GAO Highlights

FEDERAL WORKFORCE

Deferred Resignation Program Largely Responsible for Sixfold Increase in Paid Administrative Leave Salary Costs

GAO-26-108477 September 2026

A report to congressional requesters

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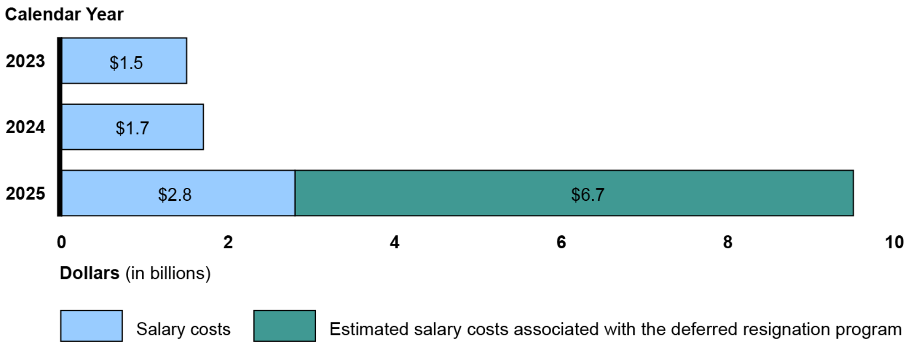
What GAO Found

GAO's review of payroll data found that federal agencies' use of paid administrative leave increased by 435 percent from 2023 to 2025. GAO estimates federal agencies in our review spent $9.5 billion in salary costs on paid administrative leave in 2025, a sixfold increase from 2023. In 2025, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) directed agencies to use paid administrative leave to support the deferred resignation program, which generally allowed federal employees to be placed on leave until they resigned or retired by September 30, 2025. Using program assumptions and internal time and attendance data provided by payroll service providers, GAO calculated about $6.7 billion of that amount was associated with deferred resignation program.

GAO's Estimate of Paid Administrative Leave Salary Costs, 2023–2025



Source: GAO analysis of payroll data from the United States Department of Agriculture's National Finance Center, General Services Administration's Payroll Services Branch, Department of the Interior's Interior Business Center, and Department of Defense's Defense Finance and Accounting Service. | GAO-26-108477

GAO identified limitations with the paid administrative leave data reported by agencies, which could overstate the actual amount used. For example, GAO found that agencies reported 144 percent more paid administrative leave used in pay periods with a public holiday in 2023 through early 2025. Holidays should not be reported as paid administrative leave, and OPM has issued guidance to help address this data issue. OPM does not plan to retroactively fix such historical errors in data released to the public. Fully disclosing any data limitations that remain unaddressed could help users make informed decisions about how to use these data.

OPM does not know the actual costs of the paid administrative leave used for workforce reduction efforts, including the deferred resignation program. One of the administration's stated principles for current workforce reduction efforts is to trim the budget topline by reducing full-time equivalent positions. To support these efforts, federal agencies used millions of workdays of paid administrative leave. To calculate long-term savings, OPM needs to know short-term costs of paid administrative leave used for these efforts. However, OPM cannot easily and accurately do this because the paid administrative leave used for workforce reduction efforts is reported with other types of general paid administrative leave. Without a mechanism to track paid administrative leave for workforce reduction efforts, federal leaders may not have the data needed to understand whether government-wide cost saving goals are being met.

Why GAO Did This Study

Paid administrative leave for federal employees is an excused absence without loss of pay or charge to leave. It is a cost to taxpayers as employees receive full pay without performing job duties.

The Administrative Leave Act, enacted on December 23, 2016, highlighted congressional concern that agency use of paid administrative leave exceeded reasonable amounts. The act requires OPM to address how agencies use and record paid administrative leave.

We were asked to review how OPM has facilitated agencies' use and reporting of paid administrative leave to be consistent with the Administrative Leave Act and other requirements. This report (1) describes the uses and salary costs of paid administrative leave at agencies from 2023 through 2025, (2) reviews how OPM discloses the limitations of paid administrative leave data released to the public, and (3) reviews how OPM tracks the costs of paid administrative leave for workforce reduction efforts.

GAO analyzed payroll data from 76 agencies, including 19 Chief Financial Officers Act agencies, which make up approximately 95 percent of the civilian workforce. GAO also reviewed OPM guidance and documents and interviewed relevant agency officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that OPM (1) publicly disclose data reliability issues that remain unaddressed to improve the transparency of paid administrative leave data OPM releases, and (2) create a new category of paid administrative leave in the Enterprise Human Resources Integration payroll system for agencies to report paid administrative leave used to support workforce reduction efforts. OPM agreed with these recommendations.