



Testimony

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Emergency Management and
Technology, Committee on Homeland
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WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION

DHS Has Made Progress in Some Areas, but Additional Improvements are Needed

Accessible Version

Statement of Tina Won Sherman, Director
Homeland Security and Justice

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-24-107426](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Emergency Management and Technology, Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear weapons have the potential to kill thousands of people. To manage threats in these areas, federal statute established CWMD in December 2018 by reorganizing functions of predecessor offices in DHS.

This statement describes findings from GAO's reports on CWMD's programs from August 2018 through March 2024. They address challenges and opportunities for the effective operations and implementation of CWMD's chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear security activities.

To conduct prior work, GAO reviewed relevant laws, policies, strategic plans, and other documents. GAO also interviewed federal, state, industry, and other officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO has made 18 recommendations since 2018 to address the challenges discussed in this statement. As of March 2024, DHS has implemented nine recommendations, partially implemented one, and not implemented three. GAO made five additional recommendations to CWMD in March 2024. GAO will monitor CWMD's progress to implement all of the remaining recommendations.

View [GAO-24-107426](#). For more information, contact Tina Won Sherman at (202) 512-8461 or shermant@gao.gov.

March 20, 2024

WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION

DHS Has Made Progress in Some Areas, but Additional Improvements Are Needed

What GAO Found

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has made progress in addressing challenges that GAO identified related to the Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction Office (CWMD). However, additional improvements are needed. The following summarizes progress made and challenges remaining in several of CWMD's key areas, reported by GAO since 2018.

Chemical defense: GAO reported on challenges and progress in CWMD's chemical defense efforts. In August 2018, GAO found that DHS had not fully integrated and coordinated its chemical defense programs and activities among its component agencies. By not doing so, DHS risked missing opportunities to leverage resources, share information, and improve its effectiveness in addressing chemical threats through improved integration and coordination. To address GAO's recommendation, CWMD issued a Chemical Defense Strategy in December 2019 that established goals and objectives that included integrating and coordinating DHS's chemical defense capabilities. DHS subsequently issued an implementation plan in September 2021 that involved CWMD and several participating DHS component agencies.

Biodefense: GAO reported on challenges with two of DHS's biosurveillance efforts that CWMD oversees—the Biological Detection for the 21st Century program and the National Biosurveillance Integration Center. In May 2021, GAO found that DHS did not 1) apply best practices when conducting technology readiness assessments for its Biological Detection for the 21st Century program; or 2) conduct these assessments before key acquisition decision points. In response, DHS revised its program guide to incorporate best practices, but as of March 2024, had not demonstrated that it is conducting such assessments before key acquisition decisions. In November 2023, GAO reported that the National Biosurveillance Integration Center documented its efforts to obtain adequate personnel and develop new technology, but did not clearly define performance measures and associated time frames in its strategic planning documents. As of March 2024, DHS reported it was developing a strategy and implementation plan for the center that will include milestones, actions, targets, and time frames. GAO will monitor DHS's efforts.

Radiological and nuclear detection: In March 2024, GAO reported on CWMD's Securing the Cities program, which is designed to enhance the nuclear detection capabilities in select cities. GAO found that CWMD took steps to strengthen program outreach among its partners, but had not clearly communicated performance expectations. GAO will monitor DHS's efforts to address these and other challenges.

Chairman D'Esposito, Ranking Member Carter, and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to be here today to discuss our work on the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction Office (CWMD).

Chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear weapons—collectively known as weapons of mass destruction—have the potential to kill thousands of people in a single incident. A federal statute established CWMD within DHS in December 2018 to plan for, detect, deter, respond to, and defend against the threats of such weapons. In carrying out this mission, CWMD coordinates with partners at the federal, state, and local levels and provides them with technology, training, and information. CWMD's partners include DHS components, such as U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and the Coast Guard; other federal agencies, such as the Department of Defense, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Department of Health and Human Services, and the Department of Energy's National Nuclear Security Administration; and first responders and public health officials.

Since its establishment, we have evaluated multiple aspects of CWMD. This statement describes our prior work on progress and challenges CWMD faces in managing key programs, including those related to chemical security, biodefense, nuclear and radiological security, and acquisitions. We also examine recent information regarding CWMD's employee morale.

This statement is based on our prior work issued from August 2018 through March 2024 on various CWMD efforts. It also includes updates on the status of previous recommendations we made during that time. To conduct our prior work, we reviewed relevant presidential directives, laws, regulations, policies, strategic plans, and other documents, and interviewed federal, state, and industry officials. More information on our scope and methodology can be found in each of the reports cited throughout this statement. The work upon which this statement is based was conducted in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable

basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Background

CWMD's formation

The Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction Act of 2018 established CWMD in statute by consolidating functions that had been previously carried out by DHS's Domestic Nuclear Detection Office and Office of Health Affairs.¹ CWMD's primary statutory missions are coordinating with other federal efforts and developing a strategy and policy for DHS to: (1) plan for, detect, and protect against the importation, possession, storage, transportation, development, or use of unauthorized chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear materials, devices, or agents in the United States; and (2) protect against an attack using such materials, devices, or agents against U.S. people, territory or interests.²

CWMD programs

CWMD manages several programs specific to its mission to protect the U.S. against chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear attacks.

Chemical defense strategy. Since the establishment of CWMD in 2018, the CWMD has undertaken actions to address chemical threats. For example, according to CWMD officials, it engaged with 17 U.S. cities to provide training on chemical threats to the mass transit sector. CWMD

¹Homeland Security Act of 2002, Pub. L. No. 107-296, title XIX, §§ 1900-1931, 116 Stat. 2135, as added by the Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction Act of 2018, Pub. L. No. 115-387, § 2(a)-(c), (e), (g) 132 Stat. 5162 (classified at 6 U.S.C. §§ 590-597, including § 591 notes). Prior to enactment, on October 6, 2017, DHS notified Congress of its intent to exercise its authority under 6 U.S.C. § 452 to consolidate some offices having chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear functions into a new office, effective December 5, 2017. According to DHS officials, the formation of CWMD consolidated the Domestic Nuclear Detection Office, most of Office of Health Affairs, and chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear policy functions formerly performed by the DHS Office of Strategy, Policy, and Plans, as well as elements of the Office of Operations Coordination. DHS subsequently abolished Domestic Nuclear Detection Office and Office of Health Affairs.

²6 U.S.C. §§ 591g, 592. The Assistant Secretary for CWMD reports to the Secretary of Homeland Security. See id. § 591.

also led the effort to develop DHS's Chemical Defense Strategy, issued in December 2019. Subsequently, in September 2021, DHS issued the Chemical Defense Strategy Implementation Plan, which CWMD also took the lead in developing, as part of a workgroup that involved 16 DHS component agencies.

BioWatch. In an effort to provide early warning, detection, or recognition of a biological attack, DHS created the BioWatch program in 2003 in response to a perceived urgency to deploy useful—even if immature—technologies in the face of potentially catastrophic consequences. This perception led to the rapid deployment of the initial BioWatch system which modified existing air monitoring technology to collect biological aerosol samples for lab testing.³ Currently, the BioWatch program collaborates with more than 30 BioWatch jurisdictions throughout the nation to operate approximately 600 aerosol collectors. It is a federally managed, locally operated system with collectors deployed primarily in outdoor locations.

According to a 2011 report from the National Academies, DHS's rapid deployment of the system meant that BioWatch was deployed without sufficient testing, validation, and evaluation of its technical capabilities.⁴ In 2015, we reported on limitations to DHS's understanding of the system's capabilities. DHS began a new biodetection technology acquisition program in 2019 called Biological Detection for the 21st Century (BD21) to potentially replace the BioWatch program. Figure 1 depicts first responders practicing a BioWatch safety drill.

³According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, an aerosol may be defined as a suspension of particles or droplets in the air and includes airborne dusts, mists, fumes or smoke.

⁴Institute of Medicine and National Research Council, *BioWatch and Public Health Surveillance* (Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, 2011).

Figure 1: First Responders in Hazmat Suits Practicing a BioWatch Safety Drill



Source: U.S. Marine Corps photo by Cpl. Alissa Schuning. | GAO-24-107426

Accessible Text for Figure 1: First Responders in Hazmat Suits Practicing a BioWatch Safety Drill

Two people wearing protective clothing that covers entire body.

Source: U.S. Marine Corps photo by Cpl. Alissa Schuning. | GAO-24-107426

National Biosurveillance Integration Center. The Implementing Recommendations of the 9/11 Commission Act of 2007 (9/11 Commission Act) established the National Biosurveillance Integration Center (NBIC) within DHS.⁵ NBIC's objective is to integrate and analyze information from health surveillance systems across the federal government and support the interagency biosurveillance community. To achieve this objective, NBIC collaborates with federal partners who have missions or resources that support NBIC's activities. The center also develops a range of written analytical products on biodefense for distribution to a broad range of stakeholders that include federal partners, congressional officials, private sector and international recipients, as well as state, local, tribal, and territorial governments.

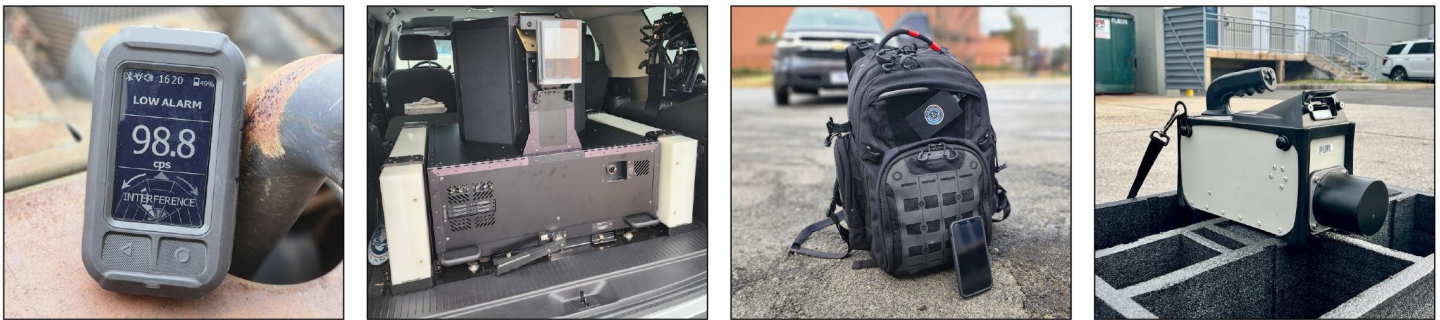
Securing the Cities. DHS initiated the Securing the Cities (STC) program in fiscal year 2007 as a pilot in the New York City, Jersey City, and Newark region. The mission of the STC program is to enhance the

⁵Pub. L. No. 110-53, title XI, § 1101, 121 Stat. 266, 375-79 (classified, as amended, at 6 U.S.C. § 195b).

ability of the U.S. to detect and prevent the malevolent use of nuclear and radioactive materials that pose risks to high-risk urban areas. As such, the STC program seeks to reduce the risk of a successful deployment of a nuclear or radiological weapon against cities and surrounding metropolitan areas in the United States. STC does so by providing, among other things, equipment and training to state and local partners to detect nuclear and radiological material before an incident involving these materials occurs. The STC program has expanded over the years and currently includes 13 participating regions across the U.S.

Technology acquisitions. CWMD, like its predecessor agency—the Domestic Nuclear Detection Office—acquires technologies to support partners in DHS components such as CBP and the Coast Guard, as well as state and local partners. Detection devices provided by CWMD to these partners include personal radiation detectors (cell phone-size devices worn by first responders to alert them when radioactivity levels exceed natural levels) and radiation isotope identification devices (detectors that can identify the specific material emitting the radiation). Figure 2 shows examples of types of nuclear and radiological detection equipment.

Figure 2: Photos of Types of Radiological and Nuclear Detection Equipment



Source: Department of Homeland Security (photos). | GAO-24-107426

Accessible Text for Figure 2: Photos of Types of Radiological and Nuclear Detection Equipment

See note below source statement.

Source: Department of Homeland Security (photos). | GAO-24-107426

NOTE: Figure 2 depicts types of nuclear and radiological detection equipment in the following order: (1) a personal radiation detector, (2) a mobile detection system, (3) a radiation detection backpack, and (4) a radiation isotope identification device.

DHS Has Made Progress Addressing Past Challenges, But Additional Improvements are Still Needed

Our past work, issued since CWMD's establishment in 2018, identifies progress and challenges in key aspects of CWMD's program areas, including chemical defense, biodefense, radiological and nuclear detection, acquisitions, and employee morale. Our work resulted in 13 recommendations, and, as of March 2024, nine were implemented, one was partially implemented, and three are not yet addressed. In addition, we have made 5 new recommendations to CWMD in our report issued today on STC.⁶ Below are examples of issues we've identified across CWMD's programmatic areas and the extent to which those issues have been addressed.

Chemical defense

In August 2018, we found that DHS consolidated some chemical defense programs and activities into CWMD, but DHS had not fully integrated and coordinated its chemical defense programs and activities.⁷ Several DHS component agencies—including CBP, the Coast Guard, and Science & Technology—conduct similar activities, such as acquiring chemical detectors or assisting local jurisdictions with preparedness, separately, without DHS-wide direction and coordination. As component agencies carried out chemical defense activities to meet their unique mission needs, there was a risk that DHS may miss an opportunity to leverage resources and share information that could lead to greater effectiveness in addressing chemical threats. Therefore, we recommended that the Assistant Secretary for CWMD develop a strategy and implementation

⁶GAO, *Nuclear Terrorism Prevention: DHS Has Strengthened the Securing the Cities Program, but Actions are Needed to Address Key Remaining Challenges*, [GAO-24-106922](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 20, 2024).

⁷GAO, *Chemical Terrorism: A Strategy and Implementation Plan Would Help DHS Better Manage Fragmented Chemical Defense Programs and Activities*, [GAO-18-562](#) (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 22, 2018.)

plan to help DHS guide, support, integrate, and coordinate chemical defense programs and activities.⁸

CWMD addressed the recommendation by issuing the Chemical Defense Strategy in December 2019. The strategy includes overarching goals and a range of related objectives establishing a departmental approach to combating chemical threats and incidents. The importance of a coordinated chemical defense strategy across DHS is especially important given that, as of March 2024, the statutory authority for the Chemical Facility Anti-Terrorism Standards program—DHS’s primary regulatory program for chemical facility security—had not been reauthorized since expiring in 2023.⁹

Biodefense

CWMD manages two significant efforts to defend against biological attacks—BD21 and the NBIC.

In 2021, we reported on DHS’s effort to replace BioWatch with a new system—BD21.¹⁰ The BD21 program faces risks, such as the possibility of increased false alarm rates, due to technology limitations and uncertainties with combining technologies for use in biodetection. While we found that the BD21 program was following DHS acquisition policy and guidance, we identified limitations in the program’s technology readiness assessments, which DHS uses to reduce risk within its technology acquisition programs.

⁸GAO recommended the Assistant Secretary for CWMD develop a strategy and implementation plan to help the Department of Homeland Security, among other things, guide, support, integrate and coordinate its chemical defense programs and activities; leverage resources and capabilities; and provide a roadmap for addressing any identified gaps. GAO identified this as a priority recommendation and describes CWMD’s actions to implement it in GAO, *Priority Open Recommendations: Department of Homeland Security*, [GAO-22-105702](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 15, 2022)

⁹In July 2023, the statutory authority for the Chemical Facility Anti-Terrorism Standards (CFATS) program (6 C.F.R. Part 27) expired. See Pub. L. No. 116-150, § 1(a), 134 Stat. 679 (2020) (classified at 6 U.S.C. § 621 note). According to DHS, the department cannot enforce compliance with the Chemical Facility Anti-Terrorism Standards regulations without congressional authorization, which means that DHS cannot require facilities to report potentially dangerous chemicals or perform inspections.

¹⁰GAO, *Biodefense: DHS Exploring New Methods to Replace BioWatch and Could Benefit from Additional Guidance*, [GAO-21-292](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 20, 2021).

Specifically, DHS issued its technology readiness assessment/manufacturing readiness assessment guide in September 2020, but we found it did not follow some of the practices in GAO’s best practice guide for technology readiness assessments.¹¹ Therefore, we recommended that DHS fully incorporate the best practices outlined in GAO’s guide into DHS’s guide, such as including information about how the department will ensure objectivity and independence. DHS addressed this recommendation by May 2022. We also recommended that DHS ensure the BD21 program conducts high-quality technology readiness assessments of all critical technologies for BD21 before key acquisition decision points. As of March 2024, this recommendation has not been implemented.

We also recommended in our 2021 report that the BD21 program address a key capability gap. Specifically, we found that existing BD21 program acquisition documentation lacked sufficient detail describing how a “situational awareness and common operating picture capability”—which DHS identified as a gap—will differ from or leverage the NBIC. Therefore, we recommended that DHS ensure the BD21 program office clarifies—within its acquisition documentation—the “situational awareness and common operating picture capability” identified as a gap. This clarification should include the specific functionality, sources of information, and distinction from existing common operating picture functions at DHS, such as NBIC. DHS has not implemented the recommendation as of March 2024.

In November 2023, we reported that the NBIC—within CWMD—identifies, tracks, and characterizes biological events using open-source, federal, and private sector data sources.¹² NBIC integrates these data to develop written products and support its information sharing and coordination activities. Additionally, in recent years, NBIC began taking steps to address challenges in accessing needed data, obtaining adequate personnel, and developing new technologies. NBIC’s efforts were guided

¹¹GAO, *Technology Readiness Assessment Guide: Best Practices for Evaluating the Readiness of Technology for Use in Acquisition Programs and Projects* [GAO-20-48G](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 07, 2020). To develop the guide, GAO worked with practitioners and technology experts from across the federal government, commercial industry, nonprofits, and academia to ascertain the generally accepted best practices for conducting high-quality technology readiness assessments.

¹²GAO, *Biodefense: National Biosurveillance Integration Center Has Taken Steps to Address Challenges, but Could Better Assess Results*, [GAO-24-106142](#) (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 29, 2023).

by two strategic planning documents, but these documents did not have clearly defined performance measures and time frames for accomplishing milestones.¹³ For example, one milestone is to strengthen relationships with relevant DHS components. However, NBIC did not include information on the specific actions for achieving the milestone or how it would assess progress toward achievement.

We recommended that DHS ensure that NBIC develops future strategic planning documents with clearly defined performance measures and associated time frames. DHS concurred with this recommendation and, in March 2024, reported that it is developing an NBIC strategy and implementation plan that will include performance milestones, actions, targets, and time frames. DHS expects to complete these actions by June 2024 and GAO will monitor its efforts to do so.

Radiological and nuclear detection

In May 2019, we identified several limitations in CWMD's efforts to implement the STC program.¹⁴ We found that CWMD did not collect information needed to fully track the regions' use of STC funds for approved purposes and to assess regions' performance in the program.¹⁵ We made four recommendations to CWMD, including that the agency more fully assess regions' performance by collecting data on achievement of key performance metrics and milestones and enforcing reporting requirements. DHS fully implemented the four recommendations as of October 2021.

The Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction Act of 2018 also included a requirement for CWMD to develop an implementation plan, including the goals of the STC program and a strategy to achieve them. CWMD issued this plan in June 2021 and assessed the program's performance based on this plan in August 2022. The act also required that the CWMD

¹³Department of Homeland Security, Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction Office, *Strategy for Integrated Biosurveillance, Fiscal Year 2018 Report to Congress*, (Washington D.C.: July 30, 2019); Department of Homeland Security, Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction Office, *Strategy for Integrated Biosurveillance – NBIC Implementation Plan FY 2022 – 2023*, (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 29, 2023).

¹⁴GAO, *Combating Nuclear Terrorism: DHS Should Address Limitation to Its Program to Secure Key Cities*, [GAO-19-327](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 13, 2019).

¹⁵The STC program seeks to reduce the risk of a successful deployment of a nuclear or radiological weapon against select regions, consisting of cities and surrounding metropolitan areas in the United States. STC currently works with 13 participating regions.

assess performance of the STC program based on this plan, which it completed in August 2022. The act included a provision for GAO to evaluate CWMD's implementation plan and progress in achieving and sustaining STC program capabilities, which is the report we issued in March 2024.¹⁶

We found in our March 2024 report that CWMD has taken multiple steps to strengthen the STC program and continues working with the regions to address challenges and ensure continued progress toward achieving and sustaining their detection capabilities. Specifically, CWMD has incorporated lessons learned from implementing the STC program over the years. Further, it has addressed our prior recommendations to strengthen the program, including increasing outreach, developing planning and reporting guidance, and providing long-term federal sustainment funding. Along with these improvements, CWMD is working with the STC regions to address challenges they continue to face implementing their programs, such as staff attrition, training availability and scheduling, partner engagement, and expansion of their programs.

We also found in our March 2024 report that CWMD's planned approach for assessing STC program performance, which includes its implementation plan with measurable outcomes, generally follows key practices we have identified in our prior work for building and using evidence to manage and evaluate results of federal efforts.¹⁷ In June 2023, CWMD released an updated version of its STC Implementation Plan detailing its current planned approach for implementing the program and assessing regional performance using a set of short, medium, and long-term outcomes. We compared CWMD's planned approach with 13 key practices and 29 supporting actions for using evidence to more effectively manage and assess the results of federal programs.

Our analysis identified that CWMD's planned approach for assessing STC program performance generally follows eight of the 13 key practices, and partially follows five of the practices. Furthermore, we found that the CWMD was incorporating 24 of the 29 key actions that supported implementing the 13 key practices. As CWMD is in the process of

¹⁶GAO, *Nuclear Terrorism Prevention: DHS Has Strengthened the Securing the Cities Program, but Actions are Needed to Address Key Remaining Challenges*, [GAO-24-106922](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 20, 2024).

¹⁷GAO, *Evidenced-Based Policymaking: Practices to Help Manage and Assess the Results of Federal Efforts*, [GAO-23-105460](#), (Washington, D.C.: July 12, 2023).

implementing its revised assessment approach, with plans to begin formally assessing regional performance in 2025, opportunities exist for it take additional actions to increase accountability for results being achieved through the STC program. We made five recommendations, including that CWMD clearly communicate performance expectations to the STC regions and improve its tracking of their progress. This entails ensuring that the STC regions are reporting consistent, complete, and accurate information in their quarterly performance reports so that CWMD can set reliable targets and benchmarks for the performance assessments. DHS concurred with these five recommendations and we will monitor DHS's efforts to implement them.

Technology acquisitions

In 2022, we found that CWMD continued to carry out functions of its predecessor offices, including the former Domestic Nuclear Detection Office.¹⁸ For example, it continued to acquire nuclear and radiological detection technologies for partners in DHS components, particularly the Coast Guard and CBP. Officials from these DHS components provided examples of CWMD-provided technologies that meet their mission needs. For example, Coast Guard officials told us that CWMD provides handheld radiation detectors as well as a new technology that allows them to transmit information from the detectors to one of CBP's offices for analysis. The Coast Guard officials told us that the new transmission system filled a gap in their capabilities by enabling more secure transmission of the information to CBP. CBP officials said that CWMD helped them obtain software developed by the Department of Energy that enhances their ability to analyze the data the Coast Guard provides. According to CBP and Coast Guard officials, without these enhanced capabilities, their ability to detect smuggled nuclear or radiological material would be diminished. From 2019 through 2021, according to CWMD officials, CWMD procured over 38,000 handheld radiation detectors for its federal partners.

CWMD also continued to manage a program to acquire replacements for certain radiation portal monitors that CBP operates at high-volume ports. However, we found, at the time of our review in 2022, that these new radiation portal monitors were late to deploy and may not meet CBP

¹⁸GAO, *Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction: DHS Could Improve Its Acquisition of Key Technology and Coordination with Partners*, [GAO-22-104498](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 19, 2022).

needs. For example, CBP officials told us that tests of these replacement monitors resulted in higher nuisance alarm rates than originally anticipated. Nuisance alarms result from naturally occurring radioactive materials in certain consumer goods, requiring CBP officers to conduct a secondary scan to determine that the source of the alarm is not a threat before a cargo container or vehicle can leave the port. Reducing such alarms is a key goal of the replacement program. Therefore, we recommended in 2022 that CWMD reassess its acquisition strategy for these replacement radiation portal monitors. CWMD implemented the recommendation by reassessing its acquisition strategy and ultimately deciding not to pursue a second phase of the radiation portal monitor acquisition that CWMD had been pursuing when we issued our report.

Employee morale

DHS has faced challenges with low morale and low employee engagement since its inception in 2003.¹⁹ CWMD ranked lowest of all DHS components in employee engagement in 2022 and ranked 430 of all 432 federal agency subcomponents in the 2022 Best Places to Work in the Federal Government® rankings.²⁰

We reported in July 2022 on steps CWMD had taken to help address morale problems resulting from merging predecessor agencies.²¹ Specifically, CWMD took steps to identify causes of morale problems and enhance employees' shared sense of mission. For example, CWMD used surveys and listening sessions to gather information on the causes of low morale. According to CWMD officials, one cause was different cultures

¹⁹The Office of Personnel Management defines employee engagement as employees' sense of purpose that is evident in their display of dedication, persistence, and effort in their work or overall attachment to their organization and its mission.

²⁰The Partnership for Public Service and the Boston Consulting Group calculate these rankings using responses to questions in the Office of Personnel Management's Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey. Results for 2022 were the most recently available as of March 2024.

²¹GAO, *Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction: DHS Office Has Opportunities to Improve Partner Services and Employee Morale*, [GAO-22-106133](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jul 19, 2022).

within the predecessor offices that merged under CWMD.²² For example, CWMD officials said one of these offices coordinated with physicists and law enforcement officials and focused on detection and prevention; whereas another coordinated with public health officials and focused on preparedness and response.

According to CWMD employees, another cause of morale issues was frequent leadership changes. As of August 2023, CWMD has had three acting assistant secretaries since its establishment in December 2018. CWMD employees said the different visions of the assistant secretaries contributed to confusion about the office's mission.²³

Thank you, Chairman D'Esposito, Ranking Member Carter and Members of the Subcommittee. This concludes my prepared statement. I would be happy to respond to any questions you may have at this time.

GAO Acknowledgements

If you or your staff have any questions about this statement, please contact Tina Won Sherman at (202) 512-8461 or shermant@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this statement. GAO staff who made key contributions to this testimony are Ben Atwater (Assistant Director), Allison Bawden, Bruce Crise (Analyst in Charge), Mike Meleady, and Ned Woodward. Additional staff who contributed to our reports cited in this statement are identified in those reports.

²²We have previously reported that successful agency reforms and reorganizations, including mergers, must involve employees and their representatives from the beginning to gain their ownership for the changes that are occurring in the organization. GAO, *Results-Oriented Cultures: Implementation Steps to Assist Mergers and Organizational Transformations*, [GAO-03-669](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 2, 2003). GAO, *Government Reorganization: Key Questions to Assess Agency Reform Efforts*, [GAO-18-427](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 13, 2018).

²³CWMD's first permanent Assistant Secretary assumed the role in August 2023.

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