INFORMATION SHARING

DHS Has Demonstrated Leadership and Progress, but Additional Actions Could Help Sustain and Strengthen Efforts

Why GAO Did This Study

Recent planned and attempted acts of terrorism on U.S. soil underscore the importance of the need to ensure that terrorism-related information is shared with stakeholders across all levels of government in an effective and timely manner. DHS, through its Office of Intelligence and Analysis, has responsibility for sharing this information and has established an information-sharing vision for 2015—which includes ensuring that the right information gets to the right people at the right time. GAO was asked to examine the extent to which DHS (1) has made progress in achieving its information-sharing mission, and (2) tracks and assesses information-sharing improvements. GAO analyzed relevant DHS documents, such as strategic planning documents and those related to DHS's governance structure, among others, and interviewed DHS officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DHS revise its policies and guidance to include processes for identifying information-sharing gaps, analyzing root causes of those gaps, and identifying, assessing, and mitigating risks of removing incomplete initiatives from its list; better track and assess the progress of key information-sharing initiatives; and establish the level of capabilities programs must implement to meet its vision for 2015. DHS agreed with these recommendations and identified actions taken or planned to implement them.

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What GAO Found

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has made progress in achieving its information-sharing mission, but could take additional steps to improve its efforts. Specifically, DHS has demonstrated leadership commitment by establishing a governance board to serve as the decision-making body for DHS information-sharing issues. The board has enhanced collaboration among DHS components and identified a list of key information-sharing initiatives. The board has also developed and documented a process to prioritize some of the initiatives for additional oversight and support. However, because DHS has not revised its policies and guidance to include processes for identifying information-sharing gaps and the results; analyzing root causes of those gaps; and identifying, assessing, and mitigating risks of removing incomplete initiatives from its list, it does not have an institutional record that would help it replicate and sustain those information-sharing efforts. Overall, DHS's key information-sharing initiatives have progressed, and most have met interim milestones. However, progress has slowed for half of the 18 key initiatives, in part because of funding constraints. For example, 5 of DHS's top 8 priority information-sharing initiatives currently face funding shortfalls. The board has not been able to secure additional funds for these initiatives because they ultimately compete for funding within the budgets of individual components, but DHS officials noted that the board's involvement has kept some initiatives from experiencing funding cuts. DHS is also developing plans that will be important in managing its information-sharing efforts, such as a revised strategy for information sharing and a related implementation plan.

DHS has taken steps to track its information-sharing efforts, but has not yet fully assessed how they have improved sharing. Specifically, DHS is tracking the implementation progress of key information-sharing initiatives, but the department does not maintain completion dates and does not fully assess the impact initiatives are having on sharing. Determining and documenting initiative completion dates and how initiatives affect sharing, where feasible, would help the board better track progress in implementing the initiatives and make any necessary course corrections if completion dates are delayed. Further, DHS has begun to assess the extent to which its technology programs, systems, and initiatives—which include the key information-sharing initiatives—have implemented critical information-sharing capabilities, such as secure user access authorization. However, DHS has not yet determined the specific capabilities each particular program must implement for DHS to conclude that it has improved information sharing enough to achieve its information-sharing vision for 2015. Establishing the level of capabilities programs must implement could help DHS prioritize programs, and track and assess progress toward its vision. In addition, DHS is in the process of implementing customer feedback measures on the usefulness of information provided and has taken steps to assess customers' information needs. DHS has not yet developed measures that determine the impact of its information-sharing efforts on homeland security, but plans to develop ways to assess information-sharing results toward achieving its 2015 vision. DHS's time frames for completing this effort are to be included in forthcoming plans currently being developed.

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