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August 27, 2012

The Honorable Gene L. Dodaro
Comptroller General
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street NW
Washington DC 20548-0001

Dear Mr. Dodaro:

The Promise Neighborhoods program aims to improve educational and developmental outcomes for students in some of the country's most distressed urban, rural, and tribal neighborhoods by providing cradle-to-career support services. In 2010, the first year of the grant, the Department of Education dedicated \$10 million to this program through the Fund for the Improvement of Education. Since that time, funding for the Promise Neighborhoods program has grown to \$60 million, with the administration requesting \$100 million in its fiscal year 2013 budget. The program provides funding for planning and implementation grants; and nonprofits, institutions of higher education, and Indian tribes, in partnership with schools, are eligible to apply.

We are concerned by apparent discrepancies in the awarding of planning and implementation grants related to the Promise Neighborhoods Program. In 2010, the department awarded organizations one-year planning grants with the expectation that grantees would be able to demonstrate a plan to improve results for children in the community being served at the end of the grant period. In 2011, the department awarded 15 new planning grants and five implementation grants. Three of the top five scoring planning grantees from 2010 submitted applications for implementation grants in 2011 but did not receive them, and one of the five organizations receiving implementation grants in 2011 did not receive a planning grant in 2010.

One of the stated goals of Promise Neighborhoods is to integrate social service programs and break down agency "silos" so solutions can be implemented effectively and efficiently across agencies. However, it is unclear to what extent the department is coordinating with other federal agencies responsible for carrying out social services and anti-poverty efforts, and whether it has the expertise and relationships with state and local organizations to carry out the program's goals.

The Honorable Gene L Dodaro

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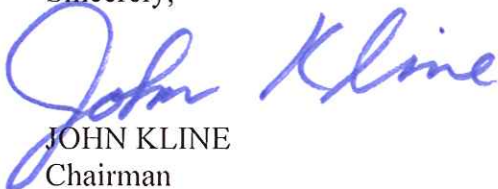
Finally, it is important that the Promise Neighborhoods program be carefully evaluated and measured against its stated goals and whether it is more effective than duplicative or overlapping programs run by other federal agencies, including Community Services Block Grants, Social Services Block Grants, Rural Community Development, Enterprise Zones, or other federal efforts around neighborhood revitalization. At this time, it is unclear how the department plans to evaluate grantees and the types of metrics the agency plans to use. The evaluation of the effectiveness of its planning and implementation grants must include a thorough review and an assessment of the value of the taxpayer investment for each grant.

In light of these concerns, we respectfully request GAO respond to the following questions:

- 1) How frequently were organizations that received planning grants able to successfully compete for an implementation grant, and what factors affected their ability to compete for these grants?
- 2) To what extent does the goal of the Promise Neighborhood program overlap with the goals of other federal programs? How does the department coordinate with related programs? What steps have the agencies taken to ensure the overlap or duplication does not waste federal funds?
- 3) How will the Department of Education evaluate the success of the Promise Neighborhoods program, including the success of the planning and implementation grants?

Thank you for your consideration of this request. Please contact Mandy Schaumburg (mandy.schaumburg@mail.house.gov) with the committee staff at 202-225-6558 if you have any questions.

Sincerely,


JOHN KLINE
Chairman