

Missing in Action: *AWOL in the Federal Government*

A Report By

Senator Tom Coburn

Ranking Member

Subcommittee on Federal Financial Management, Government Information,
Federal Services and International Security



August 2008

coburn.senate.gov/ffm

As part of my commitment to oversee how federal agencies in Washington, D.C. spend your money, I am releasing a series of oversight reports on federal agencies. My hope is that this effort will assist the agencies - and those of us in Congress overseeing their budgets - to rein in wasteful spending and to demand measurable results before asking taxpayers to send more money to the federal government.

I also hope federal agencies and congressional committees alike will welcome these oversight reports and join the effort to identify additional areas of waste, fraud, and abuse. If we work together, we can find better ways to prioritize our nation's limited financial resources.

During my time in Congress, I have met many wonderful people who work for the federal government out of a sense of service to their country. Unfortunately, there is also a sizeable and growing number of federal employees who undermine the agencies they serve by failing to show up to work. This report, *Missing in Action: AWOL in the Federal Government*, is an effort to identify the size of this problem in the hope that solutions can be found.

In a time when consumers face rising energy and food prices, the government needs to ensure efficient use of our own resources before turning to taxpayers and asking for more. No one who pays taxes likes to see his or her government waste its resources. I believe the American taxpayer deserves better.

As President Lincoln said, we are a "government of the people, by the people, for the people," and to uphold that principle, we need your help. As part of an ongoing effort to shine light on the federal government, I encourage anyone with examples of government waste, fraud, or abuse to share those with me.

To submit a tip (anonymously, if you wish) through the Internet, please visit my tip page: <http://coburn.senate.gov/ffm/>. Or to submit a tip by mail to my subcommittee office, please mail to:

Senator Tom Coburn
Subcommittee on Federal Financial Management, Government Information, Federal Services
and International Security
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With your help, we can begin making a difference and change the way Washington, D.C. works.

Sincerely,

Tom Coburn, M.D.
United States Senator

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.....	4
METHODOLOGY.....	5
FINDINGS	
▪ Finding #1: The Scope of the Problem Is Staggering.....	7
▪ Finding #2: The AWOL Problem Is Getting Worse	9
▪ Finding #3: Two Departments Significantly Above Government Average for AWOL Hours.....	11
RECOMMENDATIONS.....	16
CONCLUSION.....	17
APPENDICES	
▪ Appendix 1: Total AWOL Hours at Each Agency 2001-2007.....	18
▪ Appendix 2: Total Employees at Each Agency 2001-2007.....	19
▪ Appendix 3: Letter From State Department.....	20
CHARTS	
▪ Figure 1: Total AWOL Hours at Federal Agencies 2001-2007.....	10
▪ Figure 2: AWOL Hours by Agency 2001-2007.....	12
▪ Figure 3: Comparison of AWOL Hours 2001-2007: Treasury, Veterans Affairs & Rest of Government.....	13
▪ Figure 4: Share of Total AWOL Hours in 2007 at Each Federal Agency.....	14

Executive Summary

The average person knows one of the fastest ways to get fired from a job is by not showing up to work. Reasons for this are obvious -- employees who do not show up to work decrease productivity, morale, and ultimately, the success of an enterprise. And yet, Americans might be concerned to know that absence without leave -- more commonly referred to as "AWOL" -- has recently become a growing phenomenon for civilian employees of the federal government.

Although it does not have a clear or consistent definition across the government, AWOL is the general term given to hours during which an employee is absent from his or her job without permission. This can range from simply being late to work to not showing up for months at a time. Between 2001 and 2007, the number of work hours lost to AWOL employees rose steadily. In total, there were *nearly 20 million AWOL hours in just seven years* across 18 departments and agencies.

The following is a brief summary of the findings in this report. First, the scope of the AWOL problem is staggering. The federal government has lost thousands of work years due to employees who are AWOL. A work year is defined as the amount of time that a full-time federal employee would be expected to work in any given year. Since 2001, **nearly 10,000 work years have been lost** due to employees who are absent from their jobs without permission. This is equivalent to **2.5 million work days and 316 entire 30-year federal careers**. The amount of time lost every single year to employees charged with being AWOL is more than the amount of time put in by *all* of the employees at several agencies combined.

Second, the AWOL problem is growing worse over time. In each of the seven years between 2001 and 2007 (with the exception of 2004-2005 in which the numbers neither increased nor decreased) employees were charged by their employing agencies with more AWOL hours than they had been in the year before. By 2007, **federal employees were charged with nearly 3.5 million AWOL hours**, representing a *45 percent increase* over the number of hours reported in 2001. Thirteen of 18 agencies reported an equal or greater number of AWOL hours in 2007 than they had in 2001, indicating long-term increases in the number of AWOL hours despite some short-term progress in a few agencies.

Lastly, the AWOL problem is particularly acute at two agencies that stand out from the rest: the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the Department of the Treasury. These two agencies combined for more than 60 percent of the federal government's total AWOL hours

QUICK FACTS

Since 2001, federal employees at 18 departments and agencies were Absent Without Leave (AWOL) at least **19.6 million hours**.

Annual AWOL hours in 2007 were 45% higher than in 2001.

Since 2001, nearly 300,000 federal employees have been AWOL for some period of time.

Since 2001, the government has lost at least **9,410 years** of work from AWOL employees.

Employees at the Department of Veterans Affairs had 19 times more AWOL hours than employees at the Department of Defense to be AWOL, despite being outnumbered four to one.

The Departments of Veterans Affairs and the Treasury accounted for 61% of all AWOL hours between 2001-2007.

Between 2001-2007, 13 of the 18 agencies either saw an *increase* in annual AWOL totals or remained at approximately the same level as before, despite overall decreases in the aggregate number of employees.

The number of hours that federal employees were AWOL in 2007 is equivalent to the time it would take TSA to screen **1.7 billion** checked bags, based on an average of 500 bags screened per hour.

over the time covered in this report, amounting to more than 12 million hours. Employees at Veterans Affairs were more than sixteen times as likely as the employees at either Defense or USPS to be charged with AWOL, despite having the third-highest employee total over the past seven years, behind the U.S. Postal Service and the Department of Defense.

Methodology

Federal agencies do not have a common definition for the term AWOL, but rather define AWOL by what it is *not*. Since federal employees are away from their jobs for any number of legitimate reasons, AWOL, for the purpose of this report, is the catch-all name given for those absences that do not fall into a legitimate category.

Legitimate reasons for an absence can include the use of vacation days, sick leave, jury duty leave, Family Medical Leave Act-related leave, official leave (related to union activities), organ donation leave, and other lesser-used forms of leave. The amount of leave in each of these categories available to employees varies by length of service, seniority, and medical status, as well as other contributing factors. All federal employees are provided with 11 federal holidays per year regardless of status. An employee who is absent from work using any of those leave categories would not be charged by his or her agency with being AWOL.

Reasons for charging an employee as AWOL can vary by agency, depending on the policies in place. One agency indicated that an employee can be charged with AWOL if he or she is late to the office by as little as 15 minutes without prior permission. Other agencies indicated that an employee may not be charged with AWOL until he or she is missing from work for lengthier periods of time without permission.

Many agencies consider it to be a serious problem when an employee is charged with being AWOL, and under normal circumstances an employee who is AWOL does not get paid for the period of time he or she was absent. This investigation did not examine whether employees who were AWOL lost pay for those periods, nor did it calculate an estimated cost impact of lost AWOL hours.

The information for this investigation came from self-reported data provided by the federal agencies listed below. Each was asked for detailed statistics on AWOL employees for fiscal years 2001 through 2007. All agencies responded and most were able to provide data covering the entire seven-year period. The following is a list of all departments and agencies examined in this report:

- Department of Agriculture
- Department of Commerce
- Department of Defense*
- Department of Education
- Department of Energy
- Department of Health and Human Services
- Department of Homeland Security*
- Department of Housing and Urban Development*
- Department of the Interior
- Department of Justice*
- Department of Labor
- Department of State**
- Department of Transportation
- Department of the Treasury
- Department of Veterans Affairs
- Environmental Protection Agency
- Office of Personnel Management

U.S. Agency for International Development
U.S. Postal Service

*Provided incomplete data.

**Provided no data.

Certain agencies were not able to provide complete data, as noted in Appendix 1. Where data were not provided for a particular year, the data from the last known year were used to provide an approximation. The Department of Defense provided no data for 2001, while the Department of Homeland Security provided incomplete data for every year except for 2007. Missing from the Homeland Security data was AWOL information from employees of the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) and the Coast Guard, which accounts for a bulk of the department's AWOL hours. When TSA information was reported for 2007 as part of the departmental totals, AWOL hours at Homeland Security increased from approximately 100,000 hours per year to more than 800,000 hours per year. It is not known if similar totals would be found for other years if complete Homeland Security Department information was available.

The State Department was the only agency that did not provide data for this study because it does not keep track of employees who have gone AWOL. Between December 2006 and April 2008, several requests were made to the State Department for information, though each of the requests was denied. In response, the State Department made the following statement: "there is currently no centralized Human Resources (HR) database or reporting process tied to the Department's payroll system that tracks the number of cumulative agency AWOL hours." It is not clear why the department does not collect this information and whether this implies AWOL employees are receiving pay for their absences.

In addition to only having incomplete data for a small number of agencies, the accuracy of the data collected for this report is limited by a few factors. First, without a common definition of the term "absent without leave" (AWOL) in use at all federal agencies, it is possible there are differences in the type of information tracked by each one, when it is collected at all.

Second, it is not clear if common methods are used for collecting information on AWOL employees. Several agencies reported using the National Finance Center in New Orleans as a repository for collected data, while other agencies house their data in internal systems. These disparities in collection methods could have the effect of distorting comparisons between agencies because of data quality concerns. For example, an agency that does a poor job of tracking AWOL hours may appear to have less of a problem than an agency that is rigorous in its tracking, when in fact the opposite may be the case.

Third, because agency definitions for AWOL vary, it is possible there is significant underreporting of the problem. Whereas one agency may define AWOL broadly to include every violation, another agency may define it narrowly and not record violations until they reach a certain threshold. Furthermore, it is likely that even for agencies in which AWOL hours are recorded meticulously, agency managers did not capture *every* instance, which would otherwise increase overall totals. As mentioned, the Department of Homeland Security significantly underreported its numbers provided for 2003 through 2006, which did not include AWOL information regarding employees of the U.S. Coast Guard or the Transportation Security Administration. Similar increases may be possible for all years that did not include this information. For these reasons, this report should not be considered comprehensive, but rather a first step in understanding the scope of the problem within the federal government.

Findings

FINDING #1: The Scope of the Problem is Staggering

Every year, the federal government loses millions of hours due to employees who are absent without leave from their jobs. This translates into lost “work years” -- the amount of time a federal employee is required to work in the course of an entire year, currently 2,080 hours. The amount of time lost by the federal government every year due to federal employees who are AWOL is equivalent to removing hundreds of employees from the workforce and not replacing them. Between 2001 and 2007, *the federal government lost more than 9,400 work years of productivity due to AWOL employees.*

This does not imply that the federal government could not benefit from trimming the size of its workforce in order to gain efficiencies, but such cutbacks should be strategic and targeted, and not due to employees who do not show up for work. Unfortunately, AWOL employees make strategic workforce decisions difficult and likely harm productivity.

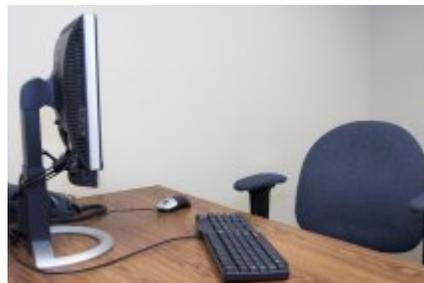
The productivity of a federal agency can be difficult to measure given that the nature of government work is not often easily quantifiable. President Ronald Reagan attempted to apply a measurement with Executive Order 12552, defining productivity in the following way: “the efficiency with which resources are used to produce a government service or product at specified levels of quality and timeliness.”¹ Using this definition, the nearly 20 million AWOL hours reported to Congress would likely reflect a corresponding significant drop in government productivity.

Between 2001 and 2007, the 18 agencies examined in this report lost more than **19.6 million hours** due to AWOL employees, for an average of 2.8 million hours lost per year. Not covered by this report is the number of AWOL hours at the State Department and 76 independent agencies, which could increase the total by a considerable amount. By means of comparison, losing 19.6 million hours over the last seven years is equivalent to the following:

- 2.45 million eight-hour work days;
- 9,410 years of federal service; or
- 316 federal careers spanning thirty years.²

Put another way, the federal government lost approximately 1,344 years of productive work *every single year* between 2001 and 2007. In 2007, the agencies reported far above that average, losing 1,668 years of work to AWOL employees in just a single year. It was more than the amount of time put in by *all* employees at each of the following agencies for an entire year:

- Congressional Budget Office
- Federal Trade Commission
- Peace Corps
- National Science Foundation
- Railroad Retirement Board
- Consumer Product Safety Commission
- Corporation for National and Community Service
- Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation
- National Transportation Safety Board
- Securities and Exchange Commission



Empty desk

¹ President Ronald Reagan’s Executive Order 12552, *Productivity Improvement Program for the Federal Government*, February 25, 1986, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1986/22586d.htm>.

² A federal employee would work 62,400 hours over the course of a 30-year career.

Few agencies can afford to sustain the loss of time that comes from employees who are absent without leave. The U.S. Patent and Trademark Office (USPTO) provides a concrete example of what can happen when employees do not show up for work. While AWOL data was not collected from the USPTO directly, it was collected from its parent department, the Department of Commerce, which reported more than 300,000 AWOL hours since 2001.

USPTO accepts applications for patents and trademarks from businesses and others in need of protection for their brands, inventions and intellectual property, making timely responses extremely important. According to the Government Accountability Office (GAO), USPTO currently has a backlog of 730,000 patent applications, which is expected to increase to more than 950,000 by 2011.³ In 2007, USPTO received nearly half a million new patent applications, each scrutinized by one of the 5,000 patent examiners on staff.⁴ According to current standards, GS-12 employees are expected to process two applications in approximately 20-32 hours, depending on the application type. If, over the course of one year, each patent examiner at the USPTO went AWOL for just two hours, it would delay consideration on 300-500 patent applications. Each of these applications -- representing a potentially useful technology -- would simply be added to the backlog to be dealt with in the years to come. *If the Department of Commerce were able to capture all of its AWOL hours since 2001 and use them to consider patent applications it could complete up to 15,000 applications.* By comparison, the government-wide total number of AWOL hours in 2007 was equivalent to the time that would be needed to process between 108,000 and 173,000 patent applications, or up to a quarter of the backlog.

In a similar example, employees of the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) who are absent without leave can cause significant disruptions for airlines looking to keep planes on schedule. The



Source: GAO.

GAO has found that TSA screeners can examine between 80 and 500 pieces of checked baggage per hour, depending on the type of scanning equipment.⁵ As of 2005, airlines carried 660 million passengers annually (with some estimates as high as 800 million by 2010), most carrying luggage that must be checked and screened.⁶ The number of AWOL hours in 2007 at just the Department of Homeland Security (838,543) would translate to between 6.7 million and 42 million pieces of luggage that could have been checked in that time (accounting for the variance in technological capability). To put the government-wide numbers from 2007 into perspective, time lost in that year alone would have been equivalent to the time needed to screen between 279 million and 1.7 billion bags. In 2005, TSA estimated that it

screened a total of roughly 500 million bags for all domestic flights.⁷

A possible consequence of losing millions of hours to employees who are absent without leave is that the federal government may seek to hire *more* personnel than it needs simply to compensate for the

³ Nazzaro, Robin, Government Accountability Office, *U.S. Patent and Trademark Office: Hiring Efforts Are Not Sufficient to Reduce the Patent Application Backlog*, February 27, 2008, <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d08527t.pdf>.

⁴ U.S. Patent and Trademark website, http://www.uspto.gov/go/taf/us_stat.htm.

⁵ Government Accountability Office, *Aviation Security: TSA Oversight of Checked Baggage Screening Procedures Could Be Strengthened*, July 2006, <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d06869.pdf>.

⁶ Website of the Bureau of Transportation Statistics, http://www.bts.gov/press_releases/2006/bts013_06/html/bts013_06.html

⁷ TSA estimates that each passenger carried 0.76 pieces of baggage, and there were 660 million passengers in that year, <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d06869.pdf>.

lost time. Increased hiring puts pressure to increase budgets, which in turn requires increased resources being provided by taxpayers - all for no additional gains in productivity. While there are no data to quantify the financial impact of AWOL employees, possible hiring increases served as just one example of the type of hidden costs that can result when employees do not come into work.

FINDING #2: The AWOL Problem Is Getting Worse.

There is strong evidence that the number of federal employees who are absent without leave is growing throughout the government, leaving no agency untouched by the problem. With brief exceptions, the number of hours federal employees were charged with being AWOL has grown every year since 2001 and by 45 percent in just seven years. The federal government has not yet found a solution to reverse this trend. A closer look at the data reveals a widespread problem that may continue to grow for years to come if not addressed.

Time is not on the side of agencies wishing to eliminate their AWOL problem as the trend data show that the natural tendency, if unchecked, is for the problem to worsen over time. For example, most agencies reported that the number of AWOL hours in the later years of the study was higher than the number reported in the earlier years. More than 70 percent of the agencies examined reported that AWOL hours were the same or higher in the last two years than in the first two years reviewed, revealing that few agencies made any progress at all over time.

Of particular note, during the time period studied the total number of federal employees *decreased* while at the same time AWOL hours at agencies *increased*, demonstrating that the AWOL problem is even worse than it first appeared on a per-employee basis. Between 2003 and 2006, the number of federal employees decreased by 128,664, or approximately five percent. The total number of AWOL hours over the same time period *increased* by approximately 15 percent. This eliminates the possibility that the increase in AWOL hours was due simply to growth in the workforce, and exposes that *the problem increased even as the workforce reduced in size*.

Emerging from the data was a pattern of gradual increases in AWOL hours at many agencies over the duration of the study, rather than large increases all at once. Thirteen of eighteen agencies reported an equal or greater number of AWOL hours in 2007 than seven years earlier in 2001, while five reported decreases. The decrease in AWOL hours at the five agencies did not offset the increase in AWOL hours at the other thirteen agencies. AWOL hours dropped in those five agencies on average by only 15 percent over the entire seven-year period, or just 2.5 percent per year. At the same time, the entire government saw an *increase* in AWOL hours of approximately 7.5 percent annually, negating the effect of the small decreases.

Several agencies saw fluctuations in their totals from year-to-year, though overall increases were standard. Typical of this growth pattern was the experience of both the Department of Energy and the Department of Transportation. These agencies saw their AWOL hours increase between 2001 and 2007, despite a series of increases and decreases during the intervening years. The fluctuations from year to year did not prevent the annual totals from increasing over the long-term.

Federal Agency	Hours Per Year							Increase Between 2001-2007
	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	
Energy	3,627	2,609	3,225	2,786	4,919	7,419	7,031	+3,404 (94%)
Transportation	13,429	54,319	12,976	19,775	22,625	35,146	32,915	+19,486 (145%)

The five agencies that reported a measurable decrease in their total AWOL hours were the Departments of Commerce, Agriculture, Defense, Treasury and Education. These agencies reported a combined 163,000 fewer AWOL hours in 2007 than in 2001. One notable improvement was seen in the Department of Education, which saw a decrease of 65 percent. However, taken as a whole, 13 of 18 agencies either reported higher annual AWOL totals by 2007 or reported totals that were relatively unchanged. Few agencies were able to truly reduce their AWOL problem over time. As noted earlier, it is possible that several of these agencies did not fully report their AWOL problem, which would lead to even higher totals.

In looking at the most recent data, a majority of agencies (12 of 18) reported a decrease in the number of AWOL hours between 2006 and 2007. While this may indicate that the AWOL problem is on the decline, it cannot be assumed that the general upward trend has been reversed. First, the short-term decline for these agencies did not slow the overall growth in AWOL hours for the government as a whole. In fact, even as some agencies saw declines, 2007 produced the largest one-year total number of AWOL hours as well as the largest year-over-year increase. Second, many agencies saw decreased AWOL hours for one particular year only to have their numbers increase the following year. To illustrate this point, 10 of 18 agencies reported higher AWOL hours in 2007 than in 2005, despite the decreases between 2006 and 2007. In other words, while their AWOL numbers dipped from 2006 to 2007, there was a trend of overall increases in federal employees going AWOL. Taken together, it is clear both the short and long-term data point to a pattern of consistent growth in AWOL numbers for most agencies.

Figure 1



Source: Federal agency data

Between 2002 and 2005, the annual number of reported AWOL hours for the federal government experienced a bit of volatility, despite a general trend upwards. In terms of absolute numbers, the AWOL hours in 2003 and 2005 were lower than in 2002 and 2004, respectively, though not by a significant amount in either case. In 2002, agencies reported 2,551,703 AWOL hours and in 2003 they reported 2,549,084 AWOL hours -- a difference of only 2,619, or less than one work year for one employee. A difference that small (0.10 percent) does not represent a meaningful decrease, but simply reveals that the totals had not significantly changed from the year before. For 2005, agencies reported that employees were charged with 49,245 fewer hours than in 2004, though the difference was only a decrease of 1.7 percent -- again, an insignificant decrease.

The largest single-year increase in AWOL hours came between 2006 and 2007 when the total jumped by more than 18 percent. This was significantly higher than the next largest one-year increase, which was an increase of 12 percent between 2003 and 2004. The significant increase in 2007 may be attributable to one of two factors: 1) an *actual* sharp increase between the two years in question, or 2) *better reporting* by agencies as compared to previous years. It is possible that the number of AWOL hours in previous years was underreported, skewing the apparent sharp increase in 2007. As previously mentioned, Homeland Security numbers are likely lower from 2001-2006, when TSA numbers were not reported.

The evidence clearly demonstrates that the federal government is facing a growing problem with employees who are absent without leave. Annual government-wide totals of AWOL hours continue to steadily increase and few agencies have reported any long-term success in lowering their absentee numbers.

FINDING #3: Two Departments Significantly Above Government Average for AWOL Hours

Between 2001 and 2007, no federal agency reported going an entire year without charging any of its employees with AWOL. Although this demonstrates that the AWOL problem was widespread, two departments in particular reported the problem was significantly worse than other agencies: the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the Department of the Treasury. Veterans Affairs and Treasury reported both the highest total number of AWOL hours as well as the highest number of hours per employee. These measurements show VA and Treasury not only reported the highest total AWOL hours, but that the two departments have the worst problem when size and number of employees are taken into account.

Veterans issues have taken on a higher profile in recent years because of the large number of new veterans returning from tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. According to the VA, there were nearly 24 million military veterans living in the United States at the end of 2007, with the number expected to increase in the years to come.⁸ The possible impact of the AWOL problem at Veterans Affairs is more clearly seen in light of reported backlogs at various VA treatment facilities. At one VA hospital in California, a 2007 report found that a staff shortage caused approximately 500 veterans to postpone orthopedic surgery.⁹ Though this backlog was not directly related to the AWOL problem, it demonstrates the need for using all VA staff resources to their fullest potential. Veterans Affairs also faced a significant backlog of disability claims in 2007, spurring calls to hire 3,000 additional staff to reduce from 180 days to 145 days the time it took for processing claims.¹⁰ Yet, between 2001 and

⁸ Website of the Department of Veterans Affairs
http://www1.va.gov/vetdata/docs/4X6_spring08_sharepoint.pdf.

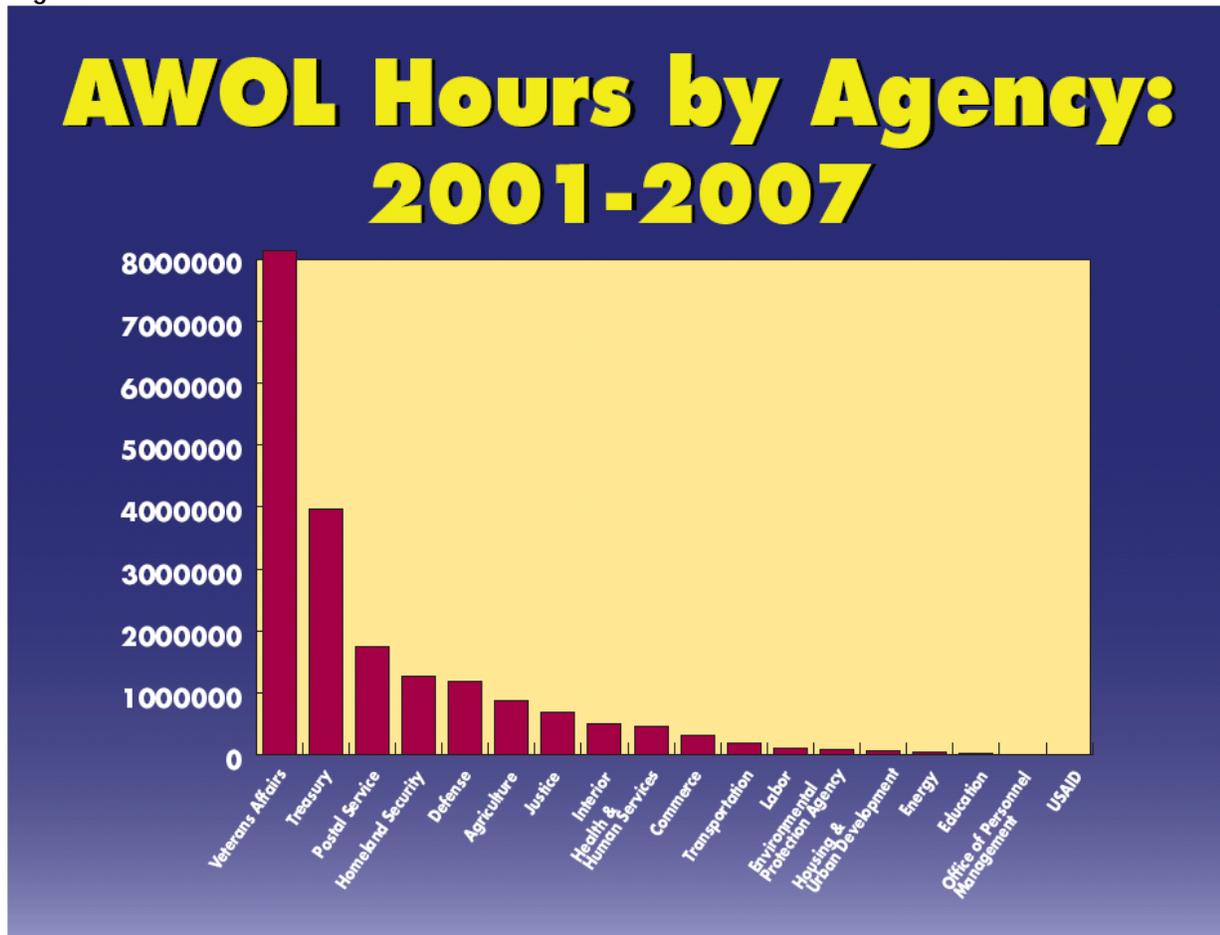
⁹ Bennett, William Finn, "Doctor says VA hospital has 18-month backlog on some surgeries," *North County Times*, May 9, 2007, http://www.nctimes.com/articles/2007/05/09/news/top_stories/12_00_795_8_07.txt.

¹⁰ Mosquera, Mary, "Claims backlog, vets' transition top issues for next VA chief," *Federal Computer Week*, September 18, 2007, <http://www.fcw.com/online/news/150064-1.html>.

2007, employees at Veterans Affairs were AWOL for 3,908 work years, meaning if that time had been put to productive use it might have reduced the need for additional hiring.

The Department of the Treasury has had backlog problems of its own with Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests, and has consistently ranked near the bottom for timeliness in answering public requests for information. One private organization claimed that in 2007, Treasury was the least responsive to FOIA requests compared with all other federal agencies, prompting the agency to set an annual target to reduce the backlog by ten percent.¹¹ The Freedom of Information Act provides citizens with a tool to make government more transparent by requiring agencies to provide documents to those that request them. It is possible that by decreasing the amount of time Treasury employees are absent without leave, additional resources would be made available for timely responses to public requests for information.

Figure 2



Source: Federal agency data

The clearest evidence of a problem at VA and Treasury is the large number of AWOL hours reported by each between 2001 and 2007, which stand out in comparison with the totals reported by other agencies (Figure 2). For the years 2001-2007, agencies reported AWOL hour totals that varied significantly from one agency to another, ranging from over eight million hours to less than four

¹¹ Bain, Ben, "Treasury tops worst FOIA responders," *Federal Computer Week*, March 19, 2008, <http://www.fcw.com/online/news/151959-1.html>; The Department of the Treasury Bureau Reports on FOIA Backlog, found on department website, http://www.ustreas.gov/foia/reading-room/GoalProjections-DOJ_103107.pdf

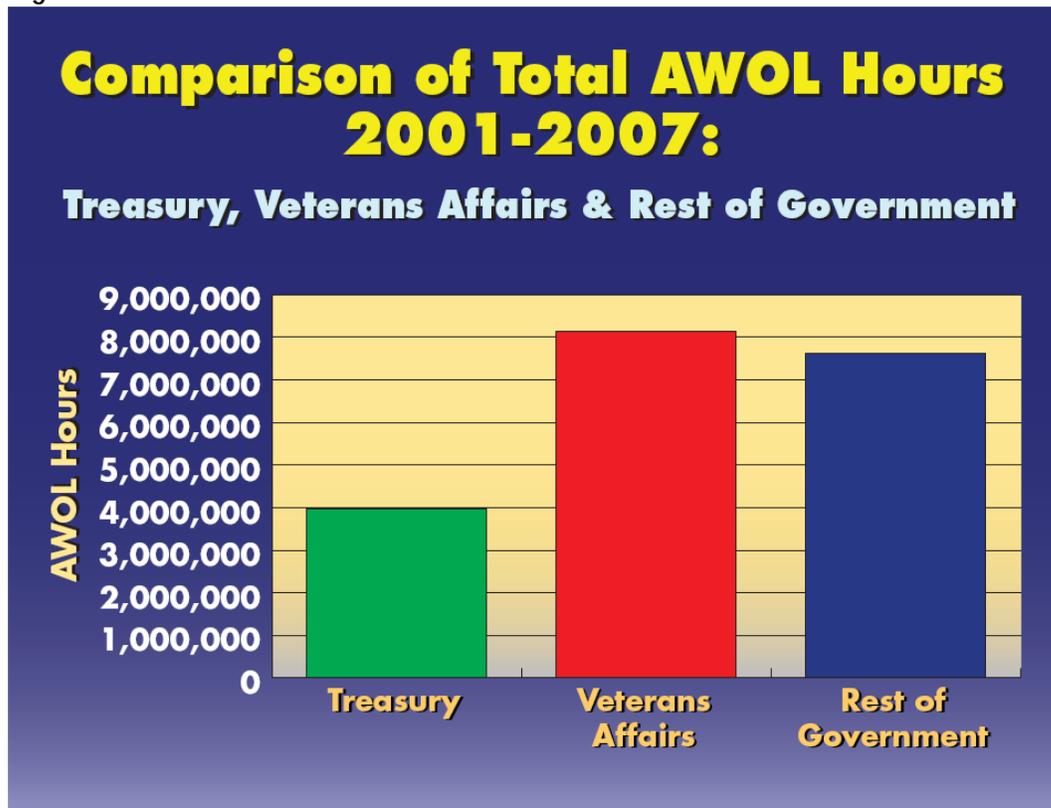
thousand. As might be expected, large agencies tended to report more AWOL hours than small agencies, with the median number of AWOL hours being approximately 300,000-450,000. Consistent with this finding was the fact that the five agencies with the largest total number of AWOL hours between 2001 and 2007 were also five of the six largest federal agencies.

Agency	AWOL Hours
Veterans Affairs	8,128,495
Treasury	3,975,482
U.S. Postal Service	1,740,257
Defense	1,195,790
Homeland Security	1,148,074

Only these five large agencies reported more than one million AWOL hours over the seven-year time period. Together they accounted for more than 16.2 million hours, or 83 percent of the government’s total AWOL hours during that time period. Yet, even among these five agencies, employees at Veterans Affairs and Treasury accounted for three-quarters of AWOL hours within the group, and more than 60 percent of the 19.6 million AWOL hours reported by all agencies examined.

Treasury reported more than twice the number of AWOL hours than the U.S. Postal Service -- the largest agency -- and four times the number of AWOL hours as the Defense Department -- the second largest agency. Veterans Affairs provided an even stronger contrast by reporting more than four times as many AWOL hours as the Postal Service and six and a half times as many as Defense.¹²

Figure 3

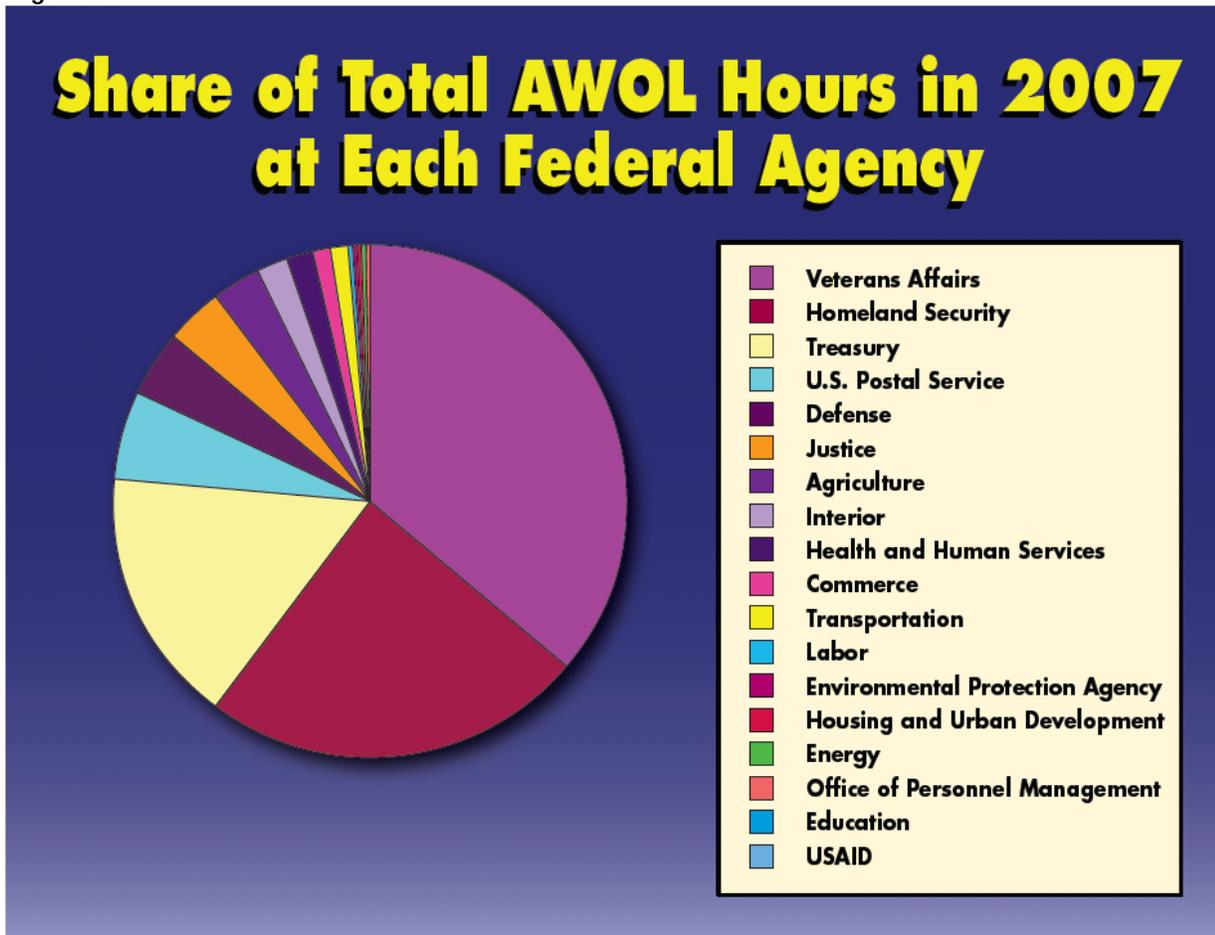


Source: Federal agency data

¹² The Department of Defense failed to report any data for 2001 - the comparison is based upon an estimated amount for 2001 in relation to the figures provided for 2002.

When data from 2007 are isolated from the other years, it shows that the five agencies with the highest total AWOL hours in that year were the same agencies that consistently - year after year - reported high AWOL hours, with one notable exception. The Department of Homeland Security replaced Treasury as the agency with the second highest number of hours in 2007, despite having only the fifth highest total number of AWOL hours the year before. This jump upward of three places was not due to a significant decrease in the number of AWOL hours at Treasury, but because of a seven-fold AWOL increase at Homeland Security from 2006 to 2007. The unusually large increase in AWOL hours occurred in a period of relatively low growth in the number of Homeland Security employees - 3.5 percent. The AWOL increase was unusual, as well, because the pattern for most agencies, including Veterans Affairs and Treasury, was to report a consistent number of AWOL hours from year to year, with only slight increases or decreases over time. No other agency reported a one-year increase in AWOL hours as large as Homeland Security between 2006 and 2007.

Figure 4



Source: federal agency data

Two agencies reported significant *decreases* in their annual AWOL hours over the time period examined in the report - the Department of Health and Human Service (HHS) and the Department of Labor. HHS reported lower numbers each year for the past five years for an overall annual decrease of 20 percent since 2003. Even more dramatic was the decrease reported by the Department of Labor over the previous four years, amounting to a decrease of 53 percent since 2004.

Since agency sizes differ greatly, though, a simple examination of AWOL hour totals may actually mask serious problems with AWOL hours at smaller agencies. In light of this, measuring AWOL hours on a *per-employee basis* at each agency, rather than simply on aggregate totals, can be used to

compare the problem across agencies of differing sizes. Use of this metric confirmed that Veterans Affairs and Treasury cannot blame their AWOL problem simply on the size of their agencies. When the data are adjusted to compare agencies by the number of AWOL hours charged to each employee, these same two agencies once again stand out from the rest.

On a per-employee basis, the average employee at a federal agency was absent without leave for little more than a few minutes per year. Though this may at first seem insignificant, the cumulative effect of thousands of employees being absent without leave can have a significant impact. By comparing agencies to one another on a per-employee basis, it is easier to determine which agencies had the worst problem with unexcused absences. Veterans Affairs and Treasury employees were at least four-and-a-half times more likely than the employees at any other agency to accrue AWOL hours. While all of the possible reasons for this have not been determined, it indicates strongly that attention should be focused on these two departments.

Veterans Affairs and Treasury employees were more than twice as likely to be charged with AWOL as employees at the Department of Homeland Security, which had the third highest per-employee average. While Homeland Security averaged 2.1 AWOL hours for every employee, Veterans Affairs and Treasury, averaged 5.9 and 5.2 hours respectively for each employee. Treasury employees were charged with being AWOL at least 15 times more than postal employees, even though Treasury is a smaller agency than the U.S. Postal Service. Employees at Veterans Affairs were absent without leave more than *19.5 times as often* as employees at the Department of Defense, even though Veterans Affairs has only *one quarter* of the employees as Defense.

Despite being the two largest federal employers, the U.S. Postal Service and the Department of Defense were near the bottom of the AWOL list when measuring on a per-employee basis.¹³ On the other hand, the Departments of Commerce, Labor, Education, and Housing and Urban Development reported higher than average AWOL hours per employee despite being smaller agencies with fewer total hours. This demonstrates that agency size is not necessarily an accurate predictor of whether an agency is likely to have an AWOL problem.

Including the significant problems at VA and Treasury, the federal government loses more than 1,000 years of work every single year, with the number fast approaching 2,000 annually, due to AWOL. The problem is heavily concentrated for the moment within two large agencies, but is a significant problem in the entire federal government. The AWOL problem is likely to worsen over time if something is not done soon to address it. Until the full extent of the problem is known, it remains a significant challenge for the government to reclaim the increasingly large number of hours lost to absence without leave.

¹³ DOD AWOL hours only reflect civilian employees and do not include AWOL that was accrued by military personnel.

Recommendations

The size, impact and duration of the AWOL problem demand a response from federal agencies in order to solve or mitigate the issue. The following actions should be implemented as soon as possible:

1. **Standard Definition of AWOL:** The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) should develop a single, uniform definition of AWOL and all agencies should adopt this definition so agencies are comparing “apples to apples,” and their progress in addressing the problem can be effectively tracked.
2. **Annual Reporting:** Agencies should collect information on the number of employees that are AWOL annually, as well as the total number of hours they were charged with being AWOL. In addition, OPM should combine this agency-specific information in one central report available to the public on the Internet. This sort of transparency will provide an incentive for an agency to police itself and to address the problem.
3. **Impact Assessment:** The Office of Management and Budget should conduct an analysis of the cost and productivity impact on the federal government when employees are absent without leave.
4. **Penalties:** Agencies should develop penalties for employees who are charged with AWOL that range in severity depending on the level of the infraction. Any employee who is either consistently charged with being AWOL or whose absence disrupts the mission of an office or agency should be dismissed immediately.

Conclusion

Although the impact of federal employees being absent without leave may not yet be fully known, it is clear, with a few exceptions, the problem is on the rise throughout the government. Increases in the total number of AWOL hours reported annually are a reminder there is a much work to be done before the problem is fixed. While a few agencies are reporting that AWOL is decreasing in the short-run, only two agencies appear to have made any long-term progress in consistently bringing their numbers down. If these trends hold, the problem will continue to grow in the foreseeable future, costing the taxpayer in ways both seen and unseen.

A surprising finding of the report is the discovery that the Department of Veterans Affairs has an AWOL problem that measures in the millions of hours every year. Even if other agencies are underreporting the extent of their problem, and therefore making Veterans Affairs look worse by comparison, the problem still stands on its own as one that demands immediate attention. Every AWOL employee threatens our ability to keep commitments to America's veterans. The men and women who have fought for our freedoms, often at great personal sacrifice, deserve much better from the agency intended to treat their wounds and repay them for their honorable service.

A similar problem is emerging at the Department of Homeland Security as well, which saw a seven-fold increase in reported AWOL hours in only one year. Whether this is due to reporting inconsistencies or to a true increase, Homeland Security has a significant problem that could have an impact on national security. Veterans Affairs and Homeland Security both saw increases in the numbers of AWOL hours during a time of war, when the services of both agencies are needed most. Citizens may never know the impact of these missing employees on the prosecution of the war and the care of its veterans.

In part, to make up for losses accrued for AWOL employees, appeals have been made for increasing the budget and hiring efforts of Veterans Affairs. On February 22, 2008, members of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee did just this and called for increasing funding levels at the department citing a "need for greater resources."¹⁴ Similarly, the Department of Veterans Affairs initiated an effort in November 2007 to hire full-time coordinators dedicated to increasing its own hiring.¹⁵ Each of these efforts might be mitigated in some way if departmental management made a sustained effort to control the AWOL problem in order to reclaim the resources it is losing.

This also holds true for the entire government, which loses thousands of years worth of productive work time every year due to employees who are AWOL. The issue is given a sense of urgency because it is taxpayers who are made to pay for any accompanying increase in costs, whether due to hiring or otherwise.

Agencies should realize that taxpayer dollars, which are used to pay for government salaries, for what they are: limited resources that must not be squandered. It is unreasonable and unfair to expect taxpayers to foot the bill for inefficiencies that federal agencies fail to address. Taxpayers who must send their hard-earned wages to Washington in part to pay for the salaries of federal government employees should in the very least be able to expect those employees to show up to work.

¹⁴ Website of the Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs, Letter from Chairman Daniel Akaka to Senate Budget Committee, February 22, 2008, http://www.senate.gov/~veterans/public/index.cfm?pageid=12&release_id=11552.

¹⁵ Website of the Department of Veterans Affairs, <http://www1.va.gov/opa/pressrel/pressrelease.cfm?id=1418>

Appendix 1: Total AWOL Hours at Each Agency 2001-2007

The following chart reflects the number of AWOL hours reported by each agency for the years 2001 through 2007.

<u>Agencies</u>	<u>2001</u>	<u>2002</u>	<u>2003</u>	<u>2004</u>	<u>2005</u>	<u>2006</u>	<u>2007</u>	<u>2001-2007</u>
Agriculture	134,640	148,548	148,928	121,122	110,974	98,988	109,615**	~872,815
Commerce	89,866	42,600	40,297	30,546	29,593	32,272	41,178	306,352
Defense	162,787*	162,787	173,389	183,193	185,276	189,959	138,399	~1,195,790
Education	6,125	6,379	3,716	5,462	2,715	4,019	2,157	30,574
Energy	3,627	2,609	3,225	2,786	4,919	7,419	7,031	37,924
Environmental Protection Agency	14,091	11,290	11,718	9,211	11,272	13,012	12,041	82,635
Health & Human Services	44,565	68,511	76,290	72,006	67,365	65,381	60,761	454,879
Homeland Security ¹⁶	--	--	91,406	88,211	37,203	113,373 ¹⁷	817,881 ¹⁸	1,148,074
Housing & Urban Development	8,422	8,332	12,776	10,875	12,313	16,434	7,903	77,055
Interior	71,834	76,865	88,250	72,647	62,626	73,140	65,832	511,194
Justice	93,471*	93,471*	93,471*	93,471*	93,471	101,917	125,476**	~694,748
Labor	7,243	13,480	17,948	28,657	19,982	15,433	13,339**	~116,082
Office of Personnel Management	1,698	1,369	862	2,083	1,963	1,540	3,040	12,555
State***	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Transportation	13,429	54,319	12,976	19,775	22,625	35,146	32,915	191,185
Treasury	631,269	535,711	518,285	529,509	566,213	625,193	569,302**	~3,975,482
USAID	556	867	495	728	461	499	275**	~3,881
US Postal Service	193,996	209,021	111,175	350,919	367,916	312,991	194,239	1,740,257
Veterans Affairs	936,027	1,115,544	1,143,877	1,223,323	1,198,392	1,243,215	1,268,117	8,128,495
TOTAL HOURS	2,413,646	2,551,703	2,549,084	2,844,524	2,795,279	2,949,930	3,469,501	~19,573,667

* Indicates that official data were not provided by the agency. Where data were not provided, the amount for the last known year was used.

** Indicates that the agency provided data for only for 23 of 26 pay periods for the given year. The figure inserted above was extrapolated from the data provided to cover the entire year.

*** The State Department did not provide information related to AWOL employees.

¹⁶ Department of Homeland Security was not created until March 2003.

¹⁷ Numbers do not include the Transportation Security Administration or the U.S. Coast Guard.

¹⁸ 2007 numbers include the Transportation Security Administration and the U.S. Coast Guard.

Appendix 2: Total Employees at Each Agency 2001-2007

The following chart shows the total number of federal employees at each agency examined from 2001-2007.

<u>No. of Employees Department/Agency</u>	<u>2001</u>	<u>2002</u>	<u>2003</u>	<u>2004</u>	<u>2005</u>	<u>2006</u>	<u>2007</u>	<u>2001-2007 Total</u>
Agriculture	110,739	114,552	107,204	106,186	104,989	105,047	103,293	648,717
Commerce	40,061	38,354	37,330	37,641	38,927	40,079	40,920	232,392
Defense	659,228	658,994	669,096	668,009	670,790	675,744	673,319	4,001,861
Education	4,841	4,768	4,593	4,482	4,429	4,229	4,201	27,342
Energy	16,056	16,102	15,823	15,265	15,050	14,795	14,754	93,091
Environmental Protection Agency	18,633	18,740	18,126	17,975	17,964	18,234	18,119	109,672
Health & Human Services	65,125	70,637	67,240	61,495	60,944	61,163	62,502	386,604
Homeland Security	--	--	150,350	148,927	149,977	154,100	159,447	603,354
Housing & Urban Development	10,145	10,285	10,660	10,411	10,086	9,935	9,665	61,522
Interior	76,880	78,390	74,818	74,500	73,599	72,274	71,657	450,461
Justice	127,182	130,310	115,259	103,536	105,102	106,781	107,292	688,170
Labor	16,358	16,288	16,296	16,095	15,599	16,195	12,328	96,831
Office of Personnel Management	3,554	3,652	3,410	3,409	4,333	5,069	5,438	23,427
State	19,976	21,668	31,402	33,013	33,808	34,160	35,105	174,027
Transportation	65,455	102,785	89,262	57,748	55,975	53,865	54,221	425,090
Treasury	147,471	146,892	134,302	117,344	114,194	106,925	103,596	767,128
USAID	2,333	2,328	2,351	2,547	2,644	2,515	2,515	14,718
US Postal Service	891,005	854,376	826,955	807,596	803,000	757,415	747,805	4,940,347
Veterans Affairs	224,778	222,728	226,171	233,501	236,363	239,299	254,183	1,382,840
Total	2,499,820	2,511,849	2,600,648	2,519,680	2,517,773	2,477,824	2,480,360	17,607,954

Source: Office of Personnel Management, <http://www.opm.gov/feddata/html/empt.asp>.

Appendix 3: Letter from State Department

United States Department of State

Washington, D.C. 20520

JAN 16 2007

Dear Senator Coburn:

Thank you for your letter of December 6, 2006 requesting information on the number of Department employees who have been charged absence without official leave (AWOL) over the last five years. We apologize for the delay in responding.

The Department's Payroll office does not have a report which tracks AWOL as distinguished from other kinds of Leave Without Pay, for example, such as that used for Family Medical Leave. Therefore, to address your concern about leave abuse, the Office of Employee Relations in the Bureau of Human Resources, which is responsible for the majority of the Department's discipline program, reports the following AWOL cases in connection with discipline: 2001-8 cases; 2002-14 cases; 2003-14 cases; 2004-17 cases; 2005-18 cases; and 2006-15 cases. These employees were charged with AWOL alone and/or as a charge along with a variety of other offenses. The discipline program covers Department of State personnel in both the Foreign Service and Civil Service systems, a total of 19,667 employees as of October 30, 2006. The average number of cases per year for the six years listed is 14, which represents a very small percentage (.0007) of our employee population.

The discipline program is intended to correct misconduct such as leave abuse. The numbers appear to indicate that discipline has been successful. There were a total of 7 removals for AWOL during 2001 - 2006 when discipline failed to correct the misconduct (AWOL). Our discipline tracking system does not record the number of hours of AWOL, nor the length of time for which employees have been charged. A manual review of each case would be required to arrive at that number.

The Honorable
Tom Coburn,
United States Senate.

We hope this information is helpful in addressing your concerns. Please feel free to contact us further on this or any matter of concern to you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jeffrey T. Bergner". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Jeffrey T. Bergner
Assistant Secretary
Legislative Affairs