



Testimony
Before the Committee on Indian Affairs,
U.S. Senate

For Release on Delivery
Expected at 2:30 p.m. ET
Tuesday, March 12, 2019

HIGH RISK

Progress Made but Continued Attention Needed to Address Management Weaknesses at Federal Agencies Serving Indian Tribes

Statement of Jessica Farb, Director, Health Care

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-19-445T](#), a testimony before the Committee on Indian Affairs, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

GAO's High-Risk List identifies federal program areas that are high risk due to their vulnerability to mismanagement, among other things. GAO added the federal management of programs that serve Indian tribes and their members to its February 2017 biennial update of high-risk areas in response to management weaknesses at Interior and HHS. GAO's recommendations identified in this high-risk area are neither reflective of the performance of programs administered by tribes nor directed at any tribally operated programs and activities.

This testimony, which is based on GAO's March 2019 High Risk report, provides examples of actions taken and progress made by these agencies to address the five criteria GAO uses for determining whether to remove a high-risk designation. For this statement, GAO also drew on findings from its reports issued from September 2011 through August 2018 and updated that work by reviewing agency documentation and interviewing agency officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO has made more than 50 recommendations related to this high-risk area to improve management weaknesses at some Interior and HHS agencies—specifically BIE, BIA, and IHS—of which 31 recommendations are still open. Sustained focus by Interior and HHS in fully implementing these recommendations and continued oversight by Congress are essential to achieving progress in these areas.

View [GAO-19-445T](#). For more information, contact Jessica Farb at (202) 512-7114 or farbj@gao.gov.

March 12, 2019

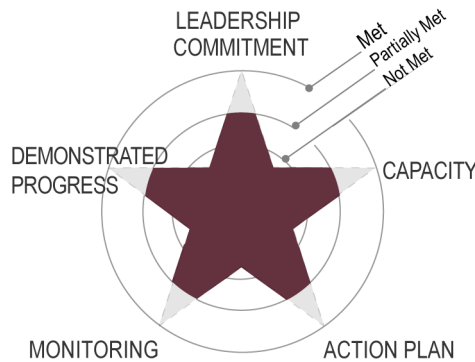
HIGH RISK

Progress Made but Continued Attention Needed to Address Management Weaknesses at Federal Agencies Serving Indian Tribes

What GAO Found

GAO designated the federal management of programs that serve tribes and their members as high risk in 2017. Officials from the Department of the Interior's Office of the Assistant Secretary-Indian Affairs (Indian Affairs), the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE), the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), and the Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) Indian Health Service (IHS) have expressed their commitment to addressing the issues that led to the designation. Since GAO last testified before this committee on June 13, 2018, Indian Affairs, BIE, BIA, and IHS have demonstrated progress to partially meet each of the five criteria for removing a high-risk designation (leadership commitment, capacity, action plan, monitoring, and demonstrated progress).

Improving Federal Management of Programs That Serve Tribes and Their Members



Source: GAO analysis. | GAO-19-445T

However, additional progress is needed to fully address management weaknesses—particularly in the areas of retaining permanent leadership and a sufficient workforce. For example, to meet the capacity criterion, an agency needs to demonstrate that it has the capacity (i.e., people and other resources) to resolve its management weaknesses. While Indian Affairs, BIE, BIA, and IHS each made progress identifying capacity and resources to partially meet this criterion, BIE and IHS continue to face significant workforce challenges. Specifically, although BIE has conducted hiring in recent years as part of an effort to reorganize the bureau, about 50 percent of all BIE positions have not been filled according to recent BIE documentation. IHS also faces workforce challenges—GAO's August 2018 report found that IHS's overall vacancy rate for clinical care providers was 25 percent.

GAO has identified varying levels of progress at the agencies in understanding what they need to do to be removed from the list and will continue to closely monitor their progress.

Chairman Hoeven, Vice Chairman Udall, and Members of the Committee:

I am pleased to be here today to discuss the status of actions by the Departments of the Interior (Interior) and Health and Human Services (HHS) to address issues that led to the high-risk designation we made related to the federal management of programs that serve tribes and their members. We added this area to our High-Risk List in February 2017 because of our concern about the ability of agencies within these departments to manage (1) education and health care programs that serve tribes and their members and (2) Indian energy resources.¹ In particular, our prior work found numerous weaknesses in how Interior’s Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) and Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA)—under the office of the Assistant Secretary- Indian Affairs (Indian Affairs)—managed education and energy resources and how HHS’s Indian Health Service (IHS) managed health care services. We reported that these management weaknesses jeopardized the health and safety of American Indians served by these programs and limited opportunities for tribes and their members to use energy resources to create economic benefits and improve the well-being of their communities. We expressed continued concerns about challenges faced by these agencies in our 2019 High-Risk Report.²

In 2016, Congress found in the Indian Trust Asset Reform Act that “through treaties, statutes, and historical relations with Indian tribes, the United States has undertaken a unique trust responsibility to protect and support Indian tribes and Indians.”³ As further stated in that act, the fiduciary responsibilities of the United States to Indians arise in part from commitments made in treaties and agreements, in exchange for which Indians surrendered claims to vast tracts of land. The act notes that this history of federal-tribal relations and understandings has benefitted the people of the United States and established “enduring and enforceable [f]ederal obligations to which the national honor has been committed.” Agencies can improve the efficiency of federal programs under which services are provided to tribes and their members by making improvements to their management and oversight of such programs.

¹GAO, *High-Risk Series: Progress on Many High-Risk Areas, While Substantial Efforts Needed on Others*, [GAO-17-317](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 15, 2017).

²GAO, *High-Risk Series: Substantial Efforts Needed to Achieve Greater Progress on High-Risk Areas*, [GAO-19-157SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 6, 2019).

³Pub. L. No. 114-178, § 101, 130 Stat. 432 (2016)(codified at 25 U.S.C. § 5601).

Such improvements would be consistent with the expressed view of Congress as to the federal government's trust responsibilities and would strengthen confidence in the performance and accountability of the federal government.

The focus of this high-risk area is on management weaknesses within federal agencies that administer programs that serve tribes and their members. However, not all federal programs are administered by federal agencies. In accordance with federal Indian policy that recognizes the right of Indian tribes to self-government and that supports tribal self-determination, a number of tribes have elected to take over the administration of certain federal programs and services from BIA, BIE, and IHS. Our recommendations identified in the high-risk area are neither reflective of the performance of programs administered by tribes nor directed at any tribally operated programs and activities.

When we added the federal management of programs that serve tribes and their members to our High-Risk List in February 2017, we cited 39 open recommendations related to this high-risk area. Since then, we added 13 recommendations in two new reports on BIE school safety and construction, and a report on IHS provider vacancy rates.⁴ Overall, as of March 2019, 31 recommendations remain open.

My statement today, which is largely based on our March 2019 *High-Risk Series: Substantial Efforts Needed to Achieve Greater Progress on High-Risk Areas*, will address actions taken and progress made by these agencies to address the five criteria we use for determining whether to remove a high-risk designation (leadership commitment, capacity, action plan, monitoring, and demonstrated progress). For this statement, we also drew on findings from our reports issued from September 2011 through August 2018 and updated that work by reviewing agency documentation and interviewing agency officials. To conduct our previously issued work on which this testimony draws, we reviewed relevant federal laws, regulations, and policies; reviewed agency documentation; and interviewed tribal, federal, and industry officials,

⁴See GAO, *Indian Affairs: Further Actions Needed to Improve Oversight and Accountability for School Safety Inspections*, [GAO-17-421](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 24, 2017); GAO, *Indian Affairs: Actions Needed to Better Manage Indian School Construction Projects*, [GAO-17-447](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 24, 2017); and GAO, *Indian Health Service: Agency Faces Ongoing Challenges Filling Provider Vacancies*, [GAO-18-580](#) (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 15, 2018).

among others. More detailed information on the scope and methodology of our work can be found in each of the reports cited in our High-Risk Series reports.⁵

We conducted the work on which this statement is based in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Background

Since 1990, generally every 2 years at the start of a new Congress, we call attention to agencies and program areas that are high risk due to their vulnerability to mismanagement or that are most in need of transformation.⁶ Our high-risk program is intended to help inform the congressional oversight agenda and to improve government performance. Since 1990, a total of 62 different areas have appeared on the High-Risk List. Of these, 26 areas have been removed, and 2 areas have been consolidated. On average, the high-risk areas that were removed from the list had been on it for 9 years after they were initially added.

Our experience with the High-Risk List over the past 29 years has shown that the key elements needed to make progress in high-risk areas are top-level attention by the administration and agency leaders grounded in the five criteria for removing high-risk designations, which we reported on in November 2000.⁷ When legislative and agency actions, including those in response to our recommendations, result in our finding significant progress toward resolving a high-risk problem, we will remove the high-risk designation. However, implementing our recommendations alone will not result in the removal of the designation, because the condition that led to the recommendations is symptomatic of systemic management weaknesses. In cases in which we remove the high-risk designation, we

⁵For a list of related reports, see [GAO-17-317](#) and [GAO-19-157SP](#).

⁶In our High-Risk List, we also call attention to agencies and program areas that are high risk due to fraud, waste, and abuse.

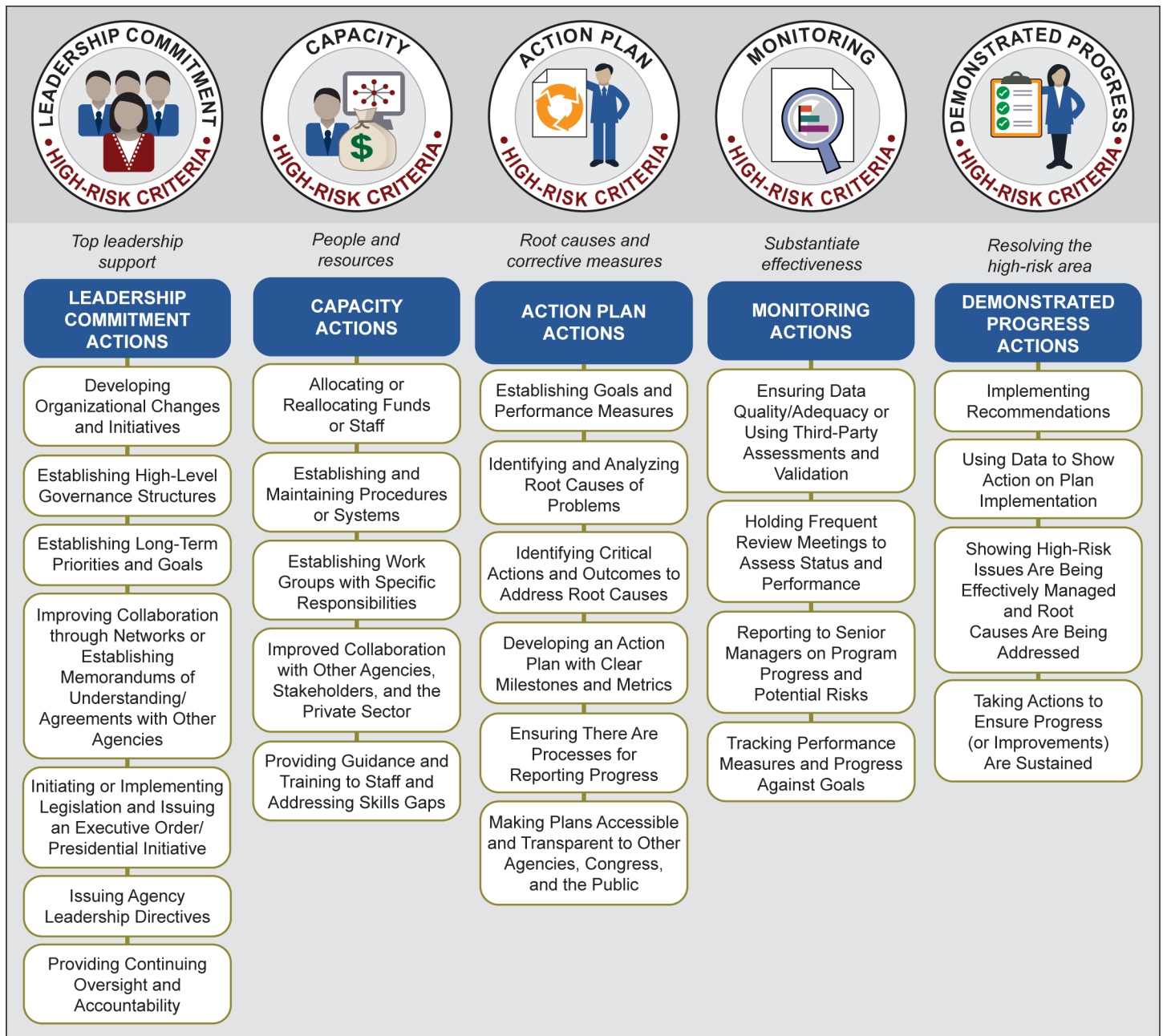
⁷GAO, *Determining Performance and Accountability Challenges and High Risks*, [GAO-01-159SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: November 2000).

continue to closely monitor the areas. If significant problems again arise, we will consider reapplying the high-risk designation. The five criteria for removing high-risk designations are as follows:

- **Leadership commitment.** Demonstrated strong commitment and top leadership support to address the risks.
- **Capacity.** Agency has the capacity (i.e., people and other resources) to resolve the risk(s).
- **Action plan.** A corrective action plan that defines the root causes, identifies solutions, and provides for substantially completing corrective measures in the near term, including steps necessary to implement solutions we recommended.
- **Monitoring.** A program has been instituted to monitor and independently validate the effectiveness and sustainability of corrective measures.
- **Demonstrated progress.** Ability to demonstrate progress in implementing corrective measures and in resolving the high-risk area.

These five criteria form a road map for efforts to improve and ultimately address high-risk issues. Addressing some of the criteria leads to progress, and satisfying all of the criteria is central to removal from the list. Figure 1 shows the five criteria for removal for a designated high-risk area and examples of agency actions leading to progress toward removal.

Figure 1: Criteria Agencies Must Meet Before High-Risk Designations Can Be Removed and Examples of Actions Leading to Progress toward Removal



Source: GAO. | GAO-19-445T

Importantly, the actions listed are not “stand alone” efforts taken in isolation of other actions to address high-risk issues. That is, actions taken under one criterion may be important to meeting other criteria as well. For example, top leadership can demonstrate its commitment by establishing a corrective action plan, including long-term priorities and goals to address the high-risk issue and by using data to gauge progress—actions that are also vital to addressing the action plan and monitoring criteria. When an agency meets all five of these criteria, we can remove the agency from the High-Risk List. We rate agency progress on the criteria using the following definitions:

- **Met.** Actions have been taken that meet the criterion. There are no significant actions that need to be taken to further address this criterion.
- **Partially met.** Some, but not all, actions necessary to meet the criterion have been taken.
- **Not met.** Few, if any, actions toward meeting the criterion have been taken.

Agencies Made Some Progress Addressing the Management Weaknesses That Led to the 2017 High-Risk Designation

Officials from Indian Affairs, BIE, BIA, and IHS expressed their commitment to addressing the issues that led to the high-risk designation for federal management of programs that serve tribes and their members. Since we last testified before this committee on June 13, 2018, we met with agency leaders and worked with each agency to identify actions the agencies took or plan to take to address the concerns that contributed to the designation.⁸ We determined that Indian Affairs, BIE, BIA, and IHS demonstrated some progress to partially meet each of the criteria for removing a high-risk designation. However, additional progress is needed for the agencies to fully address the criteria and related management weaknesses.

⁸GAO, *High Risk: Agencies Need to Continue Efforts to Address Management Weaknesses of Federal Programs Serving Indian Tribes*, [GAO-18-616T](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 13, 2018).

Overall Rating for Improving Federal Management of Programs That Serve Tribes and Their Members

As we reported in the March 2019 high-risk report, when we applied the five criteria for High-Risk List removal to each of the three segments—education, energy, and health care—we determined that Indian Affairs, BIE, BIA, and IHS have each demonstrated some progress. Overall, the agencies have partially met the leadership commitment, capacity, action plan, monitoring, and demonstrated progress criteria for the education, health care, and energy areas. However, the agencies continue to face challenges, particularly in retaining permanent leadership and a sufficient workforce.

Figure 2: Improving Federal Management of Programs That Serve Tribes and Their Members



Source: GAO analysis. | GAO-19-445T

The following is a summary of the progress that Indian Affairs, BIE, BIA, and IHS have made in addressing the five criteria for removal from the High-Risk List.

Leadership Commitment

To meet the leadership commitment criterion for removal of a high-risk designation, an agency needs to have demonstrated strong commitment and top leadership support to address management weaknesses. The following examples show actions Indian Affairs, BIE, BIA, and IHS took to partially meet the leadership commitment criterion.

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- **Education.** Indian Affairs' leaders have demonstrated commitment to addressing key weaknesses in the management of BIE schools in several ways. For example, the BIE Director formed an internal working group, convened meetings with other senior leaders within Indian Affairs, and publicly stated that his agency is committed to ensuring implementation of our recommendations on Indian education. In addition, the BIE Director and other Indian Affairs leaders and senior managers have met with us frequently to discuss outstanding recommendations, actions they have taken to address these recommendations, and additional actions they could take. We also met with the new Assistant Secretary-Indian Affairs, who expressed her commitment to supporting the agency's efforts to address weaknesses in the management of BIE schools. However, it is important that Indian Affairs leaders be able to sustain this level of commitment to solving problems in Indian education. Since 2012, there have been seven Assistant-Secretaries of Indian Affairs and five BIE Directors. There has also been leadership turnover in other key offices responsible for implementing our recommendations on Indian education. We have previously reported that leadership turnover hampered Indian Affairs' efforts to make improvements to Indian education.⁹ We believe that ensuring stable leadership and a sustained focus on needed changes is vital to the successful management of BIE schools.
 - **Energy.** BIA officials demonstrated leadership commitment by, among other things, meeting with us to discuss the agency's progress in addressing our recommendations. In June 2018, a permanent Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs was confirmed. This action provided an opportunity to improve Indian Affairs' oversight of federal actions associated with energy development. According to the BIA Acting Director and the Acting Director for Trust Services, BIA held a number of meetings with the Assistant Secretary to discuss agency action plans for our recommendations. However, BIA does not have a permanent Director, and BIA's Office of Trust Service—which has significant responsibility over Indian energy activities—does not have a permanent Director or Deputy Director. We have seen turnover in these leadership positions as officials have been brought in to temporarily fill these roles. As officials are brought in temporarily, previously identified plans and time frames for completing some

⁹GAO, *Indian Affairs: Better Management and Accountability Needed to Improve Indian Education*, [GAO-13-774](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 24, 2013).

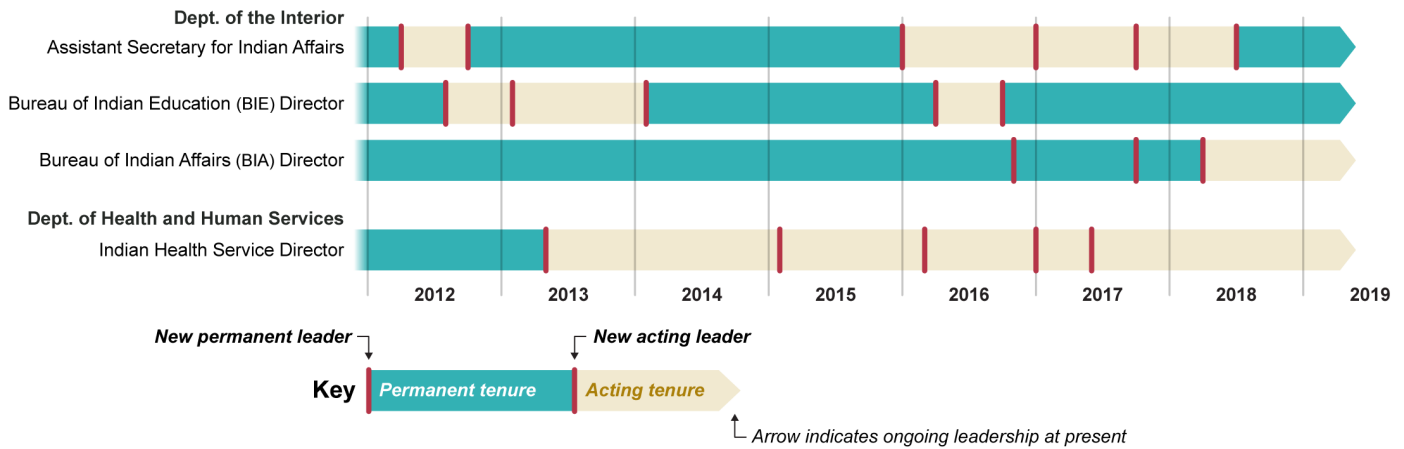
activities have changed, and BIA has found itself starting over on the process to identify or implement corrective actions.

- **Health Care.** IHS officials demonstrated leadership commitment by regularly meeting with us to discuss the agency's progress in addressing our recommendations. In addition, IHS has chartered a policy advisory council that will focus on issues related to strategic direction, recommended policy, and organizational adjustments. According to IHS, this advisory council will, among other things, serve as a liaison among IHS leadership for issues involving strategic direction and policy, as well as monitor and facilitate related policy workgroups. However, IHS still does not have permanent leadership—including a Director of IHS—which is necessary for the agency to demonstrate its commitment to improvement. Additionally, since 2012, there have been five IHS Acting Directors, and there has been leadership turnover in other key positions, such as area directors.¹⁰

To fully meet the leadership commitment criterion, all agencies will need, among other things, stable, permanent leadership that has assigned the tasks needed to address weaknesses and that holds those assigned accountable for progress. For a timeline of senior leadership turnover in Indian Affairs, BIE, BIA, and IHS from 2012 through March 2019, see Figure 3.

¹⁰IHS oversees its health care facilities through a decentralized system of area offices, which are led by area directors.

Figure 3: Senior Leadership in Agencies Responsible for Education, Energy, and Health Care Programs Serving Tribes



Source: GAO analysis of information from the Departments of the Interior and Health and Human Services. | GAO-19-445T

Capacity

To meet the capacity criterion, an agency needs to demonstrate that it has the capacity (i.e., people and other resources) to resolve its management weaknesses. Indian Affairs, BIE, BIA, and IHS each made some progress in identifying capacity and resources to implement some of our recommendations, but BIE and IHS continue to face significant workforce challenges. The following examples show actions Indian Affairs, BIE, BIA, and IHS took to partially meet the capacity criterion.

- Education.** BIE and other Indian Affairs offices that support BIE schools have made some progress in demonstrating capacity to address risks to Indian education. For example, BIE hired a full-time program analyst to coordinate its working group and help oversee the implementation of our recommendations on Indian education. This official has played a key role in coordinating the agency's implementation efforts and has provided us with regular updates on the status of these efforts. BIE has also conducted hiring in various offices in recent years as part of a 2014 Secretarial Order to reorganize the bureau.¹¹ For example, it has hired school safety officers and personnel in offices supporting the oversight of school spending. However, about 50 percent of all BIE positions have not

¹¹U.S. Department of the Interior, *Secretarial Order 3334: Restructuring the Bureau of Indian Education* (Washington, D.C.: June 16, 2014).

been filled, including new positions that have been added as a result of the agency's restructuring, according to recent BIE documentation. Moreover, the agency reported that it has not filled the position of Chief Academic Officer, a top-level BIE manager responsible for providing leadership and direction to BIE's academic programs. Furthermore, BIE has not completed a strategic workforce plan to address staffing and training gaps with key staff, which we previously recommended. Such a plan is important to allow BIE and other Indian Affairs offices to better understand workforce needs and leverage resources to meet them. In February 2019, BIE drafted a strategic workforce plan and reported it is currently gathering feedback on the plan from internal stakeholders. BIE officials indicated they are planning to finalize and implement the plan in 2019.

- **Energy.** In November 2016, we recommended that BIA establish a documented process for assessing the workforce at its agency offices.¹² BIA has taken a number of actions, such as conducting an internal survey to identify general workforce needs related to oil and gas development. This survey information supported staffing decisions for the recently created Indian Energy Service Center. In February 2019, BIA officials told us they have drafted a long-range workforce plan to ensure BIA has staff in place to meet its organizational needs. We will review the plan to determine if the planned actions will help BIA identify critical skills and competencies related to energy development and identify potential gaps.
- **Health Care.** IHS has made some progress in demonstrating it has the capacity and resources necessary to address the program risks we identified in our reports. For example, among other actions, IHS officials stated that the agency is expanding the role of internal audit staff within its enterprise risk management program to augment internal audits and complement audits by the HHS Inspector General and GAO. In addition, IHS has developed a new Office of Quality, which is expected to develop and monitor agency-wide quality of care standards. However, IHS officials told us there are still vacancies in several key positions, including the Director of the Office of Resource Access and Partnerships, and the Office of Finance and Accounting. Additionally, our August 2018 report found that IHS's overall vacancy

¹²GAO, *Indian Energy Development: Additional Actions by Federal Agencies Needed to Overcome Factors Hindering Development*, [GAO-17-43](#) (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 17, 2016).

rate for clinical care providers was 25 percent.¹³

To fully meet the capacity criterion, all of the agencies need to assess tradeoffs between these and other administration priorities in terms of people and resources, and the agencies should provide to decision makers key information on resources needed to address management weaknesses.

Action Plan

To meet the action plan criterion, an agency needs to have a corrective action plan that defines the root causes, identifies solutions, and provides for substantially completing corrective measures in the near term, including steps necessary to implement the solutions we recommended. The following examples show actions Indian Affairs, BIE, BIA, and IHS took to partially meet the action plan criterion.

- **Education.** Among other actions, BIE implemented a new action plan for overseeing BIE school spending, including written procedures and risk criteria, which fully addressed two priority recommendations. Also, BIE completed a strategic plan in August 2018, which we recommended in September 2013.¹⁴ The plan provides the agency with goals and strategies for improving its management and oversight of Indian education, and establishes detailed actions and milestones for the implementation. However, Indian Affairs has not provided documentation that it has completed action plans on other important issues, such as a comprehensive, long-term capital asset plan to inform its allocation of school facility funds, which we recommended in May 2017.¹⁵
- **Energy.** In meetings, BIA officials identified actions they have taken towards implementing our recommendations. For instance, BIA officials told us they have recently completed modifications to BIA's database for recording and maintaining historical and current data on ownership and leasing of Indian land and mineral resources—the Trust Asset and Accounting Management System (TAAMS). The officials said that the modifications incorporate the key identifiers and data fields needed to track and monitor review and response times for

¹³[GAO-18-580](#).

¹⁴[GAO-13-774](#).

¹⁵[GAO-17-447](#).

oil and gas leases and agreements. BIA officials we met with have demonstrated an understanding that addressing long-standing management weaknesses is not accomplished through a single action but through comprehensive planning and continued movement toward a goal. However, the agency does not have a comprehensive action plan to identify the root causes of all identified management weaknesses and address the problems.

- **Health Care.** In February 2019, IHS finalized its strategic plan for fiscal years 2019 through 2023, and is developing a related work plan to address certain root causes of management challenges and define solutions and corrective measures for the agency. The strategic plan divides these challenges into three categories: (1) access to care, (2) quality of care, and (3) program management and operations. We will examine the strategic plan and IHS's work plan, once issued, to determine whether they contain the needed elements of an action plan.

To fully meet the action plan criterion, a comprehensive plan that identifies actions to address the root causes of its management shortcomings would have to come from top leadership with a commitment to provide sufficient capacity and resources to take the necessary actions to address management shortcomings and risks.

Monitoring

To meet the monitoring criterion, an agency needs to demonstrate that a program has been instituted to monitor and independently validate the effectiveness and sustainability of corrective measures. We have been working with the agencies to help clarify the need to establish a framework for monitoring progress that includes goals and performance measures to track their efforts and ultimately verify the effectiveness of their efforts. The following examples show actions Indian Affairs, BIE, BIA, and IHS took to partially meet the monitoring criterion.

- **Education.** Indian Affairs, in consultation with Department of Interior's Office of Occupational Safety and Health, has taken actions to monitor corrective measures that address weaknesses with the agency's safety program—which covers safety at BIE schools. However, the agency has not yet demonstrated that it is monitoring several other areas, such as whether relevant employees are being held to the agency's required performance standards for safety inspections.

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- **Energy.** BIA has taken steps to improve monitoring by holding frequent meetings to assess its progress in implementing our recommendations. However, BIA has not yet taken needed steps to monitor its progress in addressing the root causes of management weaknesses.
 - **Health Care.** IHS has taken some steps toward monitoring the agency's progress in addressing the root causes of their management weaknesses. In addition to developing its new Office of Quality, IHS has taken steps to develop a patient experience of care survey, as well as standards for tracking patient wait times. These efforts should be reflected in the agency's corrective plan, as part of an overall framework for monitoring progress that includes goals and performance measures to track their efforts and ultimately verify the effectiveness of their efforts.

To fully meet the monitoring criterion, the agencies need to establish goals and performance measures as they develop action plans and take further actions to monitor the effectiveness of actions to address root causes of identified management shortcomings.

Demonstrated Progress

To meet the demonstrated progress criterion, an agency needs to demonstrate progress in implementing corrective measures and in resolving the high-risk area. The following examples show actions Indian Affairs, BIA, and IHS took to partially meet the demonstrated progress criterion.

- **Education.** As of February 2019, Indian Affairs had addressed 11 of the 23 outstanding education recommendations we identified in our September 2017 testimony. Three of these recommendations were closed after the June 2018 hearing, including a recommendation from our 2013 report for BIE to develop a strategic plan and two recommendations from our 2017 report on improving the oversight and accountability for BIE school safety inspections.¹⁶ Overall, Indian Affairs' efforts since we issued our High-Risk List update in February 2017 represent a significant increase in activity implementing our recommendations.¹⁷ Substantial work, however, remains to address our outstanding recommendations in several key areas, such as in

¹⁶[GAO-13-774, GAO-17-421.](#)

¹⁷[GAO-17-317.](#)

accountability for BIE school safety and school construction projects. For example, Indian Affairs has not provided documentation that the inspection information its personnel collect on the safety of BIE schools is complete and accurate.¹⁸ As of late February 2019, 12 recommendations related to this high-risk area remain open and Indian Affairs concurred with all 12 recommendations. For a full description of the status of these open recommendations, see in table 1 in appendix I.

- **Energy.** BIA has shown significant progress developing data collection instruments and processes needed to track and review response times for a number of different actions associated with energy development. For example, in our June 2015 report, we recommended that BIA take steps to improve its geographic information system (GIS) capabilities to ensure it can verify ownership in a timely manner.¹⁹ We closed this recommendation as BIA has made significant progress in enhancing its GIS capabilities by integrating map-viewing technology and capabilities into its land management data system. In addition, we recommended that BIA take steps to identify cadastral survey needs.²⁰ BIA's enhanced map-viewing technology allows the bureau to identify land boundary discrepancies, which can then be researched and corrected. To address the recommendation, BIA identified unmet survey needs that were contained within the defunct cadastral request system. BIA developed a new mechanism for its regions and agency offices to make survey requests and a new database to maintain survey requests. In fall 2018, BIA completed enhancements to TAAMS that will allow the agency to track time frames and status of oil and gas revenue-sharing agreements-called communitization agreements (CA) through the review process. BIA held training on the enhancements in November 2018 and requested staff input information on any newly submitted CAs in the system. In a meeting on February 25, 2019, the Acting Director of BIA said that BIA had also completed efforts to modify TAAMS, incorporating the key identifiers and data fields needed to track and monitor review and

¹⁸GAO, *Indian Affairs: Key Actions Needed to Ensure Safety and Health at Indian School Facilities*, [GAO-16-313](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 10, 2016).

¹⁹GAO, *Indian Energy Development: Poor Management by BIA Has Hindered Energy Development on Indian Lands*, [GAO-15-502](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 15, 2015).

²⁰A cadastral survey is, in effect, the public record of the extent, value, and ownership of land.

response times for oil and gas leases and agreements. We believe these actions show significant progress in addressing management weaknesses associated with outdated technology and data limitations for tracking and monitoring the review and approval of energy related documents. However, BIA needs to collect data from its updated system, develop time frames, and monitor agency performance to close open recommendations. For a full description of the status of the agency's open recommendations, see in table 2 in appendix II.

- **Health Care.** IHS has made progress in implementing corrective actions related to the management of health care programs. Specifically, since our 2017 High-Risk Report, IHS implemented four of our 13 open recommendations. For example, in response to our April 2013 recommendation, to ensure that IHS's payment rates for contracted services do not impede patient access to physician and other nonhospital care, IHS developed an online tool that enables the agency to track providers that do not accept IHS's payment rates. As of March 2019, six out of the 13 recommendations in our 2017 High-Risk Report remain open, and we have added one additional recommendation—for a total of seven open recommendations related to this high-risk area. IHS officials told us that they plan to complete the implementation of additional recommendations in 2019. For a full description of the status of the agency's open recommendations, see in table 3 in appendix III.

To fully meet the demonstrating progress criterion, agencies need to continue taking actions to ensure sustained progress and show that management shortcomings are being effectively managed and root causes are being addressed.

In conclusion, we see some progress in meeting all of the criteria, at all agencies, especially related to education programs. However, permanent leadership that provides continuing oversight and accountability is needed. We also see varying levels of progress at all of the agencies in understanding what they need to do to be removed from the High-Risk List, and identifying steps that can be incorporated into corrective action plans. We look forward to working with the agencies to track their progress in implementing a framework for monitoring and validating the effectiveness of planned corrective actions. Among the greatest continuing challenges for the agencies is developing sufficient capacity, including demonstrating that they have the people and other resources required to address the deficiencies in their programs and activities. This challenge cannot be overcome by the agencies without a commitment

from their leadership and the administration to prioritize fixing management weaknesses in programs and activities that serve tribes and their members. Sustained congressional attention to these issues will help ensure that the agencies continue to achieve progress in these areas.

Chairman Hoeven, Vice Chairman Udall, and Members of the Committee, this completes my prepared statement. I would be pleased to respond to any questions that you may have.

GAO Contacts and Staff Acknowledgments

If you or your staff have any questions about health care issues in this testimony or the related reports, please contact Jessica Farb at (202) 512-7114 or farbj@gao.gov. For questions about education, please contact Melissa Emrey-Arras at (617) 788-0534 or emreyarrasm@gao.gov. For questions about energy resource development, please contact Frank Rusco at (202) 512-3841 or ruscof@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this statement. Key contributors to this statement include Kelly DeMots, (Assistant Director), Christina Ritchie (Analyst-in-Charge), Edward Bodine, Christine Kehr, Elizabeth Sirois, and Leigh White.

Appendix I: Status of Open Recommendations to the Department of the Interior on Indian Education

As of late February 2019, 12 of the 23 recommendations to the Department of the Interior on Indian education we identified in our September 13, 2017, testimony remain open.

Table 1: The Status of Open Recommendations in Prior GAO Reports to the Department of the Interior (Interior) on Management and Oversight of Indian Education

Category and recommendation	Report number and date	Status
Management challenges facing Bureau of Indian Education (BIE)		
The Secretary of the Interior should direct the Assistant Secretary-Indian Affairs to revise its strategic workforce plan to ensure that employees providing administrative support to BIE have the requisite knowledge and skills to help BIE achieve its mission and are placed in the appropriate offices to ensure that regions with a large number of BIE schools have sufficient support.	GAO-13-774 September 2013	Interior agreed with this recommendation. In February 2019, BIE drafted a strategic workforce plan and reported it is currently gathering feedback on the plan from various internal offices. BIE officials indicated they are planning to finalize and implement the plan in 2019. BIE developed the draft plan to also address another workforce plan recommendation in our November 2014 report (see below). We will continue to monitor the agency's efforts to implement these recommendations.
BIE's oversight of school spending		
The Secretary of the Interior should direct the Assistant Secretary-Indian Affairs to develop a comprehensive workforce plan to ensure that BIE has an adequate number of staff with the requisite knowledge and skills to effectively oversee BIE school expenditures.	GAO-15-121 November 2014	Interior agreed with this recommendation. In February 2019, BIE drafted a strategic workforce plan and reported it is currently gathering feedback on the plan from internal offices. BIE officials indicated they are planning to finalize and implement the plan in 2019. BIE developed the draft plan to also address another workforce plan recommendation in our September 2013 report (see above). We will continue to monitor the agency's efforts to implement these recommendations.
Safety and health at Indian school facilities		
To support the collection of complete and accurate safety and health information on the condition of BIE school facilities nationally, the Secretary of the Interior should direct the Assistant Secretary-Indian Affairs to ensure that all BIE schools are annually inspected for safety and health, as required by its policy, and that inspection information is complete and accurate.	GAO-16-313 March 2016	Interior agreed with this recommendation. In September 2018, Indian Affairs provided documentation that it had completed fiscal year 2018 safety inspections of all BIE schools. The agency also reported that it is taking steps to oversee the quality of school inspections, but it has not provided us with documentation that indicates inspection information agency personnel collect and report to schools is complete and accurate. We will continue to monitor the agency's performance in this area.

**Appendix I: Status of Open Recommendations
to the Department of the Interior on Indian
Education**

Category and recommendation	Report number and date	Status
<p>To ensure that all BIE schools are positioned to address safety and health problems with their facilities and provide student environments that are free from hazards, the Secretary of the Interior should direct the Assistant Secretary-Indian Affairs to develop a plan to build schools' capacity to promptly address safety and health problems with facilities. Such a plan could prioritize assistance to schools to improve the expertise of facility staff to maintain and repair school buildings.</p>	<p>GAO-16-313 March 2016</p>	<p>Interior agreed with this recommendation.</p> <p>In June 2018, Indian Affairs provided us with documentation on its efforts to build schools' capacity to address safety and health problems with their facilities. In particular, the agency updated its Service Level Agreement between BIA and BIE, which details their roles and responsibilities for inspecting and providing technical assistance to BIE schools, among other areas. However, Indian Affairs' documents provided little information on how it plans to support BIE school personnel in fixing safety hazards in their facilities. In our 2016 report, we found that school personnel often lack the necessary technical expertise to address safety hazards in school buildings. Further, the agency did not include information on whether it has staffed regional offices with specialists to assist schools with safety and facility issues.</p> <p>In September 2018, we requested additional information from Indian Affairs on this recommendation but the agency had not provided it as of February 2019. We will continue to monitor its efforts on this recommendation.</p>
<p>The Secretary of the Interior should direct the Assistant Secretary-Indian Affairs to develop and take corrective actions, in consultation with Interior's Designated Agency Safety and Health Official, to address BIA safety program weaknesses identified in prior Interior evaluations.</p>	<p>GAO-17-421 May 2017</p>	<p>Interior agreed with this recommendation.</p> <p>In August 2018, Indian Affairs reported that it developed a corrective action plan, in consultation with Interior's Designated Agency Safety and Health Official, and taken some corrective actions identified in the plan. However, it did not provide documentation that correction actions in other important areas had been completed, such as signed management statements of commitment to safety and regional analysis and plans for correcting safety deficiencies.</p> <p>In September 2018, we requested additional information from Indian Affairs on this recommendation but the agency had not provided it as of February 2019. We will continue to monitor its efforts on this recommendation.</p>
<p>The Secretary of the Interior should direct the Assistant Secretary-Indian Affairs to assign responsibility to a specific office or official to develop and implement a plan to assess employees' safety training needs and monitor employees' compliance with Indian Affairs' safety training requirements.</p>	<p>GAO-17-421 May 2017</p>	<p>Interior agreed with this recommendation.</p> <p>In May 2018, Indian Affairs reported that it had completed a draft training plan and noted that it had submitted the plan to management for review.</p> <p>In February 2019, Indian Affairs reported that its training plan for safety personnel was waiting to be approved and signed by management. We will continue to monitor Indian Affairs' efforts to implement this recommendation.</p>

**Appendix I: Status of Open Recommendations
to the Department of the Interior on Indian
Education**

Category and recommendation	Report number and date	Status
<p>The Secretary of the Interior should direct the Assistant Secretary-Indian Affairs to ensure that BIA's employee performance standards on inspections are consistently incorporated into the appraisal plans of all BIA personnel with safety program responsibilities.</p>	<p>GAO-17-421 May 2017</p>	<p>Interior agreed with this recommendation. In February 2019, Indian Affairs reported that the appraisal plans for agency safety personnel responsible for inspecting BIE schools had been updated with the agency's performance standards for inspections. However, it did not provide documentation that this action was taken per our request. We will continue to monitor Indian Affairs' efforts to implement this recommendation.</p>
<p>The Secretary of the Interior should direct the Assistant Secretary-Indian Affairs to use information gathered from monitoring the timeliness of school safety inspection reports to assess the performance of employees with safety program responsibilities and hold them accountable.</p>	<p>GAO-17-421 May 2017</p>	<p>Interior agreed with this recommendation. In May 2018, Indian Affairs reported that its Safety Office will assist safety supervisors in tracking inspectors' performance on report timeliness, consistency and accountability of inspection services. As of February 2019, we have not received documentation that the agency is taking this action. We will continue to monitor Indian Affairs' efforts to implement this recommendation.</p>
<p>Oversight of BIE school construction projects</p>		
<p>To ensure accountability for BIE school facility funds, the Secretary of the Interior should direct the Assistant Secretary-Indian Affairs to develop a comprehensive long-term capital asset plan to inform its allocation of school facility funds. Such a plan should include a prioritized list of school repair and maintenance projects with the greatest need for funding.</p>	<p>GAO-17-447 May 2017</p>	<p>Interior agreed with this recommendation. In August 2017, Indian Affairs reported that its Office of Facilities, Property, and Safety Management was undergoing a reorganization to establish a work group focused on asset management and will continue to work with the Office of Management and Budget to develop a capital asset management plan. Indian Affairs reported a target date of June 30, 2018, for implementing this recommendation. As of February 2019, the agency had not provided documentation that it had completed a comprehensive long-term capital asset plan. We will continue to monitor Indian Affairs' efforts to implement this recommendation.</p>

**Appendix I: Status of Open Recommendations
to the Department of the Interior on Indian
Education**

Category and recommendation	Report number and date	Status
<p>To ensure accountability for BIE school facility funds, the Secretary of the Interior should direct the Assistant Secretary-Indian Affairs to develop and implement guidance for its project managers and contracting officers regarding effective use of accountability measures.</p>	<p>GAO-17-447 May 2017</p>	<p>Interior agreed with this recommendation.</p> <p>In August 2017, Indian Affairs reported that it had taken several actions, including establishing new oversight mechanisms, hiring staff with expertise in construction contracting, and administering training for contracting staff, among other actions to enhance the use of accountability measures in contracting.</p> <p>In October 2018, Indian Affairs reported that it had taken additional actions, including providing formal meeting and training events on construction and project management and conducting a review of contracting warrants to ensure that those possessing construction capability had obtained necessary training. Indian Affairs also requires additional management and legal reviews of certain construction contracts and has established multiple award construction contracts to streamline the construction contracting process and ensure that accountability measures are included in the base contracts. Indian Affairs adopted a construction contract checklist to aid the construction contracting team and developed a new letter outlining roles and responsibilities for the project managers. As of February 2019, we were evaluating the agency's documentation regarding the implementation of this recommendation.</p>
<p>To ensure accountability for BIE school facility funds, the Secretary of the Interior should direct the Assistant Secretary-Indian Affairs to improve oversight and technical assistance to tribal organizations to enhance tribal capacity to manage major construction projects.</p>	<p>GAO-17-447 May 2017</p>	<p>Interior agreed with this recommendation.</p> <p>In August 2017, Indian Affairs reported that its Division of Facilities Management and Construction will develop a project tracking and monitoring process for all projects above a certain monetary threshold. Additionally, Indian Affairs reported that this office will work with BIA and BIE officials to identify common challenges that tribes face in managing projects and provide appropriate technical assistance. Indian Affairs reported a target date of June 30, 2018, for implementing this recommendation. As of February 2019, the agency had not provided documentation that it had taken these steps. We will continue to monitor Indian Affairs' efforts to implement this recommendation.</p>
<p>To ensure accountability for BIE school facility funds, the Secretary of the Interior should direct the Assistant Secretary-Indian Affairs to develop and implement guidance for maintaining complete contract and grant files for all BIE school construction projects.</p>	<p>GAO-17-447 May 2017</p>	<p>Interior agreed with this recommendation.</p> <p>In February 2019, Indian Affairs reported that it drafted an internal policy and guidance on maintaining contract files, which were undergoing internal review. We will continue to monitor Indian Affairs' efforts to implement this recommendation.</p>

Source: GAO | [GAO-19-445T](#)

Appendix II: Status of Open Recommendations to the Department of Interior on Indian Energy

As of February 2019, 12 of the 14 recommendations to the Department of Interior's Bureau of Indian Affairs cited in our 2017 High-Risk Report remain open.

Table 2: The Status of Open Recommendations in Prior GAO Reports to the Department of the Interior's (Interior) Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) on Management and Oversight of Indian Energy Resources

Category and recommendation	Report number and date	Status
BIA's data and technology		
BIA should work with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to identify cadastral survey needs.	GAO-15-502 June 2015	BIA requested each of its 12 regions to review and identify historic survey requests that were contained within a defunct cadastral request system to determine if the requests are still valid. According to BIA officials, BIA and BLM identified about 1,900 survey requests that were not funded. BIA developed a new database that includes this inventory and new survey requests since 2015. BIA also developed a mechanism for its regions and agency offices to make new survey requests. According to BIA officials, the agency has limited funding for cadastral surveys and conduct surveys that are needed for litigation purposes and those surveys that are mandated. Officials said that BIA and BLM coordinators meet bi-monthly. We believe these actions address the recommendation and are in the process of closing this recommendation.
BIA's oversight of its review process for energy related documents		
BIA should develop a documented process to track its review and response times.	GAO-15-502 June 2015	In a meeting on February 25, 2019, the Acting Director of BIA said that the agency had completed efforts to modify TAAMS, incorporating the key identifiers and data fields needed to track and monitor review and response times for oil and gas leases and agreements and communitization agreements (CA). BIA is also in the process of revising its Fluid Minerals Handbook to establish a standard methodology for processing new leases. We have meetings planned with BIA to observe the tracking and reporting capabilities of the updated system. We also will discuss the status of actions to track and monitor realty transactions and other energy-related documents, such as rights of way agreements.
BIA should enhance data collection efforts to ensure it has data needed to track its review and response times.	GAO-15-502 June 2015	BIA identified the same actions to implement this recommendation as the prior recommendation, and we will be reviewing these actions.

**Appendix II: Status of Open Recommendations
to the Department of Interior on Indian Energy**

Category and recommendation	Report number and date	Status
BIA should establish required time frames for the review and approval of Indian CAs to ensure a more timely CA process.	GAO-16-553 June 2016	<p>In a meeting on February 25, 2019, BIA officials told us the agency has drafted suggested time frames for the review and approval for the Indian CAs for both BIA and BLM. BIA is revising the Onshore Energy and Mineral Lease Management Interagency Standard Operating Procedures to include these timeframes. The officials said that the Indian Energy and Minerals Steering Committee (IEMSC) will meet in May 2019 and discuss the proposed timeframes. IEMSC is a committee within Interior that includes senior managers from BIA, BLM, and other agencies with a focus on Indian trust energy and mineral policies and issues.</p> <p>When BIA establishes required time frames for the review approval of CAs, this recommendation will be closed.</p>
BIA should develop a systematic mechanism for tracking Indian CAs through the review and approval process to determine, among other things, whether the revised CA process meets newly established time frames.	GAO-16-553 June 2016	<p>In April 2017, BIA began tracking CAs through the review and approval process in a centralized spreadsheet while the agency modified TAAMS. In the fall of 2018, BIA completed enhancements to TAAMS that will allow the agency to track time frames and status of Indian CAs through the review process. BIA held training on the enhancements with realty staff in November 2018 and requested staff input information on any newly submitted CAs in the system.</p> <p>We believe these actions address most of the recommendation. Once timeframes have been established and monitored, we believe this will be fully addressed.</p>
BIA should assess whether the revised CA process is achieving its objective to improve the timeliness of the review and approval of Indian CAs, and if not, make changes as appropriate.	GAO-16-553 June 2016	<p>In a meeting on February 25, 2019, the BIA Acting Director and other officials said that they have collected data since April 2017 on the timeframes of the review and approval of CAs and have been assessing efforts to streamline the process. In addition, the officials said that the Indian Energy and Minerals Steering Committee (IEMSC) will meet in May 2019 and this topic will be discussed.</p> <p>When BIA provides documentation on their assessment of the revised process, we will be able to close this recommendation.</p>
BIA's collaboration and communication		
BIA should include the other regulatory agencies in the Service Center, such as FWS, EPA, and the Corps, so that the Indian Energy Service Center (Service Center) can act as a single point of contact or a lead agency to coordinate and navigate the regulatory process.	GAO-17-43 November 2016	<p>In a meeting on February 25, 2019, the BIA Acting Director said the agency has formal agreements with Interior's Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps). We plan to obtain and review these agreements. In addition, we plan to visit the Service Center to discuss agency roles and coordination.</p>

**Appendix II: Status of Open Recommendations
to the Department of Interior on Indian Energy**

Category and recommendation	Report number and date	Status
<p>BIA should establish formal agreements with Interior’s Office of Indian Energy and Economic Development (IEED) and the Department of Energy (DOE) that identify, at a minimum, the advisory or support role of each office involved with the Service Center.</p>	<p>GAO-17-43 November 2016</p>	<p>BIA prepared an addendum to expand an existing memorandum of understanding between DOE and IEED to include the Service Center. DOE has not yet approved the agreement.</p> <p>However, the existing memorandum of understanding between DOE and IEED does not identify the role for these agencies as related to the Service Center.</p> <p>We plan to visit the Service Center to discuss agency roles and coordination.</p>
<p>BIA should establish a documented process for seeking and obtaining input from key stakeholders, such as BIA employees, on the Service Center activities.</p>	<p>GAO-17-43 November 2016</p>	<p>On June 13, 2018, the Acting Director of BIA testified before the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs that the Service Center developed a process that allows key agencies to provide input and requests for service. The Acting Director reported that the process includes guidance on the prioritization of task orders and that Service Center officials began using an intake form in August 2017 to obtain input regularly from stakeholders.</p> <p>We plan to visit the Service Center to learn about this process and any others the Service Center may have to obtain input regularly from stakeholders.</p>
<p>BIA should document the rationale for key decisions related to the establishment of the Service Center, such as alternatives and tribal requests that were considered.</p>	<p>GAO-17-43 November 2016</p>	<p>BIA reported it has taken actions needed to implement our recommendation. On May 17, 2017, the Acting Assistant Secretary- Indian Affairs testified before the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs that Interior considers this recommendation implemented because (1) the development of the Service Center was the result of a concept paper produced by a multi-agency team and (2) a multi-agency team held a tribal listening session, received written comments, and conducted conference calls in an effort to gather input from relevant stakeholders.</p> <p>BIA’s actions have not resulted in documentation on the alternatives considered, whether tribal input and requests were considered, and the rationale for not incorporating key suggestions. Without documentation on alternatives considered in establishing the Service Center, it is unclear whether requests from stakeholders were appropriately considered. Since BIA has not provided this documentation, we plan to close this recommendation as unimplemented.</p>

**Appendix II: Status of Open Recommendations
to the Department of Interior on Indian Energy**

Category and recommendation	Report number and date	Status
<p>BIA should incorporate effective workforce planning standards by assessing critical skills and competencies needed to fulfill BIA's responsibilities related to energy development and by identifying potential gaps.</p>	<p>GAO-17-43 November 2016</p>	<p>BIA has taken a number of actions, such as conducting an internal survey to identify general workforce needs related to oil and gas development. This survey information supported staffing decisions for the Indian Energy Service Center.</p> <p>On June 13, 2018, the Acting Director of BIA testified before the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs that the BIA conducted a multi-agency survey to collect workforce data on needs for energy and minerals management. According to the Acting Director of BIA, the survey information confirmed needs across agencies in the areas of engineering, engineering technicians and environmental science disciplines. He also stated that BIA would work to develop effective workforce standards to address the need for the skills and competencies needed for energy development.</p> <p>In a meeting on February 25, 2019, BIA officials said that the Office of Trust Service has developed a long-range workforce action plan. The plan includes proposed actions to identify potential gaps in the workforce and determine future needs.</p> <p>We plan to gather additional information and review the workforce action plan to determine if these actions result in BIA identifying critical skills and competencies needed to fulfill BIA's responsibilities related to energy development and identifying potential gaps agency offices.</p>
<p>BIA should establish a documented process for assessing BIA's workforce composition at agency offices taking into account BIA's mission, goals, and tribal priorities.</p>	<p>GAO-17-43 November 2016</p>	<p>We plan to gather additional information and review the workforce action plan to determine if it establishes a process for assessing BIA's workforce composition at agency offices.</p>

Source: GAO | GAO-19-445T

Appendix III: Status of Open Recommendations to HHS on the Indian Health Service

As of March 2019, six out of the 13 recommendations in our 2017 High-Risk Report remain open, and we have added one additional recommendation—for a total of seven open recommendations related to this high-risk area.

Table 3: Status of Open Recommendations in Prior GAO Reports to the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) on Management and Oversight of the Indian Health Service (IHS)

Category and recommendation	Report number and date	Status
Estimating Purchased/Referred Care (PRC) program needs		
<p>To develop more accurate data for estimating the funds needed for the PRC program and improving IHS oversight, the Secretary of Health and Human Services should direct the Director of IHS to develop a written policy documenting how IHS evaluates need for the PRC program and disseminate it to area offices and PRC programs to ensure they understand how unfunded services data are used to estimate overall program needs.</p>	<p>GAO-11-767 September 2011</p>	<p>HHS agreed with our recommendation. In March 2019, IHS officials reported that updates to the PRC chapter of the Indian Health Manual had been completed that address this recommendation, and that the updated manual would be posted to the IHS website shortly. We will review the updated PRC chapter of the Indian Health Manual once it is posted.</p>
<p>To develop more accurate data for estimating the funds needed for the PRC program and improving IHS oversight, the Secretary of Health and Human Services should direct the Director of IHS to provide written guidance to PRC programs on a process to use when funds are depleted and there is a continued need for services, and monitor to ensure that appropriate actions are taken.</p>	<p>GAO-11-767 September 2011</p>	<p>HHS agreed with our recommendation. In March 2019, IHS officials reported that updates to the PRC chapter of the Indian Health Manual had been completed that address this recommendation, and that the updated manual would be posted to the IHS website shortly. We will review the updated PRC chapter of the Indian Health Manual once it is posted. We will also review IHS's monitoring of actions taken after this guidance is issued.</p>
Ensuring equitable allocation of PRC program funds		
<p>To make IHS's allocation of PRC program funds more equitable, the Secretary of Health and Human Services should direct the Director of the Indian Health Service to develop written policies and procedures to require area offices to notify IHS when changes are made to the allocations of funds to PRC programs.</p>	<p>GAO-12-446 June 2012</p>	<p>HHS agreed with our recommendation. In March 2019, IHS officials reported that updates to the PRC chapter of the Indian Health Manual had been completed that address this recommendation, and that the updated manual would be posted to the IHS website shortly. We will review the updated PRC chapter of the Indian Health Manual once it is posted.</p>

**Appendix III: Status of Open
Recommendations to HHS on the Indian Health
Service**

Category and recommendation	Report number and date	Status
Improving IHS's PRC program		
<p>In an effort to ensure that IHS has meaningful information on the timeliness with which it issues purchase orders authorizing payment under the PRC program and to improve the timeliness of payments to providers, the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services should direct the Director of IHS to: (1) modify IHS's claims data system to separately track IHS referrals and self-referrals, revise the Government Performance Results Act measure for the PRC program so that it distinguishes between these two types of referrals, and establish separate timeframe targets for these referral types; and (2) improve the alignment between PRC staffing levels and workloads by revising its current practices, where appropriate, to allow available funds to be used to pay for PRC program staff.</p>	<p>GAO-14-57 December 2013</p>	<p>HHS agreed with the first part of this recommendation. As of December 2018, IHS officials told us that it had implemented the first part of this recommendation by developing two new Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) measures that recognize the differences in payment processes for the two types of referrals in the PRC program. Officials reported that IHS is tracking and monitoring progress towards reaching both these targets, and will report its performance annually in the Congressional Justification. Regarding the second part of this recommendation, in March 2019, IHS officials reported that updates to the PRC chapter of the Indian Health Manual had been completed that address this recommendation, and that the updated manual would be posted to the IHS website shortly. We will review the updated PRC chapter of the Indian Health Manual once it is posted.</p>
Improving IHS oversight of patient wait times		
<p>To help ensure that timely primary care is available and accessible to American Indian and Alaska Native people, the Secretary of HHS should direct the Director of IHS to monitor patient wait times in its federally operated facilities and ensure corrective actions are taken when standards are not met.</p>	<p>GAO-16-333 March 2016</p>	<p>HHS agreed with our recommendation. IHS officials stated in March 2019 that they were updating the agency's patient wait time standards to include emergency department wait times, and the agency was working to develop system-wide capacity for data measurement and monitoring. Once the standards are fully developed and monitoring is underway, IHS will also need to ensure corrective actions are taken when standards are not met. We will review IHS's monitoring of patient wait times, as well as corrective actions taken, after these procedures have been established and implemented.</p>

**Appendix III: Status of Open
Recommendations to HHS on the Indian Health
Service**

Category and recommendation	Report number and date	Status
Improving IHS oversight of quality of care		
<p>To help ensure that quality care is provided to American Indian and Alaska Native people, the Secretary of HHS should direct the Director of IHS to, as part of the implementation of its quality framework, ensure that agency-wide standards for the quality of care provided in its federally operated facilities are developed, that facility performance in meeting these standards is systematically monitored over time, and that enhancements are made to its adverse event reporting system.</p>	<p>GAO-17-181 January 2017</p>	<p>HHS agreed with this recommendation and reported that agency-wide measures, goals and benchmarks have been developed, and that they build on best practices and external benchmarks from comparable organizations. HHS also has a system-wide dashboard of performance accountability metrics, for use at the enterprise, area, and facility levels. In addition, IHS awarded a contract to a software development firm in December 2018 to design a new adverse event reporting and tracking system for the agency.</p> <p>We will review IHS's monitoring of facility performance, and its new adverse event reporting system when they are completed.</p>
Improving IHS decision making about resource allocation and provider staffing		
<p>The Director of IHS should obtain, on an agency-wide basis, information on temporary provider contractors, including their associated cost and number of full-time equivalents, and use this information to inform decisions about resource allocation and provider staffing.</p>	<p>GAO-18-580 August 2018</p>	<p>HHS agreed with this recommendation. In its comments on our report, HHS stated that IHS plans to update its policies to include a centralized reporting mechanism requirement for all temporary contracts issued for providers. HHS also stated that, upon finalization of the policy, IHS will broadly incorporate and implement the reporting mechanism agency-wide and maintain it on an annual basis.</p> <p>We will update the status of this recommendation when we receive additional information.</p>

Source: GAO | GAO-19-445T

Note: IHS's PRC program, as it is currently known, was previously referred to as the Contract Health Services (CHS) program in prior GAO reports.

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