

GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE *

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*[*Editorial Note:* The General Accounting Office was officially renamed the Government Accountability Office, effective July 7, 2004 (118 Stat. 814; 31 U.S.C. 702 note).]

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The General Accounting Office is the investigative arm of the Congress and is charged with examining all matters relating to the receipt and disbursement of public funds.

The General Accounting Office (GAO) was established by the Budget and Accounting Act of 1921 (31 U.S.C. 702), to independently audit Government agencies. Over the years, the Congress has expanded GAO's audit authority, added new responsibilities and duties, and strengthened GAO's ability to perform independently.

The Office is under the control and direction of the Comptroller General of the United States, who is appointed by the President with the advice and consent of the Senate for a term of 15 years.

Activities

Audits and Evaluations Supporting the Congress is GAO's fundamental responsibility. In meeting this objective, GAO performs a variety of services, the most prominent of which are audits and evaluations of Government programs and activities. The majority of these reviews are made in response to specific congressional requests. The Office is required to perform work requested by committee chairpersons and, as a matter of policy, assigns equal status to requests from Ranking Minority Members. The Office also responds to individual Member requests, as possible. Other assignments are initiated pursuant to standing commitments to congressional committees, and some reviews are

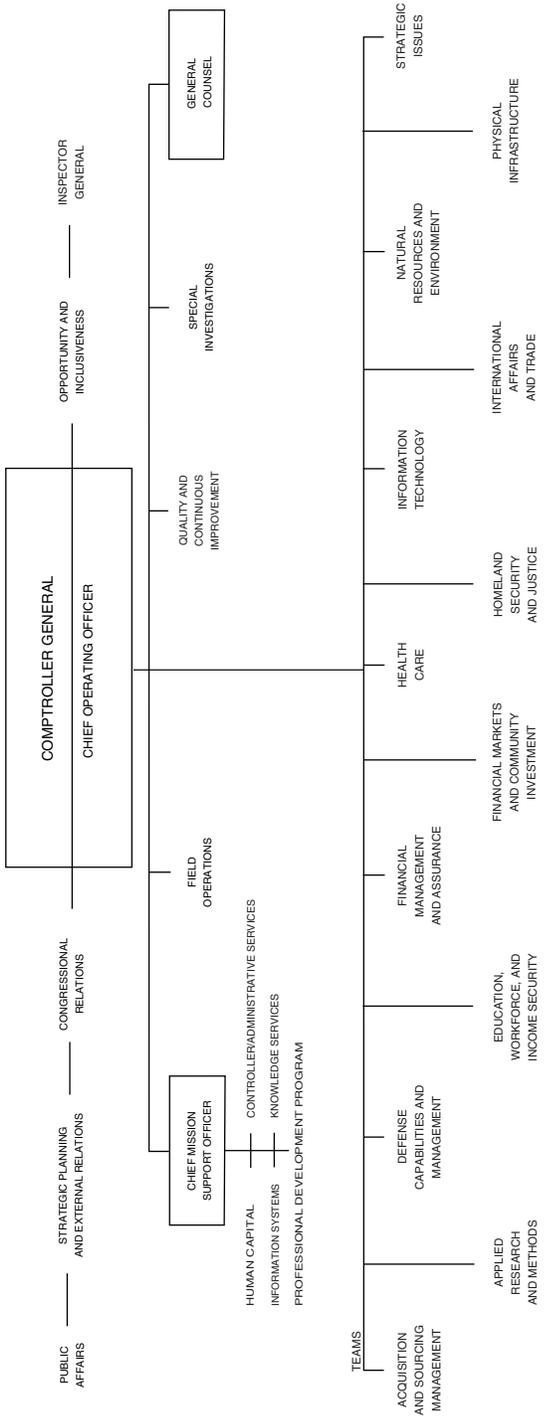
specifically required by law. Finally, some assignments are independently undertaken in accordance with GAO's basic legislative responsibilities.

The ability to review practically any governmental function requires a multidisciplinary staff able to conduct assignments wherever needed. The Office's staff has expertise in a variety of disciplines, including accounting, law, public and business administration, economics, and the social and physical sciences.

The Office is organized so that staff members concentrate on specific subject areas, enabling them to develop a detailed level of knowledge. When an assignment requires specialized experience not available within GAO, outside experts assist the permanent staff. Staff members go wherever necessary on assignments, working onsite to gather data and observe firsthand how Government programs and activities are carried out.

Legal Services The Office provides various legal services to the Congress. In response to inquiries from committees and Members, the Comptroller General provides advice on legal issues involving Government programs and activities. The Office is also available to assist in drafting legislation and reviewing legislative proposals before the Congress. In addition, it reviews and reports to the

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Congress on proposed rescissions and deferrals of Government funds.

Other legal services include resolving bid protests that challenge Government contract awards and assisting Government agencies in interpreting the laws governing the expenditure of public funds.

Investigations GAO's staff of professional investigators conducts special investigations and assists auditors and evaluators when they encounter possible criminal and civil misconduct. When warranted, GAO refers the results of its investigations to the Department of Justice and other law enforcement authorities.

Auditing and Accounting Policy GAO issues *Government Auditing Standards* for audits of Government organizations, programs, activities, and functions. These standards pertain to auditors' professional qualifications, the quality of audit effort, and the characteristics of professional and meaningful audit reports.

The Comptroller General, along with the Secretary of the Treasury and the Director of the Office of Management and Budget, serves as a principal on the Federal Accounting Standards Advisory Board. The Board considers and recommends issuance of accounting standards and principles and provides interpretations of existing ones.

Reporting GAO offers a range of products to communicate the results of its work. The type of product depends on the assignment's objectives and the needs of the intended user. Product types include testimony, oral briefings, and written reports. Virtually all of GAO's reports are available to the public.

GAO publishes its reports, testimonies, and Comptroller General decisions on the Internet at www.gao.gov the same day they are released. A daily e-mail alert service sends announcements of new reports and Comptroller General decisions to subscribers. The public can subscribe to this service on GAO's Web page. Electronic copies of GAO's reports and testimonies are also posted on the Web.

Copies of unclassified reports are available from the U.S. General Accounting Office, P.O. Box 37050, Washington, DC 20013. Phone, 202-512-6000. The first copy of each report and testimony is free; additional copies are \$2 each. There is a 25-percent discount on orders of 100 or more copies mailed to a single address. Orders should be sent with a check or money order payable to the Superintendent of Documents. VISA and MasterCard are also accepted.

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