



Highlights of [GAO 08-868T](#), a report to Subcommittee on Management, Investigations and Oversight, Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

The Homeland Security Act was enacted in November 2002, creating the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to improve homeland security following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States. The act centralized the leadership of many homeland security activities under a single federal department and, accordingly, DHS has the dominant role in implementing this national strategy.

This testimony discusses the status of DHS's actions in fulfilling its responsibilities to (1) establish policies to define roles and responsibilities for national emergency preparedness efforts and prepare for the transition between presidential administrations, and (2) develop operational plans and performance metrics to implement these roles and responsibilities and coordinate federal resources for disaster planning and response. This testimony is based on prior GAO work performed from September 2006 to June 2008 focusing on DHS's efforts to address problems identified in the many post-Katrina reviews.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is not making any new recommendations in this testimony. GAO has made recommendations in the prior reports identified in this testimony, and DHS has generally concurred with these recommendations and is taking action to implement them.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-868T](#). For more information, contact William O. Jenkins, Jr., at (202) 512-8777 or jenkinswo@gao.gov.

EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

Observations on DHS's Preparedness for Catastrophic Disasters

What GAO Found

DHS has taken several actions to define national roles and responsibilities and capabilities for emergency preparedness efforts in key policy documents and has begun preparing for the upcoming transition between presidential administrations. DHS prepared initial versions of key policy documents that describe what should be done and by whom (National Response Plan in 2004), how it should be done (the National Incident Management System in 2004) and how well it should be done (the interim National Preparedness Goal in 2005). DHS subsequently developed and issued revisions to these documents to improve and enhance its national-level policies, such as the National Preparedness Guidelines in 2007 which was the successor to the interim National Preparedness Goal. Most recently, DHS developed the National Response Framework (NRF), the successor to the National Response Plan, which became effective in March 2008. This framework describes the doctrine that guides national response actions and the roles and responsibilities of officials and entities involved in response efforts. Clarifying roles and responsibilities will be especially critical as a result of the coming change in administrations and the associated transition of key federal officials with homeland security preparedness and response roles. To cope with the absence of many political appointed executives from senior roles, DHS has designated career executives to carry out specific responsibilities in the transition between presidential administrations and recently provided information to this Committee on its transition plans. To assist in planning to execute an efficient and effective administration transition, DHS has also contracted with the Council for Excellence in Government to identify key roles and responsibilities for the Department and its homeland security partners for responding to disasters during the transition between administrations.

DHS is still developing operational plans to guide other federal agencies' response efforts and metrics for assessing federal capabilities. Two essential supplements to the new National Response Framework—response guides for federal partners and an integrated planning system—are still under development. Also, DHS is still establishing a process to measure the nation's overall preparedness based on a list of targeted capabilities and has not yet completed an inventory of all federal response capabilities. The measures and metrics associated with these targeted capabilities are not standards, but serve as guides for planning, training, and exercise activities. However, DHS policy does not direct development of these capabilities to address national priorities for federal agencies. For example, for the national priority to “Strengthen Interoperable and Operable Communications Capabilities” the National Preparedness Guidelines state that communications capabilities are developed to target levels in the states, tribal areas, territories, and designated urban areas that are consistent with measures and metrics established for targeted capabilities; federal agencies' interoperability is not addressed.