



April 2023

OVERSEAS REAL PROPERTY

State Should Improve Strategic Workforce Planning for Facilities Maintenance Staff

Why GAO Did This Study

State operates and maintains over 9,000 owned real property assets, at over 275 overseas posts. These facilities require routine operations and maintenance overseen by a network of facilities maintenance and locally employed staff.

GAO was asked to review facilities maintenance and locally employed staff at overseas posts. This report (1) describes trends in the U.S. Foreign Service facilities maintenance workforce for fiscal years 2012 to 2022 and challenges State identified related to hiring and retaining these staff, (2) describes the workforce of locally employed facilities maintenance staff and challenges State identified related to hiring and retaining these staff, and (3) assesses the extent to which State has adopted leading practices for human capital management for both of these workforces.

GAO analyzed staffing data and State documentation related to human capital management. GAO also interviewed officials at State headquarters and five overseas posts. GAO selected these posts based on each post's type of facility manager, size, and geographic region.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making three recommendations that State maintain an inventory of U.S. Foreign Service facilities maintenance skills, review which bureau should lead the U.S. Foreign Service facilities maintenance staff assignment process, and develop guidance for posts to maintain skills inventories of locally employed facilities maintenance staff. State concurred with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-23-105401](#). For more information, contact Nagla'a El-Hodiri, 202-512-7279 or ElHodiriN@gao.gov.

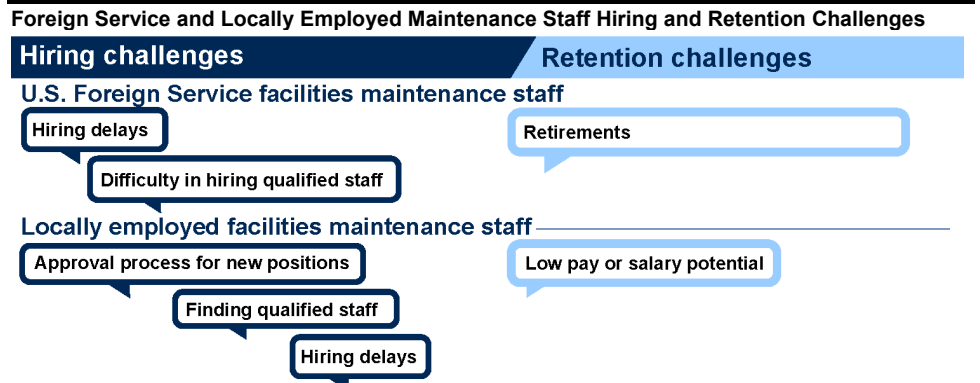
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State Should Improve Strategic Workforce Planning for Facilities Maintenance Staff

What GAO Found

The Department of State (State) has faced challenges hiring U.S. Foreign Service facilities maintenance staff, who are responsible for maintaining U.S. overseas properties that had a \$3 billion maintenance backlog as of fiscal year 2020. From fiscal year 2012 through 2022, the vacancy rate for these positions increased from 12 percent of 204 authorized positions to 23 percent of 244 authorized positions. State officials identified challenges in hiring and retaining these staff, including hiring delays and staff retirement.

State also employs more than 8,500 locally employed facilities maintenance staff to address overseas posts' maintenance needs. State officials identified challenges related to hiring and retaining locally employed facilities maintenance staff, such as English language requirements and low pay or salary potential.



Source: GAO analysis of Department of State interviews. | GAO-23-105401

For Foreign Service facilities maintenance staff, State has adopted five of the seven leading practices in strategic workforce planning that GAO evaluated. These include succession planning and assessing workforce needs. However, State does not maintain an inventory of Foreign Service facilities maintenance skills. Thus, it may not leverage these skills effectively. Further, State's current approach may limit its ability to match skills to the needs of overseas posts. Currently, State's regional bureaus are responsible for assigning these staff to posts in their regions, with advice from State's Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations. Regional bureau officials say they may be more aware of post-specific challenges, while officials from the Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations maintain they have a more global view of needs across posts and the workforce. State may be missing opportunities to leverage its knowledge and optimize the assignment of these staff to posts.

For locally employed staff, State has adopted five of six leading practices that GAO evaluated. For example, State assesses current and future workforce needs and posts have processes to address skill gaps. However, GAO found that one of the five selected posts maintained an inventory of locally employed staff skills--the sixth leading practice evaluated. State does not have any agency-wide guidance related to maintaining skills inventories, which limits posts' ability to conduct workforce planning and training efficiently.

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Abbreviations

DEIA	Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility
EHRI	Enterprise Human Resources Integration
FM	U.S. Foreign Service Facility Maintenance
FY	Fiscal Year
GTM	Bureau of Global Talent Management
ICASS	International Cooperative Administrative Support Services
LE	Locally Employed
OBO	Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations
OPM	Office of Personnel Management
ORSC	OBO Regional Support Center
TDY	Temporary Duty

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April 03, 2023

The Honorable Robert Menendez
Chairman
Committee on Foreign Relations
United States Senate

The Honorable Ami Bera
House of Representatives

The U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations (OBO) aims to provide safe, secure, resilient, and functional facilities for State and more than 30 other U.S. agencies that execute U.S. foreign policy goals around the world. OBO operates and maintains about 9,000 owned real-property assets at more than 275 overseas embassies and consulates (posts).¹ Maintaining these facilities is critical for safe and secure U.S. government operations, but as of fiscal year (FY) 2020, State's real-property assets had a deferred maintenance backlog of \$3 billion. State officials estimated that at FY 2020 maintenance funding levels, the backlog would take 30 to 40 years to address.²

State relies upon U.S. Foreign Service facilities maintenance (FM) staff and locally employed (LE) facilities maintenance staff to oversee and perform maintenance at its properties.³ However, we have reported that State faces challenges in meeting its overseas staffing needs, resulting in

¹State also leases over 15,000 other real property assets, largely residences for U.S. staff, a portion of which State is also responsible for maintaining. In general, depending on State policies and lease terms, State performs maintenance on long-term leased assets while property owners are responsible for maintenance of short-term leased assets.

²For more information, see GAO, *Overseas Real Property: Prioritizing Key Assets and Developing a Plan Could Help State Manage Its Estimated \$3 Billion Maintenance Backlog*, [GAO-21-497](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 15, 2021).

³For the purposes of this report, FM staff represent people within the Facility Management (6217) skill code in the Bureau of Global Talent Management's (GTM's) Global Employment Management System. The FM workforce includes personnel stationed overseas and in State's Washington, D.C. headquarters. At overseas posts, FM staff include facility managers, deputy facility managers, regional facility managers, and staff at OBO's Regional Support Centers. Headquarters positions generally cover management and training functions.

general Foreign Service staffing gaps.⁴ These challenges may affect State's ability to hire and retain the technical staff needed to address its maintenance backlog and protect the nearly \$74 billion in replacement value of overseas government-owned properties. Further, the amount of government-owned properties overseas continues to grow, due to an increase in the construction of new embassies, and a shift to owning rather than leasing staff housing.⁵

You asked us to review the FM workforce and LE maintenance staff at overseas posts. In this report, we: (1) describe trends in the FM workforce and challenges State identified in hiring and retaining this workforce; (2) describe the workforce of LE maintenance staff and challenges State identified in hiring and retaining these staff; (3) assess the extent to which State has employed leading practices for human capital management for its FM workforce; and (4) assess the extent to which State has employed leading practices for human capital management for its LE maintenance workforce.

To address our objectives on trends in the FM workforce, the composition of the LE workforce, and State's challenges in hiring and retaining FM and LE staff, we analyzed data from State's Bureau of Global Talent Management (GTM). We analyzed GTM's data related to employment, vacancies, employee location, and job series. We reviewed associated documentation and interviewed knowledgeable State officials about the quality of the data. We found the data fields we used to be sufficiently reliable for the purposes of this report. We also interviewed knowledgeable officials from OBO; the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs; an OBO Regional Support Center (ORSC) in Frankfurt, Germany; and the facility managers at five overseas posts (Cairo, Egypt; Dhaka, Bangladesh; Nassau, Bahamas; Seoul, South Korea; and Yaoundé, Cameroon). We selected this nongeneralizable sample of posts based on

⁴GAO, *Department of State: Integrated Action Plan Could Enhance Efforts to Reduce Persistent Overseas Foreign Service Vacancies*, [GAO-19-220](#) (Washington, D.C.: March 6, 2019); *Department of State: Foreign Service Midlevel Staffing Gaps Persist Despite Significant Increases in Hiring*, [GAO-12-721](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 14, 2012); *Department of State: Additional Steps Needed to Address Continuing Staffing and Experience Gaps at Hardship Posts*, [GAO-09-874](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sep. 17, 2009).

⁵Newly constructed embassies are usually larger than their predecessors. The total gross square footage of property that OBO maintains increased by 13 percent from 47.1 million in FY 2015 to 53.2 million in FY 2021.

a variety of factors, including variation in geographic regions and post sizes.

To assess the extent to which State has adopted human capital management practices for its FM and LE workforces, we first reviewed GAO's prior work in this area and identified relevant leading practices for human capital management.⁶ We selected two areas of leading practices: strategic workforce planning (seven practices) and diversity management (four practices).⁷ We analyzed documentary evidence from OBO, GTM, and the selected overseas posts, such as workforce plans and assessments of workforce needs at the departmental, bureau, and post level.⁸ We also interviewed officials from State bureaus, offices, and the five posts we selected regarding human capital management practices for the FM workforce and LE facilities maintenance staff. For a detailed description of our objectives, scope and methodology, see appendix I.

We conducted this performance audit from September 2021 to March 2023 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

⁶*Diversity Management: Expert-Identified Leading Practices and Agency Examples.* [GAO-05-90](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 14, 2005); *Human Capital: Key Principles for Effective Strategic Workforce Planning.* [GAO-04-39](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 11, 2003); *A Model of Strategic Human Capital Management.* [GAO-02-373SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 15, 2002).

⁷We focus on the strategic workforce planning and diversity management because they are more applicable to the analysis of a subset of a workforce (FM and LE staff), whereas other leading practices are better suited to agency-wide analysis. We did not review the workforce planning leading practice on succession planning for LE staff because our interviews with overseas posts indicated many facilities sections do not have many levels of progression that require succession planning to fill. We also did not review the four diversity management practices for LE maintenance staff. As of December 2021, State had not defined how it could address diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility (DEIA) issues for LE staff, who face different issues and cultural barriers in different countries, according to officials from State's Office of Diversity and Inclusion. However, the DEIA Strategic Plan, published in September 2022, includes ways in which the Department plans to address DEIA issues for LE staff.

⁸We reviewed the leading practices and evidence of State's related efforts to determine the extent to which State had adopted specific practices. Specifically, for each leading practice we determined that State had: adopted the practice if our evidence showed that State's relevant efforts met all parts of the practice; partially adopted the practice if our evidence showed that State's relevant efforts met some, but not all, parts of the practice; and not adopted the practice if our evidence showed that State did not have efforts that met any part of the practice.

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

Background

FM Workforce Staffing at Overseas Posts

FM staff work predominantly at overseas posts, filling roles as facility managers, deputy facility managers, and regional facility managers. According to data from the Global Employment Management System, 94 percent of FM staff worked at overseas posts as of September 2022.

While OBO identifies posts with available entry-level FM positions, GTM directs FM staff's post assignments during their first two tours (i.e., two post assignments), each of which lasts 2 years, according to State officials. Starting with the third tour, State provides each FM staff person a list of upcoming vacancies for which that person may compete. The individual then submits a list of preferred positions, known as bids, to the Office of Career Development and Assignments within GTM. At that point, State's regional bureaus have the primary role in selecting FM staff for posts in the bureaus' respective regions.⁹ OBO provides input to the regional bureaus on the individuals' qualifications for specific overseas posts.

LE Staff at Overseas Posts

State relies on LE staff to support its global mission. LE staff include foreign nationals, U.S. citizen residents of that country, and eligible family members¹⁰ overseas employed via personal services contracts.¹¹ LE staff accounted for 68 percent of State's workforce as of September 2022, and often compose the largest number of State employees at each post. OBO officials stated that overseas posts hire their own LE staff, which the posts fund through the International Cooperative Administrative Support

⁹State has six geographic regional bureaus: African Affairs, East Asian and Pacific Affairs, European and Eurasian Affairs, Near Eastern Affairs, South and Central Asian Affairs, and Western Hemisphere Affairs.

¹⁰According to 3 FAM 7121, eligible family members are individuals that meet certain criteria including that they are the spouse or domestic partner of a sponsoring employee, among other things.

¹¹According to State's Foreign Affairs Manual, a personal service contract may not exceed one year but may be renewed annually for up to four additional years. According to State, OBO's authority to use personal service contracts is derived from Section 5 of the Foreign Service Buildings Act of 1926, as amended (22 U.S.C. § 296).

Services (ICASS) system.¹² ICASS is the principal means by which State and other U.S. government agencies provide and share the cost of common support services at posts, such as the costs of LE maintenance staff and the operation of utilities (e.g. costs related to power, heating, and cooling).¹³ Agencies with employees working at overseas posts pay their share of posts' ICASS costs corresponding to their usage of ICASS-funded services.

LE maintenance staff positions include engineering and technical trade positions such as building automation, electrical, mechanical, and plumbing roles, as well as gardening and custodial services. See figure 1 for examples of LE staff conducting their work.

¹²ICASS is a customer-driven, voluntary interagency mechanism for managing and funding administrative support services abroad. ICASS gives posts the authority to determine how services are delivered, at what cost and by whom; has customer service standards established by the post, with the service provider formally accountable to the customer; and incorporates a full-cost recovery system through a no-year working capital fund. The goals of ICASS are to provide quality administrative services and increase customer satisfaction; reduce and contain costs; promote local empowerment; and establish a simple, transparent and equitable cost-distribution system. (6 FAM 911.4)

¹³In addition to funding LE staff and maintenance, State and other U.S. government tenant agencies use ICASS to fund information management, human resources services, security guard services, and other support functions.

Figure 1: Examples of Locally Employed Maintenance Staff Conducting Work



Source: Department of State. | GAO-23-105401

Selected Human Capital Management Practices

Leading practices in human capital management can help federal agencies develop strategies for hiring and retaining staff, and foster a positive work environment where individual similarities and differences are valued. We focused on two areas of human capital management: strategic workforce planning and diversity management (see table 1).

Table 1: Selected Human Capital Management Leading Practices

Strategic Workforce Planning Leading Practice	Description of Leading Practice
Have linkages between the strategic workforce plan and the agency's strategic plan	Organizations ensure the needed skills and competencies are linked to the agency's mission and long-term strategic goals.
Establish and maintain an inventory of employee skills and competencies (skills and supporting behaviors)	Organizations develop a knowledge, skills, and competencies inventory for employees and update it regularly to determine if there is an increase in the inventory of skills.
Have a process to address skills or competency gaps	Organizations have an assortment of effective tools to bring qualified applicants onboard to fill skill gaps.
Have succession plans for leadership and other critical positions	Organizations foster a committed leadership team and providing reasonable continuity through succession planning.
Approach workforce planning strategically, basing decisions on mission needs, customer expectations, workload, and workforce	Organizations with effective deployment strategies can enable an organization to have the right people, with the right skills, doing the right jobs, in the right place, at the right time by making flexible use of its internal workforce.
Conduct assessments of current and future workforce needs	Organizations identify their current and future human capital needs, including the appropriate number of employees, the key competencies and skills mix for mission accomplishment, and the appropriate deployment of staff across the organization.
Have workforce strategies based on identified current and future human capital needs	After assessing workforce needs, organizations then create strategies for identifying and filling gaps.
Diversity Management Leading Practice	Description of Leading Practice
Have a diversity strategy and plan that are developed and aligned with the organization's strategic plan	Organizations integrate diversity management into their strategic plans, which can include existing strategic plans or in separate diversity management strategic plans.
Have a recruitment process for attracting a supply of qualified, diverse applicants for employment	Organizations reach out to diverse pools of talent, widening the selection of schools from which they recruit, and may partner with multicultural professional organizations.
Involve employees in supporting diversity throughout the organization (e.g. through mentoring programs, advisory groups)	Employees become involved in their organizations' diversity management efforts by forming employee diversity task forces, councils, boards, and networks and mentoring programs.
Have a set of quantitative and qualitative measures to assess the impact of various aspects of an overall diversity program	Organizations track data on their workforce to evaluate the effectiveness of their diversity management efforts and the progress they are making in those efforts.

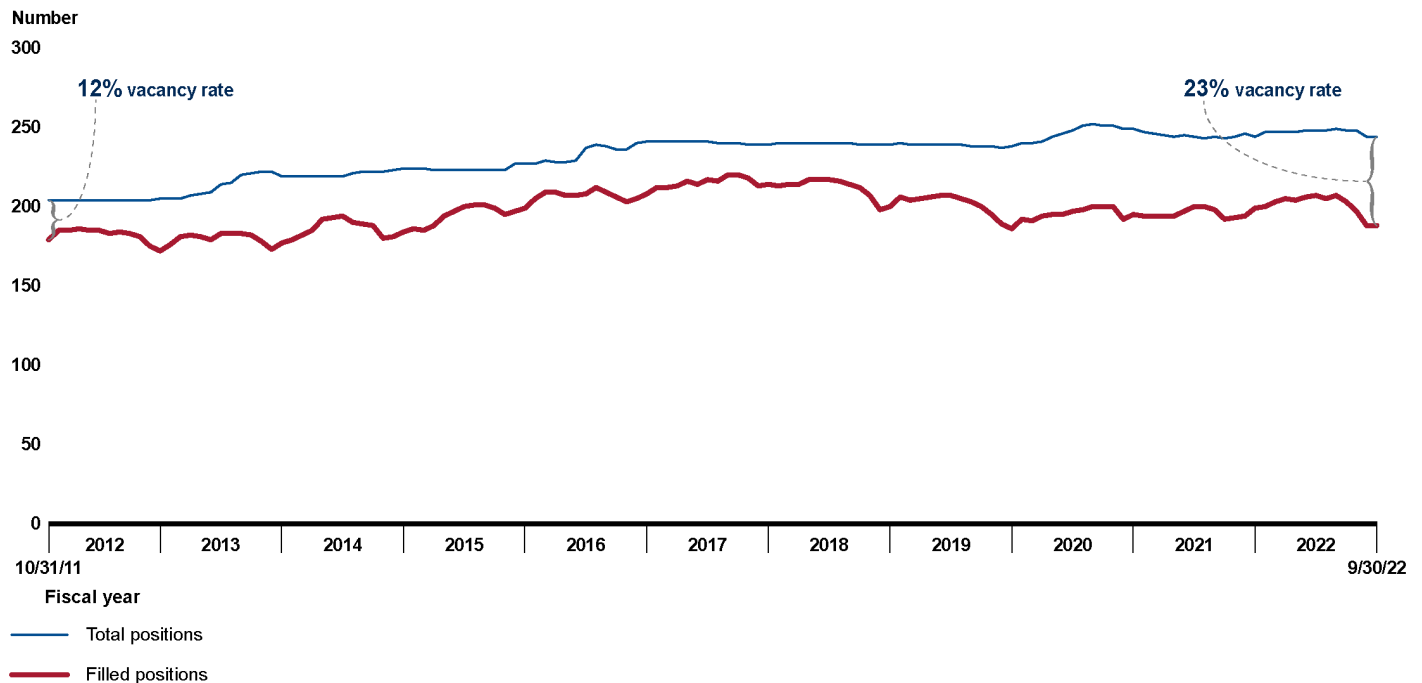
Source: GAO analysis of human capital management practices identified in GAO's prior work. | GAO-23-105401

Vacancies in the FM Workforce Have Increased, and State Has Identified Challenges in Hiring and Retaining FM Staff

FM Staff Vacancy Rate Generally Increased between Fiscal Years 2012–2022

The vacancy rate for FM positions, which has fluctuated over time, increased from 12 percent in October 2011 to 23 percent in September 2022, at which point there were 188 filled FM positions and 56 vacant positions. Over this time, the number of authorized FM positions grew, as did the number and total size of the properties OBO maintains. However, the number of filled FM positions did not increase at the same rate. Figure 2 shows the vacancy rate—the gap between the number of total FM positions and the number of filled FM positions.

Figure 2: Number of Authorized Positions and Number of Filled Positions for U.S. Foreign Service Facilities Maintenance (FM) Staff, Fiscal Years 2012-2022



Source: GAO analysis of Department of State data. | GAO-23-105401

Note: For the purpose of this report, we analyzed positions in State's Facility Management (6217) skill group. This skill group includes positions at overseas posts and at domestic locations. According to officials from the Bureau of Global Talent Management, there may be instances where employees from another skill group fill an FM position. In October 2011, State had 179 out of 204 FM positions filled, while in September 2022 State had 188 out of 244 FM positions filled.

There were some spikes in the percent of vacant FM positions between FY 2012 and FY 2022, largely due to periods when OBO did not hire above attrition or times when OBO had recently received authority to hire more FM staff. According to OBO, it hired new FM staff below attrition in FYs 2012 and 2013, and again in FY 2017 to FY 2020. In FY 2013, the number of authorized FM positions grew by 16, which increased the vacancy rate. In January 2017, State enacted a hiring freeze that lasted until May 2018, according to State. According to OBO, the effect of the hiring freeze was most noticeable in FY 2018, when the vacancy rate jumped from 11 percent in June to 17 percent in August.

In fiscal year 2021, for the first time since 2016, OBO hired more new FM staff than those who left the workforce. Officials attributed its hiring above attrition in fiscal year 2021 to OBO's enhanced recruitment activities. However, OBO was approved to hire 21 new FM positions in FY 2022,

which were not incorporated in GTM's September 2022 data, so the FM staff vacancy rate is likely to be higher in early FY 2023.

OBO Uses Various Approaches to Temporarily Fill Some FM Staff Vacancies

According to OBO officials, State uses a variety of methods to fill vacant FM positions on a temporary basis. Specifically, State uses personal services and third-party contracts, re-employed annuitants,¹⁴ eligible U.S. citizen spouses or domestic partners of Foreign Service officers through the Expanded Professional Associates Program,¹⁵ local facility managers, and temporary duty (TDY) positions. OBO prioritized using these methods to fill primary FM positions at posts before filling deputy FM positions but vacancies remain.¹⁶ Of the 56 vacancies in the GTM data in September 2022, temporary staff filled a combined 27 positions, while 25 FM positions were unfilled, and four positions were assigned to Kabul although that post is closed (see figure 3).¹⁷

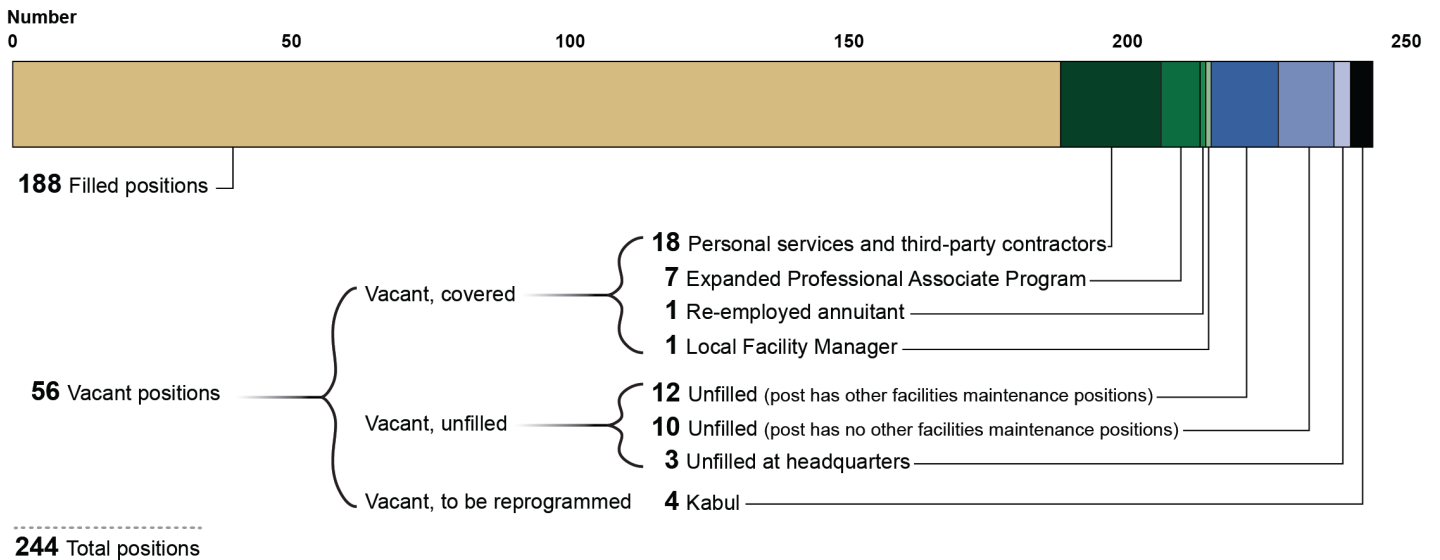
¹⁴Re-employed annuitants are retired employees that State rehires on a short-term basis.

¹⁵State uses the Expanded Professional Associates Program to provide eligible spouses of Foreign Service officers with employment opportunities in key positions at missions abroad. Applicants must clearly demonstrate during the application process that they meet or exceed the program requirements of the position for which they are applying. See 3 FAM 7120 for the eligibility criteria for this program.

¹⁶In addition to these methods for covering vacant authorized positions, OBO also uses the Expanded Professional Associates Program and locally hired facility managers to cover maintenance staffing needs at posts with above OBO's number of authorized FM positions.

¹⁷According to State officials, it can take a while to reprogram positions from one post to another.

Figure 3: U.S. Foreign Service Facility Manager Filled and Vacant Positions, as of September 2022



Source: GAO analysis of Department of State Bureau of Global Talent Management data. | GAO-23-105401

Note: The U.S. Embassy in Kabul closed in August 2021. As of September 2022, State was in the process of reprogramming the FM positions to other posts, although according to OBO officials this process can take time to complete. State’s Expanded Professional Associates Program provides eligible U.S. citizen spouses or domestic partners of Foreign Service officers with employment opportunities in key positions at missions abroad.

The various channels for temporarily filling FM position vacancies each have their own challenges. For example, according to OBO:

- FM staff who are working on personal services and third-party contracts cannot rate the performance of the employees that work for them, and cannot serve as either the post’s occupational safety and health officer or a contracting officer’s representative.¹⁸
- Re-employed annuitants cannot serve as the post occupational safety and health officer; however, they can serve as a contracting officer’s representative.
- Local facility managers, who are not U.S. citizens, cannot conduct maintenance in restricted areas of posts requiring a security clearance.

¹⁸Contracting Officer’s Representatives act as a Contracting Officer’s authorized representative to assist in the technical monitoring or administration of a contract.

-
- FM staff hired through the Expanded Professional Associates Program can only serve at posts where their spouse or domestic partner in the Foreign Service is stationed.

OBO also uses a TDY FM program to send FM staff to backfill vacant positions, or to cover positions with long-term gaps such as assigned individuals who arrive late, according to OBO officials. OBO has a cadre of 30 TDY FM staff to help cover vacancies temporarily. Since these are short-term positions, the individuals may not complete major projects at posts, which may be needed to avoid increased deferred maintenance costs. For example, one FM staff person told us that he had two tours at the same post separated by three years away from the post. During the three years, not all of the projects he had started in his first tour were completed even though two TDY FM staff and a permanent FM staff person, had been assigned to the post.¹⁹ He said that some individuals on TDY were not focused on completing projects since they were only at the post for a short period.

State Officials Identified Challenges in Hiring and Retaining FM Staff

State officials we met with identified challenges State encounters in hiring and retaining FM staff. Based on interviews with officials from OBO, ORSC Frankfurt, the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, and five selected overseas posts, we found the following challenges in hiring and retaining personnel.

The key challenges State identified in hiring FM staff were:

- **Hiring delays.** Officials from four of the eight entities cited hiring delays. For example, officials at two posts identified the long duration of the background or security clearance process as a challenge, with officials at one post saying that it may take new employees 6 to 8 months to complete the process. OBO officials said FM staff need a

¹⁹According to the FM staff person, the previous direct hire individual spent their first year at the post but then spent the second year of their tour in the U.S. because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Top Secret security clearance, which takes longer to process than lower level clearances.²⁰

- **Difficulty in hiring qualified FM staff.** Four of eight entities, including three posts, cited difficulties in hiring qualified FM staff. The FM job announcement states that FM staff generally spend the majority of their careers assigned to overseas missions and at times may live away from family or in difficult or isolated conditions. OBO officials told us that one of their challenges is finding people that both like the Foreign Service lifestyle of moving every few years and have the requisite job experience.²¹

To help address general challenges in hiring FM staff, OBO and GTM work together to develop customized recruiting strategies. OBO helps educate new recruiters on requirements for the FM position and suggests likely places to recruit FM staff. OBO officials told us they are engaged in conversations with GTM about using existing State programs designed to improve recruitment efforts, such as a monetary recruitment incentive program. OBO officials said that they worked with GTM to identify specific universities with Facility Management programs, and facility management-related professional organizations to target for recruiting.

OBO officials also told us that virtual recruiting during the COVID-19 pandemic increased the number of events for State recruiters to find applicants. Virtual recruiting allowed OBO to cover more locations, and the bureau increased recruiting at Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

One of the primary challenges State identified in retaining FM staff is retirement, as cited by officials from four of the eight entities interviewed. For example, an FM staff person at one post said that many FM staff used to come in with significant prior experience, and as a result, they did not have many years to work before they were eligible for retirement. In

²⁰GAO previously reported that in May 2020 GTM and State's Bureau of Information Resource Management (IRM) implemented a pilot program to streamline the security clearance process for Civil Service positions in IRM. Officials said the program would be adapted for the Foreign Service in the future. GAO, *State Department: Additional Actions Needed to Address IT Workforce Challenges*, [GAO-22-105932](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 12, 2022)

²¹Officials identified additional challenges beyond those mentioned in this section, but those challenges were mentioned by officials from three or fewer entities.

addition, members of the Foreign Service, including FM staff, have a mandatory retirement age of 65, with some exceptions.²²

State Employed More than 8,500 LE Maintenance Staff and Identified Several Challenges Hiring LE Staff

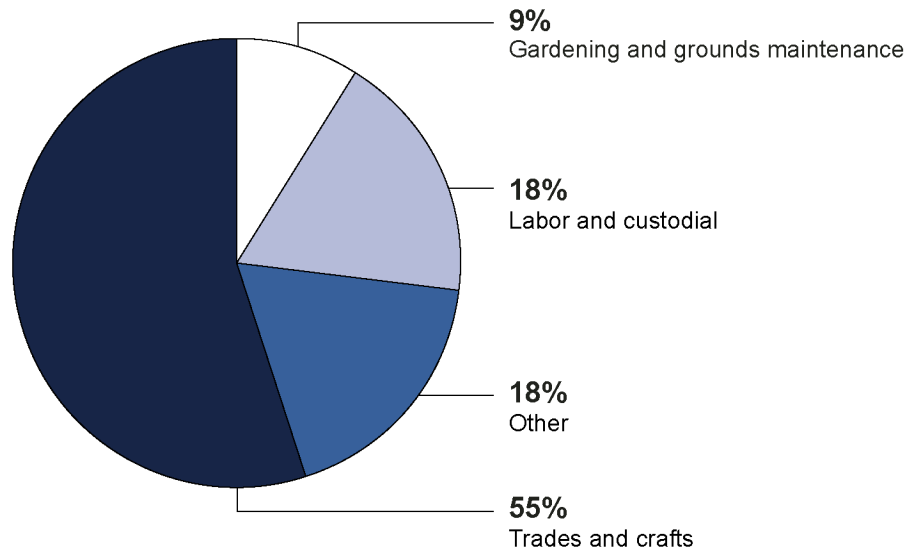
State Employed More than 8,500 LE Staff at Overseas Posts in Maintenance Positions

As of March 2022, State employed more than 8,500 LE staff at all overseas posts in maintenance positions, and the number of LE staff varied across posts, according to GTM data. LE maintenance staff primarily worked in the trades and crafts (as carpenters, electricians, maintenance workers, painters, and plumbers), labor and custodial (including custodians, the most common facilities maintenance position held by LE staff), and gardening and grounds maintenance job series (see figure 4).²³

²²The Foreign Service Act of 1980 established the mandatory retirement age. 22 U.S.C. § 4052. According to State's Foreign Affairs Manual, in some circumstances, a member of the Foreign Service may work beyond turning 65, such as if the Director General of the Foreign Service determines it is in the public interest, in which case a member of the Foreign Service may be retained on active service for a period not to exceed five years. (3 FAM 6212 a-e.)

²³LE staff also work in other related job series. These job series include architecture, engineering, general plant operations and facilities maintenance, industrial cooling and pneumatics, industrial power equipment operations and maintenance, maintenance management, mason, and utilities equipment operations series. These job series may also include staff that work in post sections other than facilities maintenance and do not include some staff in posts' facilities maintenance sections, such as those in administrative positions, according to GTM.

Figure 4: Locally Employed Maintenance Staff by Job Series, March 2022

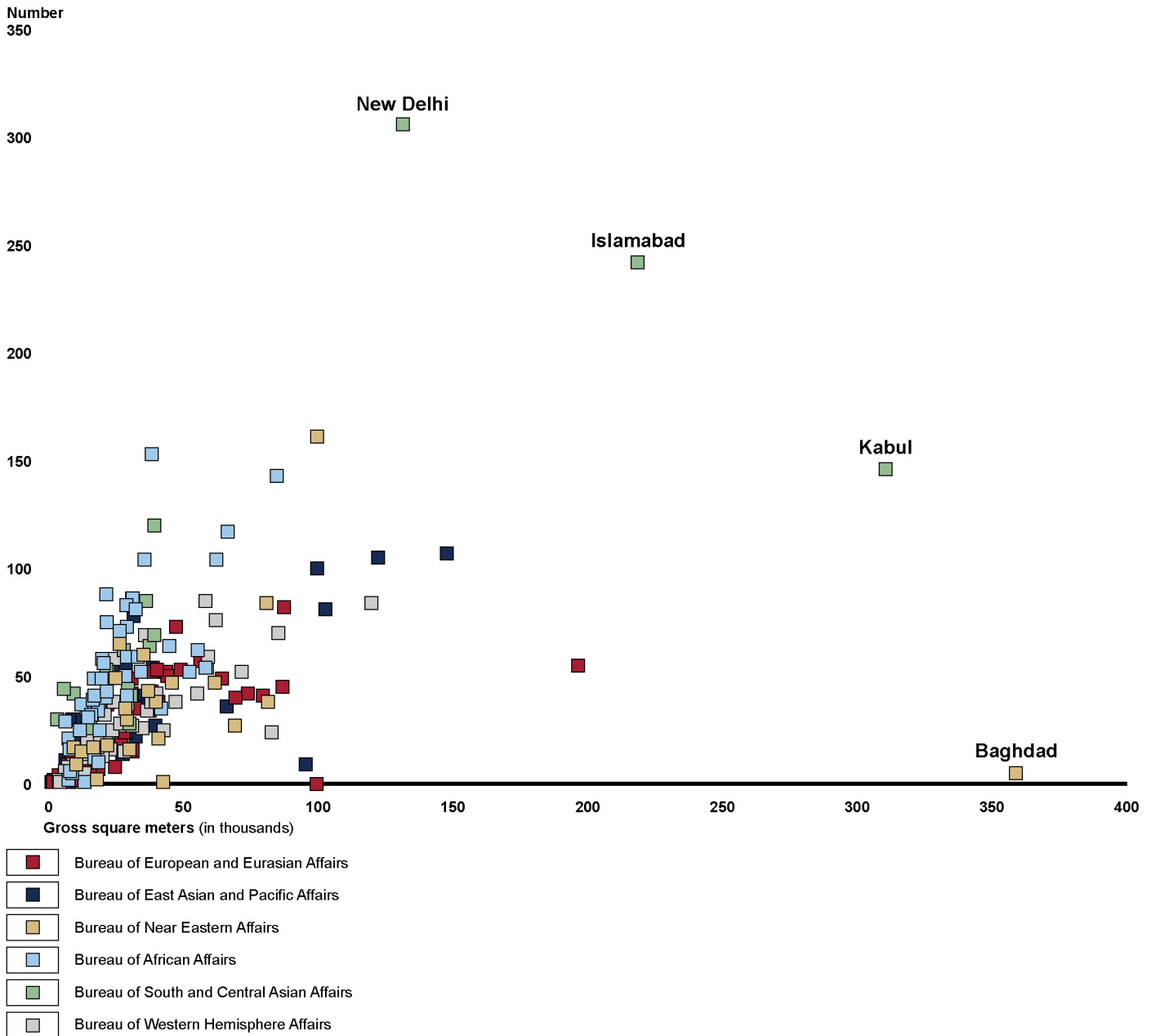


Source: GAO analysis of State Bureau of Global Talent Management data. | GAO-23-105401

As posts vary in size and by region, the number of LE staff employed to maintain posts also varies. As seen in figure 5, the number of LE maintenance staff at each post generally corresponds to the post's physical size, with some exceptions. For example, New Delhi had the most LE staff but was not the largest post, while Baghdad was the largest post and had a small number of LE staff in March 2022.²⁴

²⁴According to OBO, in New Delhi post maintenance is done by its LE maintenance staff, while in Baghdad maintenance is contracted out to a third party.

Figure 5: Comparison of Number of Locally Employed Maintenance Staff by Post Size, in Gross Square Meters



Source: GAO analysis of Department of State data. | GAO-23-105401

The average number of LE maintenance staff per post also varied by region. Posts within the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs region had the highest average number of LE staff per post, while posts within the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs region had the lowest average number of LE staff per post. According to State officials, local labor costs and the availability of qualified contractors may affect the number of LE maintenance staff per post. For example, State officials stated that South and Central Asian countries tend to have lower wages and fewer qualified preventative service maintenance contractors. As a result, posts in this region must have staff to perform operations and maintenance functions that may be performed by contractors in Europe and Eurasia. In addition, according to State officials, the number of LE maintenance staff positions can also be affected by other factors, such as the complexity of a post's facilities and the distance between properties. The average numbers of LE staff at each post, per geographic regional bureau, are provided below (table 2).

Table 2: Average Number of Locally Employed (LE) Maintenance Staff by Post, by Geographic Regional Bureau, as of March 2022

Geographic Regional Bureau Name	Average Number of LE Staff per Post within each Region
South and Central Asian Affairs	83
African Affairs	51
Near Eastern Affairs	37
Western Hemisphere Affairs	31
East Asian and Pacific Affairs	29
European and Eurasian Affairs	25

Source: GAO analysis of State Bureau of Global Talent Management data. | GAO-23-105401.

State Officials Identified Challenges in Hiring LE Staff, but Had Few Retention Issues

State officials we met with identified challenges in hiring and retaining LE maintenance staff. Based on interviews with officials from OBO, the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, and five selected overseas posts, we found that their primary challenges related to hiring LE maintenance staff include:

- Finding qualified staff that meet position requirements.** Finding qualified staff that meet position requirements was cited as a challenge by officials at six of the seven entities. Position requirements are the minimum requirements to apply for an LE position. For example, officials in Cairo said their biggest challenge was finding job candidates who had the required English proficiency

for the position. They said that many maintenance positions require English skills to use State computer systems for planning and scheduling maintenance, ordering supplies, and other purposes. Officials from posts told us that they sometimes work with the regional bureau to change the English proficiency level needed for positions.

- **Approval process for new positions.** Another challenge identified by six of the seven entities was the approval process required for new LE positions. Officials told us about two ways to get LE staff positions approved, either solely through their post ICASS Council or by obtaining approval through both the post ICASS Council and the annual Mission Resource Request.²⁵ The post ICASS Council approves new LE staff positions at the posts. However, officials from the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs told us that some U.S. government agencies at a post may be reluctant to approve new LE staff positions to prevent incurring higher ICASS costs, even if there is a justification for adding more positions. The Mission Resource Request is part of State's annual budget process. Officials from posts said they can request additional LE staff positions through this process, but it may take over a year for final approval.²⁶
- **Hiring delays.** Hiring delays constituted another common challenge identified by four of the seven entities, all of which were posts. One post said that the background investigation process was the longest step in getting new staff onboard. The official said that the country where they were located did not have good police records, which increased the length of time needed to ensure that new LE staff hires had clear records.²⁷

GTM and posts are working to address general challenges in hiring LE maintenance staff. GTM officials said they offer support to posts in developing recruitment strategies, including for difficult-to-recruit

²⁵According to officials from the ICASS Service Center, LE staff positions funded by ICASS need ICASS Council approval, even if they are included in the Mission Resource Request. The use of the Mission Resource Request for this purpose varies by post.

²⁶According to State policy, posts submit their Mission Resource Requests to their regional bureaus, which then decide whether to include any requests for new positions in the Bureau Resource Request. The Bureau Resource Request is then sent to State's Bureau of Budget and Planning for potential inclusion in the department's budget request, which is then sent to the Office of Management and Budget for potential inclusion in the President's budget request. The President's request is then sent to Congress for consideration. 6 FAH-5 H-431.

²⁷Officials identified additional challenges than those cited in this section, but these challenges were mentioned by three or fewer entities.

positions. In addition, posts are working to address recruiting challenges. For example:

- Officials at one post told us that they recruit and hire staff with experience from local job sites, since the local maintenance workforce generally does not attend trade schools.
- Officials from another post said they advertise job openings in local newspapers and contact schools focused on trade positions.

While officials at posts generally said it was not very challenging to retain LE maintenance staff, some noted that pay levels can make retention difficult. An official from one post said the post did not hire and fire based on the immediate workload demands, which made the post a more reliable employer than the local market. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic the post did not let go of their LE maintenance staff, despite a temporary drop in demand for maintenance work. In contrast, officials from two posts said that they lost LE maintenance staff to higher paying positions in other offices within the post.

To help address challenges related to competitive pay, posts can request an increase to the local compensation pay range from GTM when salary rates are inadequate for recruitment needs, according to OBO officials.²⁸

State Adopted Most Leading Practices for Human Capital Management of FM Staff, but Remaining Practices Could Help Improve Staffing

²⁸State refers to these types of requests as Exception Rate Range requests, which would provide an exception to the local compensation plan. GTM's Office of Overseas Employment authorizes exceptions when the basic salary rates for a specified position title or grade level are inadequate for a post's recruitment need.

State Adopted Most Strategic Workforce Planning Leading Practices for FM Staff

For FM staff, State has adopted five of seven leading practices for strategic workforce planning that allow agencies to determine critical skills and competencies and identify skills gaps (see table 3).

Table 3: Extent to Which State Has Adopted Selected Leading Practices for Strategic Workforce Planning for U.S. Foreign Service Facility Maintenance Staff

Leading practice	Extent of application
Have linkages between the strategic workforce plan and the agency's strategic plan	Adopted
Establish and maintain an inventory of employee skills and competencies	Not adopted
Have a process to address skills and competency gaps	Adopted
Have succession plans for leadership and other critical positions	Adopted
Approach workforce planning strategically, basing decisions on mission needs, customer expectations, workload, and workforce	Partially adopted
Conduct assessments of current and future workforce needs	Adopted
Have workforce strategies based on identified current and future human capital needs	Adopted

Source: GAO analysis of State Department documentation and interviews and prior GAO reports. | GAO-23-105401

Note: We reviewed the leading practices and evidence of State's related efforts to determine the extent to which State adopted each leading practice. Specifically, we determined that State had: adopted the practice if our evidence showed that State's relevant efforts met all parts of the practice; partially adopted the practice if our evidence showed that State's relevant efforts met some, but not all, parts of the practice; and not adopted the practice if our evidence showed that State did not have efforts that met any part of the practice.

- Linkage between workforce plan and strategic plan.** State's Five-Year Workforce Plan for Fiscal Years 2019-2023,²⁹ which specifically cites needs for the FM workforce, includes linkages to State and USAID's Joint Strategic Plan.³⁰ According to State, the workforce planning process translates the department's strategic goals from the Joint Strategic Plan into future functional workforce requirements. The Five-Year Workforce Plan notes that FM staff continue to experience staffing gaps due to recruiting and hiring shortfalls and that State is developing plans to address these staffing deficits within department funding levels.

²⁹Department of State, Bureau of Human Resources, Office of Resource Management and Organization Analysis. *Five-Year Workforce Plan, Fiscal Years 2019-2023* (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 2020).

³⁰Department of State and U.S. Agency for International Development. *Joint Strategic Plan FY 2018-2022* (Washington, D.C.: February 2018).

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- **Inventory of employee skills.** State does not maintain an inventory of FM skills and competencies, which might include project management, project design, and construction oversight. According to OBO officials, State does not systematically maintain this type of information for FM staff. OBO asks newly hired FM staff to provide a biography describing their education and previous work experience, and uses this information to become familiar with each FM's skill sets. FM staff also submit updated resumes to OBO when applying for their subsequent assignments every two to three years. In 2022, an internal OBO-sponsored report on addressing State's deferred maintenance backlog, recommended a full inventory and assessment of the existing workforce. This report recommended that OBO identify each FM's level of experience, education, certifications, and trade skills, among other things. We have previously reported that developing and regularly updating a knowledge, skills, and competencies inventory for employees can help inform workforce planning efforts.³¹ According to OBO officials, the bureau is coordinating with the Foreign Service Institute to establish skills assessment criteria and a methodology to collect a full inventory and assessment of the existing FM workforce. At this time, no one is yet collecting this information and it is unclear when OBO will start this process. By developing and maintaining an inventory of FM skills, State would improve its opportunities to understand the skills that exist or are absent in the FM workforce to allow it to better address its large maintenance backlog. In addition, OBO would have more information to address skills gaps, such as identifying additional training to provide to FM staff. State could also use such an inventory during the assignment process so all involved bureaus may better match FM skills to posts' maintenance needs.
 - **Process to address skill gaps.** In addition to State's efforts to recruit FM staff, OBO uses its Regional Support Centers to help address skill gaps in its FM workforce. To supplement FM staff's skills, OBO operates three OBO Regional Support Centers and two smaller regional hubs. These centers provide support to State facilities overseas by focusing on maintenance of critical building systems, safety, and staff development. For example, they provide mentorship and guidance to entry-level FM staff, among others, and provide direct assistance with certain tasks. According to OBO officials, these support centers also advise and support mid-level and senior-level FM staff. Officials from one of the regional support centers said they

³¹[GAO-02-373SP](#).

support FM staff through site visits, in-person support, and a mentoring program.

- **Succession plans for leadership and other critical positions.** State uses multiple processes to help FM succession planning. For example, GTM developed a Professional Development Program for FM staff to provide a “roadmap” of the competencies, assignments, and training opportunities required for FM staff to succeed at the senior rank.³² According to GTM officials, FM staff are responsible for planning their own careers based on the Professional Development Program. State also develops a five-year workforce and leadership succession plan.³³ This plan provides a framework to address State’s human capital requirements and highlights State’s challenges and achievements in recruiting, hiring, staffing, retaining and training employees, according to State. The most recent plan includes facilities maintenance positions as part of the department’s leadership planning. Officials from GTM’s Office of Talent Analytics, which manages the Foreign Service promotion planning process, said this process includes multi-year outlooks based on current staffing levels to ensure the department has the appropriate people in the necessary grade to fill higher-level positions.³⁴
- **Strategic approach to workforce planning.** State’s approach to workforce planning may limit its ability to ensure that FM staff’s skills are matched to the needs of overseas posts. As we have previously reported, the appropriate geographic and organizational deployment of employees can further support organizational goals and strategies.³⁵ Effective deployment strategies can help an organization have the right people, with the right skills, doing the right jobs, in the right place, at the right time. OBO officials told us that the goal of the

³²According to GTM officials, the Professional Development Program is replacing the current Career Development Program. The Professional Development Program will take effect in fiscal year 2025 for FM staff that want to apply for promotion to the Senior Foreign Service. GTM officials said the two programs will exist in parallel because State wants to ensure a smooth transition between the programs for FM staff that made long-term career decisions based on the goals of the Career Development Plan.

³³Department of State, Bureau of Human Resources, Office of Resource Management and Organization Analysis. *Five-Year Workforce and Leadership Succession Plan, Fiscal Years 2018-2022* (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 2019).

³⁴The Office of Talent Analytics determines the number of FM promotion opportunities in a given year based on factors including the number of FM staff and the expected attrition rate.

³⁵[GAO-02-373SP](#).

FM assignment process is to connect FM staff with the proper skills to the appropriate vacancies in a timely fashion to meet the needs of the Foreign Service.

Decision-making for FM assignments varies depending upon how long the FM staff person has been with State. For the first two tours, OBO identifies FM posts with vacant entry-level positions and GTM's Office of Career Development and Assignments determines where the FM staff are assigned. After those two tours, OBO has the option to request a consultative role in FM staff's assignment process, while State's regional bureaus have the primary role in this process.³⁶ According to Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs officials, they use their primary role to try to reduce FM vacancies within their region by monitoring transfer eligibility dates and working with posts to limit vacancies. The Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs also receives advice from OBO on which vacancies it should fill first, such as prioritizing senior FM positions over deputy FM positions. Similarly, OBO officials said that, when OBO consults with regional bureaus, it assesses a number of factors, including each FM's skills and abilities and each post's facility needs. If OBO disagrees with a regional bureau's selection of an FM for a post, it can appeal to GTM, which makes the final decision on any contested assignments.

OBO identified its lack of control of the FM assignment process as a significant deficiency in fiscal year 2018 as part of a State internal controls review. According to OBO officials, staff in the regional bureaus and at individual posts lack OBO's perspective on the maintenance needs of posts worldwide and lack OBO's knowledge regarding FM staff's skills and abilities. They also said that OBO often is not aware of misalignment of an FM's skills and a post's needs with sufficient time to correct the issue, which can lead to system and equipment failures that can contribute to deferred maintenance.

Officials from State's regional bureaus indicated that there are benefits to the current process of regional bureaus having the lead role in matching FM staff to sites in their respective region. According to regional bureau officials, ongoing contact with overseas managers keeps the regional bureaus informed about specific post-related challenges and well situated to handle certain administrative aspects related to FM staff. For example, the regional bureaus have more experience working with administrative aspects of staffing

³⁶According to OBO, the bureau requests consultations on all FM overseas non-entry level positions.

assignments across all offices at posts, such as waiving language requirements or postponing mandatory retirements, according to regional bureau officials. Regional bureau officials said that while OBO could manage the assignment process, there would likely be an adjustment period while OBO and the bureaus clarified their respective responsibilities.

Officials from GTM and the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs consider the current assignment process to work well. For example, GTM officials said the summer 2023 rotation of FM staff went smoothly, noting that the regional bureaus agreed to all consultation requests from OBO. Officials from the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs said that, while they have the final decision on FM staff placement, their bureau maintains a good working relationship with OBO officials and closely consults with them on FM staff the bureau is considering.

In contrast with the FM assignment process, OBO officials told us that State functional bureaus often lead the assignment process for their technical staff. For example, OBO leads the assignment process and makes the final selection decision for Foreign Service Construction Engineers, who typically oversee the construction of new embassies. Further, other functional bureaus such as Diplomatic Security and Consular Affairs lead the assignment process for their staff, according to State officials. For example, while Diplomatic Security coordinates with posts regarding upcoming staff assignments, Diplomatic Security's Senior Management makes the final selection of their staff's next assignments.

OBO led the assignment process for FM staff until 2009, when OBO's then-director decided FM staff should report to the regional bureaus. However, neither OBO nor GTM officials were able to provide the reasoning behind this decision. Reviewing which bureau should have primary responsibility for making final decisions on FM assignments would position State to ensure it maximizes opportunities to align skills of the FM workforce with worldwide maintenance needs. Improving facilities maintenance efficiently is critical, given State's multi-billion dollar maintenance backlog.

- **Assess current and future workforce needs.** OBO assesses its workforce needs through annual staffing reviews and occasional in-depth analyses of FM skills and competencies. According to OBO officials, OBO conducts staffing reviews to support its annual budget submissions, which may include requests for new positions.

According to OBO, it considers a number of factors in staffing reviews to determine whether to request new positions. These factors include any newly constructed embassies or consulates to be opened and other operational needs, such as the number of ongoing construction and maintenance projects at posts.³⁷ In addition, GTM carries out in-depth job analyses to make sure that State is bringing in the right skillsets for each Foreign Service position, according to GTM officials. In 2020, State worked with a consultant on an FM job analysis, based on a survey of FM staff and included information on the knowledge and skills FM staff need upon hiring. The analysis also reviewed the most important job requirements. GTM could use this information to develop ideas for how to improve the FM hiring, selection, and training processes.

- **Workforce strategies based on needs.** State uses different strategies to attempt to address FM workforce needs. For example, to help fill vacancies, GTM's Office of Talent Acquisition worked with an external consultant to determine if any changes to the FM job warranted hiring FM staff at a higher pay grade. The consultant noted that the increasing complexity of the FM position may justify hiring new FM staff at a higher starting pay grade. However, OBO officials expressed concern that hiring FM staff at a higher grade could cause challenges with future promotions. Instead of hiring new FM staff at higher pay grades, GTM's Office of Talent Acquisition has been offering higher salaries within the new hire pay grade commensurate with experience. To help ensure required FM coverage at each post, OBO periodically updates a Facility Manager matrix and identifies any FM positions it needs to reprogram to other posts. For example, in 2021, OBO reprogrammed an FM position from the closed consulate in Chengdu, China to a new consulate in Nogales, Mexico. OBO also uses third-party contractors, local facility managers, and other approaches to fill FM vacancies based on current needs.

³⁷When considering how many additional FM positions to request to support new embassies or consulates, OBO takes into account factors, such as the physical size of the posts, whether the post may be able to receive regional coverage, and the quality of the LE maintenance staff. These reviews can result in recommendations regarding both additional FM and local facility manager staff.

State Has Begun Adopting Leading Practices for Diversity Management for FM Staff

State has begun to adopt leading practices for diversity management for FM staff that can foster an understanding of the value of a more diverse and inclusive work environment.³⁸ These selected leading practices call on agencies to:

- **Have a diversity strategy and plan that are developed and aligned with the organization’s strategic plan.** In summer 2020, OBO internally published a Diversity and Inclusion Strategic Plan. The plan establishes OBO’s vision to attract, develop, and retain a talented and diverse workforce to provide safe, secure, functional, and resilient facilities. OBO’s diversity efforts are guided by the strategic goals and objectives in State’s Diversity and Inclusion Strategic Plan (2016-2020) and in State’s Inclusive Diversity Strategic Plan for FY 2020-2024, according to the plan.
- **Have a recruitment process for attracting a supply of qualified, diverse applicants for employment.** OBO officials said that the bureau works with GTM to prioritize Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA) efforts aligned with State’s strategic plan, and to promote the advancement of underrepresented groups across State. For example, OBO has increasingly engaged professional organizations for underrepresented groups as part of recruitment efforts since 2020. Officials also said they had better opportunities to recruit women because more women are enrolling in science and engineering programs.
- **Involve employees in supporting diversity throughout the organization.** OBO has taken steps to involve employees in supporting diversity. For example, OBO established a DEIA Council in October 2020, according to officials, which is a team of OBO staff that organizes events and develops DEIA strategies to promote and strengthen DEIA throughout the bureau. OBO created an affinity group for “Women in Construction, Security, and Facilities” in August 2021, and plans to establish an affinity group for Black architects and engineers.³⁹ In 2020, OBO also started a mentoring program for new FM staff to help them navigate State Department processes and

³⁸See [GAO-05-90](#).

³⁹As we reported, State has employee organizations that represent DEIA interests of staff across the department to management. Employee organization representatives meet with senior leaders in a quarterly Diversity Forum to discuss DEIA issues. GAO, *State Department: Additional Actions Needed to Improve Workplace Diversity and Inclusion* [GAO-22-105182](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 21, 2022).

identify available resources, and has plans to include diversity outreach in this program.

- **Have a set of quantitative and qualitative measures to assess the impact of various aspects of an overall diversity program.** OBO's DEIA Council has created a series of performance indicators to track OBO's progress on initiatives laid out in its DEIA Strategic Plan, including indicators to inform OBO's recruitment strategy. OBO also plans to track training on discriminatory, bullying, and toxic behavior practices for all OBO employees by March 2023. The council plans to track and refine the indicators that OBO laid out in its DEIA Strategic Plan as necessary for the next 4 years, according to OBO officials. Because these metrics are new, OBO has not yet collected any related data.

From fiscal years 2012 through 2022, State employed an increasing proportion of African American or Black and Hispanic or Latino FM staff, which is similar to trends in federal facilities maintenance staff from fiscal years 2012 through 2021. During these periods, State also employed an increasing proportion of female FM staff, while the proportion of females in federal facilities maintenance staff declined. For example, over these periods, African American or Black FM staff at State increased from 6.6 percent to 10.3 percent, and African American or Black employees in federal facilities maintenance increased from 9.5 percent to 11.6 percent. The percentage of Hispanic or Latino FM staff at State also increased from 6.6 percent to 9.4 percent, while Hispanic or Latino employees in federal facilities maintenance increased from 5.4 percent to 7.3 percent.⁴⁰ Similarly, the percentage of women FM staff at State increased from 2.8 percent to 10.3 percent over the same period. However, the percentage of women in federal facilities maintenance decreased from 12.9 percent to 9.8 percent. See table 4 for additional information about the demographics of State's FM workforce from fiscal year 2012 to fiscal year 2022 and data from the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) on the federal government's facilities maintenance workforce from fiscal year 2012 through fiscal year 2021.

⁴⁰Starting in 2012, State implemented multirace reporting and shifted Hispanic or Latino from a racial category to an ethnicity. In State's data, anyone who identified as racially Hispanic or Latino was flagged as ethnically Hispanic or Latino, and their racial value was set to "Unspecified," according to State's Bureau of Global Talent Management. State's reassignment of Hispanic or Latino into a standalone ethnicity category leads to higher numbers of staff counted in the other race categories that ethnically Hispanic or Latino staff reported as their race, as compared to OPM's data that does not include this reassignment.

Table 4: Demographics of State’s U.S. Foreign Service Facilities Maintenance (FM) Staff and Federal Facilities Maintenance Staff

State’s U.S. Foreign Service Facilities Maintenance Staff			Federal Facilities Maintenance Staff		
State Demographic Category	Percent of Workforce, as of end of Fiscal Year 2012	Percent of Workforce, as of end of Fiscal Year 2022 ^a	Office of Personnel Management (OPM) Demographic Category ^b	Percent of Workforce, as of end of Fiscal Year 2012	Percent of Workforce, as of end of Fiscal Year 2021
Race or Ethnicity					
White	82.1	77.1	White	77.4	72.9
African American or Black	6.6	10.3	African American or Black	9.5	11.6
Asian	4.7	4.0	Asian	2.7	2.9
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0.0	0.0	Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0.7	1.0
American Indian or Alaska Native	0.5	1.3	American Indian or Alaska Native	2.6	2.0
Hispanic or Latino (Ethnicity) ^c	6.6	9.4	Hispanic or Latino	5.4	7.3
Multirace ^c	1.9	3.1	More than one race	1.3	1.9
Unspecified	4.2	4.0	Unspecified	0.4	0.4
Gender					
Male	97.2	89.7	Male	87.1	90.2
Female	2.8	10.3	Female	12.9	9.8

Source: State Department data and GAO analysis of OPM data. | GAO-23-105401

Notes: For the purposes of this table, State’s FM staff are defined as people in State Department’s Facility Management (6217) skill code. For the OPM Enterprise Human Resources Integration (EHRI) data, facilities maintenance staff are defined as individuals in the Facility Operations Services (1640) series. GAO’s analysis of EHRI data included staff both in and out of pay status.

^aState’s race data from September 2022 only added up to 99.8 percent.

^bIn OPM’s data, staff that marked themselves as Hispanic or Latino, or Hispanic or Latino plus any other race, are counted as Hispanic or Latino only. Staff included in the OPM data in other race categories did not mark themselves as Hispanic or Latino.

^cStarting in 2012, State implemented multirace reporting and shifted Hispanic or Latino from a racial category to an ethnicity. In State’s data, anyone who identified as racially Hispanic or Latino was flagged as ethnically Hispanic or Latino, and their racial value was set to “Unspecified,” according to State’s Bureau of Global Talent Management. Since Hispanic or Latino is an ethnicity in State’s data, it cannot be summed with the race categories. State’s reassignment of Hispanic or Latino as a standalone ethnicity category leads to higher numbers of staff counted in the other race categories that ethnically Hispanic or Latino staff reported as their race, as compared to the OPM data that does not include this reassignment.

State Adopted All But One Leading Practice for Human Capital Management of LE Staff

Among six human capital management leading practices that we identified as relevant to strategic workforce planning for LE maintenance staff, State has adopted five agency-wide. There is no agency-wide process for the remaining practice, although we found that one of the five selected posts we reviewed had adopted it (see table 5).

Table 5: Extent to Which State Has Adopted Selected Leading Practices for Workforce Planning for LE Staff

Leading practice	Extent of application
Have linkages between the strategic workforce plan and the agency's strategic plan	Adopted (State-wide process in place)
Establish and maintain an inventory of employee skills and competencies (skills and supporting behaviors)	Partially adopted (one of five selected posts)
Have a process to address skills or competency gaps	Adopted (State-wide process in place)
Approach workforce planning strategically, basing decisions on mission needs, customer expectations, workload, and workforce	Adopted (State-wide process in place)
Conduct assessments of current and future workforce needs	Adopted (State-wide process in place)
Have workforce strategies based on identified current and future human capital needs	Adopted (State-wide process in place)

Source: GAO analysis of State Department documentation and interviews and prior GAO reports. | GAO-23-105401

Note: We reviewed the leading practices and evidence of State's related efforts to determine the extent to which State adopted each leading practice. Specifically, we determined that State had: adopted the practice if our evidence showed that State's relevant efforts met all parts of the practice; partially adopted the practice if our evidence showed that State's relevant efforts met some, but not all, parts of the practice; and not adopted the practice if our evidence showed that State did not have efforts that met any part of the practice.

- Linkage to agency strategic plan.** Similar to FM staff, State's Five-Year Workforce Plan for Fiscal Years 2019-2023, which includes linkages to State and USAID's Joint Strategic Plan, addresses LE staff needs, including for maintenance staff. For example, the plan describes an LE staff mentoring program that would help LE staff have continued opportunities for professional growth and rewarding careers with the U.S. government.⁴¹
- Inventory of employee skills.** We found that one of our five selected posts maintained an inventory of skills for its LE maintenance staff. However, State does not have requirements or guidance for posts to create or maintain such records. Officials at the U.S. Embassy in Nassau told us that they established and maintained an inventory of

⁴¹State also included its intention to create an LE staff mentoring program in its *Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility (DEIA) Strategic Plan 2022-2026*.

employee skills and competencies for their LE maintenance staff. They said they find this inventory very helpful for planning and budgeting the training needs of their staff, among other things. Nassau's inventory included each LE maintenance staff person's education, certifications, specialty skills, years of experience, and a training plan. Officials from our other four selected posts said they did not maintain similar inventories for their LE staff.⁴² When OBO worked on an internal report to identify ways to address State's deferred maintenance backlog, as for FM staff, the report recommended a full inventory and assessment of its existing LE maintenance workforce by identifying each LE staff's experiences levels, along with their education, certifications, and trade skills, among other things. However, OBO officials said that they do not have the direct authority to require staff to maintain such inventories for LE staff. We have previously reported that developing a knowledge, skills, and competencies inventory for employees and updating it regularly can help inform workforce planning efforts.⁴³ GTM officials told us they have discussed an LE staff skills database with human resources officials at posts in the past. However, there is no State-wide requirement or guidance for creating and maintaining such an inventory. By developing guidance for the creation and maintenance of an inventory of LE skills, State would help ensure posts understand the skills that exist or are absent in their LE maintenance workforces. Posts will then have more information to address skills gaps, such as by identifying additional needed training. This would also help posts conduct workforce planning more efficiently.

- **Process to address skills gaps.** To address any gaps in technical skills of their LE maintenance workforce, posts can request assistance through the ORSCs or an OBO maintenance assistance program, and use local contractors. For example, an agency at a post was having an electrical issue and did not have the ability to fix it quickly on its own, so ORSC Frankfurt contacted OBO's maintenance assistance program to send a team that quickly addressed the issue, according to officials from the ORSC. Officials in Cairo said that they would

⁴²Officials at two other posts, in Yaoundé, Cameroon and Cairo, Egypt, said they keep track of their staff's training needs, but they do not maintain information on LE staff skills. Officials at the remaining two posts, in Dhaka, Bangladesh and Seoul, South Korea, said that instead of keeping an inventory of their LE staff, they are aware of the extent of their staff's skills through the position requirements in their job descriptions when staff were first hired.

⁴³[GAO-02-373SP](#).

typically contract out for some roles that they do not have within their staff, such as concrete specialists or welders.

- **Strategic approach to workforce planning.** State has processes in place to help overseas posts approach LE workforce planning strategically. These processes include Mission Resource Requests, Overseas Presence Reviews, and ICASS budget reviews, through which posts can request additional LE maintenance positions. Overseas posts complete the mission resource requests annually. If the posts identify a need for additional LE staff positions, they justify each request in terms of specific objectives in the integrated country strategy.⁴⁴ Every five years for each post, a State office at headquarters conducts overseas presence reviews (also known as right-sizing reports), which examine current post staffing levels and their workloads, and recommend positions that the post may need or no longer need to meet its mission. Finally, officials at a post said that they can request an ICASS budget review when they want to add ICASS-funded LE staff positions. The ICASS Budget Committee will review these requests and make a final recommendation to the Council. Officials from Seoul told us they created their own form, based on the data considered in Mission Resource Requests, to justify the need for more LE staff positions to their post ICASS Council.
- **Assessment of current and future workforce needs.** State has different processes to help posts assess their current and future LE maintenance workforce needs. According to State officials, the Office of Overseas Employment sends a questionnaire annually to each mission to request post input on country-specific local employment needs and issues, including recruitment, retention, compensation, and benefits. Posts can also assess their current and future LE workforce needs using ICASS workload comparison data for facilities sections of comparably sized posts to see if their maintenance teams are under- or overstaffed. OBO carries out reviews of workforce needs when posts are moving to new embassies or consulates that are more technically sophisticated and often larger. For example, OBO recently conducted a review of Nassau's facility maintenance section, since the post is due to move into a new embassy soon. The review identified an additional 24 LE facility maintenance positions (from 13 to 37 positions) the post would need to maintain the new building, including building engineers and building automation specialists.

⁴⁴If ICASS will fund the LE staff position listed in the Mission Resource Request, the ICASS Council has to approve the position.

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- **Workforce strategies based on needs.** State and OBO have processes available to help support posts to develop LE workforce strategies to address their current and future human capital needs. The ORSCs help posts with workforce strategies when assistance is requested. ORSC officials in Frankfurt said that they have helped posts analyze their maintenance program’s workload balance across different types of maintenance work. For example, if an ORSC’s analysis shows that posts are planning too many projects for their staff to complete along with their regular maintenance work, the ORSC may suggest delaying certain projects until their regular workload is balanced. OBO supports post staff that are moving into new buildings by assessing the future workforce needs to maintain the new buildings. For example, officials in Nassau who were preparing to move into a new embassy said OBO was also helping them create strategies for filling the expected gaps by developing a staffing plan. The plan included a justification and cost analysis for new positions, which the post could use when requesting these positions.

Conclusions

State’s FM and LE workforces provide key maintenance functions to embassies, consulates, and other real property at more than 275 locations around the world. As of FY 2020, State’s real property assets had a deferred maintenance backlog of \$3 billion, which could jeopardize essential U.S. government operations. State’s FM and LE staff oversee the maintenance of these assets, but State has identified challenges hiring and retaining FM and LE staff, complicating State’s efforts to address the backlog. Our review of State’s management of its FM and LE workforces found that State has adopted most leading practices related to strategic workforce planning for these staff. Applying the remaining practices could help State make progress with its maintenance backlog. To ensure FM staff are best matched to State’s maintenance needs, State could develop and maintain inventories for FM staff skills, and review which bureaus should have responsibility for final decisions in FM assignments. State could also develop guidance about creating and maintaining skill inventories for LE staff, which would similarly help posts meet skill gaps and address their critical maintenance needs.

Recommendations for Executive Action

We are making the following three recommendations:

The Secretary of State should ensure that the Director of OBO develops and maintains an inventory of job-related skills among the FM workforce. (Recommendation 1)

The Secretary of State should review whether the regional bureaus or OBO are best positioned to strategically lead the assignment process for the FM workforce. (Recommendation 2)

The Secretary of State should develop guidance for overseas posts to create and maintain an inventory of LE maintenance staff skills. (Recommendation 3)

Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to State and OPM for review and comment. In its comments reproduced in appendix II, State concurred with our recommendations. State also provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate. OPM had no comments.

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Secretary of State, and the Director of the Office of Personnel Management. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at <https://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-7279 or ElHodiriN@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 key contributions to this report are listed in appendix III.



Nagla'a El-Hodiri
Acting Director, International Affairs and Trade

Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

We were asked to review the U.S. Foreign Service facilities maintenance (FM) workforce and locally employed (LE) maintenance staff at overseas posts. In this report, we: (1) describe trends in the FM workforce and challenges State identified in hiring and retaining this workforce; (2) describe the workforce of LE maintenance staff and challenges State identified in hiring and retaining these staff; (3) assess the extent to which State has employed leading practices for human capital management for its FM workforce; and (4) assess the extent to which State has employed leading practices for human capital management for its LE maintenance workforce.

To examine trends in the FM workforce in fiscal years 2012 through 2022, we analyzed data from State's Bureau of Global Talent Management (GTM), from its Global Employment Management System. We analyzed monthly FM employment and vacancy data for fiscal years 2012 through 2022 to understand the size and composition of the workforce. We analyzed FM positions in the Facility Management (6217) skill group. According to State officials, some employees in other skill groups also covered FM positions, but these numbers were limited for the time period we reviewed. To determine the reliability of the monthly data, we reviewed a prior GAO report that used data from the same system.¹ That report identified limitations with the data that we considered in our work, such as how the data may not reflect FM staff that were temporarily reassigned from one overseas post to another. We conducted data testing by comparing data from GTM to data provided by the Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations (OBO) on the numbers of authorized FM positions at posts. We then interviewed GTM officials about the data. We found the data fields we used to be reliable for the purposes of this report.

To examine challenges State faces in hiring and retaining FM staff, we interviewed officials from OBO; the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs; OBO's Regional Support Center (ORSC) in Frankfurt, Germany; and the facility managers at five selected overseas posts. We selected these five posts—Cairo, Egypt; Dhaka, Bangladesh; Nassau, Bahamas, Seoul, South Korea, and Yaoundé, Cameroon—based on the type of facility manager at the post (to include a mix of Foreign Service FM staff and non-Foreign Service employees working as facility managers), geographic region, and the size of the post (based on the physical footprint of the post in gross square meters). This was a nonprobability

¹*Department of State: Integrated Action Plan Could Enhance Efforts to Reduce Persistent Overseas Foreign Service Vacancies.* GAO-19-220 (Washington, D.C.: March 6, 2019).

sample and is not generalizable to all State posts. OBO operates three ORSCs in Cape Town, South Africa; Fort Lauderdale, Florida; and Frankfurt, Germany. We selected the ORSC in Frankfurt, Germany because it supported the most posts. We note that the responses from these bureaus are not generalizable to all regions. We asked these officials about maintenance workforce challenges that State has identified, which included hiring and retaining FM staff. We then analyzed these responses and grouped them based on common themes in the responses, and used those themes to categorize the responses. We also discussed steps State is taking to improve its recruitment practices to address its hiring challenges.

To examine the composition of LE maintenance staff, we analyzed data from GTM's Overseas Personnel System from March 31, 2022. We analyzed location data for LE staff based on employee skill codes identified as maintenance and operations related. This allowed us to count the number of maintenance-related LE staff at overseas posts by individual post, regionally, and globally, as well as the number of different types of maintenance-related positions globally. To assess the reliability of these data, we reviewed related documentation, traced a selection of the data to organizational charts from our five selected posts, and interviewed knowledgeable officials. The officials we interviewed conveyed some concerns about these data, because they completed data migration from a prior system in spring 2021. Our data tracing also found that some LE staff included in the job series we analyzed did not work in facilities maintenance, and that some facilities maintenance staff are in other job series we analyzed. As a result, when reporting LE staff data, we use near estimates rather than precise numbers to account for these limitations. Despite these concerns, we found these data to be sufficiently reliable for the purposes of this report.

To examine challenges State faces in hiring and retaining LE maintenance staff, we interviewed officials from OBO, the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, and the facility managers, human resources officials, and senior LE maintenance staff at the selected overseas posts. We asked these officials about maintenance workforce challenges for hiring and retaining LE maintenance staff. We then analyzed these responses and identified common themes. We then used those themes to categorize the responses. We also discussed steps State is taking to improve its recruitment practices to address its hiring challenges.

To obtain information about the extent to which State has adopted leading human capital management practices for its FM staff and LE maintenance

staff, we assessed whether State had adopted, partially adopted, or not adopted leading practices for human capital management that we have previously identified in published GAO reports.² For the FM staff, we selected two areas of related leading practices: strategic workforce planning (seven practices) and diversity management (four practices). For LE staff, we selected six workforce planning practices.³ We analyzed documentary evidence from OBO, GTM, and the selected overseas posts, such as workforce plans and assessments of workforce needs at the departmental, bureau, and post-level. We also interviewed officials from State bureaus, offices, and the five posts we selected regarding human capital management practices for FM staff and LE facilities maintenance staff. We reviewed the leading practices and evidence of State's related efforts to determine the extent to which State had adopted specific practices. Specifically, for each leading practice we determined that State had:

- **adopted** the practice if our evidence showed that State's relevant efforts met all parts of the practice;
- **partially adopted** the practice if our evidence showed that State's relevant efforts met some, but not all, parts of the practice; and
- **not adopted** the practice if our evidence showed that State did not have efforts that met any part of the practice.

In addition, since each post is responsible for its own LE staff, we indicated when a State-wide process is in place because such processes would affect all posts. When State-wide processes were not in place, we

²These reports include, *Diversity Management: Expert-Identified Leading Practices and Agency Examples*. [GAO-05-90](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 14, 2005); *Human Capital: Key Principles for Effective Strategic Workforce Planning*, [GAO-04-39](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 11, 2003); *A Model of Strategic Human Capital Management*. [GAO-02-373SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 15, 2002).

³We selected these practices for this review because they are relevant to a subset of State's workforce, whereas other practices are more relevant agency-wide. We did not review one of the workforce planning leading practices (succession planning) or the four diversity management practices for LE maintenance staff. For succession planning, based on our interviews with overseas posts, many facilities sections are not very hierarchical and therefore do not have many levels of progression that require succession planning to fill. As of December 2021, State had not defined how they could address diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility issues for LE staff, who face different issues and cultural barriers in different countries, according to officials from State's Office of Diversity and Inclusion. In September 2022, State published its *Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility (DEIA) Strategic Plan 2022-2026*, which does include information on how State plans to include LE staff in DEIA efforts, but the plan has not yet been fully implemented.

noted how many of the five posts we interviewed had implemented that process for LE staff.

For information on the trends in the demographics of the FM workforce, we reviewed data from State's Diversity Dashboard for fiscal years 2012-2022. This included data such as the gender and racial or ethnic origin of the FM workforce to highlight how the workforce has changed over time. To assess the reliability of the data, we interviewed knowledgeable officials from State about the underlying data and the process they used to create the dashboard. These officials told us that their Data Analytic Team reviewed the data before they submitted it to the Office of Personnel Management (OPM). They also explained how State implemented multi-race reporting in 2012. In particular, anyone that had previously identified as Hispanic race was shifted to Hispanic ethnicity, and their racial value was set to unspecified. Employees are able to update their own demographic data over time, but for those who did not they remained in the data as unspecified. We clarify this limitation when reporting the data in our report and generally found these data to be reliable for the purposes of this report.

To compare these trends in the demographics of the FM workforce with trends in the demographics of the federal facility maintenance workforce overall, we also analyzed data on the Facility Operations Services (1640) series in OPM's Enterprise Human Resources Integration (EHRI) dataset for fiscal years 2012-2021. This included data on the gender and racial and ethnic origin of this workforce. Our analysis of these data included staff both in and out of pay status. We assessed the reliability of the EHRI data through electronic testing to identify missing data, out of range values, and logical inconsistencies. We also reviewed prior GAO and OPM work assessing the reliability of these data, and obtained input on our use of the data for this report from OPM and State officials knowledgeable about the data. We found the data fields we used to be reliable for the purposes of this report.

We conducted this performance audit from September 2021 to March 2023 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 audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Appendix II: Comments from the Department of State



United States Department of State
Comptroller
Washington, D.C. 20520

March 14, 2023

Jason Bair
Managing Director
International Affairs and Trade
Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20548-0001

Dear Mr. Bair:

We appreciate the opportunity to review your draft report, "OVERSEAS REAL PROPERTY: State Should Improve Strategic Workforce Planning for Facilities Maintenance Staff." GAO Job Code 105401.

The enclosed Department of State comments are provided for incorporation with this letter as an appendix to the final report.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. Walsh".

James A. Walsh

Enclosure:
As stated

**Appendix II: Comments from the Department
of State**

cc: GAO – Nagla’a El-Hodiri (Acting)
OBO – William Moser
OIG - Norman Brown

Department of State Response to GAO Draft Report

**OVERSEAS REAL PROPERTY: State Should Improve Strategic Workforce
Planning for Facilities Maintenance Staff**
(GAO-23-105401, GAO Code 105401)

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on your draft report “*Overseas Real Property: State Should Improve Strategic Workforce Planning for Facilities Maintenance Staff.*”

Recommendation 1: The Secretary of State should ensure that the Director of OBO develops and maintains an inventory of job-related skills among the FM workforce.

Department Response: The Department concurs with this recommendation. The Department will identify job-related skills for the inventory, establish a framework and platform, and work with the Facility Manager workforce to input the relevant information. To maintain the inventory, we plan to conduct periodic reviews and issue requests for updates.

Recommendation 2: The Secretary of State should review whether the regional bureaus or OBO are best positioned to strategically lead the assignment process for the FM workforce.

Department Response: The Department concurs with this recommendation and is currently concluding a review to determine which bureau is best positioned to lead the Facility Manager assignment process.

Recommendation 3: The Secretary of State should develop guidance for overseas posts to create and maintain an inventory of LE maintenance staff skills.

Department Response: The Department concurs with this recommendation. Using its standard job descriptions, the Department will identify the LE

- 2 -

maintenance staff skills for the inventory, establish a framework and platform, and issue guidance to posts.

Conclusion: The Department appreciates the opportunity to comment on the draft report and is committed to implementing the three recommendations as part of our continued efforts to manage our facilities maintenance workforce and more effectively develop workforce planning strategies that protect and preserve our worldwide assets.

Appendix III: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

Nagla'a El-Hodiri, (202) 512-7279, or ElHodiriN@gao.gov

Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, Heather Latta (Assistant Director), Christopher Hayes (Analyst-in-Charge), Eddie Uyekawa, Jason Bair, Gabriella Baxter, Austin Erwin, Neil Doherty, and Larissa Barrett made key contributions to this report. In addition, Ashley Alley, Michael Armes, John Bauckman, Breanne Cave, Sara Daleski, Clifton G. Douglas, Jr., Justin Fisher, Robert Letzler, Steven Lozano, Maame Quakyi, and Deirdre Sutula provided technical assistance.

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