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The State Department RIF: What It Means for Federal Workers and the American Public

In **July 2025**, the U.S. Department of State issued formal layoff notices to over **1,350 employees**—including **1,107 civil servants** and **246 Foreign Service Officers**—as part of a sweeping reorganization that is expected to result in **nearly 3,000 total departures** when voluntary exits are included ([AP News](#), [The Guardian](#), [Reuters](#), [Government Executive](#)).

Why These Cuts Matter: What Americans Should Understand

State Department employees play a crucial role in protecting U.S. citizens and promoting U.S. businesses abroad, as well as managing our relationships with foreign governments and international organizations around the world. While some officials described these cuts as efforts to streamline government, the scale and focus of the reductions suggest a broader retreat from key public service and diplomatic functions. The indiscriminate terminations threaten to make Americans less safe at home and abroad.

The cuts affect not only the federal employees tasked with carrying out America’s foreign policy but also the services those employees provide to the public—services like passport processing, emergency evacuation support, refugee resettlement, and international crisis response.

Below are five key areas where the impact will be most visible—to the public, to U.S. allies, and to the nation’s long-term capacity to lead.

1. Loss of Specialized Personnel and Institutional Knowledge

The cuts signal the U.S. is retreating from the world stage at a time when we should be investing in our diplomatic corps. These layoffs included many career national security experts—some with rare language skills and regional expertise built over decades. In many cases, the layoffs were determined by office placement rather than job performance, resulting in the loss of institutional memory that will take years to rebuild ([Politico](#), [The Dispatch](#)).

2. Refugee and Migration Functions Severely Undermined

The **Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM)** and the **Coordinator for Afghan Relocation Efforts (CARE)** were both targeted for cuts. Nearly all staff within PRM’s refugee admissions unit were

laid off, according to internal reporting. This weakens the U.S. capacity to uphold refugee admissions and resettlement programs, including efforts to protect Afghan allies left behind after the U.S. withdrawal ([CBS News](#), [Federal News Network](#)).

3. Conflict Prevention and Stabilization Capacity Eliminated

The **Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations (CSO)**, which provided early warning of potential conflicts and deployed stabilization teams abroad, was fully eliminated. This bureau previously served as a key rapid-response tool in fragile states and conflict zones ([Reuters](#), [Federal News Network](#)).

4. Public Services for Americans Abroad Are Under Pressure

The **Office of Consular Affairs**, which handles **passport issuance, visa processing, publishing travel warnings and alerts, and providing assistance to Americans abroad**, also experienced staffing reductions. While core consular operations have reportedly been preserved, cuts to administrative and regional support teams are likely to strain already-overburdened systems, leading to slower service and limited capacity during emergencies ([Government Executive](#), [Federal News Network](#)).

5. Reductions in Human Rights, Democracy, and Exchange Programs

The **Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL)** and the **Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA)**—both central to U.S. soft power—were among the hardest hit. Nearly 20% of ECA staff were laid off, threatening programs like the Fulbright and International Visitor Leadership Program, and limiting U.S. engagement with future global leaders ([Federal News Network](#), [WOLA](#)).

These cuts reshape the State Department's ability to serve Americans and represent U.S. values abroad. They reduce our capacity, credibility, and preparedness at a time when all are urgently needed.

What Is a RIF?

A Reduction in Force (RIF) is the elimination of positions due to factors like reorganization, budget cuts, or shifting priorities—distinct from performance-based removals. Even after the Supreme Court's July 8 stay of a lower court's preliminary injunction, which paused many governmentwide RIFs, litigation continues; and injunctions affecting some agencies remain in place stemming from other lawsuits.

Your Rights Include:

- [Appeal to the Merit Systems Protection Board \(MSPB\)](#)
- [File complaints through the Office of Special Counsel \(OSC\)](#)
- [Participation in Reemployment Priority Lists](#)
- [Access to free legal representation via the Rise Up network](#)
- [Union resources and support](#)

Overview of RIF Procedures for State Department Employees

The process for conducting a RIF at the State Department depends on whether an employee is part of the Foreign Service or the civil service.

- Foreign Service RIFs are governed by the Foreign Service Act of 1980 and [3 FAM 2580](#) (last updated June 23, 2025)
- Civil Service RIFs are conducted under [3 FAM 2530](#) (updated May 24, 2025), with additional procedures for the Senior Executive Service in [3 FAM 2540](#) (updated June 23, 2025)

Administrative Rights and Procedures

Foreign Service RIF Procedures (3 FAM 2580)

Only the Secretary of State may authorize a Foreign Service RIF, and only under specific conditions: lack of work, shortage of funds, insufficient personnel ceiling, or reorganization, pursuant to Section 611 of the Foreign Service Act.

Key elements:

- Competitive area
- Competition groups (all members in a competitive area that are competing for retention)
- Retention registers (the retention ranking of all members in a competition group)
- Tenure groups are established (Groups I–III)
- Composite retention scores are calculated using:
 - Tenure group
 - Veterans' preference
 - Language proficiency
 - Promotion board scores
- Tie-breakers rely on service computation date

Civil Service RIF Procedures (3 FAM 2530)

Civil Service RIFs at the State Department follow standard OPM procedures under 5 C.F.R. Part 351. A RIF can occur because of lack of work, shortage of funds, insufficient personnel ceiling, reorganization, the exercise of reemployment rights or restoration rights, or reclassification of an employee's position due to erosion of duties.

Key elements:

- Competitive area
- Competitive levels

- Retention registers
- Tenure groups are established (Groups I–III)
- Retention rankings based on:
 - Tenure of employment
 - Veterans’ preference
 - Length of service
 - Performance scores
- Furloughs exceeding 30 calendar days (or 22 non-continuous workdays) are considered RIF actions under 5 C.F.R. Part 351

Potential Grounds for Challenging a State Department RIF

1. Improper Basis for the RIF

While an agency has broad discretion in shaping its workforce, employees may challenge whether the asserted basis for the RIF was legitimate.

2. Failure to Comply with Applicable Regulations

Agencies must apply RIF regulations “uniformly and consistently.” 5 CFR § 351.201(c). Violations may include:

- Improperly established competitive areas or competitive levels
- Errors in placement on the retention register
- Failure to provide appropriate reassignment rights
- Evidence that the separation was due to dissatisfaction with the employee, rather than an abolished position

3. Discrimination or Retaliation (Pretextual RIF)

RIFs may be challenged if there is evidence they were used as pretext for unlawful motives, including:

- Discrimination based on race, gender, disability, age, political affiliation, or veteran status
- Retaliation for whistleblowing or other protected activities

4. Factual or Procedural Inaccuracies

Employees may challenge the accuracy of the information used in the RIF process, such as:

- Incorrect office assignment
- Errors in language proficiency scoring
- Inaccurate tenure dates
- Missing or misapplied performance evaluation dates

Disclaimer

The information provided here is for informational purposes only and does not constitute legal advice. Employees facing a RIF should consult their union representative or legal counsel for advice specific to their individual circumstances.

What to Do If You're Affected

You're not alone. Civil Service Strong and our partners are here to support you across legal, career, and emotional dimensions.

Exit Checklist:

1. Secure and carefully review your RIF notice and preserve all documentation (including your personnel forms and any performance reviews)
2. Verify procedural compliance, including the correct application of tenure groupings, retention factors, and assignment to competitive levels
3. Monitor changes to RIF rules or scoring systems, especially any recent changes that differ from established practices
4. Identify any rights under union agreements or internal grievance procedures
5. Initiate legal support, such as via [Rise Up](#) and/or your union immediately
6. [Determine eligibility for MSPB appeals and priority placement](#)
7. [Filing E-Appeal with MSPB.gov](#)
8. [Apply promptly for state unemployment assistance](#)
9. Maintain organized records of all actions and communications especially if there is any indication of discrimination, retaliation, or inconsistencies with merit-system principles

Other helpful resources:

- [CSS RIF Action Checklist](#)
- [Preparing for a Reduction in Force: 12 Things Every Fed Should Do Right Now](#)
- [Virtual Go Bag](#)

Legal & Career Support

- [Rise Up: Federal Workers' Legal Defense Network \(free consultation\)](#)
- [MSPB guide & how to file an appeal](#)
- [OSC complaint process](#)
- [OPM Reemployment Priority Program](#)
- Career transition organizations: [FedsForward](#), [Work for America](#), [Coaching Collaborative](#), [Partnership for Public Service Federal Support Hub](#); [Pivot with Purpose](#) at Georgetown University

Unemployment Insurance

- [All federal RIF separations generally qualify for state UI; documentation required](#)

- Reference: [CareerOneStop](#) & [DOL UI info](#)

Well-being & Peer Support

- [Agency Employee Assistance Programs \(EAPs\) – confidential counseling](#)
- [Public Service Alliance mental health platform](#)
- [Federal Employee Education and Assistance Fund \(FEEA\) mental health support](#)

State Department-Specific Resource Links

- [Department of State FAQs for Employees Separated via a RIF Action July 11, 2025](#)
 - The State Department has a website with many helpful links and documents to official resources for RIF'd or separated employees [here](#).
 - The American Foreign Service Association has many helpful resources [here](#).
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How We're Fighting Back

Civil Service Strong, The Partnership For Public Service, and the American Federation of Government Employees are actively defending workers affected by RIFs through:

- [Litigating unjust RIFs in court](#)
- Mobilizing federal worker webinars offering legal, career, and emotional support
- Releasing [resource about RIFs](#) and other important topics
- Amplifying civil servant voices - share your story [here](#)!
- Advocating for systemic reforms to restore an effective civil service
- Browse full [CSS Resource Library](#)
- Check out [union resources and support](#)

You Are Not Alone

"Federal employees serve our nation with dedication and integrity. As we litigate multiple cases where the workforce has been unlawfully targeted, we want to make sure that people know they are not alone as they face the threat of job loss. The You Are Not Alone Project is about more than resources—it's about solidarity, dignity, and ensuring public servants have the tools they need to protect their rights and move forward."

Rob Shriver, Managing Director of Democracy Forward's Civil Service Strong and Good Government Initiatives.

“These dramatic job losses across critical government programs aren’t just numbers on a page — these are real people, with families, mortgages, and careers built in service to the American people. Our union won’t stand by while these patriotic citizens are cast aside. We are proud to partner with Civil Service Strong and Democracy Forward on the You Are Not Alone Project to ensure every public servant knows their rights, gets the support they deserve, and understands AFGE will be with them every step of the way.”

Everett Kelley, National President of AFGE

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