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RESULTS-ORIENTED GOVERNMENT

Practices That Can Help Enhance and Sustain Collaboration among Federal Agencies

GAO Accountability·Integrity·Reliability

Highlights

Highlights of GAO-06-15, a report to the Chairman, Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

The federal government faces a series of challenges in the 21st century that will be difficult, if not impossible, for any single agency to address alone. Many issues cut across more than one agency and their actions are not well coordinated. Moreover, agencies face a range of barriers when they attempt to work collaboratively.

This report identifies key practices that can help enhance and sustain agency collaboration. GAO also considered how the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) address collaboration among agencies. To illustrate these practices, we selected the Healthy People, wildland fire management, and Departments of Veterans Affairs and Defense's health resource sharing collaborations.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Director of OMB focus on additional programs in need of collaboration and promote the practices in this report. Options include expanding the focus on collaboration in the President's Management Agenda (PMA) and supplementing the Program Assessment Rating Tool (PART) guidance with information about these practices. OMB agreed with this recommendation. Agencies involved in the collaborations provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-15.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Bernice Steinhardt at (202) 512-6543 or steinhardtb@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

Collaboration can be broadly defined as any joint activity that is intended to produce more public value than could be produced when the organizations act alone. Agencies can enhance and sustain their collaborative efforts by engaging in the eight practices identified below. Running throughout these practices are a number of factors such as leadership, trust, and organizational culture that are necessary elements for a collaborative working relationship:

- define and articulate a common outcome;
- establish mutually reinforcing or joint strategies;
- identify and address needs by leveraging resources;
- agree on roles and responsibilities;
- establish compatible policies, procedures, and other means to operate across agency boundaries;
- develop mechanisms to monitor, evaluate, and report on results;
- reinforce agency accountability for collaborative efforts through agency plans and reports; and
- reinforce individual accountability for collaborative efforts through performance management systems.

GAO has previously reported that GPRA, with its focus on strategic planning, the development of long-term goals, and accountability for results, provides a framework Congress, OMB, and executive branch agencies can use to consider the appropriate mix of long-term strategic goals and strategies needed to identify and address issues that cut across agency boundaries. In addition, to provide a broader perspective on the federal government's goals and strategies to address issues that cut across agencies, we previously recommended that (1) OMB develop a governmentwide performance plan as required by GPRA and (2) Congress consider amending GPRA to require a governmentwide strategic plan.

OMB, through the PMA, has emphasized improving government performance through governmentwide and agency-specific initiatives. One of these focuses specifically on improving coordination, but only between the Departments of Veterans Affairs and Defense for health programs and systems. However, many other areas that cut across agency boundaries would benefit from greater OMB focus and attention, including information sharing for homeland security, which GAO recently designated as a high-risk area. OMB has also used its PART diagnostic tool to determine, among other things, whether individual programs duplicate other efforts and if agencies coordinate and collaborate effectively with related programs. The PART tool provides general guidance for assessing effective program coordination and collaboration, but does not discuss practices for enhancing and sustaining collaboration, such as those described and illustrated in this report.