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FOREIGN LANGUAGE CAPABILITIES

Departments of Homeland Security, Defense, and State Could Better Assess Their Foreign Language Needs and Capabilities and Address Shortfalls

Statement of David C. Maurer, Director
Homeland Security and Justice Issues





Highlights of [GAO-10-715T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

Foreign language skills are an increasingly key element to the success of diplomatic efforts; military, counterterrorism, law enforcement and intelligence missions; and to ensure access to federal programs and services to Limited English Proficient (LEP) populations within the United States. GAO has issued reports evaluating foreign language capabilities at the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the Department of Defense (DOD), and the State Department (State). This testimony is based on these reports, issued from June 2009 through June 2010, and addresses the extent to which (1) DHS has assessed its foreign language needs and existing capabilities, identified any potential shortfalls, and developed programs and activities to address potential shortfalls; (2) the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has conducted a needs assessment to help ensure access to its services for LEP persons; and (3) DOD and State have developed comprehensive approaches to address their foreign language capability challenges.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is not making any new recommendations; however, GAO made recommendations in prior reports to help DHS, DOD, and State better assess their foreign language capabilities and address potential shortfalls. All three agencies generally concurred with GAO's recommendations and have taken some actions.

View [GAO-10-715T](#) or [key components](#). For more information, contact David C. Maurer at (202) 512-9627 or maurerd@gao.gov.

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What GAO Found

In June 2010, we reported that DHS had taken limited actions to assess its foreign language needs and existing capabilities, and to identify potential shortfalls. For example, while two of three DHS components included in GAO's review had conducted foreign language assessments, these assessments were not comprehensive, as GAO's prior work on strategic workforce planning recommends. In addition, while all three DHS components GAO reviewed had various lists of employees with foreign language capabilities, DHS had no systematic method for assessing its existing capabilities. In addition, DHS and its components had not taken actions to identify potential foreign language shortfalls. Further, DHS and its components established a variety of foreign language programs and activities, but had not assessed the extent to which these programs and activities address potential shortfalls. The Department's ability to use them to address potential shortfalls varied and GAO recommended that DHS comprehensively assess its foreign language needs and capabilities, and any resulting shortfalls; and ensure these assessments are incorporated into future strategic planning. DHS generally concurred with these recommendations, and officials stated that the Department has actions planned to address them.

In April 2010, we reported that FEMA had developed a national needs assessment to identify its LEP customer base and how frequently it interacted with LEP persons. Using this assessment, FEMA officials reported that the agency had identified 13 of the most frequently encountered languages spoken by LEP communities. Locally, in response to a disaster, FEMA conducts a needs assessment by collecting information from the U.S. Census Bureau and data from local sources to help determine the amount of funding required to ensure proper communication with affected LEP communities.

In June 2009, GAO reported that DOD had taken steps to transform its language and regional proficiency capabilities, but it had not developed a comprehensive strategic plan to guide its efforts and lacked a complete inventory and validated requirements to identify gaps and assess related risks. GAO recommended that DOD develop a comprehensive strategic plan for its language and regional proficiency efforts, establish a mechanism to assess the regional proficiency skills of its personnel, and develop a methodology to identify its language and regional proficiency requirements. DOD concurred with these recommendations; however, as of June 2010, officials stated that related actions are underway, but have not been completed. Furthermore, GAO reported in September 2009 that State's efforts to meet its foreign language requirements had yielded some results but had not closed persistent gaps in foreign-language proficient staff and reflected, in part, a lack of a comprehensive, strategic approach. GAO recommended that State develop a comprehensive strategic plan with measurable goals, objectives, milestones, and feedback mechanisms that links all of State's efforts to meet its foreign language requirements. State generally agreed with GAO's recommendations and is working to address them.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

I am pleased to be here today to discuss our work assessing the federal government's foreign language capabilities.¹ Foreign language skills are vital to effectively communicate and overcome language barriers encountered during critical operations and are an increasingly key element to the success of diplomatic efforts, military operations, counterterrorism, law enforcement and intelligence missions, as well as to ensure access to federal programs and services to Limited English Proficient (LEP) populations within the United States. My testimony today focuses on our work evaluating the foreign language capabilities at the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the Department of Defense (DOD) and the State Department (State).² The findings and recommendations from this body of work can help inform decision making about foreign language programs and activities across the federal government.

DHS staff encounter a wide array of languages and dialects, under sometimes difficult and unpredictable circumstances, such as making arrests, conducting surveillance, and interviewing individuals. Thus, ensuring DHS staff have the necessary foreign language skills to carry out these duties is crucial. Further, changes in the security environment and ongoing military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan have prompted DOD to place greater emphasis on improving the foreign language proficiency of U.S. forces. Moreover, we have previously reported on the challenges State faces in ensuring it has staff with necessary foreign language skills in its mission critical positions throughout the world.

¹In this testimony, foreign language capabilities include a range of language skills and language resources to conduct operations involving foreign language related to diplomatic efforts, military operations, law enforcement, counterterrorism and intelligence, including services to Limited English Proficiency (LEP) persons (e.g., language proficient staff, language services obtained through contracts, and inter- and intra-agreements between federal agencies).

²GAO, *Department of Homeland Security: DHS Needs to Comprehensively Assess Its Foreign Language Needs and Capabilities, and Identify Shortfalls*, [GAO-10-714](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 22, 2010); *Language Access: Selected Agencies Can Improve Services to Limited English Proficient Persons*, [GAO-10-91](#) (Washington, D.C.: April 26, 2010); *Department of State: Comprehensive Plan Needed to Address Persistent Foreign Language Shortfalls*, [GAO-09-955](#) (Washington, D.C.: September 17, 2009); *Military Training: DOD Needs a Strategic Plan and Better Inventory and Requirements Data to Guide Development of Language Skills and Regional Proficiency*, [GAO-09-568](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 19, 2009).

Since 2002, we have issued a series of reports on two key aspects of foreign language capabilities across the federal government—(1) the use of foreign language skills, and (2) the nature and impact of foreign language shortages at federal agencies, particularly those that play a central role in national security. We and the Office of Personnel Management have developed strategic workforce planning guidance that has formed the basis for these reviews. We reported that the lack of foreign language capability at some agencies, including DOD and State, have resulted in backlogs in translation of intelligence documents and other information, and adversely affected agency operations and hindered U.S. military, law enforcement, intelligence, counterterrorism, and diplomatic efforts. We recommended that these agencies adopt a strategic, results-oriented approach to manage foreign language capabilities, including setting a strategic direction, assessing agency gaps in foreign language skills, and taking actions to help ensure that foreign language capabilities are available when needed, among other things.³ These agencies concurred with our recommendations and are taking steps to address them.

My comments today are based on GAO reports issued from June 2009 through June 2010 regarding foreign language capabilities at DHS, DOD, and State and selected updates made in June through July 2010. These reports include our assessment of DHS's efforts to assess its foreign language capabilities and address potential shortfalls in three of its largest components—U.S. Coast Guard, Customs and Border Protection (CBP), and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE); and our assessment of the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) efforts to deliver services to LEP persons; as well as our reports and congressional testimony on DOD's and State's efforts to develop foreign language capabilities.⁴ Specifically, my statement addresses the extent to which (1) DHS has assessed its foreign language needs and existing capabilities, identified any potential shortfalls, and developed foreign language programs and activities to address potential shortfalls; (2) FEMA has

³GAO, *Military Training: DOD Needs a Strategic Plan and Better Inventory and Requirements Data to Guide Development of Language Skills and Regional Proficiency*, [GAO-09-568](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 19, 2009); *Foreign Languages: Human Capital Approach Needed to Correct Staffing and Proficiency Shortfalls*, [GAO-02-375](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 31, 2002).

⁴GAO, *Military Training: Continued Actions Needed to Guide DOD's Efforts to Improve Language Skills and Regional Proficiency*, [GAO-10-879T](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 29, 2010); [GAO-10-714](#), [GAO-10-91](#), [GAO-09-568](#), and [GAO-09-955](#).

conducted a needs assessment to help ensure access to its services for LEP persons; and (3) DOD and State have developed comprehensive approaches to address their foreign language capability challenges.

To analyze foreign language needs, capabilities, and shortfalls at DHS, we reviewed operations in three DHS components and seven offices. We selected the U.S. Coast Guard, CBP, and ICE because they constitute a broad representation of program areas and their missions include law enforcement and intelligence responsibilities. We selected San Antonio and Laredo, Texas; Artesia, New Mexico; New York and Buffalo, New York; Miami, Florida; and San Juan, Puerto Rico to visit, identify and observe foreign language use at select DHS components. We also examined documentation on foreign language needs and capabilities, including DHS's Strategic and Human Capital Plans; and Quadrennial Homeland Security Review Report.⁵ Further, we interviewed knowledgeable DHS officials in DHS's Chief Human Capital Office (CHCO) and conducted interviews with component officials and officers for all the locations we visited to obtain information on existing capabilities and potential foreign language capability shortfalls. As part of our review of FEMA, we examined the extent to which it implemented Executive Order 13166 consistent with the Department of Justice's guidance, which includes assessing the needs of the LEP populations that agencies serve.⁶ To review DOD's plans for addressing its foreign language challenges, we analyzed DOD's Defense Language Transformation Roadmap, reviewed the military services' strategies for transforming language and regional proficiency capabilities, and assessed the range of efforts intended to help identify potential gaps. To assess State Department's foreign language proficiency challenges and measures to address them, we analyzed data on State's overseas language-designated positions as of October 2008, reviewed strategic planning and budgetary documents, interviewed State officials, and reviewed operations in China, Egypt, India, Tunisia, and Turkey. In June 2010 we also met with DOD and State officials to obtain updated information on their efforts to address our recommendations. Finally, in July 2010, we obtained updated information from FEMA

⁵DHS, Quadrennial Homeland Security Review Report: A Strategic Framework for a Secure Homeland, (Washington D.C.: Feb. 2010).

⁶Executive Order 13166 (August 11, 2000) directs each federal agency to improve access to federal programs and services for persons with limited English proficiency (LEP). Using guidance issued by DOJ, agencies are generally required to develop recipient guidance and/or an LEP plan outlining steps for ensuring that LEP persons can access federal services and programs.

officials on their efforts to identify Limited English Proficient populations. More detailed information about our scope and methodology is included in our published reports. We conducted this work in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

DHS Could Better Assess Its Foreign Language Needs and Capabilities and the Extent to Which Its Programs and Activities Address Potential Shortfalls

DHS Has Taken Limited Action to Assess Foreign Language Needs and Capabilities, and Identify Resulting Shortfalls

In our June 2010 report on DHS's foreign language capabilities, we identified challenges related to the Department's efforts to assess their needs and capabilities and identify potential shortfalls.⁷ Our key findings include:

- DHS has no systematic method for assessing its foreign language needs and does not address foreign language needs in its Human Capital Strategic Plan. DHS components' efforts to assess foreign language needs vary. For example, the Coast Guard has conducted multiple assessments, CBP's assessments have primarily focused on Spanish-language needs, and ICE has not conducted any assessments. By conducting a comprehensive assessment DHS would be better positioned to capture information on all of its needs and could use this to inform future strategic planning.
- DHS has no systematic method for assessing its existing foreign language capabilities and has not conducted a comprehensive capabilities assessment. DHS components have various lists of foreign language capabilities that are available in some offices, primarily those that include a foreign language award program for qualified

⁷[GAO-10-714](#).

employees. Conducting an assessment of all of its foreign language capabilities would better position DHS to effectively manage its resources.

- DHS and its components have not taken actions to identify potential foreign language shortfalls. DHS officials stated that shortfalls can impact mission goals and officer safety. By using the results of needs and capabilities assessments to identify shortfalls, DHS would be better positioned to develop actions to mitigate shortfalls, execute its various missions that involve foreign language speakers, and enhance the safety of its officers and agents.

We and the Office of Personnel Management have developed strategic workforce guidance that recommends, among other things, that agencies (1) assess workforce needs, such as foreign language needs; (2) assess current competency skills; and (3) compare workforce needs against available skills. DHS efforts could be strengthened by conducting a comprehensive assessment of its foreign language needs and capabilities, and using the results of this assessment to identify any potential shortfalls. By doing so, DHS could better position itself to manage its foreign language workforce needs to help fulfill its organizational missions. We recommended that DHS comprehensively assess its foreign language needs and capabilities, and any resulting shortfalls and ensure these assessments are incorporated into future strategic planning. DHS agreed with our recommendation and officials stated that the Department is planning to take action to address it.

DHS Has Developed a Variety of Foreign Language Programs, but the Extent to Which They Address Foreign Language Shortfalls Is Not Known

In June 2010, we also reported that DHS and its components had established a variety of foreign language programs and activities, but had not assessed the extent to which they address potential shortfalls.⁸ Coast Guard, CBP, and ICE established foreign language programs and activities, which include foreign language training and monetary awards.⁹ Although foreign language programs and activities at these components contributed to the development of DHS's foreign language capabilities, the Department's ability to use them to address potential foreign language shortfalls varies. For example, foreign language training programs generally do not include languages other than Spanish. Furthermore, these programs and activities are managed by individual components or offices within components. According to several Coast Guard, CBP, and ICE officials, they manage their foreign language programs and activities as they did prior to the formation of DHS. At the Department level and within the components, many of the officials we spoke with were generally unaware of the foreign language programs or activities maintained by other DHS components. Given this variation and decentralization, conducting a comprehensive assessment of the extent to which its program and activities address shortfalls could strengthen DHS's ability to manage its foreign language programs and activities and to adjust them, if necessary. DHS agreed with our recommendation and officials stated that the Department is planning to take action to address it.

FEMA Has Developed a National Needs Assessment to Identify the Limited English Proficient Populations It Serves

In April 2010, we reported that FEMA had developed a national needs assessment to identify its LEP customer base and how frequently it interacts with LEP persons.¹⁰ We reported that in developing this needs assessment, FEMA combines census data, data from FEMA's National Processing Service Center on the most commonly encountered languages used by individuals applying for disaster assistance sources, literacy and poverty rates, and FEMA's historical data on the geographic areas most prone to disasters. Furthermore, practices identified by other federal and state agencies as well as practitioners in the translation industry are reviewed and used in preparing this assessment. Through its needs

⁸GAO-10-714.

⁹Foreign language award pay is a discretionary monetary award that is in addition to basic pay and does not increase an employee's base salary.

¹⁰GAO-10-91.

assessment, FEMA officials reported that FEMA has identified 13 of the most frequently encountered languages spoken by LEP communities.

Locally, in response to a disaster, FEMA conducts a needs assessment by collecting information from the U.S. Census Bureau, data from local school districts, and information from foreign language media outlets in the area to help determine the amount of funding required to ensure proper communication with affected LEP communities. In the spring of 2009, FEMA established new procedures to identify LEP communities at the local level. While the agency's national needs assessment provides a starting point to identify LEP communities across the country, the assessment does not fully ensure that FEMA identifies the existence and location of LEP populations in small communities within states and counties. To that end, officials from FEMA's Multilingual Function developed a common set of procedures for identifying the location and size of LEP populations at the local level. The new procedures, which were initiated as a pilot program, include collecting data from national, state, and local sources, and creating a profile of community language needs, local support organizations, and local media outlets. FEMA initiated this pilot program while responding to a flood affecting North Dakota and Minnesota in the spring of 2009; the program enabled FEMA officials to develop communication strategies targeted to 12 different LEP communities including Bosnian, Farsi, Kirundi, and Somali. FEMA officials stated that they plan to use these procedures in responding to future presidentially declared disasters. According to FEMA officials, it has incorporated the pilot program procedures for identifying local LEP populations into its Standard Operating Procedures (SOP). According to FEMA, it has distributed the revised SOP to FEMA Disaster Assistance and Disaster Operations staff in headquarters, FEMA's 10 regions, and joint field offices.

During its recovery operations, FEMA has several staffing options to augment its permanent staff. FEMA officials explained that staff from FEMA's reserve corps, whose language capabilities are recorded in an automated deployment database, can be temporarily assigned to recovery operations. When FEMA lacks enough permanent and temporary staff with the appropriate foreign language skills, it hires individuals from within the affected area to fill unmet multilingual needs. For example, in 2008, FEMA used local hires who spoke Vietnamese in the recovery operations for Hurricanes Gustav and Ike in Galveston and Austin, Texas. FEMA officials stated that these local hires are especially useful during recovery efforts because they have relevant language capabilities as well as knowledge of the disaster area and established relationships with the

affected communities. Additionally, when disaster assistance employees and local hires are unavailable, FEMA can use contractors to provide translation and interpretation services. To ensure that the agency has the capacity to handle different levels of disasters, an official stated that FEMA is awarding a 4-year contract of up to \$9.9 million to support language access and related activities.

DOD and State Need to Take Additional Actions to Comprehensively Address Their Foreign Language Challenges

DOD Has Taken Steps to Improve Its Foreign Language Capabilities, but Still Needs a Comprehensive Strategic Plan, a Complete Inventory, and a Validated Requirements Methodology

DOD has taken some steps to transform its language and regional proficiency capabilities, but additional actions are needed to guide its efforts and provide the information it needs to assess gaps in capabilities and assess related risks. In June 2009, we reported that DOD had designated senior language authorities at the Department-wide level, and in the military services as well as other components.¹¹ It had also established a governance structure and a Defense Language Transformation Roadmap. At that time, the military services either had developed or were in the process of developing strategies and programs to improve language and regional proficiency. While these steps moved the Department in a positive direction, we concluded that some key elements were still missing. For example, while the Roadmap contained goals and objectives, not all objectives were measurable and linkages between these goals and DOD's funding priorities were unclear. Furthermore, DOD had not identified the total cost of its transformation efforts. Additionally, we reported that DOD had developed an inventory of its language capabilities. In contrast, it did not have an inventory of its regional proficiency

¹¹GAO, *Military Training: DOD Needs a Strategic Plan and Better Inventory and Requirements Data to Guide Development of Language Skills and Regional Proficiency*, [GAO-09-568](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 19, 2009).

capabilities due to the lack of an agreed upon way to assess and validate these skills. DOD also lacked a standard, transparent, and validated methodology to aid its components in identifying language and regional proficiency requirements. In the absence of such a methodology, components used different approaches to develop requirements and their estimates varied widely. Therefore, we recommended that DOD (1) develop a comprehensive strategic plan for its language and regional proficiency transformation, (2) establish a mechanism to assess the regional proficiency skills of its military and civilian personnel, and (3) develop a methodology to identify its language and regional proficiency requirements.

At the time, DOD generally agreed with our recommendations and responded it had related actions underway. Based on recent discussions with DOD officials, these actions are still in various stages. Specifically, DOD officials stated that it has a draft strategic plan currently undergoing final review and approval. We understand from officials that this plan includes goals, objectives, and a linkage between goals and DOD's funding priorities, and that an implementation plan with metrics for measuring progress will be published at a later date. DOD officials also stated that they are working to determine a suitable approach to measuring regional proficiency because it is more difficult than originally expected. Lastly, DOD officials stated that, while DOD has completed the assessments intended to produce a standardized methodology to help geographic commanders identify language and regional proficiency requirements, the standardized methodology has not yet been approved. In recent congressional testimony, DOD officials stated the standardized methodology would be implemented later this year. Without a comprehensive strategic plan and until a validated methodology to identify gaps in capabilities is implemented, it will be difficult for DOD to assess risk, guide the military services as they develop their approaches to language and regional proficiency transformation, and make informed investment decisions. Furthermore, it will be difficult for DOD and Congress to assess progress toward a successful transformation.

State Has Efforts Underway to Identify Foreign Language Needs and Capabilities, but Persistent Shortfalls in Foreign Language-Proficient Staff Highlight the Need for a Comprehensive, Strategic Approach

In September 2009, we reported that State continued to face persistent, notable gaps in its foreign language capabilities, which could hinder U.S. overseas operations.¹² We reported that State had undertaken a number of initiatives to meet its foreign language requirements, including an annual review process to determine the number of positions requiring a foreign language, providing language training, recruiting staff with skills in certain languages, and offering incentive pay to officers to continue learning and maintaining language skills. However, we noted that these efforts had not closed the persistent gaps and reflected, in part, a lack of a comprehensive, strategic approach.

Although State officials said that the Department's plan for meeting its foreign language requirements is spread throughout a number of documents that address these needs, these documents were not linked to each other and did not contain measurable goals, objectives, or milestones for reducing the foreign language gaps. Because these gaps have persisted over several years despite staffing increases, a more comprehensive, strategic approach would help State to more effectively guide its efforts and assess its progress in meeting its foreign language requirements. We therefore recommended that the Secretary of State develop a comprehensive strategic plan with measurable goals, objectives, milestones, and feedback mechanisms that links all of State's efforts to meet its foreign language requirements. We also recommended that the Secretary of State revise the Department's methodology for measuring and reporting on the extent that positions are filled with officers who meet the language requirements of the position. State generally agreed with our findings, conclusions, and recommendations and described several initiatives to address these recommendations. For example, State convened an inter-bureau language working group to focus on and develop an action plan to address our recommendations.

Since our report, State has revised its methodology for measuring and reporting on the extent that positions are filled with officers who meet the language requirements of the position. State officials also told us that they have begun developing a more strategic approach for addressing foreign language shortfalls, but have not developed a strategic plan with measurable goals, objectives, milestones, and feedback mechanisms.

¹² [GAO-09-955](#).

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. I would be pleased to respond to any questions that you or other members of the committee may have.

Contacts and Acknowledgments

For questions about this statement, please contact David C. Maurer at (202) 512-9627 or maurerd@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this statement. Individuals making key contributions to this testimony are William W. Crocker III; Yvette Gutierrez-Thomas; Wendy Dye; Lara Miklozek; Linda Miller; Geoffrey Hamilton; Jess Ford; Godwin Agbara; Laverne Tharpes; Robert Ball; Robert Goldenkoff; Steven Lozano; Kisha Clark; Sharon Pickup; Matthew Ullengren, Gabrielle Carrington; and Patty Lentini.

Related GAO Products

Military Training: Continued Actions Needed to Guide DOD's Efforts to Improve Language Skills and Regional Proficiency. [GAO-10-879T](#). Washington, D.C.: June 29, 2010.

Department of Homeland Security: DHS Needs to Comprehensively Assess Its Foreign Language Needs and Capabilities, and Identify Shortfalls. [GAO-10-714](#). Washington, D.C.: June 22, 2010.

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