



Highlights of [GAO-10-715T](#), a testimony before the 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

Foreign language skills are an increasingly key element to the success of diplomatic efforts; military, counterterrorism, law enforcement and intelligence missions; and to ensure access to federal programs and services to Limited English Proficient (LEP) populations within the United States. GAO has issued reports evaluating foreign language capabilities at the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the Department of Defense (DOD), and the State Department (State). This testimony is based on these reports, issued from June 2009 through June 2010, and addresses the extent to which (1) DHS has assessed its foreign language needs and existing capabilities, identified any potential shortfalls, and developed programs and activities to address potential shortfalls; (2) the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has conducted a needs assessment to help ensure access to its services for LEP persons; and (3) DOD and State have developed comprehensive approaches to address their foreign language capability challenges.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is not making any new recommendations; however, GAO made recommendations in prior reports to help DHS, DOD, and State better assess their foreign language capabilities and address potential shortfalls. All three agencies generally concurred with GAO's recommendations and have taken some actions.

View [GAO-10-715T](#) or [key components](#). For more information, contact David C. Maurer at (202) 512-9627 or maurerd@gao.gov.

FOREIGN LANGUAGE CAPABILITIES

Departments of Homeland Security, Defense, and State Could Better Assess Their Foreign Language Needs and Capabilities and Address Shortfalls

What GAO Found

In June 2010, we reported that DHS had taken limited actions to assess its foreign language needs and existing capabilities, and to identify potential shortfalls. For example, while two of three DHS components included in GAO's review had conducted foreign language assessments, these assessments were not comprehensive, as GAO's prior work on strategic workforce planning recommends. In addition, while all three DHS components GAO reviewed had various lists of employees with foreign language capabilities, DHS had no systematic method for assessing its existing capabilities. In addition, DHS and its components had not taken actions to identify potential foreign language shortfalls. Further, DHS and its components established a variety of foreign language programs and activities, but had not assessed the extent to which these programs and activities address potential shortfalls. The Department's ability to use them to address potential shortfalls varied and GAO recommended that DHS comprehensively assess its foreign language needs and capabilities, and any resulting shortfalls; and ensure these assessments are incorporated into future strategic planning. DHS generally concurred with these recommendations, and officials stated that the Department has actions planned to address them.

In April 2010, we reported that FEMA had developed a national needs assessment to identify its LEP customer base and how frequently it interacted with LEP persons. Using this assessment, FEMA officials reported that the agency had identified 13 of the most frequently encountered languages spoken by LEP communities. Locally, in response to a disaster, FEMA conducts a needs assessment by collecting information from the U.S. Census Bureau and data from local sources to help determine the amount of funding required to ensure proper communication with affected LEP communities.

In June 2009, GAO reported that DOD had taken steps to transform its language and regional proficiency capabilities, but it had not developed a comprehensive strategic plan to guide its efforts and lacked a complete inventory and validated requirements to identify gaps and assess related risks. GAO recommended that DOD develop a comprehensive strategic plan for its language and regional proficiency efforts, establish a mechanism to assess the regional proficiency skills of its personnel, and develop a methodology to identify its language and regional proficiency requirements. DOD concurred with these recommendations; however, as of June 2010, officials stated that related actions are underway, but have not been completed. Furthermore, GAO reported in September 2009 that State's efforts to meet its foreign language requirements had yielded some results but had not closed persistent gaps in foreign-language proficient staff and reflected, in part, a lack of a comprehensive, strategic approach. GAO recommended that State develop a comprehensive strategic plan with measurable goals, objectives, milestones, and feedback mechanisms that links all of State's efforts to meet its foreign language requirements. State generally agreed with GAO's recommendations and is working to address them.