LAW ENFORCEMENT

Better Performance Measures Needed to Assess Results of Justice's Office of Science and Technology

Why GAO Did This Study

The mission of the Office of Science & Technology (OST), within the Department of Justice's National Institute of Justice (NIJ), is to improve the safety and effectiveness of technology used by federal, state, and local law enforcement and other public safety agencies. Through NIJ, OST funds programs in forensic sciences, crime prevention, and standards and testing. To support these programs, Congress increased funding for OST from $13.2 million in 1995 to $204.2 million in 2003 (in constant 2002 dollars). GAO reviewed (1) the growth in OST's budgetary resources and the changes in OST's program responsibilities, (2) the types of products OST delivers and the methods used for delivering them; and (3) how well OST's efforts to measure the success of its programs in achieving intended results meet applicable requirements.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Director of NIJ reassess the measures used to evaluate OST's progress toward achieving its goals and to better focus on outcome measures to assess results where possible. In those cases where measuring outcomes is, after careful consideration, deemed infeasible, we recommend developing appropriate intermediate measures that will help to discern program effectiveness.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-198.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Laurie Ekstrand at (202) 512-8777 or Ekstrandl@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

OST's budgetary resources grew significantly in recent years, along with the range of its program responsibilities. From fiscal year 1995 through fiscal year 2003, OST received over $1 billion through Department of Justice appropriations and the reimbursement of funds from other federal agencies in exchange for OST's agreement to administer these agencies' projects. Of the over $1 billion that OST received, approximately $749 million, or 72 percent, was either directed to specific recipients or projects by public law, subject to guidance in congressional committee reports, or directed though reimbursable agreements. At the same time that spending expanded, OST's program responsibilities have changed—from primarily law enforcement and corrections to broader public safety technology.

OST delivers three groups of products through various methods. The three groups include (1) information dissemination and technical assistance; (2) the application, evaluation, and demonstration of existing and new technologies for field users; and (3) technology research and development. According to OST, as of April 2003, it has delivered 945 products since its inception. Furthermore, OST identified an additional 500 products associated with ongoing awards. OST makes its products available through a variety of methods, such as posting information on its Web site and providing research prototypes to field users for testing and evaluation.

OST has been unable to fully assess its performance in achieving its goals as required by applicable criteria because it does not use outcome measures to assess the extent to which it achieves the intended results of its programs. OST's current measures primarily track outputs, the goods and services produced, or in some cases OST uses intermediate measures, which is a step toward developing outcome measures. The Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 provides that federal agencies measure or assess the results of each program activity. While developing outcome measures for the types of activities undertaken by OST is difficult, we have previously reported on various strategies that can be used to develop outcome measures, or, at least intermediate measures, for similar types of activities.

OST's annual budgetary resources in constant 2002 dollars, fiscal years 1995–2003

Dollars in millions

Fiscal year

Source: OST.

United States General Accounting Office