



CONTINUITY OF OPERATIONS

Selected Agencies Tested Various Capabilities during 2006 Governmentwide Exercise

Highlights of [GAO-08-185](#), a report to the Ranking Member, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

To ensure the availability of essential government services in emergencies, federal agencies are required to develop continuity of operations (COOP) plans. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), under the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), is responsible for disseminating guidance to federal agencies on developing plans, as well as conducting governmentwide exercises every other year to assess federal continuity readiness. In June 2006, FEMA conducted an exercise called Forward Challenge 06, to allow agencies to activate COOP plans, deploy essential personnel to alternate facilities, and perform essential functions.

GAO was asked to describe the extent to which agencies tested continuity plans and procedures, personnel, and resources during the June 2006 exercise. To do this, GAO selected the eight civilian agencies with significant responsibilities during national disasters, analyzed agency exercise documentation, and interviewed officials to determine which test and exercise activities each agency included in its participation.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that FEMA require agencies participating in future governmentwide exercises to document the specific test and exercise activities conducted. In commenting on a draft of this report, DHS agreed with GAO's recommendation and stated that it intends to refine its assessment program and improve the level of evaluation documentation.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-185](#). For more information, contact Linda Koontz at (202) 512-6240 or koontzl@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

During Forward Challenge 06, the eight agencies GAO reviewed performed various test and exercise activities related to COOP plans and procedures, personnel, and resources. In many cases, agencies provided documentation to substantiate the specific test and exercise activities performed. However, in other cases, agencies reported conducting such activities but did not provide supporting documentation. Finally, agencies also reported not testing or exercising certain capabilities during the exercise. In these cases, participating agencies may have addressed these capabilities in other tests and exercises conducted during the year, which were outside the scope of GAO's review. The table below presents a summary of the extent to which agencies conducted various test and exercise activities during the governmentwide exercise.

Agencies' inability to substantiate many of the test and exercise activities that they reported performing during Forward Challenge 06 was due in part to the absence of specific guidance on what should be documented in such exercises. While FEMA directed participating agencies to document issues and requirements for corrective action, significant findings, and important observations during the Forward Challenge 06 exercise, it did not require participating agencies to document the specific activities from their test and exercise programs that they conducted during the exercise. Without adequate records of what has been tested during a major governmentwide exercise, agencies lack assurance that they have adequately tested their continuity capabilities at the frequency outlined in FEMA guidance, which may limit their ability to fully evaluate their readiness to respond to a disruption. In addition, adequate records can reduce the potential negative impact of turnover in key personnel due to attrition or change in administration, and strengthen agency internal control capabilities.

Agency Testing and Exercising of COOP Plans and Procedures, Personnel, and Resources

Category	Test and exercise activities	Tested and documented	Tested but not documented	Not tested during exercise ^a
Plans and Procedures	Essential Functions	4	4	0
	Activation and Notification:			
	Activation	4	3	1
	Notification—COOP Personnel	3	4	1
	Notification—Non-COOP Personnel	1	5	2
	Notification—Alternate Facility	2	2	4
	Notification—FEMA Operations Center	6	1	1
	Debriefing	8	0	0
Personnel	COOP Personnel Participation	5	3	0
Resources	Interoperable Communications:			
	Communications Capabilities	8	0	0
	Communication with Internal Contacts	6	2	0
	Communication with External Contacts	4	4	0
	Vital Records	6	2	0
	Backup Power	1	1	6

Source: GAO.

^aParticipating agencies may have addressed these capabilities in other tests and exercises conducted during the year, which were outside the scope of GAO's review.