

Donald F. Kettl

Donald F. Kettl is professor and former dean in the School of Public Policy at the University of Maryland. He is also a nonresident senior fellow at the Volcker Alliance and at the Brookings Institution.

Kettl is the author or editor of a many books and monographs, including *Escaping Jurassic Government: Restoring America's Lost Commitment to Competence* (2016), *System under Stress: The Challenge to 21st Century American Democracy Homeland Security and American Politics* (2014), *The Politics of the Administrative Process* (2015), *The Next Government of the United States: Why Our Institutions Fail Us and How to Fix Them* (2008), and *The Global Public Management Revolution* (2005). He has twice won the Louis Brownlow Book Award of the National Academy of Public Administration for the best book published in public administration. In 2008, Kettl won the American Political Science's John Gaus Award for a lifetime of exemplary scholarship in political science and public administration. He was awarded the Warner W. Stockberger Achievement Award of the International Public Management Association for Human Resources in 2007 for outstanding contributions in the field of public sector personnel management.

He holds a PhD in political science from Yale University. Prior to his appointment at the University of Maryland, he taught at the University of Pennsylvania, Columbia University, the University of Virginia, Vanderbilt University, and the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He is a fellow of Phi Beta Kappa and the National Academy of Public Administration.

Kettl has consulted broadly for government organizations at all levels, in the United States and abroad. He has appeared frequently in national and international media, including National Public Radio, *Good Morning America*, the *ABC World News Tonight*, the *NBC Nightly News*, the *CBS Evening News*, CNN's "*Anderson Cooper 360*" and "*The Situation Room*," the Fox News Channel, the Huffington Post, Al Jazeera, as well as public television's *News Hour* and the BBC. He is a regular columnist for *Governing* magazine, which is read by state and local government officials around the country. He chaired two gubernatorial blue-ribbon commissions for the Wisconsin state government, one on campaign finance reform and the other on government structure and finance. Kettl is a co-shareholder of the Green Bay Packers, along with his wife, Sue.

Roundtable
**“Progress Is Possible:
Tackling the Challenges on GAO’s High-Risk List to Make Government Work Better”**

Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
United States Senate

June 16, 2016

Donald F. Kettl
School of Public Policy
University of Maryland

Public cynicism about government performance is at an all-time high. There’s a deep sense that government just doesn’t work, that it’s getting worse, and that not much can be done about it. And for anyone looking for evidence of government’s performance problems, the “high-risk list” prepared biennially by the U.S. Government Accountability Office would seem to present a wealth of cases. The most recent report, released in 2015, lists 32 areas especially prone to fraud, waste, abuse, and mismanagement.¹

However, as I have found in my just-released report from the IBM Center for the Business of Government, *Managing Risk, Improving Results: Lessons for Improving Government Management from GAO’s High Risk List*, a careful look at GAO’s findings shows a remarkable amount of good news.² In the 25 years that GAO has been producing this report, 23 programs have gotten off the list. Many other federal programs on GAO’s list have made substantial progress.

So the high-risk list isn’t just a catalogue of troubled programs. It’s a guide to the root causes of the federal government’s riskiest programs. And, far more important, it’s also a guide to how stronger performance can help agencies get their programs off the list—and what all agencies need to do to avoid getting on the list to begin with.

Root causes

An important—perhaps surprising—finding of my look at GAO’s high-risk list over the last 25 years is that a relatively small number of causes account for most of the problems. The most important causes are:

- The inability of agencies to effectively ***work across organizational stovepipes***.
- The inability to ***track performance*** and use information to make timely decisions.
- The challenge of ***updating inadequate and aging legacy information systems***.

For example, 15 agencies share responsibility for coordinating national policy and administering 30 different laws to prevent food-borne illnesses—and the federal government relies on state agencies to investigate food-borne outbreaks. In the case of national flood insurance, local governments have a large role in determining what can be built in flood plains, and state governments have important roles as well. The effectiveness of the national flood insurance program depends on building strong coordination among all three levels of government.

Root solutions

The top three solutions that federal agencies have developed for the high-risk problems are:

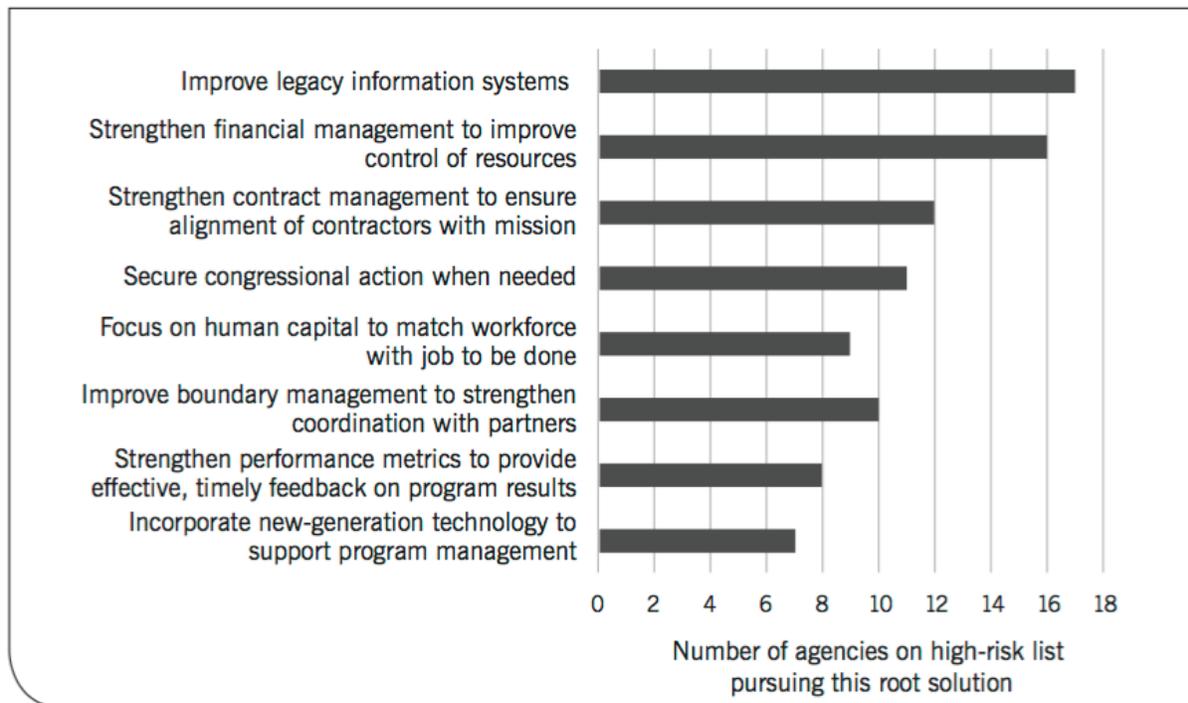
- ***Improvements to legacy information systems.*** Aging legacy information technology systems, and ineffective efforts to modernize them, have been a stumbling block for many agencies. Successful leaders make fundamental management changes to bring together technology, contracting, and program management skills. For example, GAO in 2013 removed the IRS’s Business Systems Modernization Program because it successfully installed its new taxpayer information system, the Customer Account Data Engine 2.
- ***Strengthened financial management systems to control resources.*** At their core, most high-risk programs are on the list because they pose big financial costs for taxpayers. Managers need to know where the money is going and how to redirect it. Better financial management of the Defense Department’s supply chain resulted in the department’s directing billions of dollars more closely to forecasts of needed spare parts. That produced big cost savings. In the case of the Department of the Interior’s oil and gas leasing programs, better financial management led to significant improvements in the collection of revenues from leases.
- ***Strengthened contract management to ensure contractors aligned with mission needs.*** The federal government relies heavily on contractors but often struggles to draft good contracts and manage them well. That’s the case for the Medicare program, which has been on the GAO high-risk list since its inception in 1990. However, GAO has recognized the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services for putting in place stronger competitive bidding procedures for products, like durable medical equipment (including wheelchairs) and stronger auditing and contract review processes. Taxpayers have saved substantial money as a result.

Summary

It can be tempting to focus on GAO’s high-risk list as a catalog of the federal government’s biggest problems. But, more fundamentally, it has become one of the best assessments of the progress federal agencies are making in improving the management of government, to produce better value for taxpayer dollars. In addition, it is a manual for what ***all*** agencies need to do—not only to get off and stay off this list, but to perform better on behalf of all citizens.

Root solutions for high-risk problems

The analysis of progress made by agencies on the high-risk list reveals a small handful of the most important solutions for high-risk problems.



Notes

¹ U.S. Government Accountability Office, *High-Risk Series: An Update*, GAO-15-290 (February 11, 2015).

² Donald F. Kettl, *Managing Risk, Improving Results: Lessons for Improving Government Management from GAO's High Risk List* (Washington: IBM Center for the Business of Government, 2016). I am grateful for the Center's support of this research, and for the detailed comments by John Kamensky, Mark Abramson, and Daniel Chenok, which proved exceptionally helpful in improving the final report.