INFLUENZA PANDEMIC

Applying Lessons Learned from the
2004–05 Influenza Vaccine Shortage

What GAO Found

A number of lessons emerged from federal, state, and local responses to the 2004–05 influenza vaccine shortage that carry implications for handling future vaccine shortages in either an annual influenza season or an influenza pandemic.

- First, limited contingency planning slows response. At the start of the 2004–05 influenza season, when the supply shortfall became apparent, the nation lacked a contingency plan specifically to address severe shortages. The absence of such a plan led to delays and uncertainties on the part of state and local public health entities on how best to ensure access to vaccine by individuals at high risk of severe influenza-related complications.

- Second, streamlined mechanisms to expedite vaccine availability are key to an effective response. During the 2004–05 shortage, for example, federal purchases of vaccine licensed for use in other countries but not the United States were not completed in time to meet peak demand. Some states’ experience also highlighted the importance of mechanisms to transfer available vaccine quickly and easily from one state to another.

- Third, effective response requires clear and consistent communication. Consistency among federal, state, and local communications is critical for averting confusion. State and local health officials also emphasized the value of updated information when responding to changing circumstances, using diverse media to reach diverse audiences, and educating providers and the public about prevention alternatives.

Over the past 5 years, GAO has urged the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to complete its plan to prepare for and respond to an influenza pandemic. GAO has reported on the importance of planning to address critical issues such as how vaccine will be purchased and distributed; how population groups will be given priority for vaccination; and how federal resources should be deployed before the nation faces a pandemic. On November 2, 2005, HHS released its pandemic influenza plan. GAO did not have the opportunity to review the plan before issuing this statement to determine the extent to which the plan addresses these critical issues.