

**Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations hearing entitled “EPA Oversight:
Unimplemented Inspector General and GAO Recommendations”**

September 6, 2017

Additional Questions for the Record

The Honorable Tim Murphy

- 1. Given EPA's long-standing failure to conduct satisfactory workforce and workload assessments, does the agency know for certain whether it is carrying out all of its statutory obligations?**

GAO Response: While we have not looked at the link between EPA's workforce planning and its ability to carry out specific statutory obligations, we have reported that strategic workforce planning can help an agency meet its mission requirements. With specific regard to EPA, we found that its workforce plan was not clearly aligned with its strategic plan or budget. Without alignment to the strategic plan, we concluded that EPA was at risk of not having the appropriately skilled workforce they need to effectively achieve its mission.

- 2. Your written testimony noted that EPA has failed to identify project officer critical skills and competencies or monitored its recruitment and retention efforts for grants specialists. Are these problems limited to certain regional offices or does it cut across the entire agency?**
 - a. If EPA were to institute greater accountability in its grants program would the agency be better suited to accomplish its core mission, and if so, how?**

GAO Response: In January 2017, we reported on the extent to which EPA follows leading practices of strategic workforce planning in managing its grants workforce. The scope of this work included all 10 EPA regional offices and 3 of EPA's 10 national program offices in Washington, D.C. that manage grants. We concluded that while EPA partially follows these leading practices, it had not identified project officer critical skills and competencies or developed strategies, such as training, to address project officer skill and competency gaps. The responsibilities of project officers have expanded greatly in the past 10 years. Reviewing project officers' critical skills and competencies and determining their training needs to address any skill and competency gaps could help ensure that EPA has people with the right skills to meet the goals of its 2016-2020 Grants Management Plan. Officials we interviewed from 3 of EPA's 10 regional offices told us that, in addition to identifying critical skills and competencies, reviewing project officer functions, such as roles and responsibilities, would be helpful. In addition, we concluded that the 2016-2020 Grants Management Plan did not contain any performance measures to monitor or evaluate EPA's recruitment and retention efforts for its grants personnel or show how these efforts contribute toward human capital goals and programmatic results. EPA also does not collect performance data on such measures. By developing performance measures to track the effectiveness of its recruitment and retention efforts for grant specialists and by collecting performance data for these measures, EPA could enhance its ability to identify both performance shortfalls and appropriate corrective actions.

3. What benefits could EPA realize if it adopted policies and review processes for its grant programs that could be consistently applied and analyzed?

GAO Response: To help achieve its mission of protecting human health and the environment, EPA manages a significant grants portfolio that accounts for almost half of the agency's budget. EPA's ability to manage this portfolio depends primarily on grant specialists and project officers, but as we concluded in 2017, the agency does not have the information it may need to allocate grants management resources in an effective and efficient manner. For example, because EPA does not have a process for regional and national program offices to consistently collect and analyze information about project officer FTEs, we concluded that the agency could not know the level of resources used to manage the agency's sizeable \$3.9 billion grants portfolio. By developing a documented process for regional and national program offices to collect and analyze data about project officer FTEs, EPA could have better assurance that its offices consistently collect information on project officers and that the agency and its offices are better positioned to assess and, as appropriate, restructure or resize FTE levels to meet the agency's significant grant-making responsibilities. In addition, EPA does not have a documented process for consistently obtaining workload data for grants management personnel across regional and national program offices. Developing such a process may help the agency better track changes to grants management workloads and make personnel adjustments as needed. Furthermore, EPA does not have a documented process for consistently allocating FTEs to grants management positions in regional and national program offices based on analyses of workload data. Developing such a process could provide EPA with greater assurance that the agency is allocating grants management resources effectively and efficiently.

4. The number of unimplemented GAO recommendations that relate to management and operations is significantly higher than other subject matter areas, could you explain the reason for this?

- a. **What steps could EPA take to improve its ability to implement management and operations recommendations?**

GAO Response: Of the recommendations we made to EPA since fiscal year 2007, as of August 23, 2017, EPA had not implemented 52 percent of the recommendations related to operations and management. The percentage of unimplemented recommendations in the other categories for this time period ranged from 43 percent for toxics, chemical safety, and pesticides recommendations to 20 percent of environmental contamination and cleanup recommendations. One factor explaining the differences in implementation rates is the timing of the recommendations. Experience has shown that it takes time for agencies to implement our recommendations. For this reason, we actively track unaddressed recommendations for 4 years. Of the 64 unimplemented management and operations recommendations made to EPA since 2007, we made 50 (78 percent) of them within the last 4 years (i.e., between 2013 and 2017). Therefore, EPA may have not had sufficient time to implement many of these recommendations.

Continued attention by EPA on open recommendations will help improve its ability to implement them. In fiscal year 2016, we worked with EPA to increase the frequency of recommendation follow-up from annually to semi-annually. We believe this will help bring attention to open recommendations and emphasize the importance of their implementation.

The Honorable Michael C. Burgess

In 2015, the EPA's OIG released its findings related to the EPA's use of Title 42 hiring authority to fill specific positions in its Office of Research and Development (ORD). After reviewing this report, I'd like to explore its results and any action the EPA has taken in the past two years.

5. While Title 42 appointments were designed to attract specialists in specific scientific fields, the OIG report points out that 78% of the ORD's Title 42 appointments were in management positions.

- a. How does this compare to HHS' use of Title 42?
- b. Did the OIG find the ORD's use of Title 42 in these positions to agree with the intent of the program?

GAO Response: In our previous work on HHS and EPA use of the hiring authorities under 42 U.S.C. § 209(f) and (g), we found that most employees appointed at HHS served in one of the following general occupations: staff scientist, research fellow, senior investigator, clinical research nurse, and fellow. We have not reviewed the OIG report on EPA's use of Title 42 hiring authority to fill specific positions in ORD.