

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-24-106446](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

The federal government plays an important role supporting research, programs, and other activities to promote the health and well-being of people with autism. Multiple federal agencies are involved in autism activities. To help coordinate and monitor federal autism activities and to ensure activities are not unnecessarily duplicative, Congress directed the Secretary of Health and Human Services to establish the IACC and designate an official to facilitate coordination and implementation of autism activities, known as the National Autism Coordinator.

GAO was asked to examine coordination and monitoring of federal autism activities. This report examines NIH efforts to (1) help coordinate federal autism activities and (2) monitor autism activities to ensure federal autism activities are not unnecessarily duplicative.

GAO reviewed NIH documents and relevant federal laws; assessed NIH's role in supporting coordination of autism activities against key practices that GAO identified in prior work; and gathered information from 19 federal agencies that conduct autism activities.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making two recommendations: HHS should (1) develop a process to clearly track and report progress toward IACC goals; and (2) ensure that NIH documents the procedures its Office of National Autism Coordination uses to ensure federal autism activities are not unnecessarily duplicative. HHS concurred with the recommendations.

View [GAO-24-106446](#). For more information, contact John E. Dicken at (202) 512-7114 or dickenj@gao.gov.

February 2024

AUTISM RESEARCH AND SUPPORT SERVICES

















Federal Interagency Coordination and Monitoring Efforts Could Be Further Strengthened

What GAO Found

The National Institutes of Health (NIH), within the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), plays a key role in supporting the coordination of autism activities across 18 federal agencies, including the Departments of Defense and Education. For example, NIH manages the Interagency Autism Coordination Committee (IACC), a federal advisory committee composed of federal agencies and public members, through its Office of National Autism Coordination.

GAO found that NIH, in support of the IACC and the National Autism Coordinator, generally followed six of eight key collaboration practices that GAO's prior work has shown can be effective in enhancing and sustaining interagency collaborative efforts among federal entities. For example, NIH has taken steps to bridge organizational cultures by convening meetings of the IACC.

Assessment of the National Institutes of Health's (NIH) Role in Supporting Coordination of Federal Autism Activities Compared with Leading Practices for Interagency Coordination

 Define Common Outcomes		 Clarify Roles and Responsibilities	
 Ensure Accountability		 Include Relevant Participants	
 Bridge Organizational Cultures		 Leverage Resources and Information	
 Identify and Sustain Leadership		 Develop and Update Written Guidance and Agreements	

 Partially followed  Generally followed

Source: GAO analysis of information collected from NIH and other federal agencies (data); GAO (icons). | GAO-24-106446

GAO found NIH efforts to support interagency coordination partially followed the remaining two collaboration practices, including ensuring accountability. For example, although IACC strategic plans describe high-level progress made toward autism activities, they generally have not described how progress made relates to goals. NIH officials stated their progress tracking approach is driven by established processes, some of which are required by law. Establishing a clear process for tracking progress would help to determine progress toward IACC's goals and that interagency efforts are effective.

NIH helps ensure federally funded autism activities are not unnecessarily duplicative through various activities, such as holding meetings and through data and information reviews. However, GAO found the processes used by NIH's Office of National Autism Coordination were not documented. For example, NIH does not have written procedures describing the steps these staff should follow when reviewing federal autism research information for potential duplication. Although NIH officials stated that they believe current monitoring processes are sufficient, documenting these procedures will help ensure they are properly designed and executed to provide reasonable assurance that duplication is not occurring.