



A REPORTER'S GUIDE TO  
**GAO**




OFFICE OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS  
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*About the artwork in this brochure:*

The design of this brochure uses artwork from GAO's headquarters in Washington, D.C. Opened in 1951, the GAO Building is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The granite bas-reliefs, seen on the cover and the inside text, flank GAO's G Street entrance and depict workers from various American industries. They were modeled in 1951 by sculptor Joseph Kiselewski (1901-1988), whose major work includes portraits of famous lawgivers in the House Chamber at the U.S. Capitol and the George Rogers Clark Memorial in Vincennes, Indiana. He is also known for his design of the Good Conduct Medal awarded to U.S. troops during World War II. The aluminum panels, which adorn the elevator lobbies of the GAO Building, are by Heinz Warneke (1895-1983), a German-American artist whose work can be seen at Washington's National Cathedral and many government buildings and universities. The panels take as their theme both weather and scientific fields, such as geology and astronomy.





# GAO:

## AN INTRODUCTION

*Evaluating public programs that define our times and shape our lives is the daily work of the U.S. General Accounting Office. Established in 1921, GAO is an independent, nonpartisan agency in the legislative branch. It's commonly called the “investigative arm of Congress” or the “congressional watchdog” because it examines how taxpayer dollars are spent and advises lawmakers and agency heads on ways to make government more effective and responsive.*





Over the years, GAO has earned a reputation for providing Congress with the best information available to help it make informed policy decisions — information that is accurate, timely, fair, and balanced. GAO supports congressional oversight by:



reporting on how government programs and policies are working,



auditing agency operations to determine whether federal funds are being spent efficiently and effectively,



investigating allegations of illegal and improper activities, and



issuing legal decisions and opinions.

GAO's primary mission is to serve Congress, but GAO also serves the American people by making the federal government work better. To keep



taxpayers advised of its work, GAO relies heavily on the news media to report the agency's findings and recommendations. This is why GAO's policy accommodates the needs of the press as fully as possible.

Headquartered in Washington, D.C., GAO has offices in several major cities across the country. The agency is headed by the Comptroller General of the United States, who is appointed to a 15-year term by the President from candidates proposed by a bipartisan and bicameral congressional commission. The President's choice is confirmed by the Senate. David M. Walker, the current Comptroller General, took office in November 1998. The long tenure of the office gives GAO a continuity of leadership and independence that is rare within government. GAO's independence is further safeguarded by the fact that its workforce is comprised of career employees hired on the basis of knowledge, skill, and ability.



Long gone are the days of “accountants in green eyeshades” poring over stacks of government vouchers and receipts. Today, GAO plays a far broader and more diverse role, examining virtually every federal program, activity, and policy, as well as institutions that rely on federal funds or policy. GAO's more than 3,200 employees include specialists in fields ranging from weapons procurement to welfare, banking to budgeting, farm policy to foreign policy, and energy to the environment. Since 1986, GAO has maintained a team of professional investigators, many with law enforcement backgrounds, to look into allegations of possible criminal and civil misconduct.

Every GAO report, no matter what its subject, reflects three core values: accountability, integrity, and reliability. To that end, the agency operates under strict professional standards of review and referencing; all facts and analyses presented in GAO work are thoroughly documented for accuracy.



GAO also strives to stay on the cutting edge of emerging issues: the changing security threats in a post-Cold War world, the aging of the American workforce, the impact of globalization on the U.S. economy, the use of information technology to improve government services. National issues with local impact, such as land use policy, deteriorating infrastructure, and public health, also get considerable attention from GAO.

Each year, GAO's work translates into a wide range of legislative actions, improvements in government operations, and billions of dollars in financial benefits for taxpayers.



# GAO<sub>as a</sub> RESOURCE

*You're covering a breaking story on a new weapons system and recall that GAO did a report a while back on that subject. Or perhaps you're awaiting the release of a much anticipated GAO study on the securities industry. Or maybe you'd like to speak to GAO staff with expertise on aviation safety, Medicare, or the criminal justice system.*





GAO can be a valuable information resource. Here are some suggestions on how to access and keep abreast of the latest GAO work.

## *Congressional Reports and Testimony*

GAO's written products — reports, testimony, and correspondence — are made available to the public and the press. With virtually the entire federal government subject to its review, GAO turns out a steady stream of findings, conclusions, and recommendations. Each year, it issues about 1,000 reports and testifies hundreds of times before dozens of congressional committees.

As a result of growing congressional recognition of the agency's diverse skills, most GAO work is now done at the request of committees or individual legislators. Congressional requesters of GAO reports may be given up to 30 days to release the reports once they are sent to the Hill. GAO does not control the release of these reports during this period of restriction. Requesters may choose to release a report in various ways. They may, for

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example, hold a press conference in their state or district, release it to the House or Senate press galleries or to selected media, or use it as the basis for congressional hearings.

In addition to congressional requests, GAO responds to congressional mandates included in public laws or committee reports. These products are made available upon publication, without a period of restriction.

Once reports are publicly released, GAO makes every effort to promptly post the full-text files on its web site ([www.gao.gov](http://www.gao.gov)) and alert the press to their availability. Although GAO does not issue press releases, the agency sends a daily list of issued reports and testimony to various wire services, including AP and Reuters, which include them on their daybooks. Individual reporters can arrange to have GAO e-mail this list, known as “Today's Reports,” to them every afternoon.



The Office of Public Affairs also tries to alert Washington news bureaus to reports having significant national interest. Bureaus mainly serving regional and local media are notified of reports having immediate news value and a particular geographic focus.

Copies of testimony are available upon delivery at congressional hearings or they may be downloaded from GAO's web site that same day. GAO itself does not provide testimony in advance, even on an embargoed basis.

### *Special Publications*

GAO occasionally issues special publications. For example, the agency periodically updates its *High-Risk Series* — a list of government programs vulnerable to waste, fraud, abuse, and mismanagement. The biannual *Performance and Accountability Series* documents challenges faced by individual agencies and by government as a whole. GAO also pub-



lishes an annual accountability report on its own operations.

Special publications are available to the press on GAO's web site as soon as copies have been delivered to pertinent congressional committees and agency officials.

### *Legal Publications*

GAO provides various legal services to Congress. The Office of the General Counsel issues legal decisions and opinions on the use of federal funds and other matters, reports on major rules issued by federal agencies, and bid protest decisions that resolve challenges to government contract awards. You can find all these documents on GAO's web site.







# TIPS

*on how to follow*  
GAO'S WORK

## *The Internet*

*The fastest and most efficient way for you to obtain copies of GAO documents is through the Internet. GAO's web site ([www.gao.gov](http://www.gao.gov)) contains summaries and full-text files of current reports and testimony and an expanding archive of older products. GAO posts full-text files on its web site daily, often within 24 hours of when a report or testimony is publicly released. The web site features a search engine that allows you to locate documents using key words and phrases. In those rare instances when a document isn't available in electronic format, you can always order a copy by calling the Office of Public Affairs at (202) 512-4800.*



To keep up to date on the latest GAO study, click on "Today's Reports," a daily list (title and document number) of issued reports, testimony, and correspondence that GAO updates on its web site every afternoon. You can also arrange to have GAO e-mail "Today's Reports" to you free of charge. Just go to our home page and fill out the easy-to-use electronic order form found under "To Order GAO Products."

The *Month in Review*, available on GAO's web site, provides the best overall picture of the agency's work. This publication is a comprehensive listing of released reports and testimony, which are briefly summarized and grouped under subject headings, and correspondence and legal publications. GAO also issues in electronic format an *Annual Index*, which contains summaries of all reports, testimony, and correspondence issued during a given fiscal year (October 1 to September 30).

The web site also contains several features that provide helpful background about the agency. For



example, “GAO at a Glance” is a just-the-facts point sheet on the agency's staffing, budget, and key performance measures, while “The Background and History of GAO” gives a thumbnail sketch of GAO's evolving role since its creation in 1921.

### *GAO Staff*

Agency policy calls for subject area specialists to be directly accessible to the press. Reports include the names and telephone numbers of key staff who developed them, which expedites answering such routine questions as why a certain approach was used to analyze a problem or how complex data should be interpreted.

Although knowledgeable staff are expected to answer press questions about released reports as accurately, factually, and promptly as possible — and to provide helpful information of a general nature — GAO staff won't speculate or go beyond the bounds of what is published in reports. Moreover, staff will neither discuss “leaked” reports that





have not been officially released by GAO nor comment on unfinished work. A job is not considered complete until a final report is released.

Senior officials who have broad knowledge of the larger issues surrounding particular reports and testimony are often available for interviews. Requests for broadcast interviews — radio, television, and Internet — should be made to the Office of Public Affairs. Because of GAO's organizational structure, most senior officials are located in headquarters, and on-camera interviews usually must originate in Washington.

## *The Office of Public Affairs*

The Office of Public Affairs staff is dedicated to helping the press make the best use of GAO as an information resource. Whether you're seeking a specific report or testimony, gathering background information on a subject, or looking for the ideal person in GAO to answer a question, we can help you find what you're after.



We'll make every effort to identify and get you copies of specific reports and testimony; however, limited resources do not permit extensive, in-depth research on a demand basis. There may be delays in obtaining copies of older documents.

Copies of documents requested through the Office of Public Affairs are sent first-class mail, or they can be sent by Federal Express and billed to your account. If you're under a tight deadline, the Office can fax you the executive summary found in many GAO reports — four or five pages that describe the report's major findings and recommendations.

Arrangements can also be made for you or your messenger to pick up copies of reports from GAO between 8:30 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. Staff are available to take telephone calls until 5:30 p.m. eastern time. After hours, our voice mail system provides phone numbers you can call to receive assistance.





*Don't hesitate to call us if you think  
we can help.*

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