**United States Government Accountability Office**

Testimony

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# DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY

# Employee Morale Survey Scores Highlight Progress and Continued Challenges

Statement of Chris Currie
Director, Homeland Security and Justice

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# DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY

## Employee Morale Survey Scores Highlight Progress and Continued Challenges

## Why GAO Did This Study

DHS is the third-largest cabinet-level department in the federal government, employing more than 240,000 staff in a broad range of jobs, including countering terrorism and homeland security threats, providing aviation and border security, emergency response, cybersecurity, and critical infrastructure protection. Since it began operations in 2003, DHS has faced challenges with low employee morale and engagement. Federal surveys have consistently found that DHS employees are less satisfied with their jobs compared to the average federal employee. For example, DHS's scores on the FEVS and the Partnership for Public Service's rankings of the *Best Places to Work in the Federal Government*® are consistently among the lowest for similarly-sized federal agencies.

This statement addresses our past and ongoing work monitoring human capital management and employee morale at DHS and select work on employee engagement across the government. This statement is based on products GAO issued from September 2012 through May 2019 as well as GAO's ongoing efforts to monitor employee morale at DHS as part of GAO's high-risk work. For these products, GAO analyzed DHS strategies and other documents related to DHS's efforts to address its high-risk areas, interviewed DHS officials, conducted analyses of FEVS data, and interviewed officials from other federal agencies that achieved high employee engagement scores, among other things.

GAO provided a copy of new information in this statement to DHS for review. DHS confirmed the accuracy of this information.

View GAO-20-349T. For more information, contact Chris Currie at (404) 679-1875 or curriec@gao.gov.

## What GAO Found

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has undertaken initiatives to strengthen employee engagement through efforts at its component agencies and across the department. For example, at the headquarters level, DHS has instituted initiatives to improve awareness and access to support programs, benefits, and resources for DHS employees and their families.

In 2019, DHS improved its employee engagement scores, as measured by the Office of Personnel Management's Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS)—a tool that measures employees' perceptions of whether and to what extent conditions characterizing successful organizations are present in their agency. As shown below, DHS increased its scores on a measure of employee engagement, the Employee Engagement Index (EEI), across 4 consecutive years, from a low of 53 percent in 2015 to 62 percent in 2019.

**Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Employee Engagement Index (EEI) Scores 2010–2019**
**Employee Engagement Index**
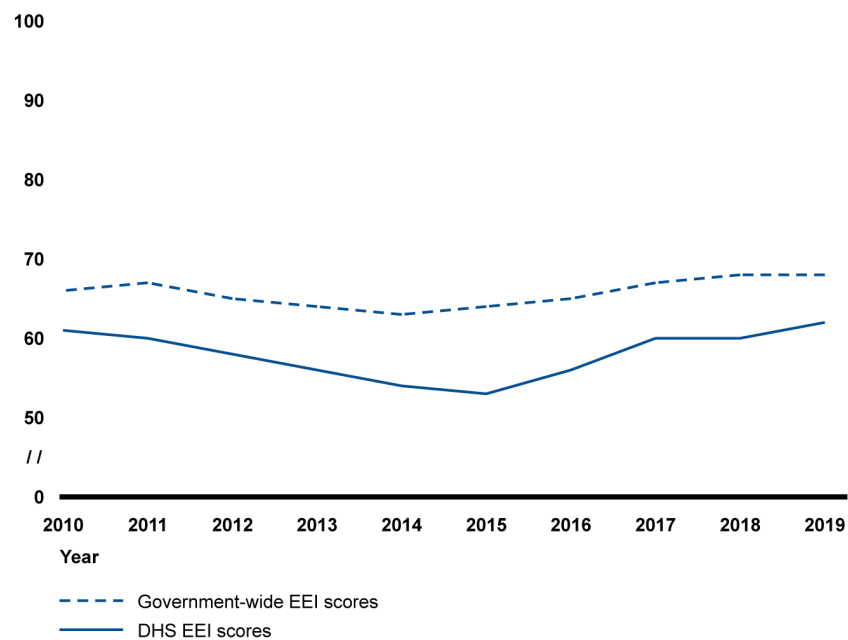


GAO analysis of Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey data. | GAO-20-349T

While DHS has made progress in improving its scores, in 2019 it remained six points below the government-wide average for the EEI. For several years, DHS and its component agencies have identified root causes for their engagement scores including concerns about leadership accountability and understaffing, among others. This statement discusses nine recommendations related to DHS employee engagement and workforce planning. DHS implemented all but one of these recommendations—to review and correct its coding of cybersecurity positions and assess the accuracy of position descriptions. Finally, filling vacancies could help ensure continued leadership commitment across DHS's mission areas.

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Madam Chairwoman Torres Small, Ranking Member Crenshaw, and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to be here today to discuss the importance of Department of Homeland Security (DHS) employee engagement and morale, the department's progress thus far, and areas where challenges remain.

DHS is the third-largest cabinet-level department in the federal government, employing more than 240,000 staff in a broad range of jobs, including aviation and border security, emergency response, cybersecurity, and critical infrastructure protection. The DHS workforce is located throughout the nation, carrying out activities in support of DHS's missions to counter terrorism and homeland security threats, secure United States borders, secure cyberspace and critical infrastructure, preserve and uphold the nation's prosperity and economic security, strengthen preparedness and resilience, and champion the DHS workforce and strengthen the department.

Since it began operations in 2003, DHS has faced challenges with low employee morale and engagement. Federal surveys have consistently found that DHS employees are less satisfied with their jobs than the government-wide average of federal employees. For example, DHS's employee satisfaction—as measured by the Office of Personnel Management Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS), a tool that measures employees' perceptions of whether and to what extent conditions characterizing successful organizations are present in their agency, and the Partnership for Public Service's rankings of the *Best Places to Work in the Federal Government*®—is consistently among the lowest for similarly-sized federal agencies.

As we stated in our 2015 report on employee engagement across the federal government, a number of studies of private-sector entities have found that increased levels of engagement result in better individual and organizational performance including increased employee performance and productivity; higher customer service ratings; fewer safety incidents; and less absenteeism and turnover.[1] Studies of the public sector, while more limited, have shown similar benefits. For example, the Merit

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[1]GAO, *Federal Workforce: Additional Analysis and Sharing of Promising Practices Could Improve Employee Engagement and Performance*, GAO-15-585 (Washington, D.C.: July 14, 2015).

Systems Protection Board found that higher levels of employee engagement in federal agencies led to improved agency performance, less absenteeism, and fewer equal employment opportunity complaints.[2] As we reported in 2015, across the government, key drivers of employee morale include holding constructive performance conversations, career development and training opportunities, work-life balance, an inclusive work environment, employee involvement, and communication from management. We also identified key lessons for improving employee engagement. These key lessons include using effective management practices to implement change, looking to other sources of data in addition to the FEVS to form a complete picture of employee engagement, and recognizing that improving engagement and organizational performance takes time, which may involve several efforts with effects seen at different points in time. Engagement is one component of employee morale.

DHS employee morale and engagement concerns are one example of the challenges the department faces in implementing its missions. In 2003, shortly after the department was formed, we recognized that the creation of DHS was an enormous undertaking that could take years to implement. Failure to effectively address management challenges could have serious national security consequences. As a result, in 2003, shortly after the department was formed, we designated Implementing and Transforming DHS as a high-risk area to the federal government. DHS subsequently made considerable progress in transforming its original component agencies into a single cabinet-level department. As a result, in 2013, we narrowed the scope of the high-risk area to focus on strengthening DHS management functions, including human capital management, and changed the name of the high-risk area to *Strengthening DHS*

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[2]U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, *The Power of Federal Employee Engagement* (Washington, D.C.: September 2008). Results were based on responses to the Merit System Protection Board's Merit Principles Survey, which asks employees about their perceptions of their jobs, work environments, supervisors and agencies and is administered approximately every 3 to 4 years.

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*Management Functions* to reflect this focus.[3] We continue to monitor DHS's work in this area—including work to address employee morale and engagement—and regularly meet with DHS to discuss progress.

My testimony today discusses our past and ongoing work monitoring human capital management and employee morale at DHS and select work on employee engagement across the government. This statement is based on products we issued from September 2012 through May 2019 as well as our ongoing efforts in 2019 to monitor employee morale at DHS as part of our high-risk work.[4] For our products we analyzed DHS strategies and other documents related to the department's efforts to address its high-risk area, interviewed DHS officials, conducted analyses of FEVS data, and interviewed officials from other federal agencies that achieved high employee engagement scores, among other things. We conducted the work on which this statement is based 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.

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[3]The five management functions included in the *Strengthening DHS Management Functions* high-risk area are acquisition management, information technology management, financial management, human capital management, and management integration. The five criteria for removal from the high-risk list are (1) a demonstrated strong commitment and top leadership support to address the risks; (2) the capacity—the people and other resources—to resolve the risks; (3) a corrective action plan that identifies the root causes and identifies effective solutions; (4) a program instituted to monitor and independently validate the effectiveness and sustainability of corrective measures; and (5) the ability to demonstrate progress in implementing corrective measures.

[4]We issue an update to the High-Risk List every 2 years at the start of each new session of Congress. Our most recent update was issued in March 2019. See GAO, *High-Risk Series: Substantial Efforts Needed to Achieve Greater Progress on High-Risk Areas*, GAO-19-157SP (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 6, 2019).

## DHS Has Taken Steps to Improve Its Employee Engagement Scores but Still Falls below the Government-Wide Average

In connection with the *Strengthening DHS Management Functions* high-risk area, we monitor DHS's progress in the area of employee morale and engagement. In 2010, we identified, and DHS agreed, that achieving 30 specific outcomes would be critical to addressing the challenges within the department's high-risk management areas. These 30 outcomes are the criteria by which we gauge DHS's demonstrated progress. We rate each outcome on a scale of not-initiated, initiated, partially addressed, mostly addressed, or fully addressed. Several of these outcome criteria relate to human capital actions needed to improve employee morale. Specifically, we monitor DHS's progress to:

- seek employees' input on a periodic basis and demonstrate measurable progress in implementing strategies to adjust human capital approaches;

- base hiring decisions, management selections, promotions, and performance evaluations on human capital competencies and individual performance;

- enhance information technology security through improved workforce planning of the DHS cybersecurity workforce; and

- improve DHS's FEVS scores related to employee engagement.

Since we began monitoring DHS's progress on these outcomes, DHS has worked to strengthen employee engagement through several efforts both at DHS headquarters and within its component agencies. In this statement, we discuss nine recommendations related to DHS employee engagement and workforce planning, eight of which have been implemented by the department. Within DHS, the Office of the Chief Human Capital Officer (OCHCO) is responsible for implementing policies and programs to recruit, hire, train, and retain DHS's workforce. As the department-wide unit responsible for human capital issues within DHS, OCHCO also provides guidance and oversight related to morale issues to the DHS components.

**Seeking employees' input and demonstrating progress to adjust human capital approaches.** DHS, OCHCO, and the components have taken action to use employees' input from the FEVS to inform and implement initiatives targeted at improving employee engagement. For example, in 2017 and 2018 DHS implemented our two recommendations for OCHCO and DHS components to establish metrics of success within their action plans for addressing employee satisfaction problems and to

better use these plans to examine the root causes of morale challenges.[5] DHS components have continued to develop these employee engagement action plans and several components report implementing initiatives to enhance employee engagement. For example, the U.S. Secret Service's action plan details a sponsorship program for all newly hired and recently relocated employees. In addition, one division of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) used FEVS survey data to identify a need for increased engagement between employees and component leadership. ICE's employee action plan includes goals with milestones, timelines, and metrics to improve this engagement through efforts such as leadership town halls and leadership site visits.

At the headquarters level, DHS and OCHCO have also established employee engagement initiatives across the department. For example, DHS established initiatives for employees and their families that aim to increase awareness and access to support programs, benefits, and resources. Through another initiative—Human Resources (H.R.) Academy—DHS provides education, training, and career development opportunities to human resource professionals within the department. DHS uses an Employee Engagement Steering Committee to guide and monitor implementation of these DHS-wide employee engagement initiatives. As a result of these steps, among other actions, we have considered this human capital outcome area fully addressed since 2018.

**Basing hiring decisions and promotions on competencies and performance.** OCHCO has conducted audits to better ensure components are basing hiring decisions and promotions on human capital competencies and individual performance and we have considered this outcome fully addressed since 2017. Our past work has highlighted the importance of selecting candidates based on qualifications, as doing otherwise can negatively affect morale.[6] Working to ensure that components' human capital decisions are based on performance and established competencies helps create a connection between individual performance and the agency's success.

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[5]GAO, *Department of Homeland Security: Taking Further Action to Better Determine Causes of Morale Problems Would Assist in Targeting Action Plans*, GAO-12-940 (Washington, D.C. Sept. 28, 2012.).

[6]GAO, *U.S. Marshals Service: Additional Actions Needed to Improve Oversight of Merit Promotion Process and Address Employee Perceptions of Favoritism*, GAO-18-8 (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 17, 2017).

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**Enhancing information technology security through improved workforce planning for cybersecurity positions.** In February 2018, we made six recommendations to DHS to take steps to identify its position and critical skill requirements among its cybersecurity workforce.[7] Since then, DHS has implemented all six recommendations. For example, in fiscal year 2019, regarding its cybersecurity position identification and coding efforts, we verified that DHS had identified individuals in each component who are responsible for leading those efforts, developed procedures, established a process to review each component's procedures, and developed plans for reporting critical needs.

However, DHS has not yet implemented a recommendation we made in March 2019 to review and correct its coding of cybersecurity positions and assess the accuracy of position descriptions.[8] Specifically, we stated that DHS had not correctly categorized its information technology/cybersecurity/cyber-related positions. We noted that having inaccurate information about the type of work performed by 28 percent of the department's information technology/cybersecurity/cyber-related positions is a significant impediment to effectively examining the department's cybersecurity workforce, identifying work roles of critical need, and improving workforce planning. DHS officials stated that they plan to implement this recommendation by March 2020. As a result, this outcome remains mostly addressed. Until DHS accurately categorizes its positions, its ability to effectively identify critical staffing needs will be impaired.

**Improving FEVS scores on employee engagement.** Since our last High-Risk report in March 2019, DHS has demonstrated additional progress in its employee engagement scores, as measured by the FEVS Employee Engagement Index (EEI). The EEI is one of three indices OPM calculates to synthesize FEVS data.[9] The EEI measures conditions that

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[7]GAO, *Cybersecurity Workforce: Urgent Need for DHS to Take Actions to Identify Its Position and Critical Skill Requirements*, GAO-18-175 (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 6, 2018).

[8]GAO, *Cybersecurity Workforce: Agencies Need to Accurately Categorize Positions to Effectively Identify Critical Staffing Needs*, GAO-19-144 (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 12, 2019).

[9]In addition to the EEI, OPM calculates two other indices. The New Inclusion Quotient, referred to as New IQ, summarizes information about inclusivity in the workplace, and Global Satisfaction is a combination of employees' satisfaction with their job, their pay, and their organization, plus their willingness to recommend their organization as a good place to work.

lead to engaged employees and is comprised of three sub-indices related to employees' views on leadership, supervisors, and intrinsic work experience. As a result of continued improvement on DHS's EEI score, we have moved this outcome rating from partially addressed to mostly addressed based on DHS's 2019 score. As shown in figure 1, DHS increased its EEI score across 4 consecutive years, from a low of 53 percent in 2015 to 62 percent in 2019. In particular, DHS improved its score by two points between 2018 and 2019 while the government average remained constant over the same period. With its 2019 score, DHS also regained the ground that it lost during an 8-point drop between 2010 and 2015.[10]

**Figure 1: Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Employee Engagement Index (EEI) Scores 2010–2019**
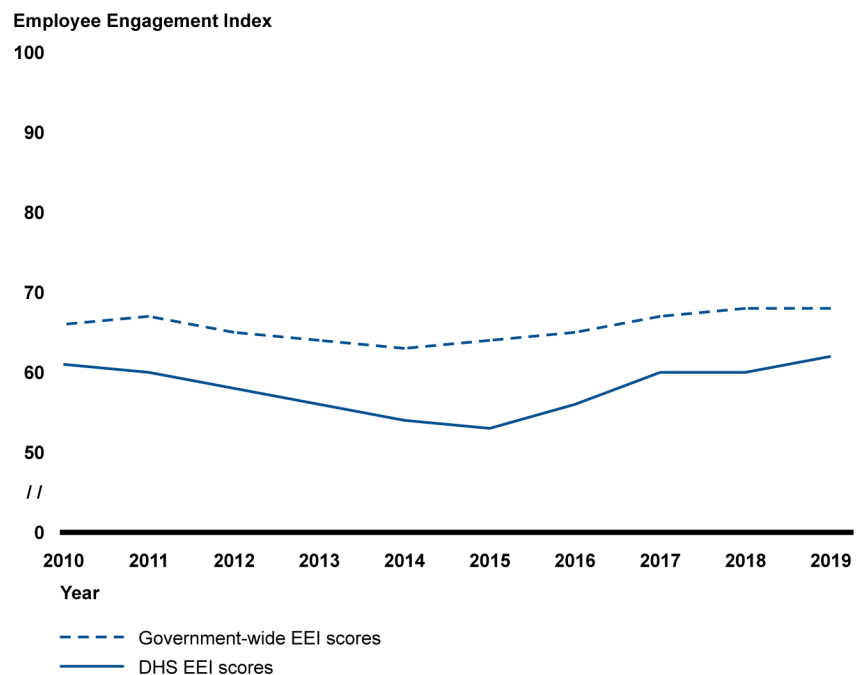


GAO analysis of Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey data. | GAO-20-349T

While DHS has made progress in improving its scores including moving toward the government average, it remains below the government

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[10]In our monitoring of DHS's progress on this outcome, we established 2010 as the benchmark year when we developed and DHS agreed upon the outcomes that we monitor.

average on the EEI and on other measures of employee morale. For example, in 2019 DHS remained six points below the government-wide average for the EEI. In addition to the EEI and other indices OPM calculates, the Partnership for Public Service uses FEVS data to produce an index of the *Best Places to Work in the Federal Government*®. The Partnership for Public Service's analysis of FEVS data indicates low levels of employee satisfaction and commitment for DHS employees relative to other large federal agencies. In 2019, the Partnership for Public Service ranked DHS 17th out of 17 large federal agencies for employee satisfaction and commitment.[11]

Across the department, employee satisfaction scores vary by component. Some DHS components have EEI scores above the government average and rank highly on the Partnership for Public Service's index. For example, the U.S. Coast Guard and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services have EEI scores of 76 and 74, respectively, and rank 85th and 90th, respectively, out of 420 subcomponent agencies on the Partnership for Public Service's index. Further, some DHS component agencies have improved their scores in recent years. The U.S. Secret Service raised its EEI score 7 points between 2018 and 2019, and it moved from the last place among all subcomponent agencies on the Partnership for Public Service's Ranking in 2016 to 360th out of 420 subcomponent agencies in 2019. However, other DHS component agencies continue to rank among the lowest across the federal government in the Partnership for Public Service rankings of employee satisfaction and commitment. For example, in 2019 out of 420 subcomponent agencies across the federal government, the DHS Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction office ranked 420th, the DHS Office of Intelligence and Analysis ranked 406th, and the Transportation Security Administration ranked 398th for employee satisfaction and commitment. As a result, continuing to increase employee engagement and morale remains important to strengthening DHS's management functions and ability to implement its missions.

DHS employee concerns about senior leadership, among other things, is one area that negatively affects DHS's overall employee morale scores. In 2015, we identified effective management practices agencies can use

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[11]Partnership for Public Service and Boston Consulting Group, *The Best Places to Work in the Federal Government*®. The Partnership for Public Service's ranking cited here is composed of rankings of large agencies, defined as agencies with more than 15,000 employees.

to improve employee engagement across the government.[12] One of these practices is the direct involvement of top leadership in organizational improvement efforts.[13] When top leadership clearly and personally leads organizational improvement efforts, it provides an identifiable source for employees to rally around and helps processes stay on course. A DHS analysis of its 2012 FEVS scores indicated DHS low morale issues may persist because of employee concerns about senior leadership and supervisors, among other things, such as whether their talents were being well-used. Within the 2019 FEVS results for both DHS and government wide, leadership remains the lowest of the three sub-indices of the EEI. In addition, for several years DHS components have identified several root causes of engagement scores. For example, in 2019, the Transportation Security Administration identified the performance of managers, time constraints and understaffing, and lack of manager and leadership accountability for change as root causes of the component's engagement scores in recent years. Another component, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, identified in 2019 that the areas of leadership performance, accountability, transparency, and training and development opportunities were 2018 engagement score root causes.

We have previously reported that DHS's top leadership, including the Secretary and Deputy Secretary, have demonstrated commitment and support for addressing the department's management challenges. Continuing to identify and address the root causes of employee engagement scores and addressing the human capital management challenges we have identified in relation to the DHS management high-risk area could help DHS maintain progress in improving employee morale. Implementing our recommendation to review and correct DHS coding of cybersecurity positions and assess the accuracy of position descriptions will assist the department in identifying critical staffing needs. In addition, as we reported in May 2019, vacancies in top leadership positions could pose a challenge to addressing aspects of DHS's high-risk area, such as employee morale.[14] There are currently acting officials

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[12]GAO-15-585.

[13]Other effective management practices included applying policies consistently, creating a line of sight between the agency's mission and the work of each employee, and reaching out to employees to obtain insight into their FEVS scores or to inform other improvement efforts.

[14]GAO, *Department of Homeland Security: Continued Leadership Is Critical to Addressing a Range of Management Challenges*, GAO-19-544T (Washington, D.C.: May 1, 2019).

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serving in ten positions requiring Senate confirmation.[15] Filling vacancies—including top DHS leadership positions and the heads of operational components—with confirmed appointees, as applicable, could help ensure continued leadership commitment across DHS's mission areas.[16] We will continue to monitor DHS's progress in strengthening management functions, and may identify additional actions DHS leadership could take to improve employee morale and engagement.

In conclusion, DHS has made notable progress in the area of human capital management, specifically in improving employee engagement and morale, but still falls behind other federal agencies. It is essential for DHS to continue improving employee morale and engagement given their impact on agency performance and the importance of DHS's missions. Continued senior leadership commitment to employee engagement efforts and filling critical vacancies could assist DHS in these efforts.

Madam Chairwoman Torres Small, Ranking Member Crenshaw, and Members of the Subcommittee, this completes my prepared statement, I would be happy to respond to any questions that you may have at this time.

## GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

If you or your staff have any questions concerning this statement, please contact Christopher P. Currie at (404) 679-1875 or curriec@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this statement. Key contributors to this statement were Alana Finley (Assistant Director), Mara McMillen (Analyst-in-Charge), Nina Daoud, Michele Fejfar, Andrew Howard, and Tom Lombardi. In addition, Colette Alexander, Richard Cederholm, Ben Crossley, Eric Essig, Laura Ann Holland, Tammi Kalugdan, Neelaxi Lakhmani, Shannin O'Neill, Kevin Reeves, John Sawyer, and Julia Vieweg made contributions to this statement.

[15]Specifically, as of December 18, 2019, the following positions remained vacant: Secretary, Deputy Secretary, Under Secretary for Management, Under Secretary for Science and Technology, Chief Financial Officer, General Counsel, Commissioner of U.S. Customs and Border Protection, Director of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Director of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, and Administrator of the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

[16]The DHS operational components are the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, Federal Law Enforcement Training Center, Transportation Security Administration, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, U.S. Coast Guard, U.S. Customs and Border Protection, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and U.S. Secret Service.