PROJECT SAFECOM

Key Cross-Agency Emergency Communications Effort Requires Stronger Collaboration

Why GAO Did This Study

One of the five priorities in the President's Management Agenda is the expansion of electronic government (e–government)—the use of Internet applications to enhance access to and delivery of government information and services. Project SAFECOM is one of the 25 initiatives sponsored by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to implement this agenda. Managed by the Department of Homeland Security, the project's goal is to achieve interoperability among emergency-response communications at all levels of government, while at the same time realizing cost savings. GAO assessed the government's progress in implementing Project SAFECOM.

What GAO Recommends

To enhance the ability of Project SAFECOM to improve communications among first responders at all levels of government, GAO recommends that the Secretary of Homeland Security direct the Under Secretary for Science and Technology to complete agreements with the project's federal and nonfederal stakeholders that define how they will contribute to SAFECOM and measure program progress. Commenting on a draft of this report, the department provided information about the project's recent activities and noted that draft agreements had been sent to all of the project's federal funding partners.
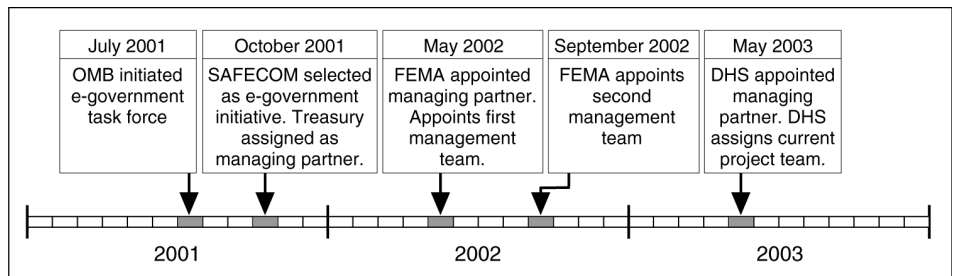
www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-494.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Linda D. Koontz at (202) 512-6240 or koontzl@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

While its overall objective of achieving communications interoperability among emergency response entities at all levels of government is a challenging task that will take many years to fully accomplish, Project SAFECOM, in its 2-year history, has made very limited progress in addressing this objective. OMB's e–government objectives of improving operating efficiency and achieving budgetary savings within federal programs have also been largely stymied.

Two major factors have contributed to the project's limited progress: (1) lack of consistent executive commitment and support, and (2) an inadequate level of interagency collaboration. In its 2 1/2-year history, Project SAFECOM has had four different management teams in three different agencies (see figure). In recent months, the current project team has pursued various near-term activities that are intended to lay the groundwork for future interoperability, including establishing a governance structure that emphasizes collaboration with stakeholders and developing guidance for making grants that can be used to encourage public safety agencies to plan for interoperability. However, it has not yet reached written agreements with several of its major stakeholders on their roles in the project or established a stable funding mechanism. Until these shortcomings are addressed, the ability of Project SAFECOM to deliver on its promise of improved interoperability and better response to emergencies will remain in doubt.

Time Line of Major Project SAFECOM Management Changes

July 2001	October 2001	May 2002	September 2002	May 2003
OMB initiated e-government task force	SAFECOM selected as e-government initiative. Treasury assigned as managing partner.	FEMA appointed managing partner. Appoints first management team.	FEMA appoints second management team	DHS appointed managing partner. DHS assigns current project team.

Source: GAO.