

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-18-255T](#), a statement for the record to the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, Committee on Financial Services, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Prepared This Statement

In September 2014, the House Committee on Financial Services requested that GAO review OFR, an office within the Department of the Treasury. Among other things, GAO was asked to assess the agency's usefulness to regulators and Congress in assessing systemic risk in the financial system and any delays or setbacks in its major undertakings. GAO subsequently initiated a review of OFR in January 2015. However, during the course of its review, GAO encountered substantial delays in obtaining access to agency officials and information. Separately, whistleblower allegations and an ongoing Treasury OIG investigation led GAO to terminate the engagement.

This statement discusses (1) GAO's audit standards and protocols regarding access to agency information, (2) issues GAO encountered in accessing information at OFR, and (3) GAO's decision to terminate the engagement without issuing a product.

View [GAO-18-255T](#). For more information, contact Lawrence L. Evans, Jr., at (202) 512-8678 or [evansl@gao.gov](mailto:evansl@gao.gov)

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## OFFICE OF FINANCIAL RESEARCH

### Observations on GAO Access to Information on Programs and Activities

#### GAO Views

GAO has broad statutory authority to audit and evaluate agency transactions, programs, and activities, as well as a broad statutory right of access to agency records. Auditing standards require that analysts and financial auditors promptly obtain sufficient, relevant evidence to provide a reasonable basis for any related findings and conclusions. Therefore, prompt access to all records and other relevant information is needed for the effective and efficient performance of GAO's work. GAO has promulgated protocols describing how it will interact with the agencies it audits. Among other things, GAO expects that agencies will promptly comply with requests for all categories of needed information. GAO also expects to receive full and timely access to agency officials who have stewardship over the requested records and to agency employees responsible for the programs, issues, and other factors covered by such records.

During the course of its review of the Office of Financial Research (OFR), GAO experienced repeated problems with gaining access to both people and documents. Many meetings took months to schedule, some were canceled with short notice, and responses to requests for documentation and other information were delayed. GAO made repeated attempts to obtain required documentation and to schedule interviews with agency officials. These attempts included frequent follow-up emails and phone calls, the imposition of deadlines for document delivery that were either not complied with or resulted in production of some but not all required documents, and a discussion between GAO Counsel and the Chief Counsel of OFR regarding the agency's continuing delays. Despite these extensive efforts, GAO experienced significant delays in getting access to officials and agency documents.

Whistleblower allegations raised additional concerns about the quality of information that OFR provided GAO. As GAO discussed with House Committee on Financial Services staff, in June 2016 GAO was contacted by an anonymous whistleblower who alleged that OFR had manipulated the information it provided. GAO subsequently learned that the Department of the Treasury's Office of Inspector General (Treasury OIG) was conducting an investigation of similar allegations from whistleblowers. Because of concerns about the quality of OFR's information and the fact that the Treasury OIG was conducting an investigation, GAO decided to terminate the engagement consistent with GAO protocols and practices. However, GAO agreed with Committee staff that, following the completion of the Treasury OIG's investigation, GAO would be in a better position to initiate a new review of OFR.