Federal Programs: Approaches to Help Create a Useful Inventory

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The executive branch has an opportunity to create an inventory of programs that can help decision makers and the public better understand what the government does and what it achieves with federal funds. This is a complex undertaking—and our body of work and recommendations can help.

The Big Picture

The federal government spends trillions of dollars on federal programs that support the American people and address policy goals. However, it does not have an inventory of these programs, despite requirements since 2011 to develop and annually update one on a publicly available website.

What exactly is a federal program and how many are there? The answers vary across the federal government—and can be based on organizational structure, funding authority, and other characteristics. This lack of a common definition—or at least a way to collect and present comparable information for programs that are defined differently—has hindered past efforts to develop an inventory.

A comprehensive listing of programs, along with related funding and performance information, would help federal decision makers and the public better understand what the government does, what it spends, and what it achieves each year.
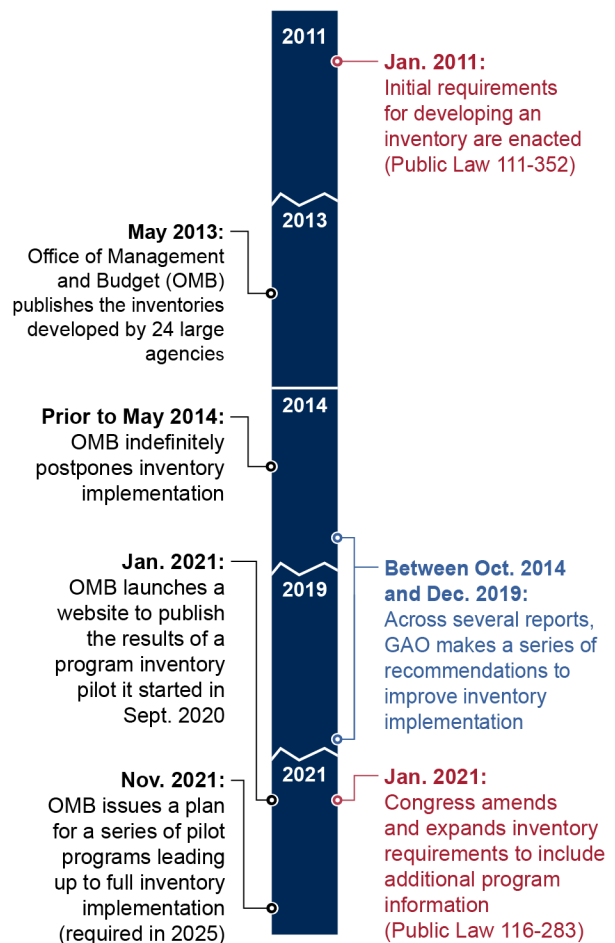
What GAO's Work Shows

Since 2014, we have made 12 recommendations to help the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) effectively plan for and create a program inventory that provides complete, comparable, and useful information.

Recent OMB efforts demonstrate progress toward these recommendations. For example, OMB published a program inventory implementation plan in November 2021.

The plan identifies a series of pilot programs to test different approaches to identifying federal programs and related information, leading up to full inventory implementation (required by statute in 2025).

OMB's plan fully addressed one of our past recommendations. The plan incorporated a systematic approach for developing a useful inventory, identified by our past work. If OMB effectively implements its plan, it could demonstrate progress toward our remaining 11 recommendations.

Key Program Inventory Milestones and Actions

2011

Jan. 2011: Initial requirements for developing an inventory are enacted (Public Law 111-352)

May 2013: Office of Management and Budget (OMB) publishes the inventories developed by 24 large agencies

2013

2014

Prior to May 2014: OMB indefinitely postpones inventory implementation

Jan. 2021: OMB launches a website to publish the results of a program inventory pilot it started in Sept. 2020

2019

Between Oct. 2014 and Dec. 2019: Across several reports, GAO makes a series of recommendations to improve inventory implementation

Nov. 2021: OMB issues a plan for a series of pilot programs leading up to full inventory implementation (required in 2025)

2021

Jan. 2021: Congress amends and expands inventory requirements to include additional program information (Public Law 116-283)

● Executive branch actions ○ Legislative actions ○ GAO recommendations

Source: GAO. | GAO-23-106272

Beyond our inventory-related recommendations, our past work has identified various practices that could also help ensure OMB's planning and implementation efforts are successful.

Sustaining leadership and stakeholder involvement

Our past work has found that the sustained commitment and direct involvement of leaders, along with early and frequent engagement of a range of stakeholders, are critical to the success of federal efforts. This is especially true for developing an inventory that encompasses all federal programs. Practices for specific stakeholder groups include those related to:

- Consulting with **Congress**, given its power to create and fund federal programs and activities;

- Leveraging the expertise and resources from (1) **federal agencies and officials** through collaborative mechanisms such as working groups, and (2) **individuals and organizations outside the federal government** using various tools and approaches collectively known as open innovation (e.g., open dialogues and idea generation); and

- Identifying and meeting the expectations and needs of **users**.

Identifying programs

Since 2011, we have issued annual reports assessing federal programs for potential fragmentation, overlap, or duplication. As part of that work, we developed a guide in 2015 for conducting those assessments. This guide includes different approaches for identifying programs, such as through the benefits, services, or products they deliver.

Designing effective pilot programs

In 2016, we identified five practices, including defining criteria to determine whether, how, and when to more broadly implement the approach being tested by a pilot program. Statutory requirements enacted in 2021 directed OMB to ensure its implementation plan reflects best practices for effective pilot programs.

Ensuring data governance and transparency

We have identified a governance framework to ensure effective data management, along with practices to collect and present federal program data on a publicly available website.

5 Practices for Transparently Reporting Open Government Data

Provide Free & Unrestricted Data | Engage with Users | Provide Data in Useful Formats | Fully Describe the Data and Any Limitations | Facilitate Data Discovery for All Users

Source: GAO. | GAO-23-106272

Challenges and Opportunities

Given the size and scope of the federal government, developing a complete inventory of federal programs is a complex undertaking.

OMB's plan lays out an iterative approach, using pilot programs, to identify lessons learned and incorporate them into subsequent efforts to implement a complete inventory.

We plan to continue to monitor these efforts and provide periodic assessments to Congress.