

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-15-20](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

No-notice catastrophic disasters pose one of the greatest challenges to national emergency preparedness. ESFs are federal interagency coordinating structures that group capabilities into functional areas most frequently needed in a national response. GAO was asked to review federal preparedness to respond to no-notice catastrophic disasters, such as IND attacks and major earthquakes. This report assesses the extent to which opportunities exist to enhance (1) assessment of ESF preparedness and (2) management oversight of the closure of federal capability gaps identified in selected exercises, real-world incidents, and other assessments. GAO reviewed relevant laws, directives, strategies, and plans; analyzed recommended corrective actions from national-level exercises and other interagency assessments; reviewed documents and interviewed officials from five federal departments key to disaster response (Defense, Energy, Health and Human Services, Homeland Security, and Justice); and compared current processes against internal control standards and leading program management practices.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that FEMA—in collaboration with other federal agencies—(1) issue supplemental guidance to ESF coordinators detailing minimum standards for activities and product deliverables necessary to demonstrate ESF preparedness, (2) regularly report on the status of corrective actions identified through prior national-level exercises and real-world disasters, and (3) develop and issue detailed program management information to better enable management oversight of the *DHS IND Strategy's* recommended actions. DHS concurred with the recommendations and identified related actions the department is taking to address them.

View [GAO-15-20](#). For more information, contact Chris P. Currie at (404) 679-1875 or curriec@gao.gov.

December 2014

EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS

Opportunities Exist to Strengthen Interagency Assessments and Accountability for Closing Capability Gaps

What GAO Found

The departments that coordinate federal emergency support functions (ESF), in preparation for national disaster response, carry out their responsibilities in various ways, but the Secretary of Homeland Security's ability to assess ESF preparedness could be enhanced. ESF coordinators conduct a range of coordination, planning, and capability assessment activities. All 10 ESF coordinators across the five departments in GAO's review reported coordinating with stakeholders and developing at least one ESF planning document. However, the ESF Leadership Group and the group's chair, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)—a component of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS)—have not worked with other federal departments to issue supplemental guidance detailing expectations for the minimum standards for activities and product deliverables necessary to demonstrate ESF preparedness. In the absence of such guidance, GAO found that ESF coordinators are inconsistently carrying out their emergency response preparedness activities. DHS and FEMA have responsibility for assessing federal emergency preparedness. Issuing supplemental guidance detailing expectations for ESF coordinators would better enable DHS and FEMA to assess the status of ESF response preparedness.

Federal departments have identified emergency response capability gaps through national-level exercises, real-world incidents, and other assessments, but opportunities exist to help close the gaps by enhancing management oversight in two areas:

- First, federal departments are responsible for implementing their own recommended corrective actions from national-level exercises and real-world disasters, such as Hurricane Sandy, but the status of federal interagency implementation of these actions is not comprehensively collected by or reported to DHS or FEMA. As a result, DHS's and FEMA's ability to assess and report on the nation's overall preparedness is hampered.
- Second, FEMA leads interagency efforts to identify and propose actions to address capability gaps in the nation's preparedness to respond to improvised nuclear device (IND) attacks, but its implementation plan lacks key program management details. Specifically, FEMA's March 2012 *IND Implementation Plan* proposed over 300 recommended actions to help close gaps identified in the April 2010 *DHS IND Strategy*. The September 2013 annual revision to the plan contained summary information on the status of some of the recommended actions, but did not contain detailed program management information—such as specific timeframes, milestones, and estimated resources required to close any given capability gap—which is needed to better enable ongoing management oversight of gap closure efforts.

Regular reporting on the status of corrective actions identified in national-level exercises and real-world major disasters, as well as detailed program management information for management oversight of the status of recommended actions in the *IND Implementation Plan*, would enhance interagency accountability for closing identified capability gaps and better enable DHS and FEMA to assess the status of federal interagency preparedness efforts.