



Highlights of [GAO-06-713](#), a report to the Chairman, Committee on Government Reform, House of Representatives

CONTINUITY OF OPERATIONS

Selected Agencies Could Improve Planning for Use of Alternate Facilities and Telework during Disruptions

Why GAO Did This Study

To ensure that essential government services are available in emergencies, federal agencies are required to develop continuity of operations (COOP) plans. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), is responsible for overseeing and assessing the status of COOP capabilities of federal executive branch agencies. It has developed guidance stating that agency COOP plans must designate alternate facilities and prepare personnel for unannounced relocation to these facilities. The guidance also states that agencies should consider the use of telework in their continuity plans.

GAO was asked to follow up on its previous work on COOP planning and determine, among other things, to what extent (1) 6 selected agencies prepared their alternate facilities and (2) 23 major agencies made preparations necessary to effectively use telework in emergency situations.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making recommendations to DHS aimed at improving the assessment and oversight of agency continuity planning and developing guidance on including telework in such planning. In commenting on a draft of this report, DHS partially agreed with GAO's recommendations and described actions to implement them.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-713.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Linda Koontz at (202) 512-6240 or koontzl@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

All six agencies GAO reviewed took steps to prepare their alternate facilities for use in emergencies. However, none of the agencies followed all of FEMA's guidance. For example, none conducted all the applicable tests and exercises, such as annual exercises that involve moving COOP personnel to alternate facilities. Further, agencies did not fully identify the resources necessary to support their essential functions, which reduces assurance that their facilities are adequately prepared.

Although individual agencies are ultimately responsible for preparing their plans and alternate facilities, FEMA's limited efforts to oversee and assess agency COOP capabilities contributed to agencies' incomplete compliance with its guidance. According to an official from the Department of Homeland Security, FEMA recently developed a schedule of oversight activities that includes conducting assessments of agency continuity plans starting in July 2006. However, the assessment's methodology is not yet finalized. If FEMA does not develop an assessment methodology that effectively evaluates agencies' compliance, it will have limited assurance that agencies have taken the steps necessary to ensure that they will be able to perform essential government operations following a disruption.

Although agencies are not required to use telework in continuity planning, 9 of the 23 agencies surveyed reported plans for essential team members to telework during a COOP event, compared with 3 in GAO's previous survey. However, few documented that they made the necessary preparations to effectively use telework during such an event (see table). For example, only one agency documented that it had notified its team members of their expectation to telework during a COOP event. The lack of specific guidance on preparations for telework during such an event contributed to the low levels of preparation that agencies reported. If agencies do not make adequate preparations, they may not be able to use telework effectively to ensure the continuity of their essential functions in emergencies.

Agency Responses to Selected Questions on Telework in COOP Plans

Question	Year	Yes	Yes (no doc) ^a	No
Are any of the agency's essential team members expected to telework in a COOP event?	2005	3	6	14
	2004 ^b	1	2	19
Were staff informed of their responsibility to telework during a COOP event?	2005	1	10	12
	2004	1	3	18
Has the agency ensured that it has adequate technological capacity for staff to telework during a COOP event?	2005	0	14	9
	2004	0	5	17
Will the agency provide technological assistance to staff during a COOP event?	2005	3	11	9
	2004	0	5	17
Has the agency tested the ability of staff to telework during a COOP event?	2005	3	7	13
	2004	0	2	20

Source: GAO.

^a Agencies responded positively but did not provide adequate documentation in support.

^b In 2004, one agency did not respond, resulting in a total of 22 responses.