



Highlights of [GAO-10-171](#), a report to Congressional Committees

Why GAO Did This Study

Recently, there has been an increased focus on developing the ability to provide early detection of and situational awareness during a disease outbreak. The Implementing Recommendations of the 9/11 Commission Act sought to enhance this capability, in part, by creating the National Biosurveillance Integration Center (NBIC) within the Department of Homeland Security. NBIC is to help provide early detection and situational awareness by integrating information and supporting an interagency biosurveillance community. The act directed GAO to report on the state of biosurveillance and resource use in federal, state, local, and tribal governments. This report is one in a series responding to that mandate. This report focuses on the actions taken by NBIC to (1) acquire resources to accomplish its mission and (2) effectively collaborate with its federal partners. To conduct this work, GAO reviewed documents, such as NBIC's Concept of Operations, and interviewed officials at NBIC and 11 federal partners.

What GAO Recommends

To enhance collaboration, GAO recommends that NBIC work with its interagency advisory body to develop a strategy for addressing barriers to collaboration—such as the lack of clear mission, roles, and procedures—and to develop accountability mechanisms to monitor these efforts. We provided this draft to DHS and 11 federal partners. DHS concurred with our recommendations.

[View GAO-10-171 or key components.](#)
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BIOSURVEILLANCE

Developing a Collaboration Strategy Is Essential to Fostering Interagency Data and Resource Sharing

What GAO Found

To carry out its early detection and situational awareness mission, NBIC has made efforts to acquire data from the integration center's community of federal partners, obtain analytical expertise from other agencies, establish governance bodies to develop and oversee the community of federal partners, and provide information technologies to support data collection, analysis, and communication. However, NBIC does not receive the kind of data it has identified as most critical for supporting its early detection mission—particularly, data generated at the earliest stages of an event. In addition, NBIC has faced challenges leveraging the expertise of its federal partners. For example, NBIC officials have emphasized the importance of agencies temporarily assigning personnel to supplement the expertise at NBIC. However, only 2 of 11 partner agencies have assigned personnel to support the integration center. NBIC has developed governance bodies that provide oversight for the integration center and the interagency community. Although the integration center has also developed an information technology system, it is primarily used to help identify and collect publicly available Internet data because NBIC lacks data from federal partners that best support the early detection goal of biosurveillance.

NBIC is not fully equipped to carry out its mission because it lacks key resources—data and personnel—from its partner agencies, which may be at least partially attributed to collaboration challenges it has faced. Integrating biosurveillance data is an inherently interagency enterprise, as reflected by both law and NBIC's strategy for meeting its mission. NBIC is to help coordinate and support a community of federal partners for early detection and enhanced situational awareness. Consequently, for NBIC to obtain the resources it needs to meet its mission, it must effectively employ collaborative practices. However, in interviews with partner agencies, GAO encountered widespread confusion, uncertainty, and skepticism around the value of participation in the interagency community, as well as the mission and purpose of NBIC within that community. Further, interviews with agency officials demonstrated a lack of clarity about roles, responsibilities, joint strategies, policies, and procedures for operating across agency boundaries. We have previously reported on key practices that can help enhance and sustain collaboration among federal agencies. For collaborating agencies to overcome barriers to working together, they need to, among other things, (1) develop a clear and compelling rationale for working together by articulating a common federal outcome or purpose; (2) establish joint strategies, policies, and procedures to help align activities, core processes, and resources; (3) identify resources needed to initiate or sustain their collaborative effort; (4) work together to define and agree on their respective roles and responsibilities; and (5) develop accountability mechanisms to guide implementation and monitoring of their efforts to collaborate. Development of a strategy for collaboration and the use of these key collaboration practices could enhance NBIC's ability to foster interagency data and resource sharing.