

Grants Workforce Planning – Podcast Transcript

Kim: Hello and welcome to another episode of EPA Uncovered—the official podcast of the EPA Office of Inspector General. I'm your host, Kim Wheeler, and today we are talking about a new audit report looking at the EPA's grants workforce planning. Joining me today is Gloria Taylor-Upshaw, the Director of Business Operations in our Office of Audit. Gloria, thanks for being here.

GLORIA: Thanks for having me. I'm glad to talk about this report.

Kim: So, let's start with the big picture. What is grants workforce management and why does it matter?

GLORIA: Absolutely. One of the EPA's core functions is to distribute federal dollars through grants to state, tribal, local, and non-profit partners. In fact, EPA awards about half of its annual budget as grants. To administer this workload, the Agency has staff who specialize in grants management and who are responsible for different functions within the grant life cycle. They help ensure federal funds are awarded fairly, spent properly, and achieve their intended results.

Kim: That sounds like a big job.

GLORIA: It is. And a few years ago, it got substantially bigger. In fiscal year 2022, the EPA received over \$100 billion dollars under the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, also known as IIJA, and the Inflation Reduction Act, or IRA. The IIJA and the IRA increased not only the amount of dollars flowing into existing EPA grant programs but also the number of new grant programs that the EPA had to implement. The IIJA funded 19 new and existing grant programs, while the IRA funded 24 new and existing grant programs.

Kim: So, is that what prompted this audit—that the Agency was suddenly managing billions of dollars in additional grant funding?

GLORIA: In part, yes. However, grants workforce planning is an issue that we have flagged for the Agency in the past. In fact, in 2022, as the EPA prepared to implement its IIJA funding, we alerted Agency leadership to several previous OIG reports identifying needed improvements in this area. Given this history, as the EPA's grant award workload grew under the IIJA, so did the need for oversight, and we initiated this audit to take a look at whether the EPA's planning efforts met federal requirements and addressed the influx of funding under the IIJA and IRA.

Kim: Gloria, you've mentioned the IRA a few times, but I thought that many of the EPA's IRA grants had been terminated?

GLORIA: Yes, that is correct. Last year, many IRA grants were terminated and the One Big Beautiful Bill Act rescinded unobligated EPA funds associated with the IRA. However, this didn't change the scope of our audit. Our objective was to assess how the Agency planned for and managed its grants workforce needs. At the time we initiated the audit, that funding would have factored into the Agency's strategic plans for workforce needs. And the Agency *is* continuing to implement more than \$60 billion dollars from the IIJA or IRA.

Kim: Thank you for explaining that. So, now that we understand why you undertook this audit, can you walk us through what you found?

GLORIA: Overall, we found that, while the Agency conducted high-level agencywide workforce planning at a broad, agency-wide level, it did not have a workforce plan specifically focused on its grants workforce—despite the significant and sustained growth in grants. Which led us to conclude that the Agency had not, established a plan for grants personnel, updated its workload benchmarks, or formally documented a process for conducting workload analyses.

Kim: Some listeners might think, “Well, if they’re doing overall workforce planning, isn’t that enough?”

GLORIA: That’s a great question. The Agency uses agencywide workforce planning documents to determine the needs of its workforce, but these high-level documents are not detailed enough to accurately identify the staffing needed to administer and manage the billions of dollars in grants that the EPA awards, nor to assess, the impacts of these increased workloads. Without targeted planning, the Agency could risk overburdening staff, processing delays, reduced oversight, and increased risk of improper payments or noncompliance. A general workforce plan may not capture those specific pressures.

Kim: And that’s why a grants-specific workforce plan is so important. So, what were some of the key gaps you identified?

GLORIA: Well, aside from the lack of a focused plan, we found that the EPA’s efforts related to its grants workforce are dispersed, with different program offices and regions taking decentralized steps to address their grants workload. We also found that the EPA hadn’t updated its workload benchmarks or formally documented its semiannual workload analyses since 2005, even though their grants workload has varied significantly in recent years.

Kim: Wow, that’s more than 20 years ago.

GLORIA: Yes, and a lot has changed in that time—not only the amount and value of the EPA’s grants but also the federal requirements the Agency must meet in managing them.

Kim: So, why hasn’t the Agency addressed this?

GLORIA: According to the Agency, competing priorities and limited staff and time have hampered its ability to develop an agencywide grants workforce plan, establish a written process for the semiannual workload analysis, and perform an updated benchmark study for the grants workforce. These steps would require significant time and resources.

Kim: But even with these challenges, if the EPA doesn’t improve its approach to grants workforce planning, it won’t be fully effective at hiring and staffing these roles and risk not complying with federal guidance.

GLORIA: That is correct.

Kim: So, what did you recommend?

GLORIA: In the report, we provided four recommendations to help the EPA address the issues we identified in the report. We recommend that they develop an agencywide grants workforce plan, establish benchmarks for workloads, develop and share guidance with the grants workforce, and develop a strategy to communicate semiannual grants workload reports.

Kim: What's the risk if the Agency doesn't carry out these steps?

GLORIA: Without effective grants workforce planning, the Agency may not be able to mitigate challenges to its grants management efforts, putting billions of taxpayer dollars at risk. We're talking about significant challenges like making sure they have enough resources for managing grant activities, adapting to staffing demands related to supplemental appropriations like the IJA, administering grants in a timely manner, and addressing the risks of improperly managed grants. Considering how many taxpayer dollars the Agency is awarding through grants, the influx of new grantees, and the number of newly established grant programs, workforce planning focused on grants management would be worthwhile.

Kim: And that's such an important takeaway. Workforce planning might not sound exciting but it's really key to effective oversight and mission delivery.

Well, that's our time for today. Thank you to Gloria for walking us through this audit and why it matters. And thanks to our listeners for joining us on EPA Uncovered. If you'd like to learn more about this report and others like it, visit our website at www.epa.oig.gov. Until next time.