



Highlights of GAO-06-616 a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

The Administration's efforts to improve the federal government's provision of social services through its Faith-Based and Community Initiative have sparked considerable interest. GAO was asked to examine (1) the activities of the initiative-related centers in five federal agencies; (2) the grant award procedures for selected grants; (3) the extent to which selected federal and state agencies are providing information on and ensuring compliance with safeguards designed to protect faith-based organizations (FBO), beneficiaries, and the government; and (4) how the progress of the initiative is being measured. We interviewed government officials administering 10 grant programs and officials from 26 FBOs.

What GAO Recommends

We recommend that the Director of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) ensure that all agencies with initiative-related centers include information on the safeguards in grant documents and in monitoring guidelines, improve data on grants awarded to FBOs, and develop a plan for reporting on progress toward the initiative's long-term goals. OMB generally agreed but expressed some concerns about the practicality of implementing a few of the recommendations. We also recommend that the Department of Justice clarify its regulations on allowed activities and clarify relevant language in its contracts, and Justice generally agreed.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-616.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Andrew Sherrill at (202) 512-7252 or ASherrill@gao.gov.

FAITH-BASED AND COMMUNITY INITIATIVE

Improvements in Monitoring Grantees and Measuring Performance Could Enhance Accountability

What GAO Found

In 2001 the Administration introduced the Faith-Based and Community Initiative and established initiative-related centers in five federal agencies. The centers employ a range of activities and resources to implement the initiative. Since fiscal year 2002, these centers have cumulatively spent more than \$24 million on administrative activities.

In reviewing grant applications and awarding grants, federal and state agencies reported using the same process for FBOs as they do for other organizations in the 10 grant programs we reviewed. Since 2001, federal agencies have awarded over \$500 million through new grant programs to provide training and technical assistance to faith-based and community organizations and to increase the participation of these organizations in providing federally funded social services.

The government agencies administering the programs that we reviewed provided grantees with some information on the safeguards designed to protect the interests of FBOs, beneficiaries, and the government. Most of the agencies provided grantees with an explicit statement on the safeguard prohibiting the use of direct federal funds for inherently religious activities. If these activities are offered, they must be offered separately in time or location from services provided with direct federal funds and must be voluntary for the beneficiary. However, we found that Justice's regulation and guidance related to these activities is unclear for its correctional programs. We also found that only four programs provided a statement on the rights of program beneficiaries and only three provided information on permissible hiring by FBOs. While officials in all 26 FBOs that we visited said that they understood that federal funds cannot be used for inherently religious activities, a few FBOs described activities that appeared to violate this safeguard. Four of the 13 FBOs that provided voluntary religious activities did not separate in time or location some religious activities from federally funded program services. Government agencies are not required to monitor FBO grantees differently than secular organizations. Few of the federal and state agencies administering these programs included references in their monitoring guidelines on grantee compliance with the safeguards.

OMB and the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives assess agencies' progress in implementing the short-term goals of the initiative and highlight this progress through a number of published vehicles. However, it is unclear whether the data reported on grants awarded to FBOs provide policymakers with a sound basis to assess the progress of agencies in meeting the initiative's long-term goal of greater participation of faith-based and community organizations. Moreover, little information is available to assess progress toward another long-term goal of improving participant outcomes because outcome-based evaluations for many pilot programs have not begun. Also, OMB faces other challenges in measuring and reporting on agencies' progress in meeting the long-term goals of the initiative.