

GAO@100 Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-22-104354](#), a report to congressional addressees

Why GAO Did This Study

State provides repatriation assistance to U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents abroad during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. State's Office of Crisis Management and Strategy and Bureau of Consular Affairs were primarily responsible for State's COVID-19 repatriation effort.

The CARES Act includes a provision for GAO to report on its ongoing COVID-19 monitoring and oversight efforts. In addition, GAO was asked to examine State's COVID-19 repatriation effort. This report examines, among other things, (1) the results of State's repatriation effort, including lessons State reported learning from challenges it faced; (2) the consistency of selected aspects of State's repatriation effort with its policies and procedures; and (3) State's oversight of its overseas posts' crisis preparedness.

GAO reviewed relevant State documents, such as cables and guidance. GAO also interviewed State officials in Washington, D.C., and in Ghana, Honduras, India, Morocco, and Peru. In addition, GAO surveyed a generalizable sample of passengers repatriated on State-chartered flights.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making six recommendations to improve State's preparedness to repatriate U.S. citizens during crises—including three recommendations to improve agencywide preparedness and three to improve State's oversight of posts' preparedness. State agreed with all of the recommendations.

View [GAO-22-104354](#). For more information, contact Jason Bair at (202) 512-6881 or bairj@gao.gov.

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COVID-19

State Carried Out Historic Repatriation Effort but Should Strengthen Its Preparedness for Future Crises

What GAO Found

From January to June 2020, the Department of State carried out a historic effort in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, helping to repatriate more than 100,000 individuals who were in 137 countries. In the previous 5 years, State had repatriated fewer than 6,000 people. Most responses to a GAO survey of repatriated individuals expressed positive views of State's communication, among other things, though some expressed concerns about matters such as the prices of repatriation flights. State reported learning several lessons from challenges it faced, such as the importance of using social media and cell phones to communicate with U.S. citizens.

State Personnel Assisting with Repatriations in Tanzania (Left) and Montenegro (right)



Source: U.S. Department of State (State). | GAO-22-104354

Despite acting swiftly to assist Americans abroad, State did not follow some of its policies and lacked guidance for certain aspects of its repatriation effort. For example, as of May 2021, an interagency group State established to coordinate plans to evacuate U.S. citizens abroad in emergencies had not met since April 2019, hampering interagency communication early in the crisis. Also, incomplete guidance for calculating and documenting actual costs of State-chartered flights led to missing or inconsistent documentation and limited State's ability to show that the prices it charged passengers complied with its fare policy.

Additionally, while State requires overseas posts to take steps to prepare for crises, its oversight of their preparedness has gaps.

- State requires posts to update emergency action plans but does not ensure timely submission of those plans. In the 20 countries from which State helped repatriate the largest numbers of people, 17 of 30 posts did not submit their updated plans for certification within required time frames in 2020.
- State requires posts to complete annual emergency preparedness drills, but does not ensure completion of the drills. In 2019, 16 of the 30 posts failed to complete all the drills within the required time frames.
- State lacks a mechanism for assessing posts' crisis preparedness. Though State encourages posts to assess their own preparedness annually, data from these assessments are not current or complete.

As a result of these gaps, State lacks assurance that posts will be prepared to respond to a future global crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic.