

The San Diego Union-Tribune

CBP has to hire 5,000 new Border Patrol agents. It's paying a private company \$297 million to help.

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December 13, 2017

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 revenues 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 per year than it hires.

It also represents one of the larger expenditures so far in the Trump administration's now nearly-year-long drive to increase border security. In October work on eight prototype border walls was completed in Otay Mesa — a project for which CBP officials set aside \$20 million in the spring.

The contract with Accenture, which is up to five years, is far greater — 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 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 the CBP law enforcement careers and opportunities” and a public education campaign about CBP 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, D.C. “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, CBP said the cost estimates are erroneous. The total contract amount includes one time start-up costs for recruiting measures and other steps to capture applicants.

The agency said that the contract was in response to its well-documented hiring woes. It said several factors, such as "changing generational values, the state-wide legalization of marijuana and a growing distrust of law enforcement" have made hiring more difficult.

In fact 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 CBP 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.

Critics have been wary of that hiring goal, noting both its costs and that the last time the agency added to the force with hiring surge in the mid 2000s, hiring standards were lowered. That move likely contributed to a spike in corruption and misconduct cases that tarred the agency.

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

Now there is a bill in Congress that would eliminate the lie detector 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.

Newsasteh said that the Accenture deal could be beneficial because the company's expertise may allow it to draw on a different pool of potential hires than CBP has drawn on in the past.

But he questioned whether so many agents are even needed. He noted that the number of apprehensions of illegal immigrants across the southwest border has fallen to record low numbers. There were 1.2 million apprehensions in 2001, and this year just 310,000 — the lowest level in 46 years.

“There are currently too many Border Patrol agents, given how low the flow of unauthorized immigrants across the border is,” he said.

In November the Inspector General for Homeland Security issued a report that said the agency could not provide enough data to justify hiring that many more agents.

This is not the first time the government has hired Accenture to help meet its hiring goals. In 2016 the company won a \$290 million, five-year contract to help the Transportation Security Agency hire 8,000 to 10,000 additional workers per year.

A company spokeswoman said it was confident it could help CBP hit its hiring goals.