INFLUENZA PANDEMIC

Gaps in Pandemic Planning and Preparedness Need to Be Addressed

What GAO Found

- Leadership roles and responsibilities for an influenza pandemic need to be clarified, tested, and exercised, and existing coordination mechanisms, such as critical infrastructure coordinating councils, could be better utilized to address challenges in coordination between the federal, state, and local governments and the private sector in preparing for a pandemic.

- Efforts are underway to improve the surveillance and detection of pandemic-related threats, but targeting assistance to countries at the greatest risk has been based on incomplete information, particularly from developing countries.

- Pandemic planning and exercising has occurred at the federal, state, and local government levels, but important planning gaps remain at all levels of government. At the federal level, agency planning to maintain essential operations and services while protecting their employees in the event of a pandemic is uneven.

- Further actions are needed to address the capacity to respond to and recover from an influenza pandemic, which will require additional capacity in patient treatment space, and the acquisition and distribution of medical and other critical supplies, such as antivirals and vaccines.

- Federal agencies have provided considerable guidance and pandemic-related information to state and local governments, but could augment their efforts with additional information on school closures, state border closures, and other topics.

- Performance monitoring and accountability for pandemic preparedness needs strengthening. For example, the May 2006 National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza Implementation Plan does not establish priorities among its 324 action items and does not provide information on the financial resources needed to implement them. Also, greater agency accountability is needed to protect federal workers in the event of a pandemic because there is no mechanism in place to monitor and report on agencies’ progress in developing workforce pandemic plans.

The current H1N1 pandemic should serve as a powerful reminder that the threat of a pandemic influenza, which seemed to fade from public awareness in recent years, never really disappeared. While federal agencies have taken action on 13 of GAO’s 24 recommendations, 11 of the recommendations that GAO has made over the past 3 years have not been fully implemented. With the possibility that the H1N1 virus could become more virulent this fall or winter, the administration and federal agencies should use this time to turn their attention to filling in the planning and preparedness gaps GAO’s work has pointed out.

View GAO-09-909T or key components. For more information, contact Bernice Steinhardt at (202) 512-6543 or steinhardtb@gao.gov.