



Highlights of [GAO-04-231T](#), a report to Congressional Requesters, Subcommittees of House Government Reform Committee

Why GAO Did This Study

The inability of first responders—police officers, firemen, hazardous materials teams, emergency medical service personnel, and others—to communicate effectively with one another as needed during an emergency is a long-standing and widely recognized problem in many areas across the country. When first responders cannot communicate effectively as needed, it can literally cost lives—of both emergency responders and those they are trying to assist. At the request of the Chairman of the full committee, we are examining the barriers to improved interoperability and the roles that federal, state, and local governments can play in improving wireless interoperability communications.

What GAO Recommends

Because our work is ongoing, we are not yet making recommendations. However based on our work to date, we identify several major challenges federal, state, and local governments must address. Effectively addressing these challenges requires collaboration of all first responders and all levels of government. Failure to do so risks spending funds ineffectively and creating new problems in our attempt to resolve existing ones.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-231T.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact William Jenkins, Jr. at (202) 512-8757 or jenkinswo@gao.gov.

HOMELAND SECURITY

Challenges in Achieving Interoperable Communications for First Responders

What GAO Found

Interoperability problems existed among public safety agencies for many years prior to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. Reports on incidents have documented a number of problems in public safety wireless communications. For over 15 years the Federal Government has been concerned about public safety spectrum issues, including communications interoperability issues. A variety of federal agencies have been involved in defining the problem and identifying potential solutions. In addition, Congress has taken several actions over the past two decades to address the availability and use of public safety wireless spectrum. The events of September 11 have resulted in greater public and governmental focus on the role of first responders and their capacity to respond to emergencies, including those resulting from terrorist incidents.

The interoperability issues that the nation faces today did not arise overnight and they will not be successfully addressed overnight. Federal, state, and local governments face several major challenges in addressing interoperability in their wireless communications.

- The first challenge is to clearly identify and define the problem. For example, it is important to recognize that interoperable communications is not an end in itself, but it is rather one component for achieving an important goal—the ability to respond effectively to and mitigate incidents that require the coordinated actions of first responders.
- The second challenge is whether and how to establish national interoperability performance goals and standards and balance them with the flexibility needed to address differences in state, regional and local needs and conditions.
- The third challenge is defining the roles of federal, state, and local governments and other entities in defining the problem, implementing any national goals and standards, and assessing alternative means of achieving those goals and standards.

The fundamental barrier to successfully addressing these challenges has been the lack of effective, collaborative, interdisciplinary and intergovernmental planning. No one first responder group or governmental agency can successfully “fix” the interoperability problems that face our nation. It will require the partnership, leadership, and coordinated planning of everyone involved.