

Why GAO Did This Study

In 2015, EPA awarded roughly \$3.9 billion, about 49 percent of its budget, in grants to states, local governments, tribes, and other recipients. These grants supported activities, such as repairing aging water infrastructure. GAO was asked to review how EPA manages its grants workforce.

This report examines (1) how staffing levels and workloads changed for EPA grants management personnel during fiscal years 2006 through 2015, the most recent years for which data were available, and (2) the extent to which EPA follows leading practices of strategic workforce planning in managing its grants workforce. GAO reviewed agency documents; analyzed EPA data; and interviewed officials from headquarters, all 10 regional offices, and a nongeneralizable sample of 3 of 10 national program offices that manage grants, which GAO selected for factors such as size of the offices' grants workforces and portfolios.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making five recommendations, including that EPA develop documented processes that can be consistently applied by EPA offices to (1) collect and analyze data about grants management workloads and (2) use these data to inform FTE allocations. EPA should also (3) review project officer critical skills and competencies and determine training needs to address gaps and (4) develop recruitment and retention performance measures and collect performance data for these measures. EPA agreed with four of the recommendations and partially agreed with the fifth, which GAO clarified to address EPA's comments.

View [GAO-17-144](#). For more information, contact J. Alfredo Gómez at (202) 512-3841 or gomezj@gao.gov.

GRANTS MANAGEMENT

EPA Partially Follows Leading Practices of Strategic Workforce Planning and Could Take Additional Steps

What GAO Found

Staffing levels for U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) grants management personnel generally declined during fiscal years 2006 through 2015, but it is unclear how workloads may have changed during this time frame. Specifically, the number of grant specialists and project officers—EPA's key grants management personnel—who entered information about grant actions into the agency's automated grants management system at key points in the process—declined by 20 percent and 41 percent, respectively. However, it is unclear how workloads may have changed because available information is contradictory, EPA has not consistently tracked and analyzed key aspects of grants management workload over time, and the agency does not have a process for doing so. Under federal standards for internal control, agencies are to clearly document internal controls. In addition, federal guidance states that agencies should take steps to assess and, as appropriate, resize full-time equivalents (FTE) to achieve the agencies' missions as effectively and efficiently as possible. Because EPA does not have a documented process that can be consistently applied to obtain workload data across offices, its regional and national program offices allocate FTEs to grants management positions using varying processes, such as assessing "pain points" as they arise and shifting personnel from other groups within a region to manage grants when necessary. Without developing a documented process that can be consistently applied by EPA offices to collect, analyze, and use workload data to inform FTE allocations, EPA cannot track changes in workload or have assurance that it is allocating grants management resources in an effective and efficient manner.

EPA partially follows leading practices of strategic workforce planning for its grants personnel by identifying critical skills and competencies, primarily for grant specialists; developing strategies to address skill and competency gaps by updating training courses as EPA issues new regulations; and taking some steps to monitor and evaluate progress by developing some performance measures for its 2016-2020 Grants Management Plan. However, according to agency officials, EPA has not reviewed project officer critical skills and competencies because of competing priorities. Such a review could help EPA determine training needs to address any gaps identified. GAO has found that leading practices of strategic workforce planning include identifying the critical skills and competencies needed to achieve current and future programmatic results, as well as developing strategies—such as training—to address skill and competency gaps. Using these practices could help EPA ensure that it has people with the right skills to meet the goals of its Grants Management Plan. EPA's plan also does not contain performance measures to monitor and evaluate recruitment and retention efforts for its grants personnel, or to show how these efforts contribute toward the agency's human capital goals and programmatic results. GAO has found that monitoring and evaluating progress toward human capital goals is a leading practice. By developing performance measures to track the effectiveness of its recruitment and retention efforts, and collecting performance data for these measures, EPA could enhance its ability to identify both performance shortfalls as well as appropriate corrective actions.