ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

EPA Needs to Follow Best Practices and Procedures When Reorganizing Its Library Network

What GAO Found

Since 2006, EPA has implemented its library reorganization plan and has closed physical access to the Office of Environmental Information (OEI) headquarters library and three regional office libraries. In the same period, six other libraries in the network independently changed their operations. Some of these libraries digitized, dispersed, or disposed of their materials before EPA had drafted a common set of agencywide library procedures for doing so. Until these procedures are completed, EPA plans no further changes to the library network.

EPA reorganized its library network primarily to generate cost savings through a more coordinated library network and more electronic delivery of services. However, GAO found that EPA did not effectively justify its reorganization decision. According to EPA officials, OEI decided to reorganize its libraries without fully completing the recommended analyses in order to reduce its fiscal year 2007 funding in response to the President’s fiscal year 2007 budget proposal.

EPA did not systematically inform the full range of stakeholders on the final configuration of the library network. In addition, EPA libraries varied considerably in the extent to which they communicated with and solicited views from staff, external stakeholders, and experts before and during the reorganization effort. EPA is currently reaching out to stakeholders, including EPA staff and library experts, by holding and attending stakeholder meetings and conferences.

EPA does not yet have an effective strategy to ensure the continuity of library services following the reorganization and does not know the full effect of the reorganization on library services. EPA’s library plan describes the reorganization effort as a “phased approach,” but it does not provide specific goals, timelines, or feedback mechanisms that allow the agency to measure performance and monitor user needs to ensure a successful reorganization while maintaining quality services. EPA did not follow key practices for a successful transformation, even though the agency made several changes to the library network that could have impaired the continued delivery of library materials and services to its staff and the public.

The several different program offices responsible for the EPA libraries in the network each generally decide how much of their available funding to allocate to their libraries and how to fund their reorganization. However, when faced with a proposed budget reduction of $2 million in fiscal year 2007, rather than following its normal procedures, OEI directed the regional and headquarters offices to reduce funding for OEI libraries—a reduction of 77 percent for these libraries from the previous fiscal year. EPA did not allocate funds to help closing libraries manage their collections; instead, the responsible program or regional office used its annual funding to pay for these costs.