

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-13-531](#), a report to the Chairman, Subcommittee on Financial Services and General Government, Committee on Appropriations, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

The federal judiciary has the critical responsibility for the fair and swift administration of justice in the United States. Like the rest of the federal government, the judiciary has been affected by decreasing federal resources, and is implementing and considering various cost containment initiatives, including sharing administrative services between district and bankruptcy courts, such as human resources, procurement, or financial management. In most federal judicial districts, the offices of the clerk—responsible for operational and administrative court functions—for the district and bankruptcy courts are separate, but in a few districts, these have been consolidated into one clerk's office.

GAO was requested to examine the potential savings from consolidating or sharing services between district and bankruptcy clerks' offices. This report addresses (1) the steps the judiciary has taken to consolidate these clerks' offices or share services between them and the costs and benefits of doing so, and (2) the extent to which the judiciary is assessing and considering further clerks' office consolidations or shared services. GAO reviewed judicial guidance related to consolidation and shared services, budget documentation, surveys and data on the extent of shared services, and information on potential cost savings from 10 federal judicial districts, selected based on geography and size, and to include courts with consolidated and nonconsolidated clerks' offices. GAO also interviewed court and judiciary officials. While the information and views obtained cannot be generalized, they provided insights.

View [GAO-13-531](#). For more information, contact David C. Maurer at (202) 512-9627 or maurerd@gao.gov.

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FEDERAL JUDICIARY

Efforts to Consolidate and Share Services between District and Bankruptcy Clerks' Offices

What GAO Found

Few federal judicial districts have consolidated their court clerks' offices; courts are sharing services among the clerks' offices, but the costs and benefits are unclear. Four of the 91 districts served by bankruptcy courts have consolidated the clerks' offices of the district and bankruptcy courts. Court officials in districts that are not considering consolidation told GAO that they are not considering consolidation primarily because the bankruptcy courts in those districts did not want to give up their independence or risk the possibility that services would be prioritized in favor of the district court, and the courts did not have evidence of cost savings or other benefits that would make consolidation worthwhile. Officials from the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts (AOUSC), which provides a wide range of services to the federal judiciary, were not aware of other districts considering consolidation and noted that the consolidation process is complicated—for example, it requires congressional approval. The judiciary has taken steps to share administrative services as part of its cost containment initiatives, but the cost savings and operational benefits of sharing services are unclear. In an AOUSC survey, 154 of 283 court units—district courts, bankruptcy courts, and probation and pretrial services offices—reported that they are sharing services with other court units, though the extent of this sharing is unknown because the survey did not ask for this information. For example, sharing can comprise various methods, such as shared staff, shared contracts for service, or shared space. According to AOUSC officials, since staff expenses make up the majority of judiciary expenses, sharing staff and eliminating positions may be the most promising way to achieve cost savings through shared services. However, the ability to cut staff based on sharing services is dependent on the attributes of each district, including the level of staff utilization, and courts GAO spoke with did not provide documented evidence of cost savings or the lack thereof. Court opinions on the operational benefits from sharing services also varied. For example, court officials stated that sharing can provide opportunities for staff specialization and better-quality service, but can also negatively affect courts if services are not provided equitably.

In August 2011, AOUSC began a cost savings study on shared administrative services. AOUSC plans to use data collected from the courts to conduct an analysis of the percentage of time devoted to administrative work in court units that share services and consequently whether there are associated cost savings. AOUSC plans to provide a draft report from the study to the Budget Committee of the Judicial Conference—the conference is the judiciary's principal policy-making body—in July 2013, but did not know when the report would be final. In addition to determining whether shared services could save money, the results of the study could provide courts with information to aid in their decisions about sharing services. For example, AOUSC officials said that after the study is completed, they may conduct case studies of courts that are sharing services and disseminate information on these courts' practices. As courts consider whether to begin or increase shared services arrangements, the results of AOUSC's cost savings study will likely be important to help determine whether shared services could result in savings or other benefits. However, since the study is ongoing and case study plans are not firm, it is too early to tell whether the results, the final report, or subsequent AOUSC actions will provide this information.