United States General Accounting Office

GAO

Report to Congressional Requesters

April 2004

PROJECT SAFECOM

Key Cross-Agency Emergency Communications Effort Requires Stronger Collaboration

G A O

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Highlights

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.

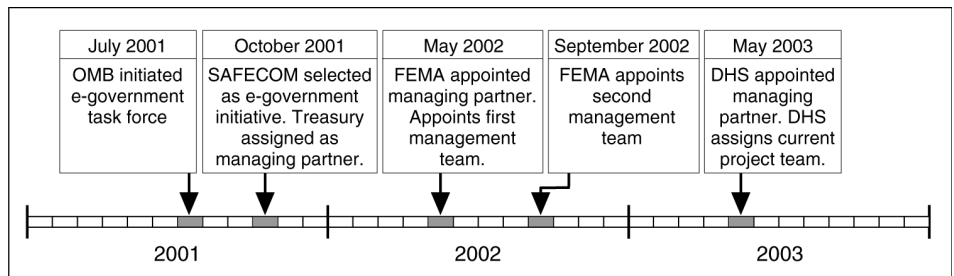www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-494.

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.

2001   2002   2003

Source: GAO.

United States General Accounting Office

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Abbreviations

AGILE	Advanced Generation of Interoperability for Law Enforcement
DHS	Department of Homeland Security
FEMA	Federal Emergency Management Agency
GAO	General Accounting Office
OMB	Office of Management and Budget
PSWN	Public Safety Wireless Network

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United States General Accounting Office
Washington, D.C. 20548

April 16, 2004

The Honorable Tom Davis
Chairman, Committee on Government Reform
House of Representatives

The Honorable Adam H. Putnam
Chairman, Subcommittee on Technology,
   Information Policy, Intergovernmental Relations
   and the Census
Committee on Government Reform
House of Representatives

The Honorable Christopher Shays
Chairman, Subcommittee on National Security,
   Emerging Threats and International Relations
Committee on Government Reform
House of Representatives

As you know, the President has identified the expansion of e–government[1] as one of five priorities in his management agenda; accordingly, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) has sponsored 25 initiatives to implement this agenda. This report specifically reviews the progress made to date on one of these initiatives, Project SAFECOM, which has an overall objective of achieving national wireless communications interoperability[2] among first responders and public safety systems at all levels of government. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) is currently the federal managing partner for this project.

The 25 e–government initiatives sponsored by OMB, including Project SAFECOM, were originally chosen on the basis of their (1) likelihood of being deployed within 18 to 24 months, (2) value to citizens, and (3) potential to improve federal agency efficiency. By achieving interoperable public safety communications systems at all levels of government, Project

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[1]E–government (electronic government) refers to the use of information technology (IT), particularly Web-based Internet applications, to enhance the access to and delivery of government information and service to citizens, business partners, and employees and among agencies at all levels of government.

[2]Interoperability is the ability of two or more systems or components to exchange information and to use the information that has been exchanged.

SAFECOM was intended to not only improve public services in emergencies but also to realize cost savings.

Achieving communications interoperability among emergency personnel is a complex and challenging task involving many different governmental and nongovernmental entities and a range of inter-related technical issues, such as how the communications spectrum is managed and how local governments buy and upgrade equipment.[3] Given the importance of addressing this challenge, you requested that we assess the progress of the federal government in implementing Project SAFECOM. To achieve this objective, we reviewed documents outlining the program's goals, plans, and achievements; its management structure and objectives; its collaboration and funding strategy; and its selection as one of the 25 OMB-sponsored electronic government initiatives. We identified documented activities and achievements directly associated with Project SAFECOM and assessed the extent to which they contributed to fulfillment of the project's original objectives. We also discussed the program's management with current and former program managers. Our work was conducted at DHS in Washington, D.C., from December 2003 through March 2004, in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

Results in Brief

After more than 2 years, Project SAFECOM has made very limited progress in addressing its overall objective of achieving communications interoperability among entities at all levels of government. In addition, although the project was originally expected to realize billions of dollars in federal budgetary savings by improving agency efficiency, program officials no longer expect it to produce such savings.

Two major factors have contributed to the project's limited progress. First, Project SAFECOM has not received consistent executive commitment and support, as evidenced by the fact that it has been assigned to three different agencies and has had four management teams in its 2 1/2-year history. Second, the project has not achieved the level of collaboration necessary for a complex cross-government initiative of this type. In recent months, the current project team has pursued various near-term activities that are

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[3]For a more detailed discussion of the challenges in achieving communications interoperability, see U.S. General Accounting Office, *Homeland Security: Challenges in Achieving Interoperable Communications for First Responders*, GAO-04-231T (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 6, 2003).

intended to lay the groundwork for future interoperability, including establishing a governance structure that emphasizes collaboration with stakeholders and developing grant guidance for use with awards to public safety agencies that encourage planning 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 question.

To enhance the ability of DHS to effectively collaborate with other agencies involved with SAFECOM, and to better ensure that the project receives stable funding, we are recommending that the Secretary of Homeland Security take steps to complete written participation and funding agreements with organizations representing all of the project's stakeholders. Commenting on a draft of this report, DHS's GAO liaison provided additional information about SAFECOM's activities since May 2003. The DHS official also noted activities under way that could partially address our recommendation. However, until DHS reaches agreements with all of SAFECOM's stakeholders, including nonfunding federal partners and state and local partners, its ability to achieve its objectives will continue to be hampered.

Background

One of the key provisions of the President's Management Agenda, released in 2001, is the expansion of electronic government. To implement this provision, OMB sought to identify potential projects that could be implemented to address the issue of multiple federal agencies' performing similar tasks that could be consolidated through e–government processes and technology. To accomplish this, OMB established a team called the E–Government Task Force, which analyzed the federal bureaucracy and identified areas of significant overlap and redundancy in how federal agencies provide services to the public. The task force noted that multiple agencies were conducting redundant operations within 30 major functions and business lines in the executive branch. For example, the task force found that 10 of the 30 federal agencies it studied had ongoing activities in the National Security and Defense line of business, while 13 of the 30 agencies had ongoing activities related to Disaster Preparation and Response Management.

To address such redundancies, the task force evaluated a variety of potential projects, focusing on collaborative opportunities to integrate IT

operations and simplify processes within lines of business across agencies and around citizen needs. Twenty-five projects were selected to lead the federal government's drive toward e–government transformation and enhanced service delivery.[4] In its e–government strategy, published in February 2002,[5] OMB established a portfolio management structure to help oversee and guide the selected initiatives. The five portfolios in this structure are "government to citizen," "government to business," "government to government," "internal efficiency and effectiveness," and "cross-cutting." For each initiative, OMB designated a specific agency as the managing partner responsible for leading the initiative, and also assigned other federal agencies as partners in carrying out the initiative.[6] OMB initially approved Project SAFECOM as an e–government initiative in October 2001. SAFECOM falls within the government-to-government portfolio, due to its focus on accelerating the implementation of interoperable public safety communications at all levels of government.

As described in its 2002 e–government report, OMB planned for SAFECOM to address critical shortcomings in efforts by public safety agencies to achieve interoperability and eliminate redundant wireless communications networks. OMB also stated that the project was expected to save lives and lead to better-managed disaster response, as well as result in billions of dollars in budget savings from "right-sized" federal communications networks and links to state networks.[7]

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[4]For a detailed assessment of the selection process, see U.S. General Accounting Office, *Electronic Government: Selection and Implementation of the Office of Management and Budget's 24 Initiatives*, GAO-03-229 (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 22, 2002). In 2002, a decision was made to separate one initiative into two individual projects, resulting in the current count of 25 projects.

[5]Office of Management and Budget, *E-Government Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 27, 2002).

[6]Federal agencies that OMB assigned as partners in the Project SAFECOM initiative include the Departments of Agriculture, Defense, Energy, Health and Human Services, Interior, Justice, and the Treasury.

[7]For an assessment of the overall management and oversight of the initiatives, see U.S. General Accounting Office, *Electronic Government: Success of the Office of Management and Budget's 25 Initiatives Depends on Effective Management and Oversight*, GAO-03-495T (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 13, 2003).

Lack of Interoperable Communications Hampers Emergency Response

In order to effectively carry out their normal duties and respond to extraordinary events such as natural disasters and domestic terrorism, public safety agencies need the ability to communicate with those from other disciplines and jurisdictions. However, the wireless communications used today by many police officers, firefighters, emergency medical personnel, and other public safety agencies do not provide such capability, which hinders their ability to respond. For example, emergency agencies responding to events such as the bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City and the attacks of September 11, 2001, experienced difficulties while trying to communicate with each other.[8]

Historically, the ability of first responders to communicate with those from other disciplines and jurisdictions has been significantly hampered because they often use different and incompatible radio systems operating on different frequencies of the radio spectrum. In February 2003, the National Task Force on Interoperability[9] estimated the number of emergency response officials in the United States—also called first-responders—at about 2.5 million, working for 50,000 different agencies, such as law enforcement organizations, fire departments, and emergency medical services. Response to an emergency may involve any or all of these disciplines, as well as may additional personnel from the transportation, natural resources, or public utility sectors.

A complex array of challenges affects the government's ability to address the emergency communications interoperability problem. In addition to the vast number of distinct governmental entities involved, the National Task Force on Interoperability identified a variety of additional barriers, including the fragmentation and limited availability of radio communications spectrum for dedicated use by emergency personnel, incompatible and aging communications equipment, limited equipment standards within the public safety community, and the lack of appropriate

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[8]See, for example, the testimony presented at a joint hearing of two Subcommittees of the House Committee on Government Reform (National Security, Emerging Threats and International Relations and Technology, Information Policy, Intergovernmental Relations and the Census) held on November 6, 2003.

[9]The National Task Force on Interoperability—made up of state and local officials, public safety officials, and members from 18 national associations—met several times in 2002 to discuss emergency communications interoperability.
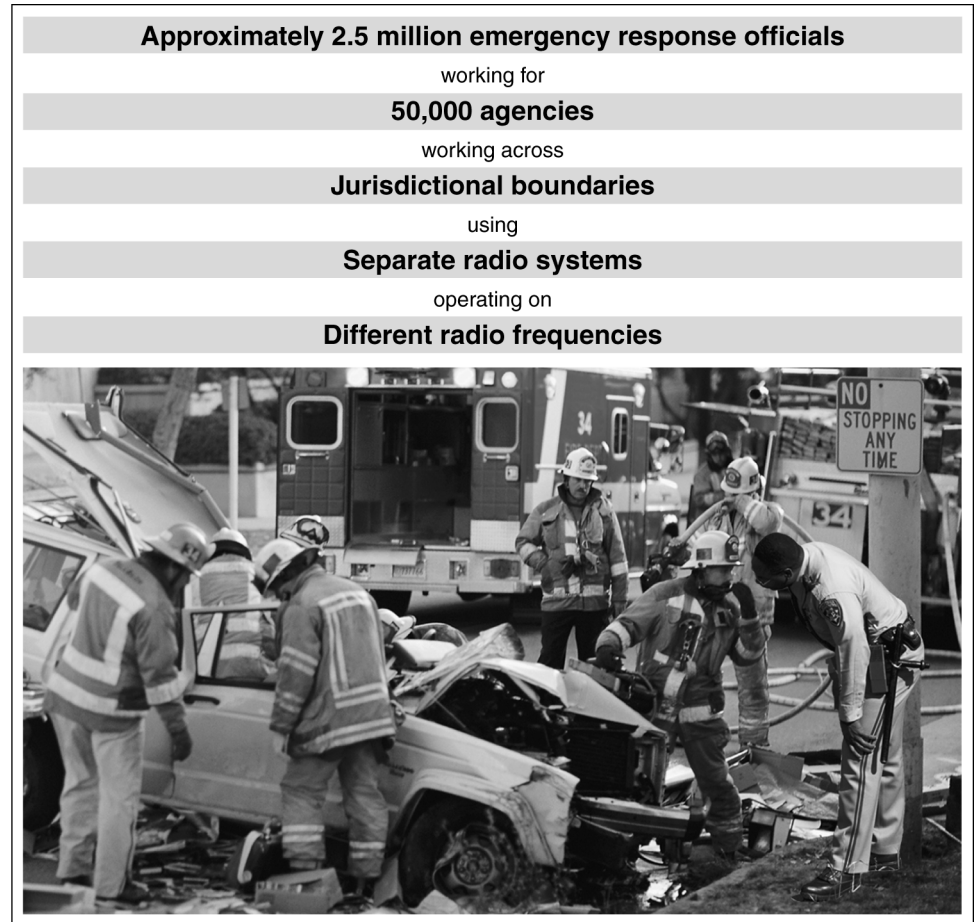
life-cycle funding strategies.[10] These barriers have been long-standing, and fully overcoming them will not be accomplished easily or quickly. Figure 1 summarizes the challenge of achieving seamlessly interoperable communications among the many personnel and organizations responding to an emergency.

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[10]The findings of the National Task Force on Interoperability are summarized in Department of Homeland Security, *Current Status of Government's Response to Interoperability Efforts and SAFECOM Program: A Report to the Committee on Appropriations of the United States House of Representatives* (Washington, D.C.: February 2004).

Figure 1: Achieving Seamlessly Interoperable Communications among Emergency Response Officials Is Challenging

Approximately 2.5 million emergency response officials
working for
50,000 agencies
working across
Jurisdictional boundaries
using
Separate radio systems
operating on
Different radio frequencies

Sources: GAO (analysis), © Corbis (image).

In some cases, first responders have resorted to stopgap measures to overcome communications problems. For example, some may swap radios with another agency at the scene of an emergency, others may relay messages through a common communications center, and still others may employ messengers to physically carry information from one group of responders to another. However, these measures have not always been adequate. The National Task Force on Interoperability identified several cases where the inability to communicate across agencies and jurisdictions

in emergency situations was a factor in the loss of lives or delayed emergency response.

Over the last decade, several federal programs have been established to address various aspects of public safety communications and interoperability. Among these was the Public Safety Wireless Network (PSWN) program—originally developed as a joint undertaking of the departments of Justice and the Treasury. PSWN's focus was to promote state and local interoperability by establishing a technical resource center, collecting and analyzing data related to the operational environment of public safety communications, and initiating pilot projects to test and refine interoperable technology. Another similar initiative is the Advanced Generation of Interoperability for Law Enforcement (AGILE) program, which is run by the Department of Justice's National Institute of Justice. AGILE was created to coordinate interoperability research within the Department of Justice and with other agencies and levels of government. AGILE has four main activities: (1) supporting research and development, (2) testing and evaluating pilot technologies, (3) developing standards, and (4) educating end users and policymakers.[11]

With roughly 100 agencies that use radio communications in law enforcement activities, the federal government also has a need for interoperable communications, both internally among its own departments and agencies and with state and local entities. This need has grown since the attacks of September 11, 2001, which blurred the distinctions between public safety and national security, and has placed federal entities such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the U.S. Secret Service, and the U.S. Coast Guard into broader public safety roles. As a result, federal public safety personnel have an increased need to be able to communicate directly with one another and with their state and local counterparts.

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[11]In August 2003, PSWN was merged into the SAFECOM project. AGILE continues to operate as a program of the Department of Justice.

Leadership Changes and Shortcomings in Collaboration Have Hampered SAFECOM's Progress

After more than 2 years, Project SAFECOM has made very limited progress in addressing its overall objective of achieving communications interoperability among entities at all levels of government. SAFECOM's lack of progress has prevented it from achieving the benefits that were expected of it as one of the 25 OMB-sponsored e–government initiatives, including improving government efficiency and realizing budgetary savings. Two factors have contributed significantly to the project's limited results. First, there has been a lack of sustained executive leadership, as evidenced by multiple shifts in program responsibility and management staff. Second, the project has not achieved the level of collaboration necessary for a complex cross-government initiative of this type. 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 grant guidance for use with awards to public safety agencies that encourage planning 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 weaknesses are addressed, SAFECOM's ability to achieve its ultimate goal of improving interoperable communications will remain in doubt.

SAFECOM Has Fulfilled Neither Its Program Goals nor the Overall E–Government Objectives

When the e–government initiative was launched in 2002, OMB identified achieving public safety interoperability and reducing redundant wireless communications infrastructures as the goal for Project SAFECOM. Specifically, SAFECOM was to

- achieve federal-to-federal interoperability throughout the nation,

- achieve federal-to-state/local interoperability throughout the nation, and

- achieve state/local interoperability throughout the nation.

As of March 2004, Project SAFECOM has made very limited progress in addressing its overall objective of achieving communications interoperability among entities at all levels of government. Specifically, project officials could provide no specific examples of cases where interoperability had been achieved as a direct result of SAFECOM activities. Furthermore, program officials now estimate that a minimum

level of interoperability will not occur until 2008, and full interoperability will not occur until 15 years later, in 2023.

OMB expected SAFECOM's value to citizens to include saved lives and better managed disaster response; however, because of the program's limited progress, these benefits have not yet been achieved. OMB also forecasted that a reduction in the number of communications devices and their associated maintenance and training would result in cost savings, including "billions" in federal savings. Project officials are currently conducting a study to estimate potential federal savings, such as savings from reducing equipment purchases. However, according to the program manager, federal savings in the billions of dollars are not likely. He added, however, that state and local agencies could realize significant savings if they could rely on Project SAFECOM to conduct consolidated testing of equipment for compliance with interoperability standards. Finally, on the issue of federal agency efficiency, the project has achieved mixed results. Although SAFECOM absorbed the projects and functions of PSWN, it has not consolidated the functions of Project AGILE, despite the similarities between the two programs' activities. According to SAFECOM's manager, the project lacks the authority to consolidate additional programs.

Lack of Sustained Leadership Has Hampered SAFECOM's Progress

As we have identified in previous work, successful organizations foster a committed leadership team and plan for smooth staff transitions.[12] The transition to modern management requires sustained, committed leadership on the part of agency executives and managers. As in the case with well-run commercial entities, strong leadership and sound management are central to the effective implementation of public-sector policies or programs, especially transformational programs such as the OMB-sponsored e–government initiatives.

Instead of sustained management attention, SAFECOM has experienced frequent changes in management, which have hampered its progress. OMB originally designated the Department of the Treasury, which was already involved in overseeing PSWN, as the project's managing partner. As originally conceived, SAFECOM would build on PSWN's efforts to achieve interoperability among state and local agencies by building an interoperable federal communications network. However, in May 2002, the
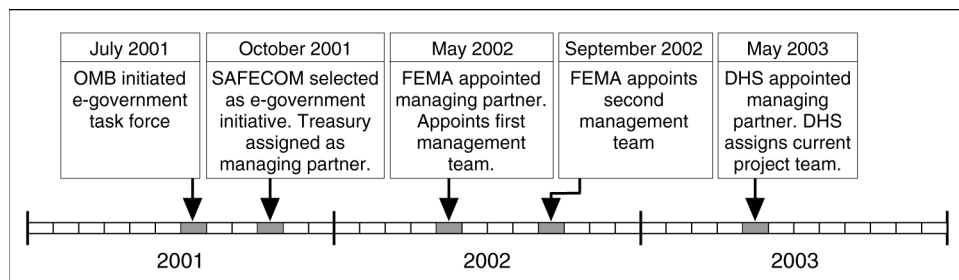
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[12]See U.S. General Accounting Office, *Electronic Government: Potential Exists for Enhancing Collaboration on Four Initiatives*, GAO-04-6 (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 10, 2003).

Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), which had an emergency-response mission more closely aligned with SAFECOM's goals, was designated managing partner. At that time, project staff focused their efforts on securing funding and beginning outreach to stakeholders such as the AGILE program and associations representing local emergency agencies. By September 2002, the Federal Emergency Management Agency had replaced its SAFECOM management team and shifted its implementation strategy to focus on helping first responders make short-term improvements in interoperability using vehicles such as demonstration projects and research. At that time, development of an interoperable federal first-responder communications system was seen as a long-term goal.

Following the establishment of DHS,[13] in May 2003, the project was taken out of the Federal Emergency Management Agency and assigned to the department's new Science and Technology Directorate because of a perceived need to incorporate more technical expertise. At that time, the project was assigned to a fourth management team. Figure 2 summarizes the major management changes that have occurred throughout Project SAFECOM's history.

Figure 2: 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.

This lack of sustained, committed executive leadership hampered SAFECOM's ability to produce results tied to its overall objective. The changing of project teams approximately every 6 to 9 months has meant

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[13]The Federal Emergency Management Agency became part of the Department of Homeland Security in March 2003.

that much of the effort spent on the project has been made repeatedly to establish administrative structures, develop program plans, and obtain stakeholder input and support. Additionally, according to the project manager of PSWN, the changes in leadership have led to skepticism among some of the project's stakeholders that the project's goals can be met.

Inadequate Collaboration Has Also Hampered Progress, Although Recent Actions May Promote Success in the Future

The ability of Project SAFECOM to meet its overall objective has also been hampered by inadequate collaboration with the project's stakeholders. As an umbrella program meant to coordinate efforts by various federal, state, and local agencies to achieve interoperability, SAFECOM's success relies on cross-agency collaboration. As we have previously reported, cross-organizational initiatives such as this require several conditions to be successful, including: (1) a collaborative management structure; (2) clear agreements among participants on purpose, outcomes, and performance measures; (3) shared contribution of resources; and (4) a common set of operating standards.[14]

While the project's current management team has made progress in developing a collaborative management structure, SAFECOM does not yet have other necessary structures or agreements in place. Its previous management teams worked on creating a collaborative management structure by, for example, seeking input from stakeholders and drafting a memorandum of understanding among the departments of Homeland Security, Justice, and the Treasury, but these activities were not completed at the time of the transition to DHS.

Since taking control of the project in May 2003, Project SAFECOM has pursued a number of activities that stress collaboration and are intended to lay the groundwork for future interoperability, according to its current manager. Specifically, DHS established a governance structure for the project in November 2003 that includes executive and advisory committees to formalize collaboration with stakeholders and provides a forum for significant input on goals and priorities by federal agencies and state and local representatives. The department has also conducted several planning conferences meant to identify project stakeholders to reach agreements with them on the program's purpose and intended outcomes. One such conference, in December 2003, provided an opportunity for stakeholders to

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[14]GAO-04-6.

modify program goals and the tasks planned to address them. The program manager also cited a statement of support by several organizations representing local first responders as evidence that the current structure is achieving effective collaboration. In addition, project officials are working with the Commerce Department to catalog all existing federal agencies that use public safety communications systems and networks.

Further, program officials noted that the SAFECOM project developed grant guidance that promotes interoperability by requiring public safety agencies to describe specific plans for achieving improved interoperability when applying for grants that fund communications equipment. This guidance represents a positive step, but it does not provide public safety agencies with complete specifications for achieving interoperability. Specifically, the guidance strongly encourages applicants to ensure that purchased equipment complies with a technical standard for interoperable communications equipment that has not yet been finalized and that, according to program officials, addresses only part of the interoperability problem. This guidance has already been incorporated into grants awarded by the Department of Justice's Office of Community Oriented Policing Services and the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

However, Project SAFECOM has not yet fulfilled other conditions necessary for successful cross-government collaboration. First, project officials have not signed memorandums of agreement with all of the project's stakeholders. As shown in table 1, agreements were completed on funding or program participation with five agencies in fiscal year 2003.[15] However, DHS did not reach a 2003 agreement with the Department of the Interior or the Department of Justice, both agencies designated as funding partners. According to the SAFECOM program manager, the Department of the Interior has not fully determined the extent of its expected participation in the program, and the Department of Justice had to delay its agreement until it received approval to reprogram the necessary funds. Justice has reached an agreement with DHS for fiscal year 2004, but as of March 2004, none of the other funding partners have signed agreements covering the current year. In addition, although other federal agencies and the organizations representing state and local stakeholders are represented

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[15]Participation agreements between DHS and the funding partners describe the responsibilities of each party. For example, the funding partners agreed to attend meetings, provide funding, and coordinate SAFECOM activities with their component agencies, while DHS agreed to provide periodic reports and exchange information with OMB.

in SAFECOM's governing structure and some have expressed support for the program, none has reached an agreement with DHS that commits it to provide nonfinancial assistance to the project. Finally, those agreements that were in place did not address key program parameters, such as specific program outcomes or performance measures. While the program's stakeholders agreed to a broad set of goals and expected outcomes at the December planning meeting, as of March 2004, there was no agreement on performance measures for them. According to the program manager, new performance measures were under development.

Table 1: Status of Agreements Reached between Federal Agencies and Project SAFECOM in Fiscal Years 2003 and 2004

Agency	Type of agreement	Period of agreement
Department of Agriculture	Funding and program participation	Fiscal year 2003
Department of Defense	Funding and program participation	Fiscal year 2003
Department of Energy	Funding only	Fiscal year 2003
Department of Health and Human Services	Funding and program participation	Fiscal year 2003
Department of Justice	Funding and program participation	Fiscal year 2004
Department of the Interior	None completed	
Department of the Treasury	Funding only	Fiscal year 2003

Source: DHS.

Second, while effective collaboration requires the sharing of resources, DHS had not received all of the funding it planned to receive from its federal partners. During fiscal year 2003, SAFECOM received only about $17 million of the $34.9 million in funding OMB allocated to it from these funding partners. About $1.4 million of that $17 million was not received until late September 2003, when only a week remained in the fiscal year. According to program officials, these funding shortfalls and delays resulted in the program's having to delay some of the tasks it had intended to complete, such as identifying the project's major milestones.

Finally, although DHS has not yet developed a common set of operating standards for SAFECOM, efforts to identify technical standards are underway, according to program officials. For example, program officials from SAFECOM and AGILE plan to accelerate the development of an

incomplete standard for interoperable communications equipment that is cited in SAFECOM's grants guidance. Program officials are also developing a document describing the requirements for public safety communications interoperability, which is intended to form the basis for future technical development efforts. SAFECOM also is supporting several demonstration projects and vendor presentations to publicize currently available interoperable systems.

The absence of many aspects of successful collaboration could hamper SAFECOM officials' ability to achieve the program's goals. For example, the lack of written agreements with some stakeholders raises concerns about the extent to which those agencies are willing to contribute to the program's success. Also, until performance measures and technical standards are finalized and implemented, it will be difficult to determine the extent of any progress. Should such difficulties continue to hamper the program's progress in fulfilling its overall goals, solutions to the problems of public safety interoperability will be further delayed.

Conclusions

While the lack of rapid progress in improving interoperable communications among first responders may be understandable, considering the complexity of the issues and the number of entities involved, federal efforts to address the issue as an e–government initiative have been unnecessarily delayed by management instability and weaknesses in collaboration. Since taking over management of the project in May 2003, DHS has shown greater executive commitment to the project than had previously been demonstrated. The agency has determined that a long-term, intergovernmental effort will be needed to achieve the program's overall goal of improving emergency response through broadly interoperable first-responder communications systems, and it has taken steps to lay the groundwork for this by creating a governance structure allowing for significant stakeholder input on program management. However, DHS has made less progress in establishing written agreements with other government agencies on responsibilities and resource commitments. The DHS effort could experience difficulties if it does not reach such agreements, which have proven essential to the success of other similarly complex, cross-agency programs.

Recommendation for Executive Action

To enhance the ability of Project SAFECOM to improve communications among emergency personnel from federal, state, local, and tribal agencies, we recommend that the Secretary of Homeland Security direct the Under Secretary for Science and Technology to complete written agreements with the project's identified stakeholders, including federal agencies and organizations representing state and local governments. These agreements should define the responsibilities and resource commitments that each of those organizations will assume and include specific provisions that measure program performance.

Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

In written comments on a draft of this report, which are reprinted in appendix I, the Department of Homeland Security's GAO liaison agreed that the lack of interoperable communications hampers emergency response. The official also provided additional information about activities undertaken by the current program management team since May 2003, including the implementation of a management structure that includes state and local stakeholders, the ongoing development of technical standards, and development of a database to track federal interoperability efforts. We discuss these activities in our report.

Regarding our draft recommendation, this official indicated that DHS has provided draft agreements to SAFECOM's federal funding partners, and added that DHS supports the need for further delineation of responsibilities and funding in future MOUs. Until DHS reaches specific agreements with all of SAFECOM's stakeholders, including nonfunding federal partners and state and local partners, its ability to achieve its objectives will continue to be hindered.

The official also stated that DHS agrees that performance measures are essential for adequate program management, and added that SAFECOM had developed a strategic performance management tool. However, DHS did not provide any evidence that SAFECOM had determined the specific performance measures that will be used to assess progress against its goals, or the process for applying them. Until such measures are implemented, program managers will be unable to determine the impact of their efforts. We also made technical corrections, as appropriate, in response to DHS's comments.

We plan to send copies to this report to the Ranking Minority Member, House Committee on Government Reform; the Ranking Minority Member, Subcommittee on Technology, Information Policy, Intergovernmental Relations and the Census; and the Ranking Minority Member, Subcommittee on National Security, Emerging Threats and International Relations. In addition, we will provide copies to the Secretary of Homeland Security and the Director of OMB. Copies will also be available without charge on GAO's Web site at www.gao.gov.

Should you have any questions concerning this report, please call me at (202) 512-6240 or John de Ferrari, Assistant Director, at (202) 512-6335. We can also be reached by e-mail at koontzl@gao.gov and deferrarij@gao.gov, respectively. Other key contributors to this report were Felipe Colón, Jr., Neil Doherty, Michael P. Fruitman, Jamie Pressman, and James R. Sweetman, Jr.

Linda D. Koontz
Director, Information Management Issues

Comments from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security

U.S. Department of Homeland Security

April 2, 2004

Norman J. Rabkin
Managing Director, Homeland Security and Justice Issues
U.S. General Accounting Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington DC 20548

Re: GAO Draft Report: Key Cross-Agency Emergency Communications Effort Requires Stronger Collaboration, GAO-04-494 (310398)

Dear Mr. Rabkin, et al:

On March 19, 2004, the General Accounting Office (GAO) presented the Department of Homeland Security with its draft report, *Key Cross-Agency Emergency Communications Effort Requires Stronger Collaboration*, GAO-04-494. As described in the report, GAO was asked to assess the progress made by Project SAFECOM in accomplishing its goals and the barriers to future progress.

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) fully agrees with GAO's statement that a lack of interoperable communications hampers emergency response. Inadequate and unreliable wireless communications have been issues plaguing public safety organizations for decades. In many cases, agencies have been unable to perform their mission critical duties because they were unable to share vital voice or data information via radio with other jurisdictions in day-to-day operations and in emergency response to incidents including acts of terrorism and natural disasters. SAFECOM is the first national initiative created specifically to address this problem.

The SAFECOM Program works with existing federal communications initiatives and key public safety stakeholders to coordinate the development of better technologies and create processes to support the cross-jurisdictional and cross-disciplinary coordination of existing systems and future networks. SAFECOM was established as the umbrella program within the federal government to help local, tribal, state, and federal public safety agencies improve public safety response through more effective and efficient interoperable wireless communications, which SAFECOM defines as the ability of public safety agencies to talk across disciplines and jurisdictions via radio communications systems, exchanging voice and/or data with one another on demand, in real time, when needed and as authorized.[1]

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[1] This definition of public safety communications interoperability differs from that listed in footnote 2 of the GAO report, "Project SAFECOM Key Cross-Agency Emergency Communications Effort Requires Stronger Collaboration."

Washington, D. C. 20528

Unlike many other e-Government (e-Gov) initiatives, the solution to the problems of public safety communications and communications interoperability—short of a major overhaul of how spectrum is allocated and managed in this country, technology is implemented, and agency budget cycles are coordinated—is not a single nor even a clear set of discrete tasks. There are no simple solutions. Instead, the identification and orchestration of many programs over time is required – coordination being provided for the nation for the first time by the SAFECOM program.

SAFECOM has taken a systematic approach towards addressing the problem, beginning in May 2003 when the program was transferred to the Directorate for Science and Technology (S&T) at DHS.

- *Identify the problem, recognizing that it is a simple problem with many complex elements.* SAFECOM recognizes that before interoperability can occur, reliable, mission-critical, agency-specific communications are first necessary for public safety agencies. SAFECOM subsequently is addressing the intricately related issues of public safety communications and communications interoperability. SAFECOM also recognizes that more than ninety percent of the public safety communications infrastructure is owned and operated at the local and state level. Addressing the problems of communications interoperability will hence require focus on the local and state public safety and government communities. In response to this revised focus of the current management team that took over the program nine months ago, SAFECOM realized the need to earn the trust and participation of the national associations representing local and state public safety and government officials. A governance structure was hence developed and implemented by SAFECOM to incorporate these local and state stakeholders. This governance structure also includes federal emergency response providers, and SAFECOM continues to support the Federal Partnership for Interoperable Communications (FPIC)[2] as a means of addressing the unique issues related to federal interoperability. Evidence of the success of this strategy can be seen by the recent letter of support developed by ten of the major local and state public safety associations.

- *Work with the leadership of the public safety community to gather comprehensive needs and requirements in order to develop appropriate approaches to solutions, referred to as work packages.* SAFECOM is about to release the first ever comprehensive Public Safety Communications Statement of Requirements (SoR) outlining what public safety needs to effectively communicate in their response to emergencies. This SoR was developed in full partnership with the National Public Safety Telecommunications Council (NPSTC) and the Department of Justice's AGILE Program[3] and is the first

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[2] FPIC was formerly known as the Federal Law Enforcement Wireless Users Group (FLEWUG), and represents the federal communications user community.
[3] The SoR is set to be released on March 22, 2004. It was tentatively approved by NPSTC on March 10, 2004, pending additional review by the Regional Planning Committees. The SoR is considered to be a

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nationally recognized statement of what first responders need to fix interoperability.

- *In partnership with the leadership of the public safety community, develop a process by which to systematically attach the problems and needs to programmatic solutions.* SAFECOM is currently drafting a plan for a technical architectural framework for public safety communications. The strategy for the plan is centered on the development of an architectural framework that satisfies the real-world requirements of public safety responders. The framework outlines WHAT the overall structured approach is for facilitating interoperability. Functional standards then define the details of the structure, and indicate HOW the architecture (and its components) will operate.

- *Identify current initiatives addressing this problem and develop a coordination strategy to leverage existing work while decreasing unnecessary duplication of efforts.* Beginning at the National Summit on Public Safety Communications and Interoperability in June 2003, SAFECOM, in partnership with the National Institute of Standards and Technology and the AGILE Program, developed an extensive database – the first ever – on federal programs and national organization efforts aimed at improving public safety communications at all levels of government. The resulting survey, assessment, and database allow SAFECOM to effectively identify and coordinate relevant programs.

- *Implement the solutions strategy to develop short- and long-term projects to address public safety communications and communications interoperability needs.* In December 2003, SAFECOM hosted its first complete stakeholder strategy meeting in San Diego, California. The resulting strategy outlined short- and long-term projects that the stakeholders felt were absolutely necessary for SAFECOM to pursue in order to improve interoperability. SAFECOM has since obligated resources for each of these projects in its budget, but is still waiting to receive funding from its federal funding partners.

These accomplishments are just a few examples of the successful steps SAFECOM has taken over the course of the last nine months. In addition, SAFECOM has reduced unnecessary duplication of effort across federal programs through the establishment of the Federal Interagency Coordination Council (FICC) for Public Safety Communications Interoperability. The FICC specifically addresses standards, technical assistance, and funding consistency across programs that support public safety communications issues. An example of FICC success can be seen in its promulgation of consensus grant guidance. In an effort to coordinate the way in which federally appropriated grant funding for public safety communications is allocated while maximizing the prospect for interoperable communications, SAFECOM developed general grant criteria with input from the public safety community in FY2003. In partnership with the Department of Justice Office of Community Oriented Policing Services and the Federal Emergency Management Agency, this grant guidance outlined eligibility for grants, the purposes for

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'living document,' that will require additional review as new user groups are identified and as technology progresses. The current document is version 1.0.

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which grants could be used, and guidelines for implementing a wireless communication system. The consolidated criteria helped to maximize the efficiency with which public safety communications related grant dollars were allocated and spent. FICC-revised grant guidance will again be included in the grant allocation process in FY04, continuing to prevent the type of stove-piped communications that have historically plagued public safety communications systems.

GAO's Recommendation for Executive Action

To enhance the ability of Project SAFECOM to improve communications among emergency personnel from federal, state, local, and tribal agencies, we recommend that the Secretary of Homeland Security direct the Under Secretary for Science and Technology to complete written agreements with the project's identified stakeholders, including federal agencies and organizations representing state and local governments. These agreements should define the responsibilities and resource commitments that each of those organizations will assume and include specific provisions measuring program performance.[4]

Specific DHS Corrective Action to GAO Recommendations

Written agreements in the form of Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) have been developed and provided to all of SAFECOM's federal funding partner agencies. Specifically, the GAO Report questioned the status of an agreement between DHS and the Department of Defense, commenting that "DHS officials stated such an agreement was in place for fiscal year 2003 but were unable to locate a copy of the agreement."[5] Since the drafting of the GAO report, the signed Memorandum of Agreement between the Departments of Homeland Security and Defense for fiscal year 2003 has been located. A copy has been provided to GAO.

2. Although these MOUs already define the responsibilities and resource commitments that the programs share, DHS supports the recommendation for further delineation of responsibilities and funding amounts in future MOUs. SAFECOM, through the establishment of a Federal Funding Partners working group that meets quarterly, has developed MOU templates outlining specifics that all agencies – not just funding partners – need to address. SAFECOM has provided FY 2004 MOUs to all of its funding partners and is currently awaiting responses.

3. DHS also agrees that the development of metrics to track SAFECOM's progress and successes is essential for adequate program management. To this end, SAFECOM has already developed a Balanced Scorecard to serve as the program's

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[4] As stated on page 18 of the GAO report.
[5] As stated on page 15 of the GAO report.

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strategic performance management tool. By establishing objectives across four perspectives and linking measures to these objectives, the Balanced Scorecard will be the instrument by which the program measures its success and maintains accountability. Quarterly Strategic Review sessions will be held to evaluate the program's progress and to provide recommendations based on the measure outcomes. A copy of the Balanced Scorecard has been provided to GAO.

Conclusion

SAFECOM will continue to reach out to its stakeholders to ensure their support and dedication to the program. In the past nine months, SAFECOM has proven that its stakeholder relationships are key to keeping the program focused on the priority issues for promoting increased public safety communications and interoperability. Its accomplishments to date are a testament to SAFECOM's dedication to its mission and capabilities for success. With adequate and consistent resources, DHS believes that SAFECOM will continue to be an effective program in addressing interoperability while reducing the unnecessary duplication of federal efforts and resource expenditure.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this report and for your continued support of the Department and its critical mission. If you have any questions regarding this matter, I am available to meet or discuss with you or your staff.

Sincerely,

Mary Jou Alderman

for Anna F. Dixon
DHS GAO Liaison

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