

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-16-249](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

The NCR is considered at high risk for various threats and hazards. Federal, state, and local agencies in the NCR continue to face challenges with emergency communications interoperability—that is, the ability to use radios to communicate across entities when needed. The federal government has taken actions to improve interoperability in the NCR including allocating almost \$720 million through a DHS grant program to enhance regional preparedness since fiscal year 2002, and establishing the ONCRC to coordinate NCR entities on homeland security activities, including interoperability.

GAO was asked to review federal efforts to improve emergency communications interoperability in the NCR. This report examines (1) actions the ONCRC has taken to help improve emergency communications interoperability in the NCR and (2) status of the ONCRC's efforts to coordinate with federal agencies to help improve emergency preparedness in the NCR, including communications interoperability. GAO reviewed documentation from the ONCRC and interviewed DHS officials and emergency managers from the District of Columbia, Maryland, and Virginia.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that ONCRC, as part of its efforts to restructure the JFC, clearly articulate in a written agreement the roles and responsibilities of participating agencies and specify how they are to work together across agency boundaries. ONCRC concurred with this recommendation.

View [GAO-16-249](#). For more information, contact Mark Goldstein at (202) 512-2834 or goldsteinm@gao.gov

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EMERGENCY COMMUNICATIONS

Actions Needed to Better Coordinate Federal Efforts in the National Capital Region

What GAO Found

The Office of National Capital Region Coordination (ONCRC), within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), has taken various actions, mainly through coordination with state and local agencies, to help improve emergency communications interoperability in the National Capital Region (NCR), a legally-designated area including Washington, D.C. and nearby parts of Virginia and Maryland. For example:

- The ONCRC participates in several committees that are involved in planning and carrying out efforts to build preparedness and response capabilities of the region. In particular, the Director of the ONCRC is a member of the NCR's Senior Policy Group, which coordinates these efforts. The ONCRC staff helped develop the NCR's 2013 *Homeland Security Strategic Plan*. One of the goals of the plan is to ensure interoperable communications capabilities. The *Strategic Plan* identified a number of NCR initiatives to achieve this goal, including supporting the establishment and maintenance of radio interoperability and managing and coordinating radio upgrades across jurisdictions.
- As part of the responsibility to serve as a liaison with entities in the NCR, the ONCRC has collaborated with the NCR's Emergency Preparedness Council (an NCR advisory body) to facilitate state and local agencies access to the DHS's Urban Area Security Initiative grant program—the primary source of federal homeland security funding for the NCR. In fiscal year 2014, DHS allocated \$53 million in grant funding to the NCR to enhance the region's homeland security and preparedness capabilities. Almost \$7 million of this amount was to fund activities, such as purchasing radios and other equipment, aimed at achieving the NCR *Strategic Plan's* goal to ensure interoperable communications capabilities.

A key role of the ONCRC is to coordinate with federal, state, and local NCR entities on emergency preparedness and homeland security activities. However, the ONCRC currently does not have a formal mechanism in place to coordinate with federal agencies. From 2002 through 2014, the Joint Federal Committee (JFC) was the ONCRC's primary means of coordinating with federal agencies in the NCR. The ONCRC has not convened the JFC since 2014 and plans to restructure it. Officials explained that the JFC was not efficient and effective as a coordinating body and that they plan to strengthen its coordination capabilities. However, written plans were not available. When the JFC existed, its operation was not fully aligned with interagency collaboration mechanisms that GAO has identified. In particular, the JFC's charter did not specify the roles and responsibilities of participating agencies or how they were to work together across agency boundaries. Addressing these interagency collaborative mechanisms in the planned restructuring of the JFC could provide greater clarity on roles and responsibilities and enhance its ability to coordinate federal efforts in the region.