



Highlights of [GAO-04-160](#), a report to the Chairman, Committee on Government Reform, House of Representatives

# CONTINUITY OF OPERATIONS

## Improved Planning Needed to Ensure Delivery of Essential Government Services

### Why GAO Did This Study

To ensure that essential government services are available in emergencies—such as terrorist attacks, severe weather, or building-level emergencies—federal agencies are required to develop continuity of operations (COOP) plans. Responsibility for formulating guidance on these plans and for assessing executive branch COOP capabilities lies with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), under the Department of Homeland Security. FEMA guidance, Federal Preparedness Circular (FPC) 65 (July 1999), provides elements of a viable COOP capability, including the requirement that agencies identify their essential functions.

GAO was asked to determine the extent to which (1) major civilian executive branch agencies have identified their essential functions and (2) these agencies' COOP plans follow FEMA guidance.

### What GAO Recommends

To ensure that the executive branch can provide essential services during emergencies, GAO recommends, among other things, that the Secretary of Homeland Security take steps to improve agency COOP plans and FEMA's process for assessing these plans. In commenting on a draft of this report, the Under Secretary for Emergency Preparedness and Response agreed that FEMA could do more to improve COOP planning, and that FEMA has begun making such improvements.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-160](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-160).

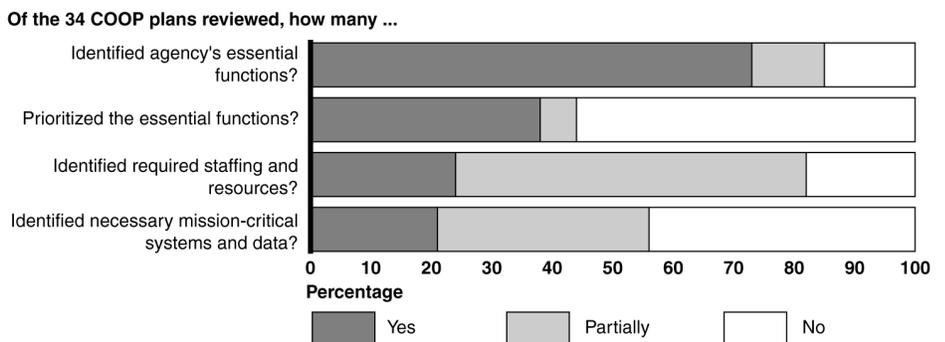
To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Linda Koontz at (202) 512-6240 or [koontzl@gao.gov](mailto:koontzl@gao.gov).

### What GAO Found

From an assessment of 34 COOP plans against FEMA guidance, GAO found that most agencies' plans identified at least one function as essential. However, the functions identified in each plan varied widely in number—ranging from 3 to 399—and included functions that appeared to be of secondary importance, while at the same time omitting programs that had been previously defined as high-impact programs. (Examples of these high-impact programs are Medicare, food stamps, and border inspections.) For example, one department included “provide speeches and articles for the Secretary and Deputy Secretary,” among its essential functions, but did not include 9 of 10 high-impact programs for which it is responsible. Several factors contributed to these shortcomings: FPC 65 did not provide specific criteria for identifying essential functions; FEMA did not review the essential functions identified when it assessed COOP planning; and it did not conduct tests or exercises to confirm that the essential functions were correctly identified. Unless agencies' essential functions are correctly and completely identified, their COOP plans may not effectively ensure that the most vital government services can be maintained in an emergency.

Although all but three of the agencies reviewed had developed and documented some of the elements of a viable COOP plan, none of the agencies could demonstrate that they were following all the guidance in FPC 65. As the figure shows, there is a wide variation in the number of agencies that addressed various elements identified in the guidance. A contributing cause for the deficiencies in agency COOP plans is the level of FEMA oversight. In 1999, FEMA conducted an assessment of agency compliance with FPC 65, but it has not conducted oversight that is sufficiently regular and extensive to ensure that agencies correct the deficiencies identified. Because the resulting COOP plans do not include all the elements of a viable plan as defined by FPC 65, agency efforts to provide services during an emergency could be impaired.

**Elements That Were Included in Agency COOP Plans in Place as of October 1, 2002**



Source: GAO analysis of agency COOP plans.