PUBLIC HEALTH INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

HHS Has Made Little Progress toward Implementing Enhanced Situational Awareness Network Capabilities

Why GAO Did This Study

A public health event, such as a widespread disease outbreak or health problems resulting from a weather-related emergency, could have catastrophic consequences for the nation. These potential threats can be partially mitigated by having a national public health situational awareness capability—that is, a capability for public health officials to be able to access real-time information about emerging threats to enable them to make timely, responsive decisions to prepare for and respond to emergencies. PAHPRA required HHS to establish a near real-time electronic nationwide public health situational awareness capability through an interoperable network of systems.

PAHPRA also included a provision for GAO to evaluate HHS's progress in developing such a capability. This report addresses what progress HHS has made toward establishing the network. GAO analyzed documents describing HHS's plan for enhancing public health situational awareness and evaluated evidence of actions taken by HHS to establish the network required by PAHPRA. GAO also examined the department's IT planning and management processes and guidance, and interviewed HHS officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending that HHS complete a plan that includes all actions for establishing the network, develop a project management plan that identifies measurable steps for completing the actions, and conduct IT management processes according to CIO guidance. HHS had no comments on the report or recommendations.

What GAO Found

The *Pandemic and All-Hazards Preparedness Reauthorization Act of 2013* (PAHPRA) required the Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS) to establish an electronic nationwide public health situational awareness network and to develop an implementation plan to guide its efforts. The law further required HHS to include in its plan specific activities for incorporating data into the network. HHS developed an implementation plan that identified several actions related to enhancing existing information-sharing capabilities needed to establish the network. However, the actions identified in the plan did not address all of the required activities, such as defining data elements and standards. Until the department addresses all required activities, it will lack an effective tool for ensuring that public health situational awareness network capabilities have been established in accordance with all of the requirements defined by the law.

In addition, HHS did not identify measurable steps for completing and tracking the status of the activities required by the law. PAHPRA required HHS to include in its plan the measurable steps to be taken to establish the network. Federal guidance also suggests that implementation plans identify timelines of tasks, cost and resource estimates, and performance metrics that can be used to track and monitor progress toward completing tasks and delivering expected outcomes. According to HHS officials who developed the implementation plan, the department established a committee of policy and planning experts from various federal agencies to define the measurable steps for completing the actions identified in the plan. However, HHS did not assign responsibilities for defining such steps to the committee, and the committee had not done so. Until the department defines measurable steps, it will not have the information and planning tools it needs to make progress toward establishing a network that provides information-sharing capabilities needed by public health entities to prepare for and respond to emergencies, as required by PAHPRA.

GAO identified other weaknesses in HHS's planning efforts that have contributed to the department's lack of progress toward establishing the network. Specifically, HHS did not follow guidance developed by its Chief Information Officer (CIO) for managing information technology (IT) resources. According to the guidance, officials who manage IT initiatives are to involve a governance organization led by HHS's CIO and designate a project team that includes a project manager and business owner. The team is to manage and oversee initiatives according to the guidance, including the development of a project management plan that identifies timelines and schedules, estimated project resources and costs, and performance metrics for tracking any progress made toward completing tasks and delivering expected outcomes. However, HHS did not designate such a team and did not involve the CIO in its planning efforts. As such, the department lacks the structure and mechanisms needed to plan, manage, and oversee actions for establishing the network. Until HHS adheres to its own guidance for managing the IT resources necessary to improve electronic information-sharing capabilities of systems and networks in use by public health entities throughout the country, it will likely continue to fall short in its efforts to establish the nationwide public health situational awareness network required by PAHPRA.