



Highlights of [GAO-10-193](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Individuals can reduce their need for first responder assistance by preparing for a disaster. By law, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) is to develop a National Preparedness System (NPS) that includes community preparedness programs. These programs account for less than 0.5 percent of FEMA's budget. They include the Citizen Corps Program (CCP) and partner programs, e.g., Fire Corps, which provide volunteers to assist first responders. FEMA's Ready Campaign promotes preparedness through mass media. GAO was asked to review federal efforts to promote community preparedness. GAO was asked to address (1) challenges, if any, FEMA faces in measuring the performance of CCP, its partner programs, and the Ready Campaign, and (2) actions, if any, FEMA has taken to develop a strategy to encompass how these programs are to operate within the context of the NPS. GAO analyzed documents on preparedness plans and strategies and compared reported performance data with observations during 12 site visits, selected primarily on the basis of major disasters. While not projectable, the results add insight.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that FEMA examine ways to verify local CCP and partner programs' data, and develop timelines and milestones for completing preparedness strategies. DHS concurred with these recommendations.

[View GAO-10-193 or key components.](#)
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EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS

FEMA Faces Challenges Integrating Community Preparedness Programs into Its Strategic Approach

What GAO Found

FEMA faces challenges measuring performance for CCP, its partner programs, and the Ready Campaign because (1) it relies on states to verify data for local program units and (2) it is unable to control the distribution of the Ready Campaign messages or measure whether the messages are changing the behavior of individuals. GAO's past work showed the importance of ensuring that program data are of sufficient quality to document performance and support decision making. FEMA includes the number of local volunteer organizations registered nationwide as its principal performance measure for community preparedness, but does not verify that registration data are accurate. For example, 5 of the 17 registered Citizen Corps councils GAO contacted were not active as councils. FEMA relies on state officials to verify the accuracy of the data, and does not have staff or processes for this purpose. FEMA officials agreed that the data are inaccurate, and have plans to improve the registration process, but this process is not designed to ensure accurate data because states will continue to be responsible for verifying the accuracy of data. FEMA counts requests for literature, Web site hits, and the number of television and radio announcements made to gauge performance of the Ready Campaign, but it does not control when information is accessed or viewed. Also, changes in behavior can be the result of a variety of factors, including campaigns sponsored by other organizations. GAO's past work stated that agencies should measure performance based on accurate, clear, and reliable data that are clearly linked to program goals, but also recognized that programs like the Ready Campaign may need to rely on substitute measures that it uses such as Web site hits. GAO recognizes that FEMA is challenged measuring the performance of CCP, partner programs, and the Ready Campaign, but examining the feasibility of approaches to verify data on CCP and its partner programs could position FEMA to begin to (1) explore why programs that no longer exist were disbanded and (2) develop possible strategies for reconstituting local programs or developing new ones.

FEMA's challenges in measuring the performance of community preparedness programs are compounded because it has not developed a strategy to show how its community preparedness programs and the Ready Campaign are to operate within the context of the NPS. In April and October 2009, GAO reported that FEMA's National Preparedness Directorate (NPD), responsible for community preparedness, had not developed a strategic plan; rather it used an operating plan, which lacked key elements of an effective national strategy, such as how to gauge progress. GAO recommended that NPD develop a strategic plan that contains these key elements. FEMA agreed and reported that it is taking actions to strengthen strategic planning. While officials said an NPD strategic plan and a community preparedness strategy are being developed, NPD has not developed timelines with milestone dates for completing these strategies. By doing so, consistent with standard management practices for implementing programs, FEMA would be better positioned to show progress and provide insights into how these plans can be used as building blocks for the national preparedness strategy.