



Highlights of [GAO-12-968T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

The federal judiciary and the GSA are in the midst of a multibillion-dollar courthouse construction initiative. In 2010, GAO found that more than a quarter of the new courthouse space was unneeded, costing \$835 million to construct and \$51 million annually to rent, operate, and maintain.

As part of this initiative, construction has not yet begun on the L.A. courthouse project that was proposed to address perceived space, operational, and security deficits in Los Angeles, California. Specifically, the L.A. Court is split between two different buildings—the Roybal and Spring Street Courthouses—causing security and operational problems. Congress has appropriated about \$400 million for the L.A. courthouse project. For this testimony, GAO was asked to review the L.A. Courthouse project and (1) explain its history and status, (2) determine the extent to which previously identified challenges related to courthouse construction apply to the project, and (3) determine if the analysis that made it the highest priority construction project still applies.

This testimony is based primarily on GAO's prior work on federal courthouses, for which GAO analyzed courthouse planning and use data, visited key sites in Los Angeles and other locations, modeled courtroom-sharing scenarios, and interviewed judges and GSA officials. This information was updated through GSA and judiciary documents and interviews. GSA and judiciary provided technical comments on GAO's updated work.

View [GAO-12-968T](#). For more information, contact Mark L. Goldstein at (202) 512-2834 or goldsteinm@gao.gov.

August 17, 2012

L.A. COURTHOUSE

Initial Project Justification Is Outdated and Flawed

What GAO Found

Because of delays and cost increases, the General Services Administration (GSA) canceled the authorized 41-courtroom Los Angeles (L.A.), California, courthouse project in 2006. Since then, GSA and the judiciary have been slow to agree upon how to proceed with the project, for which about \$366 million in appropriated funds remains available. In 2012, with the judiciary's support, GSA issued a request for proposal for contractors to design and build a 24-courtroom, 32-chamber courthouse, which would be used in conjunction with 25 existing courtrooms in the Roybal Courthouse. However, this new plan will not address one of the principal justifications for the original project—that the L.A. Court be centralized at one site. Instead, it would increase the distance between the Roybal Courthouse and the planned second court location and the distance to the federal detention center from which prisoners must be transported.

Each of the challenges leading to extra space—and the associated extra costs—in courthouses that GAO identified in 2010 apply to the L.A. courthouse project. First, the initial design of the L.A. courthouse project exceeded the congressionally authorized size by 13 courtrooms and over 260,000 square feet. Second, 16 fewer judges are located in Los Angeles than were originally projected, a change that calls into question the space assumptions that the original proposals were based on. Third, officials did not fully take into consideration the advantages of courtroom sharing, again planning more courtrooms than necessary. According to the courtroom sharing model that GAO developed for a 2010 report using the judiciary's courtroom usage data, the 45 current district judges in Los Angeles would need 25 courtrooms to adequately address all scheduled courtroom time—roughly half of the 49 courtrooms currently planned.

It is not clear if the L.A. project remains a high priority. The judiciary chose not to reassess the L.A. project under a new prioritization process it began implementing in 2009. The process was changed to address concerns about the growing cost of courthouse projects and incorporate industry standards and best practices. However, there is evidence that the L.A. project justification from the old process is outdated and flawed based on the amount of space needed and the security assessment. Two high-priority projects that were reassessed under the new system were subsequently removed from the list. GAO is currently studying the judiciary's new prioritization process as it relates to projects currently on the judiciary's 5-year plan for this subcommittee and will continue to review these issues as part of that work.