



Highlights of [GAO-04-1057T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Technology, Information Policy, Intergovernmental Relations and the Census, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Lives of first responders and those whom they are trying to assist can be lost when first responders cannot communicate effectively as needed. This testimony addresses issues of determining the status of interoperable wireless communications across the nation, the potential roles that federal, state, and local governments can play in improving these communications, and the need to structure grant programs so that they better support public sector efforts to improve these communications.

What GAO Recommends

In a recent report on interoperable communications, we recommended that the Secretary of DHS (1) continue to develop a nationwide database and common terminology for public safety interoperability communications channels; (2) help states assess interoperability in specific locations against defined requirements; (3) through federal grant awards, encourage state action to establish and support a statewide body to develop and implement detailed improvement plans; and (4) require that grant applications be in compliance with statewide interoperability plans, once they are developed. GAO also recommends that the Director of OMB work with DHS to review SAFECOM's functions and establish a long-term program with appropriate authority and funding to coordinate interoperability efforts across the federal government.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-1057T.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact William O. Jenkins, Jr. at (202) 512-8777 or jenkinsjr@gao.gov.

HOMELAND SECURITY

Federal Leadership Needed to Facilitate Interoperable Communications Between First Responders

What GAO Found

The current wireless interoperable communications capabilities of first responders nationwide have not been determined. To assess these capabilities, a set of requirements is needed that can be used to assess “what is” compared to “what should be.” The Office of Management Budget (OMB) has established the Wireless Public Safety Interoperable Communications Program, SAFECOM, within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) as the focal point for coordinating federal efforts to improve interoperable communication. In April 2004, SAFECOM issued a document designed to serve as a set of baseline requirements and is working to develop a baseline of current capabilities by July 2005. This is a difficult task, and the details of SAFECOM's baseline study have yet to be finalized.

The federal government can take a leadership role and provide support for developing (1) a national database of interoperable communication frequencies, (2) a common nomenclature for those frequencies, (3) a national architecture that identifies communications requirements and technical standards, and (4) statewide interoperable communications plans. SAFECOM has limited authority and ability to oversee and coordinate federal and state efforts as it is dependent upon other agencies for funding and their willingness to cooperate. DHS, where SAFECOM now resides, has recently announced it is establishing an Office for Interoperability and Compatibility to coordinate the federal response to the problems of interoperability. The exact structure and funding for this office, which will include SAFECOM, are still being developed.

State and local governments can play a large role in developing and implementing plans to improve public safety agencies' interoperable communications. State and local governments own most of the physical infrastructure of public safety communications systems, and states play a central role in managing emergency communications. States, with broad input from local governments, are a logical choice to serve as a foundation for interoperability planning because incidents of any level of severity originate at the local level with states as the primary source of support. However, states are not required to develop interoperability plans, and there is no clear guidance on what should be included in such plans.

The federal funding assistance programs to state and local governments do not fully support regional planning for communications interoperability. Federal grants that support interoperability have different requirements to tie funding to interoperable communications plans. In addition, uncoordinated federal and state level reviews limit the government's ability to ensure that federal funds are used to effectively support improved regional and statewide communications systems.