GAO

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COVID-19

State Carried Out Historic Repatriation Effort but Should Strengthen Its Preparedness for Future Crises

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COVID-19

State Carried Out Historic Repatriation Effort but Should Strengthen Its Preparedness for Future Crises

Why GAO Did This Study

State provides repatriation assistance to U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents abroad during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. State's Office of Crisis Management and Strategy and Bureau of Consular Affairs were primarily responsible for State's COVID-19 repatriation effort.

The CARES Act includes a provision for GAO to report on its ongoing COVID-19 monitoring and oversight efforts. In addition, GAO was asked to examine State's COVID-19 repatriation effort. This report examines, among other things, (1) the results of State's repatriation effort, including lessons State reported learning from challenges it faced; (2) the consistency of selected aspects of State's repatriation effort with its policies and procedures; and (3) State's oversight of its overseas posts' crisis preparedness.

GAO reviewed relevant State documents, such as cables and guidance. GAO also interviewed State officials in Washington, D.C., and in Ghana, Honduras, India, Morocco, and Peru. In addition, GAO surveyed a generalizable sample of passengers repatriated on State-chartered flights.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making six recommendations to improve State's preparedness to repatriate U.S. citizens during crises—including three recommendations to improve agencywide preparedness and three to improve State's oversight of posts' preparedness. State agreed with all of the recommendations.

View GAO-22-104354. For more information, contact Jason Bair at (202) 512-6881 or bairj@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

From January to June 2020, the Department of State carried out a historic effort in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, helping to repatriate more than 100,000 individuals who were in 137 countries. In the previous 5 years, State had repatriated fewer than 6,000 people. Most responses to a GAO survey of repatriated individuals expressed positive views of State's communication, among other things, though some expressed concerns about matters such as the prices of repatriation flights. State reported learning several lessons from challenges it faced, such as the importance of using social media and cell phones to communicate with U.S. citizens.

State Personnel Assisting with Repatriations in Tanzania (Left) and Montenegro (right)

Source: U.S. Department of State (State). | GAO-22-104354

Despite acting swiftly to assist Americans abroad, State did not follow some of its policies and lacked guidance for certain aspects of its repatriation effort. For example, as of May 2021, an interagency group State established to coordinate plans to evacuate U.S. citizens abroad in emergencies had not met since April 2019, hampering interagency communication early in the crisis. Also, incomplete guidance for calculating and documenting actual costs of State-chartered flights led to missing or inconsistent documentation and limited State's ability to show that the prices it charged passengers complied with its fare policy.

Additionally, while State requires overseas posts to take steps to prepare for crises, its oversight of their preparedness has gaps.

- State requires posts to update emergency action plans but does not ensure timely submission of those plans. In the 20 countries from which State helped repatriate the largest numbers of people, 17 of 30 posts did not submit their updated plans for certification within required time frames in 2020.

- State requires posts to complete annual emergency preparedness drills, but does not ensure completion of the drills. In 2019, 16 of the 30 posts failed to complete all the drills within the required time frames.

- State lacks a mechanism for assessing posts' crisis preparedness. Though State encourages posts to assess their own preparedness annually, data from these assessments are not current or complete.

As a result of these gaps, State lacks assurance that posts will be prepared to respond to a future global crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

United States Government Accountability Office

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Abbreviations

ACS	Office of American Citizens Services and Crisis Management
A/LM	Office of Logistics Management
CA	Bureau of Consular Affairs
CCPS	Consular Crisis Preparedness Scorecard
CGFS	Bureau of the Comptroller and Global Financial Services
CMS	Office of Crisis Management and Strategy
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
DHS	Department of Homeland Security
DOD	Department of Defense
DS	Bureau of Diplomatic Security
FAH	*Foreign Affairs Handbook*
FAM	*Foreign Affairs Manual*
FSI	Foreign Service Institute
HHS	Department of Health and Human Services
MASCOT	Message Alert System for Citizens Overseas Tool
MED	Bureau of Medical Services
OCS	Directorate of Overseas Citizens Services
OPMED	Directorate of Operational Medicine
STEP	Smart Traveler Enrollment Program
State	Department of State
WLG	Washington Liaison Group

November 2, 2021

Congressional Addressees

According to the Department of State (State), the U.S. government has no higher priority than protecting American citizens. In 2020, the repatriation of U.S. citizens and other individuals[1] in response to the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic formed a major element of State's efforts to support this priority.[2]

State's COVID-19 repatriation effort began in late January,[3] after State called for the departure of all nonemergency U.S. personnel from Hubei Province, China—the location of the city of Wuhan—and issued a Level 4 travel advisory.[4] State's overseas posts around the globe began providing information about commercially available flights, assisted with organizing commercially provided flights in countries that had closed their airspace,

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[1]For the purposes of this report, "repatriation" generally refers to a broad range of actions taken by State during the COVID-19 pandemic, to include the evacuation of U.S. government personnel; U.S. citizens; U.S. lawful permanent residents; and, in some cases, third-country nationals, out of foreign countries and the facilitation of commercial flights for the return of these individuals to the United States. "Repatriation" does not refer specifically to State's repatriation loan program.

[2]Under 22 U.S.C. § 4802(b), the Secretary of State is required to develop and implement policies and programs to provide for the safe and efficient evacuation of U.S. government personnel, their dependents, and private citizens when their lives are endangered. Expenditures for evacuations of U.S. private citizens must be made on a reimbursable basis to the maximum extent practicable. 22 U.S.C. § 2671(b)(2)(A). In addition, the Secretary of State may make loans to destitute U.S. citizens to provide for their return to the United States. 22 U.S.C. § 2671(b)(2)(B).

[3]State began its repatriation effort in response to the spread of COVID-19. State's initial actions included coordinating, in conjunction with the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), the emergency repatriation of approximately 1,100 U.S. citizens from Wuhan, China and the Diamond Princess Cruise Ship, docked in Yokohama, Japan. HHS quarantined these individuals domestically to prevent the spread of COVID-19. This effort concluded on March 2, 2020, following the completion of the quarantine and the documented transmission of COVID-19 in the United States. The World Health Organization officially characterized the COVID-19 outbreak as a pandemic on March 11, 2020. In April 2021, we reported on HHS's repatriation efforts; see GAO, *COVID-19: HHS Should Clarify Agency Roles for Emergency Return of U.S. Citizens during a Pandemic*, GAO-21-334 (Washington, D.C., Apr. 19, 2021).

[4]The Level 4 travel advisory for Hubei Provence, China, advised U.S. citizens not to travel to the region. State issues travel advisories for every country to inform U.S. citizens about travel risks. Each advisory ranks relative risk in the country from Level 1 to Level 4, with Level 4 signifying the greatest likelihood of life-threatening risks.

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and organized and funded charter flights when no commercial options were available.[5] Posts continued these services even after many Foreign Service staff had the opportunity to leave the posts under a global authorized departure order issued on March 15, 2020. State initiated the first repatriation flight from Wuhan, China, on January 29, 2020, and tracked repatriation flights to the United States through June 5, 2020.[6]

The CARES Act includes a provision for us to report on our ongoing monitoring and oversight efforts related to the COVID-19 pandemic.[7] In addition, we were asked to review State's repatriation efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic. This report examines (1) the results of State's repatriation efforts from January 29 through June 5, 2020; (2) the lessons State reported learning from challenges it faced; (3) the consistency of selected aspects of State's repatriation efforts with its policies and procedures; and (4) State's oversight of its overseas posts' crisis preparedness.

To address these objectives, we reviewed relevant State documents, such as policy and procedures in its *Foreign Affairs Manual* (FAM) and *Foreign Affairs Handbook* (FAH) pertaining to crisis management, emergency preparedness, and training. We also reviewed State repatriation data from January 29 through June 5, 2020, including the number of individuals repatriated, the countries they were repatriated from, the repatriation date, and the types of repatriation flights. In addition, we conducted a content analysis of 33 lessons-learned cables that 28 overseas posts submitted to State regarding their repatriation

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[5]State's overseas posts consist of U.S. embassies, consulates, and other diplomatic posts in foreign countries.

[6]According to State officials, State stopped tracking repatriation flights on June 5, when its Repatriation Task Force moved to "on-call" status. According to State guidance, the task force moved to on-call status when, among other things, no dedicated U.S. government-funded repatriation flights were planned or dedicated repatriation flights were ad hoc in nature and when there were no large pockets of U.S. citizens to whom State was providing repatriation assistance and demand was largely managed via commercial options.

[7]See Pub. L. No. 116-136, § 19010, 134 Stat. 281, 579–81 (Mar. 27, 2020). We have issued eight recurring reports on the federal response to COVID-19 as mandated by the CARES Act. For the latest report, see GAO, *COVID-19: Additional Actions Needed to Improve Accountability and Program Effectiveness of Federal Response,* GAO-21-105051 (Washington, D.C.: October 27, 2021). Our next government-wide report will be issued in January 2022 and will be available on GAO's website at https://www.gao.gov/coronavirus.

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experiences, to identify challenges and lessons learned from the pandemic and steps State is taking to address them in the future.

Moreover, we interviewed officials in several State offices and bureaus in Washington, D.C.—the Office of Crisis Management and Strategy (CMS) within the Executive Secretariat, the Bureau of Consular Affairs (CA), and the Office of Logistics Management (A/LM) within the Bureau of Administration—that were involved in repatriation-related activities. We also interviewed officials of the Bureau of Diplomatic Security (DS), which is responsible for post security and emergency preparedness. Additionally, we interviewed officials on the Emergency Action Committee and in the CA and DS sections at posts in Ghana, Honduras, India, Morocco, and Peru to obtain their perspectives about those posts' preparedness to address the crisis. We selected those posts because they were among the 20 posts that repatriated the largest numbers of people and because they represented the three regions from which the largest numbers were repatriated—the Western Hemisphere, Africa, and South Central Asia.

Further, from February 2021 to April 2021, we administered a web-based survey of a random sample of 474 passengers on State-chartered repatriation flights. The survey consisted of a variety of closed- and open-ended questions about State's provision of repatriation-related information and its communication with passengers before and after their repatriation to the United States. The survey had a response rate of 40 percent, with 189 passengers responding. All survey results are generalizable to the greater population of passengers repatriated on State-chartered flights.[8]

We conducted this performance audit from June 2020 to November 2021 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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[8]Unless otherwise noted, all estimates from this survey have a margin of error of plus or minus 10 percentage points or less at the 95 percent confidence level.

Background

Key State Entities with Responsibilities for Crisis Preparedness and Response

Several State offices and bureaus have responsibilities related to preparing for, and responding to, crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and for conducting repatriation-related activities.

Office of Crisis Management and Strategy (CMS). CMS, in the Executive Secretariat's Operations Center, coordinates crisis response across the department and with other federal agencies. CMS is responsible for department-wide crisis preparedness and response activities, including monitoring potential crises and convening and supporting task forces. CMS also manages the day-to-day operations of the Washington Liaison Group (WLG), an interagency body established to, among other things, coordinate the preparation and implementation of plans for emergency evacuations abroad.[9]

Office of Logistics Management (A/LM). A/LM, in the Bureau of Administration, develops and implements logistics policies and procedures and the delivery of travel services for State, including charter flights during crises. A/LM also determines the amount to charge passengers for State-funded repatriation charter flights.

Bureau of the Comptroller and Global Financial Services (CGFS). CGFS oversees financial management activities for State, including the collection of debts such as repatriation loans. According to CGFS officials, they use information from CA and A/LM to bill passengers who traveled on State-funded repatriation charter flights.

Bureau of Budget and Planning. The Bureau of Budget and Planning plans and allocates resources under State's policies, objectives, and applicable laws and regulations, among other things. The bureau maintains a daily cost projection regarding repatriation-related expenses.

Bureau of Consular Affairs (CA). CA provides consular and other services to U.S. citizens overseas, including during crises, and manages communication to U.S. citizens overseas through the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP) and other means. At overseas posts, consular staff coordinate State's repatriation efforts. Consular staff's roles include supporting and engaging with U.S. citizens abroad, providing

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[9]According to the WLG's charter, the group has basic responsibility for the coordination and implementation of plans for the protection and evacuation in emergencies of persons abroad for whom the Secretaries of State or Defense are responsible.

repatriation-related loans, and creating repatriation flight manifests. CA includes the following components:

- **Directorate of Overseas Citizens Services** (OCS). OCS protects and provides services to U.S. citizens abroad.

- **Office of American Citizens Services and Crisis Management** (ACS). ACS, within OCS, provides emergency and routine services to U.S. citizens. ACS also prepares for, and provides assistance during, major crises. ACS desk officers serve as information conduits between posts and headquarters.

Bureau of Diplomatic Security (DS). DS oversees security at overseas posts and is responsible for providing a safe and secure environment for the conduct of U.S. foreign policy. DS also manages regional security officers at posts. Regional security officers execute post security drills at the direction of the Emergency Action Committee chair and develop the security portion of each post's Emergency Action Plan, as directed by the chief of mission or principal officer.[10]

Bureau of Medical Services (MED). The bureau's Directorate of Operational Medicine (OPMED) executes State's operational medicine program, which includes planning and executing medical contingency plans. During the COVID-19 pandemic, OPMED operated medical evacuation flights, among other activities.

Foreign Service Institute (FSI). The Foreign Service Institute's Crisis Management Training Division conducts training and crisis management exercises at all diplomatic facilities abroad.

Regional Bureaus. The department's regional bureaus oversee the U.S. embassies and consulates and coordinate U.S. foreign relations in their respective geographic areas.

Figure 1 shows State offices and bureaus with responsibilities for crisis preparedness and response.

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[10]The chair of the post's Emergency Action Committee is responsible for ensuring the Emergency Action Plan is updated.

Figure 1: Department of State Organization Chart Showing Key Entities with Responsibilities for Crisis Preparedness and Response
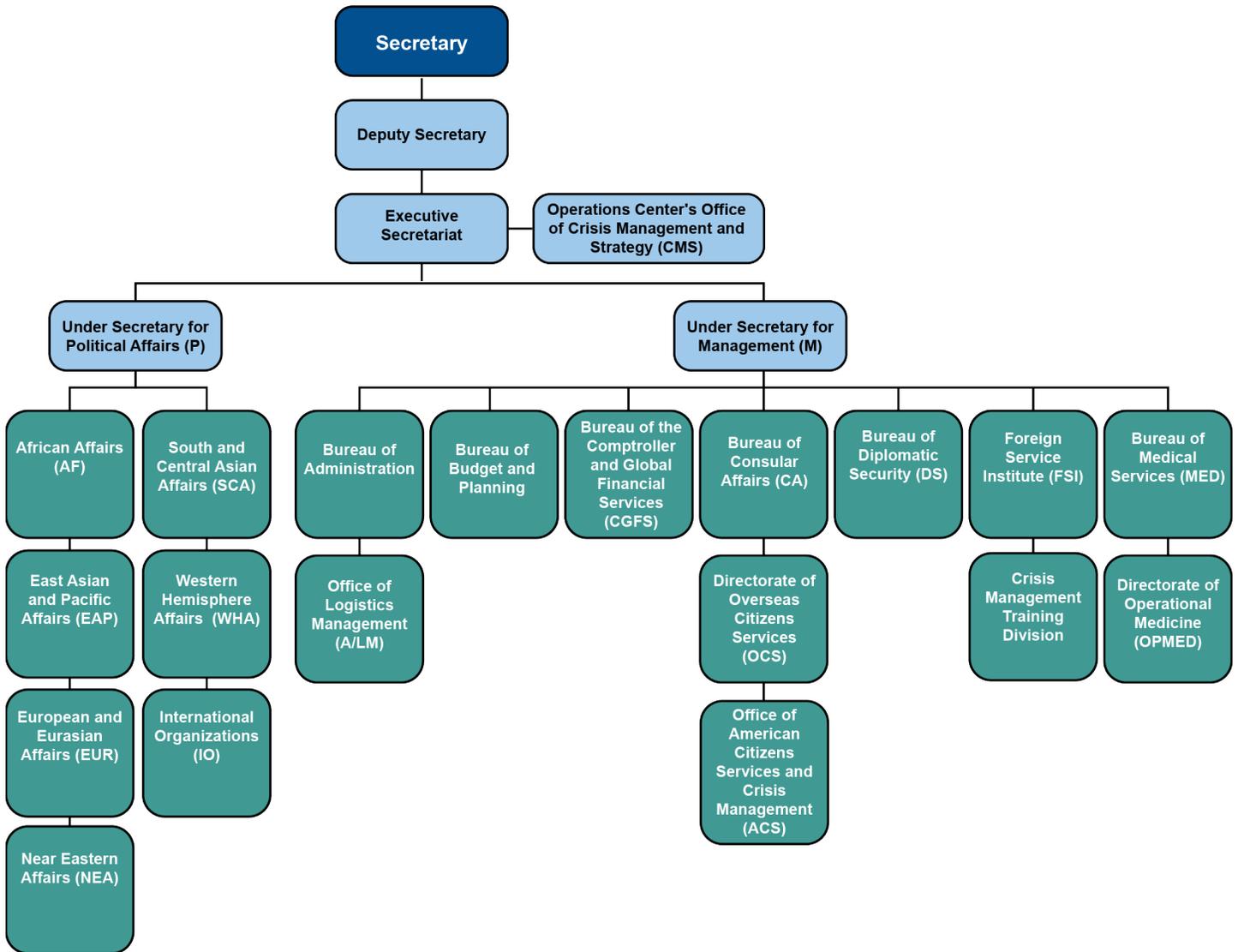
Source: GAO. | GAO-22-104354

State's Role in Repatriations

State may work with other federal agencies in repatriation efforts. For example, State is responsible for planning and initiating repatriation activities overseas, while the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) provides assistance after individuals return to the United States.[11]

State initiates the repatriation of U.S. personnel, their dependents, and other individuals to the United States from abroad when their lives are endangered. State's policy is to use commercial carriers before government-provided options.[12] State is also authorized to use government funds to procure repatriation flights to evacuate individuals during crises. In such instances, State seeks reimbursement from passengers for the cost of the repatriation flight.[13]

According to State officials, State may use the following means, among others, to help repatriate individuals during a crisis:[14]

- **Commercial rescue flights.** State may work with commercial airlines to facilitate flights or to organize flights specifically for repatriation. In such cases, passengers pay the airline directly.

- **Private charter flights.** Private charter flights include charters facilitated by State but paid for by passengers directly. Private charter

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[11]HHS, through its component agency the Administration for Children and Families, operates the U.S. Repatriation Program, which provides temporary assistance to U.S. citizens and their dependents who are repatriated by State and are without available resources. Temporary assistance provided by the U.S. Repatriation Program includes monetary payments, medical care, temporary billeting, transportation, and other goods and services (e.g., counseling) necessary for the health or welfare of individuals provided upon their arrival in the United States. 42 U.S.C. § 1313(c) and 45 C.F.R. § 212.3 (2019).

[12]See 12 FAH-1 Annex K 2. U.S. law also established a preference and specific requirements for executive branch agencies to acquire commercial services and products that meet an agency's needs. See 41 U.S.C. § 3307.

[13]Under 22 U.S.C. § 4802(b), the Secretary of State is required to develop and implement policies and programs to provide for the safe and efficient evacuation of U.S. government personnel, their dependents, and private citizens—including U.S. citizens and third-country nationals—when their lives are endangered. State's expenditures for evacuations of private citizens must be made on a reimbursable basis to the maximum extent practicable. 22 U.S.C. § 2671(b)(2)(A). In addition, the Secretary of State may make loans to destitute U.S. citizens to provide for their return to the United States. 22 U.S.C. § 2671(b)(2)(B).

[14]DOD may provide repatriation flights using military aircraft. No such DOD flights were used during the COVID-19 pandemic.

flights also include those organized by private organizations, such as commercial companies or religious organizations.

- **State-funded charter flights.** In some cases, State may organize and pay for charter flights. State is required to seek reimbursement from passengers for the cost of those flights.[15] State may work with the Department of Defense (DOD) to organize State-funded charter flights. OPMED also charters medical evacuation charter flights.

- **DOD and Department of Homeland Security (DHS) space-available flights.** Space-available flights include DOD or DHS flights operated for nonrepatriation purposes, with seats available to return U.S. citizens to the United States.

- **Other flights.** State may utilize flights operated by State's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs as well as flights operated or arranged by foreign governments.

Figure 2 shows examples of State personnel overseeing repatriation flights during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 2: State Personnel Overseeing a Military Flight in Honduras (left) and a Charter Flight in Montenegro (right)

Source: Department of Defense and Department of State (State). | GAO-22-104354

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[15]This requirement does not apply to passengers who are U.S. government employees or their dependents. 22 U.S.C. § 2671(b)(2)(A).

State Carried Out Historic Repatriation Effort during COVID-19 Pandemic

State Repatriated Unprecedented Numbers of People from January to June 2020

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, State's recent repatriation efforts were relatively infrequent and small in scale. In the 5 years before the pandemic, State repatriated a total of 5,839 individuals—an average of 1,168 per year—who were in 28 countries.[16] In contrast, from January 29 to June 5, 2020, State assisted in repatriating more than 100,000 individuals who were in 139 countries.[17]

As table 1 shows, the majority (54 percent) of passengers on repatriation flights during the COVID-19 pandemic traveled on commercial rescue flights. Thirty-five percent of passengers traveled on privately chartered flights or State-funded chartered flights, and the remaining 11 percent traveled on OPMED, DOD, or DHS flights.

Table 1: Types of Repatriation Flights and Numbers of Passengers, by Flight Type, Jan. 29–June 5, 2020

Flight type	Number of passengers	Percentage of all passengers on repatriation flights
Commercial rescue[a]	59,103	54.2
Private and State charter[b]	37,807	34.7
State Department Bureau of Operational Medicine[c]	6,592	6.0
Department of Defense[d]	4,209	3.9
Department of Homeland Security[e]	1,101	1.0
Other[f]	160	.1
Total	**108,972**	**100**

Source: Department of State (State) Office of Crisis Management and Strategy (CMS) data. | GAO-22-104354

Note: Passengers on repatriation flights included U.S. government employees and their dependents, U.S. private citizens and lawful permanent residents, and, in some cases, third-country nationals.

CMS maintained a database of repatriation flights that State organized or facilitated during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to CMS officials, they did not consistently verify information in the

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[16]State repatriated 1,056 U.S. citizens in 2015; 1,141 in 2016; 1,285 in 2017; 1,261 in 2018; and 1,096 in 2019. State carried out these repatriations in response to 13 events of civil unrest, 11 natural disasters, and seven bombings and attacks, among other crises requiring evacuations of U.S. citizens.

[17]The 139 countries include two territories, the West Bank and Gaza.

database because of the fast-paced nature of COVID-19 repatriations. We did not assess the reliability of CMS's database.

Numbers in columns may not sum to totals because of rounding.

[a]Passengers on commercial rescue flights paid the carriers directly for their tickets on a by-seat basis, with no additional U.S. government expenditure.

[b]Passengers on private chartered flights paid the operator directly. Passengers on State-funded chartered flights signed a promissory note agreeing to repay State for the cost of the flight.

[c]Passengers on Bureau of Operational Medicine flights signed a promissory note agreeing to pay State for the cost of the flight.

[d]Passengers on Department of Defense flights comprised 3,523 U.S. citizens who traveled on flights arranged by the U.S. Transportation Command and funded by the State department, and 686 who traveled on military space-available flights. Passengers on State-funded flights arranged by the U.S. Transportation Command signed a promissory note agreeing to repay State for the cost of the flight.

[e]Department of Homeland Security flights were operated by U.S. Immigrations Customs and Enforcement.

[f]"Other" includes feeder flights operated by State Department's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs and flights operated or arranged by foreign governments, among others.

As figure 3 shows, the majority of passengers on repatriation flights traveled in March and April 2020, with the numbers decreasing in May and June.[18] In addition, from January to May 2020, the number of international flights arriving in and departing from the United States decreased from approximately 129,000 to 7,838, while the number of passengers arriving in and departing from the United States fell from 18.9 million 369,000.[19]

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[18]According to State officials, during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, the administration issued a variety of proclamations, suspending entry into the United States of foreign nationals from specific countries. A nationwide travel ban from China was issued on January 31, 2020, encouraging those in China to depart through commercial means. On February 29, 2020, the administration announced the suspension of entry of foreign nationals traveling from Iran. On March 11, 2020, the United States restricted the entry of foreign nationals who had been present in the Schengen Area in the past 14 days.

[19]By contrast, in 2019, an average of 135,000 flights, carrying a total of 20.1 million passengers, arrived in and departed from the United States each month.

Figure 3: Number of Passengers on Repatriation Flights, Jan. 29–June 5, 2020
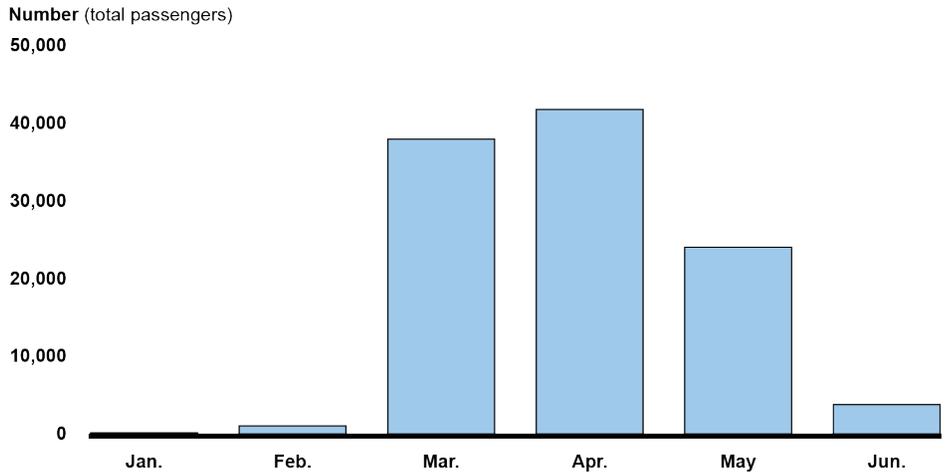
Number (total passengers)

Source: Department of State (State) Office of Crisis Management and Strategy (CMS) data. | GAO-22-104354

Figure 4 shows the numbers of passengers on repatriation flights from the six regions represented by State's six geographic bureaus from January 29 through June 5, 2020, according to State data.[20] As figure 4 indicates, more than half of the passengers on these flights departed from Western Hemisphere countries such as those in Central and South America.

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[20]State's six geographic bureaus are the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, the Bureau of African Affairs, and the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs.

Figure 4: Numbers of Passengers on Repatriation Flights from Regions Represented by State's Six Geographic Bureaus, Jan. 29–June 5, 2020
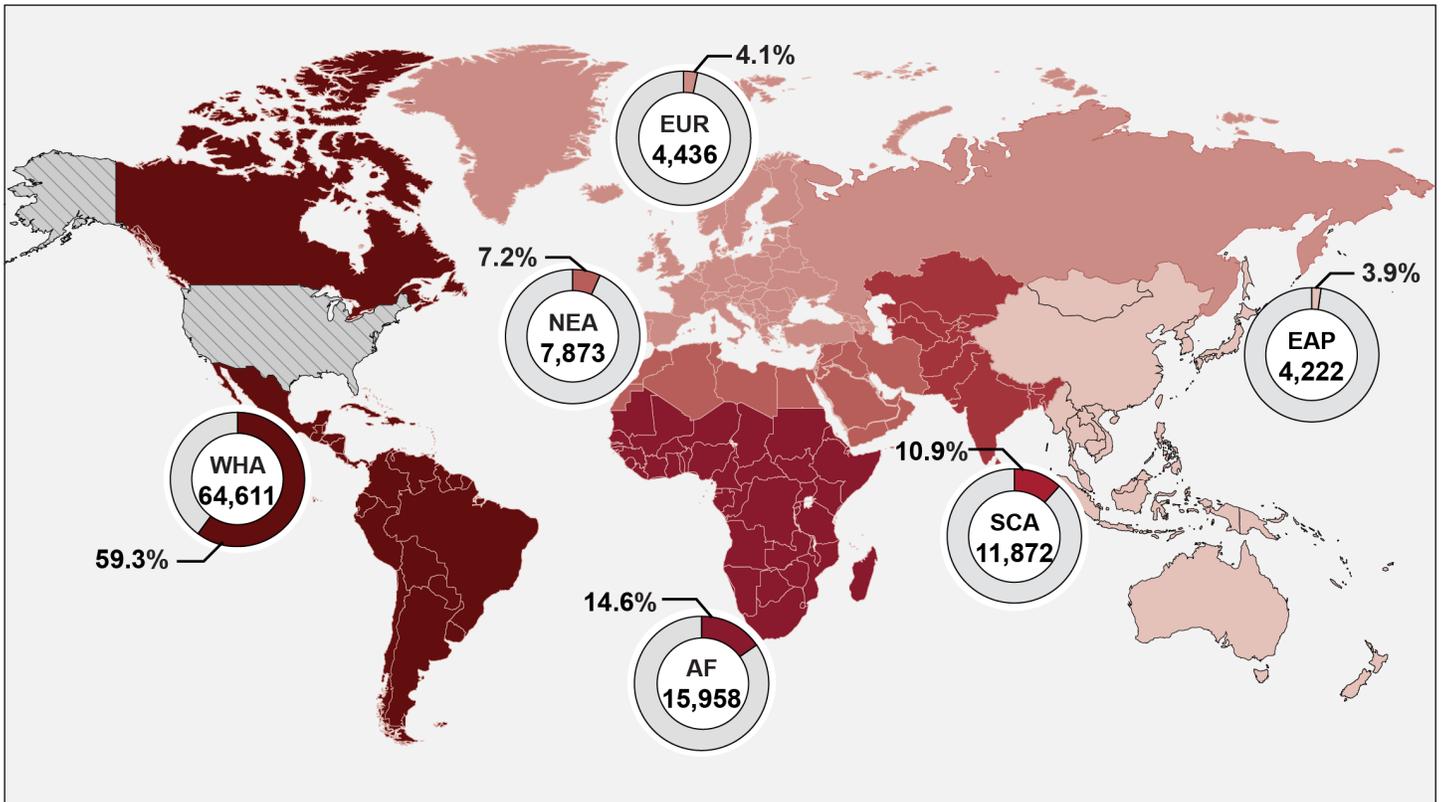
Legend: WHA = Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs; NEA = Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs; EUR = Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs; SCA = Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs; AF = Bureau of African Affairs; EAP = Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs.

Source: Department of State (State) Office of Crisis Management and Strategy (CMS) data. | GAO-22-104354

Figure 5 shows a timeline of State's repatriation effort and key related events from December 1, 2019 through June 5, 2020.

Figure 5: Timeline of Events Related to State Department COVID-19 Repatriation Efforts, Dec. 2019–June 5, 2020

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2019	
	December 2019: COVID-19 is first detected in Wuhan, China.
2020	
	January 24, 2020: State constitutes the Wuhan Task Force.
	January 29, 2020: State begins repatriation of Americans citizens from Wuhan, China.
	February 13, 2020: State establishes the Coronavirus Global Response Coordination Unit.
	February 15-25, 2020: The Diamond Princess Task Force facilitates the repatriation of 329 U.S. citizens from the Diamond Princess cruise ship while docked in Japan.
	March 6, 2020: The Coronavirus Preparedness and Response Supplemental Appropriations Act, 2020 is enacted.
	March 11, 2020: The World Health Organization characterizes COVID-19's outbreak in 114 countries as a pandemic.
	March 16, 2020: Peru closes its airspace. Over the next 4 weeks, the U.S. embassy offers more than 40 international flights and facilitates six international private charters and three medevacs from Peru.
	March 18, 2020: The Families First Coronavirus Response Act is enacted.
	March 19, 2020: State stands up the Repatriation Task Force.
	March 27, 2020: The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act is enacted.
	March 27, 2020: State has repatriated more than 15,000 people from over 40 countries.
	April 14, 2020: State has repatriated 61,689 Americans from 106 countries since January 29.
	May 28, 2020: U.S. deaths from COVID-19 pass 100,000.
	June 5, 2020: Last repatriation flight arrives in United States.[a] State has repatriated 108,972 passengers on 1,135 flights from 139 countries.[b]

Source: GAO. | GAO-22-104354

[a]State tracked repatriation flights through June 5, 2020.

[b]The 139 countries include two territories, the West Bank and Gaza.

State Established Several Task Forces to Facilitate COVID-19 Repatriations

State convenes task forces to facilitate State and interagency communication and coordination related to specific crises. During their operation, task forces serve as points of contact related to those crises.[21] From January to March 2020, State established three task forces to facilitate repatriations:

- **Wuhan Evacuation Task Force.** State constituted the Wuhan Evacuation Task Force on January 24, 2020, to facilitate the ordered departure of U.S. government employees from Wuhan, China. The first repatriation flight arrived in the United States from Wuhan on January 29, 2020. State transitioned the Wuhan Evacuation Task Force into the Coronavirus Global Response Coordination Unit 2 weeks later, on February 13, 2020, after assisting in the repatriation of more than 800 U.S. citizens.

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[21]In addition, task forces provide decision makers with the most current information available and communicate policy makers' decisions to ensure the appropriate offices are aware of relevant requirements.

- **Diamond Princess Response Task Force.** From February 15 through February 25, 2020, the Diamond Princess Response Task Force facilitated the repatriation of U.S. citizens from the Diamond Princess cruise ship while it was docked in Japan.

- **Repatriation Task Force.** The Repatriation Task Force coordinated and provided repatriation support during the COVID-19 pandemic.[22] The task force facilitated repatriations from March 19 through June 5, 2020, when it moved to on-call status.

State Provided Thousands of COVID-19 Repatriation Loans and Promissory Notes

During the pandemic, State provided more than 3,000 repatriation loans[23] and issued more than 26,000 repatriation promissory notes to U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents who needed assistance to return to the United States.[24] According to State data, 90 percent of the repatriation loans billed in fiscal year 2020 were for travel during the COVID-19 pandemic. As table 2 shows, the volume and total value of repatriation loans increased significantly from fiscal year 2019 to fiscal year 2020.

[22]In addition to the Repatriation Task Force, the Coronavirus Global Response Coordination Unit, established February 13, 2020, led State's engagement with other U.S. government agencies, state and local governments, and Congress. The unit addressed matters including the provision of outbreak updates, public health preparedness, and supply chains. Because the unit was not repatriation specific and because the Repatriation Task Force—a component of the unit—focused on repatriation, we did not include the Coronavirus Global Response Coordination Unit in our review. State transferred the unit's responsibilities to several other State offices on May 21, 2021.

[23]State may issue loans in currency for transportation and other reasonable expenses to individuals seeking to return to the United States. Individuals receiving these loans must sign a promissory note and repayment agreement—form DS-3072, *Repatriation and Emergency Medical and Dietary Assistance Loan Application*—agreeing to repay the U.S. government. We refer to these loans as repatriation loans.

[24]State may pay the cost of transportation, such as flights, for individuals seeking to return to the United States. Individuals receiving these services must sign a promissory note and repayment agreement—form DS-5528, *Evacuee Manifest and Promissory Note*—agreeing to repay the U.S. government. We refer to these promissory notes as repatriation promissory notes.

Table 2: State Department Repatriation Loans Billed and Outstanding, Fiscal Years 2015–2021

Fiscal year	Number of loans billed	Total amount billed (dollars)	Total amount outstanding (dollars)	Percentage of total billed amount repaid	Percentage of total billed amount outstanding
2015	1,310	1,376,667	525,402	62	38
2016	1,741	1,574,359	866,440	45	55
2017	1,692	1,681,018	697,047	59	41
2018	1,459	1,844,191	940,829	49	51
2019	1,023	1,468,658	649,242	56	44
2020	3,105	4,701,868	2,671,843	43	57
2021[a]	323	530,564	454,298	14	86

Source: GAO analysis of Department of State information. | GAO-22-104354

Note: The data shown are as of June 1, 2021.

[a]The data for fiscal year 2021 cover October 1, 2020, through June 1, 2021.

As table 3 shows, the volume and total value of repatriation promissory notes billed also increased significantly in fiscal year 2020, as did the percentage of the total billed amount repaid.

Table 3: State Department Repatriation Promissory Notes Billed and Outstanding, Fiscal Years 2015–2021

Fiscal year	Number of notes billed	Total amount billed (dollars)	Total amount outstanding (dollars)	Percentage of total billed amount repaid	Percentage of total billed amount outstanding
2015[a]	0	0	0	N/A	N/A
2016	53	65,629	801	99	1
2017	1,128	590,839	19,724	97	3
2018	15	41,385	27,420	34	66
2019	25	161,885	106,171	34	66
2020	26,758	45,417,831	13,239,477	71	29
2021[b]	70	135,304	45,445	66	34

Source: GAO analysis of Department of State information. | GAO-22-104354

Note: The data shown are as of June 1, 2021.

[a]There were no evacuations in fiscal year 2015.

[b]The data for fiscal year 2021 cover October 1, 2020, through June 1, 2021.

State Used Various Mechanisms to Communicate with U.S. Citizens during the Pandemic

State used various mechanisms to communicate with the public regarding repatriation during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example:

- State posted information on embassy and consulate websites.

- State sent out alerts through the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP).[25]

- State provided information on Travel.State.Gov, its website for U.S citizen travelers, including "COVID-19 Frequently Asked Questions for U.S. Citizens" (posted on March 15, 2020, according to agency officials) and "What the Department of State Can and Can't Do in a Crisis" (last updated on April 7, 2020).[26] The documents address topics such as (1) whether government-assisted repatriation flights are free, (2) use of the military to provide flights for repatriation, and (3) the availability of emergency financial assistance in the form of loans to those in need.

- State used social media such as Facebook and Twitter to update travel safety and information.

- State set up a 24-hour call center to provide answers to U.S. citizens' questions about repatriation during the pandemic. As of June 10, 2020, the center had answered more than 75,000 calls, according to State officials.

Most Respondents to Our Survey Reported State Provided Useful and Timely Repatriation-Related Information and Communication

To learn about U.S. citizens' experiences with State-funded repatriation charter flights, we surveyed a generalizable sample of 474 passengers on these flights during the period from January 29 to June 5, 2020. The survey included a number of closed-ended questions related to State's communication of repatriation-related information as well as two open-ended questions—"What worked well?" and "What did not go well?"—about the passengers' repatriation experiences. (See app. II for responses to selected survey questions.)

Our analysis of responses to the survey's closed-ended questions about State's responsiveness to passengers' repatriation-related inquiries

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[25]STEP is a database that State's Message Alert System for Citizens Overseas Tool (also known as MASCOT) uses to communicate via email with U.S. travelers who wish to receive security updates from U.S. embassies and consulates.

[26]Department of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs, *International Travel: Emergencies,* accessed July 9, 2020, https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/international-travel/emergencies.html.

indicated that the majority of passengers on repatriation flights found State to be extremely or very responsive. Our analysis of survey results related to the timeliness and usefulness of information that State provided about repatriation indicated that the majority of passengers found the information to be at least somewhat timely and useful.[27] For example:

- Among passengers who indicated they had called the U.S. embassy or consulate in their host country to obtain repatriation information and were able to speak with someone, an estimated 70 percent reported that State was extremely or very responsive to their repatriation-related questions.[28]

- Among passengers on repatriation flights who indicated they had registered with STEP, an estimated 52 percent reported that STEP notifications related to repatriation were extremely or very timely.[29]

- An estimated 52 percent of passengers on these flights indicated that State had informed them of the flight costs associated with their State-funded repatriation flight.[30] Additionally, an estimated 57 percent of passengers on these flights indicated that State had informed them about the repayment process for the flight.

- Survey respondents also provided written comments indicating that State provided highly useful responses to their repatriation-related e-mails. In addition, respondents' written comments indicated that State's website, travel.state.gov, as well as U.S. embassy websites provided useful information about the pandemic and the situation in their host countries.

Moreover, respondents to the open-ended question "What worked well?" expressed positive views of State's repatriation effort, including its

[27]The survey used the following response scale: *Extremely responsive* (or *Extremely timely* or *Extremely useful*), *Very responsive*, *Moderately responsive*, *Somewhat responsive*, *Not at all responsive*, and *No opinion.*

[28]This estimate's 95 percent confidence interval has a lower limit of 56 and an upper limit of 83. Eighty-six percent of passengers we surveyed indicated that they had called the U.S. embassy or consulate in their host country to obtain repatriation information and were able to speak with someone.

[29]Seventy-eight percent of passengers on these flights indicated that they had registered with STEP.

[30]This estimate's 95 percent confidence interval has a lower limit of 40 and an upper limit of 63.

professionalism and communication, the quality of the information State provided, and the repatriation flights. For example:

- One respondent said, "Multiple calls were made to us to make sure we had the right information."

- Another respondent said, "A member of the consulate was very helpful in getting our flight arranged. He convinced us that the situation was deteriorating very quickly and that we should take the State Department plane."

- A third respondent said, "The embassy staff answering emails were phenomenally helpful…. We always received timely and helpful email responses. They were well prepared, warm, and reassuring. The whole repatriation was incredibly well-executed."

Respondents to the open-ended question "What did not go well?" expressed concerns ranging from issues such as flight costs and State's billing process to the general repatriation process. For example:

- One respondent wrote, "The one way flight ticket from Chennai, India, to San Francisco, California, cost US $3009. It was way too high for any standards and even during a pandemic. My wife and I traveled back to the U.S. and paid $6018 one way."

- Another respondent stated that "it was hard to have to be ready to go at a moment's notice, as well as having to rely on email and internet to communicate when there was unreliable internet."

Figure 6 shows various repatriation-related activities undertaken by State during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 6: Examples of State Department Repatriation Activities

Source: Department of State (State). | GAO-22-104354

State personnel explaining repatriation procedures to travelers in Wuhan, China (top left); State personnel assisting passengers outside the Diamond Princess Cruise Ship in Yokohama, Japan (top right); State personnel checking a passenger's temperature in Cameroon (bottom left); State personnel briefing passengers being transported to a repatriation flight in Peru (bottom right).

State Reported Numerous Challenges and Lessons Learned in Repatriating U.S. Citizens during COVID-19 Pandemic

State Identified Challenges Faced and Lessons Learned in Its Repatriation Effort

As table 4 shows, in September 2020 we reported that State had identified several common challenges that officials faced in repatriating U.S. citizens and had also identified steps taken and lessons learned in addressing these challenges.[31]

Table 4: Reported Challenges Faced by State Department Officials in Repatriating U.S. Citizens during COVID-19 Pandemic and Reported Steps Taken and Lessons Learned in Addressing These Challenges

Challenge faced	Steps taken and lessons learned
Identifying, locating, and communicating with individuals who wanted to be repatriated	State collaborated with other U.S. government partners, mounting an outreach campaign via traditional and social media to enroll U.S. citizens overseas in State's Smart Traveler Enrollment Program. State and overseas posts also made extensive use of their Internet presence, social media, email, and cell phones to publicize State's repatriation efforts and, as necessary, established direct contact with individual citizens seeking repatriation options.
Responding to restrictions placed by foreign governments on internal and international travel, including border closures, curfews, quarantine requirements, and requirements for nonstandard documentation or other extraordinary exit requirements such as medical certifications and testing	State engaged foreign governments through traditional diplomacy and new strategies.
Securing options for cruise ships that encountered difficulties in docking, refueling and resupplying, or disembarking passengers and crew in ports around the world	Overseas posts worked closely with the cruise lines, engaging foreign governments and locating ports willing to accept the ships. State also convened a team of officials from across the department to provide oversight and coordination.
Answering incoming-call volume that outstripped embassies' and consulates' capacity to respond	State used its National Passport Information Center to create a 24-hour call center to answer repatriation and other emergency questions. Many posts also forwarded their switchboards to the call center, facilitating faster response times.

[31]GAO, *COVID-19: Federal Efforts Could Be Strengthened by Timely and Concerted Actions*, GAO-20-701 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 21, 2020).

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Challenge faced	Steps taken and lessons learned
Providing diplomatic intervention to help air carriers obtain timely landing permissions in each country where evacuation or repatriation occurred and obtain timely overflight permits for each country along the flight paths	State's Repatriation Task Force maintained operations and communications with State regional offices 24 hours per day and 7 days per week, contracted airlines regarding the flights, and coordinated flight clearance requirements. Additionally, the Directorate of Operational Medicine maintained a 24-hour task force to monitor the progress of the directorate's flight planning and missions.[a]

Source: GAO interview with Department of State officials. | GAO-22-104354

[a]State's Directorate of Operational Medicine provided 61 repatriation missions from January 29 through June 5, 2020, according to State officials.

During our virtual site visits at posts in five countries, post officials provided examples of the challenging circumstances the posts faced in their repatriation efforts. For example, Morocco—one of the first countries to close its airspace during the pandemic—gave the United States just 4 days to evacuate citizens, according to post officials. Honduras closed four of its five airports and required flights to use the only airport they could access without a specially trained pilot, which created an air traffic bottleneck, according to post officials.[32] Post officials in Ghana noted that repatriation required working with local authorities to obtain permission to transit to the airport and that passengers were not always comfortable with the arrangement, potentially missing flights.

In addition, we analyzed 33 cables that 28 posts submitted to State from April 2 through November 4, 2020, identifying lessons learned from challenges that affected their repatriation efforts, such as restrictions on internal and international travel, early difficulties in communicating with U.S. citizens, and flight-related problems. The cables described various factors—including working with foreign governments, using social media, coordinating with other posts, and drawing on local knowledge—that helped the posts address such challenges and facilitate repatriations.

Working with host governments. Twenty-six of the 33 cables indicated the importance of working with host governments to support repatriation efforts. For example, two cables, from posts in Nepal and Peru, reported the following:

- In Nepal, post staff organized a rescue operation using two post-owned buses to help Americans stranded in Pokhara, one of the country's main tourist hubs. Three days before the first evacuation

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[32]Because of Honduras's mountainous terrain, pilots flying into the country require special training to land at all but one of Honduras's five airports, according to State officials.

flight, a consular officer traveled to Pokhara and accompanied 40 people back to Kathmandu. Because the government of Nepal had banned all air and road travel, post staff requested and received special permission from the government to carry out the operation.

- In Peru, post staff worked with contacts in the Peruvian government to develop procedures to move U.S. citizens to departure points for repatriation flights. The contacts enabled the post staff to reach Peruvian decision makers and troubleshoot issues quickly, such as when travelers were stopped by police at roadblocks in remote regions or when underage minors traveling without a guardian needed clearance from immigration authorities to board a repatriation flight.

Using social media. Twenty-four of the 33 cables indicated the importance of using social media to communicate with U.S. citizens. For example, two cables, from posts in Rwanda and Laos, reported the following:

- In Rwanda, the post publicized opportunities to depart the country using the Message Alert System for Citizens Overseas Tool (MASCOT) as well as the embassy's Facebook page and website and the Ambassador's Twitter feed.[33] Post staff also placed hundreds of phone calls, wrote direct emails, and sent text messages via WhatsApp to those who contacted the embassy to inquire about the special flights.
- In Laos, post staff conducted outreach through MASCOT and the embassy website in addition to Facebook, where they posted information in Lao. After posting the information in Lao, post staff noticed a significant uptick in responses.

Coordinating with other posts. Seventeen of the 33 cables indicated the importance of coordination between posts, in part to address flight-related problems. For example, two cables, from posts in Djibouti and Armenia, reported the following:

- In Djibouti, post staff coordinated with Embassy Addis Ababa, in Ethiopia, to obtain flight clearances and landing permissions.

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[33]MASCOT is an application that allows consular staff to send alerts, routine messages, and travel advisories to travelers who enrolled a trip in STEP or within a particular consular district.

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- In Armenia, post staff received assistance from Embassy Doha, in Qatar, in processing last-minute flight clearances and the passenger manifest with host-country authorities.

Drawing on local knowledge. A small number of cables reported that post staff's local knowledge was helpful in the repatriation effort. The importance of local knowledge was also noted during our interviews with staff at posts in five countries that helped repatriate U.S. citizens during the pandemic. For example, two cables, from posts in Morocco and Peru, reported the following:

- In Morocco, post staff drew on existing local knowledge to navigate airports and around the country during the pandemic.
- In Peru, post staff used their local knowledge to determine how to get U.S. citizens from the jungle to the airport using land transportation.

In March 2021, State expanded lessons learned requirements. Some posts voluntarily provided lessons-learned cables related to their repatriation experiences. Other posts provided such cables after an authorized departure was declared during the COVID-19 pandemic but before the March 2021 requirement was implemented.[34] CMS remains responsible for collecting and disseminating lessons learned and shares documents, cables, and reports on its internal website.

State CA Issued a Cable Assessing Lessons Learned from the Pandemic

In July 2021, CA issued a cable identifying lessons learned from challenges encountered during the pandemic.[35] The effort was intended to identify and document successful CA innovations and workarounds as well as areas where CA processes and tools fell short during State's repatriation effort.

The cable identifies goals in four areas—policy and procedures, crisis organization, crisis communication, and technology and systems—as well as issues and tasks associated with each goal. For example:

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[34]Before State issued the March 2021 requirement, posts voluntarily submitted the 33 cables we reviewed. In a forthcoming report, we will examine adjustments in State's overseas operations during the pandemic and, to obtain insights relevant to State's operating posture in the pandemic more broadly, may review cables that posts submitted in response to the authorized or ordered departure.

[35]Department of State, "Bureau of Consular Affairs COVID-19 Lessons Learned Project: Identifying Challenges and Tasks," MRN 21 State 73804 (July 15, 2021).

- Regarding policy and procedures, the cable observes that some posts worked with host governments to allow commercial rescue flights even after the countries' airspace had closed and states this type of bilateral cooperation should become the norm. The cable identifies tasks such as implementing changes to posts' EAPs to improve standing agreements with host governments and developing standard procedures for commercial rescue flights, including best practices for securing host-country permission.

- Regarding technology and systems, the cable notes that STEP—State's primary means of communicating consular messages to U.S. citizens overseas—had limitations and that many people relied instead on social media. To develop a better way to message segments of overseas travelers appropriately, the cable identifies tasks such as determining whether STEP (or a similar traveler-registration system) or a commercially available over-the-counter product can better achieve CA objectives.

State Conducted an Interim Review of Its Repatriation Effort

In fall 2020, State initiated an interim review of its response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The review was intended to capture lessons learned during the pandemic's first year, from December 2019 through December 2020; identify challenges and best practices; and recommend changes to improve the department's response to the pandemic and future crises. The review included

- surveying 11,377 State employees,

- analyzing 55 lessons-learned cables related to the pandemic,[36]

- conducting 48 focus groups and interviews with individual posts and domestic offices,

- collecting data from 50 bureau and 23 post questionnaires responses from a representative sample of posts,[37] and

- conducting over 100 interviews with senior leaders.

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[36]These lessons-learned cables relate to repatriation, authorized and ordered departures, and consular affairs and management, according to State officials.

[37]State's selection of posts was purposeful but nongeneralizable. Officials considered local health care and posts' size, among other things, when selecting posts to receive the questionnaire.

In June 2021, State issued a comprehensive report of the results of the interim review.[38] The report provides recommendations in four substantive areas: crisis planning and response coordination, workforce management and safety, supporting U.S. citizens, and advancing U.S. foreign policy. Further, the report proposes creating a process and structure for acting upon its recommendations and tracking progress in their implementation. State officials told us they are studying the report with a view to deciding on next steps.

State Had Global Crisis-Preparedness and -Response Mechanisms, but Implementation and Guidance Were Incomplete

State Established Interagency Group to Coordinate Repatriation but Has Not Convened It since April 2019

Although State established an interagency group—the WLG—to ensure coordination for the protection and evacuation of U.S. citizens abroad, State did not sustain the regular quarterly WLG meetings, which may have contributed to gaps in interagency communication during the global repatriation effort. State and DOD established the WLG in 1998, with State as the lead agency, to coordinate and implement plans for the evacuation of persons abroad during emergencies, and according to State officials, State formalized WLG's charter in 2018.[39] The charter states that the WLG is expected to meet quarterly. CMS—which is responsible for department-wide crisis preparedness and response activities—manages the WLG's day-to-day operations, including

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[38]Department of State, *CIR, COVID-19 Interim Review: Lessons Learned from the Department of State's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic, December 2019–December 2020* (June 2021).

[39]WLG members include DOD, DHS, and HHS, among other agencies, as well as a number of State bureaus. Specifically, State WLG members include CA, DS, the Bureau of Administration, the Bureau of Legislative Affairs, the Office of the Legal Advisor, and regional bureaus.

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scheduling meetings.[40] However, as of May 2021, CMS officials told us that they had not convened the group since April 2019.

According to CMS officials, after the WLG last met in April 2019 and before the pandemic began, members of the group questioned the purpose of further meetings. CMS officials told us that, in response, they offered to schedule future meetings on request or if the need arose. According to the officials, in February 2021, interagency WLG members expressed interest in CMS reconvening the WLG to discuss information sharing about repatriation across and among the task forces. However, CMS delayed reconvening the WLG in part because of limited capacity within CMS to manage the group while also playing an active role in managing State's international response to the COVID-19 pandemic, according to CMS officials.

State documents and comments by CMS officials suggest that the lack of WLG meetings before and during the pandemic may have contributed to gaps related to interagency communication. In internal documents, State identified a number of gaps related to interagency communication during the pandemic, such as a lack of knowledge of how to communicate with other agencies, lack of guidance about points of contact at other agencies, and lack of clarity about U.S. government policy on repatriation. Comments by State officials indicated that such gaps led to challenges in communicating with the correct offices at interagency partners and coordinating repatriation efforts with interagency partners in the absence of clear, established policy. For example, CMS officials told us that regular meetings of the WLG would have facilitated interagency communication at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, because such communication would have reduced the effort required to identify the correct contacts in other agencies.

In part because CMS did not convene quarterly WLG meetings in accordance with the group's charter, State's ability to coordinate with other agencies to respond to the pandemic and carry out repatriation activities was diminished. In addition to the requirement for the WLG to meet quarterly, leading practices for interagency coordination based on our prior work call for agencies to consider how to sustain leadership of interagency groups over the long term—such as by meeting regularly—in

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[40]CMS also leads State's Crisis Management Council, which brings together crisis management practitioners and stakeholders from throughout the department to promote innovation and collaboration, among other activities.

order to maintain the group's effectiveness.[41] CMS officials told us in May 2021 that they planned to reconvene the WLG in the future but did not know when that would occur. Convening quarterly meetings of the WLG would enhance State's ability to coordinate repatriation activities with other agencies in any future global crisis.

State's Guidance for Crisis Response Has Several Gaps

State's Guidance for Establishing Task Forces Does Not Reflect Its Policy or Practices

Although State convened several task forces to carry out its repatriation efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic, State's internal guidance for establishing crisis-response task forces does not reflect the agency's policy and actual practices. Specifically, although CMS's internal guidance requires the completion of certain documentation for task forces, State officials told us that the guidance differs from their actual practices. Standards for internal control in the federal government require that management incorporate risks and organizational goals into internal control systems and document those systems.[42]

In 2018, CMS—which is responsible for recommending whether State should establish a task force and for supporting task force operations— identified a need to redesign and modernize its task force model. Specifically, CMS identified challenges related to establishing task forces under its existing model, including delays resulting from identifying and training staff, difficulty in using available tools and technology, and confusion about task force structure, roles, and responsibilities. Subsequently, CMS developed a new policy for establishing task forces, including a risk-based approach to determine the appropriate level of crisis response using a five-tier classification system.[43] State finalized the

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[41]GAO, *Managing for Results: Key Considerations for Implementing Interagency Collaborative Mechanisms*, GAO-12-1022 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 27, 2012). Interagency groups should define their leadership model, including roles and responsibilities, and sustain leadership. Leadership for collaborative efforts can be strengthened by top-level commitment from the President, Congress, or other high-level officials.

[42]GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, GAO-14-704G (Washington, D.C.: September 2014).

[43]The five-tier classification system ranges from a limited, bureau-led response that does not require a task force (tier 1), to various levels of State and interagency task forces (tiers 2 to 4), to coordination units to manage protracted crises (tier 5). See 1 FAM 022.2-3.

policy in April 2020, after the COVID-19 pandemic began and after State initiated the three repatriation-related task forces. CMS also developed internal guidance for initiating task forces that reflects selected leading practices for interagency collaboration. Specifically, the guidance includes a detailed checklist that outlines procedures and templates for identifying and documenting the scope, participants and their roles and responsibilities, and expected outcomes and reporting of the task force.[44]

However, CMS's internal guidance for initiating task forces does not fully reflect State's policy or practices. For example, the guidance does not discuss the five-tier classification system or include steps to determine, document, and communicate a task force's classification to internal and external stakeholders. Additionally, although the guidance includes a step for CMS staff initiating a task force to document a number of details, CMS officials told us that such documentation is not always appropriate. According to those officials, the need for such documentation depends on the underlying crises, timelines, and expected resource requirements. The officials told us that they did not document the Wuhan Evacuation or Diamond Princess Response Task Forces as the guidance requires. However, the officials said that they followed the guidance for the Repatriation Task Force, found the practice helpful, and expected it would be useful for future task forces. They also said that guidance and instructions related to the tier system, such as guidance regarding the documentation required for various tiers of task forces, would be helpful in future crises.

CMS officials told us that they planned to revise the internal guidance for initiating task forces to align with State's policy and practices. However, they did not define a timeline for doing so. Revising the guidance will help State ensure that any task forces it convenes in response to a future crisis are established according to its policy and practices.

State Lacked Guidance for Creating Consistent Flight Manifests

State's guidance on documentation for State-funded repatriation flights does not specify the types of information that should be included on flight manifests or include instructions for formatting them, which led to difficulties and delays in creating and processing the manifests and billing passengers on repatriation flights. As our survey found, dissatisfaction with State's billing process was a concern shared by some passengers on

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[44]GAO-12-1022. These selected practices include defining outcomes and tracking accountability and clarifying roles and responsibilities.

repatriation flights. Standards for internal control in the federal government state that management should identify the information requirements needed to achieve the agency's objectives; ensure that data are appropriate, complete, accurate, and provided on a timely basis; and ensure that data meet identified information requirements.[45]

Several State bureaus collect and use information related to State-funded repatriation flights:

- Consular personnel at overseas posts are responsible for ensuring that passengers complete promissory notes, which include both passenger information and a promise to repay State for the cost of the flight.[46] The consular personnel use passenger information when building flight manifests and provide the manifests and completed promissory notes to CGFS.

- A/LM officials told us they use the number of passengers from the manifest as part of the process to determine the amount to charge passengers.

- CGFS officials told us they use the manifests and promissory notes, along with information provided by A/LM, to ensure they have complete documentation for each flight and to bill passengers.[47]

Figure 7 shows State personnel collecting information from passengers prior to repatriation flights during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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[45]GAO-14-704G.

[46]See Department of State, *Form DS-5528: Evacuee Manifest and Promissory Note* (June 2019). Passenger payments are due 30 days after State generates the bill.

[47]State assesses interest and administrative charges for bills that are not paid in full after 30 days. After 90 days, the bill is referred to the Department of the Treasury for collection, which may include withholding tax returns or social security payments or garnishing wages, among other measures. According to State officials, if a debtor is financially unable to pay a debt in one lump sum, State may, at its discretion and on request, accept payment in regular installments. Debtors who have signed and returned a written agreement can continue to make payments to State on a recurring basis and their accounts will not be referred to Treasury. If an account becomes past due and is in default for 60 days, it will be transferred to Treasury for collection.

Figure 7: State Personnel Greeting Passengers and Collecting Information before Repatriation Flights in India

Source: Department of State (State). | GAO-22-104354

State officials at four posts told us they faced challenges related to building flight manifests during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, officials at two posts said the process of developing flight manifests was time consuming, and officials at one of these posts said that because of differing airline requirements, they did not know which information to collect. Officials at two additional posts said that they lacked State guidance on building flights manifests and therefore used information requirements provided by DOD or DHS to develop the manifests.

A/LM and CGFS officials reported facing challenges related to creating and using data from flight manifests. For example, A/LM officials told us that the manifests sometimes lacked necessary information or contained inaccurate information, such as the names of individuals who were not on the flight. Also, some manifests included U.S. government employees, while other manifests excluded them. Additionally, CGFS officials told us that because of the lack of State guidance for building flight manifests, they received manifests with inconsistently formatted data, such as inconsistently formatted names.

In part because of the lack of guidance and inconsistent formatting of flight manifests, State officials told us they faced operational difficulties and processing delays. Officials at two posts said the process of building flight manifests was time consuming. According to A/LM officials, the inconsistent formatting of flight manifests delayed calculations of the actual per-passenger cost of flights; without clear identification of passenger status, they could not perform the needed calculations or had to repeat the calculations when they received additional information. Moreover, according to CGFS officials, delays in A/LM's determination of the cost of flights slowed the billing of passengers. In addition, the officials

said the inconsistent formatting of flight manifests delayed processing of the manifests, because they had to identify certain data fields and reformat data to be consistent with their procedures.

CA officials told us they were aware of the challenges that posts faced in creating flight manifests and capturing information needed by A/LM, CGFS, and others. The officials said they planned to develop new guidance, in conjunction with stakeholders, to specify the types of information that should be included on flight manifests as well as instructions for formatting the manifests. However, they did not identify a timeline for this effort. Developing such guidance will help State minimize the risk of operational difficulties and processing delays in creating flight manifests for repatriation flights during future crises.

State's Guidance for Pricing Flights Lacked Key Procedures during the COVID-19 Repatriation Effort, but State Recently Updated the Guidance

State is required to seek reimbursement for repatriation flights it charters, which is not to exceed the cost of a reasonable commercial airfare immediately before the crisis requiring repatriation.[48] The guidance that State used for determining the prices to charge passengers for seats on State-funded charter flights during the COVID-19 repatriation effort lacked procedures for documenting and calculating the prices. As a result, documentation of costs charged to passengers was inconsistent and processing of passenger billing was delayed. However, after receiving our analysis, State updated its guidance in July 2021 to address deficiencies we identified in the guidance it used during the COVID-19 pandemic.

A/LM guidance for supporting repatriations during crises includes procedures for determining and tracking flight cost information. According to the guidance, State will charge passengers the lower of two costs for travel on a State-funded repatriation charter flight:

- **The fair market value of a comparable commercial fare (market fare).** State defines the market fare as a full-fare, nondiscounted, fully refundable or changeable, last-minute, walk-up, one-way commercial fare—sometimes known as a "Y" fare—on a comparable mode of transportation immediately before an evacuation or as the evacuation begins. Our review of the guidance that A/LM used during the COVID-

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[48]This requirement applies when State uses funding under the authority provided by section 2671 of title 22 of the United States Code. Specifically, the United States Code authorizes State to use funds for the evacuation of private U.S. citizens or third-country nationals "on a reimbursable basis to the maximum extent possible…except that no reimbursement under this clause shall be paid that is greater than the amount the person evacuated would have been charged for a reasonable commercial air fare immediately prior to the events giving rise to the evacuation." See 22 U.S.C. § 2671(b)(2)(A)(ii).

19 pandemic identified several pieces of information needed to determine a market fare: the repatriation flight's origin and destination (known as a flight route), the date used to determine the comparable commercial fare, and the commercial fare's code. In addition, A/LM officials told us that they incorporate the commercial fare as well as any applicable taxes when determining the amount to charge passengers.

- **The actual per-passenger cost of the charter flight.** The actual per-passenger cost is determined by dividing the actual cost of the flight to State by the number of passengers.

While the guidance that A/LM used during the COVID-19 repatriation effort addressed how to determine the market fare, the guidance did not include procedures for documenting the market fare's basis. A/LM officials told us that, although the guidance lacked such procedures, they began documenting the market fare's basis during the COVID-19 pandemic after CGFS requested that information.

Our review of A/LM's documentation of the adult fares for 228 flight routes during the COVID-19 pandemic found inconsistent documentation of the four information components that we identified as necessary to determine a market fare:[49] (1) the repatriation flight's origin and destination, (2) the date used to determine the comparable commercial fare, (3) the commercial fare's code, and (4) the commercial fare and applicable taxes. Our analysis found the following:

- Documentation for 40 market fares (about 18 percent) included all four components.

- Documentation for 63 market fares (about 28 percent) lacked three components—the date used to determine the commercial fare, the commercial fare code, and the commercial fare and applicable taxes.

- Documentation for 125 market fares (about 55 percent) lacked at least one component—the date of the commercial fare, the commercial fare code, or the commercial fare and applicable taxes.[50]

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[49]The 228 flight routes represent the various routes of State-funded repatriation flights. Where there were multiple flights with the same route, State used the same fare for each. The data initially included 229 entries; however, one entry did not include a market fare. We excluded this entry from our analysis.

[50]All entries identified the flight's origin and departure.

A/LM's updated guidance addresses how to document the market fare's basis. Specifically, the guidance provides steps to capture a screenshot of the market fare, which should include each of the four information components we identified as necessary to determine a market fare.[51]

Additionally, the guidance A/LM used during the COVID-19 repatriation effort did not address querying and documenting adult, child, and infant fares. State officials told us that after repatriation flights started during the COVID-19 pandemic, they began querying and documenting commercial airlines' adult, child, and infant fares in order to charge passengers on the basis of the relevant fare. Our review of available documentation for the 228 market fares found that documentation for 60 fares (about 26 percent) did not include records of the adult, child, and infant fares. A/LM's updated guidance addresses querying and documenting adult, child and infant commercial rates. Specifically, the guidance includes steps to determine and document the adult, child, and infant fares as part of determining market fares, and includes steps to identify passengers based on their age.

Finally, the guidance that A/LM used during the COVID-19 repatriation effort did not include procedures for determining the actual number of passengers on a flight, which A/LM uses to calculate the actual per-passenger cost of a State-funded charter flight. A/LM's guidance stated that A/LM should obtain the number of passengers on each flight and that CA tracks this information. However, the guidance did not address how to retrieve and process that information, such as which passengers to include in the subsequent calculation of actual per-passenger costs. For example, State officials told us that they include U.S. government employees in the number of passengers used to calculate the per-passenger cost; however, the guidance did not address this. A/LM's updated guidance addresses procedures for determining the actual number of passengers on a flight. Specifically, the updated guidance provides steps to identify the number of passengers based on flight manifests provided by CA and verified by CGFS. The updated guidance also specifies that all passengers, including U.S. government employees and foreign nationals, should be included when calculating the actual per-passenger cost.

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[51]The updated guidance additionally requires documentation of the specific air carrier, flight number, and class of service used to determine the market fare.

State Requires Posts to Prepare for Crises but Does Not Conduct Systematic Oversight of Their Preparedness

State Requires Posts to Prepare Emergency Action Plans but Does Not Ensure They Certify Required Updates

Although State requires overseas posts to develop, maintain, and annually certify an Emergency Action Plan (EAP), State has not ensured that each post certifies its plan within the required time frames. State's FAH requires overseas posts' emergency action committees to develop an EAP, ensure it is kept current, and conduct a comprehensive review of the plan within 12 months of its last certification. When certifying its plan, each post is required to review the plan's content to ensure its currency and update, if necessary.

However, our analysis of State data found that 138 of the 236 posts required to have an EAP in 2020[52] did not certify their updated plans within 12 months of the previous certification,[53] 98 of these posts certified their updated plans at least 1 month late.[54] In addition, 17 of the 30 posts representing the 20 countries from which the largest numbers of individuals were repatriated did not certify their plans within 12 months of

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[52]As of December 2020, 236 of State's 276 overseas posts were required to have an EAP; as of March 2021, 257 posts were required to have an EAP, according to State officials. State officials told us that a November 2020 update to the FAH increased the number of posts required to have an EAP. According to 12 FAH-1 H-030, "Each post (to include all embassies, consulates, branch offices, American Presence Posts, and American Institutes Taiwan, but excluding consular agencies) is required to prepare an EAP." According to State officials, the EAP records were added to the Post Emergency Guidance and Authoring System (PEGASYS) in March 2021 with a due date of March 2022.

[53]According to State officials, EAP certification dates are unavailable for the years before 2019, because State replaced the system it had used to track EAP certifications, the Crisis Emergency Planning Application, with PEGASYS in September 2018. Consequently, we are unable to assess the timeliness of EAP certifications in 2019.

[54]A post may certify its updated plan up to 90 days before the end of the month when it is due and at any time after the due date.

the previous update.[55] Eleven of the 17 posts certified their plan at least a month late.[56] As of June 2021, EAP annual reviews were overdue for 24 of the 257 posts required to have an EAP in 2021.

The FAH requires the chair of each post's Emergency Action Committee to certify the updated EAP each calendar year and submit the plan to DS annually.[57] According to DS officials, the DS Office of Special Programs' Emergency Planning Unit reviews individual sections as they are submitted, conducts a review of the entire EAP when the post submits the annual certification, and advises the post regarding the FAH requirements. However, although the unit is responsible for reviewing and approving the annual certification, it does not have authority to enforce the certification requirements, according to DS officials. In addition, DS and the regional bureaus' post management officers receive a monthly list of posts that are late in certifying their EAP, but according to State officials, the regional bureaus also have no enforcement authority.[58] Ensuring that each post certifies annual required updates of its EAP would strengthen State's assurance that posts are prepared to respond to crises.

State Requires Posts to Include Pandemic Risk Thresholds in Their EAPs

State's FAH requires each post to include risk thresholds for pandemics, among other health care–related risks, in its EAP. To support this requirement, MED developed reference materials for posts, most recently updated in October 2020, that include health care–related risk thresholds to help each post's Emergency Action Committee focus attention on events or changes that could affect the post's health, safety, and security.

According to State officials, MED maintains a Preparedness for Infectious Disease Outbreaks intranet site and sends cables that contain guidance for posts' pandemic preparation and response. MED officials stated that posts that diverge from or ignore MED's guidance in preparing for infectious disease outbreaks tend to develop plans that start too late, emphasize the wrong things, and contain questionable guidance. The reference materials MED developed also suggest actions to mitigate risk

[55]One of the 30 posts, the embassy in St. George's, Grenada, was not required to submit an EAP in 2020, according to State data.

[56]According to DS officials, several posts inquired about extensions during the pandemic, but none ultimately applied for one.

[57]12 FAH-1 H-036.

[58]The regional bureaus provide policy and logistical crisis management guidance.

once a risk threshold is met. Our review of the EAPs found that at least one post in each of the five countries we visited virtually had included a pandemic risk threshold in its plan.

Posts' Use of EAPs during COVID-19 Pandemic

State officials at each of the five posts where we conducted virtual site visits reported using the post's Emergency Action Plan (EAP) during the COVID-19 pandemic repatriation effort. Officials at four of the five posts specifically mentioned Annex K on Drawdowns and Evacuations as a relevant section of the plan. Additionally, officials at each of the five posts indicated that the crisis management and repatriation procedures they used during the pandemic included the procedures outlined in the post's EAP.

Source: Department of State officials. | GAO-22-104354

According to State officials, before the COVID-19 pandemic some posts' EAPs also included an optional pandemic annex with plans for responding to pandemics.[59] These posts included several in Africa, such as those in Yaounde, Lilongwe, and Djibouti, that had experienced the Ebola crisis, according to State officials. State officials noted that posts have the option to develop customized content or annexes, in conjunction with MED, for pandemic and epidemic planning. According to State data, 122 of the 257 global diplomatic posts required to have an EAP had pandemic annexes as of April 1, 2021. Of the five posts we visited virtually, three posts (in Hyderabad and Mumbai, India, and in Lima, Peru) had COVID-19 pandemic response plans.

State Provides Crisis Management Training to Overseas Posts

The FSI Crisis Management Training Division conducts crisis management exercises at posts. In fiscal years 2017 through 2020, FSI conducted more than 469 crisis management exercises. As table 5 shows, some exercises addressed repatriation and evacuation and other exercises addressed pandemics and epidemics. Our analysis of State data found that all five posts where we held virtual site visits conducted crisis management exercises in those fiscal years.[60]

Table 5: Numbers of Crisis Management Exercises Conducted in Fiscal Years 2017–2020, Including Exercises Addressing Repatriation and Evacuation and Exercises Addressing Pandemics and Epidemics

Fiscal year	All crisis management exercises	Exercises addressing repatriation and evacuation	Exercises addressing pandemics and epidemics
2017	136	56	17
2018	132	60	5
2019	140	61	10
2020[a]	61	23	16[b]

Source: GAO analysis of Department of State (State) data. | GAO-22-104354

[59]State does not require posts to develop a specific pandemic annex, according to State officials.

[60]Crisis management exercise scenarios are post specific and are drafted with input from posts regarding the types of scenarios to be exercised, based on an analysis of probable risks and threats in the area.

State Requires Posts to Complete and Record Annual Emergency Preparedness Drills but Does Not Ensure Compliance

The American Citizen Services Crisis Management section in Consular Affairs develops and implements tools, policies, and procedures to ensure private U.S. citizens receive emergency services during overseas crises. Repatriation of American citizens during a pandemic is one of several suggested Consular Crisis Exercises, according to State officials. Although State requires posts to complete, and record completion of, emergency preparedness drills, it does not ensure that posts comply with these requirements.[61] State's FAH requires each post to conduct emergency preparedness drills and record completion of the drills in the Post Emergency Guidance and Authoring System (PEGASYS). We reviewed PEGASYS data for 2019 through 2021 for 30 posts in the 20 countries from which State helped repatriate the largest numbers of individuals.[62] Our analysis found that in 2019, only 14 of the 30 posts recorded completion of all required drills within the required time frames. In 2020, 20 of the 30 posts completed all required drills within the required time frames.[63] As of March 26, 2021, 11 of the 30 posts had met updated annual drilling requirements for the first half of 2021, in accordance with revised FAH requirements.

[61]In 2017, we recommended that State take steps to ensure that overseas posts complete, and report completion of, required drills within mandated time frames. In response, State reported that PEGASYS, launched in September 2018, allowed it to track posts' completion of the drills. Nevertheless, posts have continued to complete, and record completion of, the drills inconsistently. See GAO, *Embassy Evacuations: State Department Should Take Steps to Improve Emergency Preparedness*, GAO-17-714 (Washington, D.C.: July 17, 2017).

[62]State officials indicated that because of State's migration to SharePoint Online in 2019, the organizational structure of the drills database was lost, resulting in incomplete records for fiscal year 2018 and the loss of data for fiscal year 2017.

[63]According to State officials, in 2020 posts were given flexibility during the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to the policy, post leadership identifies personnel that are responsible for coordinating drills and other crisis preparedness functions. In addition, according to State officials, the committee's chair is responsible for tracking and certifying drills on an annual basis under the FAH. State officials told us that post leadership is ultimately responsible for ensuring drills are completed and recorded in PEGASYS.

According to DS officials, when a post submits its EAP to DS's Office of Special Programs Emergency Planning Unit for annual review, the post's Emergency Action Committee chair certifies that training, exercises, and drills have been completed. However, the officials said the DS Emergency Planning Unit does not have authority to ensure that the Emergency Action Committee's chair enforces the drilling requirements and is not mandated to track preparedness activities other than EAP certifications.[64] Moreover, although DS reviews drilling records at posts during Post Security Program Reviews every 1 to 3 years, DS officials said it is not uncommon to find during these reviews that post personnel have not entered drilling records in PEGASYS.[65]

Usefulness of Emergency Preparedness Training at Posts during COVID-19 Pandemic

Officials at each of the five posts we visited virtually indicated that "muscle memory" from training and drills, as well as experience and relationships with host government officials, had aided their response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Training, including crisis management exercises, prepared State staff to act in response to unpredictable events.

Source: Department of State officials. | GAO-22-104354

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[64]State officials noted that, although the Emergency Planning Unit is responsible for reviewing posts' certified EAPs, the unit's mandated focus is the EAP and related framework and excludes tracking compliance with requirements for other preparedness activities, such as drills and exercises that are not considered security centric. According to the officials, ensuring compliance with such requirements is not the responsibility of regional security officers or DS.

[65]According to standard operating procedures for Post Security Program Reviews, the review team provides a report to the deputy chief of mission and regional security officer that documents noncompliant areas and makes recommendations to address them. The regional security officer must respond to recommendations with a corrective action plan within 45 days, and post officials must work with regional security officers to ensure that corrective action has been taken at the post for each noncompliant item. Post Security Program Review recommendations require a status update every 60 days, starting after the initial regional security officer response date, until closure.

Although the drills do not relate directly to crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, officials at three of the five posts we visited reported that the drills left them better prepared for the pandemic. For example, DS officials in Ghana said that the post derived collateral benefits from portions of various drills, particularly communication benefits. According to DS officials, posts that do not complete the emergency preparedness drills may be less prepared to respond, and less coordinated in their response, to situations that the drills address. Ensuring that each post completes, and records completion of, the required emergency preparedness drills would strengthen State's ability to identify posts whose crisis preparedness has gaps.

State Encourages Posts to Review Their Crisis Preparedness but Lacks a Mechanism to Systematically Assess It

Although State encourages posts to review their crisis preparedness, State lacks a mechanism that would allow it to systematically assess posts' preparedness. State provides the Consular Crisis Preparedness Scorecard (CCPS) as a voluntary tool for the consular section at each post to self-assess the post's preparedness for crisis, providing a snapshot of posts' preparedness. The CCPS contains a standardized set of 65 questions, and is divided into 10 sections spanning various areas of post preparedness.[66] For example, posts are to respond to questions such as the following:

- *What percent of all consular and non-consular staff that could perform emergency consular services in the event of a crisis know how to access consular crisis-related systems?*

- *Does Post have a plan for the use of social media in the event of a crisis?*

- *What percent of all consular staff can readily access relevant sections of the EAP at both office and home?*

When the CCPS system was originally developed, a post's response to these questions would trigger a green, yellow, or red indicator representing the post's crisis preparedness in each category and a final colored indicator representing the post's overall preparedness for crisis. According to the CCPS template, green indicators show areas in which the post is prepared for crisis and yellow or red indicators show areas that need attention. State encourages posts to use the CCPS to annually rate their own crisis preparedness. According to State's CCPS records from

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[66]CCPS questions are grouped into 10 sections: "Emergency Action Plan," "Training," "Equipment," "Work Space," "Communications," "staffing," "Admin Support," "post specific, "Consular Agency," and "Systems Access and Technology."

May 2014 to January 2020, all 232 posts that responded to the CCPS received an overall yellow or red indicator and no posts received an overall green indicator.

However, although the CCPS can be a helpful tool for posts to assess their crisis preparedness, CCPS data are not complete and cannot be used for systematic oversight. As a result, according to State officials, the CCPS is not useful for department-level management to comprehensively assess State's overall level of preparedness. State officials told us that around or before 2014, CA set a performance goal for 100 percent of posts to complete the CCPS by 2022. In late 2018, CA assessed progress toward this goal and identified systematic problems with the inputs on which the CCPS system was based. As a result, State dropped the original performance goals and metrics but did not replace them.

State officials identified the following weaknesses of CCPS that prevent CA from using CCPS data to systematically assess posts' crisis preparedness:

- State officials told us that the database that serves as a foundation for the CCPS was built without input from CA and does not accurately identify posts with consular sections. As a result, some posts with consular sections lack access to the CCPS, while other posts without these sections have access. State officials indicated that because several other State systems use the same database, they are unable to give CCPS access to all posts with consular sections without potentially affecting the operations of those other systems.

- In addition, according to State officials, after recognizing the CCPS's systemic weaknesses, State decided to make completion of the CCPS voluntary. Consequently, some posts with CCPS access may choose not to complete the exercise, and those that complete it may not do so annually. As a result, the CCPS may provide an inaccurate snapshot of selected posts' current level of preparedness, because their responses may be outdated or the in-country conditions that prompted their responses may have changed.

- Further, State officials informed us that some CCPS preparedness metrics are not suited for all posts. For example, the CCPS asks when the post last tested its Citizen Liaison Volunteer network. According to State's FAM, posts are expected to test these networks annually.[67]

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[67]According to State's FAM, posts are expected to test these networks annually. See 7 FAM 073—Post's Management Role.

Some posts that do not use the network to communicate with U.S. citizens because of in-country conditions (e.g., unreliable telecommunication networks) might indicate that they have not tested their Citizen Liaison Volunteer network in more than a year. However, because those posts may have other means of communicating with U.S. citizens that are more appropriate for the conditions in their country, their answer to the CCPS question would not provide an accurate rating of their crisis preparedness.[68]

State officials told us that, although CA regional desk officers are unable to use CCPS for oversight purposes, CA has not developed another mechanism for systematically assessing posts' preparedness. According to the FAM, State must maintain effective systems of management controls that incorporate standards for internal control in the federal government.[69] Those standards call for management to analyze identified risks to estimate their significance, which provide a basis for responding to the risk.[70] Establishing a mechanism to systematically assess each post's crisis preparedness would strengthen State's assurance that posts can protect U.S. citizens abroad during crises.

Conclusions

State carried out a historic effort in helping to repatriate more than 100,000 individuals during the first 6 months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of the passengers who responded to our survey gave State high marks for its communication and information related to repatriation. In addition, State's application of lessons learned from its COVID-19 repatriation effort will help it address future crises effectively.

However, although State took steps to prepare for a global crisis such as the pandemic, addressing several gaps could improve State's preparedness to carry out future repatriations. Reconvening quarterly meetings of the WLG, which has not met since April 2019, would ensure better communication among the agencies involved in planning emergency evacuations. Moreover, addressing gaps in guidance for initiating task forces would help ensure greater efficiency and

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[68]Although State does not require posts to complete the CCPS, State recognizes its usefulness. For example, in 2020, State's Office of Inspector General (OIG) reported that Embassy Windhoek in Namibia did not complete the CCPS to identify and mitigate country-specific risks to U.S. citizens. According to the report, the problem occurred because the section had not focused on crisis-preparedness guidance. Failure to comply with such guidance puts U.S. citizens and consular staff at risk in an emergency.

[69]2 FAM 021.1—Policy and Scope.

[70]GAO-14-704G.

accountability in any future State repatriation effort. Additionally, addressing a gap in guidance for developing and formatting the manifests for State-funded charter flights would improve the efficiency and integrity of this process.

Finally, ensuring that posts certify the required annual updates of their EAPs, ensuring that they complete and document the required emergency preparedness drills, and establishing a mechanism for systematically assessing posts' preparedness would strengthen State's assurance that they are ready for future crises.

Recommendations for Executive Action

We are making the following six recommendations to State:

The Secretary of State should ensure that the Deputy Director for CMS reconvenes quarterly meetings for the WLG, to maintain interagency communication regarding crisis preparedness and response. (Recommendation 1)

The Secretary of State should ensure that the Deputy Director for CMS develops guidance for initiating task forces that is consistent with State's policies and practices. (Recommendation 2)

The Secretary of State should ensure that the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Consular Affairs works with key stakeholders—including the Deputy Assistant Secretary for A/LM and Deputy Controller for CGFS—to develop guidance for systematically collecting information for, and formatting, flight manifests. (Recommendation 3)

The Secretary of State should ensure that the Executive Secretary, the Under Secretary for Management (M), and the Under Secretary for Political Affairs work with the regional bureaus to develop a mechanism for ensuring that each post certifies required annual updates of its EAP as required by State policy. (Recommendation 4)

The Secretary of State should ensure that the Executive Secretary, the Under Secretary for Management (M), and the Under Secretary for Political Affairs work with the regional bureaus to develop a mechanism for ensuring that each post completes, and documents completion of, required emergency preparedness drills. (Recommendation 5)

The Secretary of State should ensure that the relevant bureaus and offices establish a mechanism to systematically assess overseas posts'

preparedness to respond to crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. (Recommendation 6)

Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to State for review and comment. State's comments on the draft are reprinted in appendix III. State concurred with our recommendations and stated that it will take steps to implement them.

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees and the Secretary of State. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at http://www.gao.gov.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact Jason Bair at 202-512-6881 or BairJ@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made major contributions to this report are listed in appendix IV.
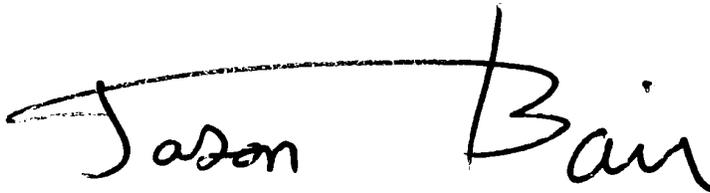
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The Honorable Jimmy Gomez
House of Representatives

The Honorable Norma J. Torres
House of Representatives

Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

This report examines (1) the results of the Department of State's (State) repatriation efforts from January 29 through June 5, 2020; (2) the lessons State reported learning from challenges it faced; (3) the consistency of selected aspects of State's repatriation efforts with its policies and procedures; and (4) State's oversight of its overseas posts' crisis preparedness.

To obtain information for all of our objectives, we reviewed State policy and procedures related to crisis management, emergency preparedness, emergency action committees, emergency action plans, evacuations and repatriations, communication, manifests, repatriation loans, and training as described in State's *Foreign Affairs Manual* and *Foreign Affairs Handbook*. We also interviewed State officials regarding the department's activities before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically State's repatriation efforts. We analyzed data on the number and types of repatriation flights facilitated by State during the pandemic from January 29 through June 5, 2020, maintained by the Office of Crisis Management and Strategy (CMS) and the Office of Logistics Management (A/LM).[1]

We assessed the reliability of these data by reviewing the data for internal consistency, examining them for duplicate entries, gaps, and obvious errors; comparing the data maintained by CMS and A/LM; and interviewing CMS and A/LM officials about their data collection and verification procedures. We found the data to be sufficiently reliable for our purpose of presenting summary data related to State's repatriation efforts and for selecting a sample of flights for a survey. We also reviewed State's data on the number and amount of repatriation loans and repatriation promissory notes billed and outstanding in fiscal years 2015 to 2021. We found these data to be sufficiently reliable for our purpose of presenting historical loan data.

To examine State's effort to repatriate U.S. citizens during the COVID-19 pandemic, we reviewed State's historical repatriation data for fiscal years 2015 through 2019, which included some of the reasons for repatriation as well as a number of countries where the repatriations occurred. We found the data to be sufficiently reliable for our purpose of presenting the historical repatriation data. We also examined the creation of the three

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[1]For the purposes of this report, "repatriation" generally refers to a broad range of actions taken by State during the COVID-19 pandemic, to include the evacuation of U.S. government personnel, U.S. citizens; U.S. lawful permanent residents; and, in some cases, third-country nationals out of foreign countries and the facilitation of commercial flights for the return of these individuals to the United States.

task forces established to facilitate repatriation during the pandemic. In
addition, we assessed various mechanisms State used to communicate
with U.S. citizens during the pandemic, including posting information on
embassy and consulate websites and on State's website for U.S. citizen
travelers (https://travel.state.gov), such as "COVID-19 Frequently Asked
Questions for U.S. Citizens," and sending updates to travelers registered
in the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program.

Further, to examine experiences that selected passengers reported
regarding repatriation on State-sponsored charter flights, we administered
a web-based survey to a sample of 474 passengers (from a population of
31,105 passengers) on State-funded charter flights from January to June
2021. To select these passengers, we first selected a random sample of
35 of the 233 State-chartered flights reported by State, which we stratified
into four groups on the basis of the flights' departure dates. We then
selected a random sample of private (i.e., non–U.S. government
employee) passengers from those flights. The survey comprised a variety
of closed- and open-ended questions about State's provision of
repatriation-related information and communication with passengers
before and after their repatriation to the United States. The survey
response rate was 40 percent, with 189 passengers responding.[2] Each
sample element was weighted in the analysis to account statistically for
all members of the population, including those who were not selected. All
survey results are generalizable to the greater population of passengers
repatriated on State-chartered flights. Because our estimates represent a
generalizable sample, we express our confidence in the precision of our
particular estimates as 95 percent confidence intervals.[3] See appendix II
for an analysis of responses to the survey's closed-ended questions.

To examine lessons State reported learning from challenges it faced
during the COVID-19 pandemic, we reviewed challenges State had
previously reported facing and steps it had reported taking to address

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[2] We calculated weights that adjust for the differential response likelihoods we observed
across examined characteristics. The nonresponse adjustment was calculated using a
weighting class adjustment where cells were based on quintiles of a predicted response
likelihood estimated by a logistic regression model that included geographic region and
the date range when the pandemic flight originated.

[3]Unless otherwise noted, all estimates from this survey have a margin of error of plus or
minus 10 percentage points or less.

them.[4] We also conducted a content analysis of 33 lessons-learned cables submitted to State by 28 overseas posts. Two analysts independently coded each cable to identify lessons learned, reconciled any differences in their analysis through discussion, and summarized the results. We further reviewed a Bureau of Consular Affairs cable reporting lessons learned and challenges encountered during the pandemic as well as associated goals, issues, and tasks to address them.[5] Moreover, we interviewed members of State's COVID-19 Interim Review team about its review of State's response to the pandemic during its first year. We also reviewed the report that the team issued in June 2021, identifying recommendations as well as actions State plans to take.[6]

To assess the consistency of selected aspects of State's repatriation efforts with its policies and procedures, we first reviewed documentation from relevant State bureaus and offices and interviewed officials to identify repatriation-related mechanisms and policies State had established. After identifying CMS, the Bureau of Consular Affairs (CA), A/LM, and the Bureau of the Comptroller and Global Financial Services (CGFS) as the primary bureaus with repatriation-related responsibilities, we interviewed officials from each bureau to identify their specific repatriation-related responsibilities, mechanisms, and policy.

- Because CMS is responsible for crisis preparedness and response, we reviewed State's policy regarding, and responsibilities related to, the Washington Liaison Group (WLG), which CMS manages on behalf of State, and repatriation-related task forces, which CMS supported during the crisis. We also reviewed WLG's charter and CMS's guidance on task forces, and we interviewed CMS officials about that policy and guidance.[7]

- Because CA is responsible for responding to crises that affect U.S. citizens abroad, we reviewed State's policy on, and responsibilities related to, repatriation. We also reviewed CA's guidance related to building flight manifests for repatriation flights, which A/LM and CGFS

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[4]GAO, *COVID-19: Federal Efforts Could Be Strengthened by Timely and Concerted Actions*, GAO-20-701 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 21, 2020).

[5]Department of State, "Bureau of Consular Affairs COVID-19 Lessons Learned Project: Identifying Challenges and Tasks," MRN 21 State 73804 (July 15, 2021).

[6]Department of State, *CIR, COVID-19 Interim Review: Lessons Learned from the Department of State's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic, December 2019–December 2020* (June 2021).

[7]See 1 FAM 022.2-3.

use to determine the costs charged to passenger and to bill those passengers. In addition, we interviewed CA, CGFS, A/LM, and post staff who generate and use flight manifests.

- Because A/LM is responsible for determining the amount to charge passengers for State-sponsored repatriation flights, we reviewed A/LM guidance on how to determine these amounts and interviewed A/LM officials about that guidance. We also interviewed CGFS officials who use A/LM's cost determination to bill passengers, and we analyzed A/LM documentation of the fair market value of repatriation flights during the pandemic. This documentation included the origin and destination of flights; the fair market value of a comparable commercial fare for an adult, child, and infant passenger; and documentation of the basis of that market fare.

To examine State's oversight of overseas posts' preparedness, we conducted virtual site visits to five posts—in Honduras, Ghana, India, Morocco, and Peru—that repatriated U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents during the pandemic. During these site visits, we interviewed officials from each post's Emergency Action Committee, CA section, and DS section. We also reviewed documentation from the posts related to their emergency preparedness, including their emergency action plans, and discussed their communication and outreach to passengers regarding repatriation flights. We selected these posts on the basis of their being among the 20 posts that repatriated the largest numbers of U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents; representing the three regions from which the largest numbers were repatriated—the Western Hemisphere, Africa, and South Central Asia; and reflecting a mixture of high, medium, and low ratios of repatriated U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents to total consular staff. In addition, we reviewed crisis management training records for fiscal years 2017 through 2020 at the 20 posts that repatriated the largest numbers during the pandemic.

In addition, we examined posts' compliance with State's annual emergency preparedness drilling requirements by reviewing State's emergency preparedness drilling records for calendar years 2019 through 2021 for 30 posts representing the 20 countries from which the largest numbers of individuals were repatriated. We also reviewed Consular Crisis Preparedness Scorecard (CCPS) ratings for posts that had completed the exercise as of January 2020, and we interviewed knowledgeable CA officials at State headquarters about the CCPS program.

We conducted this performance audit from June 2020 to November 2021 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.

Appendix II: Responses to Selected Questions from Our Survey of Passengers Repatriated on State-Funded Charter Flights

From February 2021 to April 2021, we administered a web-based survey of a sample of 474 passengers who took repatriation charter flights funded by the Department of State (State) from January 29 through June 5, 2020.[1] The survey consisted of closed- and open-ended questions about State's communication and provision of repatriation related information before and after their flights to the United States, about flight costs and repayment, and about any parts of State's repatriation process that worked well and did not work well. We obtained a survey response rate of 40 percent, with 189 passengers responding.

All survey results are generalizable to the greater population of passengers repatriated on State-chartered repatriation flights. Because our estimates represent a generalizable sample, we express our confidence in the precision of our particular estimates as 95 percent confidence intervals. Tables 6 through 19 present selected closed-ended questions and responses from our survey that are directly applicable to the research objectives of this report.[2]

Table 6: Did you register with the State Department's Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP)? (Question 2)

	Response	Estimated percentage	95 percent confidence interval (percentage)	
			Lower bound	Upper bound
2. Did you register with State's STEP?	Yes	78	70	86
	No	18	9	27
	NR	4	2	8
2a. *(If yes to question 2)* Before returning to the United States, did you receive any notifications from STEP related to repatriation?	Yes	82	72	92
	No	8	4	16
	Unsure	9	4	19
	NR	1	0	4
2b. *(If yes to question 2a)* How useful were the notifications from STEP related to repatriation?[a]	Highly useful	69	57	81
	Useful	12		19
	Not at all useful	1	0	7
	NR	18	8	28

[1]For the purposes of this report, "repatriation" generally refers to a broad range of actions taken by State during the COVID-19 pandemic, to include the evacuation of U.S. government personnel, U.S. citizens; U.S. lawful permanent residents; and, in some cases, third-country nationals out of foreign countries and the facilitation of commercial flights for the return of these individuals to the United States.

[2]The survey included 18 questions, 14 of which appear in tables 6 through 19 and are directly applicable to the research objectives of this report.

	Response	Estimated percentage	95 percent confidence interval (percentage)	
			Lower bound	Upper bound
2c. *(If yes to question 2a)* How timely were the notifications from STEP related to repatriation?[a]	Very timely	52	43	62
	Timely	26	17	34
	Not at all timely	4	1	10
	NR	18	8	28

Legend: State = Department of State, NR = no response.

Source: GAO. | GAO-22-104354

[a]For reporting purposes, we combined the survey response categories *Extremely useful (or Extremely timely)* and *Very useful (or Very timely)* into *Highly useful (or Highly timely)*, and we combined the categories *Moderately useful (or Moderately timely)* and *Somewhat useful (or Somewhat timely)* into *Useful (or Timely)*. The other survey response options for these questions were *Not at all useful (or Not at all timely)* and *No opinion*.

Table 7: How useful was the State Department's (travel.state.gov) website for obtaining information about the pandemic/situation in your host country (that is, the country you were repatriated from)? (Question 3)

Response	Estimated percentage	95 percent confidence interval (percentage)	
		Lower bound	Upper bound
Highly useful[a]	43	37	49
Useful	26	19	33
Not at all useful	7	4	13
No opinion	3	1	8
Did not use the website	18	11	26
NR	3	1	7

Legend: NR = no response.

Source: GAO. | GAO-22-104354

[a]For reporting purposes, we combined the survey response categories *Extremely useful* and *Very useful* into *Highly useful*, and we combined the response categories *Moderately useful* and *Somewhat useful* into *Useful*. The other survey response options for these questions were *Not at all useful*, *No opinion*, and *Did not use the website*.

Table 8: How useful was the U.S. Embassy's website for obtaining information about the pandemic/situation in your host country (that is, the country you were repatriated from)? (Question 4)

Response	Estimated percentage	95 percent confidence interval (percentage)	
		Lower bound	Upper bound
Highly useful[a]	46	38	55
Useful	24	13	35
Not at all useful	6	3	12
No opinion	1	0	3

Response	Estimated percentage	95 percent confidence interval (percentage)	
		Lower bound	Upper bound
Did not use the website	18	11	26
NR	4	1	14

Legend: NR = no response.

Source: GAO. | GAO-22-104354

[a]For reporting purposes, we combined the survey response categories *Extremely useful* and *Very useful* into *Highly useful*, and we combined the categories *Moderately useful* and *Somewhat useful* into *Useful.* The other survey response options for these questions were *Not at all useful*, *No opinion*, and *Did not use the website*.

Table 9: Did you call the U.S. Embassy or Consulate in your host country to obtain repatriation information? (Question 5)

	Response	Estimated percentage	95 percent confidence interval (percentage)	
			Lower bound	Upper bound
5. Did you call the U.S. Embassy or Consulate in your host country to obtain repatriation information?	Yes	53	43	63
	No	46	36	55
	NR	1	0	5
5a. *(If yes to question 5)* Were you able to speak with someone in the U.S. Embassy or Consulate?	Yes	86	76	96
	No	14	4	24
	NR	–	–	–
5b. *(If yes to question 5a)* How responsive was the U.S. Embassy or consulate to your repatriation- related questions?[a]	Highly responsive	70	56	83
	Responsive	26	13	38
	Not at all responsive	3	1	9
	No opinion	2	0	10
	NR	–	–	–
5c. *(If yes to question 5a)* How useful were the responses you received from the U.S. Embassy or Consulate to your repatriation-related questions?[a]	Highly useful	73	62	85
	Useful	21	11	32
	Not at all useful	2	0	10
	No opinion	4	1	12
	NR	–	–	–

Legend: NR = no response.

Source: GAO. | GAO-22-104354

[a]For reporting purposes, we combined the survey response *categories Extremely responsive (or Extremely useful)* and *Very responsive (or Very useful)* into *Highly responsive (or Highly useful)*, and we combined the categories *Moderately responsive (or Moderately useful)* and *Somewhat responsive (or Somewhat useful)* into *Responsive (or Useful)*. The other two survey response options for these questions were *Not at all responsive (or Not at all useful)* and *No opinion*.

Table 10: Did you e-mail the U.S. Embassy or Consulate in your host country to obtain repatriation information? (Question 6)

	Response	Estimated percentage	95 percent confidence interval (percentage)	
			Lower bound	Upper bound
6. Did you e-mail the U.S. Embassy or Consulate in your host country to obtain repatriation information?	Yes	69	59	78
	No	30	21	39
	NR	1	0	5
6a. *(If yes to question 6)* How responsive was the U.S. Embassy or Consulate to your emailed repatriation-related questions?	Highly responsive	72	60	84
	Responsive	26	14	38
	Not at all responsive	1	0	5
	No opinion	1	0	6
	NR	–	–	–
6b. *(If yes to question 6)* How useful were the responses you received from the U.S. Embassy or Consulate to your emailed repatriation-related questions?[a]	Highly useful	68	52	84
	Useful	29	14	44
	Not at all useful	2	1	8
	No opinion	1	0	6
	NR	–	–	–

Legend: NR = no response.

Source: GAO. | GAO-22-104354

[a]For reporting purposes, we combined the survey response categories *Extremely responsive (or Extremely useful)* and *Very responsive (or Very useful)* into *Highly responsive (or Highly useful)*, and we combined the categories *Moderately responsive (or Moderately useful)* and *Somewhat responsive (or Somewhat useful)* into *Responsive (or Useful)*. The other two survey response options for these questions were *Not at all responsive (or Not at all useful)* and *No opinion*.

Table 11: Did you call the State Department's 24x7 emergency hotline to obtain repatriation information? (Question 7)

Response	Estimated percentage	95 percent confidence interval (percentage)	
		Lower bound	Upper bound
Yes	11	6	16
No	77	70	84
Unsure	11	6	17
NR	0	0	0

Legend: NR = no response.

Source: GAO. | GAO-22-104354

Table 12: Did anyone (for example, your family) who resides in the U.S. attempt to use the State Department's 24x7 emergency hotline to obtain information related to your repatriation? (Question 8)

	Response	Estimated percentage	95 percent confidence interval (percentage)	
			Lower bound	Upper bound
8. Did anyone (for example, your family) who resides in the U.S. attempt to use State's 24x7 emergency hotline to obtain information related to your repatriation?	Yes	16	11	21
	No	76	69	83
	Unsure	7	4	12
	NR	2	0	7
8a. *(If yes to question 8)* Were they successful in obtaining information related to your repatriation from State's 24x7 emergency hotline?	Yes	47	23	70
	No	29	4	55
	Unsure	24	7	42
	NR	–	–	–

Legend: State = Department of State, NR = no response.

Source: GAO. | GAO-22-104354

Table 13: Did you sign paperwork agreeing to reimburse the State Department for the cost of your State-funded repatriation flight? (Question 9)

	Response	Estimated percentage	95 percent confidence interval (percentage)	
			Lower bound	Upper bound
9. Did you sign paperwork agreeing to reimburse State for the cost of your State-funded repatriation flight?	Yes	93	88	96
	No	2	1	7
	NR	5	3	10
9a. *(If yes to question 9)* When you signed the paperwork, were you aware that the actual cost of your flight would be determined at a later date?	Yes	79	73	86
	No	20	13	27
	NR	1	0	6

Legend: State = Department of State, NR = no response.

Source: GAO. | GAO-22-104354

Table 14: Leading up to your flight, did the State Department inform you about the flight costs associated with your State Department–funded repatriation flight? (Question 10)

Response	Estimated percentage	95 percent confidence interval (percentage)	
		Lower bound	Upper bound
Yes	52	40	63
No	45	32	57
NR	4	2	8

Legend: NR = no response.

Source: GAO. | GAO-22-104354

Table 15: Leading up to your flight, did the State Department inform you about the repayment process for your State Department–funded repatriation flight? (Question 11)

	Response	Estimated percentage	95 percent confidence interval (percentage)	
			Lower bound	Upper bound
11. Leading up to your flight, did State inform you about the repayment process for your State-funded repatriation flight?	Yes	57	48	67
	No	40	30	50
	NR	3	1	8

Legend: State = Department of State, NR = no response.

Source: GAO. | GAO-22-104354

Table 16: Once your repatriation flight was confirmed, did the State Department provide you information regarding next steps to proceed with the repatriation on the day of your flight? (Question 12)

	Response	Estimated percentage	95 percent confidence interval (percentage)	
			Lower bound	Upper bound
12. Once your repatriation flight was confirmed, did State provide you information regarding next steps to proceed with the repatriation on the day of your flight?	Yes	86	80	92
	No	11	5	16
	NR	3	1	8
12a. *(If yes to question 12)* How useful was the information State provided you regarding next steps to proceed with the repatriation on the day of your flight?[a]	Highly useful	80	73	88
	Useful	18	11	26
	Not at all useful	1	0	7
	NR	–	–	–

Legend: State = Department of State, NR = no response.

Source: GAO. | GAO-22-104354

[a]For reporting purposes, we combined the survey response categories *Extremely useful* and *Very useful* into *Highly useful*, and we combined the categories *Moderately useful* and *Somewhat useful* into *Useful*. The other survey response options for these questions were *Not at all useful* and *No opinion*.

Table 17: Since your return to the U.S., has State Department sent you any information regarding how to repay the cost of your State Department-funded repatriation flight? (Question 13)

Response	Estimated percentage	95 percent confidence interval (percentage)	
		Lower bound	Upper bound
Yes	91	86	94
No	5	3	10
NR	4	2	8

Legend: NR = no response.

Source: GAO. | GAO-22-104354

Table 18: Have you received a bill for the cost of your State Department-funded repatriation flight? (Question 14)

Response	Estimated percentage	95 percent confidence interval (percentage)	
		Lower bound	Upper bound
Yes	93	88	96
No	4	1	9
NR	4	2	8

Legend: NR = no response.
Source: GAO. | GAO-22-104354

Table 19: Have you received a notice that your repayment is late? (Question 15)

Question	Response	Estimated percentage	95 percent confidence interval (percentage)	
			Lower bound	Upper bound
15. Have you received a notice that your repayment is late?	Yes	26	19	32
	No	15	8	21
	Not applicable (i.e. I paid my bill on time, or the deadline for repayment has not been exceeded)	59	51	67
	NR	0	0	2
15a-1: *(If yes to question 15)* From which agency have you received a notice that your repayment is late? (State Department)	Checked	28	13	4
	NR	72	56	87
15a-2: Department of the Treasury	Checked	30	16	45
	NR	70	55	84
15a-3: Unsure	Checked	48	36	60
	NR	52	41	64

Legend: NR = no response.
Source: GAO. | GAO-22-104354

Appendix III: Comments from the Department of State

**COVID-19: State Carried Out Historic Repatriation Effort but Should Strengthen Its
Preparedness for Future Crises**
(GAO-22-104354, GAO Code 104354)

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on your draft report entitled *"COVID-19: State
Carried Out Historic Repatriation but Should Strengthen Its Preparedness for Future Crises."*
The report includes six recommendations.

Recommendation 1: The Secretary of State should ensure that the Deputy Director for CMS
reconvenes quarterly meetings for the WLG, to maintain interagency communication regarding
crisis preparedness and response.

Response: The Department agrees. The Deputy Director of CMS will reconvene quarterly
meetings of the WLG.

Recommendation 2: The Secretary of State should ensure that the Deputy Director for CMS
develops guidance for initiating task forces that is consistent with State's policies and practices.

Response: The Department agrees. The Deputy Director of CMS has developed guidance
consistent with Department policies and practices on initiating task forces and will continue to
refine the guidance and ensure it is accessible and published broadly.

Recommendation 3: The Secretary of State should ensure that the Assistant Secretary for
Consular Affairs works with key stakeholders—including the Assistant Secretary for
Administration and Comptroller/CGFS—to develop guidance for systematically collecting
information for, and formatting, flight manifests.

Response: The Department agrees. This recommendation tracks with CA's own lessons learned
process in which CA identified the same need. The recommendation is consistent with CA's goal
to create a "manifest in a box" and CA accepts the recommendation.

Recommendation 4: GAO recommends the Secretary of State should ensure that the Executive
Secretary, the Under Secretary for Management (M), and the Under Secretary for Political
Affairs (P) work with the regional bureaus to develop a mechanism for ensuring that each post
certifies required annual updates of its emergency action plan (EAP) as required by State policy.

Response: The Department agrees. The Executive Secretary, M, and P will work with the
regional bureaus to develop a mechanism for ensuring that each post certifies required annual
updates of its EAP as required by State policy.

Recommendation 5: GAO recommends the Secretary of State should ensure that the Executive
Secretary, the Under Secretary for Management (M), and the Under Secretary for Political Affair
(P) work with the regional bureaus to develop a mechanism for ensuring that each post

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completes, and documents completion of, required emergency preparedness drills.

Response: The Department agrees. The Executive Secretary, M, and P will work with the regional bureaus to develop a mechanism for ensuring that each post completes, and documents completion of, required emergency preparedness drills.

Recommendation 6: The Secretary of State should ensure that the relevant bureaus and offices establish a mechanism to systematically assess overseas posts' preparedness to respond to crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Response: The Department agrees. The Department will work to develop a mechanism to systematically assess overseas posts' preparedness to respond to crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Department thanks the GAO for this constructive audit and will promptly implement the above recommendations.

Appendix IV: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgements

GAO Contact	Jason Bair, (202) 512-6881, BairJ@gao.gov
Staff Acknowledgements	In addition to the contact named above, Kim Frankena (Assistant Director), Julie Hirshen (Analyst-in-Charge), Mason Thorpe Calhoun, and Benjamin L. Sponholtz made key contributions to this report. Justin Fisher, Christopher Keblitis, Jill Lacey, Reid Lowe, Grace Lui, and Sarah Veale also contributed to this report.