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ADMINISTRATIVE BURDEN

OMB Should Update Instructions to Help Agency Assessment Efforts

Why GAO Did This Study

According to an estimate cited by OMB, eligible Americans forgo claiming more than $140 billion in federal benefits each year. They do so, in part, due to administrative burdens—the time and other resources expended to obtain or retain these benefits. Reducing such burdens can help reduce economic insecurity and improve the public's experiences with federal programs, a longstanding priority of Congress and the executive branch.

GAO was asked to review federal agencies' efforts to reduce administrative burdens for federal benefit programs. This report examines selected federal agencies' efforts to (1) implement OMB guidance for reducing administrative burdens, (2) support burden reduction efforts, and (3) integrate burden reduction priorities into their performance management activities.

GAO compared nine federal agencies' information collection requests to OMB's burden reduction guidance and documentation instructions for agencies. GAO also compared performance management documentation developed by three selected federal agencies that administer three of the largest federal benefit programs—USDA, SSA, and VA—to relevant OMB guidance. GAO interviewed officials at OMB and the three selected agencies about their burden reduction efforts.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that OMB update its supporting statement instructions to fully incorporate all elements of its burden reduction guidance. OMB did not provide comments.

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What GAO Found

Federal information collections include applications and other forms that individuals must complete to obtain federal benefits, such as food assistance, medical care, and cash aid. In April 2022, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) issued guidance to agencies for documenting administrative burdens that individuals experience in submitting the required information. OMB has directed agencies to document these burdens in the supporting statements for each information collection request provided to OMB for review and approval. These burdens include learning, compliance, and psychological costs.

Administrative Burdens Imposed by Information Collection Requirements for Federal Benefit Programs

Learning costs	Resources expended to learn about a program, its eligibility requirements, and how to comply with those requirements.
Compliance costs	Resources expended to comply with program application, certification, or recertification requirements, including filling out paperwork and producing documentation.
Psychological costs	Cognitive load, discomfort, or stress experienced attempting to comply with requirements.

Source: GAO review of Office of Management and Budget documentation; Icons-Studio/stock.adobe.com. | GAO-25-107239

GAO reviewed supporting statements for 51 of the 8,613 approved information collection requests submitted to OMB between April 2022 and April 2024. These 51 requests met the following criteria:

- The preparing agency was a Chief Financial Officers Act agency.

- The request set requirements that individuals and households must meet to obtain or retain federal benefits.

- The agency estimated the request would impose at least 75,000 burden hours on the public.

OMB's instructions for preparing these statements do not fully incorporate OMB's burden reduction guidance. For example, OMB's instructions do not direct agencies to discuss potential learning or psychological costs as part of their statements. As a result, agencies may not be fully documenting the administrative burdens imposed by benefit program requirements, limiting transparency and potentially missing opportunities to identify and reduce burdens on the public.

As of December 2024, the Departments of Agriculture (USDA) and Veterans Affairs (VA) and the Social Security Administration (SSA) had established offices for improving customer experience. These offices helped to collect data to monitor customer feedback. They also helped to identify solutions for reducing administrative burdens in support of broader efforts to improve customer satisfaction.

USDA, VA, and SSA have also taken steps to integrate burden reduction priorities into strategic goals, strategic objectives, and performance goals associated with some of their largest programs and services.

United States Government Accountability Office