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Audit of PBS's Management of Permit-Required Confined Space

Report Number A250021/P/R/R26005
August 27, 2026

Executive Summary

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Why We Performed This Audit

We performed an audit of the GSA Public Buildings Service's (PBS's) management of its permit-required confined space. This audit was included in the GSA Office of Inspector General's *Fiscal Year 2025 Audit Plan*. We planned and performed this audit after an assessment of a hotline complaint found widespread concerns over PBS's oversight of contractors' compliance with permit-required confined space requirements.

Confined spaces are work areas that are enclosed or partially enclosed, presenting unique health and safety risks to workers who must enter, work in, or exit from them. Without proper safety measures, work in confined spaces can present significant health and life safety risks. According to a July 2020 report issued by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, more than 1,000 workers were fatally injured in confined spaces from 2011 to 2018.

Some confined spaces require a permit for entry because they present additional health or safety hazards, such as entrapment, engulfment, or hazardous atmospheric conditions. A permit is a written or printed document provided by an employer that allows and controls entry into a hazardous confined space. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) refers to these spaces as permit-required confined spaces (permit spaces). Examples of permit spaces include tanks, sump pump pits, traps, manholes, crawl spaces, and elevator pits.

To protect employees and contractors from these risks, PBS must comply with applicable OSHA requirements governing permit spaces. Accordingly, our audit objective was to determine whether PBS is adequately identifying, assessing the safety of, and mitigating the hazards found in permit spaces as required by OSHA Standard 1910.146, *Permit-required confined spaces* (29 C.F.R. 1910.146).

What We Found

PBS is not effectively managing permit space, and as a result, it is not complying with OSHA requirements, potentially exposing GSA employees and contractors to health and life safety risks. Specifically, PBS did not ensure operations and maintenance (O&M) contractors consistently complied with PBS's permit space requirements. PBS also did not consistently implement timely and complete abatement plans for open confined and permit space risk conditions. Finally, PBS did not consistently evaluate elevator pits to determine whether they were permit spaces.

What We Recommend

We recommend that the Acting PBS Commissioner improve PBS's management of permit-required confined space by:

1. Ensuring that PBS contracting officers' representatives (CORs):
    a. Verify that all O&M contractors:
        i. Maintain complete building operating plans, including a confined and permit space inventory.
        ii. Ensure all building operating plans are uploaded into the National Computerized Maintenance Management System and verify that the plans include a fully populated, current permit space inventory.
        iii. Develop building-specific permit space entry programs.
        iv. Assess permit spaces and ensure they are accurately classified and labeled in accordance with OSHA requirements.
    b. Maintain complete and accurate contract files, including all permit space deliverables.

2. Establishing a formal COR handover checklist that requires outgoing CORs to digitally certify the transfer of all permit space inventories and permit systems to their successor(s) before offboarding.

3. Developing and implementing comprehensive training for CORs concerning:
    a. O&M contract requirements, including those governing permit and confined spaces.
    b. Appropriate oversight to ensure that permit space deliverables meet OSHA and PBS policy requirements.

4. Ensuring that current bridge contracts and all future O&M solicitations incorporate the updated language and requirements of the current *PBS National O&M Specification*.

5. Developing and implementing a formal quality assurance review process within the Inventory Reporting Information System to verify that abatement plans for open confined and permit space risk conditions contain a justification for delay, a completion timetable, and interim protective measures.

6. Developing standardized guidance for evaluating elevator pits to determine if they meet OSHA and PBS permit space requirements.

The Acting PBS Commissioner agreed with the report recommendations. GSA's written comments are included in their entirety in ***Appendix E***.

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Introduction

We performed an audit of the GSA Public Buildings Service's (PBS's) management of its permit-required confined space.

Purpose

This audit was included in the GSA Office of Inspector General's *Fiscal Year 2025 Audit Plan*. We planned and performed this audit after an assessment of a hotline complaint found widespread concerns over PBS's oversight of contractors' compliance with permit-required confined space requirements.

Objective

Our audit objective was to determine whether PBS is adequately identifying, assessing the safety of, and mitigating the hazards found in permit-required confined spaces as required by Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) Standard 1910.146, *Permit-required confined spaces* (29 C.F.R. 1910.146).

See ***Appendix A*** – Objective, Scope, and Methodology for additional details.

Background

GSA is responsible for constructing, operating, and maintaining safe, secure, and healthy spaces for building occupants in more than 8,500 GSA-controlled (owned and leased) facilities nationwide.[1] These buildings often contain numerous confined spaces, such as tanks, sump pump pits, traps, manholes, crawl spaces, and elevator pits, which present unique health and safety risks.

OSHA defines confined spaces as work areas that are large enough for workers to enter and perform certain jobs but have limited or restricted means for entry and exit and are not designed for continuous occupancy.[2] Confined spaces that present additional health and safety risks are referred to by OSHA as permit-required confined spaces (permit spaces).

According to OSHA, a permit space has one or more of the following characteristics:

1. Contains or has the potential to contain a hazardous atmosphere;

[1] 40 U.S.C. 582, *Management of buildings by Administrator of General Services*.

[2] 29 C.F.R. 1910.146(b), *Definitions: Confined space.*

2. Contains a material that has the potential to engulf an entrant;[3]
3. Has an internal configuration such that an entrant could be trapped or asphyxiated by inwardly converging walls or by a floor which slopes downward and tapers to a smaller cross-section; or
4. Contains any other recognized serious safety or health hazard, such as unguarded machinery, exposed live wires, or heat stress.[4]

Without proper safety measures, work in confined spaces can be deadly. According to a July 2020 report issued by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, more than 1,000 workers were fatally injured in confined spaces from 2011 to 2018. Accordingly, OSHA requires the development and implementation of the means, procedures, and practices for safe permit space entry and exit. Examples include ventilation, air testing, barriers and shields, ladders, and appropriate rescue and emergency equipment.

Prior to accessing a permit space, OSHA requires the completion of a form (permit) that describes how workers will comply with these safety protocols to mitigate health and safety risks. OSHA further requires that the permits must be retained for at least 1 year after the work in the permit space is completed.

Requirements Governing Permit Space

Because of their inherent health and safety risks, permit spaces are subject to federal law, regulation, and PBS policies, including:

- **The Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970[5] –** Section 19 of this act requires federal agencies to create comprehensive occupational safety and health programs that provide safe and healthy places of employment. OSHA requirements under this act require federal agencies to create abatement plans if a condition cannot be abated within 30 calendar days. The abatement plan must include an explanation of the circumstances of the delay, a proposed timetable for abating the condition, and a summary of steps being taken in the interim.

- **29 C.F.R. 1910.146, *Permit-required confined spaces* –** This regulation requires all workspaces to be evaluated to determine if there are any permit spaces. If permit spaces exist, exposed employees must be notified through the posting of danger signs or equally effective means, and a written program must be developed if employees are to enter these permit spaces.

[3] OSHA defines engulfment as "the surrounding and effective capture of a person by a liquid or finely divided (flowable) solid substance that can be aspirated to cause death by filling or plugging the respiratory system or that can exert enough force on the body to cause death by strangulation, constriction, or crushing."

[4] 29 C.F.R. 1910.146(b) *Definitions: Permit-required confined space*.

[5] Pub. L. 91-586.

- ***PBS National Operations and Maintenance Specification* –** This specification establishes the mandatory standard for operations and maintenance (O&M) performance work statements. Among other things, these specifications require contractors to identify and label all confined spaces and develop a confined space entry permit system for all permit spaces within 60 calendar days of the contract start date. The specification also requires the contractor to include a list of the building's confined spaces in the building operating plan. This plan describes the contractor's program for operating and maintaining each building.

- ***PBS Safety and Health Management Policy* –** This policy describes the minimum requirements for managing facility safety, health, and environmental management programs for facilities under GSA's jurisdiction, custody, or control. As part of this policy, PBS regions are required to have written programs or processes for permit space.[6] In support of PBS's Office of Facilities Management, each PBS region's Environmental, Health, and Safety office must ensure that all permit spaces comply with OSHA signage and notification regulations.

- ***PBS Safety and Health Management Desk Guide* –** This policy requires PBS regional offices to have a written permit space program and to ensure that all permit spaces are compliant with OSHA signage and notification regulations.

PBS Facility Risk Management officials told us GSA employees are not authorized to enter permit spaces. Instead, GSA relies on O&M contractors to perform work within permit spaces. When a GSA contractor needs to enter permit space, GSA is considered a host employer under OSHA requirements.[7] As a host employer, OSHA establishes that GSA must fulfill the following requirements:

1. Inform the contractor that the workplace contains hazards and that permit space entry is allowed only through compliance with an OSHA-compliant permit space program;
2. Apprise the contractor of the elements, including the hazards identified and the host employer's experience with the space, that make it a permit space;
3. Apprise the contractor of any precautions or procedures that the host employer has implemented for the protection of employees in or near permit spaces where contractor personnel will be working;
4. Coordinate entry operations with the contractor when both host employer personnel and contractor personnel will be working in or near permit spaces; and

[6] On September 18, 2025, GSA issued GSA Order ADM 5440.760, *Changes in the Public Buildings Service*. Under the order, PBS reorganized from a regional structure to a centralized organization. This eliminated PBS's 11 regional offices. Because our audit fieldwork was completed prior to the reorganization, we retained references to PBS's regions in this report.

[7] 29 C.F.R. 1910.146(c)(8).

5. Debrief the contractor at the conclusion of the entry operations regarding: (1) the procedures followed in the permit space and (2) any hazards confronted or created in permit spaces during entry operations.

Hotline Complaint

In November 2021, we received a hotline complaint alleging that multiple PBS contractors in PBS's Heartland Region (PBS Region 6) were potentially exposed to life safety hazards associated with permit spaces. The complainant asserted that PBS did not provide contractors with access to mandatory permit space inventories or assessments required by OSHA. The complainant alleged multiple deficiencies, including:

- Improper identification and classification of permit spaces;
- Confined spaces that were not evaluated to determine if they were permit spaces; and
- Hazards that were not properly disclosed to contractors prior to entry.

After our preliminary assessment identified risk areas related to the hotline complaint, we included this audit on our *Fiscal Year 2025 Audit Plan*.

Results

PBS is not effectively managing permit space, and as a result, it is not complying with OSHA requirements, potentially exposing GSA employees and contractors to health and life safety risks. Specifically, PBS did not ensure O&M contractors consistently complied with PBS's permit space requirements. PBS also did not consistently implement timely and complete abatement plans for open confined and permit space risk conditions. Finally, PBS did not consistently evaluate elevator pits to determine whether they were permit spaces.

Appendix B lists the specific deficiencies identified for each building we sampled.

Finding 1 – PBS did not ensure O&M contractors consistently complied with permit space requirements.

To meet OSHA regulations, PBS has incorporated permit space requirements into its O&M contracts. PBS relies on its O&M contractors to comply with these requirements to protect employees and contractors from health and safety risks related to permit space. However, we found that PBS did not ensure O&M contractors consistently complied with permit space requirements. Specifically, O&M contractors did not:

- Identify confined and permit spaces in building operating plans;
- Enter building operating plans into PBS's repository of record;
- Develop building-specific permit space entry programs;
- Classify permit spaces correctly;
- Consistently label permit spaces; and
- Update obstructed, faded, or damaged permit space labels.

Overall, we found that these deficiencies occurred because PBS did not consistently award and did not effectively oversee its O&M contracts to ensure compliance with permit space requirements.

O&M Contractors Did Not Identify Confined and Permit Spaces in Building Operating Plans

According to the *PBS National O&M Specification*, O&M contract terms require contractors to provide building operating plans both at the start of the contract and annually on the anniversary of the O&M contract. These plans include important information regarding the contractor's program for operating, maintaining, and managing the building. The building operating plans must include confined space locations as part of the building's safety, security, building emergency response, recovery, and reporting procedures.

The O&M contracts covering 21 of the 22 buildings in our sample require the O&M contractor to develop building operating plans that include a confined and permit space inventory.[8] However, we found that the O&M contractors for 16 of these 21 buildings did not identify confined and permit spaces in the building operating plans, including the three examples below.

- **Lyndon B. Johnson Department of Education Building in Washington, D.C. –** The building operating plan contained no mention of confined spaces. However, the O&M contractor identified 14 confined spaces on an inventory that was maintained separately from the building operating plan. The COR stated they did not know why this information was omitted from the building operating plan.

- **Elijah Barrett Prettyman U.S. Courthouse in Washington, D.C. –** The O&M contractor and the COR provided two versions of the building operating plan for the building, dated 2020 and 2025 respectively. Both plans were incomplete because the section listing the building's confined spaces was left blank. However, the COR provided a separate confined space inventory list that identified 18 confined spaces in the garage, parking lot, elevator pits, and the exterior of the building. During our site visit, the PBS National Capital Region (NCR) safety and occupational health team and the O&M contractor confirmed there were multiple confined and permit spaces throughout the building. The COR told us they did not know why the information was omitted from both plans. They stated that the information is being added back into the current version of the building operating plan.

- **William Jefferson Clinton Federal Building in Washington, D.C. –** The building operating plan lacked a confined space inventory entirely. While the building manager provided an inventory of 14 spaces, it was incomplete because it omitted confined spaces, such as cooling towers and sump pump pits that we observed during our site visit. The COR told us that based on their review of the contract, a confined space inventory was not required to be kept in the building operating plan and that the O&M contractor kept this list in a separate safety data sheet. However, the contract states that building operating plans should contain a confined space inventory. Additionally, the building operating plan we reviewed specifically notes that the document serves as a ready source of critical information, including information on confined spaces.

O&M Contractors Did Not Enter Building Operating Plans into PBS's Repository of Record

According to the *PBS National O&M Specification*, the National Computerized Maintenance Management System (NCMMS) is the "System of Record and Repository" for all service work and facility assets. Uploading building operating plans into NCMMS is critical because it enables

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[8] The O&M contract for the Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center, the remaining building in our sample, did not use the template provided in the *PBS National O&M Specification*, and therefore the contract did not include the requirement for a building operating plan. The reason for the exclusion is discussed on page 14.

PBS and contractor personnel to access vital information about the buildings, including information on permit spaces.

The O&M contracts for 20 of the 22 buildings in our sample require the contractor to upload building operating plans into NCMMS.[9] However, as shown in *Figure 1* below, we found that building operating plans were not uploaded to NCMMS for 16 of these buildings.

Figure 1. Buildings without a Building Operating Plan in NCMMS

Building Number	Building Name	City, State
DC0114	U.S. Tax Court Building	Washington, DC
DC0094	Howard T. Markey National Courts Building	Washington, DC
DC0010	Lyndon B. Johnson Department of Education Building	Washington, DC
DC0501	Sidney R. Yates Federal Building	Washington, DC
DC0028	William Jefferson Clinton Federal Building	Washington, DC
DC0515	Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center	Washington, DC
KS0070	U.S. Courthouse – Wichita	Wichita, KS
KS0094	Robert J. Dole U.S. Courthouse	Kansas City, KS
MO0050	Charles Evans Whittaker U.S. Courthouse	Kansas City, MO
FL0010	Wilkie D. Ferguson, Jr. U.S. Courthouse	Miami, FL
FL0078	C. Clyde Atkins U.S. Courthouse	Miami, FL
FL0089	Fort Lauderdale Federal Building and Courthouse	Ft. Lauderdale, FL
FL0517	James L. King Federal Justice Building	Miami, FL
GA0121	Richard B. Russell Federal Building and U.S. Courthouse	Atlanta, GA
GA0007	Martin Luther King, Jr. Federal Building	Atlanta, GA
GA0008	Elbert P. Tuttle U.S. Court of Appeals Building	Atlanta, GA

Records provided by PBS indicate this is a widespread problem—although GSA has more than 1,500 owned buildings, the NCMMS listing only included 43 current building operating plans.

CORs provided various reasons why these uploads had not occurred and stated they maintained building operating plans in different ways, such as in physical hard copies, digital copies on shared drives, within contract file repositories, or in local digital storage. Additionally, one COR told us they were informed that the building operating plan should not be maintained within NCMMS; however, our review confirmed the O&M contract mandates it.

[9] Two buildings in our sample did not incorporate the requirement for a building operating plan in the O&M contract. One is the Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center previously discussed. The other was the U.S. Courthouse in Wichita, Kansas. The reasons for the exclusions are discussed on page 14.

Based on these conflicting responses and storage methods, the maintenance of these records is inconsistent and decentralized, resulting in ineffective oversight of contract deliverables and hindering PBS's ability to ensure contractor accountability.

O&M Contractors Did Not Develop Building-Specific Permit Space Entry Programs

OSHA requirements and O&M contract terms establish that contractors must provide permit space entry programs outlining specific safety procedures, such as performing hazard assessments, obtaining permits, and identifying entry roles.

The O&M contracts covering 21 buildings in our sample require the contractor to develop a permit space entry program for all permit spaces within 60 calendar days after the contract services start date. However, we found that the O&M contractors did not develop building-specific permit space entry programs for 16 of the 21 buildings. Specifically, we found that:

- For 14 buildings, the contractors only developed a generic, company-wide permit space entry program that lacked detail on building-specific entry requirements for permit space.

- For the remaining 2 buildings, the O&M contractors did not develop permit space entry programs until we requested them. When the contractors ultimately provided the permit space entry programs, these too only provided a generic, company-wide permit space entry program.

Many of the CORs we spoke to stated they could not speak to these deliverables because the documents were received and accepted before they were assigned as the COR for the contract. Furthermore, one COR we spoke to stated that he was unfamiliar with the specific permit space requirements and that he was just now learning about them.

O&M Contractors Did Not Classify Permit Spaces Correctly

Under the *PBS National O&M Specification*, PBS delegates the responsibility for classifying all hazardous workspaces to the O&M contractor through specific contract performance requirements. This contractual mandate requires contractors to evaluate workspaces to determine if any spaces should be classified as permit spaces within 60 days of the contract start date. However, we found 16 permit spaces that were misclassified as confined spaces, including the three examples described below and on the following pages.

- **Elijah Barrett Prettyman U.S. Courthouse in Washington, D.C. –** The building contains sewage ejector pits which, due to the presence of atmospheric hazards and engulfment risks, must be classified as permit spaces. However, the O&M contractor told us that they entered sewage ejector pits without permits because they did not know the pits should have been classified as permit spaces.

In anticipation of our site visit, the PBS NCR safety and occupational health team instructed the O&M contractor to classify the sewage ejector pits as permit spaces. The O&M contractor spray painted a label stating "Danger: Permit Required Confined Space, Do Not Enter." However, as shown in *Figure 2* below, the label is illegible.

Figure 2. Illegible Permit Space Label Near a Sewage Ejector Pit at the Elijah Barrett Prettyman U.S. Courthouse[10]

- **Sidney R. Yates Federal Building in Washington, D.C. –** The building's cooling tower has the potential to engulf an entrant according to an assessment completed by the O&M contractor in anticipation of our site visit. Because of this engulfment hazard, the cooling tower meets the definition of a permit space. However, the O&M contractor told us that they entered the cooling tower for maintenance without a permit because they were unaware of permit space requirements at the time of entry.

  The cooling tower was subsequently labeled as permit space after PBS NCR's safety and occupational health team performed a building review before our site visit and instructed the COR and O&M contractor that the space should be classified as a permit space. *Figure 3* on the next page shows the cooling tower entry gate with a new permit space label stating "Danger: Confined Space, Entry by Permit Only."

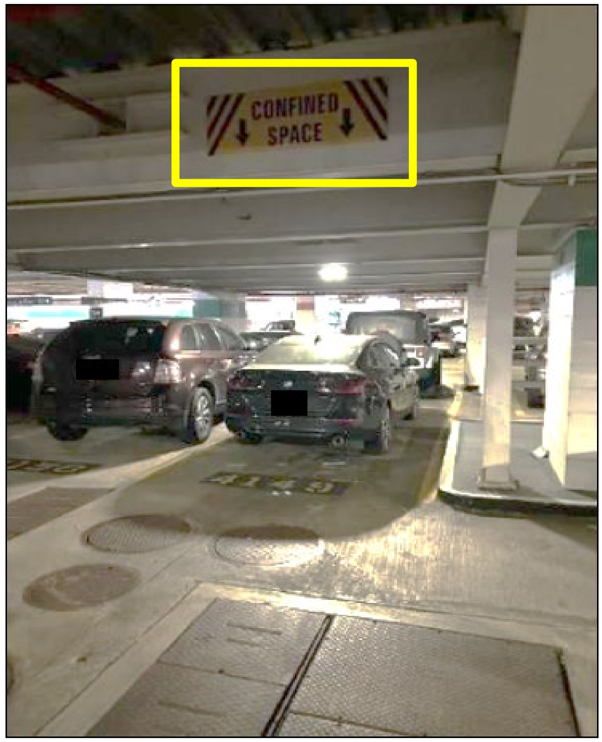
[10] Photographs taken by the audit team, April 24, 2025.

Figure 3. Cooling Tower Entry Gate at the Sidney R. Yates Federal Building with Permit Space Label Added[11]

- **Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center in Washington, D.C. –** As shown in *Figure 4* on the next page, we observed seven groundwater pits in a parking garage that were identified as "confined space" through a sign mounted above the pits. The PBS building manager subsequently provided an inventory of permit spaces for the building, which included these groundwater pits. Therefore, the groundwater pits were mislabeled as confined space when they were actually permit space. The COR told us they were unaware why the space was mislabeled.

[11] Photograph taken by the audit team, April 15, 2025.

Figure 4. Mislabeled Groundwater Pits at the Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center Parking Garage[12]



O&M Contractors Did Not Consistently Label Permit Spaces

OSHA requires workplaces that contain permit spaces to have posted warning signs notifying employees or other potential entrants of hazards. In accordance with this requirement, the *PBS National O&M Specification* establishes that the O&M contractor is responsible for identifying and labeling permit spaces within the first 60 days of the contract.

However, we found that permit spaces were not consistently labeled. We identified 20 permit spaces in 7 of the 22 buildings in our sample that did not include the OSHA-required labels. These spaces included manholes, cooling towers, sump pump pits, fuel tanks, and grease traps.

For example, *Figure 5* on the next page shows two permit spaces in the Richard B. Russell Federal Building and U.S. Courthouse in Atlanta, Georgia, that were not labeled. These spaces are grease traps, which are considered permit spaces due to their potential to contain hazardous atmospheres. PBS contractors are often required to physically enter the grease traps to perform detailed cleaning, inspection, and repairs that cannot be made from the surface. However, the grease traps were not labeled as permit spaces.

[12] Photograph taken by the audit team, April 24, 2025. License plate information has been hidden for privacy.

Figure 5. Unlabeled Grease Traps at the Richard B. Russell Federal Building and U.S. Courthouse[13]

A complete listing of unlabeled permit spaces identified during our audit is included in ***Appendix C***.

O&M Contractors Did Not Update Obstructed, Faded, or Damaged Permit Space Labels

OSHA requires that danger signs must be posted to identify permit space and that these signs shall be visible at all times.[14] To ensure compliance with this requirement, the *PBS National O&M Specification* mandates that the O&M contractor is responsible for identifying and labeling all permit spaces within 60 days of the contract start date. This contractual provision establishes a continuous obligation for the O&M contractor to ensure all safety labels remain legible, unobstructed, and properly maintained throughout the performance period.

However, we found three signs that were not visible. Additionally, as shown in *Figures 6 and 7* on the next page, we found two permit space labels that were obstructed, faded, or damaged. None of these deficiencies were identified or corrected by the O&M contractor.

[13] Photograph taken by the audit team, May 28, 2025.

[14] 29 C.F.R. 1910.146, *Permit-required confined spaces*; and 29 C.F.R. 1926.200(a), *Accident prevention signs and tags*.

Figure 6. Obstructed Permit Space Label on a Sump Pump Pit at the Elbert P. Tuttle U.S. Court of Appeals Building[15]

Figure 7. Faded and Damaged Permit Space Label on a Cooling Tower at the Richard B. Russell Federal Building and U.S. Courthouse[16]

[15] Photograph taken by the audit team, May 29, 2025.

[16] Photograph taken by the audit team, May 28, 2025.

Deficiencies in PBS's Award and Oversight of O&M Contracts Resulted in Noncompliance with Permit Space Requirements

As described above, O&M contractors did not consistently comply with contract requirements governing permit spaces. We found that this occurred due to deficiencies in PBS's award and oversight of O&M contracts. Specifically, we found that:

- PBS did not consistently incorporate terms into O&M contracts to ensure compliance with permit space requirements;
- PBS CORs were not fully aware of permit space requirements; and
- PBS CORs did not maintain adequate records.

PBS did not consistently incorporate terms into O&M contracts to ensure compliance with permit space requirements. The *PBS National O&M Specification* establishes the mandatory standard for O&M performance work statement requirements. This specification includes contract terms that require the O&M contractor to comply with permit space requirements. However, we found that PBS did not incorporate these contract terms into the following two O&M contracts:

- The O&M contract for the Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center in Washington, D.C., did not include contract terms requiring the O&M contractor to develop building operating plans that include a confined and permit space inventory. The COR stated this contract has been in bridge status since 2018 and continues to use an outdated scope of work because PBS contracting staff have not updated the contract terms to meet current specifications.

- The O&M contract for the U.S. Courthouse in Wichita, Kansas, did not include contract terms requiring the O&M contractor to upload the building operating plan, inclusive of a confined and permit space inventory, into NCMMS. The COR stated that the contract was drafted before they were assigned to the contract. As a result, they could not tell us why the contract terms were omitted.

PBS CORs were not fully aware of permit space requirements. PBS CORs who oversee the O&M contracts for the 22 buildings in our audit sample told us that they were unaware of permit space requirements for their assigned O&M contracts. Specifically:

- Five CORs were unaware that building operating plans must identify confined and permit space locations; and
- Six CORs did not fully understand permit space terms and conditions. For example, one COR stated they only considered permit spaces as those with air quality hazards but excluded engulfment spaces from being classified as permit spaces.

Of the 12 CORs we interviewed, only 4 stated that they received permit space training.[17] The lack of training prevents PBS CORs from verifying that O&M contractors are accurately identifying permit spaces and adhering to mandatory safety protocols within GSA-managed buildings.

PBS CORs did not maintain adequate records. The *PBS National O&M Specification* mandates that contractors develop a formal entry permit system and provide confined space inventories within 60 days of the contract start date. However, CORs were consistently unable to locate these critical safety deliverables. Many CORs we interviewed were not the original CORs when the contracts began and were unable to locate the corresponding documents, indicating a lack of contract oversight and a failure to maintain essential confined space records.

This documentation gap is exacerbated by high COR turnover over the course of the O&M contracts, which span 10 years. Without a standardized, central repository for these records, information necessary to manage the health and safety risks facing the buildings may be lost during personnel transitions. For example:

- **PBS Southeast Sunbelt Region (PBS Region 4) –** Both CORs we interviewed assumed their roles in March and April 2025, following the departures of the original CORs. One COR was unaware of what documents had been provided because they could not be located; the other COR confirmed that although these documents should have been on file, he was "100 percent sure" they were not.

- **PBS NCR –** The COR for the Lyndon B. Johnson Department of Education Building stated he was the third COR to serve on the O&M contract. He noted that while a previous COR had reportedly kept a folder on a shared drive, he had been unsuccessful in locating it.

To address these issues, PBS must improve its award and oversight of O&M contracts to ensure that O&M contractors comply with applicable permit space requirements and reduce the life and safety risks for personnel required to access and work in permit spaces.

Finding 2 – PBS did not consistently implement timely and complete abatement plans for open confined and permit space risk conditions.

OSHA regulations require PBS to abate unsafe or unhealthy working conditions within 30 calendar days. If PBS cannot do so, it must establish abatement plans to address the conditions. These plans must include specific information prescribed by OSHA. However, PBS did not consistently implement timely and complete abatement plans for open confined and permit space risk conditions.

[17] While the audit sample consisted of 22 buildings, several CORs were responsible for multiple buildings within the sample. Therefore, the 12 CORs interviewed represent the total oversight personnel for all 22 buildings.

PBS uses Facility Management Assessment (FMA) surveys to assess its buildings, inclusive of confined and permit spaces, for any unsafe or unhealthful conditions. Any unsafe or unhealthful conditions found during these surveys are identified as open risk conditions in PBS's Inventory Reporting Information System (IRIS).[18]

We reviewed the FMA surveys for all 22 buildings in our sample and identified 13 risk conditions related to confined and permit spaces. We found that PBS did not consistently: (1) create abatement plans within required time frames and (2) include all required data elements in the abatement plans.

A complete listing of the abatement plans identified during our audit is included in ***Appendix D***.

Abatement Plans Were Not Implemented within Required Time Frames

If an open risk condition cannot be abated within 30 days, PBS is required to develop an abatement plan to address the unsafe or unhealthful condition.[19] However, PBS did not create abatement plans for 4 of the 13 identified risk conditions related to confined and permit spaces within the required 30-day period.

We found that an abatement plan had not been created for one long-outstanding condition. The FMA survey for the Richard B. Russell Federal Building and U.S. Courthouse in Atlanta, Georgia, identified the lack of a confined space inventory as a risk condition. According to IRIS, this had been identified as an open risk condition for more than 7 years. However, PBS did not prepare an abatement plan to address the condition prior to the condition's closure.

Additionally, as shown in *Figure 8* on the following page, PBS did not implement abatement plans for the remaining three risk conditions in a timely manner. On average, PBS took more than 3 years to resolve these conditions. In one case, PBS has taken more than 4 years to resolve a condition for missing permit space signage at the Fort Lauderdale Federal Building and Courthouse in Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

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[18] IRIS is used to record safety conditions found during the risk management surveys. PBS employees track safety conditions in IRIS through final abatement or closeout.

[19] 29 C.F.R. 1960.30(c), *Abatement of Unsafe or Unhealthful Working Conditions*.

Figure 8. Abatement Plans that Were Created Beyond the OSHA 30-Day Requirement

Building	Condition	Current Status	Days Open	Days to Create an Abatement Plan
Fort Lauderdale Federal Building and Courthouse	Permit space signage was missing.	Open	1,648	49
William Jefferson Clinton Federal Building	Confined spaces were not classified and labeled.	Closed	1,203	938
Lyndon B. Johnson Department of Education Building	Confined space signage was missing.	Closed	968	292

PBS employees could not tell us why the abatement plans for these conditions were not created in a timely manner.

Abatement Plans Were Not Complete

In accordance with OSHA requirements, abatement plans must include the following data elements:

- A summary of interim steps to protect employees;
- An estimated timeline for addressing the condition; and
- An explanation of why the risk could not be abated within 30 days.

However, we found that 11 of 12 abatement plans (92 percent) prepared by PBS were not complete because they did not include at least one of the required data elements. Specifically, we found that:

- All 11 abatement plans did not include an explanation of why the risk could not be abated within 30 days; and
- Eight abatement plans did not include an estimated time frame for addressing the condition.

Additionally, the abatement plan for missing confined space signage at the William Jefferson Clinton Federal Building in Washington, D.C., did not contain all three required data elements, including a summary of interim steps to protect employees.

PBS personnel could not tell us why the abatement plans were incomplete. In some cases, they noted that the employees who originally drafted the abatement plans were no longer employed by GSA and they could not speak for them. At least one employee told us that they were unaware of OSHA's abatement plan requirements at the time they drafted the abatement plan. In addition, the PBS NCR safety and occupational health team told us that although they track whether abatement plans have been uploaded, they do not review the plans to determine whether they include all the OSHA-required data elements.

Abatement plans that are not timely or complete can lead to worsening conditions and increase risk of injury or death to building users. Accordingly, PBS should develop a formal quality assurance review process within IRIS to ensure abatement plans for open risk conditions, including those pertaining to confined and permit spaces, are created in a timely manner and contain all required information.

Finding 3 – PBS did not consistently evaluate elevator pits to determine whether they are permit spaces.

An elevator pit is a recessed area at the bottom of the elevator shaft that provides space for contractors to perform inspections or repairs. Elevator pits contain electrical and mechanical components necessary for the proper operation of the elevators. OSHA considers an elevator pit to be a confined space, which should be evaluated as a permit space. However, we found that PBS is not consistently evaluating elevator pits to determine if they are permit spaces.

According to OSHA's *Guidance Concerning Elevator Pits*, elevator pits are confined spaces because they have limited means of entry and exit and are not designed for continuous occupancy. While OSHA notes that atmospheric hazards are not generally associated with elevator pits, these areas commonly contain recognized serious electromechanical safety hazards stemming from elevator-related equipment. As a result, OSHA has established that elevator pits are generally permit spaces.

GSA uses contractors to service its elevators and access elevator pits. Because of this, GSA is considered a host employer under OSHA regulations. Accordingly, GSA must evaluate the elevator pits to determine if they should be designated as permit spaces.[20] This is important so that PBS can properly notify contractors who work in the elevator pits of the associated health and life safety risks, thereby enabling the contractors to take appropriate safety measures.

However, PBS is not consistently evaluating and designating elevator pits as permit space. Whereas PBS Region 6 consistently classified elevator pits as permit spaces, PBS Region 4 and PBS NCR did not provide evidence to confirm that they consistently evaluated elevator pits as permit space. For example, in anticipation of our site visits, PBS NCR evaluated the elevator pits at the Sidney R. Yates Federal Building, the U.S. Tax Court Building, and the Howard T. Markey National Courts Building in Washington, D.C.; however, they could not demonstrate that evaluations were conducted for elevator pits in other PBS NCR buildings. As a result, PBS may be placing contractors responsible for servicing the elevators at risk of injury or death.

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[20] OSHA Letter of Interpretation, *Guidance in determining whether elevator pits meet the definition of confined spaces*, October 27, 1995; edited March 2008; and corrected July 11, 2012.

Our audit interviews confirmed this. For example, one of the contractors we spoke to told us they were not notified by PBS of any elevator pits that are considered permit spaces; others said they only come to know of a permit space when they see a label. If an elevator pit is not properly identified as a permit space, a contractor may not be aware that appropriate safety protocols and safeguards must be implemented while working in the elevator pit.

Because elevator pits pose significant health and safety risks, PBS should consistently evaluate elevator pits to determine if they are permit spaces and ensure compliance with applicable OSHA requirements. Among other things, PBS should ensure elevator pits that are permit spaces are properly labeled and notify elevator maintenance contractors appropriately. PBS should also standardize its guidance concerning the classification of elevator pits.

Conclusion

PBS is not effectively managing permit space, and as a result, it is not complying with OSHA requirements, potentially exposing GSA employees and contractors to health and life safety risks. Specifically, PBS did not ensure O&M contractors consistently complied with PBS's permit space requirements. PBS also did not consistently implement timely and complete abatement plans for open confined and permit space risk conditions. Finally, PBS did not consistently evaluate elevator pits to determine whether they are permit spaces.

To mitigate these issues, PBS should ensure that it effectively manages the significant health and safety risks associated with permit space in its buildings. Accordingly, PBS should strengthen oversight of O&M contractor compliance with permit space requirements. PBS should ensure CORs maintain adequate contract files, establish a process to transfer permit space information when changing CORs, implement training to ensure CORs fully understand O&M contract permit space requirements, and ensure that O&M contracts follow national specifications. PBS should also ensure that abatement plans for open risk conditions, including those pertaining to confined and permit spaces, are completed in a timely manner and contain all required information. Additionally, PBS should ensure that it conducts consistent evaluations to determine if elevator pits are permit spaces.

Recommendations

We recommend that the Acting PBS Commissioner improve PBS's management of permit-required confined space by:

1. Ensuring that PBS CORs:
    a. Verify that all O&M contractors:
        i. Maintain complete building operating plans, including a confined and permit space inventory.
        ii. Ensure all building operating plans are uploaded into NCMMS and verify that the plans include a fully populated, current permit space inventory.
        iii. Develop building-specific permit space entry programs.
        iv. Assess permit spaces and ensure they are accurately classified and labeled in accordance with OSHA requirements.
    b. Maintain complete and accurate contract files, including all permit space deliverables.

2. Establishing a formal COR handover checklist that requires outgoing CORs to digitally certify the transfer of all permit space inventories and permit systems to their successor(s) before offboarding.

3. Developing and implementing comprehensive training for CORs concerning:
    a. O&M contract requirements, including those governing permit and confined spaces.
    b. Appropriate oversight to ensure that permit space deliverables meet OSHA and PBS policy requirements.

4. Ensuring that current bridge contracts and all future O&M solicitations incorporate the updated language and requirements of the current *PBS National O&M Specification*.

5. Developing and implementing a formal quality assurance review process within IRIS to verify that abatement plans for open confined and permit space risk conditions contain a justification for delay, a completion timetable, and interim protective measures.

6. Developing standardized guidance for evaluating elevator pits to determine if they meet OSHA and PBS permit space requirements.

GSA Comments

The Acting PBS Commissioner agreed with the report recommendations. GSA's written comments are included in their entirety in ***Appendix E***.

Appendix A – Objective, Scope, and Methodology

Objective

Our objective was to determine whether PBS is adequately identifying, assessing the safety of, and mitigating the hazards found in permit spaces as required by OSHA Standard 1910.146, *Permit-required confined spaces*.

Scope and Methodology

We assessed whether PBS is adequately identifying, assessing the safety of, and mitigating hazards in permit space by selecting buildings in PBS Region 4, PBS Region 6, and PBS NCR for our audit. We chose these regions based on the hotline complaint and to ensure a broad sample of buildings across the country. Within each region, we selected buildings based on their usage, square footage, and age.

To accomplish our objective, we:

- Reviewed applicable O&M contracts, national specifications, and FMA survey specifications to gain an understanding of contract terms and GSA guidance;
- Reviewed GSA policies and OSHA Standard 1910.146 (29 C.F.R. 1910.146) to gain an understanding of both GSA policy and regulatory requirements;
- Interviewed PBS employees, including CORs, as well as O&M and elevator service contractors to gain an understanding of the permit space program;
- Analyzed prior GSA Office of Inspector General audit reports and related corrective actions to determine if there are any previous findings or corrective actions related to our audit objective;
- Reviewed all permit space inventories and conducted site visits for each building to validate inventories and ensure permit spaces were properly labeled to determine if PBS is complying with policies, procedures, and regulatory requirements;
- Reviewed any permit space entry permits to determine if there were any entries into permit space and if hazard assessments were conducted; and
- Reviewed O&M contractors' training materials to see if training for O&M contractor personnel was conducted.

Data Reliability

We assessed the reliability of GSA's Federal Real Property Profile dataset and Inventory of Owned and Leased Properties report by obtaining the data directly from data.gov. We assessed the reliability of the data through data tests for accuracy and completeness, logic tests, and interviews with key personnel. We determined that the data was sufficiently reliable for the purposes of this audit.

Sampling

We selected a judgmental sample by: (1) selecting PBS regions and (2) selecting buildings within each region. We selected PBS Region 6 due to a hotline complaint filed with the GSA Office of Inspector General in November 2021 alleging that multiple PBS contractors in Region 6 were possibly exposed to permit space hazards. We included PBS NCR and PBS Region 4 in our sample because these regions contain the most buildings.

Next, we used the following criteria to select buildings within each sampled PBS region: (1) buildings with the largest square footage, (2) the oldest buildings, and (3) buildings listed as core assets by GSA in early 2025. Our original sample selection was 20 buildings: 11 in PBS NCR (2 of which we tested in survey phase), 6 from PBS Region 4, and 3 from PBS Region 6.

We then selected two additional buildings to conduct unannounced site visits, only notifying PBS on the day of our visit. We selected one building in PBS NCR and one building in PBS Region 4. In total, our sample included 22 buildings: 12 in PBS NCR, 7 in PBS Region 4, and 3 in PBS Region 6.

While our judgmental sample does not allow for projection of the results to all GSA-controlled buildings, it did allow us to adequately address our audit objective.

Internal Controls

We assessed internal controls significant within the context of our audit objective against internal control guidance for federal agencies. The methodology above describes the scope of our assessment, and the report findings include any internal control deficiencies we identified. Our assessment is not intended to provide assurance on GSA's internal control structure as a whole. GSA management is responsible for establishing and maintaining internal controls.

Compliance Statement

We conducted the audit between November 2024 and November 2025 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 objective. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objective.

Appendix B – Sampled Buildings and Finding Areas

This table provides information about the 22 buildings in our sample and the finding area.

PBS Region	Building Number (Note 1)	Building Name	City, State	Finding Area (Note 2)
NCR	DC0114	U.S. Tax Court Building	Washington, DC	1a, 1b, 3
NCR	DC0094	Howard T. Markey National Courts Building	Washington, DC	1b, 2
NCR	DC0010	Lyndon B. Johnson Department of Education Building	Washington, DC	1b, 2, 3
NCR	DC0014 (b)	Elijah Barrett Prettyman U.S. Courthouse	Washington, DC	1a, 1b, 2, 3
NCR	DC0028	William Jefferson Clinton Federal Building	Washington, DC	1a, 1b, 2, 3
NCR	DC0501	Sidney R. Yates Federal Building	Washington, DC	1a, 1b
NCR	DC0523 (a)	U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Connecting Wing	Washington, DC	1a, 1b, 3
NCR	DC0521 (a)	EPA East Building	Washington, DC	1a, 1b, 3
NCR	DC0522 (a)	EPA West Building	Washington, DC	1a, 1b, 2, 3
NCR	DC0705 (a)	Andrew W. Mellon Auditorium	Washington, DC	1b, 2, 3
NCR	DC0573 (b)	William B. Bryant Annex	Washington, DC	1a, 1b, 3
NCR	DC0515	Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center	Washington, DC	1a, 1b, 3
6	KS0070	U.S. Courthouse – Wichita	Wichita, KS	1b
6	KS0094	Robert J. Dole U.S. Courthouse	Kansas City, KS	1b
6	MO0050	Charles Evans Whittaker U.S. Courthouse	Kansas City, MO	1b
4	FL0010	Wilkie D. Ferguson, Jr. U.S. Courthouse	Miami, FL	1b, 3
4	FL0078	C. Clyde Atkins U.S. Courthouse	Miami, FL	1b, 3
4	FL0089	Fort Lauderdale Federal Building and Courthouse	Ft. Lauderdale, FL	1a, 1b, 2, 3
4	FL0517	James L. King Federal Justice Building	Miami, FL	1a, 1b, 3
4	GA0008 (c)	Elbert P. Tuttle U.S. Court of Appeals Building	Atlanta, GA	1a, 1b, 3
4	GA0121	Richard B. Russell Federal Building and U.S. Courthouse	Atlanta, GA	1a, 1b, 2, 3
4	GA0007	Martin Luther King, Jr. Federal Building	Atlanta, GA	1b, 2, 3

<u>Notes</u>:

1. These are the building numbers for the 22 buildings in our sample. We denote where sampled buildings were a part of a larger complex as follows: (a) this building is part of the EPA headquarters complex, (b) this building is part of the Elijah Barrett Prettyman U.S. Courthouse and William B. Bryant Annex, and (c) this building is part of the Elbert P. Tuttle and John C. Godbold complex.

2. This column denotes which finding area applies to each building. The four finding areas are:

   (1a) PBS did not ensure that permit spaces were correctly classified and labeled in accordance with OSHA requirements.

   (1b) PBS did not ensure effective oversight of O&M contractors for permit space requirements.

   (2) PBS did not ensure that abatement plans for open confined and permit space risk conditions complied with OSHA requirements.

   (3) PBS did not ensure that elevator pits were consistently evaluated as permit space.

Appendix C – Permit Spaces with No Label

This table provides information about seven buildings in our sample that had unlabeled permit spaces and a listing of the permit spaces in each building that were not labeled.

PBS Region	Building Number (Note)	Building Name	City, State	Unlabeled Permit Spaces
NCR	DC0114	U.S. Tax Court Building	Washington, DC	1 manhole
NCR	DC0028	William Jefferson Clinton Federal Building	Washington, DC	5 cooling towers 2 large pits 1 sump pump pit
NCR	DC0523 (a)	EPA Connecting Wing	Washington, DC	1 sump pump pit
NCR	DC0014 (b)	Elijah Barrett Prettyman U.S. Courthouse	Washington, DC	3 cooling towers
NCR	DC0573 (b)	William B. Bryant Annex	Washington, DC	3 cooling towers
NCR	DC0515	Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center	Washington, DC	1 cooling tower 1 fuel tank
4	GA0121	Richard B. Russell Federal Building and U.S. Courthouse	Atlanta, GA	2 grease traps

Note: We denote where sampled buildings were a part of a larger complex as follows: (a) this building is part of the EPA headquarters complex, and (b) this building is part of the Elijah Barrett Prettyman U.S. Courthouse and William B. Bryant Annex.

Appendix D – Conditions Reviewed in IRIS

This table lists the buildings from our audit sample that had conditions reviewed in IRIS with abatement plan compliance issues.

	Building	Abatement Plan Compliance Issue	Status	Days Open	OSHA-Compliant Timeline
1	Richard B. Russell Federal Building and U.S. Courthouse	No abatement plan was created.	Closed	2,601	No
2	Fort Lauderdale Federal Building and Courthouse	Did not include a proposed timeline for completion or a reason for the delayed abatement of the condition.	Open	1,648	No
3	William Jefferson Clinton Federal Building	Did not include a requirement for a planned corrective action, a reason for delayed abatement of the condition, or a summary of the interim steps to be taken.	Closed	1,203	No
4	Richard B. Russell Federal Building and U.S. Courthouse	Did not include a proposed timeline for completion or a reason for the delayed abatement of the condition.	Open	997	Yes
5	Lyndon B. Johnson Department of Education Building	Did not include a proposed timeline for completion or a reason for the delayed abatement of the condition.	Closed	968	No
6	Martin Luther King, Jr. Federal Building	Did not include a proposed timeline for completion or a reason for the delayed abatement of the condition.	Open	958	Yes
7	Martin Luther King, Jr. Federal Building	Did not include a proposed timeline for completion or a reason for the delayed abatement of the condition. (separate from number 6)	Open	958	Yes
8	Andrew W. Mellon Auditorium	Did not include a proposed timeline for completion or a reason for the delayed abatement of the condition.	Closed	644	Yes
9	EPA Headquarters Complex	Did not include a proposed timeline for completion or a reason for the delayed abatement of the condition.	Closed	298	Yes

	Building	Abatement Plan Compliance Issue	Status	Days Open	OSHA-Compliant Timeline
10	Howard T. Markey National Courts Building	Did not include a proposed timeline for completion or a reason for the delayed abatement of the condition.	Closed	215	Yes
11	Lyndon B. Johnson Department of Education Building	Abatement plan was compliant with OSHA requirements.	Closed	184	Yes
12	Elijah Barrett Prettyman U.S. Courthouse	Did not include a reason for the delayed abatement of the condition.	Closed	100	Yes
13	Elijah Barrett Prettyman U.S. Courthouse	Did not include a reason for the delayed abatement of the condition (separate from number 12).	Closed	61	Yes

Appendix E – GSA Comments

U.S. General Services Administration

July 16, 2026

MEMORANDUM FOR BYRON G. BUSTOS
ASSOCIATE DEPUTY ASSISTANT INSPECTOR GENERAL FOR AUDITING
REAL PROPERTY AUDIT OFFICE
OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL (JA-R)

FROM: MICHAEL GELBER
Michael Gelber
ACTING COMMISSIONER
PUBLIC BUILDINGS SERVICE (P)

SUBJECT: Response to the Office of Inspector General Draft Report, *Audit of PBS's Management of Permit-Required Confined Space* (A250021)

The Public Buildings Service (PBS) appreciates the opportunity to review and comment on the subject draft report, in which the Office of Inspector General made the following recommendations:

(1) Ensuring that PBS Contracting Officer's Representatives:

(a) Verify that all Operations and Maintenance contractors:

(i) Maintain complete building operating plans, including a confined and permit space inventory

(ii) Ensure all building operating plans are uploaded into the National Computerized Maintenance Management System and verify that the plans include a fully populated, current permit space inventory.

(iii) Develop building-specific permit space entry programs.

(iv) Assess permit spaces and ensure they are accurately classified and labeled in accordance with the Department of Labor - Occupational Safety and Health Administration requirements.

(b) Maintain complete and accurate contract files, including all permit space deliverables.

(2) Establishing a formal Contracting Officer's Representative handover checklist that requires outgoing Contracting Officer's Representatives to digitally certify the transfer of all permit space inventories and permit systems to their successor(s) before offboarding.

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(3) Developing and implementing comprehensive training for Contracting Officer's Representatives concerning:

a. Operations and Maintenance contract requirements, including those governing permit and confined spaces.

b. Appropriate oversight to ensure permit space deliverables meet the Occupational Safety and Health Administration and PBS policy requirements.

(4) Ensuring that current bridge contracts and all future Operations and Maintenance solicitations incorporate the updated language and requirements of the current *PBS National O&M Specification*.

(5) Developing and implementing a formal quality assurance review process within the Inventory Reporting Information System to verify that abatement plans for open confined and permit space risk conditions contain a justification for delay, a completion timetable and interim protective measures.

(6) Developing standardized guidance for evaluating elevator pits to determine if they meet Occupational Safety and Health Administration and PBS permit space requirements.

PBS agrees with the recommendations and is working on a corrective action plan to address them.

If you have any questions, please contact Martin Gusky, Director-Risk Management Division, PBS Office of Facilities Management, at martin.gusky@gsa.gov.

Appendix F – Report Distribution

GSA Administrator (A)

GSA Deputy Administrator (AD)

Acting PBS Commissioner (P)

Acting Deputy Commissioner (P1)

Deputy Commissioner (P1)

Acting Chief of Staff (P2)

Acting Chief of Staff (PB)

Chief Financial Officer (B)

Deputy Chief Financial Officer (B)

Audit Management Division (BPA)

Assistant Inspector General for Auditing (JA)

Deputy Assistant Inspector General for Acquisition Audits (JA)

Deputy Assistant Inspector General for Real Property Audits (JA)

Director (JAO)

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