are limiting opportunities for staff across the noncontiguous areas to have meaningful and engaging training experiences in comparison to their colleagues located in the mainland U.S. Ensuring quality training experiences for all employees contributes to increased morale and retention while also enabling employees to possess the needed knowledge and skills to perform their jobs.

Conclusions

Federal employees play key roles in every sector of society and the federal government is responsible for ensuring that they hire and retain individuals who have the necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities for these roles. Recruiting, hiring, and retaining employees can be particularly challenging for agencies in the noncontiguous U.S., as they are faced with unique circumstances such as navigating substantial time zone differences, considerable geographic distance, and cultural or language diversity. While the selected agencies we reviewed have made efforts to overcome human capital challenges in the noncontiguous U.S., we identified many instances where the agencies' actions could be improved.

Specifically, the selected agencies could better support local federal applicants. Without support, applicants may face barriers to the federal application process and agencies may be missing opportunities to hire qualified local applicants. In addition, selected agencies do not have enhanced efforts to understand the experiences of staff in the noncontiguous U.S. who are intricately involved in recruitment, hiring, and retention. Agencies are missing opportunities to identify pain points and explore potential solutions. This is particularly true around challenges and potential solutions for improved communications regarding human capital flexibilities such as hiring authorities, recruitment, and retention incentives. By examining how they solicit and use information on the experiences of staff, agencies will be better positioned to resolve their concerns.

⁵¹Both Guam and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands are 15 hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time and 14 hours ahead of Eastern Daylight Time. They do not observe daylight saving time. According to FEMA officials in Region 9, they partner with the FEMA Incident Workforce Academy to provide training opportunities to staff, but recent budget reductions have affected the planned in-person or virtual training available to staff.

⁵²GAO, *Human Capital: A Guide for Assessing Strategic Training and Development Efforts in the Federal Government*, [GAO-04-546G](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 1, 2004).

Developing and enhancing agencies' strategies to better reach local communities to broaden the pool of qualified local candidates can help maximize opportunities to fill job vacancies and improve staff retention in the noncontiguous areas. Additionally, without a strategy to address the specific training needs of the localities, agencies may be missing opportunities to maximize trainings' effectiveness in engaging their employees. These enhanced efforts would help selected agencies continue to overcome recruitment, hiring, and retention challenges in the noncontiguous U.S. and strengthen the federal workforce.

Recommendations for Executive Action

We are making a total of 12 recommendations—three to FEMA, three to FWS, three to NPS, two to SSA, and one to TSA. Specifically:

The Director of the Fish and Wildlife Service should examine the effectiveness of the agency's efforts to communicate information that helps support applicants in the noncontiguous U.S. with the federal hiring process. (Recommendation 1)

The Director of the National Park Service should examine the effectiveness of the agency's efforts to communicate information that helps support applicants in the noncontiguous U.S. with the federal hiring process. (Recommendation 2)

The Administrator of the Federal Emergency Management Agency should evaluate the agency's efforts to obtain and use feedback on hiring, recruitment, and retention practices, including human capital flexibilities, from staff in the noncontiguous U.S. to identify and address opportunities for improvement. (Recommendation 3)

The Director of the Fish and Wildlife Service should evaluate the agency's efforts to obtain and use feedback on hiring, recruitment, and retention practices, including human capital flexibilities, from staff in the noncontiguous U.S. to identify and address opportunities for improvement. (Recommendation 4)

The Director of the National Park Service should evaluate the agency's efforts to obtain and use feedback on hiring, recruitment, and retention practices, including human capital flexibilities, from staff in the noncontiguous U.S. to identify and address opportunities for improvement. (Recommendation 5)

The Administrator of the Transportation Security Administration should evaluate the agency's efforts to obtain and use feedback on hiring, recruitment, and retention practices, including human capital flexibilities, from staff in the noncontiguous U.S. to identify and address opportunities for improvement. (Recommendation 6)

The Administrator of the Federal Emergency Management Agency should evaluate the agency's current recruitment strategies and efforts to identify opportunities to broaden the pool of qualified local candidates in USVI. (Recommendation 7)

The Director of the Fish and Wildlife Service should evaluate the agency's current recruitment strategies and efforts to identify opportunities to broaden the pool of qualified local candidates across all hard-to-fill noncontiguous areas. (Recommendation 8)

The Commissioner of the Social Security Administration should evaluate the agency's current recruitment strategies and efforts to identify opportunities to broaden the pool of qualified local candidates across all hard-to-fill noncontiguous areas. (Recommendation 9)

The Administrator of the Federal Emergency Management Agency should ensure that employees in offices that are outside of the Eastern time zone are able to access live training at a reasonable time, that includes the opportunity to interact with the instructor(s) and peers. (Recommendation 10)

The Director of the National Park Service should ensure that employees in offices that are outside of the Eastern time zone are able to access live training at a reasonable time, that includes the opportunity to interact with the instructor(s) and peers. (Recommendation 11)

The Commissioner of the Social Security Administration should ensure that employees in offices that are outside of the Eastern time zone are able to access live training at a reasonable time, that includes the opportunity to interact with the instructor(s) and peers. (Recommendation 12)

Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

We provided a draft of this report to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the Department of Interior (Interior), OPM, and SSA, for review and comment. DHS and OPM also provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate. In their comments, reproduced in appendices IV and V, Interior and SSA agreed with our recommendations and described actions they plan to take to implement them.

In its comments, reproduced in appendix III, DHS also agreed with two of our four recommendations to the department—recommendations 6 and 10—and described actions it plans to take to implement them. DHS disagreed that further action is needed for the other two recommendations—3 and 7—and requested that we consider these recommendations resolved and closed.

Regarding our third recommendation, DHS did not agree that FEMA needs to evaluate the agency's efforts to obtain and use feedback on hiring and retention practices. DHS stated that FEMA holds regular and recurring meetings with hiring managers in the noncontiguous U.S. to obtain feedback and provide guidance on recruitment and retention practices. We provide examples of such meetings and guidance in the report. However, as discussed in the report, we heard from multiple officials in the noncontiguous U.S. that they experience challenges due to their headquarters office not fully understanding their needs. Agency officials in noncontiguous states stressed they could use more guidance, procedures, or training on the resources available to them. Therefore, we maintain that evaluating its efforts to obtain and use feedback on hiring, recruitment, and retention practices, could help FEMA ensure it is addressing the concerns of those responsible for hiring personnel.

DHS also did not agree with our recommendation to evaluate the agency's current recruitment strategies and efforts to identify opportunities to broaden the pool of qualified local candidates in USVI and Puerto Rico. DHS provided examples and details of recent efforts in Puerto Rico. Additionally, DHS provided data showing that 84 percent of FEMA positions in Puerto Rico were filled as of August 2024. Given this updated information, we adjusted the report to reflect examples of the agency's actions and modified the recommendation to focus on USVI. As discussed in the report, officials in USVI cite difficulties finding local staff with the required technical background or experience. Examining recruitment strategies could help strengthen recruitment, hiring, and

retention for positions in USVI. Therefore, we maintain that FEMA should evaluate the agency's current recruitment strategies and efforts in USVI.

DHS also expressed concerns that the report suggests that FEMA's current strategies are unsuccessful. We believe this is a misinterpretation of the report. Throughout the report we present the positive practices and efforts from all selected agencies, while highlighting opportunities for agencies to build upon and improve their existing efforts. DHS also raised concerns that GAO did not sufficiently engage with FEMA's Office of the Chief Human Capital Officer (OCHCO). We had extensive engagement with the agency during the course of our audit work, which included 12 interviews with various levels of FEMA staff across the country between April 2023 and June 2024. We also requested a broad range of agency documentation and other information from FEMA headquarters, including requests related to region-specific recruitment and implementation plans. We analyzed this information and incorporated it in the report, as appropriate. We believe that these efforts provide a sufficient basis for our findings and recommendations.

Additionally, DHS raised concerns about the use of vacancy data in the report. We adjusted the wording in the report to portray the fill rate (i.e., the percentage of filled vacancies), rather than the numerical count of vacancies. As noted in their letter and discussed above, DHS provided updated information that shows the fill rates have improved since June 2024. Further, DHS raised concern about the scope of our report as it relates to FEMA's temporary, excepted service workforce. We clarified in the report that our discussion of the selected agencies' experiences with recruiting, hiring, or retaining federal employees in the noncontiguous states and territories addresses employees' experiences in these areas regardless of if they were full-time, permanent, or temporary status.

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Administrator of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the Director of the Fish and Wildlife Service, Director of the National Park Service, the Director of the Office of Personnel Management, the Commissioner of the Social Security Administration, the Administrator of the Transportation Security Administration, and other interested parties. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at <https://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-6806 or LockeD@gao.gov. Contact points for our Office of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to the report are listed in appendix VI.



Dawn G. Locke
Director, Strategic Issues

Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

The House Committee on Oversight and Accountability and members of Congress from the noncontiguous U.S. states and territories asked us to examine the recruitment, hiring, and retention of federal employees in Alaska, Hawaii, and the U.S. territories. This report examines (1) employment trends related to hiring and retention of federal employees in the noncontiguous U.S. compared to the contiguous U.S., and (2) selected federal agencies' experiences with recruiting, hiring, or retaining federal employees in the noncontiguous states and territories, and what opportunities exist to enhance agencies' efforts.

To address the first objective, we analyzed personnel data captured in the Office of Personnel Management's (OPM) Enterprise Human Resources Integration (EHRI) database. We analyzed data for fiscal years 2018 through 2023—the most recent 6 years of data to identify trends—across the 24 agencies cited under the Chief Financial Officers (CFO) Act to identify employment trends in the noncontiguous U.S. states and territories and compared those trends to the contiguous U.S. states. The noncontiguous states and territories included in our scope are Alaska, Hawaii, American Samoa, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), Guam, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI). Specifically, we reviewed data on the (1) number of federal employees, (2) number of hires, (3) attrition, and (4) retention.¹ These data allowed us to identify any patterns or trends in hiring, separation, and retention of federal employees hired during the period. Of the individuals hired during fiscal years 2018 through 2023, we identified the number of employees who left the federal government during that same time frame to determine length of retention.²

We assessed the reliability of EHRI data through electronic or manual data testing to identify missing data, out of range values, and logical inconsistencies. We also reviewed our prior work assessing the reliability of these data. We interviewed OPM officials familiar with the data to understand how they collect, aggregate, and use them, and to understand any limitations of the data. For instances where data were suppressed, we aggregated the data across regions, where applicable.³ We assessed the reliability of the EHRI data by reviewing related documentation, interviewing knowledgeable officials, and testing the data for missing data, outliers, obvious errors and logic tests, and determined the data were sufficiently reliable for the purpose of our analysis.

To address the second objective, we selected five agencies as case illustrations—the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and Transportation Security Administration (TSA) from the Department of Homeland Security, the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and National Park Service (NPS) from the Department of the Interior, and the Social Security Administration (SSA). Our selection was based on our analysis of EHRI

¹For this report, attrition is defined as the separation of employees from an agency for any reason (voluntary or involuntary), including resignation, termination, death, retirement, or transfer to another federal agency. Retention of hires compares the date that federal hires in the noncontiguous U.S. started their jobs to their separation dates (if applicable). The data presented in our first objective are full-time, non-seasonal, permanent federal employees.

²For the purpose of this report, we focused on if and when employees left the federal government. Additional analysis to identify the specific type of personnel action (e.g., resignation, retirement, or reduction-in-force) and legal authority associated with each employee separation was beyond the scope of this report.

³For privacy purposes, if employee counts in specific locations were less than 12 employees, we aggregated the data across a broader location or region. For example, for certain data counts in American Samoa, CNMI, and Guam, we aggregated the data into a Pacific Territories categorization.

employment data across the 24 CFO Act agencies provided by OPM in FY 2022. We identified 12 agencies that are present in at least six of the seven locations. We narrowed our scope to three CFO Act agencies—one small, one medium, and one large—in terms of the total number of employees reported in these locations.⁴ Within those three CFO Act agencies, we selected one small agency and two sub-components from the medium- and large- sized agencies that represented high-impact service providers and a variety of missions.⁵ Although these agencies do not represent the experiences of all agencies across government, they provide illustrative examples of experiences that agencies have with recruiting, hiring, and retaining individuals in Alaska, Hawaii, and the U.S. territories.

To examine the challenges selected agencies face, and any actions they are taking to ensure they can recruit, hire, and retain federal employees, we conducted site visits and interviewed staff from the selected agencies in the noncontiguous U.S. states and territories. Based on the presence of appropriate personnel on the ground and staff resources, we conducted in-person site visits to Alaska, Hawaii, American Samoa, and Puerto Rico. We conducted virtual interviews with agency staff located in CNMI, Guam, and USVI. We also spoke to relevant entities present in these regions—Federal Executive Boards and Federal Executive Associations—to learn about their experiences and perspectives.

From all of our interviews, we identified primary challenges that were common among most or all the noncontiguous states and territories.⁶ We defined primary challenges as issues that were mentioned in at least six out of the seven locations.⁷ We also identified and reviewed location specific challenges and successes for the location profiles found in appendix II. In addition, we reviewed selected agencies' documentation related to human capital management, such as relevant hiring authority and incentive guidance, information on pay, strategic workforce planning, and relevant trainings for agency staff involved with hiring. We also reviewed applicable federal laws, regulations, and guidance.

We conducted this performance audit from January 2023 to September 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.

⁴For the purpose of this report, we categorized agencies that had a presence in the noncontiguous U.S. as large if they had 5,000 or more employees; medium if they had 1,001 to 4,999 employees; and small if they had 1,000 employees or fewer.

⁵The Office of Management and Budget designates agencies as High-Impact Service Providers, meaning that a federal entity provides or funds customer-facing services, including federal services administered at the state or local level, that have a high impact on the public, whether because of a large customer base or a critical effect on those served.

⁶The scope of this objective included any employees' experiences with hiring, recruitment, and retention, regardless of if they were full-time, permanent, or temporary status.

⁷We asked officials general questions about what challenges they faced and what they believed their respective agencies were doing well. To be counted as a primary issue in a location, we judgmentally determined that at least two agencies must bring up the issue. For examples of what selected agencies are doing well, we captured successes cited by agency officials in at least four out of the seven locations.

Appendix II: U.S. State and Territory Profiles

For the purpose of this review, we selected seven noncontiguous U.S. states and territories: Alaska, American Samoa, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), Guam, Hawaii, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI). We selected five agencies as case illustrations—the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and Transportation Security Administration (TSA) from the Department of Homeland Security, the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and National Park Service (NPS) from the Department of the Interior, and the Social Security Administration (SSA). This selection includes large, medium, and small agencies across the 24 Chief Financial Officers Act agencies that have a presence in Alaska, Hawaii, and the U.S. territories. We conducted site visits to Alaska, American Samoa, Hawaii, and Puerto Rico, and interviewed management and non-management staff identified by the selected agencies in these locations as well as CNMI, Guam, and USVI, to learn about what challenges and successes they experienced with hiring, recruiting, and retaining federal employees in their location.

The following profile pages highlight examples of the types of experiences selected federal agencies have had with recruiting, hiring, and retaining employees in Alaska, Hawaii, and the U.S. territories. This information provides additional context for each of the individual locations and are specific to our five selected agencies. Although these agencies do not represent the experiences of all agencies across government, they provide illustrative examples of experiences that agencies have with recruiting, hiring, and retaining individuals in Alaska, Hawaii, and the U.S. territories. We refer to “selected agencies” when more than one agency shared an experience.



COMMONWEALTH OF PUERTO RICO

LOCATION Caribbean Sea, 1,000 miles from the U.S. mainland	NUMBER OF FEDERAL AGENCIES 30
PHYSICAL SIZE 3,425 square miles	NUMBER OF FEDERAL EMPLOYEES 15,138
POPULATION IN 2021 3.3 million	COST OF LIVING ALLOWANCE 2.63%
	LOCALITY PAY 16.82% (Rest of U.S.)

Selected agencies in Puerto Rico said:

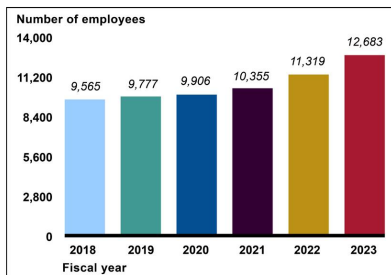
“ A lack of affordable housing, competition with other agencies, and language barriers are challenges affecting recruitment and retention. ”

” Local hiring, local networks, and telework positively contribute to recruitment and retention. ”

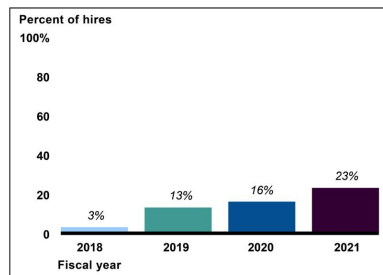
Source: kalf/stock.adobe.com (icon graphic). | GAO-25-106527

PUERTO RICO FEDERAL EMPLOYEE AND RETENTION DATA, FISCAL YEARS 2018-2023

Number of Federal Employees in Puerto Rico within 24 Chief Financial Officers Act Agencies, Fiscal Years 2018 through 2023



Percentage of Hires in Puerto Rico in Fiscal Years 2018 through 2021 Who Stayed Less than 2 Years



Source: GAO analysis of Office of Personnel Management's Enterprise Human Resources Integration data. | GAO-25-106527

Challenges Selected Agencies Experience		Successes Selected Agencies Experience	
Lack of available and affordable housing	According to agency staff, there is a shortage of available affordable housing, making it difficult for applicants who are not local to establish themselves. Many homes in Puerto Rico have been turned into vacation rentals, which has increased housing prices in recent years.	Hiring locals	Officials shared they have greater recruitment and retention success when they hire locals. Local applicants are already accustomed to the way of life on the island and likely do not need to find new housing, unlike mainland applicants. Federal employment is generally attractive in Puerto Rico, due to the stability, pay, and benefits.
Competition with other federal agencies	Many selected agencies cited competition with other federal agencies that offer telework options and better pay as factors contributing to recruitment and retention challenges. For example, Transportation Security Administration (TSA) and National Park Service officials said their main competition in Puerto Rico is with other federal agencies as staff often leave for higher paying positions.	Using local networks	FWS and TSA have found success recruiting through university networks, according to agency officials. Additional methods used by these, and other agencies include attending job fairs, sending job announcements around the region, and posting openings in local newspapers and on social media.
Language barrier	Because many people in Puerto Rico do not speak English, they would not be eligible for jobs where fluency in English is a requirement. According to agency officials, they lose many qualified candidates because of this. Conversely, Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) officials stated that it can be difficult to retain a non-local applicant who does not speak Spanish, as it is often used when working with FWS partners and community members.	Telework options	Selected agencies shared that the use of telework, or remote work has benefited recruitment and retention, as many job seekers now prefer jobs with the option to telework.


Source: GAO analysis of interviews with selected agencies. | GAO-25-106527



U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS (USVI)

<p>LOCATION Caribbean Sea, 1,000 miles from the U.S. mainland</p> <p>PHYSICAL SIZE 134 square miles (three main islands)</p> <p>POPULATION IN 2020 87,146</p>	<p>NUMBER OF FEDERAL AGENCIES 18</p> <p>NUMBER OF FEDERAL EMPLOYEES 746</p> <p>COST OF LIVING ALLOWANCE 12.04%</p> <p>LOCALITY PAY 16.82% (Rest of U.S.)</p>
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Selected agencies in USVI said:



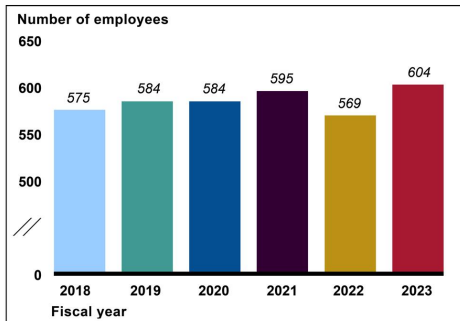
“ A lack of available housing, employer competition, and hiring non-local staff negatively affects recruitment and retention. ”

” Offering housing and telework options are important tools for recruitment and retention. “

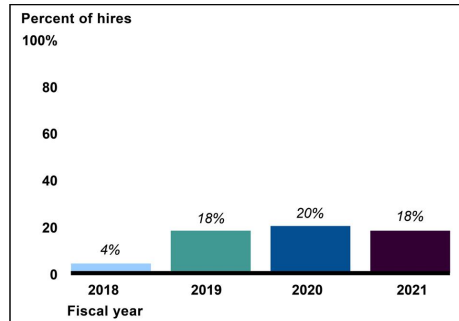
Source: kaif/stock.adobe.com (icon graphic). | GAO-25-106527

USVI FEDERAL EMPLOYEE AND RETENTION DATA, FISCAL YEARS 2018-2023

Number of Federal Employees in USVI within 24 Chief Financial Officers Act Agencies, Fiscal Years 2018 through 2023



Percentage of Hires in USVI in Fiscal Years 2018 through 2021 Who Stayed Less than 2 Years



Source: GAO analysis of Office of Personnel Management’s Enterprise Human Resources Integration data. | GAO-25-106527

Challenges Selected Agencies Experience	Successes Selected Agencies Experience
<p>Lack of available housing Agency officials at selected agencies cited a shortage of available affordable housing, which makes it difficult to attract and retain staff, particularly in lower-level positions. One official noted that many property owners offer their homes as short-term vacation rentals, reducing the amount of longer-term rentals available for residents.</p>	<p>Temporary agency housing National Park Service officials said they have offered temporary housing at or near national parks to help new staff transition to life in USVI. However, they added that it would be helpful if it were possible to offer more permanent housing.</p>
<p>Competition with local employers According to agency officials, competition with other employers in USVI affects recruitment and retention. For example, one official received feedback during a job fair that local hotels offer higher wages for entry-level positions than those offered by the agency.</p>	<p>Telework options Staff from several selected agencies noted that, where possible, telework has positively contributed to recruitment and retention. One official noted that telework is helpful when natural disasters make it difficult to travel to work in person.</p>
<p>Retaining non-local hires Officials from several selected agencies explained that they have trouble retaining staff who move to USVI from other locations. Challenges for non-local hires included the high cost of housing, difficulty traveling from USVI to the mainland U.S., pay as it relates to the local cost of living, and cultural differences, according to selected agencies.</p>	

Source: GAO analysis of interviews with selected agencies. | GAO-25-106527



GUAM

LOCATION Western Pacific, 3,700 miles from Hawaii

PHYSICAL SIZE 212 square miles

POPULATION SIZE IN 2020 153,836


NUMBER OF FEDERAL AGENCIES 19

NUMBER OF FEDERAL EMPLOYEES 3,252

COST OF LIVING ALLOWANCE 12.04%

LOCALITY PAY 16.82% (Rest of U.S.)

Selected agencies in Guam said:



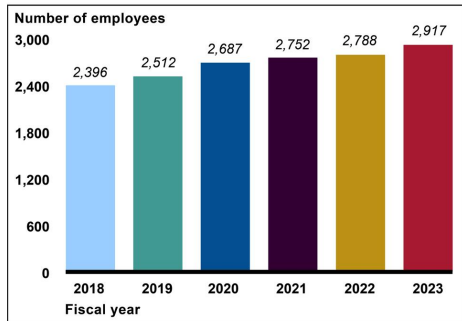
“ Small candidate pools, lack of access to quality services, and remoteness from the mainland affect recruitment and retention.

” Staff with personal ties to their mission are easier to retain, and federal job benefits and agency reputations help improve recruitment.

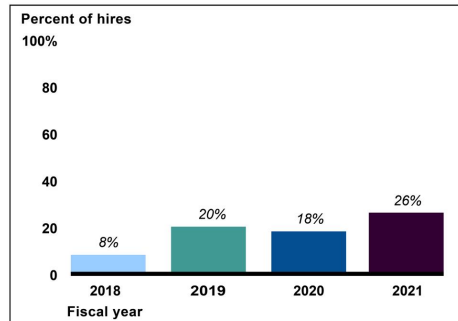
Source: kaif/stock.adobe.com (icon graphic) | GAO-25-106527

GUAM FEDERAL EMPLOYEE AND RETENTION DATA, FISCAL YEARS 2018-2023

Number of Federal Employees in Guam within 24 Chief Financial Officers Act Agencies, Fiscal Years 2018 through 2023



Percentage of Hires in Guam in Fiscal Years 2018 through 2021 Who Stayed Less than 2 Years



Source: GAO analysis of Office of Personnel Management's Enterprise Human Resources Integration data. | GAO-25-106527

Challenges Selected Agencies Experience	Successes Selected Agencies Experience
<p>Small candidate pool According to agency staff, Guam has relatively small candidate pools from which to hire, which poses challenges to recruit qualified job candidates. For example, one official noted that agency staff often need master's degrees to qualify for higher-level positions. However, Guam has a limited number of institutions that offer graduate-level education.</p>	<p>Personal ties to mission Staff from selected agencies noted that employees may have a personal connection to their respective agencies' missions. For example, one official noted that many staff choose to work for the National Park Service due to its conservation work and a belief in public service.</p>
<p>Lack of access to services Selected agency staff noted that limited services, such as reliable internet, medical care, childcare, and educational institutions affect recruitment and retention.</p>	<p>Job benefits and agency reputation Officials from selected agencies stated that federal agencies generally have a positive reputation among Guam residents, and the job stability and benefits offered by federal employment is desirable.</p>
<p>Remoteness from mainland Agency staff explained how remoteness from the mainland can exacerbate other challenges to recruitment and retention. One staff member noted that employees must often travel to the mainland for routine medical services. The cost of such a trip is very high, with airfare alone costing as much as \$3,000.</p>	

Source: GAO analysis of interviews with selected agencies. | GAO-25-106527

COMMONWEALTH OF THE NORTHERN MARIANA ISLANDS

COMMONWEALTH OF THE NORTHERN MARIANA ISLANDS (CNMI)

LOCATION Western Pacific, 3,300 miles from Hawaii
PHYSICAL SIZE 183 square miles (14 islands)
POPULATION SIZE IN 2020 47,329

NUMBER OF FEDERAL AGENCIES 14
NUMBER OF FEDERAL EMPLOYEES 230
COST OF LIVING ALLOWANCE 12.04%
LOCALITY PAY 16.82% (Rest of U.S.)

Selected agencies in CNMI said:

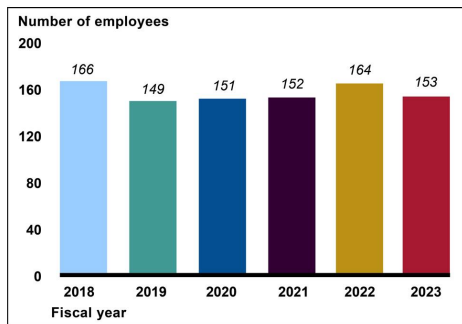
“ Small candidate pools and cultural differences with the mainland U.S. affect recruitment and retention. ”

” Locals are easier to retain, and job benefits and agency reputations help improve recruitment. “

Source: kaif/stock.adobe.com (icon graphic). | GAO-25-106527

CNMI FEDERAL EMPLOYEE AND RETENTION DATA, FISCAL YEARS 2018-2023

Number of Federal Employees in CNMI within 24 Chief Financial Officers Act Agencies, Fiscal Years 2018 through 2023



Percentage of Hires in CNMI in Fiscal Years 2018 through 2021 Who Stayed Less than 2 Years

Retention data are not reported for fiscal years 2018 through 2021 in CNMI. Data either included statistics on small groups of hires that were suppressed for privacy reasons, or no hires stayed less than 2 years.

Source: GAO analysis of Office of Personnel Management’s Enterprise Human Resources Integration data. | GAO-25-106527

Challenges Selected Agencies Experience	Successes Selected Agencies Experience
<p>Small candidate pool According to agency staff, CNMI has a relatively small candidate pool. This causes challenges recruiting qualified staff.</p>	<p>Hiring local residents According to officials from selected agencies, hiring locals has contributed to retention. Staff cited that these individuals are already accustomed to the lifestyle in CNMI, and many have a local support system of family and friends.</p>
<p>Cultural differences According to officials from selected agencies, cultural and lifestyle differences between CNMI and the mainland U.S. can affect recruitment and retention. For example, staff noted that new hires often experience culture shock, resulting in a retention challenge.</p>	<p>Job benefits and agency reputation Agency officials at all our selected agencies shared that residents covet federal jobs for a variety of reasons, including their stability and benefits, as well as the mission of working for the federal government.</p>

Source: GAO analysis of interviews with selected agencies. | GAO-25-106527



AMERICAN SAMOA

<p>LOCATION South Pacific, 2,600 miles from Hawaii</p> <p>PHYSICAL SIZE 76 square miles (7 islands)</p> <p>POPULATION IN 2020 49,710</p>	<p>NUMBER OF FEDERAL AGENCIES 9</p> <p>NUMBER OF FEDERAL EMPLOYEES 133</p> <p>COST OF LIVING ALLOWANCE 0%</p> <p>LOCALITY PAY 16.82% (Rest of U.S.)</p>
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Selected agencies in America Samoa said:



A lack of access to quality services and cultural differences are challenges affecting recruitment and retention.

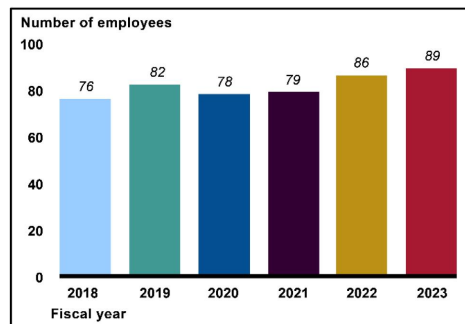


Local hiring and promoting job openings in the community have positively contributed to recruitment and retention.

Source: kalf/stock.adobe.com (icon graphic). | GAO-25-106527

AMERICAN SAMOA FEDERAL EMPLOYEE AND RETENTION DATA, FISCAL YEARS 2018-2023

Number of Federal Employees in American Samoa within 24 Chief Financial Officers Act Agencies, Fiscal Years 2018 to 2023




Percentage of Hires in American Samoa in Fiscal Years 2018 through 2021 Who Stayed Less than 2 Years

Retention data are not reported for fiscal years 2018 through 2021 in American Samoa. Data either included statistics on small groups of hires that were suppressed for privacy reasons, or no hires stayed less than 2 years.

Source: GAO analysis of Office of Personnel Management's Enterprise Human Resources Integration data. | GAO-25-106527

Challenges Selected Agencies Experience	Successes Selected Agencies Experience
<p>Lack of access to services</p> <p>Officials from selected agencies expressed challenges with their lack of access to services such as reliable internet, healthcare, and education. Inconsistent internet can affect people's ability to apply to jobs online, and employees' ability to serve the public in some cases. Lack of quality education leads to some employees paying for private schooling. Some applicants may not have the necessary education to qualify for federal jobs. At times, employees also must fly off island for quality healthcare.</p>	<p>Hiring locals</p> <p>Officials shared they have greater recruitment and retention success when they hire locals, as they are already living on the island and acclimated to local culture. National Park Service (NPS) officials stated that hiring people from Samoan villages helps to build a connection with the local community and improves how locals view NPS.</p>
<p>Cultural differences</p> <p>Officials explained that local cultural differences between the island and the mainland, in conjunction with the physical disconnectedness of their geographic location, contribute to a variety of different challenges hiring and retaining federal employees.</p>	<p>Promoting job openings in local community</p> <p>NPS and the Social Security Administration have found success by promoting job openings within the local community. Examples of this include presentations to churches, youth groups, and schools. In addition, posting flyers in the community college and information sharing by word of mouth have been useful tactics.</p>

Source: GAO analysis of interviews with selected agencies. | GAO-25-106527



ALASKA

LOCATION Alaska is a Peninsula off Northwest Canada

PHYSICAL SIZE 586,000 square miles

POPULATION IN 2020 733,391

NUMBER OF FEDERAL AGENCIES 30

NUMBER OF FEDERAL EMPLOYEES 12,539

COST OF LIVING ALLOWANCE 1.69%

LOCALITY PAY 31.96%

Source: GAO Map Resources. | GAO-25-106527

Selected agencies in Alaska said:

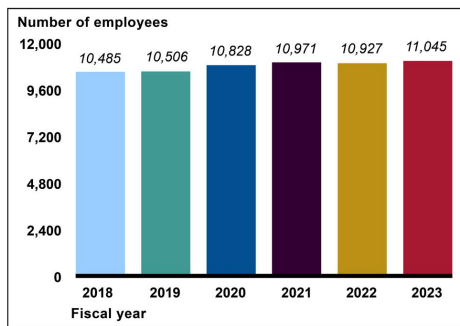
“Lack of available housing, difficulty recruiting Alaska Natives, and competition with other employers are challenges affecting recruitment and retention.”

”Incentives and offering telework, when possible, can overcome barriers to recruitment and retention.”

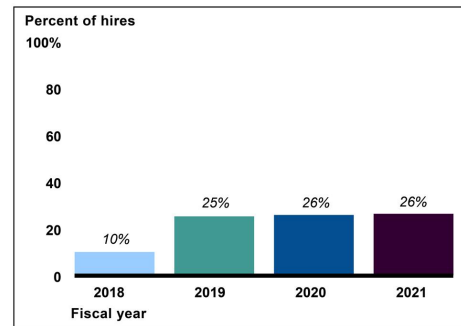
Source: kaif/stock.adobe.com (icon graphic). | GAO-25-106527

ALASKA FEDERAL EMPLOYEE AND RETENTION DATA, FISCAL YEARS 2018-2023

Number of Federal Employees in Alaska within 24 Chief Financial Officers Act Agencies, Fiscal Years 2018 to 2023



Percentage of Hires in Alaska in Fiscal Years 2018 through 2021 Who Stayed Less than 2 Years



Source: GAO analysis of Office of Personnel Management’s Enterprise Human Resources Integration data. | GAO-25-106527

Challenges Selected Agencies Experience		Successes Selected Agencies Experience	
Lack of available housing	Selected agencies cited a shortage of available housing, particularly in remote areas, as a contributing factor to recruitment challenges. Officials told us that applicants often turn down positions because they cannot secure housing.	Recruitment and retention incentives	Officials from selected agencies discussed their use of monetary incentives, such as paying for relocation and increasing pay at certain duty locations. According to officials, these types of incentives are necessary to recruit and retain federal employees in Alaska.
Recruiting Alaska Natives	Agency staff from selected agencies noted that it can be difficult to recruit members of local Alaska Native Tribes, which can make up a large proportion of the local population in remote areas. Officials noted that federal jobs may not appeal to Alaska Native residents for a variety of reasons.	Telework options	Selected agency officials noted that offering telework helps with recruitment. An official from one agency noted that when their agency began offering remote work, for positions as appropriate, it received a larger number of qualified applicants.
Competition with other employers	According to agency staff, competition with other employers in Alaska contributes to recruitment and retention issues. In some cases, other federal agencies offer benefits such as remote work, agency housing, or higher pay that are attractive to Alaska’s small local candidate pool.		

Source: GAO analysis of interviews with selected agencies. | GAO-25-106527



HAWAII

LOCATION North central Pacific Ocean approximately 2,400 miles from the west coast of the U.S.

PHYSICAL SIZE 6,423 square miles

POPULATION IN 2020 1.46 million

NUMBER OF FEDERAL AGENCIES 36


NUMBER OF FEDERAL EMPLOYEES 26,949

COST OF LIVING ALLOWANCE 3.15 to 8.9%

LOCALITY PAY 21.79%

Source: GAO Map Resources. | GAO-25-106527

Selected agencies in Hawaii said:



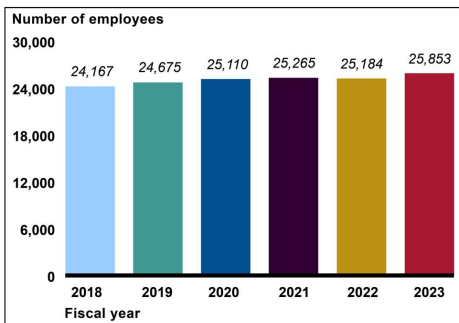
“ Competition with other employers, cultural factors, and public perception of their agencies are challenges to recruitment and retention.

” Improving agencies’ understanding of local Hawaiian culture, along with employees’ connection to the mission of the agency improved retention.

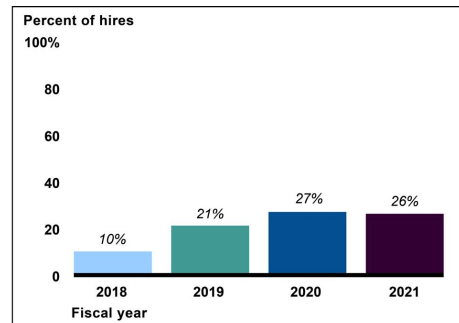
Source: kaif/stock.adobe.com (icon graphic). | GAO-25-106527

HAWAII FEDERAL EMPLOYEE AND RETENTION DATA, FISCAL YEARS 2018-2023

Number of Federal Employees in Hawaii within 24 Chief Financial Officers Act Agencies, Fiscal Years 2018 to 2023



Percentage of Hires in Hawaii in Fiscal Years 2018 through 2021 Who Stayed Less than 2 Years



Source: GAO analysis of Office of Personnel Management’s Enterprise Human Resources Integration data. | GAO-25-106527

Challenges Selected Agencies Experience	Successes Selected Agencies Experience
<p>Competition with other local employers Officials at selected agencies noted that competition with other local employers—both private companies and other federal agencies—affects recruitment and retention. Other employers offer the same pay with less requirements, meal and uniform allowances, or discounted housing and groceries.</p>	<p>Cultural competency Officials at the Fish and Wildlife Service noted that efforts to improve diversity and inclusion have helped the agency to better understand the perspective of local residents and apply that knowledge to its onboarding process. According to staff, these efforts help ensure new staff feel included and have improved retention.</p>
<p>Cultural differences Officials at selected agencies noted that it can be difficult to recruit Native Hawaiians due to cultural differences between the Hawaiian culture and the federal hiring process. Additionally, federal hiring authority targeted at Native Hawaiians requires documentation that an applicant is at least 50 percent Native Hawaiian. Officials said that a small number of Native Hawaiians have such a high percentage, and that documentation of ancestry can be difficult to obtain.</p>	<p>Connection with agency mission Officials at selected agencies noted that retention is high when employees are connected to the mission of their agency. One staffer we spoke with stated that they have no plans to leave their agency because they find their work fulfilling.</p>
<p>Public perception Selected agency officials cited local perceptions of the federal government or certain agencies as a barrier to recruitment. For example, one National Park Service (NPS) official stated that many residents are not aware NPS jobs are federal positions and come with a federal benefits package. Another official shared that some local residents view the federal government as untrustworthy.</p>	

Source: GAO analysis of interviews with selected agencies. | GAO-25-106527

Appendix III: Comments from the Department of Homeland Security

U.S. Department of Homeland Security
Washington, DC 20528



**Homeland
Security**

BY ELECTRONIC SUBMISSION

September 26, 2024

Dawn G. Locke
Director, Strategic Issues
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20548-0001

Re: Management Response to Draft Report GAO-24-106527, "FEDERAL WORKFORCE: Actions Needed to Improve Recruitment and Retention in Alaska, Hawaii, and the U.S. Territories"

Dear Ms. Locke:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this draft report. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS, or the Department) appreciates the U.S. Government Accountability Office's (GAO) work in planning and conducting its review and issuing this report.

DHS leadership is pleased to note GAO's recognition of the efforts of selected DHS agencies, including the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), to overcome the socioeconomic, administrative, and geographic challenges affecting recruitment, hiring, and retention of employees in the non-contiguous U.S. For example, GAO acknowledged that TSA recently started offering expanded relocation incentives for staff that sign a 120-month service agreement at hard-to-hire airports, and that FEMA provides mentoring and learning opportunities for staff to encourage retention, such as temporary detail assignments to different types of work or in other locations. DHS remains committed to strengthening the Department's understanding of and efforts to meet the needs of employees in these locations so that they can more fully participate in achieving the DHS mission and serving the public interest.

FEMA, however, remains concerned GAO's report will be misleading to Congress and the public, suggesting that FEMA should expend resources and time on activities that are already successful or that FEMA is understaffed at locations in U.S. territories.

Specifically, FEMA repeatedly expressed concerns (i.e., in April 2024, June 2024, and August 2024) about GAO's lack of direct communication with FEMA's Office of the Chief Human Capital Officer (OCHCO), and the consistency, source, and reliability of data used to develop findings and recommendations in this draft report. For example, FEMA OCHCO manages the recruitment and hiring processes for the entire agency and collaborates closely with FEMA Regional Offices on developing strategies to address the recruitment and hiring of vacant positions in local areas. Yet, during this audit, GAO did not interview FEMA OCHCO headquarters staff regarding efforts to recruit, retain, or train employees in the non-contiguous U.S. FEMA OCHCO only received three limited requests for information during audit fieldwork, none of which were related to FEMA's recruitment strategies specific to the U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI) and Puerto Rico or information related to training employees in the non-contiguous U.S. In addition, GAO did not request recruitment strategies specific to USVI and Puerto Rico from the respective regional office, Region 2. These strategies were available during fieldwork and could have been evaluated by GAO, if requested. Instead, GAO erroneously concluded that FEMA's recruitment and retention efforts were focused elsewhere.

Further, FEMA is concerned that readers of this report may conclude that FEMA's current recruitment strategies in the non-contiguous U.S. are unsuccessful, which is inaccurate. FEMA's current recruitment strategies and efforts in the non-contiguous U.S. are not only successful, but also supported by quantitative data. FEMA provided vacancy data for the non-contiguous U.S. to GAO in June 2024 after discussing the formal Statement of Facts and draft recommendations for this audit. This data was not requested by GAO before the conclusion of fieldwork or before DHS was informed GAO was considering the associated recommendation in this draft report. Nevertheless, the draft report uses numerical count of vacancies rather than the percentage of filled vacancies to derive conclusion, such as citing 256 vacancies in USVI and Puerto Rico. However, the draft report does not acknowledge that this was actually a fill rate of 62.57 percent (USVI) and 83.76 percent (Puerto Rico) of the available funded positions in these locations, and that 75.86 percent (USVI) and 84.11 percent (Puerto Rico) of these positions are now filled as of August 2024. If temporary, excepted service employees are excluded, 86 percent (31 out of 36) of the vacant positions in these locations are filled. These are successful fill rates. For comparison, 78.7 percent (5152 out of 6543) of permanent, full-time positions across the entire agency were filled as of September 2024. FEMA believes that the percentage of filled, funded positions is a more appropriate measure of success than a simple numerical count of vacancies in a location.

Additionally, GAO included FEMA's temporary, excepted service workforce in some of the data calculations in the draft report findings, despite stating the audit scope was limited to non-seasonal, permanent full-time employees. These temporary, excepted service employees are hired by FEMA under the authority granted by the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act and include employee types such as Cadre of On-Call Response/Recovery Employees, Local Hires, and Reservists. It's

important that readers of GAO's report understand, however, that these positions are designed to be temporary, and address a specific disaster need in a location. Including these position in the report's calculations adversely impacts the reliability of both the anecdotal and quantitative data used by GAO, as Stafford Act employees are governed by different federal law, regulation, guidance, and policy than permanent full-time employees. For example, GAO's recommendations in the report to use Direct Hire Authority is not applicable to Stafford Act employees and Stafford Act appointments are also designed to be temporary (i.e., the end of these appointments does not indicate a retention challenge). It is unclear if the distinction was made by GAO during interviews with FEMA employees, or when temporary employees are being referenced by GAO in the report. Due to FEMA's unique mission requirement, FEMA has only a small non-seasonal, permanent full-time workforce in the non-contiguous U.S. During 2024, in fact, there were only 59 non-remote, non-seasonal, permanent full-time employees in the noncontiguous U.S. As of August 2024, 87 percent of the permanent full-time positions in the noncontiguous U.S. are filled. FEMA's quantitative data does not support the conclusions drawn by GAO in this report or substantiate the need to change successful recruitment practices.

The draft report contained 12 recommendations, including four for DHS—two with which the Department concurs (Recommendations 6 and 10) and two with which the Department non-concurs (Recommendations 3 and 7). Enclosed find our detailed response to each recommendation. DHS previously submitted technical comments addressing several accuracy, contextual, and other issues under a separate cover for GAO's consideration, as appropriate.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to review and comment on this draft report. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

JIM H
CRUMPACKER

Digitally signed by JIM H
CRUMPACKER
Date: 2024.09.26 17:21:38 -04'00'

JIM H. CRUMPACKER
Director
Departmental GAO-OIG Liaison Office

Enclosure

**Enclosure: Management Response to Recommendations
Contained in GAO-24-106527**

GAO recommended that the Administrator of FEMA:

Recommendation 3: Evaluate the agency's efforts to obtain and use feedback on hiring, recruitment, and retention practices, including human capital flexibilities, from staff in the noncontiguous U.S. to identify and address opportunities for improvement.

Response: Non-Concur. FEMA OCHCO's current efforts to obtain and use feedback on hiring, recruitment, and retention practices are already successful, as evidenced by the fact that approximately 87 percent of permanent full-time positions in the non-contiguous U.S. are filled as of August 2024. For comparison, 78.7 percent (5152 out of 6543) of permanent full-time positions across the entire agency are filled as of September 2024. Specifically, FEMA OCHCO holds regular and recurring meetings with hiring managers in the non-contiguous U.S. to obtain feedback and provide guidance on recruitment and retention practices. This includes strategic recruitment consultations, scheduled program office check-ins, and monthly Human Resources Community of Practice (HR-COP) meetings with all stakeholders involved in the hiring process. The HR-COP ensures a feedback loop between stakeholders, and provides a forum to share resources and advance hiring managers' knowledge of hiring flexibilities, recruitment incentives, and recruitment strategies.

We request that GAO consider this recommendation resolved and closed.

GAO recommended that the Administrator of TSA:

Recommendation 6: Evaluate the agency's efforts to obtain and use feedback on hiring, recruitment, and retention practices, including human capital flexibilities, from staff in the noncontiguous U.S. to identify and address opportunities for improvement.

Response: Concur. TSA Human Capital will continue current efforts to garner feedback from staff in noncontiguous U.S. airports, as well as current efforts to incorporate local recommendations regarding recruitment strategy to try to attract candidates in desired quantities. In addition, Human Capital will continue to meet at least a monthly with airport Points of Contacts via stakeholder conference calls to collaborate on recruitment advertising, compensation, and innovative hiring process enhancements to collectively improve recruitment and retention performance. These recurring meetings act as a gauge and help TSA Human Capital evaluate if current levels of engagement are sufficient, or if additional interaction is required. TSA Human Capital will also gather feedback on the impact/results of current activities and determine if further activities are needed, as appropriate. Estimated Completion Date (ECD): December 31, 2024

GAO recommended that the Administrator of FEMA:

Recommendation 7: Evaluate the agency’s current recruitment strategies and efforts to identify opportunities to broaden the pool of qualified local candidates in the USVI and Puerto Rico.

Response: Non-concur. FEMA’s current recruitment strategies and efforts in the USVI and Puerto Rico are successful when evaluating the success of recruitment strategies and efforts by the percent of available positions filled. Currently, 84.11 percent (995 out of 1183) and 75.86 percent (110 out of 145) of positions are filled in Puerto Rico and the USVI, respectively. This data includes temporary, excepted service positions designed to address short-term disaster needs in these locations. As previously noted, the calculations and findings in the draft report do not differentiate between non-seasonal, permanent full-time employees and temporary, excepted service positions. However, if temporary, excepted service positions are excluded according to GAO’s methodology in the draft report, 86 percent (31 out of 36) of the available permanent full-time positions in USVI and Puerto Rico are filled as of August 2024. FEMA has a small non-seasonal, permanent full-time workforce in these locations by design.

These percentages are an improvement over vacancy data FEMA OCHCO provided to GAO in June 2024 on all active filled and vacant positions in the non-contiguous U.S., to include temporary, excepted service positions. At that time, 83.76 percent (990 out of 1,182) of vacancies were filled in Puerto Rico and 62.57 percent (107 out of 171) of vacancies were filled in the USVI. This increase is further evidence that recruitment strategies and efforts in the USVI and Puerto Rico are successful.

However, it is important to reiterate that GAO did not request recruitment strategies and vacancy data for the USVI and Puerto Rico from FEMA OCHCO or Region 2 during fieldwork. As a result, GAO incorrectly concluded that FEMA’s current recruitment efforts are focused on other regions. FEMA currently utilizes successful recruitment strategies in these locations. For example, FEMA OCHCO’s Recruitment Team partners with multiple campuses of the University of Puerto Rico, including the Carolina, Aguadilla, and Mayaguez, as well as the Catholic University of Puerto Rico and Ana G. Mendez University Puerto Rico to advertise vacancies and promote recruitment. These engagements and partnerships were built between June 2023 and June 2024 with support from FEMA Region 2, the FEMA Caribbean Field Office, and the Puerto Rico HR Team. In fiscal year (FY) 2024, FEMA OCHCO participated in hiring events at the University of Puerto Rico in Ponce and the Caribbean Field Office in San Juan. In addition, Region 2 participated in events at the University of Puerto Rico’s Mayaguez and Carolina campuses. Region 2 will also attend the Warrior Odyssey Expo Job Fair in September 2024 at Ramey Air Force Base.

We request that GAO consider this recommendation resolved and closed.

Recommendation 10: Ensure that employees in offices that are outside of the Eastern time zone are able to access live training at a reasonable time, that includes the opportunity to interact with the instructor(s) and peers.

Response: Concur. FEMA is currently making progress in this area, including FEMA Region 9 and the FEMA Incident Workforce Academy (FIWA) continuing efforts to provide greater essential training opportunities such as advanced planned offerings and partnerships with local consortia in the Pacific. For example, FEMA Region 9 and employees deployed to Region 9 and the FIWA provided place-based training in FY 2024 for the following FEMA Qualification System (FQS) courses:

- Course number 7381: “FEMA Managers” in Oakland, CA, and in Maui, HI;
- Course number 825: “FEMA Incident Action Plan” offered virtually during Pacific time zone business hours.

By October 2024, FEMA Region 9 will establish training guidance that clearly communicates management’s intent for employees to take training during regular business hours whenever possible. This guidance will also require employees to notify the Region 9 training team or the Region 9 Employee Services Branch if any training sessions are not available during their normal business hours. Additionally, this guidance will include an annual requirement to validate and report on unavailable or inaccessible training to the relevant FEMA headquarters component(s).

By December 2024, FEMA Region 9 will also conduct a survey to identify virtual trainings that employees took outside of normal business hours, and to determine potential training opportunities that employees might have foregone due to barriers related to availability, access, or timing. Once the survey is complete Region 9, will produce an initial report on unavailable or inaccessible training and any associated resource requirements, such as travel needs to or from the Pacific for training, to the appropriate FEMA headquarters component.

By September 2025, FEMA Region 9 will support the National Domestic Preparedness Consortium to plan in-person delivery of several courses in both the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands and Guam, including:

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By September 2025, FEMA Region 9 will also partner with the FIWA to deliver place-based training for a minimum of one FQS course during Pacific time zone business hours. ECD: September 30, 2025.

Accessible Text for Appendix III: Comments from the Department of Homeland Security

U.S. Department of Homeland Security
Washington, DC 20528

BY ELECTRONIC SUBMISSION

September 26, 2024

Dawn G. Locke
Director, Strategic Issues
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20548-0001

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JIM H CRUMPACKER

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JIM H. CRUMPACKER
Director
Departmental GAO-OIG Liaison Office

Enclosure

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Contained in GAO-24-106527**

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We request that GAO consider this recommendation resolved and closed. GAO recommended that the Administrator of TSA:

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We request that GAO consider this recommendation resolved and closed.

Recommendation 10: Ensure that employees in offices that are outside of the Eastern time zone are able to access live training at a reasonable time, that includes the opportunity to interact with the instructor(s) and peers.

Response: Concur. FEMA is currently making progress in this area, including FEMA Region 9 and the FEMA Incident Workforce Academy (FIWA) continuing efforts to provide greater essential training opportunities such as advanced planned offerings and partnerships with local consortia in the Pacific. For example, FEMA Region 9 and employees deployed to Region 9 and the FIWA provided place-based training in FY 2024 for the following FEMA Qualification System (FQS) courses:

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By October 2024, FEMA Region 9 will establish training guidance that clearly communicates management’s intent for employees to take training during regular business hours whenever possible. This guidance will also require employees to notify the Region 9 training team or the Region 9 Employee Services Branch if any training sessions are not available during their normal business hours. Additionally, this guidance will include an annual requirement to validate and report on unavailable or inaccessible training to the relevant FEMA headquarters component(s).

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- ICS-300: “Intermediate Incident Command System (ICS) for Expanding Incidents;”
- ICS-400: “Advanced ICS for Command and General Staff;” and
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By September 2025, FEMA Region 9 will also partner with the FIWA to deliver place- based training for a minimum of one FQS course during Pacific time zone business hours. ECD: September 30, 2025.

Appendix IV: Comments from the Department of the Interior



United States Department of the Interior

OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY
Washington, DC 20240

Mr. Dawn G. Locke
Director, Strategic Issues
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Director Locke,

Thank you for providing the Department of the Interior (Department) an opportunity to review and comment on the draft Government Accountability Office (GAO) report titled, "FEDERAL WORKFORCE: *Actions Needed to Improve Recruitment and Retention in Alaska, Hawaii, and U.S. Territories*" (GAO-24-106527). We appreciate GAO's review of the Department's issues related to recruitment, hiring, and retention of federal employees in the noncontiguous states and territories.

GAO issued multiple recommendations, including six to the Department (three each to Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and National Park Service (NPS)) to address its findings. Below is a summary of actions taken or planned to implement the recommendations:

Recommendation 1: The Director of the Fish and Wildlife Service should examine the effectiveness of the agency's efforts to communicate information that helps support applicants in the noncontiguous U.S. with the federal hiring process.

Response: Concur. To increase FWS outreach and communication to all applicants, the Joint Administrative Operations (JAO) Division of Human Resources Operations (HR) and the JAO Division of Human Capital will ensure clear guidance on all FWS webpages. Regional staff located in noncontiguous locations will be offered training on the federal hiring process by the end of FY-2025.

Target Date: October 31, 2026

Responsible Official: Assistant Director, Management and Administration

Recommendation 2: The Director of National Park Service should examine the effectiveness of the agency's effort to communicate information that helps support applicants in the noncontiguous U.S. with the federal hiring process.

Response: Concur. The National Recruitment Team (NRT) is passionate in providing information and support to applicants on a nationwide spectrum, including the noncontiguous U.S., with successfully navigating the federal hiring process. The NRT hosts a virtual biweekly Federal Resume Workshop to the public on the second and fourth Thursday of each month at 2:00 pm EST. This workshop is a 90-minute webinar designed to empower applicants with the

knowledge needed to build a federal resume that works best for them. The NPS Recruitment Team shares: tips and strategies for navigating the USAJOBS application process as well as crafting compelling federal resumes; how the federal hiring process works; why the USAJOBS profile is important; and so much more. The NRT will host a Federal Resume Workshop in Spanish on a biyearly basis at 5 pm EST to recruit a diverse, talented applicant pool while ensuring those who speak Spanish have the same opportunity to receive knowledge on writing a compelling federal resume and learning the federal hiring process. The NRT will create a recruitment flyer and a Federal Resume Workshop flyer in Spanish to communicate the event date and employment opportunities with the National Park Service.

Target Date: February 1, 2025

Responsible Official: HR Officer of Strategy

Recommendation 4: The Director of the Fish and Wildlife Service should evaluate the agency's efforts to obtain and use feedback on hiring, recruitment, and retention practices, including human capital flexibilities, from staff in the noncontiguous U.S. to identify and address opportunities for improvement.

Response: Concur. The FWS will conduct focus groups and listening sessions to obtain feedback on hiring, recruitment, and retention efforts. FWS will also use customer surveys to evaluate effectiveness of hiring and recruitment efforts.

Target Date: October 31, 2025

Responsible Official: Assistant Director, Management and Administration

Recommendation 5: The Director of the National Park Service should evaluate the agency's efforts to obtain and use feedback on hiring, recruitment, and retention practices, including human capital flexibilities, from staff in the noncontiguous U.S. to identify and address opportunities for improvement.

Response: Concur. The NRT has a NRT Customer Survey on their internal SharePoint site, which is used to obtain and utilize feedback from hiring managers on recruitment efforts by the NRT on a nationwide spectrum, including the noncontiguous U.S., to identify and address opportunities of improvement. The NRT will create and implement a survey for all NPS staff, regardless of position, to obtain and utilize feedback on recruitment practices from staff on a nationwide level to ensure we are utilizing all the best recruitment practices that would be beneficial in the field, to include parks in the noncontiguous U.S. Both surveys will be shared with the Superintendents of each park in the noncontiguous U.S. to share with their staff to obtain the requested feedback.

The NPS Strategy Group will also create a customer feedback survey to solicit for input regarding NPS's hiring, recruitment, and retention practices while promoting the understanding and use of special hiring flexibilities for noncontiguous U.S. NPS entities. The survey will be available on the NPS HR intranet SharePoint and delivered via email. This recommendation has also inspired the NPS to create one survey for all HR specialties to improve feedback methods.

The NPS will leverage reporting tools to obtain baseline metrics to support this effort. These tools include offer letter declination reasons, the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS) results, employee focus groups, as well as exit interview surveys from these geographic locations to identify areas of improvement. These metrics will provide valued data to drive the application of useful tools such as: recruitment/retention/relocations incentives, superior qualifications, enhanced leave, student loan repayment, and permanent change of station incentives.

Target Date: February 1, 2025

Responsible Official: HR Officer of Strategy

Recommendation 8: The Director of the Fish and Wildlife Service should evaluate the agency's current recruitment strategies and efforts to identify opportunities to broaden the pool of qualified local candidates across all hard-to-fill noncontiguous areas.

Response: Concur. As part of the FWS implementation of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's Management Directive 715 and the FWS Diversity, Equity & Inclusion efforts, FWS regularly evaluates recruitment strategies. It is important to note that Federal hiring must be done without differentiating local from non-local applicants (i.e. one's current location of residence is not a merit factor for selection and placement).

The Department of the Interior is updating Pathways policies. JAO HR Operations and JAO Human Capital will offer regional staff in noncontiguous locations training on the updated policies and how to effectively leverage hiring authorities once the new policies have been published.

Target Date: October 31, 2025

Responsible Official: Assistant Director, Management and Administration

Recommendation 11: The Director of the National Park Service should ensure that employees in offices that are outside of the Eastern time zone are able to access live training at a reasonable time, that includes the opportunity to interact with the instructor(s) and peers.

Response: Concur. NPS is committed to ensuring that all employees have equitable access to leadership development training opportunities, regardless of their geographic location. We recognize the importance of providing live training sessions at times that are convenient for employees in various time zones, including those in the Pacific Northwest and Pacific Island locations.

To address this need, NPS has made Leadership Development training opportunities accessible at reasonable times for employees in these areas. We offer virtual instructor-led training sessions designed to accommodate different time zones, allowing participants to engage interactively with instructors and peers.

Additionally, where feasible, NPS Learning & Development provides in-person training opportunities in various locations, as demonstrated by our past sessions in Puerto Rico and Maui.

These efforts ensure that employees in all regions have the chance to benefit from direct interaction and networking opportunities with colleagues and instructors. NPS remains dedicated to expanding these offerings and will continue to explore new ways to enhance accessibility for all employees.

Responsible Official: Deputy Associate Director, Learning & Development

If you should have any questions or need additional information, please contact the PFM AM team at DOI_PFM_AM@ios.doi.gov.

Sincerely,

SHANNON ESTENOZ Digitally signed by SHANNON ESTENOZ
Date: 2024.09.17
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Shannon A. Estenoz
Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks

Accessible Text for Appendix IV: Comments from the Department of the Interior

United States Department of the Interior

OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY
Washington, DC 20240

Mr. Dawn G. Locke
Director, Strategic Issues
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Director Locke,

Thank you for providing the Department of the Interior (Department) an opportunity to review and comment on the draft Government Accountability Office (GAO) report titled, "FEDERAL WORKFORCE: Actions Needed to Improve Recruitment and Retention in Alaska, Hawaii, and U.S. Territories" (GAO-24-106527). We appreciate GAO's review of the Department's issues related to recruitment, hiring, and retention of federal employees in the noncontiguous states and territories.

GAO issued multiple recommendations, including six to the Department (three each to Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and National Park Service (NPS)) to address its findings. Below is a summary of actions taken or planned to implement the recommendations:

Recommendation 1: The Director of the Fish and Wildlife Service should examine the effectiveness of the agency's efforts to communicate information that helps support applicants in the noncontiguous U.S. with the federal hiring process.

Response: Concur. To increase FWS outreach and communication to all applicants, the Joint Administrative Operations (JAO) Division of Human Resources Operations (HR) and the JAO Division of Human Capital will ensure clear guidance on all FWS webpages. Regional staff located in noncontiguous locations will be offered training on the federal hiring process by the end of FY-2025.

Target Date: October 31, 2026

Responsible Official: Assistant Director, Management and Administration

Recommendation 2: The Director of National Park Service should examine the effectiveness of the agency's effort to communicate information that helps support applicants in the noncontiguous U.S. with the federal hiring process.

Response: Concur. The National Recruitment Team (NRT) is passionate in providing information and support to applicants on a nationwide spectrum, including the noncontiguous U.S., with successfully navigating the

federal hiring process. The NRT hosts a virtual biweekly Federal Resume Workshop to the public on the second and fourth Thursday of each month at 2:00 pm EST. This workshop is a 90-minute webinar designed to empower applicants with the knowledge needed to build a federal resume that works best for them. The NPS Recruitment Team shares: tips and strategies for navigating the USAJOBS application process as well as crafting compelling federal resumes; how the federal hiring process works; why the USAJOBS profile is important; and so much more. The NRT will host a Federal Resume Workshop in Spanish on a biyearly basis at 5 pm EST to recruit a diverse, talented applicant pool while ensuring those who speak Spanish have the same opportunity to receive knowledge on writing a compelling federal resume and learning the federal hiring process. The NRT will create a recruitment flyer and a Federal Resume Workshop flyer in Spanish to communicate the event date and employment opportunities with the National Park Service.

Target Date: February 1, 2025

Responsible Official: HR Officer of Strategy

Recommendation 4: The Director of the Fish and Wildlife Service should evaluate the agency's efforts to obtain and use feedback on hiring, recruitment, and retention practices, including human capital flexibilities, from staff in the noncontiguous U.S. to identify and address opportunities for improvement.

Response: Concur. The FWS will conduct focus groups and listening sessions to obtain feedback on hiring, recruitment, and retention efforts. FWS will also use customer surveys to evaluate effectiveness of hiring and recruitment efforts.

Target Date: October 31, 2025

Responsible Official: Assistant Director, Management and Administration

Recommendation 5: The Director of the National Park Service should evaluate the agency's efforts to obtain and use feedback on hiring, recruitment, and retention practices, including human capital flexibilities, from staff in the noncontiguous U.S. to identify and address opportunities for improvement.

Response: Concur. The NRT has a NRT Customer Survey on their internal SharePoint site, which is used to obtain and utilize feedback from hiring managers on recruitment efforts by the NRT on a nationwide spectrum, including the noncontiguous U.S., to identify and address opportunities of improvement. The NRT will create and implement a survey for all NPS staff, regardless of position, to obtain and utilize feedback on recruitment practices from staff on a nationwide level to ensure we are utilizing all the best recruitment practices that would be beneficial in the field, to include parks in the noncontiguous U.S. Both surveys will be shared with the Superintendents of each park in the noncontiguous U.S. to share with their staff to obtain the requested feedback.

The NPS Strategy Group will also create a customer feedback survey to solicit for input regarding NPS's hiring, recruitment, and retention practices while promoting the understanding and use of special hiring flexibilities for noncontiguous U.S. NPS entities. The survey will be available on the NPS HR intranet SharePoint and delivered via email. This recommendation has also inspired the NPS to create one survey for all HR specialties to improve feedback methods.

The NPS will leverage reporting tools to obtain baseline metrics to support this effort. These tools include offer letter declination reasons, the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS) results, employee focus groups, as well as exit interview surveys from these geographic locations to identify areas of improvement. These metrics

will provide valued data to drive the application of useful tools such as: recruitment/retention/relocations incentives, superior qualifications, enhanced leave, student loan repayment, and permanent change of station incentives.

Target Date: February 1, 2025

Responsible Official: HR Officer of Strategy

Recommendation 8: The Director of the Fish and Wildlife Service should evaluate the agency's current recruitment strategies and efforts to identify opportunities to broaden the pool of qualified local candidates across all hard-to-fill noncontiguous areas.

Response: Concur. As part of the FWS implementation of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's Management Directive 715 and the FWS Diversity, Equity & Inclusion efforts, FWS regularly evaluates recruitment strategies. It is important to note that Federal hiring must be done without differentiating local from non-local applicants (i.e. one's current location of residence is not a merit factor for selection and placement).

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Target Date: October 31, 2025

Responsible Official: Assistant Director, Management and Administration

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Responsible Official: Deputy Associate Director, Learning & Development

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Sincerely,

SHANNON ESTENOZ

Digitally signed by SHANNON ESTENOZ Date: 2024.09.17
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Shannon A. Estenoz
Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks

Appendix V: Response from the Social Security Administration



SOCIAL SECURITY
Office of the Commissioner

September 11, 2024

Dawn Locke
Director, Strategic Issues
United States Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Director Locke,

Thank you for the opportunity to review the Draft Report, "FEDERAL WORKFORCE: Actions Needed to Improve Recruitment and Retention in Alaska, Hawaii, and U.S. Territories." (GAO-24-106527). We agree with the recommendations.

We have implemented new recruitment strategies, including hosting virtual weekly open house sessions for prospective applicants. In addition, we will review how to expand live virtual trainings to better include employees in Alaska, Hawaii and the Pacific Territories.

Please contact me at (410) 965-2611 if I can be of further assistance. Your staff may contact Hank Amato, Director of the Audit Liaison Staff, at (407) 765-9774.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Dustin S. Brown".

Dustin S. Brown
Acting Chief of Staff

Accessible Text for Appendix V: Response from the Social Security Administration

SOCIAL SECURITY
Office of the Commissioner

September 11, 2024

Dawn Locke
Director, Strategic Issues
United States Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Director Locke,

Thank you for the opportunity to review the Draft Report, "FEDERAL WORKFORCE: Actions Needed to Improve Recruitment and Retention in Alaska, Hawaii, and U.S. Territories." (GAO-24-106527). We agree with the recommendations.

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Sincerely,

Dustin S. Brown
Acting Chief of Staff

Appendix VI: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

Dawn G. Locke, (202) 512-6806 or LockeD@gao.gov

Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, key contributors to this report were Leah Q. Nash (Assistant Director), Julie Scarano (Analyst-in-Charge), John Sanchez and Leanne V. Sullivan. In addition, McLeod Brown, Arpita Chattopadhyay, Jacqueline Chapin, Sara Daleski, Elizabeth Dretsch, Samantha Jorgensen, Ava Kargosha, Robert Robinson, and Clarette Yen made significant contributions to this report.

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