

Democrats press GAO on pay raises

Contributed by Kelly McCormack
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Government Accountability Office (GAO) Comptroller General David Walker must provide the details of a compensation study that he used to justify denying more than 300 employees pay raises last year, according to a recent letter signed by eight House Democrats.

"We are requesting that you provide all information and communications relating to the Watson Wyatt compensation study that you relied upon to make pay determinations," wrote Rep. Danny Davis (Ill.) and seven other Democrats in a March 16 letter. Davis chairs the subcommittee on the Federal Workforce, Postal Service and the District of Columbia of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee.

Lawmakers and GAO employees have questioned Walker repeatedly on the details of the study. Agency employees also launched a union-organizing campaign in January, citing the compensation study and the denial of pay increases as a driving concern.

In a March 21 letter, Walker responded to Davis that he would give Congress information related to the Watson-Wyatt competitive compensation study. But Walker also claimed that the GAO's executive committee has been told that certain information used by the company "could not be released because it was proprietary, copyrighted, or otherwise protected."

Davis contested that assertion yesterday in an interview with The Hill. "We probably disagree in terms of the suggestion that it was proprietary," Davis said. He added that the information would probably not be proprietary "if it was generated from public resources, and the agency was a public agency."

In 2003, Walker told Congress that all employees with "met expectations" ratings would receive pay raises. But in January 2006, about 17 percent of GAO employees who qualified under that condition did not get increases.

At a recent panel hearing, the Congressional Research Service (CRS) testified that the GAO confirmed that 308 employees who did not receive raises had "met expectations" performance ratings.

Davis and the others criticized Walker for failing to keep the deal he made in 2003.

"We take seriously commitments that are made to us on the record. Such commitments would be meaningless if the individual making the commitment can change their mind without first consulting with, and seeking the approval of, Congress," read the Democrats' letter. "Therefore, it is very disturbing that you did not keep your 2003 commitment to Congress to guarantee GAO employees who 'met expectations' the 2006 and 2007 annual across the board increases, and you did so without Congressional knowledge or consent."

Davis told The Hill that the GAO's pay system would be the topic of a panel hearing in May - and that Walker will be called to testify.

But Walker justified his reasoning in his written response to the panel.

"Although I am confident that my decision on this matter was fully consistent with the law, I regret that some unfortunate and unintended gaps in expectations occurred in connection with the 2006 annual adjustment," Walker wrote. "We have engaged in an extensive internal and external communication effort, including with Congress, over the past year in regard to this matter."

The Democrats also noted in their letter that the GAO reform legislation submitted to Congress in 2003 "was not forced" upon Walker and "did not require" him to conduct a market-based compensation study, as he claimed. Nor does the law oblige Walker to "match local pay rates," the lawmakers wrote.

But Walker defended his actions.

"[I felt that] an independent study would enable me to more effectively consider the factors listed in section 3 of the Act, including, among others, providing for equal pay for work of equal value, and considering existing pay disparities and pay rates in markets where GAO has employees," Walker wrote.

At a recent panel hearing, members heard testimony from the CRS about the GAO's pay system. A CRS analyst told the committee that the GAO had canceled a meeting to discuss the Watson-Wyatt compensation study and had not indicated how some of the study's data were developed.

The lawmakers want answers by March 30. And Davis has called for data on "the outside organizations GAO compared itself to … and which occupations within those organizations were compared to GAO analysts and specialists." He and the other Democrats also urged Walker to answer questions posed by CRS last November.

