Cross-Agency Collaborations: Implementing Interagency Collaborative Groups

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Why Collaborate?

- Many of the results the federal government seeks to achieve require the coordinated efforts of more than one federal agency, level of government or sector, in areas such as:
  - Protecting the nation's critical information systems;
  - Responding to public health emergencies;
  - Ensuring food safety; and
  - Better managing the risks of climate change.

- Collaboration can be broadly defined as any joint activity that is intended to produce more public value than could be produced when organizations act alone.

Examples of Governance Mechanisms Used for Interagency Collaboration

- **Collaboration Structures within the Executive Office of the President:** Permanent or temporary groups that are sometimes referred to as task forces, councils, commissions, committees, or working groups.

- **Interagency Groups:** These groups can be lead by agency and department heads or by component and program-level staff, and can be referred to as task forces, working groups, councils, and committees.

- **Specially Created Interagency Offices:** An office with its own authority and resources with responsibility to cover a policy area that crosses a number of separate agencies and departments.

- **Collaboration Technologies:** Tools, such as shared databases and web portals, that facilitate collaboration.

Key Features and Considerations for Implementing Collaborative Mechanisms

Key features		Key considerations
	Outcomes and accountability	Have short-term and long-term outcomes been clearly defined? Is there a way to track and monitor their progress?
	Bridging organizational cultures	What are the missions and organizational cultures of the participating agencies? Have agencies agreed on common terminology and definitions?
	Leadership	How will leadership be sustained over the long-term? If leadership is shared, have roles and responsibilities been clearly identified and agreed upon?
	Clarity of roles and responsibilities	Have participating agencies clarified roles and responsibilities?
	Participants	Have all relevant participants been included? Do they have the ability to commit resources for their agency?
	Resources	How will the collaborative mechanism be funded and staffed? Have online collaboration tools been developed?
	Written guidance and agreements	If appropriate, have participating agencies documented their agreement regarding how they will be collaborating? Have they developed ways to continually update and monitor these agreements?

Source: GAO.

Implementation Approaches to Enhance Collaboration in Interagency Groups

- GAO found that federal agencies frequently use **interagency groups**, such as interagency working groups and task forces, to accomplish interagency outcomes.

- GAO determined that these groups face challenges in the following areas:
  - **Outcomes**—Defining short-term and long-term outcomes
  - **Accountability**—Tracking and monitoring progress
  - **Leadership**—Leadership roles and responsibilities
  - **Resources**—Funding, staffing and technology

Selected Interagency Groups

- GAO selected four interagency groups that addressed our leading collaboration practices to learn about approaches they used and found to be successful.

  - **Departments of Defense and Education MOU Working Group**—the education of military dependent students;
  - **Federal Interagency Reentry Council**—the reentry of former inmates into society;
  - **Rental Policy Working Group**—rental housing policy; and
  - **U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness**—homelessness issues.

Implementation Approaches—Outcomes

- Started group with most directly affected participants and gradually broadened to others.

- Conducted early outreach to participants and stakeholders to identified shared interests.

- Held early in-person meetings to build relationships and trust.

- Identified early wins for the group to accomplish.

- Developed outcomes that represent the collective interests of the participants.

- Developed a plan to communicate outcomes and track progress.

- Revisited outcomes and refreshed interagency group.

Implementation Approaches—Accountability

- Developed performance measures and ties them to shared outcomes.

- Identified and shared relevant agency performance data.

- Developed methods to report on the group's progress that are open and transparent.

- Incorporated interagency group activities into individual performance expectations.

Implementation Approaches—Leadership

- Designated group leaders exhibited collaboration competencies.

- Ensured participation for high-level leaders in regular, in-person groups meeting and activities.

- Rotated key tasks and responsibilities when leadership of the group was shared.

- Established clear and inclusive procedures for leading the group during initial meetings.

- Distributed leadership responsibility for group activities among participants.

Implementation Approaches—Resources

- Created an inventory of resources dedicated towards interagency outcomes.

- Leveraged related agency resources towards the group's outcomes.

- Pilot tested new collaborative ideas, programs or policies before investing resources.

Key Takeaways

- Driving progress in important and complex areas facing the government increasingly involves effective coordination and collaboration between federal agencies; levels of government and sectors.

- Despite the type of collaborative mechanism that exists, such as an interagency working group or task force, GAO has found that certain leading practices must be in place for collaboration to be effective.

- GAO found that there have been effective cross-agency groups who shared the approaches they adopted and found to be successful.

Related GAO Products

- *Managing for Results: OMB Improved Implementation of Cross-Agency Priority Goals, But Could Be More Transparent About Measuring Progress http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-16-509*

- *Managing for Results: Implementation Approaches Used to Enhance Collaboration in Interagency Groups http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-14-220*

- *Managing for Results: Key Considerations for Implementing Interagency Collaborative Mechanisms http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-12-1022*

- *Results-Oriented Government: Practices That Can Help Enhance and Sustain Collaboration Among Federal Agencies http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-06-15*

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