SUBSTANCE USE DISORDER

Reliable Data Needed for Substance Abuse Prevention and Treatment Block Grant Program

Why GAO Did This Study

Treatment for SUD—the recurrent use of substances, such as illicit drugs, causing significant impairment—can help individuals reduce or stop substance use and improve their quality of life. SUDs, and in particular drug misuse, have been a persistent and long-standing public health issue in the United States.

Senate Report 115-289 contains a provision for GAO to review SUD treatment capacity. This report, among other things, describes what is known about SUD treatment facilities, services, and overall capacity; and examines the information SAMHSA uses to assess the effect of three grant programs on access to SUD treatment. GAO analyzed national SAMHSA data on SUD treatment facilities and providers, and reviewed studies that assessed treatment capacity. GAO also reviewed documentation for three of SAMHSA’s largest grant programs available to states, and compared the agency’s grant data quality to federal internal control standards. Finally, GAO interviewed SAMHSA officials and stakeholders, including provider groups.

What GAO Found

According to Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) data, the number of substance use disorder (SUD) treatment facilities and services increased since 2009. However, potential gaps in treatment capacity remain. For example, SAMHSA data show that, as of May 2020, most counties did not have all levels of SUD treatment available, including outpatient, residential, and hospital inpatient services; nearly one-third of counties had no levels of treatment available. Stakeholders GAO interviewed said it is important to have access to each level for treating individuals with varying SUD severity.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending that SAMHSA identify and implement changes to the SABG program’s data collection efforts to improve two elements of reliability—the consistency and relevance—of data collected on individuals served. SAMHSA concurred with this recommendation.

View GAO-21-58. For more information, contact Alyssa M. Hundrup at (202) 512-7114 or HundrupA@gao.gov.