



Highlights of [GAO-08-36](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

An outbreak of pandemic flu would require close cooperation between the public and private sectors to ensure the protection of our nation's critical infrastructure, such as drinking water and electricity. Because over 85 percent of the nation's critical infrastructure is owned and operated by the private sector, it is vital that both sectors effectively coordinate to successfully protect these assets. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) is responsible for coordinating a national protection strategy and government and private sector councils have been created as a collaborating tool.

GAO was asked to assess how the federal and private sectors are working together at a national level to protect the nation's critical infrastructure in the event of a pandemic, the challenges they face, and opportunities for addressing these challenges. GAO reviewed 5 of the 17 critical infrastructure sectors. These 5 sectors are energy (electricity), food and agriculture, telecommunications, transportation (highway and motor carrier), and water.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Secretary of Homeland Security lead efforts to encourage the councils to consider and address the range of identified challenges for a potential influenza pandemic. DHS concurred with this recommendation and generally agreed with the report.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-36](#). For more information, contact Bernice Steinhardt at (202) 512-6806 or [steinhardtb@gao.gov](mailto:steinhardtb@gao.gov).

# INFLUENZA PANDEMIC

## Opportunities Exist to Address Critical Infrastructure Protection Challenges That Require Federal and Private Sector Coordination

### What GAO Found

Federal agencies and the private sector have worked together to (1) develop general pandemic preparedness guidance, such as checklists for continuity of business operations during a pandemic; (2) identify the number of critical workers essential to the critical infrastructure sectors' operations during a pandemic; and (3) conduct pandemic preparedness presentations, workshops, forums, and some exercises. In some instances, the federal and private sectors are working together through sector-specific and cross-sector councils as the primary means of coordinating government and private sector efforts at the national level to protect critical infrastructure. Federal and private sector representatives from the councils in the five sectors reviewed told GAO that they have taken some initial pandemic preparedness actions within their respective sectors. Additionally, each of the sectors is collaborating with DHS and other sector-specific agencies, such as the Environmental Protection Agency, to develop sector-specific pandemic guidance.

The federal government and the private sector face several challenges that may impede their efforts to protect the nation's critical infrastructure in the event of a pandemic. Maintaining a focus on pandemic planning efforts is difficult in the face of more immediate priorities, such as responding to outbreaks of foodborne illnesses. Private sector officials are concerned about the lack of clarity on the federal versus state roles in areas such as state border closures and pandemic vaccine distribution. They are also concerned about receiving consistent messages from various government entities providing pandemic-related information. Another challenge is identifying and developing strategies for addressing crucial cross-sector interdependencies that will be important for the continued operation of the nation's economy and society during a pandemic, such as the transportation sector to deliver critical supplies. Obtaining needed investments for training and infrastructure and potential legal and regulatory issues also present challenges.

Increased use of the critical infrastructure coordinating councils could help address issues relating to a pandemic. These councils bring together multiple sectors and levels of governments, linking activities between these entities. Despite their potential, the councils' efforts thus far have focused mostly on the development of sector-specific plans to address all hazards. With regard to a pandemic specifically, DHS has used the councils primarily to share information across sectors and government levels rather than to address many of the identified challenges. Because an outbreak could begin at any time, there may be insufficient time and resources to adequately plan and prepare their members for changes in how their sectors may operate and continue to provide essential services during a pandemic. DHS officials acknowledge that they could encourage greater federal and private sector use of the councils and that the councils could be used to initiate and facilitate pandemic preparedness initiatives. DHS, because it is responsible for coordinating national critical infrastructure protection efforts, is well positioned to lead efforts to use these councils to help address these challenges.