

Why GAO Did This Study

The federal government has set a goal of providing service to the public that matches or exceeds that of the private sector. Executive Order 12862 (September 11, 1993) and a related 1995 memorandum require agencies to post customer service standards and report results to customers. As requested, this report (1) assesses the extent to which federal agencies are setting customer service standards and measuring related results, (2) assesses the extent to which agencies are reporting standards and results to customers and using the results to improve service, and (3) identifies some customer service management tools and practices used by various governments. The report also examines the steps the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) is taking to facilitate agency use of tools and practices. GAO surveyed 13 federal services among those with the most contact with the public, reviewed literature and interviewed agency officials as well as knowledgeable individuals in the area of customer service.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that OMB (1) direct agencies to consider options to make customer service standards and results more readily available and (2) collaborate with the President's Management Advisory Board and agencies to evaluate the benefits and costs of applying the tools and practices identified in this report, and include those found beneficial in its related initiative. OMB had no comments on the recommendations.

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MANAGING FOR RESULTS

Opportunities to Strengthen Agencies' Customer Service Efforts

What GAO Found

All 13 government services GAO surveyed (see table below) had established customer service standards, which varied in their form from quantitative standards based on hourly, daily, monthly or annual averages to general commitments to qualitative standards. All 13 services reported having measures of customer service, such as measures of wait times or accuracy of service and 11 services had measures of customer satisfaction. For example, the National Park Service surveys visitors at over 320 points of service through a survey card program. All services had methods to receive customer complaints, and all had methods of gathering ideas from front line employees to improve customer service.

Thirteen Government Services GAO Surveyed

Direct Student Loans	Passport Services
Forest Recreation Services	Social Security
Park Visitor and Interpretive Services	Tax Information and Advice
Medicare	Veteran Disability Compensation
Indian Health Service Medical Care	Veterans' Group Life Insurance
Border Inspections of Individuals	Veteran Medical Care
Passenger and Baggage Screening	

Source: GAO.

Although standards exist, GAO found that the surveyed services' standards were often made available in a way that would not be easy for customers to find and access or, in the case of two services, were not made available to the public at all. For example, five services made standards available in long, detailed documents mostly focused on other topics, such as annual performance plans, performance and accountability reports, and budget justifications. About half of the services reported customer service results in similar types of documents. All services reported comparing customer service results to the standards and using the results to improve internal processes. For example, Customs and Border Protection officials told GAO that after they studied wait times at land borders and airports, they made facility enhancements and staff assignment changes. At one port of entry, these changes reduced wait times by more than half. However, some services have not compared performance to the private sector, as required by the Executive Order. Most services reported considering customer service measures in employee performance appraisals. For example, according to IRS officials, the performance appraisals for all employees who provide taxpayer assistance are based in part on critical job elements related to customer satisfaction.

GAO identified several customer service tools and practices government agencies have used to improve customer service, such as engaging customers through social media, providing self service options and offering redress for unmet standards. Additionally, OMB has begun an initiative to identify and share private sector best practices among federal agencies and to develop a dashboard where agencies can make customer service standards available. Building on the progress made under this initiative, OMB could evaluate the benefits and costs of applying these tools and practices on a more widespread basis and share those that are found to be beneficial.