

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-22-104414](#), a report to the Chairman, Subcommittee on Government Operations, Committee on Oversight and Reform, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Federal agencies need skilled personnel to address the complex social, economic, and security challenges facing the United States. The mobility program, established under the Intergovernmental Personnel Act of 1970, can help agencies address their mission critical skills gaps with temporary assignments.

GAO was asked to review OPM's oversight over the personnel mobility program. This report examines, among other things, the frequency with which selected agencies used the mobility program from fiscal years 2016 – 2020; selected agencies' management of the program's costs; and OPM's tracking of agencies' use of the program.

GAO selected four agencies for review. These agencies were selected as potential frequent users of the program based on a literature review and interviews with agency officials. For the selected agencies, GAO (1) reviewed a selection of 53 program agreements; (2) reviewed policies, procedures, and guidance documents; (3) analyzed mobility program data in OPM's database; and (4) interviewed officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that OPM (1) update its guidance regarding participants supervising federal employees and (2) establish a process and guidance to obtain complete and accurate mobility program data. OPM agreed with the first recommendation and disagreed with the second. GAO maintains the recommendation is still warranted, as discussed in this report.

View [GAO-22-104414](#). For more information, contact Alissa Czyz at (202) 512-6806 or czyza@gao.gov.

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PERSONNEL MOBILITY PROGRAM

Improved Guidance Could Help Federal Agencies Address Skills Gaps and Maximize Other Benefits

What GAO Found

The personnel mobility program can address skills gaps by providing temporary assignments for purposes that benefit both federal agencies and certain non-federal organizations. The four agencies GAO selected for review—the Departments of Defense and Energy, General Services Administration, and National Aeronautics and Space Administration—used the mobility program to bring top scientists, researchers, and professors into the federal government to lead complex and highly technical projects and address emerging issues. Officials also identified a number of other benefits of the program—flexible time commitments for participants of up to 2 years, ease of administration, and lower costs—compared with other means of gaining skills or expertise.

Despite these benefits, GAO found these agencies used the mobility program infrequently. The number of non-federal participants at selected agencies represented less than 1 percent of their total civilian workforce in a given fiscal year. Agency officials attributed this to certain limitations, as shown below.

Selected Agencies Identified Personnel Mobility Program Benefits and Limitations

Benefits	Limitations
Quickly fill skills gaps in technical areas	Lack of program awareness
Temporary and flexible time commitment	Reluctance of home agency/organization to temporarily lose employees
Administrative ease and cost efficiency	Salary limits for participants

Source: GAO analysis of selected agency data. | [GAO-22-104414](#)

The Office of Personnel Management's (OPM) written mobility program guidance states that "non-federal [participants]...may exercise supervision over federal employees." However, this guidance does not fully reflect advice OPM provides agencies that have sought clarity about the supervisory duties allowed, such as those related to performance management and relevant training. Without clear written guidance regarding supervisory activities, mobility program participants may take performance management actions that could pose risks to the agency.

The agencies in GAO's review managed mobility program-related costs by negotiating cost-sharing agreements with the participant's home organization. Officials at selected agencies described key considerations that may affect the proportion of the participant's costs selected agencies would reimburse the home organization. These considerations include time commitment, the distribution of benefits to both the federal government and the participant's home organization, and salary limits. The selected agencies also vetted mobility program candidates for eligibility, technical qualifications, security, and conflicts of interest.

In addition, OPM does not have complete and accurate data needed to track mobility program use. Thus, OPM does not know how often the program is being used across the federal government. Without a process to obtain complete and accurate data, OPM does not have the information needed to reliably inform its strategic decisions to oversee, provide guidance, promote, or more generally understand how federal agencies are using the mobility program to meet their mission and address critical skills gaps.