



April 2025

BORDER SECURITY

Additional Actions Needed to Evaluate the Missing Migrant Program

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-25-107548](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

The U.S. Border Patrol responds to reports of migrants who may be missing or in distress upon attempting to enter the U.S. between ports of entry. In fiscal year 2023, Border Patrol recorded 704 migrant deaths and conducted over 5,800 rescue events. The Missing Persons and Unidentified Remains Act (the Act) requires U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) to submit an annual report to Congress including the number and location of unidentified remains found along the southwest border. CBP submitted its most recent report in April 2024. The Act also includes a provision for GAO to review how CBP collects data on migrant deaths.

This report addresses (1) how Border Patrol coordinates with external entities, such as medical examiner's offices, in instances of missing migrants and the recovery and identification of migrant remains; (2) how Border Patrol records data on migrant rescues, deaths, and other Missing Migrant Program activities; and (3) the extent to which Border Patrol has conducted oversight of the Missing Migrant Program. GAO analyzed Border Patrol policies and documentation. GAO also interviewed officials at Border Patrol headquarters and representatives from six external entities and conducted visits to five field locations.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making two recommendations to CBP to ensure Border Patrol develops an evaluation design to assess the Missing Migrant Program and collects information on activities linked to its scope and purpose. DHS concurred with the recommendations.

For more information, contact Rebecca Gambler at GamblerR@gao.gov.

April 2025

BORDER SECURITY

Additional Actions Needed to Evaluate the Missing Migrant Program

What GAO Found

The U.S. Border Patrol, within U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), established the Missing Migrant Program in 2017 to help rescue migrants in distress and reduce migrant deaths along the southwest border. In 2023, it expanded the program to selected locations on the northern and coastal borders. The program includes various efforts, such as placing rescue beacons and 9-1-1 placards in remote areas along the border.

Border Patrol Rescue Beacon and 9-1-1 Placard, Arizona, June-July 2024



Source: GAO photos. | GAO-25-107548

Border Patrol coordinates with external entities such as local law enforcement, nongovernmental organizations, and foreign consulates in response to reports of distressed or missing migrants and to assist in locating remains of suspected deceased migrants. The agency also works with medical examiners and coroners, among others, to identify suspected migrant remains and return them to their families.

In field locations, Border Patrol sector personnel record rescues and deaths in the agency's system of record. Border Patrol has also developed applications to track information on Missing Migrant Program field activities, such as tracking the status of responses to 911 calls.

Border Patrol oversees the Missing Migrant Program through regular calls and information collection. However, the agency has not developed an evaluation design that provides an overall approach to gathering and analyzing information to answer specific research questions about the program. Such a design would better position Border Patrol to answer questions about the extent to which the program is meeting its scope and purpose. Additionally, the information collected is not clearly linked to the Missing Migrant Program's scope and purpose of reducing migrant deaths and rescuing migrants in distress. Following the development of an evaluation design, collecting information that is clearly linked to the program's overall scope and purpose would better position Border Patrol and decision makers to understand the program's impact providing assistance to migrants in distress and preventing migrant deaths.

Contents

Letter		1
	Background	5
	Border Patrol Sectors Coordinate with and Assist External Entities to Rescue Migrants and Identify Remains	8
	Border Patrol Records Migrant Rescues and Deaths in Its System of Record and Has Developed Additional Tracking Applications	11
	Border Patrol Conducts Oversight of the Missing Migrant Program, But Has Not Fully Developed Its Evaluation Approach	15
	Conclusions	21
	Recommendations for Executive Action	22
	Agency Comment	22
Appendix I	Objectives, Scope, and Methodology	24
Appendix II	Comments from the Department of Homeland Security	27
Appendix III	GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgements	31
Figures		
	Figure 1: Eleven Border Patrol Sectors Participating in the Missing Migrant Program, as of October 2024	6
	Figure 2: Border Patrol 9-1-1 Placard and Rescue Beacon, Arizona, June 2024	7
	Figure 3: Border Patrol Sectors and Target Zones for Recording Data on Migrant Rescues and Deaths under the Missing Migrant Program	13
	Figure 4: Unclear Alignment Between Missing Migrant Program Lines of Effort and Strategic Goals	20

Abbreviations

DHS	Department of Homeland Security
CBP	U.S. Customs and Border Protection
BSITS	Border Safety Initiative Tracking System

This is a work of the U.S. government and is not subject to copyright protection in the United States. The published product may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without further permission from GAO. However, because this work may contain copyrighted images or other material, permission from the copyright holder may be necessary if you wish to reproduce this material separately.



April 7, 2025

The Honorable Rand Paul, M.D.
Chairman
The Honorable Gary C. Peters
Ranking Member
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
United States Senate

The Honorable Mark E. Green, M.D.
Chairman
The Honorable Bennie G. Thompson
Ranking Member
Committee on Homeland Security
House of Representatives

Within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) is the lead agency responsible for border security.¹ CBP's U.S. Border Patrol is responsible for securing U.S. borders between ports of entry, including patrolling nearly 6,000 miles of land borders with Canada and Mexico, and about 2,000 miles of coastal waters around Puerto Rico and the Florida Peninsula. As part of its mission, Border Patrol responds to reports of migrants attempting to enter the U.S. who may be missing or in distress. In fiscal year 2023, Border Patrol reported that it conducted 5,826 rescue events, resulting in 42,340 rescued migrants, and it recorded 704 migrant deaths.²

Congress has expressed concern regarding migrant deaths occurring regularly near the U.S. border and directed CBP to take actions to help

¹See 6 U.S.C. § 211(c). Among other responsibilities, CBP is responsible for facilitating the flow of legitimate travel and trade at our nation's borders and detecting and interdicting terrorists, drug smugglers, human traffickers, and other threats to the security of the U.S.

²CBP, *Rescue Beacons and Unidentified Remains: Fiscal Year 2024 Report to Congress* (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 26, 2024).

reduce the number of migrant deaths.³ Migrants attempting to illegally enter the U.S. risk injury or death when crossing the southwest border in remote, desert areas or in other areas with particularly rugged and dangerous terrain. To address this longstanding issue, Border Patrol initiated the Missing Migrant Program in 2017 to help rescue migrants in distress and reduce migrant deaths along the southwest border. Border Patrol operates the program in all southwest border sectors and, in fiscal year 2023, expanded it to the Swanton sector along the northern border and the Miami sector in Florida.⁴

Since April 2022, we have issued three reports on Border Patrol's Missing Migrant Program.⁵ In summary, we reported that Border Patrol issued nationwide procedures in September 2021 intended to help standardize how agents collect and record data, coordinate with external entities to locate and identify migrant remains, and assist migrants in distress.⁶ We also found that Border Patrol had not collected and recorded complete data on migrant deaths, nor had it reported these data to Congress or disclosed associated data limitations. In particular, we reported that Border Patrol was not recording all migrant deaths in instances where an external entity, such as a medical examiner's office, first discovered the remains of a deceased migrant. We also reported that Border Patrol collected and reviewed information about Missing Migrant Program

³A committee report accompanying DHS's fiscal year 2020 appropriation directed CBP to, among other things, report data on migrant deaths, describe plans to help reduce the number of migrant deaths, and describe its coordination efforts with external entities. See H.R. Rep. No. 116-180 (2019), and Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2020, Pub. L. No. 116-93, 133 Stat. 2317 (2019). The Joint Explanatory Statement accompanying the fiscal year 2021 Consolidated Appropriations Act included a provision for us to review CBP's report and its efforts to mitigate migrant deaths. 166 Cong. Rec. H8471 (daily ed. Dec. 21, 2020). See GAO, *Southwest Border: CBP Should Improve Data Collection, Reporting, and Evaluation for the Missing Migrant Program*, [GAO-22-105053](#) (Washington, D.C., Apr. 20, 2022).

⁴Border Patrol divides responsibility for border security operations geographically among 20 sectors, each with its own sector headquarters. There are nine sectors along the southwest border, eight along the northern border, and three in the Gulf Coast and Caribbean regions. In fiscal year 2023, Border Patrol also initiated a pilot Missing Migrant Program in the Ramey, Puerto Rico sector.

⁵GAO, *Border Security: Border Patrol's Missing Migrant Program*, [GAO-24-107051](#) (Washington, D.C., Mar. 20, 2024); *Southwest Border: Border Patrol's Missing Migrant Program*, [GAO-23-106007](#) (Washington, D.C., Nov. 15, 2022); and [GAO-22-105053](#).

⁶We use the term "external entities" to refer to any government or organization that coordinates with Border Patrol on migrant deaths, including federal, state, local, or tribal entities; medical examiner's offices; consulates of foreign countries located in the U.S.; and nongovernmental organizations.

activities, but noted that it had not developed a plan for evaluating the program overall. We made three recommendations to address these issues. Border Patrol concurred with our recommendations and has taken action to revise its guidance, meet with sectors, and coordinate with external entities to better ensure data on all relevant migrant deaths are included in the system of record. Border Patrol also explained the limitations of data on migrant deaths in its most recent annual report to Congress and established a plan with time frames for evaluating the Missing Migrant Program.

The Missing Persons and Unidentified Remains Act of 2019 (the Act) requires CBP to submit an annual report to Congress that includes the number and location of unidentified remains found along the southwest border.⁷ In response, CBP submitted its first report to Congress in March 2022, a second report in August 2023, and a third report in April 2024.⁸ The reports include information on efforts to reduce the frequency of migrant deaths through the Missing Migrant Program, data on migrant deaths and rescues, and information on rescue beacons and 9-1-1 placards.⁹

The Act also includes a provision for us to review how CBP collects data on migrant deaths on an annual basis.¹⁰ This report addresses (1) how Border Patrol coordinates with external entities, such as medical examiner's offices, in instances of missing migrants and the recovery and identification of migrant remains; (2) how Border Patrol records data on migrant rescues, deaths, and other Missing Migrant Program activities;

⁷Pub. L. No. 116-277, § 5, 134 Stat. 3370, 3370-71 (2020).

⁸CBP, *Rescue Beacons and Unidentified Remains: Fiscal Year 2022 Report to Congress* (Washington, D.C., Mar. 29, 2022); CBP, *Rescue Beacons and Unidentified Remains: Fiscal Year 2023 Report to Congress* (Washington, D.C., Aug. 17, 2023); and CBP, *Rescue Beacons and Unidentified Remains: Fiscal Year 2024 Report to Congress* (Washington, D.C.: April 26, 2024). In addition, CBP issued a report in February 2021 with data on southwest border migrant deaths for fiscal years 2015 through 2019 by sector, type of death, and nationality to address the congressional directive in the committee report accompanying DHS's fiscal year 2020 appropriation. See Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Customs and Border Protection, *Migrant Death Mitigation: Fiscal Year 2020 Report to Congress* (Washington, D.C.: 2021).

⁹Rescue beacons are towers with sensors that can alert Border Patrol agents that someone needs help once activated by an individual in distress. Placards placed across the southwest border instruct migrants to call 9-1-1 for help and assist rescue personnel with locating migrants in distress.

¹⁰Pub. L. No. 116-277, § 5(c), 134 Stat. at 3371.

and (3) the extent to which Border Patrol has conducted oversight of the Missing Migrant Program.

To address how Border Patrol coordinates with external entities, we reviewed Border Patrol policies and Missing Migrant Program documents and interviewed Border Patrol headquarters officials. We also conducted site visits to five Border Patrol sectors to obtain perspectives on how sectors implement the Missing Migrant Program and coordinate with external entities.¹¹ As part of these site visits, we interviewed Border Patrol sector-level officials and representatives from a total of three medical examiner and coroner offices and three nongovernmental organizations that operate within the five Border Patrol sectors we visited.¹² The information we collected from interviews with Border Patrol sector officials and external entities cannot be generalized, but provided perspectives on Border Patrol's efforts to help reduce migrant deaths along the border and coordinate with external entities.

To address how Border Patrol collects data on suspected migrant rescues, deaths, and other Missing Migrant Program activities, we analyzed Border Patrol documents. We also observed a Border Patrol demonstration of its system of record for information on migrant rescues and deaths. In addition, we observed the agency's computer applications—Migrant Search and Rescue Applications—that help track program activities. We also interviewed headquarters and sector-level Border Patrol officials regarding their practices for collecting, recording, and maintaining data and about the process followed in developing and implementing the Migrant Search and Rescue Applications.

To address how Border Patrol conducts oversight of the Missing Migrant Program, we reviewed Border Patrol documentation, including program guidance and sector responses to a standardized Border Patrol information form about Missing Migrant Program activities. We also interviewed headquarters and sector-level program officials from each

¹¹We conducted site visits to the Rio Grande Valley, Tucson, Yuma, Swanton, and Miami sectors. We selected these sectors to reflect variations in terrain and location, and to include the two sectors that established the Missing Migrant Program since our last report in March 2024. In addition, we considered which sectors we interviewed for our prior reports to obtain variation in sector interviews across our reports.

¹²Within the sectors that we visited, we spoke with three nongovernmental organizations that conduct search and rescue missions—Águilas del Desierto and Paralelos 31 SAR in Arizona and the South Texas Human Rights Center in Texas. In addition, we interviewed officials from the Pinal County and Yuma County Medical Examiners' Offices in Arizona and the Clinton County Coroner in New York.

sector we visited. We assessed these efforts against leading practices for designing and implementing program evaluations.¹³ For a more detailed description of our scope and methodology, see Appendix I.

We conducted this performance audit from April 2024 to April 2025 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Background

U.S. Border Terrain in Sectors with the Missing Migrant Program

The U.S. land borders with Canada and Mexico and the coastal water borders comprise widely different types of terrain. For example, in Arizona, the border is characterized by desert and rugged mountains and, in Texas, it is marked by the Rio Grande River. In California, it is primarily composed of coastal beaches, inland mountains, rugged canyons, and high desert, whereas in New Mexico the border is mountainous. In the Swanton sector, which includes New York, New Hampshire, and Vermont, the terrain ranges from open agricultural land to heavily forested areas. The Miami sector operates in a coastal environment, including urban areas, coastal beaches, and both inhabited and uninhabited islands.

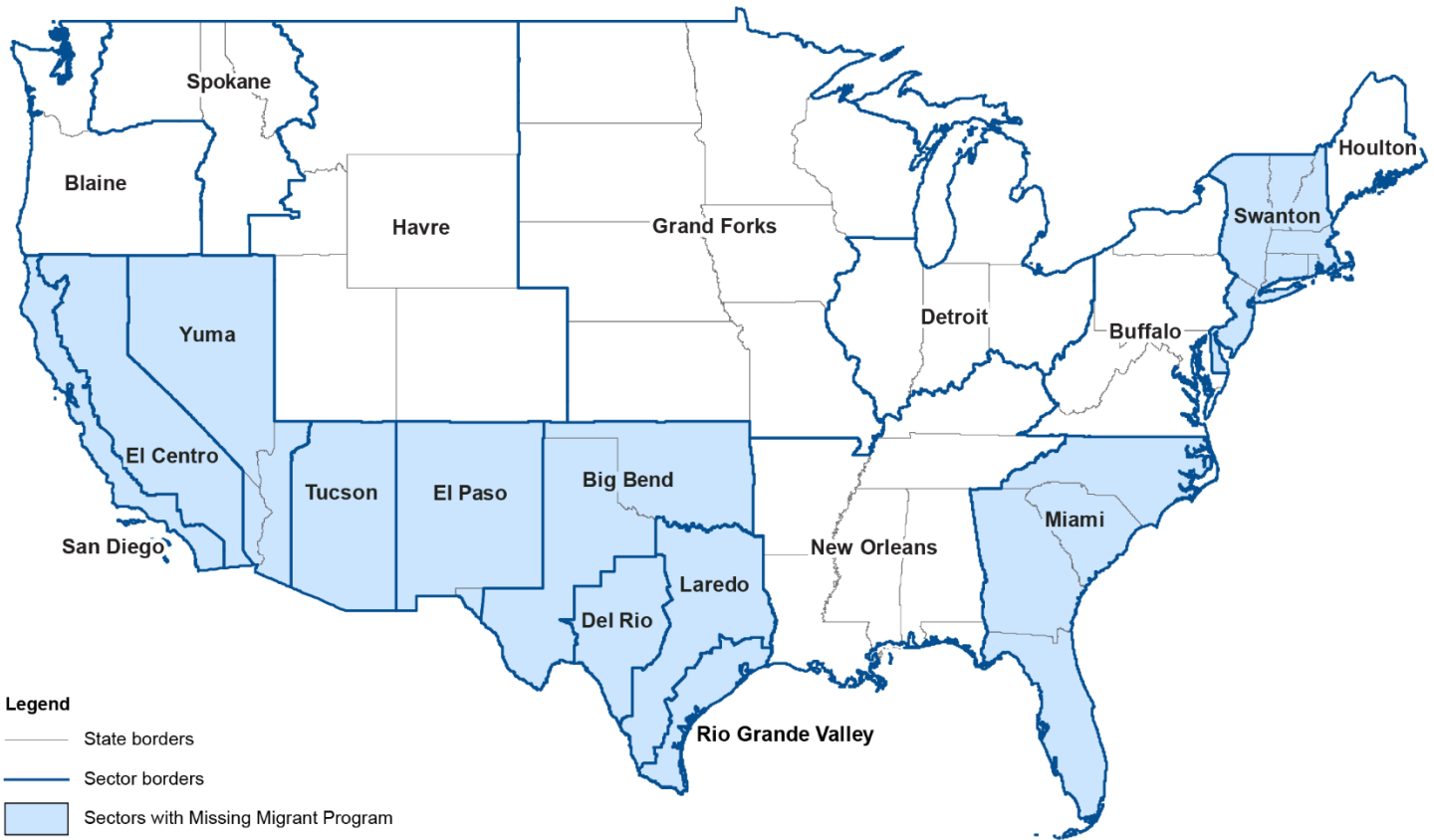
Border Patrol Efforts and the Missing Migrant Program

Some migrants attempting to enter the U.S. illegally have sought entry in remote areas, where they risk injury and death by trying to cross over mountains, deserts, and rivers. These conditions have prompted Border Patrol to warn migrants about the dangers of unlawfully entering the U.S. and to establish search and rescue units, among other initiatives, to help reduce the number of migrant deaths. For example, in 2015, Border Patrol's Tucson sector started a program to facilitate coordination with external entities and better track reports of missing and deceased migrants. Border Patrol headquarters expanded the program to sectors in South Texas in June 2016 and established the Missing Migrant Program

¹³GAO, *Evidence Based Policy Making: Practices to Help Manage and Assess the Results of Federal Efforts*, [GAO-23-105460](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 2023); GAO, *Program Evaluation: Key Terms and Concepts*, [GAO-21-404SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: March 22, 2021); GAO, *Designing Evaluations*, [GAO-12-208G](#) (Washington, D.C.: January 31, 2012).

across the southwest border in June 2017. In 2024, the Missing Migrant Program was expanded to the Swanton and Miami sectors (see fig. 1).

Figure 1: Eleven Border Patrol Sectors Participating in the Missing Migrant Program, as of October 2024



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Border Patrol information; U.S. Census Bureau (map). | GAO-25-107548

Border Patrol issued the Missing Migrant Program Internal Operating Procedure in September 2021 and updated the guidance in March 2024 to help standardize data collection to meet congressional reporting requirements outlined in the Act. The Act requires CBP to provide information on the number of migrant deaths, unidentified remains, and rescues undertaken each fiscal year.¹⁴ In addition, the Internal Operating Procedure details roles and responsibilities for sector and headquarters program officials and procedural guidelines for processing a notification of

¹⁴Internal Operating Procedures promulgate national guidance for the Border Patrol. See Pub. L. No. 116-277, § 5(a)(1), 134 Stat. at 3370-71.

a missing migrant received from external entities. For example, program officials at the sector level are responsible for maintaining regular contact and sharing appropriate information with foreign consulates, medical examiners, and law enforcement agencies, among others.

The Missing Migrant Program includes various efforts intended to help reduce the frequency of migrant deaths and help Border Patrol respond to missing migrants or those who may be in distress. These efforts include establishing standard procedures to respond to 9-1-1 calls and other external entity reports of migrants missing or in distress, and, as shown in figure 2, placing rescue beacons and 9-1-1 placards in remote areas. Rescue beacons are towers with sensors that can alert Border Patrol agents that someone needs help.

Figure 2: Border Patrol 9-1-1 Placard and Rescue Beacon, Arizona, June 2024



Source: GAO photos. | GAO-25-107548

Border Patrol Sectors Coordinate with and Assist External Entities to Rescue Migrants and Identify Remains

Border Patrol Coordinates with Various External Entities to Rescue Migrants and Locate Remains by Sharing Information and Providing Technical Assistance

Border Patrol coordinates with external entities such as foreign consulates, nongovernmental organizations, and local police departments in response to reports of missing migrants or those in distress and to assist in locating remains of suspected deceased migrants. As we previously reported, Border Patrol's Internal Operating Procedure for the Missing Migrant Program established common processes across southwest border sectors to standardize the way Border Patrol sectors respond to and coordinate on inquiries of missing migrants from external entities.¹⁵ In March 2024, we also reported that Border Patrol had taken further action to strengthen its coordination with external entities.¹⁶ For example, in fiscal year 2024, Border Patrol held three regional Missing Migrant Program meetings to connect with local external entities, including medical examiners, coroners, nongovernmental organizations, and consulates. According to Border Patrol officials, these engagements with external entities have helped them expand situational awareness and share information related to the Missing Migrant Program.

In addition to these engagements, Border Patrol officials at the sector level are to maintain regular contact and coordination with external entities. For example, Border Patrol officials noted that these entities share reports from families of migrants who may be missing or in distress with them. In response, to such reports, Border Patrol agents conduct search and rescue operations.

In conducting such operations, Border Patrol sectors coordinate with the following external entities to locate and rescue missing migrants or locate and recover suspected migrant remains:

¹⁵[GAO-22-106007](#).

¹⁶[GAO-24-107051](#).

-
- **State and local law enforcement.** In all sectors, Border Patrol coordinates with state and local law enforcement to conduct rescue missions and recover migrant remains, though the primary responsibility for these efforts lies with those state and local agencies. Border Patrol agents told us that if they discover remains, they preserve the scene and turn over control to local law enforcement. One medical examiner told us that when remains are discovered in terrain that is dangerous or difficult to reach, Border Patrol agents' knowledge of the border region makes them a valuable asset and they may assist in recovering the remains. Relatedly, as we reported in 2022, officials from three of the five external entities we met with at that time noted that Border Patrol accompanies their staff when decedent remains are found in remote areas.¹⁷ These officials told us that Border Patrol's assistance is helpful because the areas may be dangerous or difficult to access and Border Patrol agents often have familiarity with the land.
 - **Nongovernmental organizations.** Nongovernmental organizations contact Border Patrol about migrants who may be missing or deceased. For example, representatives of the three nongovernmental organizations we spoke with said migrants or their family members contact them when they are concerned for their own or family members' safety, and the organizations then contact Border Patrol. In some cases, migrants themselves contact nongovernmental organizations for assistance. Representatives of one nongovernmental organization noted that migrants may be afraid to directly call Border Patrol for assistance because they do not want to be apprehended.

Nongovernmental organizations we spoke with also noted that Border Patrol may not inform them of the agency's search, rescue, and recovery operations, including whether an individual has been located. Border Patrol officials told us that the information they may provide directly to these organizations is limited, due to privacy concerns. In addition, Border Patrol officials told us that information, such as health condition and custody determination, may be provided only to the corresponding foreign consulates. Border Patrol guidance directs sectors to refer non-governmental organizations to the respective consulate for information.

- **U.S. Coast Guard.** Border Patrol officials in the Miami sector told us that the U.S. Coast Guard is responsible for processing and returning

¹⁷[GAO-22-105053](#)

migrants who are apprehended at sea, which may reduce the number of rescues required of Border Patrol in that sector. Border Patrol officials told us they coordinate with the U.S. Coast Guard to provide medical care to migrants found to be in distress when apprehended at sea. Border Patrol officials noted that in some cases migrants are aware of the risk of repatriation by the U.S. Coast Guard if they are apprehended at sea and may injure themselves to induce a medical emergency that triggers processing by Border Patrol on land, rather than by the U.S. Coast Guard at sea.

- **Foreign Consulates.** Consulates of foreign countries also provide Border Patrol with information about migrants who have been reported missing by family members or other entities. These officials told us that the consulates usually provide them with basic biographic information on the migrant, including last known activity, last day of contact, and last known location. According to the program's Internal Operating Procedure, Missing Migrant Program personnel in each sector are to search available law enforcement databases for information on whether the individual has been encountered and provide any information to the requesting foreign official.

In addition, Border Patrol sectors told us that they may coordinate with consulates to disseminate information to their citizens on the dangers of crossing the border. For example, Border Patrol agents in one sector told us they collaborated with a consulate to develop a video that instructed migrants to call 9-1-1 or to use a rescue beacon if they found themselves in danger. Officials in another sector said they work with consulates from Latin American countries on messaging campaigns that use print media and videos to make people aware of the risk of crossing the desert and what to do if they find themselves in distress.

Border Patrol Sectors Assist External Entities with Identifying Remains

Border Patrol assists external entities, particularly medical examiner offices and foreign consulates, with identifying migrant remains and returning them to their families.¹⁸

- **Medical examiners and coroners.** According to Border Patrol guidance, Missing Migrant Program personnel are to conduct routine meetings with the medical examiner and forensic pathologist offices within each respective sector's area of responsibility. The purpose of these meetings is to exchange information on individuals who may

¹⁸The primary responsibility for identifying migrant remains and returning them to their families lies with local medical examiner offices and the appropriate foreign consulates.

have perished in the act of migrating. The three medical examiners we spoke with noted that Border Patrol officials are always willing to collaborate when asked to assist in identifying suspected migrant remains. For instance, one medical examiner told us that its office relies on Border Patrol officials to search its database for fingerprint matches and to confirm name and country of origin of a decedent. Another medical examiner noted that Border Patrol has methods for retrieving fingerprints from dehydrated remains that are not available to local officials and has provided expertise to their office. Additionally, one medical examiner told us Border Patrol has been instrumental in gathering DNA from migrants' family members to facilitate the identification of suspected migrant remains. According to the medical examiner, Border Patrol officials coordinate with consulates to collect DNA samples from family members.

- **Foreign Consulates.** Missing Migrant Program officials told us that their records of migrant remains allow them to assist consulates with notifying families of migrant deaths and repatriating remains properly. When Border Patrol receives requests for information about missing migrants from consulates, they are to research available law enforcement databases and provide consulates with available information. According to Border Patrol guidance, Missing Migrant Program officials are also to establish routine meetings with foreign consulates to discuss open case updates.

Border Patrol Records Migrant Rescues and Deaths in Its System of Record and Has Developed Additional Tracking Applications

Border Patrol sector agents are responsible for recording data on migrant rescues and deaths to report to Congress and track program activities. Border Patrol uses the Border Safety Initiative Tracking System (BSITS) as the system of record to track the number and types of rescues performed and the number of migrant deaths that occur.¹⁹ In each sector, the designated Missing Migrant Program coordinator is responsible for ensuring that rescues and deaths that occur in their sector are documented in BSITS.²⁰

To help ensure consistent data entry on migrant rescues and deaths across sectors, the Internal Operating Procedure provides criteria for the

¹⁹The tracking system enables Border Patrol to track the volume and types of rescues performed, and the number of migrant deaths that occur. Border Patrol officials told us the agency is planning to replace BSITS with a new data system but Border Patrol has not yet set a timeline for implementation of that system.

²⁰The Missing Migrant Coordinator is a designated assistant chief patrol agent in each sector. The Coordinator is responsible for managing daily Missing Migrant Program resources, personnel, and operations, and coordinating with sector leadership and the Missing Migrant Program Manager in headquarters.

inclusion of rescues and deaths in BSITS. According to the Internal Operating Procedure, a rescue is to be entered into BSITS if it involves saving an individual from confinement or a dangerous or difficult situation. This occurs when lack of intervention by Border Patrol could result in imminent death or serious bodily injury within the designated target zone.

Regarding migrant deaths, the BSITS user manual defines a reportable death as the death of a suspected undocumented migrant who died in furtherance of an illegal entry, within a target zone, regardless of whether Border Patrol was directly involved.²¹ As shown in figure 3, along the southwest border, the target zone consists of 45 counties on or near the border with Mexico. In the Swanton sector along the northern border, Border Patrol officials told us the target zone consists of 8 counties on or near the border with Canada. In the Miami sector, Border Patrol officials told us the target zone encompasses the sector's entire area of responsibility, although they are considering reducing the size of the coastal border target zone.

²¹CBP, Office of Border Patrol, *Border Safety Initiative Tracking System (BSITS) User Manual* (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 2007).

Figure 3: Border Patrol Sectors and Target Zones for Recording Data on Migrant Rescues and Deaths under the Missing Migrant Program



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Border Patrol information; U.S. Census Bureau (map). | GAO-25-107548

Note: Border Patrol uses the Border Safety Initiative Tracking System (BSITS) as the system of record for the Missing Migrant Program to track data on the number and types of rescues and the number of migrant deaths. According to Border Patrol guidance, a rescue is to be entered into BSITS if it involves saving an individual from confinement or a dangerous or difficult situation, where lack of intervention by Border Patrol could result in imminent death or serious bodily injury and within the designated target zone. A reportable death for BSITS is defined as the death of a suspected undocumented migrant who died in furtherance of an illegal entry, within a target zone, regardless of whether Border Patrol was directly involved.

Missing Migrant Program officials told us they interpret and apply program guidance in a manner appropriate to the operating environment in each sector. For instance, officials in the Miami sector told us that some migrants make landfall on uninhabited U.S. islands, or keys, and become stranded for hours or days before Border Patrol is notified of their presence. In southwest border sectors, where large groups of individuals often request transportation from Border Patrol, officials told us that any

individuals within a group who are not in need of medical attention are not counted as a rescue in BSITS. In comparison, because presence on an uninhabited island with no means to leave the island is considered a dangerous situation, Miami sector officials told us they record each of these migrants as rescues.

Border Patrol has also developed the Migrant Search and Rescue Applications to track information on other activities that sectors conduct under the Missing Migrant Program that do not meet the criteria for inclusion in BSITS. Examples of such program activities include sector personnel helping identify suspected migrant remains found outside the target zones and tracking information on incidents in progress, such as 911 calls. Border Patrol officials told us that capturing information on these other activities is important because it allows them to track active rescue and identification cases in real time and ensure they are addressed in a timely manner. According to these officials, the applications are intended to help sectors more completely document their efforts to locate and assist missing migrants or those in distress and to locate and identify suspected migrant remains.

The Migrant Search and Rescue Applications provide two visual dashboards. One dashboard includes information on open and closed decedent identification cases in which Border Patrol sector personnel assisted with decedent identification. In these cases, the location of the death or remains falls outside of a Missing Migrant Program target zone, making the case not eligible for entry into BSITS. The other dashboard contains a map of unresolved 911 calls and includes the location of rescue beacons. Border Patrol headquarters officials told us the applications provide agents in sectors with a real-time mechanism that tracks 911 calls for missing migrants and allows them to record information on coordination with local medical examiner's offices in identifying suspected migrant remains.

Officials told us that three southwest border sectors were using the Migrant Search and Rescue Applications as of December 2024. Border Patrol headquarters officials told us that the agency is in the process of deploying the applications to the remaining sectors that have the Missing Migrant Program. They added that because providing the applications to each sector entails GIS mapping of terrain and rescue beacon locations, the agency plans to roll out the applications to one sector at a time, allowing approximately 60 days to map each sector.

Border Patrol Conducts Oversight of the Missing Migrant Program, But Has Not Fully Developed Its Evaluation Approach

Border Patrol Oversees the Missing Migrant Program Primarily Through Conference Calls and Information Collection

Border Patrol conducts oversight of the Missing Migrant Program primarily through regular conference calls with sectors and information collection every 6 months. Specifically, headquarters officials said they conduct biweekly telephone conference calls with Missing Migrant Program coordinators in each sector to discuss weekly data reports on search, rescue, and recovery requests as well as requests for assistance in identifying suspected migrant remains. One Missing Migrant Program sector coordinator said that the biweekly calls provide an opportunity for sectors to share new developments within their areas of responsibility with headquarters officials, such as an increase in migrant crossings in a particular area. Moreover, the coordinator said these biweekly calls allow Missing Migrant Program coordinators to share best practices with one another, such as suggestions related to rescue beacon deployment and use.

Additionally, Border Patrol has taken some steps to collect information on Missing Migrant Program activities. In April 2022, we recommended that Border Patrol develop a plan with time frames for evaluating the program.²² In response, the agency documented steps and time frames to collect information on sector-level activities every 6 months. To support the agency's recurring information collection efforts, Border Patrol established a standardized form for sectors with the Missing Migrant Program to complete and submit to Border Patrol headquarters. Border Patrol officials told us that as of January 2025, the agency had collected two rounds of responses to the form.

The Missing Migrant Program Internal Operating Procedure states that each sector should coordinate regularly with headquarters to provide information on sector program activities to support the continuous evaluation of the program. Border Patrol's standardized form facilitates

²²[GAO-22-105053](#).

information collection from sectors and identifies key performance indicators. Each of the key performance indicators is linked to the three Missing Migrant Program strategic goals: (1) increase situational awareness, (2) invest in innovative solutions and technology, and (3) enhance stakeholder engagement. For example, the key performance indicator related to increasing situational awareness requires each sector to meet with its local medical examiner offices monthly to discuss and address data deconfliction related to migrant deaths and rescues.²³

The standardized form establishes action items for sectors in carrying out Missing Migrant Program-related activities. Three of five Missing Migrant Program sector coordinators we spoke with said it was helpful to fill out the form. They found the forms helpful for a variety of reasons, including providing them an opportunity to remind officials to report on program activities, display program successes, or meet mandated requirements. For example, officials in one sector said the requirement to conduct and report outreach activities, as described in the form, increased the frequency that Missing Migrant Program sector officials communicated with external entities, such as medical examiner's offices and local law enforcement.

Border Patrol officials said they plan to use the information collected from sectors to monitor sector activities and to support the agency's evaluation of the Missing Migrant Program. These officials also said that the information collected will help identify challenges in implementing Missing Migrant Program-related activities as well as determine if any programmatic changes are necessary.

Border Patrol Has Not Determined an Evaluation Design or Identified Relevant Information to Collect for Program Evaluation

Although Border Patrol has developed a timeline for evaluating the Missing Migrant Program and a standardized form for collecting information from sectors, the agency has not determined a design for its evaluations. An evaluation design is an overall approach to gathering and analyzing information or data to answer specific research questions about a program.²⁴ Additionally, the information CBP is collecting is not clearly linked to the Missing Migrant Program's lines of effort to reduce migrant

²³Data deconfliction in this context refers to the process of sharing investigative information with medical examiner's offices to identify similar missing migrant cases and support investigations of suspected migrant remains.

²⁴GAO, *Designing Evaluations*, [GAO-12-208G](#) (Washington, D.C.: January 31, 2012).

deaths and rescue migrants in distress, thus limiting its usefulness in supporting evaluation of the program.

Although Border Patrol plans to evaluate the Missing Migrant Program, it has not yet determined an evaluation design to guide its efforts. Program evaluation is an assessment designed to use systematic data collection and analysis to assess program effectiveness and efficiency, including whether a program is working and why.²⁵ In January 2012, we issued a guide on the five key steps to evaluation design that should be completed prior to significant information collection.²⁶ These steps include selecting an appropriate evaluation design or approach—in other words, appropriate evaluation questions, measures, and information collection methods that would enable an agency to develop valid conclusions on its evaluation questions.

As we reported in April 2022, an evaluation of the Missing Migrant Program could be designed to look at the extent to which the program is being implemented as intended, producing expected outputs, or could be improved.²⁷ It could include a needs assessment, or an evaluation designed to understand the resources required for a program to achieve its goals. It could also include an outcome evaluation, which assesses the extent to which the program has achieved its objectives and how the program achieved these objectives. According to our guide, it could also include an impact evaluation, which assesses the impact of the program by estimating what would have happened in the absence of the program.²⁸

However, as we stated earlier, Border Patrol has not determined a design for evaluating the Missing Migrant Program. Officials told us that the information they collect from sectors every six months serves as an

²⁵GAO, *Program Evaluation: Key Terms and Concepts*, [GAO-21-404SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: March 22, 2021). In this report, we describe the differences between performance measurement and program evaluation. While performance measurement and program evaluation are both key tools for federal program management, each source of evidence holds distinct value and provides answers to different, though complementary, questions. Performance measurement refers to the ongoing monitoring and reporting of a program's accomplishments and progress toward its pre-established goals. Program evaluation refers to assessment of program effectiveness and efficiency using systematic data collection and analysis.

²⁶GAO, *Designing Evaluations*, [GAO-12-208G](#) (Washington, D.C.: January 31, 2012).

²⁷[GAO-22-105053](#).

²⁸[GAO-21-404SP](#).

evaluation of the program. In their view, the collection of this information is the best way to assess the program and review the completion of key activities in each sector.

CBP's report to Congress states that its evaluation of the Missing Migrant Program will be used to make sound resource and strategic decisions to improve outcomes, including decisions on resource allocation and acquisition, ensuring mission alignment, and providing accountability to stakeholders.²⁹ By using the information collected from sectors, officials said they will be equipped to identify implementation challenges and make programmatic changes as necessary. However, the form Border Patrol uses to collect information from sectors currently functions as a performance measurement tool rather than a tool for program evaluation. The information gathered from the form provides insight on how each sector is completing Missing Migrant Program-related key performance indicators, but the form is not currently designed to support an evaluation of the program. For example, one key performance indicator is for each sector to execute the program budget. Although this is an important task, it does not provide information on how effectively the Missing Migrant Program is achieving its scope and purpose.

By developing an evaluation design that includes specific questions and research methods for answering them, Border Patrol would be better positioned to examine the extent to which the program has made progress in meeting its scope and purpose in each sector. This is especially the case among sectors that have recently deployed the Missing Migrant Program has recently been deployed.³⁰ Moreover, a clearly defined evaluation design could help inform the agency's resource allocation in each sector and identify the program's outcomes and impacts related to its purpose of reducing migrant deaths and identifying suspected migrant remains.

In addition, because the agency has not determined an evaluation design, it may not be collecting relevant information through the forms to support an evaluation of the program. The agency detailed four lines of effort that describe the scope and purpose of the Missing Migrant Program in its Internal Operating Procedure. CBP's report to Congress also provides

²⁹U.S. Customs and Border Protection, *Rescue Beacons and Unidentified Remains: Fiscal Year 2024 Report to Congress* (Washington, D.C.: April 26, 2024).

³⁰For the purposes of this report, we consider the Missing Migrant Program's scope and purpose to be the lines of effort described below.

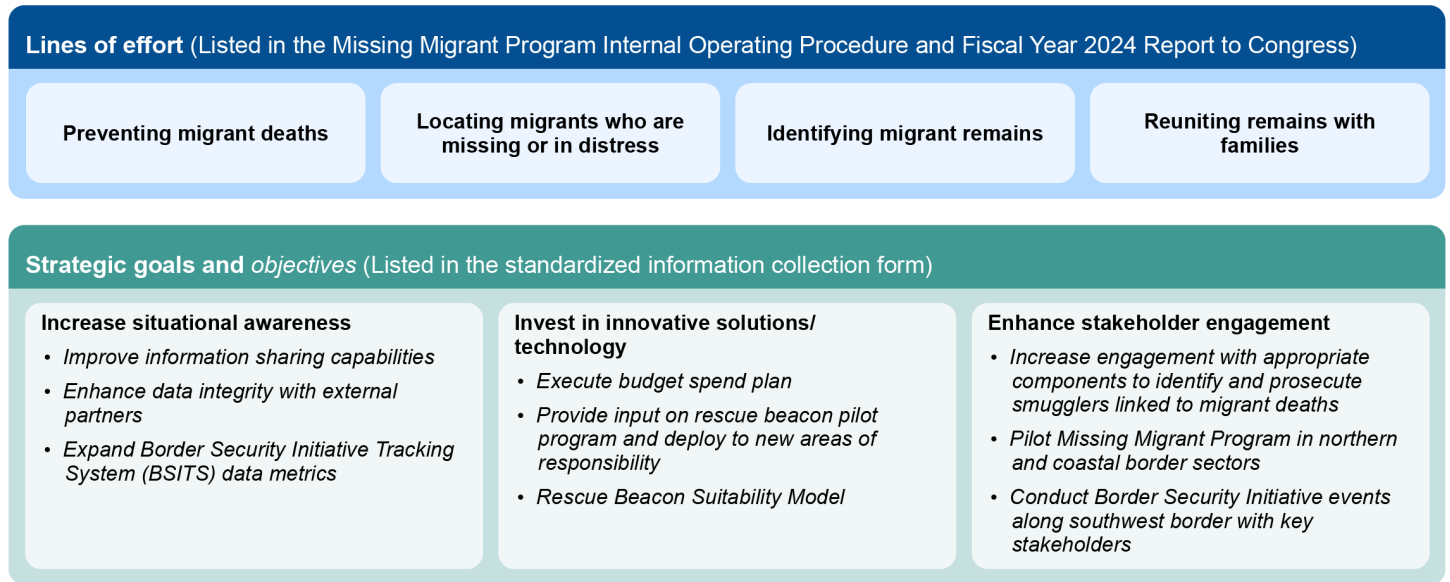
additional detail on what activities fall under each effort.³¹ The following list details these lines of effort:

- Preventing migrant deaths through messaging about the dangers of migration, informed deployment of rescue equipment, and improved information flow from foreign consulates and nongovernmental organizations.
- Locating migrants who are missing or in distress.
- Identifying migrant remains through information sharing with nongovernmental organizations, foreign consulates, medical examiners' offices, and federal, state, and local partners.
- Reuniting remains with families to provide closure for families of migrants who have perished.

While the Internal Operating Procedure describes the scope and purpose of the Missing Migrant Program as being related to these four lines of effort, the goals, objectives, and key performance indicators Border Patrol has included on its standardized form are not clearly linked to those efforts. Specifically, the information Border Patrol currently collects on Missing Migrant Program activities is not clearly linked to evaluating the program's progress in meeting its scope and purpose. Instead, each key performance indicator falls under one of the three goals listed in the form. For example, one key performance indicator requires sectors to expand their Missing Migrant Program partnerships to an additional one to two external stakeholders per year to increase stakeholder engagement. However, the form does not clearly describe how this indicator or the associated goal and objective are linked to the Missing Migrant Program scope and purpose. Further, without an evaluation design, it is not clear how responses to questions on the form will support an evaluation of the program. See Figure 4 for an overview of the Missing Migrant Program lines of effort as listed in the Internal Operating Procedure and CBP's report to Congress and the goals and objectives as listed in the form.

³¹U.S. Customs and Border Protection, *Rescue Beacons and Unidentified Remains: Fiscal Year 2024 Report to Congress* (Washington, D.C.: April 26, 2024).

Figure 4: Unclear Alignment Between Missing Migrant Program Lines of Effort and Strategic Goals



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Border Patrol documents. | GAO-25-107548

Border Patrol headquarters officials acknowledged that the link between the Missing Migrant Program goals and objectives and the four lines of effort could be more clearly stated within the standardized form. However, officials told us that the program goals and objectives already link to those efforts. Border Patrol has not clearly described how they are linked—specifically, how the information they collect is relevant to evaluate sector progress against the program’s overall scope and purpose.

Border Patrol officials also told us that the program should not be evaluated based on data about migrant deaths because factors outside of Border Patrol’s control can lead to fluctuations in the number of migrant deaths that occur in each sector. For instance, changing migration patterns may impact the number of deaths recorded. They added that headquarters officials can more reasonably monitor sector progress toward the program’s stated goals to increase situational awareness, invest in innovative solutions and technologies, and enhance stakeholder engagement, which is why those goals were included on the standardized form. While it may be challenging to develop goals with quantitative targets based on data about migrant deaths, strategic goals should

describe the outcomes that an agency is trying to achieve to advance its mission, consistent with key practices for performance management.³²

Our guide on the five key steps to evaluation design describes the importance of identifying data sources and collection procedures to obtain relevant, credible information prior to significant information collection.³³ This includes assessing the relevance and quality of available data sources and planning primary data collection to answer each evaluation question. For instance, an organization may identify performance monitoring data as a source of evidence if it determines that the data are sufficient and appropriate to support findings on an evaluation question.³⁴ To support a robust evaluation, organizations should assess whether their available sources of evidence are sufficient and appropriate to support findings and conclusions on the evaluation question, including whether available evidence is relevant to evaluate the program.³⁵

By ensuring that, after developing an evaluation design, Border Patrol collects information supporting an evaluation of the Missing Migrant Program that is clearly linked to the program's scope and purpose, the agency would be better positioned to evaluate the program. It could then do so with relevant information from sectors that relate to reducing migrant deaths and identifying suspected migrant remains.

Conclusions

Some migrants attempting to enter the U.S. illegally have sought entry in remote areas, where they risk injury and death by trying to cross over mountains, deserts, and rivers. In response, Border Patrol established the Missing Migrant Program across the southwest border in June 2017 and expanded the program to northern and coastal sectors in 2023. In fiscal year 2023, Border Patrol reported that it conducted thousands of rescues of migrants, and it recorded hundreds of migrant deaths.

Border Patrol has taken steps to collect information on Missing Migrant Program activities from sectors to monitor progress and identify challenges. Although Border Patrol plans to use this information to

³²GAO, *Evidence-Based Policymaking: Practices to Help Manage and Assess the Results of Federal Efforts*, [GAO-23-105460](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 12, 2023).

³³[GAO-12-208G](#).

³⁴Sufficiency refers to the quantity of evidence— whether it is enough to persuade a knowledgeable person that the findings are reasonable. Appropriateness refers to the relevance, validity, and reliability of the evidence in supporting the evaluation objectives.

³⁵[GAO-12-208G](#).

evaluate the Missing Migrant Program, it has not yet developed an evaluation design to draw evidence-based conclusions or show how the information will be used to inform future decision making. Developing such an evaluation design could better position Border Patrol to gather relevant information and answer questions about the extent to which the program is meeting its scope and purpose in each sector and the impacts or outcomes of its program activities. Following the development of an evaluation design, ensuring that the information Border Patrol collects is clearly linked to the program's scope and purpose could better position the agency to evaluate the program with relevant information from sectors. Such information could, in turn, help Border Patrol and lawmakers understand the program's impact in providing assistance for migrants in distress and preventing migrant deaths.

Recommendations for Executive Action

We are making two recommendations to CBP, including the following:

The Commissioner of CBP should ensure that Border Patrol develops an evaluation design to assess the Missing Migrant Program. Such a design should include evaluation questions and methods for collecting and analyzing information to address those questions. (Recommendation 1)

The Commissioner of CBP should ensure that Border Patrol, following the development of an evaluation design, collects information on Missing Migrant Program activities that is clearly linked to its scope and purpose. (Recommendation 2)

Agency Comment

We provided a draft of this report to DHS for review and comment. In its comments, reproduced in appendix II, DHS concurred with each of our recommendations. DHS also noted that it plans to take steps to address each of the recommendations, including the Missing Migrant Program working with the Border Patrol Planning and Innovation Division to develop an evaluation plan to better identify and align program goals, objectives, key performance indicators, and milestones. The agency noted that the evaluation plan will include a program design that details information collected on Missing Migrant Program activities. DHS also provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate.

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Secretary of Homeland Security, and other interested parties. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at <https://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions, please contact me at gablerr@gao.gov. Contact points for our Office of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report.

//SIGNED//

Rebecca Gambler
Director Homeland Security and Justice

Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

The Missing Persons and Unidentified Remains Act includes a provision for us to review how Customs and Border Protection (CBP) collects data on migrant deaths.¹ This report addresses (1) how Border Patrol coordinates with external entities, such as medical examiner's offices, in instances of missing migrants and the recovery and identification of migrant remains; (2) how Border Patrol records data on migrant rescues, deaths, and other Missing Migrant Program activities; and (3) the extent to which Border Patrol has conducted oversight of the Missing Migrant Program.

To address how Border Patrol coordinates with external entities, we reviewed Border Patrol policies and Missing Migrant Program documents, such as the Missing Migrant Program Internal Operating Procedure. We interviewed Border Patrol headquarters officials about the status of the Missing Migrant Program and coordination efforts with external entities. We also conducted site visits to five Border Patrol sectors to obtain perspectives on how sectors implement the Missing Migrant Program and coordinate with external entities. We visited three sectors on the southwest border—Rio Grande Valley, Tucson, and Yuma. We also visited the Miami sector in Florida and the Swanton sector along the northern border. We selected these sectors to reflect variations in terrain and location, and to include the two sectors that established the Missing Migrant Program since our last report in March 2024.² In addition, we considered which sectors we interviewed for our prior reports to obtain variation in sector interviews across our reports.

We also interviewed representatives from six external entities that operate within the Border Patrol sectors we visited. They included three nongovernmental organizations that facilitate or conduct search and rescue missions—Águilas del Desierto and Paralelos 31 SAR in Arizona and the South Texas Human Rights Center in Texas. In addition, we interviewed officials from the Pinal County and Yuma County Medical Examiners' Offices in Arizona and the Clinton County Coroner in New York. We selected these entities to reflect variation in type among the entities with whom Border Patrol officials stated they regularly coordinate. The information we collected from interviews with Border Patrol sector officials and external entities cannot be generalized, but provided perspectives on Border Patrol's efforts to help reduce migrant deaths

¹Pub. L. No. 116-277, § 5(c), 134 Stat. at 3371.

²[GAO-24-107051](#).

along the border and coordination between Border Patrol sectors and external entities.

To address how Border Patrol collects data on suspected migrant rescues, deaths, and other Missing Migrant Program activities, we analyzed Border Patrol documents, such as its database user manuals and methodology guides, and Border Patrol's April 2024 report to Congress on migrant deaths.³ We also observed a Border Patrol demonstration of its Border Safety Initiative Tracking System, which Border Patrol uses as its system of record for information on migrant rescues and deaths, and the Migrant Search and Rescue Application, which provides real-time tracking and maps of rescues, remains, and rescue beacons. We also interviewed headquarters and sector-level Border Patrol officials from each sector we visited regarding their practices for collecting, recording, and maintaining data, and the process they followed in developing and implementing the Migrant Search and Rescue Applications.

To address how Border Patrol conducts oversight of the Missing Migrant Program, we reviewed Border Patrol documentation, including program guidance, sectors' weekly reports to headquarters, and March 2024 responses to a standardized information form about Missing Migrant Program activities. Officials noted that sectors complete and submit these forms to headquarters every six months. We also interviewed headquarters and sector-level program officials from each sector we visited. We assessed these efforts against key practices for evaluation, which include developing an evaluation plan or agenda for assessing programs.⁴

We conducted this performance audit from April 2024 to April 2025 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that

³CBP, *Rescue Beacons and Unidentified Remains: Fiscal Year 2024 Report to Congress* (2024).

⁴GAO, *Evidence Based Policy Making: Practices to Help Manage and Assess the Results of Federal Efforts*, [GAO-23-105460](#) (Washington, DC: July 2023); GAO, *Program Evaluation: Key Terms and Concepts*, [GAO-21-404SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: March 22, 2021); GAO, *Designing Evaluations*, [GAO-12-208G](#) (Washington, D.C.: January 31, 2012).

**Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and
Methodology**

the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Appendix II: Comments from the Department of Homeland Security

U.S. Department of Homeland Security
Washington, DC 20528



**Homeland
Security**

BY ELECTRONIC SUBMISSION

March 21, 2025

Rebecca Gambler
Director, Homeland Security and Justice
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20548-0001

Re: Management Response to Draft Report GAO-25-107548, "BORDER SECURITY: Additional Actions Needed to Evaluate the Missing Migrant Program"

Dear Ms. Gambler:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this draft report. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS, or the Department) appreciates the U.S. Government Accountability Office's (GAO) work in planning and conducting its review and issuing this report.

DHS leadership is pleased to note GAO's positive recognition that U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) U.S. Border Patrol (USBP) took steps to collect information on Missing Migrant Program (MMP) activities from sectors to monitor progress and identify challenges. DHS remains committed to the MMP humanitarian mission of focusing on border safety, the rescue of migrants in distress, reducing migrant deaths, and the identification and reunification of decedents with their families in the border regions.

For example, the MMP works on an ongoing basis to create and foster relationships with external partners (including but not limited to federal, state, tribal, and foreign governments, non-governmental organizations, landowners, families, and others) to expand situational awareness, lines of communication for incident reporting, and information exchange. This collaboration, for instance, allowed the Laredo Sector (LRT) MMP to successfully locate a missing child and provide the Guatemalan Consulate with crucial information regarding the child's current location and status that resulted in his safe recovery.

**Appendix II: Comments from the Department
of Homeland Security**


Another example of MMP achievements within the prevention mission includes the recent collaboration of the Tucson Sector (TCA) MMP with local and international stakeholders to implement a bi-national cost-effective prevention campaign to raise awareness about the risks associated with crossing the International Boundary Fence (IBF) (i.e., significant danger of falling and causing injuries or death). As a result, TCA MMP obtained and placed decals that warn, “Climbing the wall can cause injuries, fractures, and/or death.” Mexico stakeholders (National Institute of Migration, State Police, and National Guard) then installed these decals on the Mexico side of the IBF. These decals can easily be replenished and pose no harm to individuals attempting to climb the IBF.

The draft report contained two recommendations with which the Department concurs. Enclosed find our detailed response to each recommendation. DHS previously submitted technical comments addressing several accuracy, contextual, and other issues under a separate cover for GAO’s consideration, as appropriate.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to review and comment on this draft report. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions. We look forward to working with you again in the future.

Sincerely,

JIM H
CRUMPACKER

 Digitally signed by JIM H
CRUMPACKER
Date: 2025.03.21 12:47:49 -04'00'

JIM H. CRUMPACKER
Director
Departmental GAO-OIG Liaison Office

Enclosure

Enclosure: Management Response to Recommendations Contained in GAO-25-107548

GAO recommended that the Commissioner of CBP:

Recommendation 1: Ensure that Border Patrol develops an evaluation design to assess the Missing Migrant Program. Such an evaluation design should include evaluation questions and methods for collecting and analyzing information to address those questions.

Response: Concur. In March 2025, MMP met with the USBP Planning and Innovation Division, Evaluation Branch to develop a thorough and effective evaluation plan of the MMP to better identify and align MMP goals, objectives, key performance indicators (KPIs), and milestones for an evaluation of the MMP’s effectiveness. This evaluation will assess the efficiency, effectiveness, and impact of the MMP in expected outputs such as prevention messaging campaigns, locating, and rescuing migrants, identifying remains, and reuniting remains with families.

As part of this effort, MMP and the Evaluation Branch developed a timeline that outlines key milestones to guide the evaluation assessment process. The timeline details specific actions needed within each milestones, to include stakeholder engagement, evaluation tool development, data collection, analysis, and reporting. Each milestone will systematically address evaluation questions and will ensure that the relevant data is gathered, analyzed, and used to inform any program improvements. The MMP and Evaluation Branch will collaborate to meet the following evaluation plan milestones:

Action:	Estimated Completion Date (ECD):
Convene with key stakeholders to define the scope, methodology, and timeline for the evaluation.	March 31, 2025
Review currently collected program data; identify any data gaps; and design surveys, interview guides, and data collection templates for qualitative and quantitative research, as appropriate.	June 30, 2025
Conduct field visits, interviews, surveys, and review program records.	September 30, 2025
Analyze the collected data to identify key findings, trends, and gaps in the program.	September 30, 2025
Prepare the initial draft of the evaluation report with conclusions and recommendations.	September 30, 2025

Appendix II: Comments from the Department of Homeland Security

Present the draft report to stakeholders for feedback and revise based on input.	September 30, 2025
Finalize the report incorporating stakeholder feedback. Submit the evaluation report.	December 31, 2025
Share the evaluation findings with all stakeholders.	March 31, 2026
Based on evaluation findings, create a comprehensive action plan for program improvements.	March 31, 2026
Implement changes and adjustments based on the evaluation and action plan.	July 31, 2026

Overall ECD: July 31, 2026.

Recommendation 2: Ensure that Border Patrol, following the development of an evaluation design, collects information on Missing Migrant Program activities that is clearly linked to its scope and purpose.

Response: Concur. The MMP met several times with the USBP Planning and Innovation Division, Evaluation Branch in March 2025 to discuss how the MMP's current KPIs align with the MMP's four lines of effort (Prevent, Locate, Identify, and Reunite). As previously noted, MMP is working with USBP to create an evaluation plan of the MMP to better identify and align MMP goals, objectives, KPIs, and milestones for an evaluation of the MMP's effectiveness. This evaluation will also create a program design that details information collected on MMP activities, such as inputs, activities, outputs, and measures (i.e., short term and long-term outcomes). The program design will also include a visual representation of how the MMP's four lines of effort correlate and more clearly align with MMP KPIs. ECD: June 30, 2026.

Appendix III: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgements

GAO Contact

Rebecca Gambler at gablerr@gao.gov

Staff Acknowledgements

In addition to the contact named above, E. Jeanette Henriquez (Assistant Director), Miriam Hill (Analyst-in-Charge), and James Holley made key contributions to this report. Christine Catanzaro, Michele Fejfar, Eric Hauswirth, and Heidi Nielson also provided substantial assistance.

GAO's Mission

The Government Accountability Office, the audit, evaluation, and investigative arm of Congress, exists to support Congress in meeting its constitutional responsibilities and to help improve the performance and accountability of the federal government for the American people. GAO examines the use of public funds; evaluates federal programs and policies; and provides analyses, recommendations, and other assistance to help Congress make informed oversight, policy, and funding decisions. GAO's commitment to good government is reflected in its core values of accountability, integrity, and reliability.

Obtaining Copies of GAO Reports and Testimony

The fastest and easiest way to obtain copies of GAO documents at no cost is through our website. Each weekday afternoon, GAO posts on its [website](#) newly released reports, testimony, and correspondence. You can also [subscribe](#) to GAO's email updates to receive notification of newly posted products.

Order by Phone

The price of each GAO publication reflects GAO's actual cost of production and distribution and depends on the number of pages in the publication and whether the publication is printed in color or black and white. Pricing and ordering information is posted on GAO's website, <https://www.gao.gov/ordering.htm>.

Place orders by calling (202) 512-6000, toll free (866) 801-7077, or TDD (202) 512-2537.

Orders may be paid for using American Express, Discover Card, MasterCard, Visa, check, or money order. Call for additional information.

Connect with GAO

Connect with GAO on [X](#), [LinkedIn](#), [Instagram](#), and [YouTube](#).
Subscribe to our [Email Updates](#). Listen to our [Podcasts](#).
Visit GAO on the web at <https://www.gao.gov>.

To Report Fraud, Waste, and Abuse in Federal Programs

Contact FraudNet:

Website: <https://www.gao.gov/about/what-gao-does/fraudnet>

Automated answering system: (800) 424-5454

Media Relations

Sarah Kaczmarek, Managing Director, Media@gao.gov

Congressional Relations

A. Nicole Clowers, Managing Director, CongRel@gao.gov

General Inquiries

<https://www.gao.gov/about/contact-us>



Please Print on Recycled Paper.