

Highlights of [GAO-12-748](#), a report to the Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, United States Senate

## Why GAO Did This Study

Federal agencies must plan to protect federal workers essential to ensuring the continuity of the country's critical operations in the event of a pandemic. GAO reported in 2009 that agencies had made uneven progress in developing operational influenza pandemic plans and some agencies were not close to having plans. In addition, there was no real mechanism to monitor agencies' progress.

GAO was asked to (1) determine what progress federal agencies report they have made since GAO's 2009 report and identify challenges federal agencies report they face in protecting their workforce during an influenza pandemic, and (2) determine the extent to which oversight of agencies' progress is being conducted and how the oversight information is being used.

GAO surveyed the 24 agencies covered by the Chief Financial Officers Act of 1990, conducted a follow-up case study review, and interviewed agency officials responsible for providing guidance to other federal agencies in planning for an influenza pandemic.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DHS provide additional oversight of agencies' pandemic preparedness and help focus attention on areas of uneven progress reported in GAO's survey by directing FEMA to include in its biennial assessments of agencies' continuity capabilities consideration of agencies' progress in assessing exposure risk levels of occupational exposure, identifying appropriate protective measures, and establishing operational plans to provide such protections for federal workers during an influenza pandemic. DHS concurred with the recommendation.

View [GAO-12-748](#). For more information, contact Stanley Czerwinski at (202) 512-9110 or [czerwinskis@gao.gov](mailto:czerwinskis@gao.gov)

# INFLUENZA PANDEMIC

## Agencies Report Progress in Plans to Protect Federal Workers but Oversight Could be Improved

### What GAO Found

In 2012, federal agencies reported they had made progress in planning to protect their federal employees during an influenza pandemic. For example:

- Twenty-three of 24 federal agencies reported they had completed influenza pandemic plans that address the operational approach they would use to protect their employees in the event of an influenza pandemic. In 2009, 20 agencies reported completing such plans.
- All 24 agencies reported that, to reduce employees' risk of exposure to influenza, they developed policies or procedures such as telework and avoiding all unnecessary travel. In the 2009 survey, 22 agencies reported developing the former policy and 18 the latter.
- All of the agencies reported that they planned for the distribution of hygiene supplies to protect employees whose duties require them to work onsite during an influenza pandemic. In 2009, 18 agencies reported taking this planning step.

However, the agencies reported uneven status in some key areas suggesting some additional oversight is needed. For example, only nine agencies reported they have classified all or most jobs for onsite mission essential functions by exposure risk level. Additional oversight could help in ensuring that, by classifying jobs by exposure risk level, agencies have appropriate measures in place to protect those employees who must carry out mission essential functions that cannot be performed remotely during an influenza pandemic.

There is limited oversight of agencies' progress to protect their employees during a pandemic. In 2008, the Homeland Security Council required agencies to certify their pandemic planning status, but according to agencies' officials, has not done so since then. As in 2009, GAO interviewed four agencies—Department of Health and Human Services, Department of Homeland Security (DHS), Department of Labor, and Office of Personnel Management. Each of these agencies is responsible for providing influenza pandemic continuity of operations guidance, which includes elements such as planning, personnel protection, or workplace options to federal departments and agencies. DHS and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) reported they conduct biennial assessments of department and agency continuity capabilities and report the results to the President through the National Continuity Coordinator. However, this assessment does not include planning elements specific to influenza pandemic planning, such as whether federal workers' influenza pandemic risk assessments are regularly updated and whether agencies have planned to provide protective measures to mitigate exposure risks. Including such information in the biennial assessment process could provide monitoring, evaluation, and reporting of progress and help focus attention on those areas in which reported progress is uneven.