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The Honorable James A. Traficant, Jr.
Chairman
The Honorable John J. Duncan, Jr.
Ranking Minority Member
Subcommittee on Public Buildings
and Grounds
Committee on Public Works and
Transportation
House of Representatives

This letter responds to your March 4, 1994, request that we assess the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts' (AOC) actions to address the recommendations in our report Federal Judiciary Space: Long-Range Planning Process Needs Revision (GAO/GGD-93-132, Sept. 28, 1993). To respond to your request we interviewed officials from AOC and the General Services Administration (GSA), examined current documents relating to the judiciary's long-range planning process, and discussed alternative statistical methodologies with AOC officials.

In our September 1993 report, we identified three key problems that impaired the accuracy and reliability of the judiciary's process for projecting long-range space needs: (1) all judicial districts were not treated consistently, (2) existing space plus unmet needs for authorized staff was accepted as a baseline without questioning whether it was appropriate in light of the district's current caseload, and (3) projection methods were not statistically acceptable and involved a high level of subjectivity. We made six specific recommendations in our report to correct these key problems.

AOC has made progress in improving its long-range planning process, which is one of the first such processes in the federal government for anticipating space needs. AOC has implemented two of our recommendations--one relating to the consistency of the long-range planning process and the other relating to the time span covered by the projections. AOC has partially implemented two other recommendations dealing with the projection methods and the level of subjectivity and has indicated a willingness to take further actions to

fully implement these recommendations. AOC has not fully implemented two remaining recommendations--improving the classification of districts and establishing an appropriate baseline--but AOC officials told us that they are evaluating options to address them. We offered to assist AOC in any way possible. Following is a discussion of AOC's actions on the specific recommendations contained in our September 1993 report.

IMPLEMENTED RECOMMENDATIONS

GAO recommendation: To improve consistency in the long-range planning process, AOC should prepare updated space plans for all districts whenever changes are made to the assumptions that affect staff/space allocations

In our report, we expressed concern that the districts whose space plans were completed early in the process received lower space allocations than those whose plans were completed later. AOC is now updating the long-range plans and intends to update all plans within about 2 years of their original completion. To date, AOC has completed the updating process for 15 districts, and the process is under way for another 15. If AOC follows its planned biennial schedule, the first round of updates will be completed by 1996.

GAO recommendation: To improve the reliability of the long-range planning process, AOC should limit the time span covered by the space projections to 10 years

We stated in our report that (1) 20- and 30-year projections lack precision and (2) GSA uses only the 10-year space estimates for its planning purposes. Since our original evaluation of the planning process, AOC has changed the information given to GSA for planning purposes. Now, whenever a decision is made to proceed on a particular building project, AOC provides GSA with detailed 10-year space requirements for prospectus development and an overall summary of needs at the 30-year point for site planning.

PARTIALLY IMPLEMENTED RECOMMENDATIONS

GAO recommendation: To improve the statistical reliability of future space needs, AOC should identify and use a standard statistical technique that would generate accurate caseload projections with defined confidence intervals

AOC officials told us that they have improved the reliability of the caseload projections by no longer

averaging the results generated from the regression equations and no longer applying arbitrary multipliers to the results. AOC officials said that they have adopted the statistical method we used to make the estimates that appeared in our report. However, as we stated in our report, we chose the procedure we used to make our projections because it provided a statistically acceptable method and could provide a valid basis for determining the accuracy of AOC's methodology. Both in our report and in discussions with AOC officials, we suggested alternative statistical techniques that could yield accurate results with narrower confidence intervals¹. AOC officials said they will test alternative methods for projecting caseloads. This task is of prime importance in terms of the overall planning process because accurate caseload projections are required if accurate staff needs are to be estimated.

GAO recommendation: To improve the reliability of the estimates of future space needs, AOC should reduce the subjectivity of the process by eliminating the use of arbitrarily selected regression models and by verifying the information provided by the local representatives

AOC officials told us that they have also improved the reliability in projecting caseloads by eliminating the subjectivity in selecting regression models. AOC officials informed us how they now use a defined and consistent projection methodology for all districts. Subjectivity still occurs, however, when local representatives modify the estimates of staff requirements that were generated from caseload projections. AOC officials said that to determine the reasonableness of the staffing estimates, they will begin comparing the information provided by the local representatives with the statistical projections.

RECOMMENDATIONS NOT YET FULLY ADDRESSED

GAO recommendation: To improve consistency in the long-range planning process, AOC should devise a method for classifying districts that considers case complexity in addition to caseload

AOC officials have not changed the method by which they

¹A confidence interval is a statistical procedure that allows for the estimation at a defined probability level that the population value will fall within defined upper and lower limits.

classify the 94 districts into 1 of 4 growth models.² We discussed with AOC the statistical method known as cluster analysis, which could be used to develop groups of districts on the basis of multiple factors, such as case complexity, rather than just total caseload. AOC officials said that they are evaluating a number of methods to classify districts, including cluster analysis. This task is critical for planning purposes because the average current caseload within each group determines the relationship between caseloads and the number of key personnel required.

GAO recommendation: To determine whether existing space plus unmet needs was the appropriate baseline in light of current caseloads, AOC should revise the process to require that baselines be established that reflected AOC's assumptions regarding the relationships between caseloads, staff needs, and space requirements

While AOC has not yet addressed this recommendation, it has developed and implemented an automated system, ANYCOURT, that could be used to eliminate the subjectivity involved when AOC identifies current space needs. Under the existing process, local representatives identify the unmet needs. By using a procedure such as ANYCOURT, AOC could systematically generate current space needs using actual staff and the individual space elements included in the U.S. Courts Design Guide. During our discussions, AOC officials said that they will test the use of ANYCOURT for this part of the process. Assuming that the staff needs used are valid, a system such as ANYCOURT could prove valuable in calculating both current and future space needs.

Although we did not evaluate the space allocations in ANYCOURT, we believe such a system has the potential of improving the consistency of the estimates of space needs for each site within a district. AOC officials told us that the space requirements generated by ANYCOURT are about 20-percent higher than those produced under the system they previously used. According to AOC officials, they are in the process of identifying the reasons for this increase. They also said that they would be evaluating the reasonableness of the increase and would make any needed adjustments to ANYCOURT.

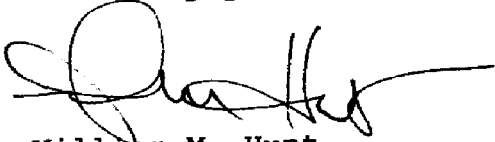
²Growth models are the four categories into which AOC places districts to establish the ratios for converting caseloads into staff needs.

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AOC officials were extremely cooperative during this assessment and indicated that they plan to take the necessary steps to address our remaining recommendations. The changes already implemented by AOC combined with our other recommended actions should correct the problems discussed in our report. We believe that the combined effects of the changes cannot be assessed until they have been fully implemented for at least 6 months.

If you have any additional questions or would like further information, please call me at (202) 512-8676.

Sincerely yours,



William M. Hunt
Director, Federal
Management Issues

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