

“The Government Accountability Office’s 2023 High Risk List”

House Committee on Oversight and Accountability

10:00 AM, Wednesday, April 26, 2023

Rep. Gerald E. Connolly (D-VA)

Every two years—at the beginning of a new Congress—the Oversight Committee holds a hearing on the Government Accountability Office’s (GAO) High-Risk report. I look forward to analyzing GAO’s latest biennial publication which highlights the federal government’s programs and functions with the greatest vulnerabilities to waste, fraud, abuse, and mismanagement, or that need broad reform. This report series also includes federal operations that require significant transformation to address the nation’s most pressing challenges. In short, the report offers a kind of roadmap to help Congress prioritize and target the federal government’s weak spots to improve vital government services on behalf of the American people.

Over the past 17 years, Congressional action on issues identified through the High-Risk report has yielded an estimated \$675 billion in financial benefits and approximately \$100 billion in financial benefits in the past two years alone. Congress must continue to work in a bipartisan manner with the Administration and agency leaders to develop solutions in these high-risk areas to enable the federal government to save billions of dollars, improve service to the public, and strengthen government performance and accountability.

According to the previous 2021 High-Risk report, the Trump Administration left a collection of crises and destruction in its wake, which we are still dealing with today. Throughout his presidency, Mr. Trump ferociously attacked federal employees, which led to a cut in the workforce that affected nearly every federal agency, with the steepest decline recorded at the Department of Education—a 15% reduction in workforce since 2016. In addition to President Trump’s gutting of the federal workforce, under his leadership, his Office of Management and Budget largely discontinued the regular progress meetings with agency leaders and the GAO Comptroller General on high-risk issues that had been the practice in previous administrations. Leadership failures by the Trump Administration exacerbated the unprecedented public health and economic crises posed by the coronavirus pandemic and increased the number of and the urgency of critical high-risk areas.

But with new leadership, comes new changes. Under the Biden Administration, Congress and executive agencies have made substantial progress addressing high-risk issues. Since the previous High-Risk List update in 2021, 16 of 34 high-risk areas improved, which is the most progress in the eight years since GAO started rating high-risk areas. Additionally, two of the 16 areas, Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation (PBGC) Insurance Programs and the 2020 Decennial Census, were removed from the list. Additionally, I am particularly pleased by the progress agencies have made in regard to “Ensuring the Cybersecurity of the Nation” through the establishment of the Office of the National Cyber Director under the Executive Office of the President and publication of the National Cybersecurity Strategy; strengthening the “USPS Financial Viability” through the passage of the bipartisan Postal Service Reform Act of 2022, which I helped shepherd; and “Improving the Management of IT Acquisitions and Operations.”

As the Ranking Member of the Cybersecurity, Information Technology, and Government Innovation Subcommittee, I maintain my laser focus on the government's management of IT acquisitions and operations. GAO found that too often, the \$100 billion of IT investments the federal government makes each year frequently fail to deliver capabilities in a timely manner, incur cost overruns and schedule slippages, or fail to contribute to mission-related outcomes. For example, 80 percent of the government's IT budget is dedicated to the operations and maintenance of existing IT investments, including legacy systems. Large, unchecked investments often lack disciplined and effective management in areas such as project planning, requirements definition, and program oversight and governance. To help manage this challenge, I championed the passage of the Federal Information Technology Acquisition Reform Act (FITARA) to eliminate wasteful endeavors that hurt our cyber posture and mission delivery and have conducted 15 oversight hearings over the past seven years. For this upcoming FITARA Scorecard, I hope to introduce new changes that update how we score agency cybersecurity performance; track CIO authority over IT budgets and acquisition; and expand the federal data center category to include an assessment of agencies' cloud migration plans and current cloud capabilities.

Finally, while I applaud this progress, we must continue to remain vigilant and carry out a whole-of-government approach towards improving service to the public and strengthening government performance and accountability. Specifically, this year GAO announced the addition of three new areas: Strengthening Management of the Federal Prison System; The Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) Leadership and Coordination of Public Health Emergencies; and something I have been particularly focused on, Unemployment Insurance Systems. As the Chairman of the Government Operations Subcommittee, I held a hearing last year dedicated to examining the recent growth in agency improper payments and identifying ways the federal government can tackle fraud, waste, and abuse in government programs without putting undue burden on the individuals and small businesses who rely on them. Unemployment insurance systems were a primary focus of the hearing given their susceptibility to fraud. I also introduced, the STOP Fraud Act, which took a proactive approach towards addressing improper payments. This Congress, I am working with Chairman Comer's staff to reintroduce this bill, and I look forward to continuing the Committee's bipartisan commitment to ensuring a more equitable and customer-friendly federal government.

I look forward to working with my colleagues in Congress and the Biden Administration to continue consistent and steady oversight in this area to develop effective solutions to these high-risk areas. I thank GAO for this report and look forward to hearing more from my good friend Mr. Dodaro.