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HOMELAND SECURITY

**Guidance from Operations
Directorate Will Enhance
Collaboration among
Departmental Operations
Centers**

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Homeland Security and Justice Issues



DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY



Highlights of [GAO-07-683T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Management, Investigations and Oversight, Committee on Homeland Security, U.S. House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

This testimony summarizes GAO's October 2006 report on the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) operations centers—centers run by three DHS components and operating 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year to conduct monitoring and surveillance activities of potential terrorist activities and other crises. Specifically, GAO assessed the extent to which the centers implemented key practices GAO's work has shown will enhance and sustain collaboration.

In addition, GAO is aware of Congress's concerns about the performance of certain DHS components with regard to situational awareness during Hurricane Katrina, and the recent efforts made in response to these concerns identified in hurricane after-action studies and reports. Because these efforts to some extent affect DHS's response to the recommendations made in GAO's previous report, this testimony briefly describes some of the steps DHS reported that it has taken to address situational awareness problems Katrina exposed. However, because these actions are relatively new, it is too early to assess how well they are being implemented.

To complete this work, GAO spoke to DHS officials and reviewed relevant documentation.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-683T.

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

Guidance from Operations Directorate May Enhance Collaboration among Departmental Operations Centers

What GAO Found

The DHS operations centers GAO studied—the Air and Marine Operations Center, the National Targeting Center, the Transportation Security Operations Center, and the National Operations Center—could improve implementation of the key practices GAO identified as having a positive effect on inter-agency collaboration. These key practices include (1) defining common outcomes and joint strategies; (2) assessing each center's needs to leverage resources; (3) defining the roles and responsibilities of the personnel conducting surveillance activities; (4) establishing compatible standards, policies, and procedures for using DHS's primary information sharing network; (5) developing mechanisms to monitor and evaluate results of joint operations; and (6) reinforcing accountability by recognizing joint efforts and outcomes achieved in annual performance plans and reports. The Operations Directorate, established in November 2005 to improve operational efficiency and coordination, provides DHS with an opportunity to more fully implement these key practices by providing guidance to the operations centers. Although GAO recommended that the Directorate provide this guidance, DHS stated that the Directorate does not have control over the component operations centers; therefore, it has not provided guidance to improve collaboration among the centers.

According to DHS, it has given priority to fixing issues that affect situational awareness and its ability to respond to national incidents and disasters, such as Hurricane Katrina. The actions in response to Katrina include establishing standard roles and procedures for reporting information during a major incident and creating a Web-based tool to provide a common view of critical information during a crisis. While DHS has not fully responded to GAO's recommendation for implementing key collaborative practices, it maintains that the initiatives it has implemented since Katrina will improve collaboration and create an environment to address the recommendations in the future.

Staff Conducting Surveillance Activities at Operations Centers



Sources: From left to right: TSA and CBP.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I appreciate the opportunity to participate in today's hearing to discuss our work on assessing the relationship among various operations centers of components of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the agency's overall National Operations Center in carrying out the important mission of maintaining situational awareness.

When DHS was established as an organization, we recognized the challenges it would face in trying to integrate 22 legacy agencies into one new corporate entity. Therefore, in January 2003 we placed the integration and transformation of the department on GAO's high-risk list—composed of those federal agencies, programs, or activities that pose the highest risk to the nation—because we recognized the country could not afford to have DHS fail. The Department's transformation remained on our high-risk list for 2007 because DHS had still not fully addressed its integration, management, and programmatic challenges.¹ Placing it on this list obligates us to continue to monitor how well the integration and transformation is succeeding.

With similar concerns, as well as concerns with the response to events that have occurred since, such as hurricanes Katrina and Rita and continuing terrorist threats, the Congress has been overseeing DHS's transformation. As part of this oversight, the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs requested that we identify the DHS operations centers (established to conduct monitoring and surveillance activities that can help detect, deter and prevent terrorist acts), to determine if any centers are redundant, and assess the functions and customers of these centers. Also, as part of this oversight, the Committee recognized that Hurricane Katrina demonstrated that the department's main operations center—the Homeland Security Operations Center—was not ready to effectively coordinate the sharing of information in a time of crisis and needed repair; therefore, it made a series of recommendations to address the problems identified and has been monitoring the agency's efforts to ensure DHS makes these changes.²

¹GAO, *High Risk Series: An Update*, [GAO-03-119](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 2003); *High Risk Series: An Update*, [GAO-07-310](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 2007).

²Report of the Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs, *Hurricane Katrina: A Nation Still Unprepared*, United State Senate. (Washington, D.C.: May 2006).

In response to the Senate Committee's request for GAO to review operations centers, we decided to assess those centers within DHS's component agencies that, first, conduct operations 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year (24/7/365), and that, second, have a broader security mission that DHS has determined requires higher levels of collaboration from many stakeholders, including DHS component agencies, and other federal, state, and local agencies. These centers are the Air and Marine Operations Center and the National Targeting Center, sponsored by U.S. Customs and Border Protection; the Transportation Security Operations Center sponsored by the Transportation Security Administration; and the National Operations Center Interagency Watch, the successor to the Homeland Security Operations Center, run within the Office of Operations Coordination at DHS. We assessed the extent to which they implemented key practices that our work has shown helps to enhance and sustain collaboration,³ since such collaboration is important to one of the main functions of each center, namely, sharing information needed to develop and maintain situational awareness of potential crises and terrorist activity nationwide. These key collaborative practices include defining and articulating a common outcome and joint strategies to guide multi-agency activities such as information sharing, and assessing staffing needs to leverage the resources other agencies contribute to the centers. We found that these practices can help agencies overcome barriers to collaboration, such as overprotection of jurisdiction and resources, as well as, incompatible procedures and processes that can result in agencies operating in a fragmented and uncoordinated way, wasting resources, and limiting effectiveness.

Based on our work on operations centers, we issued a report in October 2006 with recommendations for the Operations Directorate develop and provide guidance to the centers to encourage that they implement these key collaborative practices as a means to enhance their ability to meet their missions.⁴ Today, we would like to, first, briefly review the collaboration issues and recommendations we presented in our report, then, give an update of DHS's efforts to respond to these recommendations.

³GAO, *Results-Oriented Government: Practices That Can Help Enhance and Sustain Collaboration among Federal Agencies*, [GAO-06-15](#) (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 2005).

⁴GAO, *Homeland Security: Opportunities Exist to Enhance Collaboration at 24/7 Operations Centers Staffed by Multiple DHS Agencies*, [GAO-07-89](#) (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 2006).

In addition, we are aware of the Congress's concerns about the performance of the Homeland Security Operations Center during Hurricane Katrina, and the recent efforts made in response to these and other concerns identified in hurricane after-action studies and reports. Because these efforts to some extent affect DHS's response to our recommendations, we briefly describe some of the steps DHS recently reported to us that it has taken to address problems Katrina exposed, although it is too early to assess these actions to determine how well they are being implemented since a number of them are relatively new.

Scope and Methodology

To determine the extent to which operations centers managed by different offices and components within DHS had implemented key practices that our work has shown can enhance collaboration among federal agencies, during our original work, we reviewed transition, management integration, and planning and policy documents from the department. We also reviewed strategic plans, as well as annual performance reports and planning documents from DHS and its component agencies. In addition, we reviewed and analyzed the results of studies undertaken by DHS to assess and improve coordination and collaboration at the multi-agency centers as well as reports from GAO, the Congressional Research Service, the DHS Office of Inspector General, and others that addressed the integration, coordination, and collaboration of departmentwide program functions. To determine the extent to which they reflect how DHS has encouraged the use of the key collaborative practices, we also met with the acting director and other responsible officials from the Office of Operations Coordination to discuss its role and responsibilities.

To obtain updated information on DHS's efforts to implement our recommendations, we visited the National Operations Center, the National Infrastructure Coordination Center, the National Response Coordination Center, and Transportation Security Operations Center and met with center managers. In addition, we spoke to officials at the National Targeting Center. We also received a series of briefings on organizational and operational changes implemented since Hurricane Katrina and reviewed documentation provided to explain these changes. We relied on these visits and briefings for updated information on DHS's response to our and post-Katrina after action report recommendations; we did not verify the accuracy of DHS's officials' statements or the effectiveness of the implemented actions. We conducted our original and additional audit work in accordance with generally accepted government accounting standards between October 2005 through September 2006, and March 2007 through June 2007, respectively.

Summary

In our October 2006 report, we reported that the centers had the opportunity to better implement most of the key practices we identified that enhance collaboration. While we did not identify any major problems or barriers to executing their missions, enhanced collaboration could further ensure robust situational awareness and support to incident response. For example, we found that while DHS had implemented one key collaborative practice—leveraging its resources—by having staff from multiple agencies work together at the four operations centers, it could better implement the following collaborative practices:

- Defining and articulating a common outcome or joint strategies. This helps to provide, for example, a compelling rationale for agencies to collaborate.
- Assessing each center's needs in order to leverage resources, especially human resources or staffing needs. This helps to ensure efficiencies and that the functions of a center are not compromised by the workforce limitations of a single agency.
- Defining roles and responsibilities, especially of the watchstanders⁵ in each center, those staff who come from other agencies and have the important job of conducting surveillance activities. This helps to ensure that people at the same center in the same role perform their responsibilities consistently. Because of the potentially critical, time-sensitive need for decisive action at 24/7/365 operations centers, it is important that the roles and responsibilities of watchstanders are described and understood by both the watch staff as well as the officials responsible for managing the operations centers.
- Establishing compatible standards, policies, and procedures, such as those for DHS's Homeland Security Information Network (HSIN)⁶—the primary network DHS uses to share incident management and homeland security information across DHS, and with other federal, state, and local partners. This would provide a means to operate across

⁵For the purpose of our report, we used the term “watchstander” to refer to an individual required to work full-time on a rotating 24-hour schedule, 7 days per week, to maintain situational awareness, conduct information assessment and threat monitoring to deter, detect, and prevent terrorist incidents. A watchstander may also act as a liaison between his agency and other agency representatives at the center, and may manage response to critical threats and incidents.

⁶The HSIN is an unclassified, Web-based system that provides a secure, collaborative environment for real-time information sharing that includes reporting, graphics, and chat capabilities, as well as a document library that contains reports from multiple federal, state, local, and private-sector sources. HSIN supplies suspicious incident and pre-incident information, mapping and imagery tools, 24x7 situational awareness, and analysis of terrorist threats, tactics, and weapons.

agency boundaries and help ensure effective communications among the centers.

- Developing mechanisms to monitor and evaluate results of joint operations, such as conducting joint exercises and assessing the after-action reports. This helps management, key decision makers, and both stakeholders and customers obtain feedback to improve governing policy and operational effectiveness.
- Reinforcing agency accountability for collaborative efforts by recognizing joint efforts and outcomes achieved in published strategic and annual performance plans and reports. Joint accountability and recognition can provide an incentive to collaborate.

We found that the Operations Directorate, established in November 2005 to improve operational efficiency and coordination, provides DHS with an opportunity to more fully implement these key practices. Therefore, we recommended that the Secretary of DHS charge the Director of the Operations Directorate with developing and providing the guidance necessary to help ensure the four centers take the following six actions to implement best practices for collaboration and help better position the centers to achieve their common missions:

- Define common outcomes and joint strategies for achieving their overall mission;
- Conduct staffing needs assessments to better leverage resources within centers;
- Clarify the roles and responsibilities for watchstanders so that they understand each person's expected duties and contributions, especially during an emergency;
- Apply standards, policies, and procedures to promote the more extensive use of DHS's information network to improve communications;
- Prepare mechanisms to monitor and evaluate the results of joint and collaborative efforts to ensure effectiveness; and
- Address the results achieved by collaborative efforts in strategic and annual performance plans and reports to increase accountability.

At the time of our report, DHS agreed with these recommendations, but according to DHS officials, has yet to implement them. In recent meetings, DHS said that they believe some changes at the National Operations Center are responsive to several of these recommendations. For example, the center is taking steps to better define the role of watchstanders, and DHS has designed a strategy and set of initiatives to improve the usefulness of the information network. However, according to Operations Directorate officials, they have not been directed by DHS to issue the

overall guidance we recommended. They also do not plan to issue such guidance at this time because they stated they do not have any administrative, budgetary, or operational authority or control over the other three component centers. While we understand that these centers have missions unique to their sponsoring agencies and are not subject to the Operations Directorate, providing these centers guidance that is not mandatory but strongly endorsed on ways to better collaborate internally would enhance their effectiveness within their own centers as well as in providing the national center the information it needs, especially during a time of crisis.

DHS officials said another reason they had yet to implement our recommendations is in part because, instead of focusing on these intra-department collaboration issues, DHS has been giving priority to fixing critical inter-agency and inter-governmental issues that hindered its ability to respond to major, national incidents and disasters, particularly Hurricane Katrina. DHS officials said there were a number of post-Katrina initiatives underway which could build relationships among the centers so that they are more disposed to implement the recommended key collaborative practices in the future. For example, DHS points to its efforts to:

- Establish standard roles and procedures among all stakeholders, both within and outside DHS, for reporting information during a major incident. Now, according to DHS, information must be verified and clarified at the field and headquarters level before it is placed on its information network.
- Create the Common Operating Picture—a real-time, web-based tool designed to provide a common view of critical information during a crisis—within DHS’s Homeland Security Information Network.
- Create working groups of partners within and outside of DHS to enhance information flow on planning, training, and incident management, to resolve interdepartmental conflicts, and to facilitate decision-making at higher levels.

While it is too early to assess to what extent DHS has successfully implemented and institutionalized these initiatives since some are only recently established, they appear to be designed to address several key recommendations from congressional and administration Post-Katrina

assessments.⁷ DHS acknowledges it still has a substantial way to go to fully implement these initiatives and measure their results, but it has recently tested some of these initiatives during interagency training exercises and has plans to do more of these tests in the future. Continuing to focus on efforts to measure how well these initiatives are working, and, as importantly, to what extent key stakeholders, such as state and local governments and the private sector, anticipate that these initiatives will meet their needs is critical, given that Hurricane Katrina demonstrated these stakeholders are the first responders and key to effective disaster response and recovery. Finally, it is clear that Congressional oversight has been and will continue to be a key driver in accelerating DHS's efforts to be better prepared to respond to and manage national incidents.

DHS's Four Multi-Agency Operations Centers Have Unique Missions and Responsibilities, but Also Have Opportunities to Enhance Collaboration

In our October 2006 report on DHS multi-agency operations centers, we found that they were not unnecessarily redundant in that they have distinct missions but also contribute to the larger effort, carried out by the National Operations Center, to provide national situational awareness and incident management across DHS. In terms of key collaborative practices, DHS had implemented one practice—leveraging its resources—by having staff from multiple agencies work together at the four operations centers, but could take advantage of other relevant practices we have found to be important to enhancing and sustaining collaboration among federal agencies. We also reported that the establishment of the Operations Directorate provided DHS with an opportunity to more consistently implement these practices. As of June 2007, DHS had taken some actions but had not yet implemented our recommendations for several reasons, including the stated concern that the Operations Directorate does not have authority over component centers. Nevertheless, we continue to see merit in the wider use of the key collaborative practices we identified and a role for the Directorate to encourage their use across centers.

⁷Executive Office of the President, *The Federal Response to Hurricane Katrina: Lessons Learned*. February 2006.

The Centers Do Not Define and Articulate Common Outcomes and Joint Strategies, a Key Practice Intended to Enhance and Sustain Collaboration

At the time of our review, the three DHS components responsible for the four multi-agency centers had not developed or documented common goals or joint strategies that incorporated all the agencies within the centers and that our work has shown could, in turn, enhance collaboration among these agencies. Officials at the multi-agency operations centers we visited said they did consider formally documenting working agreements but concluded it was not essential since all of the agencies involved were part of DHS. While this may be true, documenting common outcomes can provide a compelling rationale for agencies to collaborate and documenting joint strategies ensures everyone is working in concert toward the end results that collectively need to be achieved. Our work shows that agencies strengthen their commitment to collaborate when they articulate agreements in formal documents such as memorandums of understanding, interagency guidance, or interagency planning documents.

Last year, officials from the National Operations Center said that the lack of formal agreements is a reflection of the speed with which the center was established and the inherent flexibility offered to DHS agencies in order to get them to staff the operation center positions. While recognizing the benefits of such flexibility, it is important to balance the trade-off of ensuring that all participants understand the common goals and objectives to be achieved. In addition, within DHS, external and internal memorandums of agreement and other interagency joint operating plans are often used to document common organizational goals and how agencies will work together. For example, the Office of Investigations at Immigration and Customs Enforcement and Customs and Border Protection's border patrol have a memorandum of understanding that governs the interaction between the two components as they carry out their missions to investigate and reduce vulnerabilities in the customs and immigration systems and to protect our borders, respectively, and formalizes roles and responsibilities in order to enhance information sharing. In addition, the DHS Office of Inspector General has reported that memorandums of understanding are valuable tools for establishing protocols for managing a national-level program between two organizations.⁸ For these reasons, we recommended that the Operations Directorate develop and provide guidance to the three agencies that sponsor the operations centers to help ensure they define common goals

⁸Department of Homeland Security Office of Inspector General, Office of Inspections and Special Reviews, *An Assessment of the Proposal to Merge Customs and Border Protection with Immigration and Customs Enforcement*, OIG-06-04 (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 2005).

and joint strategies that incorporate all the agencies working at the centers.

In our recent follow-up to our recommendations, DHS officials said that they had not issued such guidance, but pointed to several other post-Katrina actions DHS was taking that it believes are examples of common strategies and plans that are put into action daily and that enhance collaboration, and thus, situational awareness. For example, DHS said it has developed national reporting requirements and a coordinated national reporting chain for submitting homeland security information during a crisis, in part in response to Hurricane Katrina lessons learned. The national reporting requirements and reporting chain is to define procedures that component centers, among others, are to follow for inputting and confirming information used during a crisis.

In addition, our past work has demonstrated that agencies should involve nonfederal partners, key clients, and stakeholders in defining and articulating outcomes and decision-making. Along those lines, DHS has created or plans to create several working groups with state, local, and private sector members to enhance information flow for incident management, and facilitate decision-making at higher levels. For example, the Director of the Office of Operations said DHS plans to establish a HSIN Advisory Council to provide a forum for providing feedback on ways to improve information sharing among communities of interest.

The Centers Are at Varying Stages of Assessing Staffing Needs; Doing So Could Help to Ensure Centers Have Enough Staff to Leverage Resources to Increase Efficiency

The extent to which officials responsible for managing the four multi-agency operations centers had conducted needs assessments to determine the staffing requirements of each center as a means to leverage resources varied at the time of our review. For example, CBP officials conducted an evaluation in June 2005 that addressed the Air and Marine Operations Center's capabilities and continuing staffing needs related to its personnel, but it did not clearly address the need for, or responsibilities of, U.S. Coast Guard staff assigned to the center. Transportation Security Operations Center and National Operations Center officials said they had not documented a needs analysis for staff from other agencies. They said they viewed cross-agency staffing as a historical edict based on a general assumption that such expertise was needed to fulfill the mission of their operations center, and believed that the supporting agency providing the staff best knew the staffing requirements to fulfill its role at the centers. Our work has shown that identifying and leveraging resources, including human resources, ensures efficiencies and that the functions of a multi-

agency operations center are not compromised by the workforce limitations of a single agency.

Since our report, DHS said it is updating mission requirements for the Operations Directorate and will subsequently assess the National Operations Center's staffing needs, although DHS did not say when that assessment would be completed. On the other hand, Officials at the National Targeting Center and the Transportation Security Operations Center told us they have not assessed cross-component staffing needs because they considered such assessments to be the responsibility of the agency providing staff. Nevertheless, we maintain that such assessments continue to be useful to ensure efficiency and that operations centers have the correct mix of staff to perform their missions. Therefore, while we understand that the Operations Directorate has taken the position it does not have control over the component center resources, we maintain that providing guidance to component agencies to assist them in conducting such staffing needs assessments would allow the component sponsoring the center to leverage resources more efficiently to meet the operational needs of the center.

Not All Centers Have Established a Definition of Watchstander Roles and Responsibilities for All Agencies at Each Center; Doing So Would Help Ensure Staff Understand Each Others' Duties during Emergencies

Our work has shown that collaborating agencies should work together to define and agree on who will do what and how they will organize their joint and individual efforts, and that this facilitates decision-making. Agencies use handbooks, charters, standard operating procedures, and other methods to document these agreements. We found, however, that while three of the four multi-agency operations centers had developed descriptions for the watchstander position staffed by their own agency at the time of our review, only one center—the Air and Marine Operations Center—had developed a position description for staff assigned to the center from another DHS agency. For example, at this center, officials require that Coast Guard staff meet a standardized set of requirements for radar watchstanders. The other centers relied on the components that provide staff to define their watchstanders' roles and responsibilities. While we recognize components may be in the best position to define how their staff should contribute, we maintain that it is important that each watchstander's position within a center be clearly defined and communicated so that staff understand not only their individual role, but each other's responsibilities and span of control, as well as their expected joint contributions, most critically during major events. In addition, because of the potentially time-sensitive need for decisive action at 24/7/365 operations centers, it is important that the roles and responsibilities of watchstanders are described and understood by both

the staff and the officials responsible for managing the operations centers to enhance and sustain collaboration. Further, a definition of the watchstander role and responsibilities is important for supporting agency officials who must make staffing decisions about assigning qualified and knowledgeable personnel to the centers.

According to DHS, since our report, it has taken steps to further define the role and responsibilities of the watchstanders in its National Operations Center and documented them in its Standard Operating Procedures, as well as to develop Memoranda of Agreements with the components that will codify the role of the watchstanders they provide to the National Operations Center. Such an action, like that of the Air and Marine Operations Center with regard to Coast Guard watchstanders, helps ensure that the staff received from partnering organizations possess the necessary skills to support the operations center to which they are assigned. Given that DHS has recognized the importance of this key practice within these two instances, we continue to maintain it is important for DHS to ensure the other centers likewise have clearly defined and communicated the roles and responsibilities of watchstanders.

DHS Has Taken Some Steps to Provide Centers with Standards, Policies, and Procedures, Especially for Information Sharing, to Operate across Agency Boundaries, but Challenges Remain

Since January 2005, we have designated information sharing for homeland security a high-risk area because the federal government still faces formidable challenges in analyzing and disseminating key information among federal and other partners in a timely, accurate, and useful manner.⁹ Likewise, Hurricane Katrina demonstrated that the inability to share information during a disaster can impair the speed of response and recovery efforts. Each operations center shares information so as to understand threats, maintain situational awareness, and facilitate the management of responses to incidents. One of the key technical tools DHS has decided to use to provide for this information-sharing is the HSIN, and organizations participating in multi-agency operations centers need to be connected to the network and have the training and guidance that enables its use, among other things. DHS implemented HSIN in 2004 and reports that 18,000 individuals across DHS, other federal agencies, as well as state and local government and private entities are authorized to use it. However, we, the DHS IG, and the department itself have identified continuing concerns with this system, which is used for sharing a variety

⁹GAO. *High-Risk Series: An Update*, [GAO-07-310](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 2007).

of information, including law enforcement and emergency response information used to support situational awareness and incident response

In April 2007, we reported¹⁰ that DHS did not fully adhere to collaborative practices or Office of Management and Budget (OMB) guidance in coordinating its efforts to implement HSIN through state and local information-sharing initiatives. OMB guidance requires DHS to foster such coordination and collaboration as a means to improve government performance, including enhancing information sharing and avoiding duplication of effort. Key practices to help implement the guidance include establishing joint strategies and developing compatible policies and procedures to operate across agency boundaries. However, DHS did not fully adhere to these practices or guidance in coordinating its efforts on HSIN with key state and local stakeholders. As a result, the department faces the risk that, among other things, effective information sharing is not occurring and that its HSIN system may duplicate state and local capabilities. The department has efforts planned and underway to improve coordination and collaboration, but these efforts have just begun or are being planned with implementation milestones yet to be established. As a result, we made recommendations to the Secretary of Homeland Security to ensure that HSIN is effectively coordinated with state and local government information-sharing initiatives. The Inspector General's June 2006 report had similar findings that DHS did not provide adequate guidance, including clear information sharing processes, training, and reference materials, needed to effectively implement HSIN¹¹ so that stakeholders were sure of how to use the system.

The HSIN program manager pointed to a number of initiatives being implemented to address these challenges. These actions include the issuance of a strategic framework and implementation plan, creation of a Mission Coordinating Committee to define component information requirements for the network, and, as mentioned previously, the planned establishment of a HSIN advisory committee comprised of experts, users, and other stakeholders involved in homeland security operations around

¹⁰GAO, *Information Technology: Numerous Federal Networks Used to Support Homeland Security Need to Be Better Coordinated with Key State and Local Information-Sharing Initiatives*, [GAO-07-455](#) (Washington, D.C.: April 2007).

¹¹Department of Homeland Security Office of Inspector General, Office of Information Technology, *HSIN Could Support Information Sharing More Effectively*, DHS/OIG-06-38 (Washington, D.C.: June 2006).

the country. This committee is intended to provide DHS with comments and feedback on how the HSIN program can better meet user needs, examine DHS's processes for deploying HSIN to the states, assess state resources, and determine how HSIN can coordinate with these resources. Nevertheless, the program manager also identified challenges in getting components to participate in the process of identifying user needs, and said that the department still faced challenges in gaining widespread acceptance and use of this tool. Furthermore, one component that sponsors a key portion of HSIN, the Preparedness Directorate, is considering whether to continue to support and maintain portals to provide connectivity to private sector owners and operators of critical infrastructure sites, or whether to pursue other alternatives, raising questions about the overall utility of HSIN. Finally, the DHS Office of Inspector General plans to conduct an evaluation of the HSIN beginning later this year as a follow-up to its 2006 report to determine the progress the Department has made in fixing the shortcomings identified.¹²

Three of Four Centers Had Not Developed Methods to Monitor and Evaluate the Results of Joint Efforts

With the exception of the Air and Marine Operations Center, the multi-agency centers had not developed methods to monitor and evaluate the results of joint efforts at the time of our review, a key practice for ensuring collaboration. For example, the Office of Management and Budget's assessment of the National Operations Center for 2005 determined that center officials had not established effective annual or long-term performance goals, a first step in an effective performance management and measurement process. Nor were performance measures or other mechanisms in place to monitor and evaluate the joint efforts of multiple DHS agencies at the Transportation Security Operations Center and the National Targeting Center. Without annual goals and a means to measure performance, it is difficult for an organization to determine how well it is functioning and identify how it could be more effective. Likewise, our work has shown that developing performance measures and mechanisms can help management, key decision makers, and both stakeholders and customers obtain feedback to improve operational effectiveness and policy.

¹²Department of Homeland Security, Office of Inspector General, Office of Information Technology, *Homeland Security Information Network Could Support Information Sharing More Effectively*, OIG-06-38, June 2006.

To date, DHS has not provided guidance to the multiagency centers to help implement mechanisms to monitor and evaluate the results of collaborative efforts. However, as we further discuss later in this statement, the Operations Directorate said the National Operations Center, and, as relevant, other centers, have participated in, and will be participating in, exercises to test some of the changes the centers have implemented. These exercises provide a means to monitor and evaluate collaboration during real or hypothetical events, and the after-action reviews or lessons learned reviews conducted such as Katrina after-action reports and recommendations, as well as its own exercises and lessons learned, such as the exercises to test and revise HSIN and the Common Operating Picture (COP). The center director also described several new inter-agency groups designed to improve operations that also offer a means to monitor and evaluate results as well.

The Centers Are at Various Stages of Using Joint Agency Planning and Reporting to Reinforce Accountability for Collaborative Efforts

In our prior work, we determined that neither DHS nor the component agencies responsible for managing multi-agency operations centers consistently discussed, or included a description of, the contribution of the centers' collaborative efforts in the components' strategic or annual performance plans and reports. Our work has shown that federal agencies can use these plans and reports as tools to drive collaboration with other agencies and partners, as well as to establish complementary, consistent, and reinforcing goals and strategies for achieving results. Published strategic and annual performance plans and reports make agencies answerable for collaboration, and help to ensure that Congress has the information necessary to monitor, oversee, and effectively make investment decisions.

In terms of using strategic and performance plans to reinforce collaboration, the most recent DHS strategic plan, issued in 2004, neither included a discussion of performance goals for, nor addressed the joint operations of, the multi-agency centers. On the other hand, the Air and Marine Operations Center's strategic plan for 2005 generally discussed the importance of strengthening collaboration with other component agencies and included a goal to strengthen component agency partnerships to maximize homeland security strategies.

In terms of using published reports to increase accountability for collaboration, CBP's 2005 annual report on the operations of the National Targeting Center did include a section dedicated to the contributions of personnel from other DHS components. But, reports from the other components that manage the centers did not address the roles and

contributions of supporting agencies in accomplishing the centers' missions. Thus agencies are missing an opportunity to reinforce the value of partner agency contributions and investments. Likewise, reports from the DHS agencies that provide staff to these centers also did not address their participation in their own performance reports.

DHS's Operations Directorate Has Given Priority to Fixing the Problems that Hurricane Katrina Exposed

According to DHS officials, the Operations Directorate and the National Operations Center have been focused on responding to the congressional and administration reports and corresponding recommendations generated in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. These reports pointed to a number of failures and problems attributed to the predecessor to the National Operations Center—the Homeland Security Operations Center—including unclear roles and responsibilities; problems with the flow of information in and out of the center, especially to senior leadership; a lack of planning; problems confirming and validating information, and clarifying conflicting information; and untimely reporting. The reports concluded that as a result, senior leaders in the Department and the Administration were not aware of problems with the levees and flooding as early as they should have been. To address these problems, the after action reports made a series of recommendations, including the:

- Creation of a national operations center to provide national situational awareness, facilitate incident management, and a common operating picture;
- Establishment of a permanent planning element for incident management and a national planning and execution system; and
- Creation of a national reporting system as well as national information requirements and a reporting chain.

In response to these concerns, among others, DHS reported that it made a series of changes to its operations, organization, and procedures for sharing information in order to maintain situational awareness and provide for incident management. The changes included giving priority to improving coordination with external stakeholders, such as other federal agencies, state and local entities who are the first responders and ultimately manage recovery efforts, and its own components and their respective operations centers. The DHS National Operations Center staff with whom we spoke maintained that implementing these changes could in turn create an environment where the components and centers may be more disposed to implementing the key practices for improving collaboration that our work has identified.

To address problems with collecting, analyzing, and timely disseminating of critical information during an incident that Katrina exposed, DHS officials said the Operations Directorate and the National Operations Center established several initiatives within the last year or so. Among other things, these initiatives included a new notification system aimed at providing protocols for sharing information on a graduated scale (from steady state to awareness, concern, and finally urgency). The Operations Directorate and the National Operations Center also defined a reporting structure, ranging from more real-time, unvetted information available from and to a wide range of stakeholders to reports intended to be more complete, vetted and validated through designated lead agencies and higher-level summaries geared for more senior leadership. DHS has initially developed these protocols and processes for sharing information for hurricane response and recovery and is expanding them to other scenarios and concerns.

One other major DHS initiative to better share information for situational awareness and decision support that responds to key post-Katrina recommendations also depends on HSIN. DHS has created the Common Operating Picture within HSIN as a web-based tool designed to be available to all HSIN users, including key federal, state, and joint field office homeland security partners, to provide the information needed to make critical decisions during crises. Initially, DHS created COP templates to address hurricane disasters in time for the 2006 hurricane season. The tool includes, among other things, current summaries of specific situations, the location and operational status of critical infrastructure, media reports, and streaming video from the field that provides a real-time picture of developments, especially at an incident site, to enhance situational awareness. DHS also has created COP Training Teams that provide training and technical support to DHS components, and other partners. DHS said training was provided to 17 states on the Gulf and East coasts in 2006, the most hurricane-prone areas of the country. However, DHS is still resolving operational issues with COP. For example, DHS reported in January 2007 that a comprehensive backup capability for the COP was under development but that the Department was prepared for contingencies related to power, telecommunications and server outages. DHS also reported that it continues to develop information requirements for use in other scenarios, such as pandemics and incidents involving nuclear devices, among others, as well as to further refine the system.

DHS officials said they have created several new working groups and organizational entities within the Operations Directorate or National Operations Center aimed at improving capabilities. The new units include:

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- Senior Leadership Group. It is comprised of key DHS officials across the major components and intended to provide a forum for the Secretary to obtain critical advice from those with the most direct incident management responsibilities, to communicate decisions, to facilitate the integration and coordination of intradepartmental operational missions, activities, and programs at the headquarters level; and to assist in resolving intradepartmental issues. The group convenes as necessary, such as during an actual incident or major exercise, although the Secretary or the Director of Operations Coordination may convene the group at any time.
 - Incident Management Planning Team—consisting of 53 members drawn from 22 DHS components, 25 partner departments or agencies, and the American Red Cross—that has begun the coordination of existing plans and the use of resources for domestic disasters. According to DHS officials, the team is developing plans for the most likely, and then the most dangerous, of the National Planning Scenarios—the 15 all-hazards planning scenarios for use in national, federal, state, and local homeland security preparedness activities that are representative of the range of potential terrorist attacks and natural disasters and the related impacts that face our nation.
 - Disaster Situational Awareness Teams. These teams are to be comprised of field staff from Immigrations and Customs Enforcement since they can be more easily deployed and are to be at a site within 24 hours to provide situational awareness reporting and other assistance.
 - Crisis Action Teams. These multi-agency teams, whose membership overlaps in part with the new planning teams, are to provide interagency incident management capabilities and to, among other things, recommend courses of action, help prioritize incidents and resources, and serve as a central point for information collection, evaluation, and coordination, especially for complex or multiple incidents.

Finally, DHS has completed a study of its operational capabilities and gaps to guide its future mission and initiatives. Called the Operations Mission Blueprint, DHS operations staff said the results are still under review; therefore, that they could not provide us with a copy. Part of this study includes a plan to consolidate DHS operations centers in headquarters and its components in a facility located at the St. Elizabeth's West Campus in Washington, D.C.¹³ The plan cites a number of organizational benefits to

¹³Department of Homeland Security, *National Capital Region Housing Master Plan: Building a Unified Department*, Washington D.C., October 2006.

collocating facilities, including enhancing collaboration by bringing together a large number of DHS executives and line employees currently dispersed across the region.

While DHS provided us with background briefings, some supporting documentation, and some after action reports on the initiatives we have outlined, we did not evaluate the extent to which they have been implemented and are effective at addressing the problems Katrina identified, in part because they are so new and in some cases still concepts. DHS officials themselves, however, identified some challenges and next steps in implementation. These include, for example, continuing to outreach to and better integrate DHS components as well as other stakeholders in planning and implementation, such as state, local, and private sector partners.

As to this latter challenge, DHS has tested several of its new initiatives, such as the COP, through daily use, as well as interagency exercises. For example, through an exercise conducted last year, the National Operations Center identified opportunities to improve implementation of the COP. DHS recently completed two other exercises and plans additional exercises this fall and over the next two years that can also provide helpful performance information. We agree that the use of exercises, and more importantly the after-action and lessons learned analyses and recommendations to fix identified problems, are good methods to help determine how well initiatives are working, especially when testing under live, real-time circumstances is not possible.

Complementing this with more systematic performance measures and ways to obtain feedback from key users and stakeholders on how well the initiatives meet their needs would also be helpful. For example, officials noted that there are systematic methods for evaluating what has been achieved. The objectives of the HSIN implementation include providing measurable performance metrics as well as obtaining stakeholder feedback through its new Advisory Committee, when constituted. Implementation of the system is to be based on both agency and industry best practices. Following through on implementation of these types of measures and feedback loops is particularly important for state and local stakeholders, as Katrina demonstrated, since they are the first responders and key to effective incident response planning and implementation.

Concluding Observations

Our prior work demonstrated that the three component multi-agency operations centers we reviewed have a critical mission to meet for their own agencies, as well as a common mission to support the National Operations Center, the key hub for sharing information on nationwide situational awareness and for coordinating federal support during major disasters. Centers rely on staff from multiple agencies to achieve their missions, so it is important that the centers can collaborate effectively among the agencies within a center. Our work provides a blueprint of key practices the centers could use to achieve this collaboration, and also demonstrates that they have opportunities to implement these practices more extensively. The payoff can include assurance that all staff clearly understands roles and responsibilities, especially during a crisis, and that centers have a common goal for achieving their joint missions, the right staff from across agencies to do so, and ways to evaluate results achieved and implement needed corrective actions. In turn, this can better position DHS, and the nation, to prevent, mitigate and respond to a critical event, help the Congress to fulfill its oversight and homeland security responsibilities, and help the department better integrate into a cohesive unit. While we understand that the Directorate does not control component centers and is reluctant to issue guidance to them on ways to implement these best practices as we recommended, we continue to think that the Directorate can reinforce these practices through such guidance and example, not only as it works with external stakeholders, but also with its internal component centers. We believe the Directorate could be more proactive to accelerate implementation so that centers achieve anticipated benefits sooner given current priorities and available resources.

We also understand that the department set its priorities to first focus on fixing the problems Katrina exposed, as the Congress and Administration tasked, and recognize that such focus has, and will continue to be, a key driver in effecting change to improve situational awareness and incident management capabilities at DHS. We also believe that the initiatives DHS is implementing in response appear to be the proper steps moving forward, given that they focus on better planning for disaster response and better information sharing, as well as include the necessary key players. However, while these initiatives are aimed at putting the right players, processes, protocols, and practices in place, both we and the department recognize that implementation is early, measures of effectiveness must still be put in place, and challenges must be overcome.

Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, this completes my prepared statement. I would be happy to respond to any questions that you or any members of the subcommittee may have at this time.

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