

GAO@100 Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-21-105332](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Recovery, Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

In December 2018, statute established the CWMD office, reorganizing several legacy offices, including the Domestic Nuclear Detection Office and Office of Health Affairs into one. The office manages programs intended to enhance the United States' ability to detect, deter, and defend against chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear threats. However, programs operated and managed by the CWMD office have faced longstanding challenges, some which predate the reorganization.

This statement describes our 2016 work related to the CWMD office formation and findings from our past reports on CWMD programs from 2009 through May 2021, including challenges and opportunities for the effective operations and implementation of key programs related to biodefense, nuclear security, and chemical security.

To conduct our prior work, GAO reviewed relevant presidential directives, laws, regulations, policies, strategic plans, and other reports and interviewed federal, state, and industry officials, among others.

What GAO Recommends

GAO made 16 recommendations designed to address the challenges discussed in this statement. As of July 2021, DHS has taken steps to address some, but not all of them. Of the 16 recommendations GAO made, 10 remain open, and GAO continues to monitor DHS's progress to implement them.

View [GAO-21-105332](#). For more information, contact Chris Currie at (404) 679-1875 or CurrieC@gao.gov.

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COUNTERING WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION

Opportunities for DHS to Better Address Longstanding Program Challenges

What GAO Found

In April 2016, GAO evaluated Department of Homeland Security (DHS) plans to consolidate chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear security programs into the Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction (CWMD) office. GAO recommended DHS use, where appropriate, the key mergers and organizational transformation practices identified in prior work, such as conducting adequate stakeholder outreach. DHS agreed with and addressed the recommendation by soliciting employee feedback on the transformation and formed a leadership team for the consolidation, among other practices. However, GAO observed that significant challenges remained at the CWMD office—such as low employee morale and questions about program efficacy. GAO has ongoing work evaluating these issues and plans to issue a report in early 2022.

Over the past decade, GAO has also conducted extensive work evaluating legacy and ongoing programs managed by the CWMD office and has identified program management challenges and opportunities for improvement in the following program areas:

- **Biosurveillance programs:** Since 2009, GAO has reported on progress and challenges with two of DHS's biosurveillance efforts—the National Biosurveillance Integration Center and the pursuit of replacements for the BioWatch program (aimed at detecting aerosolized biological attacks). For example, DHS faced challenges defining these programs' missions and acquiring suitable technologies. In December 2009 and September 2012, GAO highlighted the importance of following departmental policies and employing leading management practices to help ensure that the mission of each program is clearly and purposefully defined and that investments effectively respond to those missions. DHS agreed with and addressed these recommendations. Most recently, DHS agreed to a May 2021 GAO recommendation that it should follow best practices for conducting technology readiness assessments for a biodetection effort and described planned efforts to conduct one before the next key decision event.
- **Nuclear/radiological detection:** In May 2019, GAO found that the CWMD office lacked a clear basis for proposed changes to the strategies of the Securing the Cities program, which is designed to enhance the nuclear detection capabilities of federal and nonfederal agencies in select cities. GAO found the strategies were not based on threats or needs of the participating cities. DHS agreed with our recommendations aimed at improving communication and coordination with participating cities, but has not fully implemented them.
- **Chemical defense:** In August 2018, GAO found that DHS had not fully integrated and coordinated its chemical defense programs and activities, which could lead to a risk that DHS may miss an opportunity to leverage resources and share information. Improved program integration and coordination could lead to greater effectiveness addressing chemical threats. DHS agreed to develop a strategy and implementation plan to aid integration of programs, which it expects to finalize in September 2021.