



Highlights of [GAO-08-960T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Emerging Threats, Cybersecurity, and Science and Technology, Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

The United States faces potentially dangerous biological threats that occur naturally or may be the result of a terrorist attack. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) is developing two major initiatives to provide early detection and warning of biological threats: the National Biosurveillance Integration Center (NBIC), a center for integrating and coordinating information on biological events of national significance, and the BioWatch program that operates systems used to test the air for biological agents. The Implementing Recommendations of the 9/11 Commission Act of 2007 requires DHS to establish a fully operational NBIC by September 30, 2008. This statement discusses the status of DHS's efforts to (1) make NBIC fully operational by the mandated deadline, and (2) improve the BioWatch program's technology. GAO's preliminary observations of these two programs are based on our ongoing work mandated by the Implementing Recommendations of the 9/11 Commission Act of 2007 to review U.S. biosurveillance efforts. To conduct this work, GAO reviewed related statutes; federal directives; and DHS planning, development, and implementation documents on these two initiatives. We also interviewed DHS program officials to obtain additional information about NBIC and BioWatch.

DHS reviewed a draft of this testimony and provided technical comments, which were incorporated as appropriate.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-960T](#). For more information, contact William O. Jenkins, Jr. at (202) 512-8777 or jenkinswo@gao.gov.

BIOSURVEILLANCE

Preliminary Observations on the Department of Homeland Security's Biosurveillance Initiatives

What GAO Found

DHS has made progress making NBIC fully operational by September 30, 2008, as required by the Implementing Recommendations of the 9/11 Commission Act of 2007, but it is unclear what operations the center will be capable of carrying out at that point. DHS has acquired facilities and hired staff for the center but has not yet defined what capabilities the center will have in order to be considered fully operational. DHS has also started to coordinate biosurveillance efforts with other agencies, but DHS has not yet formalized some key agreements to fulfill NBIC's integration mission. For example, DHS has signed memoranda of understanding with 6 of 11 agencies DHS identified to support the operations of NBIC. However, DHS has not yet completed other key agreements to, for example, facilitate the technical exchange of information, such as data on human health, between NBIC and the agencies. In addition, a contractor DHS hired to enhance NBIC's information technology system delivered an upgrade to the system on April 1, 2008, intended to enhance data integration capabilities. However, before this upgrade can be used effectively, DHS officials said that NBIC will need to train its employees to use the system and negotiate interagency agreements to define the data that the agencies using the system will provide. DHS officials expect that NBIC will complete the training in early 2009.

DHS has two ongoing efforts to improve the detection technology used by the BioWatch program, which deploys detectors to collect data that are then analyzed to detect the presence of specific biological agents. First, the Directorate for Science and Technology (S&T) within DHS is developing next-generation detectors for the BioWatch program. DHS plans for this new technology to collect air samples and automatically test the samples for a broader range of biological agents than the current technology. Under the current system, samples are manually collected and taken to a laboratory for analysis. DHS plans to operationally test and evaluate the new automatic technology in April 2009 and to begin replacing its existing detection technology in 2010. Operational testing and evaluation of the new technology is planned to take place in April 2009, about 1 year later than DHS initially planned, because S&T officials received revised requirements for the new system about 4 months before S&T was scheduled to complete development of the system. Second, while S&T is completing its work on the new detection technology, DHS is developing an interim solution, managed by the Office of Health Affairs, to enhance its current detection technology. This interim solution is intended to automatically analyze air samples for the same number of biological agents currently monitored by the BioWatch program. Contingent on successful operational testing and evaluation that is to start in November 2008, DHS plans to decide whether to acquire over 100 of these enhanced detectors.