



November 2024

MILITARY RECRUITING

Actions Needed to Address Digital Marketing Challenges

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-25-106719](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

Today's military services are using digital marketing, among other efforts, to reach Generation Z—known for its use of digital media and whose views about the military have been steadily declining. In fiscal year 2023, several of the military services missed their recruiting goals by tens of thousands.

The James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023 includes a provision for GAO to evaluate DOD's use of social media and other technology platforms for marketing and recruiting purposes.

This report describes (1) how the military services have used digital marketing efforts to recruit young people; and evaluates the extent to which the military services have (2) developed policies to direct their digital marketing activities and to manage risks; (3) evaluated the performance of their digital marketing activities; and (4) experienced and addressed any challenges associated with funding their marketing efforts.

GAO reviewed DOD and military service studies, guidance, and plans; interviewed agency officials; and assessed military services' efforts against commercial best practices for assessing advertising effectiveness.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making eight recommendations, including that DOD develop a risk management process, and address funding challenges. DOD concurred with seven and partially concurred with one on Army processes to improve marketing funding consistency. GAO continues to believe all recommendations are valid, as discussed in the report.

View [GAO-25-106719](#). For more information, contact Alissa Czyn at (202) 512-3058 or CzynA@gao.gov.

November 2024

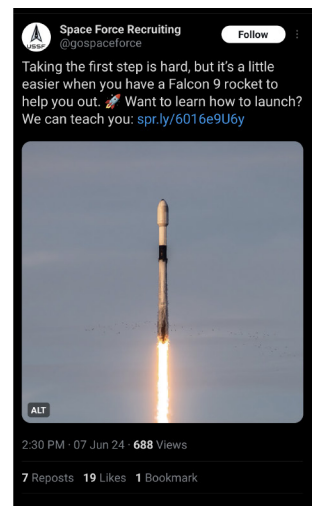
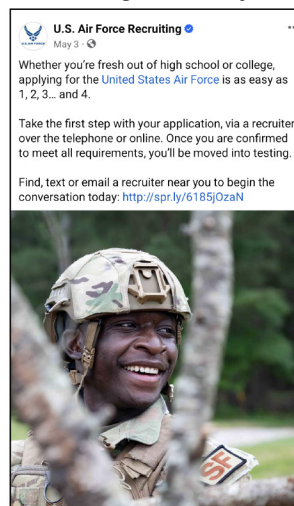
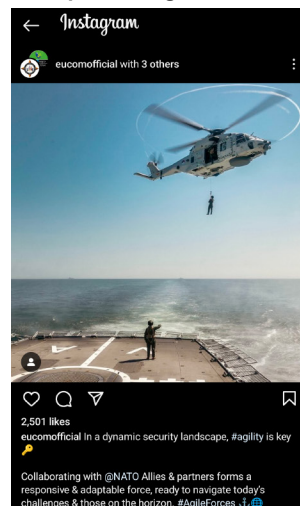
MILITARY RECRUITING

Actions Needed to Address Digital Marketing Challenges

What GAO Found

The military services use multiple digital platforms—Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and YouTube, among others—to inform young people and their mentors about career paths and life in the military.

Examples of Digital Marketing Efforts among the Military Services



Source: U.S. Navy, U.S. Air Force, and U.S. Space Force. | GAO-25-106719

In reviewing their digital marketing efforts, GAO found the following challenges:

- **Risk management.** While the Army, Navy, and Marine Corps have established strategies for responding to marketing crises or public comments in a standardized way, the Air Force (which includes the Space Force) manages risk on a case-by-case basis. Without a formal process for managing risks, the Air Force may not be positioned to address challenges that arise affecting young people's perceptions of its brand.
- **Strategic goals.** All services have evaluation frameworks that identify their target audience overall as Generation Z—a demographic born in 1997 through 2012. However, some of the strategic goals identified in the Navy's, Marine Corps', and Air Force's marketing plans—such as building a connection to the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics field—do not have specific targets or performance measures for these goals. Without identifying how such progress will be measured, such as defining the aim of each goal, time frames for completion, and responsible persons, it will be difficult for these services to assess their progress and to ensure that stakeholders understand intended outcomes.
- **Funding.** The military services face various challenges related to the timing of funding for their marketing efforts. Without assessing whether to establish and document internal processes to improve the predictability and consistency of marketing fund availability, the military services are missing out on potential benefits that would further enhance their ability to conduct marketing in support of their recruiting mission.

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Abbreviations

DOD	Department of Defense
JAMRS	Joint Advertising, Market Research and Studies

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November 20, 2024

The Honorable Jack Reed
Chairman
The Honorable Roger Wicker
Ranking Member
Committee on Armed Services
United States Senate

The Honorable Mike Rogers
Chairman
The Honorable Adam Smith
Ranking Member
Committee on Armed Services
House of Representatives

Favorable views about the military are declining among Generation Z—the generation born in 1997 through 2012 that today’s military recruiters are striving to reach. These favorable views have fallen from 46 percent in 2016 to 35 percent in 2021, according to a 2023 survey commissioned by the Department of Defense (DOD).¹ In December 2023, senior DOD leaders testified before Congress that the department faces a challenging recruiting environment due, in part, to young people’s general mistrust in institutions and their limited knowledge of military service.² While the Marine Corps and the Space Force met their recruitment goals in fiscal year 2023, the Army, Navy, and Air Force—the three largest of the military services—missed their recruitment goals by thousands.³

To help achieve their recruitment goals, the military services conduct marketing activities to encourage individuals to consider joining the military. Historically, these activities have included television and radio

¹The military services use various age ranges to define young people based on the circumstance or issue under review.

²*Recruiting Shortfalls and Growing Mistrust: Perceptions of the U.S Military Before the S. Comm. on Military Personnel*, 118th Cong. (2023).

³In fiscal year 2023, the Army fell short of its goal of 65,500 new soldiers by approximately 15,000. For the first time in at least 5 years, the Navy fell short of meeting its recruitment goal of active-duty personnel by about 7,000 sailors in fiscal year 2023. Over the past 5 years, the Army Reserve and Navy Reserve have failed to meet their recruitment goals and the Army National Guard, Air National Guard, and Air Force Reserve have also experienced recruitment challenges.

commercials, billboards or signs, and direct mail. In recent years, digital marketing—marketing that uses the internet and online-based digital technologies including computers, mobile phones, and other digital media and platforms such as social media—has become a key focus of the military services’ marketing efforts, especially to reach young people.

In May 2016, we reported that DOD did not have a formal process for coordinating advertising efforts among the services, that variations existed among the services’ performance evaluations, and that DOD did not have comprehensive oversight of the services’ advertising activities.⁴ DOD implemented our recommendations to develop a formal process for coordination; ensure the department fully measures advertising performance; and issue department-wide policy on advertising oversight. Subsequently, in November 2019, we reported on the Army’s national-level marketing organization and on its efforts to address those issues.⁵

The James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023 includes a provision for us to evaluate DOD’s use of social media and other technology platforms for marketing and recruiting purposes.⁶ Specifically, we describe (1) how the military services have used digital marketing efforts to recruit young people; and evaluate the extent to which the military services have (2) developed policies to direct their digital marketing activities and to manage risks; (3) evaluated the performance of their digital marketing activities; and (4) experienced and addressed any challenges associated with funding their marketing efforts.

To address these reporting objectives, we reviewed DOD and Army commissioned studies from 2022 and 2023 on young people’s perspectives regarding serving in the military. In addition, we reviewed DOD and the military services’ recent digital marketing guidance, including strategies and annual marketing plans, and assessed the extent to which these documents included risk management principles. We also assessed the military services’ digital marketing efforts against four of the six commercial best practices for assessing the effectiveness of

⁴GAO, *DOD Advertising: Better Coordination, Performance Measurement, and Oversight Needed to Help Meet Recruitment Goals*, [GAO-16-396](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 12, 2016).

⁵GAO, *Army Marketing: The Army Has Taken Recent Actions That Could Improve Program Oversight, Effectiveness, and Workforce Practices*, [GAO-20-93](#) (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 18, 2019). We did not make any recommendations in this report.

⁶James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023, Pub. L. No. 117-263, § 534 (2022).

advertising that were identified in the 2016 GAO report.⁷ We also assessed marketing efforts against selected federal internal control standards. In addition, we analyzed information on funding and measures of effectiveness related to the services' digital marketing efforts.

We interviewed officials from the Office of the Under Secretary for Personnel and Readiness, the Army Enterprise Marketing Office (hereafter, Army's marketing office), the U.S. Army Recruiting Command, the Army National Guard, the U.S. Navy Recruiting Command, the Marine Corps Recruiting Command, and the Air Force Recruiting Service (which manages marketing and recruitment efforts for the Air Force, Air National Guard, and the U.S. Space Force).⁸ We also interviewed budget officials from the Army, Marine Corps, Navy, and Air Force to better understand how the military services fund digital marketing activities. Additional information about our scope and methodology is included in appendix I.

We conducted this performance audit from March 2023 to October 2024 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

Roles and Responsibilities

The Office of the Secretary of Defense and the military departments have various roles and responsibilities related to marketing activities. For example, the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness oversees offices that manage advertising to recruit enlisted personnel. Additionally, under title 10 of the U.S. Code, the Secretary of each military department (Army, Navy, and Air Force) has the responsibility to recruit personnel, subject to the authority, direction, and control of the Secretary

⁷GAO-16-396. The six commercial best practices that we identified for assessing the effectiveness of advertising were: (1) establish effective roles and responsibilities; (2) ensure coordinator role is assigned; (3) develop evaluation framework; (4) use statistical modeling; (5) conduct ongoing analysis; and (6) attribute outcomes to advertising. See appendix I for details on our methodology.

⁸The Army National Guard manages its marketing and recruitment efforts separately from the active-duty Army and Army Reserve.

of Defense.⁹ As such, each Secretary has the authority to organize and delegate responsibility for advertising efforts within each military service or components within each military service. As a result, the organizational structure of marketing programs and associated recruiting for each of the military departments differs (see table 1).

Table 1: Organizations Involved in Military Services' Marketing Efforts

Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness	The Accessions Policy Directorate within Manpower and Reserve Affairs is responsible for the (1) policy, planning, and program review of active and reserve personnel, procurement, and processing and for the (2) development, review, and analysis of policies, resource levels, and budgets for recruiting enlisted personnel and for officer commissioning programs. One function for recruiting enlisted personnel and officer commissioning programs is advertising.
Joint Advertising, Market Research and Studies (JAMRS) ^a	Functions include joint military advertising, market research, and studies. JAMRS conducts research about the perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes of American youth as they relate to joining the military, which is often referred to as the propensity to serve. JAMRS has carried out studies on the state of the recruiting market and polls on propensity of youth to serve in the military. JAMRS also maintains a database that is used across the military services to begin their outreach to potential recruits.
Army Recruiting Command ^b	The command is responsible for recruiting the all-volunteer force for both the active Army and the U.S. Army Reserve.
Army Enterprise Marketing Office ^b	The marketing office is the Army's principal agent for overseeing marketing operations, including developing, executing, and analyzing national-level marketing campaigns in support of its recruiting mission.
Navy Recruiting Command ^c	The command is responsible for recruiting personnel in the active and reserve components of the Navy as well as for developing, implementing, and managing recruitment plans and programs. It is also responsible for preparing and publishing the Navy Recruiting Command Field Advertising Manual, providing training for recruiters, and coordinating the development and execution of an annual advertising and marketing plan.
Marine Corps Recruiting Command ^d	The command is responsible to the Commandant of the Marine Corps for developing, justifying, planning, organizing, conducting, and administering all personnel procurement programs to meet the needs of the Marine Corps. The command also conducts market analysis, strategic planning, training oversight, and programming and budgeting.
Air Force Recruiting Service ^e	The service is responsible for executing the Air Force's and Space Force's recruiting initiatives, programs, and services. ^f The recruiting service is responsible for organizing, developing, and equipping the forces who plan, program, budget, and execute the recruiting mission.

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) information and guidance. | GAO-25-106719

^aJAMRS reports to the Director of DOD's Office of People Analytics under the Defense Human Resources Activity—a DOD Field Activity, of the Under Secretary of Defense (Personnel and Readiness).

^bWhile the Army is in the process of reorganizing its recruiting and marketing functions, currently the Army Recruiting Command and its marketing office each have responsibilities for those missions. In February 2024, Army General Order 2024-03 reassigned the Army Recruiting Command as a direct reporting unit to the Chief of Staff of the Army. The order also reassigned Army Enterprise Marketing Office, U.S. Army Cadet Command, and U.S. Army Marketing and Engagement Brigade to the Army Recruiting Command.

⁹10 U.S.C. §§ 3013(b)(1), 5013(b)(1), and 8013(b)(1).

^cThe Navy Recruiting Command reports to the Commander of the Naval Education and Training Command under the Chief of Naval Operations.

^dThe Commanding General of The Marine Corps Recruiting Command report to the Commandant of the Marine Corps. Additionally, the Deputy Commandant, Manpower and Reserve Affairs share responsibility for recruiting program.

^eThe Commander of the Air Force Recruiting Service is responsible to the Commander of the Air Education and Training Command for the administration and operational control of assigned and attached forces.

^fThe Department of the Air Force is organized under the Secretary of the Air Force; it operates under the authority, direction, and control of the Secretary of Defense and is comprised of a Headquarters Air Force and two distinct services, which are the U.S. Air Force and the U.S. Space Force. Furthermore, the total force of the Department of the Air Force includes all regular Air Force, Air Force Reserve, Air National Guard, Space Force, and Department of the Air Force civilian personnel. The Air Force Recruiting Service is responsible for planning, programming, budgeting, and executing advertising, marketing, and other promotional activities, events, and services for the Air Force and the Space Force.

Recruitment and Advertising Expenditures

In fiscal year 2023, the military services spent about \$1.9 billion on traditional and digital recruitment and advertising efforts, as shown in table 2 below.

Table 2: Military Services' Recruitment and Advertising Expenditures, Fiscal Year 2023

Dollars in millions

Military services	Recruitment and advertising
Army	\$909
Navy	\$276
Marine Corps	\$280
Air Force and Space Force	\$281
Air Force Reserve	\$9
Air National Guard	\$98
Total	\$1,853

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense budget information. | GAO-25-106719

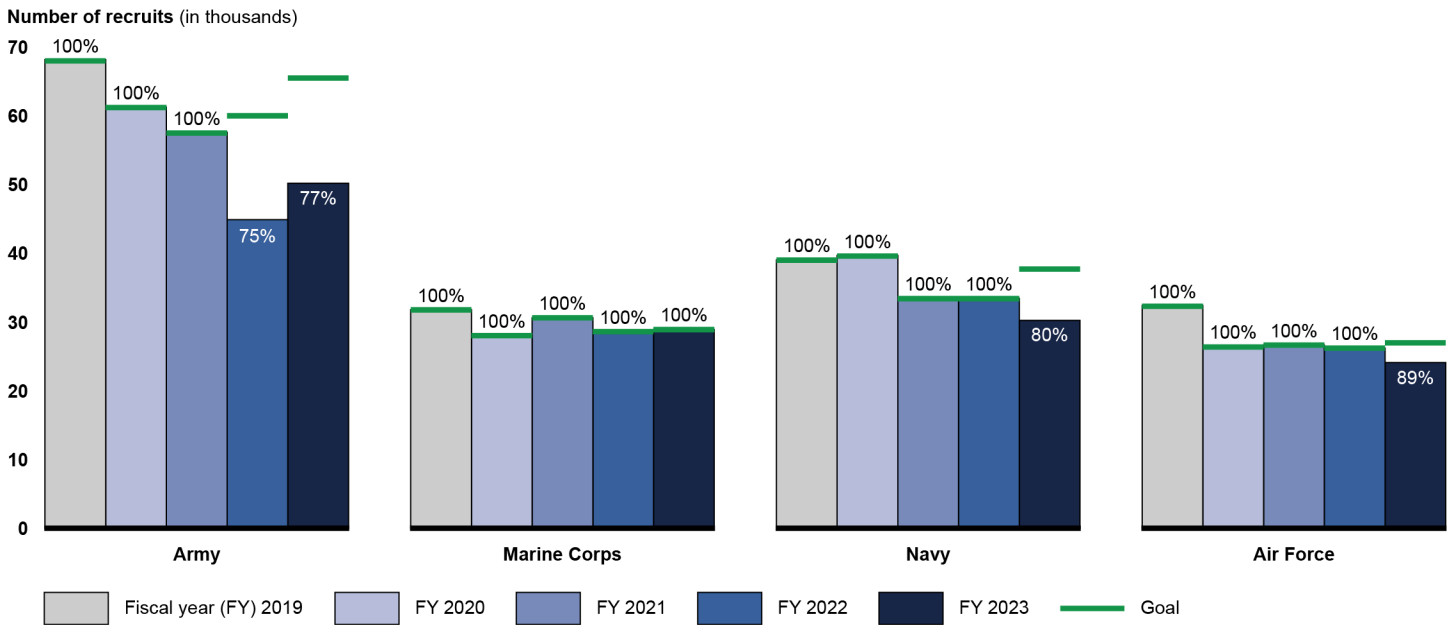
Note: The Department of Defense Budget Fiscal Year 2025 separates operations and maintenance spending into categories. The recruitment and advertising category includes all funding for related functions and includes activities beyond the scope of this report.

Recruitment Challenges

According to DOD, approximately one in four people in the United States between the ages of 17 and 24 can meet the recruitment requirements for military service. These standards relate to, for example, education and physical fitness. DOD's ability to recruit and retain qualified enlisted personnel and officers is critical to maintaining unit readiness and morale, ensuring sufficient levels of experienced leaders, and avoiding unnecessary costs. However, in fiscal year 2023, the Army, Navy and Air Force fell short of their recruitment goals by approximately 15,300; 7,500;

and 2,900 recruits, respectively. The reserve components for these military services have also missed their recruitment goals for several years (see figures 1 and 2).

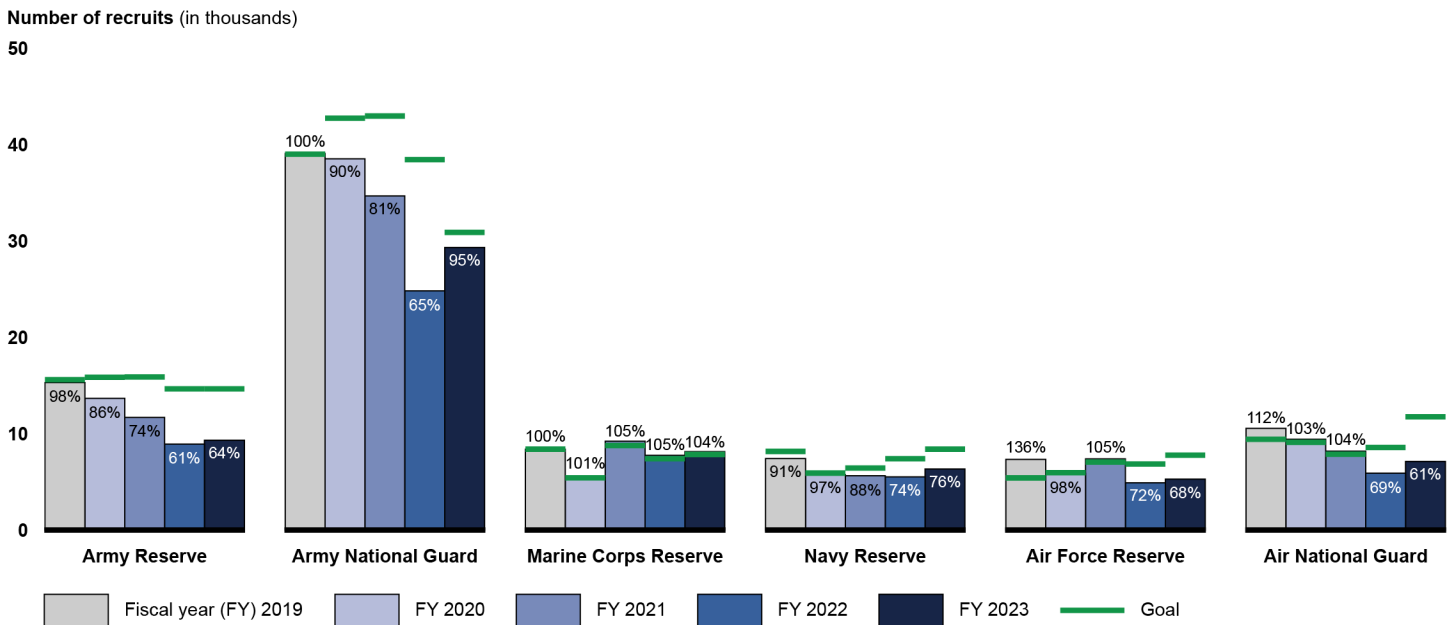
Figure 1: Percentage of Recruitment Goals Achieved for Active Component, Fiscal Years 2019–2023



Source: GAO analysis of military services' reports. | GAO-25-106719

Note: While the Air Force manages Space Force marketing and recruitment efforts, the service has separate recruitment goals. In fiscal years 2022 and 2023, the Space Force's surpassed its goals to recruit 521 and 492 guardians, respectively.

Figure 2: Percentage of Recruitment Goals Achieved for Reserve Components, Fiscal Years 2019–2023



Source: GAO analysis of military services' reports. | GAO-25-106719

Additionally, the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness and the Army have commissioned surveys to better understand the perspectives that many 16- to 21-year-olds and their mentors hold regarding military service. For details on these surveys and data collection efforts, see appendix II.

Types of Marketing

The military services' components conduct various types of advertising in support of their recruitment missions. Consistent with the private sector, the components' advertising programs follow a strategy that considers the phases of an individual's decision-making process, sometimes referred to as the consumer journey. The decision to enlist in the military is a significant commitment that can be affected by numerous factors, such as other employment or educational opportunities available to an individual who is considering a career in the military.

According to military service officials, these advertising phases are generally characterized by the components as (1) awareness, (2) engagement, and (3) lead generation, as illustrated in figure 3, and involve various advertising tactics. The goal of military advertising is to move a potential recruit through each phase and, ultimately, to a decision

to enlist. Further, each military service conducts advertising throughout each phase that, according to military service officials, is intended to communicate and reinforce a certain brand or image among potential recruits, thus leading potential recruits to determine that a particular military service is the best fit for their individual interests, beliefs, or goals.

Figure 3: Advertising Phases and Tactics Supporting Recruitment Goals of Military Service Components



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense and private-sector advertising information; GAO (icons). | GAO-25-106719

- **Awareness.** The military services conduct general awareness advertising to inform members of a broad audience about the opportunity to serve in the military and the distinct characteristics of each military service. For example, the components typically pursue awareness through traditional advertising formats such as television commercials, print advertisements, and banners at events or signs within a community.
- **Engagement.** Advertising focused on building engagement targets individuals who are aware of the military as a career option and have begun to consider the possibility of enlisting. During this phase, the military services seek to provide recruits with additional information to aid in their decision-making process. For example, this phase of advertising often occurs in the digital environment, as military services seek to provide informative social media posts and use banner advertisements to attract individuals to visit their websites for more information.
- **Lead generation.** This phase of advertising targets individuals who have considered military service and are ready to discuss the possibility of enlistment. As such, lead generation activities seek to

encourage these individuals to provide their contact information to schedule an opportunity to meet with a recruiter. Oftentimes, lead generation activities occur in the digital environment, but are also conducted in person, such as through recruiters' presence at career fairs or sporting events, often supplemented by messaging in the digital environment driving potential applicants to those events.

Importance of Digital Media to Generation Z

The military services recognize that young people communicate or receive information increasingly through digital media. According to the Army's advertising agency, younger generations view the real world through social media discussions, videos, and memes, which influences their values and beliefs. In addition, the Navy's annual marketing plan for fiscal year 2024 notes that 98.2 percent of people who take time to visit the Navy's official website, do not complete a request-for-information.

To improve efforts to engage with prospective recruits, the Navy Recruiting Command almost tripled its monthly media investments in fiscal year 2023, to an average of \$7 million to \$9 million per month compared to \$2 million to \$3 million per month for prior years. This larger investment resulted in a 79 percent increase in views on the Navy's recruitment website and a 46 percent increase in generated leads, compared to the same time period the year prior. Consequently, the Navy identified an 11 percent annual increase in contracts signed by prospective recruits that can be attributed to leads generated from their media investments.¹⁰

Likewise, the Marine Corps, Air Force, and Space Force value digital communication as a means of reaching young people of recruitment age. They use popular digital media platforms to deliver custom and paid media content to influence and engage young people to consider service in the military as a possible career path.

Military Services Use Social Media, Websites, and Recruiters in Digital Marketing Efforts

Recognizing the value that Generation Z places on digital media, the military services focus on various digital marketing efforts to improve recruitment outcomes among young people. These efforts include (1) engaging in outreach through social and other digital media platforms, (2) providing information about life in the military and career opportunities on the military services' websites, and (3) recruiter activities.

¹⁰Navy, *Annual Marketing and Advertising Plan FY24*.

Military Services Conduct Outreach through Social Media and Other Media Platforms

The military services recognize that social media and other digital media platforms provide opportunities to engage with young people and their mentors and to inform them about career paths and life in the military. For example, the Army's official Facebook page includes videos of soldiers talking about their careers and why they chose to serve in the Army. The Navy posts on its Instagram page photos of locations around the world where its ships are performing missions and images of service members engaging with the public. The Marine Corps' YouTube channel features multiple videos highlighting the various elements of Marine expeditionary units as they work together to complete their missions. The Air Force and Space Force use X (formerly Twitter) to post information about in-person opportunities to meet service members at various Air Force installations. In addition, the military services use paid digital media services that include advertisements in streaming television services (e.g., Hulu), eSports and gaming events, and search engine optimization efforts to maximize exposure to the audiences they are striving to reach.

The military services also provide guidance on why social media and digital marketing efforts are important and how they should be incorporated into recruitment efforts. For example, the Army's marketing plan states that social media remains a critical platform for Generation Z to stay plugged into culture and to connect with loved ones.¹¹ Therefore, Army officials said that they use social media to share with young people the benefits and career opportunities found across the Army.

The Navy's Social Media Guide states that the use of social media should be used to increase awareness, engagement, and interest in Navy recruiting efforts.¹² The Air Force's and Marine Corps' social media guidance notes that social media, when used effectively, presents unequalled opportunities for the services to share stories in an authentic, transparent, and rapid manner while building more substantive relationships with young prospects that a command may not have reached through traditional communication channels.¹³

Furthermore, the Army, Navy, and Marine Corps provide guidelines to professionals on the use of their respective brands in marketing efforts. Specifically, the Army's Brand Guidelines state its purpose is to create

¹¹Army Enterprise Marketing Office, *U.S. Army Annual Marketing Plan FY24-26* (2023).

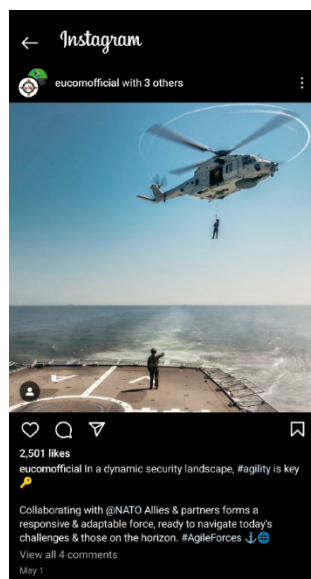
¹²U.S. Navy Recruiting Command, *Public Affairs Office Social Media Guidance 2023*.

¹³U.S. Air Force, *Social Media Guide Department of the Air Force Public Affairs* (June 2021).

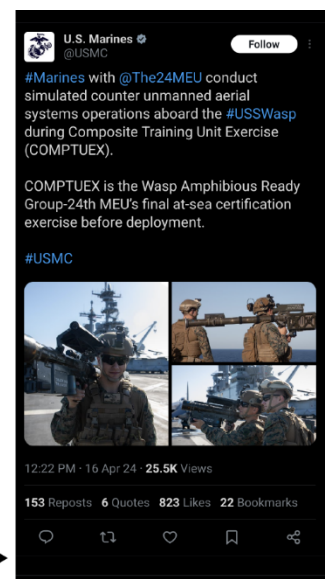
appealing and effective design solutions that help the Army tell its story in a consistent and compelling way. Similarly, the Navy’s brand guide states its purpose is to create a cohesive brand to use one voice across all platforms. Likewise, the Marine Corps’ Brand Book provides guidance on how to convey the brand to communicate the Marine Corps’ story to prospective recruits, mentors, and the public.

All five military services maintain an official centralized presence on multiple digital platforms: Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and YouTube, among others. Commands, units, and individual recruiters across the military services maintain pages and accounts on these social media and digital platforms to support recruiting efforts and engage directly with interested young people. Figure 4 provides examples of what recruiters share on digital platforms to engage with young people as recruiters strive to generate leads. In addition, officials across all the military services told us that paid digital marketing efforts, such as advertising on third party websites, social media banners, and streaming services are centrally managed by the military services’ marketing offices or recruiting commands.

Figure 4: Examples of Content the Military Services’ Shared on Their Digital Platforms



◀ A U.S. Navy post on Instagram that shows personnel working with North Atlantic Treaty Organization allies in Europe.



A U.S. Marine Corps post on X (formerly Twitter) that shows Marine Expeditionary Unit personnel conducting unmanned aerial systems operations during a training exercise. ▶

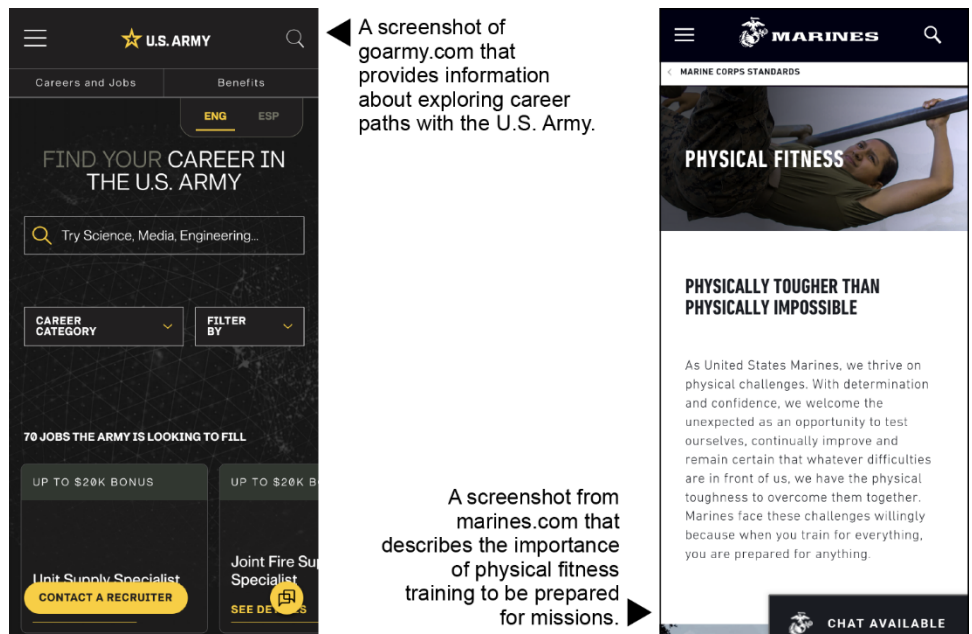
Source: U.S. Navy and U.S. Marine Corps. | GAO-25-106719

Military Services Provide Information to Potential Recruits on Official Websites

The military services develop and maintain their official recruitment-targeted websites to provide young people and other interested parties with information on the various career paths for either the active-duty or reserve components.¹⁴

The websites are designed to encourage users to submit their contact and other information for a recruiter to follow up with them. Information on the websites include descriptions about life in their respective service; benefits they offer, such as education opportunities; and the process for enlisting. In addition, each of these official military services' websites provides the user with the opportunity to chat with an advisor. The Army and the Air Force also include information about joining their respective National Guard components. The Army provides resources such as online quizzes to help potential recruits identify possible career paths based on their interests and skills. Figure 5 provides examples of the military services' recruitment websites.

Figure 5: Examples of Features Found the Military Services include in Their Recruitment Websites



Source: U.S. Army and U.S. Marine Corps. | GAO-25-106719

¹⁴The military services official recruitment-targeted websites are goarmy.com, navy.com, marines.com, airforce.com, and spaceforce.com.

Military Service Recruiters Engage in Digital Marketing Activities

The military services use recruiters at the command levels to engage in a variety of digital marketing activities to reach young people and their mentors.

Army. Army Recruiting Command officials said the command began pivoting toward using digital media to aid their recruitment efforts in 2016. According to officials, as part of this shift the Army Recruiting Command prioritized assigning noncommissioned officers with digital marketing skills to recruiting stations across all the battalions. Officials also said that public affairs specialists and social media managers are located within the battalions and have the responsibility of managing battalion-owned social media accounts. These specialists and managers also provide digital marketing and social media support to companies and recruiting stations.

In addition, Army marketing officials said they use a commercial application that is designed to help enterprises to manage large-scale social media efforts. Officials said that they use the application to help train recruiters on best practices, policies, and procedures on the use of social media content to support recruitment efforts. Further, Army marketing officials use the application to provide recruiters with brand guides, a quarterly newsletter on digital marketing trends, practical instructional guides, and training by industry professionals that recruiters can use to ensure consistency across the Army. The Army Recruiting Command also provides guidance to recruiters on communicating on digital platforms, particularly social media. This guidance includes social media operating procedures regarding engagement and standards of professional conduct, among other topics.

Navy. Officials from the Navy Recruiting Command said that the Navy is divided into east and west recruiting regions that are overseen by two commanding officers. Each region has 13 talent acquisition groups for a total of 26 groups who conduct local marketing and recruiting activities. Local Navy recruiters have access to an online resource known as an eToolbox that allows them to select from an inventory of digital marketing materials such as downloadable posters, brochures, infographics, video advertisements, and podcasts. These materials can be used for social media purposes or sent directly to a prospective recruit.

Available digital materials can also be targeted toward a prospective recruit's interests such as information about specific career fields or opportunities as an officer, an enlisted service-member, or part of a reserve component. The eToolbox also provides a list of events that are

occurring across the United States that may be of interest to prospective recruits. In addition, the eToolbox provides separate social media guides for Facebook, Instagram, SnapChat, and X (formerly Twitter) to support recruiters in their engagement with young people.

Marine Corps. Similar to the Army and Navy, officials with the Marine Corps Recruiting Command said that they provide training to the more than 3,000 Marines selected to be recruiters at any given time. According to Marine Corps officials, recruiters are trained in digital content creation and reach out to young people at community colleges and other settings, as well as to their mentors. Officials also said that Marine Corps recruiters are responsible for self-regulating what they post online to avoid damaging the service's brand.

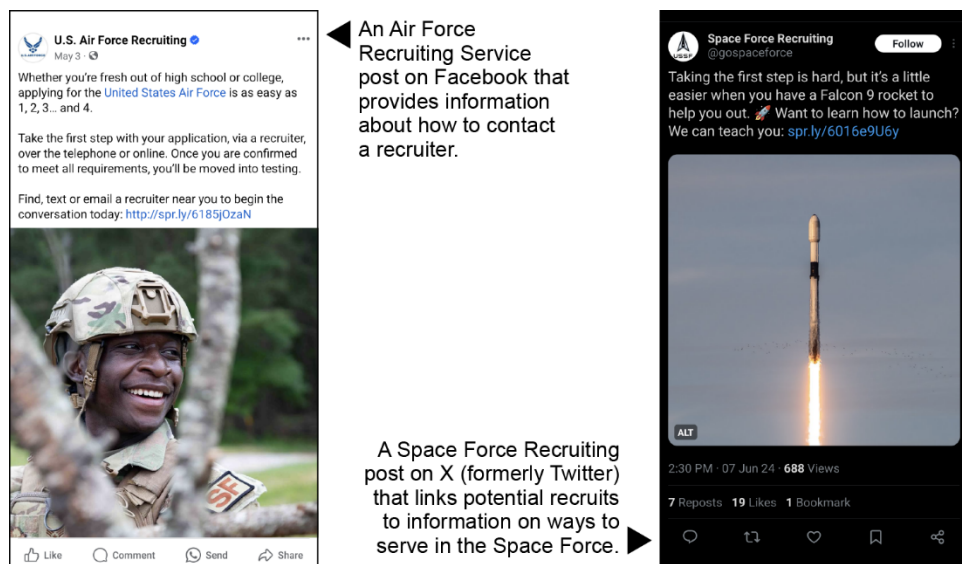
The Marine Corps also provides digital marketing and social media guidance and resources such as a guidebook for managing social media efforts and protecting the Marine Corps brand. These resources are designed to provide guidelines to recruiters on the best ways to effectively communicate on digital and social media platforms. This includes being aware that as a representative of the Marine Corps, recruiters are responsible for preserving the Marine Corps brand and are to communicate in a professional manner.

Air Force and Space Force. The Air Force Recruiting Service has four groups—three active-duty and one reserve component—that support recruiting efforts across the United States. These groups comprise multiple squadrons with noncommissioned officers who are responsible for managing unit-level public affairs programs and public affairs specialists who are authorized to engage in social media campaigns. These noncommissioned officers and public affairs specialists are also responsible for training recruiters on the appropriate use of social media as part of their recruitment efforts. In addition, Air Force Recruiting Service officials said that they are responsible for overseeing service members' efforts to recruit young people into the Space Force. However, the Space Force is a separate and distinct brand compared to the Air Force.

The Air Force has provided guidance and tools for recruiting units on creating social media and digital marketing content. For example, the Air Force has issued an instruction and developed a guidebook that provide guidelines on how content on third party digital and social media websites should be presented. In addition, these resources describe what is acceptable and unacceptable use of social and digital media when

sharing information and engaging with the public.¹⁵ Air Force Recruiting Service officials also said they meet quarterly with recruiting squadrons and units to discuss needs, accept resource requests, and determine how they can best support the recruiters. Both the Air Force's and Space Force's marketing plans identify digital marketing efforts to engage in outreach to prospective recruits. Recruiters across the military services also host events in a virtual environment. These marketing events include virtual town halls where online attendees listen to and may interact with a speaker. The military services design these events to engage individually with prospective recruits and to overcome impediments to serving in the military. Figure 6 provides examples of digital marketing efforts by the Navy, Army, and Air Force to generate interest in military service and provide information on how to contact a recruiter.

Figure 6: Examples of the Military Services' Digital Marketing Efforts to Reach Potential Recruits



Source: U.S. Air Force and U.S. Space Force. | GAO-25-106719

¹⁵Air Force Instruction 35-101, *Public Affairs Operations*, (Nov. 20, 2020); Department of the Air Force Public Affairs, *Social Media Guide* (June 2021).

All Military Services Have Developed Digital Marketing Policies, but the Air Force and Space Force Do Not Have a Formal Risk Management Strategy

The military services drive their digital marketing efforts through high-level and annual plans and strategies but vary in their approaches to managing risk, including assessing and responding to marketing crises. Specifically, all the military services developed policies to provide guidance for their digital marketing efforts. However, while the Army, Navy, and Marine Corps have risk management strategies for their digital marketing, the Air Force, which also has responsibility for Space Force marketing efforts, manages risk on a case-by-case basis as incidents arise.

Military Services Developed Policies to Guide Digital Marketing Efforts

Each military service component has guidance that defines the overall objectives of its advertising program, as well as the roles and responsibilities within the program.¹⁶ In many cases, the high-level policy is supplemented by yearly guidance that communicates the recruitment goals and the priorities of the commanding officer or senior leader responsible for a component's advertising. Specifically:

Army. Army Regulation 601-208 establishes organizational roles for the Army Marketing Program and governs the marketing operations that support recruiting efforts for Army components—active, National Guard, reserve, and special mission—as well as civilians.¹⁷ The regulation also identifies program objectives for the Army marketing program. In addition, the Army issues annual marketing plans that outline how its marketing office will achieve the service's marketing strategy.

¹⁶Army Regulation 601–208, *The Army Marketing Program* (Nov. 10, 2021); Commander of the Navy Recruiting Command Instruction 1140.3H, *Navy Recruiting Command Field Advertising Manual* (June 16, 2020); Marine Corps Order 1130.56D, *Total Force Recruiting* (May 26, 2009); Air Force Manual 36-2032, *Military Recruiting and Accessions* (Sept. 2019) (changed by Department of Air Force Guidance as of Oct. 24, 2023); and National Guard Bureau Regulation 601-1, *Army National Guard Strength Maintenance Program* (Jan. 1, 2019).

¹⁷Special missions include the Chaplain Corps, Judge Advocate General's Corps, U.S. Army Special Operations Forces, Army Medical Corps, and other similar missions.

Examples of Checklist Items

In its social media guidance for X (formerly Twitter), the Navy provides the following criteria for determining when not to engage with comments:

- Minors or anyone under age 13.
- Content that is highly political in nature or generally negative.
- Users that appear to be spam, robots, or people trying to sell something.
- Content or profiles that involve illegal activities.
- Posts or comments that trash another individual, celebrity, or brand.

Source: Navy. | GAO-25-106719

Navy. Navy Recruiting Command Instruction 1140.3H provides guidance for advertising management, including roles and responsibilities, and operating procedures. For example, the manual identifies the many responsibilities of teams (E-Talent Teams) who are tasked with keeping pace with the latest digital trends and use modern marketing campaigns to gain access to a more tech-savvy market.¹⁸ The manual also describes roles and responsibilities and processes for Navy marketing, and defines key marketing terms and processes, among other topics. In addition, the Navy employs an internal series of checklists for using social media and a list of best practices to convey expectations for the E-Talent teams (see sidebar). Additionally, in fiscal year 2024, the Navy issued an annual marketing plan that established its marketing priorities and the marketing tactics that will be used to achieve the Navy's goals and objectives.

Marine Corps. Marine Corps Order 1130.56D outlines the roles of the Marine Corps Recruiting Command as well as the elements for executing the recruiting mission, including determining personnel requirements, recruiting training commanders, and identifying the recruiting force. Additionally, the Marine Corps' Digital Engagement Strategy outlines goals, objectives, vision, and processes for engaging with the target audience on digital platforms. In addition, its Digital Engagement Policy provides guidance and information to the Marine Corps Recruiting Command regarding the governance and use of digital platforms in accordance with other policies and strategies, such as the Digital Engagement Strategy. Officials from the command told us they provide training for new recruiters, including social media training within the first year of a 3-year tour.

Air Force and Space Force. Department of the Air Force Manual 36-2032 describes how each recruiting service is to create, produce, and distribute advertising materials to support respective personnel procurement programs.¹⁹ In addition, the Air Force and Space Force annual marketing plans identify the recruiting requirements for the year, the planned approach for achieving those requirements, and key performance indicators, among other things. Furthermore, the Air Force Recruiting Service's *Standard Operating Procedural Guide*, which

¹⁸E-Talent Teams function as the central advertising and leads tracking primary point of contact. The teams' responsibilities include planning, purchasing, and tracking advertising; maintaining the database for prospect; generating local advertising initiatives and booth rental events; and analyzing effectiveness among other things.

¹⁹The recruiting services include the Air Force Recruiting Service, Air National Guard Recruiting Service, and Air Force Reserve Command Recruiting Service.

provides guidance and procedures to recruiting squadrons, recruiters, and unit marketers for recruiting individuals into the Air Force and Space Force, includes a chapter dedicated to marketing, advertising, and public affairs that discusses digital marketing. It establishes responsibility for a regional marketing organization to oversee and support marketing planning and execution.

Army, Navy, and Marine Corps Developed Risk Assessment Strategies, but Air Force Manages Risk as Incidents Arise

The military services have developed different approaches to addressing the risks involved in marketing efforts; specifically, the Army, Navy, and Marine Corps have developed formal risk management strategies while the Air Force manages risk on a case-by-case basis, including assessing and responding to marketing crises.

Army, Navy, and Marine Corps Developed Risk Management Strategies

The Army, Navy, and Marine Corps have established strategies for managing risks to their brands based on their marketing efforts. Specifically, public reactions to the military services' digital marketing efforts can vary and sometimes present risks to the perception of the military services' brands. For example, in May 2021, the Army released an animated anthology series entitled "The Calling" about the real-life stories behind soldiers' decisions to join the Army. According to Army officials, the Army designed the marketing campaign to close the relatability gap between Generation Z and the Army by offering a look at the lives and motivations of some people who choose to join the Army. However, shortly after the campaign launched, Army officials noticed a significant increase in negative commentary that violated their social media policy and disabled the comments section.

Following this ad campaign, the Army developed two documents as part of its crisis and risk mitigation strategy. The Army developed these documents with support from the Army's contracted advertising agency—Team DDB.²⁰ First, in October 2021, the Army developed its Risk Assessment Strategy, which outlines the Army's approach to create more brand-relevant social media content and engagement while avoiding and mitigating risks. Some of the risks identified by the strategy include whether the posting would be deemed insensitive, tone deaf, or partisan in that moment. The strategy also outlines a workflow of how the Army intends to mitigate risk based on three types of urgencies,

²⁰Team DDB is an integrated agency team created for the Army by the advertising agency Doyle Dane Bernbach.

Army's Risk Assessment Urgency Levels

According to the Army's strategy, each urgency will be determined by the amount of crisis indicators it meets and will require its own process, procedures, and escalations.

- Low Urgency: matches one to two of the crisis indicators.
- Moderate Urgency: matches three to four of the crisis indicators.
- High Urgency: matches five to six of the crisis indicators.

All urgencies can be found through breaking news, insider Army information, social media engagement dashboards, and trending social media conversations.

Source: Army. | GAO-25-106719

all with its own process, procedures, and escalations (see sidebar). According to Army officials, the strategy establishes internal policies for the Army's marketing office and is a useful tool for communicating how the organization will respond to crises. Officials added that the strategy, however, is not authoritative and does not direct other entities to act.

Army officials told us that they employed the processes outlined in the Risk Assessment Strategy following a recent crisis involving the relaunch of the Army's "Be All You Can Be" campaign, as shown in figure 7. At the center of the brand rollout were two films narrated by a popular actor. The crisis began in March 2023 when the actor was arrested in New York over a reported domestic dispute. He was later found guilty of one misdemeanor assault charge and one harassment violation. According to officials, employing the Risk Assessment Strategy enabled the Army to respond quickly in notifying senior Army leadership and in pulling and replacing the ads before they aired. In April 2023, the Army developed its Crisis and Risk Mitigation Strategy, which describes how the Army will evaluate mission activities to understand their potential effect on recruitment and to help determine approaches for avoiding negative impressions.

Figure 7: Examples of the Army's "Be All You Can Be" Advertising Campaign



Source: Army.mil. | GAO-25-106719

The Navy also developed guidance on public engagement and crisis management that establishes when its community management team will get involved in a situation, when it will monitor it and keep the Navy Recruiting Command informed, and how it will respond to a crisis. For example, the guidance states that the community management team should engage with negative or derogatory comments when the statements are false or accusatory of the Navy or if a comment directly calls out for help or guidance. According to the guidance, the team will always delete or hide hateful or harmful comments or those that incite

violence. Furthermore, the guidance includes examples of how the team should engage, when it should not get involved, and the escalation policy for comments the team monitors. Lastly, the Navy guidance includes pre-written responses for a variety of situations, such as for commenters that may be a harm to themselves or others.

The Marine Corps has a risk mitigation plan developed by its contracted advertising agency. The plan aims to minimize threats to project objectives and provide approaches for accomplishing the same. These approaches include a risk management plan process for (1) risk forecasting, recognition, and assessment; (2) risk response; (3) monitoring and controlling of ongoing activities; and (4) reporting of the final project. At the beginning of each project Marine Corps action officers and other personnel are to provide information for a Project Risk Watch List that outlines the likeliness of risk and the personnel responsible for response, among other things. If an identified risk requires a response, the Marine Corps Recruiting Command and the Marine Corps' advertising agency will employ agreed-upon standards and tailor responses to address the situation accordingly. Additionally, the Marine Corps has documented practices for how to respond to or escalate crisis response to include social media.

Air Force and Space Force Manage Risk as Incidents Arise

Officials from the Air Force Recruiting Service stated that it uses a case-by-case approach for dealing with issues as they arise, in lieu of a standard process. Specifically, Air Force officials stated that the Air Force Recruiting Service and Space Force maintain control over marketing channels and try to respond quickly to issues as they arise. These officials told us the Air Force Recruiting Service's marketing division monitors world events and social media which drives the process for identifying risks. Additionally, officials told us the Air Force Recruiting Service uses its advertising agency to analyze how the target audience responds to current world events and its services' content, both for the Air Force and the Space Force. This analysis depends on the agency's interpretation of the Air Force's definition of risk and could lengthen the amount of time between an event and the Air Force Recruiting Service's response to that event. According to these officials, the recruiting service will remove or substitute its content based on this analysis and the recommendations of the advertising agency.

These officials also stated the Air Force assigns public affairs personnel to most squadrons to discuss the risks of social media. In addition, the recruiting service provides some licenses for a management platform tool that enable users to publish social media content and track data, among

other things. Using this tool, Air Force Recruiting Service officials can track fluctuations in Air Force and Space Force website visits concerning specific events or situations. However, this approach depends upon individual judgment to determine which events or situations present risk. Furthermore, officials stated that they try to foresee potential crises, and if they identify a potentially problematic event, they take action. For example, according to Air Force Recruiting Service officials, an Air National Guard recruiter recently posted some content on TikTok that did not align with the Air Force's values, so Air Force Recruiting Service officials spoke with the recruiter's battalion to address the issue. The recruiting service officials told us they routinely check social media channels to try to maintain visibility into what battalions and recruiters post, but officials stated they cannot review every single recruiter's post.

While the Army, Navy, and Marine Corps have established strategies for responding to marketing crises or public comments in a standardized way, the Air Force (which includes the Space Force) has not developed a formal risk or crisis management process. According to officials, the Air Force does not have written processes or standard procedures for dealing with emergent issues. However, a crisis is unplanned, and as seen in the Army's example involving the "Be All You Can Be" campaign, a formal risk assessment strategy helped the Army to respond quickly and minimize damage to its brand. Non-standard approaches introduce uncertainty regarding how these services will react and do not clearly communicate their policies to other relevant organizations. *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government* state that management should identify, analyze, and respond to risks related to achieving the defined objectives.²¹ Specifically, management designs responses to the analyzed risks so that risks are within the defined risk tolerance for the defined objective. Management should design overall risk responses for the analyzed risks based on the significance of the risk and defined risk tolerance.

Without a formal process for identifying risks and responding to marketing crises, the Air Force may not be positioned to address challenging situations affecting young people's perceptions of its brand. In a youth market defined by declining propensity toward military service, being prepared to manage potential crises could help ensure the Air Force reaches its recruitment goals in the face of unexpected challenges.

²¹GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, [GAO-14-704G](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 10, 2014).

Formal processes for identifying and responding to risks and crises could help the Air Force, as well as the Space Force, prepare for future events and make other relevant entities aware of their plans.

Military Services Incorporate Most Best Practices for Assessing Digital Marketing Efforts, but Some are Not Measuring Progress toward Goals

The military services have undertaken various efforts to evaluate the performance of their digital marketing activities in accordance with selected commercial best practices that we identified in our prior work.²² Specifically, we identified the following four best practices as relevant to DOD's digital marketing efforts: (1) develop an evaluation framework that identifies the target audience and includes measurable goals; (2) use sophisticated statistical modeling, such as marketing mix modeling, to determine appropriate spending strategy; (3) conduct ongoing analysis of performance using industry standard measures appropriate for the purpose of the advertising activity; and (4) seek to develop understanding of how outcomes can be attributed to advertising.

During our review, we found that all the military services use statistical modeling and conduct ongoing analysis to assess the performance of their investments in digital marketing. The Army, Navy, and Marine Corps can attribute engagements, leads, and signed recruitment contracts to specific marketing efforts, while the Air Force faces challenges in this area.²³ Furthermore, while the Army has fully established measurable goals in its evaluation framework, some of the Navy's, Marine Corps', and Air Force's goals do not have accompanying performance measures or specific targets as part of their evaluation frameworks. Table 3 shows the extent to which the military services incorporated four of these selected commercial best practices, according to our analysis.

²²[GAO-16-396](#).

²³Engagements are responses to a particular marketing effort such as social media posts or online advertisement. They may include requests from young people or their mentors for more information about military service opportunities. Leads are generated when young people or their mentors provide contact information that can lead to engagement with a recruiter. Signed recruitment contracts occur when a young person signs a contract committing to becoming an enlisted service member or officer.

Table 3: GAO Assessment of Extent to Which Department of Defense Incorporates Selected Best Practices for Assessing Effective Marketing

Commercial best practice ^a	Army	Navy	Marine Corps	Air Force ^b
Use statistical modeling	●	●	●	●
Conduct ongoing analysis	●	●	●	●
Attribute outcomes to marketing	●	●	●	◐
Develop evaluation framework	●	◐	◐	◐

Legend: ● = Fully incorporated ◐ = Partially incorporated ○ = Not incorporated

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) marketing plans and GAO commercial best practices for assessing the effectiveness of marketing. | GAO-25-106719

^aWe did not include the practices of (1) establishing effective roles and responsibilities and (2) ensuring that a coordinator is assigned because this review is focused on DOD and the military services' digital marketing efforts.

^bThe Air Force Recruiting Service develops the marketing plans for the Space Force.

All Military Services Use Statistical Modeling and Conduct Ongoing Analysis

All the military services' contracted advertising agencies incorporate the use of statistical modeling by using an analytical technique known as marketing mix modeling, which allows the military services to optimize their spending strategies.²⁴ According to industry experts, marketing mix modeling refers to the use of statistical analysis to estimate the effects of various marketing tactics on desired behavior (such as enlistment) and project the ideal or most efficient mix of tactics to result in that behavior. The approach estimates the effectiveness of marketing investments by the various forms of traditional or digital media.

According to the military services' marketing and recruiting officials, marketing mix modeling is used to plan traditional and digital media projects, to formulate and justify their budgets, to adjust their marketing efforts as necessary based on performance, and to estimate the effects of marketing efforts on recruiting outcomes. All the military services use their contracted advertising agencies to conduct statistical analysis using marketing mix modeling on their behalf. The advertising agencies provide the military services with monthly marketing performance reports and quarterly forecasts that provide information to assist marketing officials with decisions on the mix of digital marketing channels to invest in and to adjust funding allocations to make the most efficient use of available resources.

²⁴Marketing mix modeling is a best practice employed by agencies to determine the most efficient and effective allocation of a client's budget toward media purchases including print, television, and digital advertising.

The military services and their contracted advertising agencies also conduct ongoing analysis by using key performance indicators and measures to continuously measure the performance of their digital marketing advertising campaigns. The measures vary, depending on the purpose of the activity. For example, the military services track individuals who are ready to discuss the possibility of enlistment to measure the performance of their lead generation activities. They also collect data on the engagements made associated with marketing efforts on different digital platforms, such as the number of visits, “likes,” or comments made on social media posts. In addition, the Army’s marketing office and their advertising agency use a commercial social media application that provides real-time information from digital media platforms on perceptions from target audiences about topics trending in the media. Army marketing officials use this information to identify and assess potential risks as it pertains to specific marketing efforts and make adjustments to those efforts, as needed.

Army, Navy and Marine Corps Can Attribute Outcomes to Digital Marketing, and the Air Force Is Taking Steps to Develop Similar Capabilities

The military services study how digital marketing affects recruiting outcomes; however, the Air Force is unable to fully attribute its recruiting outcomes to digital marketing. Specifically, as we noted earlier, the military services use marketing mix modeling to estimate the effects of marketing efforts on leads and contracts. For example, the Army closely examines how its marketing efforts influence the development of leads and encourage potential recruits to sign enlistment contracts. During fiscal years 2021 through 2022, the Army identified an increase in signed recruitment contracts based in part on actions taken on social media and public relations efforts, local media and outreach efforts, email outreach, and national digital media efforts. Conversely, the Army experienced a decline in the number of signed contracts that have resulted from other efforts, such as television campaigns, discontinuing “The Calling” marketing campaign, and the Marketing Research Integrated Pilot effort, and external factors or events.²⁵ According to Army marketing officials, this type of performance information informs them where to redirect their marketing resources to enhance recruitment outcomes.

²⁵According to Army marketing officials, the Marketing Research Integrated Pilot was a one-time Army marketing effort that expanded micro targeting research to gain data driven insights about the most effective combinations of messaging and marketing channels (e.g., paid digital media, direct mail, e-mail, and organic social media paid digital media, direct mail, e-mail, and organic social media) to reach the Army’s target audiences. This effort occurred in 2021 by expanding research from Chicago to Atlanta, Boston, Dallas, Minneapolis, and Phoenix and ended by 2022.

Likewise, the Marine Corps uses statistical modeling to understand the effects of different marketing efforts on lead generation. According to Marine Corps recruiting officials, they ascribe marketing attribution for completed recruitment contracts primarily to the last identifiable marketing effort, known also as “last-click attribution.” Officials also said that the Marine Corps uses online tags to associate digital marketing activities with specific campaigns, allowing it to track a prospect’s journey from an initial digital marketing engagement through signing an enlistment contract. Similarly, the Navy’s contracted advertising agency tracks and integrates data from several marketing and recruiting systems to determine marketing attributions.

Air Force Recruiting Service officials recognized the need for accurate and reliable data to inform marketing decisions. These officials told us that they also have some systems in place to manage recruitment leads and are taking steps to update Air Force system to be able to fully attribute recruiting outcomes to its digital marketing activities. According to officials, they plan for an updated data system to provide the capability to understand the common marketing touchpoints it takes for a recruiter to engage with and to get prospective recruits to sign an enlistment contract.

Officials said that attributing some leads or contracts to specific digital marketing sources in their current system can be challenging, because the information system responsible for capturing the sources of leads and signed contracts for the Air Force and the Space Force allows users to modify source data. Air Force recruiting officials said that they are taking steps to lock down the source data for leads and contracts in the marketing management systems so that users cannot modify it. These officials added that once these changes to lock down the source data are completed, they should be able to more accurately attribute leads and contracts to specific digital marketing sources. Air Force Recruiting Service officials said that their recruitment data system should be updated with these enhanced capabilities by fiscal year 2027.

Most Military Services Do Not Have Needed Metrics to Measure Progress Toward Goals in Their Evaluation Framework

In our analysis of the military services’ marketing plans assessed against selected commercial best practices we previously identified, we found that all the military services developed evaluation frameworks that identify a target audience. However, some of the strategic goals identified in

Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force plans do not include specific targets by which to measure progress toward achieving these goals.²⁶

All the military services' evaluation frameworks identified the general age range of the Generation Z demographic as the target audience. Further, the Air Force and Space Force broadened their target audiences to include the mentors of potential recruits. These two services also stratified their audiences based on whether the digital media campaign incurs a cost, such as for social media banners, or is free, such as the social media accounts of individual recruiters (see table 4).

Table 4: Target Audiences Identified in the Military Services' Marketing Plans

Military service	Target audience	Digital media campaigns
Army	Ages 16–28	Paid ^a and unpaid ^b
Navy	Ages 17–24	Paid and unpaid
Marine Corps	Generation Z	Paid and unpaid
Air Force	Ages 18–24	Paid
	Ages 16–26	Unpaid
Space Force	Ages 18–39 (including mentors)	Paid
	Ages 18–24	Unpaid
	Ages 35–64 (mentors only)	

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense documents. | GAO-25-106719

^aPaid digital media includes, for example, social media banners and digital marketing advertisements on streaming television services.

^bUnpaid digital media includes, for example, posts on military recruiters' social media accounts and outreach through other online forums associated with interest in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics; gaming; music; or entertainment.

In addition to age, some of the military services' marketing plans specify details of other characteristics they are seeking in potential recruits. For example, the Army's marketing plan explicitly identifies its target audience as U.S. citizens or valid permanent Green Card holders that are

²⁶Strategic goals and related objectives are long-term goals that set a general direction for a program's efforts. GAO, *Veterans Justice Outreach Program: VA Could Improve Management by Establishing Performance Measures and Fully Assessing Risks*, GAO-16-393 (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 28, 2016); *Program Evaluation: Strategies to Facilitate Agencies' Use of Evaluation in Program Management and Policy Making*, GAO-13-570 (Washington, D.C.: June 26, 2013); *Performance Measurement and Evaluation: Definitions and Relationships*, GAO-11-646SP (Washington, D.C.: May 2011); and *Managing for Results: Enhancing Agency Use of Performance Information for Management Decision Making*, GAO-05-927 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 9, 2005).

medically, physically, and morally fit for duty and hold a high school diploma or equivalent. The Air Force’s marketing plan describes some of the characteristics it is looking for in potential recruits, ranging from candidate diversity—such as female, Hispanic, or Asian candidates—to individuals who are outdoor, sports, technology, and music enthusiasts.

While the services’ most recent marketing plans identify their target audiences, the plans vary in the extent to which they include measurable goals. For example, the Army marketing plan identifies as part of its strategy lines of effort with defined measurable goals (see table 5).

Table 5: Examples of the Army’s Marketing Strategy Lines of Effort

Description	Goals	Performance measure examples
Attract Quality Talent		
Generating marketing attributable leads and increasing the percentage of officers commissioned among groups who have traditionally been underrepresented.	The Army will be comprised of soldiers and civilians that are representative of the population and are of the highest quality required for the demands of warfare in 2028.	The number and percentage of marketing attributable leads and contracts across potential recruits compared to established baselines.
Bolster the Brand		
Increasing the reach and frequency of marketing campaigns across media channels as well as public perceptions of the Army brand.	Young people and their mentors believe the Army offers purpose, passion, community, and connection as an employer.	Use of surveys to gauge the perceptions of the Army brand among young people and their mentors.
Encourage Retention		
Conducting foundational activities, such as e-mail campaigns to market career opportunities and to engage with Army personnel across the enterprise to understand how marketing can assist in retention effort. In particular, retention efforts will focus on Army Reserve and Army National Guard personnel.	Soldiers understand the value of continuing service, whether on an individual’s current path, or in pursuit of new opportunities.	Tracking and management of Army Reserve and National Guard annual loss rates.

Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Army Annual Marketing Plan, Fiscal Years 2024–2026. | GAO-25-106719

By contrast, the marketing and advertising plans for the Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force do not establish performance measures to measure progress toward meeting their strategic goals.²⁷ According to officials, the Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force do identify goals and performance measures for their individual marketing campaigns as part of their

²⁷Performance measures are concrete, objective, observable conditions that permit the assessment of progress made toward the agency’s goals. Performance measures show the progress the agency is making in achieving performance goals. See [GAO-16-393](#).

contracts with their advertising agencies. These measures include return on investment, number of program eligible leads, and number of engagements, but do not apply to the overall strategic goals of the programs. However, these three military services' plans either do not identify specific strategic goals or do not have performance measures to be able to sufficiently measure progress against such goals.

- **Navy.** The Navy's 2024 marketing plan and recruiting officials identified three strategic goals to support recruitment efforts: (1) increase the number and speed of program leads to provide to recruiters; (2) position the Navy as the lead military service to focus on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics capabilities; and (3) overcome the perception that the Navy has pervasive safety issues.

For the first strategic goal, the Navy's marketing plan provides details on efforts to improve leads, but the plan does not have specific targets for measuring progress towards achieving the second and third strategic goals. Specifically, for the second strategic goal, the Navy seeks to better position itself to recruit young people interested in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields, but it does not identify a specific target for when it will achieve its goal or for what successful achievement of the goal looks like. For the third strategic goal, the Navy has identified concerns that prospective recruits have about being physically and emotionally safe in the military service.

The Navy uses data from JAMRS surveys to determine the perceived level of safety among respondents. However, the Navy has not identified a target, such as a specific percentage increase annually in positive responses to JAMRS survey questions on safety, to gauge whether or not it is achieving desired progress. Overall, when measuring progress toward achieving its second and third strategic goals, the Navy does not provide specific details as to what goals are to be achieved, how these goals will be achieved, when they will be achieved, who is responsible for achieving them, and how progress toward achieving these goals are to be measured.

- **Marine Corps.** The Marine Corps' 2024 *Advertising Strategy Assessment* describes a strategic goal of countering competing messages in a fragmented digital media environment that deter young people from considering military service as a possible career. To achieve this goal, the strategy assessment identified three themes—Epic Experiences, Foster Deeper Connection, and Accelerate Force Recruiting. Although the Marine Corps identified the three strategic goals for its initiatives to counter competing messages in a

fragmented media environment that dissuade young people from military service, some of the performance measures do not include specificity as to what is being measured to track performance, have specific time frames for completion, or identify who is responsible for completing specific actions or efforts.

- **Air Force.** The Air Force’s marketing plan identifies four strategic goals to support recruitment efforts. Three strategic goals in the marketing plan have performance measures while the fourth does not. Among the Air Force’s goals that have performance measures, its goal to retain the skills and experience among air personnel to support the Total Force is measured through a combination of measures from the Inspire, Engage, and Recruit phases of the Air Force Recruiting Service’s marketing strategy.²⁸

However, the Air Force’s fourth strategic goal is to create a long-term association with science, technology, engineering, and mathematics and the capabilities of the Air Force and its service members. While the Air Force’s marketing plan identifies initiatives and tactics related to this goal—including creating digital marketing content that will appeal to young people who are interested in related careers and establishing relationships with organizations associated with these fields—the plan does not include specific targets detailing what is to be achieved, how it will be achieved, when it is to be achieved by, who is responsible for achieving it, and how it will be measured.

- **Space Force.** The Space Force’s marketing plan identifies six strategic goals or priorities. The Space Force relies upon a combination of measures as part of its marketing strategy to provide performance measures for five of the six goals. For example, for the Space Force’s sixth strategic goal on maintaining a pipeline of leads, the marketing plan identifies how many leads or new contacts it needs to support recruiting requirements and tracks the number of leads generated against this indicator. In addition, the plan shows that information from the JAMRS survey can be used as supplemental information to gauge awareness of the Space Force. Although the Space Force’s plan outlines initiatives and tactics related to its fifth strategic goal to establish a long-term association with science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, the plan does not clearly outline which measures will be used to gauge progress towards achieving this goal.

²⁸According to Air Force recruiting officials, retention includes measuring the conversion rate of active-duty Air Force service members to Air National Guard or Reserve components after completing an enlistment tour.

According to federal internal control standards, specific and measurable goals clearly define the following five characteristics: (1) what is to be achieved; (2) how it is to be achieved; (3) when it is to be achieved by; (4) who is responsible for achieving it; and (5) how it is to be measured.²⁹ While the Navy's, Marine Corps', and Air Force's plans or assessments specify these characteristics for some of their strategic goals, they do not fully address all of these characteristics.

Without clearly defining what each strategic goal intends to achieve, specifying time frames for when efforts supporting each goal are to be completed, and identifying who will complete each effort, it will be difficult for the Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force to measure progress against goals stated in their respective marketing plans or future iterations. Without identifying how progress toward strategic marketing goals will be measured, it will be difficult for decision makers in the military services to determine if the organization is making progress toward or achieving its desired ends. Such efforts would include clearly defining what each goal intends to achieve, how it is to be achieved, when it is to be achieved by, who is responsible for achieving it, and how it is to be measured. It will also be difficult to ensure that stakeholders understand the marketing program's intended outcomes and results.

Military Services Have Experienced Challenges with Funding Their Marketing Efforts and Have Not Taken Steps to Fully Address Them

The military services face challenges with the timing and availability of funding for their marketing efforts. According to military marketing, comptroller, and budget officials, the marketing industry's practices do not align with the military's budgeting process, undermining the services' ability to effectively plan and execute their marketing and recruiting mission. According to these officials, the timing for when they receive funding creates uncertainty for the services as they plan to purchase digital media for marketing and recruiting purposes.

Specifically, the military services use DOD's planning, programming, budgeting, and executing process to identify, budget for, and obtain funding for their marketing efforts. Through this process, the military services generally plan for their funding needs several years in advance. According to officials, in the execution phase of the process, DOD and the military services' comptroller offices allocate funding to the military services' marketing and recruiting offices and commands. This funding is used to purchase digital and traditional media spots, among other marketing and advertising efforts. Although funds the military services use

²⁹[GAO-14-704G](#).

for their marketing programs is generally appropriated annually, officials noted that the relevant offices in the military services receive the funding to implement the programs three to four times throughout the year. As a result, the services face challenges efficiently and effectively executing digital media strategies.

The **Marine Corps** has taken steps to navigate challenges associated with the timing and availability of funding but not documented its approach in guidance. Specifically, the Marine Corps' Comptroller has established an internal process to prioritize the release of funding for Marine Corps programs when needed to make purchases in instances when budgeted-for funds are not readily available. Specifically, the Comptroller communicates with various commands and offices to ensure that vital programs and missions are executed in a timely fashion even when the amount of allocated funding available throughout the year is uncertain. Marine Corps Recruiting Command officials said this process allows them to take advantage of prime media purchases at the most cost-effective time. These officials also said they have worked with the Comptroller to ensure that a larger portion of its funding is released during the first quarter of the new fiscal year when they typically need it for prime media purchases; they receive a smaller portion of funding in later quarters during the fiscal year when less funding is needed.

While the Marine Corps has optimized the timing of marketing fund releases through prioritization and quarterly reviews of program needs, these processes are informal and are in place due to the current Comptroller's approach to release funds to Marine Corps organizations at optimal times. Specifically, Marine Corps Recruiting Command officials expressed concerns that these internal processes are not documented. According to these officials, the current Comptroller staggers the release of funds based on when an organization can optimally use them. By contrast, the prior Comptroller released smaller amounts of funding throughout the year across all organizations regardless of whether the timing and amounts were optimal for purchases. As a result, some organizations received funds that they could not use immediately, and others did not have the necessary funds for optimal purchases at the right time.

Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government state that management should document the internal control responsibilities of the

organization and implement control activities through these policies.³⁰ In addition, management should document in policies for each unit its responsibility for an operational process's objectives and related risks, and control activity design, implementation, and operating effectiveness.

While Marine Corps Recruiting Command officials recognize the support of the current Comptroller and the approach to funding, they raised concerns that if the existing funding processes are not documented in guidance, then a future Comptroller could change how funding is released. Such changes, according to these officials, could put the command's ability to reach a wide array of young people and their mentors at risk because funding may not be available when the pricing of prime digital media purchases is the most cost-effective.

The **Army, Navy, and Air Force and Space Force** have also faced challenges in making digital media purchases in a timely manner to support their recruitment needs but have not established internal processes to improve the predictability and consistency of when marketing funds are available each year. Specifically:

- **Army.** Army marketing officials told us that to mitigate challenges associated with the timing of when marketing funds become available, they strive to make the highest priority digital and traditional media purchases at the beginning of the fiscal year through the Army's advertising agency. However, Army marketing officials expressed concerns about the increasing demand in the media marketplace, which affects availability and pricing of media purchases. Army marketing officials also said that to purchase the spots in advance for national commercials at a lower cost, they need to be able to make media purchases about 18 months in advance of when they want a commercial spot to play. In addition, due to budget uncertainties, marketing officials said there have been instances when they were unable to obligate funds to make the most advantageous and necessary media purchases to effectively reach out to their target audience.
- **Navy.** Officials with the Navy Recruiting Command said through the Navy's Office of Legislative Affairs, they requested to receive half of their marketing funds at the beginning of fiscal year 2024 to support media purchases needed for marketing and recruiting activities. Officials said that to meet this request, \$35 million of funding

³⁰[GAO-14-704G](#).

dedicated to Navy recruiting was shifted from other operational recruiting requirements, such as travel expenses and in-person events that were subsequently delayed. Navy Recruiting Command officials recognized that although this shift of funding met the media purchase needs for fiscal year 2024, it does not serve as a solution for media purchases in future years.

- **Air Force and Space Force.** To secure funding up front to support its marketing and recruitment efforts for the Air Force and the Space Force, officials told us that the Air Force is developing a legislative proposal to recommend that marketing and media funding be provided across 2 or more fiscal years.³¹ Some Air Force marketing officials believed that making funding available across fiscal years would help them purchase media and support marketing at the most opportune and cost-effective times as such purchases often require planning more than one year in advance.

However, some budgeting officials disagreed that a 2-year funding approach would help with media purchases beyond one purchasing cycle. Officials said that while such a legislative proposal would assist in being able to make media and marketing purchases one year out, as the two-year funding cycle ends the Air Force would be in the same position of not being certain that funding will be available to make media purchases for future cycles during the most cost-effective periods.

Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government state that management should identify changes in the internal control system that either have occurred or are needed because of changes in the entity and its environment.³² Further, according to these standards, management should document in policies the internal control responsibilities of the organization and an operational process's objectives and related risks, and a control activity design, implementation, and operational effectiveness.

The Army, Navy, and Air Force and Space Force have not assessed whether to establish internal processes to improve the predictability and consistency of when marketing funds are available each year. Without being able to provide predictable funding for their marketing programs,

³¹The Air Force Recruiting Service is responsible for planning, programming, budgeting, and executing advertising, marketing, and other promotional activities, events, and services for the Air Force and the Space Force.

³²[GAO-14-704G](#).

the military services are missing out on potential benefits that would further enhance their ability to conduct marketing in support of their recruiting mission as well as reduce waste. Specifically, the military services cannot purchase planned digital media if funding is not yet available. Further, uncertainties in the amount and the timing of available funding limit their ability to purchase streaming, paid social media, and paid search advertisements up front at lower rates and with more media options. Unpredictable funding means that the military services often experience challenges or are unable to make up-front purchases and reap the benefits. Assessing whether to adopt and document internal processes to improve the predictability of funding could better position the Army, Navy, and Air Force and Space Force to make the best use of their marketing funds.

Conclusions

As DOD faces ongoing recruiting challenges and increasingly unfavorable views on military service among young people, digital marketing efforts are an important source of information and present opportunities to influence the beliefs and understanding of potential recruits about each military service. To accomplish these goals, the military services have developed guidance to drive their marketing efforts and implemented some of the best practices for assessing these efforts, but they vary on developing formal risk management approaches, identifying detailed goals, and on attributing marketing outcomes. Additionally, the Army, Navy, and Air Force have yet to address how funding cycles affect the purchasing power of their marketing funds.

Without taking additional actions to implement best practices, develop risk management approaches, and address the unpredictability and inconsistency of marketing funding, the military services will not be prepared to manage potential crises and reach their recruitment goals. By addressing these areas, DOD and the military services can better manage their individual brands, assess the effectiveness of marketing activities, and make effective use of the public funds available to support their missions.

Recommendations for Executive Action

We are making a total of eight recommendations, including one to the Army, two to the Navy, two to the Marine Corps, and three to the Air Force. Specifically:

The Secretary of the Air Force should ensure that the Commander of the Air Force Recruiting Service defines a formal process for risk management to identify, analyze, and respond to risks related to Air

Force and Space Force marketing efforts, including digital marketing. (Recommendation 1)

The Secretary of the Navy should ensure that the Commander of the Navy Recruiting Command clearly identifies in future iterations of the Navy's marketing plan(s) how progress toward achieving strategic goals will be measured. (Recommendation 2)

The Secretary of the Navy should ensure that the Commander of the Marine Corps Recruiting Command clearly identifies in future iterations of the Marine Corps' marketing plan how progress toward achieving strategic goals will be measured. (Recommendation 3)

The Secretary of the Air Force should ensure that the Commander of the Air Force Recruiting Service clearly identifies in future iterations of the Air Force's and Space Force's marketing plans how progress toward achieving strategic goals will be measured. (Recommendation 4)

The Secretary of the Navy should ensure that the Commander of the Marine Corps Recruiting Command documents internal processes to ensure that marketing funds continue to be consistent and available. (Recommendation 5)

The Secretary of the Army should ensure that the Chief of the Army Enterprise Marketing Office assesses whether the Army should adopt and document internal processes to improve predictability and consistency of marketing funds. (Recommendation 6)

The Secretary of the Navy should ensure that the Commander of the Navy Recruiting Command assesses whether the Navy should adopt and document internal processes to improve predictability and consistency of marketing funds. (Recommendation 7)

The Secretary of the Air Force should ensure that the Commander of the Air Force Recruiting Service assesses whether the Air Force and Space Force should adopt and document internal processes to improve predictability and consistency of marketing funds. (Recommendation 8)

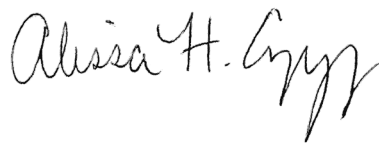
Agency Comments

In written comments on a draft of this report, DOD concurred with seven recommendations and partially concurred with one recommendation. DOD's comments are restated below and reprinted in appendix III. DOD also provided technical comments, which we incorporated where appropriate.

DOD partially concurred with the recommendation that the Secretary of the Army should ensure that the Chief of the Army Enterprise Marketing Office assesses whether the Army should adopt and document internal processes to improve predictability and consistency of marketing funds. In its comments, DOD concurred with the intent of the recommendation, but stated that the department should ensure the Army adopts and documents internal processes. However, as we noted in our report, DOD first needs to identify changes in the internal control system that either have occurred or are needed because of changes in the entity and its environment. Thus, an assessment should precede adoption of internal processes. Additionally, DOD stated that the Army's marketing office receives funds incrementally, which can limit efficient purchases, cause time delays in project completion, and increase overhead costs. It states that this problem could be improved by fully funding the Army's marketing office at the beginning of the fiscal year or by having multi-year funding to support national paid media plans. According to the department, the Army's marketing office will prepare a memorandum to the Secretary of the Army providing suggestions on how to improve predictability and consistency of marketing funds. We believe that an assessment of current internal processes that precedes adopting new processes could better position the military services to make the best use of their marketing funds and meet the intent of the recommendation.

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Secretary of Defense, the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, and other interested parties. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at <https://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at CzyzA@gao.gov or (202) 512-3058. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report are listed in appendix IV.



Alissa H. Czyz
Director, Defense Capabilities and Management

Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

This report evaluates the Department of Defense's (DOD) use of social media and other technology platforms for marketing and recruiting purposes. Specifically, we address (1) how the military services have used digital and other marketing efforts to recruit young people; (2) the extent to which the military services have developed policies to direct their digital marketing activities and to manage risks; (3) the extent to which the military services have evaluated the performance of their digital marketing activities; and (4) the extent to which the military services have experienced and addressed any challenges associated with funding their marketing efforts

To address our first objective, we reviewed the results of DOD commissioned surveys in May 2023 and May 2022, respectively, on the perspectives of young people and their mentors regarding military service as a potential career option. We used these survey results for information provided in this objective because they were the most recent available at the time this report was being developed. In addition, we reviewed the results of an Army commissioned survey from 2022 that focused on factors and predictors that may influence a young person's decision on whether to consider service in the Army as potential career option, such as political views, perspectives on the Army, and economic conditions.

Based on information provided by DOD and the military services' recruiting officials, we reviewed the military services' official recruitment focused websites and some of their official social media web pages to identify examples of how they strive to promote service in the military, provide information that many potential recruits may have about military service, and how they work to obtain contact information from interested individuals to be used by a recruiter for direct engagement.

We also reviewed guidance and other resources from the military services intended to provide recruiters and other personnel involved with recruitment or marketing efforts with information and guidelines on social media operating procedures, standards of professional conduct, and preapproved content to use in digital marketing campaigns, among other things. In addition, we reviewed each of the military services' annual marketing plans available in fiscal year 2024. These resources were used to provide examples of how the military services ensure that personnel involved with recruitment and marketing know their roles and responsibilities and how they abide by established policies and rules when they create or use online content.

We also interviewed officials from the Office of the Secretary of Defense, U.S. Army, U.S. Navy, U.S. Navy, and U.S. Air Force regarding digital marketing efforts, among other things. The following is a complete list of the organizations and officials we interviewed or obtained documentation from during the course of our audit:

- Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness
- Joint Advertising, Market Research and Studies, Office of People Analytics
- Army Enterprise Marketing Office
- Army Recruiting Command
- Army National Guard Bureau
- Navy Recruiting Command
- Marine Corps Recruiting Command
- Air Force Recruiting Service¹

To address our second objective, we reviewed DOD and the military services' digital marketing guidance, including strategies and annual marketing plans, and assessed the extent to which these documents included risk management principles. We also interviewed DOD and military service officials responsible for risk assessment. We found the risk assessment component of internal control to be significant to our objective, along with the underlying principles defining objectives and risk tolerances. We compared the services' guidance, plans, and processes against *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, which states that management should identify, analyze, and respond to risks related to achieving the defined objectives.² Specifically, management should design responses to the analyzed risks so that risks are within the defined risk tolerance for the defined objective. Furthermore, management should design overall risk responses for the analyzed risks based on the significance of the risk and defined risk tolerance.

To address our third objective, we reviewed the military services' annual marketing plans and other associated documentation available in fiscal

¹The Air Force Recruiting Service manages and oversees recruiting and marketing efforts for the Air Force, the Air Force National Guard, and the U.S. Space Force.

²GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, [GAO-14-704G](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 10, 2014).

year 2024 and assessed their content related to digital marketing against four of the six commercial best practices for assessing the effectiveness of advertising that were identified in a 2016 GAO report.³ Specifically, we focused on the practices of developing an evaluation framework, using statistical modeling, conducting ongoing analysis, and attributing outcomes to advertising because we determined that these practices were the most applicable to the military services' digital marketing efforts.⁴ To conduct our assessment, one analyst evaluated the content from the marketing plans and other related marketing documents, compared the content to the best practices criteria, and determined whether the services fully incorporated, partially incorporated, or did not incorporate the standard. Another analyst reviewed and verified the first analyst's evaluation. In instances when the analysts' conclusions differed, they discussed the criteria and came to a consensus on the rating.

We also found the risk assessment component to be significant to our audit objectives, along with the underlying principles of defining objectives and risk tolerances. We compared marketing plans and other related marketing documents to these criteria on establishing goals and performance measures found in *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*.⁵

In addition to our review of these documents to assess the content in their marketing plans and associated documentation, we interviewed officials from the Army Enterprise Marketing Office, the Navy Recruiting Command, the Marine Corps Recruiting Command, and the Air Force Recruiting Service to better understand how they attribute outcomes to digital marketing efforts. The officials at these organizations, described how they attribute digital marketing to outcomes, such as leads generated and signed contracts, and they described any challenges they experienced which we summarized in the report.

To address our fourth objective, we interviewed budget officials from the Army, Marine Corps, Navy, and Air Force to better understand how the military services fund digital marketing activities, any challenges they

³GAO, *DOD Advertising: Better Coordination, Performance Measurement, and Oversight Needed to Help Meet Recruitment Goals*, [GAO-16-396](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 12, 2016).

⁴We did not include the practices of (1) establishing effective roles and responsibilities and (2) ensuring that a coordinator is assigned because this review is focused on DOD and the military services' digital marketing efforts.

⁵[GAO-14-704G](#).

experience, and what actions they have taken to improve the predictability and consistency of marketing funds. We reviewed and analyzed information and guidance on DOD's planning, programming, budgeting, and execution process to understand how the marketing and funding cycles interact.

We conducted this performance audit from March 2023 to October 2024 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.

Appendix II: Young People and Their Mentors' Perspectives on Military Service

Top Reasons Why Young People Would or Would Not Consider Military Service, according to Spring 2023 Survey

Reasons for Military Service

1. Pay/Money
2. Paying for future education
3. Travel
4. Health and medical benefits
5. Gaining experience/work skills
6. Helping others
7. Pension and retirement benefits
8. Experience adventure
9. Improve quality of life
10. Pride, Self-Esteem, and Honor

Reasons against Military Service

1. Risk of physical injury or death
2. Risk of emotional or psychological trauma/issues.
3. Leaving family and friends
4. Other career interests
5. Dislike of military lifestyle
6. Required to live in unfavorable places
7. Long time commitment
8. Overseas deployments
9. Risk of sexual harassment or assault
10. Interfering with college education

Source: Joint Advertising and Market Research Studies. | GAO-25-106719

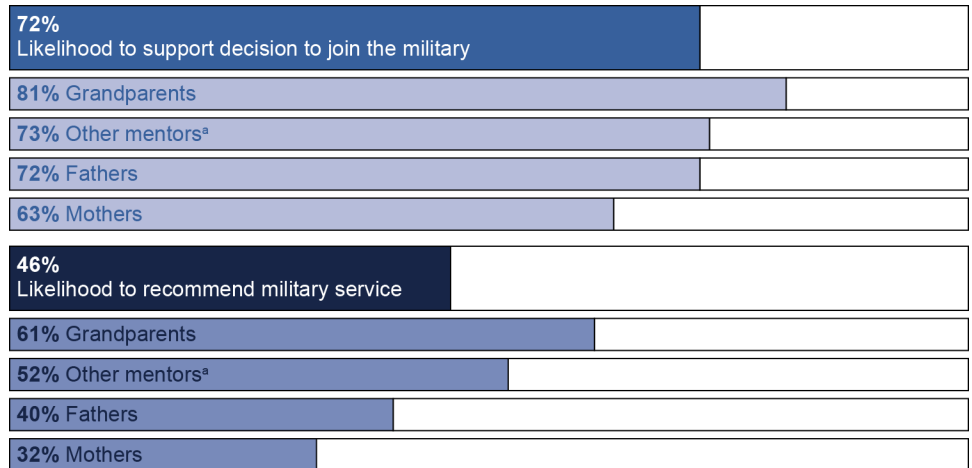
To better understand the perspectives that many 16- to 21-year-olds hold regarding military service, Joint Advertising and Market Research Studies (JAMRS) has conducted surveys that include perspectives based on factors such as gender, age, and race and ethnicity. The JAMRS Youth Poll is a mail-based survey conducted with a generalizable sample of 4,975 young people ages 16 to 24. The JAMRS Youth Poll results discussed in this report reflect the responses of young people ages 16 to 21. The results of the survey, conducted December 2022 through June 2023 and published in December 2023, identified the top 10 reasons why young people may consider military service, which include pay, educational opportunities, travel, and gaining experience and work skills, among other things.¹ Conversely, the survey identified the top 10 reasons why young people would not consider military service, which include the possibility of physical injuries or death, emotional and psychological issues, leaving family and friends, and pursuing other career interests, among other reasons (see sidebar).

In addition, JAMRS has conducted ongoing web-based panel surveys of mentors in the lives of young people to gauge their perspectives on the likelihood that they would support a prospective recruit's decision to join the military or recommend the military as a career option. The survey is conducted with a generalizable sample of parents, grandparents, and other people who influence the lives of young people ages 12 to 21. The survey conducted in July 2021 through September 2021 with results released in May 2022 estimated that 72 percent of mentors would likely support a young person's decision to join the military and 46 percent would likely recommend military service as a career option.² The survey also found that grandparents and other mentors in a young person's life were more likely than parents to recommend military service as a career option (see fig. 8).

¹Office of People Analytics Joint Advertising, Market Research and Studies, *Spring 2023 Propensity Update: Youth Poll Study Findings* (Dec. 2023).

²Office of People Analytics Joint Advertising, Market Research and Studies, *Influencer Poll Wave 74* (May 6, 2022).

Figure 8: Mentors' Likelihood to Support a Decision to Join the Military and to Recommend Military Service as a Career Path, July–Sept. 2021^a



Source: Office of People Analytics Joint Advertising, Market Research, and Studies. | GAO-25-106719

^aJAMRS identifies other influencers such as teachers and coaches. However, we use “mentors” instead to avoid confusion with the term social-media influencers.

Further, in May 2023, JAMRS created a slide deck for GAO that summarized the key results of several studies on youth media habits. Based on the results of their studies, JAMRS concluded young people’s impressions of the military are fragmented and increasingly being shaped by non-military sources, which tend to present a less favorable view of the military.³ In addition, JAMRS reported young people lack familiarity with the military, which leads to their relying on stereotypes of military life. Also, young people are not interested in searching for information to counter those misperceptions, according to the results of the survey.

The Army also collects data as part of its efforts to monitor factors that may influence young people’s decisions to consider an Army career. The Army Pulse Survey was a web-based survey, and the results reported reflect the responses from approximately 1,200 young people ages 16 to 28 and was gathered July to August 2022 and reported in October 2022.⁴ Survey results were mixed on individual factors that affect whether a young person chooses to consider the Army as a viable career option. For example, 26 percent of respondents said they were more likely to join

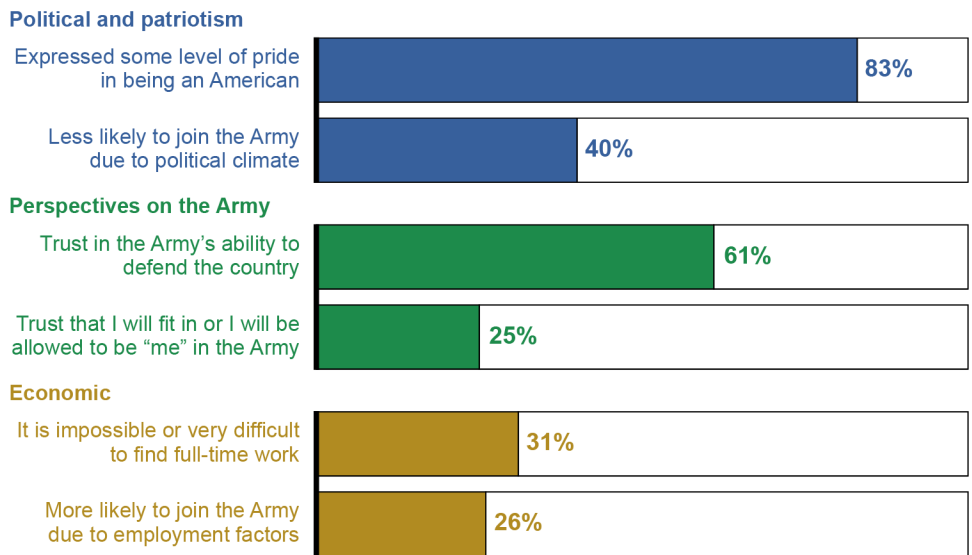
³Office of People Analytics Joint Advertising, Market Research, and Studies, *Youth Media Habits* (May 2023).

⁴Team DDB, *Army Pulse Survey* (Oct. 17, 2022).

the Army due to economic conditions affecting potential full-time employment opportunities, while 28 percent said they were less likely. Forty-six percent of respondents said that economic conditions and associated employment factors were not a consideration.

The Army Pulse Survey asked young people to identify the most important environmental dynamics affecting their perspectives, such as how the U.S. economy has affected their plans and its effect on their personal finances. Environmental factors also include the U.S. political divide, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the importance of free speech. In addition, the survey measured factors related to young people's perceptions of the Army, such as the degree to which they feel they would fit into Army culture; they could trust Army leadership, particularly for ensuring opportunities of growth; and they could sustain relationships, including with family members who may express disapproval of their decision to join the Army (see fig. 9).

Figure 9: Examples of Responses to Army 2022 Survey on Recruitment^a



Source: U.S. Army. | GAO-25-106719

^aThe information in the figure represents the percentages of respondents answering the associated question. The statements are responses from separate questions asked in the Army survey and therefore, do not add up to 100 percent in each category.

Appendix III: Comments from the Department of Defense



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RESERVE AFFAIRS

OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE
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WASHINGTON, D.C. 20301-1500

Ms. Alissa Czyz
Director, Defense Capabilities Management
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington DC 20548

Dear Ms. Czyz:

Enclosed is the Department of Defense's response to GAO Draft Report GAO-25-106719, "MILITARY RECRUITING: Actions Needed to Address Digital Marketing Challenges," dated September 18, 2024 (GAO Code 106719). My point of contact is Mr. Charles Lamer, who can be reached at charles.e.lamer.civ@mail.mil.

Sincerely,

ANGERS.JEFFREY
.PAUL.1007947417

Digitally signed by
ANGERS.JEFFREY.PAUL.10079
47417
Date: 2024.11.07 13:14:05 -05'00'

Jeffrey P. Angers
Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense
for Manpower and Reserve Affairs

Enclosure:
As stated

GAO Draft Report Dated September 18, 2024
GAO-25-106719 (GAO CODE 106719)

“MILITARY RECRUITING: ACTIONS NEEDED TO ADDRESS DIGITAL
MARKETING CHALLENGES”

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE COMMENTS
TO THE GAO RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATION 1: The GAO recommends that the Secretary of the Air Force should ensure that the Commander of the Air Force Recruiting Service defines a formal process for risk management to identify, analyze, and respond to risks related to Air Force and Space Force marketing efforts, including digital marketing.

DoD RESPONSE: Concur.

RECOMMENDATION 2: The GAO recommends that the Secretary of the Navy should ensure that the Commander of Navy Recruiting Command clearly identifies in future iterations of the Navy’s marketing plan(s) how progress toward achieving strategic goals will be measured.

DoD RESPONSE: Concur.

RECOMMENDATION 3: The GAO recommends that the Secretary of the Navy should ensure that the Commander of the Marine Corps Recruiting Command clearly identifies in future iterations of the Marine Corp’s marketing plan how progress toward achieving strategic goals will be measured.

DoD RESPONSE: Concur.

RECOMMENDATION 4: The GAO recommends that the Secretary of the Air Force should ensure that the Commander of Air Force Recruiting Service clearly identifies in future iterations of the Air Force’s and Space Force’s marketing plans how progress toward achieving strategic goals will be measured.

DoD RESPONSE: Concur.

RECOMMENDATION 5: The GAO recommends that the Secretary of the Navy should ensure that the Commander of the Marine Corps Recruiting Command documents internal processes to ensure that marketing funds continue to be consistent and available.

DoD RESPONSE: Concur.

RECOMMENDATION 6: The GAO recommends that the Secretary of the Army should ensure that the Chief of the Army Enterprise Marketing Office assesses whether the Army should adopt and document internal processes to improve predictability and consistency of marketing

**Appendix III: Comments from the Department
of Defense**

funds.

DoD RESPONSE: Partially concur. The Army Enterprise Marketing Office (AEMO) provided the following comments. AEMO recommends the following adjustment to the wording of Recommendation 6: “The Secretary of the Army should ensure the Army adopts and documents internal processes to improve predictability and consistency of providing funding to its marketing office.” AEMO concurs with the intent of the comment but feels the wording could be misleading. AEMO receives funds incrementally, which can limit efficient purchases, cause time delays in project completion, and can increase overhead costs. This problem could be improved by fully funding AEMO at the beginning of the Fiscal Year or by having multi-year funding to support national paid media plans. AEMO (through USAREC) will prepare a memorandum to the Secretary of the Army providing suggestions on how to improve predictability and consistency of marketing funds.

RECOMMENDATION 7: The GAO recommends that the Secretary of the Navy should ensure that the Commander of the Navy Recruiting Command to assesses whether the Navy should adopt and document internal processes to improve predictability and consistency of marketing funds.

DoD RESPONSE: Concur.

RECOMMENDATION 8: The GAO recommends that the Secretary of the Air Force should ensure that the Commander of the Air Force Recruiting Service assesses whether the Air Force and Space Force should adopt and document internal processes to improve predictability and consistency of marketing funds.

DoD RESPONSE: Concur.

Appendix IV: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

Alissa Czyz, (202) 512-3058 or CzyzA@gao.gov

Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, Courtney Bond (Assistant Director), Adam Anguiano (Analyst in Charge), Jacques Arsenault, Nicole Ashby, Margaret Best, Joshua Bolanos-Cruz, Elizabeth Field, Christopher Gezon, Dawn Locke, Shannon Murphy, Lillian Ofili, Geoff Peck, Kyra Robertson, Michael Silver, John Townes, and Richard Winsor made key contributions to this report.

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Sarah Kaczmarek, Managing Director, KaczmarekS@gao.gov, (202) 512-4800, U.S. Government Accountability Office, 441 G Street NW, Room 7149 Washington, DC 20548

Strategic Planning and External Liaison

Stephen J. Sanford, Managing Director, spel@gao.gov, (202) 512-4707 U.S. Government Accountability Office, 441 G Street NW, Room 7814, Washington, DC 20548



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