

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

November 4, 2015

The Honorable Gene Dodaro  
Comptroller General of the United States  
U.S. Government Accountability Office  
441 G Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Comptroller General Dodaro:

The U.S. Department of State (State) staffs U.S. Foreign Service employees—many requiring proficiency in foreign languages—to more than 270 embassies and consulates worldwide to advance American foreign policy and economic interests. Part of the responsibilities of State’s Foreign Service employees involves the processing of visas for millions of international travelers to the United States that contribute to the U.S. economy. For example, according to a recently-published September 2015 GAO report that reviewed State’s nonimmigrant visa processing efforts, which we requested along with several of our colleagues, international travelers contributed over \$220 billion and supported 1.1 million jobs to the U.S. economy in 2014. However, in that same report, GAO pointed out that although State has reduced visa applicants’ interview wait times following the president’s 2012 Executive Order 13597 by, among other things, taking some short-term staffing measures, the sustainability of such gains remains uncertain. According to that report, State may be facing staffing constraints for consular positions worldwide, despite increased demand for consular services. Additionally, Foreign Service Officers (FSO) at the posts that GAO staff visited noted that the level of foreign language training provided by State is a challenge to processing nonimmigrant visas in an efficient and effective manner.

We are concerned that any staffing and foreign language issues that State faces may not only impact its consular duties but also other Foreign Service activities. In 2009 and 2012, GAO reported on the challenges that State faced in meeting its increasing overseas staffing needs with sufficiently experienced and properly trained personnel. GAO noted that these persistent Foreign Service staffing and experience gaps put diplomatic readiness at risk. Specifically, in 2012, GAO reported that State had begun a hiring effort in 2009, called Diplomacy 3.0, to increase its Foreign Service workforce by 25 percent by 2013; but the timeframe for meeting this goal has been pushed off to 2023. In addition to gaps in the number of FSOs, GAO has repeatedly brought attention to foreign language proficiency gaps for FSOs. In 2009, GAO reported that 31 percent of FSOs in overseas language-designated positions did not meet both the foreign languages speaking and reading proficiency requirements for their positions, including such critical languages as Arabic, Urdu, and others that State noted in its FY 2016 Congressional Budget Justification are necessary for counterterrorism messaging.

Given the important role that State's Foreign Service plays in advancing U.S. interest overseas and in processing international travelers to the United States who contribute significantly to the U.S. economy and jobs, it is important to ensure that State is meeting its staffing and foreign language requirements to continue to carry out its mission. We would like GAO to build on its previous reports, including the recently issued report on State's nonimmigrant visa processing efforts, to identify any gaps in State's staffing and foreign language requirements. Specifically, we request that GAO review:

- The extent to which State has identified any gaps in its Foreign Service staffing;
- The extent to which State has identified any gaps in foreign language proficiency required for U.S diplomats to carry out their duties overseas;
- The consequences of such gaps in diplomatic readiness and other foreign service efforts, including nonimmigrant visa processing;
- What challenges State faces in meeting its staffing and foreign language proficiency requirements; and
- Actions State has taken, if any, to address such challenges.

Should you have any questions regarding this request, please have a member of your staff contact Jessica Nagasako on Senator Schatz's staff at (202) 224-3934 and Elizabeth Farrar on Senator Klobuchar's staff at (202) 224-3244. Thank you for your assistance and we look forward to working with you.

Regards,



BRIAN SCHATZ  
Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Legislative Branch  
Committee on Appropriations



AMY KLOUCHAR  
United States Senator