



PARTNERSHIP FOR PUBLIC SERVICE

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**Written Testimony
for**

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Subcommittee on Modernization**

Hearing on Legislative Branch Advancement: GAO Modernization

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Chairwoman Bice, Ranking Member Kilmer and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the invitation to participate in today's hearing on Government Accountability Office (GAO) modernization. The Partnership for Public Service is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to inspiring future generations toward public service and increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of the federal government. We support both the legislative and executive branches so they can meet their duty to the American public to deliver excellent services, efficiently use taxpayer dollars and modernize to respond to new and existing challenges.

Our nation, unfortunately, is sharply divided, with growing uncertainty each day as to whether we can restore any sense of unity or reverse waning trust in government. We are facing the looming possibility of a government shutdown, a trust deficit between the American people and government and heated debate regarding the role public servants should play in administering the rules and policies of our elected leaders. The GAO is one of Congress' greatest tools for fostering an effective and transparent government ready to face future challenges. The American people and Congress expect and deserve an agile and effective government, and I applaud the ongoing efforts of this subcommittee to ensure our legislative branch agencies are prepared and equipped to respond.

As you know, GAO serves a unique function for Congress. It provides nonpartisan, evidence-based, expert audit, evaluation, investigation and research capacity on critical issues facing government and society. This work should be seen as an integral part of strategic planning, performance management and modernization by executive branch agency heads as well as Members of Congress. GAO has a strong track record of success and in many respects serves as a model for other federal agencies. As a best practices organization, GAO itself must continue to build on the many services it provides to ensure it will meet the evolving needs of Congress well into the future.

The Importance of a Nonpartisan Audit Function

Well-run organizations use the audit function as a critical management tool to identify risks, review processes and performance and adjust or change practices to address findings. Through its biennial High Risk List, reports on certain government functions and technical explainers, GAO provides oversight, insight and foresight into government-wide and agency specific programs, processes and policies. This function cannot succeed without a full commitment to nonpartisanship.

Partnership for Public Service research shows just four in ten people trust the federal government to do what is right at least some of the time.¹ According to Pew research, Americans view negative statements as better descriptors of the U.S. political system than positive ones.² Gallup reports increased polarization and a widening gap between Republicans and Democrats on many policy issues.³ We are in an era where

¹ Partnership for Public Service and Freedman Consulting, LLC, "Trust in Government: A Close Look at Public Perceptions of the Federal Government and Its Employees," March 2022, 1. Available at <https://ourpublicservice.org/publications/trust-in-government>.

² Pew Research Center, "The biggest problems and greatest strengths of the U.S. political system." Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2023/09/19/the-biggest-problems-and-greatest-strengths-of-the-u-s-political-system>.

³ Gallup, "Update: Partisan Gaps Expand Most on Government Power, Climate," August 2023. Retrieved from <https://news.gallup.com/poll/509129/update-partisan-gaps-expand-government-power-climate.aspx>.

alternative facts and disinformation are rising, and it is harder to recognize and easier to obfuscate the truth.

GAO doggedly guards its reputation as a nonpartisan organization through protocols, culture and leadership. The organization serves all Members of Congress, relies on experts and evidence and uses a rigorous methodological approach to identify agency performance deficiencies, risks, mismanagement or outright fraud. GAO must always be a stronghold for credible analysis and findings, protect its independence and avoid even the appearance of impropriety or favor. It must always remain an unassailable place for trusted information. Audits should not be seen as partisan, burdensome or just obligatory, but rather as a critical tool that agencies fully embrace as a normal course of doing business. Looking forward, Congress and the Administration should prioritize an unwavering commitment to nonpartisanship by the candidate for Comptroller General when they next appoint and confirm this position in two years.

Investment in Expanding Authorities and Capabilities

GAO has a proven track record of return on investment. In FY2022, the GAO returned \$74 to the government for every dollar invested, and nearly twice that on average for the prior 5 years.⁴ Under its current Comptroller General, GAO has concentrated on employee engagement and invested in the development and care of its staff as a management tool to recruit and retain highly qualified experts and provide strong customer service to Congress. This commitment is highlighted in its continued presence at the top of the Partnership's Best Places to Work in Federal Government[®] rankings.⁵

Seemingly, the GAO is limited more by finances than leadership, talent or ability to reimagine or innovate. During FY2022, the GAO received work requests from 90% of the standing committees in Congress.⁶ GAO yields impressive results and is an exemplar of storied evolution – starting as a primarily voucher processing organization and transforming to a best-in-class audit organization admired around the globe for its standard setting, knowledge and capability. While funding in these constrained times must be appropriated prudently and responsibly, GAO would benefit from additional support to ensure it continues to meet Congressional needs.

Given growing government spending, complexity of management challenges, high risk of fraud and recent passage of multi-billion-dollar legislation, Congress should ensure GAO has sufficient resources to fully staff or even expand its Forensic Audits and Investigative Services function. Similarly, Congress should consider ways to strengthen GAO's ability to incentivize and ensure follow-up of open recommendations. This could be accomplished through a dynamic, interactive dashboard or other platform to provide data, status updates and recommendations highlighting where additional follow up is needed. On that point, thank you, Ranking Member Kilmer, for leading enactment of the bipartisan Improving Government for America's Taxpayers Act, which was signed into law as part of last year's defense authorization bill.⁷ Under

⁴ Government Accountability Office, "GAO's Work Led to Over \$55 Billion in Financial Benefits for the Federal Government in FY22," November 2022. Retrieved from <https://www.gao.gov/press-release/gaos-work-led-over-55-billion-financial-benefits-federal-government-fy22>.

⁵ Partnership for Public Service and Boston Consulting Group, "Best Places to Work in the Federal Government." Available at <https://bestplacetowork.org/rankings/detail/?c=GA00>.

⁶ Government Accountability Office, "Fiscal Year 2024 Performance Plan," GAO-23-900466, July 2023. Retrieved from <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-23-900466>.

⁷ "Improving Government for America's Taxpayers Act," P.L. 117-263, 117th Congress, 2022.

this new law, GAO will consolidate open priority recommendations by policy topic and help Congress better understand ways in which it can help agencies implement those recommendations.

Additionally, building off GAO's support to domestic and national audit entities and helping to strengthen global accountability (a U.S. interest and benefit to American taxpayers), Congress should consider an appropriation for GAO's Center for Audit Excellence. This is currently a fee-for-service function within GAO and a shift to a different funding model would ensure it has necessary resources and retains its intentional firewall to its operations to protect GAO's independence and prevent conflicts.

Capacity to Address Emerging Issues

GAO has a robust strategic planning function with a dedicated office that reports directly to the U.S. Comptroller General. This office includes a strategic foresight capability, conducts multiyear planning, expansively studies nearly all conceivable trend areas policymakers may contend with and involves expert external stakeholders in and outside government and around the world.

This function allows GAO to consider and evaluate rapid and unpredictable change as well as complex interaction among emerging trends to ensure our government is prepared to respond to growing risks and threats, as well as seek competitive advantages and seize opportunities. Strategic foresight is one of the strongest antidotes for mitigating uncertainty and thinking about ways to shape or influence preferred outcomes. It is a leadership competency that when done well improves understanding of changing environments and enhances decision-making. GAO has invested heavily in this capability, dedicating resources for continuous environmental scanning, providing training to its senior executives, embedding foresight practices across teams and publishing an authoritative resource on trends.⁸

One emerging trend in need of additional focus is the science and technology sector. GAO has not historically prioritized one specific area of work over others, and GAO has science and technology capability across its teams. However, GAO recently shifted to enable specific focus on science and technology in response to its trend monitoring, increased Congressional requests related to this area, and growing evidence of the impact of disruptive technologies. In 2019 GAO created the Science, Technology Assessment, and Analytics (STAA) Team, which has increased the depth and breadth of GAO's capacities to provide research and policy analysis on current and emerging issues in science and technology. In recent years, GAO has published short-form futures-oriented assessments to provide explainers on emerging technologies. Additionally, it established an Innovation Lab as an incubator and experimental unit to bolster advanced analytic capabilities, created the Polaris Council of external interdisciplinary experts, launched a Center for Strategic Foresight to stay abreast of changes in the external environment and has grown its workforce to include more PhD researchers, scientists, engineers and technical staff. All of these are efforts to be commended, and more investment may be required as this field grows along with the related need to provide understanding and recommendations to Congress.

One such investment is in its understanding and capability around Artificial Intelligence (AI). AI is a disruptive technology that will continue to have far-reaching and increasingly unknown impacts on government and society. AI, like many emerging trends and technologies, is still being explored for use and governance. Congress, as well as the American public, need to be better informed of AI's implications.

⁸ Government Accountability Office, "Trends Affecting Government and Society," GAO-22-3SP, March 2022. Retrieved from <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-22-3sp>.

Building on GAO's first technology assessment on AI⁹ in March 2018 and expanding on its June 2021 AI Accountability Framework,¹⁰ GAO must stand ready to audit agencies' responsible, ethical, reliable, and equitable use of AI and provide areas for Congress to consider in legislation and appropriations.

To build on recent advancements, Congress should support GAO efforts to strengthen its foresight capability and the role it can play across government. It should also ensure GAO has the resources to better understand and audit AI algorithms as well as advise Congress on legislation regarding proliferation, regulation and use of AI. GAO and Congress should also consider whether GAO should expand its view of its customer to include the American public and educating them on the implications of key emerging trends and technologies.

Creating a More Robust Customer Experience Function

In addition to modern technology and modern ways of working, a key tenet of a modernized organization is understanding its customers and how they experience services. Across the federal government and private sector, organizations are increasingly investing in building capacity not only for delivering robust customer service but also for ensuring an enhanced customer experience.

The Partnership has long called for this type of work to be prioritized and resourced. Customer service, at its core, is the direct and immediate interaction between a customer and the service provider, concentrating on addressing questions and resolving any issues promptly. Customer service usually starts with and focuses on solving problems of the moment. In contrast, customer experience (CX) is a broader concept that reflects the journey, or the sum of all interactions, of the customer within the organization and focuses on fostering engagement. CX involves a comprehensive understanding of customer needs, analyzing every touchpoint, evaluating interactions and measuring the effectiveness of products and services across the entire organization. This distinction underscores the importance of attending to both immediate interactions through customer service, and the broader holistic journey through customer experience.¹¹

The Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress recommended that congressional support agencies improve customer service.¹² GAO has a long history of providing strong customer service to Congress. Customer experience is the next iteration of customer service. Customer experience requires specific skillsets and practitioners, leadership support to ensure buy-in across an agency and integration of this focus throughout all teams and their work. Organizations that integrate a customer experience focus into their work understand the needs of each type of customer, engage with customers to deliver services and continuously receive feedback to drive improvements. The Department of Veterans Affairs

⁹ Government Accountability Office, "Technology Assessment: Artificial Intelligence: Emerging Opportunities, Challenges, and Implications," GAO-18-142SP, March 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-18-142sp>.

¹⁰ Government Accountability Office, "Artificial Intelligence: An Accountability Framework for Federal Agencies and Other Entities," GAO-21-519SP, June 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-21-519sp>.

¹¹ Partnership for Public Service and Accenture Federal Services, "Designing A Government for the People: Collaborative Approaches to Federal Customer Experience," December 2022. Available at <https://ourpublicservice.org/publications/designing-a-government-for-the-people>.

¹² "Recommendations on Improving Congressional Operations, Pathways to Congressional Service, and the Future of Congressional Modernization," December 2022. Retrieved from <https://www.congress.gov/117/crpt/hrpt659/CRPT-117hrpt659.pdf>.

Veterans Experience Office offers a model¹³ which GAO and this subcommittee might consider in exploring how to best resource this function, and advance GAO's Voice of Client efforts.

Focusing on customer experience still requires GAO to provide exemplary customer service to congressional staff and committees who rely upon its expertise to better inform their work. GAO already meets with individual staff and committees but should focus on additional ways to ensure staff are aware of its services and that the ways in which it provides expert advice and guidance fit with the needs of staff.

GAO has staff located and working across the country and the world as it conducts audits. Managing in-person, remote or a hybrid workforce has become increasingly complex. As such, GAO should work with House Administration to explore whether an onsite presence within congressional office buildings would be helpful. GAO's ability to staff such an office while not taking away from existing work is important. The Defense Department provides a model of employee development where employees on rotation are placed on central billets, so offices do not lose full time employee positions. GAO could use these rotations as a leadership development opportunity – in this case working at the onsite office would also ensure that GAO staff is gaining a deeper understanding of its customers on the Hill, creating strong relationships with Members and staff, and bringing greater awareness to the services it provides to Congress. This type of presence on the Hill would build on GAO's existing practice of detailing GAO analysts to congressional committees, which has been highly beneficial in providing Congress with needed expertise while increasing GAO's understanding of congressional day-to-day activities on oversight, legislation, and appropriations.

Coordination, Consolidation and Curation of Information

GAO and other legislative branch agencies serve as the in-house, nonpartisan experts, researchers and thought leaders on virtually every topic Congress may need to consider. As you know, CRS provides legislative research and analysis, CBO produces analysis on budgetary and economics issues as well as estimates on legislation, and GAO distinctly provides audits or some of the same or complementary information. However, this information can be disparate, overlapping, come in different formats and at different times, and Congress may not always be aware of all the information on a particular topic. Congress should have timely, reliable and coordinated information to assist with its oversight and policymaking responsibilities. Congress should explore formally merging some of these capabilities or whether GAO is positioned to serve as a clearinghouse and coordinator for reports and information from GAO, CRS and CBO. This consolidation of information could decrease duplication of requests on similar topics, increase research efficiency as staff could identify reports from each support agency by topic, and give staff an initial place to look for reports and recommendations before having to make new requests.

Communicating, collaborating and coordinating information leads to a better-informed Congress and more effective and efficient lawmaking. The manner (format and medium) in which information is presented is equally important. Absorption of information should be a focus in addition to collection of it. With increased resources and technology support, GAO could serve as a first point of contact and clearinghouse for critical information and help synthesize and consolidate information or refer to other experts should requests be better addressed elsewhere. Congress receives information in many different ways

¹³ Partnership for Public Service and Medallia, "The Good Government Connection: Linking the Federal Employee and Customer Experiences," May 2023. Available at <https://ourpublicservice.org/publications/the-good-government-connection>.

and from a variety of sources. In order to achieve maximum efficiency, Congress should ensure increased coordination and easier access to recommendations or reports across legislative agencies. This includes providing additional resources for GAO to explore innovative, interactive and visual ways to make its audits and reports, as well as any curated information, more accessible and digestible. Congress should also consider requesting an independent organization, like the National Academy of Public Administration, to study potential ways to achieve these objectives.

Changing Landscape of Data and Information

We are living in data-rich, data-ubiquitous world. The volume of data or information created, captured, copied or consumed has exponentially increased worldwide, and continues to grow rapidly. While many are concerned about access and equity, governments globally should also be concerned about accuracy, verifiability, and transparency. Congress and the legislative branch entities that support it will need trusted data to conduct work.

GAO relies on data from federal agencies and other sources to conduct audits. If there are delays, undue barriers or other restrictions to data, GAO audits can be slowed or incomplete. Data must be made available following law and agreed upon protocols, and GAO must have access to requested data. This includes raw or unstructured data as well as information obtained from documents, interviews or other means of discovery.

GAO has well-established statutory authority to access agency information (which it has an excellent record in safeguarding) in order to conduct audits and evaluations. Agencies, whether intentionally or not, may not always provide complete access to data. From information needed to complete a financial audit of entities as complex as the Defense Department, access to sensitive and national security protected information from parts of the Intelligence Community, or the ability to interview government officials at specific agencies, Congress must ensure readily and open access for GAO. This may entail additional authorities for GAO or guidance to agencies to ensure they are meeting this obligation.

Given growth in proliferation of data and concerns over its use, the American people will increasingly expect greater transparency and disclosure by the government. The Select Committee's recommendation on support agencies reporting on challenges and potential solutions for accessing federal data is critical and will help fully realize the Open Data Government Act and offer greater access to information.¹⁴

With the recent appointment of its first Chief Data Officer, GAO is better positioned to enhance its ability to conduct more real-time audits, serve Congress with greater speed, and potentially provide insight from an agency rather than purely audit perspective. Congress should ensure GAO has the resources to support its Chief Data Officer and Innovation Lab capabilities, while also increasing penalties for agencies not complying with furnishing required data. While GAO already has data analytics and data visualization capabilities, these are becoming more necessary to ensure products are clear, accessible and digestible.

Conclusion

There is no shortage of hardship or crisis in our country—from responding to natural disasters, managing U.S. engagement in conflicts abroad, navigating the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, securing the homeland, and preparing for issues on the horizon such as economic recession. Congress must be

¹⁴ Ibid.

prepared to address what is immediately in front of it as well as what is ahead. Our nation's grandest challenges will generally come down to three things: people (do we have skilled talent and empowering leadership), money (do we have resources and effective stewardship and accountability) and things (do we have the services and technology to achieve the best outcomes).

GAO is a model agency in employee engagement, supporting its employees and developing leaders – all of which has helped it be a strong partner to Congress. For the last 3 years GAO has been ranked the top midsize agency in the Best Places to Work in Federal Government Rankings and has consistently been in the top 4 for the last 15 years. As with any organization, remaining at the top takes intentional leadership and employee engagement to drive improvements and ensure strong customer experience. GAO is more than an audit and report writing organization and must continue its modernization efforts to ensure it is meeting the evolving needs of Congress.

The future calls for greater transparency, accountability and modernization across government, and Congress must be able to rely on GAO to help it meet its oversight responsibilities. In summary, to ensure Congress is ready, GAO must continue delivering on its mission with exceptional results and be supported in the following ways:

- Advance its strategic foresight capacity to ensure continuous emerging trend scanning capability particularly helping GAO prepare better understand generative AI, be able to audit federal use of AI and highlight policy implications of AI to lawmakers;
- Reinforce and strengthen access to data and information with an aim to conduct more real-time auditing, gain greater insight into agency operations, and help mitigate data access challenges;
- Make innovative, dynamic and virtual sources of information more accessible and digestible to Congress and the American public;
- Increase the size and capacity of GAO's Forensic Audits and Investigative Service to complement Congress and accountability community efforts to identify fraud and help agencies adopt a fraud prevention culture;
- Ensure GAO's long held and vital nonpartisan stance and approach to conducting work, including when the next nominee for Comptroller General is considered;
- Consider an appropriation for GAO's Center for Audit Excellence to help build capacity of other audit organizations and strengthen global accountability and transparency to improve state, local and foreign government's use of federal taxpayer funds;
- Advance Select Committee recommendations on encouraging better use of data in the legislative process, creation of a support agencies directory, enhancing customer experience at GAO;
- Support GAO's ability to enhance customer experience to better understand the needs of Congress and the American public; and
- Increase coordination and access to recommendations or reports across legislative agencies and consider requesting a study on potential ways to enhance coordination or curation of information in Congress that might reduce any duplication or overlap of requests.

Thank you again for holding this hearing, and thank you, Chairwoman Bice and Ranking Member Kilmer, for your leadership and commitment on ways to help modernize the Legislative Branch. On these and many other issues you are considering, the Partnership for Public Service stands ready to help find

nonpartisan, commonsense solutions to the major management challenges facing the federal government.