

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-17-711](#), a report to the Chairman, the Committee on the Budget, U.S. Senate.

Why GAO Did This Study

Agencies communicate with the public regarding their functions, policies, and activities. In September 2016, GAO reported that the federal government spends about \$1.5 billion per year on public relations activities, carried out through advertising and public relations contracts and by public affairs employees.

GAO was asked to describe the purposes and reported benefits of federal agencies' public relations investments. This report reviews (1) the activities selected agencies conducted using advertising and public relations contracts and public affairs employees, and their purposes; (2) how the level of resources the agencies devote to these activities has changed over the past decade and factors officials identified as affecting these changes; and (3) how the agencies measure results of these activities.

GAO selected four case study agencies—CFPB, FEMA, NASA, and USCIS—based on factors including obligations for advertising and public relations contracts, numbers of public affairs employees, and agency missions and public interactions. GAO reviewed documentation for contracts valued at or over \$150,000 from fiscal years 2012 through 2016; examined staff position descriptions, performance information, and employment data; and interviewed officials at these agencies.

CFPB and the Department of Homeland Security provided technical comments on this report, which were incorporated as appropriate. NASA did not have comments.

View [GAO-17-711](#). For more information, contact Heather Krause at (202) 512-6806 or krauseh@gao.gov

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PUBLIC RELATIONS SPENDING

Selected Agencies' Activities Supported by Contracts and Public Affairs Staff

What GAO Found

At the agencies GAO examined—the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB), Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS)—most of the advertising and public relations contracts GAO reviewed and public affairs staff responsibilities focused on informing and educating the public. These agencies' advertising and public relations contract obligations were concentrated in a small number of contracts that supported major agency initiatives and communications services. Specifically,

- **CFPB:** The four largest contracts (\$22.6 million out of \$32.8 million) focused on increasing public awareness of CFPB's tools and resources related to its statutory responsibility to educate and empower consumers to make better financial decisions.
- **FEMA:** The largest contract (\$8.7 million out of \$20.7 million) supported the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP). The agency's role in administering the program includes advertising to encourage people to buy flood insurance. Other high-value contracts promoted emergency preparedness, including the *Ready* campaign.
- **NASA:** The two largest contracts (\$7.6 million out of \$17.1 million) supported NASA's Communications Support Services Center, which provides graphics and other services across the agency.
- **USCIS:** The two largest contracts (\$18.1 million out of \$19.8 million) were for outreach for two immigration-related eligibility verification systems—E-Verify and Systematic Alien Verification for Entitlements.

Over the past decade, changes in advertising and public relations contract obligations and public affairs employees varied at the selected agencies due to changes in agency activities and increased use of digital media. For example, contract obligations were relatively stable at NASA and USCIS. CFPB, on the other hand, saw an increase in obligations due to ramping up operations from 2011, when the agency began operations. Variances in FEMA's obligations stemmed primarily from fluctuations in NFIP contracts due to changing priorities. The number of public affairs employees generally increased at the selected agencies, but was relatively stable at NASA. These increases were due to changes in operations and staffing structure. For example, USCIS changed its staffing model to add more lower-level public affairs staff. Officials at three of the four agencies we reviewed noted an increased use of digital media for public outreach, though the effects on contract and staff resources have been mixed.

The agencies measured performance of their activities using web-based and other indicators, such as the number of website visits and length of time spent on a page, and reported using this information to inform decision making. However, agency officials identified challenges in measuring the performance of these activities, including a lack of qualitative data on whether and how information is being used. Selected agencies have taken some steps to address these challenges by, for example, administering surveys to obtain additional feedback.