Census Bureau Testing of 2010 Decennial Systems Can Be Strengthened

What GAO Found

Although the Bureau has made progress in testing key decennial systems, critical testing activities remain to be performed before systems will be ready to support the 2010 census. Bureau program offices have completed some testing of individual systems, but significant work still remains to be done, and many plans have not yet been developed (see table below). In its testing of system integration, the Bureau has not completed critical activities; it also lacks a master list of interfaces between systems and has not developed testing plans and schedules. Although the Bureau had originally planned what it refers to as a Dress Rehearsal, starting in 2006, to serve as a comprehensive end-to-end test of key operations and systems, significant problems were identified during testing. As a result, several key operations were removed from the Dress Rehearsal and did not undergo end-to-end testing. The Bureau has neither developed testing plans for these key operations, nor has it determined when such plans will be completed.

Weaknesses in the Bureau’s testing progress and plans can be attributed in part to a lack of sufficient executive-level oversight and guidance. Bureau management does provide oversight of system testing activities, but the oversight activities are not sufficient. For example, Bureau reports do not provide comprehensive status information on progress in testing key systems and interfaces, and assessments of the overall status of testing for key operations are not based on quantitative metrics. Further, although the Bureau has issued general testing guidance, it is neither mandatory nor specific enough to ensure consistency in conducting system testing. Without adequate oversight and more comprehensive guidance, the Bureau cannot ensure that it is thoroughly testing its systems and properly prioritizing testing activities before the 2010 Decennial Census, posing the risk that these systems may not perform as planned.

What GAO Recommends

In its report, GAO recommended that the Secretary of Commerce direct the Bureau to complete key system testing activities, develop and maintain plans and schedules for integration testing, and improve the oversight of and guidance for systems testing. In comments on a draft of this report, the department agreed with GAO’s recommendations.