

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-24-106155](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

According to DOD, poor health and nutrition are growing challenges that threaten U.S. military readiness and its ability to retain a fit and healthy force. DOD's policy is to provide military service members with appropriate nutrition to help ensure they can achieve and maintain performance. DOD relies on various food service operations to feed military personnel high-quality food in a cost-effective manner.

The Joint Explanatory Statement accompanying the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2022 includes a provision for GAO to review the quality and nutrition of food available at military installations. This report assesses the extent to which OSD and the military services have (1) implemented programs and initiatives to provide service members with access to nutritious food at military installations, (2) overseen such programs and initiatives, and (3) evaluated their effectiveness.

GAO reviewed policies, guidance, and program documentation. GAO also reviewed operations at 19 dining facilities; held five discussion groups with service members; and interviewed officials from DOD, the military services, and eight installations.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making 16 recommendations, including for the services to establish nutrition program guidance, DOD to clarify or adjust leadership roles, DOD and the services to develop oversight processes and checklists, and DOD to establish goals and metrics. GAO provided a draft of this report to DOD. DOD did not provide comments.

View [GAO-24-106155](#). For more information, contact Alissa H. Czyz at (202) 512-3058 or czyza@gao.gov.

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DOD FOOD PROGRAM

Additional Actions Needed to Implement, Oversee, and Evaluate Nutrition Efforts for Service Members

What GAO Found

The Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) and the military services have taken steps to implement a color-coded nutrition labeling program and related initiatives. However, the 19 dining facilities at military installations GAO reviewed had not fully implemented required program elements. For example, GAO observed examples of color and sodium codes that were missing, not standardized, or improperly placed at 14 facilities. Without establishing guidance that addresses steps dining facilities should take to implement all coding program requirements, the services will have reduced assurance that served food is coded, labeled, and presented as the program intended.

Nutrition Coding Description

	 Green – eat often	 Yellow – eat occasionally	 Red – eat rarely
Description	High performance foods	Moderate performance foods	Low performance foods
Processing	Least processed	Some processing	Most processed
Nutrients	Whole foods, nutrient packed	Some healthful nutrients	Lowest quality ingredients
Fiber	High in fiber	Lower in fiber	Minimal fiber
Sugar	Low added sugar	Added sugar/artificial sweeteners	Added sugar/artificial sweeteners
Fat	Healthy fats	Poor-quality fats	Excess fats/trans-fat; fried foods

Source: Uniformed Services University, Consortium for Health and Military Performance, Go for Green® 2.0 Program Requirements (text and icons) and DOD information. | [GAO-24-106155](#)

GAO also found that OSD has not fully addressed congressionally directed efforts to increase access to nutritious food, including the establishment of a nutrition leadership structure, the Defense Feeding and Nutrition Board. According to Department of Defense (DOD) officials, the board's responsibilities will include directing policy, procedures, and nutrition efforts. These officials also told GAO that DOD has faced delays in its attempts to establish the board because of lack of consensus on which entities should lead it. Clarifying and adjusting leadership responsibilities, as needed, could help DOD establish the board and ensure it is adequately empowered to direct these efforts.

OSD and the services oversee aspects of nutrition programs and initiatives through semiannual meetings, menu reviews, and facility assessments. However, OSD has not conducted separate annual reviews of the military departments' nutrition programs and policies, required since 2014. Without a process to execute its required oversight reviews, DOD lacks reasonable assurance that its nutrition programs are functioning as intended. Further, service oversight assessments of nutrition labeling programs do not address all program elements. By using a required tool and revising inspection checklists, the Army and the other services, respectively, will be better positioned to identify and remediate issues that inhibit program implementation.

OSD and the military services use several mechanisms to collect feedback on food options, including surveys and comment cards. However, they have not established strategic goals, performance goals, and performance metrics. Doing so will better position OSD and the services to evaluate existing and future nutrition programs and initiatives and assess progress toward goals.