# GAO Highlights

**March 2020**

# FEDERALLY FUNDED RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT CENTERS

## Improved Oversight and Evaluation Needed for DOD's Data Access Pilot Program

## Why GAO Did This Study

FFRDCs provide federal agencies with research and development functions, technical systems engineering capabilities, and policy development and decision-making studies, among other services. The Federal Acquisition Regulation states that FFRDCs have a special relationship with DOD, which can give FFRDCs access to sensitive data beyond what would commonly be shared with contractors.

The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017 directed DOD to establish a 3-year pilot program that allows FFRDCs streamlined access to sensitive data maintained by DOD. It also included a provision for GAO to report on the pilot program within 2 years of implementation. This report addresses the extent to which (1) FFRDCs are using the pilot program, (2) DOD put procedures in place to protect data accessed, and (3) DOD is evaluating the pilot program.

GAO reviewed DOD guidance and FFRDC processes, pilot reports for January 2018 through September 2019, and DOD's plans and efforts for evaluating the pilot program. GAO also selected a nongeneralizable sample of six projects—at least one from each FFRDC with an enrolled project as of December 2018—for further review. In addition, GAO assessed the pilot program against leading practices for pilot design.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO is making six recommendations, including that DOD take steps to ensure data protections are in the agreements and followed, collect information on projects, and evaluate the pilot. DOD agreed with the recommendations.

## What GAO Found

The Department of Defense (DOD) launched a 3-year pilot program in December 2017 to enable a streamlined process to share certain sensitive data, such as data collected from its contractors, with its Federally Funded Research and Development Centers (FFRDC). At times, FFRDCs need to access such data to support DOD. The pilot was intended to reduce the burden on FFRDCs to seek permission from hundreds of contractors to access information needed for their research. Six of DOD's 10 FFRDCs have taken part in the pilot, enrolling a combined total of 33 projects, as shown in the table.

**Department of Defense (DOD) FFRDC Pilot Projects Enrolled as of September 2019**

| FFRDC | Project status | Projects (number) |
|---|---|---|
| National Defense Research Institute | 5 complete; 6 ongoing; 7 removed | 18 |
| Systems and Analyses Center | 1 complete; 3 ongoing; 3 removed; 1 on hiatus | 8 |
| Project AIR FORCE | 3 complete; 1 removed | 4 |
| Arroyo Center | 1 ongoing | 1 |
| National Security Engineering Center | 1 complete | 1 |
| Software Engineering Institute | 1 complete | 1 |
| **Total** | | **33** |

Source: GAO analysis of DOD and Federally Funded Research and Development Centers (FFRDC) information. | GAO-20-272

Note: Projects were removed when researchers discovered that they did not need access to the data requested. The project on hiatus is pending a decision about the continuation of this study.

DOD officials and FFRDC representatives reported that the streamlined process made the use of sensitive data feasible. As a result, FFRDCs with completed projects in GAO's sample indicated they were able to provide more robust analyses or insights to DOD.

DOD guidance for the pilot program established procedures to protect sensitive data. But GAO found that DOD did not incorporate all of the details of the required protections into its agreements with FFRDCs. Further, GAO found that not all FFRDCs were performing annual certification of financial disclosure forms, as required by its agreements with DOD. DOD does not have a process to ensure that all the protections pertaining to FFRDCs' streamlined access to sensitive data are being followed. Without a process that defines roles and responsibilities, DOD cannot ensure that FFRDCs adhere to the protections.

DOD developed goals for the pilot program and outlined what information was to be obtained for each participating project, actions that are consistent with GAO's leading practices for pilot design. However, DOD has not developed a plan for evaluating the program nor has it consistently collected information on about a third of the pilot projects. Leading practices for pilot design call for an evaluation plan, which should include an assessment methodology and identify responsibilities as to how the evaluation will be conducted. Without an evaluation plan and a mechanism to collect information on pilot projects, DOD will not be positioned to identify the effectiveness of the pilot program and benefit from lessons learned. Such information will be useful as Congress considers the path forward after the pilot ends in December 2020.

_____ **United States Government Accountability Office**