



Highlights of [GAO-06-740T](#), a testimony before the Committee on Government Reform, House of Representatives

## 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 providing guidance to agencies on developing such plans. Its guidance states that in their continuity planning, agencies should consider the use of telework—that is, work performed at an employee's home or at a work location other than a traditional office. The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) recently reported that 43 agencies have identified staff eligible to telework, and that more than 140,000 federal employees used telework in 2004.

OPM also reported that many government operations can be carried out in emergencies using telework. For example, telework appears to be an effective strategy for responding to a pandemic—a global outbreak of disease that spreads easily from person to person and causes serious illness and death worldwide. In previous work, GAO identified steps that agencies should take to effectively use telework during an emergency.

GAO was asked to testify on how agencies are addressing the use of telework in their continuity planning, which is among the topics discussed in a report being released today ([GAO-06-713](#)).

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-740T](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-740T).

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

## CONTINUITY OF OPERATIONS

### Agencies Could Improve Planning for Telework during Disruptions

#### What GAO Found

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 to 3 in GAO's previous survey. However, few documented that they made the necessary preparations to effectively use telework during such an event. For example, only 1 agency documented that it had communicated this expectation to its emergency team members. One reason for the low levels of preparations reported is that FEMA has not provided specific guidance on preparations needed to use telework during emergencies.

Recently, FEMA disseminated guidance to agencies on incorporating pandemic influenza considerations into COOP planning. Although this guidance suggests the use of telework during such an event, it does not address the steps agencies should take when preparing to use telework during an emergency. Without specific guidance, agencies are unlikely to adequately prepare their telework capabilities for use during a COOP event. In addition, inadequate preparations could limit the ability of nonessential employees to contribute to agency missions during extended emergencies, including pandemic influenza.

In its report released today, GAO recommends, among other things, that FEMA establish a time line for developing, in consultation with the OPM, guidance on preparations needed for using telework during a COOP event. In commenting on a draft of the report, DHS partially agreed with GAO's recommendation and stated that FEMA will coordinate with OPM in developing a time line for further telework guidance. DHS also stated that both FEMA and OPM have provided telework guidance. However, as GAO's report stated, present guidance does not address the preparations federal agencies should make for using telework during emergencies.

On May 3 the White House announced the release of an Implementation Plan in support of the National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza. This plan calls on OPM to work with DHS and other agencies to revise existing telework guidance and issue new guidance on human capital planning and COOP. The plan establishes an expectation that these actions will be completed within 3 months. If the forthcoming guidance does not require agencies to make necessary preparations for telework, agencies are unlikely to take all the steps necessary to ensure that employees will be able to effectively use telework to perform essential functions in extended emergencies, such as a pandemic influenza.