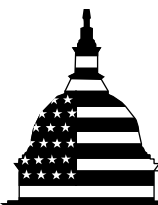September 2012

MANAGING FOR RESULTS

Key Considerations for Implementing Interagency Collaborative Mechanisms

G A O
Accountability ★ Integrity ★ Reliability

MANAGING FOR RESULTS

Key Considerations for Implementing Interagency Collaborative Mechanisms

Why GAO Did This Study

Many of the meaningful results that the federal government seeks to achieve—such as those related to protecting food and agriculture, providing homeland security, and ensuring a well-trained and educated workforce—require the coordinated efforts of more than one federal agency and often more than one sector and level of government. Both Congress and the executive branch have recognized the need for improved collaboration across the federal government. The Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 (GPRA) Modernization Act of 2010 establishes a new framework aimed at taking a more crosscutting and integrated approach to focusing on results and improving government performance. Effective implementation of the act could play an important role in facilitating future actions to reduce duplication, overlap, and fragmentation.

GAO was asked to identify the mechanisms that the federal government uses to lead and implement interagency collaboration, as well as issues to consider when implementing these mechanisms. To examine these topics, GAO conducted a literature review on interagency collaborative mechanisms, interviewed 13 academic and practitioner experts in the field of collaboration, and reviewed their work. GAO also conducted a detailed analysis of 45 GAO reports, published between 2005 and 2012. GAO selected reports that contained in-depth discussions of collaborative mechanisms and covered a broad range of issues.

View GAO-12-1022. For more information, contact J. Christopher Mihm at (202)512-6806 or mihmj@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

Federal agencies have used a variety of mechanisms to implement interagency collaborative efforts, such as the President appointing a coordinator, agencies co-locating within one facility, or establishing interagency task forces. These mechanisms can be used to address a range of purposes including policy development; program implementation; oversight and monitoring; information sharing and communication; and building organizational capacity, such as staffing and training. Frequently, agencies use more than one mechanism to address an issue. For example, climate change is a complex, crosscutting issue, which involves many collaborative mechanisms in the Executive Office of the President and interagency groups throughout government.

Although collaborative mechanisms differ in complexity and scope, they all benefit from certain key features, which raise issues to consider when implementing these mechanisms. For example:

- **Outcomes and Accountability:** Have short-term and long-term outcomes been clearly defined? Is there a way to track and monitor their progress?

- **Bridging Organizational Cultures:** What are the missions and organizational cultures of the participating agencies? Have agencies agreed on common terminology and definitions?

- **Leadership:** How will leadership be sustained over the long-term? If leadership is shared, have roles and responsibilities been clearly identified and agreed upon?

- **Clarity of Roles and Responsibilities:** Have participating agencies clarified roles and responsibilities?

- **Participants:** Have all relevant participants been included? Do they have the ability to commit resources for their agency?

- **Resources:** How will the collaborative mechanism be funded and staffed? Have online collaboration tools been developed?

- **Written Guidance and Agreements:** If appropriate, have participating agencies documented their agreement regarding how they will be collaborating? Have they developed ways to continually update and monitor these agreements?

Contents

Abbreviations

DHS	Department of Homeland Security
DOD	Department of Defense
DOI	Department of the Interior
FEB	Federal Executive Board
GPRA	Government Performance and Results Act of 1993
GPRAMA	GPRA Modernization Act of 2010
HHS	Department of Health and Human Services
HUD	Department of Housing and Urban Development
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
NIST	National Institute for Standards and Technology
OMB	Office of Management and Budget
OPM	Office of Personnel Management
SBA	Small Business Administration
USDA	U.S. Department of Agriculture
VA	Department of Veterans Affairs
VISN	Veterans Health Administration's Veterans Integrated Service Network

United States Government Accountability Office
Washington, DC 20548

September 27, 2012

The Honorable Daniel K. Akaka
Chairman
Subcommittee on Oversight of Government
    Management, the Federal Workforce,
    and the District of Columbia
Committee on Homeland Security
    and Governmental Affairs
United States Senate

Dear Mr. Chairman:

Many of the meaningful results that the federal government seeks to achieve—such as those related to protecting food and agriculture, providing homeland security, and ensuring a well-trained and educated workforce—require the coordinated efforts of more than one federal agency and often more than one sector and level of government. We have reported about the importance of collaboration between federal agencies for many years. For example, we have noted that interagency mechanisms or strategies to coordinate programs that address crosscutting issues may reduce potentially duplicative, overlapping, and fragmented efforts.[1]

Both Congress and the executive branch have also recognized the need for improved collaboration across the federal government. Accordingly, in January 2011 the almost two-decades-old Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 (GPRA) was updated with the GPRA Modernization Act of 2010 (GPRAMA).[2] Among other things, GPRAMA establishes a new framework aimed at taking a more crosscutting and integrated approach to focusing on results and improving government performance. Effective implementation of the act could play an important role in clarifying desired outcomes, addressing program performance that spans

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[1]GAO, *Managing for Results: GPRA Modernization Act Implementation Provides Important Opportunities to Address Government Challenges*, GAO-11-617T (Washington, D.C.: May 10, 2011).

[2]Pub. L. No. 111-352, 124 Stat. 3866 (Jan. 4, 2011). GPRAMA amends the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993, Pub. L. No. 103-62, 107 Stat. 285 (Aug. 3, 1993).

multiple organizations, and facilitating future actions to reduce duplication, overlap, and fragmentation.[3] GPRAMA requires the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to coordinate with agencies to establish outcome-oriented federal government priority goals—otherwise referred to as crosscutting goals—covering a limited number of policy areas as well as goals to improve management across the federal government.[4] It also requires that OMB—with the agencies—develop a federal government performance plan that defines the level of performance to be achieved toward the crosscutting goals.[5] These new requirements provide additional opportunities for collaboration across federal agencies.[6]

At your request, in this report we are identifying the range of mechanisms that the federal government uses to lead and implement interagency collaboration, as well as issues to consider when implementing these mechanisms. To examine these topics, we conducted a literature review on interagency collaborative mechanisms, interviewed 13 academic and practitioner experts in the field of collaboration, and reviewed their work. We also conducted a detailed analysis of 45 of our prior reports that we selected, from more than 300 reports that we published between 2005 and 2012 that examined aspects of collaboration within the federal government. We selected reports that contained in-depth discussions of collaborative mechanisms. In addition, we ensured that the reports in our selection covered a broad range of issues across the federal government, such as homeland security, agriculture, and health, as well as a range of collaborative mechanisms. For a more detailed discussion on our scope and methodology, see Appendix I.

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[3]GAO, *2012 Annual Report: Opportunities to Reduce Duplication, Overlap, Fragmentation, Achieve Savings, and Enhance Revenue*, GAO-12-342SP (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 28, 2012); and *Opportunities to Reduce Potential Duplication in Government Programs, Save Tax Dollars, and Enhance Revenue*, GAO-11-318SP (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 1, 2011).

[4]31 U.S.C. § 1120(a)(1).

[5]31 U.S.C. § 1115(a).

[6]GAO, *Managing for Results: GAO's Work Related to the Interim Crosscutting Priority Goals under the GPRA Modernization Act*, GAO-12-620R. (Washington, D.C.: May 31, 2012).

We conducted our work from July 2011 to September 2012 in accordance with all sections of GAO's Quality Assurance Framework that are relevant to our objectives. The framework requires that we plan and perform the engagement to obtain sufficient and appropriate evidence to meet our stated objectives and to discuss any limitations in our work. We believe that the information and data obtained, and the analysis conducted, provide a reasonable basis for any findings and conclusions in this report.

Background

In 2005, we reported on key practices to enhance and sustain interagency collaboration.[7] In our report, we broadly defined collaboration as any joint activity that is intended to produce more public value than could be produced when the agencies act alone. We also described how agencies can enhance and sustain their collaborative efforts by engaging in the eight practices identified below:

- 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 through performance management systems.

We noted that running throughout these practices are a number of factors such as leadership, trust, and organizational culture that are necessary

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[7]GAO, *Results-Oriented Government: Practices That Can Help Enhance and Sustain Collaboration among Federal Agencies*, GAO-06-15 (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 21, 2005).

elements for a collaborative working relationship. The highlights page from that report is included in Appendix II.

As required by GPRAMA, OMB included a set of 14 interim crosscutting priority goals in the 2013 federal budget. These goals covered a variety of issues such as veteran career readiness, energy efficiency, export promotion, and real property management. OMB also designated relevant agencies and programs that will be responsible for each interim goal. In order to address these goals, OMB is relying on a range of collaborative mechanisms. For example, in order to address the crosscutting goal of improving career readiness of veterans, OMB noted that it will rely, in part, on a Department of Defense-Veterans Affairs Task Force that includes representation from the Departments of Defense, Labor, Education, and Veterans Affairs, OMB, and the Office of Personnel Management (OPM).[8]

Agencies Use Interagency Collaborative Mechanisms to Meet a Range Of Purposes

Federal agencies have used a variety of mechanisms to implement interagency collaborative efforts, such as the President appointing a coordinator, agencies co-locating within one facility, or establishing interagency task forces. Figure 1 catalogues selected mechanisms that the federal government uses to facilitate interagency collaboration, which were identified through interviews with experts and a sample of our prior reports. Experts have defined an interagency mechanism for collaboration as any arrangement or application that can facilitate collaboration between agencies. This list may not be comprehensive; it reflects the mechanisms that were included in our sample.

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[8]GAO-12-620R.

Figure 1: Mechanisms for Interagency Collaboration and Definitions

1. **Presidential Assistants and Advisors:** A Presidential appointee who is solely focused on an issue of great magnitude, or policy collaboration in the Executive Office of the President.

2. **Collaboration Structures within the Executive Office of the President:** Permanent or temporary groups that are sometimes referred to as task forces, councils, commissions, committees, or working groups.

3. **National Strategies and Initiatives:** A document or initiative that is national in scope and provides a broad framework for addressing issues that cut across federal agencies and often across other levels of government and sectors.

4. **Interagency Groups:**
   a. **Interagency Group Led by Agency and Department Heads:** These groups are sometimes referred to as task forces, working groups, councils, and committees.
   b. **Interagency Group Led by Component and Program-Level Staff:** These groups are sometimes referred to as task forces, working groups, councils, and committees.

5. **Designation of Leadership:**
   a. **Lead Agencies:** Designation of one agency or department to be accountable for an initiative, particularly if it requires the efforts of several different agencies exercising different statutory authorities.
   b. **Shared Leadership:** Designation of, or agreement by, more than one agency or department to be accountable for an initiative.

6. **Geographic-Based Offices/Co-location:** One office maintaining responsibility for collaborating with federal agencies or departments that are located in the same geographic region. Also, in some cases, the location of more than one program office from different federal agencies into a facility with the intention of personnel from the agencies collaborating with one another.

7. **Positions and Details:**
   a. **Interagency Collaborator Positions:** The designation of an individual within one federal agency or department to collaborate within or between agencies or departments.
   b. **Liaison Positions:** An employee of one organization assigned to work primarily or exclusively with another agency.
   c. **Personnel Details:** A specialist or professional designated to perform certain tasks for another agency while remaining employed by his or her home agency.

8. **Specially Created Interagency Offices:** An office with its own authority and resources with responsibility to cover a policy area that crosses a number of separate agencies or departments.

9. **Interagency Agreements and Memorandum of Understanding:** A written agreement between more than one federal agency or department.

10. **Joint Program Efforts:**
    a. **Joint Budgeting and Funding:** A set of resources that are administered by more than one federal agency.
    b. **Joint Exercising and Training:** Exercising or training that involves participants from more than one federal agency.
    c. **Joint Development of Policies, Procedures, and Programs:** More than one federal agency developing a policy, procedure or program.

11. **Conferences and Communities of Practice:** A meeting that brings together representatives of different agencies or departments for the discussion of common problems, the exchange of information, or the development of agreements on issues of mutual interest.

12. **Collaboration Technologies:** Tools that facilitate collaboration, such as shared databases and web portals.

Source: GAO.

Mechanisms Can be Used to Serve Multiple Purposes

Based on our analysis of expert interviews and literature, as well as a sample of our prior reports, the mechanisms for interagency collaboration can serve the following general purposes. According to our analysis, and as demonstrated by the examples below, most collaborative mechanisms serve multiple purposes.

- **Policy Development:** For example, Congress established the Office of Science and Technology Policy in 1976 to serve as a source of scientific and technological analysis and judgment for the President with respect to major policies, plans, and programs of the federal government, among other things.[9] The Office of Science and Technology Policy's mission includes leading interagency efforts to develop and coordinate sound science and technology policies across the federal government.

- **Program Implementation:** As we reported in 2010, in the case of the Federal Emergency Management Agency's Joint Field Offices, co-locating personnel meets the purpose of program implementation during an emergency. Specifically, personnel from a range of agencies temporarily co-locate to provide services to disaster victims in one location.[10]

  We reported in 2006 that Congress passed the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act,[11] in part, to standardize the types of recreation fees collected at federal lands and waters and to increase flexibility for fee revenue expenditures. To assist with implementing this act, Department of the Interior (DOI) and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) established four working groups, including a Fee Collection/Expenditure working group to address organizational concerns, implementation issues, and coordination among the agencies as they relate to fee collections and expenditures.[12] For example, the working group assisted with developing an interagency

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[9]Presidential Science and Technology Advisory Organization Act of 1976, Pub. L. No. 94-282, title II, 90 Stat. 459. 463-68 (May 11, 1976). 42 U.S.C. § 6614(a).

[10]GAO, *Disaster Recovery: FEMA's Long-term Assistance Was Helpful to State and Local Governments but Had Some Limitations*, GAO-10-404 (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 30, 2010).

[11]Pub. L. No. 108-447, Division J, title VIII, 118 Stat. 2809, 3377-3393 (Dec. 8, 2004).

[12]GAO, *Recreation Fees: Agencies Can Better Implement the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act and Account for Fee Revenues*, GAO-06-1016 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 22, 2006).

handbook with common definitions and implementation policy guidance.

- **Oversight and Monitoring:** For example, as we reported in 2008, the Maritime Security Working Group, working on behalf of the Maritime Security Policy Coordination Committee, was responsible for monitoring and assessing implementation of actions related to the National Strategy for Maritime Security.[13]

- **Information Sharing and Communication:** As we reported in 2008 and 2010, in the case of the National Intellectual Property Rights Coordination Center, co-locating personnel was intended to promote information sharing. Specifically, personnel from agencies responsible for combating counterfeiting, piracy, and related intellectual property rights crimes are co-located for the purpose of sharing information across organizational boundaries.[14]

  As we reported in 2010, the Department of Justice has established several interagency groups to coordinate and share information on gangs and gang enforcement efforts across department and agency boundaries, including the Gang Unit; the National Gang Targeting, Enforcement, and Coordination Center; the National Gang Intelligence Center; and others.[15]

- **Building Organizational Capacity:** Capacity may include areas such as staffing, training, and information technology. For example, in 2011 we identified 225 professional development activities for national security personnel which were intended to improve certain agencies' abilities to collaborate across organizational lines. These ranged from 10-month joint professional military education programs and year-long

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[13]GAO, *Maritime Security: National Strategy and Supporting Plans Were Generally Well-Developed and Are Being Implemented*, GAO-08-672 (Washington, D.C.: June 20, 2008).

[14]GAO, *Intellectual Property: Federal Enforcement Has Generally Increased, but Assessing Performance Could Strengthen Law Enforcement Efforts,* GAO-08-157 (Washington, D.C.: Mar.11, 2008); and *Intellectual Property: Agencies Progress in Implementing Legislation, but Enhancements Could Improve Future Plans*, GAO-11-39 (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 13, 2010).

[15]GAO, *Combating Gangs: Better Coordination and Performance Measurement Would Help Clarify Roles of Federal Agencies and Strengthen Assessment of Efforts,* GAO-09-708 (Washington, D.C.: July 24, 2009).

rotations to 30-minute online courses. The developmental activities we identified included training courses and programs, training exercises, interagency rotational programs, joint professional military education, and leadership development programs.[16]

The U.S. Army Command and General Staff College's Interagency Fellowship Program is an example of one of these professional development activities. The College places Army officers at other federal agencies to learn the culture of the host agency, hone collaborative skills such as communication and teamwork, and establish networks with civilian counterparts. At the same time, participants increase workforce capacity at their host civilian agencies, such as the Department of State and U.S. Agency for International Development. In turn, the civilian agencies can free up resources to send personnel to teach or attend courses at the College.[17]

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[16]GAO, *National Security: An Overview of Professional Development Activities Intended to Improve Interagency Collaboration*, GAO-11-108 (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 15, 2010).

[17]GAO, *Interagency Collaboration: State and Army Personnel Rotation Programs Can Build on Positive Results with Additional Preparation and Evaluation*, GAO-12-386 (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 9, 2012).

Mechanisms Are Frequently Used In Combination to Address Complex Issues

Additionally, in many cases, agencies use more than one mechanism to address an issue. For example, climate change is a complex, crosscutting issue, which involves many collaborative mechanisms. As we reported in 2011, these mechanisms include entities within the Executive Office of the President and interagency groups throughout government, including task forces and working groups.[18] As shown in figure 2 below, the collaborative mechanisms in place to address climate change vary with regard to membership and purpose. The collaboration structures within the Executive Office of the President provide high-level policy direction for federal climate change programs and activities.[19] Other mechanisms are in place—including specially created interagency offices and interagency groups—to provide coordination of science and technology policy across the federal government.[20] For example, the U.S. Global Change Research Program, which began as a presidential initiative in 1989, was codified by the Global Change Research Act of 1990.[21] This program coordinates and integrates federal research on changes in the global environment and their implications for society, and is led by an interagency governing body, the Committee on Environment, Natural Resources, and Sustainability Subcommittee on Global Change Research. The subcommittee, facilitated by a national coordination office, provides overall strategic direction and is responsible for developing and implementing an integrated interagency program.

[18]GAO, *Climate Change: Improvements Needed to Clarify National Priorities and Better Align Them with Federal Funding Decisions,* GAO-11-317 (Washington, D.C.: May 20, 2011).

[19]In March 2011, the Office of Energy and Climate Change Policy joined the Domestic Policy Council.

[20]GAO-11-317.

[21]Pub. L. No. 101-606 (1990). For more information about the U.S. Global Change Research Program, see http://www.globalchange.gov/. (Accessed September, 2012).

Figure 2: Selected Collaborative Mechanisms for Federal Climate Change Activities, as of May 2011

Executive Office of the President

Office of Science and Technology Policy

Council on Environmental Quality

Office of Management and Budget

Office of Energy and Climate Change Policy

Formal and Informal Interagency Task Forces and Working Groups

Green Cabinet
OECC Director, CEQ Chair, OSTP Director, Secretaries of DOE, DOI, DOL, DOT, HUD, USDA, Administrators of EPA and SBA

Climate Change Adaptation Task Force
Co-chaired by: CEQ, NOAA, and OSTP. Participating agencies: CEA, DHS, DOC, DOD, DOE, DOI, DOS, DOT, EPA, HHS, HUD, MCC, NASA, NEC, NIC, NSS, OECC, OMB, Education, Treasury, USAID, USDA

Interagency Task Force on Carbon Capture and Storage
Participating agencies: CEQ, DOC, DOE, DOI, DOJ, DOL, DOS, DOT, EPA, FERC, OMB, OSTP, Treasury, USDA

Federal Sustainability Initiative
Participating agencies: CIA, DOD, DOE, DOI, DOL, DOT, EPA, GSA, HHS, Smithsonian, SSA, USPS, VA, other agencies

Other Task Forces and Working Groups
- National Ocean Council (Co-chaired by: OSTP and CEQ)
- Recovery through Retrofit
- Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+)

National Science and Technology Council

Committee on Science

Committee on Technology

Committee on Homeland and National Security

Committee on Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) Education

Committee on Environment, Natural Resources, and Sustainability
Co-Chairs: EPA, NOAA, OSTP
Members: CEA, CEQ, DHS, DOC, DOD, DOE, DOI, DOJ, DOS, DOT, DPC, EPA, FEMA, HHS, NASA, NEC, NSF, Smithsonian, OMB, OSTP, USDA
Coordinating agencies: HUD, TVA

International Activities
DOE, DOS, USAID, and other agencies

Air Quality Research

Disaster Reduction

Water Availability and Quantity

Toxics and Risks

Ecological Systems

U.S. Group on Earth Observation

Ocean Science and Technology

Roundtable on Climate Information and Services

National Earth Observations Task Force

Integration of Science and Technology for Sustainability Task Force

Interagency Arctic Research Policy Committee

U.S. Global Change Research Program/Subcommittee on Global Change Research
Director Senior-Level Appointee, DOC
Members: CEQ, DOC, DOD, DOE, DOI, DOS, DOT EPA, HHS, NASA, NSF, OMB, OSTP, Smithsonian, USAID, USDA

National Climate Assessment
Members: CDC, Census, CEQ, CIA, DHS, DOD, DOE, DOI, DOT, Education, EPA, HUD, NASA, NIH, NOAA, NSF, Smithsonian, OMB, OSTP, USAID, USDA, USGCRP

Climate Change Technology Program
Director: Senior-Level Appointee, DOE
Members: CEQ, DOC, DOD, DOE, DOI, DOS, DOT, EPA, HHS, NASA, NSF, OMB, OSTP, USAID, USDA

National Science and Technology Council Committees

Key entities within the Executive Office of the President

International activities

USGCRP and the Climate Change Technology Program

CDC – Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
CEA – Council of Economic Advisors
Census – Census Bureau
CEQ – Council on Environmental Quality
CIA – Central Intelligence Agency
DHS – Department of Homeland Security
DOC – Department of Commerce
DOD – Department of Defense
DOE – Department of Energy
DOI – Department of the Interior
DOJ – Department of Justice

DOL – Department of Labor
DOS – Department of State
DOT – Department of Transportation
DPC – Domestic Policy Council
Education – Department of Education
EPA – Environmental Protection Agency
FEMA – Federal Emergency Management Agency
FERC – Federal Energy Regulatory Commission
GSA – General Services Administration
HHS – Department of Health and Human Services
HUD – Department of Housing and Urban Development

IARP – Interagency Arctic Research Policy Committee
MCC – Millennium Challenge Corporation
NASA – National Aeronautics and Space Administration
NEC – National Economic Council
NIC – National Intelligence Council
NOAA – National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
NSF – National Science Foundation
NSS – National Security Staff
OECC – Office of Energy and Climate Change Policy
OMB – Office of Management and Budget
OSTP – Office of Science and Technology Policy

SBA– Small Business Administration
SSA – Social Security Administration
Smithsonian – Smithsonian Institution
Treasury – Department of the Treasury
TVA – Tennessee Valley Authority
USAID – United States Agency for International Development
USDA – United States Department of Agriculture
USGCRP – United States Global Change Research Program
USPS – United States Postal Service
VA – Veterans Administration

Source: GAO analysis of Climate Change Science Program Strategic Plan, Climate Change Technology Program Strategic Plan, NSTC organizational chart and CEQ initiatives.

There are Many Issues to Consider When Collaborating

Although the mechanisms we list in figure 2 differ in complexity and scope, they all benefit from certain key features, which raise issues to consider when implementing these mechanisms. According to expert views and our prior work, these key features fall into the categories of outcomes and accountability; bridging organizational cultures; leadership; clarity of roles and responsibilities; participants; resources; and written guidance and agreements. Many of these key features are related to our previously-identified collaboration practices.[22]

Outcomes and Accountability

Issues to Consider:

- Have short-term and long-term outcomes been clearly defined?
- Is there a way to track and monitor progress toward the short-term and long-term outcomes?
- Do participating agencies have collaboration-related competencies or performance standards against which individual performance can be evaluated?
- Do participating agencies have the means to recognize and reward accomplishments related to collaboration?

This key feature is related to the collaboration practices:

- Define and articulate a common outcome.
- Develop mechanisms to monitor, evaluate, and report on results.
- Reinforce agency accountability for collaborative efforts through agency plans and reports.

Organizational Outcomes and Accountability: As we reported in 2008, we interviewed experts in collaborative resource management.[23] Based on these interviews, we found that most of the experts emphasized the importance of groups having clear goals. They explained that in a collaborative process, the participants may not have the same overall interests—in fact they may have conflicting interests. However, by establishing a goal based on what the group shares in common, rather than on where there is disagreement among missions or philosophies, a collaborative group can shape its own vision and define its own purpose. When articulated and understood by the members of a group, this shared purpose provides people with a reason to participate in the process. For example, in 2012, we reported that Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)

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[22]GAO-06-15.

[23]GAO, *Natural Resource Management: Opportunities Exist to Enhance Federal Participation in Collaborative Efforts to Reduce Conflicts and Improve Natural Resource Conditions*, GAO-08-262 (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 12, 2008).

and Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), in collaboration with other federal agencies, shared a joint commitment to preventing and ending veteran homelessness by 2015. Representatives at two veteran and homeless advocacy organizations told us that sharing a common strategic goal between VA and HUD had been beneficial.[24]

Federal agencies can use their strategic and annual performance plans as tools to drive collaboration with other agencies and other partners and establish complementary goals and strategies for achieving results. We have found that agencies that create a means to monitor, evaluate, and report the results of collaborative efforts can better identify areas for improvement.[25] Agencies' priority goals—and agency involvement in federal government priority goals—provide additional opportunities to articulate the goals of collaborative efforts.[26] Agencies and OMB are required under GPRAMA to monitor the federal government and agency priority goals on at least a quarterly basis, which provides additional opportunities for collaboration with contributing partners.

Individual Accountability: Agencies link personal accountability to collaboration by adding a collaboration-related competency or performance standard against which individual performance can be evaluated. As we previously reported, the Department of State revised the competencies used to evaluate the Foreign Service Officers to focus on collaboration.[27] Specifically, the competencies now identify knowledge of other agencies and interagency cooperation among the skill sets to be assessed.[28] Agency officials said that this change, in part, resulted in increased interest in foreign policy advisor assignments, demonstrated by the increase in the number of applicants to the program in recent years.

This key feature is related to the collaboration practice:

- Reinforce individual accountability for collaborative efforts through performance management systems.

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[24]GAO, *Veteran Homelessness: VA and HUD Are Working to Improve Data on Supportive Housing Program*, GAO-12-726 (Washington, D.C: June 26, 2012).

[25]GAO-06-15.

[26]GAO-12-620R.

[27]GAO-12-386.

[28]Foreign Service terminology for competencies are "precepts," which according to Department of State's documentation, define "the specific skills to be considered and the level of accomplishment expected at different grades."

We reported in October 2000, that the Veterans Health Administration's Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN), headquartered in Cincinnati, implemented performance agreements that focused on patient services for the entire VISN and were designed to encourage the VISN's medical centers to work collaboratively.[29] In 2000, the VISN Director had a performance agreement with "care line" directors for patient services, such as primary care, medical and surgical care, and mental health care. In particular, the mental health care line director's performance agreement included improvement goals related to mental health for the entire VISN. To make progress towards these goals, this care line director had to work across each of the VISN's four medical centers with the corresponding care line managers at each medical center. As part of this collaboration, the care line director needed to establish consensus among VISN officials and external stakeholders on the strategic direction for the services provided by the mental health care line across the VISN; develop, implement, and revise integrated clinical programs to reflect that strategic direction for the VISN; and allocate resources among the centers for mental health programs to implement these programs.

Bridging Organizational Cultures

Issues to Consider:

- What are the missions and organizational cultures of the participating agencies?
- What are the commonalities between the participating agencies' missions and cultures and what are some potential challenges?
- Have participating agencies developed ways for operating across agency boundaries?
- Have participating agencies agreed on common terminology and definitions?

Different agencies participating in any collaborative mechanism bring diverse organizational cultures to it. Accordingly, it is important to address these differences to enable a cohesive working relationship and to create the mutual trust required to enhance and sustain the collaborative effort. To address these differences, we have found that it is important to

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[29]GAO, *Managing for Results: Emerging Benefits From Selected Agencies' Use of Performance Agreements*, GAO-01-115 (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 30, 2000).

establish ways to operate across agency boundaries. This can involve measures such as developing common terminology, compatible policies and procedures, and fostering open lines of communication. We reported in 2012 that the Interagency Council on Homelessness had taken initial steps to develop a common vocabulary for discussing homelessness and related terms, as recommended in our June 2010 report. The Council held a meeting with participants from stakeholder organizations in January 2011 and issued a report to Congress in June 2011 that summarized feedback received during the meeting. The report notes that a common vocabulary would allow federal agencies to better measure the scope and dimensions of homelessness and may ease program implementation and coordination. Additionally, the Council held three meetings in 2011 to discuss implementation of a common vocabulary with key federal agencies.[30]

Positive working relationships between participants from different agencies bridge organizational cultures. These relationships build trust and foster communication, which facilitates collaboration. Experts have stated that relationship-building is vital in responding to an emergency. For example, we reported in 2011, that through interagency planning efforts federal officials built relationships that helped facilitate the federal response to the H1N1 influenza pandemic.[31] Officials from the Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and the Department of Education said that these interagency meetings, working together on existing pandemic and non-pandemic programs, and exercises conducted prior to the H1N1 pandemic built relationships that were valuable for the H1N1 pandemic response. Specifically, HHS officials said that federal coordination during the H1N1 pandemic was much easier because of these formal networks and informal relationships built during pandemic planning activities and exercises.

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[30]GAO, *Homelessness: Fragmentation and Overlap in Programs Highlight the Need to Identify, Assess, and Reduce Inefficiencies*, GAO-12-491 (Washington, D.C.: May 10, 2012).

[31]GAO, *Influenza Pandemic: Lessons from the H1N1 Pandemic Should Be Incorporated into Future Planning,* GAO-11-632 (Washington, D.C.: June 27, 2011).

Frequent communication among collaborating agencies is another way to facilitate working across agency boundaries to prevent misunderstanding.[32] We reported in 2005 that open communication was an important factor in the successful transfer of the Plum Island Animal Disease Research Center (Plum Island) from USDA to DHS.[33] Specifically, several scientists at Plum Island had stated that the Plum Island Director's successful efforts in facilitating open communication among staff had fostered a collaborative environment. Moreover, several scientists noted that the director—who was based on the island at that time—valued the comments and ideas expressed by the scientists. One lead scientist concluded that the director's ability to establish positive relationships with staff had brought greater focus to the research and diagnostic programs. USDA officials also noted to us that the leadership of the director and the entire Senior Leadership Group, working as a team, contributed to effective cooperation at Plum Island.[34]

Leadership

> **Issues to Consider:**
>
> - Has a lead agency or individual been identified?
> - If leadership will be shared between one or more agencies, have roles and responsibilities been clearly identified and agreed upon?
> - How will leadership be sustained over the long-term?

Leadership Models: As previously discussed, leadership models range from identifying one agency or person to lead, to assigning shared leadership over a collaborative mechanism. Experts explained that designating one leader is often beneficial because it centralizes

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[32]GAO-06-15.

[33]The livestock industry, which contributes over $100 billion annually to the national economy, is vulnerable to foreign animal diseases that, if introduced in the United States, could cause severe economic losses. To protect against such losses, critical research and diagnostic activities are conducted at Plum Island in New York. USDA was responsible for Plum Island until June 2003, when provisions of the Homeland Security Act of 2002 transferred the facility to DHS. Under an interagency agreement, USDA continues to work on foreign animal diseases at the island.

[34]GAO, *Plum Island Animal Disease Center: DHS and USDA Are Successfully Coordinating Current Work, but Long-Term Plans Are Being Assessed*, GAO-06-132 (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 19, 2005).

accountability and can speed decision making. For example, as we reported in 2007, under the National Pandemic Strategy and Implementation Plan, HHS and DHS share leadership responsibilities for pandemic response. In a pandemic, HHS is responsible for areas such as the public health response, while DHS is responsible for areas such as border security and critical infrastructure protection.[35] In 2007, we reported that it was unclear from the strategy and plan how this shared leadership model would be implemented. In that regard, we recommended that HHS and DHS clarify these roles through tests and exercises. As we reported in 2011, these tests and exercises had not occurred at the start of the H1N1 pandemic and we found that HHS and DHS were not able to effectively coordinate their release of information to state and local governments. Once it became clear that the H1N1 pandemic required primarily a public health response, HHS had responsibility for most of the key activities.[36] However, one expert said that centralized leadership is not always the best model, particularly when the collaboration needs to have buy-in from more than one agency. By sharing leadership, agencies can convey their support for the collaborative effort.

Top-level Commitment: Influence of leadership can be strengthened by a direct relationship with the President, Congress, and/or other high-level officials. According to a number of former practitioners we interviewed, their association with the President, members of Congress, or other high-level officials enabled them to influence individuals and organizations within the federal government to collaborate with one another. As we reported in 2008, Department of Energy officials said to us that the fact that the Hydrogen Fuel Initiative was a presidential initiative with congressional backing helped Hydrogen Fuel Initiative managers garner support from industry and within the federal government. Our subsequent work found that the Hydrogen Fuel Initiative worked well as an interagency effort for a number of years and research and development progressed rapidly. However, as one agency official noted, when congressional funding and presidential support waned, so did the

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[35]GAO, *Influenza Pandemic: Further Efforts Are Needed to Ensure Clearer Federal Leadership Roles and an Effective National Strategy*, GAO-07-781 (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 14, 2007).

[36]GAO-11-632.

program.[37] In developing the interim federal government priority goals required under GPRAMA, a majority of the goal leaders designated by OMB are in the Executive Office of the President, which provides a direct connection to the President.

Continuity in Leadership: Given the importance of leadership to any collaborative effort, transitions and inconsistent leadership can weaken the effectiveness of any collaborative mechanism. As we illustrate below, lack of continuity is a frequent issue with presidential advisors or mechanisms that are tied to the Executive Office of the President, particularly when administrations change. As we reported in 2011, the future of the presidentially-appointed Food Safety Working Group was uncertain. We explained that this uncertainty was based on the experience of the former President's Council on Food Safety, the predecessor to the Food Safety Working Group, which was disbanded less than 3 years after it was created.[38] According to the Congressional Research Service, presidential advisors—who are frequently responsible for collaboration around a singular issue—are rarely replaced after they vacate a position, which can leave a void in leadership around an issue. Our prior reports have identified other cases where leadership changed—or was briefly absent—and accordingly, the mechanism either disappeared or became less useful.

Clarity of Roles and Responsibilities

Issues to Consider:

- Have participating agencies clarified the roles and responsibilities of the participants?
- Have participating agencies articulated and agreed to a process for making and enforcing decisions?

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[37]GAO, *Hydrogen Fuel Initiative: DOE Has Made Important Progress and Involved Stakeholders but Needs to Update What It Expects to Achieve by Its 2015 Target,* GAO-08-305 (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 11, 2008).

[38]GAO, *Federal Food Safety Oversight: Food Safety Working Group Is a Positive First Step but Governmentwide Planning Is Needed to Address Fragmentation,* GAO-11-289 (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 18, 2011).

Clarity can come from agencies working together to define and agree on their respective roles and responsibilities, as well as steps for decision making. We reported in 2009, that as part of the Partnership for

Sustainable Communities, HUD and the Department of Transportation started to define and agree on their respective roles and responsibilities. As part of this effort, the agencies began to clarify who will do what, identified how to organize their joint and individual efforts, and articulated steps for decision making. For example, the Department of Transportation and HUD planned to give responsibility to HUD to administer the Regional Integrated Planning Grants program. They also agreed that HUD would assume this responsibility in consultation with the Department of Transportation, the Environmental Protection Agency, and other federal agencies.[39]

Clarity about roles and responsibilities can be codified through laws, policies, memorandum of understanding, or other requirements. For example, as we reported in 2012, in enacting the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004, Congress included a provision requiring the Director of National Intelligence to prescribe mechanisms to facilitate the rotation of intelligence community personnel to other intelligence community elements during their careers.[40] Amongst other duties, the law requires the Director to encourage and facilitate assignments and details of personnel to national intelligence centers, and to set standards for educating, training, and career development of

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[39] GAO, *Affordable Housing in Transit-Oriented Development: Key Practices Could Enhance Recent Collaboration Efforts between DOT-FTA and HUD*, GAO-09-871 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 9, 2009).

[40] For purposes of this report, references to the intelligence community elements include the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence, the Defense Security Service, and other intelligence community components, which are subject to the Joint Duty Program requirement. Although the Defense Security Service is technically not part of the intelligence community, it is also included in our scope because Defense Security Service civilian personnel fall under the Under Secretary for Defense for Intelligence and are subject to the Joint Duty Program requirement.

personnel within the intelligence community.[41] Experts emphasized that it is helpful to use existing authorities whenever possible.

Participants

> **Issues to Consider:**
>
> - Have all relevant participants been included?
> - Do the participants have:
>   - Full knowledge of the relevant resources in their agency?
>   - The ability to commit these resources?
>   - The ability to regularly attend activities of the collaborative mechanism?
>   - The appropriate knowledge, skills, and abilities to contribute?

It is important to ensure that the relevant participants have been included in the collaborative effort. This can include other federal agencies, state and local entities, and organizations from the private and nonprofit sectors. Experts said that it is helpful when the participants in a collaborative mechanism have full knowledge of the relevant resources in their agency; the ability to commit these resources and make decisions on behalf of the agency; the ability to regularly attend all activities of the collaborative mechanism; and the knowledge, skills, and abilities to contribute to the outcomes of the collaborative effort.

For example, we reported in 2010 that even when the Federal Emergency Management Agency's Long-Term Community Recovery Branch did have the right agencies at the table, their efforts were limited when they did not have the right staff to resolve policy and program challenges. One of the reasons for this challenge was that interagency coordination meetings did not always include agency officials with a sufficient level of authority to resolve the challenges that the group identified.[42] In another example, as we reported in 2008, to ensure appropriate authority inside each agency for making hydrogen-related budget and policy decisions during

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[41]Pub. L. No. 108-458, § 1011, 118 Stat. 3638, 3644-55 (Dec. 17, 2004) (amending § 102A of the National Security Act of 1947, as codified at 50 U.S.C. § 403-1). GAO, *Intelligence Community Personnel: Strategic Approach and Training Requirements Needed to Guide Joint Duty Program*, GAO-12-679 (Washington, D.C.: June 20, 2012).

[42]GAO-10-404.

meetings, the Hydrogen and Fuel Cell Technical Advisory Committee recommended in October 2006 that the participants of the Interagency Working Group be elevated to require participation of an assistant secretary or higher. In response, the Department of Energy created the Interagency Task Force—a new entity composed of deputy assistant secretaries, program directors, and other senior officials.[43]

Resources

> **Issues to Consider:**
>
> - How will the collaborative mechanism be funded? If interagency funding is needed, is it permitted?
> - If interagency funding is needed and permitted, is there a means to track funds in a standardized manner?
> - How will the collaborative mechanism be staffed?
> - Are there incentives available to encourage staff or agencies to participate?
> - If relevant, do agencies have compatible technological systems?
> - Have participating agencies developed online tools or other resources that facilitate joint interactions?

Collaborating agencies should identify the human, information technology, physical, and financial resources needed to initiate or sustain their collaborative effort.[44] Many experts have emphasized that collaboration can take time and resources in order to accomplish such activities as building trust among the participants, setting up the ground rules for the process, attending meetings, conducting project work, and monitoring and evaluating the results of work performed. Consequently, it is important for groups to ensure that they identify and leverage sufficient funding to accomplish the objectives.[45] As noted below, in some instances specific congressional authority may be necessary in order to provide for the interagency funding of collaborative mechanisms.

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[43]GAO-08-305.

[44]GAO-06-15.

[45]GAO-08-262.

Funding

While not all collaborative mechanisms raise funding considerations, our work does point to a range of authorities that have been used for funding them. The National Defense Authorization Act required VA and the Department of Defense (DOD) to establish the Joint Incentive Fund[46] program to identify and provide incentives for creative coordination and sharing initiatives at the facility, regional, and national levels.[47] To facilitate the incentive program, Congress established a U.S. Treasury account to fund the Joint Incentive Fund activities and required DOD and VA each to contribute a minimum of $15 million each year to the account. This program is authorized through September 2015.[48] Additionally, as we reported in 2011, in the case of the 2009 H1N1 influenza pandemic, Congress appropriated more than $6 billion in direct and contingent funding into an HHS emergency fund in order to prepare for and respond to an influenza pandemic.[49] This appropriation contained authority for the Secretary of HHS to transfer funds to other HHS accounts and to other federal agencies, which the Secretary used to transfer funds to the Departments of Defense, Veterans Affairs, State, and Agriculture to assist with the response.[50]

In another example, as we reported in 2007, Federal Executive Boards (FEBs) are supported by a host agency, usually the agency with the greatest number of employees in the region. These host agencies provide varying levels of staffing, usually one or two full-time positions—an executive director and an executive assistant. Some agencies also temporarily detail employees to the FEB staff to assist their local boards and to provide developmental opportunities for their employees. Additionally, the FEBs are supported by member agencies through contribution of funds as well as in-kind support, such as office space,

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[46]Bob Stump National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2003, Pub. L. No. 107-314, § 721, 116 Stat. 2458, 2589-95 (Dec. 2, 2002), required VA and DOD to establish a joint incentive program, which is administered by the Department of Veterans Affairs-Department of Defense Joint Executive Committee, under procedures jointly prescribed by the two Secretaries. VA and DOD refer to this as the Joint Incentive Fund program.

[47]GAO, *VA and DOD Health Care: Opportunities to Maximize Resource Sharing Remain*, GAO-06-315 (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 20, 2006).

[48]See, 38 U.S.C. § 8111(d).

[49]Supplemental Appropriations Act, 2009, Pub. L. No. 111-32, 123 Stat. 1859, 1884-86 (June 24, 2009).

[50]GAO-11-632.

personal computers, telephone lines, and Internet access.[51] We noted in our report that FEBs had previously been limited in the methods available to fund operations because of the governmentwide restriction against interagency financing of boards, commissions, councils, committees, and similar groups without statutory approval. Under this restriction, it was permissible for one participant agency with a primary interest in the success of the interagency venture to pay the entire cost of supporting the functions and administration of the group, but it was not permissible to support the group through cash and in-kind support from participating agencies.[52] FEBs were exempted from this restriction in 1996, which then permitted the interagency financing through member agency contributions of funds and in-kind support.[53]

In addition, working capital funds have been used to finance the sharing/leveraging of business-like services between agencies. As we reported in 2010, the National Institute for Standards and Technology (NIST) serves as the focal point for conducting scientific research and developing measurements, standards, and related technologies in the federal government.[54] In 1950, Congress established NIST's working capital fund, giving the agency broad statutory authority to use the fund to support any activities NIST is authorized to undertake as an agency. NIST's working capital fund is a type of intragovernmental revolving fund. These funds—which include franchise, supply, and working capital funds—finance business-like operations. An intragovernmental revolving fund charges for the sale of products or services it provides and uses the proceeds to finance its operations. In another example, as we reported in 2011, federal customer agencies use the Department of the Census' nationwide polling structure, expertise, and address lists, which would

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[51]GAO, *The Federal Workforce: Additional Steps Needed to Take Advantage of Federal Executive Boards' Ability to Contribute to Emergency Operations*, GAO-07-515 (Washington, D.C.: May 4, 2007).

[52]65 Comp. Gen. 689 (1986) and 67 Comp. Gen. 27 (1987).

[53]Omnibus Consolidated Appropriations Act, Pub. L. No. 104-208, § 613, 110 Stat. 3009, 3009-356 (1996).

[54]GAO, *Intergovernmental Revolving Funds: NIST's Interagency Agreements and Workload Require Management Attention*, GAO-11-41 (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 20, 2010).

otherwise be uneconomical for them to replicate on their own.[55] For example, Census supports HUD's American Housing Survey by gathering information on the size and composition of the housing inventory in the United States.[56]

Regardless of the funding model used, participating agencies need to find compatible methods for tracking funds for accountability. For example, the Mérida Initiative is a partnership between the United States and Mexico to combat narcotics. As we noted in a December 2009 report, tracking funds for the Mérida Initiative was difficult because each of the three bureaus in the Department of State managing Mérida funds had a different method for tracking the money. Each bureau used different budgeting terms as well as separate spreadsheets for the Mérida funds it administered, and the State Department had no consolidated database for these funds.[57]

Staffing

Related collaborative mechanisms: Personnel details and joint budgeting and funding.

Relying on agencies to participate can present challenges for collaborative mechanisms. In cases where staff participation was insufficient, collaboration often failed to meet key objectives and achieve intended outcomes. According to experts, establishing "win-win" arrangements, and aligning incentives to reward participation, makes individuals and organizations more likely to participate in collaborative arrangements, particularly in cases where participation is voluntary. In a March 2012 report, we identified a number of individual incentives that can be used to bolster participation in collaborative efforts, such as:

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[55]GAO, *Intragovernmental Revolving Funds: Commerce Departmental and Census Working Capital Funds Should Better Reflect Key Operating Principles*, GAO-12-56 (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 18, 2011).

[56]Federal agencies are prohibited by law from transferring funds from one agency to another, unless otherwise authorized by law. The Economy Act of 1932 authorizes a federal agency to provide goods or services to another federal agency and generally provides authority for federal agencies to enter into intragovernmental transactions when no other, more specific, authority applies. However, the Economy Act restricts flexibility by requiring the client agency to deobligate fiscal year funds at the end of the period of availability to the extent that these funds have not been obligated by the performing agency.

[57]GAO, *Status of Funds for the Mérida Initiative,* GAO-10-253R (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 3, 2009).

- Factoring participation into promotion decisions: Personnel may be encouraged to participate in collaborative programs if agencies factor interagency experience into their promotion decisions.[58]

- Providing public recognition: In addition to providing incentives through performance management systems, agencies can publicly acknowledge or reward participants in other ways. For example, agencies could confer awards to individuals who exhibit exemplary teamwork skills or accomplishments during an interagency rotation.[59]

Technology

This key feature is related to the collaboration practice:

- Establish compatible policies, procedures, and other means to operate across agency boundaries.

  Related collaborative mechanism: Collaboration technologies.

We identified a number of technological applications that agencies are using to enhance and sustain joint activities. Specifically, agencies have developed information-sharing websites, integrated electronic reporting processes and procedures, and negotiated data-sharing arrangements. For example, the Department of Defense's National Center for Medical Intelligence hosts an encrypted information-sharing portal called Wildfire that is intended for use by members of the Biosurveillance Indications and Warnings Analytic Community, which is a self-governing interagency body, composed of federal officials who are responsible for pursuing a biosurveillance mission.[60] Second, we reported in 2012, that HHS, the Department of Education, the Department of Justice, and the White House, established a central federal website (http://www.stopbullying.gov), which was launched in March 2011 at the White House conference on bullying. The central website sought to consolidate the content of different federal sites into one location to provide free materials to the public.[61] Third, we reported in 2012, that HHS and VA have been working to make their homelessness programs'

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[58]The Interagency Personnel Rotation Act of 2011, pending before the Senate and House, would encourage interagency rotations by requiring interagency experience for national security and homeland security personnel prior to promotion to certain senior positions. The purpose of this act is to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the government by fostering greater interagency experience among executive branch personnel on national security and homeland security matters involving more than one agency. See S. 1268 and H.R. 2314.

[59]GAO-12-386.

[60]GAO, *Biosurveillance: Developing a Collaboration Strategy Is Essential to Fostering Interagency Data and Resource Sharing*, GAO-10-171 (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 18, 2009).

[61]GAO, *School Bullying: Extent of Legal Protections for Vulnerable Groups Needs to Be More Fully Assessed*, GAO-12-349 (Washington, D.C.: May 29, 2012).

data systems compatible with HUD's as part of their work with the Interagency Council on Homelessness.[62]

Written Guidance and Agreements

> **Issues to Consider:**
>
> - If appropriate, have the participating agencies documented their agreement regarding how they will be collaborating? A written document can incorporate agreements reached in any or all of the following areas:
>   - Leadership;
>   - Accountability;
>   - Roles and responsibilities; and
>   - Resources.
> - Have participating agencies developed ways to continually update or monitor written agreements?

This key feature is related to:

■ All of our collaboration practices.

Our prior work found that agencies that articulate their agreements in formal documents can strengthen their commitment to working collaboratively.[63] As we have previously reported, having a clear and compelling rationale to work together—such as that described above—is a key factor in successful collaborations. Agencies can overcome significant differences when such a rationale and commitment exist.[64]

Not all collaborative arrangements need to be documented through written guidance and agreements, particularly those that are informal. However, we have found that at times it can be helpful to document key agreements related to the collaboration. One expert we interviewed stated that the action of two agencies articulating a common outcome and roles and responsibilities into a written document was a powerful tool in collaboration. Accordingly, we have recommended many times that collaborations would benefit from a formal written agreement, such as a memorandum of understanding (MOU). For example, in 2008, we

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[62]GAO-12-491.

[63]GAO-06-15.

[64]GAO, *Next Generation Air Transportation: Collaborative Efforts with European Union Generally Mirror Effective Practices, but Near-Term Challenges Could Delay Implementation*, GAO-12-48 (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 3, 2011).

recommended that the Chairman of the Council on Environmental Quality, working with the Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior, direct an interagency task force to identify goals, actions, responsible work groups and agencies, and time frames for carrying out the actions needed to implement the Cooperative Conservation Initiative, including collaborative resource management, and document these through a written plan, memorandum of understanding, or other appropriate means.[65] This recommendation was implemented in January of 2009 when the Council on Environmental Quality, and other departments involved in cooperative conservation, signed an MOU to create a framework for collaborative resource management.

We have also reported that written agreements are most effective when they are regularly updated and monitored. For example, we reported in 2008, that the Small Business Administration (SBA) and the Rural Development offices of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (Rural Development) entered into an MOU in 2000 that provided an approach to collaborate on rural lending activities.[66] The MOU expired in 2003 and SBA and Rural Development did not appear to have implemented the MOU when it was active. We found that the ineffective implementation of the MOU had likely contributed to the sporadic and limited amount of collaboration that was taking place between the two agencies.

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[65]GAO-08-262.

[66]GAO, *Rural Economic Development: Collaboration between SBA and USDA Could Be Improved*, GAO-08-1123 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 18, 2008).

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees and other interested parties. In addition, this report is available at no charge on the GAO website at http://www.gao.gov.

If you or your staff members have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-6806 or mihmj@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report are listed in enclosure IV.

Sincerely yours,

J. Christopher Mihm
Managing Director, Strategic Issues

Appendix I: Scope and Methodology

To identify mechanisms that the federal government uses to lead and implement interagency collaboration as well as issues to consider when implementing these mechanisms we conducted a literature review of academic work, interviewed a number of experts in governmental collaboration, and analyzed a sample of our prior work.

Specifically, we conducted a literature review of scholarly and peer-reviewed articles, as well as magazine and journal articles. The review relied on Internet search databases to identify literature published or issued between January 2006, and August 2011. The search of the published research databases produced 75 articles. We reviewed these articles to further determine the extent to which they were relevant to our engagement, that is, whether they discussed approaches used by the federal government to lead and implement interagency collaboration or provided definitions of collaborative governance or interagency collaboration. We found that 24 (32 percent) of these documents were relevant to our objectives. Specifically, 11 articles discussed mechanisms used by the federal government to lead and implement interagency collaboration, 5 articles provided definitions of collaborative governance or interagency collaboration, and 8 articles discussed the benefits and challenges of a specific interagency collaborative approach. The remainder of the documents did not meet our criteria because they discussed public-private partnerships, collaboration between state and local government agencies, or collaboration between foreign government agencies.

To identify experts and practitioners in the field of collaboration, we reviewed the bibliographies of 11 articles from our sample of 24 articles we determined were relevant to our objectives. In addition, we identified a number of experts and practitioners who had recently published work on governmental collaboration, or who had implemented collaborative mechanisms in the federal government. We then judgmentally selected a total of 13 experts and practitioners for interviews. Specifically, we selected 8 academic experts in the area of collaboration based on citations in the research literature, and the recommendations of other experts. We selected 5 practitioners based on the range and depth of their experience in implementing federal collaboration undertakings, and the recommendations of other experts. Our list of experts covered a range of academic institutions, think tanks, and professional organizations such as the National Academy of Public Administration. Below we list the experts and practitioners we interviewed:

Experts and Practitioners Interviewed

Robert Agranoff – Professor Emeritus, Indiana University

Eugene Bardach – Professor Emeritus, University of California, Berkeley

G. Edward DeSeve – Former Special Advisor to the President for Recovery Implementation

Heather Getha-Taylor – Assistant Professor, University of Kansas

Dwight Ink – President Emeritus, Institute of Public Administration and Fellow of the National Academy of Public Administration

Frederick Kaiser – Congressional Research Service (retired)

John Koskinen – Former Deputy Director for Management of the Office of Management and Budget and Chair of the President's Council on Year 2000 Conversion

Janine O'Flynn – Associate Professor, Australian National University

Rosemary O'Leary – Professor, Syracuse University

Stephen Page – Associate Professor, University of Washington

Barbara Romzek – Professor, University of Kansas

Ronald Sanders – Former Chief Human Capital Officer, Office of the Director of National Intelligence

Thomas Stanton – Member of the Board of Directors, National Academy of Public Administration, and Fellow of the Center for the Study of American Government at Johns Hopkins University

We conducted in-depth interviews with each expert using a standard set of questions. We asked them to comment on a draft list of mechanisms and discussed key issues to consider in implementing collaborative mechanisms. We supplemented the information we received during the interview with information that had been published by the experts. We also met with staff from the Congressional Research Service, who have studied presidential advisors.

Additionally, we conducted an analysis of our prior reports that addressed collaborative mechanisms and key implementation issues. To do this we

first selected a judgmental sample of reports that were published between January 2005 and August 2011 that contained detailed information regarding collaborative mechanisms. During this search, we identified over 200 reports. In order to reduce the size of the sample, we selected reports that met two or more of the following criteria:

- discussed collaboration between more than one federal department,

- included a mechanism for collaboration, and

- provided an in-depth discussion of the collaborative mechanism.

To make our final selection, we identified reports that we generally agreed met the criteria and reached agreement over selection of reports when there was disagreement. To refine the sample and ensure that we covered collaboration across the federal government, we divided the reports by topic area, and selected reports to ensure that each area was covered. The reports fell into the topic areas listed in table 1:

Table 1: Topic Areas Covered in Report Sample

International Affairs	Homeland Security
National Defense	Government Operations
Science, Space, and Technology	Justice and Law Enforcement
Health	Veterans Affairs
Natural Resources	Information Management
Agriculture and Food	Financial Management
Environmental Protection	Transportation
Energy	Economic Development
Housing	Business, Industry, and Consumers
Income Security	Education
Social Services	

Source: GAO.

We assessed the depth of each report's discussion on collaborative mechanisms, and constructed a sample to ensure representation of the range of categories above and mechanism types. In total, we selected 36 reports that met our criteria.

To identify our final list of collaborative mechanisms, we reviewed the 36 reports in our sample to identify all of the mechanisms, and variations of the mechanisms, that were included. We then organized and grouped the

mechanisms according to the main types that we found in our review. For example, we identified three distinct mechanisms that involved positions and personnel details, including interagency collaborator positions, liaisons, and personnel details between agencies. Our goal was to identify and understand the major mechanisms that have been reported in academic literature and our prior work that have examined interagency collaboration. As a result, we did not attempt to identify all possible collaborative mechanisms. After developing a draft list of mechanisms, we shared it with our collaboration experts and practitioners to gather their feedback and identify any additional mechanisms, as discussed above. Five experts agreed that our list of mechanisms was complete, and we made a number of technical changes to the list based on the feedback we received.

This engagement had two phases, which required some updating of the sample to include more recent reports. As a result, we used the GAO database to find an additional 100 reports, which were published between August 2011 and June 2012. This brought the total number of reports in our sample to 300. Through this process, we selected an additional 9 reports of the 100, which brought the total number of reports we reviewed to 45. We did not add any mechanisms or key features to the list as a result of this judgmental sample. We relied on this sample to supplement the analysis of key issues to consider in implementing the interagency collaborative mechanisms.

To identify the purposes for which collaborative mechanisms can be used, we reviewed our sample of academic literature, discussed the purposes of interagency collaboration in our interviews with experts, and analyzed our judgmental sample of prior work. We found that academic experts and practitioners have used a variety of methods to categorize the purposes of collaborative mechanisms. The purposes we identified in our analysis are supported by a number of experts and our prior work.

To identify the categories of the issues for consideration, we identified issues that had been raised in expert interviews and the reports that we reviewed. We selected and organized the issues into the key features that we present in this report based on factors such as the number of times issues were raised, the importance experts attached to issues, and the evidence of their importance that we found in prior GAO work. Additionally, where possible, we looked for areas where there was overlap between the issues that we identified and the practices that we identified in GAO-06-15. While we have generally found that when agencies address as many of these issues as possible it leads to more

effective implementation of the collaborative mechanisms, we also recognize that there is a wide range of situations and circumstances in which agencies work together. Consequently, in some cases, addressing a few selected issues may be sufficient for effective collaboration.

We conducted our work from July 2011 to September 2012 in accordance with all sections of GAO's Quality Assurance Framework that are relevant to our objectives. The framework requires that we plan and perform the engagement to obtain sufficient and appropriate evidence to meet our stated objectives and to discuss any limitations in our work. We believe that the information and data obtained, and the analysis conducted, provide a reasonable basis for any findings and conclusions in this report.

Appendix II: Key Collaboration Practices

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

RESULTS-ORIENTED GOVERNMENT

Practices That Can Help Enhance and Sustain Collaboration among Federal Agencies

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.

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Appendix III: Key Issues to Consider for Implementing Interagency Collaborative Mechanisms

Outcomes and Accountability	• Have short-term and long-term outcomes been clearly defined? • Is there a way to track and monitor progress toward the short-term and long-term outcomes? • Do participating agencies have collaboration-related competencies or performance standards against which individual performance can be evaluated? • Do participating agencies have the means to recognize and reward accomplishments related to collaboration?
Bridging Organizational Cultures	• What are the missions and organizational cultures of the participating agencies? • What are the commonalities between the participating agencies' missions and cultures and what are some potential challenges? • Have participating agencies developed ways for operating across agency boundaries? • Have participating agencies agreed on common terminology and definitions?
Leadership	• Has a lead agency or individual been identified? • If leadership will be shared between one or more agencies, have roles and responsibilities been clearly identified and agreed upon? • How will leadership be sustained over the long-term?
Clarity of Roles and Responsibilities	• Have participating agencies clarified the roles and responsibilities of the participants? • Have participating agencies articulated and agreed to a process for making and enforcing decisions?
Participants	• Have all relevant participants been included? • Do the participants have: • Full knowledge of the relevant resources in their agency?

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- The ability to commit these resources?

- The ability to regularly attend activities of the collaborative mechanism?

- The appropriate knowledge, skills, and abilities to contribute?

Resources	• How will the collaborative mechanism be funded? If interagency funding is needed, is it permitted?

Resources
- How will the collaborative mechanism be funded? If interagency funding is needed, is it permitted?

- If interagency funding is needed and permitted, is there a means to track funds in a standardized manner?

- How will the collaborative mechanism be staffed?

- Are there incentives available to encourage staff or agencies to participate?

- If relevant, do agencies have compatible technological systems?

- Have participating agencies developed online tools or other resources that facilitate joint interactions?

Written Guidance and Agreements
- If appropriate, have the participating agencies documented their agreement regarding how they will be collaborating? A written document can incorporate agreements reached in any or all of the following areas:

  - Leadership;

  - Accountability;

  - Roles and responsibilities; and

  - Resources.

- Have participating agencies developed ways to continually update or monitor written agreements?

Appendix IV: GAO Contacts and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

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Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, Sarah Veale, Assistant Director, and Mallory Barg Bulman, Analyst-in-Charge, supervised the development of this report. Peter Beck, Martin De Alteriis, Don Kiggins, and Jasmin Paikattu made significant contributions to all aspects of this report. Karin Fangman provided legal counsel.