

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-18-233](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

Colleges and other postsecondary schools must plan for various potential emergencies, ranging from natural disasters to violence. A number of federal agencies, including DHS, DOJ, and Education, offer resources to support these efforts. GAO was asked to review colleges' awareness of these resources.

This report examines how (1) selected colleges prepare for emergencies, and (2) federal agencies support college emergency preparedness efforts, including the extent to which selected colleges reported awareness of federal resources.

To answer these questions, GAO interviewed officials from a non-generalizable sample of 18 colleges selected for diversity in size, type, and location. GAO also interviewed officials from three states (Colorado, Kansas, and Virginia) in which some of these schools operated. The states were selected to represent varied approaches to supporting colleges' emergency preparedness efforts. GAO also reviewed federal emergency preparedness resources, agency written responses, applicable federal laws, and federal internal control standards, and interviewed federal officials and representatives from several associations recommended by agency officials.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DHS, DOJ, and Education work together to identify opportunities to more effectively publicize emergency preparedness resources to colleges. All three agencies concurred with the recommendations or described actions to implement them.

View [GAO-18-233](#). For more information, contact Jacqueline M. Nowicki at (617) 788-0580 or [NowickiJ@gao.gov](mailto:NowickiJ@gao.gov).

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## EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

### Federal Agencies Could Improve Dissemination of Resources to Colleges

## What GAO Found

Emergency managers at 18 colleges across the country told GAO that their efforts to prepare for emergencies involved working with the campus community to develop, communicate, and practice plans, as well as working with state and local partners. Campus community members who are involved often include personnel from offices such as public safety, student affairs, or facilities. Officials at all 18 colleges reported developing emergency plans addressing a range of potential events—an approach consistent with federal emergency management principles. To publicize plans, officials often reported using websites, text messages, or presentations to the campus community. Colleges also reported practicing plans through drills. College officials noted that buy-in from the college president and other top campus leaders was critical to their efforts; several officials reported struggling to obtain such support. Most officials also said they coordinate with local or state partners such as police and relied on these partners for advice or to obtain emergency preparedness resources.

The Departments of Homeland Security (DHS), Justice (DOJ), and Education (Education) offer a variety of emergency preparedness resources to colleges (see figure). However, officials GAO interviewed at 18 colleges described mixed awareness of federal resources, especially those specifically tailored to colleges, despite federal efforts to publicize these resources in a variety of ways. Federal officials and other stakeholders acknowledged this mixed awareness and identified potential causes, such as college emergency managers having networks comprised of local officials who are more likely to know about federal resources for local agencies versus those for colleges, or some college officials devoting limited time to researching federal resources for various reasons.

#### Types of Federal Emergency Preparedness Resources for Colleges



Source: GAO analysis of federal written responses, agency interviews, and agency websites. | GAO-18-233

DHS, DOJ, and Education all publicize their resources through electronic mailing lists, websites, or other methods, but GAO identified missed opportunities in their dissemination approaches. For example, the electronic mailing list for one key resource may reach the approximately 1,000 officials from colleges subscribed, but may miss at least 3,000 additional schools. GAO also found two federal agency websites that did not include key resources from other federal agencies. Federal internal control standards state that agencies should consider the most appropriate methods for communicating with their external audiences. By identifying opportunities to improve dissemination, federal agencies may increase their ability to effectively communicate important information to colleges.