

GAO

Report to the Chairman, Committee on
Foreign Affairs, House of
Representatives

July 2010

ENGAGING FOREIGN AUDIENCES

Assessment of Public Diplomacy Platforms Could Help Improve State Department Plans to Expand Engagement



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Highlights of [GAO-10-767](#), a report to the Chairman, Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Following budget cuts and attacks against U.S. embassies in the 1990s, the Department of State (State) began to close some public diplomacy facilities, such as American libraries, and move others onto secure embassy compounds. As a result, the number of visitors to these facilities declined and face-to-face interaction with foreign publics became more difficult. To improve its engagement with foreign audiences, State's new public diplomacy strategic framework calls for expanding outreach platforms. GAO was asked to (1) describe the outreach platforms State uses overseas, (2) examine the challenges and opportunities related to these platforms, (3) review State's plans for these platforms, and (4) assess the extent to which State has evaluated these platforms. GAO analyzed State's public diplomacy framework and planning documents; interviewed State officials; and conducted fieldwork in Brazil, China, and Indonesia. We selected these locations based on the mix of existing and planned platforms.

What GAO Recommends

To improve plans for using and expanding Department of State outreach platforms, GAO recommends that the Secretary of State conduct an assessment of the relative effectiveness of each of State's overseas outreach platforms, such as by measuring how each platform has expanded engagement with foreign audiences. State concurred with GAO's recommendation.

View [GAO-10-767](#) or [key components](#). For more information, contact Jess Ford at (202) 512-4128 or fordj@gao.gov.

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What GAO Found

State utilizes a broad range of venues, both physical and virtual—referred to in this report as outreach platforms—to engage foreign audiences outside of embassy compounds overseas. These platforms include facilities in leased commercial space staffed by American diplomats, such as American Centers, which offer libraries and meeting space. They also include partnerships with other institutions, such as Binational Centers, which are autonomous organizations that conduct a range of activities, usually including English-language teaching, and American Corners, which are typically collections of American materials and programming spaces within a host institution. State also manages virtual outreach platforms, such as Virtual Presence Posts and social media, including Facebook pages, to engage foreign audiences.

While State faces several challenges related to these outreach platforms, both U.S. and foreign officials have identified opportunities for using them to increase engagement with foreign audiences. Policies designed to safeguard U.S. personnel and facilities overseas have led to the relocation of embassies and their outreach platforms to sites outside of city centers, hindering their use. Additionally, technical and staffing issues pose challenges to the current use of social media, and host country restrictions can affect State's ability to expand its outreach platforms. U.S. and foreign public diplomacy officials have identified opportunities for using outreach platforms to engage audiences abroad, such as increased language teaching and working with nongovernmental partners.

State's new strategic framework for public diplomacy calls for opening more publicly accessible platforms overall, and its plans for specific platforms vary. Following the issuance of the framework in February 2010, State convened eight working groups to examine the issues outlined therein, including one on outreach platforms. As of June 2010, the Office of the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs was analyzing and prioritizing the working groups' recommendations. State's plans pertaining to individual platforms vary. While State plans to expand some platforms, it has postponed the establishment of others. The Under Secretary has also promoted various pilot projects for increasing engagement with foreign public audiences through new platforms, such as a space in a mall in Jakarta, Indonesia.

Although State plans to expand its use of outreach platforms, it lacks information that would enable it to assess the effectiveness of these platforms. State has developed several tools to collect data on public diplomacy activities, including descriptions of events and audiences reached, but these tools do not include all outreach platforms. State has acknowledged the importance of using evaluations to inform resource allocation decisions, yet it has not evaluated the extent to which outreach platforms contribute to expanding engagement. The lack of such information limits State's ability to adjust its plans or reallocate resources toward activities that offer a greater likelihood of success.

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Abbreviations

APP	American Presence Post
BNC	Binational Center
ECA	Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs
IIP	Bureau of International Information Programs
IRC	Information Resource Center
IRM	Bureau of Information Resource Management
OIG	Office of the Inspector General
SECCA	Secure Embassy Construction and Counterterrorism Act of 1999
VPP	Virtual Presence Post

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United States Government Accountability Office
Washington, DC 20548

July 21, 2010

The Honorable Howard Berman
Chairman
Committee on Foreign Affairs
House of Representatives

Dear Mr. Chairman:

Ensuring effective representation of U.S. diplomatic interests and image is one of nine major governmental challenges GAO identified in 2009.¹ The 2010 *National Framework for Strategic Communication* states that public diplomacy and strategic communication are an important part of the U.S. government's ability to meet its national security goals and objectives. One key aspect of public diplomacy is directly engaging with audiences in foreign countries. However, conditions in high-threat posts have led to security precautions that limit public access to U.S. embassies and reduce the number of external facilities open to local populations. In response, the Department of State (State) has sought to develop and use a variety of external venues, both physical and virtual—referred to in this report as outreach platforms—for engaging foreign audiences outside U.S. embassies and consulates.

You asked us to review these public diplomacy outreach platforms. For the purposes of this report, we reviewed platforms outside of embassy and consulate compounds that State uses to conduct public diplomacy activities, whether such platforms are exclusively used for public diplomacy or not. This review includes American Presence Posts (APP), American Centers, Binational Centers (BNC), American Corners, Virtual Presence Posts (VPP), and social media efforts, such as Facebook.² This report (1) describes external outreach platforms State currently uses overseas, (2) examines the challenges and opportunities State faces in creating and maintaining these platforms, (3) reviews State's plans to

¹For additional information regarding GAO's list of areas of high risk and other major government challenges, see <http://www.gao.gov/highrisk/>.

²APPs and VPPs are not purely public diplomacy platforms and are not managed by the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs. However, because they include a significant public outreach component, we have included them in the scope of this review.

expand its outreach platforms, and (4) assesses the extent to which State has evaluated these platforms.

To describe State's external outreach platforms and its plans for expansion, we reviewed State's inventory of public diplomacy spaces, budget and planning documents, and Senate and think tank reports on public diplomacy. We also analyzed State's February 2010 strategic framework for public diplomacy. To examine the challenges and opportunities to creating and maintaining these platforms, we reviewed prior GAO work on public diplomacy, diplomatic security, and embassy construction, and analyzed legislation on public diplomacy and embassy security. To assess the extent to which State has evaluated these platforms, we reviewed program evaluations of State's public diplomacy activities, State Office of the Inspector General (OIG) reports, and State's planning documents. For all objectives, we interviewed officials from State's Office of the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs; each regional bureau's public diplomacy office; the Bureaus of International Information Programs (IIP), Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA), Diplomatic Security, and Overseas Building Operations; and the Office of eDiplomacy within the Bureau of Information Resource Management (IRM). We also conducted fieldwork in Brazil, China, and Indonesia, where we met with U.S. embassy officials and representatives of seven foreign cultural organizations and observed outreach activities at several U.S. and foreign outreach facilities. GAO teams traveling to Mexico and Pakistan for other engagements also interviewed embassy officials and collected information related to this review. See appendix I for a more complete description of our scope and methodology.

We performed our work from September 2009 to July 2010 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

The mission of State's public diplomacy activities is to support the achievement of U.S. foreign policy goals and objectives, advance national interests, and enhance national security by informing and influencing foreign publics and by expanding and strengthening the relationship between the people and government of the United States and citizens of the rest of the world. In general, public diplomacy outreach includes

communications with international audiences, cultural programming, academic grants, educational exchanges, international visitor programs, and U.S. government efforts to confront ideological support for terrorism. The Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs is responsible for State's public diplomacy efforts and oversees ECA, IIP, and the Bureau of Public Affairs. ECA aims to foster mutual understanding between the United States and other countries through International Visitor, Fulbright, and other academic and professional exchange programs. IIP communicates with foreign publics about U.S. policy, society, and values through speaker programs, print and electronic publications, Information Resource Centers (IRC), and Internet outreach. The Bureau of Public Affairs informs audiences about U.S. foreign policy through activities such as media outreach. State's workforce of over 1,000 public diplomacy officers is divided between Washington, D.C., and overseas posts, where public diplomacy staff report through the ambassador to their respective regional bureaus in Washington. Public diplomacy officers at U.S. embassies overseas engage in information dissemination, media relations, cultural affairs, and other efforts.

State currently projects U.S. presence around the world through a network of more than 260 embassies and consulates in over 180 countries. In 1990, the majority of these posts had publicly accessible facilities such as American Centers and Libraries, managed by the United States Information Agency. According to State, nearly 6 million people visited these centers and libraries in 1991. In the late 1990s, however, budget cuts, changes in U.S. foreign policy objectives, and terrorist attacks against U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania pressured the United States to close many of these libraries and centers, and in 1999 the United States Information Agency was consolidated into the State Department. By 2009, the number of visitors to the successors of State's centers and libraries had decreased to 1 million people, according to State.

Secure Embassy Construction and Counterterrorism Act of 1999

In 1999, Congress passed the Secure Embassy Construction and Counterterrorism Act of 1999 (SECCA), which had two significant implications for public diplomacy outreach to local publics.³ First, SECCA required new facilities to be set back at least 100 feet from the perimeter of the property, a requirement that, given the lack of space in many urban centers, has led to the construction of many new embassies outside of

³Pub. L. No. 106-113, App. G, Title VI, 113 Stat. 1501, 1501A-451.

cities.⁴ Second, it required that in selecting a site for a new U.S. diplomatic facility abroad, State must colocate all U.S. government personnel at the post (except those under the command of a U.S. area military commander) unless a waiver was granted by the Secretary.⁵ As a result of this colocation requirement, and with the construction of 41 new embassy compounds since 2001, many American Centers were closed, with some of their functions relocated onto embassy or consulate compounds, and renamed Information Resource Centers.

Information Resource Centers

There are currently 180 IRCs worldwide, which provide information and a range of opinion about the United States to host country nationals by distributing publications and reports, offering programs on bilateral issues, providing Internet training, and maintaining the embassy's public Internet Web site. These IRCs belong to the embassy's public affairs section and are intended to direct timely, authoritative information to targeted foreign audiences in support of U.S. policy goals. However, some have questioned whether—under current conditions—IRCs serve as effective platforms for engaging foreign audiences. First, over two-thirds of all IRCs are located on an embassy or consulate compound; of these, 77 percent are either closed to the public or accessible by appointment only. As we have previously reported, many new embassy compounds, and their IRCs, have been built on sites located far from city centers. Second, visitors to IRCs located on embassy or consulate compounds are subject to the same security procedures as other visitors to the embassy and generally are required to surrender their cell phones, laptop computers, and other electronic devices. Third, according to State officials, on-compound IRCs are generally smaller than the off-compound American Centers they replace, and a 2009 report by the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations noted that IRCs rarely have conference rooms or

⁴Pub. L. No. 106-113, App. G, § 606, codified as amended at 22 U.S.C. § 4865.

⁵22 U.S.C. § 4865. In addition, the Foreign Relations Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2003 expressed the sense of Congress that, to the degree permitted by security considerations, the Secretary of State should give favorable consideration to requests by the Director of the Peace Corps that the Secretary waive certain requirements of SECCA in order to permit the Peace Corps to maintain offices in foreign countries at locations separate from the United States embassy. Pub. L. No. 107-228, § 691, 116 Stat. 1350, 1415 (2002).

auditoriums because of the competition within embassies for limited space.⁶

These factors have contributed to significantly fewer visitors to on-compound IRCs than off-compound ones, with the Senate report finding that on-compound IRCs had almost 80 percent fewer visitors than off-compound IRCs had. For example, as we reported in 2006, visitors to the IRC in Pakistan fell to as few as one per day because many visitors felt humiliated by the embassy's rigorous security procedures, according to an embassy official there.⁷ According to State officials, the department has attempted to mitigate these obstacles by using IRC staff to reach out to local audiences through other means, such as by sending publications and responding to research queries electronically.

State Utilizes a Broad Range of External Outreach Platforms around the World

In response to the challenges in engaging foreign audiences on embassy and consulate compounds, State has developed and maintained several different external outreach platforms. As shown in figure 1, these platforms range from physical presences staffed by American officers to virtual efforts using the Internet and include APPs, American Centers, BNCs, American Corners, VPPs, and social media, such as Facebook.⁸ Appendix II includes maps of the locations of many of these platforms.

⁶Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, *U.S. Public Diplomacy—Time to Get Back in the Game* (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 13, 2009).

⁷GAO, *U.S. Public Diplomacy: State Department Efforts to Engage Muslim Audiences Lack Certain Communication Elements and Face Significant Challenges*, [GAO-06-535](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 3, 2006).

⁸In late 2009, following the initiation of our review in the summer of 2009, State's Office of Policy, Planning, and Resources for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs began to develop an inventory of its overseas public diplomacy outreach platforms. As part of this ongoing process, State is defining, categorizing, and identifying the location of each of the platforms that it utilizes for public diplomacy activities. The inventory only includes platforms that conduct public diplomacy activities exclusively; thus platforms such as APPs and VPPs, which perform a variety of functions including but not limited to public diplomacy, are not listed. In addition to the platforms discussed in this report, State's inventory includes IRCs and other facilities such as German-American Institutes, American Councils, and AMIDEAST, a nongovernmental organization aimed at strengthening relations between Americans and people in the Middle East and North Africa.

Figure 1: Description of External Outreach Platforms

	Number (as of May 2010)	Physical presence	Public access	Permanent American direct-hire staff	Managing office at State	Location	Typical activities
<p>American Presence Post</p>  <p>Source: GAO.</p>	9	✓	No	✓	Overseas post	Outside capital	Public outreach, political and economic reporting, American Citizen Services, commercial promotion
<p>American Center</p>  <p>Source: GAO.</p>	39	✓	✓	✓	Overseas post ^a	Generally capitals and other major cities	Library, English-language officer, educational advising, space for outreach programs and activities
<p>Binational Center</p>  <p>Source: GAO.</p>	123	✓	✓	No	Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs	Major cities in Central and South America and the Caribbean	English-language training, library, educational advising, space for outreach programs and activities

	Number (as of May 2010)	Physical presence	Public access	Permanent American direct-hire staff	Managing office at State	Location	Typical activities
American Corner  <p>Source: GAO.</p>	401	✓	✓	No	Bureau of International Information Programs	Within libraries and other institutions throughout the host country	Reference collection, digital media, program space in host institution
Virtual Presence Post  <p>Source: Department of State.</p>	62	No	✓	✓	Bureau of Information Resource Management ^b	Operated out of embassy or consulate with target cities throughout the host country	Public outreach, political and economic reporting, commercial promotion
Social Media  <p>Source: GAO.</p>	Varies by tool ^c	No	✓	✓	Bureau of International Information Programs	Operated out of embassy or consulate	Internet postings to sites such as Facebook and Twitter, as well as blogs

Source: GAO analysis of State Department data.

^aState is establishing a new office within IIP to coordinate American Center activities and expected this office to be opened by the end of June 2010, according to State public diplomacy officials.

^bVPPs are launched, maintained, funded, and staffed by overseas missions. The Office of eDiplomacy promotes the expansion of VPPs to additional missions and the dissemination of best practices.

⁶State manages approximately 230 Facebook accounts, 80 Twitter feeds, 55 YouTube channels, 40 Flickr sites, and 25 blogs, according to a department official.

American Presence Posts

State currently operates nine APPs in Canada, China, Egypt, France (4), Indonesia, and South Korea. APPs are small posts in key regional population centers outside of capital cities, staffed by one or two American officers and a few local staff. They are generally located in leased commercial space. The functions APPs perform vary from post to post but generally include public outreach, commercial promotion, and emergency consular services for American citizens. Officers assigned to APPs maintain a working liaison with local government officials, media organizations, opinion leaders, and U.S. businesses, allowing the United States to retain a presence in locations where it requires diplomats but cannot afford, or does not require, a fully capable consulate. APPs are established as consulates under the Vienna Convention and are subject to the same security standards as consulates. Some APPs, such as those in Medan, Indonesia, and Alexandria, Egypt, are in cities where the United States previously had a consulate. According to State's Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations, APPs cost an average of \$1.5 million to establish.

American Centers

State operates 39 American Centers in major cities around the world, just over half of which are located in Africa and East Asia. American Centers are multipurpose U.S. government public outreach facilities, staffed by U.S. government personnel.⁹ Although nearly 80 percent of American Centers are in capital cities around the world, they are stand-alone facilities located outside of the main U.S. embassy and are generally accessible to the public. While nearly all centers house a library, they generally conduct a broader range of public diplomacy activities than IRCs on embassy compounds, such as advising students regarding potential opportunities for higher education in the United States, and most also have space for public diplomacy events, such as embassy-sponsored speakers. One benefit of this approach, according to State officials, is that visitors to an American Center may come for one activity, such as educational advising, and then stay for others, such as exploring the library. For example, in Beijing, the American Center for Educational Exchange houses the embassy's Information Resource Officer and Regional English Language Officer, as well as staff from EducationUSA.¹⁰

⁹According to State data, these centers are staffed by a total of 77 American officers and over 400 local staff.

¹⁰EducationUSA is a global network of more than 400 advising centers supported by State whose mission is to actively promote U.S. higher education around the world.

In addition, this center contains the embassy's IRC and hosts outreach events such as speakers and movie nights (see fig. 2). Centers house computers with Internet connections and video conferencing equipment. In Mexico City, the embassy's Benjamin Franklin Library contains 24,000 volumes, periodicals, and publications on the United States. According to the public affairs officer in Mexico City, the library also hosts press events, cultural programs, and English language chats, and maintains an extensive Web site with a variety of multimedia content.

Figure 2: Reference Materials and Programming Space at the American Center for Educational Exchange, Beijing, China



Source: GAO.

Binational Centers

According to State data, 123 BNCs are currently in operation in major cities and provincial capitals in 18 countries in Central and South America and the Caribbean. BNCs are publicly accessible facilities run by private, autonomous organizations created through agreements between the host government and the United States. Officers from U.S. embassies managed BNCs until the 1990s, when U.S. funding for the centers was reduced. BNCs are now self-sustaining organizations, generating revenue primarily through fees for English-language training. According to State officials, there are over 400,000 students studying English at BNCs throughout the Western Hemisphere. In Brazil, for example, 38 BNCs host about 70,000 English-language students, and the three BNCs we visited each have several modern classrooms (see fig. 3). BNCs also support educational advising, house libraries with information on the United States, and

provide space for cultural programming. U.S. embassies currently use BNCs as platforms for State Department speakers and for video conferences, among other activities.

Figure 3: English Teaching Facilities at Binational Centers in São Paulo, Brazil



Source: GAO.

American Corners

Currently, 401 American Corners are in operation worldwide, with about 83 percent outside of capital cities. American Corners are partnerships with a host institution, such as a library or university, which provides space for information about the United States. They are staffed and managed by the host institution. They contain books, magazines, DVDs, and other materials about the United States and often provide access to research databases and the Internet (see fig. 4). According to State, these facilities enable the United States to have a presence in many locations where budget and security constraints have made full information centers unfeasible and have limited public access to U.S. missions. IIP provides oversight, policy coordination, and support, such as training, for the American Corners program. American Corners cost \$50,000 each to establish, and State provides up to \$10,000 each per year to sustain them.

Figure 4: American Corners in Brasilia, Brazil, and Medan, Indonesia



Source: GAO.

State expects American Corner partners to provide programming space, which can be used for hosting lectures or digital videoconferences organized by the embassy or consulate. In Medan, Indonesia, we observed the principal officer discussing Islam in America with students at an American Corner located in an Islamic university (see fig. 5). Similarly, an American Corner in Afghanistan hosted a live Web chat between 100 Afghans and officials in Washington following President Obama's speech in Cairo regarding U.S. relations with the Muslim world, according to State's head of public diplomacy for South and Central Asia.

Figure 5: Outreach at an American Corner in Medan, Indonesia



Source: GAO.

Virtual Presence Posts and Related Activities

State operates 62 VPPs around the world, serving such places as Canada's Northwest Territories and Northern Uganda. U.S. embassies and consulates use VPPs as a means to provide diplomatic engagement to an important city or region without the use of a physical facility.¹¹ In some cases, VPPs have been established to engage audiences where security concerns limit a physical presence, such as in Gaza. While some VPPs consist solely of a Web site presenting information tailored to local interests, more active VPPs involve a team of American officers and combine regular travel and media outreach to engage local audiences outside of capital cities. Overseas posts are responsible for managing VPPs within their country, while IRM's Office of eDiplomacy and IIP assist in their creation and help coordinate the department's overall VPP effort. According to State and other sources, VPPs are relatively inexpensive to

¹¹According to State officials, some VPPs are focused on specific demographic groups, such as indigenous peoples of Central America.

establish and maintain, with most costs coming from establishing the Web site and supporting travel. However, one post we visited noted that the cost of staff time was the most significant impediment to effectively employing VPPs in that country. IIRM's Office of eDiplomacy now encourages U.S. missions to use the social media platform most popular among the target audience as the preferred VPP vehicle, rather than just creating a stand-alone Web site. In China, the U.S. mission hosts a network of about 20 VPPs—more than in any other country. While a few of the VPP teams in China have a dedicated leader, most are composed solely of volunteers from across the embassy, including staff from the public affairs, political, economic, and consular sections, who participate on the VPP team in addition to their other job duties.

In some other countries, the U.S. mission maintains an informal diplomatic presence in cities outside of the capital through programs similar to VPPs. These programs, sometimes known as circuit rider or liaison officer programs, are intended to provide sustained engagement to specific areas through periodic travel and dedicated officers. The State OIG has reported that in some countries, where APP officers have been assigned but physical APPs have not been established, APP officers based in the embassy travel regularly to their target city, such as in Bolivia and Malaysia.¹² In Indonesia, the embassy assigns some entry-level officers to specific areas of the country to conduct public outreach and economic and political reporting. According to officers we met with in Indonesia, the program was created to expand the embassy's presence in light of security and budgetary challenges.

Social Media

State has a variety of online platforms to engage foreign audiences. According to a State official, as of April 2010, the department managed approximately

- 230 Facebook accounts (including about 80 embassy and consulate accounts),
- 80 Twitter feeds (including over 50 by overseas posts),
- 55 YouTube channels,

¹²Department of State, OIG, *Interim Review of the Global Repositioning Initiative*, ISP-I-09-09 (Washington, D.C.: November 2008).

-
- 40 Flickr sites,¹³ and
 - 25 active blogs.

Within State, IIP provides policy and technical support for official embassy Web sites and develops new online outreach and engagement tools. In addition, State's Offices of Innovative Engagement and eDiplomacy maintain an internal online social media hub that focuses on how to use social media effectively for public diplomacy purposes. The site contains guides on the use of these tools, best practices from overseas missions and from Washington, a forum for staff to exchange ideas on social media, and resources to help posts develop social media strategies.

Distribution of Outreach Platforms

In some cities, State manages multiple different outreach platforms, generally including an American Corner. For example, in Brasilia, we visited an American Corner in a public library that was located about half a mile from a BNC, which housed its own library of English-language books.¹⁴ On the basis of data provided by State, we identified 16 cities worldwide where both an American Corner and an American Center or BNC are located, and another 7 cities that host both an American Corner and an off-compound IRC. In addition, we identified 14 cities worldwide that host more than one American Corner.

Conversely, there are more than 150 urban areas worldwide with more than 1 million people in which the United States has no formal diplomatic presence or outreach platform. For example, officials have noted that China has about 100 cities with more than 1 million people, but the United States has a permanent physical presence in 6 of them and a virtual presence in about an additional 20.

¹³Flickr is a Web site for posting and sharing pictures.

¹⁴Following our visit to Brasilia, embassy officials told us that they had decided to remove the American Corner designation from this library and donate the American Corner's collection to the library's permanent collection, in light of the embassy's increased engagement with BNCs and their determination that this American Corner was not an effective outreach tool.

State Faces Various Challenges to Using Overseas Platforms, but Officials Have Identified Several Opportunities for Leveraging These Platforms

State faces a variety of challenges to maintaining and expanding its outreach platforms, though opportunities exist for using these platforms to increase engagement with foreign publics. Security concerns, budget constraints, technical and staffing issues, and host country restrictions have hindered State's use of outreach platforms in some locations. Despite these barriers, officials have also identified several opportunities to expand their use. Officials highlighted the use of social media to reach large audiences that would otherwise be unreachable and identified opportunities to expand the use of outreach platforms by leveraging relationships with nongovernmental partners, facilitating language instruction, and using public exhibitions to connect with foreign audiences.

Security Concerns and Other Issues Present Challenges to the Use of Outreach Platforms

Policies intended to safeguard U.S. diplomatic personnel and facilities can hamper the ability of officials to perform public outreach overseas. The security issues that have effectively limited the number of visitors to IRCs, as noted earlier, may also affect other outreach efforts. For example, the construction of many new embassy compounds far outside city centers and the relocation of publicly accessible platforms onto these compounds have often resulted in their reduction in size. According to public diplomacy officials in the Bureau of African Affairs, IRCs are smaller than external libraries. In addition, public diplomacy officials in Beijing were concerned that a planned move of the American Center onto the embassy compound would reduce the amount of available programming space. A review of 22 posts conducted by a GAO team examining new embassy construction found that 7 reported problems with the IRC or other public diplomacy space, such as insufficient space or inaccessible location.

Visitors to public diplomacy facilities may also be deterred by screening measures they must undergo prior to entry. According to officials in the Bureau of Diplomatic Security, these procedures are based on threat levels at posts identified in the *Foreign Affairs Handbook*, as well as security standards established by the Overseas Security Policy Board. Laptops, cell phones, and other electronic devices are sometimes prohibited in order to comply with these standards; IRC staff we spoke to noted that these procedures can hamper research by visitors. Think tank reports as well as testimonies before Congress contend that these restrictions portray U.S. embassies and consulates as unwelcoming places.

In order to maintain and expand its network of publicly accessible external platforms that house American officers as the department builds new compounds, the Secretary of State would have to waive the

colocation requirement. To date, however, only 1 center in a location where State has built a new embassy compound has received a waiver: the American Cultural Center and Martin Luther King, Jr., Library in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. Senior public diplomacy officials have expressed the opinion that the department should grant more colocation waivers, such as the one in Ouagadougou, in order to keep more facilities open. According to State data, however, 9 of the American Centers that remain outside of embassy compounds face the prospect of colocation in the next 3 years, and another 11 face this prospect in later years. The Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs has expressed her desire to reverse the presumption that public diplomacy platforms should be colocated within compounds, and her staff have indicated that she is taking steps to address this issue with chiefs of mission and regional security officers at posts with centers facing colocation.

Resource Constraints Have Limited State's Use of Outreach Platforms

Resource constraints hinder State's ability to construct and maintain outreach platforms. Officials in the Office of the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs have noted that one of the biggest obstacles to expanding centers is their cost. For example, senior public diplomacy officials said they will use most of their budget for American Centers on just two projects in fiscal year 2010: \$5 million for the construction of a new engagement platform in Jakarta, Indonesia, and approximately \$6.9 million for the relocation and renovation of the American Center in Rangoon, Burma.

Some of these costs are related to security requirements, which make the construction and maintenance of external public diplomacy facilities more expensive. For example, State estimates the initial average cost of security in each of 16 proposed APPs to be more than \$550,000. Further, according to the public affairs officer in Kinshasa, the embassy's regional security officer has estimated that renovations to the Congo American Language Institute to meet security requirements would cost at least \$1 million.

Social Media Efforts Are Hindered by Technical and Staffing Issues

As we reported in 2009, State's use of social media is likely to pose technical challenges, as agency efforts to plan, coordinate, fund, implement, and evaluate its "Public Diplomacy 2.0" efforts could strain systems that have had difficulty in the past.¹⁵ For example, in some cases,

¹⁵GAO, *U.S. Public Diplomacy: Key Issues for Congressional Oversight*, [GAO-09-679SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 27, 2009). "Public Diplomacy 2.0" refers to a new approach to public diplomacy that would more fully engage new and evolving communication trends such as social networking.

embassy officers overseas told us that the software they use is inadequate. Officers responsible for electronic outreach at two posts we visited told us that computers connected to State's internal network used a version of an Internet browser that was unable to play YouTube videos, presenting challenges for staff creating videos for the embassy Web site or department YouTube channel. However, in June 2010, an official from the Office of eDiplomacy noted that the department had installed an updated Internet browser that allows staff to create and play such videos.

Staffing limitations also affect State's capacity to effectively utilize social media. According to State officials, continuously updating content improves the effectiveness of social media, but officers overseas have difficulty finding time to do this. An officer in São Paulo, for example, said that maintaining Brazilian audiences' interest in the consulate's Twitter feed is even harder than attracting the audience to begin with. Officers must make trade-offs—for example a regional bureau public diplomacy office director said that time spent on a mission's Facebook site is time not spent on a VPP Web site. The director of the Office of eDiplomacy noted that his office has encouraged VPP teams to incorporate social media into their activities to avoid duplicating their efforts between VPP Web sites and social media tools. Officials also noted that staff rotations may limit the effectiveness of social media, as officers' technical skills and interest vary. The Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs has recognized that the use of social media tools has been uneven across posts, and has called for upgrading necessary equipment in Washington and overseas and using social networking and connective technologies more effectively.

Issues with Some Host Country Governments Limit Expansion of Outreach Platforms

Constraints placed on State by some host country governments have affected embassies' use and expansion of outreach platforms. First, some countries have not permitted the expansion of U.S. platforms without commensurate access to the United States. For example, some countries, such as China, link the establishment of new APPs in their country with opening consulates in the United States. Second, some host countries' infrastructures affect outreach efforts. For example, many parts of Africa and Asia have limited Internet availability. Additionally, the relatively small size of Indonesia's public library system has restricted the U.S. mission's 11 corners there to university campuses, according to officers in Jakarta. Third, according to State officials, intervention by some host country governments has pressured facilities to close or prohibited them from being established. For example, State officials said that the Burmese government has placed pressure on the landlord of the American Center in Rangoon, and in Damascus, the Syrian government closed the American

Cultural Center and American Language Center in 2008. In addition, to date, the Chinese government has not permitted the establishment of any American Corners.

Institutional Challenges Hinder Development of APPs

State faces not only external challenges in establishing APPs, but institutional constraints from within. For example, according to State's interpretation of U.S. law, the department is prohibited from establishing a foreign service post, including APPs, in the same city or town as a consular agency.¹⁶ This prohibition hindered the establishment of APPs in cities such as Santa Cruz, Bolivia, and Belem, Brazil. There is also a lack of a focal point for APPs in Washington. The State OIG found that a central point of contact for APP issues is necessary because of the duplication of effort that many posts experience when establishing an APP.¹⁷ It also reported that opening planned APPs in Brazil was complicated by incomplete advice to post from Washington regarding APPs. APP officers in Brazil told us that the lack of a central point of contact in Washington hindered the department's ability to fund and implement plans for opening APPs. In addition, the officer responsible for APPs in China said that the lack of a central office for APPs has resulted in a lack of overall guidance and support for these posts.

Officials Have Identified Potential Areas for Increasing Engagement through Outreach Platforms

U.S. diplomats and foreign public diplomacy practitioners have identified several opportunities to increase the impact of outreach platforms.

Social Media

The use of social media enables officials to expand outreach and connect with younger audiences, which the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs has identified as an important demographic. Examples of posts' utilization of this technology include the following:

- As of July 2010, nearly 140,000 Facebook users had indicated an interest in the U.S. embassy in Indonesia's Facebook page. Officials cited excitement about a planned visit by the President, the cultural relevance of Facebook,

¹⁶22 U.S.C. § 3903(7); 2 FAM 422.1-4(b). Consular agencies are staffed by locally resident agents who provide non-visa consular services. State considers APPs to be foreign service posts.

¹⁷ISP-I-09-09.

and efforts to make the site interactive as reasons for its popularity. For example, the Facebook page included applications like “Fotobama,” in which participants could post their picture next to that of the President. Winners of another mission-sponsored contest on Facebook were invited to attend a jazz performance at the Ambassador’s residence.

- Over 50 overseas posts use Twitter, according to State data as of July 2010. The mission in Brazil, for example, had nearly 1,700 followers as of July 2010 and has sent over 1,000 messages to its followers, including messages to rebroadcast news stories and counter misinformation.
- The mission in South Africa has used text-messaging technology. According to public diplomacy officials in the Bureau of African Affairs, the mission received 250,000 text messages sent by South Africans on their cell phones in anticipation of President Obama’s July 2009 visit to Ghana, which generated a contact list of hundreds of thousands of people for future embassy events.

Nongovernment Partners

Because U.S. outreach activities do not need to occur in U.S. government facilities, public diplomacy officials and think tanks have identified the use of nongovernment partners as a means of boosting outreach efforts. A survey of current recommendations for public diplomacy found that 13 recent reports have advised adopting strategies that better leverage the private sector.¹⁸

Foreign cultural organizations such as the Alliance Française, British Council, and Goethe Institut operate independently of their respective embassies, and Confucius Institutes are administered by an institution affiliated with the Chinese Ministry of Education. This use of nongovernment partners facilitates outreach in several ways:

- Nongovernment partners can reach audiences that public diplomacy officials cannot. For example the British Council in Brasilia partnered with local organizations to sponsor Conexões, a project that develops young playwrights. Additionally, BNCs have a large built-in audience in their student body, which embassies can engage through speakers and events.

¹⁸RAND, *Whither Strategic Communication? A Survey of Current Proposals and Recommendations* (Santa Monica, Calif.: 2009). This paper reviewed recommendations put forth by 36 selected documents, including reports by the Defense Science Board, the Council on Foreign Relations, and the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy.

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- Nongovernment partners can minimize the cost to the U.S. government of conducting outreach. As BNCs are predominantly self-financed, the Under Secretary has recognized their potential as a model for expanding American Centers. In addition, officials plan to solicit in-kind donations from corporate partners for a new engagement platform in Jakarta.

Language Instruction

Public diplomacy officials identified the use of language instruction as another means of leveraging outreach platforms. Foreign cultural centers such as the Australian Center, British Council, Alliance Française, and Goethe Institut all derive income from language instruction, according to representatives of these organizations. The Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs has identified English-language teaching as the single most powerful public diplomacy tool available to public affairs officers, and attendees at the public affairs officers conference agreed that English-language instruction is something they can offer that audiences want, according to another official. The mission in Brazil, for example, has unveiled a 6-year English teaching strategy in conjunction with the 2014 World Cup and 2016 Olympics to improve the quality of English teaching in Brazil and increase the number of students studying English, as well as to promote U.S. values and culture.

Exhibition Spaces as a Tool for Foreign Engagement

Overseas missions are also using exhibition spaces such as shopping malls for engagement, because they reach audiences where they already exist, rather than trying to attract visitors to new locations. We observed a USA Fair in a shopping mall in Medan, Indonesia, that featured cultural and educational information about the United States as well as interactive contests for youth (see fig. 6).

Figure 6: USA Fair at Sun Plaza Mall, Medan, Indonesia



Source: GAO.

The mission in Brazil also has used shopping malls throughout the country for a variety of purposes, from displaying photo exhibits of President Obama to hosting exhibits on consular services and studying in the United States, according to embassy officials (see fig. 7). In addition, State has approved funding for the U.S. embassy in Manama, Bahrain, to establish a mobile educational advising unit and information resource center known as Interactive America, in shopping malls in Bahrain.

Figure 7: Embassy-Sponsored Photo Exhibit at Conjunto Nacional Shopping Mall in Brasilia, Brazil



Source: GAO.

State Intends to Expand Its Use of Outreach Platforms through Varying Plans for Individual Platforms

State's new strategic framework for public diplomacy calls for opening more publicly accessible platforms overall, and has varying plans for specific platforms. Following the issuance of the framework in February 2010, State convened eight working groups to examine the issues outlined in it, including one on outreach platforms. As of June 2010, the Office of the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs was analyzing and prioritizing the working groups' recommendations. State has varying plans for individual platforms, including expanding American Centers and VPPs and postponing the establishment of new APPs. The Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs has also promoted various pilot projects for increasing engagement with foreign public audiences through new platforms.

State's New Public Diplomacy Strategic Framework Calls for Opening More Publicly Accessible Platforms

In February 2010, the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs issued a new strategic framework intended to provide a road map for public diplomacy and a basis for the fiscal year 2012 budget request. This framework, building on statements by the President in support of opening America Houses with Internet access, libraries, and English instruction, calls for the expansion of outreach platforms and venues for direct engagement with foreign audiences, which it refers to as American spaces.¹⁹ To do this, the framework proposes revitalizing and establishing American Centers and American Corners as spaces for engagement and identifying the best means of upgrading and maintaining publicly accessible, secure outreach platforms.

In April and May 2010, State convened eight working groups to develop implementation plans for the public diplomacy strategic framework. The groups examined American spaces, English-language teaching, youth outreach, international media outreach, science and technology, technology and new media, educational advising and alumni outreach, and cultural programs. Members of the American space working group included public diplomacy staff from various regions, and officials from the Bureaus of Overseas Building Operations and Diplomatic Security served as consultants. The Under Secretary instructed this working group to assess the current situation, develop and prioritize a list of ideas for new initiatives, research the necessary resources for these ideas, and consider measures of program success. According to State officials, the eight groups proposed a total of more than 250 ideas and recommendations.

As of June 2010, the Office of Policy, Planning, and Resources for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs was reviewing and prioritizing these recommendations, attaching resource requirements for the Under Secretary's consideration, and developing a plan to implement the tactics contained in the strategic framework. Officials in this office said that the plan will include assessing and aligning existing American spaces and opening new spaces in the future. These officials also told us they are working to incorporate this plan into the department's fiscal year 2012 budget request and noted that each working group developed plans for fiscal years 2010 and 2011 as well. They also said that they are developing

¹⁹State has defined "American spaces" to include American Centers, BNCs, and American Corners. Because APPs and VPPs are not purely public diplomacy tools, they are not included in the strategic framework for public diplomacy.

a plan to link the working groups' recommendations to the strategic framework by aligning the recommended actions to the tactics outlined in the strategic framework.

The working groups also recommended various actions to manage many of the challenges and opportunities acknowledged in the strategic framework, according to State officials. For example, the framework notes the challenge that security concerns present in maintaining venues for direct engagement. Public diplomacy officials told us that they have begun working with the Bureaus of Diplomatic Security and Overseas Building Operations to determine how to effectively manage security risks in order to maintain existing external platforms. State has also convened working groups to address potential areas for increasing engagement with foreign audiences, such as English-language teaching and technology and new media.

Plans for Increasing Engagement Vary by Individual Outreach Platform

In addition to the strategic framework's overall call for increasing engagement with foreign publics, State has varying plans for its other outreach platforms.

- *APPs*. In 2007, the Secretary of State announced plans to triple the number of APPs (it had 8 at the time), and the department subsequently proposed the establishment of nearly 20 more such posts in places such as Mombasa, Kenya, and Bangalore, India. However, only 2 new APPs (Wuhan, China, and Busan, South Korea) have been established since the Secretary's announcement in 2007, and plans to establish the remainder have been put on hold because of budgetary constraints.²⁰ State's *Foreign Affairs Manual* notes that requiring embassies to provide the resources for opening APPs constrains their proliferation, and State officials told us that this requirement prevented their establishment in several places. It remains unclear if or when any future APPs will be established. For example, the U.S. mission in China originally proposed the creation of 10 new APPs; however, a senior embassy official in Beijing said that will be impossible for the foreseeable future because the Chinese government has prevented further expansion of the U.S. presence until China is allowed to expand its presence in the United States. Further, in 2008, State's OIG concluded that the department should terminate plans for some pending

²⁰The APP in Lille, France, was transitioned into a VPP in 2008.

APPs because of the challenges associated with establishing them.²¹ State did not request any funds for fiscal year 2011 to establish any additional APPs.

- *American Centers.* State requested \$14.4 million for American Centers in fiscal year 2011, including funds to establish 8 to 10 new American Centers around the world. According to State officials, in June 2010, in light of the large number of American Centers at risk of closure, they plan to prioritize the preservation of existing American Centers and to request waivers of the colocation requirement in order to maintain and increase publicly accessible facilities.
- *BNCs.* Recognizing the role of BNCs as key partners for posts throughout Latin America, and their potential model for platforms elsewhere, State has initiated efforts to reinvigorate its partnership with BNCs. In August 2009, State hosted a conference in Washington, D.C., for BNC directors. According to public diplomacy officials in the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, this conference was the first of its sort in many years and was intended to “relaunch” this partnership. As part of this effort, State provided \$1.8 million in grants to BNCs in fiscal years 2009 and 2010 for capital improvements and library upgrades, as many BNC collections had not been refreshed since the U.S. Information Agency stocked them several decades ago, according to these officials. In Brazil, the embassy is undertaking an effort to recertify BNCs to help it ensure high standards of teaching and administration, and to expand its partnership with them.
- *American Corners.* According to State data, there are currently 16 American Corners under construction. In 2010, in the East Asia and Pacific region alone, State requested \$490,000 for additional new American Corners in 12 countries in the region. State is also considering ways of disengaging with American Corners it deems ineffective. For example, a 2009 cable soliciting requests for sustaining funds for American Corners included instructions on how to close or transfer ineffective American Corners—according to State, as of May 2010, 65 American Corners had been closed or transferred. According to an officer responsible for American Corners in Brazil, these instructions were an important reminder to posts to continually evaluate their utility, as officers have a general reluctance to close programs during their tenure at post. A regional bureau public diplomacy office director added they are easy to

²¹ISP-I-09-09.

establish, but without support they become moribund and are hard to close.

- *VPPs*. According to data provided by the Office of eDiplomacy, there are currently 39 planned VPPs, half of which are planned for Europe and South America.

The Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs has also supported the development of new pilot projects to engage foreign audiences. For example, State is currently establishing a public outreach venue, called @america, in a mall in Jakarta, Indonesia (see fig. 8).²² This venue will be built and staffed by contractors and will feature programming aimed at Indonesian youth—representing an effort to go to where audiences already exist, according to State officials. The embassy in Jakarta, in coordination with public diplomacy officials in Washington, developed this concept based on focus groups with young Indonesians to ensure that it reflected its target audience’s interests. The embassy originally requested \$4.6 million for this project, but State officials told us they estimate start-up costs to exceed this amount. In addition, the embassy is seeking partnerships with U.S. nongovernmental organizations, museums, and corporations to help @america offer insight into American culture, technology, values, and products. State expects @america to open in late 2010. The Under Secretary told us that she views @america as a pilot, which, if successful, may be expanded elsewhere in the world.

²²@america was originally referred to as the American Place.

Figure 8: Proposed Site for @america, Jakarta, Indonesia



Source: GAO.

Despite Plans to Expand Engagement with Foreign Audiences, State Has Not Evaluated Its Outreach Platforms, Making It Difficult to Assess Their Relative Effectiveness

Although State is developing plans to expand its engagement with foreign audiences through the use of outreach platforms, it lacks information that would enable it to assess the effectiveness of these platforms. In 2008, State established an Evaluation and Measurement Unit for public diplomacy programs, which has developed several tools to collect data on the department's public diplomacy efforts. However, State has not assessed these platforms' contribution to the goal of expanding engagement with foreign audiences.

State Uses Several Tools to Collect Data on Public Diplomacy Activities, but They Do Not Include All Outreach Platforms

In 2008, State established an Evaluation and Measurement Unit within its Office of Policy, Planning, and Resources for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs to develop performance measurement instruments and conduct evaluations of the effectiveness of all State public diplomacy programs. The unit has several tools to collect data on the department's public diplomacy efforts, including, for example, the following:

- *Public Diplomacy Impact Project.* State has described the Public Diplomacy Impact Project as the first attempt to measure the aggregate impact of the full array of public diplomacy activities and programs used by posts overseas by collecting, documenting, and quantifying data on the impact and effectiveness of public diplomacy activities on foreign audiences. The project, completed in March 2010, assessed the overall effect of the range of public diplomacy activities in eight locations by collecting information on 10 outcome performance measures for these activities.²³ The report includes some information on the use of American Centers, American Corners, and IRCs in these locations. For example, it includes information on the types of materials visitors used at these facilities, and visitors' satisfaction with these materials. However, the project did not include all outreach platforms discussed in this report, such as APPs, VPPs, and BNCs. In addition, it did not measure the specific contribution of these platforms toward State's goal of expanding engagement with foreign publics.
- *Mission Activity Tracker.* The Mission Activity Tracker is an online tool that documents the scope, frequency, and achievements of U.S. public diplomacy activities by collecting quantitative and qualitative performance measurement data from public affairs sections at overseas U.S. missions, according to the system's user guide. It includes information on public diplomacy programs used by U.S. missions to engage foreign audiences, including American Corners, IRCs, and Web 2.0 activities. According to State, the system also provides performance measurement data on the impact of U.S. mission public diplomacy outreach to key foreign audiences for reporting in the department's strategic planning process.

In addition, State uses contractors to conduct evaluations of public diplomacy programs to assess these efforts. For example, State sponsored an evaluation of the English Access Micro-scholarship program in 2006

²³The eight locations were Ecuador, Germany, India, Indonesia, Morocco, the occupied Palestinian territories, South Africa, and Turkey.

and is currently sponsoring an evaluation of the Bureau of International Information Programs' Speakers and Specialist Program, according to the Evaluation and Measurement Unit.²⁴

Lack of Evaluations of Outreach Platforms Makes It Difficult to Assess Their Relative Effectiveness and Allocate Resources Effectively

Both the executive branch and congressional committees need evaluative information to help them make decisions about the programs they oversee—information that tells them whether, and in what important ways, a program is working well or poorly and why.²⁵ While we acknowledge the challenges in measuring the results from public diplomacy activities, our prior work has emphasized the benefits of evaluating public diplomacy programs.²⁶ Specifically, in 2009 we reported that comprehensively measuring the performance of public diplomacy efforts would help State understand which efforts are most effective and determine how to make most efficient use of limited resources.²⁷

State has acknowledged the importance of using evaluations to inform resource allocation decisions. The strategic framework for public diplomacy notes that State has not uniformly used, or built into planning, tools for evaluating the short- and long-term impact of its public diplomacy programs. In addition, annual public diplomacy budgets have been determined by previous year spending, not by changing global priorities. The framework thus identifies deploying resources in line with current priorities as a strategic imperative and calls for strengthening structures and processes to ensure effective public diplomacy.

To date, however, State has not evaluated its outreach platforms. Of the various public diplomacy outreach platforms discussed in this report,

²⁴The first interim project report of this evaluation will be available in September 2010, according to State.

²⁵GAO, *Performance Measurement and Evaluation: Definitions and Relationships*, [GAO-05-739SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 2005).

²⁶The *National Framework for Strategic Communication* cites several examples of challenges to measuring the results of public diplomacy programs, including difficulties in measuring perceptions, isolating the effects of engagement from other influences, and measuring the long-term effects of engagement.

²⁷[GAO-09-679SP](#).

State has attempted to evaluate only the American Corners program.²⁸ However, despite the fact that the evaluation cost the department \$400,000, according to the director of the Evaluation and Measurement Unit, State never cleared the final evaluation report for release, and State officials involved in its preparation said that the evaluation was flawed.²⁹ State has no plans to evaluate American Corners in the near future. Public Diplomacy office directors in two of State's regional bureaus that contain nearly 60 percent of all American Corners told us that an evaluation of American Corners would help determine how well they are performing and where to place future Corners.

State has not formally evaluated the effectiveness of any of the other outreach platforms described in this report. Currently, the department is sponsoring an evaluation of its electronic media engagement, but it has no plans for evaluating any of its other outreach platforms.³⁰ As a result, State has only anecdotal, and sometimes conflicting, information regarding their effectiveness. For example, according to a Public Affairs Officer in Mexico, one of the BNCs in that country still displays magazines that are 30 years old. Meanwhile, other BNCs, such as the three we visited in Brasilia and São Paulo, have modern facilities. Similarly, conflicting anecdotal evidence exists regarding VPPs. For instance, a senior official at the embassy in Brazil said that establishing VPPs as static Web sites may create false expectations among local populations if the mission is not prepared to conduct continuous engagement. On the other hand, officials in the embassy in China told us that the network of VPPs in China—supported by the mission's commitment to travel to VPP cities—has allowed the mission to engage large numbers of Chinese citizens it otherwise could not have reached.

²⁸In soliciting proposals from potential contractors for the pilot evaluation of this program in 2005, State noted that no previous evaluative research related to the American Corners program had been conducted. The pilot evaluation was completed in 2007 and covered eight American Corners in four countries in East Asia, assessing their performance on four indicators.

²⁹State officials did not provide us with a final report of this evaluation. We reviewed an executive summary of the evaluation for this report.

³⁰In 2009, State began an Electronic Media Engagement Program evaluation, which is intended to assess the effectiveness and efficiency of IIP's outreach to foreign audiences using electronic media and Web 2.0 tools. State expects the interim report from this evaluation to be released in September 2010.

Without information on the effectiveness of outreach platforms, it is difficult to determine the individual and collective contributions that they make to the achievement of State's public diplomacy goals, such as expanding engagement with foreign audiences. Further, the lack of such information limits State's ability to make appropriate adjustments to its plans or direct resources toward successful activities.

Conclusions

After closing many of its publicly accessible facilities in recent decades, State, in 2007, initiated efforts to expand the U.S. diplomatic presence beyond foreign capitals. As a part of these efforts, State attempted to create new and expand existing platforms from which it could engage foreign audiences, for example, by proposing the creation of new APPs. However, State achieved limited success. More recently, State's Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs has outlined a strategic framework for public diplomacy, including new efforts to revitalize existing and establish new outreach platforms. We are encouraged by the development of this framework and its acknowledgment of the importance of using evaluations to inform resource allocation decisions, especially in light of current and likely future budgetary constraints. Given wide disparities in the costs of the various platforms—ranging from \$10,000 to sustain an existing American Corner to several million dollars to establish @america in Jakarta—State must weigh various trade-offs in determining which platform to use in which location. However, State lacks comprehensive information on the relative effectiveness of its platforms, such as how each platform has expanded U.S. engagement with foreign audiences. Without such information, it is difficult for policy makers to make an accurate assessment of the relative benefits of each type of outreach platform and effectively allocate scarce resources.

Recommendation for Executive Action

To help ensure that plans for using and expanding State's outreach platforms are informed by data on the extent to which each type of outreach platform supports public diplomacy goals, we recommend that the Secretary of State conduct a departmentwide assessment of the effectiveness of State's overseas outreach platforms, such as by measuring how each platform has expanded engagement with foreign audiences. This assessment should include all the platforms mentioned in this report as well as new platforms, as they are developed.

Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

State provided written comments on a draft of this report. The comments are reprinted in Appendix III. State endorsed the report's findings and conclusions and agreed with its recommendation. State also requested that we be available to consult regarding the assessment of the effectiveness of overseas outreach platforms and that we furnish criteria to measure the platforms' effectiveness. We would be happy to provide and discuss with State generally accepted criteria regarding program evaluations that may be of use to the department as it implements our recommendation. However, government auditing standards require us to maintain our independence of audited entities; thus it would be inappropriate for us to prescribe how, specifically, the department should evaluate its programs. State also provided technical comments, which we have incorporated as appropriate.

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

If you or your staff have any questions concerning this report, please contact Jess T. Ford at (202) 512-4128 or fordj@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 major contributions to this report are listed in appendix IV.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jess T. Ford". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial "J".

Jess T. Ford, Director
International Affairs and Trade

Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

In this report, we (1) describe external outreach platforms the Department of State (State) currently utilizes overseas, (2) examine the challenges and opportunities State faces in creating and expanding these platforms, (3) review State's plans to expand its overseas outreach platforms, and (4) assess the extent to which State has evaluated these platforms.

To describe the external platforms State uses to conduct outreach, we obtained State's inventory of platforms as of May 2010, which the department compiled during the course of our review. We also obtained data from regional bureaus and State's Bureau of International Information Programs (IIP) on the number, type, and location of external platforms. We analyzed State's *Foreign Affairs Manual* and reviewed reports by State's Inspector General, the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, and think tanks such as the Center for Strategic and International Studies, RAND, and the Heritage Foundation. We also examined Mission Strategic Plans for dozens of countries, which we selected based on the number and diversity of outreach platforms. We interviewed officials in State's Office of the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, public diplomacy office directors in each regional bureau, officials in IIP and the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, and officials in the Bureau of Information Resource Management's Office of eDiplomacy. We also traveled to Brasilia and São Paulo, Brazil; Beijing and Wuhan, China; and Jakarta and Medan, Indonesia, to meet with embassy officials and observe outreach platforms and activities. Our fieldwork included visits to two American Presence Posts (APP), two American Centers, three Binational Centers (BNC), four American Corners, and three Information Resource Centers.¹ We selected these locations based on the diversity of platforms in the country, size of the country, and importance of the country to U.S. national interests, but our observations from these countries are not generalizable to the universe of all outreach platforms and U.S. missions overseas. GAO teams traveling to Mexico and Pakistan for other engagements also interviewed embassy officials and collected information for this review.

We compared data on the number of outreach platforms provided by the Office of the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs with similar data provided by other bureaus and interviewed the officials

¹We did not include Information Resource Centers in our description of State's overseas outreach platforms because our review focused on external platforms not located within the embassy. Where they exist outside of the embassy, Information Resource Centers are generally part of an American Center or Binational Center.

responsible for compiling these data. State officials indicated that the inventory is a work in progress, and we noted a few minor discrepancies between data from different sources. Acknowledging these limitations, we determined that these data were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of establishing the number and location of external outreach platforms overseas.

To describe the challenges and opportunities State faces in creating and expanding its platforms, we reviewed prior GAO work on public diplomacy, diplomatic security, and embassy construction, as well as reports listed above. We analyzed the Secure Embassy Construction and Counterterrorism Act and other legislation regarding public diplomacy as well as pertinent sections of the *Foreign Affairs Manual*. In addition to meeting with State public diplomacy officials in Washington and overseas, we also interviewed officials in the Bureaus of Overseas Building Operations and Diplomatic Security. To understand the challenges and opportunities faced by other countries in conducting public outreach, we met with officials representing seven countries and toured their facilities. These facilities included the British Council, China's Confucius Institute, Germany's Goethe Institut, France's Alliance Française, the Netherlands' Erasmus Huis, the Japan Foundation, and the Australian Center. We also toured an Iranian Corner at a university in Jakarta, Indonesia.

To review State's plans for expanding its outreach platforms, we analyzed State's February 2010 public diplomacy strategic framework and the department's budget requests for fiscal years 2010 and 2011. We discussed the activities of working groups convened to develop implementation plans for the strategic framework with senior public diplomacy officials and reviewed plans under development as of June 2010. We examined planning documents, such as Bureau and Mission Strategic Plans, including those from missions with existing and proposed APPs. We also reviewed statements by the President and current and former Secretaries of State and met with the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs. We also interviewed State officials in Washington, D.C., and overseas to learn about outreach plans at the mission level. Finally, we interviewed officials regarding the planned @america in Jakarta and toured its proposed site.

To assess the extent to which State has evaluated these platforms, we reviewed completed program evaluations of State's public diplomacy activities, including the executive summary of the American Corners Program Pilot Evaluation and reports from State's Public Diplomacy Impact project. We also reviewed State Inspector General embassy

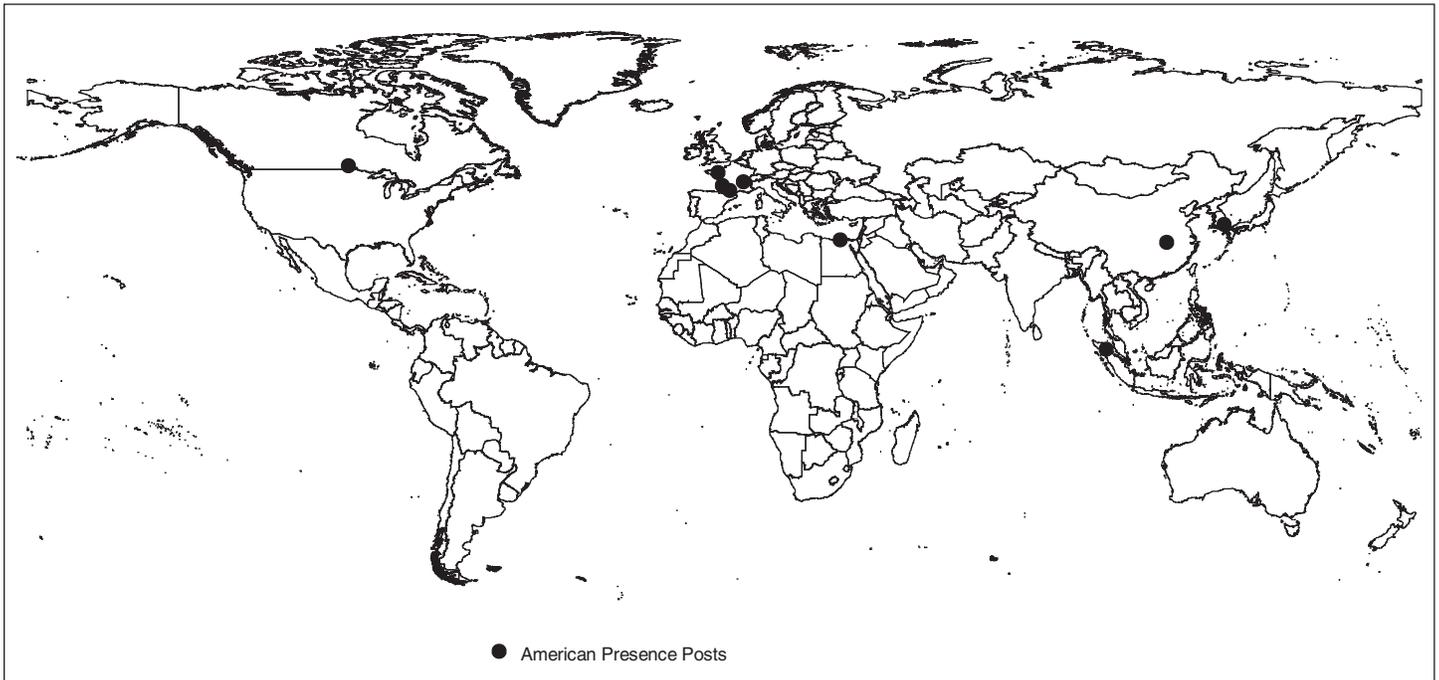
inspection reports and its interim review of the Global Repositioning Initiative. In addition, we reviewed prior GAO work regarding the benefits of evaluating government programs.² We reviewed State's planning and budget documents, such as the joint State-U.S. Agency for International Development strategic plan for 2007-2012 and State's Congressional Budget Justifications for fiscal years 2008 through 2011. In addition to meeting with the State officials in Washington, D.C., and overseas listed above, we met with staff from the Evaluation and Measurement Unit of the Office of the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs.

We performed our work from September 2009 to July 2010 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.

²GAO, *Performance Measurement and Evaluation: Definitions and Relationships*, GAO-05-739SP (Washington, D.C.: May 2005).

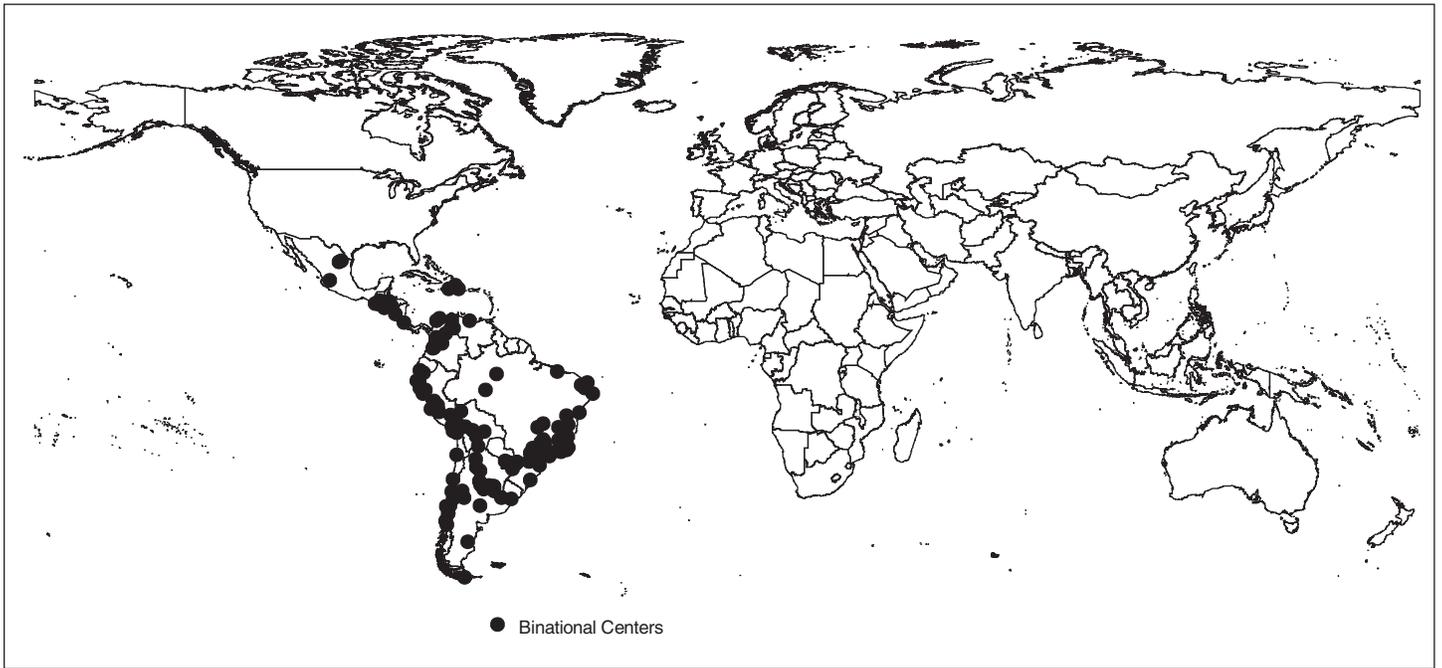
Appendix II: Maps of Overseas Public Diplomacy Platforms

Figure 9: Map of Existing American Presence Posts



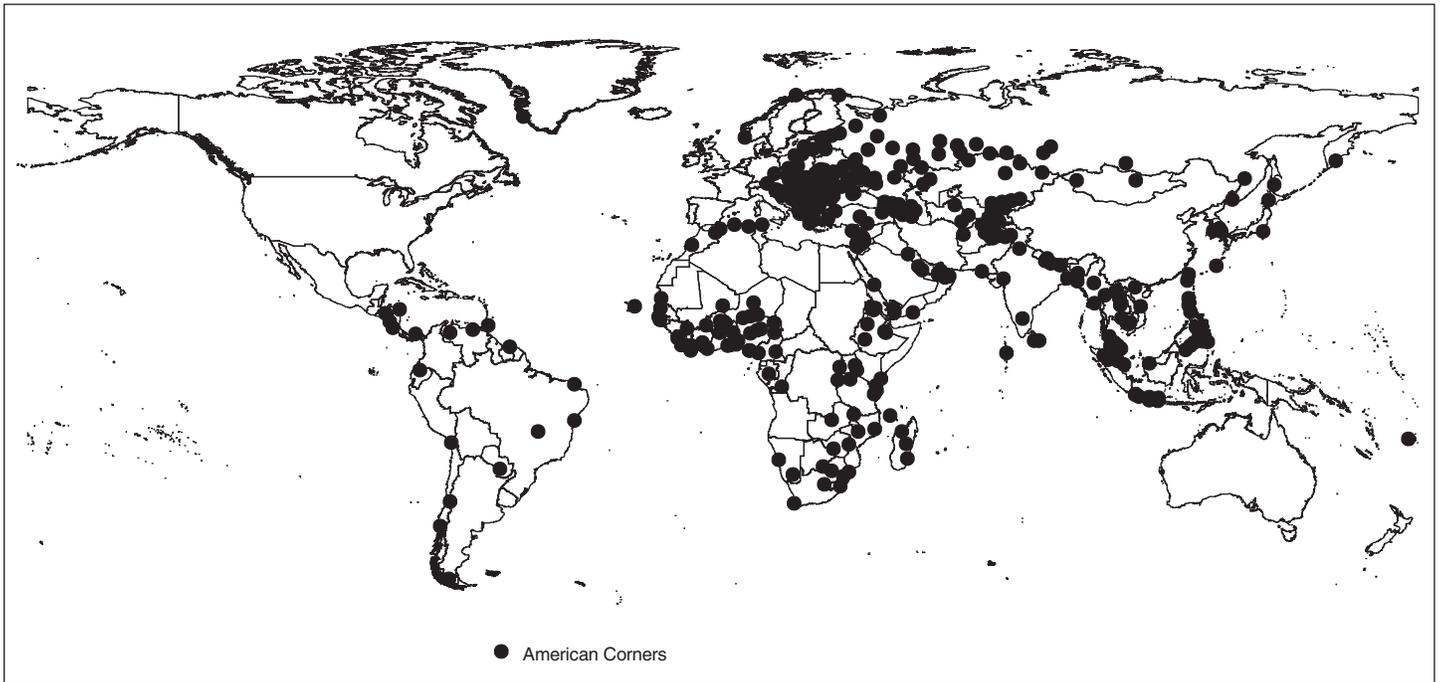
Sources: State (data); Mapinfo (map).

Figure 11: Map of Existing Binational Centers



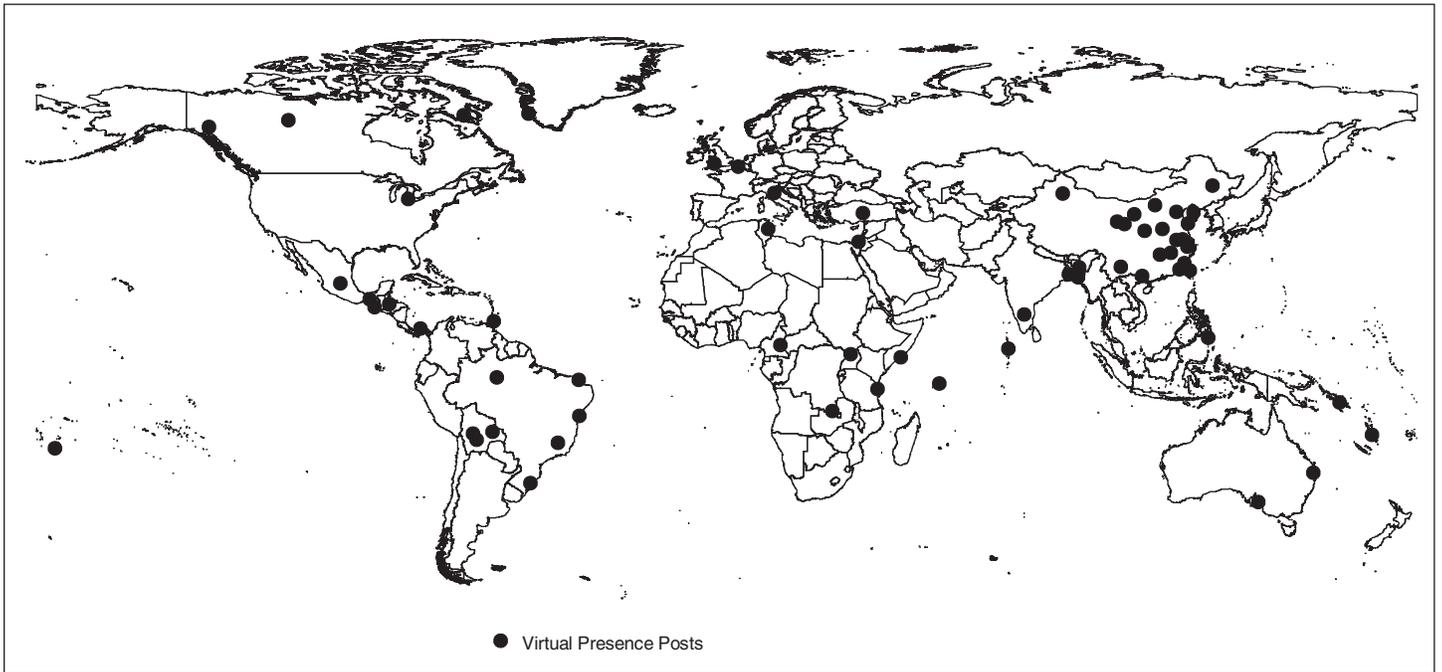
Sources: State (data); Mapinfo (map).

Figure 12: Map of Existing American Corners



Sources: State (data); Mapinfo (map).

Figure 13: Map of Existing Virtual Presence Posts



Sources: State (data); Mapinfo (map).

Appendix III: Comments from the Department of State



United States Department of State

Chief Financial Officer

Washington, D.C. 20520

Ms. Jacquelyn Williams-Bridgers
Managing Director
International Affairs and Trade
Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20548-0001

JUL 09 2010

Dear Ms. Williams-Bridgers:

We appreciate the opportunity to review your draft report, "ENGAGING FOREIGN AUDIENCES: Assessment of Public diplomacy Platforms Could Help Improve State Department Plans to Expand Engagement," GAO Job Code 320716.

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

If you have any questions concerning this response, please contact Elizabeth Whitaker, Strategic Communications Officer, Bureau of Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs at (202) 632-6309.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "James L. Millette".

James L. Millette

cc: GAO – Jess Ford
R – Judith McHale
State/OIG – Tracy Burnett

Department of State Comments on GAO Draft Report

ENGAGING FOREIGN AUDIENCES:
Assessment of Public Diplomacy Platforms Could Help Improve
State Department Plans to Expand Engagement
(GAO-10-767, GAO Code 320716)

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on your draft report entitled “ENGAGING FOREIGN AUDIENCES: Assessment of Public Diplomacy Platforms Could Help Improve State Department Plans to Expand Engagement.” The Department of State recognizes the importance of maintaining publicly accessible platforms to promote increased engagement with foreign public audiences. In fact, the Strategic Framework for Public Diplomacy promulgated by the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs puts a great deal of emphasis on restoring and expanding the publicly accessible “spaces,” and the Under Secretary called together a working group to identify specific tactics and approaches to do that. We are now at work on implementing a number of the recommendations from the American Spaces working group.

The Department of State endorses the main findings and conclusions of the GAO report. We believe that GAO’s assessment of the Public Diplomacy Platforms is accurate and balanced.

The Department of State concurs with the recommendation contained in the report and has already taken steps to implement this recommendation. In order to ensure that this recommendation is implemented in an efficient, effective, and economical manner, the Department of State requests that GAO be available to consult as we undertake a Department-wide assessment of the effectiveness of overseas outreach platforms. The Department of State believes that GAO may be able to furnish criteria to be used in developing and measuring the platforms’ effectiveness or help develop a design matrix to evaluate the process, governance and performance measures arising from the Department-wide assessment.

Appendix IV: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

Jess Ford (202) 512-4128 or fordj@gao.gov

Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the individual named above, Jason Bair, Assistant Director; Robert Ball; Rajiv D'Cruz; Martin De Alteriis; Grace Lui; and Michael Silver made key contributions to this report. Karen Deans, Mae Liles, John Mingus, Anthony Pordes, and Michael Simon provided technical assistance.

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