

GAO

Report to the Honorable
Fred Thompson, Chairman
Committee on Governmental Affairs
U.S. Senate

March 2000

MANAGING FOR RESULTS

Barriers to Interagency Coordination



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United States General Accounting Office
Washington, D.C. 20548

General Government Division

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The Honorable Fred Thompson
Chairman, Committee on Governmental Affairs
United States Senate

Dear Mr. Chairman:

Virtually all the results that the federal government strives to achieve require the concerted and coordinated efforts of two or more agencies. This shared responsibility is an outgrowth of several factors, including the piecemeal evolution of federal programs and service delivery efforts and the complexity of public needs that require several agencies to contribute resources and expertise to address these needs.

This report is based upon our prior work concerning the federal government's management of crosscutting program activities and updates our report entitled Managing for Results: Using the Results Act to Address Mission Fragmentation and Program Overlap.¹ Our work has repeatedly shown that mission fragmentation and program overlap are widespread in the federal government and that crosscutting program efforts are not well coordinated. It also has shown the importance of coordinating these programs. Without such coordination, scarce funds are wasted, program customers are confused and frustrated, and the overall effectiveness of the federal effort is limited.

In this report, we (1) provide an overview of programs in which we identified mission fragmentation and overlap in 1998 and 1999; (2) discuss barriers to interagency coordination identified in our prior work issued over the last decade; and (3) summarize, on the basis of that work, potential approaches for improving the effectiveness and efficiency of crosscutting programs.

To update our report on fragmentation and overlap, we reviewed our reports issued in 1998 and 1999. We also analyzed coordination problems and potential approaches to address those problems that were identified in

¹See Managing for Results: Using the Results Act to Address Mission Fragmentation and Program Overlap (GAO/AIMD-97-146, Aug. 29, 1997) for a general discussion of fragmentation and overlap. Examples of our work addressing specific crosscutting programs include: Adults with Severe Disabilities: Federal and State Approaches for Personal Care and Other Services (GAO/HEHS-99-101, May 14, 1999); and Weapons Acquisitions: Guided Weapon Plans Need to Be Reassessed (GAO/NSIAD-99-32, Dec. 9, 1998).

our reports issued within the last decade. For this report, we defined interagency coordination to include coordination of crosscutting programs among agencies within large departments, such as the Forest Service and the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service within the Department of Agriculture (USDA), as well as coordination across departmental jurisdictions.

We conducted this review between August 1999 and February 2000 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Because it was based on our previously published reports, we did not seek agency comments on a draft of this report.

Results in Brief

Our work has repeatedly shown that mission fragmentation and program overlap are widespread in the federal government. In 1998 and 1999, we found that this situation existed in 12 federal mission areas,² ranging from agriculture to natural resources and environment. We also identified, in 1998 and 1999, 8 new areas of program overlap, including 50 programs for the homeless that were administered by 8 federal agencies. These programs provided services for the homeless that appeared to be similar. For example, 23 programs operated by 4 agencies offered housing services, and 26 programs administered by 6 agencies offered food and nutrition services. Although our work indicates that the potential for inefficiency and waste exists, it also shows areas, such as counterterrorism, where the intentional participation by multiple agencies may be a reasonable response to a complex public problem. In either situation, implementation of federal crosscutting programs is often characterized by numerous individual agency efforts that are implemented with little apparent regard for the presence of efforts of related activities.

Not surprisingly, decisionmakers and managers are finding that achieving results on public problems increasingly calls for effective interagency coordination. However, our work also has shown that agencies encounter a range of barriers when they attempt such coordination. One such barrier concerns missions that are not mutually reinforcing or that may even conflict, making reaching a consensus on strategies and priorities difficult. Another significant barrier to interagency coordination is agencies' concerns about protecting jurisdiction over missions and control over resources. Because of these kinds of concerns, the Army, Air Force, and Navy have resisted any efforts to consolidate the services' medical

²Historically, national mission areas have been described by a classification system called budget functions. Budget functions were developed as a means to classify budgetary resources on a governmentwide basis and are, by intention, very broad. Currently, there are 17 budget functions, including such mission areas as international affairs and income security.

departments into a single health agency. Finally, interagency coordination is often hindered by incompatible procedures, processes, data, and computer systems. In a previous report, for example, we discussed how the lack of consistent data on federal wetlands programs implemented by different agencies prevented the government from measuring progress toward achieving the governmentwide goal of no net loss of the nation's wetlands.³

In our past work, we have offered several possible approaches for better managing crosscutting programs—such as improved coordination, integration, and consolidation—to ensure that crosscutting goals are consistent, program efforts are mutually reinforcing, and, where appropriate, common or complementary performance measures are used as a basis for management. One of our oft-cited proposals is to consolidate the fragmented federal system to ensure the safety and quality of food. Perhaps most importantly, however, we have stated that the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 (GPRA) could provide the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), agencies, and Congress with a structured framework for addressing crosscutting program efforts.

OMB, for example, could use the governmentwide performance plan, which is a key component of this framework, to integrate expected agency-level performance. It could also be used to more clearly relate and address the contributions of alternative federal strategies. Agencies, in turn, could use the annual performance planning cycle and subsequent annual performance reports to highlight crosscutting program efforts and to provide evidence of the coordination of those efforts.

If GPRA is successfully implemented, OMB's governmentwide performance plan and the agencies' annual performance plans and subsequent performance reports should provide Congress with new information on federal program efforts, including crosscutting programs. Congress then could use this information to identify agencies and programs addressing similar missions. Once these programs are identified, Congress can consider the associated policy, management, and performance implications of crosscutting programs as part of its oversight over the executive branch.

³ Wetlands Overview: Problems With Acreage Data Persist (GAO/RCED-98-150, July 1, 1998).

Background

As we enter the 21st century, government decisionmakers and managers in various governments around the world are finding that achieving results on public issues increasingly requires coordinated responses from numerous public and private entities. In response to this interconnection, as well as other public management challenges, those governments have implemented major public sector management reform initiatives. Performance-based management, the unifying theme of these reform initiatives, seeks to shift the focus of government performance and accountability from a focus on activities to a focus on the results of those activities.

In the United States, GPRA is a key part of the legislative framework for shifting the focus of the federal government from a preoccupation with activities to results. GPRA requires the President to include with his annual budget submission a federal government performance plan. Congress intended this plan to provide a “single cohesive picture of the annual performance goals for the fiscal year.”⁴ Under the Act, executive branch departments and agencies are to prepare multiyear strategic plans and annual performance plans. The Act also requires agencies to submit annual program performance reports, with the first report covering fiscal year 1999 to be issued by March 31, 2000.

Mission Fragmentation and Program Overlap Are Widespread

In our prior work, we identified widespread mission fragmentation and program overlap in the federal government. The broad scope of this fragmentation and overlap—ranging from social programs to defense efforts—indicates the inherent complexity of national problems that the federal government traditionally has addressed in a piecemeal approach. Table 1 highlights the areas of fragmentation and overlap that we have identified in our work through 1999.

⁴Government Performance and Results Act of 1993, Committee on Governmental Affairs, United States Senate, S. Rpt. No. 58, 103d Cong. 1st Sess. p. 27 (1993). For an assessment, see [The Results Act: Assessment of the Governmentwide Performance Plan for Fiscal Year 1999](#) (GAO/AIMD/GGD-98-159, Sept. 8, 1998).

Table 1: Areas of Potential Fragmentation and Overlap

Mission areas	Programs
Agriculture	•Food safety
Commerce and housing credit	•Financial institution regulation
	•Community development
	•Economic development
	•Emergency preparedness
	•Housing
Community and regional development	•Rural development
	•Early childhood programs
Education, training, employment, and social services	•Employment training
	•Student aid
	•High performance computing
	•National laboratories
General science, space, and technology	•Research and development facilities
	•Small business innovation research
General government	•Federal statistical agencies
	•Long-term care
	•Substance abuse
	•Nuclear health and safety
	•Telemedicine
Health	•Teen pregnancy prevention
	•Child care
	•Welfare and related programs
	•Youth programs
	•Homelessness programs
Income security	•Programs for people with disabilities
	•Guided weapon systems
	•Telecommunications
	•Military health care
	•Satellite control systems
Defense	•Nonmedical chemical and biological research and development
	•Educational programs
International affairs	•Policy formulation and implementation
	•Border inspections
	•Drug control
	•Investigative authority
	•Drug trafficking
Law enforcement	•Combating terrorism
	•Federal land management
	•International environmental programs
	•Hazardous waste cleanup
Natural resources and environment	•Water quality

Note: This table has been updated to reflect work we completed since our report, *Managing for Results: Using the Results Act to Address Mission Fragmentation and Program Overlap* (GAO/AIMD-97-146, Aug. 29, 1997), was issued.

Source: GAO analysis.

Fragmentation and Overlap Continue to Be a Problem

In reviewing our reports issued in 1999 and 1998, we found that mission fragmentation and program overlap continue to be a problem in the federal government. Several social programs, such as housing for the homeless and assistance to the disabled, were added to our list of fragmented missions and overlapping program areas. We also identified fragmentation and overlap in defense-related activities, including the Department of Defense's (DOD) acquisition of guided weapon systems. The following summaries discuss fragmentation and overlap problems in eight new program areas. These program areas are included in table 1.

Programs for the Homeless

We recently reported that 50 programs administered by 8 federal agencies could provide services for the homeless. Of these 50 programs, 16 programs with over \$1.2 billion in obligations for fiscal year 1997 were focused on helping only the homeless. The remaining 34 programs, with about \$215 billion in obligations for fiscal year 1997, were focused on helping low-income people in general, including the homeless.⁵

Both types of programs provided an array of services, such as housing, health care, job training, and transportation, which are needed to assist the homeless. In some cases, multiple agencies provided services that appeared to be similar. For example, we found that 23 programs operated by 4 agencies offered housing services, and 26 programs administered by 6 agencies offered food and nutrition services.

Assistance for People With Disabilities

Similar to federal assistance for the homeless, two groups of federal programs provided assistance to individuals with disabilities. The first group used various definitions of disabilities as a central criterion for eligibility and consisted of 30 programs with estimated expenditures totaling \$110 billion in fiscal year 1999. The second group used disability as one of many potential criteria for program participation and consisted of 40 programs, including Medicare and Medicaid, for which age, income, or both also served as bases for eligibility.⁶ In an earlier report, we stated that because services often were not coordinated among agency programs, people with disabilities might receive duplicate services or face service gaps.⁷

⁵Homelessness: Coordination and Evaluation of Programs Are Essential (GAO/RCED-99-49, Feb. 26, 1999).

⁶GAO/HEHS-99-101.

⁷People with Disabilities: Federal Programs Could Work Together More Efficiently to Promote Employment (GAO/HEHS-96-126, Sept. 3, 1996).

Teen Pregnancy Prevention

We found that the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) had 27 different programs and services that supported efforts to prevent teen pregnancy, and 8 other agencies provided funding for programs that supported such efforts. HHS identified at least \$164 million in funding for those efforts in fiscal year 1997, and Congress authorized an additional \$50 million for abstinence education in fiscal year 1998. However, teen pregnancy prevention programs' shares of funding from various funding streams, such as Medicaid and block grants, could not be isolated because of the flexibility on spending decisions given to the states. In our Performance and Accountability Series, we said that with so many stakeholders involved, interagency coordination had become increasingly necessary and complex.⁸

DOD Acquisition Program for Guided Weapons

The military services and agencies often have made decisions on the basis of their unique requirements that in the aggregate can lead to overlap or duplication across DOD. For example, we reported in 1998 that the services had a proliferation of acquisition programs for guided weapons for deep attack missions.⁹ The services planned to make a large investment—about \$16.6 billion (constant dollars) over the next 10 years—on these acquisition programs. We reported that the individual acquisition decisions of the services would result in a doubling of the inventory of guided weapons that may not be needed to meet the U.S. national objectives. Furthermore, the services missed several opportunities to consolidate programs that were designed to be used for similar purposes and in similar ways.¹⁰

DOD Acquisition Program for Telecommunications

In another report, we said that the military services and defense agencies had long procured and operated multiple long-haul telecommunications systems to meet their individual mission needs. As a result, DOD's communications environment has been fragmented and redundant. This environment consisted of at least 87 independent networks that supported a variety of long-haul telecommunications requirements. The services reported costs on 68 of the networks as totaling more than \$89 million annually. Yet, DOD lacked basic management controls to ensure that it could achieve its goal for an interoperable and cost-effective

⁸Teen Pregnancy: State and Federal Efforts to Implement Prevention Programs and Measure Their Effectiveness (GAO/HEHS-99-4, Nov. 30, 1998) and Major Management Challenges and Program Risks: Department of Health and Human Services (GAO/OCG-99-7, January 1999).

⁹Deep attack missions are operations carried out beyond the areas where friendly ground forces operate.

¹⁰GAO/NSIAD-99-32.

telecommunications environment, and it also lacked a foundation to identify redundant networks.¹¹

Military Health Care

DOD's military health care system costs about \$16 billion annually, with about \$12 billion incurred for about 580 treatment facilities. We found that although efforts to coordinate had occurred, the services had not systematically collaborated in seeking the most cost-effective placement and use of medical resources. For example, in the Washington, D.C., area, three large medical centers—Walter Reed, Bethesda, and Malcolm Grow—were in close proximity. These facilities provided duplicative services and, in some cases, lacked sufficient workload. However, we noted that it was not possible to fully address the need for or the appropriate size of military treatment facilities in Washington, D.C., or elsewhere because DOD and the services lacked an overall strategy for determining and allocating medical resources within the military health care system.¹²

DOD and the services recently took action to develop such a strategy. However, officials who are responsible for developing a comprehensive strategy for ensuring that resources are allocated for the right amounts to the right locations will face many obstacles. Historically, the services have had enough resources to maintain separate health care systems and overlapping capabilities during peacetime. Consequently, they generally do not take into account other services' resources when making allocation decisions. The Army, Air Force, and Navy also have resisted any efforts to consolidate the services' medical departments into a single health agency. Each believed that it had unique medical needs and activities and thus fought to maintain its own health system. As a result, over the years, formal interservice management efforts have been limited and, today, remain difficult to achieve.

Satellite Control Systems

Federal defense, intelligence, and civil agencies operate separate satellite control systems to ensure that satellites reach their planned orbits and perform their intended missions while in orbit. We have reported that these agencies were spending several hundred million dollars a year to control their satellites or missions, were planning to upgrade their satellite

¹¹Defense Networks: Management Information Shortfalls Hinder Defense Efforts to Meet DISN Goals (GAO/AIMD-98-202, July 30, 1998).

¹²Defense Health Care: Tri-Service Strategy Needed to Justify Medical Resources for Readiness and Peacetime Care (GAO/HEHS-00-10, Nov. 3, 1999).

control systems, and did not have the necessary impetus or direction for more efficient use of the nation's satellite control resources.¹³

In 1996, DOD was directed to coordinate with other departments and agencies, as appropriate, to foster the integration and interoperability of satellite control for all federal space activities. As of early 1999, we reported that DOD had taken limited action to foster such integration and interoperability. In addition, a group established in 1998 had not been successful in stopping agencies from planning for satellite control capabilities on an independent basis.

Nonmedical Chemical and Biological Defense Technologies

DOD, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency within DOD, the Department of Energy, and an interagency working group administer four federal programs for research and development of nonmedical chemical and biological defense technologies. These technologies include technologies for detecting, identifying, protecting against, or decontaminating personnel and equipment. We noted that coordination was important because all four programs conducted research and development in similar areas and pursued many of the same capabilities. However, the basic information that was needed to compare specific goals and objectives of the various program activities to better assess whether overlaps, gaps, and opportunities for collaboration did not exist.¹⁴

Barriers Agencies Face When Trying To Coordinate Crosscutting Programs

Despite the importance of coordinating crosscutting program efforts, nonexistent or weak coordination of those efforts has been a long-standing problem in the federal government and has proven to be difficult to resolve. On the basis of our past work, we identified several barriers that challenge agencies as they attempt to better coordinate crosscutting program efforts.

Competing Missions and Unclear Roles Make Interagency Coordination Difficult

Agency missions that have evolved over time often have conflicting objectives that reflect different aspects of complex public problems. This makes interagency coordination both more necessary and more difficult. Such difficulties are compounded when clear lines of responsibility and accountability for crosscutting program efforts are absent.

One example of the incremental evolution of programs is the federal government's approach to managing federal lands and their natural

¹³Satellite Control Systems: Opportunity for DOD to Implement Space Policy and Integrate Capabilities (GAO/NSIAD-99-81, May 17, 1999).

¹⁴Chemical and Biological Defense: Coordination of Nonmedical Chemical and Biological R & D Programs (GAO/NSIAD-99-160, Aug. 16, 1999).

resources. At the end of the 19th century, after a century of conveying or selling new territorial lands, Congress began to establish the existing framework for managing the remaining federal lands. This framework consists of a complex collection of agencies and laws that have been set up to sustain or increase commodity production and provide for other uses of federal land, such as recreation, while protecting the natural resources for future generations.

Because of concerns over declining ecological conditions, and sustainability of natural resources, many federal agency officials, scientists, and natural resource policy analysts have advocated a new, broader approach to managing the nation's lands and natural resources called "ecosystem management." Virtually all analysts of ecosystem management noted that the approach will require unparalleled coordination of activities among federal agencies managing lands in the same ecosystem. However, we reported that such coordination will be hampered by disparate missions that are rooted in various laws.¹⁵

In our work on the Forest Service's decisionmaking process, we noted that the land management agencies' disparate missions and responsibilities resulted in differing evaluations of environmental effects and risks.¹⁶ This, in turn, could lead to disagreements among agencies on whether and how the requirements of environmental laws and regulations can best be met. We found, for example, that the Forest Service may be willing to accept a greater level of risk to the recovery of a threatened or endangered species under its multiple-use and sustained-yield mandates¹⁷ than would the Fish and Wildlife Service or the National Marine Fisheries Service, both of which are charged unambiguously with conserving and protecting species threatened with extinction. As illustration, disagreements among these agencies over protecting the spawning habitat of salmon in the Pacific Northwest and protecting endangered species' habitat in the Tongass National Forest in Alaska have resulted in delays in the Forest Service's plans and projects.

¹⁵Ecosystem Management: Additional Actions Needed to Adequately Test a Promising Approach (GAO/RCED-94-111, Aug. 16, 1994).

¹⁶Forest Service Decision-Making: A Framework for Improving Performance (GAO/RCED-97-71, Apr. 29, 1997).

¹⁷Under the multiple-use principle, the Forest Service must plan for six renewable surface uses—outdoor recreation, rangeland, timber, watersheds and water flows, wilderness, and wildlife and fish. Under the sustained-yield principle, the agency is to manage its lands to provide high levels of all of these uses to current users while sustaining undiminished the lands' ability to produce these uses for future generations.

Even where missions appear to be mutually reinforcing, conflicts that inhibit interagency coordination can arise when agencies are concerned about maintaining jurisdiction over their missions and the associated resources. As was discussed earlier, DOD is challenged by the need to overcome interservice rivalries so that it can modernize its health care system.¹⁸

The lack of clear lines of authority, coupled with disparate missions, compounds the difficulty agencies have in developing a coordinated approach to public problems. For example, at least 12 federal entities had some responsibility for addressing sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) measures of other countries.¹⁹ In 1997, we reported that no one entity was clearly assigned the role of directing and coordinating overall federal efforts for those measures. Without clearly defined roles and responsibilities, it could be difficult to determine which entity should lead federal efforts to address an individual SPS measure. For example, it was not clear which agency among the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative (USTR) and multiple USDA agencies were leading federal efforts to address a Chinese ban on U. S. wheat products found to contain a type of fungus.²⁰

Trade and regulatory authorities had conflicting perspectives on how SPS measures should be addressed that were based on their agencies' missions and their differing professional orientations. In addition to uncertainty over roles and responsibilities, USTR and the multiple USDA agencies also held different opinions about whether the U.S. strategy to address the Chinese ban should focus on technical or trade policy. In addition, some trade authorities said that regulatory authorities seemed to lack a sense of urgency regarding trade matters and were willing to engage in technical discussions for many months or years. They also expressed concerns that regulatory authorities lacked negotiating expertise, which sometimes precluded them from obtaining the most advantageous result for U.S. industry. In turn, some regulatory authorities expressed frustration that trade authorities did not seem to understand that deliberate and lengthy technical and scientific processes were often necessary to adequately and

¹⁸GAO/HEHS-00-10.

¹⁹Certain foreign sanitary and phytosanitary measures, which are designed to reduce the risk of diseases and pests to humans, animals, and plants, may prohibit U.S. agricultural products from entering foreign markets and constrain the growth of U.S. agricultural exports.

²⁰Agricultural Exports: U.S. Needs a More Integrated Approach to Address Sanitary/Phytosanitary Issues (GAO/NSIAD-98-32, Dec. 11, 1997).

properly address foreign regulatory authorities' concerns about U.S. products.

Clearly articulating roles and responsibilities, however, does not necessarily eliminate coordination problems. U.S. policy on combating terrorism, which has been evolving since the 1970s, has been formalized by a series of directives from the President and implementing guidance. These directives assign roles and enumerate responsibilities for various federal agencies and establish interagency support teams.²¹

Although in 1995 lead agencies were directed to develop interagency guidance for both domestic and international counterterrorism operations, they have been unable to complete this guidance. For example, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has not coordinated the proposed Domestic Guidelines with the Department of the Treasury, although Treasury could have a significant role in an actual terrorist incident. By omitting Treasury, the FBI was excluding key agencies with counterterrorism roles, including the Secret Service; the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms; and the Customs Service.

Similarly, the State Department was unable to complete interagency guidance on international counterterrorism operations. This guidance was to outline procedures for deploying interagency foreign emergency support teams and coordinating federal operations overseas. However, the State Department could not reach agreement with Justice and the FBI on procedures for arresting terrorists overseas. In response to our recommendation that these agencies resolve their differences, the State Department dropped all discussion of this important interagency topic from the guidance in an effort to get this guidance completed. As of March 2000, the guidance was in the final coordination stage.

Incompatible Procedures, Processes, Data, and Systems

Other critical stumbling blocks to interagency coordination are incompatible procedures, processes, data, and computer systems. In 1994, we reported that conflicts in eligibility standards limited the ability of state and local administrators to use common forms for multiple federal employment training programs because eligibility requirements were not standardized across programs. For example, the term "economically disadvantaged" lacked standardization among those programs. As a result, a member of a family of four with an income of \$20,040 would be considered "disadvantaged," thus eligible for services from one program.

²¹Combating Terrorism: Issues To Be Resolved to Improve Counterterrorism Operations (GAO/NSIAD-99-135, May 13, 1999).

However, the same \$20,040 income exceeds another program's definition of disadvantaged, making the family member ineligible for services from that program.²²

In the same report, we also discussed how different annual operating cycles for planning processes hampered the ability of program administrators to jointly plan program efforts to ensure that participants receive the services they needed. We noted that 16 employment training programs targeted youth and that these programs had four different operating cycles. Some programs servicing the same target population would have completed their planning process and begun operations on January 1, while other programs would not complete their planning until the following July. As a result, we reported that administrators might not be able to coordinate their plans to ensure that the resources needed to serve their clients were available.

The lack of comparable data that are based on standards and common definitions also can make attempts to bridge agency boundaries difficult. For example, agencies involved in wetlands-related activities—at least 36—used such terms as protection, restoration, rehabilitation, improvement, enhancement, and creation inconsistently in describing and reporting on their accomplishments. Because of the lack of consistent and reliable data on the status of wetlands, agencies disputed the accuracy of each other's data. Moreover, as of 1998, the agencies' report practices did not permit the actual accomplishments of the agencies—that is, the number of acres restored, enhanced, or otherwise improved—to be determined in a consistent way across the federal government.²³

Since 1989, several interagency groups, which were established to better coordinate federal wetlands programs, have unsuccessfully attempted to improve wetland data. Although the administration announced new efforts to improve data, the lack of consistent data continues to prevent the federal government from measuring agencies' progress toward achieving the governmentwide goal of no net loss of the nation's remaining wetlands.

²²See Multiple Employment Training Programs: Conflicting Requirements Hamper Delivery of Services (GAO/HEHS-94-78, Jan. 28, 1994). The Workforce Investment Act of 1998 began to overhaul and streamline the nation's federally funded employment training system. The legislation included many actions we had recommended, including standardizing definitions and establishing common performance measures, but implementation remains problematic. We currently have ongoing work to, among other things, identify challenges states face in implementing an integrated federal training system.

²³GAO/RCED-98-150.

Finally, incompatible computer networks and management information systems can be a critical technological barrier to interagency coordination. In 1995, we reported that USDA's agencies had hundreds of incompatible networks and systems that were built over time and that hindered departmentwide information sharing.²⁴ Although USDA had a pressing need to overcome this problem, its agencies were spending hundreds of millions of dollars continuing to develop their own networks that overlapped and perpetuated long-standing information problems. Also, because some new agency networks connected many of the same locations, USDA risked wasting money on the purchase of redundant communications networks and services.

Approaches for Improving the Management of Crosscutting Programs

A number of different approaches for improving the management of crosscutting programs—that is, ensuring that goals are consistent, program efforts are mutually reinforcing, and, where appropriate, common or complementary performance measures are developed—is evident from our prior work. On the basis of this work, we have suggested that GPRA can provide a systematic means for rationalizing crosscutting efforts. We also have offered possible approaches to coordination problems in specific crosscutting programs. These approaches include establishing better coordination mechanisms, integrating service delivery, and consolidating programs.

GPRA Holds Potential to Address Crosscutting Programs

GPRA offers a structured and governmentwide framework for addressing crosscutting programs.²⁵ This framework could be used by OMB, agencies, and Congress to better ensure that the programs are being effectively coordinated. For example, we have reported that the governmentwide performance plan, prepared by OMB on the basis of agencies' performance plans, offers perhaps the best opportunity to present and integrate expected agency-level performance and to more clearly relate and address the contributions of alternative federal strategies for common performance goals. To take advantage of this opportunity, OMB should pay particular attention to whether agencies are adequately addressing crosscutting program efforts in their performance plans.

²⁴USDA Telecommunications: Better Management and Network Planning Could Save Millions (GAO/AIMD-95-203, Sept. 22, 1995).

²⁵See *Managing for Results: Using GPRA to Help Congressional Decisionmaking and Strengthen Oversight* (GAO/T-GGD-00-95, Mar. 22, 2000); *Managing for Results: Agencies' Annual Plans Can Help Address Strategic Planning Challenges* (GAO/GGD-98-44, Jan. 30, 1998); *Managing for Results: An Agenda To Improve the Usefulness of Agencies Annual Performance Plans* (GAO/GGD/AIMD-98-228; Sept. 8, 1998) and *Managing for Results: Opportunities for Continued Improvements in Agencies' Performance Plans* (GAO/GGD/AIMD-99-215, July 20, 1999).

In our assessments of progress made in implementing GPRA, we pointed out ways in which agencies could use strategic and performance planning cycles to address crosscutting programs. For example, the act's emphasis on results-based measures as part of the annual performance planning process should lead to more explicit discussion concerning the contributions and accomplishments of agencies' efforts. As agencies work with OMB to develop their strategic and annual performance plans, they could consider the extent to which programs need to be coordinated. Agencies could also use the GPRA planning processes to consider whether agency goals are complementary and common performance measures are needed.

The issuance of the first performance reports at the end of March 2000 represents a new and potentially more substantive stage in the implementation of GPRA. Through these reports, Congress and the executive branch could systematically assess agencies' actual performance on a governmentwide basis and consider steps that could be taken to improve performance and reduce costs of crosscutting programs.

These reports, coupled with the governmentwide performance plan and the agencies' annual performance plans, should provide Congress with a wealth of information on agencies' missions, goals, strategies, resources, and results. Then, Congress could use this information to identify agencies and programs addressing similar missions. Once these programs are identified, Congress could consider the associated policy, management, and performance implications of crosscutting programs as part of its oversight over the executive branch.

To take full advantage of this wealth of information, Congress might want to consider developing oversight mechanisms that allow it to more systematically articulate performance goals for the broad missions of government, assess alternative strategies that offer the most promise for achieving those goals, and focus its oversight on the most serious and systemic weaknesses and risks. As we recently testified, one possible mechanism could involve modifying the current budget resolution to include a performance component.²⁶ Already organized by budget function, similar to the program performance section of the President's governmentwide performance plan, the budget resolution could be adapted to permit Congress to respond to, and present a coordinated congressional perspective on, the President's governmentwide performance plan. For example, the "views and estimates" provided by

²⁶GAO/T-GGD-00-95.

authorization and appropriation committees as part of the process to develop the budget resolution could be expanded to include their perspectives on priority performance issues within their areas of jurisdiction.

In addition, through the efforts of the Committee on Governmental Affairs and others, crosscutting performance concerns, such as those discussed in this report, could be identified for targeted congressional attention. Obviously, a “congressional performance resolution” linked to the budget resolution is only one approach to achieve the objective of enhancing congressional oversight on the most pressing crosscutting performance and management issues.

Approaches for Addressing Select Crosscutting Programs

Beyond the general opportunities provided by GPRA, we have offered other potential approaches for improving the management of individual crosscutting program efforts. We have offered those approaches on the basis of our analysis of the coordination problem and each effort’s circumstances. These approaches range from establishing linkages among agencies through better coordination to reducing the need for coordination through consolidation of multiple agency efforts. Determining which approach, if any, is appropriate for a given crosscutting effort is ultimately an exercise in political choice that involves consideration of the unique policy, program, and operational environment of that effort.

In some reports, we said that the development of coordination mechanisms, such as long-term planning and priority setting, could be used to create interagency program linkages. In one report, we noted that, for several decades, HHS has provided special transportation services.²⁷ Similarly, the Department of Transportation awarded grants to local transit operators to provide assistance for general public transportation, such as buses, and for meeting the special needs of elderly individuals and individuals with disabilities. These agencies, which invested a total of over \$6 billion in fiscal year 1998 for transportation services, often failed to complement each other’s programs because of a lack of coordination. Consequently, we said that some clients might be left unserved or underserved, while transportation providers serving other clients might have excess capacity.

To remedy this situation, HHS and Transportation signed an agreement in October 1986 that established a joint Coordinating Council on Human

²⁷Transportation Coordination: Benefits and Barriers Exist, and Planning Efforts Progress Slowly (GAO/RCED-00-1, Oct. 22, 1999).

Services Transportation. The Council was to coordinate related programs at the federal level wherever possible and to promote coordination at the state and local levels.

However, because its efforts had been erratic and slow to produce results, we recommended, in 1999, that the Council improve transportation coordination through better strategic and implementation planning that set priorities and assigned specific responsibilities. We added that the planning efforts should also (1) make sure that transportation coordinating planning efforts under development reinforce one another, (2) assess barriers to coordination, and (3) make information on coordination barriers and strategies to overcome the barriers readily available.

In our 1998 report on child labor in agriculture, we suggested that follow-through with existing coordinating mechanisms was needed.²⁸ Recognizing that the patchwork of workforce protections was dependent upon effective coordination, the Department of Labor established coordination procedures. These procedures included referring potential cases to, conducting joint inspections with, and exchanging information with key federal enforcement agencies. However, in 1998, we found that the procedures were not always being followed and Labor, in many cases, had no controls in place to alert it to any coordination problems. We noted that the lack of coordination could result in farmworkers' children working in violation of the law.

Another approach to rationalizing crosscutting programs is to move beyond coordination to the integration of service delivery. We recently reported that despite federal policies, most children receiving federal health care assistance had not been screened for lead poisoning. We said that improved coordination for this assistance was one way to increase the number of low-income children being screened for this serious health threat. Since research has shown that underimmunized populations and populations most at risk of lead poisoning are often the same, we recommended that HHS consider integrating lead screening with other preventive health care for children. We further recommended that one possible candidate for such an arrangement might be the USDA's Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children.²⁹ As a first step in addressing our recommendations, HHS has developed a

²⁸Child Labor In Agriculture: Changes Needed to Better Protect Health and Educational Opportunities (GAO/HEHS-98-193, Aug. 21, 1998).

²⁹Lead Poisoning: Federal Health Care Programs Are Not Effectively Reaching At-Risk Children (GAO/HEHS-99-18, Jan. 15, 1999).

working group to develop and implement an initiative to address the issues we raised in this report, including establishing partnerships with other federally funded programs that are administered by the states.

Finally, our work also suggested that, where appropriate, program consolidation offered the potential to reduce costs and improve the efficiency and effectiveness of federal crosscutting efforts—especially when programs with similar objectives and clientele were brought together and unplanned fragmentation and overlap were reduced. We have long proposed as a candidate for reorganization the federal system that is to ensure the safety and quality of the nation’s food system.³⁰ Our work found that this system—at a cost of over \$1 billion a year—is inefficient and hinders the government’s efforts to effectively protect consumers from unsafe food.

An oft-cited example of fragmentation in the federal food safety effort is that, on one hand, USDA is responsible for inspecting food plants that produce open-faced meat sandwiches and pizzas with meat toppings. On the other hand, HHS’ Food and Drug Administration is responsible for inspecting food plants that produce traditional meat sandwiches and nonmeat pizzas.

Our work also suggests that efficiencies might be gained by consolidating some of the 117 federal programs serving at-risk and delinquent youth in fiscal year 1998 into a smaller set of programs. We reported in 1996 that it might be more efficient to have one program, administered by a single federal office, cover a particular service/target group combination. However, we also reported deciding what, if anything, should be done to reform the system would require consideration of how individual programs currently operate, with special attention to how consolidation could reduce overall administrative costs. It would require careful thought about what such a system should look like and how it should function, including its scope, design, goals, and strategies.³¹

³⁰Food Safety: Opportunities to Redirect Federal Resources and Funds Can Enhance Effectiveness (GAO/RCED-98-224, Aug. 6, 1998) and Food Safety and Quality: Uniform, Risk-based Inspection System Needed to Ensure Safe Food Supply (GAO/RCED-92-152, June 26, 1992).

³¹See At-Risk and Delinquent Youths: Fiscal Year 1998 Programs (GAO/HEHS-99-88R, Mar. 30, 1999); At-Risk and Delinquent Youth: Multiple Programs Lack Coordinated Federal Effort (GAO/T-HEHS-98-38, Nov. 5, 1997); At-Risk and Delinquent Youth: Fiscal Year 1996 Programs (GAO/HEHS-97-211R, Sept. 2, 1997); and At-Risk and Delinquent Youth: Multiple Federal Programs Raise Efficiency Questions (GAO/HEHS-96-34, Mar. 6, 1996).

Conclusions

Our previous work has identified widespread mission fragmentation and program overlap in the federal government. Since our 1997 report on fragmentation and overlap was issued, we identified additional examples of fragmentation and overlap, including social programs for the homeless and DOD's development and acquisition of weapon systems. This fragmentation and overlap underscores how important it is that the federal government develop the capacity to more effectively coordinate crosscutting program efforts and to identify and eliminate those programs where redundancy does not serve public policy.

Our work also indicates that coordinating crosscutting programs will be a persistent challenge for executive branch agencies. In addressing these challenges, agencies will need to overcome barriers, such as disparate missions and incompatible procedures, processes, data, and computer systems.

Although we have offered various specific approaches—such as setting up interagency coordination mechanisms, integrating service delivery, and consolidating programs—for rationalizing crosscutting programs, we believe that GPRA provides a general, systematic approach for ensuring that agencies' goals and strategies are mutually reinforcing. The act's requirements for strategic and performance planning as well as performance reporting provide agencies and OMB with opportunities to address fragmentation and overlap. OMB could use the governmentwide performance plan, which is to be based on agency performance plans, to more directly address crosscutting programs. While preparing this plan, OMB could integrate expected agency-level performance and more clearly relate and address the contributions of alternative federal strategies to common performance goals. Furthermore, as agencies work with OMB to develop their annual performance plans, they could consider the extent to which goals are complementary and the need for common performance measures. Finally, OMB and agencies could use the annual performance reporting process to show how the goals were met and, if unmet, what actions, plans, and schedules agencies have developed, or could develop, to meet those goals.

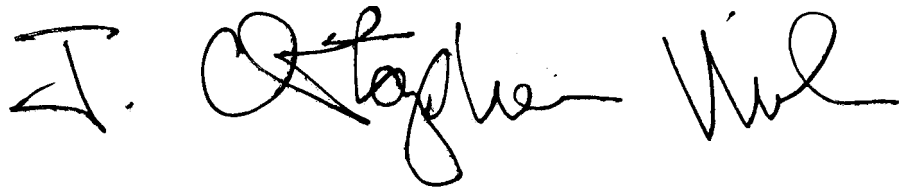
In addition, the governmentwide performance plan and annual performance reports could set the stage for a more integrated and focused dialogue between Congress and the administration about priorities and how agencies interact in implementing those priorities. Congress could use this dialogue to help identify crosscutting program efforts where a consensus exists on how to address fragmentation and overlap. This consensus may lead to statutory reform for new approaches for

interagency coordination that integrate or consolidate federal programs or that eliminate unneeded programs. Congress could also use performance information to better inform policy debate and program oversight when dialogue does not lead to consensus.

We are sending copies of this report to Senator Joseph I. Lieberman, Representative Dan Burton, and Representative Henry A. Waxman in their respective capacities as the Ranking Minority Member of the Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs, Chairman of the House Committee on Government Reform, and Ranking Minority Member of the House Committee on Government Reform. We are also sending copies to the Honorable Jacob J. Lew, Director of OMB, and will make copies available to others on request.

If you have any questions about this report, please contact me or Donna Byers, Evaluator-in-Charge, at (202) 512-8676.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. Christopher Mihm". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "J." being more distinct than the last name.

J. Christopher Mihm
Associate Director, Federal Management
and Workforce Issues

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