

Highlights of [GAO-11-857](#), a report to the Ranking Member, Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Safe and accessible federal courthouses are critical to the U.S. judicial process. The Federal Protective Service (FPS), within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the U.S. Marshals Service (Marshals Service), within the Department of Justice (DOJ), the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts (AOUSC), and the General Services Administration (GSA) are the federal stakeholders with roles related to courthouse security. As requested, this report addresses (1) attributes that influence courthouse security considerations and (2) the extent to which stakeholders have collaborated in implementing their responsibilities and using risk management. GAO analyzed laws and documents, such as security assessments; reviewed GAO's work on key practices for collaboration and facility protection; visited 11 courthouse facilities, selected based on geographic dispersion, age, size, and other criteria; and interviewed agency and judiciary officials. While the results from site visits cannot be generalized, they provided examples of courthouse security activities.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends DHS and DOJ update the MOA to, among other things, clarify stakeholders' roles and responsibilities and ensure the completion and sharing of risk assessments; and further assess costs and benefits of the perimeter pilot program, in terms of enhanced security, and include all stakeholders' views, should steps be taken to expand the program. DHS and DOJ concurred with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-11-857](#) or key components. For more information, contact Mark Goldstein at (202) 512-2834 or goldsteinm@gao.gov or William O. Jenkins, Jr. at (202) 512-8777 or jenkinswo@gao.gov.

FEDERAL COURTHOUSES

Improved Collaboration Needed to Meet Demands of a Complex Security Environment

What GAO Found

Various attributes influence security considerations for the nation's 424 federal courthouses, which range from small court spaces to large buildings in major urban areas. According to DOJ data, threats against the courts have increased between fiscal years 2004 and 2010—from approximately 600 to more than 1,400. The Interagency Security Committee—an interagency group that develops standards for federal facility security—has assigned courthouses the highest security level because they are prominent symbols of U.S. power.

Federal stakeholders have taken steps to strengthen their collaboration, such as establishing agency liaisons, but have faced challenges in implementing assigned responsibilities and using risk assessment tools.

- A 1997 memorandum of agreement (MOA) outlines each stakeholder's roles and responsibilities and identifies areas requiring stakeholder coordination. However, at 5 of the 11 courthouses GAO visited, FPS and the Marshals Service were either performing duplicative efforts (e.g., both monitoring the courthouse lobby) or performing security roles that were inconsistent with their responsibilities. The judiciary and other stakeholders stated that having the Marshals Service and FPS both provide security services has resulted in two lines of authority for implementing and overseeing security services. Updating the MOA that identifies roles and responsibilities could strengthen the multiagency courthouse security framework by better incorporating accountability for federal agencies' collaborative efforts.
- In 2008, Congress authorized a pilot program, whereby the Marshals Service would assume FPS's responsibilities to provide perimeter security at 7 courthouses. In October 2010, the judiciary recommended that the pilot be expanded. AOUSC noted general consensus among various stakeholders in support of the pilot and estimated the costs of expanding it, but AOUSC did not obtain FPS's views on assessing the pilot results or on how the expansion may affect FPS's mission. Additional analysis on the costs and benefits of this approach and the inclusion of all stakeholder perspectives could better position Congress and federal stakeholders to evaluate expansion options.
- The Marshals Service has not always completed court security facility surveys (a type of risk assessment), as required by Marshals Service guidance. At 9 of the courthouses GAO visited, the Marshals Service had not conducted these surveys, but Marshals Service officials at some courthouses told us that they assessed security needs as part of their budget development process. However, these assessments are less comprehensive than the court security facility surveys required by Marshals Service guidance. FPS has faced difficulties completing its risk assessments, known as facility security assessments, and recently halted an effort to implement a new system for completing them. Furthermore, GAO found that the Marshals Service and FPS did not consistently share the full results of their risk assessments with each other and key stakeholders. Sharing risk assessment information could better equip federal stakeholders to assess courthouses' security needs and make informed decisions.