

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-14-228T](#), a testimony before the Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

DHS is the third-largest cabinet-level department in the federal government, with more than 240,000 employees situated throughout the nation. Employees engage in a broad range of jobs to support its missions, including aviation and border security, emergency response, cybersecurity, and critical infrastructure protection, among others. Since it began operations in 2003, DHS has faced challenges in implementing human capital functions, and its employees have reported having low job satisfaction. In addition, Congress has raised questions about DHS's ability to hire and retain senior executives.

This testimony addresses (1) how DHS's employees' workforce satisfaction compares with that of other federal government employees and the extent to which DHS is taking steps to improve employee morale, and (2) vacancies in DHS senior leadership positions. This statement is based on products GAO issued in February 2012 and September 2012 and selected updates conducted in December 2013. GAO analyzed FEVS results and DHS vacancy data for fiscal years 2012 and 2013 and interviewed DHS officials.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO has made recommendations in prior reports for DHS to strengthen its analysis of low employee morale, and identify clear and measurable metrics for action plan success. DHS concurred with these recommendations and has reported actions under way to address them. GAO provided a copy of new information in this statement to DHS for review. DHS confirmed the accuracy of this information.

View [GAO-14-228T](#). For more information, contact David C. Maurer at (202) 512-9627 or [maurerd@gao.gov](mailto:maurerd@gao.gov)

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## DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY

### DHS's Efforts to Improve Employee Morale and Fill Senior Leadership Vacancies

## What GAO Found

In September 2012, GAO reported that Department of Homeland Security (DHS) employees identified having lower average morale than the average for the rest of the federal government, but morale varied across components. Specifically, GAO found that, according to the Office of Personnel Management's 2011 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS), DHS employees had 4.5 percentage points lower job satisfaction and 7.0 percentage point lower engagement—the extent to which employees are immersed in their work and spending extra effort on job performance. Several components with lower morale, such as the Transportation Security Administration, made up a substantial share of FEVS respondents at DHS and accounted for a significant portion of the overall difference between the department and other agencies. In September 2012, GAO recommended that DHS take action to better determine the root cause of low employee morale, and where absent, add benchmarking against similar organizations, among other things. Since September 2012, DHS has taken a number of actions intended to improve employee morale, such as directing component human capital officials to reevaluate their action plans to ensure that metrics of success are clear and measurable. In December 2013, GAO found that DHS has actions underway to address GAO's recommendations but DHS has not fully implemented them. It will be important to do so, as DHS employee job satisfaction declined in fiscal years 2012 and 2013 FEVS results. Specifically, 2013 FEVS data show that DHS employee satisfaction decreased 7 percentage points since 2011, which is more than the government-wide decrease of 4 percentage points over the same time period. As a result, the gap between average DHS employee satisfaction and the government-wide average widened to 7 percentage points. DHS has also consistently scored lower than the government-wide average on the FEVS Leadership and Knowledge Management index, which indicates the extent to which employees hold their leadership in high regard. Since 2011, DHS's scores for this index have decreased 5 percentage points, widening the gap between the DHS average and the government-wide average to 9 percentage points.

In February 2012, GAO reported that DHS Senior Executive Service (SES) vacancy rates, while reaching a peak of 25 percent in 2006, had generally declined, reaching 10 percent at the end of fiscal year 2011. GAO also reported that component officials identified a number of factors that may have contributed to component SES vacancy rates during that time period, including increases in SES allocations, events like presidential transitions, and organizational factors such as reorganizations. To help reduce SES vacancy rates, DHS has (1) implemented a simplified pilot hiring process aimed at attracting additional qualified applicants and planned to expand the method for all SES, and (2) implemented a centralized SES candidate development program aimed at providing a consistent approach to leadership training. As of December 2013, DHS had made the pilot process available to all components, but had not yet performed analysis of these efforts' effectiveness at reducing SES vacancy rates which, according to DHS data, have remained relatively steady since GAO's February 2012 report—11 percent at the end of fiscal year 2013.