



Highlights of [GAO-10-714](#), 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 Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has a variety of responsibilities that utilize foreign language capabilities, including investigating transnational criminal activity and staffing ports of entry into the United States. GAO was asked to study foreign language capabilities at DHS. GAO's analysis focused on actions taken by DHS in three of its largest components—the U.S. Coast Guard, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Specifically, this report addresses the extent to which DHS has (1) assessed its foreign language needs and existing capabilities and identified any potential shortfalls and (2) developed foreign language programs and activities to address potential foreign language shortfalls. GAO analyzed DHS documentation on foreign language capabilities, interviewed DHS officials, and assessed workforce planning in three components that were selected to ensure broad representation of law enforcement and intelligence operations. While the results are not projectable, they provide valuable insights.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DHS comprehensively assess its foreign language needs and capabilities and identify potential shortfalls, assess the extent to which existing foreign language programs are addressing foreign language shortfalls, and ensure that these assessments are incorporated into future strategic planning. DHS generally concurs with the recommendations.

View [GAO-10-714](#) or [key components](#). For more information, contact David C. Maurer at (202) 512-9627 or [maurerd@gao.gov](mailto:maurerd@gao.gov).

## DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY

### DHS Needs to Comprehensively Assess Its Foreign Language Needs and Capabilities and Identify Shortfalls

#### What GAO Found

DHS has taken limited actions to assess its foreign language needs and existing capabilities and to identify potential shortfalls. GAO and the Office of Personnel Management have developed strategic workforce guidance that recommends, among other things, that agencies (1) assess workforce needs, such as foreign language needs; (2) assess current competency skills; and (3) compare workforce needs against available skills. However, DHS has done little at the department level, and individual components' approaches to addressing foreign language needs and capabilities and assessing potential shortfalls have not been comprehensive. Specifically:

- DHS has no systematic method for assessing its foreign language needs and does not address foreign language needs in its Human Capital Strategic Plan. DHS components' efforts to assess foreign language needs vary. For example, the Coast Guard has conducted multiple assessments, CBP's assessments have primarily focused on Spanish language needs, and ICE has not conducted any assessments. By conducting a comprehensive assessment, DHS would be better positioned to capture information on all of its needs and could use this information to inform future strategic planning.
- DHS has no systematic method for assessing its existing foreign language capabilities and has not conducted a comprehensive capabilities assessment. DHS components have developed various lists of foreign language capable staff that are available in some offices, primarily those that include a foreign language award program for qualified employees. Conducting an assessment of all of its capabilities would better position DHS to manage its resources.
- DHS and its components have not taken actions to identify potential foreign language shortfalls. DHS officials stated that shortfalls can affect mission goals and officer safety. By using the results of needs and capabilities assessments to identify foreign language shortfalls, DHS would be better positioned to develop actions to mitigate shortfalls, execute its various missions that involve foreign language speakers, and enhance the safety of its officers and agents.

DHS and its components have established a variety of foreign language programs and activities but have not assessed the extent to which they address potential shortfalls. Coast Guard, CBP, and ICE have established foreign language programs and activities, which include foreign language training and award payments. These programs and activities vary, as does DHS's ability to use them to address shortfalls. For example, foreign language training programs generally do not include languages other than Spanish, and DHS officials were generally unaware of the foreign language programs in DHS's components. Given this variation and decentralization, conducting a comprehensive assessment of the extent to which its programs and activities address shortfalls could strengthen DHS's ability to manage its foreign language programs and activities and to adjust them, if necessary.