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Highlights

Highlights of GAO-09-589, a report to congressional requesters

GRANTS MANAGEMENT

Grants.gov Has Systemic Weaknesses That Require Attention

Why GAO Did This Study

In response to the Federal Financial Assistance Management Improvement Act of 1999, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), among other things, developed Grants.gov as the central grant identification and application portal for federal grant programs. OMB oversees the initiative and named the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) its managing partner. Grants.gov officials have acknowledged noticeably degraded system performance, and grantees have reported difficulties submitting applications that have in some cases led to late or incomplete submissions and lost opportunities for both grantees and populations served. Through analysis of agency documents, a Web-based survey of federal grant-making officials, and interviews with agency officials and grantee associations, this requested report examines (1) the benefits of Grants.gov and applicant experiences with submitting applications, (2) the governance structure of Grants.gov, and (3) the range of agency policies for processing Grants.gov applications.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making four recommendations to OMB to develop Grants.gov system performance measures, guidance clarifying the governance structure, a structured means for applicant input, and uniform policies for processing grant applications. OMB and HHS generally agreed with our findings and recommendations.

View GAO-09-589 or key components.
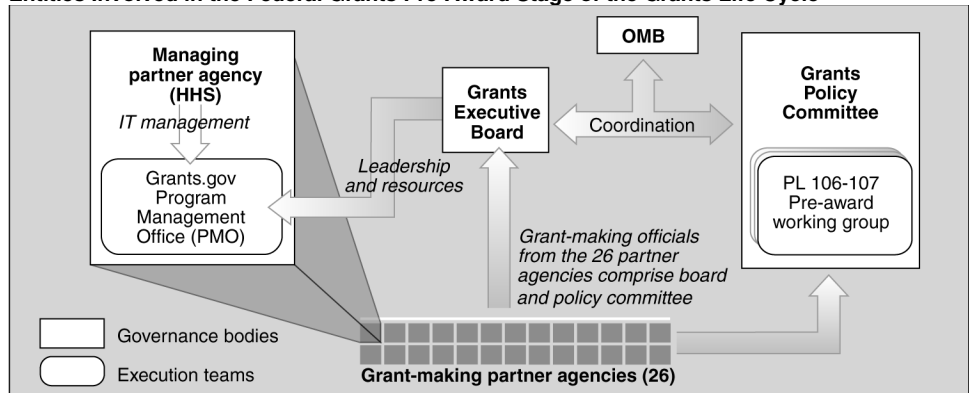For more information, contact Stanley J. Czerwinski at (202) 512-6806 or czerwinskis@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

Grants.gov has made it easier for applicants to find grant opportunities and grantors to process applications faster, but applicants continue to describe difficulties registering with and using Grants.gov, which sometimes result in late submissions. Grants.gov customer service staff do not always resolve these issues, especially during off-peak hours and peak submission periods.

Clear roles and responsibilities for the Grants.gov oversight entities and coordination among them are critical, yet insufficient, and there are no written policies for how these entities are to work with each other. HHS's Chief Information Officer and the Grants Executive Board (GEB) share responsibility for approving major initiatives and funding for Grants.gov, but there is little evidence that GEB-approved funding for Grants.gov is considered in HHS's review of Grants.gov as an IT investment. This created a disconnect between the services Grants.gov is to provide and the funding needed to purchase them. Untimely payment by the 26 agencies that fund Grants.gov also negatively affects system performance. After informing agencies that it was unable to pay its vendors, the Grants.gov Project Management Office (PMO) developed a system shutdown plan and implemented the first step—it eliminated Web site updates and moved all notices to the Grants.gov blog. Grants.gov also lacks performance measures for important aspects of the system. Finally, grantees lack a structured forum for input on the Grants.gov system and standardized governmentwide grant application policies, limiting grantees' ability to affect a system designed, in part, to streamline the grants application process and ease applicant burden.

Disparate agency policies on important aspects of processing applications— such as the criteria for granting appeals for late or incomplete applications and for what constitutes a timely application—burden applicants and sometimes puts applications submitted through Grants.gov at a disadvantage compared to applications submitted through other means, such as other electronic systems or the USPS.

Entities Involved in the Federal Grants Pre-Award Stage of the Grants Life Cycle

Source: GAO analysis of OMB data.

United States Government Accountability Office