

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-25-105804](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

USDA made a commitment to ensuring compliance with EEO requirements and best practices. OASCR leads USDA's efforts to respond to EEO complaints and coordinate department-wide EEO efforts for nearly 100,000 employees across 29 USDA agencies and offices.

The Agricultural Improvement Act of 2018 includes a provision for GAO to study, among other things, USDA's actions to decrease discrimination and civil rights complaints. This report (1) describes the nature of USDA employee discrimination complaints in fiscal years 2015 through 2023, (2) examines USDA's efforts to address EEO complaints, and (3) examines USDA's efforts to address discrimination in the workplace.

GAO reviewed USDA's reports to Congress and EEOC, agency self-assessments, and strategic plans. GAO interviewed USDA and EEOC officials and representatives from 14 USDA employee groups. GAO compared USDA actions with federal and USDA regulations, EEOC management directives, and GAO's guide on effective training in the federal government.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making three recommendations for USDA to consistently monitor and report annually on agencies' ADR programs; update its policy and resume its review of agency civil rights training program plans; and collect anonymous employee perspectives on workplace discrimination. USDA agreed with all three recommendations.

View [GAO-25-105804](#). For more information, contact Steve Morris at (202) 512-3841 or MorrisS@gao.gov.

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EQUAL EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITY

USDA Could Strengthen Efforts to Address Workplace Discrimination Complaints

What GAO Found

U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) formal equal employment opportunity (EEO) complaints have decreased from 506 in fiscal year 2015 to 306 in fiscal year 2023. USDA attributes fewer complaints to a range of factors, such as its use of mediation and other conflict resolution efforts. However, a decrease in complaints may not always indicate improvement. For example, fear of retaliation could prevent complaint filing. Of the formal complaints filed, on average, retaliation was the most frequent basis for these complaints. USDA agencies primarily use Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR), which uses mediation and facilitation techniques, to address discrimination complaints according to officials from USDA's Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights (OASCR).

OASCR has not consistently monitored agencies' use of ADR, since a 2018 reorganization eliminated its monitoring staff and realigned responsibilities to the agencies, according to OASCR officials. USDA has more than doubled its EEO staff since fiscal year 2022 according to a USDA 2023 report but has not resumed monitoring. By resuming monitoring, OASCR could better ensure these programs are meeting departmental standards such as using ADR at the first sign of conflict.

Opportunities for USDA to Address Workplace Discrimination

	Alternative Dispute Resolution programs
	Civil rights training plans
	Collection of employee perspectives

Source: GAO (data and icons). | GAO-25-105804

USDA's efforts to address discrimination in the workplace include mandatory civil rights training. USDA agencies also develop civil rights training plans, which departmental regulation requires OASCR to review. Prior GAO work found an agency's evaluation of its training program is important in demonstrating how its efforts are improving agency performance. However, OASCR does not review training plans, according to OASCR officials, who said they are updating a policy to provide criteria for these reviews. By updating its policy and resuming the reviews, OASCR could better assist agencies with their efforts to increase awareness of discrimination and employee rights.

OASCR officials were not aware of USDA having a method for consistently collecting anonymous employee perspectives on discrimination—an Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) promising practice. USDA uses an Office of Personnel Management survey. However, the survey's questions are not specific to USDA's or any other agency's workplace environment. By developing a department-wide tool to collect anonymous employee perspectives, USDA management could better understand where to target its efforts to help create a workplace free of discrimination for all employees.