

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-16-231](#), a report to the Ranking Member, Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

DHS is responsible for providing safe, secure, and humane confinement for detained aliens who may be subject to removal or have been ordered removed from the United States. GAO was asked to examine the provision and oversight of medical care in immigration detention facilities. This report examines the extent to which DHS (1) has processes for administering detainee medical care and maintaining cost information for care, (2) monitors and assesses compliance with medical care standards, and (3) oversees processes to obtain and address complaints about detainee medical care.

GAO reviewed ICE data and information on costs, detention population, standards, and oversight for 165 facilities that held detainees for more than 72 hours in fiscal year 2015. GAO also reviewed complaint processes, interviewed DHS and ICE officials, and visited 12 facilities selected based on detainee population and facility type, among other factors. The visit results are not generalizable, but provided insight to the provision of medical care.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DHS, among other things, ensure payments for medical care are supported by authorizations, conduct trend analyses of oversight data, and track all medical complaints received by DHS entities. DHS concurred with the recommendations and identified planned actions to address the recommendations.

View [GAO-16-231](#). For more information, contact Rebecca Gambler at (202) 512-8777 or gambler@gao.gov.

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IMMIGRATION DETENTION

Additional Actions Needed to Strengthen Management and Oversight of Detainee Medical Care

What GAO Found

The Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) oversees basic on-site medical care at all facilities, as required by ICE detention standards, but does not maintain complete information about medical care costs. The ICE Health Service Corps (IHSC) provided direct care to detainees at 19 over-72-hour facilities and oversaw care at the remaining 146 non-IHSC-staffed facilities in fiscal year 2015. At all facilities, IHSC uses an electronic system, the Medical Payment Authorization (MedPAR) system, to approve or deny off-site care requests for detainees; such requests could include dental visits or surgical needs. IHSC uses a system different from MedPAR to track costs or amounts paid for off-site care. The use of separate systems limits ICE's ability to link approvals and payments. For example, the number of claims paid for fiscal years 2012 through 2014 did not correspond to the number of IHSC MedPAR approvals for requested services for the same time period. While there are valid reasons for these differences, such as that approvals and claims could be made in different fiscal years, establishing a mechanism to more fully ensure that payments for off-site care are supported by the appropriate authorizations could help ICE monitor medical care costs and better validate payments.

ICE conducts medical care compliance inspections at individual facilities, but conducts limited analyses of inspection data across facilities and over time. ICE uses seven oversight mechanisms to monitor facilities' compliance with medical care detention standards, such as facility inspections and on-site detention monitors. The combined use of these oversight mechanisms resulted in more than 99 percent of ICE's average daily population (ADP) of approximately 28,000 detainees being covered by two or more mechanisms in fiscal year 2015. ICE's priority has been to focus on local, facility-specific issues rather than perform overarching analyses. For example, ICE does not utilize the data gathered through these mechanisms in a way that examines overall trends in medical care deficiencies. Conducting analysis of oversight data over time, by detention standards, and across facilities, consistent with internal control standards, could strengthen ICE's ability to manage and oversee the provision of medical care across facility types.

DHS has various processes to obtain and address the hundreds of medical care complaints it receives annually. Specifically, detainees can submit complaints regarding medical care directly to facilities or to one of various DHS entities, including the Office of Inspector General and Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties. These entities generally determine whether to take their own action on the complaints or forward them to ICE for resolution. These entities maintain complaint data in various ways, and IHSC, which is ultimately responsible for addressing medical complaints received, is developing and piloting a new system for managing tasks, including addressing complaints. However, internal control standards call for evaluation of performance over time, and it is unclear whether IHSC's new system will capture all medical complaints received by DHS or facilitate analyses of complaints over time and across facilities. Ensuring that a new tasking system would capture all complaints and facilitate analysis could improve DHS's decision-making for detainee medical care.