

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-17-714](#), a report to the Ranking Member, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

From October 2012 to September 2016, State evacuated overseas post staff and family members from 23 overseas posts in response to various threats, such as terrorism, civil unrest, and natural disasters. Overseas posts undergoing evacuations generally experience authorized departure or ordered departure of specific post staff or family members, potentially leading to suspended operations.

GAO was asked to review State policies and procedures for evacuating overseas posts. This report examines (1) the processes State has established to prepare posts for crises and to conduct evacuations and (2) State's implementation of preparedness processes for crises and evacuations. GAO reviewed State guidance and documents related to crisis and evacuation preparedness, including a sample of EAPs and State databases on EAP updates and post drills. GAO also interviewed U.S. officials in Washington, D.C., and in six countries selected because of posts' experiences with evacuations. This is the public version of a sensitive report that GAO issued in June 2017. Information that State deemed sensitive has been omitted.

What GAO Recommends

In GAO's sensitive report, GAO made five recommendations to State focused on strengthening accountability for completion and review of posts' annual EAP updates and required emergency drills, enhancing the usability of EAPs, and ensuring that lessons learned reports are completed. State concurred with all five recommendations and described actions planned or under way to address them.

View [GAO-17-714](#). For more information, contact Michael J. Courts at (202) 512-8980 or courtsm@gao.gov.

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EMBASSY EVACUATIONS

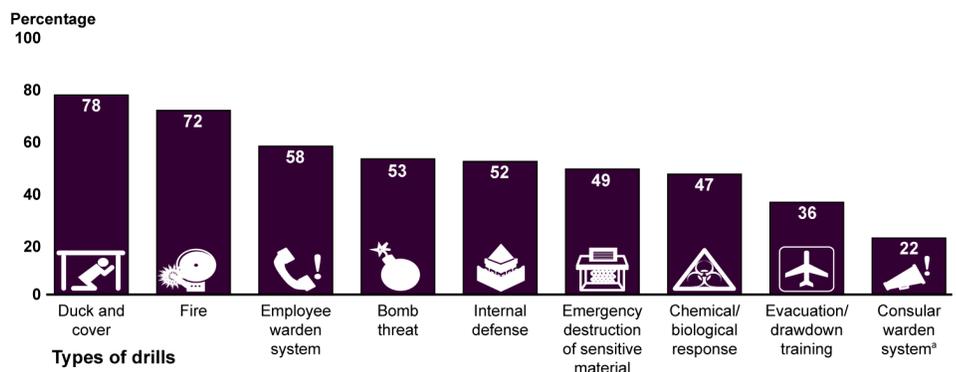
State Department Should Take Steps to Improve Emergency Preparedness

What GAO Found

The Department of State (State) has established processes to prepare overseas posts for crises and to conduct evacuations. In particular, posts prepare by developing and updating Emergency Action Plans (EAP) and conducting drills. EAPs are to contain information to assist posts in responding to emergencies, such as checklists of response procedures and decision points to help determine when to evacuate post staff or family members. Posts are required to conduct nine types of drills each fiscal year to prepare for crises and evacuations. State also has established processes for conducting post evacuations. Following an evacuation, post staff are required to transmit an after-action report identifying lessons learned to State headquarters.

State has gaps in its crisis and evacuation preparedness for overseas posts. In fiscal years 2013–2016, almost a quarter of posts, on average, were late completing required annual EAP updates. While the completion rate improved from 46 percent to 92 percent of posts completing updates on time in fiscal years 2013 and 2016, respectively, GAO's review of a nongeneralizable sample of EAPs from 20 posts that had been approved by State's Bureau of Diplomatic Security showed that only 2 of 20 had updated all key EAP sections. GAO also found that EAPs are viewed as lengthy and cumbersome documents that are not readily usable in emergency situations, as required. In addition, GAO found that, on average for fiscal years 2013–2016, posts worldwide reported completing 52 percent of required annual drills; posts rated high or critical in political violence or terrorism reported completing 44 percent of these drills. As shown in the figure below, 78 percent of posts reported completing duck and cover drills, but only 36 percent of posts reported completing evacuation training drills. Overall, less than 4 percent of posts reported completing all required drills during fiscal years 2013–2016. In addition, although posts are required to transmit an after-action report listing lessons learned to State headquarters following evacuations, no such reports were submitted in fiscal years 2013–2016. Taken together, the gaps in State's crisis and evacuation preparedness increase the risk that post staff are not sufficiently prepared to handle crisis and emergency situations.

Percentages of Overseas Posts That Reported Completing Each Type of Required Drill



Source: GAO analysis of Department of State data. | GAO-17-714

*The consular warden system is a mechanism through which a post reaches out to American citizens in country, typically by phone or e-mail, in the event of an emergency, disaster, or threat, for the purposes of distributing information of interest.