

The [U.S. Agency for International Development](#), facing unprecedented humanitarian crises from Somalia to Ukraine, is confronting a major workforce problem as increasing numbers of disaster response experts head for the doors and efforts to replace them fall short.

USAID's [Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance](#) — created just two years ago by merging two offices to streamline USAID's responses to humanitarian emergencies — is losing staff, struggling to hire, and seeing morale decline, sources tell Devex. Those inside or close to the bureau describe a combination of slow-moving bureaucracy, overstretched employees, and a rocky reorganization process that is causing as many problems as it was meant to solve. "It's like everything is sort of held together with duct tape right now," a current USAID official told Devex.

At the same time, the bureau is taking heat from some Republican lawmakers who say they aren't happy with how USAID is managing and delivering billions of dollars in assistance to Ukraine that the U.S. Congress has approved.

The head of USAID's Humanitarian Bureau, Sarah Charles, acknowledged that the agency's humanitarian staff are overworked, and she described alleviating that burden as one of her top priorities. Charles told Devex there have been "decades of underinvestment in the humanitarian workforce" at the agency, even as it responds to more crises with more funding than ever before.

"It's really fair for our workforce to be saying that they are under stress and overwhelmed," Charles said, noting that as the number and duration of complex crises USAID responds to has increased dramatically, the number of humanitarian experts inside the agency has not kept pace.

The overall picture is a troubling one for a bureau that was created with significant fanfare during former President Donald Trump's administration and which coordinates billions of dollars in funding for some of USAID's most critical work.

### **'A death spiral'**

Staffing is at the center of the bureau's challenges, according to both politicians and people inside or close to the bureau. They point to inadequate numbers of staff charged with administering unprecedented amounts of funding for complex emergencies.

*"I think many of us would have done things very differently at the time of stand up to make the transition easier for our staff."*

— Sarah Charles, assistant administrator for the Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance, USAID

A recent internal dashboard seen by Devex shows an overall vacancy rate of 43% inside the humanitarian bureau.

"We can't replace people at the rate that we're losing them ... so we're kind of caught in a death spiral," said the current USAID official, who was not authorized to speak to the press and spoke to Devex on condition of anonymity.

"The overall staffing is going down because we can't replace people, but then the people who are left behind have to do more work ... which then lowers morale. So then more people leave, and then you can't replace those new people who have left," the official said.

The situation has been made worse since the bureau was created in 2020 through the merger of the Office of Food for Peace with the Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance, multiple people told Devex.

Bringing those offices together [was meant to eliminate](#) an arbitrary distinction between food aid and other types of assistance, such as water and shelter, and in doing so make U.S. humanitarian programs more efficient and effective. But instead, sources told Devex, the merger has resulted in a slower-moving bureaucracy in which positions change or disappear without sufficient planning or explanation.

Charles, who leads the bureau as assistant to the administrator, noted that neither she nor USAID Administrator Samantha Power was present when the Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance was created during the Trump administration.

“I think we all think it was probably the right decision to break down some of those silos between food and non-food assistance and create this new and elevated humanitarian bureau. But I think many of us would have done things very differently at the time of stand up to make the transition easier for our staff,” Charles said, adding that the bureau’s creation should have involved more careful workforce planning.

“I share the priority with our workforce of bringing more people into the bureau and also making the experience of people that are in the bureau more manageable,” Charles said.

### **Lost in transition**

The Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance is unique among USAID bureaus in terms of its approach to hiring. The majority of people who work at the bureau are hired as contractors, instead of as full government employees.

The two largest categories of these — personal services contractors and institutional support contractors — make up more than 70% of the bureau’s workforce, according to a [recent report](#) by USAID’s Office of the Inspector General that examined the agency’s use of contractors for stabilization and disaster response programs.

This arrangement is by design. It was meant to help these programs staff up quickly in response to a crisis, or hire people with specific skills or expertise for limited periods of time. But in practice, USAID has struggled to recruit contractors or retain those that are hired, according to the inspector general.

It is supposed to take USAID 145 days to hire a PSC, but it takes the Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance over a year on average, the inspector general found. When they are hired, PSCs receive fewer employee benefits than direct government hires.

“These are some of our most experienced, dedicated expert humanitarians in the agency, and we value that experience and expertise. But I think they will be the first to tell you that the experience of being in that PSC mechanism has not always been a good one,” Charles said.

The vacancy rate for PSC positions at USAID’s humanitarian bureau was 57% on the workforce dashboard Devex reviewed, which displays data from early 2021 through September.

The IG’s report cites an internal USAID paper that describes the PSC vacancy rate as “a debilitating problem and a corporate risk.”

Charles said her team has worked to improve benefits available to these contractors, such as offering paid parental leave.

She also said there is a concerted effort underway to grow USAID’s humanitarian workforce. It involves creating a new category of USAID foreign service officers — known as a backstop — that specialize in humanitarian programs and increased hiring for USAID Civil Service positions in the bureau. The plan also involves introducing a new hiring mechanism called Civil Service

Limited, which would allow the humanitarian bureau and others to hire people as government employees, but with some of the shorter term flexibility typically associated with contractors.

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The general idea is to add more staff to the bureau through direct hiring as U.S. government employees rather than as contractors.

But for some inside the bureau, the process of converting positions that were held by contractors to positions for USAID's foreign service officers has so far created more anxiety and confusion. They describe humanitarian specialists being replaced by USAID officials who may not have experience or expertise in relief operations.