COVID-19

HHS Agencies’ Planned Reviews of Vaccine Distribution and Communication Efforts Should Include Stakeholder Perspectives

What GAO Found

In late 2020 and early 2021, agencies within the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) set up federal programs for vaccine distribution and administration. State and local health officials and other stakeholders interviewed by GAO said these programs helped higher-risk populations access COVID-19 vaccination. For example, the Health Resources and Services Administration’s (HRSA) health center program provided vaccinations in medically underserved areas. However, these stakeholders also cited challenges, such as initially having limited or no information on the doses federal programs were sending to pharmacies and health centers in their communities. They said this made it difficult to decide which sites, including pharmacies and health centers, to send their own allocated doses when supply was limited.

Stakeholders told GAO the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) education materials, such as provider toolkits, were useful to address the public’s concerns about the safety of COVID-19 vaccines, but providers would have liked them sooner to be able to start promoting vaccination earlier. These stakeholders, including health officials, said they had difficulty managing public expectations and responding to questions about vaccine availability when they did not receive advance notice about changes in federal priority groups for vaccination.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making four recommendations, including that CDC and HRSA obtain input from and share lessons learned with key stakeholders as they conduct their future reviews. HHS concurred with GAO’s recommendations.