

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-20-273](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

GAO has reported on the inherent fragmented nature of the federal and nonfederal resources needed to protect the nation from potentially catastrophic biological threats. GAO called for a strategic approach to help the federal government better leverage resources and manage risk. The White House issued the National Biodefense Strategy and the Presidential Memorandum on the Support for National Biodefense to promote a more efficient and coordinated biodefense enterprise.

The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017 included a provision that GAO review the strategy. This report addresses the extent to which the Strategy and implementation efforts are designed to enhance national biodefense capabilities and any implementation challenges that exist.

GAO analyzed the Strategy, plans, and NSPM-14, and compared them to selected characteristics of GAO's work on effective national strategies, enterprise risk management, organizational transformation, and interagency coordination. GAO interviewed officials from the eight federal agencies that comprised the Biodefense Steering Committee to learn about early implementation.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making four recommendations to the Secretary of HHS, including working with other agencies to document methods for analysis and the processes, roles, and responsibilities for enterprise-wide decision making. HHS concurred with all the recommendations and described steps to implement them.

View [GAO-20-273](#). For more information, contact Chris Currie at (404) 679-1875 or CurrieC@gao.gov or Mary Denigan-Macauley at (202) 512-7114 or DeniganMacauleyM@gao.gov.

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NATIONAL BIODEFENSE STRATEGY

Additional Efforts Would Enhance Likelihood of Effective Implementation

What GAO Found

Issued in September 2018, the National Biodefense Strategy (Strategy) and implementation plan, along with National Security Presidential Memorandum-14 (NSPM-14), are designed to enhance national biodefense capabilities. NSPM-14 established a governance structure composed of relevant federal agencies and chaired by the Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS) to guide implementation. It also required federal agencies with biodefense responsibilities to collect and assess data on their biodefense activities to, among other things, identify gaps. The Strategy defined the scope of the biodefense enterprise (which includes partners at all levels of government and the private sector) and brought all of the biological threats—intentional, accidental, and naturally-occurring—together, establishing an overarching vision, goals, and objectives.

Membership of the Biodefense Steering Committee



Biodefense Steering Committee

Chair:

Secretary of Health and Human Services

Other members include:

The Secretaries from the Departments of State, Defense, Agriculture, Veterans Affairs, and Homeland Security, and the Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency and the Attorney General (Department of Justice).

The heads of other agencies with biodefense responsibilities or capabilities shall participate at the invitation of the Committee, as appropriate.

Source: GAO analysis of National Security Presidential Memorandum-14 and agency information. | GAO-20-273

There are a number of challenges, however, that could limit long-term implementation success. Among other things, there was no documented methodology or guidance for how data are to be analyzed to help the enterprise identify gaps and opportunities to leverage resources, including no guidance on how nonfederal capabilities are to be accounted for in the analysis. Many of the resources that compose national capabilities are not federal, so enterprise-wide assessment efforts should account for nonfederal capabilities.

Agency officials were also unsure how decisions would be made, especially if addressing gaps or opportunities to leverage resources involved redirecting resources across agency boundaries. Although HHS officials pointed to existing processes and directives for interagency decision making, GAO found there are no clear, detailed processes, roles, and responsibilities for joint decision-making, including how agencies will identify opportunities to leverage resources or who will make and enforce those decisions. As a result, questions remain about how this first-year effort to catalogue all existing activities will result in a decision-making approach that involves jointly defining and managing risk at the enterprise level. Without clearly documented methods, guidance, processes, and roles and responsibilities for enterprise-wide decision-making, the effort runs the risk of failing to move away from traditional mission stovepipes toward a strategic enterprise-wide approach that meaningfully enhances national capabilities.