

GAO@100 Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-21-396T](#), a testimony before the Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

As of February 17, 2021, the U.S. had about 27 million cumulative reported cases of COVID-19 and more than 486,000 reported deaths, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The country also continues to experience serious economic repercussions.

Five relief laws, including the CARES Act, have appropriated \$3.1 trillion to address the public health and economic threats posed by COVID-19. The CARES Act also includes a provision for GAO to report on its ongoing monitoring and oversight efforts related to COVID-19.

This testimony summarizes GAO's insights from its oversight of the federal government's pandemic response in a series of comprehensive reports issued from June 2020 through January 2021. In particular, the statement focuses on the public health response, including testing, vaccines and therapeutics, medical supply chain, health disparities, and health data.

GAO reviewed data, documents, and guidance from federal agencies about their activities and interviewed federal and state officials and stakeholders for the series of reports on which this testimony is based. See <https://www.gao.gov/coronavirus/>.

What GAO Recommends

GAO has made 44 recommendations for agencies and four matters for congressional consideration in its comprehensive series of bimonthly reports on the federal response to COVID-19 over the last year. GAO will issue its next report in this series in March 2021.

View [GAO-21-396T](#). For more information, contact A. Nicole Clowers, (202) 512-7114 or clowersa@gao.gov.

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COVID-19

Key Insights from GAO's Oversight of the Federal Public Health Response

What GAO Found

More than a year after the U.S. declared COVID-19 a public health emergency, the pandemic continues to result in catastrophic loss of life and substantial damage to the economy. It also continues to lay bare the fragmented nature of our public health sector, the fragility of the nation's medical supply chain, and longstanding disparities in health care access, treatment, and outcomes.

GAO has made 44 recommendations to federal agencies. Of these recommendations, 16 relate to the following public health topics:

COVID-19 Testing. GAO has made two recommendations to date to improve the federal government's efforts in diagnostic testing for COVID-19, critical to controlling the spread of the virus. In January 2021, GAO recommended that the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) develop and make publicly available a comprehensive national COVID-19 testing strategy.

Vaccines and Therapeutics. GAO has made two recommendations to improve transparency, communication, and coordination around the government's efforts to develop, manufacture, and distribute vaccines and therapeutics to prevent and treat COVID-19. For example, in September 2020, GAO recommended that HHS establish a time frame for a national vaccine distribution and administration plan that follows best practices, with federal and nonfederal coordination.

Medical Supply Chain. GAO has made seven recommendations for the federal government to respond to vulnerabilities highlighted by the pandemic in the nation's medical supply chain, including limitations in personal protective equipment and other supplies necessary to treat individuals with COVID-19. In January 2021, GAO recommended that HHS establish a process for regularly engaging with Congress and nonfederal stakeholders as the agency refines and implements its supply chain strategy for pandemic preparedness, to include the role of the Strategic National Stockpile.

COVID-19 Health Disparities. GAO has made three recommendations to improve COVID-19 data by race and ethnicity, as available data show communities of color bear a disproportionate burden of COVID-19 positive tests, cases, hospitalizations, and deaths. In September 2020, GAO recommended that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention involve key stakeholders to help ensure the complete and consistent collection of demographic data.

COVID-19 Data. GAO has made two recommendations to improve the collection of data needed to respond to COVID-19 and prepare for future pandemics. GAO recommended in January 2021 that HHS establish an expert committee to help systematically define and ensure the collection of standardized data across the relevant federal agencies and related stakeholders; the absence of such data hinders the ability of the government to respond to COVID-19, communicate the status of the pandemic with citizens, or prepare for future pandemics.

Although the responsible agencies generally agreed with the majority of the 16 recommendations, only one has been fully implemented. GAO maintains that implementing these recommendations will improve the federal government's public health response and ability to recover as a nation.