



Testimony

Before the Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia of the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

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HOMELAND SECURITY

Managing First Responder Grants to Enhance Emergency Preparedness in the National Capital Region

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Highlights of [GAO-05-889T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia of the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs; U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

After the tragic events of September 11, 2001, the National Capital Region (NCR)—the District of Columbia and nearby jurisdictions in Maryland and Virginia—was recognized as a significant potential target for terrorism. In fiscal years 2002 and 2003, about \$340 million in emergency preparedness funds were allocated to NCR jurisdictions. In May 2004, GAO issued a report ([GAO-04-433](#)) that examined (1) the use of federal funds emergency preparedness funds allocated to NCR jurisdictions, (2) the challenges within the NCR to organizing and implementing efficient and effective preparedness programs, (3) any emergency preparedness gaps that remain in the NCR, and (4) the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) role in the NCR. The report made recommendations to the Secretary of DHS to enhance the management of first responder grants in the NCR. We also reported in September 2004 ([GAO-04-1009](#)) that the NCR's Governance Structure for the Urban Area Security Initiative could facilitate collaborative, coordinated, and planned management and use of federal funds for enhancing emergency preparedness, if implemented as planned DHS agreed to implement these recommendations.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-889T.

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

HOMELAND SECURITY

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What GAO Found

A coordinated, targeted, and complementary use of federal homeland security grants is important in the NCR and elsewhere. These grants are one means of achieving an important goal: enhancing the ability of first responders to prevent, prepare for, respond to, and recover from terrorist and other incidents with well-planned, well-coordinated, and effective efforts that involve a variety of first responders from multiple jurisdictions. To oversee and coordinate federal emergency preparedness programs among federal, state, local, and regional authorities in the NCR, the Homeland Security Act established the Office for National Capital Region Coordination (ONCRC) within DHS. The ongoing security risk requires a comprehensive, coordinated, and carefully planned approach to the expenditure of federal first responder grants. This requires a NCR-wide strategic plan, performance goals, an assessment of preparedness gaps to guide priority setting, and continuing assessments of the progress made in closing identified gaps

This testimony summarizes our prior work and provides information on the implementation of the three recommendations in our May 2004 report. First, we recommended that DHS work with the NCR jurisdictions to develop a coordinated strategic plan. DHS and NCR jurisdictions have completed a final draft for review that has been circulated to key stakeholders. Second, we recommended that DHS monitor the plans implementation, which must await a final plan. To implement and monitor the future plan, data will be needed regarding the funding available and used for implementing the plan and enhancing first responder capabilities in the NCR—data that is not currently routinely available. The NCR, through the District of Columbia's Office of Homeland Security, has a system for tracking the use of Urban Area Security Initiative funds in the NCR as well as other homeland security grant funds available to Washington, D.C. However, the NCR does not currently track non-Urban Area Security Initiative funds available to and used by other NCR jurisdictions in an automated, uniform way. Rather, it obtains information about those funds through a variety of means, including teleconferences involving senior emergency preparedness officials. Third, we recommended that DHS identify and address preparedness gaps and evaluate the effectiveness of expenditures by conducting assessments based on established guidelines and standards. No systematic gap analysis has been completed for the region; however, by March 2006, the NCR plans to complete an effort to use the Emergency Management Accreditation Program (EMAP) as a means of conducting a gap analysis and assess NCR jurisdictions against EMAP's national preparedness standards. The result would be a report on the NCR's compliance with EMAP standards for emergency preparedness and an analysis of areas needing improvement to address in the short- and long-term. The ONCRC has not determined how this effort would be integrated with DHS' capabilities-based planning and assessments for first responders, pending the issuance of DHS' final version of the National Preparedness Goal in October 2005.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

I appreciate the opportunity to participate in today's hearing on efforts to use federal first responder grants to effectively enhance emergency preparedness in the National Capital Region (NCR). We reported on this issue twice in 2004 and testified before the House Committee on Government Reform on this topic in June 2004.¹ My statement today highlights the major findings and recommendations of our prior work and provides some updated information on the status of efforts by NCR jurisdictions and the Department of Homeland Security's Office for National Capital Region Coordination (ONCRC) to implement our recommendations.

Summary

A coordinated, targeted, and complementary use of federal homeland security grants is important in the NCR. These grants are one means of achieving an important goal: enhancing the ability of first responders to prevent where possible, prepare for, respond to, and recover from terrorist and other incidents with well-planned, well-coordinated, and effective efforts that involve a variety of first responders from multiple jurisdictions.

The Office of National Capital Region Coordinator (ONCRC) was created by the Homeland Security Act.² It is responsible for coordinating federal, state, and local efforts to secure the homeland in the NCR and for assessing and advocating for the state, local, and regional resources in the NCR needed to implement efforts to secure the homeland.

In May 2004, we reported that ONCRC and the NCR faced three interrelated challenges in managing federal funds in a way that maximizes the increase in first responder capacities and preparedness while minimizing inefficiency and unnecessary duplication of expenditures. These challenges included the lack of (1) preparedness standards; (2) a coordinated regionwide plan for establishing first responder performance

¹ *Homeland Security: Management of First Responder Grants in the National Capital Region Reflects the Need for Coordinated Planning and Performance Goals*, [GAO-04-433](#), (Washington, D.C.: May 28, 2004); *Homeland Security: Effective Regional Coordination Can Enhance Emergency Preparedness*, [GAO-04-1009](#) (Sept. 15, 2004); and *Homeland Security: Coordinated Planning and Standards Needed to Better Manage First Responder Grants in the National Capital Region*, [GAO-04-904T](#), June 24, 2004).

² P.L. 107-296 §882

goals, needs, and priorities, and assessing the benefits of expenditures in enhancing first responder capabilities; and (3) a readily available, reliable source of data on the funds available to first responders in the NCR and their use. Without the standards, a regionwide plan, and data on spending, it will be extremely difficult to determine whether NCR first responders have the ability to respond to threats and emergencies with well-planned, well-coordinated, and effective efforts that involve a variety of first responder disciplines from NCR jurisdictions.

Our May 2004 report made three recommendations to the Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), which the Department agreed to implement. Some progress has been made in implementing these recommendations, but none has yet been fully implemented:

- Recommendation 1: Work with the NCR jurisdictions to develop a coordinated strategic plan to establish goals and priorities to enhance first responder capacities that can be used to guide the use of federal emergency preparedness funds.
 - Actions taken: According to a DHS ONCRC official, a final draft for review has been completed and circulated to key stakeholders. According to the Director, ONCRC, the plan will feature measurable goals, objectives, and performance measures.

- Recommendation 2: Monitor the plan's implementation to ensure that funds are used in a way that promotes effective expenditures that are not unnecessarily duplicative.
 - Actions taken: This recommendation cannot be implemented until the final strategic plan is in place. Importantly, to establish regional priorities and track progress in implementing the plan, data will be needed regarding the funding for and use of all first-responder grants available to NCR jurisdictions. The NCR, through the District of Columbia's Office of Homeland Security, has a system for tracking the use of UASI funds for the NCR and other homeland security grant funds allocated to Washington, D.C., such as the State Homeland Security Grants. However, at this time, it does not have an automated, uniform system to track non-UASI grant funds available and used by other NCR jurisdictions. Instead, the Office obtains information through a variety of means, including teleconferences involving senior emergency preparedness officials. The ONCRC recognizes the need to develop a more systematic means of capturing all homeland security grant funds available to and used through the NCR and its member jurisdictions.

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- Recommendation 3: Identify and address gaps in emergency preparedness and evaluate the effectiveness of expenditures in meeting those needs by adapting standards and preparedness guidelines based on likely scenarios for the NCR and conducting assessments based on them.
 - Actions taken: No systematic gap analysis has been completed for the region as a whole. However, by March 2006, the NCR plans to complete an effort to use the Emergency Management Accreditation Program (EMAP) as a means of conducting a gap analysis and assessing NCR jurisdictions against EMAP's national preparedness standards. The result would be a report on the NCR's compliance with EMAP standards for emergency preparedness and an analysis of areas needing improvement that can be addressed in the short- and long-term. How this effort would be integrated with DHS' capabilities-based planning and assessments for first responders has not yet been determined, pending the issuance of DHS' final version of the National Preparedness Goal in October 2005.

The NCR now has a UASI governance structure that could provide the regionwide coordination that is necessary for obtaining information and the consensus or acquiescence of many stakeholders for drafting, completing, and implementing a regional preparedness plan. We believe that completing the implementation of the recommendations in our May 2004 report would be a major step toward developing the structure, processes, and data needed to assess current first responder skills and capabilities in the NCR and monitor the success of efforts to close identified gaps and achieve designated performance goals for the NCR.

Background

Since the September 11, 2001, attacks, the federal government, state and local governments, and a range of independent research organizations have agreed on the need for a coordinated intergovernmental approach for allocating the nation's resources to address the threat of terrorism and improve our security. The National Strategy for Homeland Security, released in 2002 following the proposal for DHS, emphasized a shared national responsibility for security involving close cooperation among all levels of government and acknowledged the complexity of developing a coordinated approach within our federal system of government and among a broad range of organizations and institutions involved in homeland security. The national strategy highlighted the challenge of developing complementary systems that avoid unintended duplication and increase collaboration and coordination so that public and private resources are better aligned for homeland security.

The national strategy established a framework for this approach by identifying critical mission areas with intergovernmental initiatives in each area. For example, the strategy identified such initiatives as modifying federal grant requirements and consolidating funding sources to state and local governments. The strategy further recognized the importance of assessing the capability of state and local governments, developing plans, and establishing standards and performance measures to achieve national preparedness goals. In addition, many aspects of DHS' success depend on its maintaining and enhancing working relationships within the intergovernmental system as it relies on state and local governments to accomplish its mission. In our view, intergovernmental and interjurisdictional coordination in managing federal first-responder grants is as important in the NCR as it is anywhere in the nation.

The Role of DHS' Office of National Capital Region Coordination in Enhancing Regional Preparedness

As noted in our May 2004 report and June 2004 testimony, the creation of DHS was an initial step toward reorganizing the federal government to respond to some of the intergovernmental challenges identified in the National Strategy for Homeland Security. ONCRC was created by the Homeland Security Act. According to NCR emergency management officials we contacted during the time of our previous reviews, ONCRC could play a potentially important role in assisting them to implement a coordinated, well planned effort in using federal resources to improve the region's preparedness. As we stated in the past, meeting the office's statutory mandate would fulfill those key responsibilities.

The Homeland Security Act established ONCRC within DHS to oversee and coordinate federal programs for, and relationships with federal, state, local, and regional authorities in the NCR.³ The ONCRC's responsibilities are primarily ones of coordination, assessment, and advocacy. With regard to coordination, the ONCRC was mandated to:

- coordinate the activities of DHS relating to the NCR, including cooperation with the DHS' Office for State and Local Government Coordination;
- coordinate with federal agencies in the NCR on terrorism preparedness to ensure adequate planning, information sharing, training, and execution of the federal role in domestic preparedness activities;
- coordinate with federal, state, local, and regional agencies and the private sector in NCR on terrorism preparedness to ensure adequate planning,

³P.L. 107-296 §882

information sharing, training, and execution of domestic preparedness activities among these agencies and entities;

- serve as a liaison between the federal government and state, local, and regional authorities, and private sector entities in the NCR to facilitate access to federal grants and other programs.⁴

ONCRC also has responsibilities related to resource and needs assessments and advocating for needed resources in the NCR, including:

- assessing and advocating for resources needed by state, local, and regional authorities in the NCR to implement efforts to secure the homeland; and
- submitting an annual report to Congress that (1) identifies resources required to fully implement homeland security efforts in the NCR, (2) assesses progress in implementing homeland security efforts in the NCR, and (3) includes recommendations to Congress regarding additional resources needed to fully implement homeland security efforts in the NCR. (According to the ONCRC, the first annual report is now with the Office of Management and Budget for review).

We recognize that ONCRC's missions and tasks are not easy. The overall job of promoting domestic preparedness in a large area with a huge federal presence is daunting. The NCR is a complex multijurisdictional area comprising the District of Columbia and surrounding county and city jurisdictions in Maryland and Virginia. Coordination within this region presents the challenge of working with numerous jurisdictions that vary in size, political organization, and experience in managing large emergencies.

As we noted in our May 2004 report on the management of funds in the NCR, effectively managing first responder grant funds requires the ability to measure progress and provide accountability for the use of the funds. To do this, it is necessary to:

1. Develop and implement strategies for the use of the funds that identify key goals and priorities;
2. Establish performance baselines;

⁴The Office for National Capital Region Coordination was also mandated to provide state, local, and regional authorities in NCR with regular information, research, and technical support to assist the efforts of state, local, and regional authorities in NCR in securing the homeland; and develop a process for receiving meaningful input from state, local, and regional authorities and the private sector in NCR to assist in the development of the federal government's homeland security plans and activities.

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3. Develop and implement performance goals and data quality standards;
 4. Collect reliable data;
 5. Analyze those data;
 6. Assess the results of that analysis;
 7. Take action based on those results; and
 8. Monitor the effectiveness of actions taken to achieve the designated performance goals.

This strategic approach to homeland security includes identifying threats and managing risks, aligning resources to address them, and assessing progress in preparing for those threats and risks.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that the equipment, skills, and training required to prepare for and respond to identified terrorist threats and risks may be applicable to non-terrorist risks as well. For example, the equipment, skills, and training required to respond effectively to a discharge of lethal chlorine gas from a rail car is much the same whether the cause of the discharge is an accidental derailment or a terrorist act.

Our May 2004 Report Showed the Need to Improve Management of First-Responder Grants in the NCR

As we reported in May 2004, in fiscal years 2002 and 2003, the Departments of Homeland Security, Justice, and Health and Human Services awarded about \$340 million through 16 first-responder grants to NCR jurisdictions to enhance regional emergency preparedness. Of these funds, \$60.5 million were from the UASI grant, designated for regionwide needs. The remaining funds, about \$279.5 million, were available to local jurisdictions for a wide variety of needs, such as equipment and training, and local jurisdictions determined how these funds were to be spent. Local jurisdictions used or planned to use money from those grants to buy equipment and to implement training and exercises for the area's first responders, as well as improve planning for responding to a terrorist event. We have not reviewed how funds were spent since the issuance of our May 2004 report; however, spending could not be based on a coordinated plan for enhancing regional first responder capacities and preparedness because such a plan does not yet exist, although one is being prepared.

In May 2004, we reported that ONCRC and the NCR faced 3 interrelated challenges in managing federal funds in a way that maximizes the increase in first responder capacities and preparedness while minimizing inefficiency and unnecessary duplication of expenditures. These were the lack of (1) preparedness standards; (2) a coordinated regionwide plan for establishing first responder performance goals, needs, and priorities, and assessing the benefits of expenditures; and (3) readily available, reliable source of data on the federal grant funds available to first responders in the NCR and their use. Without the standards, a regionwide plan, and data on available funds and spending, it will be extremely difficult to determine whether NCR first responders have the ability to respond to threats and emergencies with well-planned, well-coordinated, and effective efforts that involve a variety of first responder disciplines from NCR jurisdictions. Moreover, without such data, it is not clear how the ONCRC can fulfill its statutory mandate to assess and advocate for resources needed by state, local, and regional authorities in the NCR to implement efforts to secure the homeland.

During our review we could identify no reliable data on preparedness gaps in the NCR, which of those gaps were most important, and the status of efforts to close those gaps. The baseline data needed to assess those gaps had not been fully developed or made available on a NCR-wide basis. We also noted that at the time our May 2004 report was released, DHS and ONCRC appear to have had a limited role in assessing and analyzing first responder needs in NCR and developing a coordinated effort to address those needs through the use of federal grant funds. ONCRC has focused principally on developing a plan for using the UASI funds—funds that were intended principally for addressing region wide needs. In its comments on a draft of our May 2004 report, DHS said that a governance structure approved in February 2004 would accomplish essential regionwide coordination. We agree that this structure has the potential to accomplish essential regionwide coordination, but it is not clear how it can do so effectively without comprehensive data on funds available for enhancing first responder skills and capabilities in the NCR, their use, and their effect on meeting identified performance goals.

Recommendations in Our May 2004 Report Not Yet Fully Implemented

To help ensure that emergency preparedness grants and associated funds are managed in a way that maximizes their effectiveness, our May 2004 report included three recommendations to the Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security. As discussed in more detail below, some progress has been made in implementing these recommendations, but none has yet been fully implemented.

- Recommendation 1: Work with the NCR jurisdictions to develop a coordinated strategic plan to establish goals and priorities for enhancing first responder capacities that can be used to guide the use of federal emergency preparedness funds.
 - Actions taken: According to an ONCRC official, a final draft for review has been circulated to key stakeholders. According to the Director, ONCRC, the plan will feature measurable goals, objectives, and performance measures.
- Recommendation 2: Monitor the strategic plan's implementation to ensure that funds are used in a way that promotes effective expenditures that are not unnecessarily duplicative.
 - Actions taken: Monitoring implementation of the strategic plan cannot be accomplished absent a plan. Importantly, to monitor the plan's implementation, data will be needed on funds available and spending from all first responder grants available to jurisdictions in the NCR, such as the State Homeland Security Grant Program. The NCR, through the D.C. Office of Homeland Security, has a system for tracking the use of UASI funds in the NCR and other homeland security grant funds available to D.C., such as the State Homeland Security Grants. However, at this time, it does not have an automated, uniform, system to track non-UASI grant funds available and used by other NCR jurisdictions. Information on the projects funded in NCR jurisdictions by funds other than UASI is obtained through the monthly meetings and weekly conference calls of the Senior Policy Group and full-day quarterly meetings of jurisdictions in the Mid-Atlantic area, sponsored by the Office of Domestic Preparedness (ODP). These meetings provide contacts for obtaining information, as needed, on grant allocations and expenditures in jurisdictions both within and outside the NCR in the mid-Atlantic region. The ONCRC recognizes the need to develop a more systematic means of capturing all homeland security grant funds available and used through the NCR.
- Recommendation 3: Identify and address gaps in emergency preparedness and evaluate the effectiveness of expenditures in meeting those needs by adopting standards and preparedness guidelines based on likely scenarios for NCR and conducting assessments based on them.

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- Actions taken: To date, no systematic gap analysis has been completed for the region as a whole. The NCR plans to use the Emergency Management Accreditation Program (EMAP) as a means of conducting a gap analysis and assessing NCR jurisdictions against EMAP's standards for emergency preparedness—an effort expected to be completed by March 2006. How this effort would be integrated with DHS' capabilities-based planning and assessments for first responders has not yet been determined, pending the issuance of DHS' final version of the National Preparedness Goal in October 2005.

At the national level, DHS' efforts to develop policies, guidance, and standards that can be used to assess and develop first responder skills and capabilities have included three policy initiatives: (1) a national response plan (what needs to be done to manage a major emergency event); (2) a command and management process—the National Incident Management System—to be used during any emergency event nation-wide (how to do what needs to be done); and (3) a national preparedness goal (how well it should be done). Since our May 2004 report, DHS, as part of developing the national preparedness goal, developed 15 scenarios (12 terrorist events, a flu pandemic, a hurricane, and an earthquake) of “national significance” that would require coordinated federal, state, and local response efforts; the critical tasks associated with these scenarios; and the capabilities—in terms of planning, training, equipment, and exercises—that first responders would need to develop and maintain to effectively prepare for and respond to major emergency events. The 300 critical tasks and 36 capabilities were intended as benchmarks first responders could use to assess their relative level of preparedness and capacity to prevent, mitigate, respond to, and recover from major emergency events, including terrorist attacks. Because no single jurisdiction or agency would be expected to perform every task, possession of a target capability could involve enhancing and maintaining local resources, ensuring access to regional and federal resources, or some combination of the two.

The January 25, 2005 proposal for the EMAP assessment program does suggest one way in which the NCR may include the DHS scenarios, critical tasks, and capabilities in the EMAP assessment project. The proposal states: “Should the NCR or local jurisdictions within the region desire to conduct (a) hazard identification, risk assessment, and impact analysis activities, and/or (b) capabilities assessment against catastrophic scenarios using federally provided technical assistance during the period of this project, EMAP representatives will coordinate

with local and regional personnel to ensure that assessment activities and products are complementary.”

Concluding Comments

The need for comprehensive, coordinated emergency planning and preparedness is important in the National Capital Region. As we noted in the recent past, the ongoing security risk to the NCR requires a comprehensive, coordinated, and carefully planned approach to the expenditure of federal first responder grants. This requires a regionwide strategic plan, performance goals, an assessment of preparedness gaps to guide priority setting, and continuing assessments of the progress made in closing identified gaps. The NCR has completed a draft strategic plan and has established a process for assessing existing preparedness gaps. But it still needs to develop a means of routinely obtaining reliable data on all funds available for enhancing emergency preparedness in the NCR and their uses. It is important to know how all first responder funds are being spent in the NCR for setting priorities and assessing the results of funds spent. The NCR has selected the EMAP emergency preparedness standards as its performance standards for the region, but it will be necessary to integrate the EMAP standards with the set of 36 performance capabilities for first responders that DHS has developed as part of its National Performance Goal.

The NCR, in common with jurisdictions across the nation, faces the challenge of implementing DHS requirements for its three key policy initiatives—the National Incident Management System, National Response Plan, and the National Preparedness Goal. Successfully accomplishing all of these things will require a sound strategic plan; effective coordination; perseverance; and reliable data on available funds, their use, and the results achieved. As we noted in our September 2004 report, the NCR’s UASI Governance Structure represents a positive step towards instituting a collaborative, multijurisdictional, regionwide, planning structure. Fully implementing the recommendations in our May 2004 report would, in our view, be a major step toward developing the structure, processes, and data needed to assess current first responder skills and capabilities in the NCR and monitor the success of efforts to close identified gaps and achieve designated performance goals for the NCR.

That concludes my statement, Mr. Chairman. I would be pleased to respond to any questions you or other members of the Committee may have.

Contacts and Acknowledgments

For questions regarding this testimony please contact William O. Jenkins, Jr. on (202) 512-8777. Ernie Hazera also made key contributions to this testimony.

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