

GPRA Overview

GPRA: Background Information

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WHAT IS GPRA?

The [Government Performance and Results Act](#), passed in 1993, was initiated by GOP legislators, but received broad bipartisan support including that of the Clinton Administration. GPRA addressed a broad range of concerns about government accountability and performance. Its goals were to improve the confidence of Americans in federal government, focus on the actual results of government activity and services, support congressional oversight and decision-making, and improve the managerial and internal workings of agencies within the federal government. While GPRA has followed on the heels of a number of efforts throughout the past fifty years to improve the workings of the federal government, GPRA is unique in its requirement that agency "results" be integrated into the budgetary decision-making process. GPRA can also be distinguished from prior reform attempts because it is taking place in a climate of increased political emphasis on "downsizing" and "reinventing" federal government, devolution of federal activities to states, and the privatization of many federal government activities. Finally, rather than other reforms that were primarily Executive Branch initiatives, GPRA is statutory; its performance measurement requirements are law.

WHO IS SUBJECT TO GPRA REQUIREMENTS?

All agencies of the federal government, defined as cabinet departments and other concerns of the government, including independent agencies and government corporations, are bound by GPRA. Excluded are the Legislative and Judicial Branches, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Panama Canal Commission, and the Postal Rate Commission. The Postal Service has separate GPRA requirements.

WHAT DOES GPRA INVOLVE?

Although passed in 1993, actual GPRA requirements began in 1997, and the full cycle will not be completed until March 2000. GPRA requires agencies to complete three plans. The following describes the timing and content of each plan. It also notes the opportunities for stakeholder comment and public accessibility of the

plans and report.

1. STRATEGIC PLAN

- Timing: The first strategic plans were due September 30, 1997. They cover the fiscal year in which they are submitted and at least five years following that fiscal year. The strategic plan is only current, however, for three years, requiring revision at that time, and it may be revised at any time. The next submission of strategic plans is due on September 29, 2000.
- Content: The strategic plan is intended to be the framework for the subsequent plans. It must include a comprehensive mission statement; a description of general goals and objectives and how these will be achieved; identification of key factors that could affect achievement of the general goals and objectives; and a description of program evaluations used and a schedule of future evaluations.
- Outside consultation: In developing its strategic plan, agencies are required to consult with Congress and to solicit and consider the views and suggestions of other stakeholders and customers who are potentially affected by its plan. Most agencies have posted their strategic plans on their website.

2. PERFORMANCE PLAN

- Timing: The first performance plans were released in February 1998, with the President's budget. The second performance plans were released in February, 1999. The performance plans are to be done on a yearly basis, covering the agency's fiscal year (normally, October 1 through September 30). Each yearly plan is to reflect performance based on the budgetary resources for that year.
- Content: Performance plans are submitted with an agency's budget request in September. A revised plan is then prepared to reflect the President's budget. These plans are to be linked with the strategic plan currently in effect, providing detailed and year-specific content based on the broader strategic plan. The performance plan must include the performance goals and indicators for the fiscal year; a description of the processes and skills, and the technology, human, and capital information or other resources that will be needed to meet the goals; and a description of how the results will be verified and validated.

The performance plan is to be linked to the budget-the goals must be based on the funding that is expected to be available to reach those targets. Performance goals and indicators are to be expressed in an objective and quantifiable manner, although agencies may request an alternative form, such as contrasting descriptions of a minimally effective program vs. as successful program -as long as it allows an accurate and independent determination. The goals, as much as possible, are to be expressed as "outcomes," supplemented by "outputs." In other words, rather than a goal of answering a percentage of telephone information requests within five minutes, an output goal, the agency should focus on its success in actually providing useful information, an outcome. In addition to goals related to providing outside services and activities to the general public, agencies are also supposed to include internal goals.

- Outside consultation: There is no requirement that stakeholders be consulted during the preparation of the performance plan. In fact, the initial plan, submitted to OMB with the agency budget request, is "privileged material" and cannot be released. The performance plan is "an inherently governmental function," and only federal employees are supposed to actually prepare it. The agency can receive assistance from consultants, contractors, or States (but must disclose the nature and extent of that assistance). Once the budget has been released, performance plans become public information and most agencies have posted their performance plans on their website.

3. PERFORMANCE REPORT

- Timing: The first performance report is due March 31, 2000. Reports will then be prepared on an annual basis thereafter. The performance report due in March, 2000, is to cover the preceding year. The performance report due in March, 2001 must cover the preceding two years. Thereafter, the yearly performance reports are to cover the preceding three years.
- Content: The report must review the success of achieving the previous year's performance goals; evaluate the performance plan for the current year in light of last year's successes or failures; provide explanations for failures to meet goals; and include summaries of program evaluations completed during the preceding year.
- These reports are considered to be results of "inherently governmental functions" and, as such, they are

to be prepared only by federal employees. Because they are connected with the federal budget, GPRA performance reports cannot be released publicly prior to official transmittal of the budget to Congress. However, when the budget is released, the performance report will be available, and could be a valuable resource to nonprofits.

In addition to the individual agency plans, a Government Wide Performance Plan created from agency strategic and performance plans is required to be made part of the President's yearly budget submissions.

WHY THE GOVERNMENT PERFORMANCE AND RESULTS ACT IS IMPORTANT TO NONPROFITS

Findings from OMB Watch's previous study, *Measuring the Measurers*, indicated that involvement with GPRA implementation by nonprofits has not been extensive. Given limitations on agency resources to conduct this outreach; indications that many nonprofits are not familiar with nor particularly interested in GPRA; and the likelihood that nonprofits may have a different perspective on an agency's mission and goals than other stakeholders, like Congress or business interests; it is not surprising that this effort has not been a particularly valuable exercise in many cases. At the same time, it is the particular perspective that nonprofits bring to agency activities that makes it important for nonprofits to have a voice. Following are a few reasons why GPRA is important.

- In the strategic planning process, agencies are required to consult with Congress and to solicit and consider the views and suggestions of other entities, including customers and other stakeholders who are potentially affected by or interested in their strategic plans. This is the only report that requires outside consultation. Nonprofits, as "stakeholders" in agency activities, can and should be part of this process. This consultation process provides an opportunity for nonprofits to play a part in formulating an agency's mission and goals. However, agencies have been more or less diligent about soliciting views and suggestions from stakeholders, so this is an area where nonprofits could usefully show more interest and actively request to become part of the strategic planning process. GPRA offers a mechanism where nonprofits can actually participate in shaping an agency's mission to better reflect the needs it should be meeting, but it will take the active participation of nonprofits.
- Nonprofits are often in the position of representing large numbers of low-income or disadvantaged Americans who otherwise have little or no voice in the administration of government programs. The mission and goals of agencies of the federal government are not politically neutral. Stakeholders represent different interests. Congress may have one idea of purpose and objectives, business another, state and private grantees, yet another. For instance, is the Forest Service supposed to be in the business of timber sales or enhancing recreational opportunities? Is the goal of family assistance to lift people out of poverty or to reduce the number of people receiving welfare benefits? Should success in the reduction of drug abuse be measured in terms of treatment or interdiction? Nonprofits can play a role in defining agency missions and goals to better reflect the needs of the people they serve, who often do not have powerful means to influence government.
- All plans produced by agencies (except for the performance plan and report at their initial stages) are a matter of public record; so nonprofits can access agency plans. Most are published on the Internet. This access can provide valuable information to nonprofits about the goals and indicators agencies are proposing to use in determining the focus of their activities. Nonprofits could become involved with making sure the goals, the measures, and the indicators of success are useful and valuable.
- Many nonprofits act as grantees for federal government programs. As agencies are required to set goals, provide data to support the accomplishment of those goals, and indicate results, many nonprofits will likely be subject to performance measurement as part of the grant requirements.
- Since GPRA requires the performance report to be directly linked to the agency's budget request, GPRA could be a tool for decreasing or increasing an agency's budget. This should be a powerful incentive for nonprofits to pay attention to GPRA, since it could directly affect the funding that an agency receives.

THE GOVERNMENT PERFORMANCE AND RESULTS ACT ISSUES

The following list of issues surrounding GPRA is not inclusive, but a starting point for thinking about GPRA by nonprofits.

- Arguably, the real meat and potatoes of GPRA is the performance plan, which lists the indicators by which success will be measured. If the measures are not carefully chosen or the indicators are not designed to measure what they should, the result could be bad outcomes. Nonprofits ought to have input into the performance plan—the way the overlying mission and goals are translated into measurable results. According to GPRA, though, agencies must only consult with outside stakeholders in preparation of the strategic plan.
- It is often difficult to establish cause and effect. Can a positive result really be attributed to an agency? For instance, in the area of welfare reform, many commentators have suggested that a major reason for its "success" is the booming economic climate in the United States, not a function of the actual program. Outside influences may contribute to an outcome. Conversely, outside influences can also negate an agency's best efforts to achieve a goal. Many government programs are administered as block grants to States, and since States are not bound by GPRA, agencies are required to show results for activities over which they have little control. Some results are intangible or may have positive effects that were not anticipated or measured in terms of the service provided. For instance, providing breakfast to schoolchildren as a part of a nutrition program may also have a beneficial effect on children's learning ability. Providing health or education services may positively affect family stability, drug reduction, even such important but difficult to measure qualities like self-esteem. If these programs are measured strictly by the results they set out to achieve, some might even be "failures" while still providing important benefits.
- Some results will not be apparent for years. Efforts at restoring the health of the ecosystem don't fit clearly into yearly budget cycles. In research, getting results may require lots of seemingly wasted time of testing and discarding hypotheses before a result can be documented. In these situations, output measures might be necessary to show what an agency is doing to accomplish a goal, even if the outcomes will not be immediately evident. However, agencies have been strongly encouraged to focus on measurable outcomes.
- In many instances there is a lack of accurate and coherent data from which to begin to measure improvements. Without some kind of baseline, it is impossible to show improvement or even set a targeted goal.
- Within one large agency, there are a number of programs responsible for a variety of functions. Even more daunting, many government functions cross agencies.
- The budget process is highly politicized. Arguably, appropriation and authorization decisions are based more on political considerations and well-funded interest group influence than the agency justification of its efforts. One recurring viewpoint is that Congress will only use GPRA as a means for punishing agencies and not in the more constructive ways envisioned by the Act.

PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT LINGO

MISSION STATEMENT

A broad summary of the purpose of an organization. For instance, the EPA's mission is "to protect human health and to safeguard the natural environment—air, water, and land—upon which life depends."

GOALS/OBJECTIVES

More specific aims flowing from the mission statement. For instance, the EPA has ten strategic, long-term

goals, including clean air; clean and safe water; safe food; preventing pollution and reducing risk; better waste management; reduction of global and cross-border environmental risks; and expansion of Americans' RTK about their environment.

OUTCOMES (OR RESULTS)

Actual changes in the population or problem targeted by a program. For instance, an EPA outcome would be insuring that all Americans have drinking water that is clean and safe to drink. GPRA emphasizes the use of outcome measures over output (see below) measures. An outcome is an evaluation of what actually got accomplished.

OUTCOME (OR PERFORMANCE) INDICATORS (OR MEASURES)

The data that is chosen to determine what was actually achieved-what results were accomplished. For instance, "no violations of any federally-enforceable health-based standards that were in place in 1994" in community water systems is a gauge of the result that all Americans have clean and safe drinking water.

OUTPUTS

The specific activities that are performed to accomplish a goal. For instance, providing low-interest loans to help municipalities meet the requirements of the Safe Drinking Water Act. This is an effort to accomplish the outcome, but it doesn't represent a measurable "result" in clean drinking water. An output is a description of a process or an activity meant to achieve a result.

TARGET

Establishing a goal within a possible range of outcomes. For instance, setting a target of 50 states that are conducting or have completed unified watershed assessments.

BENCHMARKING

Establishing a comparative goal in relation to past performance or to the performance of others. For instance, in 1999, 89% of the population served by community water systems will receive clean and safe drinking water, up from 83% in 1994. This requires baseline data-like "in 1994, 83% of the population served by community water systems had drinking water which met all health-based standard."