



U.S. CUSTOMS AND BORDER PROTECTION

Efforts to Improve Recruitment, Hiring, and Retention of Law Enforcement Personnel

Report to Congressional Committees

September 2024
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Accessible Version

GAO Highlights

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September 2024

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Why GAO Did This Study

Within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), CBP is responsible for securing U.S. borders and employs more than 45,000 law enforcement personnel across its three operational components. In recent years, CBP has fallen short of staffing targets, while encounters with noncitizens at the U.S. border have greatly increased.

GAO was asked to review CBP's efforts to recruit, hire, and retain law enforcement personnel since GAO's prior work on this topic in 2018. This report addresses: (1) CBP's approach to recruiting qualified law enforcement personnel, (2) CBP's steps to improve the hiring process for law enforcement positions, and (3) CBP's initiatives to assess and improve retention and morale for law enforcement personnel.

GAO analyzed CBP data on recruitment, hiring, and retention from fiscal years 2018 through the second quarter of fiscal year 2024. GAO also reviewed documentation related to CBP's recruitment, hiring, and retention activities and interviewed CBP officials and employee unions representing CBP law enforcement personnel. GAO also analyzed recruitment, hiring, and retention data and met with officials from four other federal law enforcement agencies. GAO selected these agencies because they have missions and hiring processes that are similar to CBP's.

What GAO Found

U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) took several actions in recent years to bolster its recruitment efforts. For example, each of CBP's operational components—the Office of Field Operations, U.S. Border Patrol, and Air and Marine Operations—offered recruitment incentives for law enforcement positions. For instance, in 2024 Border Patrol offered recruitment incentives of \$20,000 per recipient, with an additional \$10,000 for recipients stationed in remote locations. Applications for CBP law enforcement positions generally decreased from fiscal years 2018 through 2022 but increased from fiscal years 2022 to 2023. CBP officials cited several challenges to recruiting personnel in recent years, including a lack of services (e.g., medical facilities) in certain remote CBP locations, the COVID-19 pandemic, and negative public perceptions about law enforcement.

Since GAO's previous report on this topic in 2018, CBP has taken actions to streamline its hiring process, such as moving hiring steps online and allowing applicants to complete certain steps concurrently. CBP also modified the polygraph examination process by revising its restrictions on applicants' prior marijuana use, among other things. CBP's polygraph exam pass rates generally improved following these changes. Over the last several years, CBP generally saw improvements in key metrics it uses to assess its hiring process. For example, CBP reduced its time-to-hire for Border Patrol Agents, though time-to-hire increased for CBP Officers due to a backlog of applications for this position, which has since been cleared. CBP also increased its applicant yield rate—the percentage of applicants who enter on duty—for all law enforcement positions.

Time-to-Hire and Applicant Yield Rates for CBP Law Enforcement Positions, Fiscal Years (FY) 2013 through the Second Quarter of FY 2024

	Time-to-hire (in days): FY 2015–2017	Time-to-hire (in days): FY 2018–2024 ^a	Applicant yield rate: FY 2013–2017	Applicant yield rate: FY 2018–2024 ^a
CBP Officers	360	578	1.9%	2.5%
Border Patrol Agents	403	316	1.1%	1.8%
Air and Marine Operations positions	^b	288	1.0%	4.0%

Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) data. | GAO-24-107029

^aFY 2024 data is as of the end of the second quarter of the fiscal year.

^bCBP began tracking time-to-hire for Air and Marine Operations positions in FY 2018.

CBP implemented various initiatives to assess and improve retention and morale among law enforcement personnel. For example, CBP offered retention and relocation incentives in certain locations. CBP also implemented an exit survey to inform retention efforts, as GAO recommended in 2018. Further, CBP developed employee health and wellness initiatives as well as plans to address its longstanding morale challenges. While attrition rates generally remained below the federal government-wide average of 6 percent, attrition outpaced hiring for Border Patrol Agents and Air Interdiction Agents in recent years. CBP anticipates a steep increase in attrition rates across all positions starting in 2027 because a significant number of its law enforcement personnel will become eligible to retire. CBP has a strategic plan to address this retirement surge, and retention- and morale-related efforts will be increasingly important to help mitigate the surge.

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Abbreviations

AMO	Air and Marine Operations
CBP	U.S. Customs and Border Protection
DEA	U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration
DHS	Department of Homeland Security
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
FEVS	Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey

ICE U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement
OFO Office of Field Operations

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September 25, 2024

The Honorable Mark E. Green, M.D.
Chairman
The Honorable Bennie G. Thompson
Ranking Member
Committee on Homeland Security
House of Representatives

The Honorable Clay Higgins
Chairman
The Honorable J. Luis Correa
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Border Security and Enforcement
Committee on Homeland Security
House of Representatives

The Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) is responsible for, among other things, securing the U.S. border to prevent acts of terrorism and stopping the unlawful movement of people, illegal drugs, and other contraband across U.S. borders. To carry out this important mission, CBP employs more than 45,000 law enforcement officers and agents, accounting for over one-third of all federal law enforcement personnel. These personnel are housed within three CBP operational components: the Office of Field Operations (OFO), U.S. Border Patrol, and Air and Marine Operations (AMO). In recent years, CBP's law enforcement workforce has faced a number of challenges, including large increases in the number of encounters with noncitizens attempting to enter the U.S. without valid travel documents.¹

Over the last 10 years, CBP has frequently fallen short of its staffing targets for law enforcement positions, challenging the frontline workforce's ability to fulfill the agency's mission. We previously reported that challenges to recruiting, hiring, and retaining CBP law enforcement personnel include high attrition rates in some locations, a lengthy hiring process, and competition from other law enforcement agencies.² In addition, CBP has consistently ranked low in employee morale and engagement since 2005, as measured by the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS). Most recently, CBP ranked 432 out of 459 agency subcomponents in the 2023 Best Places to Work in the Federal Government rankings.³

¹Nationwide encounters of noncitizens at the U.S. border significantly increased from around 680,000 in fiscal year (FY) 2018, to more than 3 million in FY 2023. CBP defines encounters as the sum of (1) noncitizens who are not lawfully in the U.S. whom Border Patrol apprehended, (2) noncitizens encountered at ports of entry whom OFO determined to be inadmissible, and (3) noncitizens processed for expulsions under CBP's Title 42 authority. See 42 U.S.C. § 265. Title 42 expulsions began on March 21, 2020, and ended on May 11, 2023. The number of encounters could reflect unique individuals encountered more than once.

²GAO, *U.S. Customs and Border Protection: Progress and Challenges in Recruiting, Hiring, and Retaining Law Enforcement Personnel*, [GAO-18-487](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 27, 2018).

³The Partnership for Public Service and the Boston Consulting Group calculate these rankings using responses to questions in the Office of Personnel Management's Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey. The results from 2023 were the most recent available as of May 2024 and include non-law-enforcement respondents.

You asked us to review CBP’s efforts to recruit, hire, and retain law enforcement personnel, as well as the issues contributing to low employee morale. This report addresses: (1) CBP’s approach to recruiting qualified law enforcement personnel and how many applications CBP received for law enforcement positions for fiscal years (FY) 2018 through the second quarter of FY 2024, (2) what data indicate about CBP’s hiring efforts and the steps that CBP has taken to improve the hiring process for law enforcement positions, and (3) CBP’s initiatives to assess and improve retention and morale for law enforcement personnel.

To address our first objective, we reviewed relevant recruitment strategy documents from CBP’s Office of Human Resources Management and all three operational components (OFO, Border Patrol, and AMO); documents describing CBP’s recent and planned recruitment activities; sample recruitment materials; and documents and information related to CBP’s use of financial recruitment incentives. We analyzed data on CBP’s recruitment efforts to identify trends over the last 6 fiscal years—2018 through 2023—including recruitment budgets, financial recruitment incentives, and the number and type of agency recruitment events.⁴ We also analyzed CBP data on the number of applications for its law enforcement positions from FY 2018 through the second quarter of FY 2024.⁵ Further, we interviewed CBP officials from all three operational components as well as officials from CBP’s Office of Human Resources Management to identify and discuss the challenges CBP faces in recruiting law enforcement personnel and the changes made to the agency’s recruitment practices since 2018.

To address our second objective, we reviewed documentation on CBP’s hiring practices and initiatives for law enforcement personnel, including CBP’s hiring initiatives for FY 2023 and its applicant care strategy. We analyzed hiring data from FY 2018 through the second quarter of FY 2024 to identify trends, including CBP’s time-to-hire—the average number of calendar days that elapsed between the application submission date and the applicant’s entry-on-duty date—and the number of applicants who entered on duty each year.⁶ In addition, we analyzed data relating to the polygraph exam, such as exam pass rates from FY 2018 through the second quarter of FY 2024, and waivers and other exam exemptions granted to applicants from FY 2018 through FY 2023. Further, we interviewed officials in the three operational components, CBP’s Office of Human Resources Management, and CBP’s Office of Professional Responsibility—which manages the background investigation and polygraph exam portions of the hiring process—to obtain information about changes and challenges to CBP’s hiring process.

To address our third objective, we reviewed documentation on CBP’s efforts to identify and address retention and morale challenges, such as CBP’s FY 2023–2024 Employee Engagement Action Plan and employee engagement action plans from operational components. Additionally, we reviewed documentation related to agency retention and employee engagement, including CBP’s use of financial retention incentives and special salary rates, as well as workforce care and wellness initiatives. We also analyzed data from FY 2018 through the second quarter of FY 2024 on retention and relocation incentives, special salary rates, staffing levels, and

⁴We selected this period to include data since our June 2018 report through FY 2023, which was the most recent fiscal year for which complete data were available at the time of our review. See [GAO-18-487](#).

⁵We selected this period to include data since our June 2018 report through the second quarter of FY 2024, which was the most recent half of a fiscal year for which complete data were available at the time of our review. See [GAO-18-487](#).

⁶We selected this period to include data since our June 2018 report through the second quarter of FY 2024, which was the most recent half of a fiscal year for which complete data were available at the time of our review. See [GAO-18-487](#).

attrition rates.⁷ We also analyzed employees' responses in the FEVS, CBP's exit survey, and CBP's Organizational Health Assessment.⁸ Additionally, we reviewed historical trends of CBP's standings in the Best Places to Work in the Federal Government rankings, as determined by the FEVS employee engagement and satisfaction scores. Further, we interviewed CBP officials from all three operational components, as well as officials from CBP's Workforce Care Directorate and its Personnel Research and Assessment Division, which is tasked with developing the agency's Employee Engagement Action Plan.

For all our objectives, we reviewed CBP's Human Capital Strategic Plan, FY 2021–2026, as well as the strategic plans from each of the operational components, to identify the agency's recruiting, hiring, retention, and employee morale initiatives. We also assessed selected data from FY 2013 through FY 2017 relating to recruitment, hiring, and retention to identify long-term trends. Additionally, we interviewed representatives from the National Border Patrol Council union and the National Treasury Employees Union—which represents CBP Officers—to gain insights into the challenges the agency faces in recruiting, hiring, and retaining personnel, and their perspectives on the efforts that CBP has pursued to address these challenges.

We also reviewed documents and data from four other selected federal law enforcement agencies—U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), U.S. Secret Service, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA)—to learn about their challenges and efforts relating to recruiting, hiring, and retaining law enforcement personnel. We met with officials from all these agencies except FBI to discuss these topics, and we obtained written responses from FBI on these topics. We included these agencies in our review to provide context and points of comparison for CBP's efforts and outcomes in these areas. We selected ICE because it is a DHS component that, like CBP, has an immigration-related mission. We selected the remaining agencies because they require applicants to complete a polygraph exam as part of their hiring process, and we previously found that the polygraph exam was a significant challenge in CBP's hiring process.⁹ Further, all these agencies, like CBP, have a multistep hiring process that involves a medical exam, physical fitness test, and background investigation, among other steps.

We assessed the reliability of data that we used for all our analyses by obtaining and analyzing documentation on agencies' systems capabilities and data controls, cross-checking data across disparate sources to ensure consistency, and interviewing officials regarding these data systems. We found these data to be sufficiently reliable for the purposes of reporting on trends and outcomes of CBP's recruitment, hiring, and retention efforts.

We conducted this performance audit from September 2023 to September 2024 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our

⁷We selected this period to include data since our June 2018 report through the second quarter of FY 2024, which was the most recent half of a fiscal year for which complete data were available at the time of our review. See [GAO-18-487](#).

⁸CBP's Organizational Health Assessment is a multiphase process that includes assessing the current state of job demands and resources, identifying areas of strength, drivers of employee engagement, and areas of needed improvement to address challenges affecting workplace climate and retention. This involves conducting a workplace climate survey and assessing CBP's FEVS results, exit survey results, and focus group findings.

⁹[GAO-18-487](#).

audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Background




CBP Law Enforcement Positions

Within CBP's three operational components—OFO, Border Patrol, and AMO—there are five categories of law enforcement officer positions, each with different job requirements and responsibilities:

- OFO's CBP Officers conduct immigration and customs inspections at ports of entry to prevent the illicit entry of travelers, cargo, merchandise, and other items.
- Border Patrol Agents secure international land borders and coastal waters between ports of entry and respond to cross-border threats.
- AMO has three categories of law enforcement officers—Air Interdiction Agents, Aviation Enforcement Agents, and Marine Interdiction Agents—who secure the air and maritime environment at and beyond the U.S. border.

See figure 1 for more information on CBP's law enforcement officer positions.

Figure 1: Overview of CBP’s Operational Components and Law Enforcement Officer Positions

	<i>Number of law enforcement personnel on board at the end of fiscal year 2023</i>	<i>Mission</i>	<i>Job requirements</i>
 <p>Office of Field Operations</p>	26,030 Customs and Border Protection Officers	To protect U.S. borders at ports of entry; conduct overseas operations to ensure homeland security; and enforce customs law, immigration law, trade law, criminal statutes, and agricultural policies.	Entry-level positions require 3 years of general experience or a bachelor’s degree, or a combination of education and experience.
 <p>U.S. Border Patrol</p>	19,104 Border Patrol Agents	To secure international land borders and coastal waters between ports of entry and enforce immigration law and criminal statutes.	Entry-level positions require 1 year of general experience or a bachelor’s degree, or a combination of education and experience.
 <p>Air and Marine Operations</p>	539 Air Interdiction Agents, 382 Aviation Enforcement Agents, and 396 Marine Interdiction Agents	To secure the air and maritime environment at and beyond the U.S. border.	Air and Marine Operations law enforcement officer positions require specific certifications and licensing, among other requirements, because of the technical competencies required for these positions. ^a

Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) documentation; photos source careers.cbp.gov. | GAO-24-107029

^aCBP requires Air Interdiction Agents to have a Federal Aviation Administration commercial or Airline Transport Pilot Certificate, at least 1,500 total flight hours, and a current Federal Aviation Administration Class I Medical Certificate. CBP requires Marine Interdiction Agents to have a qualifying U.S. Coast Guard Merchant Mariner Credential and 1 year of specialized law enforcement experience to be hired at the General Schedule Grade 9 level.

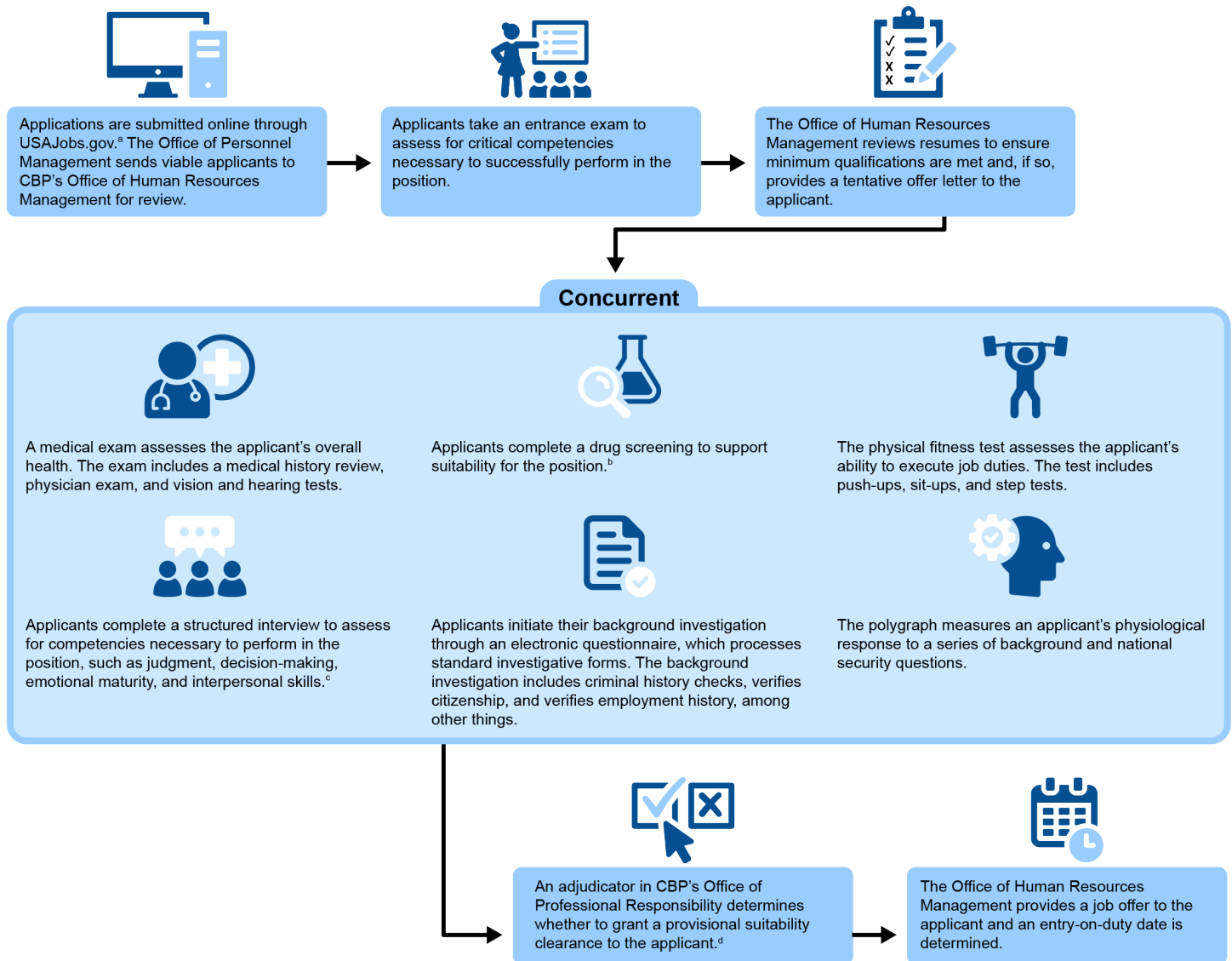
CBP’s Hiring Process for Law Enforcement Positions

CBP’s law enforcement hiring process includes nearly a dozen steps, including a background investigation, medical exam, physical fitness test, and polygraph exam.¹⁰ Applicants can conduct several of these steps concurrently. For example, once an applicant receives a tentative job offer, they can schedule their structured interview, medical exam, physical fitness test, and drug test, as well as begin their background investigation.¹¹ Figure 2 depicts the hiring process for CBP’s law enforcement positions.

¹⁰The Anti-Border Corruption Act of 2010 requires all applicants for CBP law enforcement officer positions to receive a polygraph exam before being hired. Pub. L. No. 111-376, § 3, 124 Stat. 4104, 4104-05 (2011). The polygraph exam is a screening and diagnostic tool used by 30 federal agencies with law enforcement and national security missions. According to CBP, the polygraph exam assists in ensuring personnel integrity and to provide protection from insider threat.

¹¹CBP law enforcement personnel receive a tentative job offer after passing the entrance exam and the qualifications review. AMO’s direct hire authority for Air Interdiction Agent positions allows AMO recruiters to offer a tentative job offer to any applicant who meets the minimum qualifications for the position. See 5 U.S.C. § 3304(a)(3).

Figure 2: CBP's Hiring Process for Law Enforcement Positions



Source: GAO analysis of Customs and Border Protection (CBP) documentation and interviews with CBP officials; Icons-Studio/stock.adobe.com. | GAO-24-107029

Note: In addition to the above steps, Air Interdiction Agent and Marine Interdiction Agent applicants must complete a three-part assessment.

^aDue to Air and Marine Operation's direct-hire authority, applications for the Air Interdiction Agent position do not need to be submitted through USAJobs.gov.

^bThe timing of the drug test for CBP Officer applicants occurs after the suitability determination but before the final job offer.

^cThe structured interview for Air and Marine Operations applicants occurs after the polygraph exam.

^dCBP must still complete a final suitability review once all steps of the background investigation process are complete.

Financial Incentives and Other Human Capital Flexibilities Available to CBP

CBP can use financial incentives and other compensation-based human capital flexibilities to help recruit and retain qualified law enforcement personnel. These include recruitment, relocation, and retention incentives, as

well as special salary rates. These flexibilities may be used when a federal agency determines that a position is likely to be difficult to fill in the absence of an incentive or pay rate. For CBP, this includes positions in locations that (1) are a significant distance from amenities and services such as housing, medical care, childcare, and schools; (2) have harsh weather conditions; (3) have scarce consumer goods and services; or (4) have a high cost of living. Table 1 provides an overview of these human capital flexibilities.

Table 1: Selected Financial Incentives and Special Salary Rates Available to Federal Agencies

Authority	Eligibility	Payment Ranges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recruitment incentives (5 U.S.C. § 5753; 5 C.F.R. part 575, subpart A) 	<p>Newly appointed employees, if the agency determines that the position is likely to be difficult to fill in the absence of such incentive.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An agency may authorize a recruitment incentive of up to 25 percent of the employee's beginning annual rate of basic pay.^{a, b} The U.S. Office of Personnel Management may authorize an agency to pay a recruitment incentive of up to 50 percent, but not to exceed 100 percent.^c
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Retention incentives (5 U.S.C. § 5754; 5 C.F.R. part 575, subpart C) 	<p>A current employee (or group or category of employees), if the agency determines that the unusually high or unique qualifications of the employee or a special need of the agency for the employee's services makes it essential to retain the employee. In addition, the agency must determine that the employee is likely to leave federal service or leave for a different federal position under certain conditions, in the absence of such an incentive.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An agency may authorize a retention incentive of up to 10 or 25 percent of the rate of basic pay for a group or individual, respectively. The U.S. Office of Personnel Management may, at agency request, authorize a retention incentive of up to 50 percent.^a
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Relocation incentives (5 U.S.C. § 5753; 5 C.F.R. part 575, subpart B) 	<p>A current employee who moves to a new position in the same geographic area under certain circumstances or must relocate to accept a position in a different geographic area, if in either case, the agency determines that the position is likely to be difficult to fill in the absence of such incentive.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An agency may authorize a relocation incentive of up to 25 percent of the employee's beginning annual rate of basic pay.^b The U.S. Office of Personnel Management may authorize an agency to pay a relocation incentive of up to 50 percent, but not to exceed 100 percent.^c
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Special salary rates (5 U.S.C. §§ 5305, 5307; 5 C.F.R. part 530, subpart C) 	<p>A current or newly appointed employee, if the agency determines that the position is likely to be difficult to fill or retain in the absence of such incentive due to (1) significantly higher non-federal pay rates in the area, location, or occupational group; (2) the remoteness of the area or location involved; (3) the undesirability of the working conditions or nature of the work involved; or (4) any other circumstances the U.S. Office of Personnel Management considers appropriate.</p>	<p>An agency may authorize a special salary rate of up to 30 percent of the employee's beginning annual rate of basic pay.^a</p>

Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Code of Federal Regulations and U.S. Office of Personnel Management documentation. | GAO-24-107029

Note: Selected financial incentives are calculated as a percentage of an employee's basic pay. Section 208 of the Federal Employees Pay Comparability Act of 1990 first authorized the U.S. Office of Personnel Management to allow federal agencies to give recruitment, relocation, and retention incentives to employees. Pub. L. No. 101-509, tit. V, § 208, 104 Stat. 1389, 1458-60 (codified as amended at 5 U.S.C. §§ 5753-54). The Federal Workforce Flexibility Act of 2004 provided federal agencies increased flexibilities regarding these incentives. Pub. L. No. 108-411, § 101, 118 Stat. 2305, 2305-2311 (amending 5 U.S.C. §§ 5753-54). Agencies that may utilize these authorities are defined in 5 U.S.C. § 5701(1) and include agencies in the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, as well as military departments.

^aThe employee's annual rate of basic pay at the beginning of the service period.

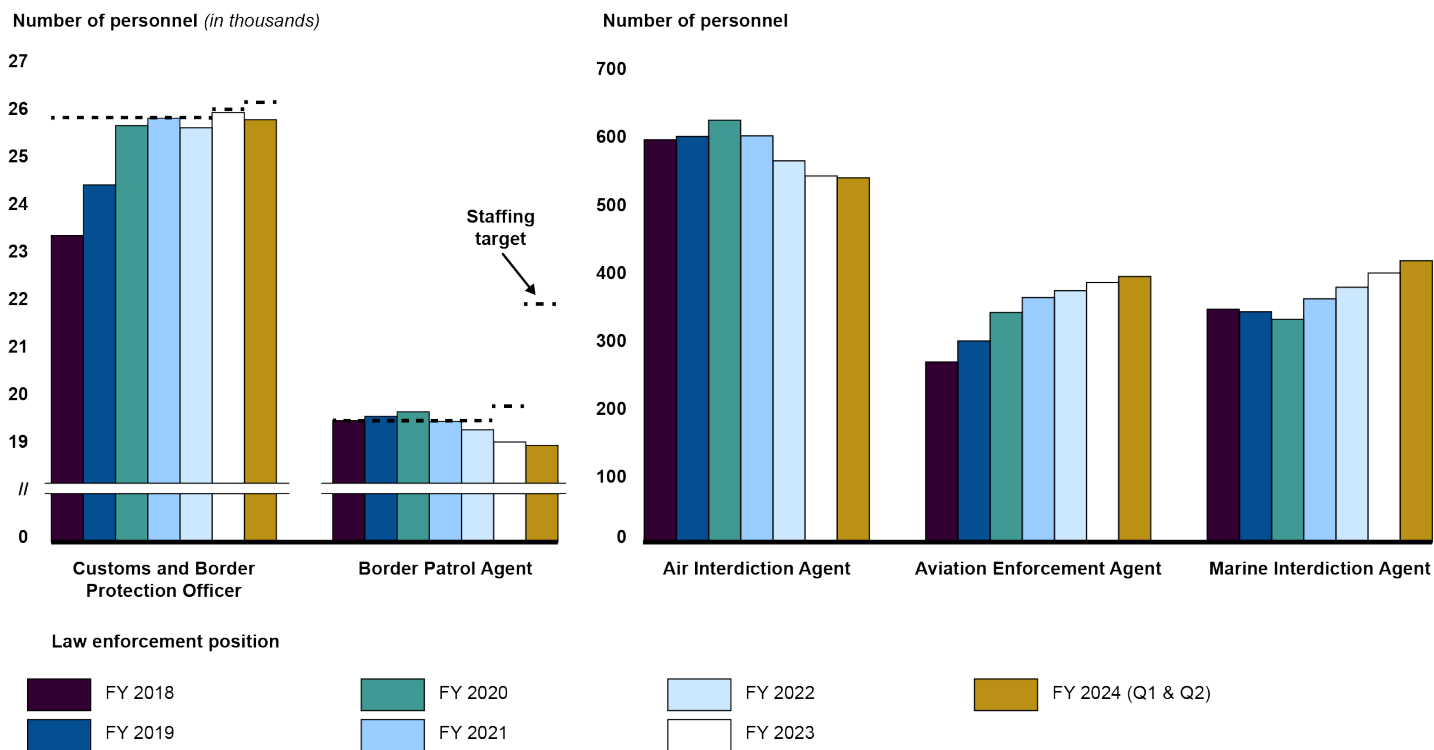
^bMultiplied by the number of years in the service period (not to exceed 4 years).

^cMultiplied by the number of years in the service period (up to 100 percent of basic pay).

Staffing Levels for CBP Law Enforcement Positions

As we reported in 2018, CBP generally did not meet its staffing targets from FY 2013 through FY 2017. While OFO continued to experience challenges meeting its staffing targets in FY 2018 and FY 2019, it met or was close to meeting staffing targets from FY 2020 through the second quarter of FY 2024. Border Patrol met its staffing targets from FY 2018 through FY 2020 but fell short from FY 2021 through the second quarter of FY 2024.¹² Staffing levels for the Air Interdiction Agent position generally decreased and staffing levels for Aviation Enforcement Agents and Marine Interdiction Agents generally increased during this period, as shown in figure 3.

Figure 3: Target versus Actual Staffing Levels for CBP Law Enforcement Positions, Fiscal Year (FY) 2018 through the Second Quarter of FY 2024



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) data. | GAO-24-107029

¹²OFO determines staffing targets by assessing available funding, statutory provisions, current staffing levels, and projected attrition. Border Patrol's staffing targets are determined by authorized staffing levels that represent the number of agents supported by the component's appropriations, informed by provisions of explanatory statements and other legislative documents accompanying annual appropriations. See, e.g., 2024 Explanatory Statement, 170 Cong. Rec. H1501, H1809 (daily ed. Mar. 22, 2024).

Accessible Data for Figure 3: Target versus Actual Staffing Levels for CBP Law Enforcement Positions, Fiscal Year (FY) 2018 through the Second Quarter of FY 2024

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Customs and Border Protection officer	23.447	24.511	25.756	25.914	25.71	26.03	25.879
Border Patrol agent	19.555	19.648	19.74	19.536	19.359	19.104	19.033
Air Interdiction Agent	592	597	621	598	561	539	536
Aviation Enforcement Agent	265	296	338	360	370	382	391
Marine Interdiction Agent	343	339	328	358	375	396	414

Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) data | GAO-24-107029

Note: The Office of Field Operations determines staffing targets for CBP Officers by assessing available funding, statutory provisions, current staffing levels, and projected attrition. Border Patrol's staffing targets are determined by authorized staffing levels that represent the number of agents supported by the component's appropriations, informed by provisions of explanatory statements and other legislative documents accompanying annual appropriations. Executive Order 13767, which was in effect from January 2017 to January 2021, called for CBP to hire 5,000 additional Border Patrol Agents, subject to available appropriations. According to CBP officials, CBP was not appropriated funding to hire an additional 5,000 agents; therefore, they are not included in Border Patrol's staffing targets. Air and Marine Operations does not have staffing targets for its three law enforcement positions. Fiscal year 2024 staffing levels are as of the end of the second quarter of the fiscal year.

Prior Related GAO Work

We have previously reported on human capital and morale issues at CBP specifically and DHS more broadly. Specifically, in 2018 we reported on CBP's efforts to recruit qualified law enforcement officers, more efficiently hire law enforcement applicants, and retain law enforcement officers.¹³ While we found that CBP improved its hiring process and enhanced its efforts to address retention challenges, we recommended that CBP develop a formal process for capturing information on departing employees to better understand retention challenges and take appropriate action to address them. In response to this recommendation, CBP implemented an exit survey in 2018 for all departing employees that captures information on reasons for attrition. As a result, CBP has important information it can use to inform its retention efforts.

Further, in January 2021 we reported on actions that DHS has taken to improve employee morale and engagement.¹⁴ We recommended that the DHS Office of the Chief Human Capital Officer provide agency components, such as CBP, with written guidance on the required elements of an employee engagement action plan and the required approvals for this plan. We also recommended that this office monitor component action

¹³GAO-18-487.

¹⁴GAO, *DHS Employee Morale: Some Improvements Made, but Additional Actions Needed to Strengthen Employee Engagement*, GAO-21-204 (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 12, 2021).

planning to ensure components review and assess the results of their actions to improve employee engagement.¹⁵

CBP Used Advertising, Events, and Incentives for Recruitment, but Applications Generally Decreased

CBP took several actions in recent years to bolster its recruitment efforts, such as increasing recruitment-related marketing and events, implementing hiring flexibilities, and beginning to offer recruitment incentives to new Border Patrol Agents. Despite these actions, applications for CBP law enforcement positions generally decreased from FY 2018 to FY 2022, though they increased from FY 2022 to FY 2023. CBP officials identified several challenges affecting recruitment, which may have affected the number of applications it received.

CBP Increased Recruitment Advertising and Events, Implemented Hiring Flexibilities, and Created New Recruitment Teams

CBP has used a variety of strategies to recruit applicants for its law enforcement positions, including marketing and advertising, in-person recruitment events, virtual events, hiring flexibilities, and recruitment teams.

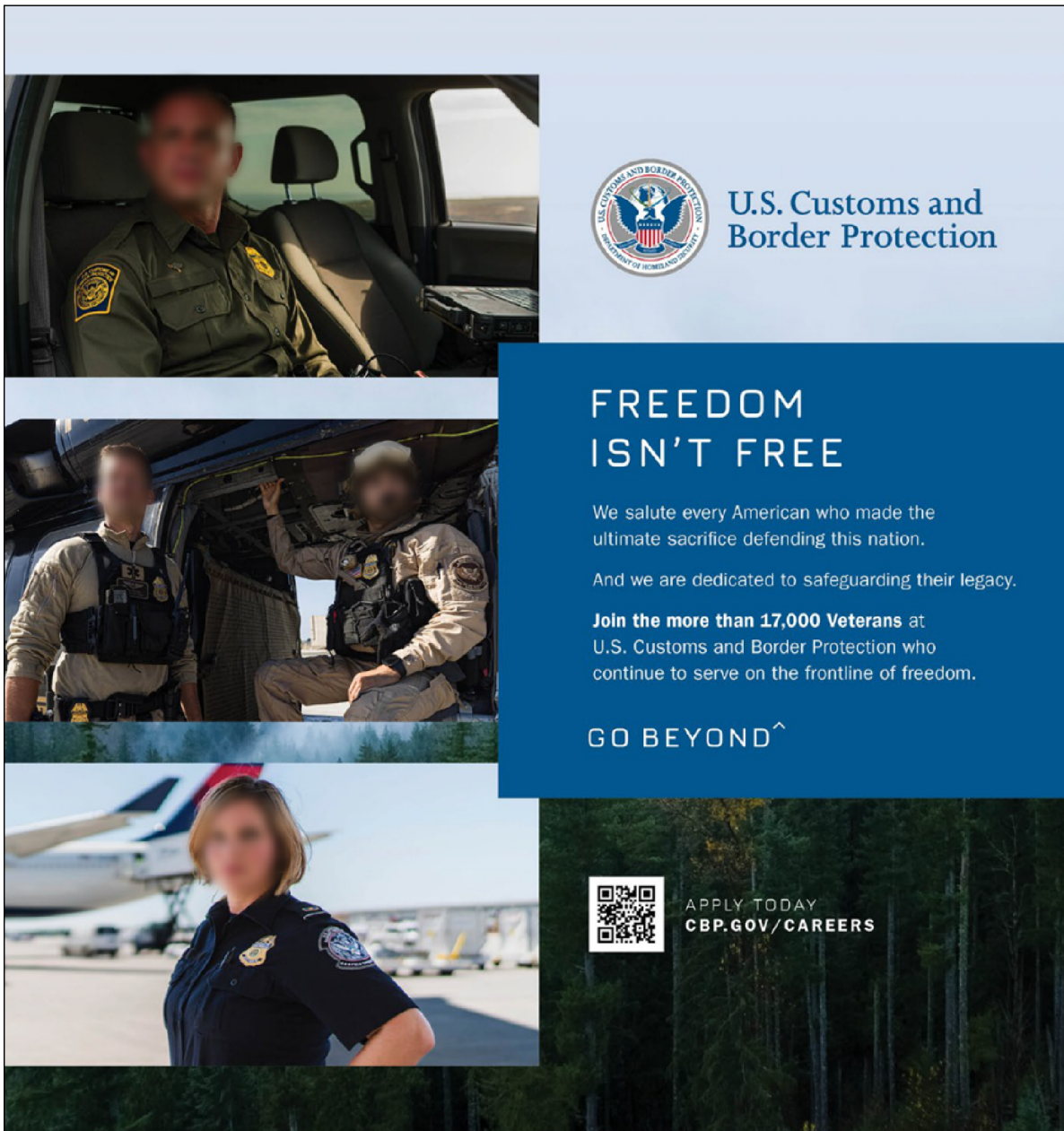
Marketing and advertising. Marketing and advertising have become increasingly important components of CBP's recruitment strategy, according to CBP officials. In FY 2023, CBP's total marketing and advertising budget, at approximately \$41 million, was around three times higher than that of previous fiscal years. CBP officials said they anticipate that CBP's marketing and advertising budget will remain at or will surpass the FY 2023 level in future years.

CBP officials said that the agency used a large portion of its recent marketing and advertising funding for recruiting efforts for the Border Patrol Agent position. This is because CBP has not been able to consistently meet its staffing targets for this position and because CBP expects retirement rates among Border Patrol Agents to increase starting in 2027. From FY 2020 through FY 2023, CBP used marketing and advertising funds to place about 19,000 paid advertisements for the Border Patrol Agent position, about 3,800 advertisements for Air and Marine Operations positions, and about 1,700 advertisements for the CBP Officer position.¹⁶ These advertisements included commercials on video streaming services, paid content on social media platforms, billboards, radio advertisements, and print advertisements in magazines. CBP officials estimated that about 75 percent of these advertisements were online, and the remainder were physical advertisements. See figure 4 for a media advertisement example used to recruit applicants for all of CBP's operational components.

¹⁵GAO-21-204. DHS concurred with these recommendations. In March 2021, DHS implemented the first recommendation on providing written guidance to components on the action planning process, including the required elements of an employee engagement action plan. For the second recommendation, DHS has required component heads to approve action plans. For the third recommendation, DHS has been monitoring components' implementation of planned actions and the results of the actions in their plans. To fully implement these two recommendations, DHS must ensure that all components receive DHS approval on all elements of their plans and that components review and assess the results of the actions in their plans.

¹⁶CBP generally met its staffing targets for the CBP Officer position from FY 2020 through FY 2023.

Figure 4: CBP Media Advertisement to Recruit Law Enforcement Personnel



Source: U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP). | GAO-24-107029

CBP also used marketing and advertising funds to create videos for its website and YouTube channel about topics such as its hiring process and a “day in the life” of its law enforcement personnel. We previously

reported that sharing “day in the life” information is an effective practice for federal recruitment because it helps potential applicants learn how an agency operationalizes its mission.¹⁷

To assess the effectiveness of its advertising campaigns, CBP’s job application includes a question about how applicants heard about the position for which they are applying. Among other options, applicants can indicate whether they came across a CBP advertisement online, including on social media; in a theater, on television, or on film; in print (e.g., newspaper or magazine); on an outdoor banner or billboard; or on the radio. This information helps CBP assess which types of advertising campaigns brought in the highest number of applications, according to CBP officials. CBP officials also told us they track how many of these applicants enter on duty to assess which types of campaigns brought in the highest quality applications.

In addition to assessing the effectiveness of general types of advertising campaigns, CBP is able to assess the effectiveness of individual advertising campaigns to a limited extent. Specifically, when individuals sign up to receive CBP hiring updates, CBP can determine which of its online advertising campaigns they accessed, if any, and whether they applied for a law enforcement position.¹⁸ However, as a federal government agency, CBP cannot track individuals’ online activities across multiple websites or cross-reference their information across websites without consent.¹⁹ This limits CBP’s ability to determine how many applicants were brought in by specific advertising campaigns, according to CBP officials. CBP internally shares the data it is able to gather—such as the number of people who click on a CBP advertisement and then submit an application for a law enforcement position—to provide an estimated return on investment for its advertising campaigns.

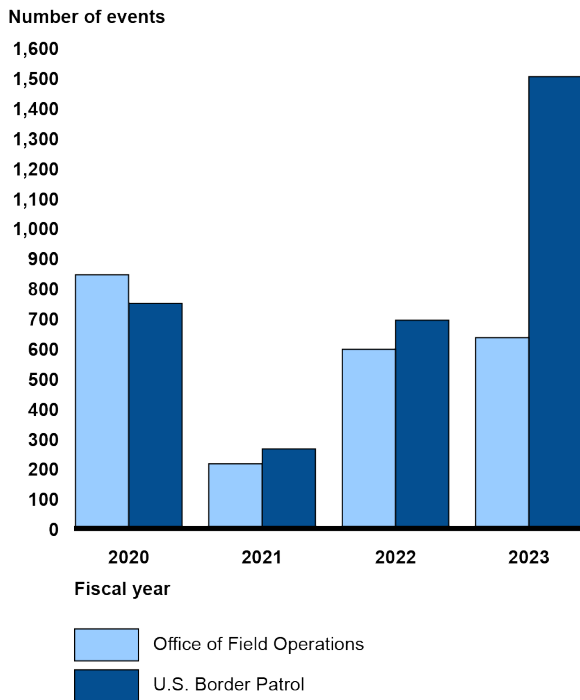
In-person recruitment events. CBP held several hundred in-person recruitment events each year from FY 2020 through FY 2023, including over 1,500 events hosted by Border Patrol in FY 2023, as shown in figure 5. CBP officials said that the COVID-19 pandemic inhibited its in-person recruitment efforts in recent years, particularly from FY 2020 through FY 2022, due to limitations on holding events in person. In addition, CBP pared down its recruitment resources during the pandemic because of funding challenges, according to CBP officials.

¹⁷GAO, *Federal Workforce: Key Talent Management Strategies for Agencies to Better Meet Their Missions*, [GAO-19-181](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 28, 2019).

¹⁸CBP can access this information only for individuals who agreed to share their cookie information when signing up for hiring updates and who used the same email address for their application as they used to sign up for hiring updates. CBP officials said that around 30 percent of law enforcement applicants sign up to receive hiring updates.

¹⁹Office of Management and Budget Memorandum M-10-22, *Guidance for Online Use of Web Measurement and Customization Technologies* (June 25, 2010).

Figure 5: CBP In-Person Recruitment Events, Fiscal Years 2020–2023



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) data. | GAO-24-107029

Accessible Data for Figure 5: CBP In-Person Recruitment Events, Fiscal Years 2020–2023

	Office of Field Operations	U.S. Border Patrol
2020	844	749
2021	215	265
2022	596	693
2023	635	1503

Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) data. | GAO-24-107029

Note: CBP’s Air and Marine Operations also held in-person recruitment events during this time frame, but because of the small number of events (12 or fewer each year), we did not include them in the above figure. CBP did not track data on recruitment events prior to fiscal year 2020 because it did not have a tool to do so, according to CBP officials.

CBP’s in-person recruitment events took place at military bases, colleges and universities, job fairs, and airports, among other locations. CBP officials said they often chose recruitment locations with the intent of targeting specific populations. For example, to find applicants who were likely to pass CBP’s physical fitness and medical tests, Border Patrol recruited at locations focused on physical fitness, such as CrossFit and Spartan Races. CBP also held recruitment events at Minority Serving Institutions, including Historically Black Colleges and Universities, to recruit populations that are underrepresented in its workforce.²⁰

CBP assessed the effectiveness of its in-person recruitment events by tracking how many event attendees signed up to receive CBP hiring updates and how many submitted an application. CBP officials said they used

²⁰Minority Serving Institutions are certain institutions of higher education eligible for grants under Titles III and V of the Higher Education Act. See 20 U.S.C. § 1067q(a).

this information to determine which types of in-person events they should continue holding and which should be discontinued.

CBP’s in-person recruitment events are led by law enforcement personnel from CBP’s operational components. Most of these personnel perform recruitment duties part-time as a collateral responsibility in addition to their regular law enforcement duties (see table 2). These recruiters must be approved by their component leadership, and funding for their positions comes from the components’ operational budgets.

Table 2: Number of CBP Recruiters by Component, as of October 2023

	Full-time recruiters	Part-time recruiters ^a
Office of Field Operations	19	867
U.S. Border Patrol	27	1,035
Air and Marine Operations	5	79
Total	51	1,981

Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) data. | GAO-24-107029

^aPart-time recruiters in this table indicate individuals who are not full-time recruiters and who completed CBP’s recruiter training between June 12, 2017, and August 11, 2023. This may include individuals who no longer work at CBP.

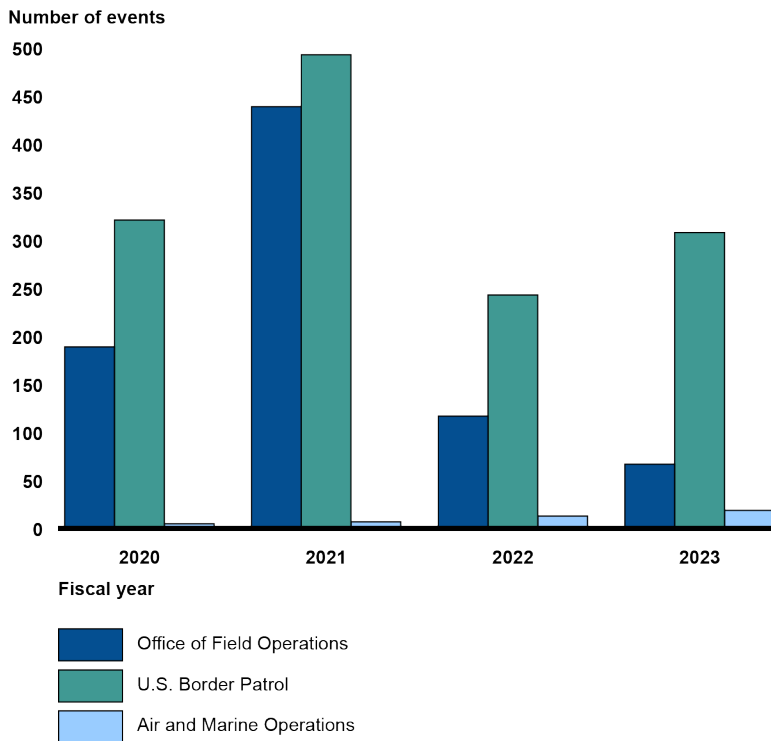
CBP’s National Recruitment Division supports in-person recruitment efforts in several ways.²¹ For example, this division conducts a 5-day training for recruiters that covers information on CBP’s hiring process, requirements for law enforcement positions, and public speaking and engagement skills, among other topics. CBP officials stated that a goal of this training is to ensure that recruiters provide standardized, accurate information to all potential applicants. CBP’s National Recruitment Division also creates and distributes standardized recruitment materials such as flyers, slide decks, and brochures. Recruiters are to use these standardized materials during their recruitment activities. In addition, the division analyzes and shares data with operational components regarding which recruitment efforts provide the highest return on investment. Lastly, CBP’s National Recruitment Division allocates funding to operational components for in-person recruitment events. The total amount of funding that this division allocated for in-person recruitment events from FY 2019 through FY 2023 ranged from around \$86,000 to around \$316,000 per year.²²

Virtual recruitment events. CBP held hundreds of virtual recruitment events each year from FY 2020 through FY 2023. As shown in figure 6, virtual events increased from FY 2020 to FY 2021 because CBP had to cancel in-person recruitment events due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These events included virtual career fairs and webinars during which potential applicants could ask current CBP law enforcement personnel about their day-to-day job duties and CBP’s hiring process.

²¹CBP’s National Recruitment Division was formerly named the National Frontline Recruitment Command. CBP renamed the division in 2018 because its scope expanded to include recruiting for non-law-enforcement entities.

²²In addition to the funding allocated by the National Recruitment Division, operational components may use funding from their own budgets to fund recruitment initiatives. For example, Border Patrol expended over \$3 million annually from FY 2019 through FY 2023 to partner with the Professional Bull Riders Association. This partnership helped Border Patrol recruit individuals who fit its applicant profile, according to Border Patrol officials.

Figure 6: CBP Virtual Recruitment Events, Fiscal Years 2020–2023



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) data. | GAO-24-107029

Accessible Data for Figure 6: CBP Virtual Recruitment Events, Fiscal Years 2020–2023

	Office of Field Operations	U.S. Border Patrol	Air and Marine Operations
2020	189	321	5
2021	439	493	7
2022	117	243	13
2023	67	308	19

Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) data. | GAO-24-107029

Note: CBP did not track data on recruitment events prior to fiscal year 2020 because it did not have a tool to do so, according to CBP officials.

AMO hiring flexibilities. AMO obtained direct-hire authority for the Air Interdiction Agent position in January 2023.²³ AMO officials explained that recruiting Air Interdiction Agents is particularly challenging because there is a global shortage of pilots, and it is difficult for AMO to compete with the private sector for these pilots because it cannot provide comparable salaries. Direct-hire authority boosted AMO’s ability to recruit pilots who may be willing to forgo a higher salary for benefits that are difficult to find in the private sector, such as the opportunity to serve the country and being able to spend more time at home, according to AMO officials.

²³Direct-hire authority helps agencies fill vacancies in positions experiencing a severe shortage of candidates. This authority expedites the hiring process by eliminating competitive rating and ranking procedures and eliminating veterans’ preference. 5 U.S.C. § 3304(a)(3).

AMO officials said that direct-hire authority allows applicants to submit applications outside of the USAJobs.gov portal, and this has been beneficial for two main reasons: (1) AMO officials can now provide tentative job offers to qualified candidates at in-person recruitment events, and (2) AMO can receive applications from a website called Airline Apps, which most pilots use to apply for jobs, according to AMO officials. In addition, direct-hire authority allows AMO officials to help applicants correct minor mistakes in their applications that would otherwise result in their applications being automatically rejected by the USAJobs.gov system, according to AMO officials. CBP data indicate that after CBP obtained direct-hire authority, the number of Air Interdiction Agent applications that CBP received from qualified applicants tripled. Leveraging hiring flexibilities such as direct-hire authority is a leading practice for federal recruitment.²⁴

In addition to obtaining direct-hire authority, AMO obtained permission from the U.S. Office of Personnel Management to waive the 100-hour flight requirement for the Air Interdiction Agent position in August 2023. This authority was renewed in August 2024. AMO officials said this waiver helped with recruiting veterans because many military pilots do not complete 100 flight hours during their final year of service. AMO officials said that removing this requirement does not pose a risk to the agency because Air Interdiction Agent applicants must still complete a flight test as part of the hiring process.

Border Patrol Interior Recruitment Teams. In January 2022, Border Patrol stood up Interior Recruitment Teams, which it considers to be a critical element of its strategy for recruiting Border Patrol Agents. These teams are staffed by full-time recruiters in 10 non-border locations outside of Border Patrol's typical areas of responsibility.²⁵ CBP officials said these teams are intended to bring in a higher number of applications for the Border Patrol Agent position because they provide access to new populations of applicants. As of May 2024, these teams had conducted over 1,300 recruiting events and had brought in around 5,400 applications for law enforcement positions, according to CBP officials.

CBP Offered Recruitment Incentives to Border Patrol Agents and Increased Incentives for Other Positions

All three CBP operational components offered recruitment incentives in recent years to help address recruitment challenges for law enforcement positions. Border Patrol began offering incentives to new employees in all locations beginning in FY 2022, and OFO and AMO continued offering recruitment incentives to new employees in specific locations that were difficult to fill.²⁶ The CBP-wide cost of these incentives ranged from a low of approximately \$3.6 million in FY 2021 to a high of approximately \$8.4 million in FY 2023. Leveraging special pay authorities—such as recruitment incentives—is a leading practice for federal hiring.²⁷

²⁴[GAO-19-181](#).

²⁵These teams are located in Charlotte, NC; York, PA; Atlanta, GA; Orlando, FL; Nashville, TN; Sacramento, CA; Dallas, TX; Denver, CO; Kansas City, MO; and Salt Lake City, UT.

²⁶Only newly appointed federal employees are eligible to receive recruitment incentives. 5 U.S.C. § 5753(b)(2)(A). See 5 C.F.R. §§ 575.102 (newly appointed refers to the first appointment as a federal employee, among other listed definitions), 575.105 (recruitment incentives may be paid under prescribed conditions to an employee who is newly appointed to a listed position that is likely to be difficult to fill).

²⁷[GAO-19-181](#).

Border Patrol. Border Patrol began offering \$5,000 recruitment incentives to new agents in all locations in June 2022, with an additional \$5,000 for agents in certain remote locations.²⁸ Border Patrol documentation states that these nationwide incentives were necessary because the agency has faced considerable recruiting challenges for the Border Patrol Agent position, and attrition among Border Patrol Agents had consistently outpaced hiring. In addition, many other law enforcement agencies began offering recruitment incentives around this time, and Border Patrol needed to offer incentives to remain competitive, according to Border Patrol officials. Border Patrol officials previously told us that recruitment incentives were not offered in the past because they created resentment among current employees who did not receive extra pay to do the same job in the same location.²⁹ However, officials said that staffing conditions now outweigh this concern.

Border Patrol increased the amount of its recruitment incentives in November 2022 and again in January 2024 because its initial incentives were not bringing in enough applicants to meet hiring targets, according to Border Patrol. As of June 2024, Border Patrol was offering \$20,000 per recipient, with an additional \$10,000 for recipients in remote locations. Border Patrol pays the first \$10,000 of this incentive after an agent's completion of the training academy, and it pays the remainder after an agent completes 3 years of service. Border Patrol requires recipients sign a 3-year service agreement to receive this incentive. Just over half of the Border Patrol Agents hired during FY 2023 (522 of 968) received a recruitment incentive. The remainder did not receive an incentive either because they were a federal employee or because they chose not to sign a service agreement.

OFO. As we previously reported, OFO began offering recruitment incentives to new CBP Officers in 2015 in two ports of entry, and by 2017 it was offering incentives in 18 ports of entry.³⁰ From FY 2018 through FY 2023, OFO offered recruitment incentives to CBP Officers in 24 ports of entry.³¹ Recipients of these incentives, who represent around 27 percent of all CBP Officers hired during this period, were required to sign a 3-year service agreement to receive these incentives.³² The amount of these incentives ranged from 15–25 percent of recipients' salaries for the duration of their service agreement, with an annual average of around \$12,100 allocated per recipient. This reflects a slight increase from FY 2015 through FY 2017, when around 19 percent of new CBP Officers received an incentive at an annual average of around \$9,600 per recipient.

AMO. In May 2017, AMO began offering recruitment incentives to all law enforcement personnel stationed in Aguadilla, Puerto Rico, to address ongoing staffing challenges. According to CBP documentation, applicants who previously declined job offers for this location stated that their decision was based on high crime rates, limited access to medical facilities and specialists, inadequate housing for families, limited opportunities for spousal employment, and the lack of an English curriculum in schools. AMO also noted that higher salaries offered by private sector airlines in this location challenged its ability to recruit Air Interdiction Agents. As of

²⁸These remote locations were Why, AZ; Lordsburg, NM; and Sierra Blanca, Presidio, Sanderson, Comstock, Freer, and Hebronville, TX.

²⁹GAO-18-487.

³⁰GAO-18-487. As of October 2023, CBP operated 328 ports of entry.

³¹These ports of entry were Douglas, Nogales, Lukeville, and San Luis, AZ; Calexico, Otay Mesa, San Ysidro, and San Francisco, CA; Coburn Gore, Houlton, and Jackman, ME; Grand Portage, MN; Raymond and Sweetgrass, MT; Dunseith, Portal, and Pembina, ND; Massena, NY; Presidio, Roma, and Laredo, TX; Beecher Falls and Norton, VT; and Oroville, WA. OFO offered incentives in at least 16 of these locations each year from FY 2018 through FY 2023, but it did not offer incentives in all these locations in all years.

³²Recipients in San Francisco were required to sign a 4-year service agreement.

June 2024, these incentives were still in place and were offered in the amount of 25 percent of recipients' salaries, to be paid as a lump sum at the beginning of each year of the service period for up to 3 years.

In addition to the incentive offered to law enforcement personnel stationed in Puerto Rico, in December 2021, AMO began offering recruitment incentives to new Marine Interdiction Agents stationed in Long Beach, California, citing the high cost of living and heavy competition with the private sector in this location. This incentive is in the amount of 10 percent of recipients' salaries, to be paid in annual installments at the end of each year for 3 years with the option to extend a fourth year. AMO has not offered additional recruitment incentives for the Aviation Enforcement Agent position.³³

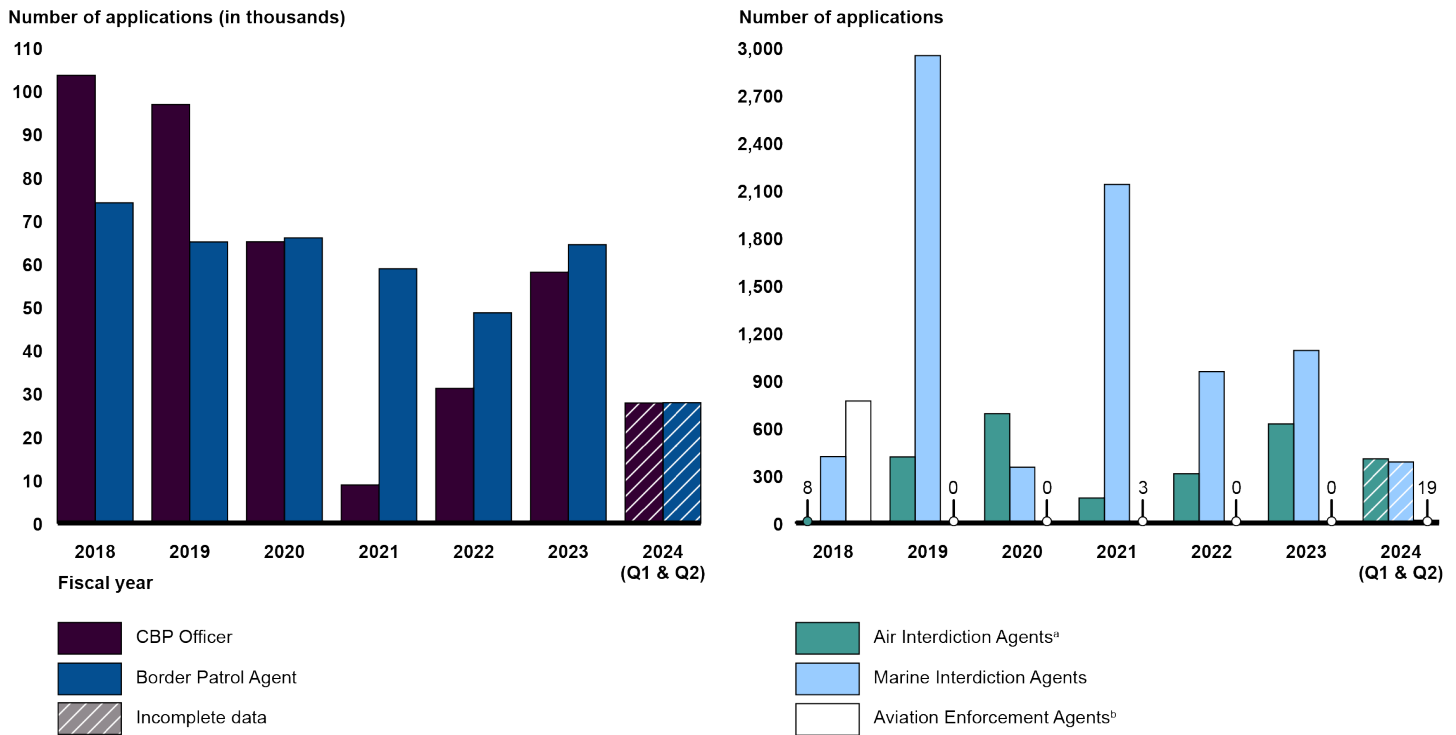
OFO, Border Patrol, and AMO assess the effectiveness of recruitment incentives at least annually and discontinue incentives when they are no longer needed. In conducting these assessments, CBP primarily reviews the number of applications received and the percentage of applicants who enter on duty in locations where incentives were offered. From FY 2018 through FY 2023, OFO and AMO adjusted the locations that were eligible for incentives based on these metrics and other staffing trends. Border Patrol did not discontinue any recruitment incentives during this period because staffing trends did not merit this change, according to Border Patrol officials.

Applications Decreased in Recent Years Due to Various Challenges but Increased in 2023

The number of applications that CBP received for the Border Patrol Agent and CBP Officer positions generally decreased from FY 2018 through FY 2022, and applications for AMO positions varied during this period, as shown in figure 7. Applications for all law enforcement positions increased from FY 2022 through FY 2023. CBP officials attributed this increase to its recruitment efforts that took place in FY 2022 and FY 2023, such as increased spending on marketing and advertising, holding a larger number of in-person recruitment events, and beginning to offer recruitment incentives for the Border Patrol Agent position.

³³In October 2023, AMO officials said CBP had not posted an open job announcement for the Aviation Enforcement Agent position for several years because the attrition rate for this position is low. Officials also said AMO has been able to fill vacancies through internal transfers and veteran's recruiting authority—a special authority by which agencies can appoint an eligible veteran without competition to positions through the GS-11 grade level or equivalent level. 38 U.S.C. § 4214(b)(1).

Figure 7: Applications for CBP Law Enforcement Positions, Fiscal Years 2018 through the Second Quarter of Fiscal Year 2024



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) data. | GAO-24-107029

Accessible Data for Figure 7: Applications for CBP Law Enforcement Positions, Fiscal Years 2018 through the Second Quarter of Fiscal Year 2024

	Customs and Border Protection Officer	Border Patrol Agent	Air Interdiction Agents ^a	Marine Interdiction Agents	Aviation Enforcement Agents ^b
2018	103.57	74.076	8	420	771
2019	96.837	65.025	418	2950	0
2020	65.066	65.967	691	353	0
2021	8.838	58.844	159	2137	3
2022	31.191	48.646	312	956	0
2023	58.047	64.409	626	1090	0
2024 (Q1 & Q2)	27.791	27.846	406	386	19

Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) data. | GAO-24-107029

Note: From July 2020 through June 2023, CBP capped the number of applications that it would accept for the CBP Officer position because there was a backlog of applications for this position during this period.

^aFiscal year 2024 data for the Air Interdiction Agent position indicates the number of qualified candidates who entered into the hiring process. This differs from the number of applications received because qualified candidates were able to bypass the traditional application process starting when CBP received direct-hire authority in January 2023.

^bIn October 2023, CBP officials said CBP had not posted an open job announcement for the Aviation Enforcement Agent position for several years because the attrition rate for this position is low and CBP has been able to fill vacancies for this position through internal transfers and veteran's recruiting authority—a special authority by which agencies can appoint an eligible veteran without competition to positions through the GS-11 grade level or equivalent level.

CBP officials told us that several challenges inhibited the agency's ability to recruit law enforcement personnel in recent years and that these challenges may have affected the number of applications CBP received. Officials from other law enforcement agencies raised similar concerns. For example, negative public perceptions about law enforcement in general—and negative portrayals in the media of CBP's work specifically—have recently inhibited people from applying to the agency, according to CBP officials. DEA officials also said that negative perceptions about law enforcement have been a recruitment challenge in recent years. CBP and Secret Service officials also noted that there has generally been an increased interest in jobs that offer telework opportunities and work-life balance. CBP is limited in its ability to provide telework options for its law enforcement positions because the work generally entails a physical presence at or near the border. In addition, CBP officials said that the agency's ability to provide work-life balance is constrained by increasing demands on its law enforcement workforce, such as managing the significant increase of individuals encountered at or apprehended along the southwest border.

CBP and Secret Service officials also said that there has been a decline in physical fitness levels in the general population, which makes it challenging to find enough applicants who can pass the physical fitness and medical tests that are part of CBP's hiring process. In addition, CBP and Secret Service officials said that changing societal norms about drug use has posed a challenge to recruitment. This is discussed in greater detail later in this report. Lastly, as previously mentioned, the COVID-19 pandemic posed several challenges to CBP's recruitment efforts from 2020 through 2022.

In addition to these recent challenges, CBP officials said that potential applicants may also be deterred by conditions that have always been inherent to many CBP occupations. For example, many CBP law enforcement personnel must live and work in places that are geographically remote or where costs of living are high, and where weather conditions are often extreme. Many other law enforcement occupations do not have these characteristics, which makes it difficult for CBP to compete with other federal, state, and local agencies, according to CBP officials.

Streamlining CBP's Hiring Process Contributed to Improving Hiring Outcomes

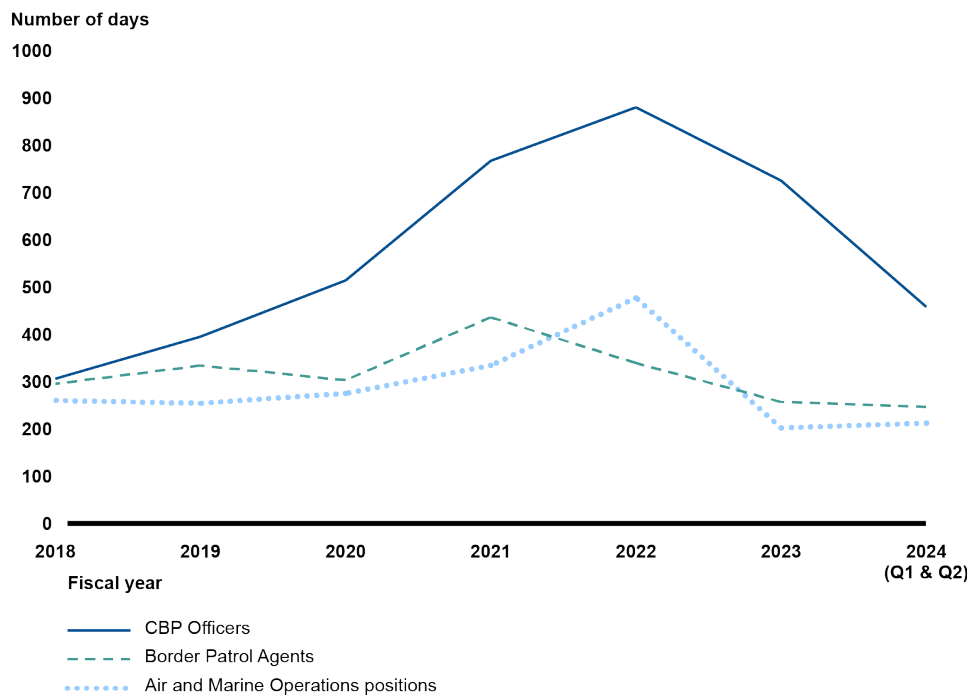
CBP's performance in two key metrics that it uses to assess the efficiency and effectiveness of its hiring process for law enforcement personnel has generally improved since the last time we reported on this topic in 2018.³⁴ Specifically, CBP reduced its time-to-hire for Border Patrol Agents and AMO agents, though time-to-hire increased for CBP Officers due to a backlog of applications for this position. CBP also increased its applicant yield rate—the percentage of applicants who enter on duty—for all law enforcement positions. These improvements were due, at least in part, to changes that CBP made to streamline its hiring process, including changes it made to the polygraph exam process.

³⁴[GAO-18-487](#).

CBP Hiring Time and Applicant Yield Rates Generally Improved

Time-to-Hire. CBP’s time-to-hire metric conveys the average number of calendar days that elapsed between the application submission date and an applicant’s entry-on-duty date.³⁵ Average time-to-hire for CBP Officers averaged 578 days from FY 2018 through the second quarter of FY 2024, up from an average of 360 days from FY 2015 to FY 2017—a 61 percent increase. For Border Patrol Agents, average time-to-hire was 316 days from FY 2018 through the second quarter of FY 2024 (22 percent lower than the FY 2015 to FY 2017 average of 403 days), and for AMO agents it was 288 days (11 percent lower than the FY 2015 to FY 2017 average of 322 days), as shown in figure 8. Average time-to-hire for law enforcement personnel at comparable federal agencies varied.³⁶ Specifically, from FY 2018 through FY 2023, time-to-hire for law enforcement personnel at Secret Service averaged 247 days, at FBI it averaged 276 days, and at DEA it averaged 564 days.

Figure 8: Average Time-to-Hire for CBP Law Enforcement Positions, Fiscal Year 2018 through the Second Quarter of Fiscal Year 2024



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) data. | GAO-24-107029

³⁵When we reported on CBP hiring in 2018, CBP’s time-to-hire measurement began on the closing date of a job announcement. In FY 2019, CBP changed the beginning point of this measurement to be the application submission date because this is a better indicator of what the applicant experiences in terms of duration of the hiring process, according to CBP officials. This change generally would increase time-to-hire by about 10 days, according to the Office of Personnel Management’s target timeframes for federal hiring steps.

³⁶For the purposes of time-to-hire, we did not consider ICE to be a comparable agency because of key differences in its hiring process, such as the lack of a polygraph exam. Further, ICE’s methodology for calculating time-to-hire is different from CBP’s.

Accessible Data for Figure 8: Average Time-to-Hire for CBP Law Enforcement Positions, Fiscal Year 2018 through the Second Quarter of Fiscal Year 2024

	Customs and Border Protection Officers	Border Patrol Agents	Air and Marine Operations positions
2018	306	295	260
2019	395	334	254
2020	514	303	275
2021	767	436	334
2022	880	339	477
2023	725	257	202
2024 ^a	458	246	212

Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) data. | GAO-24-107029

Note: Time-to-hire increased for CBP Officers primarily because there was a backlog of applications for this position from fiscal years 2019 through 2023. CBP cleared this backlog in September 2023 and anticipates that time-to-hire will decrease to around 300 days by the end of fiscal year 2024.

^a2024 data indicates time-to-hire through the second quarter of the fiscal year (October 31, 2023, to March 31, 2024).

As shown in figure 8, time-to-hire significantly increased for CBP Officers from FY 2018 through the second quarter of FY 2024, peaking at over 800 days in FY 2022. This occurred primarily because CBP had a backlog of applications for this position from FY 2019 through FY 2023. According to CBP officials, the agency conducted a recruitment surge from 2017 through 2019 to address historical challenges in meeting staffing goals for this position. The recruitment surge successfully brought in many applications for the CBP Officer position, and CBP allowed all qualified applicants to proceed to its hiring process.³⁷ This caused time-to-hire to increase significantly as many applicants had to wait for a position to become available, but it also enabled CBP to meet its staffing goals for the CBP Officer position from FY 2020 through FY 2023. CBP cleared the backlog of CBP Officer applications in September 2023 and placed monthly caps on applications to prevent application backlogs from occurring in the future. CBP officials anticipate that average time-to-hire for CBP Officers will decrease to around 300 days by the end of FY 2024. This would be 17 percent lower than the time-for-hire for this position from FY 2015 through FY 2017 when it averaged 360 days.

CBP officials said they do not anticipate that time-to-hire for Border Patrol Agents and AMO agents will significantly decrease below FY 2023 levels in future years because CBP is already processing these applications as quickly as possible, in their view. In addition, CBP officials noted that time-to-hire is not entirely under CBP’s control because applicants must independently complete some parts of the hiring process. For example, applicants must accurately complete and submit documentation for their background investigations and medical exams, and they are responsible for scheduling their medical exams. Further, CBP officials said that some applicants choose to wait several months after accepting a position to begin their training, which delays their entry-on-duty date and extends time-to-hire.

Applicant yield rates. The applicant yield rate indicates the percentage of applicants who completed the hiring process and entered on duty. As shown in table 3, from FY 2018 through the second quarter of FY 2024, the average yield rate for all law enforcement positions was higher than it was from FY 2013 through FY 2017. The annual number of law enforcement personnel who entered on duty also increased over this period. From FY 2018 through FY 2023, average applicant yield rates for law enforcement positions at other federal

³⁷Federal agencies typically allow only the most qualified applicants to proceed to the hiring process. However, CBP employs a mass hiring model in which it allows all qualified applicants to proceed to its hiring process due to how long the hiring process takes and the low percentage of applicants who complete the process, according to CBP officials.

agencies varied: Secret Service’s average yield rate was 1.7 percent, FBI’s was 3.1 percent, ICE’s was 3.6 percent, and DEA’s was 7.4 percent.

Table 3: Applicant Yield Rates and Annual Entries on Duty for CBP Law Enforcement Positions, Fiscal Years (FY) 2013 through the Second Quarter of FY 2024

	Average applicant yield rate ^a : FY 2013–2017	Average applicant yield rate ^a : FY 2018–2024	Average annual entries on duty: FY 2013–2017	Average annual entries on duty: FY 2018–2024
CBP Officers	1.9%	2.5%	978	1,495
Border Patrol Agents	1.1%	1.8%	523	1,094
Air and Marine Operations agents	1.0%	4.0%	39	77

Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) data. | GAO-24-107029

Note: We calculated projected FY 2024 yield rates and entries on duty using data through the second quarter of the fiscal year.

^aWe present applicant yield rates as long-term trends rather than as annual rates because applicants are usually hired in a different fiscal year than when they submitted their application, due to CBP’s long hiring process. This means that yield rates can fluctuate significantly from year to year and do not accurately convey the percentage of applicants who entered on duty on an annual basis. We calculated applicant yield rates by dividing the number of applicants who entered on duty in a given time period by the number of applications received in that same time period.

CBP Streamlined its Hiring Process and Modified the Polygraph Exam Hiring Step to Improve Hiring Outcomes

CBP made several changes to its overall hiring process and the polygraph exam hiring step to reduce time-to-hire and increase applicant yield rates.

Hiring Process Changes

Hiring steps moved online. CBP provided ways for applicants to complete some hiring steps online, which improved time-to-hire and applicant yield rates because it reduced applicants’ travel time and provided more scheduling options, according to CBP. Specifically, CBP created an online option for a portion of the entrance exams for the Border Patrol Agent and CBP Officer positions, which became available in March 2017, according to CBP officials. In October 2022, the full Border Patrol entrance exam became available online, and around 85 percent of Border Patrol Agent applicants took the entrance exam online as of September 2023, according to CBP officials. CBP anticipates that the full CBP Officer entrance exam will be available online by the beginning of fiscal year 2026. In addition, in June 2023 CBP began providing an option for applicants to complete the structured interview online. Previously, applicants for the Border Patrol Agent and CBP Officer positions completed the entrance exam and structured interview in person.

Concurrent steps. CBP adjusted its hiring process so that the structured interview and background investigation (including the polygraph exam) can take place after an applicant receives a tentative job offer. CBP officials told us that this change took place in December 2022. Previously, applicants had to wait until they completed the medical exam and physical fitness test to conduct the interview and polygraph exam. In addition, starting in February 2023, Border Patrol began allowing applicants to complete their medical exam, physical fitness test, and drug test in one appointment.

Applicant Care program. CBP fully implemented its Applicant Care program in FY 2020, according to CBP officials, after first piloting the program in FY 2017. The primary purpose of this program is to provide consistent guidance and support to applicants to help prevent them from dropping out of the hiring process. CBP recruiters aim to contact applicants individually as part of this program, but this is not always possible due to the large number of applicants, according to CBP officials.

CBP launched an online portal to support the Applicant Care program. Through this portal, applicants can view the status of their applications, read answers to frequently asked questions, and contact CBP's hiring center. This portal was launched in October 2019, according to CBP officials. To further support the Applicant Care program, in FY 2022 CBP launched a series of videos explaining the hiring process and sharing information about law enforcement training and job duties. In addition, in FY 2023 CBP launched an online platform through which applicants can schedule and conduct the structured interview.

Modifications to the Polygraph Exam Step of the Hiring Process

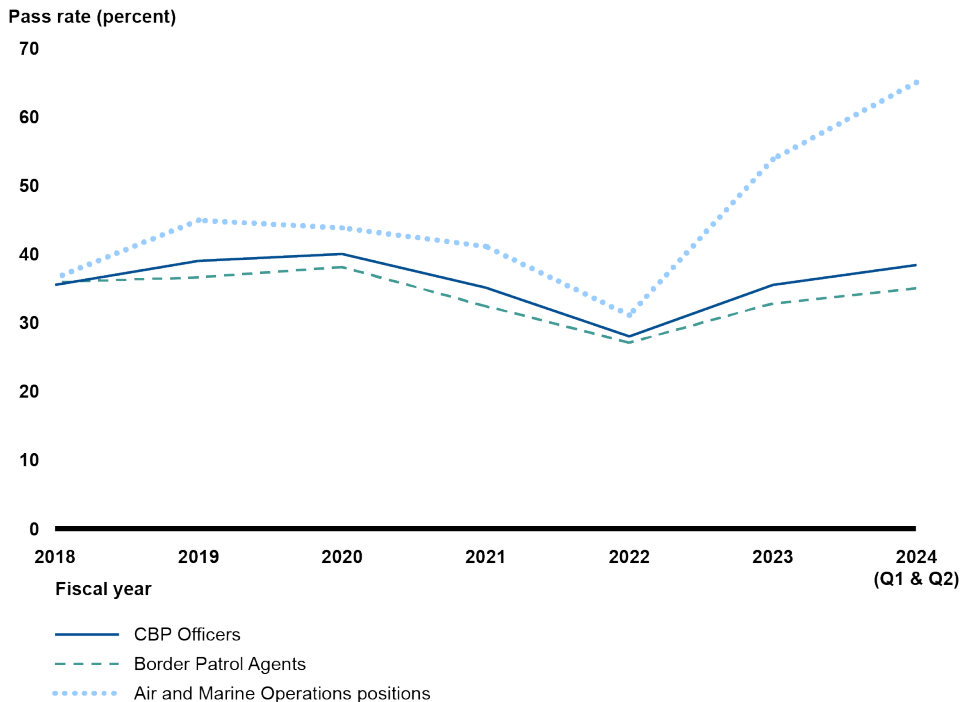
CBP officials and union representatives told us that the polygraph exam continues to be one of the most significant challenges in CBP's hiring process because of the low percentage of applicants who pass the exam. We reported in 2018 that the polygraph exam consistently had the lowest pass rate of any step in CBP's hiring process and that it was the step that took the longest amount of time to complete.³⁸

CBP's polygraph exam pass rates have improved moderately in recent years, and the duration of this step significantly decreased. Specifically, the average polygraph exam pass rate from FY 2015 through FY 2017 was 25 percent, and from FY 2018 through the first half of FY 2024 the annual average pass rate ranged from 28 percent to 40 percent. Nevertheless, approximately two-thirds of CBP law enforcement applicants did not pass the polygraph exam during this period, as shown in figure 9. Polygraph exam pass rates for comparable law enforcement agencies varied. Specifically, from FY 2018 through FY 2023, the average polygraph exam pass rate for Secret Service law enforcement applicants was 36 percent, for FBI applicants it was 66 percent, and for DEA applicants it was 56 percent.³⁹ At CBP, the duration of the polygraph exam step of the hiring process decreased from 53 days in FY 2018 to 19 days in FY 2023.

³⁸GAO-18-487.

³⁹Reasons why polygraph pass rates may vary across agencies include differences in applicant demographics (e.g., age, education level, and professional experience); whether the exam is conducted near the beginning or end of the hiring process; and agency-specific polygraph protocols.

Figure 9: CBP Polygraph Exam Pass Rates, Fiscal Year 2018 through the Second Quarter of Fiscal Year 2024



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) data. | GAO-24-107029

Accessible Data for Figure 9: CBP Polygraph Exam Pass Rates, Fiscal Year 2018 through the Second Quarter of Fiscal Year 2024

	Customs and Border Protection Officers	Border Patrol Agents	Air and Marine Operations positions
2018	35.5	35.9	36.5
2019	39	36.6	44.9
2020	40	38.1	43.8
2021	35.1	32.4	41.1
2022	28	27.1	31.1
2023	35.5	32.8	53.8
2024 (Q1 & Q2)	38.4	35	65

Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) data. | GAO-24-107029

Note: As of April 2023, CBP law enforcement applicants hired at the GS-11 grade level or higher take a polygraph exam that contains questions only about counterintelligence issues. Most CBP positions at this grade level are Air and Marine Operations agents, according to CBP officials. The remainder of CBP law enforcement applicants take a polygraph exam with questions about counterintelligence issues, illegal drug use, and serious crime.

CBP took several steps to improve the pass rates and efficiency of the polygraph exam step of the hiring process:

- Changed marijuana use policy.** In May 2023, CBP lowered its prohibition on applicants' marijuana use, from 2 years prior to applying for a law enforcement position to 90 days prior to applying. CBP

selected this new 90-day interval to align with the Office of Personnel Management’s proposed new personnel vetting questionnaire, which asks about marijuana use only within the past 90 days, according to CBP officials.⁴⁰ In April 2024, CBP further adjusted this policy by considering applicants’ marijuana use within the prior 90 days as one factor in its background investigation determinations rather than as an automatic disqualifying activity. According to CBP, the agency made these changes because around half of CBP law enforcement applicants live in states where marijuana use is legal at the state level, and each year the agency is potentially losing thousands of candidates who do not apply or who are not found suitable for employment due to recent marijuana use. Officials said that these applicants might not know that marijuana is a prohibited substance at the federal level. All CBP law enforcement personnel must still take a drug test as part of the hiring process. Further, CBP law enforcement personnel are prohibited from using illegal drugs—including marijuana—during their employment, and they are subject to random drug testing.

- **Modified polygraph exam.** In January 2023, CBP modified its polygraph exam structure and sequencing to improve the applicant’s exam experience. Among other changes, the modified exam separates questions about illegal drug use from questions about serious crime because this is now a best practice in the polygraph community, according to CBP officials. In addition, in April 2023, CBP began using a second type of polygraph exam for applicants hired at the GS-11 grade level or higher.⁴¹ This exam includes only questions about counterintelligence issues and does not contain questions about drug use or serious crime. According to CBP, applicants who take this exam have established a level of trust through their previous experience that qualifies them for this modified exam. According to CBP officials, both of these new polygraph exams are streamlined in comparison to previous exams, and they no longer solicit information that applicants provide during the background investigation process, such as financial information.
- **On-call adjudication process.** Since June 2017, CBP has required polygraph examiners to use an on-call adjudication process.⁴² As part of this process, polygraph examiners contact an adjudicator during a polygraph exam if they believe that an applicant admitted something during the exam that would disqualify them from being hired.⁴³ If the adjudicator determines that the applicant’s admission was in fact disqualifying, then the applicant would not be called back for additional testing, thus shortening the duration of this step in the hiring process. Since implementing this on-call process, the percentage of CBP applicants who required additional testing decreased from 23 percent in FY 2017 to 14 percent in FY 2023.
- **Countering misinformation.** CBP has taken several steps to internally and externally share accurate information about the polygraph exam, with the goals of (1) reducing the number of applicants who attempt to cheat during the exam and (2) making applicants more comfortable during the exam, according to CBP officials. For example, CBP began a messaging campaign in 2018 to share information about the

⁴⁰According to a Federal Register notice published on November 23, 2022, the Office of Personnel Management plans to consolidate several existing security clearance forms, including Standard Form 86: Questionnaire for National Security Positions, into one form, the Personnel Vetting Questionnaire. *Notice of Submission for a New Information Collection Common Form: Personnel Vetting Questionnaire*, 87 Fed. Reg. 71700 (Nov. 23, 2022).

⁴¹Most CBP law enforcement personnel who are hired at the GS-11 grade or higher are Air and Marine Interdiction Agents, according to CBP officials.

⁴²CBP mandated the use of this process in response to a recommendation from the DHS Office of the Inspector General. See DHS OIG, *CBP Spends Millions Conducting Polygraph Examinations on Unsuitable Applicants*, OIG-17-99-MA (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 4, 2017).

⁴³Adjudicators review various sources of information, including polygraph exam and background investigation results, to determine whether applicants are suitable for employment.

polygraph exam with applicants and CBP recruiters. A fact sheet distributed as part of this campaign contains information about how and why CBP's polygraph exams differ from those of other federal agencies and about the internal and external quality reviews conducted as part of CBP's polygraph program. CBP also posted videos about the polygraph exam on its website, as well as answers to frequently asked questions. In February 2023, polygraph examiners started directly contacting applicants to share information about the exam and answer applicants' questions. In addition, CBP established an Applicant and Employee Suitability Advisory Council in May 2023 to increase knowledge within the agency about the polygraph exam and to provide a forum to discuss concerns and improvements.

In addition to these changes, around 5 percent of CBP applicants who made it past the polygraph stage of the hiring process from FY 2018 through FY 2023 were not required to take a polygraph exam either because CBP granted them a waiver or because they previously passed a polygraph exam at another federal agency. Specifically, CBP granted waivers to over 900 veterans during this period because these veterans met certain criteria, including holding an active Top Secret security clearance.⁴⁴ In addition, CBP waived the polygraph exam for around 200 applicants who had previously passed a polygraph exam at another federal agency.⁴⁵ In total, around 23,000 applicants for CBP law enforcement positions passed CBP's polygraph exam from FY 2018 through FY 2023.

While CBP's polygraph exam pass rates and efficiency generally improved after these changes were implemented, some CBP officials and employee union representatives we met with said they feel that CBP's polygraph pass rates are still too low. They also questioned the accuracy of the exams' results. For example, union officials said they had been informed of cases in which applicants failed the CBP polygraph exam but passed a polygraph exam at another federal agency or had obtained federal security clearances. According to CBP data, the annual polygraph exam pass rate across all law enforcement applicants has not surpassed 40 percent since we started reviewing this issue in 2015.

CBP officials responsible for overseeing the polygraph exam noted that many applicants do not pass the exam because, during their exam, they admitted to a disqualifying activity such as illegal drug use or other criminal activity. Specifically, from FY 2018 through the second quarter of FY 2024, at least 39 percent of CBP applicants who failed the polygraph exam made such admissions, according to CBP data.⁴⁶ Some of these admissions pertain to potential serious criminal activity. From 2019 through 2023, CBP referred approximately 1,800 polygraph admissions to other law enforcement agencies for potential investigation. These referrals pertain only to activity that presents imminent danger and not to minor offenses like marijuana use, according to CBP officials.

⁴⁴The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017 permitted the Commissioner of CBP to waive the polygraph exam requirement for any veteran applicant deemed suitable for employment who holds a current, active Top-Secret clearance and is able to access sensitive compartmented information; has a current single-scope background investigation; and was not granted any waivers to obtain the clearance. Pub. L. No. 114-328, div. A, tit. X, subtit. E, § 1049, 130 Stat. 2000, 2396 (2016) (classified at 6 U.S.C. § 221 note).

⁴⁵CBP may recognize the results of certain polygraph exams conducted by other federal agencies per an internal directive issued in November 2016.

⁴⁶CBP does not know the exact percentage of applicants who made disqualifying admissions because CBP tracks this data only as part of its on-call adjudication process. For applicants who fail the exam and whose exams do not involve this on-call process, CBP does not review the exam results to see if the applicant made a disqualifying admission. This is because CBP cannot hire applicants who fail the polygraph exam, so reviewing these applicants' exam results would unnecessarily prolong the hiring process, according to CBP officials.

CBP implements several measures to ensure that polygraph exam results are accurate and consistent. For example, CBP implements a quality control process for every exam in which a second examiner independently reviews exam materials and judges what the exam result should be (pass, fail, or further testing needed). The exam materials reviewed include physiological data collected during the exam and portions of the exam's audio recording. If this quality control examiner's judgment does not align with the original examiner's determination—which happens about 8 percent of the time, according to CBP officials—then a second quality control examiner may review the exam materials to determine the result of the exam.

In addition, CBP reviews the performance of each of its polygraph examiners at least annually to help ensure consistency across examiners, according to CBP officials. As part of these reviews, CBP assesses whether an examiner's results are significantly outside of the normal range—such as if an abnormally high number of applicants who they examined failed the exam. In these cases, CBP officials may listen to audio recordings of this examiner's polygraph exams to assess whether there are any issues that need to be addressed, according to CBP officials.

The National Center for Credibility Assessment—a federal entity that conducts training, oversight, and research on polygraph exams—also implements measures to ensure the accuracy and consistency of CBP's polygraph exams, as well as those of other federal agencies. For example, this Center approves all polygraph exams used by federal agencies, and it trains all federal polygraph examiners on polygraph testing standards and procedures. The center also conducts biennial on-site inspections of agencies' polygraph processes to determine whether they comply with internal procedures and federal polygraph standards. The Center's most recent inspection, the results of which were issued in March of 2023, found that CBP's polygraph procedures met federal standards and that CBP's quality control procedures ensured an independent and objective review of polygraph exam data.

CBP Implemented Various Initiatives to Assess and Improve Retention and Morale Among Law Enforcement Personnel

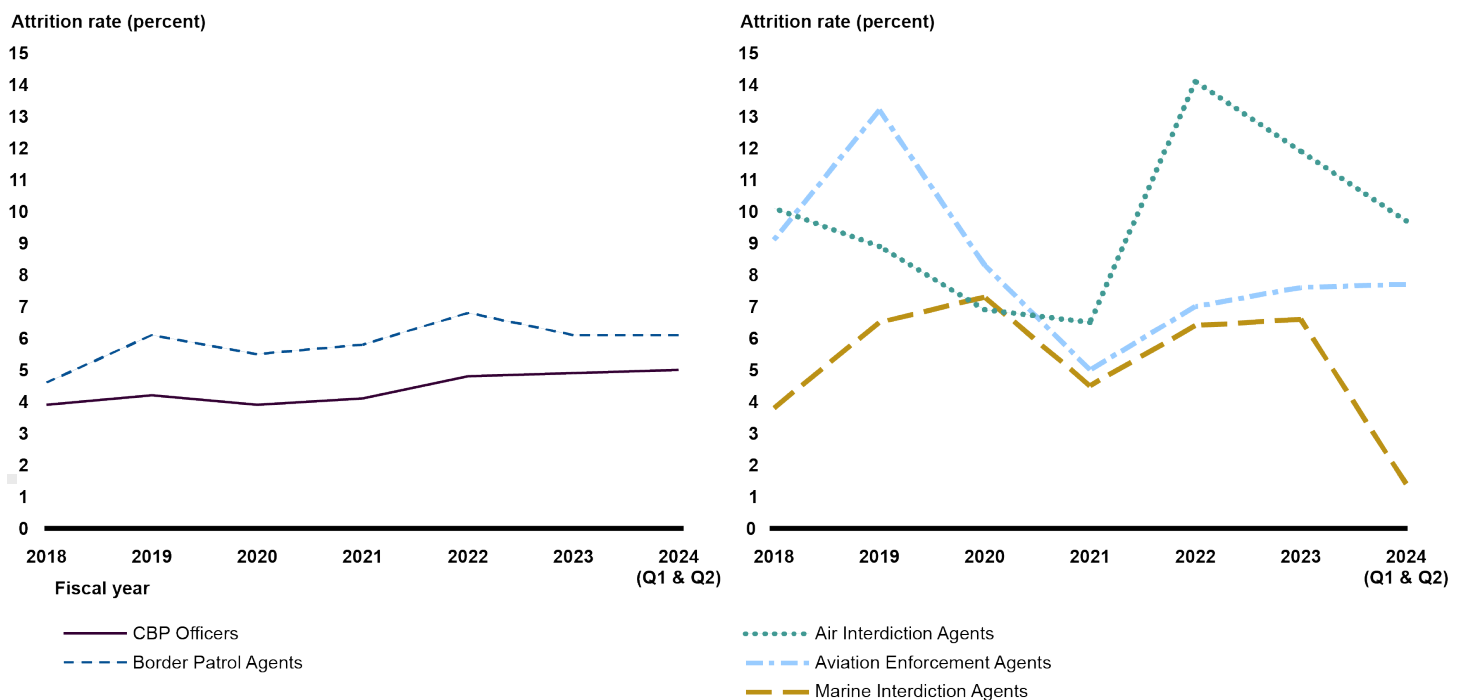
CBP took several actions in recent years to improve retention of its law enforcement personnel, including increasing the use of financial incentives and other pay authorities and managing health and wellness programs for law enforcement personnel and their families. However, in the last decade, attrition rates for CBP law enforcement positions generally increased. Additionally, CBP has developed several initiatives to address its longstanding challenges with employee morale and engagement. It will be important for CBP to continue to focus on ways to improve employee morale and engagement, particularly as CBP anticipates a large number of law enforcement retirements beginning in FY 2027.

Retention of CBP Law Enforcement Personnel Varied by Position

Attrition rates for CBP law enforcement positions generally increased from FY 2013 through the second quarter of FY 2024 but generally remained below the federal government-wide average of around 6 percent. Specifically, attrition for CBP Officers was around 2 to 3 percent from FY 2013 to FY 2017 and increased to around 4 percent between FY 2018 and the second quarter of FY 2024. Similarly, attrition for Border Patrol Agents generally increased from around 4 percent between FY 2013 and FY 2018 to just under 6 percent from FY 2018 through the second quarter of FY 2024.

Attrition for AMO aviation positions was slightly higher than other CBP law enforcement components over this period. Specifically, from FY 2013 through FY 2017 annual attrition rates for Air Interdiction Agents ranged from 5 percent to 9 percent, and for Aviation Enforcement Agents it ranged from 8 percent to 11 percent. Attrition for Marine Interdiction Agents did not exceed 5.3 percent during this period. In FY 2018 through the second quarter of FY 2024, attrition rates for Air Interdiction Agents ranged from 7 to 14 percent, for Aviation Enforcement Agents it ranged from 5 to 13 percent, and for Marine Interdiction Agents it ranged from 1 to 7 percent. See figure 10 for attrition rates for CBP law enforcement personnel from FY 2018 through the second quarter of FY 2024.

Figure 10: Annual Attrition Rates for CBP Law Enforcement Personnel, Fiscal Year 2018 through the Second Quarter of Fiscal Year 2024



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) data. | GAO-24-107029

Accessible Data for Figure 10: Annual Attrition Rates for CBP Law Enforcement Personnel, Fiscal Year 2018 through the Second Quarter of Fiscal Year 2024/

	CBP Officers	Border Patrol Agents	Air Interdiction Agents	Aviation Enforcement Agents	Marine Interdiction Agents
2018	3.9	4.6	10.1	9.1	3.8
2019	4.2	6.1	8.9	13.2	6.5
2020	3.9	5.5	6.9	8.3	7.3
2021	4.1	5.8	6.5	5	4.5
2022	4.8	6.8	14.1	7	6.4
2023	4.9	6.1	11.9	7.6	6.6
2024a	5	6.1	9.7	7.7	1.4

Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) data. | GAO-24-107029

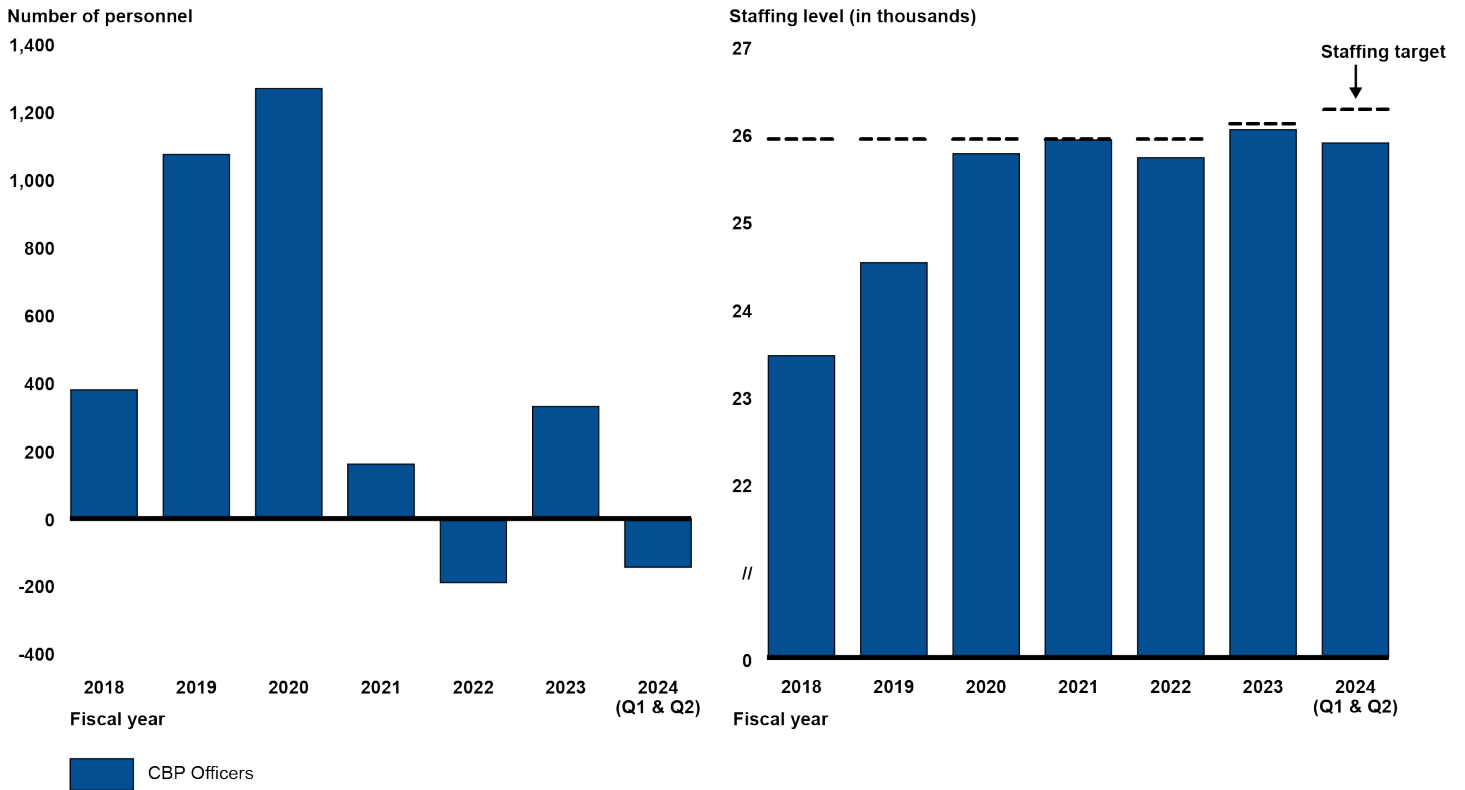
Note: Since there are only a few hundred Air Interdiction Agents, Aviation Enforcement Agents, and Marine Interdiction Agents, a small number of departures can have a large effect on attrition rates for these positions.

Attrition rates among CBP law enforcement personnel were generally comparable to those of law enforcement personnel at other selected federal agencies. Specifically, the average attrition rate from FY 2018 through FY 2023 for law enforcement positions at ICE was 5.6 percent; for Secret Service it was about 9.5 percent; for FBI it was 5.6 percent, and for DEA it was 6.6 percent.

From FY 2018 through the second quarter of FY 2024, CBP’s ability to hire more law enforcement personnel than it lost to attrition varied by position. Specifically, CBP generally hired more CBP Officers than it lost but had a net loss of Border Patrol and AMO agents in recent fiscal years.

- **OFO.** CBP generally hired more CBP Officers than it lost each fiscal year, which enabled it to meet its staffing targets for this position in recent years. Specifically, from FY 2018 through FY 2021, CBP gained over 6,800 officers and lost around 3,900 officers to attrition. However, in FY 2022 CBP saw a net loss of 189 CBP Officers, though it recouped these losses in FY 2023. As of April 2024, CBP had a total of 25,879 CBP Officers on board. Figure 11 depicts the net staffing gains and losses and overall staffing levels for the CBP Officer position from FY 2018 through the second quarter of FY 2024.

Figure 11: Net Staffing Gains and Losses and Overall Staffing Levels for CBP Officer Positions, Fiscal Year 2018 through the Second Quarter of Fiscal Year 2024



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) data. | GAO-24-107029

Accessible Data for Figure 11: Net Staffing Gains and Losses and Overall Staffing Levels for CBP Officer Positions, Fiscal Year 2018 through the Second Quarter of Fiscal Year 2024

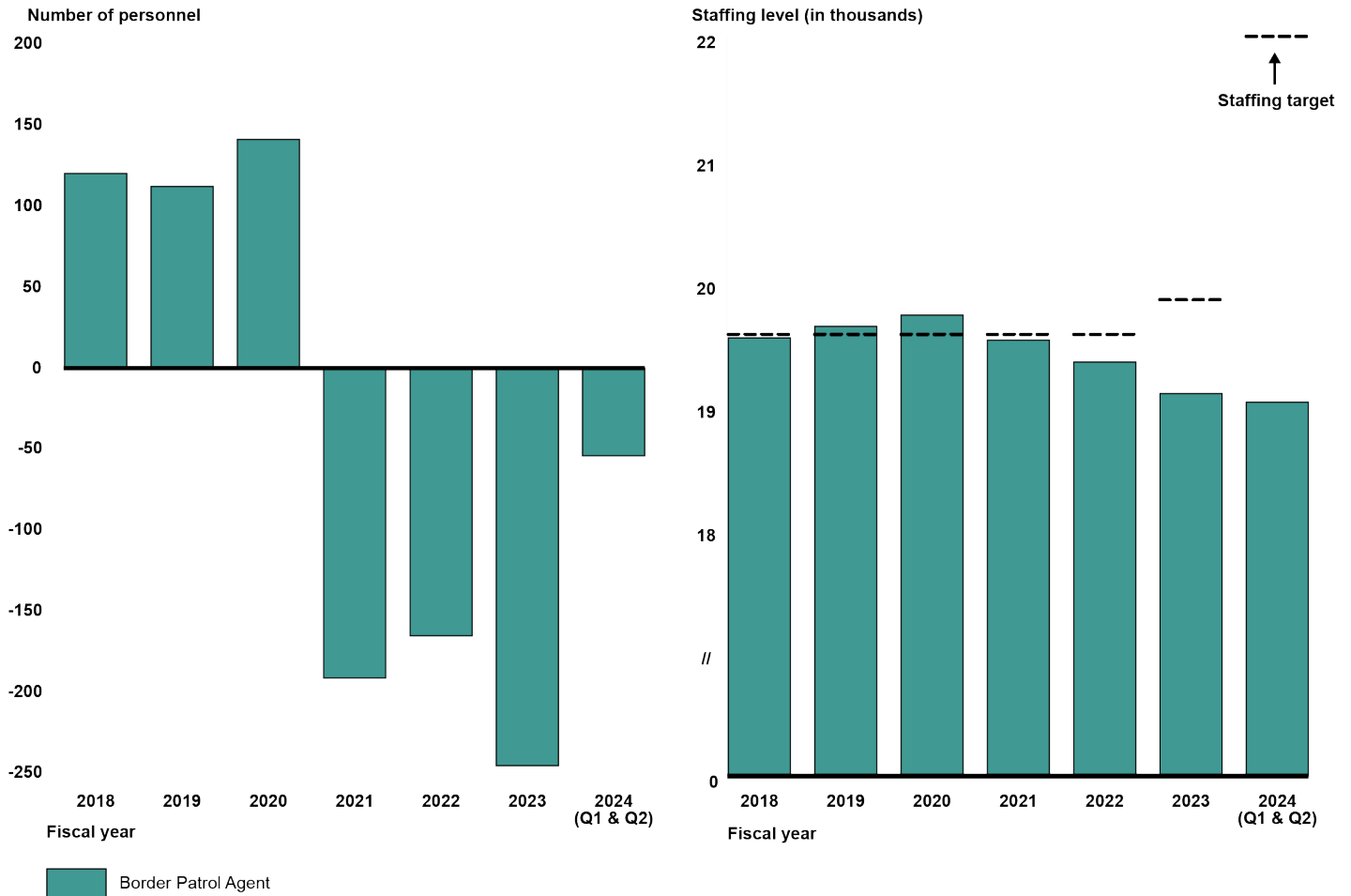
Fiscal year	Number of personnel	Staffing level (in thousands)
2018	380	23.447
2019	1074	24.511
2020	1268	25.756
2021	161	25.914
2022	-189	25.71
2023	331	26.03
2024"	-143	25.879

Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) data. | GAO-24-107029

Note: CBP officials told us that to determine CBP Officer staffing targets, the Office of Field Operations assesses available funding, statutory provisions, current staffing levels, and projected attrition. FY 2024 data are as of the end of the second quarter of the fiscal year.

- **Border Patrol.** Border Patrol’s staffing gains and losses varied from FY 2018 through the second quarter of FY 2024. From FY 2018 through FY 2020 CBP hired more Border Patrol Agents than it lost, enabling it to meet its staffing target of 19,555 agents. Specifically, CBP gained over 3,500 agents from FY 2018 through FY 2020 but lost over 3,100 agents to attrition during this period, an average net gain of 124 agents per year. Beginning in FY 2021, CBP was not able to replace all departing Border Patrol Agents with new hires. Accordingly, CBP has not been able to meet its staffing targets for Border Patrol Agents in recent fiscal years, as shown in figure 12.

Figure 12: Net Staffing Gains and Losses and Overall Staffing Levels for Border Patrol Agent Positions, Fiscal Year 2018 through the Second Quarter of Fiscal Year 2024



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) data. | GAO-24-107029

Accessible Data for Figure 12: Net Staffing Gains and Losses and Overall Staffing Levels for Border Patrol Agent Positions, Fiscal Year 2018 through the Second Quarter of Fiscal Year 2024

Fiscal year	Number of personnel	Staffing level (in thousands)
2018	120	19.555
2019	112	19.648
2020	141	19.74
2021	-191	19.536
2022	-165	19.359
2023	-245	19.104
2024	-54	19.033

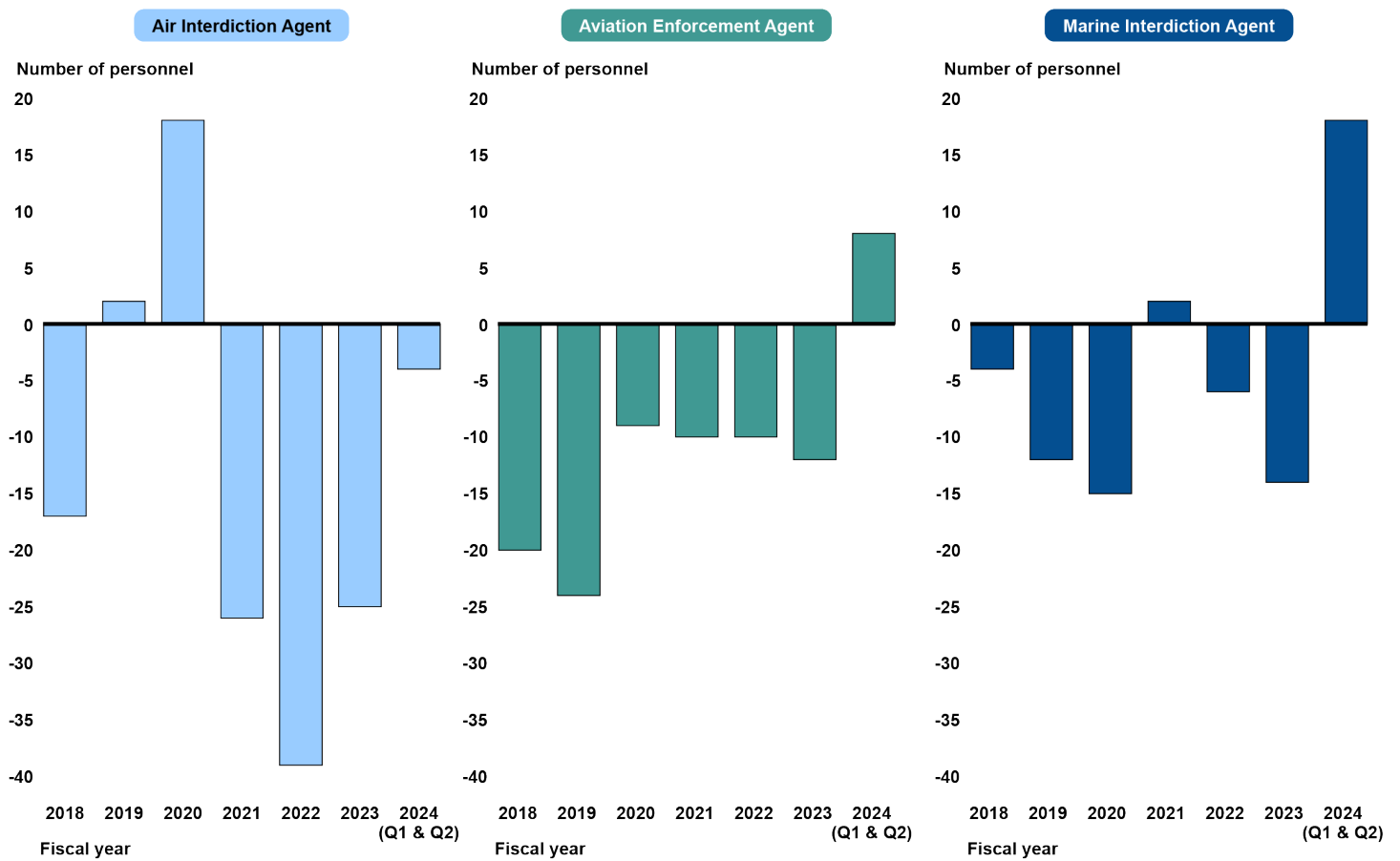
Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) data. | GAO-24-107029

Note: Staffing targets for Border Patrol Agent positions represent the authorized staffing levels or number of such positions determined by Border Patrol to be supported by its appropriation, and informed by legislative language contained in explanatory statements and other congressional documents. From FY 2018 through FY 2022, Border Patrol reported its authorized staffing level for agents as 19,555. The explanatory statement accompanying the

FY 2023 appropriation stated that the agreement provides funding for 19,855 agents. See 2023 Explanatory Statement accompanying the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023, 168 Cong. Rec. S8553, S8557 (daily ed. Dec. 20, 2022). The explanatory statement accompanying the Further Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2024 provided that \$494,804,000 was funding for 22,000 agents. See 170 Cong. Rec. H1501, H1809 (daily ed. Mar. 22, 2024). FY 2024 data are as of the end of the second quarter of the fiscal year.

- **AMO.** Staffing levels for AMO agents varied in recent years. Specifically, high attrition rates for Air Interdiction Agents contributed to a net loss of 94 agents from FY 2021 through the second quarter of FY 2024, with a total of 536 agents on board as of April 2024. The number of Aviation Enforcement Agents on board during this period remained relatively stable at around 340 agents, and attrition averaged around 8 percent over this period. Attrition rates for Marine Interdiction Agents increased during this period, and CBP generally had a net loss of Marine Interdiction Agent personnel, as shown in figure 13.

Figure 13: Net Staffing Gains and Losses for CBP Air and Marine Operations Law Enforcement Positions, Fiscal Year 2018 through the Second Quarter of Fiscal Year 2024



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) data. | GAO-24-107029

Accessible Data for Figure 13: Net Staffing Gains and Losses for CBP Air and Marine Operations Law Enforcement Positions, Fiscal Year 2018 through the Second Quarter of Fiscal Year 2024

	Air interdiction agent	Aviation enforcement agent	Marine interdiction agent
2018	-17	-20	-4
2019	2	-24	-12
2020	18	-9	-15

	Air interdiction agent	Aviation enforcement agent	Marine interdiction agent
2021	-26	-10	2
2022	-39	-10	-6
2023	-25	-12	-14
2024	-4	8	18

Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) data. | GAO-24-107029

Note: FY 2024 data are as of the end of the second quarter of the fiscal year.

Challenges with Retaining Law Enforcement Personnel

CBP officials told us that improving its retention of qualified law enforcement personnel is critical in addressing staffing shortfalls, but CBP officials and union representatives identified several challenges to retaining these personnel. Many of these challenges are the same as those that affect recruitment, such as high cost of living in some locations, a lack of services in some remote locations (e.g., schools and medical facilities), and competition with other law enforcement agencies and the private sector.

OFO officials told us that while they do not face retention challenges in general for CBP Officers, they have challenges with retaining officers in certain remote and high-cost-of-living locations. For example, in FY 2023 OFO saw an 8.3 percent attrition rate among CBP Officers in Piegan, Montana, and a 6.7 attrition rate among CBP Officers in San Francisco, California.

Officials said CBP experiences the most challenges with retaining Border Patrol Agents and Air Interdiction Agents. Border Patrol officials told us that attrition rates for Border Patrol Agents are higher in remote locations that lack services for agents' families. For example, since 2018 Border Patrol has struggled to retain agents in its stations in Presidio and Sanderson, Texas, because these locations lack adequate health care options, infrastructure, and a job market for families of the stationed agents. AMO officials told us that it is challenging to retain Air Interdiction Agents due to private sector competition with airlines, which can offer higher compensation. Additionally, CBP officials said that the high cost of living and competition with the private sector make it difficult to retain Marine Interdiction Agents in Long Beach, California, and St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands, which had an 8.3 percent attrition rate in FY 2023.

Since 2018, CBP has surveyed departing employees about the reasons why individuals planned to leave the agency.⁴⁷ From FY 2019 through FY 2023, law enforcement personnel who responded to these exit surveys most frequently cited the following as reasons for leaving the agency: geographical location of the job (e.g., undesirable location, desire to be closer to family), poor communication between senior leadership and employees, and lack of work-life balance.

CBP's exit survey also collected information on where respondents intended to seek employment after leaving CBP. Among the law enforcement personnel who responded to CBP's exit survey in FY 2023, 31 percent (273 of 894 respondents) said they planned to leave CBP to work in the private sector. Additionally, 28 percent (253 of 894 respondents) said they planned to leave CBP for another federal service position, either within or outside of DHS. Over recent years, CBP has seen a significant increase in the number of respondents who

⁴⁷CBP began conducting these exit surveys in August 2018 in response to a recommendation we made. See [GAO-18-487](#).

reported they were leaving CBP for the private sector, ranging from around 14 percent in FY 2020 to around 38 percent in FY 2022.

CBP's exit survey also indicates that an increasing number of law enforcement personnel are retiring or leaving the agency before their mandatory retirement date.⁴⁸ Specifically, in FY 2023, around 50 percent of law enforcement respondents (330 of 666) who indicated they were retiring said that they were retiring before their mandatory retirement age, an increase from 40 percent of respondents (82 of 201) in FY 2019. In addition:

- CBP's retirement trend data showed that each year since FY 2018, OFO lost more CBP Officers to retirements than to separations from the agency.⁴⁹ However, the rate of CBP Officer separations steadily increased from 35 percent of total losses in FY 2018 to 43 percent in FY 2023.
- CBP lost more Border Patrol Agents to separations than retirements from FY 2018 through FY 2021, indicating that the majority of these agents were not retiring but were generally leaving to pursue other employment. Beginning in FY 2022, the rate of Border Patrol Agent retirements began to outpace separations from the agency, with retirements accounting for around 50 percent of total losses. This trend continued into FY 2024: retirements accounted for 57 percent of total losses through the second quarter of the fiscal year. Additionally, retirements were on track to outpace those experienced in FY 2023, as 334 Border Patrol Agents retired during the first half of FY 2024, which is more than half of the retirements CBP experienced in FY 2023 (589 retirements).

CBP is Preparing for an Upcoming Retirement Surge

Beginning in FY 2027, CBP anticipates significant increases in retirements across its law enforcement positions. This retirement surge could have significant effects on CBP's ability to meet its national security mission, according to CBP. For CBP Officers, the expected increase in retirements originates from a 2007 statutory provision that allows officers hired after 2008 to retire at age 50 with 20 years of law enforcement service.⁵⁰ CBP projects that many officers who reach their 20 years of service will opt to retire, and that retirement rates will dramatically increase starting in 2028. For Border Patrol Agents, CBP expects significant increases in retirement rates due to a hiring surge for this position that took place from 2007 to 2009. Agents hired during this period will be eligible to retire beginning in 2027.⁵¹ CBP projects a more gradual increase in Border Patrol retirement rates as compared to CBP Officer retirements, but due to expected difficulties in filling these positions, CBP anticipates that the resulting staffing shortfall will be much larger. Additionally, CBP also

⁴⁸Generally, the mandatory retirement date for law enforcement personnel is the last day of the month in which the officer or agent reaches 57 years of age or 20 years of law enforcement service if then over that age. 5 U.S.C. § 8425(b)(1).

⁴⁹A separation indicates that an employee has left CBP due to a change to a lower grade level, competitive promotion, conversion, death, reassignment, removal, resignation, or termination.

⁵⁰The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2008 contained special retirement provisions for CBP Officers hired after July 6, 2008, enabling these officers to retire at age 50 with 20 years of law enforcement service, or any age with 25 years of law enforcement service and receive an annuity. Pub. L. No. 110-161, § 535, 121 Stat. 1844, 2075-78 (2007). Previously, CBP Officers would have had to retire at age 55 after completing 30 years of service or at age 60 after completing 20 years of service to be entitled to an annuity. See 5 U.S.C. § 8336(a)-(b).

⁵¹Border Patrol Agents qualify for retirement coverage under 5 U.S.C. § 8336(c), which entitles employees to annuities if they retire at any age after 25 years of service or at age 50 with at least 20 years of service.

expects to lose a significant number of Air Interdiction Agents to retirements between FY 2028 and 2032, and a moderate number of Marine Interdiction Agents.

CBP developed a strategic plan to address the projected surge in retirements across the three law enforcement components.⁵² Along with staffing projections, the strategic plan assesses available resources and identifies strategies to minimize the size and effects of staffing shortfalls, particularly if CBP is not able to maintain staffing levels needed to achieve its mission. For example, beginning in FY 2025, CBP plans to hire a surplus of CBP Officers so that it has sufficient officers on board and fully trained when the retirement wave begins in FY 2028. In addition, starting in FY 2026, CBP plans to offer retention incentives to Border Patrol Agents who will be eligible for voluntary retirement, if funding is available. CBP has projected that it will need \$53 million annually from FY 2026 through FY 2029 to implement its plan of providing a 10 percent increase to these agents' salaries.

Additional steps CBP plans to take to minimize the operational impacts on Border Patrol include (1) relocating personnel from the northern border and coastal border to the southwest border; (2) obtaining assistance from state, local, and federal law enforcement partners; (3) increasing surveillance technology to improve situational awareness and efficiency; and (4) continuing to utilize its new Border Patrol Processing Coordinator position. CBP created this processing coordinator position in 2019 to support Border Patrol Agents by performing tasks such as transporting individuals in Border Patrol custody and processing individuals apprehended by agents.⁵³

CBP intends to update the strategic plan's projected staffing shortfalls and resource gaps on a quarterly basis. These periodic updates will be important to provide indications of whether CBP's assumptions and planned strategies to mitigate high retirement rates are working as intended, and whether a change in the course of action is needed.

CBP Offered Monetary Incentives and Implemented Other Initiatives to Improve Retention

To address challenges with retention, CBP has leveraged the use of financial incentives and other pay authorities, as well as promoted the availability of employee health and wellness programs.

Financial Incentives and Other Pay Authorities

CBP has offered retention incentives, relocation incentives, and special salary rates as part of its efforts to improve retention of law enforcement personnel. Leveraging existing pay authorities is a leading practice for

⁵²The explanatory statement accompanying the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023, required CBP to submit a human capital strategic plan that included an assessment of potential operational impacts, hiring and recruitment strategies that incorporate lessons learned from previous hiring efforts, resource requirements for CBP operational components, and funding requirements to maintain operational effectiveness. 2023 Explanatory Statement, 168 Cong. Rec. S8553, S8557 (daily ed. Dec. 20, 2022).

⁵³As of April 2024, 1,376 of these coordinators were on board, which has helped reduce the number of temporary details that Border Patrol Agents performed at the southwest border, according to CBP officials. Officials also said that these processing coordinators reduced the amount of time that Border Patrol Agents spent on processing paperwork, allowing these agents to spend more time on their law enforcement duties.

retaining federal employees.⁵⁴ In FY 2023 all three CBP operational components offered multiple types of monetary incentives to help retain law enforcement personnel and improve attrition.

Retention incentives. Since our 2018 report, CBP has increased its use of financial incentives to retain law enforcement personnel. For example, in FY 2019 Border Patrol offered a 5 percent retention incentive to Border Patrol Agents at the GS-12 and GS-13 grade levels who participated in a 12-month service agreement. This incentive was part of a Border Patrol Agent retention strategy during a period of increased encounters across the southwest border in 2019. The total amount expended for these incentives was over \$73 million for FY 2019, up from \$183,000 in FY 2018.⁵⁵ Officials said that CBP determined that this retention incentive was not needed for Border Patrol Agents after FY 2019 due to the dramatic decrease in the number of noncitizen encounters at the border during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵⁶ From FY 2020 through FY 2023, the amount of Border Patrol Agent retention incentives dropped to under \$1 million per year and were offered only in locations that experienced high rates of attrition. For example, Border Patrol offered a 10 percent retention incentive in 2023 for supervisory and nonsupervisory staff in Sanderson and Presidio Stations, located on the southwest border of Texas.

AMO also offered retention incentives for positions and locations experiencing high rates of attrition. Specifically, since FY 2023, AMO has offered retention incentives to Marine Interdiction Agents in Long Beach, California, and in St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands, due to the high cost of living. Additionally, in FY 2023, Air Interdiction Agents in three remote locations received retention incentives and all Air Interdiction Agents with over 13 years of service received an incentive. See table 4 for CBP’s use of retention incentives in FY 2023. Other federal law enforcement agencies such as Secret Service and DEA offered retention incentives for certain law enforcement positions between FY 2018 and 2023.

Table 4: Fiscal Year 2023 Retention Incentives for CBP Law Enforcement Personnel

Operational component	Incentive rate ^a	Position	Location
Border Patrol	10 percent	Supervisory and nonsupervisory Border Patrol Agents	Sanderson and Presidio Stations, TX
Air and Marine Operations	10 percent	Air Interdiction Agents	Grand Forks, ND; San Angelo, TX; and Sierra Vista, AZ
Air and Marine Operations	10 percent	Marine Interdiction Agents	Long Beach, CA; and St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands
Air and Marine Operations	10 percent	Air Interdiction Agents with 13+ years of service	All

Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) documentation. | GAO-24-107029

⁵⁴GAO-19-181.

⁵⁵The FY 2019 retention incentive for Border Patrol Agents was approved in May 2019 and paid on a quarterly basis from June 2019 through June 2020.

⁵⁶In March 2020, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued an order pursuant to Title 42 which temporarily suspended entry of certain noncitizens into the U.S. from Canada or Mexico who would otherwise be detained by CBP. Under this order, noncitizens were immediately expelled to their country of last transit to prevent the spread of communicable diseases. Title 42 expulsions began on March 21, 2020, and ended on May 11, 2023. See 42 U.S.C. § 265; 42 C.F.R. § 71.40. The Title 42 order was lifted when the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency ended in May 2023. See 85 Fed. Reg. 16,559 (Mar. 24, 2020); 85 Fed. Reg. 17,060 (Mar. 26, 2020); 88 Fed. Reg. 31,314 (May 16, 2023) (discussing the expiration of the Title 42 order); see also, e.g., 85 Fed. Reg. 65,806 (Oct. 13, 2020).

^aUnless waived based on a critical agency need, the total amount of the retention incentive paid to an employee during a service period may not exceed 10 percent of the employee's basic pay if paid under subsection (c) (high risk that a significant portion of employees in the group would be likely to leave in the absence of retention bonuses); or 25 percent of the employee's basic pay if paid under subsection (b) (employee's unique qualifications or special need of the agency makes the employee essential to retain, and without the bonus, the employee would likely leave Federal service or for a different Federal position) . 5 U.S.C. § 5754(e)(1).

CBP reviews retention incentives on an annual basis to determine whether the incentive is still needed to maintain staffing levels where retention challenges exist. Officials review the reasons why the retention incentive was originally approved, whether law enforcement personnel are likely to leave their assigned duty station, and whether CBP has competitive candidates in the pipeline to fill positions. As a result of these reviews, CBP made changes to the incentives offered each fiscal year. For example, in March 2023 CBP implemented a retention incentive for Air Interdiction Agents after determining that (1) it needed more candidates in the pipeline for this position and (2) agents with 13 years or more of piloting experience were likely to leave federal service for the private sector. Additionally, CBP extended a 10 percent retention incentive for Air Interdiction Agents located at certain duty stations from FY 2023 through FY 2024 after determining that AMO would continue to face challenges with retaining qualified pilots.

Relocation incentives. Relocation incentives may be paid to employees who relocate and accept an appointment in a different geographic area and when the position is likely to be difficult to fill in the absence of an incentive. In FY 2023, OFO provided a 25 percent salary increase to supervisory and nonsupervisory law enforcement personnel to relocate to remote ports of entry along the northern U.S. border, such as certain locations in Montana. Border Patrol also offered 25 percent relocation incentives to personnel in 19 of its geographically remote stations due to high attrition rates at those locations and is continuing to offer relocation incentives in FY 2024. Additionally, from January 2017 to October 2020, AMO offered relocation incentives to current federal employees who relocated to the Caribbean Air and Marine Branch or its subordinate units. See table 5 for CBP's use of relocation incentives in FY 2023. CBP reviews relocation incentives on an annual basis to determine whether the incentive is still needed.

Table 5: Fiscal Year 2023 Relocation Incentives for CBP Law Enforcement Personnel

Operational component	Incentive rate ^a	Position	Location
Office of Field Operations	25 percent	Supervisory and nonsupervisory CBP Officers	Del Bonita, Piegan, Scobey, Turner, Wild Horse/Havre, and Whitlash Ports of Entry, MT
Office of Field Operations	25 percent	Nonsupervisory CBP Officers	Alcan, Dutch Harbor, and Nome Ports of Entry, AK
Border Patrol	25 percent	Nonsupervisory Border Patrol Agents	Ajo and Douglas Stations, AZ; El Centro and Calexico Stations, CA; Havre, Plentywood, Scobey, Malta, Sweetgrass Stations, MT; Portal Station, ND; Lordsburg Station, NM; Alpine, Big Bend National Park Sub-Station, Marfa, Presidio, Sanderson, Eagle Pass North, Eagle Pass South, and Carrizo Springs Stations, TX

Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) documentation. | GAO-24-107029

^aThe total amount of the relocation incentive paid to an employee during a service period may not exceed 25 percent of the employee's annual rate of basic pay in effect at the beginning of the service period multiplied by the number of years in the service period, not to exceed 4 years. 5 U.S.C. § 5753(c)(1), (d)(1); 5 C.F.R. § 575.109(b)(1).

Special salary rates. Special salary rates establish a higher rate of basic pay and are paid to employees who fill a specific role in a geographic area where the agency experiences challenges in retaining personnel. In FY 2023, OFO offered special salary rates to law enforcement personnel stationed at the remote port of entry in Portal, North Dakota, and for high cost of living in San Francisco, California. Since FY 2019, AMO has used special salary rates to reduce attrition among Air Interdiction Agents to better compete with private airlines. The

total amount of funding allocated for special salary rates for Air Interdiction Agents ranged from around \$26 million in FY 2019 to around \$67 million in FY 2023. Border Patrol does not offer special salary rates for its law enforcement positions. The Office of Personnel Management does not require CBP to conduct an annual review of its special salary rates unless the agency wants to increase, decrease, or terminate the special salary rate. See table 6 for CBP’s use of special salary rates in FY 2023.

Table 6: Fiscal Year 2023 Special Salary Rates for CBP Law Enforcement Personnel

Operational component	Incentive rate ^a	Position	Location
Office of Field Operations	40 percent	Supervisory and nonsupervisory CBP Officers	Portal, ND
Office of Field Operations	52 percent	Supervisory and nonsupervisory CBP Officers	San Francisco, CA
Air and Marine Operations	35 percent	Air Interdiction Agents	All locations

Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) documentation. | GAO-24-107029

^aThe higher minimum rate of pay during a service period may not exceed the maximum rate of basic pay (excluding any locality-based comparability payment under section 5304 or similar provision of law) for the grade or level by more than 30 percent, and no rate may be established under this section in excess of the rate of basic pay payable for level IV of the Executive Schedule. 5 U.S.C. § 5305(a)(1).

Health and Wellness Initiatives

CBP’s Workforce Care Directorate, which was established in 2023, manages several initiatives to support the wellness of law enforcement personnel and their families and improve retention of these personnel. For example, this directorate manages CBP’s employee assistance program, which provides health coaching, legal assistance, and counseling support for CBP employees, their partners, and dependent children. Additional support programs include a childcare subsidy program, veteran support program, substance and alcohol misuse program, and a financial wellness program. Leveraging benefits and incentives, such as work-life programs, is a leading practice for retaining federal employees.⁵⁷

CBP has also worked to remove barriers that inhibit law enforcement personnel from seeking and using mental health services. Specifically, a memorandum of understanding that CBP signed in May 2023 states that employees will not be subjected to disciplinary or adverse actions, a fitness-for-duty exam, or retaliation solely based on the utilization of mental health resources or for notifying CBP that they are experiencing mental health issues and are considering treatment. This memorandum also states that employees experiencing mental health issues will be afforded flexibilities such as paid family and medical leave, annual leave, sick leave, or unpaid leave. The memorandum states that its purpose is to reduce the stigma in seeking mental health services, resources, and treatment. Officials told us that prior to this memorandum, if employees expressed a mental health issue such as suicidal thoughts, they might undergo a fitness for duty evaluation, which could result in CBP terminating the employee.

⁵⁷[GAO-19-181](#).

CBP Has Taken Steps to Address Longstanding Challenges with Morale and Engagement

Morale has been a longstanding challenge for CBP.⁵⁸ Since FY 2005, the agency's scores in employee engagement and satisfaction have frequently been in the lowest quartile among similarly sized federal agencies, as measured by the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS).⁵⁹ CBP was ranked 432 of 459 subcomponent agencies in the 2023 Best Places to Work in the Federal Government rankings—lower than most other law enforcement agencies in this category.⁶⁰ Comparatively, DEA was ranked 233, FBI was ranked 412, Secret Service was ranked 413, and ICE was ranked 437. In addition, CBP's 2023 Employee Engagement Index score (61 percent) remained below the government-wide average (72 percent), although CBP's score increased 2 percentage points (up from 59 percent in 2022). This index measures employee perceptions of leadership integrity and leadership behaviors and is based on employees' responses to questions about communication, interpersonal relationships between employees and supervisors, and employee motivation.⁶¹

CBP has taken actions to help assess and address its morale and employee engagement challenges. These actions include annually developing a CBP-wide employee engagement action plan, developing CBP component-specific action plans, developing a communications plan for employee engagement, and implementing initiatives to recognize employees and obtain employee perspectives on organizational climate.

Employee Engagement Action Plan. Since 2004, CBP has developed an Employee Engagement Action Plan annually to assess the state of morale and improve engagement.⁶² To develop its FY 2023–2024 Employee Engagement Action Plan, CBP reviewed its 2022 FEVS results, its 2022 exit survey results, and conducted 48 one-on-one interviews with frontline employees to better understand the issues underlying low FEVS scores.⁶³ CBP also reviewed the results of a DHS pulse survey and a contractor-supported

⁵⁸We have designated human capital management, including addressing challenges in the federal workforce such as employee morale, as a government-wide high-risk area. See GAO, *High-Risk Series: Efforts Made to Achieve Progress Need to Be Maintained and Expanded to Fully Address All Areas*, [GAO-23-106203](#), (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 20, 2023) for GAO's most recent high-risk report. We have also reported on employee morale challenges within other DHS components as well as other law enforcement agencies. See [GAO-24-106052](#) and GAO, *Bureau of Prisons: Opportunities Exist to Better Analyze Staffing Data and Improve Employee Wellness Programs*, [GAO-21-123](#), (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 24, 2021).

⁵⁹The U.S. Office of Personnel Management administered FEVS biennially from 2002–2008 and has administered it annually since 2010. Employee responses to FEVS questions measure their perceptions of whether, and to what extent, conditions characterizing successful organizations are present in their agencies. Higher FEVS scores indicate that an agency has the conditions that lead to higher employee engagement, which is a component of morale.

⁶⁰The Partnership for Public Service and the Boston Consulting Group calculate these rankings using responses to questions in the Office of Personnel Management's Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey. 2023 results were the most recent available as of May 2024 and include non-law enforcement respondents.

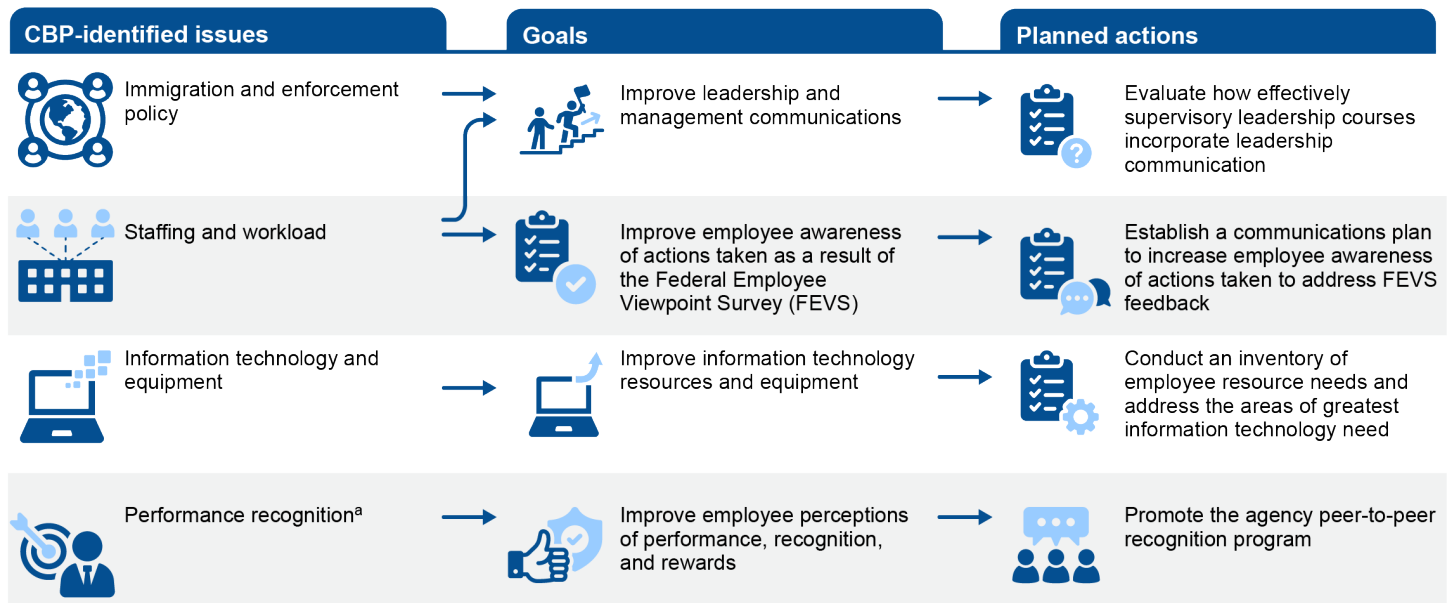
⁶¹The Office of Personnel Management calculates the Employee Engagement Index by averaging the percent of positive responses to the 15 survey questions in the index. The Employee Engagement Index is measured in percentage points on a scale of 0 to 100 with higher scores indicating an agency has the conditions that lead to higher employee engagement.

⁶²Action planning is a strategic tool that assists agencies in their efforts to improve employee engagement. Since 2012, the DHS Office of the Chief Human Capital Officer has required major operational components to develop an employee engagement action plan to improve employee engagement and submit the plan for review.

⁶³The 2022 FEVS results for CBP were the most recent at the time of the FY 2023–2024 Employee Engagement Action Plan issuance.

assessment.⁶⁴ Through these methods, CBP identified several new and continuing operational and policy-based issues as driving factors in the decline of employee engagement: (1) immigration and enforcement policy, (2) information technology and equipment concerns, and (3) workload and staffing. CBP then identified specific goals and actions to address these issues. Additionally, CBP continued actions outlined in its 2022 action plan designed to promote increased employee recognition, appreciation, and cohesion. Figure 14 depicts the CBP-identified issues, goals, and planned actions described in its FY 2023–2024 Employee Engagement Action Plan.

Figure 14: CBP’s Fiscal Year 2023–2024 Employee Engagement Action Plan



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) documentation; Icons-Studio/stock.adobe.com. | GAO-24-107029

Note: According to CBP’s plan, because of the limitations to what CBP leadership can do to change immigration and enforcement policies affecting its frontline workforce, CBP plans to address concerns about these policies by improving leadership management and communication. Specifically, CBP plans to enhance leaders’ skills on how to communicate to the workforce and improve transparency from all levels of leadership on the ways that policy changes will affect the day-to-day work of frontline employees.

^aCBP originally identified performance recognition as an issue impacting employee morale and engagement in its FY 2022 Employee Engagement Action Plan and carried the issue and associated goals and actions to its FY 2023–2024 plan.

To achieve its goal of improving leadership and management communications, CBP’s action plan states that the agency intends to (1) evaluate the extent to which its required leadership training courses effectively incorporate leadership communication for employee engagement and (2) incorporate the resulting recommendations for improvement. As a result of these actions, in February 2024 CBP was in the process of introducing a new leadership engagement training curriculum and was seeking a contract for leadership

⁶⁴DHS conducted a pulse survey on employee basic needs in November 2022, and asked what employees needed to do their job better. CBP employees’ open-ended comments noted issues related to immigration and enforcement, leadership and management, information technology, and equipment and resource challenges. In 2022, DHS partnered with a contractor to develop teams consisting of consultants and subject matter experts to identify employee morale and engagement challenges within frontline OFO and Border Patrol offices. CBP incorporated the teams’ findings on information technology and equipment issues into one of its four goals in the FY 2023–2024 Employee Engagement Action Plan.

coaching services. CBP plans to monitor employees' responses to FEVS questions on leadership communication to assess whether these actions are having the intended impact.

To address employees' concerns about staffing and workload, CBP's action plan states that CBP will seek to improve leadership development and communication to generate an organizational climate in which employees feel heard and supported.⁶⁵ The plan also states that CBP will aim to improve employees' belief in organizational change efforts as a result of the FEVS. For example, CBP established a communications plan that included a web page on CBP's internal website that addresses specific actions being taken as a result of the survey. Additionally, CBP developed a best practices guide on resources that can be used to address organizational challenges, such as workload and attrition.

To address information technology resource and equipment concerns, CBP established a dashboard system to track the age of workstation equipment and replace the oldest workstations. CBP also requested 100 additional technology field support positions so that field technicians can target and address the areas of greatest technology need.

To improve employee perceptions of recognition and performance, CBP planned to (1) provide management with additional guidance on using employee recognition tools, (2) enhance its webinar trainings to include a greater focus on recognition, (3) promote its Values-in-Practice program to encourage employee recognition across all levels, and (4) implement a retirement recognition program. As of February 2024, CBP has completed three of its four planned actions to meet this goal.

Operational Component Action Plans. Since 2022, CBP's operational components have developed their own Employee Engagement Action Plans intended to improve employee engagement. To develop their FY 2023–2024 action plans, OFO, Border Patrol, and AMO reviewed their lowest scores from the 2022 FEVS results to identify focus areas for improvement. Additionally, Border Patrol officials told us that they conducted open forums for both union and non-bargaining unit employees to provide feedback on how to improve morale and address the challenges identified through the FEVS.

To address challenges related to leadership communication and motivation, OFO plans to implement a new leadership training, with messaging initiatives on how its leadership can best integrate employees in the decision-making process. Border Patrol plans to improve its employee communications by expressing the "why" behind agency decisions. Border Patrol also plans to create a suggestion box to allow employees to communicate ideas to management. Additionally, AMO plans to create a strategic communications plan and administer a pulse survey to assess whether AMO's leadership communication efforts are improving. Further, to address challenges related to performance recognition, AMO plans to provide its leaders with guidance and tips on using available employee recognition tools, including the use of nonmonetary awards.

Engagement-in-Action communications plan. In 2023, CBP launched its Engagement-in-Action communications campaign to deliver messaging on the actions CBP is taking to address FEVS results. The goal of the communications campaign is to increase employee engagement and improve the workplace experience by creating video, email, and intranet postings that highlight organizational improvement efforts

⁶⁵The 2023–2024 action plan also identifies actions that CBP has taken to alleviate workload issues that are outside the immediate scope of the action plan. These actions include conducting workload studies, implementing program management software and training, using contractor support, surge hiring Border Patrol Processing Coordinators, and capping mandatory 12-hour overtime shifts in some regions.

throughout CBP. For example, officials told us that the campaign features employees sharing positive outcomes of morale-related initiatives to boost other employees' belief that their feedback will result in agency action.

CBP's "Values-in-Practice" program. This program is an agency-wide peer-to-peer recognition effort that allows CBP employees to acknowledge the work of colleagues across all levels of the agency. The program was deployed in response to CBP's 2023–2024 Employee Engagement Action Plan goal of improving employee perceptions of performance, recognition, and rewards. According to CBP, employees made over 2,700 submissions to the program between December 2022 and September 2023. To continue to increase program awareness, CBP's Strategic Partnerships and Communications Division has developed ongoing communication efforts.

Awards and recognition programs. CBP's program offices participate in employee awards and recognition programs that offer monetary, performance-based awards; nonmonetary honorary awards; time-off awards; and quality step increases. Implementing meaningful rewards programs is a leading practice for retaining federal employees.⁶⁶

Organizational Health Assessment. CBP deployed its Organizational Health Assessment initiative in 2023 to identify challenges that affect morale in specific frontline offices and develop interventions to address those challenges. As part of this initiative, CBP implemented a workplace climate survey in three OFO field offices—El Paso, New Orleans, and Los Angeles—from January to February 2023 to identify the job-related demands and resources that drive employee stress, burnout, engagement, and motivation. The results of this survey indicate that top drivers of strain within these OFO field offices included a lack of work-life balance, emotional demands, workload, and work intensity. The top drivers of motivation included mission significance, meaningful work, recognition, role clarity, and support. This survey also helped CBP identify challenges related to scheduling uncertainty, communication and coordination between teams, and support from supervisors. Officials told us that these challenges were not evident in CBP's 2022 FEVS results.

While these new initiatives are positive steps to address employee morale and engagement issues, it is too soon to tell the extent that these initiatives will address CBP's employee morale and engagement challenges. Given the longstanding challenges CBP has faced in these areas, it will be important for CBP to continue to focus on ways to improve employee morale and engagement.

Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to DHS and the Department of Justice for review and comment. DHS provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate.

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, and the Attorney General. In addition, the report is available at no charge on GAO's website at <http://www.gao.gov>.

⁶⁶GAO-19-181.

Letter

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-8777 or gablerr@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on

the last page of this report. GAO staff who made major contributions to this report are listed in appendix I.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rebecca Gambler". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Rebecca Gambler
Director
Homeland Security and Justice

Appendix I: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

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Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, Adam Hoffman (Assistant Director), Liz Poulsen (Analyst-in-Charge), Nasreen Badat, Benjamin Crossley, Amanda Miller, Catherine Morrissey, Sasan J. “Jon” Najmi, Mary Offutt-Reagin, and Simran Sandhu made significant contributions to this report.

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