

Highlights of [GAO-12-721](#), a report to the Chairman, Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

In 2009, GAO reported on challenges that State faced in filling its increasing overseas staffing needs with sufficiently experienced personnel and noted that persistent Foreign Service staffing and experience gaps put diplomatic readiness at risk. State is currently undertaking a new hiring plan, known as "Diplomacy 3.0," to increase the size of the Foreign Service by 25 percent to close staffing gaps and respond to new diplomatic priorities. However, fiscal constraints are likely to delay the plan's full implementation well beyond its intended target for completion in 2013. In addition, State's first Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review highlighted the need to find ways to close overseas gaps. GAO was asked to assess (1) the extent to which State's overseas midlevel experience gaps in the Foreign Service have changed since 2008 and (2) State's efforts to address these gaps. GAO analyzed State's personnel data; reviewed key planning documents, including the Five Year Workforce Plan; and interviewed State officials in Washington, D.C., and at selected posts.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that State update its Five Year Workforce Plan to include a strategy to address midlevel Foreign Service gaps and a plan to evaluate the success of this strategy. State reviewed a draft of this report and agreed with GAO's recommendation.

View [GAO-12-721](#). For more information, contact Michael Courts at (202) 512-8980 or courtsm@gao.gov.

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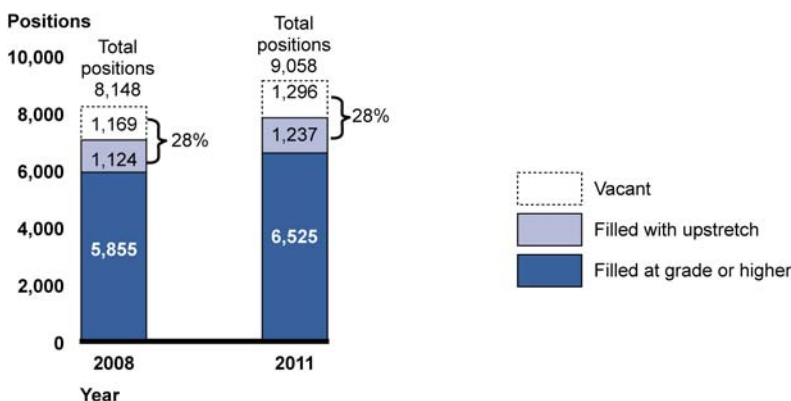
DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Foreign Service Midlevel Staffing Gaps Persist Despite Significant Increases in Hiring

What GAO Found

The Department of State (State) faces persistent experience gaps in overseas Foreign Service positions, particularly at the midlevels, and these gaps have not diminished since 2008. In fiscal years 2009 and 2010, State increased the size of the Foreign Service by 17 percent. However, these new hires will not have the experience to reach midlevels until fiscal years 2014 and 2015. As shown in the figure, GAO found that 28 percent of overseas Foreign Service positions were either vacant or filled by upstretch candidates—officers serving in positions above their grade—as of October 2011, a percentage that has not changed since 2008. Midlevel positions represent the largest share of these gaps. According to State officials, the gaps have not diminished because State increased the total number of overseas positions in response to increased needs and emerging priorities. State officials noted the department takes special measures to fill high-priority positions, including those in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan.

Overseas Foreign Service Positions Filled at Grade, Filled with Upstretch Assignments, and Vacant, 2008 and 2011



Source: GAO analysis of State data.

State has taken steps to increase its reliance on Civil Service employees and retirees, as well as expand mentoring, to help address midlevel experience gaps overseas; however, State lacks a strategy to guide these efforts. State is currently implementing a pilot program to expand overseas assignments for Civil Service employees. Efforts to expand the limited number of these assignments must overcome some key challenges, such as addressing new gaps when Civil Service employees leave their headquarters positions and identifying qualified Civil Service applicants to fill overseas vacancies. State also hires retirees on a limited basis for both full-time and short-term positions. For example, State used limited congressional authority to offer dual compensation waivers to hire 57 retirees in 2011. As a step toward mitigating experience gaps overseas, State began a pilot program offering workshops that include mentoring for first-time supervisors. State acknowledges the need to close midlevel Foreign Service gaps, but it has not developed a strategy to help ensure that the department is taking full advantage of available human capital flexibilities and evaluating the success of its efforts to address these gaps.