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Highlights

PAPERWORK REDUCTION ACT

New Approaches Can Strengthen Information Collection and Reduce Burden

Why GAO Did This Study

Americans spend billions of hours each year providing information to federal agencies by filling out forms, surveys, or questionnaires. A major aim of the Paperwork Reduction Act (PRA) is to minimize the burden that these information collections impose on the public, while maximizing their public benefit. Under the act, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) is to approve all such collections. In addition, agency Chief Information Officers (CIO) are to review information collections before they are submitted to OMB for approval and certify that these meet certain standards set forth in the act.

GAO was asked to testify on the implementation of the act's provisions regarding the review and approval of information collections. For its testimony, GAO reviewed previous work in this area, including the results of an expert forum on information resources management and the PRA, which was held in February 2005 under the auspices of the National Research Council. GAO also drew on its earlier study of CIO review processes (GAO-05-424) and alternative processes that two agencies have used to minimize burden. For this study, GAO reviewed a governmentwide sample of collections, reviewed processes and collections at four agencies that account for a large proportion of burden, and performed case studies of 12 approved collections.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-477T.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Linda Koontz at (202) 512-6240 or koontzl@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

Among the PRA provisions aimed at helping to achieve the goals of minimizing burden while maximizing utility is the requirement for CIO review and certification of information collections. GAO's review of 12 case studies showed that CIOs provided these certifications despite often missing or inadequate support from the program offices sponsoring the collections. Further, although the law requires that support be provided for certifications, agency files contained little evidence that CIO reviewers had made efforts to get program offices to improve the support they offered. Numerous factors have contributed to these problems, including a lack of management support and weaknesses in OMB guidance. Because these reviews were not rigorous, OMB, the agency, and the public had reduced assurance that the standards in the act—such as minimizing burden—were consistently met. To address the issues raised by its review, GAO made recommendations to the agencies and OMB aimed at strengthening the CIO review process and clarifying guidance. OMB and the agencies report making plans and taking steps to address GAO's recommendations.

Beyond the collection review process, the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) have set up processes that are specifically focused on reducing burden. These agencies, whose missions involve numerous information collections, have devoted significant resources to targeted burden reduction efforts that involve extensive public outreach. According to the two agencies, these efforts led to significant reductions in burden. For example, each year, IRS subjects a few forms to highly detailed, in-depth analyses, reviewing all data requested, redesigning forms, and involving stakeholders (both the information users and the public affected). IRS reports that this process—performed on forms that have undergone CIO review and received OMB approval—has reduced burden by over 200 million hours since 2002. In contrast, for the 12 case studies, the CIO review process did not reduce burden.

When it considers PRA reauthorization, the Congress has the opportunity to promote new approaches, including alternatives suggested by the expert forum and by GAO. Forum participants made a range of suggestions on information collections and their review. For example, they suggested that OMB's focus should be on broad oversight rather than on reviewing each individual collection and observed that the current clearance process appeared to be "pro forma." They also observed that it seemed excessive to require notices of collections to be published twice in the *Federal Register*, as they are now. GAO similarly observed that publishing two notices in the *Federal Register* did not seem to be effective, and suggested eliminating one of these notices. GAO also suggested that the Congress mandate pilot projects to target some collections for rigorous analysis along the lines of the IRS and EPA approaches. Such projects would permit agencies to build on the lessons learned by the IRS and EPA and potentially contribute to true burden reduction.

United States Government Accountability Office