

Audit of GSA's Response to COVID-19: PBS Faces Challenges to Meet the Ventilation and Acceptable Indoor Air Quality Standard in GSA-Owned Buildings - GSA Office of Inspector General

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Why We Performed This Audit

In April 2020, we began monitoring GSA's activities in response to the nationwide public health emergency resulting from Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) and GSA's implementation of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act. During our monitoring efforts, we became aware of concerns with ventilation system capabilities in GSA-owned buildings. As a result, we initiated this audit to determine whether GSA's Public Buildings Service (PBS) has: (1) adhered to federally adopted industry standards for acceptable indoor air quality and (2) implemented Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) to mitigate and prevent the spread of COVID-19 in GSA-owned buildings.

What We Found

Ventilation in GSA-owned buildings is subject to industry standards as well as federal guidance. Federal regulations require that GSA-owned buildings meet the ventilation standard issued by the American Society of Heating, Refrigerating, and Air-Conditioning Engineers (ASHRAE ventilation standard). This standard establishes minimum ventilation and testing requirements necessary to minimize adverse health effects for building occupants. GSA is also subject to guidance issued by CDC and OSHA. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, both agencies issued guidance recommending additional measures to improve building ventilation and minimize exposure to viral particles.

PBS is struggling to meet the ASHRAE ventilation standard and to comply with CDC and OSHA guidance. We found that PBS is not meeting—or does not have complete information to determine if it is meeting—the ASHRAE ventilation standard for the majority of GSA-owned buildings. We also found that PBS has not consistently implemented CDC and OSHA recommendations to improve ventilation in GSA-owned buildings. Taken together, these deficiencies increase the risk that building occupants will be exposed to airborne viruses, including the virus that causes COVID-19.

What We Recommend

We recommend that the PBS Commissioner:

1. Complete a comprehensive assessment to determine whether GSA-owned building air handlers meet the ASHRAE ventilation standard's minimum outdoor air requirements and develop a comprehensive plan to address deficiencies identified.
 2. Create and implement a plan to notify building occupants whenever deficiencies and hazards associated with outdoor air requirements are identified.
 3. Ensure that all PBS staff with ventilation system responsibilities, including contracting officer's representatives, contracting officers, project managers, and building managers, are trained on the requirements of the ASHRAE ventilation standard.
 4. Ensure operations and maintenance contracts define requirements for regular testing, adjusting, and balancing of air handlers.
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5. Ensure that GSA's *Guidance for COVID-19 HVAC Operations* adheres to CDC COVID-19 guidance for improved building ventilation.

The PBS Commissioner agreed with our recommendations. GSA's written comments are included in their entirety in **Appendix D**.

Business Line
Public Buildings Service

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