# HUMAN SERVICES PROGRAMS
## Opportunities to Reduce Inefficiencies

## Why GAO Did This Study

The federal government, often in concert with states, provides assistance to millions of individuals and families each year through a multiplicity of programs. These programs play a key role in supporting workers who have lost their jobs, families with low-incomes, and vulnerable children who have experienced abuse and neglect. However, given the fiscal pressures facing the federal government and the continued demands placed on assistance programs, it is critical that programs designed to serve those most in need provide benefits and services as effectively and efficiently as possible. In light of concerns about fragmentation, duplication, and overlap in government programs, this testimony addresses: (1) the key characteristics of some programs and tax expenditures that provide assistance to individuals and families; (2) problems in administering and providing services through multiple programs; and (3) actions that may help address these problems. We focused on programs under the jurisdiction of the Subcommittee of Human Resources and some related programs and tax expenditures for children and working-age adults; we developed an illustrative but not all-inclusive list of these programs. We relied on work conducted between 2001 and 2011, which employed an array of methodologies. These included surveys of federal and state officials; site visits to states and local areas; interviews with local, state, and federal officials; and analysis of agency data and documents.

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## What GAO Found

Various federal programs and tax expenditures exist to assist individuals and families by providing income support, child care, and child welfare services. Other programs help meet these households' needs in other areas, such as health and nutrition. Overall, several congressional committees as well as six federal agencies oversee these programs at the federal level, while federal agencies, state and local agencies, as well as for-profit and nonprofit agencies directly provide services at the local level. Families can receive benefits from one or more of these programs. For example, a low-income family may be eligible for and receive income support through Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), and Child Support Enforcement, as well as subsidized child care assistance.

This array of programs plays a key role in supporting those in need, but our work has shown it to be too fragmented and overly complex—for clients to navigate, for program operators to administer efficiently, and for program managers and policymakers to assess program performance. Individuals often must visit multiple offices to apply for aid and provide the same information and documentation each time—a process that is cumbersome and inefficient. The complexity and variation in eligibility rules and other requirements among programs contribute to time-consuming and duplicative administrative processes that add to overall costs. Some programs provide similar services through separate programs, resulting in additional inefficiencies. For example, we recently reported that TANF, Workforce Investment Act Adult (WIA Adult), and Employment Service (ES) programs often maintain separate administrative structures to provide some of the same services and activities, such as job search assistance, to low-income individuals. In addition, gaps in information can hamper program oversight.

Approaches such as simplifying policies, improving technology, and fostering innovation and evaluation can improve services and reduce costs. Simplifying policies can improve productivity and help staff focus more time on activities such as ensuring the accuracy of benefits. Facilitating technology enhancements can streamline eligibility processes and improve program integrity. In addition, fostering state innovation and evaluation can help the federal government and policymakers determine which approaches are the most cost-effective and limit investment in unproven strategies.

Because federal programs have evolved over time to meet various needs, it is not surprising to see multiple programs with some fragmentation of administration, some overlap in populations served, and some duplication of services offered. These features may be warranted, for example, to ensure quality services are provided and certain populations are served. However, our work indicates that further exploration of the extent of fragmentation, overlap, and duplication could help better identify ways to streamline and improve programs and to reduce inefficiencies.