Communication Protocols and Risk Communication Principles Can Assist in Refining the Advisory System

DHS assigns threat levels for the entire nation and assesses threat conditions for geographic regions and industrial sectors based on analyses of threat information and vulnerability of potential terrorist targets.

DHS has not yet officially documented its protocols for communicating threat level changes and related threat information to federal agencies and states. Such protocols could assist DHS to better manage these entities’ expectations about the methods, timing, and content of information received from DHS. To ensure early, open, and comprehensive information dissemination and allow for informed decisionmaking, risk communication experts suggest that warnings should include (1) multiple communication methods, (2) timely notification, and (3) specific threat information and guidance on actions to take. Federal agencies and states responding to GAO’s questionnaires sent to 28 federal agencies and 56 states and territories generally indicated that they did not receive specific threat information and guidance, which they believe hindered their ability to determine and implement protective measures.

The majority of federal agencies reported operating at heightened security levels regardless of the threat level, and thus, did not need to implement a substantial number of additional measures to respond to code-orange alerts. States reported that they varied in their actions during code-orange alerts.

The costs reported by federal agencies, states, and selected localities are imprecise and may be incomplete, but provide a general indication of costs that may have been incurred. Additional costs reported by federal agencies responding to GAO’s questionnaire were generally less than 1 percent of the agencies’ fiscal year 2003 homeland security funding. DHS collected information on costs incurred by states and localities for critical infrastructure protection during periods of code-orange alert. However, this information does not represent all additional costs incurred by these entities during the code-orange alert periods.