



Highlights of [GAO-09-1044T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

A comprehensive system to alert the American people in times of hazard allows people to take action to save lives. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is the agency within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) responsible for the current Emergency Alert System (EAS) and the development of the new Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS). In this testimony, based on its report released today, GAO discusses (1) the current status of EAS, (2) the progress made by FEMA in implementing an integrated alert and warning system, and (3) coordination issues involved in implementing an integrated alert and warning system. GAO conducted a survey of states, reviewed FEMA and other documentation, and interviewed industry stakeholders and officials from federal agencies responsible for public alerting.

What GAO Recommends

In the report released today, GAO recommends that FEMA implement processes for systems development and deployment, report periodically on progress toward achieving an integrated public alert and warning system, and implement a plan to verify the dependability of IPAWS and to train IPAWS participants. In response to our report, DHS agreed with all of the recommendations and provided explanations of actions aimed at addressing them. However, FEMA's planned actions to address the recommendations may not be sufficient.

View [GAO-09-1044T](#) or [key components](#). For GAO report, view [GAO-09-834](#). For survey results, view [GAO-09-880SP](#). For more information, contact Mark Goldstein at (202) 512-2834 or goldsteinm@gao.gov.

EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS

Improved Planning and Coordination Necessary for Development of Integrated Public Alert and Warning System

What GAO Found

As the primary national-level public warning system, EAS is an important alert tool but it exhibits longstanding weaknesses that limit its effectiveness. In particular, the reliability of the national-level relay system—which would be critical if the President were to issue a national-level alert—remains questionable due to a lack of redundancy; gaps in coverage; a lack of testing and training; and limitations in how alerts are disseminated to the public. Further, EAS provides little capability to alert specific geographic areas. FEMA has projects under way to address some of these weaknesses. However, to date, little progress has been made and EAS remains largely unchanged since GAO's previous review, completed in March 2007. As a result, EAS does not fulfill the need for a reliable, comprehensive alert system.

Initiated in 2004, FEMA's IPAWS program has made little progress. IPAWS is intended to integrate new and existing alert capabilities, including EAS, into a comprehensive "system of systems." However, national-level alert capabilities have remained unchanged and new technologies have not been adopted. IPAWS efforts have been affected by shifting program goals, lack of continuity in planning, staff turnover, and poorly organized program information from which to make management decisions. The vision of IPAWS has changed twice over the course of the program and strategic goals and milestones are not clearly defined, as IPAWS has operated without an implementation plan from early 2007 through June 2009. Consequently, as state and local governments are forging ahead with their own alert systems, IPAWS program implementation has stalled and many of the functional goals of IPAWS, such as geo-targeting of messages and dissemination through redundant pathways to multiple devices, have yet to reach operational capacity. FEMA conducted a series of pilot projects without systematically assessing outcomes or lessons learned and without substantially advancing alert and warning systems. FEMA does not periodically report on IPAWS progress, therefore, program transparency and accountability are lacking.

FEMA faces coordination issues in developing and implementing IPAWS. Effective public warning depends on the expertise, efforts, and cooperation of diverse stakeholders, such as state and local emergency managers and the telecommunications industry. However, many stakeholders GAO contacted know little about IPAWS and expressed the need for better coordination with FEMA. A GAO survey indicated that the majority of state emergency management directors had little communication with FEMA regarding IPAWS. FEMA has taken steps to improve its coordination efforts by planning to participate in emergency management conferences and building improved relationships between the IPAWS program and FEMA regional offices. However, despite stating its plans to create a stakeholder subcommittee and state advisory committees, FEMA has established neither group and has no current plans to do so.