



FEDERAL RESEARCH CENTERS

DHS Actions Could Reduce the Potential for Unnecessary Overlap among Its R&D Projects

Report to Congressional Requesters

October 2024

GAO-25-106394

United States Government Accountability Office

Accessible Version

GAO Highlights

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Highlights of [GAO-25-106394](#), a report to congressional requesters

October 2024

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Why GAO Did This Study

DHS uses FFRDCs—not-for-profit organizations—to meet special, long-term R&D needs that its components and other contractors cannot meet as effectively. Since DHS established its first FFRDC in 2004, as statutorily required, the department has obligated over \$3 billion through fiscal year 2023 on FFRDC contracts. According to DHS, FFRDCs are to provide independent and objective advice on critical homeland security issues.

GAO was asked to review the oversight of FFRDCs. This report addresses, among other issues, the extent to which (1) S&T has reviewed DHS's proposed FFRDC projects for potential unnecessary overlap with other DHS R&D activities and (2) FFRDC PMO has developed tools to assess FFRDCs' performance and receives, analyzes, and shares key performance information.

GAO reviewed DHS and S&T policies and procedures. GAO also selected a sample of 118 out of 732 FFRDC task orders—orders for services placed against established contracts—over a 9-year period to reflect a range in value and volume. GAO also interviewed officials from S&T, FFRDC PMO, selected DHS components, and the FFRDCs.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making eight recommendations, including that DHS (1) amend policies to require S&T to review FFRDC projects for potential overlap with DHS R&D activities and (2) ensure FFRDC PMO analyzes the risk of low response rates for FFRDC user surveys. DHS concurred with all eight recommendations and identified planned actions to address them.

What GAO Found

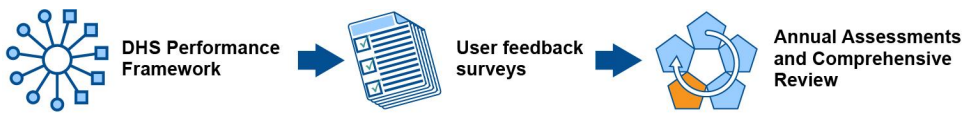
The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Science and Technology Directorate (S&T) is responsible for coordinating and overseeing the department's research and development (R&D) activities and, with selected DHS components, funding these activities. To help meet its R&D needs, DHS sponsors Federally Funded Research and Development Centers (FFRDCs), two of which are overseen by S&T's FFRDC Program Management Office (PMO).

S&T has a coordination process that includes steps for reviewing proposed R&D projects with DHS component-funded R&D projects that S&T funds, oversees, or otherwise supports. S&T officials told GAO that they review proposed FFRDC projects for unnecessary overlap as part of this coordination process. However, GAO's review of DHS and S&T policies found that the five DHS components that receive R&D appropriations are not required to share their component-funded R&D activities with S&T. Thus, S&T's overall coordination reviews may not always include these DHS component-funded

R&D activities. A leading practice from prior GAO work states that establishing a means to operate across agency boundaries can reduce or better manage program overlap. S&T could reduce the potential for conducting similar R&D work by amending its policies to require that officials review proposed FFRDC projects for unnecessary overlap with DHS component-funded R&D projects.

FFRDC PMO is responsible for assessing the performance of the two FFRDCs it oversees. Federal requirements and DHS guidance require FFRDC PMO officials to assess FFRDC performance each year and more comprehensively every 5 years. FFRDC PMO has developed two tools—a performance framework that identifies 11 performance metrics and a FFRDC user feedback survey—to assess FFRDC performance.

Department of Homeland Security’s (DHS) Federally Funded Research and Development Center Performance Assessment Process



Source: GAO review of DHS Science and Technology Directorate documentation; GAO (illustrations). | GAO-25-106394

GAO found that FFRDC PMO’s response rates for FFRDC user feedback surveys ranged in recent years from 100 percent to 43 percent across the two FFRDCs. FFRDC PMO officials said they have not analyzed the extent to which these variations in response rates could have impacted the validity of the overall survey data. Low response rates raise the risk that the survey responses do not represent the views of all FFRDC users. If the views of the users who did not respond to the survey differ from those who did, the survey results could produce a different outcome than what would be found across all users. Given the importance of the surveys in assessing FFRDC performance, analyzing the risk of low response rates could help FFRDC PMO identify whether further steps, such as increasing such rates, are needed to mitigate the risk of those responses not representing all users.

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Abbreviations

DHS	Department of Homeland Security
FAR	Federal Acquisition Regulation
FFRDC	Federally Funded Research and Development Center
FY	Fiscal Year
HSEOAC	Homeland Security Operational Analysis Center
HSSEDI	Homeland Security Systems Engineering and Development Institute
PMO	Program Management Office
R&D	Research and Development
S&T	Science and Technology Directorate

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October 30, 2024

The Honorable Mark E. Green, M.D.
Chairman
Committee on Homeland Security
House of Representatives

The Honorable Anthony P. D’Esposito
Chair
Subcommittee on Emergency Management and Technology
Committee on Homeland Security
House of Representatives

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) uses Federally Funded Research and Development Centers (FFRDC) to meet special, long-term research and development (R&D) needs that DHS and other contractors cannot meet as effectively.¹ Since DHS established the first FFRDC in 2004, as statutorily required, the department has obligated over \$3 billion through fiscal year 2023 on contracts for DHS FFRDCs to research issues and technologies that affect homeland security.² According to DHS, the purpose of its FFRDCs is to provide the department with independent and objective advice on critical homeland security issues.

The Science and Technology Directorate (S&T) oversees DHS’s three FFRDCs. Within S&T, the FFRDC Program Management Office (PMO) oversees, manages, and supports operations for two of DHS’s three FFRDCs—the Homeland Security Operational Analysis Center (HSOAC) and the Homeland Security Systems Engineering and Development Institute (HSSEDI).³ S&T sponsors the FFRDCs through contracts with entities—such as not-for-profit organizations—that operate the FFRDCs. Combined, HSOAC and HSSEDI

¹See Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR) 35.017(a)(2). The Secretary of Homeland Security, acting through the Under Secretary for Science and Technology (S&T), is responsible for, among other things, coordinating R&D activities and establishing or contracting with FFRDCs. See Homeland Security Act of 2002, Pub. L. No. 107-296, tit. III, §§ 302, 305 116 Stat. 2135, 2163-64, 2168 (codified as amended at 6 U.S.C. §§ 182(12), 185). For the purpose of this report, we characterize the Under Secretary’s responsibilities as carried out by S&T.

²The Homeland Security Act created DHS and authorized it to contract or establish one or more FFRDCs. The Homeland Security Act also required DHS to establish a specific FFRDC, the Homeland Security Institute, DHS’s first FFRDC, with a specified timeframe for operation. The Homeland Security Institute has since been terminated pursuant to statute. See Pub. L. No. 107-296, tit. III, § 312, 116 Stat. at 2176 (codified as amended at 6 U.S.C. § 192).

³DHS guidance specifies that, for these two FFRDCs, the FFRDC PMO will oversee FFRDC operations on behalf of the Under Secretary for Science and Technology and will serve as the primary point of contact for the FFRDCs. See Department of Homeland Security, *Instructions for Establishing or Contracting with Federally Funded Research and Development Centers (FFRDCs) and National Laboratories*, 143-04-001, Revision Number 01 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 28, 2016). DHS’s third FFRDC is the National Biodefense Analysis and Countermeasures Center (Center), which is overseen by S&T’s Office of National Laboratories. Established in 2004, the Center partners with the Federal Bureau of Investigation and provides biocontainment laboratory capability to address biological threats. Because our report focuses on FFRDC PMO’s oversight of HSOAC and HSSEDI, we did not include the Center in our review. For the purposes of this report, “FFRDCs” refers to the FFRDCs overseen by FFRDC PMO—HSOAC and HSSEDI.

specialize in 16 areas, including homeland security threat and opportunity studies, emerging threats, innovation and technology, cyber solutions, and systems engineering.⁴

- **HSOAC.** HSOAC supports DHS through its operational analyses and acquisition and organizational studies. RAND, a not-for-profit research organization that conducts R&D work across multiple fields and industries, has operated HSOAC since its inception in 2016.⁵ In 2022, the DHS Office of Procurement Operations awarded RAND a \$495 million, 5-year contract on a sole-source (non-competitive) basis to continue to operate HSOAC into 2027.⁶
- **HSSEDI.** HSSEDI provides technical and systems engineering expertise to DHS. The MITRE Corporation (MITRE), a not-for-profit research organization that supports federal government operations in areas such as defense and cybersecurity, has operated HSSEDI since its launch in 2009.⁷ In 2020, the DHS Office of Procurement Operations awarded MITRE an \$862 million, 5-year contract on a sole-source basis to continue to operate HSSEDI into 2025.⁸ In March 2023, the contract ceiling was increased to \$1.42 billion. For more information on HSOAC and HSSEDI, see appendices I and II, respectively.

You asked us to review the extent to which FFRDC PMO engages in various oversight activities for HSOAC and HSSEDI. This report addresses the extent to which

1. S&T has reviewed DHS’s proposed FFRDC projects for potential unnecessary overlap with other DHS R&D projects;⁹

⁴For the purposes of this report, we use the term “DHS component sponsor” to refer to DHS components—other than S&T—that initiate and fund a task order. The term does not refer to the FFRDCs’ “contract sponsor,” which is S&T. See FAR 35.017(b). We also use the term “sponsor” in reference to S&T and DHS components’ actions to initiate a task order.

⁵According to RAND, in fiscal year 2023, it retained nearly 2,000 employees and earned \$390 million in corporate revenue. In addition to homeland security, it specializes in areas such as social science, acquisition studies, policy analysis, economics, international affairs, and national security. Along with HSOAC, RAND operates three FFRDCs sponsored by the Department of Defense.

⁶This is RAND’s first contract renewal; the initial 5-year contract was awarded, on a competitive basis, in 2016. The period of performance for the preceding contract was September 19, 2016, through March 23, 2022, with an indefinite-delivery/indefinite-quantity contract ceiling of approximately \$495 million. Under RAND’s current contract, the period of performance is from March 24, 2022, through March 23, 2027. Under FAR 16.504(a), an indefinite-quantity contract “provides for an indefinite quantity, within stated limits, of supplies or services during a fixed period. The government places orders for individual requirements.”

⁷According to MITRE, in fiscal year 2022, it retained over 9,000 employees and earned \$2.2 billion in corporate revenue. In addition to homeland security, it specializes in areas such as defense and intelligence, aerospace, cybersecurity, telecom, transportation, and artificial intelligence issues. Along with HSSEDI, it manages five additional FFRDCs sponsored by other federal agencies.

⁸This is MITRE’s third contract; the initial 5-year contract was awarded, on a competitive basis, in 2009. It was renewed as a sole-source contract in 2014. MITRE’s current contract runs from March 24, 2020, through March 23, 2025. The period of performance for the preceding contract was September 24, 2014, through March 23, 2020, with an indefinite-delivery/indefinite-quantity contract ceiling of \$675 million.

⁹For the purposes of this report, we use the term “project” to mean generic R&D activities. “Overlap” occurs when multiple programs have similar goals, engage in similar activities or strategies to achieve those goals, or target similar beneficiaries. See GAO, *Fragmentation, Overlap, and Duplication: An Evaluation and Management Guide*, [GAO-15-49SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 14, 2015). For the purposes of this report, we refer to “unnecessary overlap” as instances in which multiple entities engage in unnecessarily similar efforts, resulting in an inefficient use of resources. For some R&D activities, however, overlap may be desirable to build upon work already performed or ongoing.

2. S&T's FFRDC PMO has developed tools to assess FFRDCs' performance and receives, analyzes, and shares key work performance information;¹⁰ and
3. S&T's FFRDC PMO has reviewed and analyzed DHS's use of the results of FFRDC task orders.¹¹

To address all our objectives, we identified task orders issued to FFRDCs from September 2014 through February 2023. This approximately 9-year timeframe includes the ongoing and immediately preceding 5-year FFRDC contract periods of performance and allowed us to review task orders issued over time. We assessed the reliability of the data by reviewing S&T data-entry guidelines and interviewing S&T officials on internal controls for data maintenance and verification. We determined the data were sufficiently reliable for identifying task orders that S&T and DHS components sponsored, and other key task order information.

To better understand S&T's FFRDC R&D project implementation processes, we reviewed a nongeneralizable sample of 118 out of 732 FFRDC task orders issued within the approximately 9-year timeframe. The 118 task orders were issued on behalf of S&T and three DHS components.¹² We selected the components and task orders to reflect a range of the (1) value of issued task orders, (2) number of issued task orders by component, and (3) timeframes for which the task orders were issued (period of performance). We analyzed key documents, such as FFRDC PMO's appropriateness certificate, for each task order and interviewed 17 S&T and DHS component program managers across the 118 task orders about their experiences overseeing the task orders.¹³ We selected these managers to reflect a range of number of task orders they oversaw and value of the projects placed on the task orders.

To determine the extent to which S&T reviews proposed FFRDC projects for potential unnecessary overlap with other DHS R&D projects, we analyzed DHS and S&T management directives and guidelines for coordinating DHS-wide R&D needs and projects. We evaluated DHS's R&D coordination procedures against our fragmentation, overlap, and duplication guidance for coordinating agency actions, selected leading practices for interagency collaboration, and *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*.¹⁴ We analyzed a set of five key documents, such as the Technical Execution Plan, for each of the 118 selected task orders, for indications that S&T, FFRDC PMO, FFRDC, or DHS component officials had reviewed FFRDC task

¹⁰For the purposes of this report, "work performance" is defined as work FFRDCs perform in the execution of task orders. It does not include aspects of FFRDC operations such as business processes and invoice control.

¹¹For the purposes of this report, we use the term "task order" to mean an order for services placed against a FFRDC indefinite-delivery/indefinite-quantity contract. A "task order" is an order for services placed against an established contract or with government sources, FAR 2.101. For the purposes of this report, a task order may address one project or multiple parts of a project. "Results" refers to the deliverables that FFRDC sponsors—S&T and DHS components—receive, as specified in the task order.

¹²The three DHS components are (1) Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, (2) Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction Office, and (3) Federal Emergency Management Agency.

¹³In some instances, program managers oversaw more than one of the 118 task orders.

¹⁴[GAO-15-49SP](#); GAO, *Government Performance Management: Leading Practices to Enhance Interagency Collaboration and Address Crosscutting Challenges*, [GAO-23-105520](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 24, 2023); and *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, [GAO-14-704G](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 2014). With respect to *Government Performance Management* leading practices, we compared DHS, S&T, and FFRDC PMO policies and procedures against one of eight leading practices—the extent to which entities have compatible policies, procedures, and other means to operate across agency boundaries. We selected this leading practice because it most closely applied to our report objective to review the extent to which FFRDC PMO reviews DHS proposed FFRDC projects for unnecessary overlap with other DHS R&D activities. We determined that the remaining leading practices were outside the scope of our review.

orders for potential overlap with other DHS R&D activities.¹⁵ We interviewed S&T, FFRDC PMO, FFRDC, and DHS component officials regarding their actions to identify and mitigate potential FFRDC project overlap.

To determine the extent to which FFRDC PMO has developed tools to assess FFRDCs' performance and receives, analyzes, and shares key work performance information, we reviewed relevant federal requirements for assessing FFRDC performance as well as DHS management directives on establishing and contracting with FFRDCs.¹⁶ We analyzed the most recent 5-year Comprehensive Review for each FFRDC. We also analyzed five Annual Assessments, for fiscal year 2020, fiscal year 2021, and fiscal year 2022 for HSSDI and fiscal year 2021 and fiscal year 2022 for HSOAC, to determine the extent to which they were consistent with federal and DHS guidance and key practices for evidence-based policymaking that we identified in our 2023 work.¹⁷ We also interviewed FFRDC PMO officials regarding their procedures for assessing FFRDC performance and RAND and MITRE officials regarding their assessment experiences.

To understand how FFRDC PMO receives and analyzes feedback on FFRDC performance, we analyzed FFRDC PMO's data used to determine user feedback survey response rates from fiscal year 2019 through fiscal year 2023. To assess the reliability of these data, we reviewed relevant documentation and interviewed responsible officials. We determined the data were sufficiently reliable to report on survey response rates over these fiscal years. We also interviewed FFRDC PMO officials regarding their procedures for collecting, assessing the quality of, and analyzing user feedback survey data. We assessed the extent to which FFRDC PMO's processes for collecting, validating, and analyzing user feedback data were consistent with *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government* and key practices for evidence-based policymaking.¹⁸

To address the extent to which FFRDC PMO has reviewed and analyzed DHS's use of the results of FFRDC task orders, we reviewed DHS and S&T policies and procedures for contracting with FFRDCs.¹⁹ We examined key documents, such as completed user feedback surveys, from the 118 selected FFRDC task orders to identify FFRDC PMO efforts to track S&T's and DHS components' use of task order results and interviewed FFRDC PMO officials about their outreach practices, as well as the 17 selected S&T and DHS component program managers and FFRDC officials. We also assessed the extent to which FFRDC PMO's outreach

¹⁵We did not receive all documents for each task order either because the DHS component or FFRDC PMO officials could not locate the documents, or they were not completed. In some instances, the task order had yet to be completed and therefore a list of deliverables was not available. According to DHS component and FFRDC PMO officials, sponsors may not always develop a list or summary of deliverables.

¹⁶See FAR 35.017 and DHS, *Instructions for Establishing or Contracting with Federally Funded Research and Development Centers (FFRDCs) and National Laboratories*.

¹⁷FFRDC PMO revised its FFRDC user feedback survey and Annual Assessment process in fiscal year 2019; the reasons for these revisions are discussed later in this report. Due to the extensive nature of the revisions, we focused our analysis on Annual Assessment reports from fiscal year 2020—the first year of the new process—through fiscal year 2022. Fiscal year 2023 Annual Assessments were not available at the time of our review. FFRDC PMO officials are not required to complete an Annual Assessment in the year they complete a Comprehensive Review and therefore did not complete an Annual Assessment for HSOAC in fiscal year 2020. GAO, *Evidence-Based Policymaking: Practices to Help Manage and Assess the Results of Federal Efforts*, [GAO-23-105460](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 12, 2023).

¹⁸[GAO-14-704G](#) and [GAO-23-105460](#); and Office of Management and Budget, *Standards and Guidelines for Statistical Surveys* (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 2006).

¹⁹DHS, *Instructions for Establishing or Contracting with Federally Funded Research and Development Centers (FFRDCs) and National Laboratories*; DHS, S&T, *Direct Ordering Guide for the Homeland Security Operational Analysis Center*, Version 3.2 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 28, 2022); and DHS, S&T, *Direct Ordering Guide for the Homeland Security Systems Engineering and Development Institute*, Version 2.2 (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 21, 2020).

efforts were consistent with key practices for evidence-based policymaking.²⁰ For additional information on our objectives, scope, and methodology, see appendix III.

We conducted this performance audit from November 2022 to October 2024 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Background

DHS FFRDC Function and Oversight

FFRDCs are designed in part to meet departments' special long-term R&D needs by allowing them to use non-government resources to accomplish tasks that are integral to their mission and operation. According to DHS guidance, FFRDCs provide the department with independent and objective advice to address critical homeland security issues.

In addition to overseeing the FFRDCs, S&T's FFRDC PMO also acts as a liaison between the FFRDCs and the FFRDC task order sponsors.²¹ FFRDC PMO is responsible for key FFRDC operations, including contract administration and management, business operations and knowledge management, and customer relationship management.

S&T's Processes for Coordinating DHS R&D Activities

As the primary R&D arm of DHS, S&T is responsible for providing DHS components with R&D support and coordination. According to S&T officials, S&T is responsible for developing, coordinating, and tracking R&D projects it either funds with its own R&D appropriations or which it directly supports, such as by providing management or needed technical expertise. S&T officials stated that approximately 80 percent of all DHS R&D activities are funded with S&T R&D appropriations, while the remaining approximately 20 percent are R&D activities that DHS components fund with their own R&D budget authority and develop through their own project development processes.²² We found in our prior work that, because selected DHS components can use

²⁰[GAO-23-105460](#).

²¹In addition to S&T and DHS components, such as the Transportation Security Administration, DHS staff offices and components in other federal departments (e.g., Department of State) may sponsor DHS FFRDC task orders. However, because S&T and DHS components sponsor the vast majority of DHS FFRDC task orders, for the purposes of this report we refer to the entities—other than S&T—that funded task orders to the FFRDCs as “DHS components.”

²²According to S&T officials, DHS components that have their own R&D budget authority also have their own processes for determining R&D needs and developing R&D projects, which function separately from S&T. DHS components may also use other available funds in some instances to finance FFRDC projects or other R&D projects. S&T officials told us they did not know what percentage of DHS's R&D activities are funded with other available appropriations.

their own R&D funds in addition to S&T's funds to conduct R&D projects, R&D activities at DHS are inherently fragmented.²³

According to S&T guidance, to meet its DHS R&D coordination responsibilities, S&T has developed a R&D coordination process comprised of multiple steps. Two of these steps include procedures for identifying potential R&D project overlap: (1) identifying and prioritizing DHS mission needs (called "capability gaps") and (2) determining how to address those needs.²⁴ According to S&T officials, S&T's coordination process applies only to the DHS components' R&D needs and projects that S&T funds, oversees, or otherwise supports. That is, S&T's coordination process does not apply to the approximately 20 percent of DHS R&D activities that certain DHS components fund with their own R&D appropriations.²⁵

S&T's first relevant step for identifying potential project overlap is to identify and prioritize DHS R&D needs. This step is carried out by S&T's Integrated Product Teams, which are organized by DHS component and are generally comprised of S&T and component senior officials. The Integrated Product Teams also are to coordinate each DHS component's prioritized R&D needs with those of other DHS components to identify overlapping needs and projects. If, based on the work of the Integrated Product Teams, S&T officials identify overlapping DHS component needs or projects, S&T's R&D coordination guidance instructs them to bring these components together to explore options to mitigate unnecessary overlap.

S&T's second relevant step is to evaluate options for addressing the R&D needs the Integrated Product Teams identified in the first step. During this phase, various S&T subject matter experts are to review proposed R&D projects for overlap with other ongoing or planned R&D efforts across DHS.

Funding R&D Projects

According to S&T officials, DHS components may use a variety of funding sources to fund R&D projects, including those with the FFRDCs and other vendors or research institutions, as shown in figure 1.²⁶

S&T R&D funding. S&T provides funds for R&D activities, including FFRDC projects, to DHS components. It coordinates these activities through its R&D coordination process.

DHS component R&D funding. As of May 2024, five DHS components have their own R&D budget authority—a specific appropriation for R&D activities—to conduct R&D activities separately from S&T efforts. These DHS components use these funds to identify their own R&D needs and to fund R&D

²³See GAO, *Department of Homeland Security: Oversight and Coordination of Research and Development Should Be Strengthened*, GAO-12-837 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 12, 2012). Fragmentation refers to 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. See GAO, *2024 Annual Report: Additional Opportunities to Reduce Fragmentation, Overlap, and Duplication and Achieve Billions of Dollars in Financial Benefits*, GAO-24-106915 (Washington, D.C.: May 15, 2024).

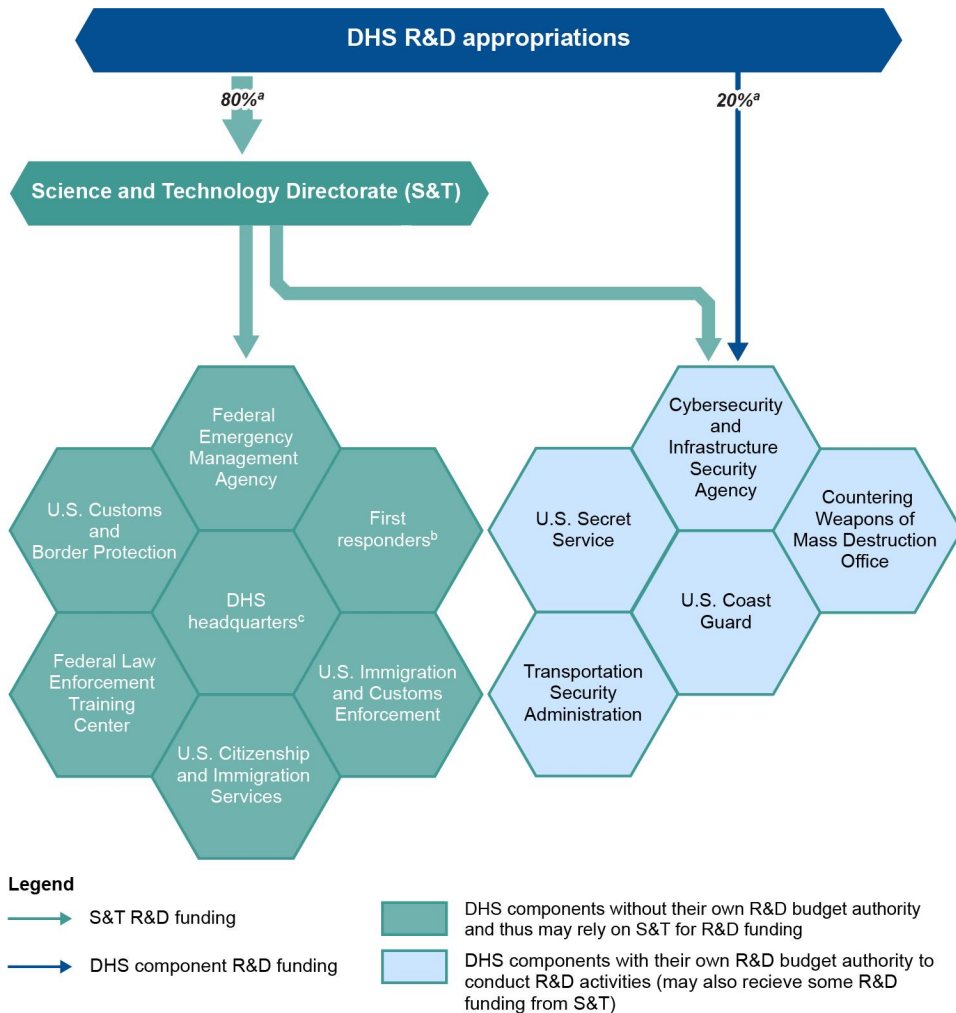
²⁴According to S&T guidance, R&D "needs"—which S&T refers to as "capability gaps"—are vulnerabilities that require research and/or development to address, often because an existing solution is not available, practical, or affordable. S&T refers to its coordination process as the "Business Process Flow." See DHS, *Understanding S&T's Business Process Flow: Overview of S&T's Matrixed Research and Development Process*, (Washington, D.C.: June 14, 2022).

²⁵S&T's coordination process also does not apply to R&D projects that components may pay for with other available funds.

²⁶The two funding streams, in addition to funding FFRDC R&D work, also may fund other DHS R&D projects.

processes and projects, including FFRDC projects and those with other research institutions, in support of their respective missions. See figure 1.

Figure 1: Distribution of Research and Development (R&D) Funds through the Department of Homeland Security (DHS)



Source: GAO analysis of the DHS Science and Technology Directorate’s research and development coordination guidance. | GAO-25-106394

Note: Funding can be used for R&D activities conducted by FFRDCs as well as for other DHS R&D activities.

^aAccording to S&T officials, approximately 80 percent of all DHS R&D funding goes through S&T, with the remaining 20 percent going directly to DHS components with their own R&D project development processes. Using its R&D appropriations, S&T may also fund some projects for the DHS components that have their own R&D project development processes and funding.

^bS&T determines the R&D needs and projects for the first responder community at the federal, state, and local levels.

^c“DHS headquarters” in this context refers to any DHS headquarters entity, such as the Office of Policy, that may have a R&D need.

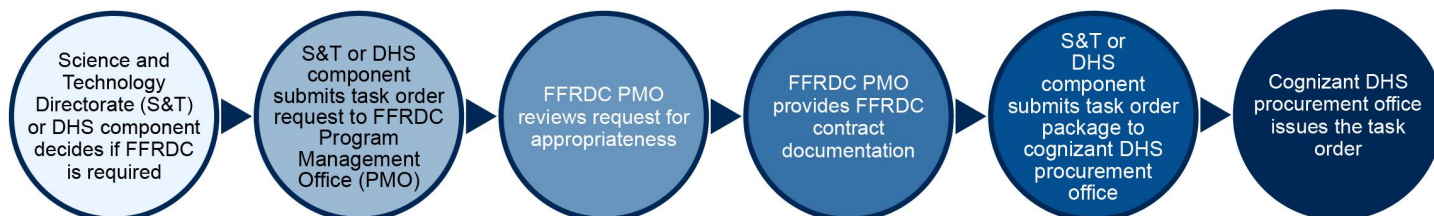
Other available DHS component funding. According to S&T officials, DHS components may also use other available component funds to finance FFRDC projects or other R&D projects performed by other

vendors or research institutions.²⁷ This includes both DHS components that have their own specific R&D budget authority and those that do not.

FFRDC Task Order Issuance Process, Implementation, and Closure

S&T’s FFRDC PMO is responsible for determining the appropriateness of proposed task orders for FFRDC development. As part of the process for issuing task orders, DHS procedures require S&T and DHS component sponsors to submit a task order proposal to FFRDC PMO officials for an “appropriateness” review to ensure the proposal meets specific FFRDC requirements.²⁸ FFRDC PMO officials are to review the information S&T and DHS component sponsors submit and, if suitable, certify that the task order is appropriate for a FFRDC. See figure 2.

Figure 2: Task Order Issuance Process for Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Federally Funded Research and Development Centers (FFRDC)



Source: GAO analysis of DHS, S&T, FFRDC PMO documentation. | GAO-25-106394

At the beginning of this process, DHS component sponsors assign a contracting officer and contracting officer’s representative to ensure contract requirements are met and a program manager to oversee the development of the task order and liaise with the FFRDC.²⁹

After the appropriateness review, the assigned program manager submits a procurement request package to the cognizant procurement office for issuance.³⁰ S&T or the DHS component sponsor is responsible for funding the task order.

²⁷According to a DHS official, other available DHS component funds, such as those in the “Operations and Support” appropriation, may be used for R&D activities depending on specific facts involved, including the nature and purpose of the R&D project. DHS may request to fund R&D projects with non-R&D funds, or Congress may choose to fund R&D projects from a non-R&D account, such as for relatively smaller R&D projects or for R&D projects for DHS components whose R&D needs may not justify standalone R&D budget authority, according to the official.

²⁸DHS directs the FFRDC PMO to conduct an appropriateness review, prior to the issuance of a task order, to ensure the proposal meets specific FFRDC requirements. PMO officials look, for example, to ensure S&T or the DHS component does not have the personnel and resources to address the work on its own. DHS, *Instructions for Establishing or Contracting with Federally Funded Research and Development Centers (FFRDCs) and National Laboratories*.

²⁹S&T sponsors are supported during the process by FFRDC PMO, which undertakes various task order functions, such as performing contracting officer’s representative duties and facilitating funding, among other tasks.

³⁰FFRDC PMO submits the package on behalf of S&T sponsors. The package is to include a technical execution plan, signed appropriateness review form, and cost estimate, among other documentation.

The FFRDC provides “deliverables” to the S&T or DHS component sponsor, as identified in the task order. Deliverables may include reports, data, assessments, analysis, and many other types of products.

DHS Requirements for Assessing FFRDC Work Performance

FFRDC PMO, on behalf of the Under Secretary for Science and Technology, is also responsible for assessing FFRDC performance.³¹ The Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR) and DHS guidance require FFRDC PMO officials to conduct Comprehensive Reviews every 5 years; DHS guidance also requires FFRDC PMO officials to conduct Annual Assessments.³²

- **Comprehensive Reviews.** FFRDC PMO officials are to conduct a Comprehensive Review of FFRDC performance every 5 years, corresponding with the FFRDC contract period, to include metrics that measure the efficiency and effectiveness of FFRDC work performance.³³ The purpose of a Comprehensive Review is to analyze how well a FFRDC has met DHS’s needs during the 5-year contract period and whether DHS has a continued need for R&D that can be met by the FFRDC. The Under Secretary for Science and Technology uses the Comprehensive Review to determine whether to re-award, re-compete, or terminate the department’s sponsorship of the FFRDC.³⁴ DHS guidance requires FFRDC PMO to include a summary of program metrics and goals, as well as user surveys of performance in the review.³⁵ As shown in figure 3, the Comprehensive Review takes the place of the Annual Assessment for the contract year in which it is performed.
- **Annual Assessments.** FFRDC PMO officials are to assess FFRDC performance annually in the areas of technical quality, responsiveness, value, cost, and timeliness, and to establish performance metrics and goals, measure progress against those goals, and document the results in a report. This assessment report is to include S&T or DHS component sponsors’ perspectives on FFRDC performance, which FFRDC PMO officials are to gather through a user feedback survey.

³¹See FAR 35.017-1(e), 35.017-4 and DHS, *Instructions for Establishing or Contracting with Federally Funded Research and Development Centers (FFRDCs) and National Laboratories*. Federal regulations and DHS guidance direct FFRDCs to be continually assessed for quality, cost-effectiveness, and conformity with the FAR and DHS directives. DHS guidance also requires FFRDC PMO to conduct specified and ad hoc reports—such as semi-annual reports on FFRDC oversight—as part of its necessary oversight functions and responsibilities.

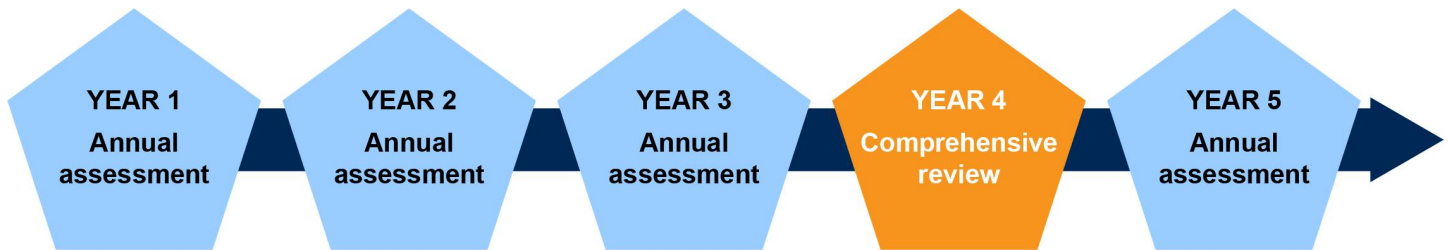
³²FAR 35.017-1(e), 35.017-4 and DHS, *Instructions for Establishing or Contracting with Federal Funded Research and Development Centers (FFRDCs) and National Laboratories*, and DHS, *DHS Directives System Instructions Document*.

³³As part of the Comprehensive Review, FFRDC PMO must assess the FFRDC’s work performance, including efficiency and effectiveness in the areas of (1) maintaining its objectivity and independence, (2) quick response capability, (3) currency in its field of expertise, and (4) familiarity with the needs of the sponsor. Full guidance in assessing FFRDC performance is provided in FAR 35.017-4 and DHS, *Instructions for Establishing or Contracting with Federally Funded Research and Development Centers (FFRDCs) and National Laboratories*, 143-04-001 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 28, 2016).

³⁴If the Under Secretary determines to continue sponsorship of the FFRDC, the contract is extended or re-competed. See FAR 35.017-1(e), 35.017-4(a), (b) and Department of Homeland Security, *DHS Directives System Instructions Document*. The decision to re-compete the contract means FFRDC PMO will competitively solicit who will be the FFRDC operator. The decision to terminate means the FFRDC no longer exists with any operator. See generally FAR 35.017-5.

³⁵DHS, *Instructions for Establishing or Contracting with Federally Funded Research and Development Centers (FFRDCs) and National Laboratories*.

Figure 3: Federally Funded Research and Development Centers (FFRDC) Performance Assessment Requirements Timeline, by Contract Year



Source: GAO analysis of Science and Technology Directorate, FFRDC Program Management Office documentation. | GAO-25-106394

Note: The Comprehensive Review is completed in year 4 of the 5-year contract. This is to allow the time necessary should DHS need to re compete or terminate the contract before it expires.

S&T’s Process for Reviewing Proposed FFRDC Projects for Potential Unnecessary Overlap May Not Include All DHS R&D Projects

S&T’s R&D Coordination Process Includes Review of Proposed FFRDC Projects for Potential Overlap

S&T’s R&D coordination process includes steps for reviewing proposed R&D projects—including FFRDC projects—for potential unnecessary overlap with other DHS R&D projects. S&T officials told us that they review potential FFRDC projects for overlap with other DHS R&D projects as part of S&T’s ongoing efforts to coordinate DHS R&D activities that S&T funds, oversees, or otherwise supports.

S&T officials told us they use steps in the coordination process, such as through the Integrated Product Teams, to identify and coordinate DHS components’ R&D needs and projects, which S&T funds or otherwise supports.³⁶ S&T guidance requires officials to document key decision points in the S&T coordination process. We reviewed examples of S&T’s documentation of key steps in the coordination process for non-FFRDC R&D projects.³⁷

³⁶S&T officials stated that these S&T coordination efforts are focused on specific R&D activities for various DHS components. In contrast, DHS has directed its newly formed Innovation, Research, and Development Coordination Council (Council) to apply long-range R&D strategic planning across all DHS components for strategic priority research areas. According to a Council official, while DHS plans to focus on these issue areas over a 7-year period, this long-term, strategic planning approach will not include details on specific R&D projects or the entities who will be performing them, which would be the necessary focus to identify unnecessary project overlap. The official added that the Council’s efforts will reduce the possibility of any overlap in DHS’s long-term, strategic planning efforts for R&D. Based on the Council’s work, DHS recently issued its first R&D strategic plan covering fiscal years 2024 through 2030. See DHS, *DHS Innovation, Research, and Development Strategic Plan, Fiscal Years 2024-2030*, (Washington, D.C.: May 2024).

³⁷We reviewed examples of decisions that S&T officials documented during the course of their DHS R&D coordination activities—both needs and projects. Specifically, we reviewed documentation of S&T’s Business Process Flow system that records S&T’s coordination process efforts. This system tracks the lifecycle of S&T R&D projects from needs determination through project completion, such as identified mission need, stakeholders, potential solutions, decisions, related efforts, projects, results, and any transfers of technology from R&D to application. We also reviewed examples of the system’s need analysis reports, which document S&T reviews of DHS components’ R&D needs for related efforts. According to a S&T official, the review for related efforts includes overlap. See DHS, *Understanding S&T’s Business Process Flow: Overview of S&T’s Matrixed Research and Development Process*.

S&T's Coordination Process May Not Include All DHS R&D Projects

S&T officials who oversee the R&D coordination process with DHS components told us that the five DHS components that receive R&D appropriations are not required to share their component-funded R&D activities with S&T as part of S&T's R&D coordination process. For this reason, the FFRDC project reviews that S&T officials told us they conduct to identify potentially unnecessary overlap may not always include DHS component-funded R&D activities.

S&T officials responsible for reviewing R&D activities as part of the coordination process—including reviews for potential overlap—told us they have concerns about obtaining needed information on the R&D activities that the five DHS components self-fund and develop. Specifically, five of the nine S&T portfolio managers who lead the Integrated Product Teams told us that although the five DHS components usually share information on their self-funded R&D activities with S&T, they may not always do so. These S&T officials said they are not always made aware—through the Integrated Product Teams—of FFRDC or other R&D projects initiated by these five DHS components. Five of the nine portfolio managers also told us that obtaining information on DHS component-funded R&D projects would be helpful to them in assessing whether the projects potentially overlap with other DHS R&D projects.

According to S&T officials, in the event they are not made aware of DHS component-funded R&D efforts through S&T's coordination processes, it is possible to identify those efforts through an annual report of DHS R&D activities that S&T compiles each year. S&T officials told us that each fiscal year, in response to a statutory requirement, they reach out to DHS components to compile a list of all DHS R&D projects that were funded through DHS R&D budget authority, including DHS component R&D appropriations.³⁸ The list includes R&D projects that were ongoing, completed, or terminated during the prior fiscal year, including DHS component-funded projects. According to S&T officials, they use the list to develop the statutorily required DHS annual R&D report, which also provides FFRDC PMO and DHS components with a complete list of DHS R&D activities that they can review for potentially overlapping R&D activities.

However, the DHS annual report on R&D activities may not provide sufficient information to fully identify unnecessary overlap between FFRDC and DHS R&D projects for two reasons: (1) the time lag in updating the list and (2) its potential omission of some projects based on the funding source.

Time lag in updating the annual DHS R&D list. Because S&T officials update and provide the list to Congress annually, there can be a significant lag in identifying newly initiated DHS R&D activities through the DHS annual report, including FFRDC projects. For example, DHS issued its fiscal year 2022 report in early July 2023, approximately 9 months after the end of the fiscal year. For R&D projects initiated earlier in fiscal year 2022, the lag time for stakeholders to learn about these projects would be greater. While the annual list of DHS R&D projects could be useful to FFRDC PMO and DHS components as an additional way to identify potential project overlap, DHS components could initiate new R&D projects after S&T compiles the annual list. Therefore, FFRDC PMO and DHS components would not see these new projects until S&T updates the list the next year.

³⁸S&T officials compile this list of DHS R&D projects each fiscal year and include it in a report to Congress. The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017 requires DHS to annually provide Congress with a report that includes a comprehensive list of ongoing R&D projects, including certain appropriate details. Pub. L. No. 114-328, div. A tit. XIX, § 1906(a), 130 Stat. 2000, 2676-77 (codified at 6 U.S.C. § 195e(b)) (2016). Such list would include FFRDC projects.

Consequently, using the annual list to identify overlapping projects would mean missing potentially relevant projects that DHS initiates after the annual list was updated. In addition, S&T portfolio managers told us that receiving timely information on proposed FFRDC projects before the task order is issued would be helpful in assessing whether any of these projects potentially overlap with other DHS R&D activities.

Potential impact of funding source on completeness of the annual R&D list. In addition, since the list includes projects funded from R&D appropriations, the annual list may not capture some R&D projects that DHS components finance with funds that are not from a specific R&D appropriation, which, according to S&T officials, could include FFRDC projects.³⁹

While S&T develops and publishes this list annually, the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017 requires DHS to develop and update the list of R&D projects on at least a quarterly basis.⁴⁰ S&T officials told us that while they update the results of certain completed projects each quarter, they do not update all the projects due to their view that this information would be of limited usefulness during the course of the year.⁴¹ Further, S&T officials told us that they do not distribute the quarterly updates of certain projects internally to DHS components. Instead, they said they used them to update the annual list in anticipation of the report to Congress.

Updating the annual list of R&D projects on at least a quarterly basis, as required by the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017, and disseminating the updated list to relevant DHS entities, including DHS components, would provide DHS with a more updated and useful resource with which to review proposed FFRDC projects for potentially unnecessary overlap.

According to our guidance on fragmentation, overlap, and duplication, agencies that establish a means to operate across agency boundaries can reduce or better manage program overlap.⁴² Additionally, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government* state that effective and efficient operations minimize waste.⁴³

DHS and S&T policies and procedures require S&T officials to review proposed FFRDC projects for potential unnecessary overlap through their R&D coordination process. However, this process may not include all R&D projects that DHS components develop with their own R&D appropriations. S&T officials stated that this is

³⁹According to DHS officials, in some instances, funding for R&D may be requested and appropriated in a different account, such as for DHS components where the R&D function may not justify a standalone appropriation because of a project's or DHS component's relatively smaller size.

⁴⁰The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017 requires DHS to develop (1) a list, updated "as frequently as possible, but not less than quarterly," of classified and unclassified R&D projects (whether ongoing, completed, or otherwise terminated) and certain specified details about such projects, among other things, and (2) submit an annual report to specified congressional committees that lists all classified and unclassified R&D projects (whether ongoing, completed, or otherwise terminated). 6 U.S.C. § 195e.

⁴¹The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017 also requires DHS to report on "indicators of success of transitioned projects"—that is, for each project that has been transitioned to practice from R&D, DHS must report on indicators developed and tracked to demonstrate the uptake of the technology or project among customers or end-users. See 6 U.S.C. § 195e(a)(1)(D), (c).

⁴²[GAO-15-49SP](#).

⁴³[GAO-14-704G](#).

because, as part of S&T’s coordination process, DHS and S&T policies and procedures do not require the five DHS components to share their component-funded R&D activities with S&T.

By amending its policies and procedures to require S&T officials to review proposed FFRDC projects for unnecessary overlap with DHS component-funded R&D projects, S&T could better avoid the potential for expending DHS resources for similar R&D projects.

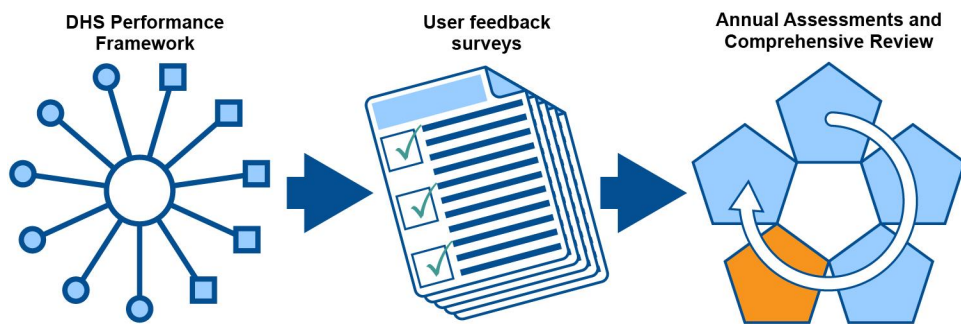
According to *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, an agency’s significant events should be fully documented.⁴⁴ Documenting the results of the R&D coordination efforts between the proposed FFRDC task orders and the R&D activities funded by the five DHS components could better ensure that the overlap reviews take place and informs all relevant parties that the overlap reviews have been conducted.

FFRDC PMO Has Tools to Assess FFRDC Performance but May Not Receive, Analyze, or Share Key Information

FFRDC PMO Has Developed and Implemented Tools to Assess Performance, Including a Framework and User Feedback Survey

FFRDC PMO officials have developed and implemented two tools—the FFRDC PMO Performance Framework (Performance Framework) and a user feedback survey—to meet the Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR) requirements and DHS guidance on assessing FFRDC work performance and to ensure consistency across assessments.⁴⁵ In combination, these two tools serve as the foundation for FFRDC PMO officials’ performance assessments of FFRDCs, as shown in figure 4.

Figure 4: Department of Homeland Security’s (DHS) Federally Funded Research and Development Center Performance Assessment Process



Source: GAO review of DHS Science and Technology Directorate documentation; GAO (illustrations). | GAO-25-106394

The Performance Framework organizes FFRDC assessment criteria, which the FAR and DHS guidance require as part of the Comprehensive Reviews and Annual Assessments.⁴⁶ As shown in table 1, FFRDC PMO

⁴⁴GAO-14-704G.

⁴⁵FFRDC PMO refers to the user feedback survey as the “Task Order Performance Assessment.”

⁴⁶FAR 35.017-4 and DHS, *Instructions for Establishing or Contracting with Federally Funded Research and Development Centers (FFRDCs) and National Laboratories*.

officials have defined 11 performance metrics based on FAR and DHS guidance and distilled them into five performance categories. These five performance categories comprise two broad performance areas: (1) technical value and (2) quality process.

Table 1: Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Federally Funded Research and Development Centers (FFRDC) Program Management Office (PMO) Performance Framework

Performance area	Performance category	Performance metrics from Federal Acquisition Regulation	Performance metrics from DHS Directives System Instructions
Technical Value	Effectiveness	Current in its fields of expertise	Technical quality
		Familiarity with sponsors' needs	na
	Impact	Meeting sponsor's needs	Program value
Quality Process	Responsiveness	Quick response capability	Flexibility
	Efficiency	Objectivity and independence	Timeliness
	Cost effectiveness	Cost control	Cost estimation

Source: DHS Science and Technology Directorate, FFRDC PMO. | GAO-25-106394

To collect information about how the FFRDCs are performing in the areas outlined in the Performance Framework, FFRDC PMO officials have also developed a user feedback survey. According to FFRDC PMO officials, the intention of this survey is to offer S&T and DHS component sponsors—FFRDC users—a direct mechanism to submit comprehensive, structured, and detailed feedback to FFRDC PMO at the conclusion of a task order.⁴⁷ FFRDC PMO officials stated that due to their varying involvement in the day-to-day management of task orders, the user feedback surveys provide them with necessary insight into how well the FFRDCs have performed for S&T and DHS component sponsors across the department. As such, FFRDC PMO officials told us they consider the surveys a critical resource for their oversight and management of FFRDCs.

In the user feedback survey, S&T and DHS component sponsors answer questions about FFRDC performance on the 11 performance metrics defined in the Performance Framework. Specifically, the user feedback survey consists of two types of questions. First, S&T and DHS component program managers answer rating questions by selecting a score from a 5-point scale that ranges from “Unsatisfactory” to “Exceptional,” to describe FFRDC performance, as shown in table 2. Second, the survey includes open-ended questions that offer program managers the option of providing narrative feedback, such as examples, to support their rating responses. Appendix IV includes FFRDC PMO’s user feedback survey template as well as additional details on how FFRDC PMO uses the rating data to determine whether the FFRDCs meet performance standards.

Table 2: Department of Homeland Security’s (DHS) Federally Funded Research and Development Center (FFRDC) User Feedback Survey Scores and Ratings Definitions

Scoring number	Rating	Definition
1	Unsatisfactory	Does not meet expectations; serious problems exist for which corrections appear to be, or were, ineffective.
2	Poor	Does not meet expectation; significant weaknesses or minor issues for which proposed actions were marginally effective or not fully implemented.

⁴⁷In the context of FFRDC contracts, projects are awarded as “task orders” and sponsor officials complete the user feedback survey at the end of each task order. A project may encompass one or many task orders. As such, S&T and DHS component officials may complete the user feedback survey multiple times over the course of a project.

Scoring number	Rating	Definition
3	Satisfactory	Meets expectations; few significant weaknesses and some minor issues for which corrective actions appear to be, or were, satisfactory.
4	Very good	Exceeds expectations; few, if any significant weaknesses; few, if any, minor issues for which corrective actions were generally effective.
5	Exceptional	Exceeds expectations; no significant weaknesses; no minor issues.

Source: DHS Science and Technology Directorate, FFRDC Program Management Office. | GAO-25-106394

FFRDC PMO Lacks Understanding of Potential Risks Posed by Incomplete Survey Information

FFRDC PMO does not have an understanding of potential risks to the quality of its user feedback data due to variation in response rates. Our analysis of FFRDC PMO’s response rate data for completed user feedback surveys found that response rates varied when comparing across recent fiscal years and FFRDCs. FFRDC PMO officials told us that they have not analyzed the extent to which these variations in response rates could have impacted the validity of the overall survey data.

Specifically, our analysis found that response rates for user feedback surveys for HSSEDI ranged from 83 percent in fiscal year 2021 to 46 percent in fiscal year 2023, and response rates for HSOAC ranged from 100 percent in fiscal year 2019 to 43 percent in fiscal year 2023. Lower response rates could mean survey results do not represent the views of the population—in other words, the results could be biased to underrepresent or overrepresent different aspects of the population. However, FFRDC PMO officials told us they do not conduct an analysis to understand the risk of bias in the overall results from the user feedback surveys.

We reviewed user feedback survey response rates from fiscal year 2019 through fiscal year 2023, as shown in table 3. During this period, we found S&T and DHS component program managers completed less than two-thirds of the surveys sent to them in fiscal year 2020 and fiscal year 2023 for HSSEDI, and in fiscal years 2021, 2022, and 2023 for HSOAC. S&T and DHS component response rates to the user feedback survey also varied by FFRDC. For example, in fiscal year 2021, S&T and DHS component program managers completed 83 percent of user feedback surveys for HSSEDI, but 58 percent of surveys for HSOAC. Additionally, we found that S&T and DHS component managers completed less than half of the surveys distributed in fiscal year 2023 for both HSSEDI and HSOAC projects.⁴⁸

Table 3: User Feedback Survey Response Rates for Department of Homeland Security’s (DHS) Federally Funded Research and Development Centers (FFRDC), from Fiscal Year 2019 through Fiscal Year 2023

Fiscal year	Homeland Security Systems Engineering and Development Institute			Homeland Security Operational Analysis Center		
	Number of task orders	Number of responses	Response rate	Number of task orders	Number of responses	Response rate
2019	46	34	74%	32	32	100%
2020	76	47	62%	29	19	66%

⁴⁸According to FFRDC PMO officials, in fiscal year 2023, the office’s follow-up efforts to S&T and DHS component officials who had not completed the user feedback survey yielded lower response rates than in fiscal year 2019 through fiscal year 2022 for both HSSEDI and HSOAC, at 46 and 43 percent, respectively. However, as of January 2024, FFRDC PMO officials were deciding whether to make further efforts to collect additional user feedback for those task orders.

Fiscal year	Homeland Security Systems Engineering and Development Institute			Homeland Security Operational Analysis Center		
	Number of task orders	Number of responses	Response rate	Number of task orders	Number of responses	Response rate
2021	42	35	83%	31	18	58%
2022	58	44	76%	27	17	63%
2023 ^a	50	23	46%	54	25	43%

Source: DHS Science and Technology Directorate, FFRDC Program Management Office. | GAO-25-106394

^aUser feedback data for fiscal year 2023 are as of February 2024.

FFRDC PMO staff told us their initial effort to prompt S&T and DHS component program managers to respond to the survey is a reminder email set up through an online system.⁴⁹ According to FFRDC PMO officials, program managers are to receive up to two reminder emails within 2 weeks of closing out the project. According to FFRDC PMO officials, after the initial email outreach effort, FFRDC PMO leadership may decide to take additional steps to encourage survey response depending on the results of the main efforts and staff availability. These additional steps include (1) FFRDC PMO staff outreach to users directly by phone, (2) FFRDC PMO director outreach to users by phone, or (3) notices to users from S&T’s Executive Secretariat Office.

FFRDC PMO officials told us they have not analyzed the risk of nonresponse bias and thus do not use it as a factor when deciding whether to take additional steps to increase survey response rates. “Nonresponse bias” can occur when survey results produce a different outcome than what would be found in the overall population, because the views of those who did not respond to the survey differ from those who did respond.

While bias can be caused by many factors, low survey response rates are of concern because they raise the risk that the responses received do not represent the views of all S&T and DHS component program managers (the overall user population). For example, a survey response rate of 40 percent means 60 percent of S&T and DHS component program managers did not respond to the survey. The 60 percent of program managers who did not respond could have different views on FFRDC performance from the 40 percent who did respond.

There are multiple ways to analyze the risk of nonresponse bias. One way is to compare the characteristics of those program managers (e.g., length of experience as a program manager) who responded or the characteristics associated with their task orders (e.g., type of work overseen or the DHS component funding the task order) to the corresponding characteristics of the overall population of the survey. In this way, an analysis of nonresponse bias can help to identify whether certain groups are missing or underrepresented from the results. Once identified, additional steps can be taken to correct the bias, such as targeting missing groups with additional follow-up.

Determining when to conduct a nonresponse bias analysis can vary based on circumstances such as the level of importance of the survey and the likelihood of a large difference between those who did and did not respond to the survey. However, the 2006 Office of Management and Budget’s *Standards and Guidelines for Statistical*

⁴⁹FFRDC PMO staff stated that the emails are automatically sent for S&T users. However, because other DHS components will not be able to access S&T’s SharePoint system, FFRDC PMO staff must manually email a pdf copy of the user feedback survey to non-S&T users.

Surveys suggests that an agency should plan to conduct analysis of nonresponse if it expects the survey response rate to be less than 80 percent.⁵⁰

Key practices for evidence-based policymaking that we identified state that an organization should assess the quality of the evidence it uses for decision-making, which includes the completeness of the data.⁵¹ Additionally, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government* states that, to establish an effective internal control system, management should use quality information to achieve an entity's objectives. Quality information requires reliable data that are reasonably free from error and bias and faithfully represent what they purport to represent. Documentation is also a necessary part of an effective internal control system.⁵²

FFRDC PMO officials told us they have not conducted an analysis of risk for nonresponse bias in part due to competing higher priorities and limited staff resources. But they said that a formal analysis of risk for nonresponse bias has not been necessary given the staff's experience-based knowledge of program managers' behavior with respect to completing or not completing the user surveys.⁵³ While FFRDC PMO staff may be familiar with the reasons program managers may not have completed user surveys in the past, each assessment year can be unique in terms of risk factors and characteristics of the user population, and knowing the reasons for not responding does not necessarily help determine whether there could be bias in the overall results.

Moreover, FFRDC PMO relies solely on the user feedback data to understand FFRDC work performance in its Annual Assessment and as an input to its Comprehensive Review. *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government* states management should identify, analyze, and respond to risks related to achieving objectives and communicate necessary quality information to achieve the entity's objective.⁵⁴

Given the importance of the data to understanding FFRDC work performance, risks to the quality of the data may impact FFRDC PMO's ability to fulfill its objective of assessing FFRDC performance. Therefore, conducting an analysis of the risk for nonresponse bias could help FFRDC PMO officials identify to what extent survey results may be at risk of potential bias and whether they should take actions to mitigate that risk and increase the survey response rate. Moreover, documenting the results of the user feedback surveys (response rate, risk of bias analysis, and steps taken to increase the response rate) for each fiscal year's Annual Assessment and the Comprehensive Review would help FFRDC PMO better ensure it is transparent about relevant data in all assessments of FFRDC work performance.

⁵⁰Although this user feedback survey is not a statistical survey subject to the Office of Management and Budget's directive, we provide this information as an example of guidance given for other federal surveys related to response rates and nonresponse bias analyses. Office of Management and Budget, *Standards and Guidelines for Statistical Surveys*, OMB Directive No. 2 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 2006).

⁵¹[GAO-23-105460](#).

⁵²[GAO-14-704G](#).

⁵³FFRDC PMO officials provided the following ideas as to why S&T and DHS component program managers may delay providing their survey responses or choose not to respond: (1) they are unaware or uncertain about the user survey process, (2) they believe submitting a survey response is optional, or (3) they are not the appropriate point-of-contact to provide the survey response.

⁵⁴[GAO-14-704G](#).

FFRDC PMO Did Not Comprehensively Analyze Open-Ended Survey Responses on FFRDC Performance

To assess users' experiences with FFRDCs, FFRDC PMO officials rely on ratings data from completed user feedback surveys; however, since fiscal year 2022, officials have not included an analysis of users' open-ended written responses in Annual Assessments to provide context for users' satisfaction ratings. Specifically, while satisfaction ratings can indicate when FFRDCs did not meet performance standards, they cannot tell FFRDC PMO officials the reasons why they did not meet the standards. A comprehensive analysis of the users' responses to the open-ended survey questions, however, could explain the reasons why.

For fiscal year 2019 for HSOAC, and fiscal years 2020 and 2021 for HSSEDI, FFRDC PMO officials analyzed open-ended written responses from FFRDC user surveys to identify positive- and negative-themed comments.⁵⁵ FFRDC PMO included the broad results of this analysis in the respective FFRDC Annual Assessments, along with examples of "themed" comments.⁵⁶ Each quarter FFRDC PMO officials also drafted a presentation for discussion with FFRDC leadership of survey results for that quarter. The presentation slides provided examples of high- and low-scoring survey results, including both rating scores and open-ended written comments.

FFRDC PMO officials told us they stopped developing the positive- and negative-themed analysis of open-ended survey comments with the fiscal year 2022 Annual Assessments. They said they discontinued the analysis because the Word format they used for the Annual Assessments in fiscal year 2019 through fiscal year 2021 was too long and FFRDC PMO consequently decided to switch the assessment format to an executive-level summary product. As such, in fiscal year 2022, FFRDC PMO officials revised the Word Annual Assessment format into a "report card" style PowerPoint briefing. FFRDC PMO officials streamlined the survey analysis to focus solely on rating scores and revised the format from a Word report to presentation slides.

FFRDC PMO officials stated that under the revised Annual Assessment format, they generally scan the open-ended survey comments as S&T and DHS component program managers complete the surveys to identify notably high or low FFRDC performance. FFRDC PMO officials told us they will also complete a "cursory" review of the open-ended written responses to identify themes associated with low ratings data. However,

⁵⁵According to FFRDC PMO officials, they generally finished revising the user feedback survey in fiscal year 2019 and launched the new survey in fiscal year 2020. However, because FFRDC PMO officials required a fiscal year 2019 annual assessment upon which to base the HSOAC fiscal year 2020-2021 Comprehensive Review, they developed a HSOAC fiscal year 2019 Annual Assessment using the initial draft of the revised user feedback survey. FFRDC PMO officials also stated that there was a lag in developing some Annual Assessments following the revision of the user feedback survey, resulting in FFRDC PMO finalizing some Annual Assessments in a subsequent fiscal year. FFRDC PMO officials said that generally, these lags were due to delays in receiving program managers' completed surveys and decisions to devote resources to competing priorities. Prior to revising the user feedback survey in fiscal year 2019, officials distributed a questionnaire to FFRDC users that was modelled on a standardized federal contract satisfaction survey and FAR 35.017. This questionnaire contained a smaller number of ratings-based questions across three categories: (1) deliverable qualities, (2) team qualities, and (3) project management.

⁵⁶For all surveys received in each fiscal year, FFRDC PMO presented the distribution of five-point rating scores for each of the 11 performance metrics in the Performance Framework. The Annual Assessments also presented "notable" themes from the open-ended comments for each performance metric. Each theme described whether positive or negative comments were in the majority or minority of written responses for each performance metric. The report also provided examples of notable themes for both the majority and minority groups.

FFRDC PMO officials stated they no longer conduct a comprehensive review of the open-ended responses, nor do they include the themes they identify from the cursory review in the Annual Assessments.

FFRDC PMO officials also stated that they do not perform a comprehensive analysis of the open-ended responses because they rely on other sources, such as interviews with the S&T and DHS component program managers, to inform the Annual Assessments and Comprehensive Reviews. However, our analysis of the fiscal year 2022 FFRDC Annual Assessment presentation slides found that FFRDC PMO did not include context from any source as to why FFRDCs are not fully meeting performance standards.⁵⁷ Of the three instances in which FFRDC PMO officials identified aggregated ratings for a performance metric as “partly meets FFRDC PMO standard” in the fiscal year 2022 Annual Assessments, none included an explanation of what factors may be driving those ratings.

FFRDC PMO leadership told us that they are considering instituting a “formal (i.e., regular, structured and complete) analysis” of user survey information in the future for both FFRDC Annual Assessments and the Comprehensive Reviews. This analysis might include an assessment of positive and negative themes for the open-ended survey comments or other type of content analysis, as deemed necessary. As of July 2024, FFRDC PMO officials told us they expect to establish a process for assessing users’ open-ended written comments by March 2025.

Key practices for evidence-based policymaking that we identified state that an organization should assess the quality of evidence it uses for decision-making, which includes the completeness of the evidence.⁵⁸ These key practices state that understanding the quality of the evidence is important because it impacts the credibility of the data and, ultimately, the decisions an organization makes based on those data. Performing a comprehensive analysis of the users’ open-ended survey responses may explain why user ratings fall below performance standards and therefore provide a more complete understanding of user feedback. Further, incorporating this analysis into their FFRDC Annual Assessments may help FFRDC PMO officials and FFRDC leadership identify and more accurately address issues that are broader than just one task order.

FFRDC PMO Has Not Consistently Shared Annual Assessment Results with FFRDCs

We found that FFRDC PMO officials have not consistently shared Annual Assessment results with FFRDC leadership, as required by DHS directive, although they have shared feedback—such as project performance or staffing issues—through other channels.⁵⁹ Specifically, both HSSEDI and HSOAC leaders told us they had not received or been briefed on Annual Assessment results for fiscal year 2020 through fiscal year 2022. FFRDC PMO officials and FFRDC leadership stated that FFRDC PMO officials share feedback with FFRDCs through channels other than the Annual Assessments.

For example, FFRDC PMO officials told us they hold quarterly review meetings, during which they provide FFRDC leadership with feedback both at a project and a strategic level. Additionally, FFRDC PMO officials stated they schedule ad hoc meetings with FFRDC leadership in response to specific feedback from a program

⁵⁷Fiscal year 2023 Annual Assessments were not available at the time of our review.

⁵⁸[GAO-23-105460](#).

⁵⁹DHS, *Instructions for Establishing or Contracting with Federally Funded Research and Development Centers (FFRDCs) and National Laboratories*.

manager or other S&T and DHS component officials regarding the FFRDC's performance on a task order. Leaders from both HSSEDI and HSOAC agreed they receive oral and written feedback from FFRDC PMO. However, HSOAC leadership stated they would appreciate having more structure in the feedback and seeing the user feedback survey results, both of which could be achieved through sharing the Annual Assessments.

FFRDC PMO officials told us they do not share the results of annual assessments with FFRDCs due to the sensitive nature of the feedback and because of the time lag between the user feedback survey results and the annual assessment report. While feedback on individual task orders could include sensitive information, such as the identities of the S&T and DHS component program managers who provided the feedback, FFRDC PMO officials told us they regularly provide project-level and strategic feedback to FFRDCs through quarterly and ad hoc review meetings. Moreover, the user survey results provided in the Annual Assessments are aggregated.

DHS directs FFRDC PMO to share the results of Annual Assessments with FFRDC management and provide feedback and assistance in resolving problems.⁶⁰ By consistently sharing Annual Assessments with FFRDC leadership, as required by DHS directive, FFRDC leadership can receive a holistic assessment of their performance rather than feedback about individual projects. This holistic view could provide the FFRDCs a better understanding of their overall performance across DHS components and areas in which they need to improve.

FFRDC PMO Receives Some Information on DHS's Use of Task Order Results but Does Not Sufficiently Review and Analyze How DHS Uses Results

FFRDC PMO Receives Some Information on How Task Order Results Are Used

FFRDC PMO officials told us that they receive some information on how S&T and DHS components use results for some FFRDC task orders.⁶¹ FFRDC PMO officials may receive feedback on the use of task order results in the following instances.

- In preparation for a Comprehensive Review, FFRDCs provide FFRDC PMO officials with summaries of between 12 to 14 selected task orders they have completed that showcase the FFRDCs' skills in their fields of expertise. These case studies discuss how S&T and DHS components used the task order results and the extent to which the results met their needs. For example:⁶²
 - U.S. Coast Guard satellite connectivity. To address reliability issues with the satellite communications capabilities of U.S. Coast Guard ships—which were affecting operational readiness and efficiency—

⁶⁰DHS, *Instructions for Establishing or Contracting with Federally funded Research and Development Centers (FFRDCs) and National Laboratories*.

⁶¹For the purposes of this report, we use the term "task order" to mean an order for services placed against a FFRDC indefinite-delivery/indefinite-quantity contract. A "task order" is an order for services placed against an established contract or with government sources, FAR 2.101. For the purposes of this report, a task order may address one project or multiple parts of a project. "Results" refers to the deliverables that FFRDC sponsors—S&T and DHS components—receive, as specified in the task order.

⁶²HSSEDI provided these case study summaries in preparation for FFRDC PMO's fall 2018 Comprehensive Review. Examples of HSOAC's (RAND) case study summaries are designated as "Law Enforcement Sensitive" or are not approved for public release.

HSSEDI adapted MITRE's satellite communications software to support U.S. Coast Guard's satellite communications operations. As a result, according to HSSEDI, U.S. Coast Guard improved its operational readiness and efficiency fleet-wide. HSSEDI addressed this issue through U.S. Coast Guard task orders, MITRE's independent research program, and other FFRDC work.

- Data analytic capability for export enforcement. To enhance U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement labor- and time-intensive manual investigation of the export of sensitive U.S. technology, materials, and products, HSSEDI developed an enhanced data analytic capability. S&T requested that HSSEDI develop a way to track the shipment of individual components that could be assembled into a weapon. HSSEDI stated that it developed improved tools for investigators to find linkages between shippers, receivers, and methods of shipping, which helps them save time, more efficiently track sensitive technology, and discover new ways to track illegal activity. In December 2017, U.S. Customs and Border Protection and the Domestic Nuclear Detection Office (now the "Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction Office") partnered with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement to explore options for adapting this data analytic capability to their own missions. HSSEDI addressed this issue through a S&T task order, MITRE's independent research program, and other MITRE FFRDCs.
- FFRDC PMO officials said they also reach out to S&T and DHS components for examples of unique or noteworthy task orders that went well and details on how S&T and DHS components used the results. FFRDC PMO officials told us they use these examples in their educational outreach to S&T and DHS components on the benefits of using FFRDCs to address research and development (R&D) needs.
- FFRDC PMO officials said they can also receive some feedback from S&T and DHS components when individual task order results did not meet the components' needs or they had issues with the FFRDC during the implementation of the task order. This feedback is relatively infrequent, however, compared to the positive feedback FFRDC PMO officials receive from the FFRDCs and solicit from S&T and DHS components.

FFRDC PMO Does Not Sufficiently Review and Analyze S&T and DHS Components' Use of Task Order Results Due to Limited Collection of Information

Our review of key documents from selected FFRDC task orders, interviews with selected S&T and DHS component program managers who oversaw those task orders, and discussions with FFRDC PMO officials found that FFRDC PMO does not sufficiently review and analyze how S&T and DHS components use task order results (deliverables) to be better informed as to how well those results overall meet users' needs. Specifically, while FFRDC PMO officials receive some information on task order results that FFRDCs, S&T, and DHS components identify as having worked well, they receive comparatively less information about the range of task order results, including ones that did not meet S&T and DHS components' expectations or otherwise did not work out well. As a result, FFRDC PMO officials are not positioned to review and analyze comprehensive task order results, which would help FFRDC PMO officials to better understand how results met user needs and to identify and address issues of concern.

Our analysis of selected task order documents showed that FFRDC PMO and other stakeholders did not indicate whether FFRDC PMO followed up with S&T and DHS components to determine how task order results were used. In addition, of the 17 S&T and DHS component program managers we interviewed, one told us he had discussed with FFRDC PMO how his agency had used the task order results after the order was completed. In this instance, the follow-up was part of routine meetings his agency holds to discuss the results of R&D work.

FFRDC PMO officials stated that they do not have the time and staff to follow up with S&T or DHS components on every task order to determine how and to what extent the results were used. However, officials stated that obtaining more information on how and to what extent S&T or DHS components used the task order results would help them to identify particularly noteworthy task orders to showcase in Comprehensive Reviews and in educational outreach efforts.

Key practices for evidence-based policymaking that we identified in prior work state that reviewing program outcomes can help organizations identify effective approaches to solving issues, such as performance challenges or trends in below-standard performance, as well as lessons learned.⁶³ In addition to helping to identify which processes are working well, it also helps to identify processes that are not working well and which may require changes or new approaches. Reviewing outcomes also helps organizations better understand what led to the results they achieved or why desired results were not achieved.

Ensuring that FFRDC PMO officials review and analyze a selection of completed task orders that better reflect a range of results would allow them to better understand the extent to which task order results are meeting S&T and DHS components' needs. To accomplish this, FFRDC PMO officials could explore options for identifying and reviewing a broader range of results from a selection of task orders.

For example, FFRDC PMO officials could request from S&T and the DHS components examples of task orders in which the results did not exceed or meet expectations, to complement their ongoing outreach efforts. Additionally, FFRDC PMO officials could identify and review results from a random selection of completed task orders. The selection would not need to be so large as to be generalizable, but large enough to provide a more balanced picture of S&T's and DHS components' satisfaction with task order results. This approach would provide more insight as to S&T's and DHS components' use of task order results, including those that did not work out well.

Establishing a process to review a selection of task orders with results that reflect an array of outcomes, including those that did not meet expectations, and analyzing that information, could help to inform FFRDC PMO's future decision-making regarding the design and implementation of task orders. This information could also enhance S&T's understanding of FFRDC performance as presented in the FFRDC Annual Assessments and Comprehensive Reviews.

Conclusions

Since 2004, DHS has obligated billions of dollars on contracts for DHS FFRDCs to research issues and technologies that affect homeland security. These obligations represent a significant investment in R&D. Recognizing the scope and importance of this investment, S&T has established a process to coordinate DHS's R&D activities, including proposed FFRDC projects. However, S&T's R&D coordination process may not always include component-funded R&D projects. In those instances, S&T officials may use the annual list of DHS R&D projects that S&T submits each year to Congress. Updating this list at least quarterly, as required by statute, and disseminating the updated list to relevant DHS entities, including DHS components, would offer

⁶³[GAO-23-105460](#).

DHS a more updated and useful resource with which it could review proposed FFRDC projects for potentially unnecessary overlap with other DHS R&D projects.

S&T's R&D coordination process may not always include DHS component-funded R&D activities. Amending policies and procedures to require S&T to review those R&D activities for unnecessary overlap with proposed FFRDC projects could better ensure that DHS investments in R&D activities reduces the potential for this. Moreover, documenting the results of the overlap review could better ensure that S&T conducts the reviews and informs relevant parties about them.

Given the importance of FFRDCs' role in addressing critical DHS R&D needs that are integral to its mission and operation, the department has developed internal guidance for assessing FFRDCs' work performance, in addition to federal requirements, which FFRDC PMO officials implement. Receiving, analyzing, and sharing key user feedback survey information is a critical underpinning of FFRDC PMO's efforts to assess FFRDC work performance. Yet, FFRDC PMO has not addressed issues in these areas that may impact its ability to fully and successfully assess FFRDC performance, such as not understanding potential risks posed by using incomplete survey information and not comprehensively analyzing users' open-ended survey responses in addition to ratings data. Assessing the risk of low survey response rates across FFRDCs, comprehensively analyzing users' open-ended survey responses, and sharing the results of their assessments with FFRDC leadership (as required) would allow FFRDC PMO officials to more fully leverage the data they use to assess FFRDC work performance, provide the FFRDCs with a holistic assessment of performance, and potentially enhance the quality of their performance assessments.

While user feedback survey data are an invaluable source of information on FFRDC performance, gathering additional information on how FFRDC sponsors use the results of task orders could provide unique insight into the longer-term impact of FFRDC work. In addition, obtaining data on a range of user's experiences that produced an array of outcomes—experiences that worked out well and those that did not—could provide a more balanced understanding of FFRDCs' work and the extent to which it meets users' needs. It could also help FFRDC PMO's design and implementation of task orders in the future.

Recommendations for Executive Action

We are making the following eight recommendations to DHS:

The DHS Under Secretary for Science and Technology should update the list of R&D activities on at least a quarterly basis, as statutorily required, and disseminate the updated list to relevant DHS entities, including DHS components. (Recommendation 1)

The DHS Under Secretary for Science and Technology should amend policies and procedures to require that S&T review proposed FFRDC projects for unnecessary overlap with R&D activities funded and developed by DHS components that have their own R&D appropriations. (Recommendation 2)

The DHS Under Secretary for Science and Technology should require S&T to document its additional overlap reviews of R&D activities funded and developed by DHS components that have their own R&D appropriations. (Recommendation 3)

The DHS Under Secretary for Science and Technology should ensure that FFRDC PMO conducts and documents an analysis of the risk of nonresponse bias based on the response rate of the initial outreach efforts for each fiscal year's set of user feedback surveys. Should the analysis indicate a risk of nonresponse bias which would influence FFRDC PMO's understanding of FFRDC performance, FFRDC PMO should take additional steps to increase their response rate. (Recommendation 4)

The DHS Under Secretary for Science and Technology should ensure FFRDC PMO documents, in all Annual Assessments and 5-Year Comprehensive Reviews, the response rate, risk of bias, and steps taken to increase the user feedback survey response rate. (Recommendation 5)

The DHS Under Secretary for Science and Technology should amend its policies and procedures to require FFRDC PMO to include a comprehensive analysis of open-ended responses to FFRDC user surveys in the Annual Assessments to gain a more complete understanding of user feedback when assessing FFRDC performance. (Recommendation 6)

The DHS Under Secretary for Science and Technology should ensure that FFRDC PMO shares, as required, the results of Annual Assessments with FFRDC leadership. (Recommendation 7)

The Under Secretary for Science and Technology should ensure that FFRDC PMO establishes a process to review and analyze a selection of task order results that reflect a range of S&T and DHS component experiences to inform the design and implementation of FFRDC task orders. (Recommendation 8)

Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

We provided a draft of this product to DHS for review and comment. DHS provided written comments, which are summarized below and reproduced in full in appendix VI. DHS also provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate. In its written comments, DHS concurred with our eight recommendations and identified actions planned or undertaken to address them.

Regarding recommendations 2 and 3, we initially proposed that S&T and DHS component sponsors take steps to identify unnecessary FFRDC project overlap, and document the results, during FFRDC PMO's task order appropriateness review. However, S&T officials clarified that the purpose of the appropriateness review is to assess whether a proposed task order is appropriate for a FFRDC. Therefore, using the review to identify potential project overlap would be outside the scope of the review. In response to these comments, we modified recommendations 2 and 3 and made conforming changes throughout the report to remove references to the appropriateness review as the point in time in which a project overlap review should occur.

With respect to our first recommendation that S&T should update the list of R&D activities on at least a quarterly basis, as statutorily required, and disseminate the updated list to relevant DHS entities, DHS concurred and noted that it would coordinate with the heads of DHS components and headquarters offices to collect and share R&D activities with relevant entities on a quarterly basis. It also noted that S&T would implement quarterly updates of the R&D activities inventory and facilitate centralized access to the inventory on an internal website for DHS entities to access. These steps, if fully implemented, should address the intent of this recommendation.

With respect to our second recommendation that DHS should amend policies and procedures to require that S&T review proposed FFRDC projects for unnecessary overlap with R&D activities funded and developed by DHS components with their own R&D appropriations and to document these reviews, DHS concurred. The department noted that S&T plans to conduct a study in fiscal year 2025 to determine needed actions, to include a baseline of all “entry points” for DHS component R&D appropriations to FFRDCs and other DHS offices that receive R&D appropriations for Innovation, Research, and Development support. After the baseline is established, S&T plans to conduct a gap analysis to identify and consider all relevant policies and processes. S&T would use this information to develop a capability roadmap and associated implementation costs for determining resource needs. We will monitor S&T’s implementation actions and the extent to which they address this recommendation.

DHS also concurred with our third recommendation that S&T document its additional overlap reviews of R&D activities self-funded by DHS components. The department noted S&T plans to identify the appropriate avenue to document overlap review results in fiscal year 2026, after it completes the study for recommendation 2. We will monitor S&T’s implementation actions and the extent to which they address this recommendation.

With respect to our fourth recommendation that FFRDC PMO conduct and document an analysis of the risk of nonresponse bias based on response rates of initial outreach efforts for each fiscal year’s set of user feedback surveys, DHS concurred. DHS noted that FFRDC PMO plans to analyze the risk of nonresponse bias in FFRDC user survey response rates for each fiscal year. To develop this analysis, FFRDC PMO plans to study the Federal Committee on Statistical Methodology’s best practices for analyzing nonresponse bias and identify the resources needed to implement a future approach. In fiscal year 2026, FFRDC PMO plans to use fiscal years 2025 and 2026 FFRDC user feedback survey responses and associated data to pilot test an approach and will use the resulting information to assess the risk of nonresponse bias. We will monitor FFRDC PMO’s implementation actions and the extent to which they address this recommendation.

DHS also concurred with our fifth recommendation that FFRDC PMO document, in all FFRDC Annual Assessments and Comprehensive Reviews, the applicable FFRDC survey response rate(s), risk of bias, and any steps it takes to increase the FFRDC user feedback survey response rate. DHS noted that FFRDC PMO plans to document the results of the analysis it conducts in response to recommendation 4 in future Annual Assessments and apply the outputs in the fiscal year 2026 HSOAC Comprehensive Review. We will monitor FFRDC PMO’s implementation actions and the extent to which they address this recommendation.

With respect to our sixth recommendation that S&T amend its policies and procedures to require FFRDC PMO to include a comprehensive analysis of open-ended responses to FFRDC user surveys in FFRDC Annual Assessments, DHS concurred. DHS noted that in fiscal year 2025, FFRDC PMO will conduct an analysis to determine what is needed to ensure a comprehensive analysis of user responses to open-ended survey questions and pilot test the results in fiscal year 2026. FFRDC PMO plans to use the test results to amend its policies and procedures and require a comprehensive analysis of open-ended responses to FFRDC user feedback surveys. We will monitor FFRDC PMO’s implementation actions and the extent to which they address this recommendation.

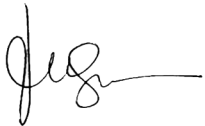
With respect to our seventh recommendation that FFRDC PMO shares, as required, the results of FFRDC Annual Assessments with FFRDC leadership, DHS concurred. The department noted that FFRDC PMO will coordinate with FFRDC leadership, as appropriate, to identify a recurring timeframe to formally share the results of the FFRDC Annual Assessments. These steps, if fully implemented, should address the intent of this recommendation.

With respect to our eighth recommendation that FFRDC PMO establish a process to review and analyze a selection of task order results that reflect a range of S&T and DHS component experiences to inform the design and implementation of FFRDC task orders, DHS concurred and requested that we close the recommendation as implemented, based on ongoing actions. Specifically, DHS noted that FFRDC PMO already reviews and analyzes a selection of task orders with the FFRDCs to improve task order practices.

However, as detailed in this report, we found that FFRDC PMO does not sufficiently review and analyze how S&T and DHS components use task order results to better understand how well those results overall meet users' needs. The reviews FFRDC PMO discusses in its response focus on the "health" of ongoing task orders," such as "progress to date," rather than how the results of completed task orders have been used, including those that did not work out well or did not meet expectations. Reviewing such information would help FFRDC identify and better address issues of concern. To fully address our recommendation FFRDC PMO should collect information on a range of task order outcomes.

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Secretary of Homeland Security, and other interested parties. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at <https://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions concerning this report, please contact Tina Won Sherman at (202) 512-8461 or ShermanT@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report are listed in appendix VII.



Tina Won Sherman
Director, Homeland Security and Justice

Appendix I: Information on Homeland Security Operational Analysis Center (HSOAC)

<p>Founded 2016</p> <p>Contractor RAND</p> <p>Headquarters location Santa Monica, CA</p> <p>Primary sponsor Department of Homeland Security (DHS)</p> <p>Executive agent for the primary sponsor DHS's Science and Technology Directorate</p>
<p>Contract Information</p> <p>Indefinite-delivery/indefinite-quantity contract, awarded sole-source^a</p> <p>How projects are placed on contract: through task orders</p> <p>Type: Cost-plus-fixed-fee</p> <p>Latest contract extension: March 23, 2022</p> <p>Total value: \$495 million</p> <p>Period of performance: March 24, 2022, through March 23, 2027^b</p> <p>Contracting office: DHS, Office of Chief Procurement Officer, Office of Procurement Operations, Science and Technology Acquisition Division</p>
<p>Task orders issued by fiscal year (FY)</p> <p>FY2023: 45 FY2022: 65 FY2021: 44</p> <p>Obligations by FY</p> <p>FY2023: \$85,589,049 FY2022: \$71,865,882 FY2021: \$66,848,338</p>
<p>DHS component sponsors include, among others,</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction Office • Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency • Federal Emergency Management Agency • Science and Technology Directorate • Transportation Security Administration • U.S. Customs and Border Protection
<p>Background</p>

HSOAC provides DHS with studies and analysis expertise. HSOAC supports DHS in addressing analytic, operational, and policy challenges in its mission areas and across the homeland security environment. HSOAC provides analysis to identify vulnerabilities and future risks, help DHS improve management and planning, and improve the agency’s operational processes and procedures.

Focus areas

(i.e., areas of expertise or specialization)

- Acquisition studies
- Preparedness, response, and recovery
- Innovation and technology acceleration
- Homeland security threat and opportunity studies
- Personnel policy and management studies
- Operational studies
- Organizational studies
- Regulatory, doctrine, and policy studies
- Research and development studies

Source: GAO analysis of DHS Science and Technology Directorate information and data. | GAO-25-106394

^aA “sole-source” contract is one that was awarded on a non-competitive basis.

^bThe period of performance for RAND’s prior contract was September 19, 2016, through March 23, 2022, with an indefinite-delivery/indefinite-quantity contract ceiling of \$495 million.

Appendix II: Information on Homeland Security Systems Engineering and Development Institute (HSSEDI)

<p>Founded 2009</p> <p>Contractor MITRE</p> <p>Headquarters location Bedford, MA, and McLean, VA</p> <p>Primary sponsor Department of Homeland Security (DHS)</p> <p>Executive agent for the primary sponsor DHS's Science and Technology Directorate</p>
<p>Contract Information</p> <p>Indefinite-delivery/indefinite-quantity contract, awarded sole-source^a</p> <p>How projects are placed on contract: through task orders</p> <p>Type: Cost-plus-fixed-fee</p> <p>Latest contract extension: March 23, 2020</p> <p>Total value: \$1.42 billion</p> <p>Period of performance: March 24, 2020, through March 23, 2025^b</p> <p>Contracting office: DHS, Office of Chief Procurement Officer, Office of Procurement Operations, Science and Technology Acquisition Division</p>
<p>Task orders issued by fiscal year (FY)</p> <p>FY2023: 72 FY2022: 59 FY2021: 57</p> <p>Obligations by FY</p> <p>FY2023: \$221,938,359 FY2022: \$193,704,101 FY2021: \$155,955,498</p>
<p>DHS component sponsors include, among others</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction Office• Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency• Federal Emergency Management Agency• Science and Technology Directorate• Transportation Security Administration• U.S. Customs and Border Protection
<p>Background</p>

HSSEDI is a systems engineering and integration center that supports the Department of Homeland Security by providing specialized technical and systems engineering expertise to S&T, DHS components, program managers, and operating elements in addressing national homeland security system development issues related to the development and delivery of DHS capabilities. HSSEDI achieves its program objectives through efforts such as the recommendation of new technologies and establishment of technical standards, measures, and best practices.

Focus areas

(i.e., areas of expertise or specialization)

- Acquisition planning and Development
- Emerging threats, concept exploration, experimentation and evaluation
- Information technology and communications
- Cyber solutions / operations
- Systems engineering, system architecture and integration
- Technical quality and performance
- Independent test and evaluation

Source: GAO analysis of DHS science and Technology Directorate information and data. | GAO-25-106394

^aA “sole-source” contract is one that was awarded on a non-competitive basis.

^bThe period of performance for MITRE’s prior contract was September 24, 2014, through March 23, 2020, with an indefinite-delivery/indefinite-quantity contract ceiling of \$675 million.

Appendix III: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

This report addresses the Department of Homeland Security’s (DHS) use and oversight of two Federally Funded Research and Development Centers (FFRDC)—the Homeland Security Systems Engineering and Development Institute (HSSEDI), operated by MITRE since 2009, and the Homeland Security Operational Analysis Center (HSOAC), operated by RAND since 2016. These FFRDCs are organized under DHS’s Science and Technology Directorate (S&T) and overseen by the FFRDC Program Management Office (PMO).¹

Specifically, we examined the extent to which

1. S&T has reviewed DHS’s proposed FFRDC projects for potential unnecessary overlap with other DHS Research and Development (R&D) projects;²
2. S&T’s FFRDC PMO has developed tools to assess FFRDCs’ performance and receives, analyzes, and shares key work performance information;³ and
3. S&T’s FFRDC PMO has reviewed and analyzed DHS’s use of the results of FFRDC task orders.⁴

To address all our objectives, we identified the number of task orders issued to the two FFRDCs from September 2014 through February 2023. We chose this 9-year period to include the ongoing 5-year FFRDC contract period and the immediately preceding completed 5-year base contracts awarded to MITRE and RAND to operate HSOAC and HSSEDI, respectively. These two contract periods include operations starting in 2014 for HSSEDI and in 2016 for HSOAC and allowed us to review (1) the number of S&T and DHS component task orders issued over time, (2) roughly parallel time periods for each FFRDC, and (3) one complete and one ongoing 5-year contract period for each FFRDC. Including a complete contract period also allowed us to review the most recent 5-year Comprehensive Review performance appraisal for each FFRDC.⁵

¹DHS has a third FFRDC—the National Biodefense Analysis and Countermeasures Center—which is classified as a research and development laboratory and is overseen by S&T’s Office of National Laboratories. Because our report focuses on FFRDC PMO’s oversight of HSOAC and HSSEDI, we did not include the Center in our review. For the purposes of this report, “FFRDCs” refers to HSOAC and HSSEDI.

²For the purposes of this report, we use the term “project” to mean generic R&D activities. “Overlap” occurs when multiple programs have similar goals, engage in similar activities or strategies to achieve those goals, or target similar beneficiaries. See GAO, *Fragmentation, Overlap, and Duplication: An Evaluation and Management Guide*, [GAO-15-49SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 14, 2015). For the purposes of this report, we refer to “unnecessary overlap” as instances in which multiple entities engage in unnecessarily similar efforts, resulting in an inefficient use of resources. For some R&D activities, however, overlap may be desirable to build upon work already performed or ongoing.

³For the purposes of this report, “work performance” is defined as work FFRDCs perform in the execution of task orders. It does not include aspects of FFRDC operations such as business processes and invoice control.

⁴For the purposes of this report, we use the term “task order” to mean an order for services placed against a FFRDC indefinite-delivery/indefinite-quantity contract. A “task order” is an order for services placed against an established contract or with government sources, FAR 2.101. For the purposes of this report, a task order may address one project or multiple parts of a project. “Results” refers to the deliverables that FFRDC sponsors—S&T and DHS components—receive, as specified in the task order.

⁵FFRDC PMO officials are to conduct a comprehensive review of FFRDC performance every 5 years, to correspond with the FFRDC contract period. See FAR 35.017-1(e), 35.017-4. The Under Secretary for Science and Technology uses the Comprehensive Review to determine whether to re-award, re-compete, or terminate DHS’s sponsorship of the FFRDC.

We assessed the reliability of the task order data by reviewing relevant guidelines and processes for entering and maintaining the data, such as S&T's *Collaboration Site (STCS) Governance Plan*.⁶ We also interviewed relevant S&T officials to better understand how the data are compiled, maintained, and verified, and to identify internal controls for ensuring data accuracy and completeness. We determined that the data were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of identifying (1) the number of task orders issued, (2) task order amounts and performance period, (3) task order sponsors (S&T and DHS components), and (4) key task order documents (e.g., task order documentation and appropriateness certification).

To better understand how DHS issues task orders, assesses FFRDC performance, and tracks S&T and DHS components' use of task order results, we selected a nongeneralizable sample of 118 out of 732 task orders issued during the 9-year period. We identified these task orders by selecting S&T and three additional DHS components that had funded task orders during this period, to reflect a range of (1) value of issued task orders, (2) number of task orders issued by component, and (3) timeframes in which the task orders were issued (period of performance).⁷ We also considered the type of process used to issue the task orders and the number of task orders issued between both FFRDCs.

We further refined the list of task orders by selecting one sub-office within each of the S&T and three DHS component sponsors, with consideration to value, number, and timeframes of issued task orders. In consultation with FFRDC PMO officials, we identified five key task order documents, which we analyzed for each selected task order: task order documentation, FFRDC PMO appropriateness certificate, Technical Execution Plan, list of task order deliverables, and the completed user feedback survey.⁸ This analysis helped us to better understand how task orders were issued and the extent to which DHS officials (1) assessed FFRDC performance and (2) tracked how S&T and DHS component sponsors used the results of the task orders.

Additionally, we identified and interviewed 17 S&T and DHS component program managers across the 118 task orders about their experiences overseeing the task orders, including how they worked with FFRDC researchers and assessed FFRDC performance.⁹ We selected these managers based on factors such as a range in the number and value of the task orders they oversaw.

We examined DHS's ongoing and prior 5-year contracts with MITRE and RAND to operate HSSEDI and HSOAC, respectively. This included reviewing contract file documentation details such as type of contract, period of performance, the total award amount, task order type, the scope of the contract (statement of work),

⁶DHS, Science and Technology, Office of Enterprise Services, Chief Information Office, *S&T Collaboration Site (STCS) Governance Plan*, Version 4.0 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 29, 2021).

⁷The three DHS components are Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction Office, and Federal Emergency Management Agency.

⁸We did not receive all documents for each task order either because the DHS component or PMO officials could not locate the documents or because they were not completed. In some instances, the task order had yet to be completed and therefore a list of deliverables was not available. According to DHS component and PMO officials, sponsors may not always develop a list or summary of deliverables.

⁹Some program managers oversaw more than one task order.

management plan, and other requirements. In addition, we reviewed DHS processes for issuing FFRDC task orders, such as FFRDC PMO training to DHS components, and HSSEDI and HSOAC ordering guidelines.¹⁰

To identify DHS FFRDC annual and total contract obligations from fiscal year 2004 through fiscal year 2023, we queried the Federal Procurement Data System for each relevant FFRDC base contract awarded during this time period and all task orders issued and modifications awarded under each contract.¹¹

To address our first objective, we reviewed DHS policies and procedures regarding the extent to which the PMO, FFRDCs, S&T, and DHS components are to take actions to identify, document, and mitigate unnecessary overlap among FFRDC task orders and DHS R&D projects. These policies and procedures included DHS management directives on processes for working with the FFRDCs and coordinating projects, such as DHS's *Instructions for Establishing or Contracting with FFRDCs Research and Development Coordination Directive*.¹²

We also assessed S&T guidance—for example, *Science and Technology Directorate's Business Process Flow*—for identifying and coordinating DHS R&D needs and projects to determine the extent to which these processes require S&T officials to identify unnecessary overlap between proposed FFRDC task orders and other ongoing or planned DHS R&D activities.¹³ We assessed these DHS, S&T, and PMO policies and procedures against criteria for coordinating agency actions and identifying and mitigating potential unnecessary overlap of activities, such as our Fragmentation, Overlap, and Duplication guidance and *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*.¹⁴

We interviewed FFRDC PMO and FFRDC officials to better understand how they apply these requirements and policies and the extent to which they take actions to identify and mitigate potential FFRDC project overlap.

We also interviewed nine S&T portfolio managers who lead nine of the 12 Integrated Product Teams regarding the steps they take to identify unnecessary overlap across departmental R&D activities, including DHS

¹⁰DHS, Science and Technology Directorate, Training Slides (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 8, 2023); DHS, S&T, *Direct Ordering Guide for the Homeland Security Systems Engineering and Development Institute, Version 2.2*. (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 21, 2020); and DHS, S&T, *Direct Ordering Guide for the Homeland Security Operational Analysis Center, Version 3.2* (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 28, 2022).

¹¹The U.S. General Services Administration's Federal Procurement Data System is the government's central repository for information on federal procurement actions. It contains data on federal contracts with an estimated value of \$10,000 or more and provides details on the procurement activities of more than 60 federal departments. Dollar amounts reported by federal agencies to FPDS represent the net amount of funds obligated and deobligated as a result of procurement actions.

¹²DHS, *Instructions for Establishing or Contracting with Federally funded Research and Development Centers (FFRDCs) and National Laboratories*, 143-04-001, Revision Number 01 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 28, 2016) and DHS, DHS Directives System, *Research and Development Coordination*, Directive Number 069-02 (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 19, 2020).

¹³DHS, Science and Technology Directorate, *Understanding S&T's Business Process Flow: Overview of S&T's Matrixed Research and Development Process*, Revision 2.10 (Washington, D.C.: June 14, 2022).

¹⁴[GAO-15-49SP](#); GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, [GAO-14-704G](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 2014); and *Government Performance Management: Leading Practices to Enhance Interagency Collaboration and Address Crosscutting Challenges*, [GAO-23-105520](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 24, 2023). With respect to *Government Performance Management* leading practices, we chose to compare DHS, S&T, and PMO policies and procedures against one of eight criteria—specifically, the extent to which these entities have compatible policies, procedures, and other means to operate across DHS boundaries. We selected this leading practice because it most closely applied to our report objective to review the extent to which FFRDC PMO has developed and implemented procedures to ensure DHS components' requests for FFRDC projects do not overlap with other DHS R&D work. We determined that the remaining criteria were outside the scope of our review.

component-funded R&D efforts.¹⁵ The testimonial evidence we obtained from these interviews with DHS, S&T, FFRDC PMO, FFRDC, and DHS component officials is not generalizable to all officials who were involved with FFRDC task orders during our selected time frame but provided us with useful information regarding officials' experiences. We also analyzed five key documents, such as the Technical Execution Plan, for each of the 118 selected task orders to identify evidence that FFRDC PMO, S&T, DHS component, or FFRDC officials had reviewed FFRDC projects for potential overlap with other DHS R&D activities.

To address our second objective, we reviewed relevant federal requirements and DHS policy regarding S&T's and DHS components' procedures for assessing FFRDC performance, such as Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR) 35.017, *DHS Management Directive 143-04-001*, and the most recent DHS 5-year contracts with MITRE and RAND to operate HSSEDI and HSOAC, respectively.¹⁶ We also analyzed PMO reports on FFRDC performance, including two 5-year Comprehensive Reviews (Comprehensive Review) on HSSEDI's and HSOAC's performance. In addition, we analyzed FFRDC Annual Assessments for fiscal years 2020, 2021, and 2022 for HSSEDI and fiscal years 2021 and 2022 for HSOAC.¹⁷

We assessed the extent to which PMO's Annual Assessments and Comprehensive Reviews were consistent with federal requirements, DHS guidance, and key practices for evidence-based policymaking that we identified in prior work.¹⁸ Additionally, we interviewed PMO officials to discuss their procedures and practices for assessing FFRDC performance. We also interviewed RAND and MITRE officials regarding their experiences with FFRDC PMO's performance assessment review processes.

To better understand how FFRDC PMO officials collect and analyze S&T and DHS component feedback on FFRDC task order performance, we analyzed FFRDC PMO's data used to determine user feedback survey response rates from fiscal year 2019 through fiscal year 2023. To assess the reliability of these data, we reviewed relevant documentation and interviewed the responsible officials. We determined the data were sufficiently reliable to report on the response rate for the user feedback surveys over the relevant fiscal years.

We interviewed FFRDC PMO officials to discuss their approach to collecting, assessing the quality of, and analyzing user feedback from the user surveys—on FFRDC performance for both the Annual Assessments and Comprehensive Reviews. We also assessed the extent to which FFRDC PMO officials' processes for

¹⁵Specifically, we interviewed S&T portfolio managers who worked with 9 of the 12 DHS components in developing R&D projects through their Integrated Product Teams.

¹⁶See FAR 35.017 and DHS, *Instructions for Establishing or Contracting with Federally Funded Research and Development Centers (FFRDCs) and National Laboratories*.

¹⁷FFRDC PMO revised its user feedback and Annual Assessment process in fiscal year 2019. Due to the extensive nature of the revisions, we focused our analysis on Annual Assessment reports from fiscal year 2020, the first year of the new process, through fiscal year 2022. Fiscal year 2023 Annual Assessments were not available at the time of our review. FFRDC PMO officials are not required to complete an Annual Assessment in the year they complete a Comprehensive Review, and therefore did not complete an Annual Assessment for HSOAC in fiscal year 2020.

¹⁸See FAR 35.017; DHS, *Instructions for Establishing or Contracting with Federally Funded Research and Development Centers (FFRDCs) and National Laboratories*; and GAO, *Evidence-Based Policymaking: Practices to Help Manage and Assess the Results of Federal Efforts*, [GAO-23-105460](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 12, 2023).

collecting, validating, and analyzing user feedback data were consistent with *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government* and key practices for evidence-based policymaking.¹⁹

To address our third objective, we reviewed relevant DHS and S&T policies and procedures, such as DHS's *Instructions for Establishing or Contracting with Federally Funded Research and Development Centers (FFRDCs) and National Laboratories*, S&T FFRDC PMO's *Program Management Plan*, and FFRDC *Direct Ordering* guides, to identify the extent to which FFRDC PMO officials are required to track how S&T and DHS component sponsors use the results of FFRDC task orders.²⁰ We examined key documents, such as completed user feedback surveys, from the 118 selected FFRDC task orders to identify the extent to which these documents identified FFRDC PMO efforts to track how S&T and DHS component sponsors used task order results. We also interviewed 17 program managers regarding the extent to which FFRDC PMO officials contacted them for information on how their agencies had used task order results.

Further, we interviewed FFRDC PMO officials to identify the extent to which they follow up with program managers about how task order results are used and under what circumstances. We assessed the extent to which PMO's efforts to collect information on S&T's and DHS components' use of task order deliverables were consistent with key practices for evidence-based policymaking.²¹ We also interviewed HSSEDI and HSOAC senior leaders regarding the task order summaries they provide to FFRDC PMO officials for inclusion in the FFRDC Annual Assessments and Comprehensive Reviews.

We conducted this performance audit from November 2022 to October 2024 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

¹⁹GAO-14-704G; GAO-23-105460; and Office of Management and Budget, *Standards and Guidelines for Statistical Surveys* (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 2006).

²⁰DHS, *Instructions for Establishing or Contracting with Federally Funded Research and Development Centers (FFRDCs) and National Laboratories*; DHS, Science and Technology, Office of Innovation & Collaboration, Federally Funded Research and Development Centers (FFRDC) Program Management Office (PMO) *Program Management Plan*, Version 1.0 (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 1, 2022); DHS, S&T, *Direct Ordering Guide for the Homeland Security Operational Analysis Center*; and DHS, S&T, *Direct Ordering Guide for the Homeland Security Systems Engineering and Development Institute*.

²¹GAO-23-105460.

Appendix IV: Federally Funded Research and Development Center (FFRDC) User Feedback Survey Form, Fiscal Year 2023



DHS S&T Federally Funded Research and Development Center (FFRDC)
 Program Management Office (PMO)
 FY2023 Task Order Performance Assessment (TOPA)

Welcome

Introduction

Thank you for your time and inputs to this Task Order Performance Assessment (TOPA). The PMO collects feedback from program managers to 1) meet the requirements of Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR) 35.017-4 and DHS Management Directive (MD) 143.04, and more importantly, 2) support the PMO's oversight and strategic management of the FFRDCs.

Note: You can complete this form online via this link: [Task Order Performance Assessment Questions \(SharePoint-based\)](#)

Providing Responses to the Task Order Performance Assessment

This assessment consists of 24 questions across 11 performance metrics. This assessment also includes open-ended questions that provide an opportunity to submit additional commentary. Responses are either single choice or open-ended. For the single choice responses, select the rating from a choice of five that best reflects your experience. For the open-ended responses, we would like you to provide a description or example that supports your experience. In general, your responses should focus on your opinion of the FFRDC team's performance during the whole task order period of performance.

The TOPA, when filled out, is procurement sensitive information for internal DHS use. Please do not share your TOPA inputs with the DHS FFRDCs and their operating organizations

FFRDC TOPA Ratings Definitions

The table below defines the five choices for the single choice questions.

Number	Choice	Definition
1	Unsatisfactory	Does not meet expectation; serious problems exist for which corrective actions appear to be, or were, ineffective.
2	Poor	Does not meet expectation; significant weaknesses and/or minor issues for which proposed actions were marginally effective or not fully implemented.
3	Satisfactory	Meets expectation; few significant weaknesses and some minor issues for which corrective actions appear to be, or were, satisfactory.
4	Very Good	Exceeds expectation; few, if any significant weaknesses; few, if any, minor issues for which corrective actions were generally effective.
5	Exceptional	Exceeds expectation; no significant weaknesses; no minor issues.

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DHS S&T FFRDC PMO FY23 TOPA (page 2 of 8)

FFRDC TOPA Information

PROGRAM MANAGER AND TASK ORDER INFORMATION	
Your Name	
Your Official Title	
Your Email	
Your Phone Number	
Organization	If Other, please provide your organization's name below
Task Order Title	
FFRDC	
Date TOPA Form Completed	

FFRDC TOPA Questions

METRIC 1 - CURRENT IN ITS FIELD OF EXPERTISE						
What is the PMO Measuring? The capability of the FFRDC to effectively demonstrate the current body of knowledge in their respective technical or analytical specialties.						
1.	Please rate the FFRDC's ability to demonstrate in its work that it is current in its fields of expertise.	Unsatisfactory 1 <input type="radio"/>	Poor 2 <input type="radio"/>	Satisfactory 3 <input type="radio"/>	Very Good 4 <input type="radio"/>	Exceptional 5 <input type="radio"/>
2.	Please identify and briefly describe any notable instances during the FFRDC's work in which they did or did not demonstrate currency in their relevant fields of expertise.					

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DHS S&T FFRDC PMO FY23 TOPA (page 3 of 8)

METRIC 2 - FAMILIARITY WITH SPONSOR NEEDS						
What is the PMO Measuring? The capability of the FFRDC to effectively demonstrate useful understanding of the technical requirements of the task order sponsor (DHS component or other organization) through its work.						
3.	Please rate the FFRDC's demonstrated familiarity with task order sponsor needs at the beginning of their work.	Unsatisfactory 1 <input type="radio"/>	Poor 2 <input type="radio"/>	Satisfactory 3 <input type="radio"/>	Very Good 4 <input type="radio"/>	Exceptional 5 <input type="radio"/>
4.	Please identify and briefly describe notable instances in which the FFRDC did or did not demonstrate familiarity with task order sponsor needs at the beginning of their work.					

METRIC 3 - TECHNICAL QUALITY						
What is the PMO Measuring? The capability of the FFRDC to effectively deliver products and services using expert technical standards, while keeping utility for DHS mission needs high.						
5.	Please rate the quality of the FFRDC's technical or analytical work.	Unsatisfactory 1 <input type="radio"/>	Poor 2 <input type="radio"/>	Satisfactory 3 <input type="radio"/>	Very Good 4 <input type="radio"/>	Exceptional 5 <input type="radio"/>
6.	Please identify and briefly describe notable instances in which the FFRDC did or did not deliver required technical or analytical quality.					

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DHS S&T FFRDC PMO FY23 TOPA (page 4 of 8)

METRIC 4 - MEETING SPONSOR NEEDS

What is the PMO Measuring?

The capability of the FFRDC to demonstrate **impact** through meeting essential technical or analytical requirements for the task order sponsor (DHS component or other organization).

		Unsatisfactory 1	Poor 2	Satisfactory 3	Very Good 4	Exceptional 5
7.	Please rate the FFRDC's ability to satisfy your task order sponsor's needs.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
8.	Please identify and briefly describe notable instances in which the FFRDC did or did not satisfy your task order sponsor's needs.					

METRIC 5 – PROGRAM VALUE

What is the PMO Measuring?

The capability of the FFRDC to deliver solutions that positively **impact** the program objectives of the task order sponsor (DHS component or other organization).

		Unsatisfactory 1	Poor 2	Satisfactory 3	Very Good 4	Exceptional 5
9.	Please rate the FFRDC's ability to deliver value that advanced your task order sponsor's program.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
10.	Please identify and briefly describe any notable instances in which the FFRDC did or did not deliver value that advanced your task order sponsor's program.					

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METRIC 6 – QUICK RESPONSE CAPABILITY

What is the PMO Measuring?

The capability of the FFRDC to demonstrate **responsiveness** through addressing the feedback and urgent needs, as required, of the task order sponsor (DHS component or other organization).

11.	Please rate the FFRDC's ability to respond quickly to task order sponsor feedback.	Unsatisfactory 1 <input type="radio"/>	Poor 2 <input type="radio"/>	Satisfactory 3 <input type="radio"/>	Very Good 4 <input type="radio"/>	Exceptional 5 <input type="radio"/>	
12.	Please identify and briefly describe any notable instances in which the FFRDC did or did not respond quickly to task order sponsor feedback.						
13.	Please rate the FFRDC's ability to respond to urgent tasks or activities quickly.	Unsatisfactory 1 <input type="radio"/>	Poor 2 <input type="radio"/>	Satisfactory 3 <input type="radio"/>	Very Good 4 <input type="radio"/>	Exceptional 5 <input type="radio"/>	N/A 6 <input checked="" type="radio"/>
14.	Please identify and briefly describe any notable instances in which the FFRDC did or did not successfully meet agreed urgent deadlines for a product.						

METRIC 7 – FLEXIBILITY

What is the PMO Measuring?

The capability of the FFRDC to demonstrate **responsiveness** through adapting its work and management processes, based on recognition and understanding of shifts in the requirements of the task order sponsor (DHS component or other organization).

15.	Please rate the FFRDC's flexibility in adapting to and meeting your changing task order needs, feedback, etc.	Unsatisfactory 1 <input type="radio"/>	Poor 2 <input type="radio"/>	Satisfactory 3 <input type="radio"/>	Very Good 4 <input type="radio"/>	Exceptional 5 <input type="radio"/>
16.	Please identify and briefly describe any notable instances in which the FFRDC did or did not adapt to changing task order needs, feedback, etc.					

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METRIC 8 – OBJECTIVITY AND INDEPENDENCE

What is the PMO Measuring?

The capability of the FFRDC to demonstrate **efficiency** through its approach to DHS work without prejudice or undue external influence regarding the nature or structure of the challenge being addressed or in formulating or evaluating potential solutions to that challenge.

17.	Please rate the FFRDC's ability to execute work with objectivity and independence.	Unsatisfactory 1 <input type="radio"/>	Poor 2 <input type="radio"/>	Satisfactory 3 <input type="radio"/>	Very Good 4 <input type="radio"/>	Exceptional 5 <input type="radio"/>
18.	Please identify and briefly describe any notable instances in which the FFRDC did or did not demonstrate necessary objectivity and independence.					

METRIC 9 – TIMELINESS

What is the PMO Measuring?

The capability of the FFRDC to **efficiently** generate task order products and services, according to agreed due dates.

19.	Please rate the FFRDC's ability to complete the task order activities, milestones, deliverables, etc. by agreed deadlines.	Unsatisfactory 1 <input type="radio"/>	Poor 2 <input type="radio"/>	Satisfactory 3 <input type="radio"/>	Very Good 4 <input type="radio"/>	Exceptional 5 <input type="radio"/>
20.	Please identify and briefly describe any notable instances in which the FFRDC did or did not demonstrate necessary timeliness in completion of task order products.					

METRIC 10 – COST CONTROL

What is the PMO Measuring?

The capability of the FFRDC to demonstrate **cost-effectiveness** through working within the budget agreed to by the task order sponsor (DHS component or other organization).

21.	Please rate the ability of the FFRDC to execute task order work within budget.	Unsatisfactory 1 <input type="radio"/>	Poor 2 <input type="radio"/>	Satisfactory 3 <input type="radio"/>	Very Good 4 <input type="radio"/>	Exceptional 5 <input type="radio"/>
22.	Please identify and briefly describe any notable instances in which the FFRDC did or did not successfully manage its task order budget.					

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DHS S&T FFRDC PMO FY23 TOPA (page 7 of 8)

METRIC 11 – COST ESTIMATION

What is the PMO Measuring?

The capability of the FFRDC to demonstrate **cost-effectiveness** through accurate forecasting of costs for task order products and services.

23.	Please rate the FFRDC's ability to estimate accurately the costs of executing task order work.	Unsatisfactory 1 <input type="radio"/>	Poor 2 <input type="radio"/>	Satisfactory 3 <input type="radio"/>	Very Good 4 <input type="radio"/>	Exceptional 5 <input type="radio"/>
24.	Please Identify and briefly describe any notable instances in which the FFRDC did or did not successfully estimate the costs of executing task order work.					

GENERAL COMMENTS REGARDING YOUR EXPERIENCE WITH YOUR TASK ORDER

25.	Please provide any additional comments you may wish to share with the FFRDC PMO regarding your experience with the FFRDC in the execution of your task order.					
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COMMENTS ABOUT PDF VERSION OF THE FORM

26.	To serve you better, the FFRDC PMO is collecting information about your choice to use the PDF version of the form. Please choose one of the following options:	<input type="radio"/> I cannot access the DHS S&T Directorate SharePoint link to complete the form. <input type="radio"/> I was unaware of the SharePoint version. <input type="radio"/> I wanted to finish my input offline. <input type="radio"/> Other				
27.	If other, please explain					

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DHS S&T FFRDC PMO FY23 TOPA (page 8 of 8)

Thank You!

Please email the PMO team at FFRDC.TOPA@hq.dhs.gov if you have further questions or comments about your task order, the PMO or the FFRDCs.



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Appendix V: Process for Analyzing User Feedback Survey Ratings Data

The Science and Technology Directorate's (S&T) Federally Funded Research and Development Center (FFRDC) Program Management Office (PMO) is responsible for assessing the performance of FFRDCs, including through Annual Assessments. In the Annual Assessments, FFRDC PMO officials are to assess FFRDC performance against established performance metrics and goals. The assessment is based on FFRDC users' perspectives on FFRDC performance, which FFRDC PMO officials are to gather through a user feedback survey known as the *Task Order Performance Assessment*.

Department of Homeland Security (DHS) component officials, typically the program manager who oversaw the development of the FFRDC project, select a rating from a 5-point scale that ranges from "Unsatisfactory" to "Exceptional" to describe FFRDC performance on 11 performance metrics. These ratings data are aggregated in two ways to evaluate FFRDC performance in the Annual Assessments.

Score Frequency Distribution. FFRDC PMO officials calculate the score frequency distribution—that is, how often S&T and DHS components gave FFRDCs scores in each of the five rating categories, from "Exceptional" to "Unsatisfactory," across all ratings. This is calculated as a total across all metrics and for each of the 11 performance metrics. For the score frequency distribution, FFRDC PMO officials define their performance standard as follows:

- Green: checkmarks in the "Exceptional" or "Very good" categories
- Amber: checkmarks in the "Satisfactory" category
- Red: checkmarks in the "Poor" or "Unsatisfactory" categories

If less than 80 percent of scores fall in the Green category, more than 15 percent of scores fall in the Amber category, or more than 5 percent of scores fall in the Red category, FFRDC PMO officials classify FFRDC performance as not fully meeting the standard for the distribution of scores.

Performance Index Score. FFRDC PMO officials also calculate what it calls a "Performance Index Score," the sum of the rating scores as a proportion of the highest possible rating. For example, if a S&T or DHS component official gave a FFRDC a rating of "4" across all 11 metrics, the Performance Index Score would be 0.8. This score is calculated by adding all of the ratings together for a combined score of 44 and dividing by the maximum possible score of "5" across all 11 metrics, or 55. As with the distribution of scores, the Performance Index Score is calculated in total and for each of the 11 performance metrics. FFRDC PMO officials define their performance standard for the Performance Index Scores as follows:

- Green: Performance Index Scores falling between 0.8 and 1.0
- Amber: Performance Index Scores falling between 0.6 and 0.79
- Red: Performance Index Scores falling below 0.6

Appendix VI: Comments from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS)

U.S. Department of Homeland Security
Washington, DC 20528



**Homeland
Security**

BY ELECTRONIC SUBMISSION

October 8, 2024

Tina Won Sherman
Director, Homeland Security and Justice
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20548-0001

Re: Management Response to Draft Report GAO-25-106394, "FEDERAL RESEARCH CENTERS: DHS Actions Could Reduce the Potential for Unnecessary Overlap among Its R&D Projects"

Dear Ms. Sherman:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this draft report. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS or the Department) appreciates the U.S. Government Accountability Office's (GAO) work in planning and conducting its review and issuing this report.

DHS leadership is pleased to note GAO's positive recognition of the Science and Technology Directorate's (S&T) actions to meet its research and development (R&D) needs by sponsoring the Federally Funded Research and Development Center (FFRDC) Program Management Office (PMO). DHS remains committed to strengthening processes to meet long-term R&D needs, such as streamlining task oversight, enhancing collaboration across DHS, and addressing staffing limitations that hinders optimal performance.

The draft report contained eight recommendations, with which the Department concurs. Enclosed find our detailed response to each recommendation. DHS previously submitted technical comments addressing several accuracy, contextual, and other issues under a separate cover for GAO's consideration, as appropriate.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to review and comment on this draft report. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

JIM H CRUMPACKER Digitally signed by JIM H CRUMPACKER
Date: 2024.10.08 08:20:36 -04'00'

JIM H. CRUMPACKER
Director
Departmental GAO-OIG Liaison Office

Enclosure

**Enclosure: Management Response to Recommendations
Contained in GAO 25-106394**

GAO recommended that the DHS Under Secretary for S&T:

Recommendation 1: Update the list of R&D activities on at least a quarterly basis, as statutorily required, and disseminate the updated list to the relevant DHS entities, including DHS components.

Response: Concur. S&T will coordinate with the heads of DHS Components and headquarters offices to collect, and share with the same, the R&D activities on a quarterly basis. Pursuant to DHS Directive 069-02,¹ and associated DHS Innovation, Research, and Development Coordination (IRDC) initiatives,² S&T will implement quarterly updates of the R&D activities inventory and facilitate centralized access to the inventory on the IRDC website for relevant DHS entities and Components to access. Estimated Completion Date (ECD): September 30, 2025.

Recommendation 2: Amend policies and procedures to require that S&T review proposed FFRDC projects for unnecessary overlap with R&D activities funded and developed by DHS components with their own R&D appropriations.

Response: Concur. In fiscal year (FY) 2025, S&T will conduct a study to determine what actions are needed to implement this recommendation, to include an operational analysis to establish the baseline of all entry points for DHS Component R&D appropriations to S&T FFRDCs and other offices which receive R&D appropriations for Innovation, Research, and Development (IRD) support. This will include the review and approval processes in place for each office, and the existing authorities, regulations, and policies in place which allow for these transactions and current system(s) which are in place to track the lifecycle of the IRD activities funded by component R&D appropriations.

Once the initial analysis establishing the baseline is completed, the study will include a gap analysis identifying all policy, authority, system, process, and resource related elements that should be considered. A "To Be" capability roadmap will then need to be produced, along with associated costs for implementation and sustainment. Once the entire study with these elements is completed, the package will be considered for a resourcing decision. In FY 2026, S&T will develop a plan to address the actions identified by this study. By the end of FY 2027, S&T will implement the plan, as appropriate. ECD: September 30, 2027.

¹ "Research and Development Coordination," Revision 2, dated February 19, 2020.

² IRDC initiatives include Strategic Priority Research Area (SPRA) working groups such as the Data Integration, Analytics, Modeling and Simulation working group and the Digital Identity and Trust working group. These are cross-Departmental working groups which are formed to complete a comprehensive review of the validated inventories containing reported innovation and R&D from across DHS that aligns with their respective SPRAs and identifies deltas where IRD investments are needed for each of the six DHS missions to deliver future capabilities under each SPRA, some of which cross-cut missions.

Recommendation 3: Require S&T to document its additional overlap reviews of R&D activities funded and developed by DHS components with their own R&D appropriations.

Response: Concur. Following completion of the FY 2025 operational analysis to establish the baseline of all entry points for DHS Component R&D appropriations to S&T FFRDCs and other offices which receive R&D appropriations for IRD support of actions and subsequent gap analysis, S&T will also identify the appropriate avenue in which to document the results of the reviews for unnecessary overlap as part of the capability road map considerations. In FY 2026, S&T will pursue the development of a plan to address the actions identified by the completed study, to include ensuring that the policies and procedures that are updated to require the review for unnecessary overlap also require the documentation of such reviews. In FY 2027, S&T will implement the plan, as appropriate. ECD: September 30, 2027.

Recommendation 4: Ensure that PMO conducts and documents an analysis of the risk of nonresponse bias based on the response rate of the initial outreach efforts for each fiscal year's set of user feedback surveys. Should the analysis indicate a risk of nonresponse bias which would influence PMO's understanding of FFRDC performance, PMO should take additional steps to increase their response rate.

Response: Concur. The FFRDC PMO will develop and implement an analysis of the risk of nonresponse bias based on the response rate of the initial outreach efforts for each fiscal year's set of user feedback surveys; this will be added to the existing statistical analysis approach for task order performance assessment (TOPA) responses. Specifically, in FY 2025, the FFRDC PMO will study the best practices identified by the Federal Committee on Statistical Methodology (FCSM) in the following documents: (1) "Best Practices for Nonresponse Bias Reporting,"³ (2) "A Framework for Data Quality,"⁴ and (3) "Nonresponse Bias Analysis Methods: A Taxonomy and Summary,"⁵ for nonresponse bias analysis and reporting. This will include an assessment of the resources and level of effort required for the FFRDC PMO to effectively implement a nonresponse bias analysis approach. Once this assessment is complete, FFRDC PMO will use the TOPA responses and associated data received in FY 2025 and FY 2026 as the basis for a pilot exercise in FY 2026 for analyzing and assessing any nonresponse bias that may exist. The FFRDC PMO will then use the nonresponse bias analysis approach to assess the risk of nonresponse bias, as appropriate. Based on these results, additional steps may be required. ECD: September 30, 2027.

Recommendation 5: Ensure PMO documents, in all Annual Assessments and 5-Year Comprehensive Reviews, the response rate, risk of bias, and steps taken to increase the user feedback survey response rate.

³ "Best Practices for Nonresponse Bias Reporting," dated June 2023; <https://www.fcsm.gov/assets/files/docs/FCSM%20NRBA%20Report%20062623.pdf>.

⁴ FCSM-20-04, "A Framework for Data Quality," dated September 2020; https://www.fcsm.gov/assets/files/docs/FCSM.20.04_A_Framework_for_Data_Quality.pdf.

⁵ "Nonresponse Bias Analysis Methods: A Taxonomy and Summary," dated November 4, 2021; <https://www.fcsm.gov/assets/files/docs/J5Wagner.pdf>.

Response: Concur. The FFRDC PMO will take steps to develop the analysis for response rate, risk of bias, and steps taken to increase user feedback, and document this information in future Annual Assessments and 5-Year reviews. In the process of reviewing and studying the best practices identified by the FCSM for nonresponse bias analysis and reporting, the FFRDC PMO will use the outputs of that work in FY 2026 and FY 2027 to make documentations in the Annual Assessments, as appropriate. The FFRDC will also use the outputs of its nonresponse bias approach in the next cycle of the comprehensive review for the Homeland Security Operational Analysis Center FFRDC conducted every five years,⁶ which is expected to formally kick off in FY 2026. ECD: September 30, 2027.

Recommendation 6: Amend its policies and procedures to require PMO to include a comprehensive analysis of open-ended responses to FFRDC user surveys in the Annual Assessments to gain a more complete understanding of user feedback when assessing FFRDC performance.

Response: Concur. In FY 2025, the FFRDC PMO will conduct an analysis to determine what is needed to ensure a comprehensive analysis of open-ended responses to user surveys in the Annual Assessment and will pilot an implementation of the results of the analysis in FY 2026. In FY 2027, following an analysis of the results of that pilot, the FFRDC PMO will amend its policies and procedures, as appropriate, to include a requirement for conducting a comprehensive analysis of open-ended responses to FFRDC user surveys as part of the FFRDC PMO's TOPA system. ECD: September 30, 2027.

Recommendation 7: Ensure that PMO shares, as required, the results of Annual Assessments with FFRDC leadership.

Response: Concur. FFRDC PMO will coordinate with FFRDC leadership, as appropriate, to identify a recurring timeframe to formally share with FFRDC leadership the results of the Annual Assessments of FFRDC performance. ECD: September 30, 2025.

Recommendation 8: Ensure that PMO establishes a process to review and analyze a selection of task order results that reflect a range of S&T and DHS component experiences to inform the design and implementation of FFRDC task orders.

Response: Concur. The FFRDC PMO already reviews and analyzes a selection of task order results with the FFRDCs to improve task order practices, which results in increased awareness, provides lessons learned, and improves clarity in the task order process. In accordance with both FFRDC "indefinite delivery/indefinite quantity" contracts, the FFRDC PMO conducts quarterly reviews of a selection of task orders. Specifically, the FFRDC PMO selects two task orders for each review based on a combination of factors such as the current political landscape, the DHS priorities, topic areas of interest, and length of time remaining to complete. This review is a deep dive into the health of the task orders to include funding, progress to date, any

⁶ defined by FAR 35.017-4 "Reviewing FFRDCs;" <https://www.acquisition.gov/far/35.017>.

communication issues with the PM or others, and an opportunity to discuss any deliverables that may resonate with the larger Homeland Security Enterprise customer base. To this last point, the FFRDC also selects one task order to present through various communications such as the FFRDC PMO Quarterly Newsletter and other S&T communications as a success story of impactful work.

DHS requests that GAO consider this recommendation resolved and closed, as implemented.

Appendix VI: Comments from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS)

U.S. Department of Homeland Security
Washington, DC 20528

BY ELECTRONIC SUBMISSION

October 8, 2024

Tina Won Sherman
Director, Homeland Security and Justice
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20548-0001

Re: Management Response to Draft Report GAO-25-106394, "FEDERAL RESEARCH CENTERS: DHS Actions Could Reduce the Potential for Unnecessary Overlap among Its R&D Projects"

Dear Ms. Sherman:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this draft report. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS or the Department) appreciates the U.S. Government Accountability Office's (GAO) work in planning and conducting its review and issuing this report.

DHS leadership is pleased to note GAO's positive recognition of the Science and Technology Directorate's (S&T) actions to meet its research and development (R&D) needs by sponsoring the Federally Funded Research and Development Center (FFRDC) Program Management Office (PMO). DHS remains committed to strengthening processes to meet long-term R&D needs, such as streamlining task oversight, enhancing collaboration across DHS, and addressing staffing limitations that hinders optimal performance.

The draft report contained eight recommendations, with which the Department concurs. Enclosed find our detailed response to each recommendation. DHS previously submitted technical comments addressing several accuracy, contextual, and other issues under a separate cover for GAO's consideration, as appropriate.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to review and comment on this draft report. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions.

Sincerely,
JIM H. CRUMPACKER
Director
Departmental GAO-OIG Liaison Office

Enclosure

Enclosure: Management Response to Recommendations Contained in GAO 25-106394

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Appendix VII: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

Tina Won Sherman at (202) 512-8461 or shermant@gao.gov.

Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the individual named above, Christopher Ferencik (Assistant Director), Barbara Guffy (Analyst-in-Charge), James Ashley, Nasreen Badat, Robert Bullock, Michele Fejfar, Samantha Flom, Parker Hallof, Michael Harmond, Eric Hauswirth, Samantha Lyew, Susan Murphy, Anh Nguyen, and Sarah Veale made key contributions to this report. Cassandra Ardern and Benjamin Licht also contributed to this report.

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