

Highlights of [GAO-06-894](#), a report to the Chairman, Committee on Foreign Relations, U.S. Senate

DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Staffing and Foreign Language Shortfalls Persist Despite Initiatives to Address Gaps

Why GAO Did This Study

GAO has reported in recent years on a number of human capital issues that have hampered the Department of State’s ability to carry out U.S. foreign policy priorities and objectives, particularly at posts central to the war on terror. In 2002, State implemented the Diplomatic Readiness Initiative (DRI) to address shortfalls in the number and skills of State employees. This report discusses State’s progress in (1) addressing staffing shortfalls since the implementation of DRI and (2) filling gaps in the language proficiency of foreign service officers and other staff. To accomplish these objectives, GAO analyzed staffing and language data and met with State officials.

What GAO Recommends

To enhance staffing levels and skills at hardship posts as well as language proficiency of foreign service staff, GAO is making five recommendations to the Secretary of State in the areas of staffing and assignment of foreign service staff, including using directed assignments, as necessary, using a risk-based approach to fill critical positions with fully qualified officers who have the skills and experience necessary to effectively manage and supervise essential mission functions at hardship posts; and systematically evaluating the effectiveness of initiatives to reduce staffing and language gaps. State generally agreed with our findings and recommendations.

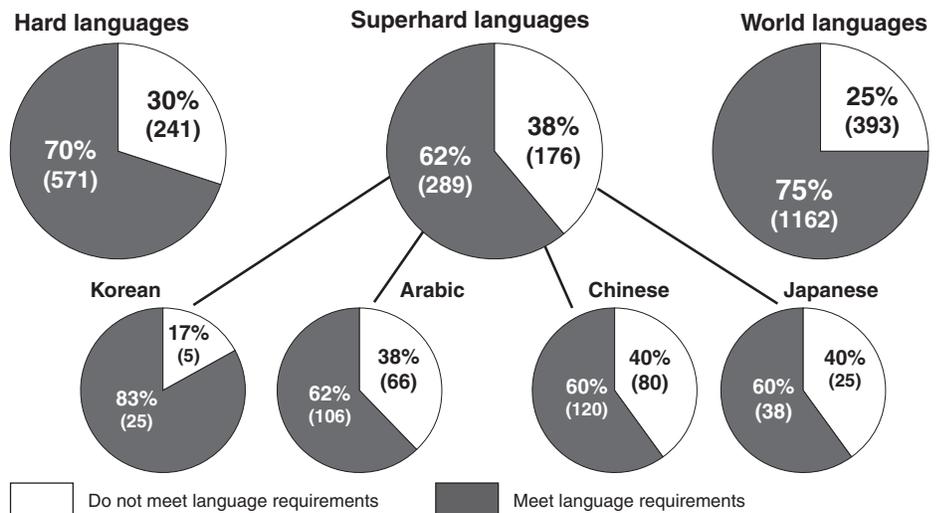
www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-894.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Jess T. Ford, (202) 512-4128 or fordj@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

State has made progress in addressing staffing shortages since implementing the DRI. However, the initiative did not fully meet its goals, and mid-level vacancies remain a problem at many posts, including some critical to the war on terror. State implemented various incentives to attract more mid-level officers to these locations, including offering extra pay to officers who serve an additional year at certain posts. However, it has not evaluated the effectiveness of these incentives and continues to have difficulties attracting qualified applicants. Mid-level positions at many posts are staffed by junior officers who lack experience, have minimal guidance, and are not as well-equipped to handle crises as more seasoned officers. This experience gap can severely compromise the department’s readiness to carry out foreign policy objectives and execute critical post-level duties.

State has made progress in increasing its foreign language capabilities, but serious language gaps remain. State initiated a number of efforts to improve its foreign language capabilities. However, it has not evaluated the effectiveness of these efforts, and it continues to experience difficulties filling its language-designated positions with language proficient staff. Almost one third of the staff in these positions do not meet the language requirements. The percentage is much higher at certain critical posts—for example, 60 percent in Sana’a, Yemen. Several factors—including the perception that spending too much time in one region may hinder officers’ and specialists’ promotion potential—may discourage employees from bidding on positions where they could enhance and maintain their language skills over time and limit State’s ability to take advantage of those skills and the investment it makes in training. Gaps in language proficiency can adversely impact State’s ability to communicate with foreign audiences and execute critical duties.



Source: GAO analysis of Department of State data.