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**EMERGENCY
MANAGEMENT**

**Observations on DHS's
Preparedness for
Catastrophic Disasters**

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Homeland Security and Justice





Highlights of [GAO 08-868T](#), a report to Subcommittee on Management, Investigations and Oversight, Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

The Homeland Security Act was enacted in November 2002, creating the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to improve homeland security following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States. The act centralized the leadership of many homeland security activities under a single federal department and, accordingly, DHS has the dominant role in implementing this national strategy.

This testimony discusses the status of DHS's actions in fulfilling its responsibilities to (1) establish policies to define roles and responsibilities for national emergency preparedness efforts and prepare for the transition between presidential administrations, and (2) develop operational plans and performance metrics to implement these roles and responsibilities and coordinate federal resources for disaster planning and response. This testimony is based on prior GAO work performed from September 2006 to June 2008 focusing on DHS's efforts to address problems identified in the many post-Katrina reviews.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is not making any new recommendations in this testimony. GAO has made recommendations in the prior reports identified in this testimony, and DHS has generally concurred with these recommendations and is taking action to implement them.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-868T](#). For more information, contact William O. Jenkins, Jr., at (202) 512-8777 or jenkinswo@gao.gov.

EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

Observations on DHS's Preparedness for Catastrophic Disasters

What GAO Found

DHS has taken several actions to define national roles and responsibilities and capabilities for emergency preparedness efforts in key policy documents and has begun preparing for the upcoming transition between presidential administrations. DHS prepared initial versions of key policy documents that describe what should be done and by whom (National Response Plan in 2004), how it should be done (the National Incident Management System in 2004) and how well it should be done (the interim National Preparedness Goal in 2005). DHS subsequently developed and issued revisions to these documents to improve and enhance its national-level policies, such as the National Preparedness Guidelines in 2007 which was the successor to the interim National Preparedness Goal. Most recently, DHS developed the National Response Framework (NRF), the successor to the National Response Plan, which became effective in March 2008. This framework describes the doctrine that guides national response actions and the roles and responsibilities of officials and entities involved in response efforts. Clarifying roles and responsibilities will be especially critical as a result of the coming change in administrations and the associated transition of key federal officials with homeland security preparedness and response roles. To cope with the absence of many political appointed executives from senior roles, DHS has designated career executives to carry out specific responsibilities in the transition between presidential administrations and recently provided information to this Committee on its transition plans. To assist in planning to execute an efficient and effective administration transition, DHS has also contracted with the Council for Excellence in Government to identify key roles and responsibilities for the Department and its homeland security partners for responding to disasters during the transition between administrations.

DHS is still developing operational plans to guide other federal agencies' response efforts and metrics for assessing federal capabilities. Two essential supplements to the new National Response Framework—response guides for federal partners and an integrated planning system—are still under development. Also, DHS is still establishing a process to measure the nation's overall preparedness based on a list of targeted capabilities and has not yet completed an inventory of all federal response capabilities. The measures and metrics associated with these targeted capabilities are not standards, but serve as guides for planning, training, and exercise activities. However, DHS policy does not direct development of these capabilities to address national priorities for federal agencies. For example, for the national priority to “Strengthen Interoperable and Operable Communications Capabilities” the National Preparedness Guidelines state that communications capabilities are developed to target levels in the states, tribal areas, territories, and designated urban areas that are consistent with measures and metrics established for targeted capabilities; federal agencies' interoperability is not addressed.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I appreciate the opportunity to participate in today's hearing to discuss the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) preparedness to lead federal efforts to prepare for, prevent, mitigate the effects of, respond to, and recover from all domestic disasters, whether natural or man-made, including acts of terror. My remarks today focus on the preparation for and response to major and catastrophic disasters which require substantial federal coordination with and assistance to state and local responders. My statement is grounded in the work GAO has done to-date on DHS and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in preparing for, responding to and recovering from major disasters and catastrophes.

The need for federal leadership in homeland security efforts was never greater than in the hours and days following the attacks of September 11, 2001, which ultimately led to the creation of DHS and the establishment of the Department's roles to provide strategic, national leadership as the focal point for federal response and coordination. This role is defined in law and executive order and described in federal emergency management strategies, policies, and procedures. In order to provide the coordinated national homeland security effort directed by the Congress and the President, DHS must provide leadership across a broad spectrum of stakeholders including: federal agencies and departments, and DHS's own components; state, local and tribal governments, their emergency management agencies and other state agencies; sector-specific businesses and industry; voluntary organizations; and academia. It is an enormous challenge and responsibility. In leading national preparedness efforts, DHS through FEMA is responsible for developing national-level policies and doctrine to guide the efforts of these stakeholders to establish operational plans to carry out their roles and responsibilities and build, measure, and sustain their ability to do so effectively.

The effectiveness of DHS and FEMA in assuming these responsibilities was severely tested—and in some cases clearly found wanting—in the aftermath of the 2005 hurricane season and its catastrophic impact on the

Gulf Coast. Numerous reports,¹ along with our own observations,² identified concerns about leadership of the federal response to Hurricane Katrina and questions regarding the roles, and responsibilities of DHS, FEMA and other federal agencies, as well as state and local officials and non-governmental organizations. As we reported in September 2006, effective preparation and response for catastrophic disasters requires that roles and responsibilities be clearly defined and understood and that responsible officials know what capabilities are needed to fulfill their roles and responsibilities, develop the operational plans to implement those roles and responsibilities, and establish, realistically test, and maintain the needed capabilities. To address many of the issues and problems highlighted by the Katrina response, Congress passed the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act of October 2006 (Post-Katrina Act),³ which charged FEMA with the primary responsibility for coordinating and implementing key aspects of federal emergency preparedness and response.

The Post-Katrina Act defines a catastrophic incident as any natural disaster, act of terrorism, or other man-made disaster that results in extraordinary levels of casualties or damage or disruption severely affecting the population (including mass evacuations), infrastructure, environment, economy, national morale, or government functions in an area. Effective federal preparation for and response to such an event requires planning, coordination, cooperation, and leadership within DHS and between DHS and other federal agencies—civilian and military— as well as state and local governments, and the private and nonprofit sectors who have resources and capabilities needed for the response.

¹See reports: *A Failure of Initiative: Final Report of the House Select Bipartisan Committee to Investigate the Preparation for And Response to Hurricane Katrina* (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 15, 2006), U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs *Hurricane Katrina: A Nation Still Unprepared* (Washington, D.C.: May 2006), White House Homeland Security Council *The Federal Response to Hurricane Katrina: Lessons Learned* (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 23, 2006), Department of Homeland Security's Office of Inspector General *A Performance Review of FEMA's Disaster Management Activities in Response to Hurricane Katrina*, OIG-06-32 (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 31, 2006).

²GAO, *Catastrophic Disasters: Enhanced Leadership, Capabilities, and Accountability Controls Will Improve the Effectiveness of the Nation's Preparedness, Response, and Recovery System*, [GAO-06-618](#), (Washington, D.C., Sept. 2, 2006).

³The Post-Katrina Act was enacted as Title VI of the Department of Homeland Security Appropriations Act, 2007, Pub. L. No. 109-295, 120 Stat. 1355 (2006).

Today, I'd like to briefly discuss the status of DHS's actions in fulfilling its responsibilities to:

- establish policies to define roles and responsibilities for national emergency preparedness efforts and prepare for the transition between presidential administrations; and
- develop operational plans and performance metrics to implement these roles and responsibilities and coordinate federal resources for disaster planning and response

My observations on DHS's and FEMA's development of policies, plans and metrics to lead federal efforts in this statement are based on our prior work, focusing on DHS's efforts to address problems identified in the many post-Katrina reviews from September 2006 to June 2008, as well as related work by the DHS Office of Inspector General (OIG). We have issued a number of GAO reports that have examined a wide variety of operational and management issues, made observations and recommendations, and followed up on our reports assessing DHS's leadership capabilities in working with other federal agencies. Examples relevant to the hearing today include our reviews of emergency communications interoperability,⁴ evacuations of disadvantaged populations,⁵ national preparedness for pandemic flu,⁶ and coordination with the Department of Defense (DOD).⁷

Summary

DHS has taken several actions to define national roles and responsibilities and capabilities for preparedness and response in key policy documents

⁴GAO, *First Responders: Much Work Remains to Improve Communications Interoperability*, [GAO-07-301](#) (Washington, D.C.: April 2, 2007).

⁵GAO, *Status of Implementation of GAO Recommendations on Evacuation of Transportation-Disadvantaged Populations and Patients and Residents of Health Care Facilities*, [GAO-08-544R](#) (Washington, D.C. Apr. 1, 2008).

⁶GAO, *Influenza Pandemic: Further Efforts Are Needed to Ensure Clearer Leadership Roles and an Effective National Strategy*, [GAO-07-781](#) (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 14, 2007).

⁷GAO, *Homeland Defense U.S. Northern Command Has Made Progress but Needs to Address Force Allocation, Readiness Tracking Gaps, and Other Issues*, [GAO-08-251](#) (Washington, D.C., Feb. 16, 2008), *Homeland Defense: Steps Have Been Taken to Improve U.S. Northern Command's Coordination with States and the National Guard Bureau, but Gaps Remain*, [GAO-08-252](#) (Washington, D.C., April 16, 2008), and *Homeland Security: Enhanced National Guard Readiness for Civil Support Missions May Depend on DOD's Implementation of the 2008 National Defense Authorization Act*, [GAO-08-311](#) (Washington, D.C.: April 16, 2008).

and has begun preparing for the upcoming transition between presidential administrations. However, it needs to better integrate stakeholders in its revision of key policy documents, particularly the National Response Framework. To implement requirements of the Homeland Security Act of 2002 and HSPDs 5 and 8,⁸ DHS issued initial versions of key policy documents in 2004 (NIMS and the National Response Plan) and 2005 (National Preparedness Goal) and has developed and issued revisions intended to improve and enhance its national-level policies. Most recently, the National Response Framework (NRF), the successor to the National Response Plan, became effective in March 2008; it describes the doctrine that guides national response actions and the roles and responsibilities of officials and entities involved in response efforts. Clarifying roles and responsibilities will be especially critical as a result of the coming change in administrations and the associated transition of key federal officials with homeland security preparedness and response roles. To cope with the absence of many political appointed executives from senior roles, DHS has designated career executives to carry out specific responsibilities in the transition between presidential administrations and recently provided information to this Committee on its transition plans. To assist in planning to execute an efficient and effective administration transition, DHS has also contracted with the Council for Excellence in Government to identify key roles and responsibilities for the Department and its homeland security partners for responding to disasters during the transition between administrations.

DHS's efforts to develop operational plans to guide other federal agencies' response efforts and metrics for assessing federal capabilities are incomplete. In addition, DHS is still establishing a process to measure the nation's overall preparedness based on the Target Capabilities List (TCL)⁹ and has not yet developed a complete inventory of all federal response capabilities. For example, for the national priority to "Strengthen

⁸The Homeland Security Act of 2002 and HSPD 5 required DHS to develop a comprehensive National Incident Management System (NIMS) and a comprehensive National Response Plan. Homeland Security Presidential Directive-8 (HSPD-8) of December 17, 2003 directed the Secretary of Homeland Security to develop a national domestic all-hazards preparedness goal.

⁹The TCL is a comprehensive catalog of capabilities to perform homeland security missions, including performance measures and metrics for common tasks. The 37 capabilities referenced in the *Guidelines* span the full spectrum of homeland security missions. While the listing does not yet encompass every function that must be accomplished to prevent, protect against, respond to, or recover from a major event, it nonetheless offers a comprehensive starting point for planning.

Interoperable and Operable Communications Capabilities” the National Preparedness Guidelines state that communications capabilities are developed to target levels in the states, tribal areas, territories, and designated urban areas that are consistent with measures and metrics established for targeted capabilities; federal agencies’ interoperability is not addressed.

Background

DHS’s federal leadership role and responsibilities for emergency preparedness as defined in law and executive order are broad and challenging. To increase homeland security following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States, President Bush issued the National Strategy for Homeland Security in July 2002,¹⁰ and signed the Homeland Security Act in November 2002 creating DHS. The act centralized the leadership of many homeland security activities under a single federal department and, accordingly, DHS has the dominant role in implementing the strategy. As we noted in our review of DHS’s mission and management functions, the National Strategy for Homeland Security underscores the importance for DHS of partnering and coordination.¹¹ For example, 33 of the strategy’s 43 initiatives are required to be implemented by 3 or more federal agencies. If these entities do not effectively coordinate their implementation activities, they may waste resources by creating ineffective and incompatible pieces of a larger security program.

In addition, more than 20 Homeland Security Presidential Directives (HSPDs) define DHS’s and other federal agencies’ roles in leading efforts to prepare for and respond to disasters, emergencies, and potential terrorist threats. Directives that focus on DHS’s leadership role and responsibilities for homeland security include HSPD-5 and HSPD-8 which are summarized below:

- Homeland Security Presidential Directive-5 (HSPD-5), issued on February 28, 2003, identifies the Secretary of Homeland Security as the principal federal official for domestic incident management and directs him to coordinate the federal government’s resources utilized in response to or

¹⁰White House Office of Homeland Security, *National Strategy for Homeland Security* (Washington, D.C., Jul. 16, 2002).

¹¹GAO *Department of Homeland Security: Progress Report on Implementation of Mission and Management Functions* [GAO-07-454](#) (Washington, D.C.: August 17, 2007).

recovery from terrorist attacks, major disasters, or other emergencies.¹² The Secretary of DHS, as the principal federal official, is to provide standardized, quantitative reports to the Assistant to the President for Homeland Security on the readiness and preparedness of the nation—at all levels of government—to prevent, prepare for, respond to, and recover from domestic incidents and develop and administer a National Response Plan (NRP). To facilitate this role, HSPD-5 directs the heads of all federal departments and agencies to assist and support the Secretary in the development and maintenance of the NRP. (The plan was recently revised and is now called the National Response Framework.

- Homeland Security Presidential Directive-8 (HSPD-8), issued in December 2003, called for a new national preparedness goal and performance measures, standards for preparedness assessments and strategies, as well as a system for assessing the nation’s overall preparedness. According to the HSPD, the Secretary is the principal federal official for coordinating the implementation of all-hazards preparedness in the United States. In cooperation with other federal departments and agencies, the Secretary coordinates the preparedness of federal response assets. In addition, the Secretary, in coordination with other appropriate federal civilian departments and agencies, is to develop and maintain a federal response capability inventory that includes the performance parameters of the capability, the time (days or hours) within which the capability can be brought to bear on an incident, and the readiness of such capability to respond to domestic incidents. Last year, the President issued an annex to HSPD-8 intended to establish a standard and comprehensive approach to national planning and ensure consistent planning across the federal government.

After the hurricane season of 2005, Congress passed the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act of 2006, that, among other things, made organizational changes within DHS to consolidate emergency preparedness and emergency response functions within FEMA. Most of the organizational changes, such as the transfer of various functions from

¹² If and when any one of the following four conditions applies: (1) a Federal department or agency acting under its own authority has requested the assistance of the Secretary; (2) the resources of State and local authorities are overwhelmed and Federal assistance has been requested by the appropriate State and local authorities; (3) more than one Federal department or agency has become substantially involved in responding to the incident; or (4) the Secretary has been directed to assume responsibility for managing the domestic incident by the President.

DHS's Directorate of Preparedness to FEMA, became effective as of March 31, 2007. According to the act, the primary mission of FEMA is to:

“reduce the loss of life and property and protect the Nation from all hazards, including natural disasters, acts of terrorism, and other man-made disasters, by leading and supporting the Nation in a risk-based, comprehensive emergency management system of preparedness, protection, response, recovery, and mitigation.”¹³ The act kept FEMA within DHS and enhanced FEMA's responsibilities and its autonomy within DHS.¹⁴ As a result of the Post-Katrina Act, FEMA is the DHS component now charged with leading and supporting the nation in a risk-based, comprehensive emergency management system of preparedness, protection, response, recovery, and mitigation.

DHS Has Issued and Revised National-Level Preparedness Policies to Define Roles and Responsibilities

¹³ 6 U.S.C. 313(b)(1).

¹⁴ GAO *Homeland Security: Preparing for and Responding to Disasters*. [GAO-07-395T](#) (Washington, D.C. Mar 9, 2007).

DHS Has Taken Action to Revise National Preparedness Policies But Should Plan for Better Integrating Stakeholders in the Future

DHS has taken action to define national roles and responsibilities and capabilities for preparedness and response which are reflected in several key policy documents: the National Response Framework, (what should be done and by whom); the National Incident Management System (NIMS) (how it should be done), and the National Performance Guidelines (how well it should be done). To implement requirements of the Homeland Security Act of 2002 and HSPDs 5 and 8,¹⁵ DHS issued initial versions of these documents in 2004 (NIMS and the National Response Plan) and 2005 (National Preparedness Goal) and has developed and issued revisions intended to improve and enhance these national-level policies. Most recently, the National Response Framework (NRF), the successor to the National Response Plan, became effective in March 2008; it describes the doctrine that guides national response actions and the roles and responsibilities of officials and entities involved in response efforts. The NRF also includes a Catastrophic Incident Annex, which describes an accelerated, proactive national response to catastrophic incidents, as well as a Supplement to the Catastrophic Incident Annex—both designed to further clarify federal roles and responsibilities and relationships among federal, state and local governments and responders. Together, these documents are intended to provide a comprehensive structure, guidance, and performance goals for developing and maintaining an effective national preparedness and response system.

Because there are a range of federal and nonfederal stakeholders with important responsibilities for emergency preparedness and response, it is important that FEMA and DHS include these stakeholders in its development and revisions of national policies and guidelines. Today we are issuing a report on the process DHS used to revise the NRF, including how DHS integrated key stakeholders. DHS included non-federal stakeholders in the revision process during the initial months when issues were identified and draft segments written, and during the final months when there was broad opportunity to comment on the draft that DHS had produced. However, DHS deviated from the work plan it established for the revision process that envisioned the incorporation of stakeholder views throughout the process and did not provide the first full revision draft to non-federal stakeholders for their comments and suggestions

¹⁵The Homeland Security Act of 2002 and HSPD 5 required DHS to develop a comprehensive National Incident Management System (NIMS) and a comprehensive National Response Plan. Homeland Security Presidential Directive-8 (HSPD-8) of December 17, 2003 directed the Secretary of Homeland Security to develop a national domestic all-hazards preparedness goal.

before conducting a closed, internal federal review of the draft. DHS's approach was also not in accordance with the Post-Katrina Act's requirement that DHS establish a National Advisory Council (NAC) to incorporate non-federal input into the revision process. Although the NAC was to be established within 60 days of the Act (i.e., December 4, 2006), FEMA, which assumed responsibility for selecting members, did not name NAC members until June 2007 because of the additional time needed to review hundreds of applications and select a high quality body of advisors, according to the FEMA Administrator. The NAC's first meeting took place in October 2007 after DHS issued the revised plan for public comment. We are recommending that, as FEMA begins to implement and eventually review the 2008 National Response Framework, the Administrator develop and disseminate policies and procedures describing the conditions and time frames under which the next NRF revision will occur and how FEMA will conduct the next NRF revision. These policies and procedures should clearly describe how FEMA will integrate all stakeholders, including the NAC and other non-federal stakeholders, into the revision process and the methods for communicating to these stakeholders. FEMA agreed with our recommendation.

The importance of involving stakeholders, both federal and non-federal, was underscored in our review of The National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza (National Pandemic Strategy) and The Implementation Plan for the National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza (National Pandemic Implementation Plan) which were issued in November 2005 and May 2006 respectively, by the President and his Homeland Security Council.¹⁶ Key non-federal stakeholders, such as state and local governments, were not directly involved in developing the National Pandemic Strategy and Implementation Plan, even though these stakeholders are expected to be the primary responders to an influenza pandemic. While DHS collaborated with the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and other federal agencies in developing the National Pandemic Strategy and Implementation Plan, we found that there are numerous shared leadership roles and responsibilities, leaving uncertainty about how the federal government would lead preparations for and response to a pandemic. Although the DHS Secretary is to lead overall non-medical support and response actions and the HHS Secretary is to lead the public health and

¹⁶GAO, *Influenza Pandemic: Further Efforts Are Needed to Ensure Clearer Federal Leadership Roles and an Effective National Strategy*, GAO-07-781 (Washington, D.C.: Aug 14, 2007).

medical response, the plan does not clearly address these simultaneous responsibilities or how these roles are to work together, particularly over an extended period and at multiple locations across the country. In addition to the two Secretaries, we observed that the FEMA Administrator is now the principal domestic emergency management advisor to the President, the Homeland Security Council, and the DHS Secretary, pursuant to the Post-Katrina Act, adding further complexity to the leadership structure in the case of an influenza pandemic. Most of these leadership roles and responsibilities have not been tested under pandemic scenarios, leaving it unclear how they will work. We therefore recommended that DHS and HHS work together to develop and conduct rigorous testing, training, and exercises for pandemic influenza to ensure that federal leadership roles are clearly defined and understood and that leaders are able to effectively execute shared responsibilities to address emerging challenges, and ensure these roles are clearly understood by all key stakeholders. We also recommended that, in updating the National Pandemic Implementation Plan, the process should involve key non-federal stakeholders. DHS and HHS agreed with our recommendations, and said that they were taking or planned to take actions to implement our recommendations.

Presidential Transition Period Poses Challenges for DHS Leadership of National Preparedness Efforts

As we noted in our report on the preparation for and response to Hurricane Katrina issued in September 2006,¹⁷ clearly defined and understood roles and responsibilities are essential for an effective, coordinated response to a catastrophic disaster.

In any administration, the number of political appointees who depart rises as the President's term nears an end. Many cabinet secretaries and agency heads—in addition to the DHS Secretary and the FEMA Administrator—have response responsibilities in a major or catastrophic disaster, which could occur at any time. As political appointees depart, it is therefore essential that there be career senior executives who are clearly designated to lead their respective department and agency responsibilities for emergency response and continuity of operations. It is also important that they clearly understand their roles and responsibilities and have training to exercise them effectively.

¹⁷GAO-06-618.

DHS has designated career executives to carry out specific responsibilities in the transition between presidential administrations and recently provided information to this Committee on its transition plans. DHS has also contracted with the Council for Excellence in Government to map key roles and responsibilities for responding to disasters during the transition between administrations. The Council is to produce a visual mapping of these roles, plus supplementary documentation to support/explicate the mapping. Once those materials had been developed, the Council plans to hold a series of trainings/workshops for career civil servants in acting leadership positions and nominated political appointees based on the roles mapped out by the Council. In addition, the project includes training and workshops for those in acting leadership positions outside DHS.

DHS Has Not Yet Developed Comprehensive Operational Plans and Metrics to Coordinate Federal Response Resources

DHS Still Developing Ways to Lead National Planning

DHS is responsible for, but has not yet completed, leading the operational planning needed for an effective national response. Two essential supplements to the new National Response Framework—Federal Partner Response Guides and DHS’s Integrated Planning System—are still under development. The partner guides are designed to provide a ready reference of key roles and actions for federal, state, local, tribal, and private-sector response partners. According to DHS, the guides are to provide more specific “how to” handbooks tailored specifically to the federal government and the other non-federal stakeholders: state, local and tribal governments, the private sector and nongovernmental organizations. DHS has not established a schedule for completing these guides.

On December 3, 2007, President Bush issued Annex I to HSPD-8, entitled National Planning. The Annex describes the development of a national planning system in which all levels of government work together in a

collaborative fashion to create plans for various scenarios and requires that DHS develop a standardized, integrated national planning process. This Integrated Planning System (IPS) is intended to be the national planning system used to develop interagency and intergovernmental plans based upon the National Planning Scenarios. The National Response Framework states that local, tribal, state, regional, and federal plans are to be mutually supportive. Although the Annex calls for the new system to be developed in coordination with relevant federal agencies and issued by February 3, 2008, DHS has not yet completed the IPS, and HSPD-8 Annex 1 (i.e. the White House) does not lay out a timeframe for release of the IPS.

According to FEMA's Administrator, the agency's National Preparedness Directorate, in coordination with its Disaster Operations Directorate and the DHS's Office of Operations Coordination, has begun to develop a common federal planning process that will support a family of related planning documents. These related planning documents will include strategic guidance statements, strategic plans, concept plans, operations plans, and tactical plans. The Annex to HSPD-8 is designed to "enhance the preparedness of the United States by formally establishing a standard and comprehensive approach to national planning" in order to "integrate and effect policy and operational objectives to prevent, protect against, respond to, and recover from all hazards." According to the Administrator, FEMA continues to be a significant contributor to the draft IPS, and will also be involved in developing the family of plans for each of the national planning scenarios as required by the Annex.

In following up on the status of recommendations we made after Hurricane Katrina related to planning for the evacuation of transportation disadvantaged populations,¹⁸ we found that DHS's leadership in this area had led to the implementation of some, but not all of our recommendations.¹⁹ For example, we recommended that DHS clarify within the National Response Plan that FEMA is the lead and coordinating agency to provide evacuation assistance when state and local governments are overwhelmed, and clarify the supporting federal agencies'

¹⁸GAO, *Disaster Preparedness: Limitations in Federal Evacuation Assistance for Health Facilities Should be Addressed*, [GAO-06-826](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 20, 2006) and *Transportation-Disadvantaged Populations: Actions Needed to Clarify Responsibilities and Increase Preparedness for Evacuations*, [GAO-07-44](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 22, 2006).

¹⁹GAO, *Status of Implementation of GAO Recommendations on Evacuation of Transportation-Disadvantaged Populations and Patients and Residents of Health Care Facilities*, [GAO-08-544R](#) (Washington, D.C., Apr.1, 2008).

responsibilities. In April 2008, we noted that DHS's draft Mass Evacuation Incident Annex to the National Response Framework appears to clarify the role of FEMA and supporting federal agencies, although the annex is still not finalized. Similarly, we recommended that DHS improve its technical assistance by, among other things, providing more detailed guidance on how to plan, train, and conduct exercises for the evacuation of transportation disadvantaged populations. DHS had developed basic guidance on the evacuation of transportation disadvantaged populations and was currently working on targeted guidance for states and localities. However, we had also recommended that DHS require, as part of its grant programs, all state and local governments plan, train, and conduct exercises for the evacuation of transportation-disadvantaged populations, but DHS had not done so. DHS agreed to consider our recommendation.

We also recommended that DHS clearly delineate how the federal government will assist state and local governments with the movement of patients and residents out of hospitals and nursing homes to a mobilization center where National Disaster Medical System (NDMS)²⁰ transportation begins. DHS and HHS have collaborated with state and local health departments in hurricane-prone regions to determine gaps between needs and available resources for hospital and nursing home evacuations and to secure local, state, or federal resources to fill the gaps. Based on this analysis, HHS and DHS contracted for ground and air ambulances and para-transit services for Gulf and East Coast states.

At a more tactical level of planning, FEMA uses mission assignments to coordinate the urgent, short-term emergency deployment of federal resources to address disaster needs. Mission assignments may be issued for a variety of tasks, such as search and rescue missions or debris removal, depending on the performing agencies' areas of expertise. According to DHS, the Department has agreements and pre-scripted mission assignments with 31 federal agencies for a total of 223 assignments that essentially pre-arrange for the deployment of health equipment, a national disaster medical system, military equipment, and a whole host of other services in the event that they are necessary to support a state or a locality. FEMA officials said these assignments are

²⁰Under the Pandemic and All-Hazards Preparedness Act, primary authority for the National Disaster Medical System was transferred from DHS to HHS in January 2007. HHS and DHS are collaborating to implement this recommendation.

listed in the operational working draft of the “Pre-Scripted Mission Assignment Catalogue,” which FEMA intends to publish this month.

We have previously made recommendations aimed at improving FEMA’s mission assignment process and FEMA officials concurred with our recommendations and told us that they are reviewing the management of mission assignments.²¹ In addition, reviews by the DHS OIG regarding mission assignments concluded that FEMA’s management controls were generally not adequate to ensure that deliverables (missions tasked) met requirements; costs were reasonable; invoices were accurate; federal property and equipment were adequately accounted for or managed; and FEMA’s interests were protected.

According to the DHS OIG, mission assignment policies, procedures, training, staffing, and funding have never been fully addressed by FEMA, creating misunderstandings among federal agencies concerning operational and fiduciary responsibilities and FEMA’s guidelines regarding the mission assignment process, from issuance of an assignment through execution and close-out, are vague. Reflecting upon lessons learned from Hurricane Dean, the California wildfires, and the national-level preparedness exercise for top officials in October 2007, FEMA’s Disaster Operations Directorate formed an intra/interagency Mission Assignment Working Group to review mission assignment processes and procedures and develop recommendations for the management of mission assignments, according to the OIG. Most recently, we reported²² on mission assignments for emergency transit assistance and recommended that DHS draft prescribed mission assignments for public transportation services to provide a frame of reference for FEMA, FTA, and state transportation departments in developing mission assignments after future disasters. DHS agreed to take our recommendation under consideration.

²¹GAO, *Disaster Relief: Governmentwide Framework Needed to Collect and Consolidate Information to Report on Billions in Federal Funding for the 2005 Gulf Coast Hurricanes*, [GAO-06-834](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 6, 2006).

²²GAO, *Emergency Transit Assistance: Federal Funding for Recent Disasters, and Options for the Future*, [GAO-06-243](#) (Washington, D.C., Feb. 15, 2008).

DHS Still Developing Ways to Define and Measure Federal Agencies' Capabilities

DHS issued an update to the national goal for preparedness in National Preparedness Guidelines in September 2007 to establish both readiness metrics to measure progress, and a system for assessing the nation's overall preparedness and response capabilities. However, DHS has not yet completed efforts to implement the system and has not yet developed a complete inventory of all federal response capabilities. According to the September 2007 Guidelines, DHS was still establishing a process to measure the nation's overall preparedness based on the Target Capabilities List (TCL), which accompanies the Guidelines. Our ongoing work on national preparedness and the national exercise program is reviewing DHS's plans and schedules for completing this process.

In the Guidelines, the description for each capability includes a definition, outcome, preparedness and performance activities, tasks, and measures and metrics that are quantitative or qualitative levels against which achievement of a task or capability outcome can be assessed. According to the Guidelines, they describe how much, how well, and/or how quickly an action should be performed and are typically expressed in a way that can be observed during an exercise or real event. The measures and metrics are not standards, but serve as guides for planning, training, and exercise activities. However, the Guidelines do not direct development of capabilities to address national priorities to federal agencies. For example, for the national priority to "Strengthen Interoperable and Operable Communications Capabilities" the Guidelines state that interoperable and operable communications capabilities are developed to target levels in the states, tribal areas, territories, and designated urban areas that are consistent with measures and metrics established in the TCL; federal agencies' interoperability is not addressed.

Prior disasters and emergencies, as well as State and Urban Area Homeland Security Strategies and status reports on interoperable communications, have shown persistent shortfalls in achieving communications interoperability.²³ These shortfalls demonstrate a need for a national framework fostering the identification of communications requirements and definition of technical standards. State and local

²³According to the National Preparedness Guidelines, communications interoperability is the ability of public safety agencies (including police, fire, EMS, etc.) and service agencies (including public works, transportation, hospitals, etc.) to talk within and across agencies and jurisdictions via radio and associated communications systems; exchange voice, data, and/or video with one another on demand; and do so in real time, when needed, and when authorized.

authorities, working in partnership with DHS, need to establish statewide interoperable communications plans and a national interoperability baseline to assess the current state of communications interoperability. Achieving interoperable communications and creating effective mechanisms for sharing information are long-term projects that require Federal leadership and a collaborative approach to planning that involves all levels of government as well as the private sector. In April 2007, we reported²⁴ that DHS's SAFECOM program intended to strengthen interoperable public safety communications at all levels of government had made limited progress in and had not addressed interoperability with federal agencies, a critical element to interoperable communications required by the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004.²⁵ We concluded that the SAFECOM program has had a limited impact on improving communications interoperability among federal, state, and local agencies. The program's limited effectiveness can be linked to poor program management practices, such as the lack of a plan for improving interoperability across all levels of government, and inadequate performance measures to fully gauge the effectiveness of its tools and assistance. We recommended, among other things, that DHS develop and implement a program plan for SAFECOM that includes goals focused on improving interoperability among all levels of government. DHS agreed with the intent of the recommendation and stated that the Department was working to develop a program plan.

DHS had also not yet developed a complete inventory of federal capabilities, as we reported in August 2007,²⁶ in assessing the extent to which DHS has met a variety of mission and management expectations. As a result, earlier this year Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee sent letters requesting information from 15 agencies with responsibilities under the National Response Framework to respond in the event of a nuclear or radiological incident. The committee asked for information on a variety of issues—for example, about evacuation, medical care, intelligence, forensics, and tracking fallout—to assess agencies' current capabilities and responsibilities in the event of a nuclear attack. Other federal agencies also need this information from DHS; in

²⁴GAO, *First Responders: Much Work Remains to Improve Communications Interoperability*, [GAO-07-301](#) (Washington, D.C.: April 2, 2007).

²⁵Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004, Pub. L. No. 108-458, section 7303, 118 Stat. 3638, 3843-44, Dec. 17, 2004.

²⁶[GAO-07-454](#).

reviewing the Department of Defense's (DOD) coordination with DHS, we reported in April 2008 that DOD's Northern Command (NORTHCOM) has difficulty identifying requirements for capabilities it may need in part because NORTHCOM does not have more detailed information from DHS on the specific requirements or capabilities needed from the military in the event of a disaster.

This concludes my statement. I would be pleased to respond to any questions that your or other members of the subcommittee may have at this time.

Contacts and Staff Acknowledgements

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