

Why GAO Did This Study

To assess quality of life and identify areas for improvement, the Air Force conducts periodic surveys of its airmen. Recent surveys indicated that many of them were not satisfied with the quality, variety, and availability of food at Air Force bases. As a result, the Air Force implemented an initiative in 2010—the Food Transformation Initiative—to improve on-base food services. The Air Force piloted the initiative at six installations with a \$10.3 million contract awarded in August 2010 and plans to eventually expand the initiative to other installations in the United States. The Senate and House Armed Services Committees directed GAO to undertake a comprehensive review of the initiative. GAO reviewed (1) the initiative's objectives and performance measures, (2) implementation progress, (3) the initiative's impact on food service workers at the pilot installations, and (4) alternative approaches the Air Force considered. GAO reviewed documentation on the initiative, interviewed Air Force and contractor officials, and visited four of the six pilot installations.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Air Force take several actions to improve management of the Food Transformation Initiative, including developing an evaluation plan to assess the initiative's results before moving beyond the pilot. In commenting on a draft of this report, the Department of Defense concurred with all the recommendations.

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DEFENSE MANAGEMENT

Actions Needed to Improve Management of Air Force's Food Transformation Initiative

What GAO Found

The Air Force established eight objectives for its Food Transformation Initiative, but it has not fully developed metrics or an evaluation plan for assessing the initiative's results. When GAO began its review, the Air Force had developed metrics for three of the eight objectives. The Air Force subsequently identified metrics for four additional objectives, but it did not have a robust evaluation plan, as called for by best practices derived from prior GAO work and various guidance documents, that describes how the initiative's results will be measured. Without well-defined metrics, contained in an evaluation plan that is clearly linked to its objectives, the Air Force is not in a position to adequately assess the results of the pilot and make informed decisions about the initiative's future.

The Air Force has made some improvements to its food service operations as a result of the Food Transformation Initiative, but a key part of the initiative has been delayed, and it is too early to measure its results. The Air Force has obtained mostly positive feedback on the changes it has made, but the data collected to date are preliminary. In addition, the campus dining concept, which will allow airmen to use their meal cards to eat at on-base dining facilities other than the main dining facility, had not been implemented at the time of GAO's review. Therefore, this concept, a key part of the initiative, could not be assessed. Furthermore, initial data show that the Air Force may have underestimated some of the costs of the initiative, by overestimating the number of hours military personnel can provide the contractor for cooking and food preparation.

The Food Transformation Initiative, as implemented so far, has had varying effects on food service workers. All military and civilian cooks at the main dining facilities have maintained their jobs, but some expressed concerns about increases in their job responsibilities. Most contract mess attendant employees have retained their jobs, but the total number of these employees has been reduced and some contract employees lost their jobs as a result of the initiative. Further, most civilian employees at nonappropriated fund food and beverage operations, such as clubs and snack bars, accepted jobs with the new contractor, but their job security remains uncertain as the contractor tries to make the facilities profitable and the remaining parts of the initiative are implemented.

The Air Force included three options in its analysis of alternatives in selecting its method for improving its food services, but did not follow its own guidance for identifying and assessing alternatives that would meet the program's stated objectives. GAO found that two of the three alternatives were not viable options to be considered because they only met three of the program's eight objectives. In addition, the Air Force may be able to reduce its food service costs by reviewing and renegotiating its existing food service contracts at bases that are not part of the pilot program.