



Highlights of [GAO-09-783T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia, Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs

Why GAO Did This Study

As evidenced by the spring 2009 outbreak of the H1N1 virus, an influenza pandemic remains a real threat to the nation and the world and has the potential to shut down work critical to the smooth functioning of society. This testimony addresses (1) the extent to which federal agencies have made pandemic plans to protect workers who cannot work remotely and are not first responders; (2) the pandemic plans selected agencies have for certain occupations performing essential functions other than first response; and (3) the opportunities to improve agencies' workforce pandemic plans.

The issues discussed in the testimony are based on the GAO report, *Influenza Pandemic: Increased Agency Accountability Could Help Protect Federal Employees Serving the Public in the Event of a Pandemic* ([GAO-09-404](#), June 12, 2009). In this report, GAO recommended that the Homeland Security Council (HSC) request that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) monitor and report to the Executive Office of the President on the readiness of agencies to continue operations while protecting their employees in the event of a pandemic. To help carry out its oversight role, the Congress may want to consider requiring a similar report from DHS. The HSC noted that it will give serious consideration to the findings and recommendations in the report, and DHS said the report will contribute to its efforts to ensure government entities are well prepared for what may come next.

View [GAO-09-783T](#) or [key components](#). For more information, contact Bernice Steinhardt, (202) 512-6543 or steinhardt@gao.gov.

INFLUENZA PANDEMIC

Greater Agency Accountability Needed to Protect Federal Workers in the Event of a Pandemic

What GAO Found

GAO surveyed the 24 agencies employing nearly all federal workers to gain an overview of governmentwide pandemic influenza preparedness efforts and found that a wide range of pandemic planning activities are under way. However, as of early 2009, several agencies reported that they were still developing their pandemic plans and their measures to protect their workforce. For example, several agencies had yet to identify essential functions during a pandemic that cannot be performed remotely. In addition, although many of the agencies' pandemic plans rely on telework to carry out their functions, five agencies reported testing their information technology capability to little or no extent.

To get a more in-depth picture of agency planning, GAO selected three case study agencies that represent essential occupations other than first response that cannot be performed remotely. The three case study occupations—correctional workers, production staff disbursing federal checks, and air traffic controllers—showed differences in the degree to which their individual facilities had operational pandemic plans. For example, the Bureau of Prisons' correctional workers had only recently been required to develop pandemic plans for their correctional facilities. Nevertheless, the Bureau of Prisons has considerable experience limiting the spread of infectious disease within its correctional facilities and had also made arrangements for antiviral medications for a portion of its workers and inmates. The Department of the Treasury's Financial Management Service, which has production staff involved in disbursing federal payments such as Social Security checks, had pandemic plans for its four regional centers and had stockpiled personal protective equipment such as respirators, gloves, and hand sanitizers at the centers. Air traffic control management facilities, where air traffic controllers work, had not yet developed facility pandemic plans or incorporated pandemic plans into their all-hazards contingency plans. The Federal Aviation Administration had recently completed a study to determine the feasibility of the use of respirators by air traffic controllers and concluded that their long-term use during a pandemic appears to be impractical.

There is no mechanism in place to monitor and report on agencies' progress in developing workforce pandemic plans. Under the *National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza Implementation Plan*, DHS was required to monitor and report on the readiness of departments and agencies to continue operations while protecting their employees during an influenza pandemic. The HSC, however, informed DHS in late 2006 or early 2007 that no specific reports on this were required to be submitted. Rather, the HSC requested that agencies certify to the council that they were addressing in their plans the applicable elements of a pandemic checklist in 2006 and again in 2008. This process did not include any assessment or reporting on the status of agency plans. Given agencies' uneven progress in developing their pandemic plans, monitoring and reporting would enhance agencies' accountability for protecting their employees in the event of a pandemic.