



Highlights of [GAO-09-404](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

Protecting federal workers essential to ensuring the continuity of the country's critical operations will involve new challenges in the event of a pandemic influenza outbreak. This requested report discusses (1) the extent to which agencies have made pandemic plans to protect workers who cannot work remotely and are not first responders, (2) the pandemic plans selected agencies have for certain occupations performing essential functions other than first response, and (3) the opportunities to improve agencies' workforce pandemic plans. GAO surveyed pandemic coordinators from 24 agencies and selected three case study occupations for review: federal correctional workers, staff disbursing Treasury checks, and air traffic controllers.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Homeland Security Council (HSC) request that the Secretary of Homeland Security monitor and report to the Executive Office of the President on the readiness of agencies to continue their operations while protecting their employees in the event of a pandemic. The Congress may want to consider requiring similar Department of Homeland Security (DHS) reporting. The HSC noted that it will give serious consideration to the report findings and recommendations, and DHS said the report findings and recommendations will contribute to its efforts to ensure that government entities are well prepared for what may come next.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-09-404](#). For more information, contact Bernice Steinhardt at (202) 512-6543 or steinhardtb@gao.gov.

INFLUENZA PANDEMIC

Increased Agency Accountability Could Help Protect Federal Employees Serving the Public in the Event of a Pandemic

What GAO Found

The HSC's 2006 *National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza Implementation Plan* required federal agencies to develop operational pandemic plans, and responses from the pandemic coordinators of the 24 agencies GAO surveyed indicate that a wide range of pandemic planning activities are under way. However, the responses also showed that several agencies had yet to identify essential functions during a pandemic that cannot be performed remotely. In addition, although many of the agencies' pandemic plans rely on telework to carry out their functions, several agencies reported testing their information technology capability to little or no extent.

GAO's three case study agencies also showed differences in the degree to which their individual facilities had operational pandemic plans. The Bureau of Prisons' correctional workers had only recently been required to develop pandemic plans for their correctional facilities. Nevertheless, the Bureau of Prisons has considerable experience limiting the spread of infectious disease within its correctional facilities and had also made arrangements for antiviral medications for a portion of its workers and inmates. The Department of the Treasury's Financial Management Service, which has production staff involved in disbursing federal payments such as Social Security checks, had pandemic plans for its four regional centers and had stockpiled personal protective equipment such as respirators, gloves, and hand sanitizers at the centers. Air traffic control management facilities, where air traffic controllers work, had not yet developed facility pandemic plans or incorporated pandemic plans into their all-hazards contingency plans. The Federal Aviation Administration had recently completed a study to determine the feasibility of the use of respirators by air traffic controllers and concluded that their long-term use during a pandemic appears to be impractical.

There is no mechanism in place to monitor and report on agencies' workforce pandemic plans. Under the *National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza Implementation Plan*, DHS was required to monitor and report on the readiness of agencies to continue operations while protecting their employees during an influenza pandemic. The HSC, however, informed DHS in late 2006 or early 2007 that no specific reports on this were required to be submitted. Rather, the HSC requested that agencies certify to the council that they were addressing in their plans the applicable elements of a pandemic checklist in 2006 and again in 2008. This process did not include any assessment or reporting on the status of agency plans. Given agencies' uneven progress in developing their pandemic plans, monitoring and reporting would enhance agencies' accountability to protect their employees in the event of a pandemic. GAO has previously reported on the importance of internal control monitoring to assess the quality of performance over time. Without appropriately designed monitoring and reporting, the President and the Congress cannot fully assess the ability of the agencies to continue their operations while protecting their federal employees in the event of a pandemic.