



February 2014

MANAGING FOR RESULTS

Implementation Approaches Used to Enhance Collaboration in Interagency Groups

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-14-220](#), a report to congressional addressees

Why GAO Did This Study

Many of the meaningful results that the federal government seeks to achieve require the coordinated efforts of more than one federal agency, level of government, or sector. The GPRAM Modernization Act of 2010 (GPRAMA) takes a more crosscutting and integrated approach to improving government performance. GPRAMA requires that GAO periodically review implementation of the law. As a part of a series of reports responding to this requirement, GAO assessed how interagency groups addressed the central collaboration challenges identified in its prior work of 1) defining outcomes; 2) measuring performance and ensuring accountability; 3) establishing leadership approaches; and 4) using resources, such as funding, staff, and technology.

GAO selected four interagency groups that met its key practices for enhancing and sustaining collaboration to learn about the approaches they used and found to be successful. These groups addressed issues of homelessness, reentry of former inmates into society, rental housing policy, and the education of military dependent students. To identify successful approaches, GAO reviewed agency documents, and interviewed agency officials that participated in these groups. Additionally, GAO convened recipients of the Presidential Distinguished Rank Award, who had experience with interagency collaboration. GAO is not making any recommendations in this report. GAO shared a draft of this report with key agencies that participated in the interagency groups GAO reviewed. The agencies either had no comments or provided technical comments, which GAO incorporated as appropriate.

View [GAO-14-220](#). For more information, contact J.Christopher Mihm at (202) 512-6806 or mihmj@gao.gov.

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Implementation Approaches Used to Enhance Collaboration in Interagency Groups

What GAO Found

The interagency groups GAO selected and expert practitioners—including those who received the Presidential Distinguished Rank Award—have used a range of approaches to address some of the key considerations for implementing interagency collaborative mechanisms, related to defining outcomes; measuring performance and ensuring accountability; establishing leadership approaches; and using resources, such as funding, staff, and technology.

Implementation Approaches Used by Select Interagency Groups

Key Considerations for Implementing Interagency Collaborative Mechanisms	Implementation Approaches from Select Interagency Groups
Outcomes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Have short-term and long-term outcomes been clearly defined? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Started group with most directly affected participants and gradually broadened to others. Conducted early outreach to participants and stakeholders to identify shared interests. Held early in-person meetings to build relationships and trust. Identified early wins for the group to accomplish. Developed outcomes that represented the collective interests of participants. Developed a plan to communicate outcomes and track progress. Revisited outcomes and refreshed interagency group.
Accountability <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is there a way to track and monitor progress? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Developed performance measures and tied them to shared outcomes. Identified and shared relevant agency performance data. Developed methods to report on the group's progress that are open and transparent. Incorporated interagency group activities into individual performance expectations.
Leadership <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Designated group leaders exhibited collaboration competencies. Ensured participation from high-level leaders in regular, in-person group meetings and activities. Rotated key tasks and responsibilities when leadership of the group was shared. Established clear and inclusive procedures for leading the group during initial meetings. Distributed leadership responsibility for group activities among participants.
Resources <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How will the collaborative mechanism be funded? How will the collaborative mechanism be staffed? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Created an inventory of resources dedicated towards interagency outcomes. Leveraged related agency resources toward the group's outcomes. Pilot tested new collaborative ideas, programs, or policies before investing resources.

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Abbreviations

DOD	Department of Defense
DOJ	Department of Justice
DPC	Domestic Policy Council
ECQs	executive core qualifications
Education	Department of Education
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
Labor	Department of Labor
MOU	memorandum of understanding
MOU Working Group	DOD and Education MOU Working Group
OMB	Office of Management and Budget
PHA	public housing authorities
Reentry Council	Federal Interagency Reentry Council
TANF	Temporary Assistance for Needy Families
Treasury	Department of the Treasury
USDA	U.S. Department of Agriculture
USICH	U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness
VA	Department of Veterans Affairs

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February 14, 2014

Congressional Addressees

Many of the meaningful results that the federal government seeks to achieve, such as those related to protecting food and agriculture and providing homeland security, require the coordinated efforts of more than one federal agency, level of government, or sector. However, agencies face a range of challenges and barriers when they attempt to work collaboratively. The need for improved collaboration has been highlighted throughout our work over many years, in particular in two bodies of work. First, our reports over the past three years identified more than 80 areas where opportunities exist for executive branch agencies or Congress to reduce fragmentation, overlap, and duplication.¹ We found that resolving many of these issues requires better collaboration among agencies. Second, collaboration and improved working relationships across agencies are fundamental to many of the issues that we have designated as high risk due to their vulnerabilities to fraud, waste, abuse, and mismanagement, or because they are most in need of transformation.²

The current federal budget situation poses additional challenges for agencies. Federal agencies will need to work even more closely with other agencies to leverage more limited resources to achieve their missions in the current fiscally constrained environment. The Budget Control Act of 2011, signed on August 2, 2011, established a 10-year cap on discretionary spending as part of a process to achieve more than \$2 trillion in deficit reduction.³ Spending for the major health and retirement

¹GAO, *2013 Annual Report Actions Needed to Reduce Fragmentation, Overlap, and Duplication and Achieve Other Financial Benefits*, [GAO-13-279SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 9, 2013); *2012 Annual Report Opportunities to Reduce Duplication, Overlap and Fragmentation, Achieve Savings, and Enhance Revenue*, [GAO-12-342SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 28, 2012); and *Government Operations: Opportunities to Reduce Potential Duplication in Government Programs, Save Tax Dollars, and Enhance Revenue*, [GAO-11-318SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 1, 2011).

²GAO, *High-Risk Series: An Update*, [GAO-13-283](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 14, 2013).

³Pub. L. No. 112-25, 125 Stat. 240. In December 2013, the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2013 extended the sequestration of direct spending to fiscal years 2022 and 2023 and revised discretionary spending limits established under the Budget Control Act of 2011. Pub. L. No. 113-67, div. A, title I, subtitle A, § 101, 127 Stat. 1165, 1166-69 (Dec. 26, 2013).

programs is projected to increase as a share of the gross domestic product in coming decades, putting greater pressure on the rest of the federal budget. All of these conditions will require greater scrutiny of federal efforts.

For almost two decades we have reported on agencies' missed opportunities for improved collaboration through the effective implementation of the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 (GPRA).⁴ In our 1997 assessment of the status of the implementation of GPRA, we reported that agencies faced challenges addressing crosscutting issues, which led to fragmentation and overlap.⁵ Again, we reported in 2004—more than 10 years after the enactment of GPRA—that there was an inadequate focus on addressing issues that cut across federal agencies.⁶ Now, more than 20 years since GPRA's passage, our work continues to demonstrate that the needed collaboration is not sufficiently widespread.⁷ The GPRA Modernization Act of 2010 (GPRAMA)⁸ establishes a new framework aimed at taking a more crosscutting and integrated approach to focusing on results and improving government performance. Like the original GPRA, effective implementation of GPRAMA could play an important role in clarifying desired outcomes, in addressing program performance that spans multiple organizations, and in facilitating future actions to reduce unnecessary duplication, overlap, and fragmentation.

This report is part of a series of reports under our mandate in GPRAMA to periodically examine how agencies are implementing the law. The objectives of this report are to examine how select interagency groups (such as task forces, working groups, councils, and committees): 1) defined their outcomes; 2) measured performance and ensured accountability; 3) established leadership approaches; and 4) used

⁴Pub. L. No. 103-62, 107 Stat. 285 (Aug. 3, 1993).

⁵[GAO/GGD-97-109](#).

⁶GAO, *Results-Oriented Government: GPRA Has Established a Solid Foundation for Achieving Greater Results*, [GAO-04-38](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 10, 2004).

⁷GAO, *Managing For Results: Executive Branch Should More Fully Implement the GPRA Modernization Act to Address Pressing Governance Challenges*, [GAO-13-518](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 26, 2013).

⁸Pub. L. No. 111-352, 124 Stat. 3866 (Jan. 4, 2011).

resources, such as funding, staff and technology. We focused on these key issues because we determined, based on a sample of prior work on interagency collaboration from 2005 to 2013, that they are the most common challenges that interagency groups face when collaborating. Accordingly, we wanted to identify specific implementation approaches that interagency groups have used to address these issues. We focused on interagency groups, which was the most commonly used mechanism for federal interagency collaboration that we found in our prior reports.⁹

In 2012, we reported on the multiple interagency mechanisms that the federal government uses to collaborate.¹⁰ These mechanisms included interagency groups (such as task forces, working groups, councils and committees); co-location (such as housing one or more federal agencies that collaborate on various programs in one location); and collaboration technologies (such as shared databases and web portals), among others. We found in this work that although collaborative mechanisms differed in complexity and scope, they all benefitted from certain key practices, many of which we had identified in 2005. Accordingly, in our 2012 report, we built on our past work and developed key issues for Congress and others to consider when implementing these mechanisms. Some of these key features and issues to consider are:

- **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?

⁹Although we focused on these four areas, because they were the most challenging features for interagency groups to implement, some of the approaches we identify in this report can also be useful for implementing the other key features of collaborative mechanisms, such as bridging organizational cultures, clarifying roles and responsibilities, and including relevant participants.

¹⁰GAO, *Managing for Results: Key Considerations for Implementing Interagency Collaborative Mechanisms*, [GAO-12-1022](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 27, 2012).

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- **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?

Given agencies' longstanding challenges working across organizational lines, in 2005, we identified the following practices that can help enhance and sustain collaboration among federal agencies.¹¹ (See figure 1). Appendixes I and II provide the highlights pages for these reports and Appendix III contains a list of the collaborative mechanisms we identified.

Figure 1: Practices that can help enhance and sustain collaboration among federal agencies

- 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.

Source: [GAO-06-15](#).

To identify these implementation approaches, we focused on four interagency groups, which we had documented in our prior work as successfully addressing one or more of the key considerations for implementing collaborative mechanisms. Based on a review of our prior work, we identified potential interagency groups that exhibited some of the practices to enhance and sustain collaboration.¹² We then narrowed the list of interagency groups to four groups that represented a balanced

¹¹GAO, *Results-Oriented Government: Practices That Can Help Enhance and Sustain Collaboration among Federal Agencies*, [GAO-06-15](#) (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 21, 2005).

¹²[GAO-06-15](#) and [GAO-12-1022](#).

and diverse set of characteristics, including the number of participating agencies, duration, creation vehicle (for example, through laws, etc.), and groups with both voluntary and mandated participation. Our final selection of interagency groups includes the following:

- Department of Defense (DOD) and Department of Education (Education) Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) Working Group;
- Federal Interagency Reentry Council (Reentry Council);
- Rental Policy Working Group; and the
- U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH).

More details on each of these groups can be found in the background section of this report. For each of these interagency groups, we reviewed documentation and interviewed officials from select agencies that participate in each of these groups,¹³ and the Office of Management and Budget. We also observed a Reentry Council event and a USICH meeting in order to identify potential implementation approaches. In addition, to identify collaborative leadership competencies, we reviewed relevant academic literature and relevant reports.

In addition to the illustrative examples described above, we hosted two expert practitioner panels, in coordination with the Senior Executives Association,¹⁴ to identify and discuss useful approaches for implementing interagency groups. We selected panelists who were recipients of the Presidential Distinguished Rank Award in 2011 or 2012, and had

¹³We interviewed officials from the U.S. Departments of Agriculture, Defense, Education, Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, Justice, Labor, Treasury, and Veterans Affairs, as well as the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness. We requested a meeting with the Domestic Policy Council (DPC) in the Executive Offices of the President, but DPC officials did not respond to our request for a meeting. We also interviewed a former DPC official, who was DPC's official contact when the Rental Policy Working Group was formed in 2010.

¹⁴The Senior Executives Association is a nonprofit professional association that promotes ethical and dynamic public service by fostering an outstanding career executive corps, advocates the interests of career federal executives (both active and retired), and provides information and services to members, according to its website: <http://www.seniorexecs.org/> (accessed December 17, 2013).

experience leading or participating in interagency groups.¹⁵ We invited these panelists to share their perspectives on interagency groups; we did not ask them to speak on behalf of the federal agencies or organizations that these participants represent or represented. A list of the expert practitioners we interviewed is in Appendix IV, which also provides more detailed information about our objectives, scope and methodology.

Based on our interviews with interagency group participants and expert practitioners, we identified approaches that more than one group used to address each of the selected key issues of outcomes, accountability, leadership, and resources. We note that our findings rest on the examples we reviewed and the practitioners we interviewed and thus may not be applicable to all interagency groups. For example, in this report, we focus on interagency groups that are not established to respond to an emergency event, which academic and public policy experts have noted requires a different type of collaboration than during emergencies.

We conducted this performance audit from November 2012 to February 2014 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Background

Interagency Groups

The four interagency groups we reviewed possessed varied characteristics related to their purposes and outcomes, leadership structures, agency participation, and funding sources and staffing, as discussed in more detail below.

¹⁵Each year, the Presidential Distinguished Rank Award recognizes no more than one percent of career Senior Executive Service members who demonstrated, “extraordinary long term achievements” in program results or executive leadership. The nominating criteria for these awards specify that, among other things, the senior executive has demonstrated his or her ability to partner with stakeholders inside and outside the organization. We held individual interviews with experts who were unable to attend the panel discussions.

DOD and Education MOU
Working Group

We reported in 2011 that there were approximately 1.1 million school-age dependents of military parents in the United States. Because of their family situations, military dependent students may face a range of unique challenges, such as frequent moves throughout their school career and the emotional difficulties of having deployed parents.¹⁶

DOD and Education officials have a history of collaborating on education issues for children of military families. They formalized and broadened these efforts with an MOU, which they signed in June 2008. The purpose of the MOU was to establish a framework for collaboration between DOD and Education to address the quality of education and the unique challenges faced by children of military families. The MOU defined, in general terms, the basis on which these departments would work together to strengthen and expand school-based efforts to ease student transitions and help military dependent students develop academic and coping skills during periods of parental deployments. In addition, the MOU required the creation of a working group to ensure that the agencies meet the objectives of the MOU.

The DOD and Education MOU Working Group (MOU Working Group), is co-chaired by representatives from DOD's Defense Education Activity's Educational Partnership Branch and Education's Office of Innovation and Improvement, Military Liaison Team. The working group is also composed of representatives from several DOD and Education offices. The MOU Working Group has no separate budget. Working group representatives participate in working group activities as part of fulfilling their respective responsibilities at their home agencies. According to DOD and Education officials, they have made progress on a number of initiatives. For example, the Chief of the Educational Partnerships and Non-DOD School Program for DOD told us in May 2013 that 47 states had signed an interstate compact that allowed flexibility during the transfer of military dependent students across jurisdictions. It also allowed credits and course work to more easily transfer to the students' new schools.

Federal Interagency Reentry
Council

In December 2012, we reported that about 700,000 inmates are released from federal and state custody each year, and another 9 million are booked into and released from local jails, according to the Bureau of

¹⁶GAO, *Education of Military Dependent Students: Better Information Needed to Assess Student Performance*, [GAO-11-231](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 1, 2011).

Justice Statistics. Moreover, we reported that these inmates face considerable challenges as they transition into, or reenter, society after incarceration. More than two-thirds of state prisoners are rearrested for a new offense within three years of their release and about half are reincarcerated.¹⁷ In January 2011, the U.S. Attorney General convened the Reentry Council, a group of 20 federal entities whose mission is to make communities safer, assist those who return from prison and jail in becoming productive citizens, and save taxpayer dollars by lowering the direct and collateral costs of incarceration.¹⁸ The premise of the Reentry Council is that many federal agencies have a major stake in assisting former inmates or inmates preparing for release from federal, state, and local correctional facilities. The U.S. Attorney General chairs the Reentry Council's annual meeting. Also supporting the council is a staff-level working group that meets monthly.¹⁹ The Reentry Council has no separate budget, and its representatives participate in the group's activities as part of fulfilling their responsibilities at their respective agencies.

As we found in December 2012, among other accomplishments, the Reentry Council has been focused on reducing the barriers that exist for the reentry population. For example, the Reentry Council has taken several actions to address collateral consequences of criminal convictions—these are the laws and policies that restrict former inmates from things such as employment, welfare benefits, access to public housing, and eligibility for student loans for higher education. Such

¹⁷GAO, *Inmate Reentry Programs: Enhanced Information Sharing Could Further Strengthen Coordination and Grant Management*, [GAO-13-93](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 14, 2012).

¹⁸The Reentry Council is composed of the Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency; Domestic Policy Council; Federal Trade Commission; Internal Revenue Service; Office of Management and Budget; Office of National Drug Control Policy; Office of Personnel Management; the U.S. Departments of Agriculture, Education, Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, Interior, Justice, Labor, Veterans Affairs; Equal Employment Opportunity Commission; U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness; Social Security Administration; Small Business Administration; and the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships.

¹⁹DOJ leads a staff-level working group composed of officials from the Reentry Council's participant agencies that supports the Reentry Council. In particular, DOJ officials told us the staff-level working group meets monthly to support the Reentry Council by discussing plans and progress on various Reentry Council initiatives, policies, and programs.

collateral penalties place substantial barriers to an individual's social and economic advancement and can challenge successful reentry.

Rental Policy Working Group

As we reported in June 2012, during the 2007-2009 recession, the elevated unemployment rate and declining home prices worsened the financial circumstances for many families, along with their ability to make their mortgage payments. As we and the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) reported, this period coincided with a rapid increase in the percentage of loans in foreclosure and increased demand for rental housing.²⁰ In 2010, the Domestic Policy Council (DPC) established the Rental Policy Working Group, along with HUD, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), and the Department of the Treasury (Treasury), to respond to the need for better coordination of federal rental policy.²¹ We reported in August 2012 that HUD, Treasury, USDA, the Department of Labor and the Federal Home Loan Banks administered 45 programs or activities that supported rental housing in fiscal year 2010.²² DPC leads the Rental Policy Working Group meetings. This group is supported by various subgroup meetings, which are lead by the respective leads for those groups, USDA, HUD, or Treasury. The Rental Policy Working Group has no separate budget, and group representatives participate in the group's activities as part of fulfilling their responsibilities at their respective agencies.

As we discuss in more detail later, HUD official told us that, since January 2013, HUD has continued working with USDA and Treasury to implement a set of alignment recommendations that would improve coordinated government-wide oversight of subsidized rental housing properties, and reduce the administrative burden on affordable housing owners and managers. For one of those recommendations, the Rental Policy Working Group launched a pilot program in six states to test the feasibility of conducting a single, recurring physical inspection for jointly subsidized

²⁰GAO, *Foreclosure Mitigation: Agencies Could Improve Effectiveness of Federal Efforts with Additional Data Collection and Analysis*, [GAO-12-296](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 28, 2012); HUD, *Worst Case Housing Needs 2011 Report to Congress*. (Washington, D.C.: August 2013); and HUD, *Worst Case Housing Needs 2009 Report to Congress*. (Washington, D.C.: February 2011).

²¹The Rental Policy Working Group also includes the National Economic Council and the Office of Management and Budget.

²²GAO, *Housing Assistance: Opportunities Exist to Increase Collaboration and Consider Consolidation*, [GAO-12-554](#) (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 16, 2012).

U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness

rental housing properties that would satisfy all agencies' inspection requirements. According to the Rental Policy Working Group, this pilot program has avoided 120 duplicative inspections across the six states that participated in a second round of this pilot program in 2013.

According to HUD, on a single night in January 2013, approximately 610,000 people were identified as experiencing homelessness.²³ In 1987, Congress established USICH under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act as an independent establishment to among other things, monitor, evaluate and recommend improvements in programs and activities to assist homeless individuals.²⁴ In 2009, under the Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing Act (HEARTH Act), Congress directed USICH to coordinate a government-wide response to homelessness and to create a national partnership at every level of government and with the private sector, while maximizing the effectiveness of the federal government in contributing to the end of homelessness.²⁵ Currently, the heads (or their designee) of 19 federal entities participate in USICH.²⁶ USICH is supported by the Council Policy Group, which provides a regular forum for coordinating policies and programs, collecting data, developing special initiatives, and preparing recommendations for consideration by USICH members. USICH elects a chairperson and a vice chairperson from its members, and these

²³<https://www.onecpd.info/resources/documents/AHAR-2013-Part1.pdf> (accessed December 12, 2013).

²⁴USICH was established by title II of the McKinney-Vento Act, Pub. L. No. 100-77, § 201, 101 Stat. 482, 486 (July 22, 1987) as the "Interagency Council on the Homeless." In 2004, Congress renamed it the "United States Interagency Council on Homelessness." Pub. L. No. 108-199, div. G, § 216, 118 Stat. 3, 394 (Jan. 23, 2004). For more information on federal homelessness programs, see 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).

²⁵Pub. L. No. 111-22, div. B, § 1004, 123 Stat. 1632, 1666 (May 20, 2009).

²⁶The U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness includes members from the following: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Department of Commerce, DOD, Education, Department of Energy, Department of Health and Human Services, Department of Homeland Security, HUD, Department of Interior, DOJ, Department of Labor, Department of Transportation, and Department of Veterans Affairs; Corporation for National and Community Service; General Services Administration; Office of Management and Budget; Social Security Administration; Postal Service; and the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives (now known as the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships).

positions rotate among its members at the first meeting of each year. Additionally, an executive director, who is appointed by USICH member agencies and reports directly to the USICH's chairperson, manages USICH's daily activities. USICH is required by law to meet at least four times per year, although it has met more frequently. Unlike the other interagency groups we reviewed, USICH receives an appropriation from Congress and employs full-time staff.²⁷ According to HUD, the total number of people identified as experiencing homelessness on a single night has decreased by 9.2 percent between 2007 and 2013. A number of sub-populations have also demonstrated reductions in homelessness. Specifically, HUD reported that, from 2010 through 2013, the number of people experiencing chronic homelessness was reduced by more than 15 percent, and the number of homeless veterans was reduced by about 24 percent during that same period.

Select GPRA Modernization Act Requirements

GPRAMA is a significant enhancement of GPRA, which was the centerpiece of a statutory framework that Congress put in place during the 1990s to help resolve long-standing management problems in the federal government, and provide greater accountability for results. GPRA sought to focus federal agencies on performance by requiring agencies to develop long-term and annual goals—contained in strategic and annual performance plans—and measure and report on progress towards those goals annually.

In our past reviews of its implementation, we found that GPRA provided a solid foundation to achieve greater results in the federal government. However, several key governance challenges remained, including addressing crosscutting issues. To help address this and other challenges, GPRAMA revises existing provisions and adds new requirements. Some of the new provisions and requirements that emphasize collaboration include:

Cross-agency priority goals: The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) is required to coordinate with agencies to establish federal government priority goals that include outcome-oriented goals covering a limited number of policy areas, as well as goals for management

²⁷In fiscal year 2012, Congress appropriated \$3.3 million for USICH to carry out its responsibilities. In that year, USICH had 18 full-time employees, with staff based in Washington, D.C., and four regional positions.

improvements needed across the government. The act also requires that OMB—with agencies—develop annual federal government performance plans to, among other things, define the level of performance to be achieved toward the cross-agency priority goals. GPRAMA also requires that OMB identify the agencies, organizations, program activities, regulations, tax expenditures, policies, and other activities contributing to each crosscutting priority goal.²⁸

Agency priority goals: Certain agencies are required to develop a limited number of agency priority goals every two years. Both the agencies required to develop these goals and the number of goals to be developed are determined by OMB. These goals are to reflect the highest priorities of each selected agency, as identified by the head of the agency, and be informed by the cross-agency priority goals, as well as input from relevant congressional committees. GPRAMA requires agencies to identify organizations, program activities, regulations, policies, and other activities—both internal and external to the agency—that contribute to each of their agency priority goals and include this information in their performance plans and provide it to OMB for publication on Performance.gov.²⁹ In addition, OMB's 2012 guidance directs agencies to include tax expenditures in their identification of organizations and programs that contribute to their agency priority goals.³⁰

Goal leaders: For each cross-agency priority goal, OMB must identify a lead government official—referred to by OMB as a goal leader—responsible for coordinating efforts to achieve each of the goals. For agency performance goals, including agency priority goals, agencies

²⁸GAO, *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).

²⁹OMB is required to develop a single, government-wide performance website to communicate government-wide and agency performance information. The website—implemented by OMB as Performance.gov—is required to make available information on agency priority goals and cross-agency priority goals, updated on a quarterly basis; agency strategic plans, annual performance plans, and performance updates; and an inventory of all federal programs. For more information, see GAO, *Managing for Results: Leading Practices Should Guide the Continued Development of Performance.gov*, [GAO-13-517](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 6, 2013).

³⁰GAO, *Managing For Results: Agencies Should More Fully Develop Priority Goals under the GPRA Modernization Act*, [GAO-13-174](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 19, 2013).

must also designate a goal leader, who is responsible for achieving the goal.³¹

Federal program inventory: GPRAMA requires OMB to compile and make publicly available a list of all federal programs, and to include the purposes of each program, how it contributes to the agency's mission and goals, and recent funding information.

Data-driven performance reviews: GPRAMA requires data-driven performance reviews at the federal level with a provision that federal agencies conduct quarterly performance reviews on progress toward their agency priority goals.³² Specifically, agencies are required to assess how relevant programs and activities contribute to achieving agency priority goals; categorize goals by their risk of not being achieved; and for those at risk, identify strategies to improve performance. GPRAMA also specified that the reviews must occur on at least a quarterly basis and involve key leadership and other relevant parties both within and outside the agency.³³

Strategic reviews: OMB's 2013 guidance directs agencies to conduct annual strategic reviews of progress toward strategic objectives to inform their decision making, beginning in 2014.³⁴ Agency leaders are responsible for assessing progress on each strategic objective established in the agency strategic plan, including mission, as well as management or crosscutting objectives. Among other things, the reviews are intended to strengthen collaboration on crosscutting issues by identifying and addressing crosscutting challenges or fragmentation.

³¹GAO, *Managing For Results: Agencies Have Elevated Performance Management Leadership Roles, but Additional Training Is Needed*, [GAO-13-356](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 16, 2013).

³²GAO, *Managing for Results: Data-Driven Performance Reviews Show Promise But Agencies Should Explore How to Involve Other Relevant Agencies*, [GAO-13-228](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 27, 2013).

³³31 U.S.C. §1121(b).

³⁴OMB, Circular No. A-11, *Performance Plans, Performance Reviews, and Annual Program Performance Reports*. (July 2013).

Approaches Used to Develop Outcomes from Select Interagency Groups

Key Considerations for Implementing Interagency Collaborative Mechanisms	Implementation Approaches
<p>Outcomes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have short-term and long-term outcomes been clearly defined? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Started group with most directly affected participants and gradually broadened to others. • Conducted early outreach to participants and stakeholders to identify shared interests. • Held early in-person meetings to build relationships and trust. • Identified early wins for the group to accomplish. • Developed outcomes that represented the collective interests of participants. • Developed a plan to communicate outcomes and track progress. • Revisited outcomes and refreshed interagency group.

Establishing shared outcomes and goals that resonate with, and are agreed upon by all participants, is essential to achieving outcomes in interagency groups, but can also be challenging. Participants each bring different views, organizational cultures, missions, and ways of operating.³⁵ They may even disagree on the nature of the problem or issue being addressed. We identified a number of challenges in our prior work that interagency groups face when attempting to develop shared goals, including building a coalition of key federal participants, agreeing on the nature of a crosscutting issue, establishing mutually agreed-upon outcomes or objectives, and incorporating outcomes into strategic plans or implementation plans, among others. Furthermore, agency officials involved in several of the interagency groups we reviewed cautioned that if agencies don't have a vested interest in the outcomes, and if outcomes are not aligned with agency objectives, participant agencies would not invest their limited time and resources.³⁶ They told us that the process of developing shared or group outcomes takes time, requires building

³⁵GAO-06-15 and GAO-12-1022.

³⁶Agencies are prohibited from expending appropriated funds on efforts unrelated to agency objectives. Under 31 U.S.C. § 1301(a) (commonly referred to as the purpose statute), agency appropriations are only available for expenses which are necessary or incident to the accomplishment of the purpose for which the appropriation is made.

relationships, and creating trust. The following approaches were used by agency officials to avoid or address these challenges.

Started Group with Most Directly Affected Participants and Gradually Broadened to Others

We found that three of the four interagency groups we reviewed were started with a smaller group of key participants. Several expert practitioners we spoke with emphasized the importance of ensuring initial participation from agencies that have significant responsibility or interest in a crosscutting issue area. Officials reported that these early interactions helped to establish initial momentum and a vision for subsequent collaborative efforts. Over time, this smaller group of participants added agencies that had a more targeted commitment in the group's activities and outcomes. For example, prior to the formation of the Reentry Council, a core group of agencies with considerable involvement in reentry issues and programs met to discuss their common interests and the possibility of further coordinating their efforts. According to one official we spoke with, these agencies included the Departments of Labor, Justice, Veterans Affairs, Education, Housing and Urban Development, and Health and Human Services. Following a number of early interactions, and meetings between officials from these agencies, interest grew for a more formal and coordinated approach to advance effective reentry policies. Subsequently, the U.S. Attorney General convened the Reentry Council in January 2011. Over time, interest has more than doubled to include 20 federal agencies.

Conducted Early Outreach to Participants and Stakeholders to Identify Shared Interests

Agency officials in all four interagency groups we reviewed and a number of expert practitioners emphasized the importance of reaching out to potential participants and identifying shared interests. While the interagency groups we reviewed benefitted from starting with a smaller group of participants, our past work found that if collaborative efforts do not consider the input of all relevant stakeholders, important opportunities for achieving outcomes may be missed.³⁷ Officials reported that shared interests are the driving force for collaborative efforts, and collecting early input from participants was necessary to determine whether interagency collaboration would be mutually beneficial. In some cases, agency officials agreed on the nature of an issue. However in other cases, officials held conflicting perspectives. To overcome conflicting

³⁷[GAO-12-620R](#).

perspectives, participants of interagency groups conducted outreach to stakeholders to build reasonable agreement.

In one instance, USICH conducted extensive outreach to participants and stakeholders prior to developing shared interagency outcomes and a national strategic plan in 2010.³⁸ Specifically, USICH's outreach activities included feedback collected from workgroups composed of federal officials, expert practitioner panels, input from more than 750 leaders at regional stakeholder forums, focus groups, congressional staff, consumer advisory boards, and written comments from thousands of community experts and individuals.³⁹ According to documents that outlined the process for gathering stakeholder input and interviews with officials that participate in USICH, this input helped to inform the plan's priorities and strategies. In addition, participants reported that it was essential to develop a practical and evidence-based plan with on-the-ground solutions that have widespread support. Furthermore, agency officials from HUD, Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), HHS and Department of Labor (Labor), each reported that they are committed to the national strategic plan on homelessness and believe it reflects their own agency's objectives and interests.

Held Early, In-Person Meetings to Build Relationships and Trust

Three of the interagency groups we examined and both expert practitioner panels stressed the importance of holding in-person meetings during the early stages of an interagency group. They each noted that personal interactions contributed to relationship-building, which formed the foundation for all subsequent activities and helped to break down silos. These meetings also enabled officials to learn about individual perspectives and aided in the transfer of knowledge between participating agencies. In addition, officials reported that in-person interactions helped build trust and strengthen professional networks. In our past work, we found that trust is an essential element to collaborative relationships.⁴⁰

³⁸U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, *Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness* (Washington, D.C.: June 2010).

³⁹For the purposes of this report, participants are federal agencies with membership in a group, and stakeholders include non-participant federal agencies, state and local governments, non-governmental organizations, or any organization with an interest in the group's activities and outcomes.

⁴⁰[GAO-06-15](#).

We also previously found that positive working relationships between participants from different agencies bridge organizational cultures. These relationships build trust and foster communication, which facilitates collaboration.⁴¹

Other officials we spoke with emphasized the importance of building trust on an individual basis with officials from participating agencies with related policy and program responsibilities. The purpose and activities for these in-person meetings varied and included planning, negotiating agreements, and information sharing, among others. For example, participants of the Rental Policy Working Group said that when they began working together, they spent several months building relationships and understanding each agency's rental housing programs, policies, and efforts.

One expert practitioner told us that in-person meetings were essential for the Southeast Environmental Partnership for Planning and Sustainability to negotiate an agreement on environmentally acceptable procedures for controlled burns. Controlled burns, sometimes called prescribed burns, refer to the process of setting fires under controlled conditions. Initially, partnership participants had a very different view of controlled burns as an environmental activity. Officials from the Environmental Protection Agency focused on controlled burns as a contributor to air pollution, whereas officials from other federal and state agencies that conduct controlled burns, such as the Departments of the Interior, Agriculture, and Defense, viewed it as an important activity to sustain and manage land. Over time, officials from these agencies began to gain a better understanding of each other's perspectives by meeting face-to-face. This interaction built trust and allowed them to reach common ground. Ultimately, the officials who conducted controlled burns for preservation of landscape ecologies adopted methods to minimize the environmental effects of these burns. Meanwhile, officials responsible for regulating air pollution gained a better appreciation for the value of fire in ecological restoration and preservation.

Identified Early Wins for the Group to Accomplish

A number of agency officials and expert practitioners recommended that newly formed interagency groups identify and pursue "early wins" as an

⁴¹[GAO-12-1022](#).

approach to build momentum and develop positive working relationships between group participants. According to officials, “early wins” should be practical and achievable projects that can be completed in the short-term. We were told that early wins allowed officials to establish relationships with their counterparts in other agencies and enabled teams to practice working together. This approach is consistent with our prior work that identified key practices from select efficiency initiatives, which highlighted the importance of identifying easily accomplished initiatives that can generate immediate returns to gain momentum for efficiency improvements.⁴²

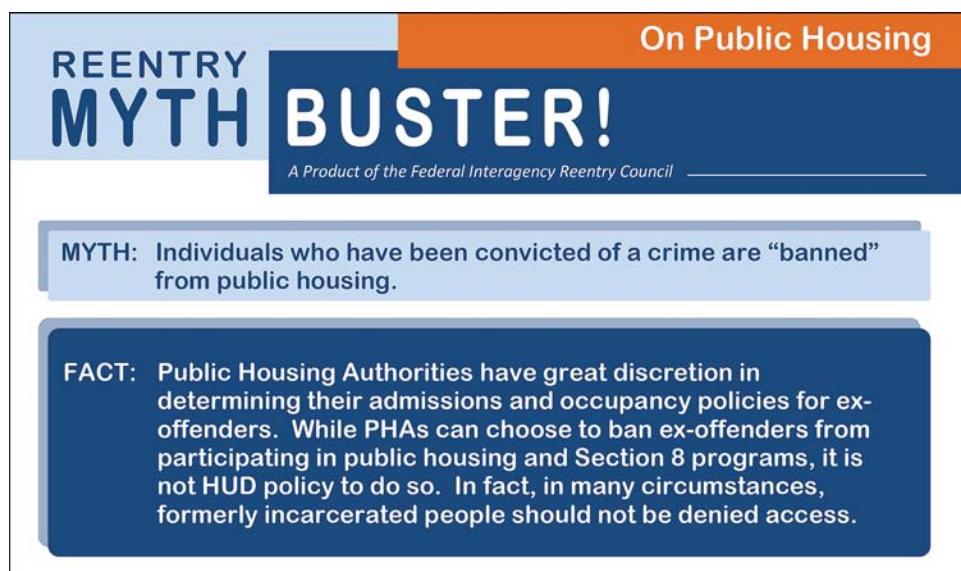
Early wins had a secondary benefit of demonstrating the benefits of collaboration. Officials from the groups reported that achieving early wins, allowed participants to build upon recent experiences, working relationships, improved knowledge of related programs, and team structures that had been established to coordinate group activities.

Participants of the Reentry Council’s staff-level working group initially employed an approach to identify “low hanging fruit” and intentionally sought early successes to build support and momentum. According to these officials, these early wins kept participants engaged and involved. For example, after forming the Reentry Council, participants agreed to participate in a “myth busting” campaign to address common misconceptions and dispel myths associated with the reentry population. According to Department of Justice (DOJ) officials, the “myth busting” campaign was implemented within existing authorities and received widespread support among participant agencies. As part of the campaign, the Council and its subcommittees developed short one or two-page whitepapers that clarified government policies, rules, and regulations related to formerly incarcerated individuals, and distributed them to stakeholders at the federal, state, and local levels. In one instance, the myth buster noted that there is a misconception that housing assistance from public housing authorities (PHA) is not generally allowable for formerly incarcerated individuals who qualify under federal guidelines (see figure 2). According to DOJ officials, a number of local housing authorities—such as New York City and New Orleans, Louisiana—have

⁴²GAO, *Streamlining Government: Key Practices from Select Efficiency Initiatives Should Be Shared Governmentwide*, [GAO-11-908](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 30, 2011).

since reconsidered admissions policies for formerly incarcerated individuals.

Figure 2: Excerpt from a Public Housing “Myth Buster” from the Reentry Council



Source: HUD.

In another example of a quick win, Reentry Council member agencies developed new policies that enhanced their ability to meet the needs of the reentry population. Specifically, DOJ officials told us that VA had previously not been permitted to conduct outreach to incarcerated veterans until six months prior to their release. According to Reentry Council documents, VA revised its administrative policy that limited prison outreach. According to these documents, the revised policy allows for assessment and release planning with incarcerated veterans earlier than six months before release, thus enhancing the odds of successful reentry to society.

Developed Goals That Represented the Collective Interests of Participants

Agency officials in two of the groups we reviewed described a process for developing goals that represented the collective interests of participants, and articulating goals a high enough level that participants could reach agreement, but with enough specificity that participants felt they had a stake in the group’s goals. For example, an official from the Reentry Council’s staff-level working group told us that they developed six goals that were intentionally crafted at a high level to attract widespread support

from participating agencies. Although broad, the goals were also focused on important issue areas and challenges that participating agencies expressed interest in addressing. The group goals included:

- identifying research- and evidence-based practices;
- identifying opportunities and barriers to improve outcomes;
- promoting statutory, policy, and practice changes to reduce crime and improve the well-being of formerly incarcerated people;
- supporting initiatives in the areas of education, employment, health, housing, faith-based reentry services, drug treatment, and family and community well-being;
- leveraging resources across agencies; and, coordinating messaging and communication about prisoner reentry.

Agency officials we spoke with said that these goals had not changed since being adopted in 2011, and are likely to remain relevant into the future.

To represent the collective interests of its participants, USICH has a policy to reach agreement among its members to ensure that all views are heard. As noted above, USICH is composed of the heads (or their designee) of 19 federal agencies. All 19 agencies have equal votes in any decisions brought before the group. USICH worked through its Council Policy Group to develop strategic interagency opportunities, built consensus, and laid the groundwork for the decisions brought before the leadership. We observed this process take place in June 2012 when USICH was considering revisions to objectives in its strategic plan.

Developed a Plan to Communicate Outcomes and Track Progress

All of the interagency groups we examined had developed formal plans or strategies that included outcomes, objectives, and descriptions of the group. We have previously reported on the importance of reinforcing agency accountability for collaborative efforts through agency plans and reports.⁴³ Our prior work found that agencies that articulate their agreements in formal documents can strengthen their commitment to working collaboratively.⁴⁴

⁴³ [GAO-06-15](#).

⁴⁴ [GAO-12-1022](#).

The DOD and Education MOU Working Group developed a strategic plan to track its progress toward objectives, actions, and measurable outcomes that fulfilled the intention of their interagency agreement. Specifically, the strategic plan was aligned to focus on areas identified in the MOU, including expanding the quality of educational opportunities for military-dependent students, overcoming challenges military-dependent students face due to transitions or deployments, collaborative use of data, and increasing awareness of relevant education-related issues. The working group's strategic plan describes the areas of mutual interest, and outlines specific objectives within these areas of interest that promote greater collaboration and improve the education of children of military families. For example, one objective calls for increasing awareness of education-related issues for military dependent children. The strategic plan provides related action items, such as development of a joint strategic communication plan, and subtasks with measurable outcomes, target audiences, and individual agency leads to promote accountability. DOD and Education officials told us that the strategic plan helped them examine and prioritize their areas of collaboration to plan for future efforts, and reflect on the extent to which they are meeting the original intent of the MOU.

Revisited Outcomes and Refreshed Interagency Group

Several expert practitioners emphasized that interagency groups should periodically revisit their outcomes, and ensure that their work is aligned with current needs. In past work, we have discussed the importance of sustainability of group leadership. However, several expert practitioners noted that the group's duration should be dictated by the nature of the outcome. In fact, the expert practitioners added that, to stay productive, many groups need to refresh their focus. If groups are not able to agree to a clear outcome, one expert practitioner noted that the group may decide to cease operating entirely. In some cases, interagency groups achieve their outcomes and can cease to meet or change focus.

In other cases, expert practitioners told us that the focus of some groups changed over time and needed to be refreshed or given a new focus for the group to continue. In the instance of the MOU Working Group, in May 2010—which was two years after the working group was formed—the President announced that an Interagency Policy Committee on Education would develop a new study directive to strengthen military families. This directive included outcomes to ensure excellence in military children's education and their development, which included:

- Improving the quality of the educational experience;
- Reducing negative impacts of frequent relocations and absences; and
- Encouraging the healthy development of military children.

These outcomes were directly related to the work of the DOD and Education MOU Working Group, which focused on improving educational outcomes for children from military families, according to DOD and Education officials. According to senior Education officials, the directive led Education to place an even greater priority on its collaborative efforts with DOD, and built upon the MOU Working Group’s strategic plan and related initiatives. The study directive provided another framework under which DOD and Education have worked together to improve the quality of education for military dependent children. DOD officials told us that, over the past two years, they have refocused on a number of new goals and emerging issues of importance. In one instance, the department has moved to focus on charter schools, with an emphasis on those in military installations, and with high concentrations of military dependent students.

Approaches for Ensuring Accountability from Select Interagency Groups

Key Considerations for Implementing Interagency Collaborative Mechanisms	Implementation Approaches
<p>Accountability</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there a way to track and monitor progress? • Do participating agencies have collaboration-related competencies or performance standards against which individual performance can be evaluated? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developed performance measures and tied them to shared outcomes. • Identified and shared relevant agency performance data. • Developed methods to report on the group’s progress that are open and transparent. • Incorporated interagency group activities into individual performance expectations.

Developed Agency Performance Measures and Tied Them to Shared Outcomes

Agencies in all of the groups we reviewed developed performance measures—or other approaches to track contributions—within their own agencies that related to the outcomes of the interagency group. However, officials explained that within interagency efforts, the commitment of individual agencies varied. This difference in commitment is reflected in the prominence of interagency group activities in the agency’s performance measures. For example, some goals of the national strategic

plan on homelessness are reflected in the agency priority goals of HUD and VA.⁴⁵

HUD and VA also have some shared performance measures. For example, the agencies have a goal related to the percent of chronically homeless veterans who are served by the HUD-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing program. This is a shared program between HUD and VA that combines housing choice voucher rental assistance for veterans experiencing homelessness provided by HUD with case management and clinical services provided by VA. Through shared performance management, coordinated technical assistance, and communication to the field, the percentage of chronically homeless veterans served by this program increased by 49 percent in fiscal year 2009 to more than 65 percent in fiscal year 2013, according to USICH.

In another instance, two agencies participating in the Reentry Council—DOJ and Labor—have developed internal agency outcomes and performance measures to track progress toward their shared outcomes. For example, DOJ has established an outcome to increase the number of inmate participants in its Residential Drug Abuse Program by 6 percent over four years from 18,500 to 19,920.⁴⁶ In contrast, while HUD officials participate in the Reentry Council, the Reentry Council's outcomes are not explicitly included in the agency's strategic plans. Nevertheless, the agency officials said to us that their participation in the Reentry Council aligned with HUD's Strategic Plan, Goal 3, which focuses on utilizing housing as a platform for improving quality of life.

In our June 2013 report on the initial implementation of GPRAMA, we found that performance information can be used across a range of

⁴⁵HUD and VA both have an agency priority goal of reducing homelessness. HUD has a goal to "in partnership with VA, reduce the number of homeless veterans to 35,000 by 2013, by serving 35,500 additional homeless veterans." VA has an agency priority goal to "assist in housing 24,400 additional homeless veterans (12,200 per year) and reduce the number of homeless veterans to 35,000 in 2013, to be measured in the January 2014 point-in-time homelessness count.

⁴⁶The Residential Drug Abuse Program is the Bureau of Prisons' most intensive drug treatment program in which participants live in a housing unit separate from the general population; participate in half-day programming and half-day work; as well as educational or vocational activities. According to the DOJ strategic plan, research has shown that inmates who complete the residential drug treatment program and those who work in prison industries while incarcerated are less likely to recidivate.

management functions to improve results, from setting program priorities and allocating resources, to taking corrective action to solve program problems.⁴⁷ Moreover, we found that, if agencies do not use performance measures and performance information to track progress toward outcomes, they may be at risk of failing to achieve their outcomes. We have found this practice also holds true for efforts between federal agencies.⁴⁸

To develop performance measures, one interagency group helped participants by creating a number of guides and toolkits to assist federal officials and stakeholders in measuring the performance of their efforts. Specifically, HUD developed and shared resources on performance measurement related to homelessness with participants from USICH. These resources both provided training on developing performance measures, and identified available HUD data sources, which agencies could use when creating performance measures.

Identified and Shared Relevant Agency Performance Data

USICH and HUD officials told us that within interagency groups, it was necessary to agree on common data sources that will be used to track performance. For example, USICH and its participants have agreed to use HUD's point-in-time count, which provides a snapshot of the number of people experiencing homelessness on a given night in America.⁴⁹ According to the point-in-time counts, the total number of people identified as experiencing homelessness on a single night declined by 9.2 percent, or from about 672,000 in 2007 to about 610,000 in 2013. Reaching agreement on a common data source for tracking homelessness was a challenging process because it required agencies to agree to common definitions of homelessness, and the methodology for collecting the data,

⁴⁷ [GAO-13-518](#).

⁴⁸ [GAO/GGD-00-106](#).

⁴⁹ Communities annually submit point-in-time estimates to HUD. The counts attempt to enumerate both unsheltered persons (those in places not meant for human habitation such as the streets, abandoned buildings, or cars) and sheltered persons (those in emergency shelter or transitional housing on the night of the point-in-time count). Communities typically conduct their counts during a 24-hour period in the last week in January when a large share of the homeless population is expected to seek shelter rather than stay outside.

which had been a long-standing problem.⁵⁰ Identifying and collecting timely data is necessary to track and review performance over time. In our prior work on the use of data-driven performance reviews, we found that agencies should look for opportunities to leverage data produced by other agency components or outside entities.⁵¹ We also found that agreeing on common definitions is one way to bridge organizational cultures.⁵²

USICH also leveraged additional useful data sources from participating agencies. In one instance, the development and implementation of HUD's Homeless Management Information Systems provided counts of the total number of people who use emergency shelters or transitional housing programs during the course of a year. According to documents from USICH, these data allow USICH and its stakeholders to track lengths of stay in shelters, service use patterns, and flow in and out of the system. Based on these data, USICH learned that the annual estimate of individuals using shelter decreased by about 5 percent between 2007 and 2013 from 213,000 to 203,000 people, whereas, the number of persons in families using shelters has increased by about 7 percent from about 178,000 to about 192,000 people during that period.

Developed Methods to Report on the Group's Progress That Were Open and Transparent

Officials from all four groups we reviewed and expert practitioners stressed the importance of developing processes to regularly report the progress of the group. Performance reporting happened in a variety of ways, including posting information on websites, public reporting in meetings, and developing written reports for Congress. Each of the groups we reviewed had different levels of transparency and their approaches for reporting mirrored this transparency. For example, USICH regularly posts progress reports on its website and provides an annual report to Congress. In the case of the Reentry Council, agencies provided

⁵⁰Under the 2009 HEARTH Act, Congress broadened the general definition of homelessness and provided greater statutory specificity concerning those who should be considered homeless. In November 2011, HUD issued a final rule to implement changes to the definition of homelessness, which expanded who is eligible for various HUD-funded homeless assistance programs. As a result, persons meeting other federal statutes' broader definitions of homelessness also can be eligible for HUD programs.

⁵¹[GAO-13-228](#).

⁵²[GAO-12-1022](#).

written updates on their progress on specific initiatives, which were circulated among the group participants. Highlights from these written updates were also circulated through press releases. Furthermore, the Reentry Council posted information to a website, which described issues the group is addressing, summarized accomplishments to date, laid out priorities moving forward, and pointed to key resources and links.⁵³ Both the MOU Working Group and the Rental Policy Working Group circulated updates through measures such as written reports to the White House and updates at group meetings. At various times, the Rental Policy Working Group shared progress through the Office of Urban Affairs' Blog, which is posted on the website for the Executive Office of the President. We have previously reported about the importance of publicly reporting performance information as a tool for accountability.⁵⁴

Incorporated Interagency Group Activities into Individual Performance Expectations

Senior agency officials from three of the groups we examined told us that the activities and outcomes of the interagency group they participated in are reflected in their individual performance contracts.⁵⁵ In some cases, individuals told us that the interagency group was explicitly named in the performance contract. In other cases, individuals told us that the work of the interagency group was aligned with the policy areas named in their performance contract. For example, staff from participating agencies explicitly included performance expectations for collaboration with the Reentry Council within their performance expectations and rating standards. As such, a satisfactory performance rating for these individuals is contingent upon collaboration with the group. The agency's performance management system also tracked individual contributions toward the Reentry Council, as well as participation in group meetings and activities. An explicit alignment of daily activities with broader results helps individuals see the connection between their daily activities and

⁵³<http://csgjusticecenter.org/nrrc/projects/firc/snapshots/> (accessed Dec. 12, 2013).

⁵⁴GAO-13-517.

⁵⁵Members of the Senior Executive Service are required to have performance plans or performance contracts.

organizational goals and encourages individuals to focus on achieving goals, as we found in a 2003 report.⁵⁶

Leadership Approaches from Select Interagency Groups

Key Considerations for Implementing Interagency Collaborative Mechanisms	Implementation Approaches
<p>Leadership</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Designated group leaders exhibited collaboration competencies. • Ensured participation from high-level leaders in regular, in-person group meetings and activities. • Rotated key tasks and responsibilities when leadership of the group was shared. • Established clear and inclusive procedures for leading the group during initial meetings. • Distributed leadership responsibility for group activities among participants.

Designated Group Leaders Exhibited Collaboration Competencies

Expert practitioners and agency officials we interviewed told us that the designated leaders of interagency groups that they had been involved with exhibited the following five competencies: worked well with people, communicated openly with a range of stakeholders, built and maintained relationships, understood other points of view, and set a vision for the group. These competencies are also discussed by scholars in the literature we reviewed.

- **Worked well with people:** A few expert practitioners told us that effective interagency leaders possessed “soft skills,” “people skills,” or “interpersonal skills.” One expert practitioner told us that effective interagency group leaders did not have to be extroverted, but they had to be able to work well with people. Another expert practitioner told us that the leader needed to talk in person with stakeholders rather than managing or interacting remotely. This competency is consistent with how some scholars have discussed the importance of collaborative leaders possessing interpersonal skills. For example,

⁵⁶GAO, *Results-Oriented Cultures: Creating a Clear Linkage between Individual Performance and Organizational Success*, GAO-03-488 (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 14, 2003).

one scholar noted that collaborative leaders must be attuned to the needs and motivations of others to lead collaborative efforts.⁵⁷

- **Communicated openly with a range of stakeholders:** A few expert practitioners told us that effective interagency group leaders had open communications with a range of stakeholders. One expert practitioner told us that it was important that the interagency group he led had an open and honest discussion with key stakeholders (in this case state and local officials) before attempting to resolve an issue to recognize those officials' concerns. Another expert practitioner told us the leader needed to be able to communicate openly with the group's members about how they would benefit from the collaboration, and why they were important to the collaboration. Some scholars have also noted that it is important for collaborative leaders to possess good communication skills. According to one scholar, research has shown that, if communications are open and free, then stakeholders would feel more comfortable in establishing longer-term working relationships and collaboration on other projects.⁵⁸
- **Built and maintained relationships:** A few expert practitioners and agency officials stressed that the interagency group leader's ability to build and maintain relationships was critical to interagency collaboration. According to one expert practitioner, it was important to form personal and trusting relationships so that the group had a basis for open and candid communication when difficulties arose. Another expert practitioner said that building relationships helped individuals know who to contact at other organizations involved in the collaboration. Some scholars have noted that it is important for collaborative leaders to build effecting working relationships. One study noted that it is the job of the leader to help increase trust by building working relationships and creating incentives for those in the collaboration.⁵⁹
- **Understood other viewpoints:** A few expert practitioners told us that effective interagency leaders had the ability to draw out, understand, and value other viewpoints. According to one expert practitioner, the

⁵⁷Heather Getha-Taylor, "Reconsidering Leadership Theory and Practice for Collaborative Governance: Examining the U.S. Coast Guard," *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change*, vol. 29 (2008): 151-173.

⁵⁸David R. Connelly, "Leadership in the Collaborative Interorganizational Domain," *International Journal of Public Administration*, vol. 30, no. 11 (2007): 1231-1262.

⁵⁹Heather Getha-Taylor, "Cross-Sector Understanding and Trust," *Public Performance and Management Review*, vol. 36, no. 2 (2012): 216-229.

best interagency leaders had the ability to understand others, especially those with other viewpoints. The expert practitioner added that this skill helps stakeholders build trust. This competency is consistent with how some scholars have discussed the need for collaborative leaders to elicit other points of view. According to one study, scholarly research has shown that leaders use this approach to repeatedly elicit ideas and build integrative solutions, to break down cultural barriers, to de-escalate conflict, and to provide feedback to the group that heightens its performance.⁶⁰

- **Set a vision for the group:** An expert practitioner and agency officials told us that it was important for interagency leaders to set the strategic vision for the group. According to agency officials, interagency group leaders needed to have both the subject matter expertise to understand what the interagency group could accomplish, while also working with the group's participants to collaboratively determine the vision. Some scholars have reported on the need for collaborative leaders to build a common vision. For example, one study noted that the successful collaborator is a skilled visionary who has the ability to see the big picture, and who thinks strategically, developing goals and the structures, inputs, and actions needed to achieve them.⁶¹

The five competencies above are broadly consistent with the Office of Personnel Management's (OPM) executive core qualifications (ECQs). OPM identified five ECQs for federal Senior Executive Service officials that assess executive experience and potential, and measure whether an individual has the broad executive skills needed to succeed in a variety of Senior Executive Service positions. OPM defines one of the ECQs as the ability to build coalitions internally with other federal agencies, sectors, and levels of government to achieve common outcomes. The competencies that are included in the ECQ for building coalitions and their definitions are included in table 1 below.

⁶⁰Rosemary O'Leary and Catherine Gerard, "Collaboration Across Boundaries: Insights and Tips from Federal Senior Executives," IBM Center for the Business of Government Collaboration Across Boundaries Series, (Washington, D.C.: 2012).

⁶¹O'Leary and Gerard, "Collaboration Across Boundaries Series: Insights and Tips from Federal Senior Executives," p. 28.

Table 1: OPM’s Executive Core Qualification: Building Coalitions

Competency	Definition
Partnering	Develops networks and builds alliances, collaborates across boundaries to build strategic relationships and achieve common goals.
Political Savvy	Identifies the internal and external politics that impact the work of the organization. Perceives organizational and political reality and acts accordingly.
Influencing/Negotiating	Persuades others; builds consensus through give and take; gains cooperation from others to obtain information and accomplish goals.

Source: OPM.

In a January 2012 memorandum, OPM included partnering, political savvy, and influencing/negotiating in its list of the core or supplemental competencies for two leadership positions required under the GPRA Modernization Act of 2010.⁶² Those leadership positions are the Agency Priority Goal Leaders and the agency Performance Improvement Officers.⁶³ Moreover, OPM’s memorandum includes other supplemental competencies related to collaboration—such as interpersonal skills for, among other things, developing and maintaining effective relationships with others.

We previously reported on some activities for developing collaborative competencies in leaders at agencies with national security responsibilities. Our March 2012 report on national security personnel rotations found that rotational assignment programs can help develop attributes in leaders that enable them to successfully work across agency lines.⁶⁴ For instance, the U.S. Army places a select number of its leaders into a rotational program to hone collaborative skills, such as

⁶²OPM, *Memorandum for Chief Human Capital Officers: Government Performance and Results Act Modernization Act of 2010 Functional Competencies*, Jan. 3, 2012.

⁶³For more information about agency performance management positions and their responsibilities under the GPRA Modernization Act of 2010, see [GAO-13-356](#).

⁶⁴Rotational assignment programs are work assignments at a different agency from the one in which the participant is normally employed, with an explicit professional development purpose.

communication and teamwork, and establish networks with their civilian counterparts.⁶⁵

Ensured Participation from High-Level Leaders In Regular, In-Person Group Meetings and Activities

High-level leaders, such as Cabinet Secretaries (or agency heads), provided attention and support to each interagency group we reviewed by frequently attending meetings in-person, participating in a range of the groups' activities, or both. Moreover, membership of three of the four interagency groups we reviewed included high-level officials from the Executive Office of the President, signaling that there was Presidential support for implementing the group's initiatives. In our September 2012 report on interagency collaborative mechanisms, we found that the influence of leadership can be strengthened by a direct relationship with the President, Congress, other high-level officials, or all of these officials.⁶⁶ Officials told us that their interagency groups benefitted from involving high-level leaders because those leaders helped recruit key participants and made policy-related decisions requiring a high-level of authority. In one instance, officials told us that individuals were more likely to attend meetings because of the opportunity to interact with or brief high-level officials. Cabinet Secretaries (or agency heads), frequently attended in-person the meetings of two of the four interagency groups we reviewed. For instance, Cabinet Secretaries frequently attended USICH meetings in-person, and USICH's leadership has rotated among the Secretaries of HUD, HHS, VA, and Labor since its formation. An HHS official said that, beginning in 2009, USICH leadership set a goal to have at least three Cabinet Secretaries attend each meeting. Officials from USICH told us in May 2013 that USICH had consistently met this goal.

A few expert practitioners and agency officials told us that high-level leaders publicly reported progress of group initiatives to their peers at group meetings. This practice is consistent with how we have discussed the use of data-driven performance reviews as a leadership strategy to drive performance improvement of federal agencies. In our February 2013 report on data-driven performance reviews, we found that attendance of high-level leaders fosters ownership and helps ensure

⁶⁵GAO, *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).

⁶⁶[GAO-12-1022](#).

participants take the reviews seriously and that decisions and commitments can be made.⁶⁷ During a recent Reentry Council meeting, chaired by the Attorney General, a representative from each participant agency reported on his or her agency's commitment to the Reentry Council's efforts and progress made supporting innovative reentry policies or programs. According to agency officials, agency leaders were aware of their interagency commitments and responsibility for regularly briefing their counterparts at other federal agencies. The agency officials noted that this regular peer reporting created a strong incentive for agency leaders to keep informed of the progress made throughout the year, and to set expectations with group participants and other staff. Furthermore, a few expert practitioners and agency officials told us that this senior-level involvement created a cascading level of accountability and commitment within individual agencies because agency staff reported to their senior leadership on their progress towards interagency outcomes.

High-level leaders participated in a range of activities for each interagency group we reviewed, such as speaking publicly about the group's issues, visiting affected communities, and convening a White House conference with group participants and stakeholders. In addition to the public housing myth buster described earlier in this report, high-level HUD leaders conducted outreach to advance the Reentry Council's agenda. Specifically, in 2011, the HUD Secretary and Deputy Secretary for Public and Indian Housing sent a letter to executive directors of public housing authorities (PHAs) to clarify misconceptions. Specifically, the letter explained current federal regulations and informed local PHAs that, in many circumstances, formerly incarcerated individuals should not be denied access to federally supported public housing. According to Reentry Council officials, the letter from HUD's senior leaders provided important leadership commitment to the field on an issue that is perceived as a major barrier to reentry.

⁶⁷[GAO-13-228](#).

Rotated Key Tasks and Responsibilities When Leadership of the Group Was Shared

Leadership of two of the groups that we reviewed—the DOD and Education MOU Working Group and USICH—is shared between two or more agencies. We previously found that agencies can convey their support for the collaborative effort by sharing leadership.⁶⁸ However, in our prior work, we concluded that some agencies had difficulty implementing shared leadership of an interagency collaboration mechanism because it was unclear how the shared leadership model would work in practice.⁶⁹

USICH has employed an approach for implementing its shared leadership model, which many of its participants told us has been beneficial. By law, USICH must elect a chair and vice-chair from among its members and rotate those positions among its members at the first meeting of each year.⁷⁰ In practice, since the government-wide USICH's strategic plan was published in 2010, the current vice-chair has always been elected as chair the following year. Moreover, USICH's participants come from 19 departments and agencies, but at the time of this review, the chair and vice-chair have always come from four agencies—HUD, HHS, VA, and Labor—with significant homelessness programs. A HUD official who participates in USICH told us this leadership model provides continuity of federal agencies' outcomes and strategies for reducing homelessness over time, and provides a longer-term perspective on important issues that will affect homelessness outcomes. VA officials told us that knowing in advance which agency will become the next chair enables the chair and co-chair to collaboratively establish short-term outcomes that have the buy-in of USICH's members. Officials told us that both the VA and HUD Secretaries are approaching their current terms as equal co-chairs rather than chair and vice-chair to ensure both agencies buy-in to the Council's outcomes and actions given the approaching deadline to complete USICH's outcome to prevent and end veterans' homelessness by 2015.

The MOU Working Group rotated the agency that hosted the group meeting between DOD and Education. Education officials told us that an

⁶⁸[GAO-12-1022](#).

⁶⁹GAO, *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).

⁷⁰42 U.S.C. § 11312.

official from the agency that hosted the meeting also served as the chair of the meeting. A DOD official told us that they used this approach because it provided a sense of ownership in the group's activities.

Established Clear and Inclusive Procedures for Leading the Group During Initial Meetings

During initial meetings, participants of two of the four interagency groups we reviewed established procedures for leading the group, such as the frequency of meetings, protocols for communicating across agencies, whether group meetings will have an agenda, and whether stakeholders will take formal notes. We previously found that agencies bring diverse cultures to collaborative efforts, and it is important to address these differences to enable a cohesive working relationship and to create the mutual trust required to sustain the collaborative effort.⁷¹ In our prior work, we also found that it is important to establish ways to bridge organizational cultures, such as developing common terminology, compatible policies and procedures, and fostering open lines of communication.⁷²

The MOU Working Group developed a communications protocol to provide a clear understanding of (1) the preferred methods of communicating, and (2) the chain-of-command protocol for communicating within the different levels of organizations within those agencies, including the military services. DOD officials told us it can be difficult for employees at civilian agencies, such as Education, to understand the terminology used by military officials as well as recognize officials' ranks in the different military services. Among other things, the communications protocol defines a request for information and the information that should be included in such a request, including what type of information is needed, how and when it is needed, and the justification for the deadline. The communications protocol specifies that it is meant to guide the working relationships between DOD and Education, provide a common understanding of the best ways to communicate and collaborate, and that the communications protocol is not a rigid list of requirements that is appropriate for every situation.

⁷¹[GAO-06-15](#).

⁷²[GAO-12-1022](#).

Distributed Leadership Responsibility for Group Activities Among Participants

In each interagency group we reviewed, leadership responsibility for group activities was distributed among the different participant agencies. Moreover, the individual(s) with responsibilities for these activities were documented in the groups' strategic plans, reports, or action plans. Officials said they distributed responsibility of activities among the group's agencies and officials for various reasons, such as getting stakeholders to buy-in to the group's objectives, keeping stakeholders engaged, and taking advantage of the individual expertise within the group.

For example, a DOJ official who co-chairs the Reentry Council's staff-level working group said that it intentionally distributed leadership of the subcommittees, in part, to disburse responsibility more broadly throughout the federal government and to allow for interaction and participation of a greater number of stakeholders.⁷³ Reentry Council staff-level working group participants from VA, HUD, and HHS agreed that distributing leadership of subcommittees was an effective approach. An HHS official said this approach has allowed the subcommittees to be staffed by a broader group of participants from within the agencies. Moreover, VA officials told us that some agencies were a natural fit to lead certain subcommittees. In one instance, VA officials said it made sense for HHS to lead the subcommittee on health care because, among other things, HHS officials have the technical expertise to fulfill many of the subcommittees' objectives.

In addition to distributing leadership responsibility across the participating agencies, high-level agency officials and subject-matter experts from the different member agencies participate in different sub-groups that support USICH and the Reentry Council. Membership of USICH and the Reentry Council is largely composed of cabinet-level officials who meet regularly but infrequently to discuss a range of topics, such as the path of work to be completed or progress made on group initiatives. In addition to those meetings, the Reentry Council and USICH are supported by a sub-group of high-level agency officials who, among other things, prepare recommendations for consideration at Reentry Council and USICH meetings. Moreover, both groups sometimes convene working groups

⁷³At the time of this review, the Reentry Council had 12 subcommittees focusing on a range of reentry issues that are led by combinations of nine federal entities. For instance, the Social Security Administration leads a Reentry Council subcommittee on access to benefits. According to DOJ officials, some subcommittees meet monthly while others meet quarterly.

composed of subject-matter experts to work on specific program-level initiatives and tasks.

Approaches for Managing Resources from Select Interagency Groups

Key Considerations for Implementing Interagency Collaborative Mechanisms	Implementation Approaches
<p>Resources</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How will the collaborative mechanism be funded? If interagency funding is needed, is it permitted? • How will the collaborative mechanism be staffed? • Have participating agencies developed online tools or other resources that facilitate joint interactions? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Created an inventory of resources dedicated towards interagency outcomes. • Leveraged related agency resources toward the group's outcomes. • Pilot tested new collaborative ideas, programs, or policies before investing resources.

Created an Inventory of Resources Dedicated Towards Interagency Outcomes

Agency officials from all four of the interagency groups we reviewed, and OMB staff told us that agencies generally do not receive specific funding for interagency activities.⁷⁴ To understand the resources that the interagency group had available, two of the interagency groups developed a detailed inventory of programs and authorities that related to the outcomes of the interagency group. According to officials, the inventories that each of the groups developed were intended to help the group better understand the full range of federal programs and resources devoted to government-wide outcomes or initiatives. For example, officials told us the Rental Policy Working Group developed an inventory of government programs that were related to each of the group's 10 rental alignment proposals. The inventory was based on information from federal, state, and local government officials as well as housing developers and managers and included relevant regulations, statutes, and policies. Additionally, the inventory was used to promote

⁷⁴However, VA and HUD participate in a joint program authorized by Congress that contributes toward the goals of USICH which has designated funding. Under this joint program, HUD is authorized to set aside amounts under its rental assistance voucher program to provide assistance to homeless veterans through a supported housing program administered jointly with the VA under 42 U.S.C. § 1437f(o)(19). The program provides rental assistance to homeless veterans with chronic mental illnesses or chronic substance use disorders who agree to continue treatment for such mental illness or substance use disorders as a condition to receiving such rental assistance and ensures such treatment and appropriate case management for each veteran receiving such rental assistance.

understanding of government-wide rental programs, and according to officials, was useful in making decisions about the coordination of related programs across agency lines and between levels of government.

An inventory of relevant resources can also be used to identify the range of federal spending on an issue, which can result in more coordinated spending. In fiscal year 2011, DOJ, Labor, and HHS separately administered reentry grant programs.⁷⁵ The Attorney General convened the Reentry Council, in part, to coordinate agencies' reentry efforts to further prevent unnecessary duplication and share promising practices. Participants of the Reentry Council told us they developed an inventory of federal resources that are used to assess where resources are targeted to enable federal and local stakeholders to leverage these investments. To develop this inventory, participants of the Reentry Council created a spreadsheet that listed relevant funding streams and resources from their agencies that were dedicated to reentry programs. The inventory identified the amount of funding, the intended purpose, and jurisdictions associated with resources. The information from this inventory is available in an online resource with an interactive map of reentry resources across the United States.⁷⁶

Officials we spoke with said this type of inventory can also help communicate some of the differences between agency organizational cultures, capabilities of agencies to control spending, and array of program tools being used to achieve mission objectives. For example, in the instance of USICH, agency officials reported that their agencies often had different policy and program tools, such as grants, at their disposal. Accordingly, in the early days of the Council, participants from the different agencies needed to understand the different purposes and requirements of the policy and program tools that each agency could bring to the table. In the case of HHS, homeless individuals may be eligible for the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. But, since TANF is administered by the states, HHS cannot require states to use those grant funds for certain purposes. HHS officials told us that HHS's Administration for Children and Families sent out an

⁷⁵GAO-13-93.

⁷⁶Accessible at: <http://csgjusticecenter.org/reentry/national-criminal-justice-initiatives-map/> (accessed Dec. 24, 2013). However, at present, the map does not include the flow of funds to subgrantees.

informational memorandum informing community-based organizations that they can spend TANF grant funds on homeless individuals. Officials from USICH told us that this memo sent a powerful message to the field about the opportunity of TANF agencies to engage in state and local efforts to end homelessness, and strategic steps they can take that are within their authority. HHS officials also noted that, given the nature of the program, they cannot require TANF funds to be dedicated to any specific group, including those experiencing homelessness. According to HHS officials, the nature of TANF funds can sometimes present a challenge to working across agency cultures because partners may expect that HHS can target funds more directly toward homeless individuals than they can. In contrast, the VA directly provides services to homeless individuals through medical centers. Therefore, it has more direct control over the specific homelessness outcomes that USICH is trying achieve. Officials from USICH told us their role is to facilitate a broad understanding of the policy and program tools that each member agency brings to the table.

Our annual reports on fragmentation, overlap, and duplication have highlighted the challenges associated with the lack of a comprehensive list of federal programs and funding information. We have found that a first step in identifying potential fragmentation, overlap, or duplication among federal programs or activities involves creating a comprehensive list of programs along with related funding information.⁷⁷ Currently, no comprehensive list exists, nor is there a common definition for what constitutes a federal “program.” In our prior work, we found that the lack of a common definition for a program makes it difficult to develop a comprehensive list of all federal programs. The lack of a list, in turn, makes it difficult to determine the scope of the federal government’s involvement in particular areas and, therefore, where action is needed to avoid fragmentation, overlap, or duplication. We also found that federal budget information is often unavailable or insufficiently reliable to identify the level of funding provided to programs or activities. For example, agencies could not isolate budgetary information for some programs because the data were aggregated at higher levels. Without knowing the full range of programs involved or the cost of implementing them, gauging the magnitude of the federal commitment to a particular area of activity, or the extent to which associated federal programs are duplicative is difficult. To help address these challenges, GPRAMA requires the Director of

⁷⁷[GAO-13-279SP](#).

OMB to compile and make publicly available a comprehensive list of all federal programs, and to include the purposes of each program, how it contributes to the agency's mission and goals, as well as recent funding information. In May 2013, OMB published program inventories developed by 24 agencies. We will report on these inventories later this year.

Leveraged Related Agency Resources Toward the Group's Outcomes

Officials who participate in the Reentry Council told us that they identified the range of resources dedicated to the crosscutting issue, and looked for ways to leverage existing activities, tools, or programs that can benefit the interagency group. By assessing their relative strengths and limitations, collaborating agencies looked for opportunities to leverage each others' resources, thus obtaining additional benefits that would be unavailable if they were working separately.⁷⁸

In the case of the Reentry Council, it used two technological resources to share information. For external information sharing, information about the Council is available on an existing website of the National Reentry Resource Center that is funded in part through DOJ's Second Chance Act grant program.⁷⁹ According to an HHS official, there was already a website that was entirely dedicated to reentry issues. Therefore, it made sense to put the Reentry Council's information on that website.

For internal communication, the Reentry Council relies on the MAX Federal Community collaboration platform that is made available to agencies through the Budget Formulation and Execution Line of Business, an E-Government initiative. According to OMB staff, MAX Community pages provide a platform for securely sharing information and documents within or between agencies. Anyone with an e-mail address from an executive branch agency can create a page on the MAX Federal Community system and share documents within their agency or with other federal agencies. OMB staff also told us that executive branch agencies can sponsor other users. OMB staff explained that access to

⁷⁸[GAO-06-15](#).

⁷⁹The Second Chance Act of 2007 authorized grant funding for the establishment of a reentry resource center to, among other things, provide education, training, and technical assistance for States, tribes, territories, local governments, service providers, nonprofit organizations, and corrections institutions and disseminate best practice information to states and other relevant entities. See, Pub. L. No. 110-199, § 101(c)(2), 122 Stat. 657, 666-667 (2008) (codified at 42 U.S.C. § 3797w(m)).

documents on MAX is given on a page-by-page basis, which allows interagency groups to control access as needed. Some groups involved with more sensitive policy development have decided to have a closed group where only specific individuals have access.

Interagency groups we reviewed also leveraged the expertise of other agency officials to improve their programs and spending. Several agencies—including HHS, DOJ, and Labor—used the Reentry Council to identify individuals from other agencies to provide input into the grants programs that they administer. In one instance, as part of their work on the Reentry Council, Labor officials developed “Face Forward” grants, which were designed to give youth a chance at success by offering support services, training, and skills development that can help them obtain employment and overcome the stigma of a juvenile record. They included officials from DOJ who helped Labor officials score the grant applications and decide which grants would receive funding. Labor staff members said that this relationship helped them to spend the funds in a more strategic manner because they had additional information on the topic. To solicit this participation from DOJ staff, Labor staff members identified the specific time commitment and expertise that they needed from the DOJ staff. They provided this list of commitments to a DOJ official who co-chairs the Reentry Council’s staff-level working group. The DOJ official was then able to recruit the appropriate officials from DOJ.

Pilot Tested New Collaborative Ideas, Programs, or Policies before Investing Resources

Given limited resources, interagency groups we reviewed pilot-tested selected ideas, programs, or policies before investing more extensive resources into implementation. Through pilot testing, groups were able to allow time to identify unanticipated consequences, implementation challenges, or to gather information on program effectiveness. In the case of the Rental Policy Working Group, in November 2011, USDA, HUD, and Treasury worked with their housing finance agency counterparts at the state level in Wisconsin, Michigan, Washington, Minnesota, Oregon, and Ohio to eliminate duplicative physical inspections of rental housing subsidized through more than one public funding source.⁸⁰ A second round of this initial pilot was conducted in 2013 with the same states

⁸⁰In our 2012 report on fragmentation, overlap, and duplication, we found that examining the benefits and costs of housing programs and tax expenditures that address the same or similar populations or areas, and potentially consolidating them, could help mitigate overlap and fragmentation, and decrease costs.

participating. The purpose of the second round was to address issues that arose during the first pilot. Specifically, this pilot worked to ensure that (1) all of the inspections could be completed in a timely manner, and (2) all of the inspection reports were shared with all relevant parties in a timely manner. The 2013 pilot achieved both of these goals, and HUD reports that as a result, the Rental Policy Working Group avoided 120 duplicative inspections across six states. The Rental Policy Working Group plans to expand this pilot in 2014 by adding an additional 25 states.

In another instance, USICH noted that it focuses on implementing strategies it has found to be effective at reducing or ending homelessness. It shared that innovative program models can begin as pilots and use evidence of savings to make the case for sustainability and expansion. Specifically, the Community Support Program for People Experiencing Chronic Homelessness in Massachusetts provides non-clinical support services to adults who are experiencing chronic homelessness so that they can be permanently housed in the community, and prevent avoidable hospitalizations. Initially, this program began as a pilot program with a cap on enrollment. This approach allowed the partners to launch the program and establish new partnerships, service models, and payment mechanisms. When the pilot program demonstrated results, including savings associated with reductions in hospitalizations, it was sustained and the enrollment cap was lifted.

Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report for review and comment to the heads of the nine key agencies that participated in the four interagency groups that we reviewed for this study. These included the Secretaries of the U.S. Departments of Agriculture, Defense, Education, Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, Justice, Labor, Treasury, and Veterans Affairs. We also shared a draft of this report for review and comment with the Director of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), and the Executive Director of the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH).

The Departments of Defense, Education, Labor and USICH had no comments on the report. We received technical comments from the Departments of Agriculture, Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, Justice, Treasury, and Veteran Affairs, as well as OMB, which we incorporated as appropriate.

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

If you or your staff 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 appendix V.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "J. Christopher Mihm". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized "J" and "M".

J. Christopher Mihm
Managing Director, Strategic Issues

List of Addressees:

The Honorable Thomas R. Carper
Chairman

The Honorable Tom Coburn
Ranking Member
Committee on Homeland Security
and Governmental Affairs
United States Senate

The Honorable Mark R. Warner
Chairman
Task Force on Government Performance
Committee on the Budget
United States Senate

The Honorable Elijah Cummings
Ranking Member
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
House of Representatives



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 steinhardt@gao.gov.

October 2005

RESULTS-ORIENTED GOVERNMENT

Practices That Can Help Enhance and Sustain Collaboration among Federal Agencies

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.

United States Government Accountability Office

Appendix II: Highlights Page from GAO-12-1022



September 2012

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?

United States Government Accountability Office

Appendix III: List of Collaborative Mechanisms from GAO-12-1022

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.

Appendix IV: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

This report is part of a series of reports under our mandate in GPRAMA to periodically examine how agencies are implementing the law. The objectives of this report are to examine how select interagency groups (such as task forces, working groups, councils, and committees): 1) defined their missions and desired outcomes; 2) measured performance and ensured accountability 3) established leadership approaches; and 4) used resources, such as funding, staff and technology.

Following issuance of our 2012 report on interagency collaboration, we continued our work to identify the most commonly implemented mechanism for collaboration, from the list of mechanisms (listed in appendix III).¹ Accordingly, this report focuses on one of these mechanisms—interagency groups—(also referred to as councils, committees, task forces, and working groups), because they were the most commonly cited interagency mechanism in our sample of GAO reports on collaboration published from January 2005 through February 2013.

After narrowing our scope to focus on interagency groups, we conducted an analysis to determine the most common challenges that interagency groups face when collaborating. To identify the most common challenges, we reviewed a sample of GAO reports on collaboration, which were issued from January 2005 through February 2013. We also reviewed relevant recommendations from our prior work directed at interagency groups. We organized the challenges that these reports identified into the key issues from our 2012 report and found that the most common challenges that interagency groups experienced fell under the key features of:

- Outcomes
- Accountability
- Leadership
- Resources

To identify implementation approaches that agencies have used to address or avoid these challenges, we identified a limited number of interagency groups from our prior work that have addressed or avoided one or more of these challenges. To identify interagency groups that have

¹GAO, *Managing for Results: Key Considerations for Implementing Interagency Collaborative Mechanisms*, [GAO-12-1022](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 27, 2012).

addressed one or more collaboration-related challenges, we examined our sample of reports, including areas that we previously identified as being at risk for fragmentation, overlap, and duplication; high-risk; crosscutting federal priority goals under GPRAMA; and prior recommendations, to identify groups that addressed, or partially addressed, these challenges. Based on a review of our prior work, we identified potential interagency groups that exhibited some of the practices to enhance and sustain collaboration.² We then narrowed the list of interagency groups to four groups that represented a balanced and diverse set of characteristics, such as the number of participating agencies, duration, creation vehicle (for example, through laws, etc.), and groups with both voluntary and mandated participation. Our final selection of interagency groups includes the following:

- Department of Defense (DOD) and Department of Education (Education) Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) Working Group
- Federal Interagency Reentry Council (Reentry Council)
- Rental Policy Working Group
- U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH)

To arrive at a subset of agencies to interview about their participation in the selected groups, we selected the lead agency, entity, or agencies from each group. We also interviewed agencies that we determined to be key contributors. We interviewed officials from the following entities: Office of Management and Budget; U.S. Department of Agriculture; Department of Defense; Department of Education; Department of Health and Human Services; Department of Housing and Urban Development; Department of Justice; Department of Labor; Department of the Treasury; Department of Veterans Affairs; USICH; and the Domestic Policy Council in the Executive Offices of the President. During these interviews, we asked working group members about the implementation approaches that they had employed to establish and enhance outcomes, accountability, leadership, and resources. We did not interview all contributors to all interagency groups. For interagency groups with three or fewer federal agency participants, we interviewed officials from all participant agencies. We also observed a Reentry Council event and a USICH meeting to identify potential implementation approaches. In addition, to identify

²GAO, *Results-Oriented Government: Practices That Can Help Enhance and Sustain Collaboration among Federal Agencies*, [GAO-06-15](#) (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 21, 2005) and [GAO-12-1022](#).

collaborative leadership competencies, we reviewed relevant academic literature and relevant reports.

In addition to the illustrative examples described above, we hosted two expert practitioner panels, in coordination with the Senior Executive Association, to identify and discuss useful practices and lessons for implementing interagency groups. We selected panelists that were recipients of the Presidential Distinguished Rank Award in 2011 or 2012 and that had experience leading or participating in interagency groups.³ We invited these panelists to share their perspectives on interagency groups; we did not ask them to speak on behalf of the federal agencies or organizations that these participants represent or represented. Of the expert practitioners listed below seven practitioners participated in two small group panels and we conducted individual interviews with the other four.

The following expert practitioners participated in our panels and interviews:

- Charles A. Casto, Retired Regional Administrator, Region III, U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission
- Dr. John Clifford, Chief Veterinary Officer and Deputy Administrator, Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture
- William J. Fleming, Retired Deputy Chief Human Capital Officer and Director for Human Resources Management, U.S. Department of Commerce
- James D. Giattina, Director of the Water Protection Division, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
- Dr. Rowan Gould, Deputy Director for Operations, Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Department of the Interior
- Lana T. Hurdle, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Budget and Programs, U.S. Department of Transportation

³Each year, the Presidential Distinguished Rank Award recognizes no more than one percent of career Senior Executive Service members who demonstrated, “extraordinary long term achievements” in program results or executive leadership. The nominating criteria for these awards specify that, among other things, the senior executive has demonstrated their ability to partner with stakeholders inside and outside the organization. For individuals who had interagency experience, but were unable to attend the panel discussion, we held individual interviews.

- Michael W. Lowder, Director, Office of Intelligence, Security, and Emergency Response, U.S. Department of Transportation
- Dr. Alexander E. MacDonald, Deputy Assistant Administrator for Laboratories and Cooperative Institutes and Director, Earth System Research Laboratory, National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration, U.S. Department of Commerce
- Dr. A. Stanley Meiburg, Deputy Regional Administrator for Region 4, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
- Craig H. Middlebrook, Deputy Administrator, Saint Lawrence Seaway Development Corporation, U.S. Department of Transportation
- Thomas P. Skelly, Director, Budget Service, U.S. Department of Education

Based on our interviews with interagency group participants and expert practitioner panelists, we identified and categorized recurring themes under each of the four considerations from our prior work and developed from these a set of approaches associated with each challenge. If more than one group had used the approach and found it to be effective, we included it in our list. If a limited number of groups experienced a specific challenge, but identified a way to address it, we noted this in the text. For example, only two interagency groups in our sample had a shared leadership model. While our examples were limited to two groups, this is a frequently cited challenge in our work, so we included the approach, but noted in the text that the finding was only supported by two groups we reviewed. We asked agency officials to review the examples for accuracy and incorporated their comments where appropriate. We did not independently verify the effectiveness of these examples, but did examine agency documentation and support for testimonial evidence where available.

We also note that our findings rest on the examples we reviewed and the practitioners we interviewed and thus may not be applicable to all interagency groups. For example, in this report, we focus on interagency groups that respond to non-emergency situations, which require a different type of response than emergencies. Also, all of the policy or topic areas in our examples are currently high-priorities of this administration, as demonstrated by the involvement of the Executive Office of the President or Cabinet-level officials in the groups. As such, this report provides agency perspectives and approaches that have been effective in addressing collaboration-related considerations for the groups we studied, but does not provide a comprehensive or universally applicable set of implementation approaches for interagency group. We previously found that interagency groups can vary widely depending on the purpose, composition, or other unique characteristics, and as such,

approaches that have proven effective for one group may not always apply to other groups. Nevertheless, we identified common approaches among the groups we reviewed.

We conducted this performance audit from November 2012 to February 2014 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Appendix V: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

J. Christopher Mihm, (202) 512-6806 or mihmj@gao.gov

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, and Don Kiggins made significant contributions to this report. Karin Fangman provided legal counsel and Alicia Cackley, Andrew Finkel, David Maurer, and Paul Schmidt made key contributions to this report.

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