

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-25-107346](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

CBP relied on contracts to operate and maintain soft-sided facilities (SSF). These facilities provide support and services when additional processing and holding capacity is needed for individuals apprehended along the southwest border. DHS also received funding to construct Joint Processing Centers (JPC)—permanent facilities that DHS expects will be more cost-effective than SSFs in the future.

GAO was asked to review CBP's and DHS's use and oversight of SSFs and JPCs. This report examines, among other things, (1) how CBP used contracts to support its SSF needs, and (2) the extent to which CBP and DHS engaged in planning efforts for SSF and JPC related acquisitions.

GAO analyzed contracting data on SSF contract obligations for fiscal years 2019-2024, and reviewed DHS budget plans, acquisition policies, and cost estimates for SSFs and JPCs. GAO also visited four selected SSF locations in Yuma and Tucson, AZ, El Paso, TX, and San Diego, CA based in part on apprehension and cost data; reviewed a nongeneralizable sample of eight of 69 contracts for SSFs and JPC construction contract documents; and interviewed DHS and CBP officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making six recommendations, including that CBP identifies and documents lessons learned from its SSF acquisitions; and that DHS documents its process for identifying future JPC locations and completes a life-cycle cost estimate for the Laredo JPC. DHS concurred with the recommendations.

For more information, contact Travis J. Masters at MastersT@gao.gov and Rebecca Gambler at GamblerR@gao.gov.

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BORDER SECURITY

DHS Needs to Better Plan for and Oversee Future Facilities for Short-term Custody

What GAO Found

Between 2019 and 2024, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP)—a component of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS)—experienced a significant increase in the number of individuals apprehended by U.S. Border Patrol along the southwest border. To address this issue, CBP used temporary soft-sided facilities—steel-framed tent-like structures—to provide additional capacity for processing and holding people in its custody.

Because they are temporary, the number of facilities can change due to trends in the number of people apprehended. In September 2024, CBP had seven soft-sided facilities with different capacities—from 983 to 2,500. In March 2025, CBP ceased operating these facilities due to a significant drop in apprehensions.

Aerial and Interior Views of Soft-Sided Facilities Used by U.S. Customs and Border Protection



Source: U.S. Customs and Border Protection/A. Franklin (left); U.S. Customs and Border Protection (right). | GAO-25-107346

CBP obligated over \$4 billion total from 2019 through 2024 for soft-sided facilities and related services. But CBP engaged in limited acquisition planning to inform its investments in these facilities. For example, CBP did not take steps to accurately determine the number of contractor staff it needed to operate those facilities. As a result, some locations had either too few or too many staff. While CBP is not currently operating soft-sided facilities, it is likely to do so in the future if there are future surges in apprehensions, according to officials. Thus, CBP has an opportunity to identify and document lessons learned to better inform future investment decisions for these facilities.

In fiscal year 2022, Congress appropriated \$330 million to DHS to develop and construct Joint Processing Centers. DHS plans to build and operate up to five of these facilities along the southwest border, which GAO estimates could cost roughly \$7 billion. While DHS engaged in some initial planning to acquire Joint Processing Centers, officials did not complete key acquisition planning and oversight steps that leading practices suggest are key to inform large-dollar investments. For example, DHS began construction on the Laredo, Texas Joint Processing Center in October 2024 without reliable and complete operations and cost information. Further, it has not fully documented requirements and criteria for determining its Joint Processing Center locations. Documenting its process for identifying future Joint Processing Center locations and completing a life-cycle cost estimate would ensure that DHS is managing billions of dollars of mission critical services efficiently and effectively.