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Congressional Committees

GAO Audits Involving DOD: Status of DOD’s Efforts to Schedule and Hold Timely Entrance Conferences

The Government Accountability Office’s (GAO) agency protocols govern our relationships with audited entities. These protocols, coordinated with federal agencies including the Department of Defense (DOD), require agencies to assist us in scheduling an entrance conference within 14 calendar days of receiving notice of a new audit.¹ The entrance conference provides us an opportunity to communicate our audit objectives and enables agencies to assign key points of contact to support our work. In past years, DOD has experienced difficulty meeting the protocol target for the timely facilitation of entrance conferences.

In Senate Report 116-48 accompanying a bill for the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020, the Senate Armed Services Committee included a provision for us to review DOD’s timely scheduling and holding of entrance conferences. This report evaluates the extent to which DOD scheduled entrance conferences within 14 days, consistent with our protocols, and also held those conferences within 30 days. To address our objective, we collected and analyzed data on GAO audits involving DOD that were initiated in the first quarter of fiscal year 2020, October 1, 2019 through December 31, 2019.

This is the first of four reports that we will produce on this topic for fiscal year 2020. Specifically, we determined the number of notification letters requesting entrance conferences that we sent to DOD from October 1, 2019 through December 31, 2019. We also reviewed data collected by DOD on entrance conference requests to ensure data consistency. We defined the date an entrance conference was scheduled as the date the relevant GAO team received a communication, such as an email, appointment, or telephone call from DOD, stating that an entrance conference had been scheduled. We then analyzed the data to determine the number of days between when DOD received the notification letter for each new audit and when DOD scheduled the entrance conference and assessed whether DOD scheduled entrance conferences within 14 days of notification, which is the time frame identified in our protocols. We also determined the date that each requested entrance conference was held (i.e., actually occurred) by collecting this information from the relevant GAO team for each audit and assessed whether DOD held entrance conferences for new audits within 30 days of notification, which was the time frame identified in the mandate for this review.

We conducted this performance audit from September 2019 to February 2020 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

¹GAO, *GAO’s Agency Protocols*, [GAO-19-55G](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 23, 2019).

obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Background

The Audit Management Division (AMD) within DOD's Washington Headquarters Services (WHS) facilitates the scheduling of entrance conferences with DOD. WHS is a DOD field activity, reporting to DOD's Chief Management Officer (CMO), who serves as the principal advisor to the Secretary and Deputy Secretary on establishing policies for and directing business enterprise operations of the department, including among other things planning and processes, performance measurement and management, and business information technology management and improvement activities and programs. DOD established AMD on April 1, 2019, to improve DOD's management oversight and facilitation for GAO audits and assist the DOD Inspector General with the follow-up of their recommendations.

The CMO serves as DOD's central liaison with GAO teams on all matters concerning our audits, reports, and activities. Division officials assign an audit liaison to each new GAO audit upon receipt of a notification letter requesting an entrance conference. Scheduling entrance conferences requires the coordination and availability of key officials within the AMD, from various DOD offices, and GAO. Specifically, the AMD will designate a primary action officer from the appropriate office or component within the department that will be responsible for facilitating access and availability of DOD officials and documents as required by the audit and coordinating DOD's official response to the audit. The AMD will also designate appropriate collateral action offices to facilitate our ability to meet with DOD officials to obtain the required information to address the audit objectives outlined in the notification letter.

An entrance conference is a meeting that we hold with agency officials at the start of an audit. As noted earlier, GAO expects that an agency will arrange for an entrance conference to be scheduled no later than 14 calendar days after receiving a request for a meeting. At the entrance conference, we discuss (1) the source of the work; (2) the roles and responsibilities of the GAO staff; (3) information needs (e.g., data and access to agency officials); (4) key objectives (i.e., research questions); (5) sites where GAO expects to conduct its work, when known; and (6) the need for any precautions to protect the data and information, such as security clearances. To the extent possible, we also provide the agency with an estimate of how long the work will take.²

DOD and GAO can, in certain circumstances, mutually agree that an entrance conference for a specific audit is not required. For example, our protocols state that an entrance conference may not be required in instances when we are (1) responding to congressional requests for testimony based on ongoing or recently completed work, (2) performing work that is to be completed within a short time frame and is closely related to ongoing work, (3) updating the implementation status of recommendations made in issued products, or (4) collecting descriptive information from or about agencies as part of a government-wide review. DOD guidance describes the policies and responsibilities for responding to our requests related to conducting surveys, reviews, and other audit activities within DOD, as well as the policies and responsibilities for providing DOD responses to our draft and final reports and other documents.³

²[GAO-19-55G](#).

³DOD Instruction 7650.02, *Engaging with the Government Accountability Office (GAO) on GAO Audits*. (Jan. 24, 2020)(reissuing DOD Instruction 7650.02, *Government Accountability Office (GAO) Reviews and Reports*, (Nov. 20, 2006, Incorporating Change 1).

DOD Generally Scheduled Entrance Conferences within 14 Days and Held Conferences within 30 Days

We began 35 new audits for which we requested an entrance conference with DOD during the first quarter of fiscal year 2020.⁴ We found that DOD generally scheduled entrance conferences within 14 days and held those conferences within 30 days of notification, with the exception of audits for which we sent notification letters to DOD in mid-December through the end of the calendar year. The last week of December and the first week of January include several federal holidays, and DOD and GAO operated at reduced staffing levels during this time due to employee annual leave plans.⁵ As shown in table 1, during the first quarter of fiscal year 2020, of the 35 requests for entrance conferences, DOD scheduled 25 entrance conferences within 14 days of notification and held 23 entrance conferences within 30 days of notification.

Table 1: Department of Defense (DOD) Entrance Conferences Scheduled and Held within Certain Time Frames, First Quarter of Fiscal Year 2020

Category	Total number of requests for entrance conferences	Scheduled within 14 days	Scheduled after 14 days	Held within 30 days	Held after 30 days
Number of audits	35	25	10	23	12

Source: GAO analysis of GAO and DOD information. | GAO-20-391R.

Prior to mid-December 2019, two audits exceeded the 14 day scheduling requirement. DOD officials stated that these delays occurred because it was difficult to coordinate the schedules of critical collateral action officers. For those requests for entrance conferences sent in mid-December, 8 audits exceeded the 14 day scheduling requirement. For those 8 audits, DOD scheduled them within 23 to 32 days of notification. DOD officials stated that these 8 audits experienced a delay due to the need for additional scheduling time as a result of federal holidays and annual leave plans for AMD, DOD, and GAO officials. In all cases, this information was communicated to the GAO team responsible for conducting the audit in a timely manner.

Of the 35 requests for entrance conferences, 23 were held within 30 days of notification and 12 were held more than 30 days after notification. Of the 12 entrance conferences that were held beyond 30 days of notification, one was held 34 days after notification due to scheduling conflicts between DOD officials' and our officials' schedules. For the remaining 11 audits, according to DOD officials, these entrance conferences were held more than 30 days after notification due to limited availability of AMD, DOD, and GAO officials as a result of federal holidays and annual leave plans. These 11 entrance conferences were held within 33 to 43 days after notification. Table 2 illustrates the average days, as well as the range of days, taken by DOD to schedule and hold entrance conferences.

⁴There were a total of 38 requests for entrance conferences sent to DOD during the reporting period, of which one represented ongoing work and GAO and DOD officials mutually agreed to waive the entrance conference. Further, GAO and DOD officials agreed to delay scheduling entrance conference for two audits, which were requesting that DOD officials complete a questionnaire. Therefore, these requests were not included in the analysis of overall total of new requests sent to the department.

⁵ Deputy Secretary of Defense Memorandum, *Office of the Secretary of Defense Holiday Reduced Manning* (Nov. 19, 2019). The scope of this review includes only notification letters sent to DOD until the end of December 2019; however, DOD officials scheduled and held entrance conferences during January 2020 in response to notification letters sent in December 2019.

Table 2: Average Number of Days for the Department of Defense (DOD) to Schedule and Hold GAO Entrance Conferences

Entrance conference	Average days taken	Minimum days taken	Maximum days taken
Scheduled	14	3	32
Held	27	11	43

Source: GAO analysis of GAO and DOD information. | GAO-20-391R.

Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to DOD for review. DOD did not provide comments on this report. DOD provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate.

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees and the Secretary of Defense. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at <https://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-2775 or fielde1@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 were Suzanne Perkins, Assistant Director; Laura Anderson; Suzanne Kaasa; Juliee Conde-Medina; Ronald La Due Lake; Felicia Lopez; and Ophelia Robinson.

Elizabeth Field

Director, Defense Capabilities and Management



Enclosures – 2

Enclosure I

List of Committees

The Honorable James M. Inhofe
Chairman

The Honorable Jack Reed
Ranking Member
Committee on Armed Services
United States Senate

The Honorable Richard C. Shelby
Chairman

The Honorable Dick Durbin
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Defense
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate

The Honorable Adam Smith
Chairman

The Honorable Mac Thornberry
Ranking Member
Committee on Armed Services
House of Representatives

The Honorable Pete Visclosky
Chairman

The Honorable Ken Calvert
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Defense
Committee on Appropriations
House of Representatives

Enclosure II

List of GAO Audits for Which DOD Did Not Schedule or Hold Timely Entrance Conferences

Table 3 identifies the unique identifier (GAO job code) for each audit for which an entrance conference was not scheduled within 14 calendar days or not held within 30 days of the Department of Defense's (DOD) being notified of GAO's request for an entrance conference.

Table 3: Unique Identifiers (Job Codes) for Delayed Entrance Conferences

Unique identifier (job code)	Days needed to schedule entrance conference (if over 14 days)	Days needed to hold entrance conference (if over 30 days)
103917	15	
103652		34
103937	19	
103991		33
103963		36
103973		35
103980		37
103949	29	37
103972	29	43
103985	29	42
103873	23	37
103988	32	40
103887	23	37
104010	23	
104012	23	37

Source: GAO analysis of GAO and DOD information. | GAO-20-391R.

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