



Highlights of [GAO-07-758](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

Since its inception in 2003, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has faced numerous human capital challenges related to recruiting, retaining, and managing its workforce of nearly 171,000 employees.

As requested, this report analyzes DHS's attrition, efforts to recruit and retain staff, use of external employees, and compliance with certain provisions of the Vacancies Reform Act, which requires agencies to report to Congress and the Comptroller General vacancies in certain presidentially-appointed positions requiring Senate confirmation. To conduct its work, GAO surveyed human capital personnel from DHS and its component agencies; analyzed federal personnel data files, Office of Personnel Management (OPM) human capital documentation, and relevant legislation; and interviewed key DHS officials.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending that DHS's Office of General Counsel develop written policies and procedures clearly explaining the duties of officials and others responsible for ensuring compliance with the Vacancies Reform Act. DHS reviewed a draft of this report and concurred with the recommendation.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-758](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-758).

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Robert Goldenkoff at (202) 512-2757 or [goldenkoffr@gao.gov](mailto:goldenkoffr@gao.gov).

# HOMELAND SECURITY

## DHS's Actions to Recruit and Retain Staff and Comply with the Vacancies Reform Act

### What GAO Found

DHS's overall attrition rate for permanent employees (excluding those in the Senior Executive Service and presidential appointments) declined from 8.4 percent in 2005 to 7.1 percent in 2006. These rates, which were above the roughly 4 percent average rate for all cabinet-level agencies, were affected by high levels of attrition (about 14-17 percent) among transportation security officers at DHS's Transportation Security Administration. With the security officers excluded, DHS's attrition rate was 3.3 percent. To monitor and understand attrition rates, DHS and several of its component agencies separately analyze attrition data and administer exit surveys to employees upon their departure. GAO has previously reported that these data are useful to agencies for workforce planning purposes.

DHS used various strategies to recruit and retain employees in fiscal years 2005 and 2006. For example, DHS used human capital flexibilities in accordance with OPM guidance that included offering employee cash awards and hiring staff under a 2-year training program. These practices and others were rated by most DHS human capital officials GAO interviewed as "very effective" recruitment or retention tools, though most component officials also cited barriers to making greater use of certain flexibilities, such as expedited hiring.

DHS implemented agreements under the Intergovernmental Personnel Act, allowing nonfederal employees to be temporarily assigned to a federal agency to meet mission needs. As of September 2006, 36 such agreements were in place, roughly half of them in DHS's Science and Technology Directorate. DHS also used personal services contracts to acquire talent from outside the government on a temporary basis—with 61 such contracts in place as of September 2006, almost all of them in Customs and Border Protection and U.S. Coast Guard.

Between March 2003 and April 2007, DHS filled 16 positions covered by the Vacancies Reform Act and complied with the "tenure provision" in all cases, which limits to 210 days the tenure of acting officials in certain positions that require presidential appointment and Senate confirmation. However, during this same period, DHS did not always meet related reporting requirements of the act and did not have one of the five management controls that GAO has reported as necessary to ensure compliance—written procedures documenting how to comply. The act requires that agencies immediately report vacancies to Congress and the Comptroller General. DHS did not meet this requirement for 3 of 16 vacancies between 2003 and 2007; DHS's Office of General Counsel did not know why these vacancies were not reported. GAO has previously reported that documented procedures are a necessary management control mechanism so that when DHS staff responsible for ensuring DHS's compliance with the act leave or are reassigned, their replacements will have established guidelines to follow.