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November 15, 2022

The Honorable Gary Peters
Chairman
The Honorable Rob Portman
Ranking Member
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
United States Senate

The Honorable Bennie G. Thompson
Chairman
The Honorable John Katko
Ranking Member
Committee on Homeland Security
House of Representatives

Southwest Border: Border Patrol’s Missing Migrant Program

U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), is the lead federal agency responsible for border security, including securing the nearly 2,000 mile southwest border with Mexico. U.S. Border Patrol, within CBP, is responsible for securing the border between ports of entry to prevent individuals and goods from entering the country illegally.¹ As part of its border security role, Border Patrol responds to reports of migrants attempting to enter the U.S. between ports of entry who may be missing or in distress. In fiscal year 2021—the most recent year for which data are available—Border Patrol reported more than 1.6 million encounters with individuals along the U.S.-Mexico border, which is the highest annual total on record. Some migrants attempting to enter the U.S. illegally have sought to cross the border in remote areas, where they risk injury and death by trying to cross over mountains, deserts, and rivers. In fiscal year 2021, Border Patrol recorded a record number of migrant deaths—approximately 600—and the rescue of about 13,000 others.² Border Patrol established the Missing Migrant Program in 2017 to help rescue migrants in distress and reduce migrant deaths along the southwest border.

In April 2022, we reported on Border Patrol’s implementation of the Missing Migrant Program.³ Specifically, we reported that Border Patrol issued nationwide procedures in September 2021

¹Ports of entry are facilities that provide for the controlled entry into or departure from the U.S. Specifically, a port of entry is any officially designated location (seaport, airport, or land border location) where DHS officers or employees are assigned to clear passengers and merchandise, collect duties, and enforce customs laws, and where DHS officers inspect persons entering or applying for admission into or departing the U.S. pursuant to U.S. immigration and other laws.

²Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Customs and Border Protection, *Rescue Beacons and Unidentified Remains: Fiscal Year 2022 Report to Congress* (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 29, 2022).

³GAO, *Southwest Border: CBP Should Improve Data Collection, Reporting, and Evaluation for the Missing Migrant Program*, [GAO-22-105053](#) (Washington, D.C., Apr. 20, 2022). In that report, we addressed how Border Patrol has implemented the Missing Migrant Program to help reduce the frequency of migrant deaths; the extent to which Border

intended to help standardize how it coordinates with external entities.⁴ We found that CBP had not collected and recorded, or reported to Congress, complete data on migrant deaths, nor disclosed associated data limitations. Lastly, we found that Border Patrol did not have a plan to evaluate the Missing Migrant Program. We made recommendations to address these issues. Border Patrol concurred with them, and we discuss actions taken in response to these recommendations later in this report.

The Missing Persons and Unidentified Remains Act requires CBP to submit annual reports to Congress that include, among other elements, the number and location of unidentified remains found along the southwest border.⁵ In response, Border Patrol submitted its first report to Congress on March 29, 2022. The report includes 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.⁶

The Act also includes a provision for us to review how CBP collects data on migrant deaths and how CBP works with external entities in cases involving missing migrants or unidentified remains. This report addresses (1) Border Patrol's coordination with external entities in instances of missing migrants and the recovery and identification of migrant remains; (2) Border Patrol's data on migrant deaths and the extent to which there are available data on migrant deaths from selected external entities; and (3) how Border Patrol evaluates the Missing Migrant Program.

This report supplements information and draws from our April 2022 report on the Missing Migrant Program.⁷ Further details on the scope and methodology for our April 2022 report are available within the published product.

To address our first two objectives, we interviewed officials from Border Patrol headquarters and selected sectors.⁸ In particular, we obtained perspectives from officials from three Border Patrol sectors—Del Rio, El Paso and Tucson—in June 2022. We interviewed these sectors about how they coordinate with external entities, collect and record data on migrant deaths, and use the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs).⁹ We selected these sectors to supplement the information we obtained from the sectors we included in the scope of our April

Patrol collects and reports complete and accurate data on migrant deaths; and how Border Patrol evaluates the Missing Migrant Program. We evaluated the extent to which Border Patrol's data recording and reporting aligned with agency policies and compared Border Patrol data with publically reported data on migrant deaths. We also assessed Border Patrol efforts to evaluate the Missing Migrant Program.

⁴We use the term external entity 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.

⁵See Pub. L. No. 116-277, § 5, 134 Stat. 3370, 3371 (2020).

⁶Rescue beacons are towers with sensors that can alert Border Patrol agents that someone needs help once activated by an individual in distress. 9-1-1 placards placed across the southwest border instruct migrants to call 9-1-1 for help and assist rescue personnel with locating migrants in distress.

⁷[GAO-22-105053](#).

⁸Along the southwest border, Border Patrol divides responsibility for border security operations geographically among nine sectors that include border stations.

⁹The Department of Justice's National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs) is a centralized repository and resource center for missing, unidentified, and unclaimed person cases.

2022 report.¹⁰ They also reflect a range in the number of reported migrant deaths, types of terrain, and interactions with external entities.

In addition, we interviewed representatives from three external entities that operate within the three Border Patrol sectors we contacted. They included the Webb County Medical Examiner's Office in Texas and Justices of the Peace in Kinney County and Edwards County in Texas. We interviewed these representatives in June and July 2022 to obtain information about how they coordinate with Border Patrol or NamUs officials, collect and record data on migrant deaths, and whether they knew of other sources of data on migrant deaths. We selected these entities to reflect variation in location and type among the entities with whom Border Patrol officials stated they regularly coordinate. We also made our selection to supplement the interviews with external entities we conducted for our April 2022 report.¹¹ The information we collected from interviews with Border Patrol sector officials and external entities cannot be generalized, but provides important perspectives on how they coordinate.

To address our first objective, we reviewed Border Patrol documentation that describes Border Patrol's coordination with external entities. For example, we reviewed the Missing Migrant Program's procedures, which includes guidance on coordinating with external entities and responding to inquiries of missing migrants. We also summarized and updated information from our April 2022 report to describe Border Patrol's coordination with external entities to locate and assist migrants, and to recover and identify remains. In addition, we interviewed NamUs officials, as Border Patrol shares information with them on missing persons and unidentified remains, as described in more detail later in this report.

To address our second objective, we reviewed Border Patrol documentation on how the agency collects data on migrant deaths. For example, we reviewed procedures for the Border Safety Initiative Tracking System (BSITS), which Border Patrol uses as its system to record information on migrant rescues and deaths.¹² In addition, to determine the extent to which there are available data on migrant deaths from selected external entities, we obtained information from Border Patrol headquarters and all nine southwest border sectors, the external entities we interviewed, and from NamUs. In addition, we interviewed officials from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), which collects nationwide information on deaths from state and local agencies.

To address our third objective, we also reviewed Border Patrol documentation, such as a sample of sectors' weekly reports to headquarters on the Missing Migrant Program and an after-action report of a meeting of sectors' Missing Migrant Program coordinators from sectors along

¹⁰For our April 2022 report, we interviewed officials from Border Patrol headquarters and from four of the nine Border Patrol sectors responsible for operations along the southwest border—Laredo, Rio Grande Valley, San Diego and Tucson.

¹¹For our April 2022 report, we interviewed representatives from five external entities that operate within the Border Patrol sectors we contacted. They included Águilas del Desierto, a nonprofit organization that conducts search and rescue missions along the southwest border; the Brooks County Sheriff's Office and Webb County Medical Examiner's Office in Texas; the San Diego County Sheriff's Office in California; and the Pima County Medical Examiner's Office in Arizona.

¹²Office of Border Patrol, *Border Safety Initiative Tracking System (BSITS) User Manual* (Washington, D.C.: 2007).

the Southwest Border.¹³ We used information from our April 2022 report to describe recent efforts to evaluate the Missing Migrant Program.

We conducted this performance audit from April 2022 to November 2022 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

The southwest border spans almost 2,000 miles across four states.¹⁴ As mentioned above, some migrants attempting to enter the U.S. illegally risk injury and death by trying to cross over mountains, deserts, or rivers. These conditions have prompted Border Patrol to warn migrants about the dangers of unlawfully crossing the border and to establish search and rescue units, among other initiatives, to help reduce the number of migrant deaths. To coordinate these initiatives, Border Patrol established the Missing Migrant Program in 2017 and issued guidance—the Missing Migrant Program Internal Operating Procedure—in September 2021 to help standardize the program across sectors.¹⁵ This document establishes common processes for all nine sectors along the southwest border to assign roles and responsibilities to agents assigned to the Missing Migrant Program or respond to inquiries about missing migrants from external entities.

The Missing Migrant Program focuses its efforts on its target zone, which is an area consisting of 45 counties on or near the border with Mexico. The Missing Migrant Program carries out 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 as well as placing rescue beacons and 9-1-1 placards in remote areas.

Border Patrol uses BSITS as the system of record on migrant deaths. BSITS enables Border Patrol to track the volume and types of rescues performed, and the number of migrant deaths that occur. 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 the target zone, whether or not the Border Patrol was directly involved. The manual also states that deaths outside the target zone should be recorded in BSITS if Border Patrol was directly involved with the incident.

¹³The Missing Migrant Program Coordinator is the Border Patrol official at the sector level assigned to manage program resources, personnel and operations.

¹⁴These four states are Arizona, California, New Mexico, and Texas. Border Patrol divides responsibility for border security operations in this region between nine geographically defined sectors: Big Bend, Del Rio, El Centro, El Paso, Laredo, Rio Grande Valley, Tucson, San Diego, and Yuma.

¹⁵Some Border Patrol efforts to reduce migrant deaths predate the establishment of the national Missing Migrant Program. For example, in 2015, Tucson sector started a program to facilitate coordination with external entities and better track reports of missing and deceased migrants. An Internal Operating Procedure serves as national guidance for Border Patrol.

Border Patrol Coordinates with External Entities to Assist Migrants and to Recover and Identify Remains

Border Patrol Coordinates with External Entities to Locate and Assist Migrants

Through the Missing Migrant Program, Border Patrol coordinates with external entities in instances of missing migrants or reports of migrants who may be in distress. As we reported in April 2022, Border Patrol's Internal Operating Procedure for the Missing Migrant Program established common processes across southwest border sectors to, among other things, standardize the way they respond to inquiries of missing migrants from external entities.¹⁶ For example, the Internal Operating Procedure provides guidance for communicating with officials from foreign consulates about reports of missing migrants. We also found that the Missing Migrant Program includes various efforts intended to help Border Patrol coordinate with external entities to find missing migrants or assist those who may be in distress. These efforts include establishing standard procedures to respond to 9-1-1 calls.

In addition, Border Patrol coordinates with NamUs officials in some cases involving missing migrants. Law enforcement officials and medical examiners publish missing person records on NamUs's website to assist family members and others in identifying missing persons. According to Border Patrol officials, they have access to NamUs and use the system to develop leads on missing migrants. For example, in the Del Rio sector, a Border Patrol official told us that the sector searches NamUs when a foreign consular official sends them information about a missing person. Del Rio sector officials also receive information from this system about migrants who may have crossed the border or gone missing within the sector's area of operations. Tucson sector officials told us that they are collaborating with NamUs officials to make substantiated reports of missing migrants from the public visible on NamUs' website.¹⁷

Border Patrol Coordinates with External Entities to Recover and Identify Decedent Remains

Border Patrol coordinates with external entities to recover and identify decedent remains, even though the primary responsibility for these efforts lies with state and local agencies, according to officials and agency procedures.¹⁸ Regarding recovering remains, for example, Border Patrol officials in Tucson, San Diego, and Rio Grande Valley sectors told us that if they discover remains, they preserve the scene and turn over control to the investigating authority, such as the police.

Border Patrol officials also help external entities recover remains from remote or inaccessible areas. For example, officials from the El Paso sector told us that they help recover the remains of decedents who have drowned in irrigation canals along the U.S.-Mexico border. They also told us that state and local law enforcement officials rely on Border Patrol to help recover remains from remote rangeland in New Mexico. In one case, in Texas, an official from an external entity told us that Border Patrol helped the local sheriff recover remains by providing

¹⁶[GAO-22-105053](#).

¹⁷According to NamUs and Border Patrol officials, it is not possible for private citizens or foreign consular officials to report a missing person using NamUs and have that information be viewable by the public absent an association with an active law enforcement case. For additional information, see GAO, *Missing Persons and Unidentified Remains Opportunities May Exist to Share Information More Efficiently*, [GAO-16-515](#) (Washington, D.C., June 7, 2016).

¹⁸According to the CDC, the registration of deaths is a state function supported by individual state laws and regulations. See CDC, *Physician's Handbook on Medical Certification of Death*, (Hyattsville, Maryland: 2003).

access to land where a death occurred. Relatedly, in April 2022, we reported that officials from three external entities that we met with noted that Border Patrol accompanies their staff when remains are found in remote areas.¹⁹ These officials told us that Border Patrol's assistance is helpful because the areas may be dangerous or difficult to access.

Border Patrol shares information it collects from decedent remains with external entities. In particular, Border Patrol officials told us that they assist external entities in identifying decedents by examining their personal effects (such as mobile phones or government identification cards). For example, in cases where a migrant decedent has an identity card in their possession, Border Patrol officials told us that they check their databases for a match and share any relevant information with the appropriate external entity. According to officials from one external entity, this can allow for the identification of remains.

Border Patrol officials also told us they coordinate with external entities, such as medical examiners, funeral homes, and foreign consulates, to identify decedent remains using fingerprint matching. For example, Tucson sector officials told us that a medical examiner located within the sector collects fingerprints from deceased individuals. Border Patrol checks these fingerprints against its databases for matching records. Border Patrol officials also told us that they share fingerprints with foreign consular officials who have access to databases in their countries. In the event of a positive fingerprint match, Border Patrol guidance directs personnel to notify the appropriate medical examiner and foreign consulate with the decedents' identifying information (e.g., name and date of birth). Additionally, Border Patrol officials in the Del Rio sector also told us that they use a messaging application to collect information about remains from local funeral homes and the public, such as ranchers, who encounter remains. These Border Patrol officials told us that they coordinate with local funeral homes to collect fingerprints from remains in order to identify them.

Further, Border Patrol officials in the Tucson sector also told us that they coordinate with external entities, such as Arizona's Department of Public Safety, to respond to mass casualty incidents. These incidents typically involve trucks or vans carrying a large number of suspected migrants. For example, we previously reported that Border Patrol officials in the Rio Grande Valley sector told us that after a severe auto accident in August 2021 involving multiple fatalities of suspected migrants, they fingerprinted decedents to support state law enforcement efforts.²⁰

Border Patrol also collects DNA from remains and coordinates with external entities to facilitate their identification. For example, officials from the El Paso sector told us that if they learn that a decedent might have living family members, these officials will collect DNA using a test kit and upload the results to the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Combined DNA Index System.²¹ This system allows federal, state and local labs to exchange and compare DNA profiles electronically in order to develop investigative leads. In addition, El Paso sector officials told us that there have been instances where foreign consulates informed Border Patrol that decedents have living family members outside the U.S. In these instances, Border Patrol coordinated with U.S.

¹⁹[GAO-22-105053](#).

²⁰[GAO-22-105053](#).

²¹The Combined DNA Index System is the Federal Bureau of Investigation's program of support for criminal justice DNA databases, as well as the software used to run these databases.

government officials stationed abroad to collect DNA samples. Medical examiners in the U.S. then determine if these DNA samples match that of migrant decedents.

Border Patrol's Missing Migrant Program officials may also use NamUs to help identify remains. According to NamUs program officials, medical examiners typically enter information on unidentified remains in the system after these officials exhaust other options, such as fingerprint matching. El Paso sector officials told us that they use NamUs as a "last resort" because they primarily coordinate with the El Paso Office of the Medical Examiner to identify remains. Further, in May 2022, Border Patrol headquarters officials told us that they are taking steps to improve information sharing with NamUs personnel. For example, the Missing Migrant Program held a sector coordinator meeting in April 2022 and NamUs officials attended.

Border Patrol's Migrant Death Data Are Incomplete; External Entities Collect Some Data

Data Collected by Border Patrol Sectors Are Incomplete

Border Patrol sectors are responsible for collecting and recording data on migrant deaths through the Missing Migrant Program. However, in April 2022, we found that these data are not complete. Border Patrol has a policy for recording information on migrant deaths in BSITS. Specifically, the BSITS User Manual states that Border Patrol should record the death of a suspected undocumented migrant who died in furtherance of an illegal entry within the target zone, whether the Border Patrol was directly involved or not. Based on the manual, if Border Patrol was not involved in the initial discovery of remains found within the target zone, it should record the death when known, including the agency or person that initially discovered the remains, in BSITS.

In April 2022, we found that Border Patrol has not collected and recorded, or reported to Congress, complete data on migrant deaths. In response to Congressional reporting requirements,²² 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.²³ Border Patrol officials told us that they pulled all records of migrant deaths for that report from BSITS—the system of record for migrant death information—including discoveries made by external entities. However, we found that these data were not complete because Border Patrol had not ensured the collection and recording of all available information on migrant deaths in its system.

In particular, we found that Border Patrol was not recording all migrant deaths in instances where an external entity first discovers the remains. Specifically, Border Patrol sectors included in our review were not consistently recording the data as required. For example, San Diego sector officials told us that they were in frequent communication with medical examiners, sheriff's departments, and fire departments. If an entity other than Border Patrol identifies

²²A House Report accompanying the 2020 Department of Homeland Security Appropriations Bill directed CBP to report on each discovery of migrant remains along the southern border, "whether the discovery was made by CBP personnel or other individuals or organizations." The Missing Persons and Unidentified Remains Act of 2019 requires CBP to produce an annual report on all unidentified remains discovered during the reporting period on or near the border between the U.S. and Mexico. Missing Persons and Unidentified Remains Act of 2019, Pub. L. No. 116-277, § 5, 134 Stat. 3370, 3371 (2020). See *Rescue Beacons and Unidentified Remains: Fiscal Year 2022 Report to Congress*.

²³Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Customs and Border Protection, *Migrant Death Mitigation: Fiscal Year 2020 Report to Congress* (Washington, D.C.: 2021).

remains, then that external entity notifies the sector officials if they believe that the decedent was likely a migrant crossing the border between ports of entry. In those instances, they recorded the death in BSITS. However, in the Tucson sector, officials told us that they did not update BSITS after they learned of a migrant death from an external entity, such as the Pima County Medical Examiner's Office in Arizona.

As a result, we recommended that Border Patrol take steps to ensure it collects and records available information on migrant deaths, including those identified by external entities.²⁴ Border Patrol agreed with our recommendation and has taken several steps to address it. For example, in April 2022, the Missing Migrant Program held a meeting for program coordinators from sectors along the southwest border, which included agenda items related to the roles and responsibilities that coordinators have in supervising the collecting and recording of data on migrant deaths. According to the meeting's after-action report, the discussion allowed for a shared understanding of the nationwide requirements, to include the standardization of collecting and recording of data.

Missing Migrant Program officials in headquarters have also sent emails to sector coordinators and conducted field visits to help standardize the collection and recording of data on migrant deaths. For example, in May 2022, Border Patrol sent the Missing Migrant Program sector coordinators an email restating the definition of a BSITS reportable death that emphasized that incidents meeting this definition must be recorded in BSITS. Additionally, in June 2022, Tucson sector officials told us that sector leadership asked them to review about 140 cases in which local medical examiners identified decedents as migrants, but sector officials have not yet entered these deaths into BSITS. Tucson sector officials told us that they had not been able to start this review due to the need to address other priorities. Further, Border Patrol officials told us that in September and October 2022, headquarters officials visited 6 sectors—Del Rio, Laredo, Rio Grande Valley, San Diego, El Centro, and Yuma—to review program activities at the sector level. During these visits, headquarters officials also met with Missing Migrant Program coordinators to discuss data entry into BSITS. While these are positive steps, to fully address the intent of our recommendation, Border Patrol needs to complete its planned actions and further ensure that sectors are collecting and recording available information on migrant deaths.

Selected External Entities Collect Some Data on Migrant Deaths

Among the external entities we interviewed, some of them, particularly medical examiners' offices, collect data on migrant deaths that occur within their geographic areas. For example, an official from one medical examiner's office we contacted—the Webb County Medical Examiner's Office in Texas—stated that the office maintains its own spreadsheet on migrant deaths. This official said that the information in the spreadsheet includes, among other things, the location where they found a migrant's remains and the cause of the migrant's death. This official also told us that the majority of the office's workload relates to migrant deaths and the spreadsheet facilitates information sharing with Border Patrol and other local law enforcement officials. Further, as we reported in April 2022, the Arizona OpenGIS Initiative for Deceased Migrants

²⁴In our April 2022 report, we also recommended that Border Patrol include known migrant deaths, including those reported by external entities, and any data limitations in public agency reports and those to Congress. Border Patrol agreed with this recommendation and has actions planned or underway to address it as described above.

(the Initiative), a collaborative effort between the Pima County Medical Examiner's Office and Humane Borders, Inc., collects data on migrant deaths in Arizona.²⁵

In addition to these entities, the CDC collects decedent data from states and local agencies that are responsible for filling out death certificates in their respective jurisdictions, according to the Chief of Mortality Statistics. Thus, CDC's data include information on the deaths of any migrants reported by state and local agencies. However, CDC's Chief of Mortality Statistics also told us that a decedent's immigration status is not required to complete a death certificate. As a result, CDC cannot specifically identify migrant deaths within its overall data on deaths nationwide.

While some of the external entities we contacted collect and maintain data on migrant deaths, officials from these entities, as well as from Border Patrol, noted differences in these data. For example, the Webb County Medical Examiner told us that the data the office collects on migrant deaths is not comparable to the data Border Patrol collects because Border Patrol's sector boundaries do not align with Webb County's borders. Further, Border Patrol officials told us that their definition of a reportable migrant death and the definition of a migrant death used by medical examiners might differ.²⁶

In April 2022, we reported that while there may be differences in data collected by the Border Patrol Tucson sector and the Initiative, the Tucson sector collected and recorded fewer migrant deaths in BSITS than the Initiative each year, from fiscal years 2015 through 2019. We did not confirm whether all of the migrant deaths reported by the Initiative met the definition of a migrant death to be recorded in BSITS, according to Border Patrol policy. However, the data we analyzed indicated that the Initiative recorded more migrant deaths in the Tucson sector's area of responsibility than the sector did. As mentioned above, Border Patrol has actions planned to address our recommendation that the agency collect and record available information on migrant deaths, including those identified by external entities.

Border Patrol Has Taken Steps to Evaluate the Missing Migrant Program

Border Patrol collects and reviews information about Missing Migrant Program activities; however, it does not have a plan to evaluate the program overall. In April 2022, we found that implementing the nationwide Internal Operating Procedure for the Missing Migrant Program could help provide oversight of the program at the sector level by standardizing how sectors track their program activities. According to the Internal Operating Procedure, each sector is to submit a weekly report to headquarters that describes major activities, developments, and initiatives in its area of responsibility. For example, they are to include:

- weekly and year-to-date statistics on external entity requests for information on missing migrants, searches and rescues, searches and recoveries, and identifications of remains;
- rescue beacon and 9-1-1 rescue placard activations and dispositions; and

²⁵Humane Borders, Inc. is a non-profit that established a system of water stations in the Sonoran Desert on routes used by migrants to prevent death by dehydration or exposure. Geographic Information Systems consist of computer software, hardware, and data used to capture, store, manipulate, analyze, and graphically present a potentially wide array of geospatial data.

²⁶According to Border Patrol guidance, a reportable migrant death requires the migrant's death to have occurred in furtherance of an illegal entry. Border Patrol officials told us that medical examiners may not have this requirement.

- coordination efforts with external entities.

At the time of our April 2022 report, Border Patrol officials stated that they monitor the program through these weekly reports. Further, in fiscal year 2022, the Missing Migrant Program implemented a standardized web-based form for sectors to complete their weekly reports, which may help management assess performance across sectors, and according to the National Coordinator, will help Border Patrol meet congressional reporting requirements. However, we reported that Border Patrol did not have a plan to evaluate the Missing Migrant Program. Specifically, we reported that the weekly reports do not constitute an evaluation of the program and its progress toward meeting its programmatic goals. In addition, Border Patrol did not have a plan to aggregate or use the information from the weekly reports to evaluate the program across sectors.

As a result, we recommended that Border Patrol develop a plan with time frames to evaluate the Missing Migrant Program. Border Patrol agreed with our recommendation and has actions underway to address it. For example, the Missing Migrant Program held a sector coordinator meeting in April 2022 where, among other actions, they established goals and objectives for the program. According to the meeting's after-action report, the goals for calendar year 2022 are to increase situational awareness, invest in innovative solutions, and enhance stakeholder engagement. Each goal also has objectives. For example, the goal to increase situational awareness includes objectives related to expanding data collection and reconciling data with that of external entities. Further, the after-action report states that Border Patrol will hold another meeting in fall of 2022 where officials will review fiscal year 2022 program data, identify and mitigate any challenges encountered during the reporting year, and evaluate program success based on available data. To fully address the intent of our recommendation, Border Patrol should develop a plan for evaluating the program overall, beyond fiscal year 2022.

Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to the departments of Health and Human Services, Homeland Security, and Justice for review and comment. The three departments did not provide formal written comments, but DHS provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate.

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

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-8777 or gablerr@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made major contributions to this report include E. Jeanette Henriquez (Assistant Director), R. Gifford Howland (Analyst in Charge), Pete Haderlein, Michele Fejfar, and Heidi Nielson.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rebecca Gambler". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Rebecca Gambler
Director, Homeland Security and Justice
(106007)