COVID-19
Information on HHS’s Public Education Campaign

What GAO Found
In the summer of 2020, the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs (ASPA) within the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) worked with procurement offices within the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to solicit proposals and make awards to two firms in support of a COVID-19 public education campaign. The primary goals of the campaign, according to award documents, were sharing information on preventing the spread of COVID-19 and increasing vaccine acceptance. ASPA officials developed and led the campaign, while FDA and NIH staff oversaw the technical aspects of the contracting process.

- FDA awarded a nearly $15 million contract in September 2020 to Atlas Research, a consulting firm. The award focused primarily on developing a series of public service announcements for multiple media channels. The announcements were to feature members of the entertainment industry and public health officials.
- NIH made a $250 million award in September 2020 to Fors Marsh Group, a consulting firm, which then developed multiple messages for the public on vaccine development and COVID-19 prevention. Messages were designed for television, radio, print and social media channels. Fors Marsh Group also designed the campaign’s theme and logo, We Can Do This (see figure).

HHS’s We Can Do This Web Page

In October 2020, following congressional inquiries and negative press coverage about the campaign, the then-Secretary of Health and Human Services convened a group of public health officials to ensure the campaign was serving important public health purposes. FDA terminated the Atlas Research contract in November 2020, following the HHS internal review. Fors Marsh Group has continued to work on the campaign.

ASPA paid for the two awards and other campaign costs with COVID-19 relief funds appropriated for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Specifically, CDC and ASPA entered into a $300 million interagency agreement, initially funded with $100 million from the CARES Act and $200 million from the Paycheck Protection Program and Health Care Enhancement Act. HHS budget officials reported that the department subsequently identified a more appropriate funding source, and CDC adjusted its budget accounts to use only its CARES Act funds for the $300 million interagency agreement with ASPA.