

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-14-424](#), a report to the Chairman, Subcommittee on Financial and Contracting Oversight, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

State receives about 2,200 pieces of correspondence each year from members of Congress seeking information. GAO was asked to review State's procedures for responding to requests for information.

GAO examined (1) State's process for responding to congressional correspondence and (2) the extent to which State tracks the timeliness of its responses to congressional correspondence. To do so, GAO reviewed information on 4,804 pieces of correspondence that State indicated it had received and responded to between April 2011—when State said it began using a database to track its response letters—and June 2013. GAO also interviewed cognizant State officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that State (1) take steps to ensure that all response letters, including those tasked to bureaus to reply directly to constituents and members, are tracked; and (2) ensure that if and when interim acknowledgments to members of Congress are provided, they are tracked. State agreed with GAO's recommendations and said it would begin to implement them immediately.

View [GAO-14-424](#). For more information, contact Michael Courts at (202) 512-8980 or courtsm@gao.gov.

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STATE DEPARTMENT

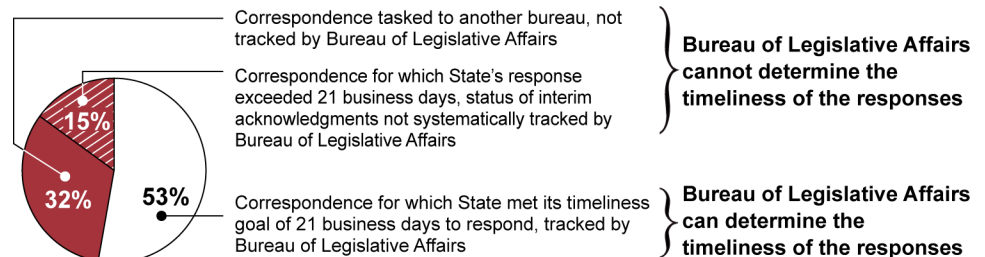
Process to Track Responses to Congressional Correspondence Can Be Improved

What GAO Found

The Department of State (State) uses a multistage process to respond to congressional correspondence. In April 2011, the Bureau of Legislative Affairs (the Bureau), which is responsible for tracking State's response letters, began using a database to track State's responses as they move through the stages of the process. The process includes the Bureau entering key information into a database, tasking other State bureaus or offices with subject matter expertise to draft response letters, and conducting reviews of draft response letters prior to mailing them. In some cases, the Bureau tasks other bureaus with drafting, reviewing, and mailing the letters themselves.

State did not track key information on the timeliness of nearly half of its responses to congressional correspondence. State's timeliness goal is to provide the member, within 21 business days of receiving his or her correspondence, with either a response letter or an interim acknowledgment informing the member of the delay. State tracked the time it took to respond and also met its timeliness goal in 2,524 (53 percent) of the 4,804 cases that GAO reviewed. However, State did not track the timeliness of its responses in 1,544 (32 percent) of the cases GAO reviewed because the bureau tasked with mailing the response directly to constituents and members did not notify the Bureau when it did so, as required by State policy. In those cases, the Bureau recorded the date it tasked the other bureau as the date State sent its response letter, although it had no information as to if or when this actually occurred. In addition, because the Bureau did not systematically track State's interim acknowledgments in cases that took more than 21 days, GAO could not determine whether State actually sent such acknowledgments in 736 (15 percent) of the cases GAO reviewed where the response time exceeded 21 days (see figure). Because its database lacks accurate and complete data, State is not in a position to identify elements of the process that may be most prone to delays and therefore cannot develop strategies to improve the timeliness of its response letters.

Extent to Which the Department of State (State) Tracks Data Needed to Determine Whether It Met Its Timeliness Goal for Congressional Correspondence, from April 2011 through June 2013



Source: GAO analysis of Department of State data.