

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-25-107288](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

DOD's Fire and Emergency Services community supports efforts to safeguard and advance vital U.S. national interests by ensuring safety and minimizing loss on DOD installations. DOD civilian firefighters comprise 95 percent of all federal civilian firefighters who provide structural firefighting services, such as responding to building fires. According to DOD, meeting firefighter staffing requirements is important to maintain safe operations.

GAO was asked to review issues facing federal agencies with civilian firefighter workforces. This report (1) compares DOD civilian firefighter authorizations with staffing levels, (2) assesses DOD's efforts to address civilian firefighter staffing gaps, and (3) compares DOD and local government firefighter work schedules and compensation at five locations.

GAO reviewed relevant regulations and policies; analyzed DOD and OPM data on staffing, compensation, and hours worked; and interviewed cognizant DOD and OPM officials. GAO interviewed a nongeneralizable sample of firefighters and officials at five DOD installations, selected to obtain variation among the services.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO is making six recommendations that DOD implement a strategy to mitigate firefighter staffing gaps and monitor efforts to set annual staffing targets and close gaps, and the military services develop strategic human capital plans that include all required elements. DOD generally concurred with the recommendations and identified actions it plans to take to implement them.

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# FEDERAL CIVILIAN FIREFIGHTERS

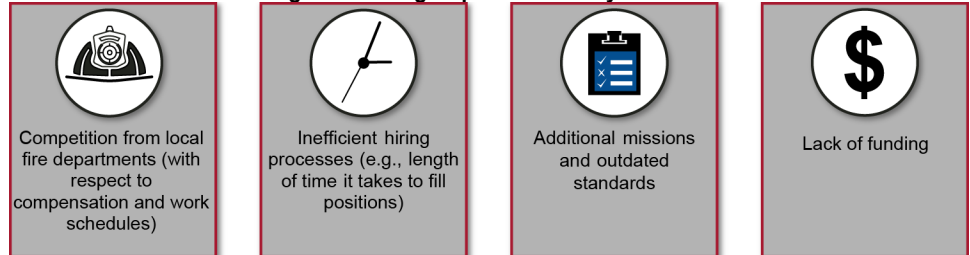
## DOD Should Take Action to Address Long-Standing Staffing Gaps

### What GAO Found

The Department of Defense (DOD) employed fewer civilian firefighters than authorized in fiscal years 2019 through 2023, the most current 5 years of data available. According to DOD and Office of Personnel Management (OPM) data, DOD employed approximately 93 percent of its authorized civilian firefighter positions in fiscal years 2019 through 2023. DOD stated that the authorizations represent the minimum staffing that must be maintained to ensure safe operations and that staffing below the authorized levels increases the department's risk of property loss and environmental damage.

DOD has taken limited steps to address long-standing staffing gaps in its civilian firefighter workforce. Since 2003 DOD has identified causes of civilian firefighter staffing gaps (see figure), such as competition from local fire departments. DOD has taken some steps, such as including strategies for civilian firefighter retention in the department's strategic workforce plan updates, to address these gaps.

### Causes of the Civilian Firefighter Staffing Gaps Identified by DOD Since 2003



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) information. | GAO-25-107288

However, DOD has not fully addressed the identified causes of its civilian firefighter staffing gaps through sustained or coordinated efforts. Specifically:

- **DOD has not developed and implemented a department-wide strategy to mitigate the causes of and close civilian firefighter staffing gaps.** Such a strategy is required by DOD policy and federal regulations. Developing this would better position DOD to address long-standing civilian firefighter staffing gaps that put firefighters at increased risk of injury.
- **DOD has not consistently set staffing targets for its civilian firefighter workforce or reported on progress in closing identified gaps.** Monitoring such efforts will provide DOD leadership better visibility over progress in closing the identified staffing gaps that have the potential to put a strategic program or goal at risk of failure.
- **The military services have not consistently developed or implemented Fire and Emergency Services civilian strategic human capital plans.** Such plans, as required by DOD policy, would assess the current state of the workforce and forecast future requirements to manage risks.

GAO also found that DOD civilian firefighters at all five selected locations worked more hours than local firefighters and made less per hour in base compensation, while total cash compensation varied. Including an analysis of DOD and local fire departments' work hours and compensation differences within its department-wide strategy would help DOD make progress toward addressing staffing gaps.