FEDERAL CONTACT CENTERS

Mechanism for Sharing Metrics and Oversight Practices along with Improved Data Needed

Why GAO Did This Study

Federal agencies have increasingly relied on contact centers—centers handling inquiries via multiple channels such as telephone, Web page, e-mail, and postal mail—as a key means of communicating with the public. Many of these centers are contractor-operated. Concerns exist about the accuracy of responses provided through contractor-operated centers.

This report examines (1) the extent to which the contract terms and oversight practices for contact centers at selected agencies emphasize the importance of providing accurate information to the public, and (2) whether guidance for the operation of contact centers and basic information needed to provide general oversight exist. GAO reviewed one contractor-operated contact center at each of six agencies: the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), General Services Administration (GSA), U.S. Postal Service (USPS), and the Departments of Defense, Labor, and Education (DOD, DOL, and Education).

What GAO Recommends

GAO makes recommendations to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and GSA to improve the sharing of metrics and oversight practices for contact centers, and to improve data reporting on contracts for these services. OMB and GSA concurred with our recommendations.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-270.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact William T. Woods at (202) 512-8214 or woodsw@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

The contracts and oversight practices for the contact centers of the six agencies reviewed, which handle millions of inquiries annually, varied significantly regarding the emphasis they placed on providing accurate information to the public. Although federal policy for disseminating information to the public specifically emphasizes accuracy, only four of the six agencies include accuracy as a performance metric in their contracts. With respect to oversight, only two of the six agencies used all four of the accuracy-related oversight practices we identified—regular knowledge database reviews, regular contact monitoring, postcontact customer satisfaction surveys, and validation of contractor reports. Although each agency used some form of oversight to assess the accuracy of the information provided by its contact center, each agency differed regarding how it implemented these practices.

There is no governmentwide guidance or standards for operating contact centers—including guidance on specifying accuracy as a contract performance metric or as a key focus for oversight. Some agencies indicated that had federal guidance been available, it would have helped them establish performance indicators and develop oversight policies and practices. Recognizing the need for operational standards for contact centers, an interagency working group recently proposed draft guidelines to OMB and other federal agencies, but OMB has no plans to issue these guidelines or any standards for use by agencies. Additionally, until recently the federal government had not collected data on the universe of federal contact centers. OMB and GSA attempted to collect data on the number, types, and costs of federal contact centers in 2004, but the data collected were incomplete. In addition, no governmentwide procurement information was reported to the Federal Procurement Data System (FPDS) in fiscal years 2000 through 2004 using the reporting code for telephone call centers, which OMB said is the appropriate code for contact centers. The five agencies we reviewed that report data to FPDS used a variety of different codes, some because they believe that the telephone call center code is too narrow to cover the services of their multichannel contact centers.

Agency Oversight Practices Used for Ensuring Accuracy of Information

Agency	Regular knowledge database review	Regular contact monitoring	Postcontact customer satisfaction surveys	Validation of contractor reports
CDC	*planned*	√	*planned*	√
DOD-TMA North			√	
DOL	√	√		
Education	√	√		
GSA	√	√	√	√
USPS	√	√	√	√

Source: GAO analysis.

United States Government Accountability Office