

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-16-342](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Federal agencies have the discretion to authorize administrative leave—an excused absence without loss of pay or charge to leave—for personnel matters, such as when investigating employees for misconduct allegations. In October 2014, GAO reported on the use of administrative leave in the federal government. GAO found that, between fiscal years 2011 and 2013, 263 federal employees were on this type of leave for 1 year or more during this 3-year period. Of these, 71 were DHS employees.

GAO was asked to examine DHS's use of administrative leave across directorates, offices, and components (DHS components). This report describes (1) the number of DHS employees who were on administrative leave for 1 year or more for personnel matters from fiscal years 2011 through 2015, (2) the factors that contribute to the length of time employees are on administrative leave, and (3) the extent to which DHS has policies and procedures for managing such leave. GAO used data from DHS and the Office of Personnel Management, reviewed DHS policies and procedures, interviewed DHS officials, and reviewed information on selected cases of DHS employees placed on administrative leave. Cases were selected based on length of leave, reason for using leave, and DHS component, among other things.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DHS evaluate the results of its administrative leave policy and share the evaluation results with the department's components. DHS concurred with the recommendation.

View [GAO-16-342](#). For more information, contact Andrew Von Ah at (213) 830-1011 or vonaha@gao.gov.

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ADMINISTRATIVE LEAVE

Evaluation of DHS's New Policy Can Help Identify Progress toward Reducing Leave Use

What GAO Found

Between fiscal years 2011 and 2015, 116 Department of Homeland Security (DHS) employees were on administrative leave for personnel matters for 1 year or more, with a total estimated salary cost of \$19.8 million for this period. Of these 116 employees on administrative leave:

- 69 employees (59 percent) were for matters related to misconduct allegations,
- 28 employees (24 percent) were for matters related to fitness for duty issues, and
- 19 employees (or 16 percent) were for matters related to security clearance investigations.

As of September 30, 2015, DHS reported that of these 116 employees:

- 68 employees (59 percent) were separated from the agency,
- 32 employees (28 percent) were back on duty,
- 2 employees (2 percent) were on indefinite suspension, and
- 14 employees (12 percent) remained on administrative leave.

Several factors can contribute to the length of time an employee is on administrative leave for personnel matters, such as certain legal procedural steps that must be completed before suspending or removing an employee, or time needed for completing investigations. For example, in one particularly long and complex misconduct investigation, an employee was on administrative leave for over 2 years while investigating officials conducted over 50 interviews abroad.

In September 2015, DHS issued an administrative leave policy to ensure proper and limited use of administrative leave across the department. The policy clarifies when such leave is proper, elevates the level of management approval needed for longer periods of leave, and requires quarterly reporting of leave use to component heads and the Chief Human Capital Officer. Component policies and procedures varied prior to the DHS policy; however, component officials stated they would make changes needed to comply with the new policy. Federal internal control standards call for agencies to conduct routine monitoring and separate evaluations to ensure agency controls are effective, and to share their results. While the quarterly reports required under DHS's policy provide routine monitoring information, the policy does not address how DHS will evaluate the effectiveness of the policy and related procedures or how DHS will share lessons learned. DHS officials said they plan to learn from reviewing quarterly reports, but agreed evaluations could be valuable in assessing policy effectiveness. Evaluations of DHS's administrative leave policy can help the department identify effective practices for managing administrative leave, as well as agency inefficiencies that increase the time employees spend on such leave. Sharing evaluation results with components may help ensure DHS's administrative leave policy and procedures are effective, and are achieving the intended result of reducing leave use.