

Why GAO Did This Study

In response to a presidential initiative to move federal agency headquarters outside of Washington, D.C., in August 2018, the Secretary of Agriculture announced his decision to relocate ERS and NIFA. The agencies moved to Kansas City, Missouri, in September 2019. USDA's stated objectives for relocating the agencies included attracting and retaining highly qualified staff, but various stakeholders raised questions about the ability of ERS and NIFA to continue their missions after relocation.

GAO was asked to review USDA's relocation of ERS and NIFA. This report examines (1) the authorities and requirements that USDA identified for relocating ERS and NIFA, (2) the effect of relocation on the agencies' human resources and productivity, and (3) the extent to which the agencies followed selected leading practices for agency reforms and strategic human capital management.

GAO collected responses from USDA on legal requirements; reviewed a prior GAO report on this relocation; analyzed trends in the agencies' human resources, ERS's publications, and NIFA's grant timeliness; and compared USDA and agency actions to relevant leading practices for effective agency reforms and strategic human capital management.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making eight recommendations to USDA to more fully follow selected leading practices related to agency reforms and strategic human capital management. USDA generally agreed with these recommendations.

View [GAO-23-104709](#). For more information, contact Steve Morris at (202) 512-3841 or morris@gao.gov.

AGENCY RELOCATIONS

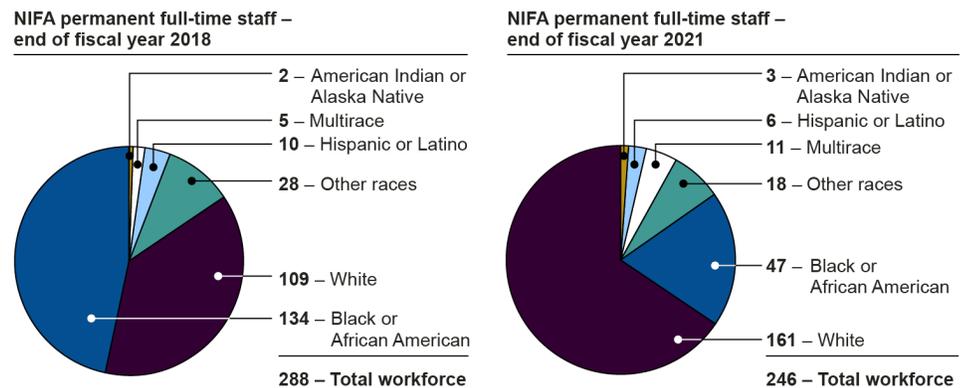
Following Leading Practices Will Better Position USDA to Mitigate the Ongoing Impacts on Its Workforce

What GAO Found

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) identified numerous legal authorities and requirements and took various actions in relocating two of USDA's research agencies—the Economic Research Service (ERS) and the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA). For example, USDA identified legal authority for the Secretary of Agriculture to relocate the offices and relied on certain regulations to select an appropriate site.

ERS's and NIFA's workforce size and productivity temporarily declined following the agencies' 2019 relocation from offices in Washington, D.C., to Kansas City, Missouri. Coinciding with the loss of staff in fiscal years 2019 and 2020, ERS produced fewer key reports, and NIFA took longer to process grants. By the end of fiscal year 2021, however, agencies' workforce size and productivity had largely recovered. Two years after the relocation, the agencies' workforce was composed mostly of new employees with less experience at ERS and NIFA than the prior workforce. In addition, a decline in the number of employees in certain protected groups persisted. For example, the proportion of Black or African American staff at NIFA declined from 47 percent to 19 percent (see fig.).

Number of Permanent Full-Time Staff at NIFA, by Race and Ethnicity, at the End of Fiscal Years 2018 and 2021



NIFA = National Institute of Food and Agriculture

Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Department of Agriculture data. | GAO-23-104709

Overall, USDA's actions leading up to and during the relocation of ERS and NIFA followed some, but not all, selected leading practices for effective agency reforms and strategic human capital management. For example, USDA minimally involved employees, Congress, and other key stakeholders in relocating the agencies. In addition, both agencies partially followed, or did not generally follow, many of the leading practices related to strategic workforce planning, training and development, and diversity management—practices that can help agencies meet their missions and strategic goals. By more fully following these leading practices as the agencies continue to rebuild their workforces, ERS and NIFA will be better positioned to address the impact of the recent relocation and any future relocations. Following these practices will also help agencies support workforce training needs and strategically plan for changes in their workforce composition.