



August 2019

STATE DEPARTMENT

Leadership Focus Needed to Guide Agency Reform Efforts

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Why GAO Did This Study

In 2017, State initiated a series of reform efforts in response to an executive order by the President and guidance issued by the Office of Management and Budget aimed at reorganizing and streamlining the government. GAO's prior work has shown that successful agency reform efforts follow key implementation practices, such as establishing a dedicated team to manage the implementation of reforms, and ensuring transparency by setting public goals and milestones to monitor progress.

This report examines (1) the status of the reform efforts that State reported to Congress in February 2018 and (2) the extent to which State addressed key practices critical to the successful implementation of agency reform efforts. GAO reviewed State's reform plans, proposals, and related documents; met with officials involved in State's reform efforts; and assessed implementation of the reform efforts against relevant key practices identified in GAO's prior work.

What GAO Recommends

The Secretary of State should (1) determine which unimplemented reform projects, if any, should be implemented and communicate this determination to Congress and appropriate State personnel, and (2) establish a single dedicated team to manage the implementation of all reform efforts that the Secretary decides to pursue. State generally concurred with the recommendations.

What GAO Found

The Department of State (State) is implementing most of the 17 reform projects it reported to Congress in February 2018, but a few are stalled or discontinued. State completed one project streamlining policy formulation, and continues working to implement 13 projects on topics including human resources, information technology, and data analytics. Progress on two projects related to overseas presence has stalled, and State has discontinued a project to consolidate real property management.

State has not addressed certain key practices related to leadership focus and attention in implementing its reform efforts. Multiple transitions in State's leadership and changing priorities contributed to uncertainty about leadership support for reform projects. Top leadership is expected to drive any needed transformation by clarifying priorities and communicating direction to employees and stakeholders.

- In March 2018, the President replaced the Secretary of State, a transition that created uncertainty within the agency regarding the future of ongoing reform projects. While some officials stated that the new Secretary had expressed support for data analytics and cyber security reform efforts, other officials said they were unclear as to whether their projects remained a priority. According to senior officials, the current Secretary has focused on critical needs, such as ending the hiring freeze and increasing recruitment, and on launching new initiatives.
- In April 2018, State disbanded the dedicated teams overseeing its reform efforts and shifted responsibility to bureaus and offices. In some cases, officials assigned to lead reform projects reported receiving little or no direction from department leadership. GAO's prior work has highlighted the benefits of having a dedicated team to manage agency transformations.
- In addition, State officials indicated that the challenges posed by these transitions were compounded by a lack of Senate-confirmed leadership in key positions. Specifically, during the first 2 years of State's reform efforts, bureaus and offices responsible for implementing 12 of State's 13 continuing reform projects reported directly to one or more officials serving in an acting capacity. For example, State did not have a Senate-confirmed Under Secretary for Management from January 2017 to May 2019, which, according to senior officials, hindered State's reform efforts.

According to State officials, taken together these leadership transitions led to several projects being scaled back, slowed down, or both.

Although uncertainties exist about leadership priorities regarding the reform efforts, the bureaus and offices responsible for implementing reform projects have taken steps to manage and monitor them, consistent with key practices. Each of the continuing projects has implementation plans that include milestones and deliverables, and some report their progress publicly. For example, State reports on the progress of some projects in its annual performance plans and reports. The lack of a dedicated team to manage the reform process, however, could slow State's overall efforts.

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Abbreviations

FAM	Foreign Affairs Manual
IT	information technology
M/PRI	Office of Management Policy, Rightsizing, and Innovation
OIG	Office of Inspector General
OMB	Office of Management and Budget
State	Department of State
USAID	U.S. Agency for International Development

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August 1, 2019

The Honorable Robert Menendez
Ranking Member
Committee on Foreign Relations
United States Senate

The Honorable Gary C. Peters
Ranking Member
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
United States Senate

The Honorable Lindsey Graham
Chairman
The Honorable Patrick J. Leahy
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate

The Honorable Eliot L. Engel
Chairman
Committee on Foreign Affairs
House of Representatives

In March 2017, the President issued Executive Order 13781, which directed the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to propose a plan for improving the efficiency, effectiveness, and accountability of the executive branch by reorganizing governmental functions and eliminating unnecessary agencies, components of agencies, and agency programs.¹ In April 2017, OMB issued Memorandum M-17-22, requiring executive branch agencies to submit reform plans to OMB by September 2017.² The OMB memo included detailed guidance on how agencies should develop these reform plans.

¹Exec. Order No. 13781, *Comprehensive Plan for Reorganizing the Executive Branch*, 82 Fed. Reg. 13959 (Mar. 13, 2017).

²OMB, *Comprehensive Plan for Reforming the Federal Government and Reducing the Federal Civilian Workforce*, M-17-22 (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 12, 2017).

The Department of State (State) is the lead agency responsible for implementing U.S. foreign policy and works to advance U.S. interests around the world. In 2017, State initiated a series of reform efforts in response to Executive Order 13781 and the subsequent guidance from OMB. Our prior work has shown that the success of agency reforms hinges on the agencies' adherence to key practices for organizational transformations, such as agreement on reform goals and the involvement of Congress, federal employees, and other key stakeholders. We previously developed key questions from our prior work on practices that can help assess agency reform efforts.³

We prepared this report under the authority of the Comptroller General to conduct work to assist Congress with its oversight responsibilities.⁴ Our objectives were to (1) examine the status of the reform efforts that State included in its fiscal year 2019 Congressional Budget Justification and (2) assess the extent to which State addressed key practices critical to the successful implementation of agency reform efforts.⁵ For both objectives, we reviewed State's reform plans, proposals, and related documents, and interviewed senior officials—at or above the assistant secretary level—as well as implementing officials involved in State's reform efforts.

To determine the extent to which State addressed key practices for implementing agency reforms, we assessed State's reform efforts against selected practices compiled in our June 2018 report, which were distilled from a body of work published over several decades and reviewed by subject matter specialists. We focused our evaluation on the current implementation phase of State's reform efforts—from April 2018 to the present—to avoid duplicating the reviews of earlier phases of State's reform efforts conducted by State's and the U.S. Agency for International

³GAO, *Government Reorganization: Key Questions to Assess Agency Reform Efforts*, [GAO-18-427](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 13, 2018).

⁴31 U.S.C. § 717(b).

⁵In this report, the term "reform efforts" refers to all reform-related projects, proposals, plans, activities, and documents related to the 16 keystone projects reported in State's fiscal year 2019 Congressional Budget Justification. The term "projects" refers specifically to those projects; State subsequently split one of the 16 projects into two separate projects. Thus, we refer to 17 reform projects throughout this report.

Development's (USAID) Offices of Inspector General (OIG).⁶ Because our review was focused on the implementation phase of State's reform efforts, we limited the scope of our evaluation to implementation-related key practices from our June 2018 report and excluded key practices related to other phases of agency reform efforts. Specifically, we assessed State's implementation of its reform efforts against our prior report's key questions in two subcategories of practices specific to assessing the implementation of agency reforms: (1) Leadership Focus and Attention and (2) Managing and Monitoring. We considered the key questions in each subcategory, the nature of State's reform projects, and the efforts State had taken to implement them, and then made a qualitative judgment as to what extent, if any, State had addressed those practices. A full description of our scope and methodology can be found in appendix I.

We conducted this performance audit from October 2018 to August 2019 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

GAO's Questions for Assessing Reform Efforts

In developing our June 2018 report to assist the Congress, OMB, and agencies in assessing agency reform plans, we reviewed our prior work and leading practices on organizational transformations; collaboration; government streamlining and efficiency; fragmentation, overlap, and duplication; and high-risk and other long-standing agency management challenges. The resulting June 2018 report includes 58 key questions to aid in assessing reform efforts.⁷ These questions are organized into four

⁶U.S. Agency for International Development, Office of Inspector General, *USAID's Redesign Efforts Have Shifted Over Time*, 9-000-18-003-P (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 8, 2018); Department of State, Office of Inspector General, *Considerations for the Department of State's Ongoing Reform and Redesign Plans* (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 28, 2017). Another report on the pre-implementation phases of State's reform efforts is expected in the fall of 2019 from State's Office of Inspector General.

⁷[GAO-18-427](#).

broad categories and 12 subcategories. We determined that the questions most relevant to the current implementation stage of State’s reform efforts are found in two subcategories: (1) Leadership Focus and Attention and (2) Managing and Monitoring. Table 1 lists the key questions in these subcategories.

Table 1: Key Questions Identified by GAO for Assessing the Implementation of Agency Reforms

Category	Subcategory	Key question
Implementing Reforms	Leadership Focus and Attention	Has the agency designated a leader or leaders to be responsible for the implementation of the proposed reforms?
		Has agency leadership defined and articulated a succinct and compelling reason for the reforms (i.e., a case for change)?
		How will the agency hold the leader or leaders accountable for successful implementation of the reforms?
		Has the agency established a dedicated implementation team that has the capacity, including staffing, resources, and change management, to manage the reform process?
	Managing and Monitoring	How has the agency ensured the continued delivery of services during reform implementation?
		Has the agency developed an implementation plan with key milestones and deliverables to track implementation progress?
		Has the agency ensured transparency over the progress of its reform efforts through web-based reporting on key milestones?
		Has the agency put processes in place to collect the needed data and evidence that will effectively measure the reforms’ outcome-oriented goals?
		How is the agency planning to measure customer satisfaction with the changes resulting from its reforms?

Source: GAO. | GAO-19-450

Note: Excerpted from GAO, *Government Reorganization: Key Questions to Assess Agency Reform Efforts*, [GAO-18-427](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 13, 2018).

State’s 17 Reform Projects In response to the March 2017 Executive Order 13781 and the ensuing OMB memo, State launched a “listening tour” intended to gather ideas and feedback from State and USAID employees. As a key component of this outreach effort, State hired a contractor to design and administer a confidential online survey, which was sent to all State and USAID employees in May 2017. According to the contractor’s report, the survey had a 43 percent response rate, with 27,837 State employees and 6,142 USAID employees responding to the survey. The contractor also conducted in-person interviews with a randomly selected cross section of

personnel, which included 175 employees from State and 94 from USAID.⁸

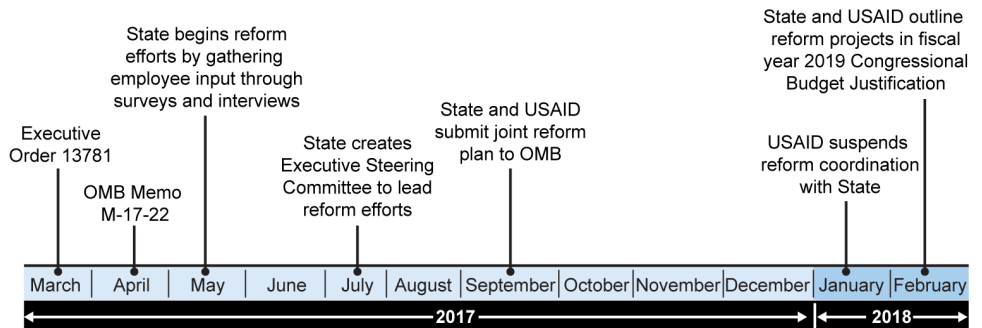
The contractor's report on the results of the survey and the interviews highlighted five areas for State reforms. In July 2017, the Deputy Secretary of State created five planning teams to develop multiple projects in those five areas. The Deputy Secretary also established an Executive Steering Committee composed of senior State and USAID officials to guide the five planning teams and provide direction during the reform process. Led jointly by State and USAID, each planning team comprised participants from a cross section of overseas and domestic workforces. The planning teams were tasked with gathering information and conducting analysis as described below:

- **Foreign Assistance Programs:** Analyze current foreign assistance programs at State and USAID to develop a future vision, ensuring alignment with national priorities.
- **Overseas Alignment and Approach:** Assess key diplomatic activities and identify required platforms, including the balance of work between headquarters and the field.
- **Human Capital Planning:** Identify ways to promote an agile and empowered workforce as part of an overarching talent map.
- **Management Support:** Identify opportunities to streamline administrative support functions at the bureau and agency levels to ensure front line effectiveness.
- **Information Technology (IT) Platform Planning:** Focus on improving the employee experience through increased use of cutting-edge technology and streamlining duplicative systems and processes.

Figure 1 shows a timeline of key events in State's initial reform efforts.

⁸State and USAID submitted a joint reform plan to OMB in September 2017. According to USAID documents, USAID suspended its coordination with State in January 2018 because State could not articulate the objectives for the joint reform effort. GAO has ongoing work reviewing the status of USAID's reform efforts.

Figure 1: Timeline of Key Events in Development of the Department of State Reform Efforts Prior to the Implementation Stage



Legend: OMB = Office of Management and Budget; State = Department of State; USAID = U.S. Agency for International Development.

Source: GAO analysis of agency documents. | GAO-19-450

The planning teams developed specific reform projects, listed below in table 2, which State described in the fiscal year 2019 budget justification it submitted to Congress in February 2018.⁹ According to implementing officials, all these projects predated the Executive Order and OMB memo issued in the spring of 2017. They also noted, however, that the administration's reform-related directives helped advance State's preexisting efforts by focusing management attention and agency resources on these projects.

⁹In addition to these reform projects, State's Congressional Budget Justification also reported seven changes related to its reform efforts that are complete or underway. State reported that it is (1) expanding employment opportunities for eligible family members; (2) implementing cloud-based email and collaboration; (3) increasing flexibilities for employees on medical evacuations; (4) streamlining the security clearance process; (5) simplifying the permanent change-of-station travel process; (6) improving temporary duty travel options and experience; and (7) integrating USAID and State global address lists.

Table 2: Goals and Objectives of 17 Reform Projects as Reported by the Department of State in February 2018

Project	Reported goals and objectives
Improve Efficiency and Results of Internal Policy and Decision-Making Processes and Interagency Engagement	Improve the efficiency and results of internal Department of State (State) policy and decision-making processes and help employees focus on executing the President's agenda for U.S. national security and prosperity. New processes are expected to enable State and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to better align their focus, leading to improved decision-making, programs, and implementation.
Workforce Readiness	Recruit top talent that complements workforce demands and allows for flexibility in moving personnel to meet mission needs. State defined success as a workforce having the right knowledge, skills, and experience to meet current and emerging mission demands, and staff equipped and ready for deployment to meet evolving priorities.
Assess Human Resources Service Delivery	Bring more leading industry practices to human resources operations and find better ways of deliver these services. This assessment is expected to review how services are currently provided, highlight human-resource pain points, generate recommendations to enhance the operating model that will address the root causes of inefficiencies, and review possibilities of achieving cost avoidance through new service delivery models.
Improve Performance Management	Provide employees consistent and frequent performance feedback and opportunities to discuss career development, with flexibilities to align employee and mission needs, and implement a culture that fosters accountability by enabling timely and substantive discussions, including performance review input from multiple sources.
Real-Time Collaboration and Work Anytime, Anywhere	Deploy centrally managed wifi networks for unclassified data domestically and abroad, implement a modern enterprise-wide cloud collaboration suite, and provide employees with the tools and flexibility to work securely from anywhere.
Information Technology	Improve information technology governance processes, tools, and infrastructure and empower State's Chief Information Officer to transition systems to modern platforms on the cloud where applicable and use shared services to lower cost and increase security while enabling innovation.
Define and Improve Budget Processes for Foreign Assistance	Assess how to ensure the foreign assistance budget process is effective, efficient, and driven by strategy; update and integrate disparate foreign assistance-related systems; and streamline staff workload so employees have more time to plan, coordinate, implement, and monitor foreign assistance programs.
Real Property: Implementing Internal and External Process Improvements ^a	Evaluate and implement internal and external process improvements within the real property portfolio.
Acquisition: Assessing Service Delivery and Expanding Strategic Sourcing Opportunities	Assess State's acquisition function, establish and expand additional strategic sourcing opportunities, bring more leading industry practices to State's operations, find improved ways of delivering acquisition services, review how business is currently done, highlight acquisition-processes pain points, and generate a set of recommendations for a future operating model that addresses the root causes of inefficiencies.
Build Capacity and Data Literacy	State is developing a Center for Analytics to activate existing data management policies and leverage analytics capabilities scattered throughout the agency. State plans to build department-wide analytical tools to allow employees at all levels to have more timely data to answer pressing policy and management questions.
Broaden and Enhance Access to Data and Analytics	Enhance employees' ability to answer key operations, programming, and policy questions without manual data calls by improving data quality, harmonizing key datasets, and investing in data clean-up efforts to improve the breadth and accuracy of reporting.

Project	Reported goals and objectives
Increase Global Awareness of Data Assets	Raise the profile of State's existing data resources and tools and enhance training to develop a culture that prioritizes data-informed decision-making; highlight and promote capacities that are already in place; seek user feedback on existing needs; and empower staff working with foreign affairs data to address complex data-related challenges.
Develop and Implement a National Interest Global Presence Model	To strengthen State's ability to lead and coordinate the U.S. government's presence abroad, this project aims to develop a robust quantitative means to assess the costs of the U.S. diplomatic overseas presence on the basis of national interests and policy priorities. This tool will consist of a consolidated global database and models, including authoritative cost and personnel data by mission, as well as country-level data.
Improve Enterprise-wide Data Availability	Update and implement data standards, harmonize data sets, and clarify and activate data governance structures to make data more widely available.
Improve U.S. Government Global Presence Governance	Build upon existing processes mandated by Congress and Executive Orders that were designed to govern the U.S. presence abroad. Evaluation of the U.S. global presence against national interests will empower decisions about the most efficient deployment of resources needed to achieve objectives. State envisions this initiative will allow agencies to improve their coordination on overseas deployments, reducing overlap and duplication, while also providing all agencies better visibility on projected future staffing.
Expand Post Archetype Options	Examine various presence models, or "archetypes," for deploying U.S. government resources overseas. Currently, State employs a limited number of archetypes (e.g., embassies, consulates, American Presence Posts) that are not always suited to addressing challenges. This project is expected to conduct an analysis of past, current, and potential future overseas presence configurations to inform a "menu" of archetypes.
Real Property: Moving to One Real Property Function ^a	State provides real property globally from two service providers: the Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations and the Bureau of Administration. This project will assess moving toward one unified real property organization versus the two separate providers.

Source: State. | GAO-19-450

Note: Project goals and objectives are based on State's fiscal year 2019 Congressional Budget Justification.

^aState initially presented this as part of a combined project—Real Property: Moving to One Real Property Function and Implementing Internal and External Process Improvements—in its fiscal year 2019 Congressional Budget Justification. State subsequently split these into two separate projects, which is why this report refers to 17 reform projects rather than 16.

As of April 2019, State Had One Completed and 13 Continuing Reform Projects; Two Other Projects Had Stalled and One Project Was Discontinued

As of April 2019, according to State officials and status reports, State had completed one of its 17 reform projects; 13 projects were continuing; two projects were stalled pending future decisions or actions; and one project was discontinued. Table 3 provides additional details on each project and a summary of the results of our analysis.

Table 3: Status of Department of State (State) Reform Projects as of April 2019

Project	Implementing bureau or office	Status	Project status details reported by State
Improve Efficiency and Results of Internal Policy and Decision-Making Processes and Interagency Engagement	Executive Secretariat, Policy Planning Staff	✓	In April 2018, State issued guidance for drafting and clearing planning and strategy documents.
Workforce Readiness	Bureau of Human Resources, Foreign Service Institute	→	The bureau is pursuing workforce initiatives as part of the President's Management Agenda, and the Foreign Service Institute is initiating a leadership development curriculum.
Assess Human Resources Service Delivery	Bureau of Human Resources	→	The bureau is consolidating shared services in its Charleston, South Carolina, facility, analyzing human resources transaction costs, and working to make human resources service delivery more cost effective.
Improve Performance Management	Bureau of Human Resources	→	The bureau developed tools and training for supervisors, established full-time tenure review board, and is assessing additional actions.
Real-Time Collaboration and Work Anytime, Anywhere	Bureau of Information Resource Management	→	State is reporting progress toward milestones, such as making Microsoft Office Online and Skype available to all staff and expanding cloud-based email capabilities.
Information Technology	Bureau of Information Resource Management	→	The bureau is strengthening IT governance, modernizing legacy technology, enhancing cybersecurity, and streamlining IT acquisition.
Define and Improve Budget Processes for Foreign Assistance	Office of U.S. Foreign Assistance Resources	→	The office is implementing changes to improve core aspects of the foreign assistance budget process, including strengthening linkages to strategic planning.
Real Property: Implementing Internal and External Process Improvements	Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations	→	The bureau is pursuing initiatives to reduce project, facility operations, and maintenance costs.
Acquisition: Assessing Service Delivery and Expanding Strategic Sourcing Opportunities	Bureau of Administration	→	The bureau is establishing enterprise-wide agreements with vendors, strengthening program management capabilities, tracking investments, and reporting progress to OMB.
Build Capacity and Data Literacy	Office of Management Policy, Rightsizing, and Innovation (M/PRI)	→	State plans to implement this project by enhancing internal capacity for analysis within all bureaus and offices through its proposed Center for Analytics. ^a
Broaden and Enhance Access to Data and Analytics	M/PRI	→	State plans to implement this project with its proposed Center for Analytics. ^a
Increase Global Awareness of Data Assets	M/PRI	→	State plans to implement this project with its proposed Center for Analytics. ^a
Develop and Implement a National Interest Global Presence Model	M/PRI	→	State is developing a National Interest Global Presence Model to meet a variety of needs and plans to implement this project with its proposed Center for Analytics. ^a

Project	Implementing bureau or office	Status	Project status details reported by State
Improve Enterprise-wide Data Availability	M/PRI	→	State is developing standardized data sets for department-wide use, clarifying data governance structures, and plans to continue this project through the Center for Analytics. ^a
Improve U.S. Government Global Presence Governance	M/PRI		Implementation on hold pending reevaluation by State's recently confirmed Under Secretary for Management. ^b
Expand Post Archetype Options	M/PRI		Implementation on hold pending reevaluation after the National Interest Global Presence Model is completed.
Real Property: Moving to One Real Property Function	Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations, Bureau of Administration	⊗	State no longer plans to combine its two real property offices into one real property provider.

Legend:

✓ = Completed: State has finished all work on the project and announced its completion.

→ = Continuing: State is taking actions to develop and implement the project.

|| = Stalled: The project's implementation plans are on hold.

⊗ = Discontinued: State has stopped work on the project and does not expect it to move forward.

Source: GAO analysis of State documents and information from interviews with State officials. | GAO-19-450

^aAccording to State documents, State plans to establish a Center for Analytics as a new directorate within M/PRI in fiscal year 2019. The center is expected to serve all bureaus and offices as a central entity for cross-functional analysis to support decision-making.

^bThe Senate confirmed the President's nominee for Under Secretary of State for Management on May 16, 2019.

Loss of Leadership Focus Contributed to Staff Uncertainty about Some Reform Efforts, Although Bureaus and Offices Have Taken Steps to Manage and Monitor Continuing Projects

Leadership Focus and Attention

As State shifted into the implementation phase of its reform efforts in early 2018, multiple transitions within the agency contributed to a loss of leadership focus on the efforts, resulting in uncertainty about leadership's support for some reform projects. In February 2018, State reported to

Congress in its fiscal year 2019 budget justification that it was pursuing the reform projects we described above. In March 2018, the first transition affecting the implementation of those projects occurred when the President removed the then Secretary of State and nominated the then CIA director to replace him; in April 2018, the Senate confirmed the current Secretary. According to senior State officials, when the new Secretary took office, his top priority was ending the hiring freeze and restarting a concerted recruitment effort because vacancies in key positions and a general staffing shortfall would otherwise have led to what one senior official described as a “cataclysmic failure” at State. These senior officials noted that the new Secretary decided some of the existing reform projects were not well designed and that he wanted greater emphasis on cybersecurity and data analytics. They said he also wanted to pursue other initiatives, including a new proposal to create a Global Public Affairs Bureau by merging two existing bureaus. The senior officials told us that the Secretary authorized responsible bureaus and offices to determine whether to continue, revise, or terminate existing reform efforts or launch new initiatives. However, State did not formally communicate other changes in its reform priorities to Congress, such as its plan to no longer combine State and USAID’s real property offices.

State initiated another transition in leadership of the reform efforts in April 2018 when it disbanded the dedicated planning teams overseeing the reform efforts and delegated responsibility for implementing the reform projects to relevant bureaus and offices. As the planning teams finished working on their particular reform efforts and prepared to transfer these projects to the bureaus, some planning teams provided memos and reports on the status of their efforts and offered recommendations for the bureaus to consider when determining next steps in implementing the projects. Some implementing officials, however, reported that they received little or no direction regarding their projects or any other indication of continued interest in their project from department or bureau leadership aside from the initial notification that the project had been assigned to them. For example, in separate discussions with implementing officials responsible for three different projects, the officials reported that they had not received any direction or other guidance related to their assigned project since it was delegated to them in April 2018. In one case, this lack of communication continued for nearly a year. In addition, although implementing officials said that they have managed to incorporate reform-related work into their daily responsibilities, they noted that there were multiple benefits from having had dedicated planning teams to lead earlier phases of State’s reform efforts. For example, they said that the dedicated teams included senior officials and

the regular involvement of high-level leadership facilitated by these teams had helped advance the reform efforts. These dedicated teams also required staff to set aside time to focus on reform initiatives, which allowed them to develop holistic solutions to reform-related challenges. Conversely, implementing officials reported negative implications of not having dedicated teams. For example, one implementing official described how positive work initiated under the leadership of these dedicated teams—including efforts to eliminate redundancies and identify opportunities for consolidation—ended when the teams were disbanded because the staff and resources needed to continue these efforts were no longer available.

Various State officials noted that the prolonged absence of Senate-confirmed leadership in key positions posed additional challenges. We have previously testified that it is more difficult to obtain buy-in on long-term plans and efforts that are underway when an agency has leaders in acting positions because federal employees are historically skeptical of whether the latest efforts to make improvements are going to be sustained over a period of time.¹⁰ For example, State did not have a Senate-confirmed Under Secretary for Management from January 2017 to May 2019. In November 2018, the Deputy Secretary of State told us that the lack of a confirmed Under Secretary for Management was hindering State's ability to conduct business and implement reforms. The bureaus and offices responsible for 12 of State's 13 continuing reform projects reported directly to an Acting Undersecretary for Management from January 2017 through May 2019. Moreover, State officials told us that both projects that we determined to be stalled were, among other things, awaiting the confirmation of an Under Secretary for Management to make key decisions. Furthermore, some implementing officials told us that the lack of confirmed officials in leadership positions within the bureaus responsible for implementing the projects added to a lack of leadership focus on implementing some of State's reform projects.

According to State officials, as of April 2019, although 13 of the reform projects described in the fiscal year 2019 Congressional Budget Justification were considered by State to be continuing, some had been scaled back, slowed down, or both as a result of senior leadership's

¹⁰*Trouble at the Top: Are Vacancies at the Department of Homeland Security Undermining the Mission?*, Hearing before the Committee on Homeland Security, U.S. House of Representatives, 116th Congress, May 1, 2019 (Testimony of the Honorable Gene Dodaro, Comptroller General of the United States).

shifting priorities and attention. For example, one of State's initial reform projects was related to better management of real property. However, State ultimately scaled back this project, effectively splitting it into two projects: One project focused on real property process improvements is continuing, but State has discontinued the other project to consolidate its and USAID's real property function. Implementing officials told us in November 2018 that they were still pursuing the internal real property process improvements. They said then that they expected this reform project would likely progress at a slower pace without the dedicated team that previously had provided direct access and frequent interaction with senior department leadership. However, these officials recently informed us that the pace of progress on this project actually increased under the leadership of the bureau's Senate-confirmed Director. The bureau was led by acting directors from January 2017 through September 2018.

We have identified leadership focus and attention as practices vital to successfully implementing reform efforts.¹¹ These practices include communicating clear and compelling reasons for the reforms, having a dedicated implementation team to manage the transformation process, and designating leaders responsible for implementing reforms and holding them accountable. Dedicating a strong and stable implementation team responsible for a transformation's day-to-day management is important to ensuring that reforms receive the focused, full-time attention needed to be sustained and successful. One of the key responsibilities of a dedicated team is communication, particularly answering questions about the reform process from employees and other stakeholders. An implementation team is also important to ensuring that reform efforts are implemented in a coherent and integrated way. Because an agency's transformation process is a large undertaking, we have found that an implementation team must have direct access to and be accountable to top leadership. In turn, top leadership must vest the team with the necessary authority and resources to set priorities, make timely decisions,

¹¹ [GAO-18-427](#).

and move quickly to implement top leadership's decisions regarding the transformation.¹²

In addition, we previously reported that the single most important element of successful improvement initiatives is the demonstrated commitment of top leaders. This commitment is most prominently demonstrated through top leaders' personal involvement in developing and directing reform efforts.¹³ Federal standards for internal control in the federal government also emphasize the importance of maintaining leadership continuity in order to achieve agency objectives.¹⁴ As a result, in other reports, we have recognized that agency reform efforts can take years to implement and that the time frame required for change typically takes longer than the tenures of political leaders.¹⁵ Similarly, the time it takes to nominate and confirm officials for senior management positions can also hamper efforts to initiate reforms or sustain momentum needed to successfully implement reform initiatives.¹⁶ For these reasons, and others, we have highlighted the need to ensure that top leadership drives the transformation and establishes dedicated teams to manage the transformation process.

Taken together, the leadership transitions at State had two significant effects on State's reform efforts. First, the transition of departmental leadership and lack of direction and communication about subsequent changes in leadership's priorities contributed to uncertainty among

¹²GAO, *Results-Oriented Cultures: Implementation Steps to Assist Mergers and Organizational Transformations*, [GAO-03-669](#) (Washington D.C.: July 23, 2003); *Highlights of a GAO Forum: Mergers and Transformation: Lessons Learned for a Department of Homeland Security and Other Federal Agencies*, [GAO-03-293SP](#) (Washington D.C.: Nov. 14, 2002). In addition, the Foreign Affairs Manual (FAM) also cites dedicating an implementation team and communicating with employees early and often as key practices for transformation. Department of State, 1 FAM 014.2, Key Organizational Practices.

¹³GAO, *Management Reform: Elements of Successful Improvement Initiatives*, [GAO/T-GGD-00-26](#) (Washington D.C.: Oct. 15, 1999).

¹⁴GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, [GAO-14-704G](#) (Washington D.C.: Sept. 10, 2014), Principle 4.06.

¹⁵GAO, *The Chief Operating Officer Concept and Its Potential Use as a Strategy to Improve Management at the Department of Homeland Security*, [GAO-04-876R](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 28, 2004).

¹⁶GAO, *Highlights of a GAO Roundtable: The Chief Operating Officer Concept: A Potential Strategy to Address Federal Governance Challenges*, [GAO-03-192SP](#) (Washington D.C.: Oct. 4, 2002).

implementing officials about the future of individual reform projects. Second, according to implementing officials, the transition of project responsibility from dedicated teams to bureau-level implementing officials resulted in fewer resources and a lack of senior leadership involvement and attention for some projects. Absent leadership decisions, implementing officials will continue to struggle with understanding leadership priorities with regard to State's reform efforts. Similarly, for any projects that are determined to be leadership priorities, day-to-day implementation activities will continue to be hampered by the lack of a dedicated team to guide and manage the agency's overall reform effort.

Managing and Monitoring

Although uncertainty exists about the leadership priorities regarding reform efforts, the bureaus and offices responsible for implementing State's reform projects have taken steps to manage and monitor their reform projects. Our previous work has identified monitoring as another important practice when implementing reform efforts, including, among other things, developing implementation plans and ensuring transparency by publicly reporting on progress toward milestones.¹⁷ These practices are also incorporated into State's Foreign Affairs Manual and other department policies.¹⁸

We found that the relevant bureaus and offices responsible for implementing reform projects had developed implementation plans and that these plans identified milestones and deliverables for the projects. For example the Human Resources Services Delivery project had an implementation plan with milestones and deliverables, such as identifying programs and functions for consolidation in 2019 and reducing human resource delivery costs by 14 percent by 2022. Similarly, we found that the implementation plan for the IT Modernization project incorporated milestones that including, among other things, implementing a comprehensive enterprise IT risk management program by fiscal year 2020; reducing average deployment time for new IT capabilities by 10 percent annually from fiscal year 2019 through fiscal year 2021; and

¹⁷[GAO-18-427](#).

¹⁸Department of State, *Department of State Program and Project Design, Monitoring, and Evaluation Policy* (November 2017). Various aspects of effective monitoring as laid out in laws, regulations, and agency guidance are also found in the FAM. See 1 FAM 014.2, Key Organizational Practices; 18 FAM 301.2, Strategic Planning; 18 FAM 301.4-2, Program/Project Design; 18 FAM 301.4-3, Monitoring; and 18 FAM 301.4-6, Implementation.

increasing workforce access to cloud-based email and business data from 10 percent to 100 percent by September 30, 2019.

With regard to monitoring, while there is no centralized mechanism for reporting progress on all projects, we found that each of the ongoing projects currently has some form of progress reporting. For example, State reports progress on projects with IT components—such as Real-Time Collaboration and Work Anytime, Anywhere and Improve Enterprise-Wide Data Accessibility—as part of its quarterly reporting on IT Modernization under the Government Performance and Results Modernization Act of 2010. As a result, these projects have continued within a formal monitoring structure that involves regular web-based status updates and progress reporting. Other reform efforts—such as human capital and real property projects—are monitored against milestones established in State’s Joint Strategic Plan and progress is reported in State’s Annual Performance Reports. Progress for certain projects is also monitored and reported in other reports, such as State’s joint strategic plan, IT strategy, or human capital plan. Finally, other reform projects, such as State’s acquisition reform efforts, are reported at the government-wide level as part of the Cross-Agency Priority Goals outlined in the President’s Management Agenda.

State collects data and evidence in order to measure progress in achieving outcome-oriented goals it sets for these projects. State reports these goals and relevant performance data in its annual performance plans and reports. For example, State uses the U.S. General Services Administration’s Customer Satisfaction Survey to measure and report the performance of its Human Capital Delivery Services reform efforts.¹⁹ State also uses data collected through the Office of Personnel Management’s Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey to measure employee satisfaction, which State established as a performance indicator for this project.²⁰

¹⁹The General Services Administration’s Customer Satisfaction Survey is part of a collaborative project to measure and improve the performance of mission-support functions across the federal government; this initiative surveys federal employees and others to collect data to support its analysis.

²⁰The Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey measures employees’ perceptions of whether, and to what extent, conditions characteristic of successful organizations are present in their agencies.

Conclusions

Effectively implementing major reforms can span several years and must be closely managed. In 2017, State began a reform effort that led to 17 reform projects, most of which are unimplemented but still continuing. State notified both OMB and the Congress of these projects. Nevertheless, State leadership has not provided the focus necessary to support the officials responsible for implementing all these reform projects. When a new Secretary of State took charge in March 2018, he transferred responsibility for implementing the reform efforts from dedicated teams led by senior department leadership to bureaus and offices. In addition, key political appointee positions remained filled by officials in an acting capacity until only recently. These transitions at State have had an effect on its reform efforts. Without explicit direction from senior leadership, some implementing officials involved in the reform efforts remain unclear about whether their projects are an agency priority. Further, for the reform efforts that remain an agency priority, a dedicated team to oversee implementation could help accelerate State's efforts to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of its operations.

Recommendations for Executive Action

We are making the following two recommendations to State:

The Secretary of State should determine which of the unimplemented reform projects included in its fiscal year 2019 Congressional Budget Justification, if any, should be implemented and communicate this determination to Congress and appropriate State personnel. (Recommendation 1)

The Secretary of State should establish a single dedicated team to manage the implementation of all reform efforts that the Secretary decides to pursue. (Recommendation 2)

Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to State, USAID, and OMB for review and comment. We received comments from State and USAID, which are reprinted in appendixes II and III, respectively. In response to our recommendation that State determine which reform projects should be implemented and communicate that information to Congress and appropriate State personnel, State indicated that it concurred but suggested it should inform OMB instead of Congress. While we agree that it is important for State to share information regarding its reform efforts with OMB, we remain concerned about State's lack of communication with Congress regarding the status of the projects State initially reported in its fiscal year 2019 Congressional Budget Justification.

Congress is a key stakeholder in State's reform efforts and should be informed of changes in State's priorities and the status of these projects to help ensure successful implementation.

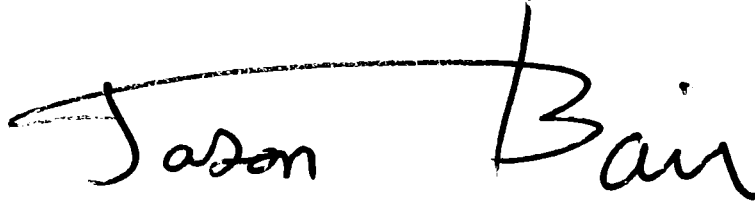
In response to our recommendation that State establish a dedicated team to manage the implementation of all reform projects, State suggested that leadership of its reform projects should be decided on a case-by-case basis with the latitude to determine whether projects will be assigned to a higher level or within individual bureaus. We stand by our recommendation that State should establish a single dedicated team to manage the implementation of all its reform efforts. This is a key practice for implementing agency reforms identified in previous GAO reports, as well as in State's Foreign Affairs Manual (1 FAM 014.2), which calls for State to "dedicate an implementation team to manage the transformation process" for major reorganizations of bureaus or offices. Because reform efforts can span several years, dedicating a strong and stable team is important to ensure that the transformation receives the needed attention to be sustained and successful.

In its comments, USAID expressed several concerns about the leadership of State's reform efforts and State's coordination with USAID. OMB did not provide written comments on the report. We also received technical comments from State and USAID, which we incorporated throughout our report as appropriate.

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Secretary of State, the Administrator of USAID, and other interested parties. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at <http://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staffs have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-6881 or BairJ@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page

of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report are listed in appendix IV.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jason Bair". The signature is written in a cursive style, with a long horizontal stroke above the word "Jason" and a large, stylized "B" for "Bair".

Jason Bair
Acting Director, International Affairs and Trade

Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

We prepared this report under the authority of the Comptroller General to conduct work to assist Congress with its oversight responsibilities.¹ This report examines (1) the status of the reform efforts that the Department of State (State) reported to Congress in its fiscal year 2019 Congressional Budget Justification and (2) the extent to which State addressed key practices we previously identified as critical to the successful implementation of agency reform efforts. For the purposes of this review, we use the term “reform efforts” to refer to all reform-related projects, proposals, plans, activities, and documents related to the 16 projects identified in State’s fiscal year 2019 Congressional Budget Justification. The term “projects” refers specifically to the 16 reform projects identified in State’s fiscal year 2019 Congressional Budget Justification. State subsequently split one of these 16 projects into two separate projects; thus, we refer to 17 reform projects throughout the report.

For both objectives, we reviewed State’s reform plans, proposals, and related documents. We also interviewed four senior officials—generally at or above the assistant secretary level—that had responsibility for the reform efforts as a whole, as well as all implementing officials responsible for each of the continuing reform projects. To determine the status of State’s reform efforts, we reviewed documents and reports related to each of the reform projects described in State’s fiscal year 2019 Congressional Budget Justification.

To determine the extent to which State addressed key practices for implementing agency reforms, we assessed State’s reform efforts against key questions identified in the implementation category of our June 2018 report.² Specifically, we assessed State’s implementation efforts against key questions from the two implementation-related subcategories of our 2018 report: (1) Leadership Focus and Attention and (2) Managing and Monitoring. We considered the nature of each of State’s reform projects and the efforts taken to implement them, reviewed project-specific reports and other relevant State documents, interviewed State officials responsible for implementing each project, and then made qualitative determinations about the extent to which State’s overall reform efforts addressed these criteria. A second analyst then independently reviewed

¹31 U.S.C. § 717(b).

²GAO, *Government Reorganization: Key Questions to Assess Agency Reform Efforts*, [GAO-18-427](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 13, 2018).

and validated each determination. Subsequently, other GAO staff reviewed and concurred with these determinations.

We only applied criteria from our June 2018 report that we determined were relevant to the scope of our review, which was limited to the implementation phase of State's reform efforts—from April 2018 to the present—to avoid duplicating the reviews of earlier phases of State's reform efforts conducted by State's and the U.S. Agency for International Development's Offices of Inspector General (OIG).³ Because State's OIG was also reviewing State's reform efforts, we coordinated regularly with State's OIG to avoid duplication. We did not consider criteria from the first two categories of our June 2018 report—(1) Goals and Outcomes and (2) Process for Developing Reforms—because these applied to the initial phases of State's reform efforts, which were outside the scope of our work and central to the broader historical review that State's OIG was conducting at the time of our review. We also did not apply criteria from the final category of our June 2018 report—Strategically Managing the Federal Workforce—to avoid duplicating work State's OIG recently conducted on State's workforce management.⁴ For the two sub-categories that we selected, we considered the key questions in the report in light of their relevance to State reforms efforts, and also employed other relevant criteria, where appropriate, most notably criteria for leadership from federal internal control standards.

We conducted this performance audit from October 2018 to August 2019 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.

³U.S. Agency for International Development, Office of Inspector General, *USAID's Redesign Efforts Have Shifted Over Time*, 9-000-18-003-P (Washington, D.C.: March 8, 2018); Department of State, Office of Inspector General, *Considerations for the Department of State's Ongoing Reform and Redesign Plans* (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 28, 2017). Another report on the pre-implementation phases of State's reform efforts is expected in the fall of 2019 from State's Office of Inspector General.

⁴For a summary of State OIG reports on State's workforce management, see pages 118-120 of Department of State, *Agency Financial Report for Fiscal Year 2018* (November 2018).

Appendix II: Comments from the Department of State



United States Department of State
Comptroller
Washington, DC 20520

JUL 2 2019

Thomas Melito
Managing Director
International Affairs and Trade
Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20548-0001

Dear Mr. Melito:

We appreciate the opportunity to review your draft report, "STATE DEPARTMENT: Leadership Focus Needed to Guide Agency Reform Efforts" GAO Job Code 103108.

The enclosed Department of State comments are provided for incorporation with this letter as an appendix to the final report.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jeffrey C. Mounts".

Jeffrey C. Mounts (Acting)

Enclosure:
As stated

cc: GAO – Jason Bair (Acting)
M/PRI – James Schwab
OIG - Norman Brown

Department of State Comments on GAO Draft Report

**STATE DEPARTMENT: Leadership Focus Needed to Guide
Agency Reform Efforts**
(GAO 19-450, GAO Code 103108)

The Department thanks GAO for the opportunity to comment on your draft report entitled “*State Department: Leadership Focus Needed to Guide Agency Reform Efforts*”. The report includes two recommendations for the Department of State. The Department concurs with these recommendations with the modifications outlined below.

The Department appreciates that GAO has addressed our concerns with their original statement of facts on State Department reform efforts. We appreciate that GAO added information about how certain IT, HR, and strategic sourcing Impact Initiative projects have continued under the auspices of the President’s Management Agenda. The Department also appreciates that the GAO draft report discusses reform initiatives that began under Secretary of State Pompeo’s tenure including: the reorganization of a new Global Public Affairs (GPA) Bureau; enhancing the Department’s capabilities on cyberspace policy and emerging technology; and streamlining and accelerating the hiring process.

Recommendation:

The Secretary of State should determine which of the unimplemented reform projects included in its fiscal year 2019 Congressional Budget Justification, if any, should be implemented and communicate this determination to Congress and appropriate State personnel.

Response:

The Department concurs with this recommendation with a modification, replacing “Congress” with “OMB”.

GAO is conducting this review pursuant to E.O. 13781 and OMB Memo M-17-22, under which OMB is the recipient for agency reorganization and reform plans. Accordingly, any updates should more properly be directed to the Office of Management and Budget. Reporting and engagement with Congress on these matters is subject to separate provisions in the FY 2017-FY2019 appropriations acts, which this report does not consider or address.

- 2 -

Recommendation:

The Secretary of State should establish a dedicated team to manage the implementation of all reform projects that the Secretary decides to pursue.

Department Response:

The Department understands the intent of recommendation, but recommends a different approach. The Department suggests rephrasing the recommendation as:

The Secretary of State should formally assign responsibility for such reform projects that the Secretary decides to pursue, including dedicated teams as necessary.

GAO's findings do not fully assess whether each of the 13 'continuing' projects equally required a newly formed dedicated team. This should be a case-by-case determination. As the listed reform projects range from cross-cutting to being within an existing bureau's scope of responsibility, the Department should have the latitude to determine whether the projects will be assigned to a higher level or within individual bureaus.

Appendix III: Comments from the U.S. Agency for International Development



July 9, 2019

Thomas Melito
Managing Director
International Affairs and Trade
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20548

Re: STATE DEPARTMENT: Leadership Focus Needed to Guide Agency Reform Efforts
(GAO-19-450)


Dear Mr. Melito:

I am pleased to provide the formal response of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to the draft report produced by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) titled, *State Department: Leadership Focus Needed to Guide Agency Reform Efforts* (GAO-19-450).

USAID remains committed to implementing Executive Order 13781 and Memorandum M-17-22 issued by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) in April 2017, which requested that the U.S. Government begin a reorganization. Continuing reform at the U.S. Department of State is essential, and will result in untold improvements to both of our organizations. As demonstrated through relentless coordination on many internal USAID reforms, the Agency stands ready to work with the Department of State on myriad opportunities for change, including the consolidation of overseas real property and the streamlining of the foreign-assistance budget process. USAID appreciates the rigorous review by the GAO of our own Transformation, and we believe we have met all eleven criteria established by the GAO for reorganizations in the Federal Government. We note the draft report only measures the Department of State against two of the eleven indicators, and encourage the GAO to hold all Departments and Agencies that are undertaking reform efforts to the same standards.

I am transmitting this letter for inclusion in the GAO's final report. Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the draft report, and for the courtesies extended by your staff while conducting this engagement. We appreciate the opportunity to participate in the evaluation of the Administration's reorganization efforts.

Sincerely,


Frederick Nutt
Assistant Administrator
Bureau for Management



COMMENTS BY
THE U.S. AGENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT (USAID)
ON THE DRAFT REPORT PRODUCED BY
THE U.S. GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE (GAO)
TITLED, "STATE DEPARTMENT: LEADERSHIP FOCUS NEEDED TO GUIDE
AGENCY REFORM EFFORTS" (GAO-19-450)

Page 5, Footnote 8 - Collaboration with the U.S. Department of State remains important for USAID's Transformation, both broadly and on a project-by-project basis. During the period when former Secretary Tillerson was pursuing joint redesign proposals, USAID closely coordinated with the Secretary's team on a variety of issues, attended every meeting, and embedded personnel at the State Department to work on the reorganization ideas. USAID suspended coordination with the State Department only because State could not articulate clear objectives for the joint reform effort.

Pages 7-8, Table 2- While not mentioned in the draft report, we wish to note that the State Department has not coordinated with USAID, post-suspension, on any of the continuing projects listed in the report.

Pages 12-13, Real Property - USAID originally offered to combine the remaining real property we own and manage overseas with the international real-estate portfolio controlled by the State Department, but the necessary counterparts at the Bureau of Overseas Building Operations were not prepared to open negotiations. USAID again presented a proposal on this subject to the State Department on April 20, 2018, as part of a larger package of possible joint reforms, but we never received a response.

Appendix IV: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

Jason Bair, (202) 512-6881, or bairj@gao.gov.

Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, Thomas Costa (Assistant Director), Joshua Akery (Analyst in Charge), Peter Beck, David Dayton, Martin de Alteriis, Emily Gupta, Patrick Hickey, Chris Keblitis, Sarah Veale, and Alex Welsh made key contributions to this report.

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