

## BORDER SECURITY

### Additional Efforts Needed to Address Persistent Challenges in Achieving Radio Interoperability

#### Why GAO Did This Study

The lack of communications interoperability—the capability of different electronic communications systems (e.g., radios) to readily connect with one another to enable timely communications—can affect mission operations and the overall effectiveness of agencies responsible for securing the border. DHS continues to face challenges in achieving interoperable radio communications within and among federal, state, and local agencies despite investment by these agencies to improve their radio systems. GAO was asked to evaluate DHS border security and immigration tactical communications (TACCOM) programs and operational impacts resulting from interoperability challenges. This report addresses the extent to which (1) CBP and ICE have upgraded tactical communications equipment and infrastructure along the U.S. southwest border, (2) CBP and ICE have provided tactical communications training to radio users, and (3) DHS has taken actions to improve the interoperability of tactical communications along the U.S. southwest border and what challenges, if any, remain. GAO analyzed DHS documentation; visited four locations, selected for DHS prioritization of technology upgrade projects; and interviewed DHS officials.

#### What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that CBP and ICE develop performance and program plans for their modernization programs, mechanisms to track training, and plans to address skills gaps in understanding radio systems. CBP and ICE concurred with the recommendations.

View [GAO-15-201](#). For more information, contact Rebecca Gambler at (202) 512-8777 or [gamblerR@gao.gov](mailto:gamblerR@gao.gov).

#### What GAO Found

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS), U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) have taken steps to upgrade tactical communications equipment and infrastructure, but could benefit by developing performance and program plans. Specifically, CBP has completed modernization projects in four of the nine sectors that compose the southwest border. Since rolling out upgrades—which include replacing and updating equipment and expanding infrastructure—CBP has not established an ongoing performance monitoring plan to determine whether the systems are working as intended. Without such a plan, CBP is not well positioned to assess whether its radio systems are functioning as intended in each location and are meeting user needs. In addition, ICE has taken some actions to modernize its tactical communications radio systems. However, ICE does not have a program plan to manage its portfolio of projects. By developing a program plan to guide ICE's overall tactical communications modernization program, ICE could better manage its program and achieve its program goals.

Additional efforts are needed to ensure that CBP and ICE agents and officers receive necessary training. CBP provided training to its agents and officers on upgraded radio systems in each southwest border location that received upgrades; however, 8 of 14 CBP radio user groups GAO met with suggested that radio users be provided with additional radio training to enhance their proficiency in using radio systems. Further, CBP does not know how many radio users are in need of training. Developing and implementing a plan to address any skills gaps related to the upgraded radio systems would help ensure more CBP radio users are able to effectively use their radios to accomplish the agency's mission. Further, developing a mechanism to identify CBP radio users in need of training would help CBP improve its ability to monitor radio user training needs. ICE provided training on the upgraded radio systems in one location, but 3 of the 4 ICE radio user groups GAO met with in field locations stated that additional training would help address challenges experienced by radio users. Further, ICE officials stated that they did not track the training that the agency provided. Developing and implementing a plan to address any skills gaps for ICE radio users related to understanding the upgraded radio systems would help ensure more ICE radio users are able to effectively use their radios to accomplish the agency's mission. Further, developing a mechanism to track training provided to ICE radio users would help ensure that the agency can address ICE radio user training needs.

DHS is taking actions to improve tactical communications interoperability among DHS components and with other federal, state, and local agencies, but it is too soon to assess whether these actions will address the various challenges CBP and ICE face in achieving interoperability. Specifically, among other actions, DHS developed a draft DHS Communications Interoperability Plan to more fully understand and address the department's underlying interoperability challenges. This draft plan outlines goals and initiatives aimed at addressing various types of interoperability challenges faced by DHS components, but since the plan has not been implemented, it is too soon to assess the extent to which this guidance will effectively address the interoperability challenges faced by DHS components.