



Highlights of [GAO-10-1028](#), a report to the Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

## Why GAO Did This Study

The U.S. Congress has continuing concerns about U.S. underrepresentation in United Nations (UN) organizations. Some UN organizations establish targets for member state representation, and such positions are classified as geographic positions. GAO's 2006 report found that the State Department (State) could take additional steps to increase U.S. representation. This report examines (1) U.S. representation at five UN organizations; (2) issues affecting the employment of professional staff, including Americans at these organizations; and (3) efforts State has undertaken to increase U.S. representation. GAO analyzed employment data from five UN organizations that comprise over 50 percent of total UN professional staff and interviewed U.S. and UN officials, including 63 Americans employed at the five organizations.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Secretary of State (1) include data on U.S. representation in all professional positions in its annual report to Congress, (2) evaluate its ongoing activities to increase U.S. representation, and (3) consider a pilot program to fund Junior Professional Officers (JPO), who are entry-level employees funded by member states, at UN organizations where the United States currently does not have any JPOs. In commenting on a draft of this report, State concurred with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-10-1028](#) or [key components](#). For more information, contact Thomas Melito at (202) 512-9601 or [melitot@gao.gov](mailto:melitot@gao.gov).

# U.S. EMPLOYMENT IN THE UNITED NATIONS

## State Department Needs to Enhance Reporting Requirements and Evaluate Its Efforts to Increase U.S. Representation

### What GAO Found

In 2009, the United States was underrepresented, based on formal and informal targets, at all five of the UN organizations GAO reviewed—the Secretariat, World Health Organization (WHO), Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (see table). This follows general U.S. underrepresentation at most of these organizations from 2006 to 2009. At the four UN organizations that distinguish geographic and nongeographic positions, there was an increase in the percentage of nongeographic professional positions during 2006 to 2009. The United States is not as well represented in nongeographic as geographic positions at FAO and the Secretariat, which could affect future overall U.S. representation. In addition, U.S. representation in policymaking and senior-level positions generally decreased at these UN organizations from 2006 to 2009.

**U.S. Representation at Five UN Organizations, Year-end 2009**

UN organization	Percentage of total geographic positions targeted for Americans	Percentage of geographic positions filled by Americans	Equitability of U.S. representation based on targets	Percentage of nongeographic positions filled by Americans	Percentage of total professional positions filled by Americans
Secretariat	12.5%-16.9%	11.9%	Under	9.5%	10.2%
WHO <sup>a</sup>	8.3%-11.2%	8.2%	Under	8.5%	8.3%
FAO	13.7%-18.5%	12.7%	Under	6.9%	10.5%
IAEA	12.5%	11.2%	Under	20.1%	13.8%
UNHCR <sup>b</sup>	13%	data not applicable	Under	data not applicable	7.4%

Sources: GAO analysis of Secretariat, WHO, FAO, IAEA, and UNHCR data.

<sup>a</sup>WHO raised questions about the reliability of its data.

<sup>b</sup>UNHCR does not have geographic positions; State has determined U.S. representation at UNHCR should be at least 13 percent of total professional positions.

The five UN organizations GAO reviewed have challenges that affect the recruitment, hiring, and retention of professional staff, including Americans. Challenges include Americans' lack of proficiency in UN languages, difficulty for spouses to obtain employment in some locations, lengthy hiring processes, and limited opportunities for promotion and professional growth. For example, 45 out of 63 Americans we interviewed identified the lengthy hiring process as a challenge to recruiting and hiring. While these UN organizations have initiated human resource reforms that may address some of the issues, such as efforts to decrease hiring time, it is too early to determine their impact.

Since 2006, State has made efforts to increase U.S. representation in the UN, including implementing some of GAO's 2006 recommendations. State has improved its Web site; increased outreach initiatives; begun developing a Web-based database, so interested UN job applicants can receive automatic vacancy announcements; and conducted an informal review of funding JPOs, but it continues to allocate JPOs at only a few UN organizations. State has not assessed the effectiveness of most of its current efforts to increase U.S. representation. Despite State's efforts, many Americans employed at the five organizations learned about UN job opportunities through their own networks, not through State.