

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-13-734](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

DHS is the third-largest department in the federal government, with an annual budget of about \$60 billion, 200,000 staff, and a broad range of missions. In 2002, DHS was created from 22 legacy agencies. The geographic overlap of these agencies' legacy field office structures was extensive, underscoring the importance of collaboration among them when conducting missions that crossed across boundaries. As a follow-on to GAO's September 2012 report on DHS's efforts to integrate field operations, GAO was asked to review DHS and key operational components' use of collaborative mechanisms. This report (1) assesses DHS's visibility over collaborative field mechanisms established by component agencies, and (2) describes factors that enhance or impede collaboration within these mechanisms, and the extent to which DHS has collected and disseminated successful collaborative practices.

GAO analyzed selected mechanisms' guidance; conducted 10 mechanism site visits based on their geographic diversity, among other factors; and compared their practices with collaboration practices identified in previous GAO work. GAO also interviewed DHS and component officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DHS (1) collect information on existing collaborative mechanisms for better visibility over them, and (2) collect promising practices from the mechanisms and distribute them to components. DHS concurred with the recommendations and identified planned actions to address them.

View [GAO-13-734](#). For more information, contact Joseph Kirschbaum at (202) 512-9971 or kirschbaumj@gao.gov.

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DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY

Opportunities Exist to Enhance Visibility over Collaborative Field Mechanisms

What GAO Found

Opportunities exist for the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to enhance its visibility over collaborative field mechanisms (i.e., multiagency groups such as task forces, committees, and teams that enhance stakeholder collaboration to more effectively and efficiently achieve their missions) established by component agencies. DHS, at the departmental level, has limited visibility over the universe and operation of these mechanisms and does not identify information from them that could further enhance collaboration across DHS and inform future DHS decisions. In the absence of a single DHS regional/field structure, DHS components have created collaborative mechanisms to better integrate field operations by better coordinating their missions and sharing information. However, when GAO sought to identify these mechanisms, in conjunction with DHS, senior DHS officials stated that while they maintain regular visibility over component activities—which may involve these collaborative mechanisms—DHS does not collect information on the types of mechanisms and collaborative practices these mechanisms employ because the mechanisms operate under the components, and thus this information was not readily available at the departmental level. DHS officials stated that primary oversight over the mechanisms is the responsibility of the operational components or mechanism participants. However, DHS's own strategic goals emphasize the importance of cross-departmental integration and coordination to enhance DHS's mission, and DHS could benefit—on a strategic level—from greater awareness of these mechanisms and the collaborative practices they employ. DHS is ultimately accountable for the resources that support these mechanisms, and is responsible for decision making about its overall field structure and for moving the department closer to its goal of greater component unification and integration. By collecting additional information on collaborative mechanisms, DHS could achieve better visibility over the universe of existing mechanisms, and thus be better positioned to analyze or implement any future changes to DHS's regional/field structure.

Participants from each of the collaborative mechanisms GAO reviewed identified several common factors that enhanced their collaboration, which DHS could benefit from collecting and disseminating on a broader scale. For example, participants identified the value of sharing resources, information, and recognition of successful missions as examples of successful collaboration practices they employed. Officials also cited collaboration challenges, including resource constraints, rotation of key personnel, and lack of leadership commitment. As GAO's fieldwork indicated, similar collaboration issues are relevant to multiple components, thus, DHS leadership could benefit from undertaking a review of collaborative mechanisms to solicit and identify promising practices, and then sharing this information among all components. In addition, given DHS's more strategic perspective, a more centralized DHS clearinghouse of collaborative practices information could be more efficient to collect and more easily accessed by a wider range of DHS components than under the current structure, where such information may not be readily shared outside of individual components or mechanisms. Collecting and disseminating information on collaborative practices would allow DHS to inform components about promising practices and lessons learned from which they could benefit.