



Highlights of [GAO-07-301](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

As the first to respond to natural disasters, domestic terrorism, and other emergencies, public safety agencies rely on timely communications across multiple disciplines and jurisdictions. It is vital to the safety and effectiveness of first responders that their electronic communications systems enable them to communicate with whomever they need to, when they need to, and when they are authorized to do so. GAO was asked to determine, among other things, (1) the extent to which Department of Homeland Security (DHS) funding and technical assistance has helped to improve interoperable communications in selected states and (2) the progress that has been made in the development and implementation of interoperable communications standards. To address these objectives, GAO reviewed grant information, documentation of selected states' and localities' interoperability projects, and standards documents.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO is making recommendations to DHS, which include assessing how states' grant requests support statewide communications plans and modifying its guidance on acquiring interoperable equipment. DHS disagreed with the latter recommendation, but GAO believes that it is important to provide more flexibility until completed subsets of standards have been fully defined. DHS agreed or deferred comment on all others.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-301](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-301).

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](mailto:koontzl@gao.gov).

# FIRST RESPONDERS

## Much Work Remains to Improve Communications Interoperability

### What GAO Found

According to DHS, \$2.15 billion in grant funding was awarded to states and localities from 2003 through 2005 for communications interoperability enhancements. This funding, along with technical assistance, has helped to make improvements on a variety of specific interoperability projects. However, states that GAO reviewed (see table below) had generally not used strategic plans to guide investments toward broadly improving interoperability. Further, no national plan was in place to coordinate investments across states. To its credit, DHS has required states to implement a statewide plan by the end of 2007, and DHS has recently been required to implement a National Emergency Communications Plan. However, no process has been established for ensuring that states' grant requests are consistent with their statewide plans. Until DHS takes a more strategic approach to improving interoperable communications—such as including in its decision making an assessment of how grant requests align with statewide communications plans—progress by states and localities in improving interoperability is likely to be impeded.

Until recently, the private-sector coordinating body responsible for developing Project 25 standards—a suite of national standards intended to enable interoperability among the communications products of different vendors—has made little progress. Although one of the eight major subsets of standards was defined in the project's first 4 years (from 1989 to 1993), from 1993 through 2005, no additional standards were completed that could be used to develop Project 25 products. Specifications for three additional subsets of standards were defined over the past 2 years. However, ambiguities in the published standards have led to incompatibilities among products made by different vendors, and no compliance testing has been conducted to determine if these products are interoperable. Nevertheless, DHS has strongly encouraged state and local agencies to use grant funding to purchase Project 25 radios, which are substantially more expensive than non-Project 25 radios. As a result, states and local agencies have purchased fewer, more expensive radios that still may not be interoperable and thus may provide few added benefits. Until DHS modifies its grant guidance to provide more flexibility in purchasing communications equipment, states and localities are likely to continue to purchase expensive equipment that provides them with minimal additional benefits.

### DHS Grant Funding to Improve Interoperability in Selected States

State	Grants from 2003 through 2005
New York	\$145.5 million
Kentucky	\$50 million
Oregon	\$53.4 million
Florida	\$55.7 million

Source: GAO analysis of DHS data.