

Highlights of [GAO-09-834](#), a report to the Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

A comprehensive system to alert the American people in times of hazard allows people to take action to save lives. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is responsible for the current Emergency Alert System (EAS) and the development of the new Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS). In this requested report, GAO examined (1) the current status of EAS, (2) the progress made by FEMA in implementing an integrated alert and warning system, and (3) the challenges involved in implementing an integrated alert and warning system. GAO conducted a survey of states, reviewed FEMA and other documentation, and interviewed industry stakeholders and officials from federal agencies responsible for public alerting.

## What GAO Recommends

To ensure a consistent direction for the public alert and warning system, GAO recommends, among other things, that FEMA develop strategic goals and processes for deployment of IPAWS and report periodically on program progress. In response, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) agreed with all of the recommendations and provided examples of actions aimed at addressing the recommendations. However, FEMA's planned actions to address some of the recommendations might be insufficient. DHS and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) provided technical comments which have been incorporated in the report.

[View GAO-09-834 or key components.](#) For GAO survey results, view [GAO-09-880SP](#). For more information, contact Mark Goldstein at (202) 512-2834 or [goldsteinm@gao.gov](mailto:goldsteinm@gao.gov).

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# EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS

## Improved Planning and Coordination Necessary for Modernization and Integration of Public Alert and Warning System

### What GAO Found

As the primary national-level public warning system, EAS is an important alert tool, but it exhibits longstanding weaknesses that limit its effectiveness. EAS allows state and local officials limited ability to produce public alerts via television and radio. Weaknesses with EAS include lack of reliability of the message distribution system; gaps in coverage; insufficient testing; and inadequate training of personnel. Further, EAS provides little capability to alert specific geographic areas. EAS does not ensure message delivery for individuals with hearing and vision disabilities, and non-English speakers. FEMA has projects under way to address some of these weaknesses with EAS. However, to date, little progress has been made and EAS remains largely unchanged since GAO's previous review, completed in March 2007. As a result, EAS does not fulfill the need for a reliable, comprehensive alert system.

Initiated in 2004, FEMA's IPAWS program is intended to integrate new and existing alert capabilities, including EAS, into a comprehensive "system of systems." However, national-level alert capabilities have remained unchanged and new technologies have not been adopted. IPAWS efforts have been affected by shifting program goals, lack of continuity in planning, staff turnover, and poorly organized program information from which to make management decisions. The vision of IPAWS has changed twice over the course of the program and strategic goals and milestones are not clearly defined, as IPAWS operated without an implementation plan from early 2007 through June 2009. Consequently, as state and local governments are forging ahead with their own alert systems, IPAWS program implementation has stalled and many of the functional goals of IPAWS, such as geo-targeting of messages and dissemination through redundant pathways to multiple devices, have yet to reach operational capacity. FEMA conducted a series of pilot projects without systematically assessing outcomes or lessons learned and without substantially advancing alert and warning systems. FEMA does not periodically report on IPAWS progress, therefore, program transparency and accountability are lacking.

FEMA faces coordination issues and technical challenges in developing and implementing IPAWS. Effective public warning depends on the cooperation of stakeholders, such as emergency managers and the telecommunications industry, yet many stakeholders GAO contacted knew little about IPAWS and expressed the need for better coordination with FEMA. FEMA has taken steps to improve its coordination efforts, but the scope of stakeholder involvement is limited. FEMA also faces technical challenges related to systems integration, standards development, the development of geo-targeted and multilingual alerts, and alerts for individuals with disabilities. For example, the standard intended to facilitate integration of systems is still under development and is not widely used. As a result of these coordination and technical hurdles, integration with state and local systems will likely be a significant challenge due to potential incompatibility, and FEMA does not yet have logistical plans to integrate these systems.