DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Foreign Language Proficiency Has Improved, but Efforts to Reduce Gaps Need Evaluation

What GAO Found

As of September 2016, 23 percent of overseas language-designated positions (LDP) were filled by Foreign Service officers (FSO) who did not meet the positions’ language proficiency requirements. While this represents an 8-percentage-point improvement from 2008, the Department of State (State) still faces significant language proficiency gaps (see fig.). Regionally, the greatest gaps were in the Near East (37 percent), Africa (34 percent), and South and Central Asia (31 percent). According to FSOs we interviewed, language proficiency gaps have, in some cases, affected State’s ability to properly adjudicate visa applications; effectively communicate with foreign audiences, address security concerns, and perform other critical diplomatic duties.

State reviews overseas posts’ language needs every 3 years, but the extent to which the reviews’ outcomes address these needs is unclear. State’s policies indicate that operational need should determine the designation of positions as LDPs and required proficiency levels. However, views expressed by geographic bureau officials and FSOs whom GAO met at overseas posts suggest that other factors, such as staffing and cost concerns, influence State’s decisions about LDP designations and proficiency requirements. State Human Resources officials noted that State is taking steps to better align its LDP policies with its operational needs.

State has implemented most actions described in its 2011 “Strategic Plan for Foreign Language Capabilities” but has not evaluated the effects of these actions on language proficiency at overseas posts. According to State’s evaluation policy, the department is committed to using performance management, including evaluation, to achieve the most effective foreign policy outcomes and greater accountability. Actions State has implemented under the plan include reviewing the language requirements of overseas posts every 3 years; offering recruitment incentives for personnel with proficiency in critically important languages; providing language incentive pay only for languages that reflect the department’s highest strategic priorities; and using technology to strengthen and develop new approaches for language training and to complement FSOs’ language skills. However, more than 5 years after it began implementing its strategic plan, State has not systematically evaluated the results of these efforts. As a result, State cannot determine the extent to which these efforts contribute to progress in increasing language proficiency worldwide and reducing proficiency gaps.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Secretary of State evaluate the effectiveness of efforts implemented under the “Strategic Plan for Foreign Language Capabilities.” State agreed with our recommendation.