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United States Government Accountability Office
Washington, DC 20548

GAO Moves Aggressively to Protect Personal Info

WASHINGTON, June 23, 2006 – The U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) has pulled from its website archival records that contain some personal identifying information of selected government workers, and it is calling on other database providers – both public and private – to remove such materials as well.

The GAO learned this week that certain old documents containing individual names and social security numbers – and, in some cases, additional identifiers such as addresses – had been posted to the GAO website. Among the documents, for example, were audit reports from the early 1970s of Department of Defense travel vouchers. Supporting documentation attached to some of those reports included service members’ names and other personal identifiers.

As soon as the agency learned that such documents had been posted, David M. Walker, Comptroller General of the United States and head of the GAO, ordered them immediately removed from the GAO website. He also asked GAO administrators to immediately initiate contacts with other agencies, including the Pentagon, as well as private companies to urge them to purge similar files from their Internet databases. While there is no evidence that this information has been misused, the GAO also launched an intensive effort to attempt to contact the individuals named in the documents and notify them of potential disclosures.

GAO estimates that this involves fewer than 1,000 individuals.

“This was certainly regrettable but totally inadvertent,” Walker said. “GAO strives to be a model federal agency, and that includes transparency – we make virtually all our reports, testimonies, and other work products accessible to the public. At the same time, we are very concerned about personal privacy.

“Several years ago, GAO began the process of digitizing archival records and posting them to our website. This week we discovered that some of the older records, dating from the 1920s to the 1980s, contained individual names, addresses and other information. We took immediate steps to correct the situation. Fortunately, these records are of little public interest, and we are aware of no compromises of any individual’s identity. Nonetheless, we are taking this very, very seriously.”

The GAO was alerted to the postings on June 20 by an employee of an Inspector General for a federal agency, not by an individual identified in any of the documents.

Sallyanne Harper, GAO's Chief Administrative Officer, said the agency has halted the posting of archival materials and initiated a review of those records to ensure that all personal information is redacted before they are digitized.

"We are doing everything possible to ensure that this does not happen again," Harper said.

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