

## Why GAO Did This Study

Federal programs for those experiencing or at risk for homelessness generally are designed to provide housing assistance and other services such as health care, job training, or food assistance. This report responds to the statutory requirement that GAO identify federal programs, agencies, offices, and initiatives that have duplicative goals or activities and addresses (1) the number of and funding levels for federal homelessness programs and the extent to which fragmentation, overlap, and duplication exists; (2) whether the programs have been evaluated; and (3) actions of the Interagency Council and federal agencies to coordinate efforts and the extent to which the federal strategic plan to prevent and end homelessness is an effective strategy. To address these objectives, GAO sent questionnaires to 10 federal agencies and obtained and analyzed data for a range of programs.

## What GAO Recommends

The Interagency Council and the Office of Management and Budget—in conjunction with HHS, HUD, Labor, and VA, should further analyze the degree and effects of overlap and fragmentation. VA agreed with this recommendation. HHS, HUD, Labor, and the Council did not explicitly agree or disagree. We also recommended that the Council incorporate additional elements into updates to the federal strategic plan or in implementation and planning documents. The Council stated it has been setting priorities and measuring progress, but was unable to provide documentation. GAO maintains its position and that the implementation of the federal strategic plan be made more transparent.

View [GAO-12-491](#). For more information, contact Alicia Puente Cackley at (202) 512-8678 or [cackleya@gao.gov](mailto:cackleya@gao.gov).

## HOMELESSNESS

### Fragmentation and Overlap in Programs Highlight the Need to Identify, Assess, and Reduce Inefficiencies

## What GAO Found

Homelessness programs are fragmented across multiple agencies and some show evidence of overlap. In fiscal year 2010, eight federal agencies obligated roughly \$2.8 billion to administer 26 homelessness programs. Three agencies—the Departments of Health and Human Services (HHS), Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and Veterans Affairs (VA)—are responsible for the majority of programs and dollars, 22 of 26 programs, and 89 percent of total funds. GAO found that these agencies and the Department of Labor (Labor) have multiple programs that offer similar services to similar beneficiaries. Fragmentation of services and overlap in some programs is partly due to their legislative creation and partly due to programs evolving to offer services that meet the variety of needs of persons experiencing homelessness. Fragmentation and overlap can lead to inefficient use of resources. For example, both HHS and VA have programs that provide similar services, but each agency separately manages its programs under different administrative units. In addition, some local service providers told us that managing multiple applications and reporting requirements was burdensome, difficult, and costly. Moreover, according to providers, persons experiencing homelessness have difficulties navigating services that are fragmented across agencies.

While almost all targeted programs maintain performance information (including data on the number of homeless served), few targeted programs have conducted evaluations to assess how effectively the programs are achieving their objectives. While performance information can be helpful for monitoring whether programs were achieving desired results, evaluations allow for comprehensive assessments. According to GAO's questionnaire, 2 of the 26 programs reported they had a program evaluation within the last 5 years. Information from program evaluations can help agencies fully assess what is working and how improvements can be made. Moreover, understanding program performance and effectiveness is key to determining in which programs and interventions to strategically invest limited federal funds.

The U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (Interagency Council) is required to coordinate the federal response to homelessness and has taken several steps to coordinate efforts and promote initiatives across federal agencies. Federal coordination efforts have increased in recent years and included issuing the first federal strategic plan, increasing coordination at the state and local levels by focusing on the creation of state interagency councils on homelessness, and taking steps to develop a common vocabulary for discussing homelessness and related terms. The strategic plan serves as a useful and necessary step in increasing agency coordination and incorporates some elements of an effective strategy, but lacks key characteristics desirable in a national strategy. For example, the plan does not list priorities or milestones and does not discuss resource needs or assign clear roles and responsibilities to federal partners. In order for the Interagency Council and its members to effectively translate the goals and objectives of the plan into actions and measure their own progress in implementing them, these elements must be made transparent to help ensure accountability and measure the plan's progress.