



Leading Practices for Enhancing and Sustaining Interagency Collaboration

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Why Collaborate?

- Many of the results the federal government seeks to achieve require the coordinated efforts of more than one federal agency, level of government or sector, in areas such as:
 - Responding to public health emergencies;
 - Protecting the nation's critical information systems; and
 - Ensuring food safety.
- Collaboration can be broadly defined as any joint activity that is intended to produce more public value than could be produced when organizations act alone.

Relationship between Collaboration and Fragmentation, Overlap and Duplication

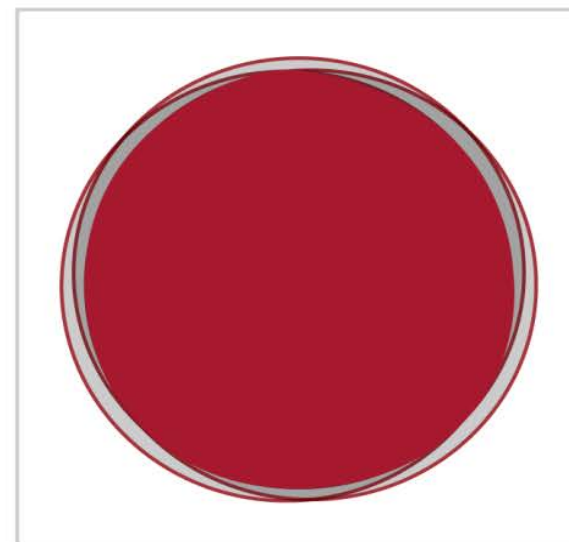
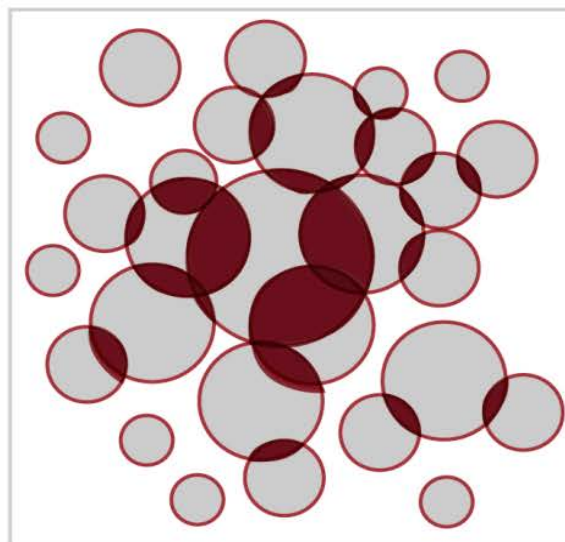
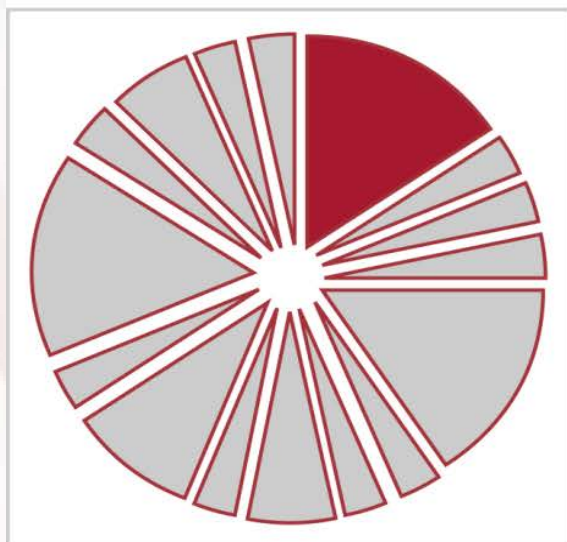
- In 2010, GAO was mandated to “Identify duplication in the federal government and recommend ways to reduce or eliminate it.”
- GAO designed an approach to assess fragmentation, overlap, and duplication, which explores ways to better manage such programs, including through improved coordination and collaboration.
- When federal agencies share a purpose or goal on a particular program, GAO may find they are not working effectively together.

Definitions of Fragmentation, Overlap, and Duplication

Fragmentation refers to those circumstances in which more than one federal agency (or more than one organization within an agency) is involved in the same broad area of national need and opportunities exist to improve service delivery.

Overlap occurs when multiple agencies or programs have similar goals, engage in similar activities or strategies to achieve them, or target similar beneficiaries.

Duplication occurs when two or more agencies or programs are engaged in the same activities or provide the same services to the same beneficiaries.










Source: GAO. | GAO-15-404SP

Examples of Governance Mechanisms Used for Interagency Collaboration

- **Collaboration Structures within the Executive Office of the President:** Permanent or temporary groups that are sometimes referred to as task forces, councils, commissions, committees, or working groups.
- **Interagency Groups:** These groups can be lead by agency and department heads or by component and program-level staff, and can be referred to as task forces, working groups, councils, and committees.
- **Specially Created Interagency Offices:** An office with its own authority and resources with responsibility to cover a policy area that crosses a number of separate agencies and departments.
- **Collaboration Technologies:** Tools, such as shared databases and web portals, that facilitate collaboration.

Key Features and Considerations for Implementing Collaborative Mechanisms

Key features		Key considerations
	Outcomes and accountability	Have short-term and long-term outcomes been clearly defined? Is there a way to track and monitor their progress?
	Bridging organizational cultures	What are the missions and organizational cultures of the participating agencies? Have agencies agreed on common terminology and definitions?
	Leadership	How will leadership be sustained over the long-term? If leadership is shared, have roles and responsibilities been clearly identified and agreed upon?
	Clarity of roles and responsibilities	Have participating agencies clarified roles and responsibilities?
	Participants	Have all relevant participants been included? Do they have the ability to commit resources for their agency?
	Resources	How will the collaborative mechanism be funded and staffed? Have online collaboration tools been developed?
	Written guidance and agreements	If appropriate, have participating agencies documented their agreement regarding how they will be collaborating? Have they developed ways to continually update and monitor these agreements?

Source: GAO.

Implementation Approaches to Enhance Collaboration in Interagency Groups

- GAO found that federal agencies frequently use **interagency groups**, such as interagency working groups and task forces, to accomplish interagency outcomes.
- GAO determined that these groups face challenges in the following areas:
 - **Outcomes**—Defining short-term and long-term outcomes
 - **Accountability**—Tracking and monitoring progress
 - **Leadership**—Leadership roles and responsibilities
 - **Resources**—Funding, staffing and technology

Selected Interagency Groups

- In a 2014 report, GAO selected four interagency groups that addressed our leading collaboration practices to learn about approaches they used and found to be successful.
 - **Departments of Defense and Education MOU Working Group**—the education of military dependent students;
 - **Federal Interagency Reentry Council**—the reentry of former inmates into society;
 - **Rental Policy Working Group**—rental housing policy; and
 - **U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness**—homelessness issues.

Implementation Approaches—Outcomes

- Started group with most directly affected participants and gradually broadened to others.
- Conducted early outreach to participants and stakeholders to identified shared interests.
- Held early in-person meetings to build relationships and trust.
- Identified early wins for the group to accomplish.
- Developed outcomes that represent the collective interests of the participants.
- Developed a plan to communicate outcomes and track progress.
- Revisited outcomes and refreshed interagency group.

Implementation Approaches—Accountability

- Developed performance measures and ties them to shared outcomes.
- Identified and shared relevant agency performance data.
- Developed methods to report on the group's progress that are open and transparent.
- Incorporated interagency group activities into individual performance expectations.

Implementation Approaches—Leadership

- Designated group leaders exhibited collaboration competencies.
- Ensured participation for high-level leaders in regular, in-person groups meeting and activities.
- Rotated key tasks and responsibilities when leadership of the group was shared.
- Established clear and inclusive procedures for leading the group during initial meetings.
- Distributed leadership responsibility for group activities among participants.

Implementation Approaches—Resources

- Created an inventory of resources dedicated towards interagency outcomes.
- Leveraged related agency resources towards the group's outcomes.
- Pilot tested new collaborative ideas, programs or policies before investing resources.

Key Takeaways

- Driving progress in important and complex areas facing the government increasingly involves effective coordination and collaboration between federal agencies; levels of government and sectors.
- Despite the type of collaborative mechanism that exists, such as an interagency working group or task force, GAO has found that certain leading practices were associated with more effective collaboration.
- GAO found that there have been effective cross-agency groups who shared the approaches they adopted and found to be successful.

Desirable Characteristics for a National Strategy

- **Purpose, scope, and methodology**—Addresses why the strategy was produced, the scope of its coverage, and the process by which it was developed.
- **Problem definition and risk assessment**—Addresses the particular national problems and threats the strategy is directed towards.
- **Goals, subordinate objectives, activities, and performance measures**—Addresses what the strategy is trying to achieve, steps to achieve those results, as well as the priorities, milestones, and performance measures to gauge results.

Desirable Characteristics for a National Strategy

- **Resources, investments, and risk management—**Addresses what the strategy will cost, the sources and types of resources and investments needed, and where resources and investments should be targeted, based on balancing risk reductions with costs.
- **Organizational roles, responsibilities, and coordination—**Addresses who will be implementing the strategy, what their roles will be compared to others, and mechanisms for them to coordinate their efforts.
- **Integration and implementation—**Addresses how a national strategy relates to other strategies' goals, objectives, and activities, and to subordinate levels of government and their plans to implement the strategy.

National Pandemic Strategy and Implementation Plan

- In 2005, the Homeland Security Council issued a National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza, and in 2006, an Implementation Plan.
- In 2007, GAO assessed the national pandemic strategy against the desirable characteristics for a national strategy. (GAO-07-781).
- GAO found that while the strategy and plan were an important first step in guiding national preparedness, further efforts were needed to ensure clearer federal leadership roles and responsibilities.
- The pandemic strategy also did not describe the financial resources which were needed to implement planned actions.

Related GAO Products

- *Fragmentation, Overlap and Duplication: An Evaluation and Management Guide*
<https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-15-49SP>
- *Managing for Results: Implementation Approaches Used to Enhance Collaboration in Interagency Groups*
<http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-14-220>
- *Managing for Results: Key Considerations for Implementing Interagency Collaborative Mechanisms*
<http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-12-1022>
- *Combating Terrorism: Evaluation of Selected Characteristics in National Strategies Related to Terrorism*
<https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-04-408T>



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