



At a Glance

Why We Did This Review

This is a quick reaction report that addresses hiring activities by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) that occurred after EPA employees accepted payments of up to \$25,000 to separate from federal employment. The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) gave the EPA authority under the Voluntary Early Retirement Authority (VERA, or “early-out”) and Voluntary Separation Incentive Payment (VSIP, or “buyout”) programs so that the agency could downsize or restructure its workforce. As a result, 479 employees voluntarily left in 2014, with the EPA paying \$11.9 million in VERA-VSIP incentives. One condition of the authority granted EPA is that vacated positions cannot be filled using the same or substantially similar position descriptions used for the employees who left.

This report addresses the following EPA goal or cross-agency strategy:

- *Embracing EPA as a high-performing organization.*

Send all inquiries to our public affairs office at (202) 566-2391 or visit www.epa.gov/oig.

The full report is at: www.epa.gov/oig/reports/2015/20150714-15-P-0184.pdf

Quick Reaction Report: EPA Should Ensure Positions Vacated Under Buyouts Are Eliminated or Properly Filled

What We Found

Two of four EPA organizations we reviewed correctly used the authority granted by OPM for the VERA-VSIP programs by either eliminating vacated positions or filling them using different position descriptions. However, the Office of Environmental Information (OEI) filled one of nine vacated positions using the same position description, and Region 8 filled seven of 31 vacated positions using the same position description. EPA paid a total of \$200,000 in buyouts to employees vacating these eight positions. Senior managers from these organizations were aware they should not hire employees under position descriptions of separated employees. An OEI Director said OEI used the same position description because it needed continuity due to the loss of managers. In Region 8, an official said he used the same position description because of time constraints, and the manager of an office expressed the belief that the limitations did not apply to all of the vacated positions.

The EPA paid staff up to \$25,000 each to voluntarily separate from federal employment, but in some cases replaced them without modifying the positions. The EPA needs to improve its controls over this in light of the currently planned rapid hiring of more than 500 employees.

OPM gave EPA program and regional offices authority to offer early-outs and buyouts to eliminate or restructure positions. This can achieve cost savings or mission improvements even if re-hiring occurs in restructured positions. However, by paying some employees under VSIP to leave federal service only to fill those same positions without changing them, the EPA lost an opportunity to reduce costs or improve mission work.

In May 2015, the EPA Deputy Assistant Administrator for Administration and Resources Management announced plans to hire more than 500 employees by September 30, 2015. During this effort, the EPA must ensure it does not improperly fill positions vacated through early-outs or buyouts. We alerted EPA officials to the issue in this report and met with them on June 11, 2015.

Recommendation and Planned Agency Corrective Actions

We recommend that the EPA implement controls to prevent positions vacated under VERA-VSIP from being filled using the same position description. The agency agreed with our recommendation and plans to complete corrective actions by July 31, 2015. We agree with these corrective actions and consider the recommendation resolved.