

**Executive Actions Reshaped Probationary Employment Rules and Reduced Staff Levels at Selected Agencies**

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A report to congressional requesters

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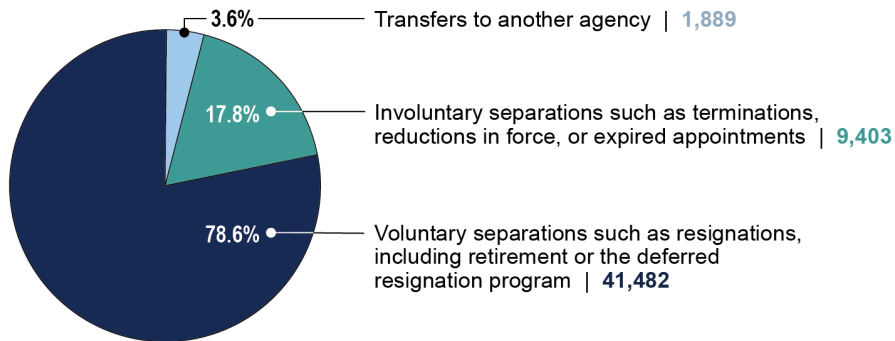
**What GAO Found**

Since January 2025, in response to presidential directives and accompanying Office of Personnel Management (OPM) guidance, many federal agencies have taken steps to reduce their probationary and trial employee staffing levels. These are employees who have not yet completed the service requirements necessary to finalize their appointments, either after being newly hired or after being appointed as a supervisor or manager. Probationary periods are generally 1 or 2 years during which probationary and trial employees have limited job protections.

An executive order and OPM guidance directed agencies to identify their probationary employees and determine who should be retained. When making termination decisions about probationary employees, federal agencies could now consider—in addition to employee performance and conduct—whether the individual’s continued employment would advance organizational goals. In December 2025, OPM proposed a rule that would make it the adjudicator of all appeals, replacing the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board. This proposed probationary and trial period appeals regulation provides for appeals of such terminations to claims alleging discrimination based on partisan politics, marital status, or the agency’s failure to follow termination procedures. According to OPM, until a final rule is issued, there is no right to appeal.

GAO’s analysis of OPM’s Federal Workforce Data (FWD) found that, in 2025, probationary employees separated from 11 selected agencies at a slightly higher rate (19 percent) compared to all employees who separated from these agencies (15 percent). Over two-thirds of these separating probationary employees did so voluntarily (see figure) as did all employees who separated from these agencies.

**Number and Percent of Personnel Actions by Type of Separation for Probationary Employees at Selected Agencies, 2025**



Source: GAO analysis of the Office of Personnel Management’s Federal Workforce Data. | GAO-26-108557

Across most selected agencies in 2025, a greater proportion of probationary employees separated compared to all employees who separated. At the Department of Energy, for instance, about 34 percent of probationary employees separated, compared with 19 percent of all employees. The Department of Defense recorded the largest number of probationary separations—about 20,000 employees—but separation rates for probationary employees and the overall Defense workforce were nearly identical, at about 14 percent.

**Why GAO Did This Study**

Since January 2025, several executive orders directed changes to the federal workforce including probationary employees. As a result, federal agencies, including those with health and safety missions, took steps to reduce their probationary and trial employee staffing levels.

GAO was asked to examine workforce changes affecting federal probationary and trial employees at agencies that focus on health or safety. This report describes (1) regulations and policies related to probationary and trial periods for federal employees, including updates since January 2025; and (2) trends in these employee separations at selected agencies from January through December 2025.

GAO analyzed workforce data on OPM’s FWD website from the following selection of 11 agencies, including 12 subcomponents, with health or safety missions: the Departments of Agriculture and Forest Service; Commerce and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration; Defense; Energy; Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Food and Drug Administration, and National Institutes of Health; Homeland Security, Federal Emergency Management Agency, and Transportation Security Administration; the Interior, Bureau of Land Management, and National Park Service; Transportation and Federal Aviation Administration; Veterans Affairs, Veterans Health Administration, and Veterans Benefits Administration; the Environmental Protection Agency; and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission.