

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-22-104519](#), a report to congressional addressees

## Why GAO Did This Study

The U.S. government has over 22,000 U.S. staff working in more than 290 overseas posts. State made operational adjustments in an effort to balance overseas staff's health with the pursuit of diplomacy during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The CARES Act includes a provision for GAO to report on its ongoing oversight efforts related to COVID-19. In addition, GAO was asked to examine State's overseas operational response to COVID-19. This report examines, among other things, actions State took to respond to COVID-19 and how it communicated them to overseas employees, posts' operational adjustments and the effect on operations, and lessons learned identified by State.

GAO reviewed relevant State documents, including agency guidance and post-level reporting, and interviewed State and other U.S. agency officials. GAO also met with four selected overseas posts based on various factors, such as geographic location and proportion of U.S. overseas staff evacuated.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO is making six recommendations to State, including that it review its evacuation policies, maintain timely communication with other agencies present overseas, develop a plan to track overseas telework, and develop a procedure to ensure collection of lessons learned. State agreed with five of the recommendations and partially agreed with one.

View [GAO-22-104519](#). For more information, contact Jason Bair at (202) 512-6881 or [bairj@gao.gov](mailto:bairj@gao.gov).

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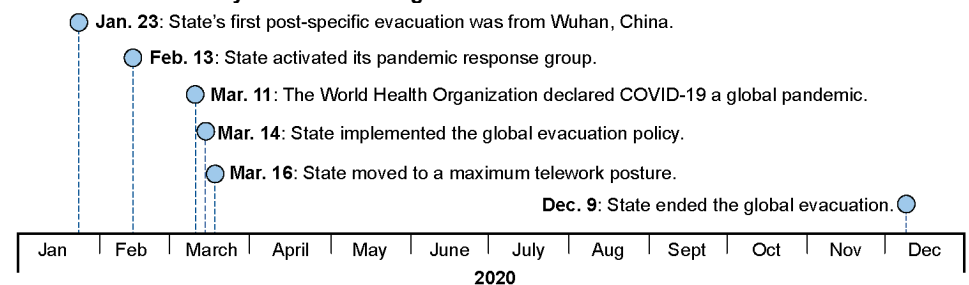
## COVID-19

### State Should Strengthen Policies to Better Maintain Overseas Operations in Future Crises

## What GAO Found

The Department of State made key decisions for overseas posts (e.g., U.S. embassies and consulates) during the COVID-19 pandemic, as shown in the figure below, but did not communicate them to other overseas agencies before they went into effect. State created a new global evacuation policy with flexibilities that were different from the pre-existing policies for post-specific evacuations, which created confusion for staff on timelines, allowances, and conditions for returning to post. According to federal internal control standards, policies should be documented in the appropriate level of detail. However, State has not yet established an evacuation policy that could be used for future crises affecting multiple posts. In addition, State's decisions for posts affected all U.S. government staff overseas but State did not communicate these key decisions, and related policies, to other overseas agencies before announcing them to all staff. As a result, other overseas agencies had to develop guidance for their staff to follow after State's public announcements.

#### Timeline of State's Key Decisions during the COVID-19 Pandemic



Source: Department of State (State). | GAO-22-104519

Evacuations of key personnel and public health restrictions reduced some operations at posts, but information technology improvements and other adjustments largely allowed staff to continue to work. Nevertheless, some posts reported they did not have sufficient information to help them determine which staff should remain overseas and which could be evacuated. Posts implemented a maximum telework policy and State used COVID-19 relief funds to provide equipment and better network access. Federal internal control standards state that agencies should use quality information to make decisions. However, State does not track telework at overseas posts and, as a result, does not have the information needed to inform future decisions about its use overseas.

State has identified lessons learned on telework and communication but does not have a procedure for ensuring their collection from posts. According to State's guidance, lessons learned are required to be gathered and preserved after critical operational events. Individual posts reported lessons learned on communication, including the utility of informal communication between staff, but not all posts submitted required lessons learned. State does not have a procedure to ensure the collection of lessons learned from posts—a significant component of improving its future crisis response.