

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-16-97](#), a report to the Chairman, Committee on the Judiciary, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

In March 2013, the President ordered spending reductions, known as sequestration, across the federal government. As a result, the federal judiciary's resources were reduced by about \$346 million over the remainder of fiscal year 2013. The judiciary has been affected by decreasing federal resources, such as the sequestration, and has been implementing various cost containment initiatives.

GAO was asked to evaluate judiciary cost savings actions and the effects of the 2013 sequestration. This report examines, among other things, (1) judiciary actions to achieve cost savings and efficiencies, and the extent to which the judiciary has estimated cost savings; and (2) judiciary actions to implement the 2013 sequestration and any effects from these actions on judiciary personnel and operations.

GAO analyzed relevant judiciary documents and collected information from and interviewed judiciary officials in all 12 regional circuit courts and the district court, bankruptcy court, and federal defender organization in four judicial districts, selected to obtain a diverse group of districts on the basis of funding level, among other factors.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Director of the Administrative Office of the United States Courts (AOUSC) take the following two actions for major cost containment initiatives: (1) develop a reliable method for estimating cost savings achieved, and (2) regularly report estimated cost savings achieved. AOUSC said it will seriously consider GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-16-97](#). For more information, contact David C. Maurer at (202) 512-9627 or MaurerD@gao.gov.

November 2015

FEDERAL JUDICIARY

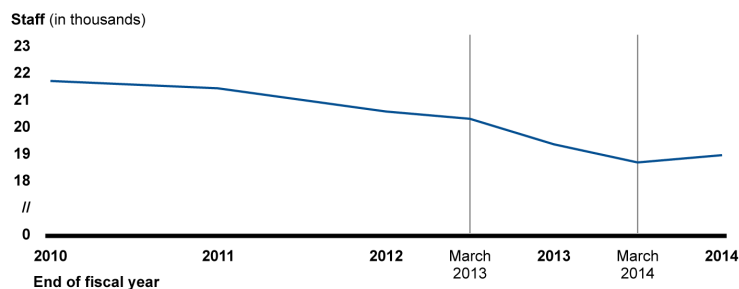
Improved Cost Savings Estimates Could Help Better Assess Cost Containment Efforts

What GAO Found

The federal judiciary has implemented cost containment initiatives for over 10 years, but the judiciary does not fully know how much it has saved because it has not developed a reliable method for estimating cost savings achieved. For example, GAO found that the judiciary's estimate of cost savings primarily attributed to cost containment initiatives since fiscal year 2005—nearly \$1.5 billion, relative to projected costs—does not include all savings realized from cost containment initiatives, includes amounts that did not result from initiatives, does not always include the costs associated with implementing initiatives, and was not always supported by adequate documentation. Examples of cost-saving initiatives are establishing rent budget caps and providing incentives to courts for work efficiency. Judiciary officials confirmed, for example, that \$291 million of the \$538 million in space and facilities estimated savings is the result of lower than anticipated rent inflation. Also, an estimated \$89 million in savings resulting from information technology (IT) initiatives did not include all savings (such as savings from an IT-based solution to manage and administer the jury function) or provide adequate documentation of costs to implement the initiatives. Judiciary officials stated that they discuss cost containment initiatives in the judiciary's congressional budget justifications, among other documents. GAO analyzed the judiciary's congressional budget justifications and found that these documents did not consistently report information on cost savings achieved for major initiatives. Reliable information on and reporting of estimated cost savings achieved for major initiatives could help the judiciary better assess the progress of its initiatives and help inform congressional oversight and decision making.

The judiciary imposed emergency measures in response to the 2013 sequestration and has identified negative effects of the sequestration on the judiciary. Examples of emergency measures were postponing and reducing payments to private attorneys representing individuals who cannot afford counsel in criminal cases. One of the most significant effects of sequestration cited by judiciary officials was continued court staff loss. According to GAO analysis of judiciary data, in the 12 months following sequestration, total onboard court full-time equivalent staff declined by nearly 1,600—or about 8 percent (see fig.). Also, over 3,600 court and defender organization staff were furloughed in fiscal year 2013. Funding for expenses such as drug abuse treatment for offenders was reduced by 20 percent. Further, according to judiciary officials, some courts and defender organizations reduced services, such as closing 1 day per week.

Total Onboard Court Full-Time Equivalent Staff, as of End of Fiscal Years 2010 to 2014



Source: GAO analysis of judiciary data. | GAO-16-97