



Highlights of [GAO-06-343](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

The Commission on Civil Rights (the Commission) and its 51 state advisory committees were established in 1957 to serve as independent entities charged with reporting on the status of civil rights in the nation. GAO was asked to assess (1) the adequacy of the Commission's policies for ensuring the quality of its reports and (2) the role of the state advisory committees.

What GAO Recommends

GAO makes several recommendations designed to strengthen the quality of Commission reports and make better use of its state advisory committees. They include establishing policies for ensuring the quality of national office reports and briefings and improving accountability for the Commission's decisions on these products; establishing a requirement to ensure the timely renewal of state advisory committee charters; and establishing an external accountability mechanism such as seeking the services of an Inspector General.

The Commission did not comment on our conclusions or recommendations but instead described actions it has taken to improve its policies, processes, and operations. These actions, however, do not address our recommendations. One of the seven Commissioners agreed with our report and two disagreed.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-343.
www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-551SP
 To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Bob Robertson at (202) 512-9889 or robertsonr@gao.gov.

U.S. COMMISSION ON CIVIL RIGHTS

The Commission Should Strengthen Its Quality Assurance Policies and Make Better Use of Its State Advisory Committees

What GAO Found

The Commission has some policies for ensuring the quality of its national office reports, briefings, and hearings. However, it lacks policies for ensuring that these products are objective and that the Commission is sufficiently accountable for the decisions made on these products. While the Commission's policies for its national office products call for legal and other reviews, and Commissioners have an increased role in the development of its products, as GAO previously recommended, the Commission's policies do not require that Commission reports, briefings, or hearings incorporate balanced, varied, and contrasting perspectives in order to ensure objectivity. Also, the Commission has no policy on the use of external reviewers of national office reports, such as a policy that would specify when external reviewers should be used and how to select them so as to obtain a broad representation of views. We also found that the Commission's leadership has lacked accountability for some of its reporting decisions. For example, in some cases, the leadership has not consulted with all Commissioners at key points in the development of its reports. This includes the development of the Commission's 2005 national report to the President and Congress, which was significantly refocused without obtaining the concurrence of all Commissioners. Finally, the Commission has not secured an external means of oversight to examine its reporting policies and monitor its practices.

The state advisory committees have played a key role in the Commission's mission by identifying and reporting on local civil rights issues, but most committees do not have current charters giving them authorization to operate and the Commission has not fully integrated the committees into the accomplishment of its mission. Since 1980, the state advisory committees have accounted for 200 of the 254 reports issued by the Commission. However, 38 of the 51 state advisory committees cannot function because their authorizing charters have expired. In recent years, the committees' operations have been limited by reduced funds for meetings and travel and reductions to regional office staff who provide the committees with essential operational support. Additionally, in our survey of the state advisory committees and interviews with committee members, they reported a lack of timely review by the Commission of reports they have developed. Furthermore, although the state advisory committees are considered the "eyes and ears" of the Commission, it has not incorporated the role or work of the committees into its strategic planning and decision-making processes. Finally, the Commission has not provided for independent oversight of its policies and practices for the state advisory committees.