

Actions Needed to Ensure Complete Reports to Congress on Unidentified Remains and Rescue Beacons

GAO-26-108818

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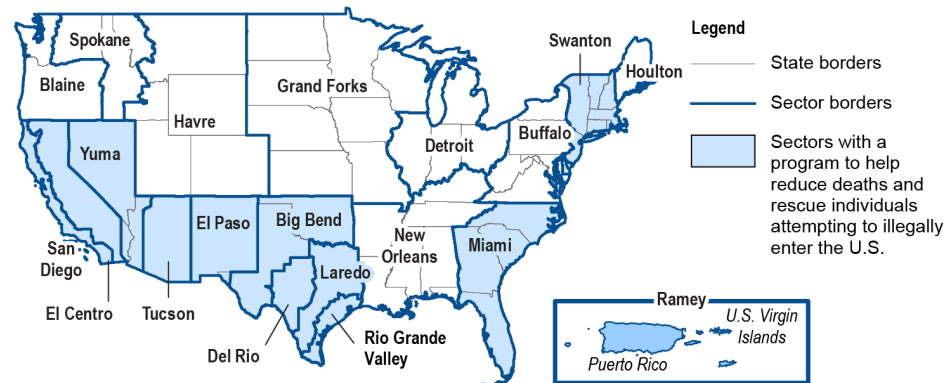
A report to congressional committees

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What GAO Found

Border Patrol—a component of U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP)—established a program in 2017 to help rescue individuals in distress and reduce deaths along the border. The program includes various efforts such as placing rescue beacons and 911 placards in remote areas.

Border Patrol Sectors Operating Programs to Reduce Deaths and Rescue Individuals Attempting to Illegally Enter the U.S., as of April 2026



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Border Patrol information; U.S. Census Bureau (map). | GAO-26-108818

CBP used data in its fiscal year 2025 report to Congress that Border Patrol recorded using practices and systems that have not changed since our April 2025 report on these activities. However, CBP's fiscal year 2025 report did not include all required information about rescue beacons. A Border Patrol official told GAO that the agency inadvertently omitted some information and was not aware it was required to report the remainder. Border Patrol's internal operating procedures state that the program manager is responsible for completing the annual report to Congress, but they do not specify the reporting requirements. Documenting these requirements would help ensure CBP includes all required information in its annual reports and increase transparency about its efforts to reduce deaths and rescue individuals in distress along the border.

Border Patrol has taken several steps to evaluate its program to help reduce deaths and rescue individuals, in response to GAO's two prior recommendations (GAO-25-107548). For example, it developed an evaluation plan that defined the scope, methodology, and timeline for an evaluation and identified information needed to complete it, consistent with GAO's first recommendation. For the second recommendation, Border Patrol has conducted site visits, interviews, and a survey of staff, according to officials. Border Patrol has additional evaluation-related activities planned and expects to complete a program assessment by September 2026. Such an evaluation would help the agency determine if the program is meeting its intended purpose.

Why GAO Did This Study

Border Patrol responds to reports of individuals attempting to illegally enter the U.S. between ports of entry who may be missing or in distress. In fiscal year 2024, CBP reported Border Patrol responded to 3,302 rescue events. The Missing Persons and Unidentified Remains Act requires CBP to submit an annual report to Congress including the number and location of unidentified remains. The act also requires CBP to report information on rescue beacons, including their numbers and locations. CBP submitted its most recent report in August 2025.

The act includes a provision for GAO to annually review how CBP collects the data it reports to Congress and measures the effectiveness of its program to help reduce deaths and locate and rescue individuals attempting to illegally enter the U.S. who are in distress. This report focuses on CBP's activities since GAO's April 2025 report.

GAO assessed CBP's (1) data collection for its fiscal year 2025 report to Congress and (2) efforts to measure program effectiveness. GAO reviewed Border Patrol documentation, including internal operating procedures, system guides, and program evaluation plans. GAO compared CBP's fiscal year 2025 report to the act's requirements and to prior annual reports. GAO also interviewed Border Patrol officials about their data collection and evaluation processes and practices.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending that CBP ensure Border Patrol updates its internal operating procedures to document the reporting elements required by the act. The Department of Homeland Security concurred with the recommendation.