

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-19-171](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

Public-safety communications systems are used by thousands of federal, state, and local jurisdictions. It is vital that first responders have communications systems that allow them to connect with their counterparts in other agencies and jurisdictions. OEC offers written guidance, governance planning, and technical assistance to help ensure public-safety entities have the necessary plans, resources, and training to support emergency communications. FirstNet, an independent authority within the Department of Commerce, is establishing a public-safety network.

GAO was asked to review OEC's efforts related to interoperable emergency communications. This report examines (1) OEC's and FEMA's collaborative efforts to develop grant guidance; (2) how OEC incorporates FirstNet's network and other emerging technologies into its plans and offerings; and (3) the extent to which OEC has assessed its methods of communication. GAO evaluated OEC's and FEMA's coordination against GAO's leading practices for interagency collaboration; surveyed all 54 state-designated SWICs; evaluated OEC's communications efforts against federal internal control standards; and interviewed officials that represented various areas of public safety.

What GAO Recommends

OEC should assess its methods of communication to help ensure it is using the appropriate tools in communicating with external stakeholders. DHS concurred with the recommendation.

View [GAO-19-171](#). For more information, contact Mark Goldstein at (202) 512-2834 or goldsteinm@gao.gov.

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EMERGENCY COMMUNICATIONS

Office of Emergency Communications Should Take Steps to Help Improve External Communications

What GAO Found

The Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Office of Emergency Communications (OEC) and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) collaborate on grant guidance to help public-safety stakeholders use federal funds for interoperable emergency communications. GAO found that OEC's and FEMA's efforts generally align with GAO's leading practices for effective interagency collaboration. For example, OEC's and FEMA's memorandum of agreement and standard operating procedures articulate their agreement in formal documents, define their respective responsibilities, and include relevant participants. During this review, the agencies established a process to monitor and assess grantees' compliance with the grant guidance. However, because the grants for 2018 were not yet awarded at the time of GAO's review, GAO was unable to assess the effectiveness of the new process.

Hypothetical Example of Emergency Communications Interoperability



Source: GAO. | GAO-19-171

OEC incorporates the First Responder Network Authority's (FirstNet) nationwide public-safety broadband network and other emerging technologies into various offerings such as written guidance, governance planning, and technical assistance. Public-safety organizations GAO interviewed and statewide interoperability coordinators (SWIC) GAO surveyed were generally satisfied with OEC's communication efforts.

OEC has not assessed its methods for communicating with external stakeholders. According to federal internal control standards, management should externally communicate the necessary quality information to achieve the entity's objectives and periodically assess its methods of communication so that the organization has the appropriate tools to communicate quality information on a timely basis. Some SWIC survey respondents and public-safety representatives identified an opportunity for OEC to improve its methods of communication. For example, 26 of the 54 SWICs responded that OEC could use additional tools or approaches, such as social media, for improving communication with its stakeholders. In addition, public-safety officials reported that they have missed training because they were unaware of opportunities. Because OEC has not assessed its methods of communication, OEC may not be using the best tools and approaches to provide timely information on training opportunities, workshops, and other emergency communications information to the public-safety community.