

Government paying private firm \$297 million to help hire 5,000 Border Patrol agents

Greg Moran

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SAN DIEGO — With a mandate from President Donald Trump to hire 5,000 new Border Patrol agents, Customs and Border Protection awarded a \$297 million contract to a private company to help recruit and hire the new agents and other workers.

The contract with a division of Accenture, an international professional services corporation with \$35 billion in revenue in 2017, comes at a time when the Border Patrol is struggling to meet minimum staffing levels mandated by Congress and is losing more agents a year than it hires.

It also represents one of the larger expenditures so far in the Trump administration's nearly-year-long drive to increase border security.

In October, work on eight prototype border walls was completed in Otay Mesa near the U.S.-Mexico border — a project for which Customs and Border Protection officials set aside \$20 million in the spring.

The contract with Accenture, which is up to five years, is far bigger, both in its initial year and long-term payout. The company will be paid \$42.6 million in the first year alone, federal contracting records show.

The scope of work in the contract requires the company to manage “the full life cycle of the hiring process” from job posting to processing new hires. The company, the agency said in an email response to questions, will augment the agency's existing internal hiring programs.

It also calls for a “hard-hitting, targeted recruitment campaign consisting of promoting (Customs and Border Protection) law enforcement careers and opportunities” and a public education campaign about customs and Border Patrol jobs.

Accenture will be paid to assist hiring 5,000 Border Patrol agents, as well as 2,000 customs officers and 500 agents for the Office of Air and Marine Operations. The award was made on Nov. 17, with Accenture being selected above four other bidders, federal contract records show.

To skeptics of the hiring push, the Accenture contract makes little sense.

“They’re spending almost \$40,000 per hire,” said Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration policy analyst at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank in Washington. “Just off the bat that seems like a pretty desperate move.”

If the contract runs its full five years and is fully paid out, the agency will spend \$39,600 per hire. That’s just below the \$39,738 starting pay for a customs officer.

In its statement, Customs and Border Protection said the cost estimates are erroneous. The total contract amount includes one-time startup costs for recruiting measures and other steps to attract applicants.

The agency said the contract was in response to its well-documented hiring problems. It said several factors, such as “changing generational values, California’s legalization of marijuana and a growing distrust of law enforcement” have made hiring more difficult.

The agency said in the bid documents for the contract that it has to recruit 133 applicants to fill just a single Border Patrol agent position.

“Not unlike other major companies and organizations, we are expanding our recruiting and hiring efforts to find better, more effective ways to recruit, hire and retain frontline personnel,” the statement said.

Congress requires a force of 21,370 agents, but a report recently said that as of May there were only 19,500 agents. Compounding the problem is retention. Between 2013 and 2016, an average of 523 agents were hired, while 904 left.

The need for the hiring deal stems from a Jan. 25 executive order signed by Trump, which ordered Customs and Border Protection to increase its ranks by 5,000 agents.

The agency is the largest federal law enforcement agency with more than 40,000 officers and agents in both Border Patrol and customs. Congress has yet to appropriate money for the new hires though legislation to do so is pending.

Critics have been wary of that hiring goal, noting its costs. They also point out that the last time the agency added to the force with a hiring surge in the mid-2000s, standards were lowered. That probably contributed to an increase in corruption and misconduct cases that tarred the agency.

In response, Congress required all new hires to pass polygraph tests, but the requirement contributed to the hiring shortfall. About 65 percent of all applicants failed the test, the Associated Press reported this year.

Now there is a bill in Congress that would eliminate the polygraph tests for certain applicants — members of the armed services, veterans with security clearances and law enforcement personnel who had passed a lie detector test or had a background investigation in the preceding three years.

The bill is still pending. It's one example of how the agency has embraced the ambitious hiring goal — and taken steps to widen the applicant pool from which it can hire.

Another step: The contract includes a provision for “reinstatement” of former Border Patrol agents.