DEFENSE CONTRACTING

Enhanced Information Needed on Contractor Workplace Safety

Why GAO Did This Study

DOD is the largest contracting agency in the federal government, obligating about $320 billion for contracts in fiscal year 2017. Some DOD contracts—including some in the manufacturing and construction industries—involve work that can be dangerous, and questions have been raised about working conditions for these workers.

The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2018 includes a provision for GAO to review issues related to the safety and health records of DOD contractors. This report examines: (1) the incidence of prior serious safety or health violations among selected companies with DOD manufacturing and construction contracts, and (2) how DOD and selected DOD components address contractor workplace safety and health during the acquisition process. GAO matched federal contracting data for fiscal year 2017 to OSHA inspection data for fiscal years 2013-2017 (most recent available); interviewed officials from OSHA, DOD, selected military departments, and selected DOD components; reviewed documentation from six selected DOD contract files; and reviewed relevant federal laws and regulations, policy, and guidance.

What GAO Found

Some selected companies with Department of Defense (DOD) manufacturing or construction contracts in fiscal year 2017 were previously cited for serious safety or health violations, according to GAO’s analysis of federal data. Of the 192 companies with DOD contracts GAO selected for review, 106 had been inspected by the Department of Labor’s (DOL) Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) or state occupational safety and health agencies during fiscal years 2013 through 2017. These inspections resulted in 83 companies being cited for at least one violation, including 52 with at least one serious violation (see figure). However, available data do not allow a determination of whether these violations occurred during work on a DOD contract because OSHA inspection data do not include that information.

The incidence of violations among all inspected companies with DOD contracts cannot be determined because OSHA does not require its staff to obtain and enter a corporate identification number in its inspection data, which is needed to match contracting data to inspection data. As a result, OSHA’s data do not consistently include these numbers, and users of OSHA’s website cannot use these numbers to search for companies’ previous violations. According to federal internal control standards, management should share the quality information necessary to achieve the entity’s objectives. Unless OSHA explores the feasibility of requiring a corporate identification number in its inspection data, website users will likely have difficulty obtaining accurate information on individual companies’ previous violations.

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What GAO Recommends

GAO is making one recommendation to OSHA and two recommendations to DOD to enhance available information on contractor workplace safety. OSHA neither agreed nor disagreed with GAO’s recommendation, but planned to take action to address it. DOD agreed with the recommendations.