

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-21-152](#), a report to congressional addressees

Why GAO Did This Study

Federal decision makers need data of sufficient quality to assess whether federal programs achieve intended results. Effective data governance is a key component to ensure data quality.

Congress included provisions in statute for GAO to report on the quality of spending data and use of evidence. This report examines: (1) selected agencies' efforts to meet the data governance milestones in the 2020 Action Plan; (2) the extent to which agency data quality plans for spending data were consistent with OMB guidance; (3) the extent to which the CDO Council follows leading collaboration practices; and (4) key questions to help CDOs effectively implement data governance. To address these objectives, GAO selected four agencies to represent a range of data governance experiences: (1) USDA, (2) Commerce, (3) HUD, and (4) NSF. GAO reviewed documents and interviewed officials regarding agencies' implementation of data governance. GAO also interviewed state and local CDOs and officials from academia and industry.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making a total of nine recommendations to the four selected agencies to address milestones in the 2020 Action Plan and to ensure their data quality plans are consistent with OMB guidance. GAO is also making one recommendation to the CDO Council to develop additional mechanisms for monitoring progress toward established goals. The four selected agencies generally agreed with GAO's recommendations. The CDO Council did not agree or disagree with the recommendation.

View [GAO-21-152](#). For more information, contact Michelle Sager at (202) 512-6806 or sagerm@gao.gov.

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DATA GOVERNANCE

Agencies Made Progress in Establishing Governance, but Need to Address Key Milestones

What GAO Found

The Departments of Agriculture (USDA), Commerce (Commerce), Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and the National Science Foundation (NSF) have recently taken steps to establish data governance consistent with applicable statute and guidance. The selected agencies established data governance frameworks to help ensure that their data assets are transparent, accessible, and of sufficient quality to support their agencies' missions, improve operations, and provide information to the public. All four agencies designated Chief Data Officers (CDO) as required under the Open, Public, Electronic and Necessary Government Data Act of 2018 (OPEN Government Data Act). As directed in the *Federal Data Strategy 2020 Action Plan* (2020 Action Plan), USDA, Commerce, and NSF established data governance bodies and published information about them on their websites. USDA and NSF have also established agency-wide data strategies. However, Commerce and HUD have not conducted an initial data maturity assessment, as required by September 20, 2020. All four agencies identified opportunities to increase staff data skills but three agencies did not perform an assessment of staff data literacy skills by July 31, 2020, as directed in the 2020 Action Plan.

USDA, Commerce, HUD, and NSF developed data quality plans for their spending data reported under the Digital Accountability and Transparency Act of 2014 (DATA Act) that were largely consistent with Office of Management and Budget (OMB) guidance. However, Commerce and HUD did not include plans to ensure that information on award descriptions—defined as a description of the purpose of the award—is reported in plain English as required. Without plain English descriptions, the public and other users of the data may not clearly understand the purpose of the award.

The OPEN Government Data Act also established a CDO Council to identify government-wide best practices for the use, dissemination, and generation of data. The Council adopted its charter in June 2020. The Council supports agency CDOs' implementation of data governance and provides a forum for cross-agency collaboration to address issues of national importance. The CDO Council could better realize these benefits by developing additional mechanisms to track progress toward established goals.

In addition to these requirements, the OPEN Government Data Act assigns the responsibility for implementing data governance to agency CDOs. Officials from academia, state and local governments, and industry told us that effectively implementing data governance requires a culture change that results in a shared understanding of the importance of using data as a strategic asset. Based on interviews with these officials and analysis of related documentation, GAO identified three key questions for federal CDOs to consider to effectively implement data governance:

1. How can the CDO ensure data governance strategies answer the agency's priority mission questions?
2. What are the CDO's key objectives with regard to data governance?
3. How can the CDO communicate the value of data governance?