



Highlights of [GAO-04-740](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Lives of first responders and those whom they are trying to assist can be lost when first responders cannot communicate effectively as needed. This report addresses issues of determining the status of interoperable wireless communications across the nation, and the potential roles that federal, state, and local governments can play in improving these communications.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Secretary of DHS (1) continue to develop a nationwide database and common terminology for public safety interoperability communications channels; (2) assess interoperability in specific locations against defined requirements; (3) through federal grant awards, encourage state action to establish and support a statewide body to develop and implement detailed improvement plans; and (4) encourage that grant applications be in compliance with statewide interoperability plans, once they are developed. GAO also recommends that the Director of OMB work with DHS to review SAFECOM's functions and establish a long-term program with appropriate authority and funding to coordinate interoperability efforts across the federal government.

DHS generally agreed with our first two recommendations but did not specifically address the other recommendations to DHS. OMB had no comments.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-740.

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

HOMELAND SECURITY

Federal Leadership and Intergovernmental Cooperation Required to Achieve First Responder Interoperable Communications

What GAO Found

In a November 6, 2003, testimony, GAO said that no one group or level of government could “fix” the nation’s interoperable communications problems. Success would require effective, collaborative, interdisciplinary, and intergovernmental planning.

The present extent and scope nationwide of public safety wireless communication systems’ ability to talk among themselves as necessary and authorized has not been determined. Data on current conditions compared to needs are necessary to develop plans for improvement and measure progress over time. However, the nationwide data needed to do this are not currently available. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) intends to obtain this information by the year 2005 by means of a nationwide survey. However, at the time of our review, DHS had not yet developed its detailed plans for conducting this survey and reporting its results.

The federal government can take a leadership role in support of efforts to improve interoperability by developing national requirements and a national architecture, developing nationwide databases, and providing technical and financial support for state and local efforts to improve interoperability. In 2001, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) established the federal government’s Wireless Public Safety Interoperable Communications Program, SAFECOM, to unify efforts to achieve national wireless communications interoperability. However, SAFECOM’s authority and ability to oversee and coordinate federal and state efforts has been limited by its dependence upon other agencies for funding and their willingness to cooperate. OMB is currently examining alternative methods to implement SAFECOM’s mission. In addition, DHS, where SAFECOM now resides, has recently announced it is establishing an Office for Interoperability and Compatibility to coordinate the federal response to the problems of interoperability in several functions, including wireless communications. The exact structure and funding for this office, which will include SAFECOM, are still being developed.

State and local governments can play a large role in developing and implementing plans to improve public safety agencies’ interoperable communications. State and local governments own most of the physical infrastructure of public safety communications systems, and states play a central role in managing emergency communications. The Federal Communications Commission recognized the central role of states in concluding that states should manage the public safety interoperability channels in the 700 MHz communications spectrum. States, with broad input from local governments, are a logical choice to serve as a foundation for interoperability planning because incidents of any level of severity originate at the local level with states as the primary source of support. However, states are not required to develop interoperability plans, and there is no clear guidance on what should be included in such plans.