

A report to congressional requesters.

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What GAO Found

Telework use decreased following the end of the COVID-19 pandemic emergency and the President's January 2025 *Return to In-Person Work* memorandum among three federal agencies GAO reviewed: the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), the Social Security Administration (SSA), and the Department of State's Bureau of Consular Affairs (CA).

Officials at all three agencies told us telework likely had some effect on operations. For instance, SSA and CA had staff who had left or considered leaving for other organizations with more telework availability. They told us that other factors, such as a lack of qualified applicants and increased workloads, led to recruiting challenges.

Officials at SSA told us telework was an important recruitment tool. GAO found, however, that SSA is at risk of skills gaps in key occupations, in part because its employees are seeking greater telework flexibility elsewhere. These risks come at a time when SSA is seeking to substantially reduce the size of its workforce. GAO previously reported that it is critical for agencies to carefully consider how to strategically downsize their workforces and maintain the staff resources to carry out their missions before implementing workforce reduction strategies (GAO-18-427). Agency officials said SSA has a human capital plan it can update to help guide staffing decisions, but has not done so because they are focused on responding to administration workforce priorities such as implementing skills-based hiring. However, without developing or updating a human capital plan, SSA may lack the information needed to ensure it has the mission-critical staff necessary to provide timely public service.

Officials at all three agencies also told us factors other than telework contributed to problems in providing key customer services at times during fiscal years 2019 through 2024. For example,

- BIA attributed delays in providing probate services to Tribes and their citizens to factors such as staffing shortages and funding issues.
- SSA officials cited a learning curve related to a new disability case processing system and a substantial increase in the volume of submitted medical evidence as contributors to delays in processing disability claims.
- CA reported an unexpectedly large volume of applications and high rates of attrition that contributed to substantial delays in 2023 passport processing.

However, none of the agencies had evaluated their telework programs to determine their effects on its performance and identify problems, a key practice for successful telework programs. Officials said they had not done so because they were unsure how to or were not required to conduct such evaluations.

GAO determined that it was not practical for BIA and CA to evaluate their telework programs now because their staff can no longer use regular telework. Since some of SSA's program offices continue to regularly use telework, it remains important for the agency to evaluate its telework program to identify any problems or issues and make appropriate adjustments.

Why GAO Did This Study

Federal agencies have used telework to help accomplish their missions, maintain continuity of operations during emergencies, and recruit and retain employees.

GAO was asked to review telework use at BIA, SSA, and CA. This report (1) summarizes how often the agencies' staff teleworked from July 2019 through May 2025, and how the agencies' telework programs changed following the President's issuance of the *Return to In-Person Work* memorandum in January 2025; (2) describes the effects telework's use had on the agencies' operations and customer service; and (3) assesses the extent to which the agencies followed selected key practices for successful telework programs.

For this report, GAO collected and analyzed the agencies' telework data from July 2019 through May 2025. GAO reviewed and summarized agencies' plans to change telework use before and after January 2025. GAO analyzed agency performance information, and compared agencies' activities with selected key telework practices identified in GAO-21-238T. GAO also conducted interviews and 11 discussion groups with agency staff.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that SSA (1) update its human capital plan to ensure the agency can identify and retain mission-critical staff, given recent changes in SSA's telework posture and efforts to reshape the organization, and (2) evaluate its telework program to identify problems or issues with the program and make appropriate adjustments and assess the effects of telework on agency performance. SSA did not agree or disagree with the recommendations.