FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT

DHS Has Taken Steps to Enhance Its Program, but Opportunities Exist to Improve Efficiency and Cost-Effectiveness

What GAO Found

DHS has taken steps to enhance its FOIA program. DHS developed an improvement plan that focused on eliminating its backlog of overdue requests, implementing enhanced training requirements, and deploying more advanced technology. Further, the DHS Privacy Office has initiated actions to ensure policy compliance and provide oversight of FOIA operations throughout the department’s component agencies, including developing a departmentwide handbook, monitoring monthly data processing statistics, and instituting relevant training for employees. As a result, DHS has reported reducing its backlog by about 24 percent since implementing its plan.

However, opportunities exist for DHS to improve the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of FOIA processing across the department. Specifically, implementation of the following practices could facilitate the processing of information requests at a number of its major components:

- **Internal monitoring and oversight.** Establishing mechanisms for monitoring and oversight of processing efficiency may help reduce the backlog of open requests.
- **Component-specific training.** Component-specific training could enhance the efficiency of processing within component agencies.
- **Online status-checking services.** Providing requesters with online access to information concerning the status of their requests could contribute to better customer service and higher staff productivity.
- **Electronic dissemination of records.** Releasing records in an electronic format could provide cost savings and increase efficiency.
- **Electronic redaction.** By adopting electronic redaction more broadly, DHS may be able to reduce the staff time otherwise spent manually redacting records, while also improving the consistency of its responses to requests.

By implementing these practices—which are already being used by certain DHS components and other agencies—across major DHS components, the department could further reduce its backlog, increase efficiency, improve customer service, and respond to information requests in a more timely fashion.