

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-22-104724](#) a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, HHS began a national public education campaign led by ASPA. Congressional committees and the media raised questions about the focus and timing of the campaign. There were also concerns that funds meant for CDC were used to pay for the effort.

The CARES Act includes a provision for GAO to report on the federal response to the pandemic. In addition, GAO was asked to conduct a review of the award process for the COVID-19 public education campaign, as well as its source of funding.

This report describes, among other issues: ASPA, FDA, and NIH's roles in executing the COVID-19 public education campaign, and how ASPA paid for the campaign awards.

To conduct this work, GAO reviewed and analyzed inter-agency agreements, award files, related funding documents, and the products developed for the public education campaign; federal statutes and regulations; applicable agency guidance; and agency email communications about the campaign. GAO also interviewed relevant agency officials and contractors, and received written answers to questions regarding the funding used for the campaign.

GAO provided a draft of this report to HHS for review and comment. HHS stated that it appreciated the opportunity to review the draft, and had no comments.

View [GAO-22-104724](#). For more information, contact Alyssa M. Hundrup at (202) 512-7114 or hundrupa@gao.gov.

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COVID-19

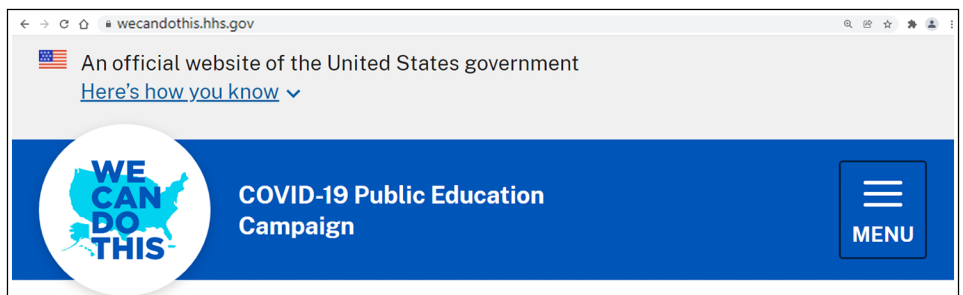
Information on HHS's Public Education Campaign

What GAO Found

In the summer of 2020, the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs (ASPA) within the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) worked with procurement offices within the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to solicit proposals and make awards to two firms in support of a COVID-19 public education campaign. The primary goals of the campaign, according to award documents, were sharing information on preventing the spread of COVID-19 and increasing vaccine acceptance. ASPA officials developed and led the campaign, while FDA and NIH staff oversaw the technical aspects of the contracting process.

- FDA awarded a nearly \$15 million contract in September 2020 to Atlas Research, a consulting firm. The award focused primarily on developing a series of public service announcements for multiple media channels. The announcements were to feature members of the entertainment industry and public health officials.
- NIH made a \$250 million award in September 2020 to Fors Marsh Group, a consulting firm, which then developed multiple messages for the public on vaccine development and COVID-19 prevention. Messages were designed for television, radio, print and social media channels. Fors Marsh Group also designed the campaign's theme and logo, *We Can Do This* (see figure).

HHS's *We Can Do This* Web Page



Source: Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). | GAO-22-104724

In October 2020, following congressional inquiries and negative press coverage about the campaign, the then-Secretary of Health and Human Services convened a group of public health officials to ensure the campaign was serving important public health purposes. FDA terminated the Atlas Research contract in November 2020, following the HHS internal review. Fors Marsh Group has continued to work on the campaign.

ASPA paid for the two awards and other campaign costs with COVID-19 relief funds appropriated for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Specifically, CDC and ASPA entered into a \$300 million interagency agreement, initially funded with \$100 million from the CARES Act and \$200 million from the Paycheck Protection Program and Health Care Enhancement Act. HHS budget officials reported that the department subsequently identified a more appropriate funding source, and CDC adjusted its budget accounts to use only its CARES Act funds for the \$300 million interagency agreement with ASPA.