DATA ACT

Progress Made but Significant Challenges Must Be Addressed to Ensure Full and Effective Implementation

What GAO Found

The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and the Department of the Treasury (Treasury) have taken some significant steps toward implementing the key provisions of the Digital Accountability and Transparency Act of 2014 (DATA Act); however, several challenges need to be addressed in order to successfully meet the act’s requirements.

Data standards and technical schema. GAO reported in January 2016, that OMB and Treasury had issued standardized data element definitions for reporting federal spending, but the lack of key guidance has slowed the ability of agencies to operationalize the data standards. Specifically, OMB and Treasury had not yet released guidance to agencies regarding how some data elements should be reported in order to produce consistent and comparable data. For example, Award Description, defined as a brief description of the purpose of the award, led to different interpretations by agencies.

Agency reported implementation challenges and mitigation strategies. GAO’s ongoing review of required implementation plans submitted to OMB indicates that federal agencies have identified significant challenges in implementing the DATA Act including competing priorities, resources, systems integration, and guidance. Some agencies also identified strategies to mitigate identified challenges, including effective communication and information sharing and leveraging of existing resources, and reported that additional support from OMB and Treasury is needed for successful implementation.

Pilot to reduce recipient reporting burden. OMB has designed a pilot that consists of two parts focused on the grants and procurement communities. The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) has been designated as the executing agency for the grant portion while OMB leads the procurement portion with support by the General Services Administration’s 18F and others. If implemented according to HHS’s proposed design, the grants portion of the pilot will likely meet requirements established under the act and will partially reflect leading practices for effective pilot design. However, the procurement portion does not clearly document how it will contribute to meeting the act’s requirements nor does it reflect leading practices for effective pilot design.

Although progress has been made, GAO has been unable to close any DATA Act recommendations including those calling for establishing a data governance structure, developing a federal program inventory, and expanding two-way dialogue with stakeholders. GAO will continue to monitor OMB’s and Treasury’s progress to address its recommendations as implementation proceeds.