



September 2017

PUBLIC RELATIONS SPENDING

Selected Agencies' Activities Supported by Contracts and Public Affairs Staff

Accessible Version

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-17-711](#), a report to the Chairman, the Committee on the Budget, U.S. Senate.

Why GAO Did This Study

Agencies communicate with the public regarding their functions, policies, and activities. In September 2016, GAO reported that the federal government spends about \$1.5 billion per year on public relations activities, carried out through advertising and public relations contracts and by public affairs employees.

GAO was asked to describe the purposes and reported benefits of federal agencies' public relations investments. This report reviews (1) the activities selected agencies conducted using advertising and public relations contracts and public affairs employees, and their purposes; (2) how the level of resources the agencies devote to these activities has changed over the past decade and factors officials identified as affecting these changes; and (3) how the agencies measure results of these activities.

GAO selected four case study agencies—CFPB, FEMA, NASA, and USCIS—based on factors including obligations for advertising and public relations contracts, numbers of public affairs employees, and agency missions and public interactions. GAO reviewed documentation for contracts valued at or over \$150,000 from fiscal years 2012 through 2016; examined staff position descriptions, performance information, and employment data; and interviewed officials at these agencies.

CFPB and the Department of Homeland Security provided technical comments on this report, which were incorporated as appropriate. NASA did not have comments.

View [GAO-17-711](#). For more information, contact Heather Krause at (202) 512-6806 or krauseh@gao.gov

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What GAO Found

At the agencies GAO examined—the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB), Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS)—most of the advertising and public relations contracts GAO reviewed and public affairs staff responsibilities focused on informing and educating the public. These agencies' advertising and public relations contract obligations were concentrated in a small number of contracts that supported major agency initiatives and communications services. Specifically,

- **CFPB:** The four largest contracts (\$22.6 million out of \$32.8 million) focused on increasing public awareness of CFPB's tools and resources related to its statutory responsibility to educate and empower consumers to make better financial decisions.
- **FEMA:** The largest contract (\$8.7 million out of \$20.7 million) supported the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP). The agency's role in administering the program includes advertising to encourage people to buy flood insurance. Other high-value contracts promoted emergency preparedness, including the *Ready* campaign.
- **NASA:** The two largest contracts (\$7.6 million out of \$17.1 million) supported NASA's Communications Support Services Center, which provides graphics and other services across the agency.
- **USCIS:** The two largest contracts (\$18.1 million out of \$19.8 million) were for outreach for two immigration-related eligibility verification systems—E-Verify and Systematic Alien Verification for Entitlements.

Over the past decade, changes in advertising and public relations contract obligations and public affairs employees varied at the selected agencies due to changes in agency activities and increased use of digital media. For example, contract obligations were relatively stable at NASA and USCIS. CFPB, on the other hand, saw an increase in obligations due to ramping up operations from 2011, when the agency began operations. Variances in FEMA's obligations stemmed primarily from fluctuations in NFIP contracts due to changing priorities. The number of public affairs employees generally increased at the selected agencies, but was relatively stable at NASA. These increases were due to changes in operations and staffing structure. For example, USCIS changed its staffing model to add more lower-level public affairs staff. Officials at three of the four agencies we reviewed noted an increased use of digital media for public outreach, though the effects on contract and staff resources have been mixed.

The agencies measured performance of their activities using web-based and other indicators, such as the number of website visits and length of time spent on a page, and reported using this information to inform decision making. However, agency officials identified challenges in measuring the performance of these activities, including a lack of qualitative data on whether and how information is being used. Selected agencies have taken some steps to address these challenges by, for example, administering surveys to obtain additional feedback.

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Abbreviations

CFPB	Consumer Financial Protection Bureau
CORE	Cadre of On-Call Response/Recovery Employees
CSSC	Communications Support Services Center
DCI	data collection instrument
DHS	Department of Homeland Security
DOD	Department of Defense
EHRI	Enterprise Human Resource Integration
FEMA	Federal Emergency Management Agency
FPDS-NG	Federal Procurement Data System-Next Generation
NASA	National Aeronautics and Space Administration
NFIP	National Flood Insurance Program
OMB	Office of Management and Budget
OPM	Office of Personnel Management
PRA	Paperwork Reduction Act
SAVE	Systematic Alien Verification for Entitlements
USCIS	U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services

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September 12, 2017

The Honorable Mike Enzi
Chairman
Committee on the Budget
United States Senate

Dear Mr. Chairman:

In September 2016, we reported that the federal government spends about \$1.5 billion per year on public relations activities, carried out both through advertising and public relations contracts, and by federal public affairs employees.¹ Agencies may have legitimate interests in communicating with the public regarding their functions, policies, and activities. For example, agencies communicate with the public for purposes ranging from publicizing health and safety bulletins to providing information on federal entitlements and benefits.

You asked us to describe the primary purposes and reported benefits of federal agencies' public relations investments, including contracts and employees support. In this report, we reviewed:

- the activities selected agencies conduct using advertising and public relations contracts and public affairs employees, and their purposes;
- how the level of resources these agencies devote to these activities has changed over the past decade, and the factors that officials identify as affecting these changes; and
- how these agencies measure the results of these activities.

To address these objectives, we selected four agencies to use as case illustrations across all three objectives. We chose the agencies based on several factors, including having high total obligations for advertising and public relations contracts, or high total numbers of public affairs employees and/or large changes in these numbers over the past decade relative to other agencies with similar organizational structures (e.g.,

¹GAO, *Public Relations Spending: Reported Data on Related Federal Activities*, [GAO-16-877R](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 30, 2016).

comparing component agencies).² We also selected agencies with differing missions and interactions with the public. The four agencies are:

- Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB);
- National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA); and
- within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS):
 - Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA); and
 - U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS).

We previously reported that the Department of Defense (DOD) obligates more funding to advertising and public relations contracts, and employs more public affairs staff than any other agency.³ We did not include DOD in this review because we have recent work that examined advertising at that department.⁴

To identify the activities selected agencies conduct using advertising and public relations contracts and public affairs employees, and the purposes of these activities, we reviewed information on these contracts and staff. Specifically, we used the Federal Procurement Data System-Next Generation (FPDS-NG) database to identify contracts at the selected agencies with values of \$150,000 or more that were classified as advertising or public relations services over fiscal years 2012 through

²An obligation is a definite commitment that creates a legal liability for the payment of goods and services ordered or received. An agency incurs an obligation, for example, when it places an order, signs a contract, or takes other actions that require the government to make payments.

³Specifically, DOD was responsible for over 60 percent of obligations for advertising and public relations contracts from fiscal years 2006 through 2015, and employed just over 40 percent of all federal public affairs employees from fiscal years 2006 through 2014. See [GAO-16-877R](#).

⁴See GAO, *DOD Advertising: Better Coordination, Performance Measurement, and Oversight Needed to Help Meet Recruitment Goals*, [GAO-16-396](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 12, 2016).

2016.⁵ The four agencies we reviewed had a combined total of 68 contracts with these characteristics. These 68 contracts represented just over a quarter (68 out of 253 contracts) and nearly 95 percent (\$90.7 million of the \$97.4 million) of all advertising and public relations contracts and related obligations at these agencies over this time period.⁶

To illustrate the types of general activities supported by agency contracts, we analyzed statements of work and other documentation for the 68 contracts, and classified them according to five categories that we identified in our earlier work: (1) public education and awareness; (2) customer service; (3) general information; (4) recruitment; and (5) compliance with laws and policies.⁷ We also shared this classification with agency public affairs officials to ensure concurrence. As part of our assessment of the reliability of the contract data, we also reviewed a nongeneralizable sample of 18 contracts not coded as advertising or public relations services, but that appeared to include some activities related to these services. We identified these other contracts by searching FPDS-NG for contracts with (1) vendors that had received other contracts for advertising and public relations services, and (2) contract descriptions that used the terms “advertising” or “public relations.”

To identify activities supported by public affairs employees, we analyzed position descriptions and other documentation showing how agencies use public affairs employees. We also interviewed agency contracting and public affairs officials about activities supported by both contracts and employees.

⁵In this report we use the term “contract” to refer to three types of contract vehicles: stand-alone contracts, task orders, and requests (or “calls”) for services provided under blanket purchase agreements. We focused on contracts with obligations of at least \$150,000. This is the simplified acquisition threshold, which determines when government agencies can use Simplified Acquisition Procedures (SAP) as prescribed in Part 13 of the Federal Acquisition Regulation. Generally, government agencies may use SAP for acquisitions not exceeding \$150,000. SAP acquisitions are not subject to full and open competition requirements. Rather, agencies must promote competition to the maximum extent practicable.

⁶Agencies also deobligated amounts from these contracts—there were \$7 million in deobligations from the 253 contracts, which included about \$150,000 in deobligations from the 68 contracts we reviewed. After factoring in the deobligations, the net obligations for the 253 contracts were about \$90.4 million; the net obligations for the 68 we reviewed were about \$90.6 million.

⁷Some contracts fell into two or more categories, as they are not mutually exclusive.

To review how the level of contract and staff resources at selected agencies has changed over the past decade, and factors affecting these changes, we analyzed obligations data from the FPDS-NG database and employment data provided by agencies. We also interviewed agency public affairs officials about changes and trends over the past decade in these activities. We assessed the reliability of FPDS-NG data by considering known strengths and weaknesses of the data based on our past work and comparing it to information in contracts provided by agencies. We assessed the reliability of employment data provided by agencies by comparing it to the Office of Personnel Management's (OPM) Enterprise Human Resource Integration (EHRI) database—the primary government-wide source for information on federal employees. We determined that both the FPDS-NG contracting data and agency employment data were sufficiently reliable for our purposes.

To review how selected agencies measure the results of activities supported by advertising and public relations contracts and public affairs staff, we analyzed information on performance management included in the contracts we reviewed. We also reviewed relevant agency documentation, including agency performance reports and reports describing performance of specific outreach initiatives. In addition, we interviewed agency public affairs officials about the information used to measure these activities. Additional details on our scope and methodology are in appendix I.

We conducted this performance audit from August 2016 to September 2017 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Background

Agencies communicate with the public for various reasons. In September 2016, we reported on categories of advertising and public relations activities that agencies may engage in, including:

- **Public education and awareness** – providing information on public health and safety issues, informing the public of its rights and entitlements, discouraging harmful or dangerous behavior;

-
- **Customer service** – providing information to users of agency services;
 - **General information** – keeping the public informed of agency activities;
 - **Recruitment** – the process of attracting qualified applicants to apply for positions; and
 - **Compliance with laws and policies** – making information available in order to comply with statutes, executive orders, policies, and procedures.⁸

There are no single, commonly-accepted definitions of the terms “advertising,” “public relations,” or “public affairs.”⁹

- **Advertising.** Although federal guidance does not define “advertising” for purposes of classifying contracts, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) defines the term in relation to determining costs for grants and other federal awards. OMB Circular A-87 defines “advertising costs” as “the costs of advertising media and corollary administrative costs,” and “advertising media” as including magazines, newspapers, radio and television, direct mail, exhibits, and electronic or computer transmittals.¹⁰
- **Public relations.** OMB Circular A-87 defines “public relations” as “community relations and those activities dedicated to maintaining the image of the governmental unit or maintaining or promoting understanding and favorable relations with the community or public at large or any segment of the public.”
- **Public affairs.** We have stated that “public affairs” involves “efforts to develop and disseminate information to the public to explain the activities of and the issues facing an organization.”¹¹

⁸[GAO-16-877R](#).

⁹The *Federal Procurement Data System Product and Service Codes Manual*, which lists and in some cases defines product service codes for federal contracts, includes a limited discussion of what the product service code for public relations includes and no specific guidance on what advertising includes. See U.S. General Services Administration, *Federal Procurement Data System Product and Service Codes Manual*, August 2015 Edition (effective October 1, 2015).

¹⁰See OMB, *OMB Circular A-87 Revised* (Washington, D.C.: May 10, 2004).

¹¹GAO, *Public Affairs and Congressional Affairs Activities of Federal Agencies*, [GAO/GGD-86-24](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 14, 1986).

While agencies have flexibility to use a variety of approaches to communicate with and reach out to the public, there are some prohibitions on public relations activities. For example, appropriations acts and other provisions of law prohibit the use of appropriated funds for certain types of communications. Since 1951, appropriations acts have included provisions prohibiting agencies from using appropriations for unauthorized “publicity or propaganda.” While Congress has not defined the meaning of such publicity or propaganda, we have recognized three types of activities that violate these prohibitions: (1) self-aggrandizement, (2) covert propaganda (defined as “communications such as editorials or other articles prepared by an agency or its contractors at the behest of the agency and circulated as the ostensible position of parties outside of the agency”), and (3) materials that are purely partisan in nature.¹²

Appropriations acts have also typically included provisions prohibiting the use of federal funding for certain grassroots lobbying. Typical language includes a prohibition against using appropriated funds for communications designed to support or defeat legislation pending before Congress, except in presentation to Congress itself. We have determined that in order for a violation to occur, there must be evidence of a clear appeal by the agency to the public to contact members of Congress in support of, or in opposition to, pending legislation.

The four agencies we reviewed were selected, in part, for their different missions and interaction with the public. Table 1 summarizes each agency’s mission.

¹²For more information, see B-326944, Dec. 14, 2015; GAO, *Principles of Federal Appropriations Law Annual Update of the Third Edition*, [GAO-15-303SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: March 2015); and *Principles of Federal Appropriations Law*, Third Edition, Volume I, [GAO-04-261SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: January 2004).

Table 1: Selected Agencies' Missions

Agency	Mission
Consumer Financial Protection Bureau	Implement and enforce federal consumer financial law consistently to ensure that markets for consumer financial services and products are fair, transparent, and competitive, among other things.
Federal Emergency Management Agency	Support citizens and first responders to ensure that as a nation we work together to build, sustain, and improve our capability to prepare for, protect against, respond to, recover from and mitigate all hazards.
National Aeronautics and Space Administration	Drive advances in science, technology, and exploration to enhance knowledge, education, innovation, economic vitality, and stewardship of Earth.
U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services	Secure America's promise as a nation of immigrants by providing accurate and useful information to our customers, granting immigration and citizenship benefits, promoting an awareness and understanding of citizenship, and ensuring the integrity of our immigration system.

Source: Agency mission statements. | GAO 17-711

We previously reported that government-wide annual obligations for advertising and public relations contracts averaged close to \$1 billion over fiscal years 2006 through 2015, with the Department of Defense responsible for about 60 percent of obligations for these contracts over the 10-year period.¹³ The four selected agencies obligated on average a combined amount of \$19 million annually over the past 10 years for advertising and public relations contracts, though annual obligations amounts vary substantially from year to year. As shown in table 2, these agencies obligated annual amounts ranging from -\$0.3 million (reflecting deobligations) to nearly \$18 million.

¹³ [GAO-16-877R](#). Government-wide, advertising and public relations contracts represent 0.2 percent of total obligations.

Table 2: Selected Agencies' Obligations for Advertising and Public Relations Contracts (Dollars in Millions)

Agency	Fiscal Years 2007 – 2016 Annual Obligations to Advertising and Public Relations Contracts ^a			Fiscal Year 2016 Obligations to Advertising and Public Relations Contracts	Fiscal Year 2016 Advertising and Public Relations Contract Obligations as a Percent of Total Agency Obligations
	Average Annual Obligations	Minimum Annual Obligations	Maximum Annual Obligations		
Consumer Financial Protection Bureau ^b	\$6.6	\$1.1	\$15.8	\$15.8	2.45 %
Federal Emergency Management Agency	\$9.4	-\$0.3	\$17.8	\$11.7	0.06 %
National Aeronautics and Space Administration	\$2.8	\$0.3	\$4.6	\$4.6	0.02 %
U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services	\$3.7	\$1.3	\$6.3	\$5.0	0.14 %

Source: Federal Procurement Data System – Next Generation data. | GAO 17-711

^aObligation amounts shown are net, meaning that they reflect any deobligations agencies made.^bCFPB began operations in July 2011 and fiscal year 2012 was the first year in which it obligated funds to advertising and public relations contracts. All descriptive data provided for CFPB therefore reflect fiscal years 2012 through 2016.

The four agencies employed from 7 to 114 public affairs employees as of the end of fiscal year 2016, as shown in table 3. We previously reported that the government-wide number of full-time permanent public affairs employees was about 5,000 in fiscal year 2014, with about 42 percent of these employees at the Department of Defense.¹⁴

Table 3: Selected Agencies' Public Affairs Employees

Agency	Number of Full-Time Permanent Public Affairs Employees, As of the End of Fiscal Year 2016	Public Affairs Employees as a Percent of Total Agency Full-Time Permanent Employees
Consumer Financial Protection Bureau	7	0.4%
Federal Emergency Management Agency ^a	43	0.9%
National Aeronautics and Space Administration	114	0.7%
U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services	20	0.1%

Source: Agency employment data. | GAO 17-711

^aFEMA data reflect only full-time permanent public affairs employees and not staff classified as temporary full-time staff or Cadre of On-Call Response/Recovery Employees (CORE). According to FEMA officials, CORE staff are on-call employees who work full time, but typically are employed on for 2-year terms. At the end of fiscal year 2016, the agency also had five temporary full-time staff and 55 CORE staff.

¹⁴[GAO-16-877R](#).

Selected Agencies Used Advertising and Public Relations Contracts and Public Affairs Employees Primarily to Inform and Educate the Public

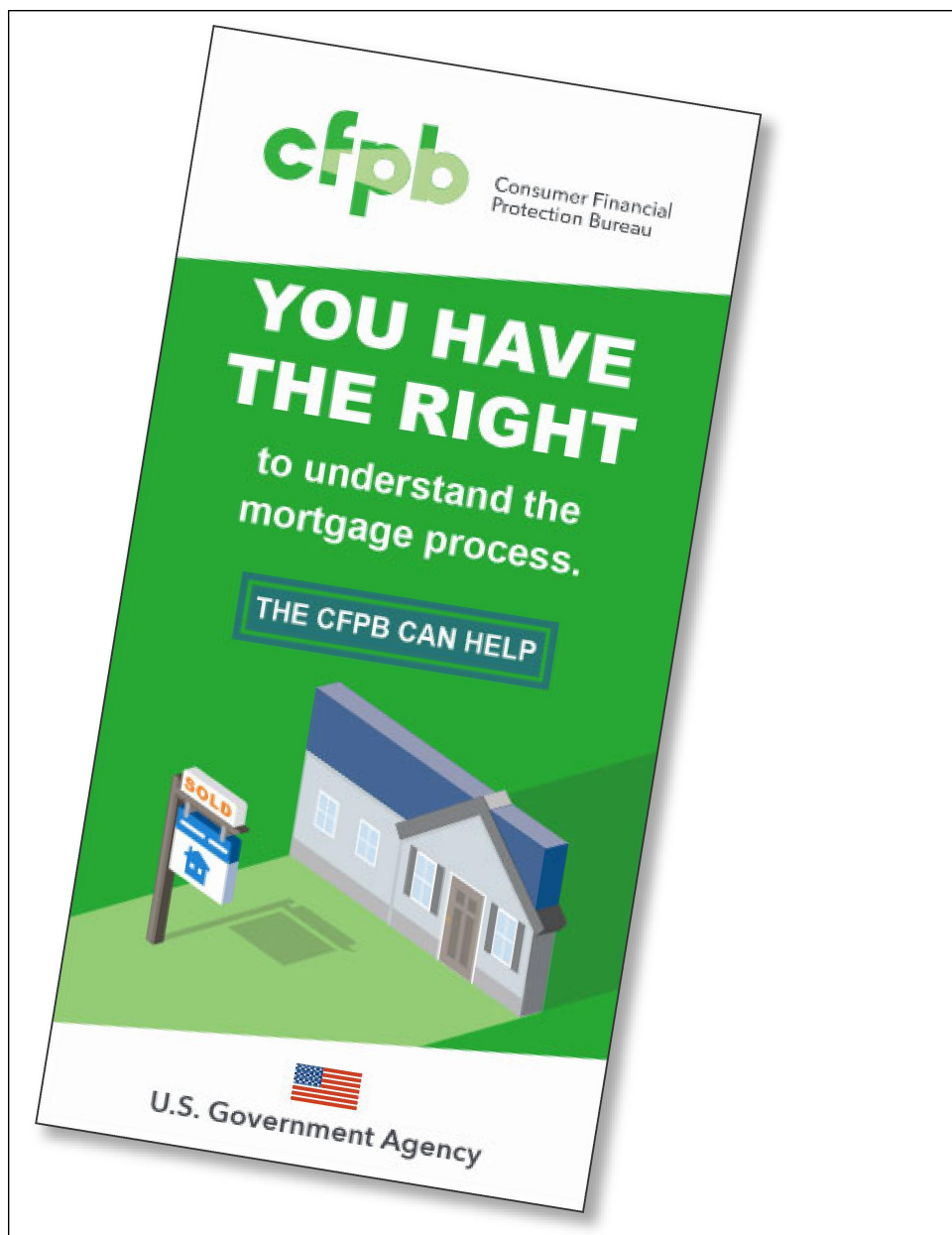
Most Agency Spending Was Concentrated in a Few Contracts Supporting Major Agency Initiatives and Communication Support

At each of the agencies we reviewed, obligations were concentrated in a small number of advertising and public relations contracts. The activities supported by these contracts ranged from promoting agency initiatives to providing communications support services. Appendix II provides details on each agency's largest advertising and public relations contracts (in terms of obligations) over fiscal years 2012 through 2016.

CFPB. CFPB's four largest advertising and public relations contracts represented nearly 70 percent of obligations for these contracts over fiscal years 2012 through 2016 (\$22.6 million out of \$32.8 million).¹⁵ These four contracts all focused on increasing general awareness of the tools and resources CFPB offers to the public to promote better financial decision making. Contract documentation linked the need for increasing general awareness of CFPB's tools and resources to CFPB's statutory responsibility to develop and implement initiatives intended to educate and empower consumers to make better financial decisions. According to CFPB officials, promoting awareness of CFPB's tools and the services it provides is intended to increase their use. In particular, research conducted by a CFPB contractor in 2015 showed that before CFPB's campaign to increase awareness of its tools and resources, awareness and use of these tools and resources had remained level over the prior two and a half years. Figure 1 shows an example of CFPB outreach promoting its tools and resources.

¹⁵ All of the 26 CFPB contracts we reviewed were coded as advertising services. In total, CFPB had 43 task orders or calls coded as advertising services and 1 coded as public relations services over fiscal years 2012 through 2016. There may be multiple task orders or calls associated with a single contract or blanket purchase agreement. As previously noted, we reviewed three types of contract vehicles: stand-alone contracts, task orders, and requests (or "calls") for services provided under blanket purchase agreements. For simplicity, in this report we refer to them all as "contracts."

Figure 1: Example of CFPB Outreach Material



Source: Consumer Financial Protection Bureau | GAO-17-711

FEMA. The largest of FEMA's advertising and public relations contracts represented just over 40 percent of all obligations for these contracts over fiscal years 2012 through 2016 (\$8.7 million out of \$20.7 million). This contract, and several others, supported the National Flood Insurance

Program (NFIP). According to FEMA officials, part of its role in administering the NFIP involves public communications and advertising to encourage people to buy flood insurance to better prepare themselves for disaster. FEMA's other high-value contracts included ones for services promoting emergency preparedness, including those supporting the Ready campaign. The Ready campaign promotes preparedness for many types of emergencies, including hurricanes, extreme heat, and tornadoes. Figure 2 illustrates Ready campaign outreach related to extreme weather alerts.

Figure 2: Example of FEMA Outreach Material



Source: Federal Emergency Management Agency | GAO-17-711

NASA. NASA's two largest advertising and public relations contracts represented just under half of all obligations for these contracts over fiscal

years 2012 through 2016 (\$7.6 million of \$17.1 million). These two contracts, and other lesser-value ones, supported NASA's Communications Support Services Center. This center provides support services across the agency, such as developing products that support the agency's education and public outreach programs. According to NASA officials, the contracts are for services that are less efficient for NASA staff to perform or for which staff do not have the needed expertise. Figure 3 shows an example of NASA outreach illustrating a program to grow plants in space.

Figure 3: Example of NASA Outreach Material



Source: National Aeronautics and Space Administration | GAO-17-711

USCIS. USCIS' two largest advertising and public relations contracts represented just over 90 percent of obligations for these services over fiscal years 2012 through 2016 (\$18.1 million out of \$19.8 million). These two contracts supported planning and developing media and educational messaging tools for the E-Verify and Systematic Alien Verification for

Entitlements (SAVE) programs. E-Verify is an Internet-based system that allows businesses to confirm the eligibility of their employees to work in the United States. SAVE is a verification service for benefit-granting agencies to verify applicants' immigration or citizenship status. According to contract documentation, outreach on these programs aims to, among other things, increase understanding and use of these services. Figure 4 shows an example of USCIS outreach promoting a virtual assistant, which is one of the ways the agency interacts with those using or interested in its services.

Figure 4: USCIS Outreach Material Promoting Its On-Line Customer Service



Source: U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services | GAO-17-711

Overall Focus of Selected Agencies' Contracts and Public Affairs Staff Is Providing Education and General Information

More broadly, most of the 68 contracts we reviewed focused on public education and awareness, general information, or both.¹⁶ Table 4 shows the frequency of the types of general activities supported by the contracts we reviewed at each agency.

Table 4: General Activities Supported by Advertising and Public Relations Contracts Reviewed by GAO

Activity Type ^a	CFPB	FEMA	NASA	USCIS
Public Education and Awareness	88 percent (23)	50 percent (12)	86 percent (12)	75 percent (3)
General Information	54 percent (14)	63 percent (15)	100 percent (14)	50 percent (2)
Compliance with laws and policies	0 percent (0)	8 percent (2)	0 percent (0)	0 percent (0)
Recruitment	4 percent (1)	0 percent (0)	7 percent (1)	0 percent (0)
Customer service	12 percent (3)	21 percent (5)	14 percent (2)	0 percent (0)
Total advertising and public relations contracts reviewed by GAO^b	26	24	14	4

Source: GAO analysis of agency documentation. | GAO 17-711

^aThe activity type categories are not mutually exclusive, and contracts may be categorized under more than one activity type. Therefore, the sum of activity types is different than the number of contracts reviewed per agency.

^bWe reviewed three types of contract vehicles: stand-alone contracts, task orders, and requests (or "calls") for services provided under blanket purchase agreements. There may be multiple task orders or calls associated with a single contract or blanket purchase agreement. For simplicity, in this report we refer to them all as "contracts."

The contracts we reviewed also involved different types of tasks, including analysis, content creation, monitoring, distribution, planning, or technical or operational support. For example, planning activities include creating a media strategy with new or existing resources or conducting

¹⁶We reviewed the contracts to get a sense of the types of activities supported by these contracts, using the categories of public relations activities identified in our September 2016 report: (1) public education and awareness; (2) general information; (3) customer services; (4) recruitment; and (5) compliance with laws and policies. See GAO-16-877R.

We reviewed three types of contract vehicles: stand-alone contracts, task orders, and requests (or "calls") for services provided under blanket purchase agreements. There may be multiple task orders or calls associated with a single contract or blanket purchase agreement. For example, a significant majority of CFPB's advertising and public relations obligations were incurred through calls under blanket purchase agreements. For simplicity, in this report we refer to them all as "contracts."

market research. Appendix II provides a description of these tasks and the frequencies with which they were included in contracts.

Our review of position descriptions for public affairs employees across the selected agencies showed that these employees' duties also primarily supported educating and providing information to the public. Officials at the agencies we reviewed supported this by most commonly citing public education and awareness, followed by general information, as public affairs staff's primary activities. Of the 13 position descriptions we reviewed at various levels of responsibility, duties included:

- writing, editing, and analysis;
- communication planning and evaluation;
- disseminating information through various channels, including news media (wire services, radio, television, newspapers, and magazines), agency websites, and social media accounts;
- engaging with stakeholders, including those within and outside of agencies; and
- managing relationships with media entities.

In some cases, public affairs staff are involved in activities also supported by contracted services to provide information to the public. For example, FEMA's Ready campaign involved contributions from both public affairs staff and a contractor's staff. According to FEMA officials, public affairs staff responsibilities for the campaign included developing messages, responding to questions from the public, representing the campaign at outreach events, and tracking campaign efforts. The contractor's staff, on the other hand, provided coding for the website, developed public service announcements, and created social media graphics and videos.

Officials told us that the decision to contract a service instead of using public affairs staff, or the level of involvement of public affairs staff, depends on the type of work and who is able to provide the service more efficiently. For example, a USCIS public affairs official told us that the agency contracts for services related to outreach in situations where contractual services will save time and money or result in higher quality, such as providing a daily delivery of news clippings and media references to the agency, and maintaining a media contact database that agency staff use for outreach. Additionally, a NASA public affairs official told us that the agency contracts for services that employees do not have the expertise to do. For example, NASA headquarters has a photo office that is staffed by contractors, and contractors operate the cameras for NASA's

television station. In both cases, NASA officials told us they monitor the contractors.

Selected Agencies Carry Out Public Communications Activities in Addition to Those Reflected in Contract and Public Affairs Employee Data

Advertising and public relations contracts do not necessarily capture all of the advertising and public relations activities carried out by the four case study agencies. As we reported previously, there are other product service codes aside from those related to advertising and public relations services that can encompass such activities.¹⁷ We did not focus on them because they may also include activities that are not related to public relations. Additionally, there is an element of subjectivity involved in selecting the appropriate product service code for a contract that may lead different people to appropriately select different codes for similar services. For example, three of the four agencies we reviewed had contracts for services to monitor media for references to them or their activities. Agencies coded these contracts as either advertising or public relations services. Alternatively, USCIS coded a contract for a digital broadcast monitoring service as “IT and Telecom - Other IT and Telecommunications.” USCIS officials said that this coding was because the monitoring related to digital broadcasting.

Similarly, staff aside from those classified under the public affairs occupational series may also be involved in public affairs activities. For example, the agencies we reviewed used other staff to support public affairs activities by performing tasks such as translating material into other languages, editing materials to ensure that they meet standards for readability, and developing and maintaining information technologies that support outreach. Additionally, officials at both FEMA and NASA told us that public engagement is an integral part of their agencies’ activities, and that one could consider all of their employees to be involved in public affairs to some extent.

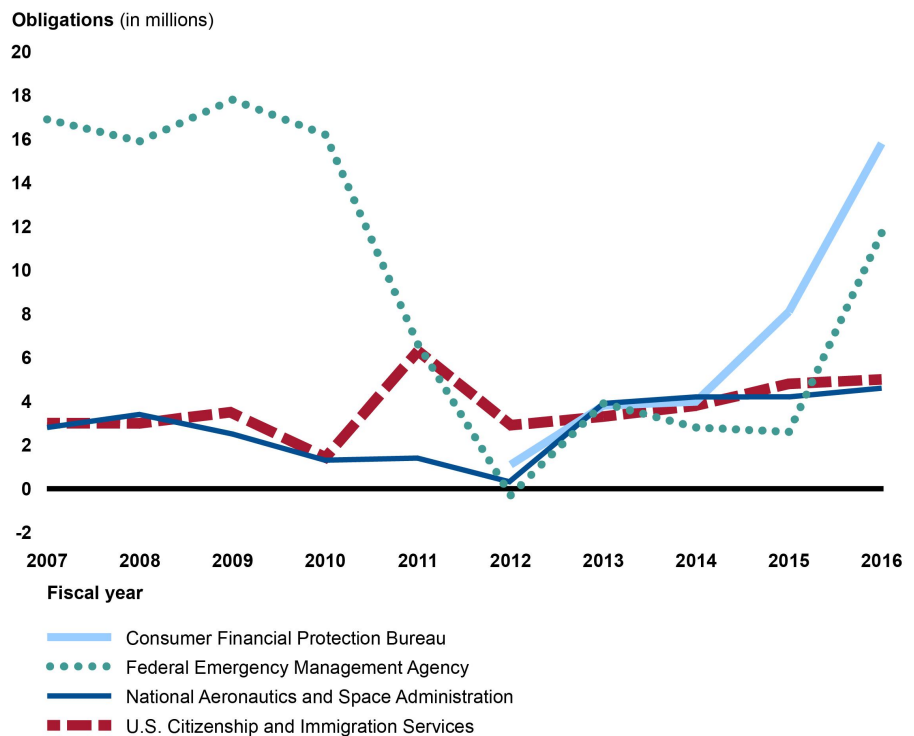
¹⁷ [GAO-16-877R](#).

Resources for Contracts and Public Affairs Employees Varied over Past Decade Due to Changes in Agency Activities and Increased Use of Digital Media

Obligations for Advertising and Public Relations Contracts Relatively Stable at NASA and USCIS, and Varied at CFPB and FEMA

The amounts the agencies we reviewed obligated to contracts coded as advertising or public relations services varied from year to year, though some agencies' obligations were more stable. As shown in figure 5, CFPB and FEMA had the most significant changes over the last 10 years.

Figure 5: Selected Agencies' Obligations for Advertising and Public Relations Contracts, Fiscal Years 2007 – 2016



Source: GAO analysis of Federal Procurement Data System-Next Generation data. | GAO-17-711

Notes: CFPB began operations in July 2011. Fiscal year 2012 was the first year in which it obligated funds to advertising or public relations contracts.

Dollar amounts are nominal. Adjusting for inflation does not substantially change the trends shown.

According to CFPB officials, the increase in CFPB obligations over time is due to standing up its operations. Officials told us that during fiscal years 2013 through 2015, they piloted campaigns and conducted research on outreach. The results of these pilot campaigns and research informed later outreach activities. Increases in fiscal years 2015 and 2016 were due primarily to two contracts that focused on increasing awareness of CFPB and the tools it offers consumers. CFPB officials told us that fiscal year 2016 obligations reflect full operations, and they expect future years' obligations to be more consistent.

The changes in FEMA obligations over the past decade are due in large part to changes in three contracts related to supporting outreach and customer support services for the agency's National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP). For example, in fiscal year 2010, most of the agency's obligations for advertising and public relations services (about \$12.5 million out of a total of \$16.2 million) were for an integrated marketing, advertising, and public relations services contract for the NFIP. In fiscal year 2011, the amount obligated to that contract dropped to about \$1 million. In fiscal year 2016, FEMA obligated about \$8.7 million for another contract supporting the NFIP, which drove the sharp increase in obligations in that year. Officials said that the amounts obligated for outreach for the NFIP depend on the program's other priorities, such as flood hazard mapping, which FEMA does to assess flood risks and uses to inform the development of NFIP regulations and flood insurance requirements.

At NASA and USCIS, obligations were relatively stable over the past decade. NASA officials said they expected obligations to remain consistent or even decline in the future, in anticipation of declining resources. USCIS officials also said they expect obligations to remain relatively level in the future, though they may increase marketing activities if E-Verify is mandated nationwide.

Public Affairs Employment Was Relatively Stable at NASA, but Increased at Other Agencies Largely Due to Operational Changes

Employment of public affairs employees at the agencies we reviewed increased over the past decade, but was relatively stable at NASA. Table

5 shows the changes in public affairs employees at these agencies from 2007 through 2016.

Table 5: Agencies' Number of Full-Time Permanent Public Affairs Employees, Fiscal Years 2007 and 2016

Agency	Number of Public Affairs Employees End of Fiscal Year 2007	Number of Public Affairs Employees End of Fiscal Year 2016	Percentage Change Fiscal Years 2007 – 2016
Consumer Financial Protection Bureau	5 ^a	7	40 percent
Federal Emergency Management Agency ^b	20	43	115 percent
National Aeronautics and Space Administration	112	114	4 percent
U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services	11	20	82 percent

Source: GAO analysis of agency data. | GAO 17-711

^aFrom fiscal year 2011, CFPB's first year of operations.

^bFEMA data reflect only full-time permanent public affairs employees and not staff classified as temporary full-time staff or Cadre of On-Call Response/Recovery Employees (CORE). According to FEMA officials, CORE staff are on-call employees who work full time, but typically are employed on for 2-year terms. At the end of fiscal year 2007 the agency also had two temporary full-time staff and 45 CORE staff. At the end of fiscal year 2016, the agency also had five temporary full-time staff and 55 CORE staff. If these staff are considered, FEMA public affairs staff increased from 67 to 103 from the end of fiscal year 2007 to the end of fiscal year 2016, an increase of 54 percent.

CFPB, FEMA, and USCIS officials identified several factors that caused the increase in the number of public affairs staff they use, including changes in operations and staffing structure.

- CFPB officials told us that the increase from five to seven public affairs employees between fiscal years 2011 and 2016 was due to standing up operations from fiscal year 2011. According to officials, the number of public affairs staff in fiscal year 2016 represents the steady state of operations for these employees at CFPB.
- FEMA officials cited organizational and structural changes, the rise of digital media, increasing stakeholder engagement, and an increase in work volume and duties as the reasons for its increase in public affairs employment. For example, in fiscal year 2007, the Protection and National Preparedness Directorate, which included public affairs staff, moved to FEMA.
- A USCIS public affairs official attributed the increase in the number of public affairs staff to a focus on having a greater number of lower-level public affairs staff versus a smaller number of higher level staff. They said they have found this staffing model to be effective.

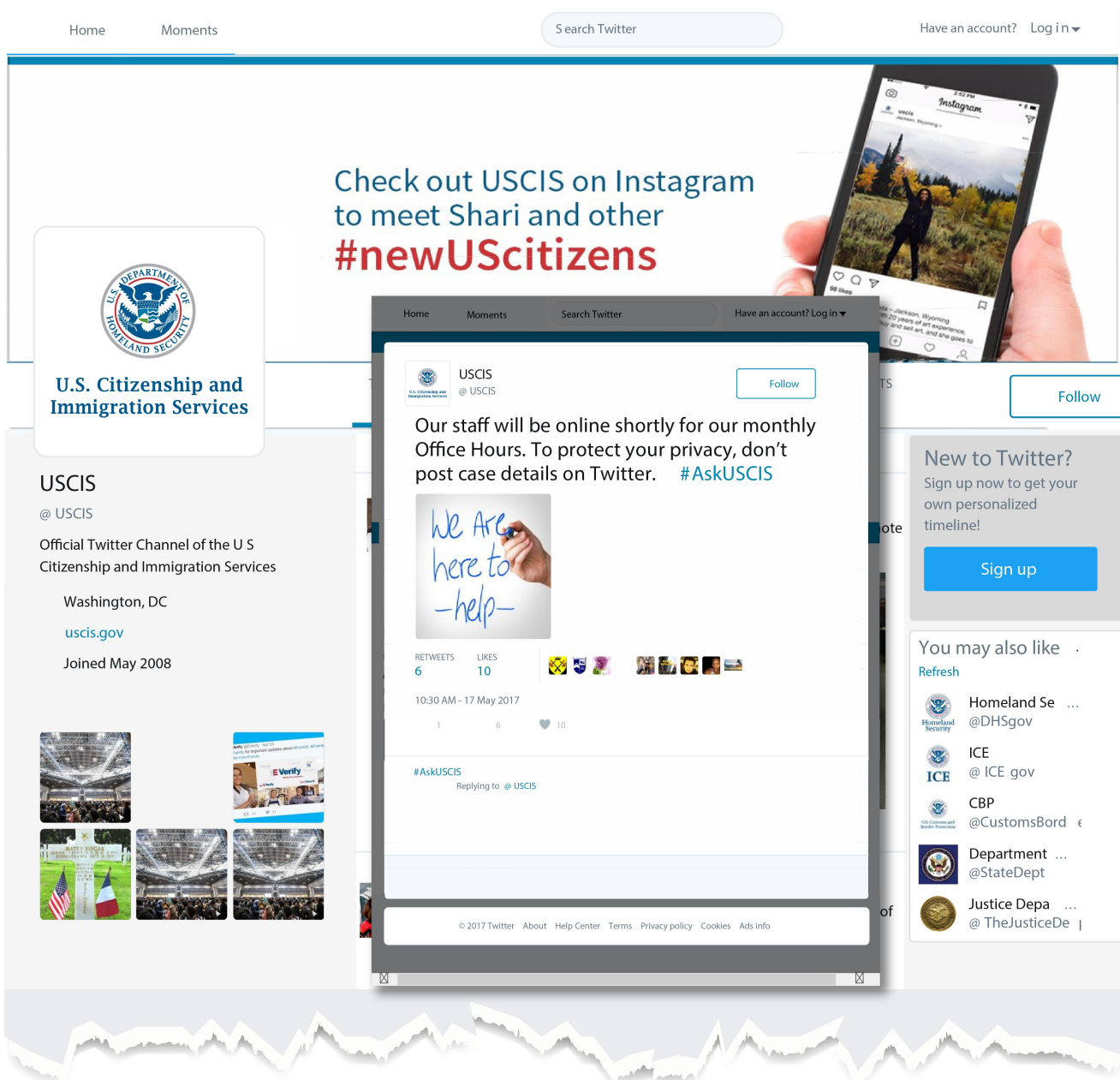
A NASA public affairs official said that the stability in the agency's number of public affairs staff was due to the end of the space shuttle program in 2011, which reduced the public affairs workload, balanced by an increased focus on commercial cargo and crew flight, which in turn has increased the public affairs workload. The official told us he expects staffing to either remain stable or decline in future years as the agency manages resource constraints.

Use of Digital Media Changed Communications Methods and Increased Opportunities for Public Engagement, with Mixed Effects on Resources

Officials at three of the four agencies we reviewed identified increased use of digital media as a significant change over the past decade, and at all four agencies said that these platforms are their primary methods of outreach. While the increased popularity of these media represented a change for FEMA, NASA, and USCIS, officials at CFPB, which began operations in 2011, said that they have used digital media platforms since its beginning. All four agencies had websites and presences on multiple social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter.

According to officials at the agencies we reviewed, the use of digital media has increased the reach of agency communications and changed the nature of these agencies' interactions with the public. FEMA officials emphasized the usefulness of these media in obtaining information from the public by gaining awareness of conditions during disasters. For example, FEMA guidance described how during Hurricane Sandy public affairs employees were able to use social media to obtain information about power outages, volunteering and donations, and concerns about the response efforts. A USCIS public affairs official also said that digital media have improved and changed the agency's reach. For example, USCIS has been working to provide customer service online by doing things like holding "office hours" on Twitter, during which Twitter users can post questions, which are answered by USCIS staff (see figure 6).

Figure 6: USCIS Twitter Account Posting about Agency “Office Hours”



Source: USCIS Twitter account website. | GAO-17-711

The increased use of digital media has had mixed effects on resources at the agencies we reviewed. FEMA officials told us that they increased the number of public affairs staff in response to the increase and evolution of

digital media and the public's reliance on it during major disasters. For example, officials said during the Louisiana Floods in 2016, monthly engagement (shares, reactions, and comments) on the agency's Facebook account increased to 49,000, compared to an average of 7,000 (see figure 7). NASA and USCIS officials said they have generally been able to adjust to the increased use of digital media using existing resources. For example, NASA officials told us that they focused on hiring new public affairs staff with expertise in these areas when hiring to fill open public affairs positions. They also trained public affairs staff in digital media skills and modified contracts to include more digital media tasks in place of more traditional ones.

Figure 7: FEMA Facebook Post During 2016 Louisiana Floods



Source: FEMA Facebook website. | GAO-17-711

Although the agencies we reviewed used digital media to a large extent, they all continue to use more traditional media such as newspapers and radio. FEMA officials told us that some populations they are trying to reach do not have access to digital media, so they use a mix of media. For example, they have found that radio is an effective medium for reaching out to members of tribal nations. Officials also made the point that other media channels are important because, during a disaster,

people may not be able to access digital media due to power loss or other connection failures.

Selected Agencies Used Web-Based and Other Tools to Assess Activities Supported by Contracts and Public Affairs Employees

Selected Agencies Used Web-Based and Other Tools as Indicators of Performance

All of the agencies we reviewed identified performance indicators they use to assess the performance of outreach activities, including those supported by advertising and public relations contracts and public affairs staff. However, the type and extent of assessment depends on the types of outreach conducted. For example, all four agencies use web-based indicators when assessing digital outreach, including use of agency websites and social media accounts. Officials told us that digital media are well suited to performance measurement and offer richer analytical possibilities than more traditional media. Outreach types and related indicators are described below.

- **Digital media:** Agencies use web-based indicators when assessing digital outreach, including indicators of the number of people reached, such as number of visits to a website and click-through rates (a ratio showing how often people who see a digital advertisement end up clicking on it). Agencies also use indicators related to how engaged users are with the outreach materials, including bounce rates (the percentage of visitors to a particular website who navigate away from the site after viewing only one page), the length of time a user spends on a web page or watching a video, and the number of people who respond to or share a social media post. When assessing digital outreach, agency officials told us that they also consider data on the proportion of users who access websites from mobile versus desktop computers and the geographic location of users.
- **Traditional media:** Agencies use other indicators to evaluate the performance of outreach conducted through traditional media such as newspapers, radio, and television. For newspapers, these indicators included circulation and number of readers per copy. For radio and television, they included the number of listeners or viewers.

-
- **Other types of outreach:** In some cases, agencies designed indicators specific to more targeted outreach efforts. For example, CFPB has a program that involves working with libraries to provide websites, worksheets, guides, and other information to help with consumers' financial decisions. CFPB directed a contractor supporting this program to assess this outreach through pilot testing of a guidebook and job aids with partner libraries, and to capture and document libraries' feedback and consolidate recommendations to CFPB. CFPB also used focus groups, field input from stakeholders, and surveys to inform outreach efforts. Officials told us that obtaining qualitative information through such efforts requires more resources, but this information is extremely useful in assessing performance of CFPB outreach activities.

All Selected Agencies Reported Using Performance Information in Decision Making, but Identified Some Challenges

In many cases, the agencies we reviewed identified quantitative and qualitative goals for their contract and employee activities. For example, one CFPB contract we reviewed included a goal of reaching 20 percent of the target audience (defined as adults ages 30–44 with household incomes between \$35,000 and \$125,000) at a frequency of five times per month. In another case, FEMA set a qualitative goal for a contract supporting the Ready campaign. The objectives of the contract included encouraging state and local governments to create localized efforts to encourage emergency preparedness.

The agencies we reviewed all used performance information to assess services provided through advertising and public relations services contracts. The majority of the contracts we reviewed (43 out of 68) explicitly included an analysis component, which involved such actions as developing indicators, collecting quantitative data, or analyzing and reporting the effectiveness of outreach efforts.¹⁸ With the exception of NASA, each agency used contracts and public affairs staff to support a

¹⁸The absence of an analysis component does not mean that agencies did not assess performance of the contracted services. Rather, such a component was not specifically included in the contracted tasks.

major outreach initiative.¹⁹ These agencies also assigned to contractors responsibility for supporting performance assessment of those initiatives. For example, USCIS contracts supporting education and outreach initiatives for the E-Verify and SAVE programs directed the contractors to develop performance indicators to analyze and assess the results of outreach efforts. Appendix II provides examples of how the agencies we reviewed assessed the performance of selected major initiatives.

Agencies also assign responsibility to public affairs employees to assess the outreach activities they support. Position descriptions for public affairs staff at all four of the agencies we reviewed specifically included assessment of agency outreach activities. For example, a NASA public affairs official told us that public affairs staff are involved in reviewing data on how many people read certain features and analyzing the effects of releasing new information, such as photos taken from spacecraft. The agency's Internet manager, who is classified under the public affairs occupational series, supervises the review of analytic information.

Officials at the agencies we reviewed told us that they use performance information to inform decisions about outreach activities. For example:

- FEMA officials told us that they use the results of emergency preparedness surveys to inform the focus of future advertising for the Ready campaign. In response to people reporting lack of time as a barrier to discussing emergency preparedness with family members, FEMA developed messages for its Ready initiative focused on working towards emergency preparedness while doing other daily tasks, such as driving to school or eating dinner.
- USCIS used a report summarizing lessons learned from fiscal year 2016 outreach about the E-Verify program to inform fiscal year 2017 outreach efforts. The report included an assessment of which efforts in fiscal year 2016 most successfully supported objectives such as building awareness of the program. It included performance indicators, such as the number of times an online advertisement is shown on a search result page or other site (impressions), and the

¹⁹At CFPB, the highest-value contracts focused on promoting awareness of CFPB tools and resources; at FEMA they focused on outreach related to the National Flood Insurance Program and the Ready Campaign; and at USCIS they focused on outreach for the E-Verify and SAVE programs. Alternatively, four of NASA's five highest-value contracts provided support to the Communications Support Services Center. At NASA, public affairs staff analyzed performance of outreach activities, including those supported by the center's services, using a variety of indicators.

number of times a person clicks on an on-line advertisement (clicks). The summary report recommended approaches for fiscal year 2017 based on lessons learned from fiscal year 2016 performance.

Despite the usefulness of web-based indicators and other tools used to measure outreach activities, officials at the agencies we reviewed acknowledged some challenges in using them. The following are examples of challenges officials at our case study agencies identified:

- **Lack of qualitative feedback:** Officials at USCIS and CFPB told us that while they have access to several indicators related to performance of outreach (for example, number of visitors to a site or downloads of materials), these indicators are not the same as understanding whether and how information is being used. A USCIS public affairs official said that the agency has this challenge with outreach through both digital and traditional media. For example, USCIS staff have information on the circulation of a newspaper in which they have placed an advertisement, but without additional assessment, it is difficult for staff to know how or if someone used information in the advertisement or had a favorable impression of it.
- **Difficulty measuring long-term effects:** NASA officials told us that digital media offers the ability to get virtually immediate feedback on indicators such as the number of people reached, and that such information helps inform decisions and ensure they make sound investments. However, officials noted that it is more difficult to determine the long-term effects of outreach activities. For example, it would be difficult for NASA to determine whether its outreach aimed at schoolchildren led them to eventually pursue careers in science, technology, engineering, and math fields.
- **Difficulty identifying factors that influence performance:** FEMA officials told us that there are many variables that affect performance of digital media outreach, including the time of day or week, the specific content of the message, and other news topics or marketing campaigns occurring at the same time. They said they use the data to make decisions, but in some instances it is difficult to determine why outreach did not perform well. In our prior work on advertising at the Department of Defense, we reported similar challenges in measuring the impact of advertising on recruitment.²⁰ We stated that determining the precise impact of advertising on outcomes in this case is inherently challenging, in part due to concurrent effects of external

²⁰[GAO-16-396](#).

factors, such as the influence of family support and the availability of other career or educational activities.

- **Difficulty performing in-depth assessments:** Tools that allow for more in-depth assessments of outreach activities may require more resources than collecting web-based or other indicators does. For example, under the Paperwork Reduction Act (PRA), agencies must receive approval from OMB for surveys or other efforts that involve collecting data from the public. CFPB officials told us the approval process for collecting information from the public can be challenging because the outreach initiative that is the subject of the information collection often changes or may evolve in the time it takes to receive approval, which can take up to a year. In our 2010 report on opportunities to strengthen agencies' customer service efforts, we reported that in certain circumstances the PRA clearance process made obtaining customer input difficult because of the time it takes to obtain approval for surveys to collect customer input.²¹ In our 2014 report on customer service at selected agencies, we reported that use of the Fast Track process designed to speed OMB survey approval had varied among the agencies we reviewed and not led to significant improvements.²²

Selected agencies have taken steps to address these challenges. For example, FEMA and CFPB have used focus groups or surveys to obtain richer information on whether and how people are using their outreach material. FEMA works with a contractor to administer surveys that provide data on how the public may be responding to the agency's outreach, such as the extent to which people have taken action to prepare for emergencies. Both agencies have worked with OMB to obtain approval for their information collections, despite the resources involved. CFPB officials told us the information obtained through these collections makes it worth the time and resources involved in the approval process.

²¹GAO, *Managing for Results: Opportunities to Strengthen Agencies' Customer Service Efforts*, [GAO-11-44](#) (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 27, 2010).

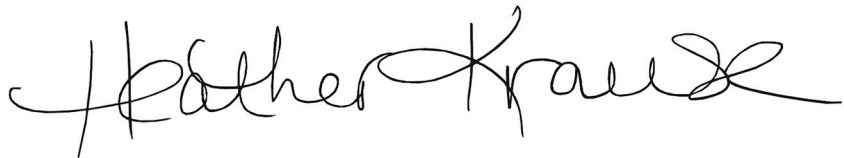
²²GAO, *Managing for Results: Selected Agencies Need to Take Additional Efforts to Improve Customer Service*, [GAO-15-84](#) (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 24, 2014).

Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to CFPB, DHS, and NASA for comment. CFPB and DHS provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate. NASA did not have comments.

As agreed with your staff, unless you publicly announce the contents of this report earlier, we plan no further distribution until 30 days from the report date. At that time, we will send copies of this report to the Director of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, Acting Secretary of Homeland Security, Acting Administrator of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, and interested congressional committees. In addition, the report will be available at no charge on the GAO website at <http://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-6806 or krauseh@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Heather Krause". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Heather" and last name "Krause" clearly distinguishable.

Heather Krause
Director, Strategic Issues

Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

Our objectives were to review (1) the activities that selected agencies conducted using advertising and public relations contracts and agency public affairs employees, and their purposes; (2) how the level of resources selected agencies devoted to these activities changed over the past decade and the factors that officials identified as affecting these changes; and (3) how selected agencies measured the results of these activities.

To address our objectives, we selected four agencies for case study based on several factors. First, we focused on agencies with high total obligations for advertising and public relations contracts or high total numbers of public affairs employees relative to other agencies with similar characteristics, and/ or large changes in these numbers in recent years relative to other agencies with similar organizational structures (e.g. comparing component agencies). Of those agencies, we selected ones with differing missions and types of interactions with the public. We also considered input on the suitability of agencies for case illustration purposes from our staff with expertise in agencies' operations. The four selected agencies were the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, Federal Emergency Management Agency, National Aeronautics and Space Administration, and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

We previously reported that the Department of Defense (DOD) obligates more funding to advertising and public relations contracts, and employs more public affairs staff than any other agency.¹ We did not include DOD in this review because we have recent work that examined advertising at that department.²

To identify the activities selected agencies conduct using advertising and public relations contracts and the purposes of these activities, we reviewed information on these contracts. Specifically, we used the

¹Specifically, DOD was responsible for over 60 percent of obligations for advertising and public relations contracts from fiscal years 2006 through 2015, and employed just over 40 percent of all federal public affairs employees from fiscal years 2006 through 2014. See [GAO-16-877R](#).

²[GAO-16-396](#).

Federal Procurement Data System-Next Generation (FPDS-NG) database to identify contracts at the selected agencies with values of \$150,000 or more that were classified as advertising or public relations services over fiscal years 2012 through 2016.³ The FPDS-NG database captures information on the federal government's contract awards and obligations. It includes data for most federal contracts that have an estimated value of \$3,000 or more. The four agencies we reviewed had a combined total of 68 contracts with these characteristics. These 68 contracts represented just over a quarter (68 out of 253) and almost 95 percent (\$90.7 million of the \$97.4 million) of all advertising and public relations contracts and related obligations at these agencies over this time period.⁴

To illustrate the types of general activities the 68 contracts supported, we analyzed statements of work and other documentation using a data collection instrument (DCI). We used the DCI to categorize key characteristics of the services described in the contract documentation, such as the purpose of the activities, media channels for each of the activities, the intended audiences of the outreach, and any references to agency statutes or missions. We also interviewed agency contracting and public affairs officials about activities supported by contracts.

We also classified the contracts according to five categories that we identified in our earlier work: (1) public education and awareness; (2) customer service; (3) general information; (4) recruitment; and (5) compliance with laws and policies.⁵ To conduct our analysis, one analyst used the DCI to review and code each contract. Another analyst verified

³In this report we use the term "contract" to refer to three types of contract vehicles: stand-alone contracts, task orders, and requests (or "calls") for services provided under blanket purchase agreements. We focused on contracts with obligations of at least \$150,000. This is the simplified acquisition threshold, which determines when government agencies can use Simplified Acquisition Procedures (SAP) as prescribed in Part 13 of the Federal Acquisition Regulation. Generally, government agencies may use SAP for acquisitions not exceeding \$150,000. SAP acquisitions are not subject to full and open competition requirements. Rather, agencies must promote competition to the maximum extent practicable.

⁴Agencies also deobligated amounts from these contracts—there were \$7 million in deobligations from the 253 contracts, which included about \$150,000 in deobligations from the 68 contracts we reviewed. After factoring in the deobligations, the net obligations for the 253 contracts were about \$90.4 million; the net obligations for the 68 we reviewed were about \$90.6 million.

⁵Some contracts fell into two or more categories, as they are not mutually exclusive.

the coding. Finally, we shared our classification according to the five categories with agency public affairs officials to ensure concurrence.

We assessed the reliability of FPDS-NG data by considering known strengths and weaknesses of the data based on our past work that used the database, and by comparing FPDS-NG data to information in contracts provided by agencies. We also reviewed a nongeneralizable sample of 18 contracts not coded as advertising or public relations services, but that appeared to include some activities related to these services. We identified these other contracts by searching FPDS-NG for contracts with (1) vendors that had received other contracts for advertising and public relations services, and (2) contract descriptions that used the terms “advertising” or “public relations.” We determined that these data were sufficiently reliable for our purposes.

To identify activities supported by public affairs staff, and their purposes, we analyzed employment data provided by agencies on employees classified under the Office of Personnel Management’s (OPM) public affairs occupational series. We also reviewed position descriptions and other documents provided by agencies and interviewed agency public affairs officials who manage public relations activities to describe the organization and role of public affairs employees in public relations and advertising activities, and the purposes of those activities. We assessed the reliability of agency employment data by comparing it to OPM’s Enterprise Human Resource Integration database—the primary government-wide source for information on federal employees—and determined that they were sufficiently reliable for our purposes.

To review how the level of contract and staff resources at selected agencies has changed over the past decade and factors affecting these changes, we reviewed FPDS-NG data, including the total obligations of public relations and advertising contracts from fiscal years 2007 to 2016. We also analyzed employment data provided by agencies on the numbers of full-time permanent public affairs staff over fiscal years 2007 through 2016. We interviewed agency public affairs officials to discuss reasons for any changes, as well as descriptions of changes in the types of work performed.

To review how selected agencies measure the results of activities supported by advertising and public relations contracts and public affairs staff, we reviewed agency performance information, including agency performance reports and reports describing specific outreach activities and campaigns. We also examined whether and how the contracts we

reviewed involved performance measurement. We reviewed this information and interviewed agency public affairs officials to identify methods that agencies use to measure the effects of activities supported by these contracts and staff, any challenges that the agencies have with measuring their effects, and ways that agencies incorporate performance information into decision making.

We conducted this performance audit from August 2016 to September 2017 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Appendix II: Tasks and Major Outreach Initiatives Supported by Selected Agencies’ Advertising and Public Relations Services Contracts

Largest Advertising and Public Relations Contracts at Selected Agencies

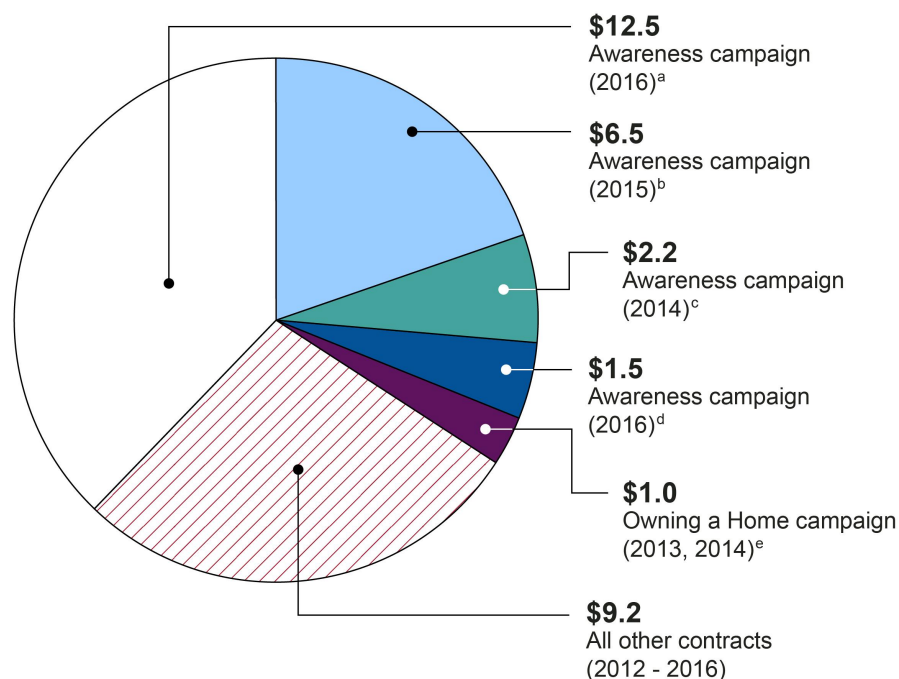
At the agencies we reviewed, a relatively small number of advertising and public relations contracts represented a large portion of total obligations to these contracts. The following figures and notes illustrate and describe each agency’s largest contracts over fiscal years 2012 through 2016.

Consumer Financial Protection Bureau

Figure 8 shows Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB) obligations to its five largest and all other advertising and public relations contracts (“calls” or “task orders”) over fiscal years 2012 through 2016. CFPB had a total of 44 advertising and public relations contracts (“calls” or “task orders”) with combined obligations of \$32.8 million over this time period.¹ There may be multiple calls or task orders for a single contract.

¹We reviewed 26 CFPB advertising calls (requests for services provided under blanket purchase agreements) and task orders with a combined value of \$31.2 million. The CFPB calls and task orders we reviewed did not include any coded as public relations over fiscal years 2012 through 2016, but there was 1 among the 44 total calls and task orders CFPB had over fiscal years 2012 through 2016. There may be multiple calls or task orders for a single contract.

Figure 8: CFPB Five Largest Advertising and Public Relations Contracts and All Others, Fiscal Years 2012 – 2016



Dollars (in millions)

Source: GAO analysis of Federal Procurement Data System-Next Generation data | GAO-17-711

^aAwareness campaign (2016): The call for services directs the vendor to support a campaign to build awareness of CFPB tools. Specific services covered by the contract include developing a media plan, creative development, and purchasing media, placing advertising, consumer research, and reporting on key performance metrics.

^bAwareness campaign (2015): The call for services directs the vendor to support a campaign to build awareness of CFPB tools. Specific services covered by the contract include developing a media plan, creative development, placing advertising, and reporting on key performance metrics.

^cAwareness campaign (2014): The call for services directs the vendor to support a campaign to build awareness of CFPB tools. Specific services covered by the contract include purchasing media and developing a set of metrics to measure the effectiveness of the campaign.

^dAwareness campaign (2016): The call for services directs the vendor to support a website marketing campaign involving search and digital display advertising. Specific services covered by the contract include developing a marketing campaign and purchasing search marketing to drive as many consumers as possible to the CFPB website from searches related to certain search terms.

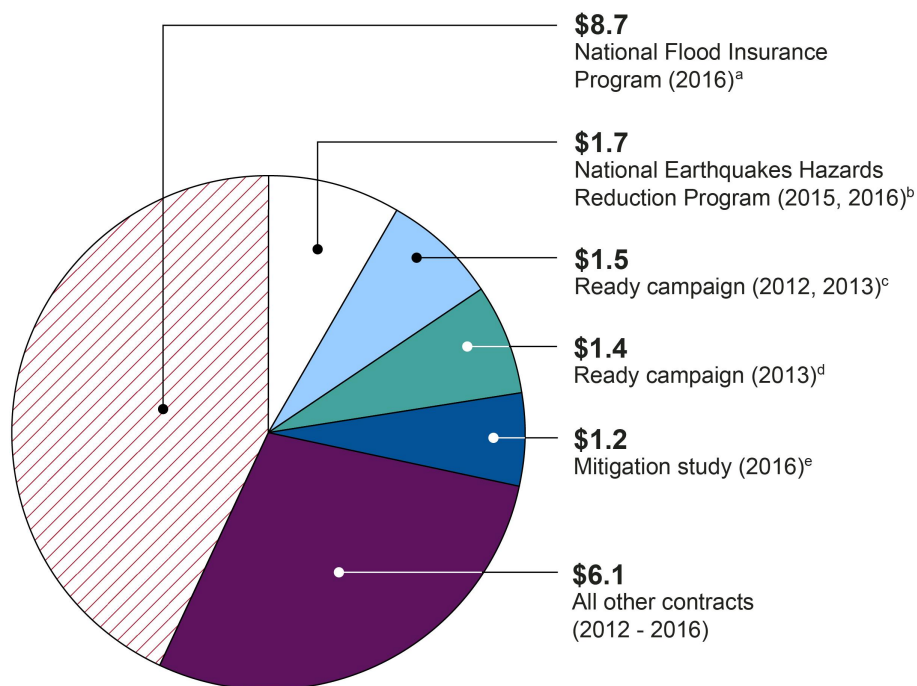
^eOwning a Home" campaign (2013, 2014): The call for services directs the vendor to support development of an advertising and marketing strategy around CFPB's Owning a Home product, a set of tools and information designed to help consumers make better decisions about mortgages.

Federal Emergency Management Agency

Figure 9 shows Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) obligations to its five largest and all other advertising and public relations

contracts over fiscal years 2012 through 2016. FEMA had a total of 148 of these contracts with a combined value of \$20.7 million over this time period.²

Figure 9: FEMA Five Largest Advertising and Public Relations Contracts and All Others, Fiscal Years 2012 – 2016



Dollars (in millions)

Source: GAO analysis of Federal Procurement Data System-Next Generation data | GAO-17-711.

^aNational Flood Insurance Program (2016): The contract directs the vendor to provide a full-service integrated customer communications and public relations effort for the National Flood Insurance Program.

^bNational Earthquake Hazards Reduction Program (2015, 2016): The contract directs the vendor to provide a range of services for the Building Science Branch and its National Earthquake Hazards Reduction Program, including supporting strategic planning and process improvement, training management, partnership and events, and outreach and information support.

^cReady campaign (2012, 2013): The contract directs the vendor to support the Ready campaign's use of public service advertising and other outreach by conducting market research and media analysis; developing, producing, and distributing new creative products for television, outdoor, radio, and web media, and other tasks.

²We reviewed 24 FEMA advertising and public relations contracts with a combined value of \$24.5 million.

**Appendix II: Tasks and Major Outreach
Initiatives Supported by Selected Agencies'
Advertising and Public Relations Services
Contracts**

^dReady campaign (2013): The contract directs the vendor to support the Ready campaign by, among other things, distributing public service advertising and developing and implementing a research campaign that evaluates the effectiveness of this advertising.

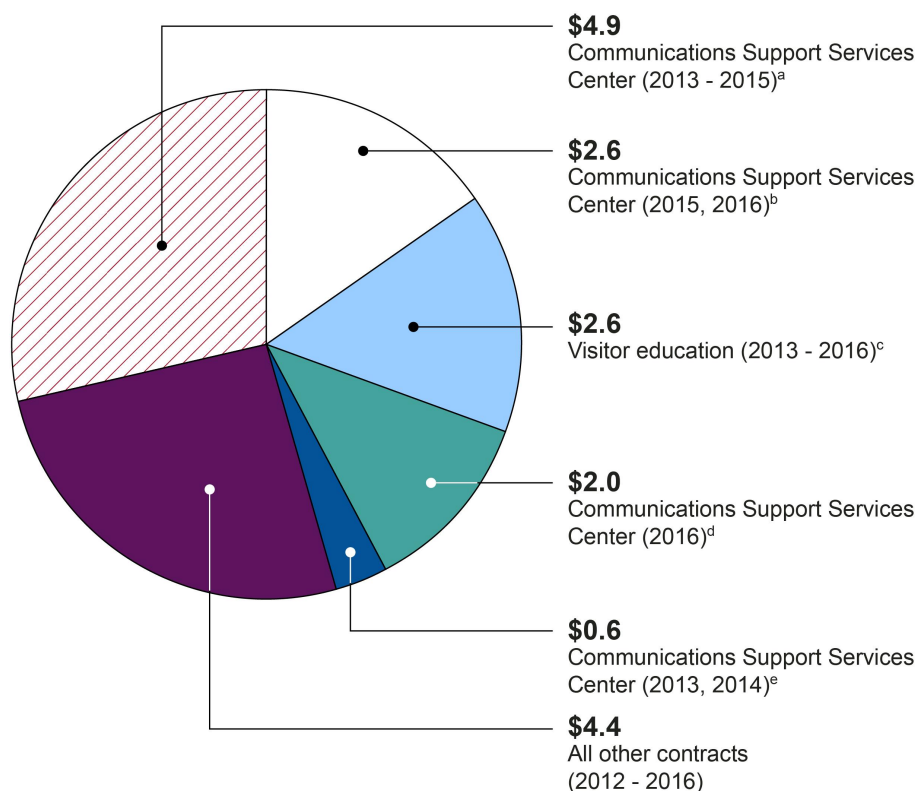
^eMitigation study (2016): The contract directs the vendor to update a study to quantify the future savings from natural hazard mitigation efforts funded through FEMA's grant programs. The information is designed to be used to inform the development of guidance and strategies for audiences including federal, state, and local jurisdictions

National Aeronautics and Space Administration

Figure 10 shows National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) obligations to its five largest and all other advertising and public relations contracts over fiscal years 2012 through 2016. NASA had a total of 55 of these contracts with a combined value of \$17.1 million over this time period.³

³We reviewed 14 NASA advertising and public relations contracts with a combined value of \$15.1 million.

Figure 10: NASA Five Largest Advertising and Public Relations Contracts and All Others, Fiscal Years 2012 – 2016



Dollars (in millions)

Source: GAO analysis of Federal Procurement Data System-Next Generation data | GAO-17-711.

^aCommunications Support Services Center (CSSC) (2013-2015): The contract directs the vendor to provide a variety of support services through the CSSC, which provides information products to assist with internal communications, education and public outreach programs, and dissemination of information for business and mission support operations. Specific services include providing print and replication products, graphic design, animation, video, multimedia, and digital publications.

^bCSSC (2015, 2016): The contract directs the vendor to provide through the CSSC the same types of services described for the prior contract.

^cVisitor education (2013 – 2016): The contract directs the vendor to support NASA's Glenn Research Center's public outreach program, which includes visitor education and community outreach. Among other things, the contractor provides management, operation, and maintenance of exhibits and facilities and the performance of informal education and public information programs.

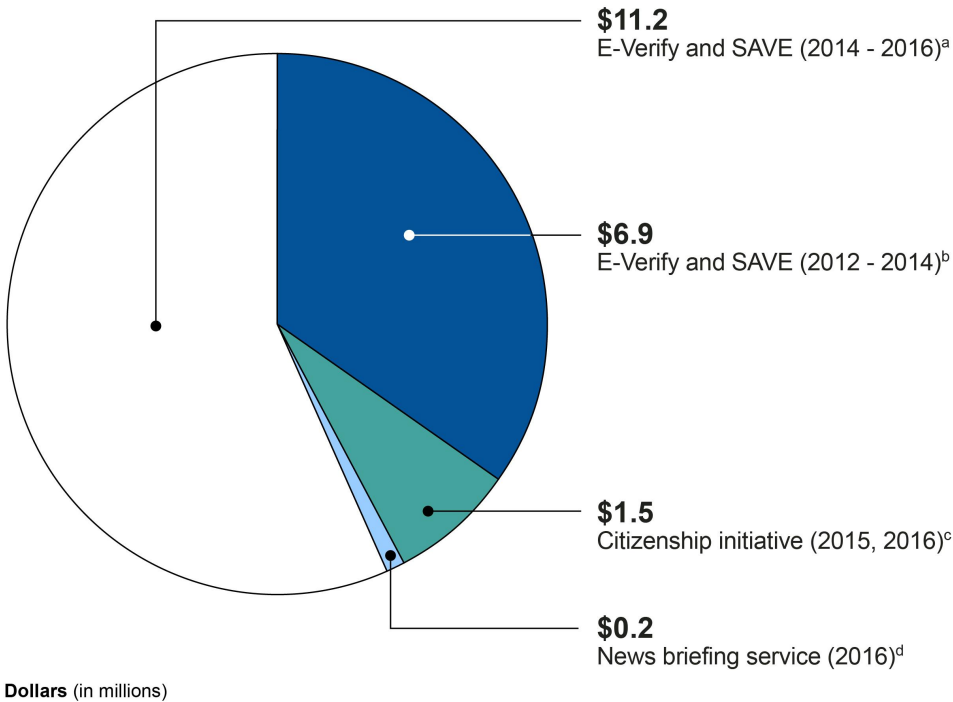
^dCSSC (2013): The contract directs the vendor to provide through the CSSC the same types of services described for the contracts in notes a and b above.

^eCSSC (2013, 2014): The contract directs the vendor to provide support services through the CSSC, in particular complex visual design and art products to support the agency's Aeronautic Research Mission Directorate.

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services

Figure 11 shows U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) obligations to the four advertising and public relations contracts we reviewed. The agency had two other of these contracts over fiscal years 2012 through 2016, with a value of about \$27,000 and -\$100,000. Because the net value of these contracts is negative, we did not represent them in the figure.

Figure 11: USCIS Four Largest Advertising and Public Relations Contracts, Fiscal Years 2012 – 2016



Source: GAO analysis of Federal Procurement Data System-Next Generation data | GAO-17-711.

^aE-Verify and Systematic Alien Verification for Entitlements (SAVE) (2014 – 2016): The contract directs the vendor to plan, develop, and implement initiatives to assist in managing a nationwide and geo-targeted public education and outreach effort to present the E-Verify and SAVE programs to a diverse public audience. Specific tasks include planning and developing media and educational messaging tools and content and developing performance indicators and collecting performance information.

^bE-Verify and SAVE (2012-2014): The contract directs the vendor to develop and implement a public education and outreach plan designed to, among other things, increase the number of employers enrolled in E-Verify and increase understanding of the SAVE program. Specific tasks include creating and implementing strategies for targeted outreach, developing resources such as media and information toolkits, and assisting in coordinating with USCIS partners in outreach efforts.

^cCitizenship initiative (2015, 2016): the contract directs the vendor to support the agency's citizenship and public education and awareness initiative, designed to provide lawful permanent residents with

information on preparing for the naturalization process. Specific tasks include developing project and media plans, researching and purchasing media, and developing outreach and education materials in multiple languages.

^dNews briefing service (2016): The contract directs the vendor to provide a daily written news briefing based on a review of articles and broadcasts from all major U.S. newspapers, television and cable news, relevant magazines and journals, and other sources. The vendor is responsible for analyzing and editing this information, including determining which aspects of each story are important to constituencies within the agency.

Tasks Included in Advertising and Public Relations Contracts

The contracts we reviewed involved different types of tasks. Table 6 lists and describes these tasks and provides examples from the agencies. Note that some contracts fell into two or more categories, as contracts may involve multiple types of services.

Table 6: Description of Types of Tasks Included in Selected Agencies’ Advertising and Public Relations Services Contracts

Task	Frequency (out of 68)	Description	Example
Analysis	43/63 percent	Creating metrics, collecting quantitative data, or analyzing and reporting on the effectiveness of a campaign	All of our selected agencies had at least one contract that directed contractors to carry out tasks related to analysis. For example, a CFPB contract directed the contractor to help it develop a set of metrics on the effectiveness of a project to build awareness of CFPB tools. The contractor was directed to provide a report on these metrics on a weekly basis and a summary report at the end of the project.
Content creation	50/74 percent	Creating content of any type intended for outreach	All of our selected agencies had at least one contract for services related to creating content. For example, a FEMA contract directed the contractor to create a new series of FEMA educational and preparedness radio and television announcements focusing on making the public aware of wireless emergency alerts, which are sent to users’ mobile phones when there is an alert related to extreme weather or other situations.
Monitoring	5/7 percent	Tracking or collecting news or social media information about the agency	Three of our selected agencies had at least one contract for services that provide daily summaries of news stories that reference the agency. For example, USCIS contracted with a company to prepare and deliver a daily executive news and analytical briefing. In particular, the contract was directed to monitor and review articles and broadcasts from major U.S. newspapers, national television and cable news, and Internet sites and social media platforms, among others.
Distribution	46/68 percent	Dissemination of information; purchasing media space	All of our selected agencies had at least one contract for services related to distributing information. For example, a USCIS contract focused on publicizing the agency’s initiative to promote the rights, responsibilities, and importance of U.S. citizenship to eligible lawful permanent residents. The agency contracted with a company to provide analyses of media markets and purchase advertisements for print, digital, radio, and other media based on this analysis.

**Appendix II: Tasks and Major Outreach
Initiatives Supported by Selected Agencies’
Advertising and Public Relations Services
Contracts**

Task	Frequency (out of 68)	Description	Example
Planning	46/68 percent	Creating a media strategy with new or existing resources; market research	All of our selected agencies had at least one contract for services that support their public relations activities. For example, NASA contracted with a company to support its Communications Support Services Center, which provides products that assist the agency with its education and public outreach programs, among other things. The contract covers a range of services, and includes planning social media elements in conjunction with traditional media campaigns.
Technical or operational support	36/53 percent	Providing support for agency public relations resources	All of our selected agencies had at least one contract for services that support their public relations activities. For example FEMA contracted with a company to provide all of the infrastructure and technological resources for a call center to be used in support of the National Flood Insurance Program.

Source: GAO analysis of agency information. | GAO 17-711

Note: Because contracts may involve multiple activities, the frequency of these types of activities adds up to more than the number of contracts reviewed.

Five of the six tasks (all except monitoring) were included in a majority of the contracts, and the three most frequent tasks were the three most closely related to distributing information (planning, content creation, and distribution). Planning activities often included conducting market research (of the 46 contracts that included planning, 31 included market research). Agencies asked contractors to create content for a variety of mediums. Of the 50 contracts that involved content creation, the most common tasks included were related to writing/editorial (37), graphic design (30), and video production (29), and the most common media were web/digital (38), and print (30). Agencies tasked contractors with distributing the information or buying media on a variety of platforms, but more often than not, did not include a specific medium in the contract. Of the 46 contracts that involved distribution, the most frequent method specified is through digital advertising (17).

**Performance Measurement of Major Outreach Activities
Supported by Contracts**

Table 7 shows examples of each agency’s major outreach initiatives, as indicated by the advertising and public relations services contracts with the highest obligations, along with related performance measurement activities. High-value contracts at CFPB, FEMA, and USCIS focused on a particular outreach initiative or initiatives, while NASA’s highest value contracts were for services that more generally supported outreach and other agency activities.

**Appendix II: Tasks and Major Outreach
Initiatives Supported by Selected Agencies’
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Table 7: Major Outreach Initiatives Supported by Advertising and Public Relations Contracts and Public Affairs Staff, and Related Performance Measurement Activities

Agency	Examples of Major Outreach Initiatives	Related Performance Measurement Activities
CFPB	Building awareness of CFPB tools and resources	CFPB contracts supporting these initiatives directed the vendor to develop performance indicators and report regularly on them to CFPB. For example, one contract stated that the vendor was to work with CFPB to develop a set of indicators of the effectiveness of the campaign and report high-level indicators on a weekly basis and more detailed ones on a monthly basis. The vendor was also directed to prepare presentations on campaign performance for CFPB officials and stakeholders and develop a research plan to understand the impact and value of advertising to certain consumers. A presentation from the vendor included recommendations for the campaign based on performance of previous outreach.
FEMA	National Flood Insurance Program; Ready campaign	National Flood Insurance Program: The contract supporting customer service and outreach for the program instructs the contractor to, among other things, monitor and learn from prior outreach efforts and use techniques such as market testing to provide early feedback on engagement strategies. Ready campaign: FEMA uses information from surveys on emergency preparedness to inform its Ready campaign. For example, a contractor administered an annual national survey to the general public between 2004 and 2015 to chart large-scale trends in awareness, attitudes, and behaviors relating to emergency preparedness. The survey is now administered on an ongoing basis, with results available quarterly. FEMA also specified in contracts for services supporting the campaign that contractors should track and monitor public service advertisements to determine market penetration and inform future messages.
NASA	Services to support outreach and other activities	NASA’s largest advertising contract is for support services for its Communications Support Services Center, which provides support across the agency, including to public affairs staff, in developing products such as exhibits and graphics. A contract for these services directed the contractor to launch and track social media activities. Additionally, public affairs staff monitor outreach activities, including those supported by the Communications Support Services Center, using a variety of indicators.
USCIS	E-Verify and Systematic Alien Verification for Entitlements (SAVE) education and outreach	USCIS contracts supporting education and outreach initiatives for the E-Verify and SAVE programs directed the contractors to develop performance indicators to analyze and evaluate the results of outreach efforts. Examples of performance information the contractors provided include monthly reports summarizing activities performed and indicators, such as number of clicks resulting from on-line advertising and a public education and outreach plan summarizing performance from the previous year, and recommending an approach based on that for the next year.

Source: GAO analysis of agency information. | GAO 17-711

Appendix III: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

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Staff Acknowledgments

Other GAO staff who made contributions to this report include Carol Henn (Assistant Director); Shari Brewster; Jenny Chanley; Cale Jones; Julia Kennon; Joshua Miller; Meredith Moles; Kathleen Padulchick; and Elise Vaughan Winfrey.

Appendix IV: Accessible Data

Data Tables

Data Table for Figure 5: Selected Agencies' Obligations for Advertising and Public Relations Contracts, Fiscal Years 2007 – 2016

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Consumer Financial Protection Bureau	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	\$1.1	\$3.8	\$4.0	\$8.1	\$15.8
Federal Emergency Management Agency	\$16.9	\$15.9	\$17.8	\$16.2	\$6.6	-\$0.3	\$3.9	\$2.8	\$2.6	\$11.7
National Aeronautics and Space Administration	\$2.8	\$3.4	\$2.5	\$1.3	\$1.4	\$0.3	\$3.9	\$4.2	\$4.2	\$4.6
U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services	\$3.0	\$3.0	\$3.5	\$1.3	\$6.3	\$2.9	\$3.3	\$3.8	\$4.8	\$5.0

Data Table for Figure 8: CFPB Five Largest Advertising and Public Relations Contracts and All Others, Fiscal Years 2012 – 2016 (Amount in millions of dollars)

Contract	Amount
Awareness campaign (2016) ^a	\$12.5
Awareness campaign (2015) ^b	\$6.5
Awareness campaign (2014) ^c	\$2.2
Awareness campaign (2016) ^d	\$1.5
"Owning a Home" campaign (2014) ^e	\$1.0
All other contracts (2012 - 2016)	\$9.2

Data Table for Figure 9: FEMA Five Largest Advertising and Public Relations Contracts and All Others, Fiscal Years 2012 – 2016 (Amount in millions of dollars)

Contract	Amount
National Flood Insurance Program (2016) ^a	\$8.7
National Earthquakes Hazards Reduction Program (2015, 2016) ^b	\$1.7
Ready campaign (2012, 2013) ^c	\$1.5
Ready campaign (2013) ^d	\$1.4
Mitigation study (2016) ^e	\$1.2
All other contracts (2012 - 2016)	\$5.8

Data Table Figure 10: NASA Five Largest Advertising and Public Relations Contracts and All Others, Fiscal Years 2012 – 2016 (Amount in millions of dollars)

Contract	Amount
Communications Support Services Center (2013-2015) ^a	\$4.9
Communications Support Services Center (2015-2016) ^b	\$2.6
Visitor education (2013 - 2016) ^c	\$2.6
Communications Support Services Center (2013) ^d	\$2.0
Communications Support Services Center (2016) ^e	\$0.6
All other contracts (2012 - 2016)	\$4.4

Data Table Figure 11: USCIS Four Largest Advertising and Public Relations Contracts, Fiscal Years 2012 – 2016 (Amount in millions of dollars)

Contract	Amount
E-Verify and SAVE (2014 - 2016) ^a	\$11.2
E-Verify and SAVE (2012 - 2014) ^b	\$6.9
Citizenship initiative (2015 - 2016) ^c	\$1.5
News briefing service (2016) ^d	\$0.2

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