

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-24-107426](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Emergency Management and Technology, Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear weapons have the potential to kill thousands of people. To manage threats in these areas, federal statute established CWMD in December 2018 by reorganizing functions of predecessor offices in DHS.

This statement describes findings from GAO's reports on CWMD's programs from August 2018 through March 2024. They address challenges and opportunities for the effective operations and implementation of CWMD's chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear security activities.

To conduct prior work, GAO reviewed relevant laws, policies, strategic plans, and other documents. GAO also interviewed federal, state, industry, and other officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO has made 18 recommendations since 2018 to address the challenges discussed in this statement. As of March 2024, DHS has implemented nine recommendations, partially implemented one, and not implemented three. GAO made five additional recommendations to CWMD in March 2024. GAO will monitor CWMD's progress to implement all of the remaining recommendations.

View [GAO-24-107426](#). For more information, contact Tina Won Sherman at (202) 512-8461 or shermant@gao.gov.

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WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION

DHS Has Made Progress in Some Areas, but Additional Improvements Are Needed

What GAO Found

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has made progress in addressing challenges that GAO identified related to the Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction Office (CWMD). However, additional improvements are needed. The following summarizes progress made and challenges remaining in several of CWMD's key areas, reported by GAO since 2018.

Chemical defense: GAO reported on challenges and progress in CWMD's chemical defense efforts. In August 2018, GAO found that DHS had not fully integrated and coordinated its chemical defense programs and activities among its component agencies. By not doing so, DHS risked missing opportunities to leverage resources, share information, and improve its effectiveness in addressing chemical threats through improved integration and coordination. To address GAO's recommendation, CWMD issued a Chemical Defense Strategy in December 2019 that established goals and objectives that included integrating and coordinating DHS's chemical defense capabilities. DHS subsequently issued an implementation plan in September 2021 that involved CWMD and several participating DHS component agencies.

Biodefense: GAO reported on challenges with two of DHS's biosurveillance efforts that CWMD oversees—the Biological Detection for the 21st Century program and the National Biosurveillance Integration Center. In May 2021, GAO found that DHS did not 1) apply best practices when conducting technology readiness assessments for its Biological Detection for the 21st Century program; or 2) conduct these assessments before key acquisition decision points. In response, DHS revised its program guide to incorporate best practices, but as of March 2024, had not demonstrated that it is conducting such assessments before key acquisition decisions. In November 2023, GAO reported that the National Biosurveillance Integration Center documented its efforts to obtain adequate personnel and develop new technology, but did not clearly define performance measures and associated time frames in its strategic planning documents. As of March 2024, DHS reported it was developing a strategy and implementation plan for the center that will include milestones, actions, targets, and time frames. GAO will monitor DHS's efforts.

Radiological and nuclear detection: In March 2024, GAO reported on CWMD's Securing the Cities program, which is designed to enhance the nuclear detection capabilities in select cities. GAO found that CWMD took steps to strengthen program outreach among its partners, but had not clearly communicated performance expectations. GAO will monitor DHS's efforts to address these and other challenges.