**FEDERAL COURTHOUSES**

**Improved Collaboration Needed to Meet Demands of a Complex Security Environment**

### Why GAO Did This Study

Safe and accessible federal courthouses are critical to the U.S. judicial process. The Federal Protective Service (FPS), within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the U.S. Marshals Service (Marshals Service), within the Department of Justice (DOJ), the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts (AOUSC), and the General Services Administration (GSA) are the federal stakeholders with roles related to courthouse security. As requested, this report addresses (1) attributes that influence courthouse security considerations and (2) the extent to which stakeholders have collaborated in implementing their responsibilities and using risk management. GAO analyzed laws and documents, such as security assessments; reviewed GAO’s work on key practices for collaboration and facility protection; visited 11 courthouse facilities, selected based on geographic dispersion, age, size, and other criteria; and interviewed agency and judiciary officials. While the results from site visits cannot be generalized, they provided examples of courthouse security activities.

### What GAO Found

Various attributes influence security considerations for the nation’s 424 federal courthouses, which range from small court spaces to large buildings in major urban areas. According to DOJ data, threats against the courts have increased between fiscal years 2004 and 2010—from approximately 600 to more than 1,400. The Interagency Security Committee—an interagency group that develops standards for federal facility security—has assigned courthouses the highest security level because they are prominent symbols of U.S. power.

Federal stakeholders have taken steps to strengthen their collaboration, such as establishing agency liaisons, but have faced challenges in implementing assigned responsibilities and using risk assessment tools.

- A 1997 memorandum of agreement (MOA) outlines each stakeholder’s roles and responsibilities and identifies areas requiring stakeholder coordination. However, at 5 of the 11 courthouses GAO visited, the Marshals Service and FPS both provide security services has resulted in two lines of authority for implementing and overseeing security services. Updating the MOA that identifies roles and responsibilities could strengthen the multiagency courthouse security framework by better incorporating accountability for federal agencies’ collaborative efforts.

- In 2008, Congress authorized a pilot program, whereby the Marshals Service and FPS both provide security services has resulted in two lines of authority for implementing and overseeing security services. Updating the MOA that identifies roles and responsibilities could strengthen the multiagency courthouse security framework by better incorporating accountability for federal agencies’ collaborative efforts.

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### What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends DHS and DOJ update the MOA to, among other things, clarify stakeholders’ roles and responsibilities and ensure the completion and sharing of risk assessments; and further assess costs and benefits of the perimeter pilot program, in terms of enhanced security, and include all stakeholders’ views, should steps be taken to expand the program. DHS and DOJ concurred with GAO’s recommendations.

**View GAO-11-857 or key components.**

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