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MANAGING FOR RESULTS

Selected Agencies Need to Take Additional Efforts to Improve Customer Service

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Why GAO Did This Study

Providing customer service has been a long-standing challenge for federal agencies. GPRAMA requires that agencies establish a balanced set of performance indicators to be used in measuring progress toward performance goals, including customer service. This report is part of GAO's response to its mandate to evaluate the implementation of GPRAMA. It evaluates (1) the extent to which selected agencies and their services are using customer service standards and measuring performance results against these standards, and how selected agencies are communicating standards and using customer feedback to improve customer service; and (2) the extent to which OMB and the PIC are facilitating federal agencies' use of tools and practices to improve customer service. GAO selected five agencies and their services based on prior work in which it surveyed 12 federal agencies that are among those with the most widespread contact with the public. GAO reviewed and compared agency customer service documents to federal legislation and guidance, and interviewed agency officials about customer service.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the five agencies update their customer service standards and that Forest Service, NPS, FSA, and VBA's VGLI implement formal feedback mechanisms to improve customer service. CBP, Forest Service, FSA, NPS, and VBA all agreed with GAO's recommendations.

View GAO-15-84. For more information, contact J. Christopher Mihm at (202) 512-6806 or mihmj@gao.gov

What GAO Found

GAO reviewed the customer service standards at Customs and Border Protection (CBP), Forest Service, Federal Student Aid (FSA), the National Park Service (NPS), and two services in the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA)—disability compensation and Veterans' Group Life Insurance (VGLI). GAO found that none of the agencies' standards included all of the key elements of customer service standards (see table). GAO identified key elements of effective customer service standards by reviewing the requirements of the GPRA Modernization Act of 2010 (GPRAMA) and executive orders that focused on providing greater accountability, oversight, and transparency. Without all of the key elements present, agencies may not be able to easily communicate performance targets or goals to customers, measure their progress towards meeting those goals, and pinpoint improvement opportunities.

Extent to Which Agencies' Customer Service Standards Met Key Elements

Agency	Customer service standards that include targets or goals for performance	Customer service standards that include performance measures	Customer service standards that are easily publicly available
CBP	No	No	Yes
Forest Service	No	No	No
FSA	Yes	Yes	No
NPS[a]	No	No	No
VBA's disability compensation	Yes	Yes	No
VBA's VGLI	Yes	Yes	No

Source: GAO analysis of agency documentation. | GAO-15-84

[a]NPS provided GAO two sets of standards, its "Visitors' Bill of Rights" and its visitor survey descriptions, both of which GAO assessed and determined that neither included key elements.

GAO found that all five agencies provide customers with opportunities to submit feedback, including comments and complaints. CBP and VBA's disability compensation had formal mechanisms for reviewing customer feedback, but the other agencies did not. For example, Forest Service and NPS do not have guidance for when to elevate customer comments from the local level up to the agency level. As a result, these agencies may not be effectively reviewing and addressing customer concerns across the agency.

The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) has taken steps to facilitate the improvement of agencies' customer service initiatives. For example, OMB issued guidance to assist agencies in their implementation of Executive Order 13571, *Streamlining Service Delivery and Improving Customer Service* which was issued to strengthen customer service and require agencies to develop and publish a customer service plan. OMB formed a task force to assist agencies with the development of customer service plans. Moving forward, OMB has identified customer service as a cross-agency priority (CAP) goal in 2014 in an effort to elevate the importance of customer service by the federal government and intends to have the Performance Improvement Council (PIC) play a role in the CAP goal implementation planning for customer service.

_____ **United States Government Accountability Office**

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Abbreviations

CAP goal	cross-agency priority goal
CBP	Customs and Border Protection
COD	Common Origination and Disbursement
FSA	Federal Student Aid
GPRA	Government Performance and Results Act
GPRAMA	GPRA Modernization Act of 2010
NPS	National Park Service
OIRA	Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs
OMB	Office of Management and Budget
PIC	Performance Improvement Council
PRA	Paperwork Reduction Act
VA	Veterans Affairs
VBA	Veterans Benefits Administration
VGLI	Veterans' Group Life Insurance

GAO U.S. GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE

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Congressional Addressees,

Federal agency personnel interact with the public in a vast number of ways: providing medical and insurance benefits to veterans, managing border and airport security, informing and educating visitors within national parks and forests, and in many other roles. The circumstances and expectations for service vary within this range of roles, based upon the particular transaction such as providing information, evaluating benefit eligibility, implementing regulations, and managing law enforcement. These diverse functions help the federal government ensure public health and safety. For this reason, it is critical for agencies to gauge how services are meeting their customers' needs, while also sustaining and focusing agency efforts on continuing improvements in service delivery.

For the last 20 years – in recognition of the importance of service delivery in effective governance – both Congress and the executive branch have taken action to improve federal agencies' customer service. Most recently, Congress enacted the GPRA Modernization Act of 2010 (GPRAMA) to focus and sustain attention on agency performance and improvement.[1] GPRAMA requires that agencies establish a balanced set of performance indicators to be used in measuring progress toward performance goals, including goals for customer service.[2]

This report is part of a series of reports under our mandate to periodically examine implementation of GPRAMA.[3] The objectives of this report are to evaluate (1) the extent to which selected agencies and their services are using customer service standards and measuring performance results against these standards, and how selected agencies are communicating standards and using customer feedback to improve customer service; and (2) the extent to which the Office of Management and Budget (OMB)

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[1]Pub. L. No. 111-352, 124 Stat. 3866 (Jan. 4, 2011). GPRAMA significantly enhanced the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993, Pub. L. No. 103-62, 107 Stat. 285 (Aug. 3, 1993).

[2]Pub. L. No. 111-352, § 3, 31 U.S.C. § 1115(b)(6).

[3]Pub. L. No. 111-352, § 15(b)(1), 31 U.S.C. § 1115 note.

and the Performance Improvement Council (PIC) are facilitating federal agencies' use of tools and practices to improve customer service.

For our review we selected five agencies and their services (see table 1).[4] We made our selection based on prior work in which we surveyed 12 federal agencies that were previously found to be among those with the most widespread contact with the public.[5] For the prior report, five of those agencies were selected for additional follow-up interviews—based on their responses to key survey questions—in order to gain a fuller understanding of their responses. For this report, we selected the same five agencies and their services to determine the progress made by each since the issuance in 2011 of Executive Order 13571, *Streamlining Service Delivery and Improving Customer Service*.[6]

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[4]For the purposes of this report, we will refer to services by their agency name (for example, Forest Service) with the exception of the two services within the Veterans Benefits Administration—disability compensation and Veterans' Group Life Insurance — which we identify as services.

[5]GAO, *Managing for Results: Opportunities to Strengthen Agencies' Customer Service Efforts*, GAO-11-44 (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 27, 2010). Services were chosen for the survey based on a list—developed by the National Performance Review in the late 1990s—of agencies with the most contact with the public, input from subject matter experts, and available public data. The National Performance Review was a major executive branch reform initiative launched in 1993 to improve government performance. In 1998, it was renamed the National Partnership for Reinventing Government.

[6] Executive Order No. 13571 (Apr. 27, 2011), *Streamlining Service Delivery and Improving Customer Service*, 76 Fed. Reg. 24,339 (May 2, 2011).

Table 1: Agencies and Services Included in Review

Department	Agency	Service
Department of Agriculture	Forest Service	Managing recreational facilities and services
Department of Education	Office of Federal Student Aid (FSA)	Awarding student loans under the Direct Loan Program
Department of Homeland Security	Customs and Border Protection (CBP)	Conducting border security inspections of individuals
Department of the Interior	National Park Service (NPS)	Providing visitor and interpretive services
Department of Veterans Affairs	Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA)	Providing disability compensation
		Providing Veterans' Group Life Insurance (VGLI)

Source: GAO summary of agency information. | GAO-15-84

To address how selected agencies are using customer service standards and measuring performance against those standards and how the agencies are communicating standards and using customer feedback to improve service, we interviewed agency officials and reviewed our relevant prior work on customer service and on the agencies in our sample. We also reviewed agencies' customer service standards, available performance measures related to those standards, information on customer service satisfaction surveys and feedback mechanisms, and departmental and agency strategic and customer service plans. In addition, we compared agency information to key elements for effective customer service standards. The key elements we selected for assessing customer service standards include requirements found in GPRA, GPRAMA, executive orders, and OMB guidance and memorandums that include how customer service standards are to be used and measured,

including how standards should be communicated to customers.[7] We conducted Internet searches to determine the extent to which customer service information was made publicly available by the agencies. We did not evaluate agency performance data or determine the reliability of such data, nor did we evaluate the overall effectiveness of or level of customer service provided by any of the agencies reviewed as these issues were not within the scope of our engagement.

To evaluate the extent to which OMB and the Performance Improvement Council (PIC) are facilitating federal agencies' use of tools and practices to improve customer service, we reviewed OMB guidance and memorandums, customer service task force agendas, and other documents related to customer service and survey administration. We interviewed officials from OMB's Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs (OIRA) and the Office of Performance and Personnel Management. We also reviewed information on customer service published on Performance.gov, a government-wide performance website maintained by OMB. For a more detailed description of our scope and methodology, see appendix I.

We conducted this performance audit in Washington, D.C., between November 2013 to October 2014 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards, which 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.

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[7]Exec. Order No. 12862, *Setting Customer Service Standards* (Sept. 11, 1993), 58 Fed. Reg. 48,257 (Sept. 14, 1993); Exec. Order No. 13571, *Streamlining Service Delivery and Improving Customer Service* (Apr. 27, 2011), 76 Fed. Reg. 24,339 (May 2, 2011); Memorandum on Customer Service, 31 Weekly Comp. Pres. Doc. 456 (Mar. 22, 1995) (released by Office of the Press Secretary on Mar. 23, 1995); Memorandum on Conducting "Conversations with America" to Further Improve Customer Service, 34 Weekly Comp. Pres. Doc. 368 (Mar. 3, 1998); Office of Management and Budget, *Implementing Executive Order 13571 on Streamlining Service Delivery and Improving Customer Service*, Memorandum M-11-24 (June 13, 2011); Office of Management and Budget, *New Fast Track Process for Collecting Service Delivery Feedback Under the Paperwork Reduction Act*, Memorandum M-11-26 (June 15, 2011); Office of Management and Budget, *Information Collection under the Paperwork Reduction Act*, Memorandum (Apr. 7, 2010); Office of Management and Budget, *Social Media, Web-Based Interactive Technologies, and the Paperwork Reduction Act,* Memorandum (Apr. 7, 2010); Office of Management and Budget, *Paperwork Reduction Act—Generic Clearances*, Memorandum (May 28, 2010).

Background

Over the last 20 years, both Congress and the executive branch have taken actions to improve federal customer service. On January 5, 1993, the Government Performance Results Act (GPRA) was enacted to, among other things, improve the effectiveness and efficiency of federal programs by establishing a system to set goals for program performance and to measure results.[8] GPRA was also intended to address several broad purposes, including promoting a new focus on results, service quality, and customer satisfaction.

Building on GPRA, Executive Order 12862, *Setting Customer Service Standards*, was issued on September 11, 1993.[9] The order stated that all executive departments and agencies that "provide significant services directly to the public shall provide those services in a manner that seeks to meet the customer service standard established" which is "equal to the best in business."[10] It also stated that the departments and agencies shall take a number of actions related to this requirement.

On March 22, 1995, a presidential memorandum on improving customer service was issued, which stated "[f]or the first time, the Federal Government's customers have been told what they have a right to expect when they ask for service."[11] The memorandum further stated that the government must be customer-driven and customer-focused and clarified expectations regarding agency actions, standards, and measurements. To mark the occasion of the fifth anniversary of President Clinton's reinventing government initiative, another presidential memorandum was issued on March 3, 1998, which called for efforts to "engage customers in conversations about further improving Government service."[12]

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[8]Pub. L. No. 103-62, § 2, 107 Stat. 285 (Aug. 3, 1993).

[9]Exec. Order No. 12862, *Setting Customer Service Standards*, 58 Fed. Reg. 48,257 (Sept. 11, 1993).

[10]The order defined the "best in business" as the highest quality of service delivered to customers by private organizations providing a comparable or analogous service.

[11]Memorandum on Customer Service 31 Weekly Comp. Pres. Doc. 456 (Mar 22, 1995) (released by Office of the Press Secretary on Mar. 23, 1995).

[12]Memorandum on Conducting "Conversations with America" to Further Improve Customer Service. 34 Weekly Comp. Pres. Doc. 368 (Mar. 3, 1998).

In 2010 we assessed how federal agencies were setting customer service standards, measuring results, reporting those results and using them to improve service. To do this work, we conducted a survey, based on the requirements of Executive Order 12862 and the related memorandums, of 13 services provided by 12 federal agencies.[13] In addition, we examined steps the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) had taken to facilitate federal agency use of tools and practices to improve customer service. We found that although all of the services in our review had customer service standards, not all were made available in a way that would be easy for customers to find and access, or in some cases, the standards were not made available at all.[14] In addition, we found that some agency officials thought the requirements of the Paperwork Reduction Act and its clearance process made obtaining customer input difficult.

Since 2010, an additional law has been enacted and an executive order has been issued that affect federal agencies and how they provide customer service. GPRAMA significantly enhanced the requirements of GPRA requiring agencies to develop annual performance plans that include performance goals for an agency's program activities and accompanying performance measures.[15] Under GPRAMA, these performance goals should be in a quantifiable and measurable form to define the level of performance to be achieved for program activities each year.[16]

On April 27, 2011, Executive Order 13571, *Streamlining Service Delivery and Improving Customer Service*, was issued to strengthen customer service and require agencies to develop and publish a customer service plan, in consultation with OMB.[17] On June 13, 2011, OMB issued

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[13]The sample of services was not a representative sample of services provided by the federal government, meaning that results from our survey cannot be generalized to apply to all services provided by the federal government.

[14]GAO-11-44.

[15]GPRA, Pub. L. No. 103-62, 107 Stat. 285 (1993); GPRAMA, Pub. L. No. 111-352, 124 Stat. 3866 (Jan. 4, 2011).

[16]Pub. L. No. 111-352, § 3, as codified at 31 U.S.C. § 1115(b).

[17]Exec. Order No. 13571, § 2. *Streamlining Service Delivery and Improving Customer Service*, 76 Fed. Reg. 24,339-40 (Apr. 27, 2011).

guidance to agencies to assist in implementing the activities outlined in Executive Order 13571.[18]

As required by GPRAMA, in March 2014 OMB announced the creation of a new set of cross-agency priority (CAP) goals in the fiscal year 2015 budget, which included customer service as a CAP goal to further build upon the progress being made by individual agencies.[19] According to OMB officials, the agency is committed to improving customer service government-wide and to getting agency leadership to focus on the issue. To that end, OMB identified a number of actions that support improved customer service (see text box).

Cross-Agency Priority Goal: Customer Service

To build upon the progress being made by individual agencies, the administration is taking action to deliver improved customer service across the federal enterprise. To accomplish this goal, the administration will

- streamline transactions,
- develop standards for high impact services, and
- utilize technology to improve the customer experience.

Source: Performance.gov. | GAO-15-84

Most recently, OMB issued additional guidance on July 18, 2014, regarding the president's Management Agenda priorities, which will be executed through the CAP goals, for the fiscal year 2016 budget.[20] OMB's guidance states that 15 specific departments and agencies, which are members of the customer service CAP goal community of practice, should include additional customer service information with their fiscal

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[18]Office of Management and Budget, *Implementing Executive Order 13571 on Streamlining Service Delivery and Improving Customer Service*, Memorandum M-11-24 (June 13, 2011).

[19]According to OMB, CAP goals address the longstanding challenge of addressing problems that are government-wide and require active collaboration between multiple agencies. To establish these goals, OMB solicited nominations from federal agencies and several congressional committees. In addition, OMB identified Smarter IT Delivery as a CAP goal with the purpose of improving outcomes and customer satisfaction with federal services through smarter IT delivery and stronger agency accountability for success.

[20]Office of Management and Budget, *Management Agenda Priorities for the FY 2016 Budget*, Memorandum M-14-12 (July 18, 2014).

year 2016 budget submissions.[21] These 15 departments and agencies include the 5 departments in our review. According to the guidance, each department is to highlight a limited number of key activities, provide the requested funding levels for the activities and describe how the requests were informed by citizen feedback, and report on the activities' projected contribution to improving the department's mission and outcomes.

Table 2 summarizes selected legislation, executive orders, and memorandums affecting federal customer service.

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[21]The 15 departments and agencies are as follows: the Departments of Agriculture; Commerce; Education; Health and Human Services; Homeland Security; Housing and Urban Development (Federal Housing Administration only); Interior; Labor; State (Consular Affairs only); Treasury; Veterans Affairs; and General Services Administration; Office of Personnel Management; Small Business Administration; and Social Security Administration. Office of Management and Budget, *Management Agenda Priorities for the FY 2016 Budget*, Memorandum M-14-12, at 2 (July 18, 2014).

GAO-15-84 Federal Customer Service

Table 2: Selected Legislation, Executive Orders, and Memorandums Affecting Federal Customer Service

Government Performance and Results Act[a] January 1993	Executive Order 12862—Setting Customer Service Standards[b] September 1993	Presidential Memorandum on Customer Service[c] March 1995	Presidential Memorandum on Conducting "Conversations with America" to Further Improve Customer Service[d] March 1998	GPRA Modernization Act of 2010[e] January 2011	Executive Order 13571— Streamlining Service Delivery and Improving Customer Service[f] April 2011	Office of Management and Budget Memorandum on Implementing Executive Order 13571[g] June 2011
Among other things the purpose of this act are to: • set program goals, measure program performance against those goals, and report publicly on their progress; • improve federal program effectiveness and public accountability by promoting a new focus on results, service quality, and customer satisfaction; • help federal managers improve service delivery by requiring that they plan for meeting program objectives and by providing them with information about program results and service quality	Requires that certain agencies, among other things— • identify the customers who are, or should be, served by the agency; • survey customers to determine the kind and quality of services they want and their level of satisfaction with existing services; • post service standards and measure results against them; • benchmark customer service performance against the best in business; • make information, services, and complaint systems easily accessible; and • provide a means to address customer complaints.	Clarifies that the requirements of Executive Order 12862 are continuing requirements and reinforced that, among other things— • customer service standards (standards) established customers' rights and expectations; • standards should be published; • agencies shall measure results against standards, and report results to customers on an annual basis; • measures should be objective where possible, and should include customer service; and • replacement standards should be published, if warranted.	Requires that covered agencies, among other things— • put in place a process to address customer complaints; and • track and analyze the data they receive and use it to change processes that do not serve customers well.	The act among other things— • states agency performance plans establish a balanced set of performance indicators to be used in measuring or assessing progress toward each performance goal, including, as appropriate, customer service, efficiency, output, and outcome indicators; and • defines customer service measures as an assessment of service delivery, which can include an assessment of quality, timeliness, and satisfaction among other factors.	Requires agencies to, among other things— • work with OMB to develop a customer service plan (plan); • establish a signature initiative that uses technology to improve the customer experience; • establish mechanisms to solicit customer feedback; • set clear customer service standards; and • improve customer service by adopting best practices.	Clarifies that, among other things—plans should: • address three to five of the agency's highest volume services, including the most critical and significant transactions with customers; and • include setting, communicating, and using customer service standards. Clarifies that standards should where possible • include targets for speed, quality/accuracy, and satisfaction; and • be understandable to the public, easily accessible at the point of service and on the Internet, and measurable, where appropriate.

Source: GAO summaries of relevant federal laws, executive orders, and presidential and OMB memorandums. | GAO-15-84

Note: The purpose of this table is to summarize sections of federal laws, executive orders, and presidential and OMB memorandums that only relate to customer service and are relevant to this report's objectives

[a]Pub. L. No. 103-62, 107 Stat. 285 (1993).

[b] Exec. Order No. 12862, *Setting Customer Service Standards* (Sept. 11, 1993), 58 Fed. Reg. 48,257 (Sept. 14, 1993).

[c]Memorandum on Customer Service, 31 Weekly Comp. Pres. Doc. 456 (Mar. 22, 1995) (released by Office of the Press Secretary on Mar. 23, 1995).

[d]Memorandum on Conducting "Conversations with America" to Further Improve Customer Service, 34 Weekly Comp. Pres. Doc. 368 (Mar. 3, 1998).

[e]Pub. L. No. 111-352, 124 Stat. 3866 (Jan. 4, 2011).

[f]Exec. Order No. 13571 (Apr. 27, 2011), *Streamlining Service Delivery and Improving Customer Service*, 76 Fed. Reg. 24,339 (May 2, 2011).

[g]Office of Management and Budget, *Implementing Executive Order 13571 on Streamlining Service Delivery and Improving Customer Service*, Memorandum M-11-24 (June 13, 2011).

None of the Agencies Met All Key Elements to Improve Customer Service Standards; Additional Focus on Customer Feedback May Further Assist Agencies Moving Forward

Customer service standards (standards) should inform customers as to what they have a right to expect when they request services.[22] The customer service executive orders, memorandums, and guidance do not include strict guidelines on how standards should be structured, allowing agencies to develop their standards based in part on their particular needs and mission. As a result, each of the agencies in our review had standards that varied in the amount and type of information included, reflecting differences in needs and mission. Because flexibility exists in how agencies create standards—rooted in the purposes of GPRA and GPRAMA, the customer service executive orders, memorandums, and guidance—we identified key elements of effective customer service standards that would allow agencies to better serve the needs of their customers by providing greater accountability, oversight, and transparency. Such key elements are themselves based on the purposes and some requirements of GPRA, GPRAMA, and executive orders: to set performance targets or goals, measure performance against the set targets or goals, and communicate such information to customers. Specifically, we assessed each of the agency's standards against the following key elements: whether the standards (1) include targets or goals for performance; (2) include performance measures; and (3) are made easily publicly available. Although standards may vary from agency to agency based on need and mission, each agency's standards should include the key elements in order to improve customer service moving forward.

Performance targets or goals. We have previously found that a fundamental element in an organization's efforts to manage for results is its ability to set meaningful goals for performance and to measure progress toward those goals.[23] The customer service executive orders, memorandums, and guidance also reflect these principles. Specifically, Executive Order 13571 stated that agencies set "clear customer service standards and expectations, including, where appropriate, performance

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[22]Memorandum on Customer Service, 31 Weekly Comp. Pres. Doc. 456 (Mar. 22, 1995) (released by Office of the Press Secretary on Mar. 23, 1995).

[23]GAO, *Managing for Results: Executive Branch Should More Fully Implement the GPRA Modernization Act to Address Pressing Governance Challenges*, GAO-13-518 (Washington, D.C.: June 26, 2013).

goals for customer service required by the GPRA."[24] The law defines a performance goal as a "target level of performance expressed as a tangible, measurable objective, against which actual achievement can be compared, including a goal expressed as a quantitative standard, value, or rate."[25] OMB provided further guidance that standards should, where possible, include targets for speed, quality/accuracy, and satisfaction.[26] Although Executive Order 13571and OMB guidance state performance goals should be established "where appropriate" and targets "where possible," without clearly defined goals for customer service, agencies are unable to effectively communicate their service intentions to customers. As a result, we identified performance goals as a key element for effective customer service standards. Standards that include performance targets or goals allow agencies to define, among other things, the level, quality, and timeliness of the service they provide to their customers.

Performance measures. Our prior work has found that performance information can be used across a range of management functions to improve results, from setting program priorities and allocating resources to taking corrective action to solve program problems. Measuring performance allows organizations to track the progress they are making toward their goals and gives managers crucial information on which to base their organizational and management decisions.[27] Executive Order 12862 stated that agencies shall "post service standards and measure results against them,"[28] and a 1995 presidential memorandum further stated that agencies shall "on an ongoing basis, measure results achieved against the customer service standards and should also include

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[24]Exec. Ord. No. 13571, § 2(c) (Apr. 27, 2011), *Streamlining Service Delivery and Improving Customer Service*, 76 Fed. Reg. 24,339, 24,339-40 (May 2, 2011).

[25]31 U.S.C. § 1115(h)(9).

[26]Office of Management and Budget, *Implementing Executive Order 13571 on Streamlining Service Delivery and Improving Customer Service*, Memorandum M-11-24 (June 13, 2011).

[27]See GAO, *Small Business Administration: Additional Guidance on Documenting Credit Elsewhere Decisions Could Improve 7(a) Program Oversight*, GAO-09-228 (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 12, 2009) and *Small Business Administration: Additional Measures Needed to Assess 7(a) Loan Program's Performance*, GAO-07-769 (Washington, D.C.: July 13, 2007).

[28]Exec. Ord. No. 12862, § 1 (c).

customer satisfaction as a measure."[29] Among other things, GPRAMA requires that each agency performance plan should "establish a balanced set of performance indicators to be used in measuring or assessing progress toward each performance goal, including, as appropriate, customer service, efficiency, output, and outcome indicators."[30] We have found that if agencies do not use performance measures and performance information to track progress toward goals, they may be at risk of failing to achieve their goals.[31]

We have also found that there has been little improvement in managers' reported use of performance information or practices that could help promote this use.[32] For example, since 1997 we have surveyed federal managers to determine the extent to which agencies are using performance information to improve agency results. In 1997, when we first administered the survey, approximately 32 percent of federal managers government-wide reported to a great or very great extent that they have performance measures that tell them whether or not they are satisfying their customers. In 2013, 16 years after the first survey, this measure increased by approximately 8 percentage points to 40 percent, a statistically significant difference but still less than a majority of managers reporting positively on having such measures.

Easily publicly available. According to Executive Order 12862, agencies are to post their standards, while Executive Order 13571 requires agencies to post customer service metrics and best practices online. Most recently, OMB provided additional guidance that the standards be "easily accessible at the point of service and on the Internet[.]"[33] Without such easily available information, customers may not know what to expect, when to expect it, or from whom.

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[29]Memorandum, *Improving Customer Service*, § 3 (March 23, 1995).

[30]31 U.S.C. § 1115(b)(6).

[31]GAO-13-518.

[32]GAO-13-518.

[33]Memorandum, M-11-24, Appendix § 2 at 2. We conducted an Internet search on each agencies' websites to determine whether or not customer service standards were easily available.

None of the agencies in our review had standards that included all of the key elements (see table 3). Without all of the key elements present in their standards, agencies may not be able to inform customers, provide accountability, measure progress, or improve customer service.

Table 3: Extent to Which Agencies' Customer Service Standards Include Key Elements

Agency	Customer service standards that include targets or goals for performance	Customer service standards that include performance measures	Customer service standards that are easily publicly available
Customs and Border Protection	No	No	Yes
Forest Service	No	No	No
Federal Student Aid	Yes	Yes	No
National Park Service[a]	No	No	No
Veterans Benefits Administration's disability compensation	Yes	Yes	No
Veterans Benefits Administration's Veterans' Group Life Insurance	Yes	Yes	No

Source: GAO analysis of agency documentation. | GAO-15-84

[a]NPS provided us two sets of standards, its "Visitors' Bill of Rights" and its visitor satisfaction survey descriptions, both of which we assessed. Based on our analysis, we determined that neither set of standards included key elements.

U.S. Customs and Border Protection Is a Model for Providing Customer Information, but Other Elements are Missing

U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) is the unified border agency within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) charged with the management, control, and protection of our nation's borders at and between the official ports of entry. CBP's primary mission is to protect the American public against terrorists and weapons of terror from entering the country while fostering the nation's economic security. CBP's border security inspection of individuals processes travelers that present themselves for entry into the United States. According to CBP, over 362 million passengers, pedestrians, and crew were inspected in fiscal year 2013 in 328 distinct ports of entry.

CBP's border security inspection standards are made easily available to the public; however, its standards do not include performance targets or goals and, according to CBP officials, CBP does not measure performance against those standards (see table 4).

Table 4: Assessment of Customs and Border Protection Customer Service Standards Against Key Elements

Agency	Customer service standards that include targets or goals for performance	Customer service standards that include performance measures	Customer service standards that are easily publicly available
Customs and Border Protection	No	No	Yes

Source: GAO analysis of agency documents. | GAO-15-84

CBP's standards, its "Pledge to Travelers" are qualitative in nature, for example, "we pledge to treat you with courtesy, dignity, and respect," and "we pledge to provide reasonable assistance due to delay or disability" (see text box).

Customs and Border Protection's (CBP) "Pledge to Travelers" for Border Security Inspections of Individuals

- We pledge to cordially greet and welcome you to the United States.
- We pledge to treat you with courtesy, dignity, and respect.
- We pledge to explain the CBP process to you.
- We pledge to have a supervisor listen to your comments.
- We pledge to accept and respond to your comments in written, verbal, or electronic form.
- We pledge to provide reasonable assistance due to delay or disability.

Source: Customs and Border Protection. | GAO-15-84

According to CBP officials, the standards outline CBP's service in ideal circumstances for law-abiding travelers; CBP officials stated that theirs is a law enforcement agency and as a result, although the pledge applies to all travelers, different actions are taken for those attempting to break the law. The standards did not include descriptions or otherwise define what "courtesy, dignity, and respect" or "reasonable assistance" meant to CBP. In addition, CBP standards do not include a performance goal or target and CBP officials told us that they do not have performance measures that directly link to their standards nor did they provide a reason why they do not link. As a result, CBP officials are unable to determine the extent to which the agency is meeting customer service needs based on their standards.

Instead, agency officials told us they are able to use customer comment data to infer how well the agency performs regarding the pledge. According to CBP officials, in fiscal year 2013 agency-wide CBP received 2,285 comments specifically related to the "Pledge to Travelers" and CBP

officer conduct. To date for fiscal year 2014, CBP received 1,339 customer comments. With this information, CBP officials said they are able to identify areas where improvements or additional officer training is needed such as providing clarification about nonimmigrant visas for temporary stays. However, without clearly stated performance goals or measures directly linked to those goals, CBP is unable to determine the extent to which the standards are being met agency-wide, identify areas to improve service, or strategies to close performance gaps.

CBP was the only agency in our review that makes its standards easily available to the public. CBP posts its standards on the Internet on its webpage, as well as at points of service in entry ports, field offices, and headquarters, according to CBP officials (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Customs and Border Protection's "Pledge to Travelers" Included on Agency Webpage

Source: CBP.gov website Travel/Customer Service page as of May 21,2014. | GAO-15-84

Forest Service's Standards Do Not Include Any Key Elements

Forest Service's mission is to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the nation's forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations. Forest Service's recreational facilities provide customers with passes and permits to experience the forests through such activities as hiking, camping, hunting, fishing, cross-country skiing, and snowmobiling. Forest Service's recreational facilities standards do not include any key elements for improving customer service (see table 5).

Table 5: Assessment of Forest Service Customer Service Standards Against Key Elements

Agency	Customer service standards that include targets or goals for performance	Customer service standards that include performance measures	Customer service standards that are easily publicly available
Forest Service	No	No	No

Source: GAO analysis of agency documents. | GAO-15-84

Forest Service's standards are a part of the agency's "National Quality Standards," an internal document that contains employee performance requirements that employees need to meet as part of their performance ratings—for example, "garbage does not exceed the capacity of garbage containers" (see text box). The standards did not include additional descriptions such as frequency—for example, that the garbage should be emptied on a daily basis. Forest Service officials also told us that there were no performance measures directly linked to their employee operations and maintenance performance standards and that the results are self-reported by local supervisors on an annual basis. As a result, Forest Service is unable to determine the extent to which the standards are being met agency-wide, to identify areas to improve service, or to develop strategies to close performance gaps.

Forest Service Customer Service Standards for Recreational Facilities

Excerpt of Forest Service standards (see appendix II for the complete list of standards)

- Visitors are not exposed to human waste.
- Water, wastewater, and sewage treatment systems meet federal, state and local water quality regulations.
- Garbage does not exceed the capacity of garbage containers.
- Individual units and common areas are free of litter including domestic animal waste.
- Facilities are free of graffiti.
- Restrooms and garbage locations are free of objectionable odor.
- Constructed features are clean.

Source: Forest Service. | GAO-15-84

Forest Service officials stated that the agency is finalizing changes to the standards (which were developed in 2005) based on employee performance and other current practices within the agency and expects to finalize those changes by the end of fiscal year 2014. However, according to Forest Service officials, these changes will not include performance goals or measures. In 2010, we found that Forest Service did not make its standards available to customers as officials felt the standards would not

be helpful to the visitors who evaluate such things as cleanliness of rest rooms against their own standards and not those set forth by Forest Service.[34] Forest Service officials stated that there has been no change since 2010 and the standards continue to be embedded in internal employee performance reviews and are not publicly available at all. With clearly defined performance goals and measures, Forest Service could more easily communicate its definition of cleanliness, as well as other services, to its customers. In addition, according to executive orders and guidance, standards were specifically intended to inform the public, irrespective of Forest Service's position that its standards are not publicly available because they may not be helpful to visitors.

Office of Federal Student Aid's Standards Include Performance Goals and Are Measured; However, Standards Are Not Made Publicly Available

Federal Student Aid's (FSA) core mission is to ensure that all eligible individuals benefit from federal financial assistance—grants, work-study, and loans—for education beyond high school. FSA provides student loans under the Direct Loan Program, where the Department of Education is the lender. FSA's customers include student and parent applicants, borrowers, and colleges and universities that disburse Direct Loans and other federal aid authorized under Title IV of the Higher Education Act of 1965[35] directly to eligible student borrowers.[36] FSA provided the standards for the Common Origination and Disbursement (COD) system through which FSA disburses Direct Loan funds to participating Title IV school customers for our analysis. These standards included two key elements—standards that include performance targets or goals and performance measures that are directly linked to the goals. However, the standards are not made publicly available (see table 6).

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[34]GAO-11-44.

[35]Pub. L. No. 89-329, 79 Stat. 1232-1254 (Nov. 8, 1965), codified at 20 U.S.C. §§ 1070-1099d and 42 U.S.C. §§ 2751-2756b.

[36]Student and parent applicants complete FSA's Free Application for Federal Student Aid, which determines eligibility for federal student aid, including Direct Loans. FSA disburses Direct Loan funds to participating Title IV school customers through the Common Origination and Disbursement (COD) system. Schools disburse the Direct Loan funds, and other federal aid including grants, directly to eligible student borrowers. The Direct Loan Program provides four types of student loans: direct subsidized loans, direct unsubsidized loans, direct PLUS loans, and direct consolidation loans. FSA's Direct Loan Servicers provide loan servicing to borrower customers.

Table 6: Assessment of Federal Student Aid Customer Service Standards Against Key Elements

Agency	Customer service standards that include targets or goals for performance	Customer service standards that include performance measures	Customer service standards that are easily publicly available
Federal Student Aid	Yes	Yes	No

Source: GAO analysis of agency documents. | GAO-15-84

According to FSA officials, their standards for disbursing direct loans are requirements embedded within performance-based contracts that the service contractor must meet.[37] FSA officials stated that each phase of the loan life cycle was governed by separate performance-based contracts and standards.[38] FSA's COD standards, which govern one of these life-cycle phases, include performance goals to be achieved for the service contractor.[39] However, the language used in the contracts is specifically designed to lay out the technical requirements for the service provider and as a result, without technical knowledge it may be more difficult for individuals outside of the service industry, such as parents and students, to understand (see text box).

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[37]Performance-based contracts specify the desired outcomes and allow the servicer to determine how best to achieve those outcomes, rather than prescribe the methods contractors should use. COD has its own contract and service provider.

[38]FSA identified three general Direct Loan Program life-cycle phases: (1) Aid Awareness & Application Processing; (2) Aid Award & Disbursement; and (3) Loan Servicing.

[39]FSA provided us with standards for the COD system phase of the Direct Loan program. This was the phase in the scope of GAO-11-44, as well.

> **Federal Student Aid Customer Service Standards for Student Loans under the Direct Loan Program**
>
> Excerpt of Direct Loan Origination and Disbursement through the Common Origination and Disbursement System (COD) Standards (see appendix III for the complete list of standards)
>
> - Received unprocessed batches from schools will be reviewed each business day. The Contractor will review and resolve unprocessed batches within 3 business days from identification.
> - Availability of the COD Web site including all of the individual application and infrastructure components that result in availability of the application to the business excluding scheduled downtime, required processing outages and FSA provided technology service (e.g. telecommunications, networking).

Source: Federal Student Aid. | GAO-15-84

FSA has performance measures directly linked to the standards, including target time frames for achieving the standards that range from daily to monthly. FSA officials told us that the COD contract service provider collects and reviews the performance data on a daily basis and provides performance reports to FSA management monthly in its Customer Experience Dashboard. The dashboard provides the current performance data against historical data for the same period. For example, it provides the number of Free Application for Federal Student Aid applications received in 2013-2014 compared to the same time in 2011-2012. According to FSA officials, the performance data are used to determine the service provider's level of performance. If the standards are not being achieved, remedies may be taken as outlined in the contract. According to FSA officials, the standards are viewed as the minimum level of performance expected. The officials said the performance metrics have not been adjusted in approximately 4 years, but the agency is discussing metric changes for contract renewal. The COD standards overall were developed through consultation between the agency and education subject matter experts and were last modified in 2006.

In 2010, we found that FSA did not make its standards available to customers for the Direct Loan Program because they were not intended to inform the public.[40] According to FSA officials, there has been no change since 2010 and its standards continue to be embedded within various service contracts and are not available to FSA's customers. However, according to executive orders and guidance, standards were

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[40]GAO-11-44.

specifically intended to inform the public, irrespective of FSA's position that its standards are for the service provider and are not intended to inform the public. As a result, FSA's customers may not be fully aware of the services that are available.

National Park Service's Standards Do Not Include Any Key Elements

The National Park Service's (NPS) mission is to preserve "unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values of the national park system for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations." According to NPS, its interpretive and educational services advance this mission by providing memorable educational and recreational experiences that help the public understand the meaning and relevance of park resources and foster development of a sense of stewardship by forging a connection between park resources, visitors, the community, and the national park system. NPS customers are the visitors using the programs, services, and facilities that NPS offers. NPS provided two sets of standards that we assessed—the "Visitors' Bill of Rights" and visitor satisfaction survey descriptions. Neither of the standards included any key elements of effective customer service standards (see table 7).

Table 7: Assessment of National Park Service Customer Service Standards Against Key Elements

Agency	Customer service standards that include targets or goals for performance	Customer service standards that include performance measures	Customer service standards that are easily publicly available
National Park Service[a]	No	No	No

Source: GAO analysis of agency documents. | GAO-15-84

[a]NPS provided us two sets of standards, its "Visitors' Bill of Rights" and its visitor satisfaction survey descriptions, both of which we assessed. Based on our analysis, we determined that neither set of standards included key elements.

The first set of customer service standards, the "Visitors' Bill of Rights," is included in an internal training module which NPS officials stated is a

standard to which they train employees.[41] The "Visitors' Bill of Rights" is a set of qualitative standards and includes descriptions of what NPS park visitors have a right to expect during their stay, such as "have their privacy and independence respected," (see text box). NPS officials stated that this standard was developed in 1996 and has not been updated since then. According to NPS officials, there are no performance measures linked to the "Visitors' Bill of Rights" as the standards were intended for internal training purposes. In addition, these standards are not publicly available.

National Park Service's Customer Service Standards for Visitor and Interpretive Services

First set of standards— Visitors' Bill of Rights:

Visitors have the right to:
- have their privacy and independence respected;
- retain and express their own values;
- be treated with courtesy and consideration; and
- receive accurate and balanced information.

Second set of standards—visitor satisfaction survey scorecard measure definitions:

- Visitor understanding level is at least 83 percent.
- Visitor satisfaction level overall is at least 90 percent.
- Visitor satisfaction with visitor services is at least 88 percent.
- Visitor satisfaction with park facilities is at least 83 percent.
- Ratio of number of interpretive contacts per visitor is at least 0.8.

Source: National Park Service. | GAO-15-84

NPS also provided as standards its visitor satisfaction survey scorecard descriptions. The survey measures each park unit's performance related to visitor satisfaction, visitor understanding, and appreciation. The survey is a random sample of visitors in 330 units. According to the fiscal year 2013 results of the visitor survey, approximately 97 percent of park visitors were satisfied overall with appropriate facilities, services, and

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[41]NPS provided its management policies as another example of its standards, specifically sections outlining interpretive and educational programs, use of the parks, and park facilities. These approximately 50 pages of policies, while informative about such topics as interpretive competencies and skills, do not include any statement of what the standards are for the visitor and interpretive services and therefore we did not include the policies in our analysis.

recreational opportunities.[42] According to NPS officials, this set of standards includes benchmark scores—standard and exceptional ratings—that the individual parks are rated against. While it is important for agencies to solicit a customer's level of satisfaction for services provided, as is done by NPS, such feedback should be conducted in addition to having a set of predetermined customer service standards that include performance targets or goals that can be measured.[43] Further, the visitor surveys are conducted after customers have received NPS services; one of the purposes of standards is to inform customers of what they can expect prior to receiving the services. Without clearly stated performance goals or measures directly linked to those goals, NPS is unable to determine the extent to which the standards are being met agency-wide or strategies to close performance gaps.

Finally, these standards are not made easily publicly available. According to executive orders and guidance, standards were specifically intended to inform the public. As such, standards need to be identified as standards and made easily publicly available. However, we found the results of the visitor survey on the NPS website under the NPS Social Science Branch publications and were not identified as standards. As a result, customers may not easily be able to find the results of the surveys much less make the connection that the survey and its results reflect NPS's standards for service.

Veterans Benefits Administration Standards Include Performance Goals and Are Measured for Performance but Are Not Made Easily Publicly Available

The Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) disability compensation program provides monetary support to over 3.7 million veterans with disabling conditions that were incurred or aggravated during military service. The program also provides monthly payments to about 370,000 beneficiaries including surviving spouses, dependent children, and dependent parents in recognition of the economic loss caused by a veteran's death during military service or, after discharge from military service, as a result of a service connected disability. The Veterans' Group Life Insurance (VGLI) program, also within VBA, allows veterans to continue their life insurance coverage after separation from the military.

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[42]According to the 2013 NPS Visitor Survey Data Report, the system-wide response rate was 35 percent with 41,643 total visitors responding to the survey.

[43]All of the agencies in our review conducted customer satisfaction surveys. However, NPS is the only agency that provided visitor satisfaction surveys as its customer service standards.

VGLI serviced approximately 426,000 customers during 2013. VBA's disability compensation and VGLI's customer service standards each include two key elements, but neither are made publicly available (see table 8).

Table 8: Assessment of Veterans Benefits Administration Customer Service Standards Against Key Elements

Program	Customer service standards that include targets or goals for performance	Customer service standards that include performance measures	Customer service standards that are easily publicly available
Disability compensation	Yes	Yes	No
Veterans' Group Life Insurance	Yes	Yes	No

Source: GAO analysis of agency documents. | GAO-15-84

Disability Compensation

VBA's disability compensation standards include two key elements of effective customer service standards—goals for performance and performance measures; however the standards are not made easily publicly available (see table 8). The standards are quantitative, such as "increase compensation claims processing timeliness to 125 days and quality to 98 percent accuracy for medical issues" (see text box).[44] According to VBA officials, standards are re-evaluated on an annual basis and adjusted as appropriate. For example, disability compensation standards were updated in fiscal year 2014 with a new standard added to increase the percentage of claims filed online for the disability compensation program.

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[44]According to VBA disability compensation officials, the average number of days to complete rating-related claims in 2013 was 200 days.

Veterans Benefits Administration Disability Compensation's Customer Service Standards

- Increase compensation claims processing timeliness to 125 days and quality to 98 percent accuracy for medical issues.
- Increase the percentage of claims filed online.
- Increase the annual number of disability compensation claims received virtually/electronically from a baseline of 2 percent in 2013, to 12 percent in 2014, and 20 percent in 2015.
- Increase the National Call Center Satisfaction Index Score.
- Increase the number of registered eBenefits users to 3.8 million in 2014 and 5 million in 2015.

Source: Veterans Benefits Administration Benefits Assistance Service. | GAO-15-84

VBA disability compensation has performance measures that are directly linked to customer service standards and, according to VBA officials, the results serve as performance indicators of its service contractor for disability compensation since 2010. The service contractor gathers the performance data and reports out to VBA management. For example, according to VBA officials, data collected for VBA call centers is reported by the service contractor to VBA management on a daily basis, with supplemental analysis reports provided monthly. These reports include overall satisfaction results, service attributes and diagnostic data. Other performance data, such as data collected on the online reporting site, can be accessed by VBA management on a daily basis for all satisfaction scores according to VBA officials. To identify any areas of opportunity, VBA officials said they hold monthly monitoring sessions to listen to customer satisfaction surveys, which are implemented over the phone. According to VBA officials, reported data are analyzed by both VBA and the service contractor to identify opportunities to make process improvements that may increase satisfaction results to meet the agency's goals. When the performance results do not meet the standards, a plan is executed to drive up performance, according to VBA officials. Performance data are also used to quantify the various aspects of the delivery of benefits and services, to identify best practices that may exist within VBA lines of business and regional offices, and to recognize employees who provide outstanding customer service, according to VBA officials.

Disability compensation standards are available on the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) web-page through publicly available reports such as the Performance and Accountability Report (PAR) and are also identified in VA's Strategic Plan. These documents serve a larger purpose, and while not excluding customers, are targeted to a much broader audience. However, these documents may not be readily

understood, much less known, to most customers. As a result, although VBA disability compensation information is online, it is not easily available or accessible to its customers.

Veterans' Group Life Insurance

Similarly, VGLI's standards include performance goals allowing performance to be measured (see table 8 above). VGLI's standards are quantitative in nature, such as "98 percent of e-mails responded to within 24 hours of receipt." VGLI standards are reviewed on an annual basis, and adjusted as appropriate. For example, the most recent update of the standards was in 2013, when there was an adjustment of the standard for first call resolution from 78 percent to 82 percent. According to VGLI officials, this adjustment reflected process improvements and technological enhancements (see text box).

Veterans Benefits Administration Veterans' Group Life Insurance Customer Service Standard

- 80% of calls answered within 20 seconds.
- 97% of correspondence handled within 5 business days of receipt.
- 98% of e-mails responded to within 24 hours of receipt.
- 90% overall satisfaction with Office of Service members' Group Life Insurance.
- 82% first call resolution rate.

Source: Veterans' Group Life Insurance. | GAO-15-84

According to a VGLI official, VGLI's service contractor reviews the performance standards annually and makes adjustments as appropriate based on industry standards, process improvements, and technological enhancements. For example, the service contractor makes adjustments to the numbers of employees working on specific tasks based on fluctuations in workflow throughout the year. In addition, the service contractor has trained its employees to be functional in several areas, and as a result employees can be temporarily reassigned based on work needs. For example, the service contractor stated that employees who primarily serve an administrative function are also trained to work in the call center if the center is experiencing higher than normal call volume. In addition, performance measures are directly linked to the standards and are also benchmarked against the insurance industry by the service contractor. Specifically, the service contractor measures performance and collects data, then reports out to VGLI officials on a monthly basis using a data metrics dashboard as well as quarterly briefings. However, VGLI's standards are not made publicly available as the standards are used internally for its service contract, according to VGLI officials. As we previously stated, based on the executive orders and guidance, standards were specifically intended to inform the public and should be made publically available, regardless of VGLI's use of the standards. Without

such information, VGLI's customers may not be fully aware of the services that are available.

Some Agencies' Feedback Mechanisms Were Better Able to Identify Needed Service Improvements Agency-wide

All of the agencies in our review provide customers with opportunities to submit feedback, including comments and complaints, through a variety of ways such as satisfaction surveys, comment cards submitted in person or online, e-mails, and call centers. However, not all of the agencies in our review had a formal or systematic mechanism for reviewing customer feedback (see table 9).

Table 9: Not All Selected Agencies Had an Internal Process to Review and Elevate Customer Feedback

Agencies	Customs and Border Protection	Forest Service	Federal Student Aid	National Park Service	Veterans Benefits Administration's Disability Compensation	Veterans Benefits Administration's Veterans' Group Life Insurance
Internal process to elevate and review customer feedback	Yes	No	No[a]	No	Yes	No[a]

Source: GAO analysis of agency information. | GAO-15-84

[a]FSA and VBA's VGLI have feedback review mechanisms in place that are managed by external service providers. According to agency officials, the agency management does not routinely get involved in reviewing customer feedback.

Specifically, we found that CBP and VBA's disability compensation have a formal mechanism in place to review customer feedback. Forest Service and NPS do not have criteria or guidance for when to elevate customer comments from the local level up to the agency level. FSA and VBA's VGLI rely on service providers to review and elevate the customers' comments at the service provider's discretion. Executive Order 13571 stated that agencies should establish "mechanisms to solicit customer feedback on Government services" and that agencies use "such feedback regularly to make service improvements."[45] OMB guidance to agencies for implementing Executive Order 13571 further stated that agencies "[c]ollect ongoing, timely, actionable customer feedback to identify early warning signals of customer service issues."[46] Although the

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[45]Exec. Ord. No. 13571, § 2(b).

[46]Memorandum, M-11-24, Appendix § 1, at 1.

executive order and guidance did not provide specific details as to how the agency feedback mechanisms should be developed, research on best practices emphasizes the need for a single, centralized management framework for receiving customer feedback so that all information about the customers can be linked together to facilitate a more complete knowledge of the customer.[47] In addition, the *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government* calls for agencies to develop control activities, such as policies, procedures, techniques, and mechanisms that enforce management's directives, which helps to reinforce the need for agencies to develop guidance or policies for reviewing and elevating customer feedback.[48] Moving forward, a feedback mechanism that better aligns with OMB guidance, best practices, and *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government* could include guidance for reviewing customer feedback and taking action to resolve potential problems at the agency level from service providers and disparate locations across the country. In addition, such a feedback mechanism would also enable agencies to determine if customer concerns are localized, specific to a given function, agency-wide, or systemic.

Customs and Border Protection. CBP has a formal mechanism in place to review customer feedback and is the only agency in our review that has a customer service web page that allows customers to file comments and complaints online and that includes information such as how CBP handles traveler complaints (see figure 2). According to CBP officials, the agency received approximately 8,700 complaints and 723 compliments in fiscal year 2013, a year in which CBP officers inspected over 362 million passengers, pedestrians, and crew. According to the same officials, for the past 3 years CBP's INFO Center, where customers can call or email with questions or complaints, has tracked the history, timing, and resolution of a comment, and the specific port from where the comment originated. The center receives between 800 and 1,200 calls a day as

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[47]GAO, *Transportation Information Security Sharing: Stakeholder Satisfaction Varies; TSA Could Take Additional Actions to Strengthen Efforts*, GAO-14-506 (Washington, D.C.: June 24, 2104) and *Defense Logistics: Improving Customer Feedback Program Could Enhance DLA's Delivery of Services*, GAO-02-776 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 9, 2002). We conducted an extensive literature search of best practice organizations to determine popular techniques for collecting customer feedback that we used to evaluate activities related to defense logistics.

[48]GAO, *Internal Control: Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, GAO/AIMD-00-21.3.1 (Washington, D.C.: November 1999).

well as 150 emails a day. According to CBP officials, 95 percent of the complaints are closed within 95 days or sooner.

Figure 2: Information on Customs and Border Protection's Webpage on How Customer Complaints Are Addressed

Source: CBP.gov website Travel page as of May 21,2014. | GAO-15-84

CBP officials said they routinely use customer comments to improve customer service. For example, CBP officials reported using customer feedback to identify a misconception among CBP officers at a specific port concerning the time limitations of a type of nonimmigrant visa for temporary stay. After identifying the problem through customer feedback, CBP officials reported that additional officer training was provided and the complaints on visa admittance at that specific port declined.

Forest Service. According to Forest Service officials, most customer feedback was submitted, reviewed, and handled at the local unit level (forests). For example, in comments visitors reported dangerous steps along the Double Arch Trail in Kentucky's Daniel Boone National Forest, and in 2013 Forest Service repaired those steps. According to Forest Service officials, local customer feedback is only elevated to the attention of headquarters staff at the discretion of local management and stated that local management can use the monthly meetings with regional management to discuss any issues or problems. However, Forest Service officials did not provide us criteria or documentation for situations when local management would elevate such feedback to headquarters for additional review or input. In addition, Forest Service officials stated that there is no mechanism for collecting comments agency-wide. As a result of this decentralized approach, Forest Service may be unable to determine the extent to which potential problems may exist agency-wide or identify needed improvements.

Office of Federal Student Aid. According to FSA officials, customers primarily provide direct feedback online or on the phone through a contracted service provider, who is responsible for resolving any issues that may arise. Issues may be elevated to FSA at the contract service provider's discretion but, according to FSA officials, FSA is not commonly involved.

In addition, FSA officials did not provide any criteria or process by which the service provider would elevate customer feedback. FSA officials told us there are different service providers for the different phases of a loan. As a result, although each phase may be distinct, FSA may be unable to identify similar problems or concerns that occurred over time. Providing additional guidance, such as specific criteria of which customer comments or feedback should be elevated to FSA's attention by the service provider, would better position FSA to not only provide better oversight of its service provider but to also potentially improve customer service.

FSA did share an example of how it launched the Financial Aid Counseling Tool (FACT) in response to schools' requests for an enhanced financial literacy tool that would be available to students year-round. According to FSA officials, FACT assists borrowers in making informed decisions about their loans and managing their debt by providing access to their real time loan balances, budgeting worksheets, and features to project income planning and to estimate monthly loan payments for various repayment options. However FSA was not able to provide further clarification or documentation as to why this specific case was raised to its attention over others and why subsequent action was taken.

National Park Service. According to NPS officials, most customer feedback is submitted at the level of each park via visitor comment cards. Visitors may also write to regional and national NPS offices with their feedback, as well as submit formal complaints regarding accessibility and discrimination. There is a general "contact us" feedback option online. NPS officials told us that feedback submitted at local parks is reviewed at that level and only elevated at the discretion of local management. NPS headquarters officials were unable to provide examples of using customer feedback to improve service and instead reached out to local parks for information. For example, Golden Gate Park in California implemented a park-wide restroom improvement program, improved signage, and replaced a missing park map and brochures in certain areas based on customer feedback. According to NPS officials, NPS does not have agency-wide policies or processes to guide the review of feedback or to inform management about the nature and extent of the feedback to help improve operations and customer service. As a result, NPS may not be able to identify systemic or consistent problems across all of its units unless such information is elevated.

Veterans Benefits Administration Disability Compensation. VBA's mechanism for managing disability compensation customer feedback is largely managed by its service provider, according to VBA officials. The officials said most customer comments are submitted via call centers where there is a standard procedure for phone call escalations. Concerns are forwarded from the service provider to VBA based on agency guidance, and appropriate follow-up action is taken by the VA regional office. This process is managed and tracked through an internal system, according to VBA officials. As a result, although VBA's disability compensation customer feedback is largely managed by service providers, VBA officials have a formal mechanism in place to oversee not

only the feedback that has been escalated, but also the service provided to customers.

In October 2010, VBA disability compensation launched a customer satisfaction research program for its national call centers and subsequently identified 97 service enhancements, 55 of which have been implemented, according to VBA officials. For example, VBA disability compensation implemented Virtual Hold Call Back technology, which allows callers to leave their name and phone number to receive an automatic return call. Since the implementation date of September 2011, the system has returned over 10 million calls, according to VBA officials.

Veterans Benefits Administration–Veterans' Group Life Insurance. According to a VGLI official, VGLI's service provider reviews and handles customer feedback that may be submitted through VGLI's portal–an on-line chat mechanism with customer service representatives. However, we were unable to find an online contact or complaint option on VGLI's website. According to VGLI officials, customers also have the option to submit written feedback to VBA. VGLI holds quarterly meetings with its service provider to discuss service improvements that may be needed based on the feedback; however, VGLI officials said there were no criteria or process by which specific types of feedback were brought to their attention. As a result, VGLI officials may not be aware of potential system-wide issues affecting customers that may be reflected in their feedback.

According to VGLI officials, feedback was used to identify the challenges veterans faced concerning the limits of and their desire for more life insurance coverage. As a result of the feedback, VGLI initiated "VGLI Buy Up" which allows veterans to increase their life insurance coverage once every 5 years by $25,000. In addition, proof of medical eligibility is not required.

Identification of Customer Service as a Cross-Agency Priority Goal May Provide Additional Focus Needed to Further Improve the Customer Experience Governmment-wide

OMB has taken several steps to facilitate the improvement of agencies' customer service initiatives. For example, in 2010 we recommended, and OMB later took steps to implement, that the Director of OMB should (1) direct agencies to consider options to make their customer service standards and results more readily available to customers and (2) collaborate with the President's Management Advisory Board and agencies to provide citizens with the information necessary to hold government accountable for customer service, among other things.[49] To implement these recommendations, OMB issued its customer service plan memorandum, as developed by OMB's Deputy Director for Management, in June 2011 following the issuance of Executive Order 13571, which was issued to improve customer service and require agencies to develop and publish a customer service plan. The memorandum stated that OMB would establish and coordinate a Customer Service Task Force to "facilitate the exchange of best practices and the development of agency customer service plans and signature initiatives…that will meet regularly until agencies published their plans."[50]

Task force actions. According to the task force schedule and agendas we obtained from OMB, the task force met with agency officials on a monthly basis from June to September 2011 before agency plans were posted on Performance.gov in October 2011.[51] The task force was made up of senior agency officials responsible for the development of their agencies' plans. According to an OMB official, senior agency officials identified best practices based on customer service experiences from within their own agencies. We wanted to review the outcome of these meetings including the self-identified best practices; however, according to OMB, no meeting minutes were taken and the staff involved in the task force are no longer with OMB.

Department actions. Each of the departments included in our review published their plans as scheduled. However, of the five agencies in our review, only CBP officials told us that they used the plan as a tool to manage and oversee aspects of customer service. According to

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[49]GAO-11-44.

[50]Memorandum M-11-24 § 1, at 2.

[51]According to OMB, Performance.gov is intended to highlight the administration's management initiatives and address the performance reporting requirements of GPRAMA (see, 31 U.S.C. § 1116(a)).

Executive Order 13571, the plans were to address how the departments would "provide services in a manner that seeks to streamline service delivery and improve the experience of its customers"[52] and the OMB interpretive guidance stated that the plans should "identify implementation steps for the customer service activities outlined in EO 13571."[53] However, two of the agencies told us that unless required to do so by OMB, they do not intend to update their customer service plans. Further, Forest Service officials were not even aware that a department-wide customer service plan had been created. We have previously found that a well-developed and documented project plan encourages agency managers and stakeholders to systematically consider what is to be done, when and how it will be done, what skills will be needed, and how to gauge progress and results.[54] However, we found that the plans were in effect, static documents and did not reflect any updates to milestones or actions taken. We discussed the usefulness of the customer service plans with OMB officials and they agreed that the departments could have implemented the plans more effectively. OMB stated that moving forward, the CAP goal implementation plan, which is discussed later, may better help provide additional focus on customer service government-wide.

Performance Improvement Council role. We also inquired about the role of the Performance Improvement Council (PIC) in helping agencies with their customer service efforts. The PIC, however, did not have an active role in assisting agencies with the development of their plans. The PIC, chaired by OMB's Deputy Director for Management and composed of performance improvement officers from various federal agencies, is charged with, among other responsibilities, facilitating the exchange of successful performance improvement practices among agencies, working to resolve government-wide or crosscutting performance issues, and assisting OMB in implementing certain GPRAMA requirements.[55] Further, the PIC's role includes considering the performance improvement experiences of customers of government services. Despite their

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[52]Exec. Ord. No. 13571, §2.

[53]Memorandum M-11-24 § 1, at 1.

[54]GAO, *Federal Employees: Opportunities Exist to Strengthen Performance Management Pilot*, GAO-13-755 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 12, 2013).

[55]Exec. Order No. 13450, *Improving Government Program Performance*, 72 Fed. Reg. 64,519 (Nov. 15, 2007) first established the Performance Improvement Council, whose establishment was later codified under GPRAMA at 31 U.S.C. § 1124(b).

designated role in improving customer experience, OMB officials confirmed that the PIC was not actively involved in the task force. However, moving forward, OMB stated that if plans on involving the PIC in the CAP goal implementation plan for customer service.

OMB additional actions. Although OMB has taken action to move customer service forward government-wide, such as developing guidance and facilitating the task force, other steps were not completed because of budget limitations, according to OMB officials. These uncompleted actions pertain to OMB's prior effort to provide oversight and accountability of agencies' customer service metrics. In 2010, we found that OMB was developing a pilot dashboard that contained agency standards and some related measures, with links to agency web sites where customers could track their individual transaction status, where available. We found that OMB had asked agencies participating in the pilot to identify metrics that were drivers of customer satisfaction, such as wait time, processing time, and first call resolution. OMB expected the pilot dashboard to launch publicly in late fall 2010.[56] However, an OMB official told us that although the agency had begun work on the performance dashboard, there was a reprioritization of resources within OMB and the pilot effort was discontinued. The OMB official did not know if the pilot efforts would begin again. Such a performance dashboard would have been the first of its kind government-wide and may have enabled OMB to provide greater oversight of agency customer service performance against identified standards. Nevertheless, OMB envisions that the attention given to customer service by making it a CAP goal will move customer service forward government-wide.

Fast Track Process May Not Speed-Up Survey Approval Process

In 2010, we found that in certain instances the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995 (PRA) clearance process made obtaining customer input difficult because of lengthy delays to obtain approval for a survey to collect customer input (see text box).[57] For example, we previously found that NPS stated that lengthy delays in obtaining approval for information collections, such as visitor surveys, under the PRA sometimes caused research to be postponed or even abandoned.[58] We also found that

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[56]GAO-11-44.

[57]GAO-11-44; Pub. L. No. 104-13, 109 Stat. 163 (May 22, 1995), *codified at* 44 U.S.C. §§ 3501-3520.

[58]GAO-11-44.

Forest Service officials considered the time needed to obtain clearance for surveys to be a major barrier to gathering input from customers on their level of satisfaction.[59]

In early 2010, OMB also issued three memorandums—relevant to customer service goals—containing clarifying guidance to improve the implementation of the PRA.[60] The memorandums provided information for federal agencies to facilitate their understanding of PRA clearances and when and how they can be used. On June 15, 2011, OMB's Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs (OIRA) issued a memorandum outlining the new Fast Track process for survey approval which would allow agencies to obtain timely feedback on service delivery using such types of voluntary collections as online surveys and comment cards or complaint forms.[61] According to OIRA officials, the biggest challenge in implementing the Fast Track process has been disseminating information to agencies on when to use Fast Track. An OMB official told us that the agency is aware of the lack of communication concerning the Fast Track process and in the upcoming year plans to address this information gap.

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[59]GAO-11-44.

[60]Office of Management and Budget, *Information Collection under the Paperwork Reduction Act*, Memorandum (Apr. 7, 2010); Office of Management and Budget, *Social Media, Web-Based Interactive Technologies, and the Paperwork Reduction Act*, Memorandum (Apr. 7, 2010); and Office of Management and Budget, *Paperwork Reduction Act—Generic Clearances*, Memorandum (May 28, 2010).

[61]Office of Management and Budget, *New Fast Track Process for Collecting Service Delivery Feedback Under the Paperwork Reduction Act*, Memorandum M-11-26 (June 15, 2011). According to the memorandum, examples of collections that would generally not fall under the new process are: (1) surveys that require statistical rigor because they will be used for making significant policy or resource allocation decisions; (2) collections where the results are intended to be published; and (3) collections that are intended for the purpose of basic research and that do not directly benefit the agency's service delivery.

Source: GAO. | GAO-15-84

Note: See GAO-11-44.

OIRA officials provided us with the following data on the Fast Track process. As of May 2014, 85 agencies have been approved to use the Fast Track process for survey approval, including all of the agencies in our review. OIRA officials said they have approved 580 data collection requests using the Fast Track process, returned 67 requests to agencies because of improper submission, and 24 requests were withdrawn by the agencies themselves.

Use of the new Fast Track process varied among the agencies we reviewed. For example, Forest Service officials told us that their local forest units had experienced a slight improvement in timeliness of their survey approvals because they used the Fast Track process. However, the Forest Service officials also told us that surveys primarily administered by headquarters serve a different purpose and rely heavily on statistical analysis for research. Such surveys, according to Forest Service officials, would not be eligible for the Fast Track process because of their statistical rigor. According to OIRA guidance, Fast Track is not intended to be used for surveys that require statistical rigor that will be used for making significant policy or resource allocation decisions, or for collections whose results are intended to be published. According to FSA officials, they have neither noticed an improvement or degradation in the approval process under the Fast Track process. FSA officials told us that OMB has routinely approved surveys that fall under the Fast Track process within the designated time frames, with few exceptions. VBA disability compensation officials also told us that their surveys were not

eligible for the Fast Track process because their surveys did not meet all the requirements for Fast Track. For NPS, according to officials, the time involved with the procedural review through the Fast Track is still lengthy and is perceived as prohibitive for parks and programs to conduct valuable and usable social science research surveys. Finally, CBP officials told us that they have not used the Fast Track process and have no plans to do so in the near future. Officials at VBA's VGLI did not have an opinion on the Fast Track process because they have not used it.

Customer Service Identified as Cross-Agency Priority Goal

OMB identified customer service as a cross-agency priority goal (CAP) goal in March 2014 to further build upon the progress being made by individual agencies (see figure 3).

Figure 3: Customer Service as a Designated Cross-Agency Priority Goal

Source: Performance.gov website Customer Service page as of May 21,2014. | GAO-15-84

By focusing on developing standards for high impact services, OMB recognizes that government leaders have a responsibility to understand customer expectations and service needs, and continually evaluate and improve their effectiveness in meeting those needs. According to OMB officials, two goal leaders and a goal team are responsible for the CAP goal. In June 2014, the CAP goal team issued an implementation plan to increase customer satisfaction and promote positive experiences, issued an action plan to achieve that goal, and assigned a team to oversee and manage the project. The implementation plan, issued on the Performance.gov website, identified the development and implementation

of standards, practices, and tools as one of the CAP goal team's four strategies or sub-goals to further improve customer service.[62] According to the implementation plan, the problem of fragmentation within and across agencies has made the establishment of customer service initiatives difficult. The CAP goal team's strategy to address the problem of fragmentation will be to establish an infrastructure to improve coordination and to develop sustain change over time by developing a community of practice across agencies and clarifying who is responsible for customer service. According to the implementation plan, the community of practice will share best practices and develop guidance that the agencies will use to develop customer service standards. While it is too early to assess the effect of the new CAP goal, this new effort does offer an opportunity for OMB to begin to elevate the importance of customer service government-wide and to engage agencies on how to better meet customer needs.

Conclusions

All five agencies established customer service standards. However, those standards did not always include performance targets or goals, did not always have performance measures, and were not always easily publicly available. Specifically, three of the five agencies in our review did not have all of the elements of a customer-centered performance management approach for delivering federal service. Having customer standards that include performance targets or goals allows customers to understand what to expect for the services they are seeking. Without standards customers may be left not knowing or confused over what to expect when using a government-provided service. We also found that not all agencies measured performance to determine whether customer service standards were being met. Measuring performance allows agencies to track the progress they are making toward meeting those standards and gives managers crucial information on which to base decisions as well as to update those standards, when necessary. Thus, if agencies do not measure performance to track progress toward meeting customer service standards then they risk failing to meet the needs of their customers.

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[62]The four cross-agency priority goal strategies for customer service are: (1) improve top customer interactions; (2) develop and implement standards, practices, and tools; (3) feedback and transparency; and (4) focus on the frontline.

In addition, communicating customer service standards to the public in a way that is useful and readily available to customers is important in enabling the public to hold government accountable and to inform customer decision making. Four of five agencies we reviewed did not make customer service standards easily available to customers. For example one agency provided its standards through documents that serve larger purposes, such as departmental performance and accountability reports and agency strategic plans. While not excluding customers, those documents are targeted to a much broader audience. Notably, all five agencies in our review use customer feedback to improve customer service. Agencies reported they used this feedback in a number of instances to make improvements to training and the number of services offered among other things. However, only CBP and VBA's disability compensation had a formal or systematic process for reviewing customer feedback. Having such a feedback mechanism could help agencies link information about their customers and ultimately assist agencies with customer service improvements.

In March 2014, OMB made customer service a CAP goal. In June 2014 OMB released an implementation plan for customer service that included a goal statement to increase customer satisfaction and to promote positive experiences, released an action plan to achieve that goal, and assigned a team to oversee and manage the project. While it is too early to assess the effect of the new CAP goal, this new effort does offer an opportunity for OMB to begin to elevate the importance of customer service government-wide and to engage agencies on how to better meet customer needs.

Recommendations for Executive Action

Recognizing that moving toward a more customer-oriented culture within federal agencies is likely to be a continuous effort, we recommend that the:

Secretary of Agriculture direct the Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment to take the following four actions to improve Forest Service's customer service standards and feedback review: ensure standards include performance targets or goals; ensure standards include performance measures; ensure standards are easily publicly available; and develop a feedback mechanism to collect comments agency-wide, which should include guidance or criteria to elevate customer feedback from local and regional offices to identify the need for and to make service improvements;

Secretary of Education direct Federal Student Aid's Chief Operating Officer to take the following two actions to improve Federal Student Aid's customer service standards and feedback review: ensure standards are easily publicly available and develop a feedback mechanism that includes guidance or criteria for service providers to elevate customer feedback to identify the need for and to make service improvements;

Commissioner of U.S. Customs and Border Protection take the following two actions to improve CBP's customer service standards: ensure standards include performance targets or goals and ensure standards include performance measures;

Secretary of the Interior direct the Assistant Secretary of Fish, Wildlife and Parks to take the following four actions to improve the National Park Service's customer service standards and feedback review: ensure standards include performance targets or goals; ensure standards include performance measures; ensure standards are easily publicly available; and develop a feedback mechanism that includes guidance or criteria to review and elevate customer feedback from local and regional offices to identify the need for and to make service improvements;

Secretary of Veterans Affairs direct the Veterans Benefits Administration to improve disability compensation customer service standards by making the standards easily publicly available; and

Secretary of Veterans Affairs direct the Veterans Benefits Administration to take the following two actions to improve Veterans' Group Life Insurance's customer service standards and feedback review: ensure standards are easily publicly available and develop a feedback mechanism that includes guidance or criteria for service providers to elevate customer feedback and identify the need for and to make service improvements.

Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

We provided a draft of this report to the OMB and the Departments of Agriculture, Education, Homeland Security, Interior and Veterans Affairs. The Chief of the Forest Service (Department of Agriculture), the Chief Operating Officer at Federal Student Aid (Department of Education), the Department of Homeland Security, and the Department of Veterans Affairs provided written comments on a draft of the report, which are reprinted in appendixes IV, V, VI, and VII respectively. In their written responses, the Departments of Agriculture, Education, Homeland Security and Veterans Affairs agreed with our recommendations. Department of Interior officials also stated that they agreed with our

recommendation in an e-mail. Finally, OMB, the Departments of Homeland Security, Education and Veterans Affairs also suggested technical changes to the report, which we incorporated where appropriate.

We are sending copies of this report to the Director of OMB and the heads of the five agencies that were included in this review as well as interested congressional committees and other interested parties. This report will also be 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) 512-6806 or mihmj@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of our report. Key contributors to this report are listed in appendix VIII.

J. Christopher Mihm
Managing Director, Strategic Issues

List of Congressional Addressees

The Honorable Thomas R. Carper
Chairman
The Honorable Tom Coburn, M.D.
Ranking Member
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
United States Senate

The Honorable Mark R. Warner
Chairman
Task Force on Government Performance
Committee on the Budget
United States Senate

The Honorable Elijah E. Cummings
Ranking Member
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
House of Representatives

Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

The objectives of this study were to address the extent to which (1) selected agencies and their services are using customer service standards and measuring performance results against these standards, and how selected agencies are communicating standards and using customer feedback to improve customer service; and (2) the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and the Performance Improvement Council are facilitating federal agencies' use of tools and practices to improve customer service. To address our two objectives, we selected agencies and their services for our review based on prior work in which we surveyed 12 federal agencies (which are among those with the most widespread contact with the public) about 13 services they provided.[63]

For the prior report, five of those agencies were selected for additional follow-up interviews—based on their responses to key survey questions—in order to gain a fuller understanding of their responses. For this report, we selected the same five agencies and their services to determine the progress made by each since the issuance in 2011 of Executive Order 13571 on improving customer service (see table 10).[64] To determine progress made, we expanded our review to include in-depth interviews with agency officials and an examination of relevant customer service documentation such as plans, performance measures, and feedback mechanisms.

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[63]GAO, *Managing for Results: Opportunities to Strengthen Agencies' Customer Service Efforts*, GAO-11-44 (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 27, 2010). Services were chosen for the survey based on a list—developed by the National Performance Review in the late 1990s—of agencies with the most contact with the public, input from subject matter experts, and available public data. The National Performance Review was a major executive branch reform initiative launched in 1993 to improve government performance. In 1998, it was renamed the National Partnership for Reinventing Government. The sample of services was not a representative sample of services provided by the federal government, meaning that results from our survey cannot be generalized to apply to all services provided by the federal government.

[64]For purposes of this report, we will refer to services by their agency name (example Forest Service) with the exception of the two services within the Veterans Benefits Administration—disability compensation and Veterans' Group Life Insurance—which we identify as services.

Table 10: Agencies and Services Included in Review

Department	Agency	Service
Department of Agriculture	Forest Service	Managing recreational facilities and services
Department of Education	Office of Federal Student Aid (FSA)	Awarding student loans under the Direct Loan Program
Department of Homeland Security	Customs and Border Protection (CBP)	Conducting border security inspections of individuals
Department of the Interior	National Park Service (NPS)	Providing visitor and interpretive services
Department of Veterans Affairs	Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA)	Providing disability compensation
		Providing Veterans' Group Life Insurance (VGLI)

Source: GAO summary of agency information. | GAO-15-84

To address how selected agencies are using customer service standards and measuring performance against those standards, communicating standards, and using customer feedback to improve service, we reviewed our relevant prior work on customer service and the specific agencies in our sample. We requested and reviewed agencies' customer service standards and available performance measures related to those standards. In addition, we compared agency information to relevant executive orders, presidential and OMB memorandums, and OMB guidance consistent with GPRA Modernization Act of 2010 (GPRAMA) provisions related to customer service (see table 11).[65]

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[65]Exec. Order No. 12862, *Setting Customer Service Standards* (Sept. 11, 1993), 58 Fed. Reg. 48,257 (Sept. 14, 1993); Exec. Order No. 13571, *Streamlining Service Delivery and Improving Customer Service*, (Apr. 27, 2011), 76 Fed. Reg. 24,339 (May 2, 2011); Memorandum on Customer Service, 31 Weekly Comp. Pres. Doc. 456 (Mar. 22, 1995) (released by Office of the Press Secretary on Mar. 23, 1995); Memorandum on Conducting "Conversations with America" to Further Improve Customer Service, 34 Weekly Comp. Pres. Doc. 368 (Mar. 3, 1998); Office of Management and Budget, *Implementing Executive Order 13571 on Streamlining Service Delivery and Improving Customer Service*, Memorandum M-11-24 (June 13, 2011); Office of Management and Budget, *New Fast Track Process for Collecting Service Delivery Feedback Under the Paperwork Reduction Act*, Memorandum M-11-26 (June 15, 2011); Office of Management and Budget, *Information Collection under the Paperwork Reduction Act*, Memorandum (Apr. 7, 2010); Office of Management and Budget, *Social Media, Web-Based Interactive Technologies, and the Paperwork Reduction Act,* Memorandum (Apr. 7, 2010); and Office of Management and Budget, *Paperwork Reduction Act—Generic Clearances*, Memorandum (May 28, 2010).

Table 11: Customer Service Standards—Selected Legislation and Guidance

Key elements	Customer service standards that include targets or goals for performance	Customer service standards that include performance measures	Customer service standards that are easily publicly available
Selected legislation and guidance	The GPRA Modernization Act of 2010 (GPRAMA) stated that agencies, shall among other things, "establish performance goals to define the level of performance to be achieved" by a program activity. Executive Order 13571 stated that agencies set "clear customer service standards and expectations, including, where appropriate, performance goals for customer service required by the GPRA." OMB guidance further stated that standards should include targets for speed, quality/accuracy, and satisfaction.	A 1995 presidential memorandum on improving customer service stated that agencies shall, on an ongoing basis, measure results achieved against the customer service standards and should also include customer satisfaction as a measure. GPRAMA states that agencies should "establish a balanced set of performance indicators to be used in measuring or assessing progress toward each performance goal, including, as appropriate, customer service, efficiency, output, and outcome indicators."	As stated in Executive Order 12862 and reinforced by subsequent presidential memorandums and Executive Order 13571, agencies were to post their standards and make information and services easily available. Most recently, OMB provided additional guidance that the standards be "easily accessible at the point of service and on the Internet."

Source: GAO analysis of relevant federal laws and executive orders. | GAO-15-84

The key elements we selected for assessing customer service standards include requirements found in GPRA, GPRAMA, executive orders, and OMB guidance and memorandums that focus on how customer service standards are to be used and measured including how standards should be communicated to customers.

We conducted interviews with agency officials from various offices—such as performance and budget—as well as those directly involved in customer service. We did not evaluate the overall effectiveness of or level of customer service provided by any of the agencies reviewed as these issues were not within the scope of our engagement. We requested and reviewed agency information on customer service satisfaction surveys and feedback mechanisms, and departmental and agency strategic and customer service plans. In addition, we conducted Internet searches to determine the extent to which customer service information was made publicly available by the agencies.[66] Specifically, we assessed the agencies on the contents of their standards and not against the level or quality of customer service they provide. In addition, we did not evaluate

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[66]We conducted an Internet search on each agencies' website to determine whether or not customer service standards were available.

agency performance data or determine the reliability of such data as
these issues were not within the scope of our engagement.[67]

To evaluate the extent to which OMB and the Performance Improvement
Council (PIC) are facilitating federal agencies' use of tools and practices
to improve customer service, we reviewed OMB guidance and
memorandums, customer service task force agendas, and other
documents related to customer service and survey administration
including the Fast Track process. We interviewed officials from OMB's
Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs and the Office of
Performance and Personnel Management. We also reviewed information
on customer service published on Performance.gov, a government-wide
performance website.

We conducted this performance audit in Washington, D.C., between
November 2013 to October 2014 in accordance with generally accepted
government auditing standards, which 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.

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[67]The sample of services was not a representative sample of services provided by the
federal government, meaning that results from our analysis cannot be generalized to apply
for all services provided by the federal government.

Appendix II: Forest Service Customer Service Standards for Recreational Facilities and Services

Health and Cleanliness
1. *Visitors are not exposed to human waste.
2. *Water, wastewater, and sewage treatment systems meet federal, state, and local water quality regulations.
3. Garbage does not exceed the capacity of garbage containers.
4. Individual units and common areas are free of litter including domestic animal waste.
5. Facilities are free of graffiti.
6. Restrooms and garbage locations are free of objectionable odor.
7. Constructed features are clean.

Resource Setting
1. *Effects from recreation use do not conflict with environmental laws (such as ESA, NHPA, Clean Water, TES, etc).
2. Recreation opportunities, site development, and site management are consistent with Recreation management system (ROS, SMS, BBM) objectives, development scale, and the Forest land management plan.
3. Landscape character and resource conditions at the recreation site are consistent with the Forest scenic integrity objectives and Forest Plan prescriptions.
4. Visitors and vehicles do not exceed site capacity.

Safety and Security
1. *High-risk conditions do not exist in recreation sites.
2. *Utility inspections meet federal, state, and local requirements.
3. Laws, regulations and special orders are enforced.
4. Visitors are provided a sense of security.

Responsiveness
1. *When signed as accessible, constructed features meet current accessibility guidelines.
2. Visitors feel welcome.
3. Information boards are posted in a user-friendly and professional manner.
4. Visitors are provided opportunities to communicate satisfactions (needs, expectations).
5. Visitor information facilities are staffed appropriately during seasons of use and current information is available.
6. Recreation site information is accurate and available from a variety of sources and outlets.

Condition of Facilities
1. Constructed features are serviceable and in good repair throughout the designed service life.
2. Constructed features in disrepair due to lack of scheduled maintenance, or in non-compliance with safety codes (e.g. life safety, OSHA, environmental, etc.) or other regulatory requirements (ABA/ADA, etc.), or beyond the designed service life, are repaired, rehabilitated, replaced, or decommissioned.
3. New, altered, or expanded constructed features meet Forest Service design standards and are consistent with an approved site development plan, including an accessibility transition plan. Critical National Standards are identified with an asterisk (*). If not met, the resulting conditions pose a high probability of immediate or permanent loss to people or property. If they cannot be met, due to budget or other constraints, immediate action must be taken to correct or mitigate the problem. Immediate action may include closing to public use the site, trail, area, permit, or portions of the affected site, trail or area. If conditions, facilities, or services addressed by "non-critical" standards decline to the point where the health or safety of the visitor is threatened, then mitigating actions must be taken.

Appendix III: Federal Student Aid Customer Service Standards for Student Loans under the Direct Loan Origination and Disbursement Program through the Common Origination and Disbursement System (COD)

1. Received unprocessed batches from schools will be reviewed each business day. The Contractor will review and resolve unprocessed batches within 3 business days from identification.

2. Availability of the COD Web site including all of the individual application and infrastructure components that result in availability of the application to the business excluding scheduled downtime, required processing outages and FSA provided technology service (e.g. telecommunications, networking, AIMS, and PM).

3. The number of days (30 days) required to fix commingled data incidents (Type 1 & Type 2)

4. Availability of the Total Access Ad Hoc functionality including all of the individual application and infrastructure components that result in availability of the application to the business excluding scheduled downtime and required processing outages.

5. Contractor shall provide bi-lingual (English and Spanish) phone support to schools, students, parents, and borrowers Monday - Friday from 8:00AM to 8:00PM Eastern Standard Time. All incoming calls shall be routed through the existing COD toll-free support number and routed to the appropriate Customer Service Representative with the purpose of responding to the caller issues.

6. The average amount of time a user spends on hold in the Interactive Voice Response system. The average speed of answer is measured from the time the user selects an option to speak with a customer service representative until a customer service representative answers the phone.

7. Of the total calls received, the percentage of calls in the Interactive Voice Response that are abandoned by the Customer before reaching the customer service representative.

8. The Contractor shall monitor and evaluate communications (telephone calls and emails) between Customer Service Representatives, Schools, Third Party Servicers, and Borrowers. The Contractor shall monitor and evaluate a random sampling of communications. The results of the evaluations will be collected and reported monthly. The purpose of the evaluations is to help confirm that the information provided to Schools, Third Party Servicers and Borrowers meets or exceeds the quality performance metric.

9. Deposit all funds received from schools, students, and third party servicers into established United States Treasury accounts.

10. The Contractor shall successfully restore COD Mainframe application data and core COD processing functionality (as defined in Section C.2.7.1) within the allotted time frame of each annual DR test.

11. Critical severity problems shall be resolved within 24 hours, or worked continuously until they are resolved.

12. The number of existing open problems at the time of release by priority are resolved within 30 days of the Release implementation date. This does not include problems that possess a workaround acceptable to Federal Student Aid.

13. The percentage of new problems introduced by a Service Pack implementation as measured within 30 days from the Service Pack implementation date. This will be determined by dividing the number of new problems detected after a Service Pack implementation that are associated with the Service Pack code modifications by the number of service tickets (problems and enhancements) the Service Pack attempted to resolve.

14. Publication of the COD Technical Reference prior to or on the mutually agreed upon publication date. Mutual agreement to change the publication date will reset the publication date for this SLA.

15. Publication of the COD Project Briefing based on a mutually agreed upon schedule excluding any Federal Holidays or closures.

USDA United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest
Service

Washington
Office

1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250

File Code: 1420
Date: OCT 8 2014

Mr. J. Christopher Mihm
Managing Director, Strategic Issues
U.S. Government Accountability Office
411 G. Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Mr. Mihm:

Thank you for the opportunity to review and provide comments on the draft U.S. Government
Accountability Office (GAO) Report "Managing for Results: Selected Agencies Need to Take
Additional Efforts to Improve Customer Service" (GAO-15-84). The Forest Service has
reviewed the report and generally agrees with its findings and recommendations.

GAO recommended that the Secretary of Agriculture direct the Under Secretary for Natural
Resources and Environment take the following four actions to improve Forest Service's
customer service standards and feedback review to include: standards that include performance
targets or goals; standards that are measured for performance; standards that are easily publicly
available; and a feedback mechanism to collect comments agency-wide including guidance or
criteria to elevate customer feedback from local and regional offices to identify the need for and
make service improvements.

The Forest Service is committed to providing quality recreation experiences that meet our
customers' expectations. The standards we use to guide employee performance in maintaining
our recreation facilities and areas help ensure that quality. The report and its recommendations
highlight that a logical next step for the Forest Service is to develop a set of standards that we
present to the public, and a mechanism to collect feedback from customers.

Thank you for the opportunity to review your draft report. If you have any questions, please
contact Thelma Strong, Chief Financial Officer, at (202) 205-1321, or tstrong@fs.fed.us.

Sincerely,

Mary Wagner

FOR THOMAS L. TIDWELL
Chief

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Appendix V: Comments from the Department of Education

Federal **Student Aid** | PROUD SPONSOR *of*
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October 7, 2014

Ms. Lisa Pearson
Assistant Director, Strategic Initiatives
Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Ms. Pearson:

Thank you for providing the Department of Education (Department) with an opportunity
to review and respond to the draft Government Accountability Office (GAO) report,
"MANAGING FOR RESULTS: Selected Agencies Need to Take Additional Efforts to
Improve Customer Service" (GAO-15-84). In administering the student financial
assistance programs, Federal Student Aid (FSA) works closely with a broad range of
students, parents, borrowers, and postsecondary institutions; and we recognize the
importance of providing high-quality customer service to this diverse population. We
appreciate GAO's acknowledgement that FSA standards include performance targets and
that we measure performance against those targets as part of our day-to-day operations.
We also appreciate the opportunity to see how other selected federal agencies approach
customer service.

We concur with the recommendation GAO made to FSA in its draft report: *we
recommend that the Secretary of Education direct Federal Student Aid's Chief Operating
Officer take the following two actions to improve Federal Student Aid's customer service
standards and feedback review to include: standards that are easily publicly available
and a feedback mechanism including guidance or criteria for service providers to elevate
customer feedback to identify the need for and make service improvements.*

We have already taken action consistent with GAO's recommendation and plan further
process refinements to increase customer transparency and expections of our services.
The Department's response to the recommendation follows.

Action 1: *"…improve Federal Student Aid's customer service standards and feedback
review to include: standards that are easily publicly available…"*

Response to Action 1: We will explore ways to develop and implement customer-facing
service standards. As GAO notes in its report, most of our service standards are inward-
facing and used as a way to monitor vendor performance. We agree that complementing
outward-facing metrics would better inform our customers of the level of service they
should expect. This is particularly true for loan servicing, our largest and most complex
group of activities. Accordingly, we are working to develop outward (or customer)

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StudentAid.gov

Page 2 – Ms. Lisa Pearson

facing standards to dovetail into process materials we already provide to our applicants and borrowers.

Action 2: *"...improve Federal Student Aid's customer service standards and feedback review to include . . . feedback mechanism including guidance or criteria for service providers to elevate customer feedback to identify the need for and make service improvements."*

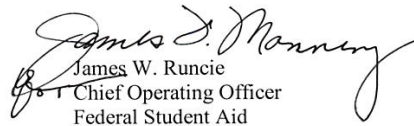**Response to Action 2:** We will examine ways to improve or expand our processes for elevating customer feedback.

As GAO notes in its report, most initial customer interactions are made through Department vendors. In addition, FSA receives feedback through several other avenues. As a routine part of our contractor oversight, FSA surveys its customers quarterly for feedback on their servicing experiences. We meet with each of our Direct Loan servicers and review the survey results, discuss improvements they intend to make based on the data, and make suggestions for improvement. As GAO also noted in its report, we review comments from surveys to identify potential servicing issues and areas for potential improvements.

In addition to the borrower survey, we receive customer feedback through regularly monitoring servicer phone calls, as well as through issues escalated to the FSA Ombudsman or, in other cases, through correspondence to Department management or Congressional offices. We review all issues that are escalated to us to determine if they reflect a systemic problem that needs to be addressed or highlight an opportunity to improve our processes or services. We meet with each servicer weekly to discuss borrower issues including ways that the servicer believes FSA might improve customer service to borrowers.

Lastly, in addition to mainstream media, FSA aggressively leverages social media (Facebook, Twitter and YouTube), and our Web site: https://studentaid.gov/, to drive awareness of our services; elicit customer feedback; digitally engage and interact with students and borrowers; and drive traffic to FSA's Web sites. FSA conducts regular social media engagements with customers (i.e. Twitter Town Halls) and uses various social media management tools to monitor real-time customer conversations across multiple social media channels, and blogs around FSA's key products and services (FAFSA, student loans, grant programs, etc.). Customer feedback and insights garnered through social media channels are regularly documented and shared internally to improve products and services across the student aid lifecycle.

Thank you again for the opportunity to review and comment on the draft GAO report.

Sincerely,

James W. Runcie
Chief Operating Officer
Federal Student Aid

Enclosure: Technical Comments

Appendix VI: Comments from the Department of Homeland Security

**Homeland
Security**

October 7, 2014

J. Christopher Mihm
Managing Director, Strategic Issues
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20548

RE: GAO Draft Report GAO-15-84: "MANAGING FOR RESULTS: Selected Agencies
        Need to Take Additional Efforts to Improve Customer Service"

Dear Mr. Mihm:

Thank you for the opportunity to review and comment on this draft report. The U.S. Department
of Homeland Security (DHS) appreciates the U.S. Government Accountability Office's (GAO's)
work in planning and conducting its review and issuing this report.

The Department appreciates GAO's recognition that the U.S. Customs and Border Protection
(CBP) was one of the few agencies reviewed which had formal mechanisms for reviewing
customer feedback. For example, GAO found that CBP was the only agency in their review that
(1) made customer service standards easily available to the public, and (2) had a "customer
service" web page that allowed customers to file comments and complaints online and included
information, such as, "How CBP Handles Traveler Complaints."

The draft report contained one recommendation for DHS with which the Department concurs.
Specifically, GAO recommended that the Commissioner of the U.S. Customs and Border
Protection:

Recommendation: Improve CBP's customer service standards to include: standards that
include performance targets or goal and standards that are measured for performance.

Response: Concur. To implement this recommendation, CBP's Office of Field Operations will
work with a task force on customer service comprised of experts who represent companies with
international reputations for customer experience excellence. This task force will determine the
best methods to measure the traveler's experience during the arrivals process from the time they
deplane through baggage control and egress. The task force's work will also include an in-depth
assessment of the key drivers of the traveler's experience, development of traveler surveys to
measure performance, and a methodology for continued assessment and improvement.
Estimated Completion Date: September 30, 2015.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to review and comment on this draft report. Technical
comments were previously provided under separate cover. Please feel free to contact me if you
have any questions. We look forward to working with you in the future.

Sincerely,

Jim H. Crumpacker, CIA, CFE
Director
Departmental GAO-OIG Liaison Office

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Appendix VII: Comments from Department of Veterans Affairs

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
WASHINGTON DC 20420

October 3, 2014

Mr. J. Christopher Mihm
Director, Strategic Issues
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Mr. Mihm:

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has reviewed the Government Accountability Office's (GAO) draft report, *"MANAGING FOR RESULTS: Selected Agencies Need to Take Additional Efforts to Improve Customer Service"* (GAO-15-84). VA generally agrees with GAO's conclusions and concurs with GAO's recommendations to the Department.

The enclosure specifically addresses GAO's recommendations and provides an action plan and technical comments on the draft report. VA appreciates the opportunity to comment on your draft report.

Sincerely,

Jose D. Riojas
Chief of Staff

Enclosure

Enclosure

Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Response to
Government Accountability Office (GAO) Draft Report
*"MANAGING FOR RESULTS: Selected Agencies Need to Take Additional Efforts
to Improve Customer Service"*
(GAO-15-84)

GAO Recommendation: Recognizing that moving toward a more customer-oriented culture within federal agencies is likely to be a continuous effort, GAO recommends that:

Recommendation 1: the Secretary of Veterans Affairs direct the Veterans Benefits Adminstration to improve disability compensation customer service standards to make it easily publicly available;

VA Comment: Concur. Veterans Benefit Administration (VBA) is exploring the best approach to make the customer service standards more easily available and accessible to the public. Target Completion Date: November 30, 2014.

Recommendation 2: the Secretary of Veterans Affairs direct the Veterans Benefits Adminstration's take the following two actions to improve Veterans' Group Life Insurance's customer service standards and feedback review to include: standards that are easily publicly available; and a feedback mechanism including guidance or criteria for service providers to elevate customer feedback and identify the need for and make service improvements.

VA Comment: Concur. VBA is exploring the best approach to make the customer service standards more easily available and accessible to the public. Additionally, we are exploring the option to include a feedback mechanism that includes guidance and criteria for service providers to evaluate customer feedback and to identify any need for service improvements. Target Completion Date: November 30, 2014.

Appendix VIII: GAO Contacts and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact	J. Christopher Mihm, (202) 512-6806 or mihmj@gao.gov
Staff Acknowledgments	In addition to the above contact, Lisa Pearson (Assistant Director) and Dewi Djunaidy supervised this review and the development of the resulting report. Pat Norris, Diantha Garms, Tom Beall, Jehan Chase, Deirdre Duffy, Robert Robinson, and Scott Zellner made significant contributions to this report.