CONTINUITY OF OPERATIONS

Agencies Could Improve Planning for Telework during Disruptions

What GAO Found
Although agencies are not required to use telework in continuity planning, 9 of the 23 agencies surveyed reported plans for essential team members to telework during a COOP event, compared to 3 in GAO’s previous survey. However, few documented that they made the necessary preparations to effectively use telework during such an event. For example, only 1 agency documented that it had communicated this expectation to its emergency team members. One reason for the low levels of preparations reported is that FEMA has not provided specific guidance on preparations needed to use telework during emergencies.

Recently, FEMA disseminated guidance to agencies on incorporating pandemic influenza considerations into COOP planning. Although this guidance suggests the use of telework during such an event, it does not address the steps agencies should take when preparing to use telework during an emergency. Without specific guidance, agencies are unlikely to adequately prepare their telework capabilities for use during a COOP event. In addition, inadequate preparations could limit the ability of nonessential employees to contribute to agency missions during extended emergencies, including pandemic influenza.

In its report released today, GAO recommends, among other things, that FEMA establish a time line for developing, in consultation with the OPM, guidance on preparations needed for using telework during a COOP event. In commenting on a draft of the report, DHS partially agreed with GAO’s recommendation and stated that FEMA will coordinate with OPM in developing a time line for further telework guidance. DHS also stated that both FEMA and OPM have provided telework guidance. However, as GAO’s report stated, present guidance does not address the preparations federal agencies should make for using telework during emergencies.

On May 3 the White House announced the release of an Implementation Plan in support of the National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza. This plan calls on OPM to work with DHS and other agencies to revise existing telework guidance and issue new guidance on human capital planning and COOP. The plan establishes an expectation that these actions will be completed within 3 months. If the forthcoming guidance does not require agencies to make necessary preparations for telework, agencies are unlikely to take all the steps necessary to ensure that employees will be able to effectively use telework to perform essential functions in extended emergencies, such as a pandemic influenza.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-713T.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Linda D. Koontz at (202) 512-6240 or koontzl@gao.gov.