

Why GAO Did This Study

The 2010 *National Security Strategy* emphasizes the importance of strengthening our security and resilience at home and building capability to respond to and recover from major chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, and high-yield explosive (CBRNE) incidents. The National Guard has established 17 CBRNE Enhanced Response Force Packages (CERFP), which are staffed with National Guard part-time personnel, to provide life-saving capabilities in response to a CBRNE event. The teams are intended to coordinate operations with multiple response partners at the local, state, and federal levels—including Department of Defense (DOD) forces. The National Guard Bureau (NGB) is responsible for managing the CERFP program. GAO assessed (1) how well CERFPs are prepared to perform their mission and how such readiness is measured and reported; (2) how effectively CERFPs coordinate with incident response partners and how well this is evaluated; and (3) the effectiveness of the CERFPs' command and control framework. GAO reviewed program documentation, surveyed National Guard and emergency management officials from 27 states, observed training exercises, and interviewed DOD, NGB, and CERFP officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DOD take a number of actions to increase CERFP preparedness, strengthen pre-incident coordination with potential response partners, and ensure the effective command and control of operations involving CERFPs. DOD agreed with the recommendations.

View [GAO-12-114](#) or key components. For more information, contact Janet St. Laurent at (202) 512-4300 or stlaurentj@gao.gov.

HOMELAND DEFENSE AND WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION

Additional Steps Could Enhance the Effectiveness of the National Guard's Life-Saving Response Forces

What GAO Found

The National Guard's CERFPs face personnel, training, and equipment challenges that have adversely affected their preparedness to effectively execute the CBRNE mission. For example, state National Guard and CERFP officials cited ongoing difficulty in maintaining adequate numbers of personnel with the proficiency needed to execute many specialized tasks they are to perform, and stated that additional equipment may be needed to perform the mission. These challenges highlight that NGB has not established a process to comprehensively review and validate personnel, training, and equipment requirements. In addition, CERFPs' readiness information is not comprehensively available to potential DOD response partners because such information is not yet included in DOD's centralized readiness-reporting system, and final plans to do so have not yet been developed. In the absence of accurate requirements and comprehensive readiness information, NGB is unable to effectively prioritize funding and mitigate resource deficiencies that could jeopardize the CERFPs' preparedness levels.

CERFPs coordinate with some of their potential response partners—such as local and state organizations—through activities such as briefings but have achieved varying levels of success in educating such partners about CERFP capabilities because of insufficient guidance on how to conduct interagency coordination. Existing coordination guidance is imprecise on the frequency and targeting of coordination activities, thereby providing little direction for prioritizing responsibilities. Additionally, opportunities exist to enhance regional coordination through interstate agreements and planning. Such agreements would allow more effective pooling and sharing of resources across state boundaries; however, few interstate agreements exist between states with and without CERFPs. NGB is taking steps to assess the CERFPs' performance of coordination activities, but NGB's evaluation tool, based on existing guidance, does not have coordination standards against which CERFP performance can be measured. In the absence of sufficient interagency coordination guidance and evaluation standards, NGB is unable to foster a consistent approach to coordination that improves the CERFPs' ability to respond to regional events.

NGB has a framework in place for the operational command and control of CERFPs that outlines how teams will integrate with civilian and military command structures. However, the command and control of operations involving CERFPs may be limited because of (1) inadequate communications equipment; (2) the absence of required agreements between some CERFPs and their out-of-state elements; and (3) infrequent opportunities to practice potential command and control arrangements in a realistic response environment. For example, the CERFPs' authorized communications equipment is not interoperable with the equipment used by some other response organizations, such as first responders, and has a limited range. In addition, NGB has initiated plans to introduce 10 new forces—called Homeland Response Forces—to assist civil authorities in responding to disasters of all kinds. This plan will affect the existing command and control framework, but NGB has not issued updated command and control guidance to the CERFPs. As a result of these factors, NGB lacks assurance that CERFP operations can be commanded and controlled effectively.