

Why GAO Did This Study

USDA and HHS veterinarians perform crucial work for public and animal health and for emergency response to an economically devastating or highly contagious animal disease—where USDA has a lead role. In 2009, USDA and HHS committed to department-wide efforts to address veterinarian workforce challenges, such as recruitment. In 2010, OPM issued a strategic plan for federal veterinarians to help improve recruiting initiatives and emergency response plans.

GAO was asked to review workforce planning for federal veterinarians. This report examines (1) department-wide efforts USDA and HHS have made for their routine veterinarian workforces, (2) the extent to which USDA has identified the veterinarians needed for emergency response to an animal disease outbreak, and (3) the steps OPM and other federal agencies have taken to achieve the goals of the government-wide strategic plan for the veterinarian workforce. GAO reviewed USDA, HHS, and government-wide workforce plans and interviewed relevant officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that USDA assess and address veterinarian workforce needs for emergency response to an animal disease outbreak, and that OPM review agencies' use of direct-hire authority for veterinarians and monitor and evaluate progress and obtain leadership support for achieving government-wide veterinary workforce goals. USDA partially agreed, noting that it has taken steps to assess its emergency needs. GAO believes the recommendation remains valid. OPM agreed with both recommendations.

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FEDERAL VETERINARIANS

Efforts Needed to Improve Workforce Planning

What GAO Found

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has taken actions to ensure that component agencies include veterinarians in workforce planning efforts for meeting routine needs, but the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) has not done so. GAO has identified top leadership involvement as a key principle for workforce planning. For example, USDA provided guidance to its component agencies to assess and develop strategies for its workforce. In accordance with this guidance, USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS)—the agency that inspects slaughter plants—developed a workforce plan that included recruitment incentives and other strategies for veterinarians. HHS's Food and Drug Administration (FDA) also included veterinarians in its workforce plans, but HHS did not provide guidance or direction to FDA or other component agencies to do so. GAO recommended in 2009 that USDA and HHS conduct department-wide assessments of their veterinarian workforces. The efforts of USDA and its component agencies met the intent of the recommendation. GAO believes that the recommendation to HHS is still valid. Direction and guidance from HHS could help integrate its component agencies' workforce planning efforts for veterinarians into a department-wide assessment.

USDA participated in a government-wide study to estimate the veterinarians needed to respond to animal disease outbreaks, but because of limitations in the study, the estimates are not reliable for purposes of effective emergency response planning. For example, the estimates were based on a USDA model that had not been verified or validated. Moreover, USDA has not developed a detailed plan to augment or train its workforce to respond to an economically devastating or highly contagious outbreak. Without reliable estimates of the veterinarians needed or how it will augment and train its workforce, USDA cannot ensure it will have enough veterinarians to adequately respond.

The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) and other federal agencies have taken steps toward achieving the goals outlined in OPM's government-wide strategic plan for the veterinarian workforce, primarily through an interagency group OPM created. However, in each of the three goals, the interagency group did not follow through on next steps and made limited progress. For example, to improve recruiting, OPM granted government-wide direct-hire authority in 2009 to enable agencies to hire qualified veterinarians without regard to certain federal hiring requirements. However, OPM did not follow through on plans to review agencies' use of the authority. As a result, OPM cannot determine the overall impact on recruitment or whether the authority should continue or be modified. Monitoring and evaluating progress toward human capital goals is among the key principles GAO has identified for effective strategic workforce planning. According to OPM officials, the group did not consistently monitor progress toward goals in part because it did not have sufficient leadership support from participating agencies. OPM and group members, including USDA and HHS, recognize a need for a higher level of leadership but have not identified officials to serve in this capacity. Obtaining leadership support—including from USDA and HHS, the major federal employers of civilian veterinarians—and monitoring and evaluating progress could help emphasize the importance of completing work under these goals and better position OPM to ensure progress or take appropriate actions if progress is limited.