

Highlights of [GAO-22-104745](#), a report to congressional addressees.

Why This Matters

The Indian Health Service (IHS) serves over 2 million American Indians and Alaska Natives. These groups have been disproportionately vulnerable to negative outcomes from COVID-19. During emergencies, federal contracting staff face pressure to work quickly to meet increased needs. We examined some of IHS's COVID-related contracts to see how the agency's efforts fared.

Key Takeaways

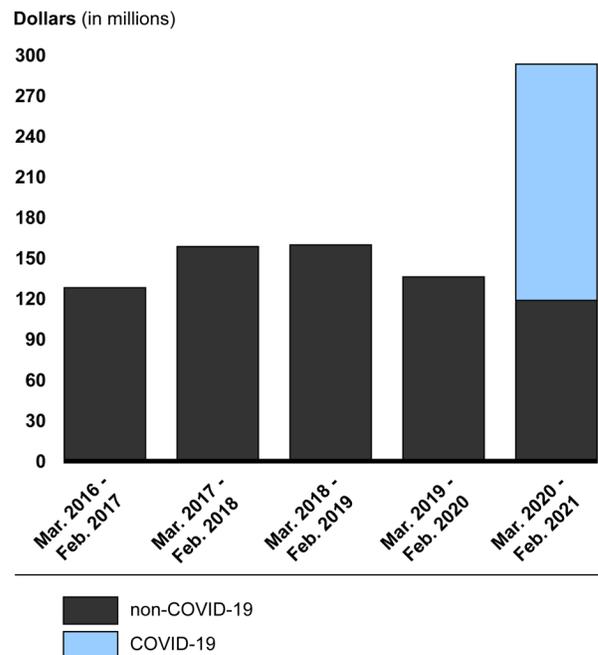
Despite facing challenges, including unprecedented demand for medical supplies, IHS was able to acquire needed products from a variety of vendors. IHS contract obligations for products, excluding prescription drugs, increased substantially during COVID-19 to address emergent needs for additional personal protective equipment, lab supplies, and more. Using emergency contracting flexibilities available under federal regulation, IHS

- bought personal protective equipment and other medical products in bulk
- awarded contracts noncompetitively
- used streamlined procedures for higher dollar contracts to obtain medical supplies faster

However, we found that IHS contracting officers did not notice that some COVID-related supplies were delivered late. Officials attributed this oversight to the spike in volume as well as the urgency of procurements during a pandemic.

Contracting officers are responsible for ensuring the terms of a contract are met—under normal circumstances and in emergency acquisitions. IHS officials told us that they began taking intermediate steps to improve tracking of products during 2020; the agency is currently obtaining new software to improve contractor oversight.

IHS Contract Obligations Increased Substantially Due to COVID-19



Source: GAO analysis of Federal Procurement Data System data. | GAO-22-104745

How GAO Did This Study

We analyzed relevant federal procurement data through June 30, 2021. We also reviewed four contracts—covering about 1/4 of obligations in IHS's largest product category (medical and surgical instruments, equipment, and supplies). We also interviewed IHS contracting officials.

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