

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-16-681](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

During emergency situations, reliable communications are critical to ensure a rapid and sufficient response. PKEMRA was enacted in 2006 to improve the federal government's preparation for and response to disasters, including emergency communications. Since that time, natural and man-made disasters continue to test the nation's emergency communications capabilities. Given that states and localities are the first line of response following a disaster, states' emergency communications planning is very important.

GAO was asked to review the implementation of PKEMRA. This report examines (1) federal efforts to implement PKEMRA emergency communications provisions related to planning and federal coordination, and (2) how states' emergency communications planning has changed since PKEMRA. GAO reviewed relevant reports and documentation from DHS and other agencies; surveyed SWICs from 50 states, the District of Columbia, and 5 territories, receiving 52 responses; assessed the ECPC's collaborative efforts; and interviewed federal and state officials selected for their emergency communications experience. GAO plans to review the implementation of other PKEMRA emergency communications provisions in future work.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making recommendations to DHS aimed at improving the ECPC's collaborative efforts, including defining its goals and tracking its recommendations. DHS concurred with the recommendations.

View [GAO-16-681](#). For more information, contact Mark Goldstein at (202) 512-2834 or goldsteinm@gao.gov.

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EMERGENCY COMMUNICATIONS

Effectiveness of the Post-Katrina Interagency Coordination Group Could Be Enhanced

What GAO Found

Implementation of the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act of 2006 (PKEMRA) provisions related to emergency communications planning and federal coordination has enhanced federal support for state and local efforts; however, federal coordination could be improved. PKEMRA created within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) the Office of Emergency Communications, which has taken a number of steps aimed at ensuring that state and local agencies have the plans, resources, and training they need to support reliable emergency communications. PKEMRA also directed DHS to develop the National Emergency Communications Plan (NECP). The NECP includes goals for improving emergency communications and encourages states to align their plans with these emergency communications goals. PKEMRA further established the Emergency Communications Preparedness Center (ECPC), comprising 14 member agencies, to improve coordination and information sharing among federal emergency communications programs. GAO previously identified key features and issues to consider when implementing collaborative mechanisms, including interagency groups like the ECPC. GAO found that the ECPC's collaborative efforts were consistent with most of these features, such as those related to leadership and resources, but were not fully consistent with others. For example, one of the key features calls for interagency groups to clearly define goals and track progress, yet the ECPC has not done so. As a result, the ECPC's member agencies might not understand the ECPC's goals or have a chance to ensure that the goals align with their own agencies' purposes and goals. Furthermore, the ECPC puts forth recommendations that could improve emergency communications. But the recommendations are implemented at the discretion of the ECPC's member agencies and are not tracked. Without a mechanism to track the ECPC's recommendations, it is unclear the extent to which the recommendations are being implemented and the ECPC is missing an opportunity to monitor its progress.

Almost all of the Statewide Interoperability Coordinators (SWIC) responding to GAO's survey reported that to better plan for emergency communications during disasters, their states have taken the following steps since PKEMRA: (1) developed comprehensive strategic plans for emergency communications that align with the NECP; (2) established SWIC positions to support state emergency communications initiatives, such as developing high-level policy and coordinating training and exercises; and (3) implemented governance structures to manage the systems of people, organizations, and technologies that need to collaborate to effectively plan for emergencies. GAO did not independently verify state responses. In responding to GAO's survey, most SWICs reported not having a comprehensive emergency communications plans in place prior to PKEMRA's 2006 enactment. In particular, prior to the enactment of PKEMRA, only a few states had comprehensive emergency communications plans in place, but now all but one have such a plan. Most of the SWICs also reported that their statewide plans cover key elements, such as governance, standard operating procedures, and training and exercises, which are considered by DHS as the essential foundation for achieving the NECP goals.