INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY MODERNIZATION

Corporation for National and Community Service Needs to Develop a System That Supports Grant Monitoring

Why GAO Did This Study

CNCS engages more than five million Americans yearly in national volunteer service by awarding grants to programs such as AmeriCorps and Senior Corps. In fiscal year 2016, CNCS received almost $800 million in appropriations to fund approximately 2,300 grants. The agency is taking steps to modernize its outdated IT infrastructure, including developing and delivering systems to replace its legacy grant management system and improve IT support of the agency's grant monitoring program. In a March 2017 report, GAO noted system deficiencies that resulted in usability, data quality, and other technical issues.

This report examines (1) the extent to which CNCS's IT modernization projects align with business and management needs for grant monitoring and (2) progress CNCS has made toward ensuring the successful and timely delivery of new systems to support grant monitoring. GAO assessed agency planning and IT project management documents against key practices and conducted interviews with agency officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending three actions to improve CNCS's practices for defining requirements and developing schedules and test plans for grant monitoring system development. In comments on a draft of this report, CNCS did not fully agree with the recommendations. Based on additional documentation that CNCS provided, GAO revised the report, as appropriate, and modified the recommendations.

View GAO-17-267. For more information, contact David A. Powner at pownerd@gao.gov or (202) 512-9286.

What GAO Found

The Corporation for National and Community Service's (CNCS) information technology (IT) modernization projects are currently planned to align with the agency's business and management needs for its existing process, but are not yet defined for a future risk-based process. The projects include the development of a modernized system in two versions. The first version was planned to provide support for business needs of the agency's existing grant monitoring process. The second version is to provide additional functionality to support monitoring within a yet-to-be-defined risk-based process. CNCS officials and the development contractor responsible for delivering the first version of the system agreed to a set of requirements that address business needs for improving outcomes of the existing monitoring process. However, because business needs for a risk-based monitoring process have not been determined, OIT officials and system stakeholders have not defined requirements for the second version of the future system, as intended by CNCS's IT modernization plans.

CNCS has taken steps to help avoid continued delays, but progress toward delivering the system has been limited. In July 2015, CNCS initiated a project that was to deliver the first version of the system in April 2016. After subsequent delays, agency officials updated plans to reflect a September 2016 delivery. However, as of July 2017, this version had not been delivered, and the delivery date was changed to October 2017. Successful development and delivery of IT systems relies on adherance to key practices for managing project schedules and testing. However, weaknesses in CNCS's practices introduced risks to successful delivery of the system. In particular, the system development project schedules could not be used to track progress because they did not include actual dates when activities were started and finished. In addition, although CNCS and its contractor conducted testing according to plans, the grant monitoring system was not included in all phases of testing. Agency officials used other tools to track progress, and plans did not require them to conduct all stages of testing for the system. However, unless CNCS officials improve system development practices for managing project schedules and testing, they will continue to introduce risks to successful delivery of system functionality that supports grant monitoring.

The grant monitoring system development project experienced delays when CNCS did not initially conduct oversight needed to ensure that the contractor took corrective actions as planned. In monitoring the contractor's performance during system development and testing, agency officials enhanced oversight to avoid continued delays. In ongoing management reviews of the project, CNCS officials reported that, since the last corrective action plan was provided by the contractor in December 2016, performance has improved and the project is on track to deliver the first version of the grant monitoring system in October 2017.

However, successful delivery of system functionality that supports the agency's grant monitoring process will remain at risk unless CNCS takes steps to correct weaknesses in system development practices for managing project schedules and testing. Further, CNCS's grant monitoring officers will continue to rely on an outdated legacy system to support the processes they follow for monitoring the use of millions of dollars of grant funds awarded each year.

_____ **United States Government Accountability Office**