

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON SCIENCE, SPACE, AND TECHNOLOGY

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June 5, 2017

The Honorable Gene L. Dodaro
Comptroller General of the United States
U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO)
441 G Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20548

Dear Mr. Dodaro:

It has been 25 years since the GAO released the report entitled, "ASBESTOS IN FEDERAL BUILDINGS: Federal Efforts to Protect Employees From Potential Exposure."¹ Unfortunately, it is quite evident that the federal government still does not have a good handle on the extent of asbestos in federal buildings. The GAO's own investigations continue to document previously undiscovered asbestos in federal buildings on a routine basis. A report in April 2015 found that a medical facility construction project by the Department of Veterans Affairs in Aurora, Colorado outside Denver discovered asbestos leading to increased costs and construction delays.² Similar discoveries have occurred at federal courthouses in New York City and Indianapolis, Indiana as well as Department of Energy facilities in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, and at the Department of Commerce headquarters' building in Washington, D.C.³

Its widespread use in the construction industry before the public health dangers were well known has made a complete inventory of asbestos's prevalence in current buildings difficult. Those most at risk are construction workers who may inhale tiny asbestos fibers that can lead to asbestos-related respiratory and other illnesses particularly mesothelioma. There have also been

¹ "ASBESTOS IN FEDERAL BUILDINGS: Federal Efforts to Protect Employees From Potential Exposure," General Accounting Office (GAO), GAO/RCED-93-9, October 1992, accessed here: <http://www.gao.gov/assets/160/152541.pdf>

² "VA CONSTRUCTION: Actions to Address Cost Increases and Schedule Delays at Denver and Other VA Major Medical- Facility Projects," Statement of Mark L. Goldstein, Director, Physical Infrastructure Issues, Testimony Before the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, U.S. Senate, Government Accountability Office (GAO), April 24, 2015, accessed here: <http://www.gao.gov/assets/670/669833.pdf>

³ See: "RECOVERY ACT: GSA's Courthouse Projects Illustrate Opportunities to Improve Management Practices and Analyze Environmental Outcomes," Government Accountability Office (GAO), GAO-15-307, February 2015, accessed here: <http://www.gao.gov/assets/670/669043.pdf>; "DOE FACILITIES: Better Prioritization and Life Cycle Cost Analysis Would Improve Disposition Planning," Government Accountability Office (GAO), GAO-15-272, March 2015, accessed here: <http://www.gao.gov/assets/670/669119.pdf>; and "FEDERAL REAL PROPERTY: GSA Could Better Identify Risks of Unforeseen Conditions in Repair and Alteration Projects," Government Accountability Office (GAO), GAO-16-273, March 2016, accessed here: <http://www.gao.gov/assets/680/676231.pdf>

documented cases of secondary exposure from workers exposed to asbestos bringing the microscopic fibers home on their clothes.

Over the past few decades, government regulations have greatly limited exposures to asbestos, but the widespread past use of asbestos, its lingering prevalence and the long latency period that can sometimes occur from exposure to asbestos-related illness has made eliminating exposures altogether difficult. In fact, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recently reported that the number of deaths attributed to asbestos causing mesothelioma in the U.S. increased from 2,479 in 1999 to 2,597 in 2015, and CDC scientists are not certain why.⁴ They also do not yet understand why younger people born after asbestos was largely banned in the U.S. in the 1970s are currently being diagnosed with asbestos-related mesothelioma.

Federal buildings are certainly not the only potential avenue of exposure to asbestos. However, ensuring the health and safety of federal civil servants should be a priority. Therefore, I am requesting that GAO conduct a review that addresses two key issues, the identification and inventory of asbestos threats and the potential medical follow-up for federal workers.

In your review please address the following questions:

- What are the current government efforts to maintain an up-to-date inventory of federal buildings containing asbestos and is this data readily accessible to the public? Does GAO have any recommendations for ensuring that the presence of asbestos in federal buildings is identified, cataloged and accessible to the public? Are there technologies that could be deployed to ensure the rapid detection of asbestos fibers?
- Does the government have appropriate guidelines or policies in place to inform federal workers if they have been exposed – or potentially exposed – to asbestos and have those guidelines been followed? Does GAO have any recommendations regarding follow-up with medical personnel if an employee has been potentially exposed to asbestos?

To discuss this request in more detail please have your staff contact Doug Pasternak of the Committee's Democratic staff at (202) 226-8892.

Your assistance in this matter is greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,



Mr. Donald S. Beyer, Jr.
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Oversight

⁴ Robert Jimison, "Asbestos exposure is still making people sick," *CNN*, March 3, 2017, accessed here: <http://www.cnn.com/2017/03/03/health/asbestos-mesothelioma-death-rates-study/>