What GAO Did This Study

FOIA, enacted into law more than 50 years ago, seeks to improve the public’s access to government information and promote the principles of openness and accountability in government.

The CARES Act includes a provision for GAO to monitor and oversee the federal government’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic. GAO also was asked to review how the pandemic affected FOIA processes and procedures. This report examines (1) how key measures of FOIA administration changed from fiscal years 2019 to 2020 and over time since fiscal year 2012; (2) how selected agencies adapted their FOIA operations during the pandemic; and (3) how selected agencies’ backlog reduction plans aligned with standards for internal control and performance management practices.

GAO selected five agencies based on a variety of factors including the number of FOIA requests received, processed, and backlogged. GAO reviewed documents and interviewed officials from the selected agencies and the National Archives and Records Administration.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making a total of four recommendations, with one each to DOL, DHS, USDA, and OIP. These recommendations include that OIP should evaluate the usefulness and burden of collected performance information, and identify ways reporting can inform current and emerging challenges. The agencies agreed with the recommendations.

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