Drugs Policy

Assessing Treatment Expansion Efforts and Drug Control Strategies and Programs

What GAO Found

In an effort to reduce the prevalence of opioid misuse and the fatalities associated with it, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) has made expanding access to medication-assisted treatment (MAT) for opioid use disorder a priority since 2015. MAT is an approach that combines behavioral therapy and the use of certain medications like methadone and buprenorphine. GAO reported in September 2016 that several factors could affect patients’ access to MAT, such as availability of qualified practitioners and their capacity to meet patient demand. GAO also reported in October 2017 on HHS efforts to expand access to MAT for opioid use disorder and recommended, among other things, that HHS establish measures to better determine progress toward goals. While HHS established performance measures with targets to increase the number of prescriptions for certain MAT medications, it has not yet fully implemented this recommendation. Further action to measure the treatment capacity of providers would help HHS determine whether a sufficient number of providers are becoming available to evaluate and treat patients who could benefit from MAT.

What GAO Recommends

GAO has previously recommended that HHS establish performance measures with targets to better gauge progress toward achieving agency goals for expanding access to MAT. HHS concurred and has taken some steps to address the recommendation.

The Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP)—responsible for coordinating and overseeing efforts by more than a dozen federal agencies to address illicit drug use—issued the 2019 National Drug Control Strategy on January 31, 2019. The Strategy encourages the use of evidence-based approaches to treatment and making MAT a standard of care for opioid addiction. However, as GAO testified in March 2019, the Strategy does not include certain information required by law, such as annual objectives that are quantifiable and measurable. Further, while the Strategy lists some items that it designates as measures of performance or effectiveness related to MAT, it lacks information on the current level of treatment access or any associated timeline by which ONDCP hopes to achieve desired results. Such information could help prioritize activities across federal agencies and measure progress over time, which previous GAO work has shown to be important for achieving results. ONDCP’s responsibility to develop the National Drug Control Strategy and coordinate among federal agencies offers the agency an opportunity to guide activities to address the unprecedented number of drug overdose deaths. As part of its ongoing work, GAO will continue to assess ONDCP’s efforts and consider recommendations as appropriate. GAO plans to issue a product by the end of the calendar year.