

Federal Programs: Assessing and Improving Effectiveness

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GAO's work regularly finds that federal programs are unable to assess their performance to determine if they are solving the problem they were created to fix. By defining goals and collecting and using relevant data, agencies could make informed decisions to improve their programs' results.

The Big Picture

Each year, the federal government spends trillions of dollars on programs that Americans depend on, such as health care, public safety, and disaster support. Our recent reports have found that many federal programs do not have clearly defined goals to identify what they seek to achieve or relevant data to assess progress. Without this information, Congress and agency leaders cannot determine if federal programs funded by taxpayer dollars are delivering intended results and supporting the American people.

What GAO's Work Shows

Through a three-step process, federal agencies can monitor and manage the results of their programs.

The program performance management process



Source: GAO. | GAO-26-109130

Federal programs do not consistently manage their performance. Our work often finds programs are focused on inputs (such as money to spend) and outputs (such as number of individuals who received benefits). By contrast, outcomes are the results of a program (such as number of individuals whose lives improved in an intended way).

Programs often lack information on outcomes because they operate without clear, measurable goals or data to assess their results. Agency leaders

and Congress need this information to determine if programs are solving the problems they were created to fix, and in turn, if they are a good return on investment for taxpayer money.

Selected Federal Programs that GAO Previously Found Had Incomplete Performance Management Processes

Federal Program	Assessment of Process
New Chemicals Program at the Environmental Protection Agency. Assesses the safety of new chemicals. (GAO-25-106839)	
Caregiver Support Program at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Provides mental health support to full-time caregivers for veterans with serious injuries. (GAO-26-108070)	
Efforts to Combat Fentanyl Trafficking at the Department of Homeland Security. Secures U.S. borders against drug trafficking. (GAO-25-107667)	
Food Assistance Programs at the Department of Agriculture. Supply food banks and pantries to support seniors and families who struggle to afford groceries. (GAO-24-106539)	
Supportive Housing Program jointly at the Department of Housing and Urban Development and VA. Supports veterans experiencing homelessness. (GAO-26-107517)	

Key:



Source: GAO. | GAO-26-109130

Moreover, federal programs rarely work in isolation. Our work often identifies [sets of related programs](#)—within an agency or across multiple agencies—that seek to achieve the same outcomes and may create overlapping efforts.

We also find these related programs have not always defined goals or collected data to manage their

performance. This creates the potential for waste and inefficiency. It limits decision-makers' abilities to (1) assess relative performance across programs and (2) make informed decisions to streamline efforts or provide resources to more effective programs.

Most Programs that Solely Support Pregnant Women, Young Children, and Their Families Had Established Performance Management Processes

Many pregnant women, children through age 5, and their families use support services like food assistance or childcare. In 2026, [we identified](#) 15 federal programs at five agencies that provide direct services only to this population.

Twelve of these 15 programs had performance management processes that set goals, collect data, and use the information to assess whether the programs are meeting goals. We recommended that the remaining three programs without these processes—one each at the Departments of Agriculture, Health and Human Services, and Veterans Affairs—fully develop them to ensure programs are meeting goals, identifying potential improvements, and targeting resources appropriately.

Source: GAO. | GAO-26-109130

When we have identified opportunities to improve program performance by developing goals and collecting and using data, agencies have taken action to implement our recommendations.

Actions to Improve Performance Management for the Securing the Cities Program

The Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Securing the Cities program seeks to help state and local governments detect and deter nuclear terrorism. In 2019, [we found](#) that DHS did not collect information to fully track cities' use of the program's funds or assess performance. We recommended DHS do so.

Subsequently, [we found](#) in 2024 that the program had established goals, performance measures, and milestones, and conducted quarterly financial assessments. DHS is now better positioned to monitor the program's performance and identify any needed actions to improve results.

Source: GAO. | GAO-26-109130

Additional evidence is needed to determine program effectiveness. Because of its ongoing nature, performance management can serve as an [early-warning system](#) to identify the need for real-time improvements. Collecting evidence beyond performance data can help determine whether a

program is working and why. This includes robust studies known as [program evaluations](#), which can provide valuable insights on program performance.

Types of [Program Evaluations](#) and Insights

- **Process evaluations** assess the extent to which a program is being implemented as intended.
- **Outcome evaluations** assess whether (1) program activities are aligned with desired outcomes and (2) changes in outcomes are consistent with program goals.
- **Impact evaluations** assess the effect of a program by comparing results to what would have happened in its absence.

Source: GAO. | GAO-26-109130

When we asked federal managers in a [2020 survey](#) about these robust evaluations, about [one-third of respondents](#) reported having access to them to help manage their programs.

Challenges and Opportunities

[Statutory requirements provide a solid foundation](#) for effective federal performance management. They have also [increased agencies' use of performance data in decision-making](#), such as identifying program problems to address and developing new strategies.

In contrast, Congress and the administration often do not have the performance data and evidence they need to make informed improvements and target resources to individual programs or across related programs.

Our work has identified approaches to help ensure decision makers have sufficient information, including

- [practices](#) to help individual or sets of related programs manage performance and build evidence;
- [practices](#) to effectively coordinate, and a [guide](#) to evaluate and manage, related programs; and
- a [guide](#) to design program evaluations.

Consistently using these approaches could help agencies manage and assess their programs and provide policymakers and the public with vital information about federal program performance.

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