

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-20-559](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

The SES was created in 1978 as a corps of federal executives selected for their leadership qualifications. They serve in key positions just below the top presidential appointees. Federal agencies have broad authority to reassign career SES members, but these reassignments must meet certain requirements. GAO was asked to provide information on the reassignments of career SES members. Among other things, this report examines (1) career SES reassignments at selected agencies within the moratoriums on involuntary reassignments from fiscal years 2017 through 2019, (2) the extent to which selected agencies followed requirements, and (3) OPM's monitoring of career SES reassignments.

GAO analyzed personnel records, reviewed agency processes, and interviewed agency officials from four selected agencies that were among those with the highest percentage of career SES members reassigned in fiscal year 2017. GAO also reviewed requirements and OPM guidance, and interviewed OPM officials.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO is making four recommendations, including one each to Commerce, HUD, and Interior to improve their career SES reassignment processes, to which each agency agreed. GAO also recommends OPM monitor career SES reassignments. OPM disagreed, but GAO maintains that oversight is needed, as discussed in the report.

View [GAO-20-559](#). For more information, contact Michelle B. Rosenberg at (202) 512-6806 or [RosenbergM@gao.gov](mailto:RosenbergM@gao.gov).

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## SENIOR EXECUTIVE SERVICE

### Opportunities for Selected Agencies to Improve Their Career Reassignment Processes

## What GAO Found

The Senior Executive Service (SES) was designed, in part, to enable agencies to assign and reassign career SES members to best accomplish the agency's mission. When reassigning career SES members, agencies must meet requirements to protect career SES members from arbitrary and capricious actions. These protections include two 120-day moratoriums when agencies cannot involuntarily reassign career SES members, although voluntary reassignments are permissible, if certain requirements are met. The moratorium periods begin upon the permanent appointment of a (1) new agency head or (2) career SES member's new, noncareer supervisor (e.g., a political appointee).

Selected agencies GAO reviewed—the Departments of Commerce (Commerce), Energy, Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and Interior (Interior)—varied in the extent to which they reassigned career SES members during moratoriums. Agencies most often initiated these reassignments to address agency-specific priorities, including filling senior-level vacancies and succession planning.

**Reassignments Made within 120-Day Moratoriums at Selected Agencies, Fiscal Years 2017 through 2019**

Selected agency	New agency head moratorium	New, noncareer supervisor moratorium
Department of Commerce	8	1
Department of Energy	10	6
Department of Housing and Urban Development	0	5
Department of the Interior <sup>a</sup>	10	1
Subtotal	28	13
<b>Total</b>		<b>41</b>

Source: GAO analysis of selected agency documentation. | GAO-20-559

<sup>a</sup>Includes reassignments from October 30, 2017, through September 30, 2019, to avoid duplicating work previously performed by the department's Office of Inspector General.

Selected agencies could not always demonstrate that they met requirements for career SES reassignments, especially for reassignments during the new, noncareer supervisor moratorium. Specifically:

- Commerce did not maintain required documentation,
- HUD did not seek written waivers from the career SES member, and
- Interior's process did not address how to make reassignments during the moratorium.

As a result, they could not always show that career SES member reassignments during moratorium periods were voluntary. Each agency made or was making improvements to their career SES reassignment process, but in some cases need to make further process changes to fully address reassignment requirements.

The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) is responsible for the governmentwide management of the SES. While OPM has oversight authority, it has not monitored career SES reassignments, or required agencies to take corrective actions. As a result, OPM is likely missing opportunities to correct career SES reassignments that were contrary to requirements.