What GAO Found

In January 2022, GAO reported that the COVID-19 pandemic affected selected government-wide measures of Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) administration, while other indicators reflected ongoing longer-term trends. FOIA requests received declined by 8 percent and requests processed declined by 12 percent in fiscal year 2020, the first year of the pandemic, compared to the previous year.

FOIA Requests Received and Processed Government-wide, Fiscal Years 2012 through 2020

This report also found that four of five selected agencies—the Departments of Agriculture, Homeland Security, and Labor, and the Environmental Protection Agency—initially encountered temporary challenges preparing employees to work in the maximum telework environment. These challenges including working in a virtual environment and ensuring access to equipment at home. The agencies subsequently used various practices, such as providing interim releases of requested information, to help maintain operations.

GAO has reported that selected agencies faced continuing challenges with FOIA request backlogs. From fiscal years 2012 to 2020, the government-wide backlog increased by 97 percent. GAO has made several recommendations to address these challenges, including that agencies develop specific plans to reduce backlogs. However, three of these recommendations from its January 2022 report and two from its 2018 review have not yet been implemented.

GAO has reported that selected agencies had not (1) updated their policies and processes to reflect current proactive disclosure requirements, and (2) accurately and completely reported disclosures. Accordingly, it made six recommendations to these agencies to improve their management of proactive disclosures, which have not yet been implemented.

Taking actions to address backlogs and make proactive disclosures could help enhance government transparency and the efficient use of agency resources.