HOMELAND SECURITY

DHS' Efforts to Enhance First Responders' All-Hazards Capabilities Continue to Evolve

What GAO Found

DHS has undertaken three major policy initiatives aimed at creating a national, all-hazards coordinated and comprehensive response to large-scale incidents: (1) a national response plan (what needs to be done); (2) a command and management process (how it needs to be done); and (3) a national preparedness goal (how well it should be done). GAO reviewed these products and determined that each supports a national, all-hazards approach. DHS has developed plans to implement three related programs to enhance first responder capabilities: (1) to assess and report on the status of first responders’ capabilities; (2) to prioritize national resource investments; and (3) to establish a national training and exercise program. Implementing these programs will likely pose a number of challenges for DHS including integrating internal and external assessment approaches, assessing state and local risks in a national context to effectively prioritize investments, and establishing common training requirements across responder disciplines.

Because terrorist attacks share some common characteristics with natural and accidental disasters, 30 of DHS’ 36 capabilities first responders need to support preparedness and response efforts are similar. GAO’s analysis found that the baseline capabilities required for terrorist attacks and natural or accidental disasters are more similar for response and recovery and differ most for prevention. Because terrorist attacks are planned, intentional acts, all of DHS’ prevention capabilities focus on terrorist attacks, while almost all other baseline capabilities focus on all hazards.

Legislation and presidential directives call for DHS to place special emphasis on preparedness for terrorism and DHS has directed that the majority of first responder grant funding be used to enhance first responder capabilities to prevent, protect against, respond to, and recover from terrorist attacks. Nonetheless, grants funds can have all-hazards applications.