

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-18-616T](#), 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.

This testimony 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 (leadership commitment, capacity, action plan, monitoring, and demonstrated progress).

To conduct this work, GAO drew on findings from GAO reports issued from September 2011 through September 2017 and updated that work by reviewing agency documentation and interviewing agency officials.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO has made 52 recommendations to improve management weaknesses at some Interior and HHS agencies, of which 34 are still open. Some of these weaknesses led to the agencies' placement on the High Risk List. GAO sees 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.

View [GAO-18-616T](#). For more information, contact Frank Rusco at (202) 512-3841 or [ruscof@gao.gov](mailto:ruscof@gao.gov).

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## HIGH RISK

### Agencies Need to Continue Efforts to Address Management Weaknesses of Federal Programs Serving Indian Tribes

#### What GAO Found

GAO designated the federal management of programs that serve tribes and their members as high risk, and 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) expressed their commitment to addressing the issues that led to the designation. Since GAO last testified before this committee on September 13, 2017, Indian Affairs, BIE, BIA, and IHS have demonstrated varying levels of progress to partially meet most or all of the criteria for removing a high-risk designation. However, additional progress is needed to fully address management weaknesses, particularly in the areas of leadership commitment and capacity.

- **Leadership commitment.** To meet the leadership commitment criterion for removal of a high-risk designation, the agency needs to have demonstrated strong commitment and top leadership support to address management weaknesses. Indian Affairs, BIE, BIA, and IHS each took some actions to partially meet the leadership criterion. 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 the implementation of prior GAO recommendations on Indian education. In addition, BIA officials demonstrated leadership commitment by, for example, issuing a memorandum requiring the use of a centralized data management system to track requests for land ownership records. To fully meet the leadership commitment criterion, all the agencies need, among other things, stable, permanent leadership that has assigned the tasks needed to address weaknesses and that holds those assigned accountable for progress.
- **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 progress identifying capacity and resources to partially meet the capacity criterion. For example, BIE hired school safety officers and personnel in offices supporting the oversight of school spending. BIA conducted a survey to identify workforce needs related to energy development to support staffing decisions for the recently created Indian Energy Service Center. IHS officials told us 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. However, all the agencies have vacancies in key offices. For example, BIA officials said the agency does not have the staff or resources to implement a comprehensive workforce planning system to ensure it has staff in place at its agency offices to meet its organizational needs concerning numerous activities, including energy resources. To fully meet the capacity criterion, all the agencies need to assess tradeoffs between these and other administration priorities in terms of people and resources, and should provide key information to decision makers on resources needed to address the criteria and related management weaknesses.