FEDERAL REAL PROPERTY

Efforts Made, but Challenges Remain in Reducing Unneeded Facilities

What GAO Found

Since 2012, the administration has taken steps to reform real property management and address the long-standing challenge of reducing excess and underutilized property. For example, in 2015, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) issued government-wide guidance—the National Strategy for the Efficient Use of Real Property—which GAO found in 2016 could help agencies strategically manage real property.

However, GAO’s work has found that significant challenges persist in managing real property in general and excess and underutilized property in particular. They include:

- a lack of reliable data with which to measure the extent of the problem,
- a complex disposal process,
- costly environmental requirements,
- competing stakeholder interests, and
- limited accessibility of some federal properties.

Properties in the Washington, D.C., area such as the Cotton Annex building, vacant General Services Administration (GSA) warehouses, and buildings on the St. Elizabeths campus (pictured below) illustrate the challenges for disposal and re-utilization of vacant federal buildings. For example, GAO found in 2014 that real property data indicated some GSA warehouses were utilized when they had been vacant for as long as 10 years.

Examples of Vacant Federal Buildings

In addition to the steps already taken by the administration, further action by federal agencies to implement GAO’s previous recommendations could help to address some of these challenges. For example, GAO has made recommendations to GSA and other federal agencies that, if implemented, would increase the federal government’s capacity to manage its portfolio and document the progress of reform efforts. GAO highlighted its highest priority open recommendations to GSA in an August 2016 letter to GSA. Among those are three recommendations related to excess and underutilized property, including a recommendation to assess the reliability of data collected and entered into GSA’s Federal Real Property Profile database by individual federal agencies.

Additionally, real property reform bills that could address the long-standing problem of federal excess and underutilized property have been introduced in Congress. Specifically, two bills have been passed by the House of Representatives in 2016, but neither has been enacted yet.