



March 2016

EMERGENCY COMMUNICATIONS

Actions Needed to Better Coordinate Federal Efforts in the National Capital Region

Accessible Version

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-16-249](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

The NCR is considered at high risk for various threats and hazards. Federal, state, and local agencies in the NCR continue to face challenges with emergency communications interoperability—that is, the ability to use radios to communicate across entities when needed. The federal government has taken actions to improve interoperability in the NCR including allocating almost \$720 million through a DHS grant program to enhance regional preparedness since fiscal year 2002, and establishing the ONCRC to coordinate NCR entities on homeland security activities, including interoperability.

GAO was asked to review federal efforts to improve emergency communications interoperability in the NCR. This report examines (1) actions the ONCRC has taken to help improve emergency communications interoperability in the NCR and (2) status of the ONCRC's efforts to coordinate with federal agencies to help improve emergency preparedness in the NCR, including communications interoperability. GAO reviewed documentation from the ONCRC and interviewed DHS officials and emergency managers from the District of Columbia, Maryland, and Virginia.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that ONCRC, as part of its efforts to restructure the JFC, clearly articulate in a written agreement the roles and responsibilities of participating agencies and specify how they are to work together across agency boundaries. ONCRC concurred with this recommendation.

View [GAO-16-249](#). For more information, contact Mark Goldstein at (202) 512-2834 or goldsteinm@gao.gov

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Actions Needed to Better Coordinate Federal Efforts in the National Capital Region

What GAO Found

The Office of National Capital Region Coordination (ONCRC), within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), has taken various actions, mainly through coordination with state and local agencies, to help improve emergency communications interoperability in the National Capital Region (NCR), a legally-designated area including Washington, D.C. and nearby parts of Virginia and Maryland. For example:

- The ONCRC participates in several committees that are involved in planning and carrying out efforts to build preparedness and response capabilities of the region. In particular, the Director of the ONCRC is a member of the NCR's Senior Policy Group, which coordinates these efforts. The ONCRC staff helped develop the NCR's 2013 *Homeland Security Strategic Plan*. One of the goals of the plan is to ensure interoperable communications capabilities. The *Strategic Plan* identified a number of NCR initiatives to achieve this goal, including supporting the establishment and maintenance of radio interoperability and managing and coordinating radio upgrades across jurisdictions.
- As part of the responsibility to serve as a liaison with entities in the NCR, the ONCRC has collaborated with the NCR's Emergency Preparedness Council (an NCR advisory body) to facilitate state and local agencies access to the DHS's Urban Area Security Initiative grant program—the primary source of federal homeland security funding for the NCR. In fiscal year 2014, DHS allocated \$53 million in grant funding to the NCR to enhance the region's homeland security and preparedness capabilities. Almost \$7 million of this amount was to fund activities, such as purchasing radios and other equipment, aimed at achieving the NCR *Strategic Plan's* goal to ensure interoperable communications capabilities.

A key role of the ONCRC is to coordinate with federal, state, and local NCR entities on emergency preparedness and homeland security activities. However, the ONCRC currently does not have a formal mechanism in place to coordinate with federal agencies. From 2002 through 2014, the Joint Federal Committee (JFC) was the ONCRC's primary means of coordinating with federal agencies in the NCR. The ONCRC has not convened the JFC since 2014 and plans to restructure it. Officials explained that the JFC was not efficient and effective as a coordinating body and that they plan to strengthen its coordination capabilities. However, written plans were not available. When the JFC existed, its operation was not fully aligned with interagency collaboration mechanisms that GAO has identified. In particular, the JFC's charter did not specify the roles and responsibilities of participating agencies or how they were to work together across agency boundaries. Addressing these interagency collaborative mechanisms in the planned restructuring of the JFC could provide greater clarity on roles and responsibilities and enhance its ability to coordinate federal efforts in the region.

Contents

Letter	1	
	Background	5
	ONCRC Has Taken Various Actions to Help Improve Emergency Communications Interoperability in the NCR	11
	The ONCRC's Ability to Coordinate with Federal Agencies to Help Improve Emergency Preparedness, Including Communications Interoperability, in the NCR is Currently Limited	17
	Conclusions	19
	Recommendation for Executive Action	19
	Agency Comments	20
Appendix I: DHS Management Response		21
Appendix II: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments		23
	GAO Contact	23
	Staff Acknowledgments	23
Appendix III: Accessible Data		24
	Agency Response Letter	24
Figures		
	Figure 1: Hypothetical Example of Emergency Communications Interoperability	5
	Figure 2: The National Capital Region (NCR)	7
	Figure 3: Illustration of a Land Mobile Radio (LMR) System	9

Abbreviations:

DHS	Department of Homeland Security
FCC	Federal Communications Commission
FEMA	Federal Emergency Management Agency
HSA	Homeland Security Act of 2002
JFC	Joint Federal Committee
LMR	land mobile radio
MPD	Metropolitan Police Department
MWCOG	Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments
NCR	National Capital Region
NCRNet	National Capital Region Network
NECP	<i>National Emergency Communications Plan</i>
NTIA	National Telecommunications and Information Administration
OEC	Office of Emergency Communications
ONCRC	Office of National Capital Region Coordination
SCIP	<i>Statewide Communications Interoperability Plans</i>
UASI	Urban Area Security Initiative

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March 10, 2016

The Honorable Bennie Thompson
Ranking Member
Committee on Homeland Security
House of Representatives

The Honorable Donald Payne
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Response, and
Communications
Committee on Homeland Security
House of Representatives

The National Capital Region (NCR) is one of the most complex multi-jurisdictional regions in the country, and is considered at high risk for various threats and hazards. It is home to the Nation's capital; about 270 federal agencies and departments from three branches of the federal government; 11 jurisdictions in the state of Maryland and the Commonwealth of Virginia; and the District of Columbia (District). It is critical that first responders (e.g., law enforcement officers, firefighters, and emergency medical service personnel) and emergency preparedness and management officials in the NCR have emergency communications interoperability—that is, the ability to use radios and other equipment to communicate with each other across agencies and jurisdictions when needed and as authorized.¹ We reported over the years and most recently in 2015 that the lack of such interoperability can affect mission operations and put first responders and the public at risk when responding officials cannot communicate with one another.²

Challenges with emergency communications interoperability during the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks at the Pentagon hampered rescue efforts and raised questions about the overall effectiveness of federal, state, and local agencies' response efforts in the NCR. After these attacks, various federal actions, including substantial budgetary investment, were taken to address the limitations of the emergency

¹ Emergency communications interoperability also includes data and video.

² GAO, *Border Security: Additional Efforts Needed to Address Persistent Challenges in Achieving Radio Interoperability*, [GAO-15-201](#) (Washington, D.C.; Mar. 23, 2015).

communications used by the first responders in the NCR. For example, from fiscal years 2002 through 2015, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) allocated almost \$723 million through the Urban Area Security Initiative (UASI) grant program to the NCR to build, sustain, and enhance regional emergency preparedness activities, including emergency communications interoperability.³ In 2002, in response to the lack of a coordinated approach by federal, state, and local agencies to the attacks, the Office of National Capital Region Coordination (ONCRC), was established by law, within DHS, to oversee and coordinate federal programs for and relationships with federal, state, local, and regional authorities in the NCR.⁴ The NCR is the only region in the country that has a statutorily created and federally funded office devoted to coordinating homeland security activities. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and the Department of Commerce's National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) have allocated radio frequency spectrum to federal, state, and local agencies in the NCR to help facilitate reliable mission critical voice communications.

However, more than 10 years after the bipartisan 9/11 Commission reported that improvements to interoperable communications at all levels of the government need to be addressed, the NCR continues to face challenges in achieving emergency communications interoperability within and among federal, state, and local agencies despite substantial investment by the federal government to improve interoperability in the NCR.⁵ For example, an after-action-report prepared by the District's Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) about the September 2013 Navy Yard shooting in Washington, D.C., which resulted in 13 fatalities, identified problems with radio communications among first responders, including interoperability.⁶ The report states that although MPD's radios worked on the scene and within the building where the shootings occurred, some federal law enforcement agencies that assisted in the response experienced

³ The Urban Area Security Initiative (UASI) grant program assists high-threat, high-density urban areas in efforts to build and sustain the capabilities necessary to prevent, protect against, mitigate, respond to, and recover from acts of terrorism. State and local agencies in the NCR also receive funding from other federal grant programs.

⁴ Pub. L. No 107-296 § 882(b) (2002), 116 Stat. 2135, 2246, codified at 6 U.S.C. § 462.

⁵ 9/11 Commission, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States* (Washington, D.C.: July 2014).

⁶ Internal Review of the Metropolitan Police Department, *After Action Report, Washington Navy Yard, September 16, 2013*, (Washington, D.C.: July 2014).

problems with their emergency communications that hampered interoperability during the response. Specifically, the MPD noted that using the same designated radio channel would have enhanced interoperability of radio communications among law enforcement personnel. A separate report by the Department of the Navy found that the Navy's emergency response personnel did not have interoperable radio communications with other agencies because of a lack of understanding of equipment capabilities and incorrectly programmed Navy radios.⁷ Moreover, the District's Homeland Security Emergency Management Agency and Fire Department after action reports on the 2015 fatal fire in the L'Enfant Plaza Metrorail station in the District, noted that problems with radio communications at the station affected the overall response efforts.⁸ In response to these problems, in 2015, the Mayor of the District required first responders to revise their emergency communications protocols to facilitate interoperability.

You asked us to review federal efforts to improve the interoperability of emergency communications in the NCR. This report examines (1) the actions the ONCRC has taken to help improve emergency communications interoperability in the NCR and (2) the status of the ONCRC's efforts to coordinate with federal agencies to help improve emergency preparedness in the NCR, including emergency communications interoperability.

To address our objectives, we reviewed documentation from the ONCRC and other DHS components with responsibility for emergency communications interoperability in the NCR.⁹ We examined actions from

⁷ *Final Report on the Investigation into the Fatal Shooting Incident at the Washington Navy Yard on 16 September 2013 and Associated Security, Personnel, and Contracting Policies and Practices*, (November 8, 2013).

⁸ Testimony of Acting Assistant Fire and Emergency Medical Services Chief of Operations Edward R. Mills III before the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform Subcommittee on Transportation and Public Assets and Subcommittee on Government Operations, February 13, 2015, and the *Initial District of Columbia Report on the L'Enfant Plaza Metro Incident on January 12, 2015*.

⁹ According to DHS, achieving emergency communications interoperability is a multi-dimensional challenge that involves technology, people, and processes. The focus of this engagement is on efforts to address the non-technical challenges related to interoperability such as the coordination of emergency communications activities across and among stakeholders in a variety of agencies and jurisdictions in the NCR. A review of the technological issues (e.g. radios and equipment that are used to share information when responding to an incident) will be addressed in a separate ongoing engagement on emergency communications.

2013 to 2015 and selected this timeframe because it represents the most current information available. For example, we reviewed ONCRC's 2013 to 2015 reports to Congress, the NCR's 2013 *Homeland Security Strategic Plan*, DHS's *Interoperability Continuum* guidance, and DHS's 2014 *National Emergency Communications Plan* (NECP), all of which are designed to assist emergency response agencies and policy makers with identifying and implementing solutions for enhancing interoperability. To further inform our assessment, we reviewed selected after-action reports on incidents in the NCR from 2013 through 2015, particularly incidents that involved federal, state, and local first responders who needed to coordinate their responses.

We also reviewed prior GAO reports on interagency collaboration that identified leading practices in these areas.¹⁰ Based on this review, we selected certain key considerations for implementing interagency collaboration mechanisms and compared them with ONCRC's efforts to collaborate with federal agencies in the NCR to help improve emergency preparedness, including interoperability. Specifically, we selected (1) whether the agencies documented an agreement on how they will be collaborating and (2) defined and agreed on respective roles and responsibilities. We selected these key considerations because they are most applicable to the ONCRC's coordination responsibilities.

We interviewed ONCRC and DHS officials about actions taken and any challenges they face coordinating efforts to improve emergency communications interoperability in the NCR. In addition, we interviewed officials from FCC, NTIA, the District's Department of Homeland Security and Emergency Management Agency, Maryland's Emergency Management Agency, Virginia's Department of Emergency Management, and the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (MWCOC) regarding efforts to improve interoperability in the NCR.¹¹

¹⁰GAO, *Managing for Results: Key Considerations for Implementing Interagency Collaborative Mechanisms*, [GAO-12-1022](#) (Washington, D.C.; Sept. 27, 2012) and GAO, *Results-Oriented Government: Practices That Can Help Enhance and Sustain Collaboration among Federal Agencies*, [GAO-06-15](#) (Washington, D.C.; Oct. 21, 2005).

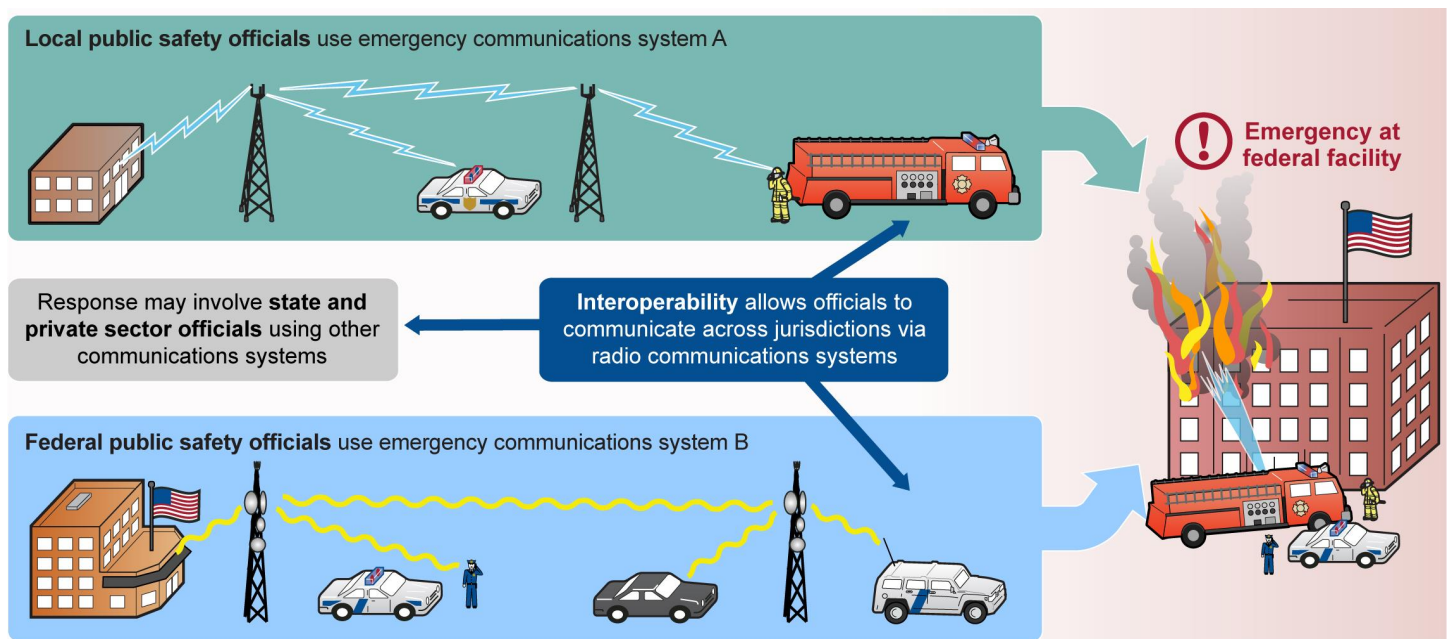
¹¹ The Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (MWCOC) is an independent, non-profit association comprised of elected officials from the District, Maryland, and Virginia that, among other things, brings together officials, emergency planners, and first responders to improve homeland security and emergency preparedness in the NCR. MWCOC is supported by financial contributions from its participating local governments and federal and state grants, as well as donations from the private sector.

We conducted this performance audit from March 2015 to February 2016 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Background

Emergency communications interoperability refers to the ability of first responders and emergency preparedness and management officials to use their radios and other equipment to communicate with each other across agencies and jurisdictions when needed and as authorized, as shown in our hypothetical example of response to a fire in a federal building in figure 1.

Figure 1: Hypothetical Example of Emergency Communications Interoperability



Source: GAO. | GAO-16-249

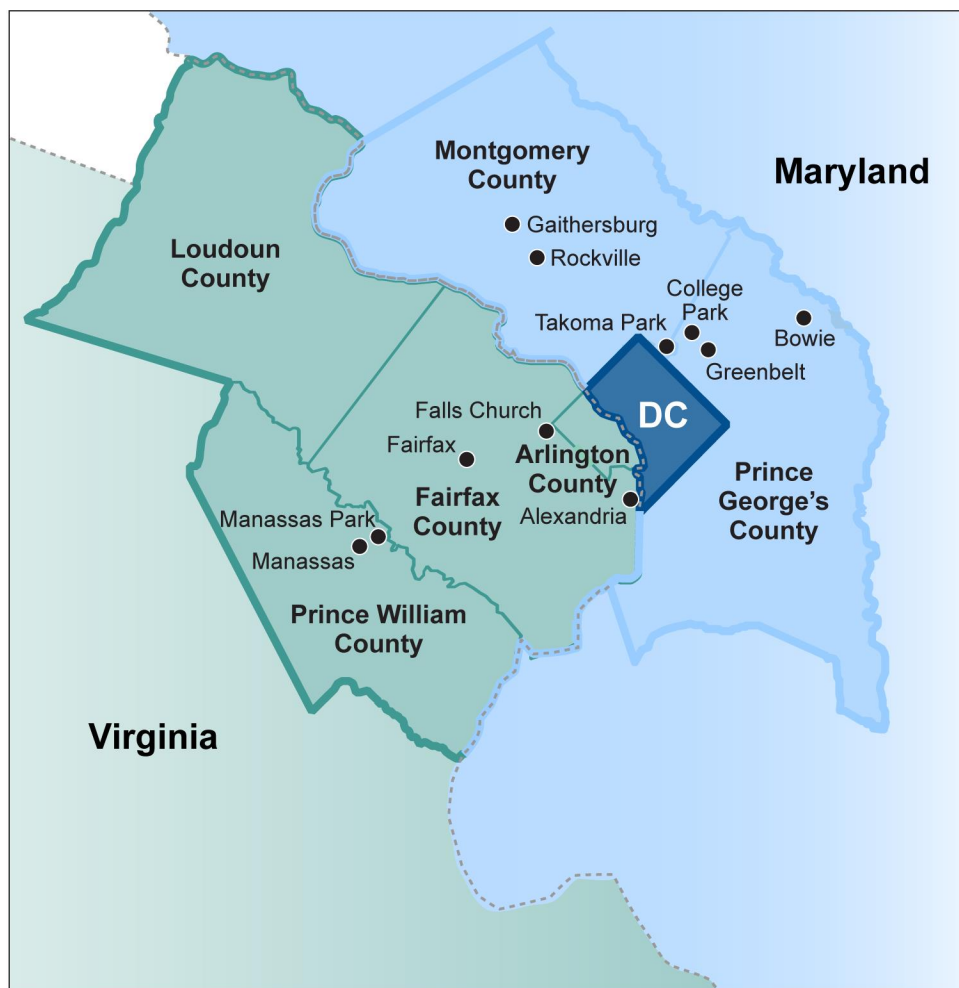
According to DHS's NECP, emergency communications interoperability is one of the components of an effective emergency preparedness and management structure. DHS's *Interoperability Continuum* states that first responders need interoperability during day-to-day incidents as well as large scale emergencies. For example, interoperability is important in responding to localized emergency incidents, such as a vehicle collision

on an interstate highway, and in regional incident management, such as in responding to a disaster. It also facilitates first responder communications during planned events such as sporting events, State of the Union addresses, or presidential Inaugurations that involve multiple responding agencies.

The NCR is a legally-designated geographic region that includes the District, and local jurisdictions in the state of Maryland and the Commonwealth of Virginia, as shown in figure 2.¹²

¹² The National Capital Region (NCR) for purposes of the Office of National Capital Region Coordination (ONCRC) is defined at 10 U.S.C. § 2674(f) (2).

Figure 2: The National Capital Region (NCR)



Source: GAO and MapInfo. | GAO-16-249

There is no single operational authority for emergency response in the NCR because the responsibilities reside with state and local jurisdictions. Instead, the NCR is supported by a network of committees that were created by the jurisdictions and include representatives from the District, Maryland, Virginia, as well as the federal government, and private and nonprofit entities such as MWCOC. These committees work together to improve the region's ability to prepare for, respond to, and recover from hazards. For example, key committees include:

- The Senior Policy Group which is comprised of senior emergency management officials from the District, Maryland, Virginia, and the

ONCRC and coordinates efforts to increase regional preparedness, mitigation, and response capabilities in the NCR. The Senior Policy Group also oversees the allocation and implementation of UASI funding and determines priority actions for increasing the region's preparedness and response capabilities as well as reducing vulnerability to terrorist attacks.

- The Emergency Preparedness Council (Council) which is an advisory body of representatives from the District, Maryland, Virginia, and private, and non-profit entities that reports to the MWCOG Board of Directors.¹³ This Council provides oversight of the regional emergency coordination and strategic plans to identify and address gaps in readiness in the NCR. It also is the federally-required working group with oversight responsibility for the UASI grant program.¹⁴ In this capacity, the Council coordinates with the Senior Policy Group with the aim of ensuring that grant funds are used to support projects that will build an enhanced and sustainable capacity to prevent, protect against, and recover from threats or acts of terrorism. The UASI grant funds can be used to invest in technology, equipment, training, exercises, and management.

Currently, federal, state, and local agencies in the NCR generally own, operate, and maintain their own land mobile radio (LMR) systems, which are primarily used by first responders and emergency-preparedness and management officials to transmit and receive critical voice communications during public safety incidents or disasters. However, as we reported in 2012, LMR systems often are not interoperable and can have problems with compatibility, continuity, and capacity during emergencies or disasters.¹⁵ The LMR systems are designed to provide critical voice communications services during public safety incidents or disasters, and as shown in figure 3, consist of:

- handheld portable radios (typically carried by emergency responders);
- mobile radios (often located in vehicles);

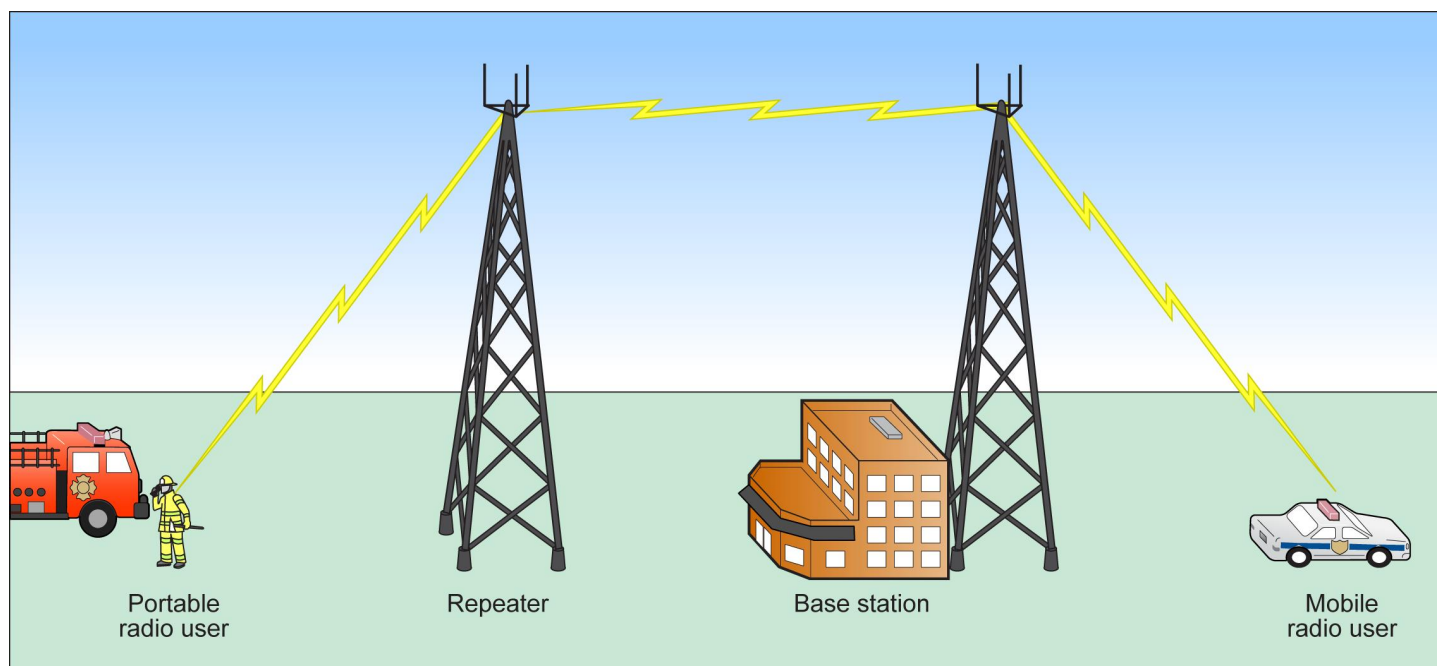
¹³ The Board of Directors is the MWCOG's governing body and is responsible for its overall policies, functions, and funding.

¹⁴ DHS's Urban Area Security Initiative (UASI) grant recipients must create a working group with representation from the region who will be responsible for coordinating development and implementation of program elements.

¹⁵ GAO, Emergency Communications: Various Challenges Likely to Slow Implementation of a Public Safety Broadband Network, [GAO-12-343](#) (Washington, D.C.; Feb. 22, 2012).

- base station radios (located in a fixed position such as a dispatch center); and
- repeaters (towers that increase the communication range of handheld portable radios and base station radios by retransmitting received signals).

Figure 3: Illustration of a Land Mobile Radio (LMR) System



Source: GAO. | GAO-16-249

LMR systems are designed to provide rapid voice call set-up and group-calling capabilities. Group calling is important for first responders because it enables one individual to simultaneously communicate to every member of a group, such as all firefighters in the interior of a burning building. According to DHS's 2014 NECP, because LMR systems will remain the primary tool for mission critical voice communications for many years to come, they have to meet a high standard for reliability, redundancy, capacity, and flexibility. Thus, according to the 2014 NECP, for many public safety agencies maintaining their LMR systems and improving interoperability continues to be their top communications priority.

According to the Homeland Security Act of 2002 (HSA), the ONCRC, located within DHS's Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), is required, among other things, to:¹⁶

- coordinate the activities of DHS relating to the NCR;
- coordinate on terrorism preparedness with federal, state, local, and regional agencies, and private sector entities in the NCR to ensure adequate planning, information sharing, training, and execution of domestic preparedness activities among these agencies and entities;
- serve as a liaison between the federal government and state, local, and regional authorities, and private sector entities in the NCR to facilitate access to federal grants and other programs; and
- provide state, local, and regional authorities in the NCR with regular information, research, and technical support to assist the efforts of state, local, and regional authorities in securing the homeland.¹⁷

The HSA also requires that the ONCRC to submit an annual report to Congress that includes:

- identifying resources required to fully implement homeland security efforts in the NCR;
- an assessment of the progress made by the entities in implementing homeland security efforts (including emergency communications interoperability); and
- recommendations to Congress regarding the additional resources needed to fully implement homeland security efforts.

The Director of the ONCRC is also a member of the NCR's Senior Policy Group. In fiscal year 2015, ONCRC's budget was \$3.4 million, and it is currently authorized at 20 full-time equivalent staff in Washington, D.C.

¹⁶ The Federal Emergency Management Agency is responsible for coordinating national preparedness efforts in response to natural and man-made disasters.

¹⁷ Pub. L. No 107-296 § 882(b), 116 Stat. 2135, 2246, codified in 6 U.S.C. § 462.

DHS's Office of Emergency Communications (OEC) was established pursuant to statute in 2006, in response to the September 11th terrorist attacks and the 2005 Hurricane Katrina. The OEC's mission is to support and promote communications systems used by first responders and government officials to keep America safe, secure, and resilient. Among other things, OEC is responsible for leading the nation's interoperable public safety, national security, and emergency-preparedness, and communications efforts. The OEC also is responsible for providing training, workshops, and guidance to help federal, state and local agencies and the private sector develop their emergency communications efforts.¹⁸

ONCRC Has Taken Various Actions to Help Improve Emergency Communications Interoperability in the NCR

The ONCRC has worked with both state and local entities and other DHS components on various efforts aimed at improving emergency preparedness in the NCR, including emergency communications interoperability. In particular, the ONCRC's 2013 report to Congress notes that one of its principal mechanisms to assist state and local agencies in the region with emergency communications interoperability is through its participation on several committees that are involved in planning and carrying out efforts to build and sustain preparedness capabilities. For example, ONCRC staff helped revise the NCR's 2013 *Homeland Security Strategic Plan* (NCR *Strategic Plan*).¹⁹ The NCR *Strategic Plan* represents the region's strategy for improving preparedness to address various hazards. According to the Director of ONCRC, the ONCRC works with state and local agencies in the NCR to support their activities aimed at achieving the plan's goals. One of the goals of the plan is to ensure interoperable communications capabilities.²⁰ The plan identified a number of NCR's initiatives to achieve this goal including:

- ensuring communications interoperability across agencies,
- managing and coordinating radio upgrades across jurisdictions,

¹⁸ Pub. L. No. 107-296 § 882(c)(1), 116 Stat. 2135, 2246, codified in 6 U.S.C. § 462.

¹⁹ The NCR *Strategic Plan* was originally developed in 2006 to comply with the UASI grant program requirements.

²⁰ The plan also includes three other goals for developing and maintaining critical emergency response and recovery capabilities in the NCR: improve information sharing and situational awareness, enhance critical infrastructure protection, and ensure development and maintenance of the NCR's core capabilities.

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- maintaining a cache of extra radios,
 - conducting training to improve the ability of all NCR partners to access and use communications systems effectively, and
 - encourage participation in biannual communication exercises that test all regional communication platforms.

In addition, the ONCRC has worked with NCR agencies to continue developing the National Capital Region Network (NCRNet) which is a secure, non-commercial, fiber optic network. As part of the interoperable communications infrastructure, the NCRNet is designed to address the NCR's need for a web-based capability for secure data communications and should allow for more efficient, flexible, and secure data exchange particularly among state and local jurisdictions within the NCR. According to the ONCRC's 2014 report to Congress, most of the local jurisdictions in the region are connected via the NCRNet, but other NCR agencies are not. In comments on a draft of this report, ONCRC officials said that, as of December 2015, all of the jurisdictions in NCR are connected to NCRNet and efforts are underway to include federal agencies in the NCRNet.

According to the Director of ONCRC, although NCR agencies and entities are not required to implement the NCR's *Strategic Plan*, they are committed to implementing it because they helped develop the plan and are stewards of public trust and resources. In its 2014 and 2015 reports to Congress, the ONCRC states that, as a result of the NCR's *Strategic Plan*, state and local agencies have a framework for sustaining current emergency communications capabilities, such as interoperability, and building new ones. The reports also noted that achieving the plan's goals will improve the region's preparedness to address critical risk in the NCR.

As noted previously, one of the ONCRC's responsibilities is to serve as a liaison with entities in the NCR to facilitate access to federal grants. The ONCRC officials told us that the ONCRC (as a member of the Senior Policy Group) has collaborated with the NCR's Emergency Preparedness Council to facilitate state and local agencies access to the DHS's UASI grant program. The UASI grant program is the primary source of federal homeland security funding for the NCR. In fiscal year 2014, DHS allocated \$53 million through the UASI grant program to the NCR to

enhance the region's homeland security and preparedness capabilities.²¹ Almost \$7 million of the \$53 million was to fund projects aimed at the NCR *Strategic Plan's* goal to ensure interoperable communications capabilities, such as purchasing radios and other equipment as well as developing a strategic plan for radio encryption.²² Regarding other types of grants for homeland security, we found in 2013 that officials in the NCR do not have access to comprehensive information on federal-funding sources for homeland security and emergency-management capabilities other than UASI grants and recommended that the ONCRC collect and maintain information on all such federal funding sources for NCR jurisdictions.²³ Although the ONCRC initially agreed with this recommendation, officials currently state they do not plan to implement it, in part, because it is the responsibility of the NCR's Project Management Office.²⁴

The ONCRC also helps support emergency communications interoperability in the NCR by coordinating with FEMA's Region III's Regional Emergency Communications Coordination Working Groups to share information with NCR agencies about interoperability, including lessons learned and best practices such as from the 2015 papal visit, the 2010 earthquake, and snowstorms in the NCR.²⁵ In addition, the ONCRC staff said that, in 2008, when the FCC directed reconfiguration of the 800 MHz band radios—used by police, firefighters, and emergency service personnel—

²¹ Assessing DHS's management controls for ensuring that the funds were used in accordance with the terms of the grant was outside of the scope of this engagement. According to DHS officials, before funding can be distributed, DHS requires each grant recipient to develop and submit a strategic plan that outlines the region's common goals, objectives, and steps for implementation. This strategy is intended to provide each recipient with direction for enhancing regional capability and capacity to prevent and reduce vulnerability.

²² The purpose of radio encryption is to prevent eavesdropping of sensitive radio communications.

²³ GAO, *Performance Measures and Comprehensive Funding Data Could Enhance Management of National Capital Region Preparedness Resources*, [GAO-13-116R](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 25, 2013).

²⁴ An Office of National Capital Region Coordination (ONCRC) official said that the NCR has established a Program Management Office (PMO) which is responsible for compiling grant information on DHS and other federal funding sources for the NCR. The ONCRC will provide support and guidance through its policy review role as a part of the NCR Senior Policy Group.

²⁵ Each of FEMA's 10 regions located throughout the country has a Regional Emergency Communications Coordination Working Group which serves as the single coordination point for emergency communications at the regional level.

the ONCRC assisted federal agencies in the NCR with ensuring that their 800 MHz band radios were included as part of the local jurisdictions' reconfiguration plans. Further, according to ONCRC officials, FEMA maintains a cache of extra radios that can be distributed during an emergency to other NCR agencies' first responders whose radios may not be interoperable with each other. For example, when the U.S. Capitol Police requested additional radios during the 2013 State of the Union address, the ONCRC issued the radios to them, according to ONCRC officials.

The ONCRC has coordinated with a number of other DHS's components in their efforts to improve emergency communications interoperability across the country, including in the NCR, according to ONCRC officials. For example, officials noted that the ONCRC worked closely with DHS' OEC in the development of DHS's 2014 *National Emergency Communications Plan (NECP)* which establishes a national strategy for improving emergency communications (including interoperability) across all levels of government and increasing coordination across the emergency response community. In the 2014 *NECP*, the Secretary of Homeland Security, states that ensuring interoperable communications among responders during all threats and hazards is paramount to the safety and security of all Americans. The 2014 *NECP* aims to improve communications capabilities of first responders' at all levels of the government and states that one of DHS's top priorities is to identify and prioritize areas for improvement in first responders LMR systems. To do so, the *NECP* has five goals that include enhancing decision making, coordination, and planning for emergency communications and improving first responders' ability to communicate through training and exercise programs.

The ONCRC also coordinated with OEC to develop the *Interoperability Continuum (Continuum)*, which is designed to assist first responders and policy makers across the country with planning and implementing interoperability solutions for emergency communications. For example, the *Continuum* identifies the five elements that public safety agencies should address to achieve interoperability. The five elements are to:

- establish a governance structure;
- develop standard operating procedures;
- acquire and implement technology that meets user needs;

-
- provide training and exercise programs; and
 - ensure that interoperable communications technologies are used.

The *Interoperability Continuum* can also be used by jurisdictions to track progress in strengthening interoperable communications. While the *Interoperability Continuum* is guidance, emergency management officials from the District, Maryland, and Virginia have incorporated the Interoperability Continuum's five elements in their 2013 *Statewide Communications Interoperability Plans (SCIP)*.²⁶ Specifically, the District, Maryland, and Virginia's 2013 *SCIP* have aligned their strategic goals for interoperability—governance, standard operating procedures, technology, training and exercises, and usage—with the *Interoperability Continuum's* five elements. The *SCIPs* identified several initiatives aimed at achieving these goals. For example, regarding governance, Maryland states that one of its initiatives is to codify its existing governance structure through legislation. The District and Virginia plans note that refining the purpose and membership of their statewide interoperability executive committees is one of their initiatives related to governance. To ensure that first responders' technological needs are met the District, Maryland, and Virginia plan to add nationwide interoperability channels, conduct vulnerability assessments of critical communications infrastructure, and maintain and upgrade existing technologies.

Furthermore, the ONCRC worked closely with OEC on developing emergency communications grants guidance, according to ONCRC officials. The guidance aims to provide state and local grant recipients with information on emergency communications policies, eligible costs, best practices, and technical standards for investing federal funds in emergency communications projects. The guidance also recognizes the need to sustain current LMR systems and encourages grant recipients to participate, support, and invest in planning activities that will help them prepare for deployment of new emergency communications systems or technologies. For example, grant recipients should continue developing plans and standard operating procedures, conducting training and exercises, and investing in standards-based equipment to sustain LMR capabilities.

²⁶ The *Statewide Communications Interoperability Plan (SCIP)* is a strategic plan designed to enhance emergency communications interoperability and provide guidance for emergency management officials at the state, regional, and local levels.

Overall, emergency management officials in the District, Maryland, and Virginia we spoke to were generally satisfied with ONCRC's efforts to coordinate with them to help ensure interoperability of emergency communications. However, these officials also said that achieving interoperability of emergency communications among all NCR agencies and entities when needed will continue to be a challenge, in part, because of the size and complexity of the region.

As noted previously, the ONCRC is required to report to Congress annually on the progress of emergency preparedness in the region, including the state of emergency communications interoperability. In the 2014 and 2015 reports to Congress, the ONCRC states that achieving the goals in the NCR's *Strategic Plan* will improve the region's preparedness to address risk in the NCR. However, these reports do not include performance measures that would indicate the extent to which those goals have been achieved. We found in 2013 that, while NCR agencies had taken steps to develop measures to assess the region's performance in improving emergency preparedness, more could be done to assist in these efforts. We recommended that the ONCRC assist NCR agencies in developing performance measures to better assess the implementation of the NCR's *Strategic Plan*. ONCRC agreed with this recommendation and ONCRC officials told us that they are working on implementing it but did not provide a timeframe for completion. In the interim, without performance measures as we recommended for monitoring and assessing regional efforts to enhance interoperability, ONCRC's ability to provide Congress with comprehensive information on the extent to which first responders in the NCR have emergency communications interoperability when needed and authorized is hampered. For example, in the 2013 through 2015 reports to Congress, the ONCRC reports that NCR agencies continue to make progress towards achieving interoperable communications, but does not report on the extent to which emergency communications interoperability exists in the region.

The ONCRC's Ability to Coordinate with Federal Agencies to Help Improve Emergency Preparedness, Including Communications Interoperability, in the NCR is Currently Limited

As discussed in the previous section, the ONCRC coordinates with state and local agencies in the NCR primarily through its participation on NCR committees including the Senior Policy Group and the Emergency Preparedness Council. However, the ONCRC currently does not have a formal mechanism in place to coordinate with federal agencies and is making some effort to improve how it coordinates with them. According to ONCRC's 2015 report to Congress, over 270 federal agencies exist in the NCR, and ONCRC officials are trying to identify those that should be involved in these coordination efforts. For example, as demonstrated in examples cited previously, federal entities—such as DHS, the Navy, and the U.S. Capitol Police—have responsibilities related to emergency preparedness and incident response in the NCR. We noted in 2012 that many of the meaningful results that the federal government seeks to achieve—such as those related to providing homeland security—require the coordinated efforts of more than one federal agency.²⁷

From the establishment of the ONCRC in 2002 through 2014, the Joint Federal Committee (JFC) was the ONCRC's primary means of coordinating federal efforts with state and local agencies in the NCR. The JFC's charter states that it was established to provide a forum for policy discussions, information sharing, and issue resolution regarding federal preparedness activities in the NCR. It was chaired by the Director of ONCRC who was to preside over all meetings, ensure the development of a meeting agenda, and ensure that the JFC's responsibilities and activities were carried out. Membership in the JFC was open to all federal departments and agencies with offices in the NCR and meetings were to be held at least quarterly. However, the ONCRC officials said that the JFC has not convened since 2014. In its 2014 report to Congress, the ONCRC stated that the JFC is not operating effectively and efficiently to accomplish its mission and would be restructured. The report also noted that federal agencies commented that the JFC lacked the authority, organization, and ability to focus on specific issues to be effective.

According to ONCRC officials, during its existence, the JFC focused on information sharing, and they plan to restructure it into a federal coordinating body that will assist in the interagency and intergovernmental coordination of homeland security within the NCR. In addition, they said that once restructured, the JFC would produce guidance (such as standard operating procedures) and identify lessons

²⁷ [GAO-12-1022](#).

learned. The Director of the ONCRC told us that in the absence of the JFC, the ONCRC has held informal meetings with some federal agencies in the NCR, such as the Secret Service during the 2015 papal visit, but said that this was not a sufficient mechanism for coordinating with federal agencies in the NCR. The Director also stated there is value to having a coordination mechanism in the NCR, such as the JFC, in part, because it would help federal agencies in the NCR to better coordinate the federal response to future incidents in the region. The Director said that the ONCRC was in the early stages of restructuring the JFC and estimated that it should be reconvened by 2017. However, according to ONCRC officials, written plans or documents for the specific elements of the restructuring were not available.

For many years, we have reported about the importance of collaboration between and among federal agencies.²⁸ For example, we have noted that interagency mechanisms or strategies to coordinate programs that address crosscutting issues may reduce potentially duplicative, overlapping, and fragmented efforts. When the JFC existed, it did not fully operate in a manner that was consistent with key considerations for implementing interagency collaboration mechanisms that we have previously identified. According to our prior work on collaboration, agencies can strengthen their commitment to working collaboratively by having written agreements. Our work has also shown that when implementing collaborative mechanisms, clearly articulating agency roles and responsibilities and how agencies will collaborate, including how they will operate across agency boundaries, into a written document can be a powerful tool for collaboration and doing so can provide a clear understanding of those roles and responsibilities. Our body of work has also shown that written agreements are most effective when they are regularly updated and monitored. The JFC did not have a written agreement that defined the general processes and procedures it used to carry out its responsibilities. Instead, the JFC had a high level charter which was last updated in 2009. The charter stated that membership shall be open to all departments and agencies of the three branches of the federal government. However, the charter did not provide information on (1) the roles, responsibilities, structure, and functions of its members; or (2) how its members were to work together across agency boundaries. It may be difficult for the JFC, once restructured, to enhance interagency

²⁸ See for example, GAO, *Managing for Results: Implementation Approaches Used to Enhance Collaboration in Interagency Groups*, [GAO-14-220](#), (Washington, D.C. Feb. 14, 2014), [GAO-12-1022](#), and [GAO-06-15](#).

understanding, coordination, and collaboration among federal agencies in the NCR without such a written agreement. Addressing the above key considerations for implementing collaborative mechanisms in the planned restructuring of the JFC could provide greater clarity to its members on their roles and responsibilities, particularly when responding to incidents, as well as improve the ONCRC's ability to carry out its statutory responsibilities for coordinating federal homeland security and emergency-management activities in the NCR.

Conclusions

The ONCRC's statutory responsibility for overseeing and coordinating emergency preparedness, including emergency communications interoperability in the NCR is important for helping to ensure that federal, state, and local agencies can communicate and share information with each other across agencies and jurisdictions when needed and as authorized. However, until the ONCRC implements our recommendation—to assist NCR agencies in developing performance measures to better assess the implementation of the NCR Strategic Plan—the ONCRC has limited ability to monitor and report to Congress on progress in achieving emergency communications interoperability in the region. Moreover, the ONCRC's primary means of coordinating with federal agencies in the NCR (the JFC) has not convened since 2014 and was not operating in a manner that is fully consistent with some of our key considerations for implementing interagency collaborative mechanisms, such as clearly articulating roles and responsibilities into a written document. According to the Director of ONCRC, efforts are underway to restructure the JFC. Incorporating these key considerations would be an important step toward improving interagency collaboration, particularly among federal agencies, in the NCR. In particular, revising the JFC's charter to describe in general how the JFC will operate and, in particular, each member's role and responsibilities would better enable the JFC to assist the ONCRC with coordinating federal agencies' efforts to help enhance emergency preparedness, including interoperability in the NCR.

Recommendation for Executive Action

To further build on the efforts to improve emergency communications interoperability in the NCR, we recommend that the FEMA Administrator direct the Director of ONCRC to take the following action:

- as part of its efforts to restructure the JFC, clearly articulate in a written agreement the roles and responsibilities of the participating agencies and specify how these agencies are to work together across agency boundaries.

Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to DHS for comment. On March 2, 2016, DHS provided written comments, which are reprinted in appendix I and provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate. DHS concurred with our recommendation and described action under way to address it. Specifically, the ONCRC has formed a temporary working group comprised of volunteers from various federal agencies. That group, among other things, will be responsible for determining the JFC's mission, functions, deliverables, and membership requirements as well as drafting a new charter to clearly state members' roles and responsibilities. The ONCRC estimated a completion date of March 31, 2017.

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Secretary of Homeland Security, the Administrator of FEMA, the Director of ONCRC, and other interested parties. In addition, this report is available at no charge on the GAO website at <http://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff has any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-2834 or goldsteinm@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report are listed in appendix II.



Mark Goldstein

Director, Physical Infrastructure

Appendix I: DHS Management Response



March 2, 2016

Mark L. Goldstein
Director, Physical Infrastructure
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20548

Re: Draft Report GAO-16-249 "EMERGENCY COMMUNICATIONS: Actions Needed to Better Coordinate Federal Efforts in the National Capital Region"

Dear Mr. Goldstein:

Thank you for the opportunity to review and comment on this draft report. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) appreciates the U.S. Government Accountability Office's (GAO) work in planning and conducting its review and issuing this report.

The Department is pleased to note GAO's positive recognition of actions the Federal Emergency Management Administration's (FEMA) Office of National Capital Regional Coordination's (ONCRC) has taken to help improve emergency communications interoperability in the National Capital Region (NCR). Facilitating additional improvements to interoperable communications across the NCR remains a priority focus for the ONCRC. DHS is committed to ensuring that the unique coordination challenges facing the NCR because of the region's large federal presence, including Congress, the Judiciary, numerous federal departments and agencies, and the intersection between Maryland, Virginia, and the District of Columbia are effectively addressed.

The draft report contained one recommendation with which DHS concurs. Specifically, GAO recommended that the FEMA Administrator direct the Director of the ONCRC to:

Recommendation: As part of its efforts to restructure the Joint Federal Committee (JFC), clearly articulate in a written agreement the roles and responsibilities of the participating agencies and how these agencies are to work together across agency boundaries.

Response: Concur. The ONCRC agrees that the restructuring of the JFC should include the establishment of a written agreement clearly stating the roles and responsibilities of

the member agencies, and outlining the manner in which these entities are to work together across agency boundaries.

Since the inception of the ONCRC in 2002, the NCR's homeland security and emergency management environment has matured significantly. In recognition of this much changed environment and to ensure FEMA continues to best serve the needs of the Region, FEMA conducted a review of ONCRC's mission, activities and organizational structure. The resulting recommendations, which received overwhelming support from NCR stakeholders, and the approval of Congress in July 2014, included a proposal to re-organize the JFC.

During the ONCRC mission review, FEMA acknowledged that the ONCRC was created to play a significant role in the coordination of federal preparedness activities, and the integration of those with that of the state and local partners in the NCR. More importantly, FEMA noted that the JFC, the principal component for coordinating these efforts, was not operating effectively and efficiently to accomplish this critical task. As a result of this review, FEMA recommended that the JFC be re-formed from an entity primarily focused on information sharing, to a federal coordinating body capable of producing outputs that will assist in the interagency and intergovernmental coordination of homeland security within the NCR. The ONCRC is currently spearheading this effort.

The ONCRC has formed a temporary working group, comprised of volunteers from various federal agencies, tasked with: (1) determining the JFC's mission, functions/deliverables and membership requirements; (2) establishing its organizational structure; and (3) drafting a new charter clearly stating the roles and responsibilities of members. Estimated Completion Date: March 31, 2017.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to review and comment on this draft report. Technical comments were previously provided under separate cover. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions. We look forward to working with you in the future.

Sincerely,



Jim H. Crumpacker, CIA, CFE
Director
Departmental GAO-OIG Liaison Office

Appendix II: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

Mark L. Goldstein, (202) 512-2834 or goldsteinm@gao.gov

Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, Tammy Conquest, Assistant Director; Melissa Bodeau; Antoine Clark; Sharon Dyer; Rich Hung; Sara Ann Moessbauer; Josh Ormond; Cheryl Peterson; and Lisa Shibata made key contributions to this report.

Appendix III: Accessible Data

Agency Response Letter

Text of Appendix I: DHS Management Response

Page 1

U.S. Department of Homeland Security

Washington, DC 20528

March 2, 2016

Mark L. Goldstein

Director, Physical Infrastructure

U.S. Government Accountability Office

441 G Street, NW

Washington, DC 20548

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Sincerely,

Jim H. Crumpacker, CIA, CFE

Director

Departmental GAO-OIG Liaison Office

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