

DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY



Observations on GAO Access to Information on Programs and Activities

Highlights of GAO-07-700T, a testimony before the Subcommittee on Management, Investigations and Oversight, Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives

Why GAO Prepared This Statement

In testimony before this committee and the House Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on Homeland Security in February 2007, GAO stated that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has not made its management or operational decisions transparent enough to allow Congress to be sure that the Department is effectively, efficiently, and economically using its billions of dollars of annual funding. GAO also noted that its work for Congress to assess DHS's operations has, at times, been significantly hampered by long delays in obtaining access to program documents. Following the aforementioned testimonies, GAO was asked to testify about its access issues.

This testimony provides information on (1) the scope of GAO's work, (2) GAO protocols for accessing agency information, (3) DHS processes for working with GAO, (4) access issues GAO has encountered, and (5) steps GAO has taken to address these issues.

This testimony identifies issues that Congress and DHS may wish to give attention so that DHS may provided GAO timely access to information needed to carry out its statutory responsibilities.

GAO's Views

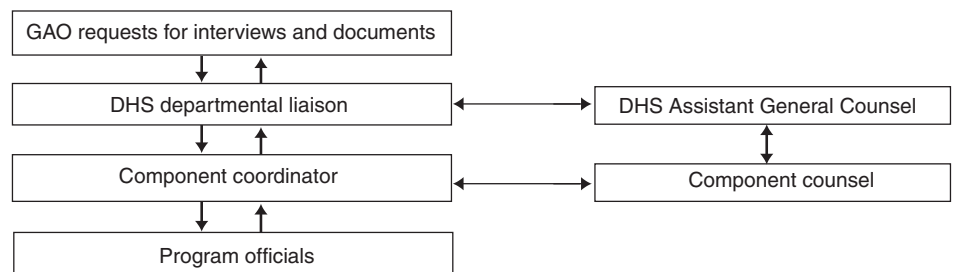
To carry out its audit and evaluation authorities, GAO has a broad statutory right of access to agency records. Auditing standards require that analysts and financial auditors promptly obtain sufficient, competent, and relevant evidence to provide a reasonable basis for any related findings and conclusions. Therefore, prompt access to all records and other information associated with these activities is needed for the effective and efficient performance of GAO's work. This is also necessary in order for the Congress to be able to conduct its constitutional responsibilities in a timely and effective manner.

Since DHS began operations in 2003, GAO has provided major analyses of the department's plans and programs for transportation security, immigration, Coast Guard, and emergency management. GAO has also reported on DHS's management functions such as human capital, financial management, and information technology.

GAO has processes it applies in working with departmental agencies across the federal government that work well. DHS's adopted processes have frequently impeded GAO's efforts to carry out its mission by delaying access to documents required to assess the department's operations. This process involves multiple layers of review by department- and component-level liaisons and attorneys and results in frequent and sometimes lengthy delays in obtaining information.

GAO recognizes that the department has legitimate interests in protecting certain types of sensitive information from public disclosure. GAO shares that interest as well and follows strict security guidelines in handling such information. GAO similarly recognizes that agency officials will need to make judgments with respect to the manner and the processes they use in response to GAO's information requests. However, to date, because of the processes adopted to make these judgments, GAO has often not been able to do its work in a timely manner. GAO has been able to eventually obtain information and answer audit questions, but the delays experienced at DHS impede GAO's ability to conduct audit work efficiently and to provide timely information to congressional clients.

DHS process for working with GAO.



Source: GAO analysis of DHS Directive # 820.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-700T.

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