

# Presidential Transitions: GSA's Reported Cost for the 2020–2021 Transition and Its Budget Request for the 2024–2025 Election Cycle

GAO-24-107518

Q&amp;A Report to Congressional Committees

September 26, 2024

## Why This Matters

The General Services Administration (GSA) serves a central role in coordinating and facilitating presidential transitions under the Presidential Transition Act of 1963, as amended (PTA). Among other things, the PTA authorizes GSA to provide services and facilities to eligible candidates before the general election, as well as a variety of transition services to the incoming and outgoing administrations after the election. The PTA further assigns responsibilities to facilitate government-wide and agency-level planning, information sharing, and cooperation between the incumbent administration and eligible candidates.

House Report 117-393 includes a provision for GAO to review GSA's cost of supporting the 2020–2021 presidential transition. This information will help the Committee on Appropriations ensure that GSA is prepared for future transitions and assess the feasibility of GSA providing support to more than one transition team should the result of an election be unclear (H.R. Rep. No. 117-393, at 74 (2022)).

This report describes GSA's reported cost of supporting the 2020–2021 presidential transition. Additionally, it examines how the agency developed its fiscal year (FY) 2024 pre-election and FY 2025 post-election budget requests, and whether those requests were consistent with certain provisions in the PTA. Lastly, we present other publicly available sources of information on GSA's role in supporting the 2024–2025 presidential transition.

## Key Takeaways

- According to GSA, its total cost of supporting the 2020–2021 presidential transition was about \$34.6 million. This amount included the cost of providing pre- and post-election presidential transition services, facilities, and other expenses.
- GSA received a \$9.6 million appropriation for FY 2020 pre-election presidential transition activities. Of this amount, GSA reported spending a total of \$6.1 million on office space, communication services and IT equipment, and printing and supplies associated with the transition. The remaining funding expired at the end of FY 2021.
- GSA received a \$9.9 million appropriation for FY 2021 post-election presidential transition activities. Of this amount, GSA reported spending \$9.5 million on expenses related to the incoming administration, outgoing administration, and appointee orientation activities. The remaining funding expired at the end of FY 2021.
- GSA also reported 2020–2021 presidential transition costs of \$12.7 million from its Acquisition Services Fund (for IT equipment, furniture, and moving services) and \$4.1 million from its Federal Buildings Fund (for office space),

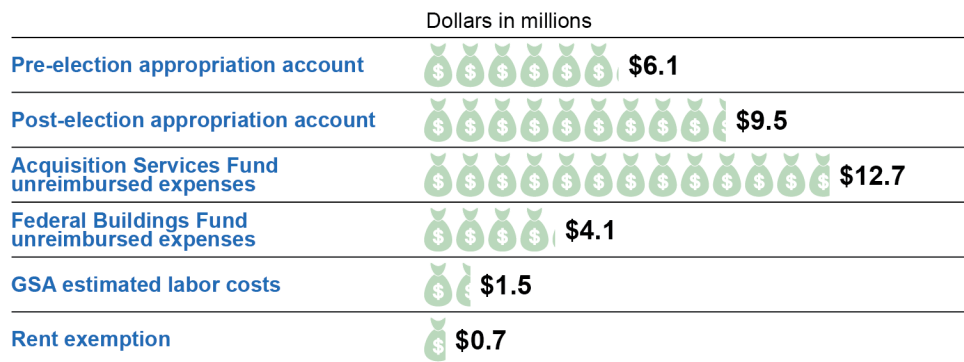
which were not reimbursed by the pre- or post-election presidential transition appropriations. Additionally, GSA estimated \$1.5 million in labor costs for employees who worked on transition-related activities and a \$0.7 million rent exemption (unreimbursed rent) for presidential transition office space.

- GSA calculated its presidential transition-related appropriation requests by adjusting the prior enacted amounts for inflation and requested these amounts through the President’s Budget. For FY 2024 pre-election activities, GSA requested and subsequently received \$10.4 million. The agency’s practice is to adjust the pre-election request based on inflation, even though the agency determined that doing so is not required by the PTA.
- For FY 2025 post-election activities, GSA requested \$11.2 million. GSA calculated this request consistent with the inflation adjustment provision in the PTA. As of September 26, 2024, the date of this report, GSA had not received a FY 2025 post-election appropriation.
- There are other publicly available reports that include more detail about GSA’s responsibilities for supporting presidential transitions under the PTA, as well as the agency’s presidential transition-related budget requests.

**What did GSA report as its cost for supporting the 2020–2021 presidential transition?**

GSA reported that its total cost for supporting the 2020–2021 presidential transition was about \$34.6 million. This amount included expenditures made under GSA’s pre- and post-election appropriations, as well as other expenses the agency deemed necessary to carry out the purposes of the PTA (see fig. 1).<sup>1</sup>

**Figure 1: Breakdown of General Services Administration’s (GSA) Reported \$34.6 Million Total Cost of Supporting the 2020–2021 Presidential Transition as of June 30, 2024**



Source: GAO analysis of GSA data. | GAO-24-107518

Specifically, the agency’s reported total cost included the following:

**FY 2020 pre-election appropriation.** GSA received a pre-election appropriation of \$9.6 million for its role in supporting the 2020–2021 presidential transition under the PTA.<sup>2</sup> GSA reported spending a total of \$6.1 million (outlays) on pre-election activities such as IT and communications, office space and supplies, contract support, and transportation. The remaining funding expired on September 30, 2021, and any balance that remains 5 years after that date will be canceled, returning the funds to the general fund of the Treasury. Table 1 presents a summary of GSA’s reported 2020–2021 pre-election obligations and outlays by major category.<sup>3</sup>

**Table 1: General Services Administration’s (GSA) 2020–2021 Reported Pre-Election Presidential Transition Obligations and Outlays**

Major category	Obligations	Outlays
IT and communications	\$3,825,076	\$3,800,328
Space and space related changes	2,383,030	2,088,328
Contract support	159,622	159,622
Office supplies	17,951	17,951
Transportation	3,230	3,196
<b>Total pre-election</b>	<b>\$6,388,909</b>	<b>\$6,069,425</b>

Source: GAO analysis of GSA data as of June 30, 2024. | GAO-24-107518

Note: An obligation is a definite commitment that creates a legal liability of the U.S. government for the payment of goods and services ordered or received, or a legal duty on the part of the U.S. government that could mature into a legal liability by virtue of actions on the part of another party that are beyond the control of the U.S. government. An outlay is the issuance of checks, disbursement of cash, or electronic transfer of funds made to liquidate a federal obligation.

**FY 2021 post-election appropriation.** GSA received a presidential transition (post-election) appropriation of \$9.9 million for its role in supporting the 2020–2021 presidential transition under the PTA.<sup>4</sup> Of that appropriation, GSA reported spending \$9.5 million (outlays) on post-election activities consisting of \$6.3 million on the incoming administration; \$2.2 million on the outgoing administration; and \$1.0 million for appointee orientation activities, such as briefings, workshops, and training. The remaining funding expired on September 30, 2021, and any balance that remains 5 years after that date will be canceled, returning the funds to the general fund of the Treasury. Table 2 provides a summary of GSA’s reported 2020–2021 post-election obligations and outlays by major category.

**Table 2: General Services Administration’s (GSA) 2020–2021 Reported Post-Election Presidential Transition Obligations and Outlays**

Major category	Obligations	Outlays
<b>Incoming administration</b>		
Contract support	\$6,170,261	\$6,170,261
Staff support	111,708	102,520
Other federal support	39	39
<b>Total incoming administration</b>	<b>6,282,008</b>	<b>6,272,820</b>
<b>Outgoing administration</b>		
Personnel compensation and benefits	1,723,152	1,723,152
Space related costs (office space, security, furniture)	233,315	232,231
Communications (printing, phone, mail)	164,610	164,605
IT	84,930	84,930
Contract support	22,269	21,543
Office supplies	14,861	14,861
Travel	7,525	7,525
<b>Total outgoing administration</b>	<b>2,250,661</b>	<b>2,248,847</b>
<b>Appointee orientation activities</b>		
Training from nonfederal provider	571,730	560,168
Training from federal agency	424,250	424,250
<b>Total appointee orientation activities</b>	<b>995,980</b>	<b>984,418</b>
<b>Total post-election</b>	<b>\$9,528,649</b>	<b>\$9,506,085</b>

Source: GAO analysis of GSA data as of June 30, 2024. | GAO-24-107518

Notes: An obligation is a definite commitment that creates a legal liability of the U.S. government for the payment of goods and services ordered or received, or a legal duty on the part of the U.S. government that could mature into a legal liability by virtue of actions on the part of another party that are beyond the control of the U.S. government. An outlay is the issuance of checks, disbursement of cash, or electronic transfer of funds made to liquidate a federal obligation. Amounts shown in columns may not sum to the totals because of rounding.

**Acquisition Services Fund (ASF) and Federal Buildings Fund (FBF) activities.** To meet its responsibilities under the PTA—and because the pre- and post-election appropriations are not always enacted before the start of the transition process—GSA officials told us that the agency generally uses funding from its ASF and FBF to begin covering a variety of presidential transition expenses.<sup>5</sup> For example, the agency uses the ASF for expenses related to IT equipment, furniture, and moving services; it uses the FBF for office space modifications and infrastructure upgrades. While these expenses may be reimbursed with pre- and post-election appropriations, GSA officials told us that the total presidential transition cost typically exceeds these amounts. As a result, the ASF and FBF costs are often not fully reimbursed. For the 2020–2021 presidential transition, GSA reported that it spent \$12.7 million from the ASF and \$4.1 million from the FBF for presidential transition costs that were not reimbursed.

**GSA employee labor costs.** GSA’s labor costs for employees working on the 2020–2021 presidential transition are not included in the pre- and post-election appropriation accounts. GSA estimated these costs to be about \$1.5 million.

**Unreimbursed rent for transition office space.** The Public Building Service, a component of GSA, provided a rent exemption of \$689,673 for presidential transition office space in the Herbert C. Hoover Building that the pre- and post-election appropriations otherwise would have been required to pay. GSA officials told us that the service waived the rent in accordance with 40 U.S.C. § 586(b) because of the limited funding available for GSA’s total responsibilities outlined in the PTA for the 2020–2021 transition.

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### How did GSA calculate its 2024 pre-election and 2025 post-election budget requests, and were they consistent with certain provisions of the PTA?

GSA calculated its FY 2024 pre-election and FY 2025 post-election budget requests by adjusting the prior enacted amounts for inflation.<sup>6</sup> We found that the agency’s FY 2025 post-election request was consistent with the inflation adjustment provision in the PTA.<sup>7</sup> GSA officials told us that the agency’s practice is to adjust the pre-election request based on inflation, even though the agency has determined that doing so is not required by the plain language of the PTA. However, GSA does so because it believes this approach best aligns with the intent of Congress.

**FY 2024 pre-election budget request.** GSA requested and subsequently received a FY 2024 pre-election appropriation of \$10.4 million.<sup>8</sup> GSA calculated its pre-election budget request by adjusting the FY 2020 enacted amount of \$9.6 million for inflation (see fig. 2). To do so, GSA used the inflation rates provided by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). OMB provides these rates to federal agencies for use in developing budget requests.

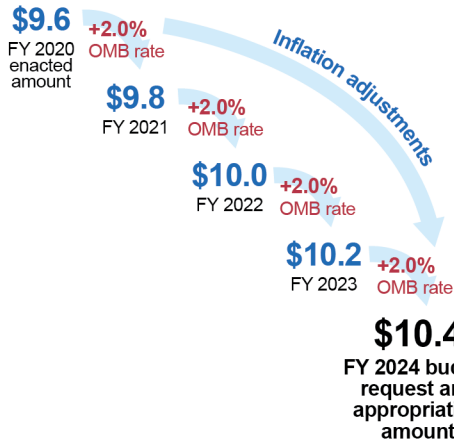
**FY 2025 post-election budget request.** GSA calculated its FY 2025 presidential transition (post-election) budget request of \$11.2 million by adjusting the FY 2021 enacted amount of \$9.9 million for inflation (see fig. 2). Specifically, GSA applied the Core Consumer Price Index rate for FY 2022 and the OMB-provided inflation rates for FY 2023 through FY 2025. As of September 26, 2024, the date of this report, GSA had not received a FY 2025 post-election appropriation.

**Figure 2: General Services Administration’s (GSA) Fiscal Year (FY) 2024 Pre-Election and FY 2025 Post-Election Budget Request Calculations**

**Fiscal Year 2024 GSA pre-election budget request**

Calculated from the FY 2020 enacted amount, adjusted for inflation using Office of Management and Budget (OMB) rates for FY 2021-2024

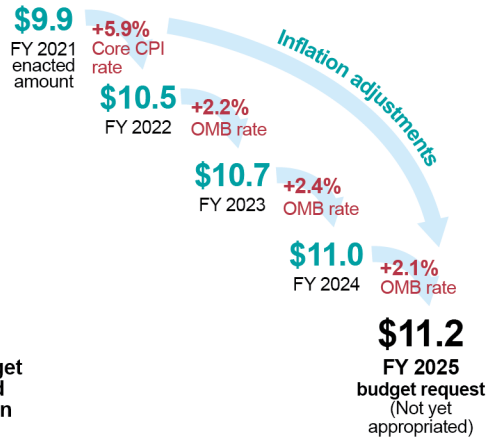
Dollars in millions



**Fiscal Year 2025 GSA post-election budget request**

Calculated from the FY 2021 enacted amount, adjusted for inflation using the Core Consumer Price Index (CPI) rate for FY 2022 and OMB rates for FY 2023-2025

Dollars in millions



Source: GAO analysis of GSA data. | GAO-24-107518

Note: GSA officials told us that OMB provides agencies with inflation assumptions at multiple points in the fiscal year. Therefore, there may be different inflation assumptions for one fiscal year. GSA used the latest OMB inflation rate assumptions that were available at the time that GSA developed the estimates for the pre-election and post-election budget requests.

**How does GSA plan to use the 2024 pre-election appropriation?**

As described in its FY 2024 Congressional Justification, GSA plans to use the \$10.4 million pre-election funds to provide transition services such as suitable office space, communication services and IT equipment, and printing and supplies.<sup>9</sup>

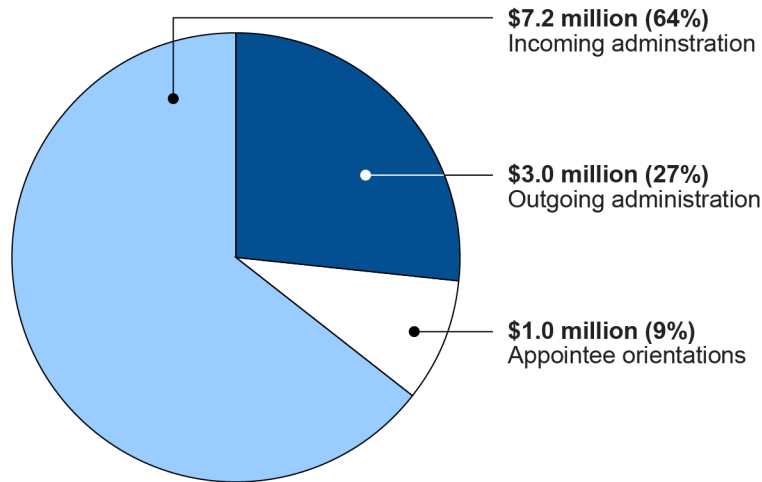
Transition services become available to each eligible candidate as soon as the GSA Administrator notifies them that they are eligible. The services continue until the date on which the apparent successful candidates for the offices of the President and Vice President can be determined.<sup>10</sup>

GSA officials told us that the agency does not anticipate requesting additional appropriations if more than two transition teams are deemed eligible for transition services. These officials also stated that GSA has developed contingencies to accommodate up to three pre-election transition teams.

**How does GSA plan to use the requested 2025 post-election appropriation?**

According to its FY 2025 Congressional Justification, GSA plans to use the requested \$11.2 million post-election funds to provide transition services and facilities to the incoming and outgoing administration, as well as orientations for presidential appointees (see fig. 3). The proposed appropriation language establishes that \$10.2 million would be permanently canceled and no longer available if the President-elect is the incumbent President or if the Vice President-elect is the incumbent Vice President.

**Figure 3: General Services Administration's (GSA) \$11.2 Million Fiscal Year 2025 Post-Election Budget Request**



Source: General Services Administration. | GAO-24-107518

**What did GSA consider for the incoming administration in its 2025 post-election budget request?**

As described in its FY 2025 Congressional Justification, GSA's post-election budget request included \$7.2 million for the incoming President, Vice President, or their designees to pay for costs such as suitable office space for transition activities, compensation to transition office staff, communications services, allowances for travel and subsistence, and printing and postage costs.

This funding would become available to an incoming administration the day after the general election and ending 60 days after the inauguration.<sup>11</sup> However, GSA's proposal in the FY 2025 Congressional Justification states that funds are not available during any period of multiple apparent successful candidates, except for certain funding for services and facilities for former Presidents and Vice Presidents, in connection with winding up the affairs of their offices.<sup>12</sup>

**Recent changes to the PTA.** The Presidential Transition Improvement Act amended the PTA to direct GSA to treat one or more eligible candidates as the apparent successful candidate when certain criteria are met. If there are multiple apparent successful candidates, GSA is authorized to provide transition services to each such candidate, and transition officials are required to provide equal access to required information and spaces. GSA is also required to provide weekly reports to Congress that include, among other things, a summary of funds distributed to each apparent successful candidate under the PTA.<sup>13</sup>

**GSA considerations regarding recent changes to the PTA.** GSA's FY 2025 Congressional Justification states that, prior to the enactment of the 2022 legislation, services and support to any remaining eligible candidates was held steady at the pre-election level until a winner of the general election could be determined. For its 2025 post-election budget request, GSA's proposed language maintains each remaining eligible candidate's access to the classified briefings, agency employees, and expanded GSA support. However, the proposed appropriation language reserves the appropriated funding until the outcome of the election is known. According to GSA, this ensures that, in the event of a change in administration, the incoming administration has access to an appropriated amount commensurate with what has been provided in previous election cycles. An eligible candidate who is later determined to be the sole apparent successful candidate would be able to be reimbursed for allowable expenses incurred. However, a remaining eligible candidate later determined not

to be the sole apparent success candidate would not be eligible for such reimbursement.

GSA officials told us that after the FY 2025 Congressional Justification was published, GSA briefed the House and Senate Committees on Appropriations on GSA's FY 2025 budget request. GSA stated that, following that briefing, the agency worked with the Senate Appropriations Committee's Subcommittee on Financial Services and General Government (FSGG) to draft a new proposal that does not contain the restriction on spending during any period of multiple possible successful candidates and provides sufficient funding to support two candidates at the authorized levels during a period of multiple possible apparent successful candidates. According to GSA, this language was incorporated into the Senate's draft FSGG appropriations bill.<sup>14</sup>

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### What did GSA consider for the outgoing administration in its 2025 post-election budget request?

As described in GSA's FY 2025 Congressional Justification, the post-election budget request included \$3.0 million for expenses of the outgoing President and Vice President. These funds would be available from 30 days before through 6 months after the date their terms of office expire.<sup>15</sup> According to GSA these funds would be used to provide suitable office space for transition activities, compensation to transition office staff, communication services, allowances for travel and subsistence, and printing and postage costs associated with the transition.

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### What did GSA consider for presidential appointees in its 2025 post-election budget request?

According to GSA's FY 2025 Congressional Justification, the agency's post-election request included \$1.0 million to cover federal agencies' costs related to providing briefings, workshops, training, and orientation for prospective presidential appointees. These funds would become available from the day after the general election through the end of the fiscal year. However, pursuant to GSA's proposed appropriations language, these funds would not be available during any period of multiple apparent successful presidential candidates.

GSA's appropriation request states that these funds will not be rescinded if there is no change in administration. For that reason, GSA proposed reserving this funding until the outcome of the election is known. As this funding is available for appointee orientation activities both before and after inauguration day and is available until September 30, 2025, GSA determined that the impact of any delay in accessing these funds is expected to be minor and addressable.

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### What other information about GSA's 2024–2025 presidential transition activities is publicly available?

Other publicly available information on GSA's role in supporting the 2024–2025 presidential transition includes the following:

**2024 Presidential Transition Directory.** PTA requires GSA to develop a compilation of federal publications and materials that provide information on the officers, organization, statutory and administrative authorities, functions, duties, responsibilities, and mission of each department and agency.<sup>16</sup> This directory was made available on November 1, 2023 and can be found on GSA's Presidential Transition Directory website.<sup>17</sup> This website is designed to give presidential candidates quick and easy access to key information about the structure of the federal government and policies related to the presidential transition.

**GSA's reports to Congress.** PTA requires GSA to submit two reports to Congress describing the activities undertaken by the President and agencies to prepare for the responsible transfer of power to a new President.<sup>18</sup> These reports to the House Committee on Oversight and Accountability and the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs are due 6 months and 3 months prior to a presidential election, and are currently available on

GSA's website.<sup>19</sup> The first of these progress reports was issued in May 2024, and the second was issued in August 2024.

**Congressional Research Service report.** On May 22, 2024, the Congressional Research Service issued a report summarizing the key provisions of the PTA, as well as GSA's FY 2024 and FY 2025 budget proposals for presidential transition-related activities. This report can be found on the Congressional Research Service's website.<sup>20</sup>

**GSA's Congressional Justifications for presidential transition activities.** GSA's FY 2024 and FY 2025 Congressional Justifications are available on the agency's Annual Budget Requests website.<sup>21</sup>

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## Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to the Administrator of GSA for review and comment. GSA did not have any comments on the report.

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## How GAO Did This Study

To determine what GSA reported as its total cost for its role in supporting the 2020–2021 presidential transition, we reviewed relevant federal laws and other publicly available reports; interviewed GSA officials; reviewed relevant policies and procedures; and reviewed GSA's financial records and other supporting documentation, such as appropriation warrants, and GSA reconciliations to Treasury reports. GSA officials also provided a written assertion that the reported transactions were complete. We did not audit these transactions for validity, accuracy, and completeness.

To determine how GSA calculated its FY 2024 pre-election and FY 2025 post-election budget requests, and whether the FY 2025 request was consistent with certain provisions of the PTA, we interviewed GSA officials; performed recalculations; and reviewed relevant supporting documentation, including GSA's FY 2024 and FY 2025 Congressional Justifications.

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

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## List of Addressees

The Honorable Chris Van Hollen  
Chair  
The Honorable Bill Hagerty  
Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Financial Services and General Government  
Committee on Appropriations  
United States Senate

The Honorable David Joyce  
Chairman  
The Honorable Steny Hoyer  
Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Financial Services and General Government  
Committee on Appropriations  
House of Representatives



We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Administrator of the General Services Administration, and other interested parties. In addition, the report will be available at no charge on the GAO website at <https://www.gao.gov>.

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## GAO Contact Information

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>PTA, Pub. L. No. 88-277 (1964) (codified as amended at 3 U.S.C. § 102 note).

<sup>2</sup>Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2020, Pub. L. No. 116-93, div. C, title V, 133 Stat. 2317, 2467 (2019).

<sup>3</sup>An obligation is a definite commitment that creates a legal liability of the U.S. government for the payment of goods and services ordered or received, or a legal duty on the part of the U.S. government that could mature into a legal liability by virtue of actions on the part of another party that are beyond the control of the U.S. government. An outlay is the issuance of checks, disbursement of cash, or electronic transfer of funds made to liquidate a federal obligation.

<sup>4</sup>Continuing Appropriations Act, 2021 and Other Extensions Act, Pub. L. No. 116-159, div. A, § 134, 134 Stat. 709, 716 (2020).

<sup>5</sup>The appropriation language in Pub. L. No. 116-93 and Pub. L. No. 116-159 includes provisions that allow GSA to transfer and credit the ASF or FBF to reimburse certain obligations.

<sup>6</sup>GSA requests these amounts through the President's Budget.

<sup>7</sup>Section 7(a) of the PTA authorizes appropriations for carrying out the purposes of the PTA. The amounts authorized to provide services and facilities to the apparent successful candidates under section 3 of the PTA and to the former President and Vice President under section 5 of the PTA were set at a fixed amount at the time these provisions were enacted. However, section 7(b) of the PTA states that these fixed amounts "shall be increased by an inflation adjusted amount, based on increases in the cost of transition services and expenses which have occurred in the years following the most recent Presidential transition."

<sup>8</sup>Further Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2024, Pub. L. No. 118-47, div. B, title V.

<sup>9</sup>GSA publishes its annual Congressional Justification, which provides the details of GSA's budget request that the President sends to Congress, on its public website.

<sup>10</sup>PTA § 3(h) (codified as amended at 3 U.S.C. § 102 note).

<sup>11</sup>PTA § 3(a),(b) (codified as amended at 3 U.S.C. § 102 note).

<sup>12</sup>Section 5 of the PTA authorizes GSA to provide these services and facilities to former Presidents and Vice Presidents.

<sup>13</sup>Pub. L. No. 117-328, div. P, title II, 136 Stat. 4459, 5241 (2022).

<sup>14</sup> Financial Services and General Government Appropriations Act, 2025, S. 4928, 118<sup>th</sup> Cong.

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<sup>15</sup>PTA § 5 (codified as amended at 3 U.S.C. § 102 note). The PTA makes these funds available “for a period not to exceed seven months from 30 days before the date of the expiration of his term of office as President or Vice President.”

<sup>16</sup>PTA § 3(a)(9) (codified as amended at 3 U.S.C. § 102 note).

<sup>17</sup>2024 Presidential Transition Directory (website), General Services Administration, accessed September 26, 2024, <https://www.gsa.gov/governmentwide-initiatives/presidential-transition-2024>.

<sup>18</sup>PTA § 4(i) (codified as amended at 3 U.S.C. § 102 note).

<sup>19</sup>Congressional Reports (website), General Services Administration, accessed September 26, 2024, <https://www.gsa.gov/governmentwide-initiatives/presidential-transition-2024/congressional-reports>.

<sup>20</sup>Congressional Research Service, *Presidential Transition Act: Provisions and Funding*, R46602, May 22, 2024, accessed September 26, 2024, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/details?prodcode=R46602>.

<sup>21</sup>Annual Budget Requests (website), General Services Administration, accessed September 26, 2024, <https://www.gsa.gov/reference/reports/budget-and-performance/annual-budget-requests>.