

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-22-105984](#), a report to the Chairman of the Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

CBP operators use a wide array of technologies to execute their missions, such as those related to counterterrorism, border security, and lawful trade and travel. The Innovation Team works to support these operators by delivering cutting-edge technologies. As of July 2022, it had initiated 73 pilot projects to demonstrate new technologies.

GAO was asked to review the Innovation Team's role in CBP's overarching process for acquiring new technologies. This report addresses the extent to which the team (1) established a performance assessment system that reflects key practices and (2) collaborated with key stakeholders.

GAO reviewed CBP and Innovation Team guidance and documentation; collected written responses from six of seven operator groups; and interviewed team leaders, front-line operators, and CBP acquisition officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making three recommendations to CBP, including that it strengthen the Innovation Team's performance assessments, update its guidance for collaborating with key operator groups, and document formal transition agreements. DHS concurred with these recommendations.

View [GAO-22-105984](#). For more information, contact Marie A. Mak at (202) 512-4841 or MakM@gao.gov.

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CUSTOMS AND BORDER PROTECTION

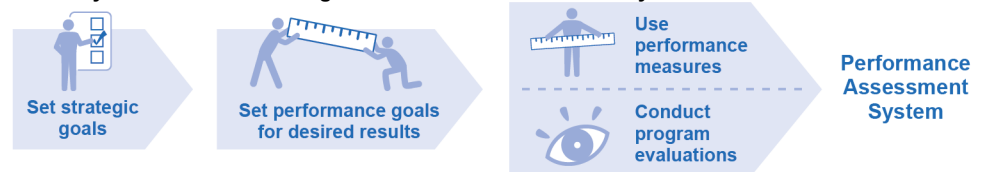
Innovation Team Has Opportunities to Mature Operations and Improve Performance

What GAO Found

In 2018, the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) Commissioner created an Innovation Team to more quickly deliver new, innovative, and disruptive technologies within CBP. These technologies have the potential to significantly alter how Border Patrol agents and other operators conduct their work and have included advanced communications systems and opioid detection capabilities.

To guide its efforts, the Innovation Team established strategic goals. However, as it continues to mature its operations, it has opportunities to further strengthen its performance assessments by implementing key practices. Specifically, the team established three performance goals, but it did not clearly derive these performance goals from its strategic goals. For example, it established a strategic goal to rapidly deliver capabilities, but it has not established an associated performance goal for the time frames it should take to complete its pilot projects. Additionally, the Innovation Team has not measured progress against two of its three established performance goals. As a result, the team cannot demonstrate the extent to which it has made progress toward its strategic goals, or identify performance shortfalls warranting corrective action, if any.

GAO Key Practices for Creating a Performance Assessment System



Source: GAO. | [GAO-22-105984](#)

The Innovation Team proactively collaborates with front-line operators—such as Border Patrol agents—but has opportunities to strengthen these collaborations. From 2019 to 2022, the team collaborated with seven groups of operators to get their feedback on the technologies it was piloting. However, the team's principal guidance document does not address how the team should coordinate with these operators because, according to officials, the guidance was in place before the collaboration began. Operator groups GAO interviewed raised questions about roles, responsibilities, and processes. For example, multiple operators asked whether they should play a larger role in identifying evolving technology needs.

The Innovation Team's guidance states that, prior to investing in a pilot project, the team is to identify a transition partner who will fully deploy the technology if a demonstration proves it to be a useful capability. Of the 39 completed pilot projects, 19 did not transition. GAO found that the most common reason that pilot projects did not transition—about a third of the time—was the inability to identify a transition partner willing to invest further in the technology. Innovation Team leadership told GAO that this happened because the transition agreements were informal. When the individuals involved left their organizations, the officials that remained were not willing to deploy the technologies. By consistently documenting formal agreements with transition partners, team leadership can help mitigate the risk of piloting a technology that lacks a transition path or interested owner.