RUNAWAY AND HOMELESS YOUTH GRANTS
Improvements Needed in the Grant Award Process

What GAO Found

Based on GAO’s review of past grant announcements for these programs, GAO found that the criteria upon which grant applications were evaluated were not clearly identified or presented in a single location in the announcement. Rather, GAO found that criteria were scattered throughout various sections of the announcement, had multiple labels, and were not presented in an orderly manner. As a result, applications that did not address the criteria from all sections were likely to receive lower evaluation scores, decreasing their chances of receiving a grant.

HHS provides technical assistance to potential applicants for runaway and homeless youth grants, as required by statute. Of the 20 applicants GAO interviewed who sought technical assistance, 17 were satisfied with the help they received.

Grant award decisions are primarily based on the results of the peer review process, and internal controls in place to ensure that applications are evaluated consistently were not always adequate. GAO found weaknesses in four out of the six procedures the agency relies on to ensure consistent evaluation of applications. For example, although HHS policy requires peer reviewers to be experts in the field of runaway and homeless youth programs, about one-quarter of the reviewers who evaluated applications for 2009 Street Outreach grants had little or no experience in this area.

With regard to notification of grant award decisions, GAO found that they have not always been communicated to applicants in a timely manner, which can delay the start of new programs and present planning challenges for existing ones. GAO also found that the information in notification letters to applicants who were not awarded grants was not always clear or complete.

HHS’s Grant Programs for Runaway and Homeless Youth

- **Basic Center**: Provides food, clothing, shelter, health care, and counseling services for runaway and homeless youth under age 18.
- **Transitional Living/Maternity Group Homes**: Provides runaway and homeless youth ages 16 through 21 with up to 18 months of residential services.
- **Street Outreach**: Designed to prevent the sexual abuse and exploitation of runaway and homeless youth and to treat any already abused or exploited.

Source: GAO analysis of ACF documents.