FEDERAL DISABILITY ASSISTANCE

Wide Array of Programs Needs to be Examined in Light of 21st Century Challenges

What GAO Found

More than 20 federal agencies and almost 200 programs provide a wide range of assistance to people with disabilities, including employment-related services, medical care, and monetary support. About half of these programs serve only people with disabilities while the rest serve people both with and without disabilities. In fiscal year 2003, more than $120 billion in federal funds was spent on programs that only serve people with disabilities, with over 80 percent of these funds spent on monetary support (see figure below). In addition, considerable funds are spent on people with disabilities by programs that also serve people without disabilities, like Medicare and Medicaid.

Federal Spending for Wholly Targeted Programs by Primary Type of Assistance, Fiscal Year 2003

The program challenges cited most frequently in our recent survey of nearly 200 programs serving people with disabilities are largely consistent with several of the key findings from past reports that led GAO to place federal programs supporting people with disabilities on its high-risk list. Both our recent survey and our past work have identified challenges in (1) ensuring timely and consistent processing of applications; (2) ensuring timely provision of services and benefits; (3) interpreting complex eligibility requirements; (4) planning for growth in the demand for benefits and services; (5) making beneficiaries or clients aware of benefits and services; and (6) communicating or coordinating with other federal disability programs.

In light of the vital role federal programs play in providing assistance to people with disabilities and in helping to ensure an adequate national labor force, we have identified a number of factors that are important to consider in assessing the need for, and nature of, program transformations including (1) program design issues; (2) fiscal implications of proposed program changes; and (3) feasibility of implementing program changes.