INFLUENZA PANDEMIC
Sustaining Focus on the Nation’s Planning and Preparedness Efforts

What GAO Found

Leadership roles and responsibilities need to be clarified and tested, and coordination mechanisms could be better utilized. Shared leadership roles and responsibilities between the Departments of Health and Human Services (HHS) and Homeland Security (DHS) and other entities are evolving, and will require further testing and exercising before they are well understood. Although there are mechanisms in place to facilitate coordination between federal, state, and local governments and the private sector to prepare for an influenza pandemic, these could be more fully utilized.

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. Steps have been taken to improve international disease surveillance and detection efforts. However, information gaps limit the capacity for comprehensive comparisons of risk levels by country.

Pandemic planning and exercising has occurred, but planning gaps remain. The United States and other countries, as well as states and localities, have developed influenza pandemic plans. Yet, additional planning needs still exist. For example, the national strategy and implementation plan omitted some key elements, and HHS found many major gaps in states’ pandemic plans.

Further actions are needed to address the capacity to respond to and recover from an influenza pandemic. An outbreak will require additional capacity in many areas, including the procurement of additional patient treatment space and the acquisition and distribution of medical and other critical supplies, such as antivirals and vaccines for an influenza pandemic.

Federal agencies have provided considerable guidance and pandemic-related information, but could augment their efforts. Federal agencies, such as HHS and DHS, have shared information in a number of ways, such as through Web sites and guidance, but state and local governments and private sector representatives would welcome additional information on vaccine distribution and other topics.

What GAO Recommends

This report does not make new recommendations. However, the report discusses the status of GAO’s prior recommendations on the nation’s planning and preparedness for a pandemic.

GAO has made 23 recommendations in its reports—13 of these have been implemented and 10 remain outstanding. Continued leadership focus on pandemic preparedness remains vital, as the threat has not diminished.