

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-19-466](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

The Trump Administration requested \$28.5 billion in foreign assistance in fiscal year 2019, to be administered by at least 22 federal agencies. Almost 95 percent of this assistance is administered by six agencies—the Departments of Agriculture (USDA), Defense (DOD), State (State), Health and Human Services (HHS), the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). FATAA required the President to set forth guidelines for M&E of U.S. foreign assistance. In January 2018, OMB issued the required guidelines for federal agencies. FATAA also contained a provision for GAO to analyze the guidelines established by OMB; and assess the implementation of the guidelines by the agencies.

In this report, GAO examined the extent to which (1) OMB’s M&E Guidelines incorporate GAO leading practices, and (2) agencies incorporate the OMB Guidelines in their M&E policies and plans. GAO assessed the OMB Guidelines against GAO’s 28 leading practices identified in [GAO-16-861R](#). GAO also assessed the six agencies’ foreign assistance M&E policies against the Guidelines and interviewed OMB and relevant agency officials in Washington, DC.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making recommendations to OMB, DOD, State, and USDA. OMB did not agree with the recommendation to update the Guidelines, but GAO maintains that doing so can help to emphasize the importance of the M&E practices we identified. DOD, State, and USDA agreed with GAO’s recommendations.

View [GAO-19-466](#). For more information, contact David B. Gootnick at (202) 512-3149 or gootnickD@gao.gov.

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FOREIGN ASSISTANCE



Federal Monitoring and Evaluation Guidelines Incorporate Most but Not All Leading Practices

What GAO Found

The Office of Management and Budget’s (OMB) foreign assistance Guidelines incorporate most of GAO’s leading practices for monitoring and evaluation (M&E), but gaps exist (see figure).

Summary of Office of Management and Budget’s Guidelines Addressing GAO’s Leading Practices for Monitoring and Evaluation

Leading monitoring practice	Office of Management and Budget Guidelines
	 11
	 3
Leading evaluation practice	Office of Management and Budget Guidelines
	 12
	 2

-  The Guidelines incorporate this practice.
-  The Guidelines do not incorporate this practice.

Source: GAO analysis of U.S. government documents and professional organization reports. | GAO-19-466

- **Monitoring:** The Guidelines define monitoring as the continuous tracking of program or project data to determine whether desired results are as expected during implementation. The Guidelines do not require GAO’s leading practices on risk assessments, staff qualifications, and program close-out procedures.
- **Evaluation:** The Guidelines define evaluation as the systematic collection and analysis of program or project outcomes for making judgments and informing decisions. They do not require GAO’s leading practices on developing staff skills and following up on recommendations.

OMB officials indicated the Guidelines are focused on elements required in the Foreign Aid Transparency and Accountability Act of 2016 (FATAA), but noted that agencies can add additional requirements to their own M&E policies. FATAA requires the President to set forth guidelines “according to best practices of monitoring and evaluation.” OMB staff acknowledged that GAO’s leading practices are important, but stated that there is no singular established standard for best monitoring practices. Nevertheless, all of GAO’s leading practices can help agencies address impediments, effectively manage foreign assistance, and meet their goals.

When assessing agencies’ M&E policies against OMB Guidelines, GAO found that agencies incorporated most of the requirements. However, for monitoring, one of the six agencies GAO reviewed—DOD—did not include the requirements to establish agencies’ roles and responsibilities and ensure verifiable data for monitoring activities. For evaluation, agencies required most Guideline requirements, but not all. For example, DOD, HHS, and USDA did not require conducting impact evaluations for pilot programs or projects. Without a clear requirement to do such evaluations, agencies risk duplicating or scaling up programs without fully understanding the factors that could lead to their success or failure. Agencies GAO reviewed have plans or mechanisms in place to oversee the implementation of their M&E policies. For example, State developed a guidance document to operationalize and oversee its M&E policy to ensure the implementation of the Guidelines.