



Highlights of [GAO-06-117](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Since 1998, GAO has issued numerous reports on nursing home quality and safety that identified significant weaknesses in federal and state oversight. Under contract with the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS), states conduct annual nursing home inspections, known as surveys, to assess compliance with federal quality and safety requirements. States also investigate complaints filed by family members or others in between annual surveys. When state surveys find serious deficiencies, CMS may impose sanctions to encourage compliance with federal requirements.

GAO was asked to assess CMS's progress since 1998 in addressing oversight weaknesses. GAO (1) reviewed the trends in nursing home quality from 1999 through January 2005, (2) evaluated the extent to which CMS's initiatives have addressed survey and oversight problems identified by GAO and CMS, and (3) identified key challenges to continued progress in ensuring resident health and safety.

GAO reviewed federal data on the results of state nursing home surveys and federal surveys assessing state performance; conducted additional analyses in five states with large numbers of nursing homes; reviewed the status of its prior recommendations; and identified key workforce and workload issues confronting CMS and states.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-117.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Kathryn G. Allen, (202) 512-7118, allenk@gao.gov.

NURSING HOMES

Despite Increased Oversight, Challenges Remain in Ensuring High-Quality Care and Resident Safety

What GAO Found

CMS's nursing home survey data show a significant decline in the proportion of nursing homes with serious quality problems since 1999, but this trend masks two important and continuing issues: inconsistency in how states conduct surveys and understatement of serious quality problems. Inconsistency in states' surveys is demonstrated by wide interstate variability in the proportion of homes found to have serious deficiencies—for example, about 6 percent in one state and about 54 percent in another. Continued understatement of serious deficiencies is shown by the increase in discrepancies between federal and state surveys of the same homes from 2002 through 2004, despite an overall decline in such discrepancies from October 1998 through December 2004. In five large states that had a significant decline in serious deficiencies, federal surveyors concluded that from 8 percent to 33 percent of the comparative surveys identified serious deficiencies that state surveyors had missed. This finding is consistent with earlier GAO work showing that state surveyors missed serious care problems. These two issues underscore the importance of CMS initiatives to improve the consistency and rigor of nursing home surveys.

CMS has addressed many survey and oversight shortcomings, but it is still developing or has not yet implemented several key initiatives, particularly those intended to improve the consistency of the survey process. Key steps CMS has taken include (1) revising the survey methodology, (2) issuing states additional guidance to strengthen complaint investigations, (3) implementing immediate sanctions for homes cited for repeat serious violations, and (4) strengthening oversight by conducting assessments of state survey activities. Some CMS initiatives, however, either have shortcomings impairing their effectiveness or have not effectively targeted problems GAO and CMS identified. For example, CMS has not fully addressed issues with the accuracy and reliability of the data underlying consumer information published on its Web site.

The key challenges CMS, states, and nursing homes face in their efforts to further improve nursing home quality and safety include (1) the cost to older homes to be retrofit with automatic sprinklers to help reduce the loss of life in the event of a fire, (2) continuing problems with hiring and retaining qualified surveyors, and (3) an expanded workload due to increased oversight, identification of additional initiatives that compete for staff and financial resources, and growth in the number of Medicare and Medicaid providers. Despite CMS's increased nursing home oversight, its continued attention and commitment are warranted in order to maintain the momentum of its efforts to date and to better ensure high-quality care and safety for nursing home residents.

CMS generally concurred with the report's findings. CMS noted several areas of progress in nursing home quality and identified remaining challenges to conducting nursing home survey and oversight activities.