

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-21-23](#), a report to the Chairwoman, Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies, Committee on Appropriations, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

CDC has estimated that each year, one in six people in the United States gets a foodborne illness, 128,000 are hospitalized, and 3,000 die. CDC data show increases in the number of reported multistate foodborne illness outbreaks—groups of two or more linked cases in multiple states—in recent years. Such outbreaks are responsible for a disproportionate number of hospitalizations and deaths, compared with single-state outbreaks.

GAO was asked to review CDC’s response to multistate foodborne illness outbreaks. This report examines (1) CDC’s roles and responsibilities, (2) challenges that CDC faces and the extent to which it has addressed these challenges, and (3) the extent to which CDC evaluates its performance. GAO reviewed agency documents and data; conducted site visits and case studies; and interviewed federal, state, and local public health officials, as well as representatives of stakeholder groups.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending that CDC (1) develop a plan to respond to the increasing use of CIDTs, (2) make publicly available its decision-making framework for communicating about multistate foodborne illness outbreaks, and (3) implement all the elements of a performance assessment system. CDC concurred with all three recommendations.

View [GAO-21-23](#). For more information, contact Steve D. Morris at (202) 512-3841 or morris@gao.gov.

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FOOD SAFETY

CDC Could Further Strengthen Its Efforts to Identify and Respond to Foodborne Illnesses

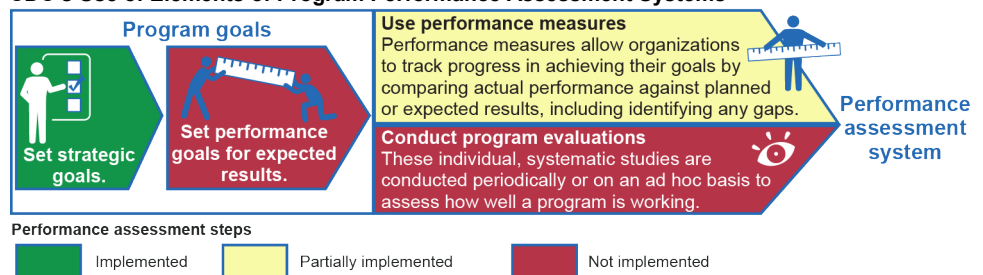
What GAO Found

The roles and responsibilities of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) during a multistate foodborne illness outbreak include analyzing federal foodborne illness surveillance networks to identify outbreaks, leading investigations to determine the food causing the outbreak, and communicating with the public. CDC also works to build and maintain federal, state, territorial, and local capacity to respond to foodborne illness outbreaks by awarding funds to state and local public health agencies and through other initiatives.

In identifying and responding to multistate foodborne illness outbreaks, CDC faces challenges related to clinical methods and communication, and it has taken some steps to respond to these challenges. One challenge stems from the increasing clinical use of culture-independent diagnostic tests (CIDTs). CIDTs diagnose foodborne illnesses faster and cheaper than traditional methods, but because they do not create DNA fingerprints that can specify a pathogen, they may reduce CDC’s ability to identify an outbreak. A CDC working group recommended in May 2018 that CDC develop a plan to respond to the increasing use of CIDTs. By developing a plan, CDC will have greater assurance of continued access to necessary information. CDC also faces a challenge in balancing the competing needs for timeliness and accuracy in its outbreak communications while maintaining public trust. CDC has an internal framework to guide its communications decisions during outbreaks, and it recognizes that stakeholders would like more transparency about these decisions. By making its framework publicly available, CDC could better foster public trust in its information and guidance during outbreaks.

CDC has taken steps to evaluate its performance in identifying and responding to multistate outbreaks. Specifically, CDC has developed general strategic goals (see fig.) and taken initial steps to develop performance measures. However, CDC has not yet established other elements of a performance assessment system—an important component of effective program management.

CDC’s Use of Elements of Program Performance Assessment Systems



In particular, CDC has not set specific performance goals, used performance measures to track progress, or conducted a program evaluation of its multistate foodborne illness outbreak investigation efforts. By implementing all elements of a performance assessment system, CDC could better assess its progress toward meeting its goals, identify potentially underperforming areas, and use that information to improve its performance.