

DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY

Progress Report on Implementation of Mission and Management Functions



Highlights of GAO-07-454, a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

The Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) recent 4 year anniversary provides an opportunity to reflect on the progress DHS has made since its establishment. DHS began operations in March 2003 with the mission to prevent terrorist attacks within the United States, reduce vulnerabilities, minimize damages from attacks, and aid in recovery efforts. GAO has reported that the creation of DHS was an enormous management challenge and that the size, complexity, and importance of the effort made the challenge especially daunting and critical to the nation's security. Our prior work on mergers and acquisitions found that successful transformations of large organizations, even those faced with less strenuous reorganizations than DHS, can take at least 5 to 7 years to achieve. GAO was asked to report on DHS's progress in implementing its mission and management areas and challenges DHS faces. This report also discusses key themes that have affected DHS's implementation efforts.

How GAO Did This Study

To assess DHS's progress, GAO identified performance expectations for each mission and management area based on legislation, homeland security presidential directives, DHS and component agencies' strategic plans, and other sources.

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www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-454.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Norman J. Rabkin at (202) 512-8777 or rabkinn@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

At the time of its creation in 2003 as one of the largest federal reorganizations in the last several decades, we designated the implementation and transformation of DHS as a high-risk area due to the magnitude of the challenges it confronted in areas vital to the physical and economic well being of the nation. After 4 years into its overall integration effort, DHS has attained some level of progress in all of its mission and management areas. The rate of progress, however, among these areas varies, as shown in the table below.

Summary of Assessments of DHS's Progress in Mission and Management Areas

Mission/management area	Number of performance expectations	Number of expectations generally achieved	Number of expectations generally not achieved	Number of expectations not assessed	Overall assessment of progress
Border security	12	5	7	0	Modest
Immigration enforcement	16	8	4	4	Moderate
Immigration services	14	5	9	0	Modest
Aviation security	24	17	7	0	Moderate
Surface transportation security	5	3	2	0	Moderate
Maritime security	23	17	4	2	Substantial
Emergency preparedness and response	24	5	18	1	Limited
Critical infrastructure protection	7	4	3	0	Moderate
Science and technology	6	1	5	0	Limited
Acquisition management	3	1	2	0	Modest
Financial management	7	2	5	0	Modest
Human capital management	8	2	6	0	Limited
Information technology management	13	2	8	3	Limited
Real property management	9	6	3	0	Moderate
Total	171	78	83	10	

Source: GAO analysis.

Definitions:

Substantial progress: DHS has taken actions to generally achieve more than 75 percent of the identified performance expectations.

Moderate progress: DHS has taken actions to generally achieve more than 50 percent but 75 percent or less of the identified performance expectations.

Modest progress: DHS has taken actions to generally achieve more than 25 percent but 50 percent or less of the identified performance expectations.

Limited progress: DHS has taken actions to generally achieve 25 percent or less of the identified performance expectations.

GAO analyzed these documents to identify responsibilities for DHS and obtained and incorporated feedback from DHS officials on the performance expectations. On the basis of GAO's and the DHS Office of Inspector General's (IG) prior work and updated information provided by DHS, GAO determined the extent to which DHS has taken actions to generally achieve each performance expectation. An assessment of generally achieved indicates that DHS has taken actions to satisfy most elements of the expectation, and an assessment of generally not achieved indicates that DHS has not yet taken actions to satisfy most elements of the expectation. An assessment of generally not achieved may be warranted even where DHS has put forth substantial effort to satisfy some but not most elements of an expectation. In cases when we or the DHS IG have not completed work upon which to base an assessment or the information DHS provided did not enable us to clearly determine the extent to which DHS has achieved the performance expectation, we indicated no assessment made. Our assessment of DHS's progress relative to each performance expectation is not meant to imply that DHS should have fully achieved the performance expectation by the end of its fourth year. On the basis of this analysis, GAO determined whether DHS has made limited, modest, moderate, or substantial progress in each mission and management area. The assessments of progress do not reflect, nor are they intended to reflect, the extent to which DHS's actions have made the nation more secure in each area.

Key underlying themes have affected DHS's implementation efforts, and will be essential for the department to address as it moves forward. These include management, risk management, information sharing, and partnerships and coordination. For example, while DHS has made progress in transforming its component agencies into a fully functioning department, it has not yet addressed key elements of the transformation process, such as developing a comprehensive strategy for agency transformation and ensuring that management systems and functions are integrated. This lack of a comprehensive strategy and integrated management systems and functions limits DHS's ability to carry out its homeland security responsibilities in an effective, risk-based way. DHS also has not yet fully adopted and applied a risk management approach in implementing its mission and management functions. Some DHS component agencies, such as the Transportation Security Administration and the Coast Guard, have taken steps to do so, but DHS has not yet taken sufficient actions to ensure that this approach is used departmentwide. In addition, DHS has taken steps to share information and coordinate with homeland security partners, but has faced difficulties in these partnership efforts, such as in ensuring that the private sector receives better information on potential threats.

Given DHS's dominant role in securing the homeland, it is critical that the department's mission and management programs are operating as efficiently and effectively as possible. DHS has had to undertake these responsibilities while also working to transform itself into a fully functioning cabinet department—a difficult task for any organization. As DHS moves forward, it will be important for the department to continue to develop more measurable goals to guide implementation efforts and to enable better accountability of its progress toward achieving desired outcomes. It will also be important for DHS to continually reassess its mission and management goals, measures, and milestones to evaluate progress made, identify past and emerging obstacles, and examine alternatives to address those obstacles and effectively implement its missions.

What GAO Recommends

While this report contains no new recommendations, in past products, GAO has made approximately 700 recommendations to DHS designed to strengthen departmental operations. DHS has implemented some of these recommendations, has taken actions to address others, and has taken other steps to strengthen its mission and management activities.

In its comments on a draft of this report, DHS took issues with our methodology and disagreed with our assessments for 42 of 171 performance expectations. DHS's five general concerns were with (1) perceived alteration of standards used to judge progress; (2) our binary approach to assess the performance expectations; (3) perceived changes in criteria after DHS provided additional information; (4) consistent application of our methodology; and (5) differences in the priority of performance expectations. We believe that we have fully disclosed and consistently applied our methodology and that it provides a sound basis for this progress report.