

# Evaluation of Safety and Health Concerns in the U.S. Antarctic Program





# At a Glance

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OIG 25-03-001 | May 12, 2025

## WHY WE DID THIS EVALUATION

Through the United States Antarctic Program (USAP), NSF facilitates and manages scientific research that must be performed or is best performed, in Antarctica. Each year, about 700 people conduct scientific research at NSF's three research stations and about 2,500 people provide operational and logistical support. These individuals, known as USAP participants, include federal employees, grant recipients, military members, and contractors. Logistical support for the USAP is accomplished through the Antarctic Support Contract and other agreements.

Antarctica is one of the most hazardous environments on Earth. To help protect USAP participants, NSF provides safety expectations and guidance for activities in Antarctica through contract requirements and policy. The Antarctic Support Contractor (Contractor) also manages a safety and health program for all USAP participants. We conducted this evaluation to determine whether NSF monitored the Contractor compliance with occupational safety and health standards and instituted programs to provide safe and healthy working conditions for the USAP. We also evaluated specific complaints we received related to unsafe working and living conditions in McMurdo Station.

## WHAT WE FOUND

NSF monitors occupational safety and health for the USAP and the Contractor's safety program, as required. However, NSF and the Contractor could implement additional measures to enhance the safety and well-being of USAP participants. Specifically, we identified concerns related to central communications staffing, fire department staffing and equipment, and safety hazards in the food storage warehouse. We also found that some USAP participants feared retaliation for reporting safety concerns. NSF and Contractor have taken steps to improve safety and living conditions, such as updating its medical surveillance program, completing a fire staffing assessment, and responding to USAP participants' complaints about waste facilities and repairing dormitory bathroom facilities. NSF will also be transitioning to a new USAP support contract in 2026, which will provide an opportunity to include additional requirements in its future contract to enhance the safety and well-being of USAP participants.

## WHAT WE RECOMMEND

We made three recommendations to enhance the safety and well-being of USAP participants.

## AGENCY RESPONSE

NSF agreed with the recommendations. Please see Appendix C for NSF's response to the report.

## CONTACT US

For congressional, media, and general inquiries, email [OIGPublicAffairs@nsf.gov](mailto:OIGPublicAffairs@nsf.gov).

# National Defense Authorization Act General Notification

Pursuant to Pub. L. No. 117-263 § 5274, business entities and non-governmental organizations specifically identified in this report have 30 days from the date of report publication to review this report and submit a written response to NSF OIG that clarifies or provides additional context for each instance within the report in which the business entity or non-governmental organizations is specifically identified. Responses that conform to the requirements set forth in the statute will be attached to the final, published report.

If you find your business entity or non-governmental organization was specifically identified in this report and wish to submit comments under the above-referenced statute, please send your response within 30 days of the publication date of this report to [OIGPL117-263@nsf.gov](mailto:OIGPL117-263@nsf.gov), no later than June 14, 2025. We request that comments be in .pdf format, be free from any proprietary or otherwise sensitive information, and not exceed two pages. Please note, a response that does not satisfy the purpose set forth by the statute will not be attached to the final report.