



September 2013

# DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY

## Opportunities Exist to Enhance Visibility over Collaborative Field Mechanisms

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-13-734](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

DHS is the third-largest department in the federal government, with an annual budget of about \$60 billion, 200,000 staff, and a broad range of missions. In 2002, DHS was created from 22 legacy agencies. The geographic overlap of these agencies' legacy field office structures was extensive, underscoring the importance of collaboration among them when conducting missions that crossed across boundaries. As a follow-on to GAO's September 2012 report on DHS's efforts to integrate field operations, GAO was asked to review DHS and key operational components' use of collaborative mechanisms. This report (1) assesses DHS's visibility over collaborative field mechanisms established by component agencies, and (2) describes factors that enhance or impede collaboration within these mechanisms, and the extent to which DHS has collected and disseminated successful collaborative practices.

GAO analyzed selected mechanisms' guidance; conducted 10 mechanism site visits based on their geographic diversity, among other factors; and compared their practices with collaboration practices identified in previous GAO work. GAO also interviewed DHS and component officials.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DHS (1) collect information on existing collaborative mechanisms for better visibility over them, and (2) collect promising practices from the mechanisms and distribute them to components. DHS concurred with the recommendations and identified planned actions to address them.

View [GAO-13-734](#). For more information, contact Joseph Kirschbaum at (202) 512-9971 or [kirschbaumj@gao.gov](mailto:kirschbaumj@gao.gov).

September 2013

## DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY

### Opportunities Exist to Enhance Visibility over Collaborative Field Mechanisms

## What GAO Found

Opportunities exist for the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to enhance its visibility over collaborative field mechanisms (i.e., multiagency groups such as task forces, committees, and teams that enhance stakeholder collaboration to more effectively and efficiently achieve their missions) established by component agencies. DHS, at the departmental level, has limited visibility over the universe and operation of these mechanisms and does not identify information from them that could further enhance collaboration across DHS and inform future DHS decisions. In the absence of a single DHS regional/field structure, DHS components have created collaborative mechanisms to better integrate field operations by better coordinating their missions and sharing information. However, when GAO sought to identify these mechanisms, in conjunction with DHS, senior DHS officials stated that while they maintain regular visibility over component activities—which may involve these collaborative mechanisms—DHS does not collect information on the types of mechanisms and collaborative practices these mechanisms employ because the mechanisms operate under the components, and thus this information was not readily available at the departmental level. DHS officials stated that primary oversight over the mechanisms is the responsibility of the operational components or mechanism participants. However, DHS's own strategic goals emphasize the importance of cross-departmental integration and coordination to enhance DHS's mission, and DHS could benefit—on a strategic level—from greater awareness of these mechanisms and the collaborative practices they employ. DHS is ultimately accountable for the resources that support these mechanisms, and is responsible for decision making about its overall field structure and for moving the department closer to its goal of greater component unification and integration. By collecting additional information on collaborative mechanisms, DHS could achieve better visibility over the universe of existing mechanisms, and thus be better positioned to analyze or implement any future changes to DHS's regional/field structure.

Participants from each of the collaborative mechanisms GAO reviewed identified several common factors that enhanced their collaboration, which DHS could benefit from collecting and disseminating on a broader scale. For example, participants identified the value of sharing resources, information, and recognition of successful missions as examples of successful collaboration practices they employed. Officials also cited collaboration challenges, including resource constraints, rotation of key personnel, and lack of leadership commitment. As GAO's fieldwork indicated, similar collaboration issues are relevant to multiple components, thus, DHS leadership could benefit from undertaking a review of collaborative mechanisms to solicit and identify promising practices, and then sharing this information among all components. In addition, given DHS's more strategic perspective, a more centralized DHS clearinghouse of collaborative practices information could be more efficient to collect and more easily accessed by a wider range of DHS components than under the current structure, where such information may not be readily shared outside of individual components or mechanisms. Collecting and disseminating information on collaborative practices would allow DHS to inform components about promising practices and lessons learned from which they could benefit.

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**Abbreviations**

ACTT	Alliance to Combat Transnational Threats
ATF	Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives
BEST	Border Enforcement Security Task Force
BUR	<i>Bottom-Up Review Report</i>
CBIG	Caribbean Border Interagency Group
CBP	U.S. Customs and Border Protection
COP	Common Operational Picture
CTCEU/TTPG	Counterterrorism and Criminal Exploitation Unit Terrorist Tracking and Pursuit Group
DEA	Drug Enforcement Administration
DHS	U.S. Department of Homeland Security
DOD	U.S. Department of Defense
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
FEMA	Federal Emergency Management Agency
FURA	Forces United for Rapid Action
GPRA	Government Performance and Results Act

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GPRAMA	GPRA Modernization Act of 2010
HSI	Homeland Security Investigations
HSTF-SE	Homeland Security Task Force Southeast
I&A	Office of Intelligence and Analysis
ICE	U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement
IOC	Interagency Operations Center
JFC	Joint Field Command
JIATF-South	Joint Interagency Task Force-South
JTT	Joint Targeting Team
NBU	National BEST Unit
NCTC	National Counterterrorism Center
NSARC	National Search and Rescue Committee
OAM	Office of Air and Marine
OBIM	Office of Biometric Identity Management
OIC	Operational Integration Center
OPS	Office of Operations Coordination and Planning
OVS	Operations Plan Vigilant Sentry
PA&E	Program Analysis & Evaluation Division
QHSR	<i>Quadrennial Homeland Security Review</i>
RCT	Regional Concurrence Team
ReCoM	Regional Coordinating Mechanism
RISC	Regional Interagency Steering Committee
SAFE	Security and Accountability for Every Port Act
SEWG	Special Event Working Group
STBIC	South Texas Border Intelligence Center
STC	South Texas Campaign
TCO	transnational criminal organization
TSA	Transportation Security Administration
USAO	U.S. Attorney's Office
USCG	U.S. Coast Guard
USCIS	U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services
USMS	U.S. Marshals Service
USSS	U.S. Secret Service

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September 27, 2013

### Congressional Requesters

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) is the third-largest cabinet-level department in the federal government, with an annual budget of about \$60 billion, 200,000 staff, and a broad range of missions, including aviation, maritime, and border security, as well as emergency management and infrastructure protection, among others. In 2002, when DHS was created from 22 separate agencies, among other actions, it had to integrate many disparate agencies—some with long histories of independent or autonomous operations, and all with distinct operational cultures—while maintaining their unique strengths and capabilities.<sup>1</sup> This merger presented significant public policy and management challenges for DHS. With its establishment, DHS also inherited the legacy field office structures and authorities of its component agencies, which resulted in an environment where components were conducting their respective missions in overlapping geographic regions. These overlapping component boundaries were especially relevant to DHS's seven key operational components—U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the U.S. Coast Guard (USCG), U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), the Transportation Security Administration (TSA), and the U.S. Secret Service (USSS)—and each component was accustomed to carrying out its missions within its identified set of geographic regions and system of field offices.<sup>2</sup>

Further, in November 2010, we reported on the overlap in mission and operational boundaries that exists among agencies at the northern and southern borders—a condition that requires coordination and

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<sup>1</sup>The Homeland Security Act of 2002 established DHS, which began operations in March 2003. Pub. L. No. 107-296, 116 Stat. 2135.

<sup>2</sup>DHS officials identified the seven listed agencies as the key DHS operational components. GAO, *Department of Homeland Security: Efforts to Assess Realignment of Its Field Office Structure*, [GAO-12-185R](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 28, 2012).

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collaboration for efficient and effective law enforcement.<sup>3</sup> In some cases, agencies have separate responsibility for investigating crimes that are committed by the same criminals or organizations in the same geographic region, making agency collaboration and coordination important to their mission success. The overlap in geographic and operational boundaries among DHS components that continues to exist underscores the importance of collaboration and coordination among these components when conducting their missions 10 years after beginning operations under DHS. Agencies not sharing information or coordinating their operations can lead to competition, interference, and operational inflexibility, as the DHS Inspector General reported in 2005 and 2007.<sup>4</sup> However, interagency mechanisms or strategies to coordinate programs that address crosscutting issues may reduce potentially duplicative, overlapping, and fragmented efforts.<sup>5</sup> Figure 1 provides an example of the extent to which geographic boundaries overlap in the southwestern United States for four of the seven DHS key operational components discussed in this report—FEMA, CBP, ICE, and USCG.

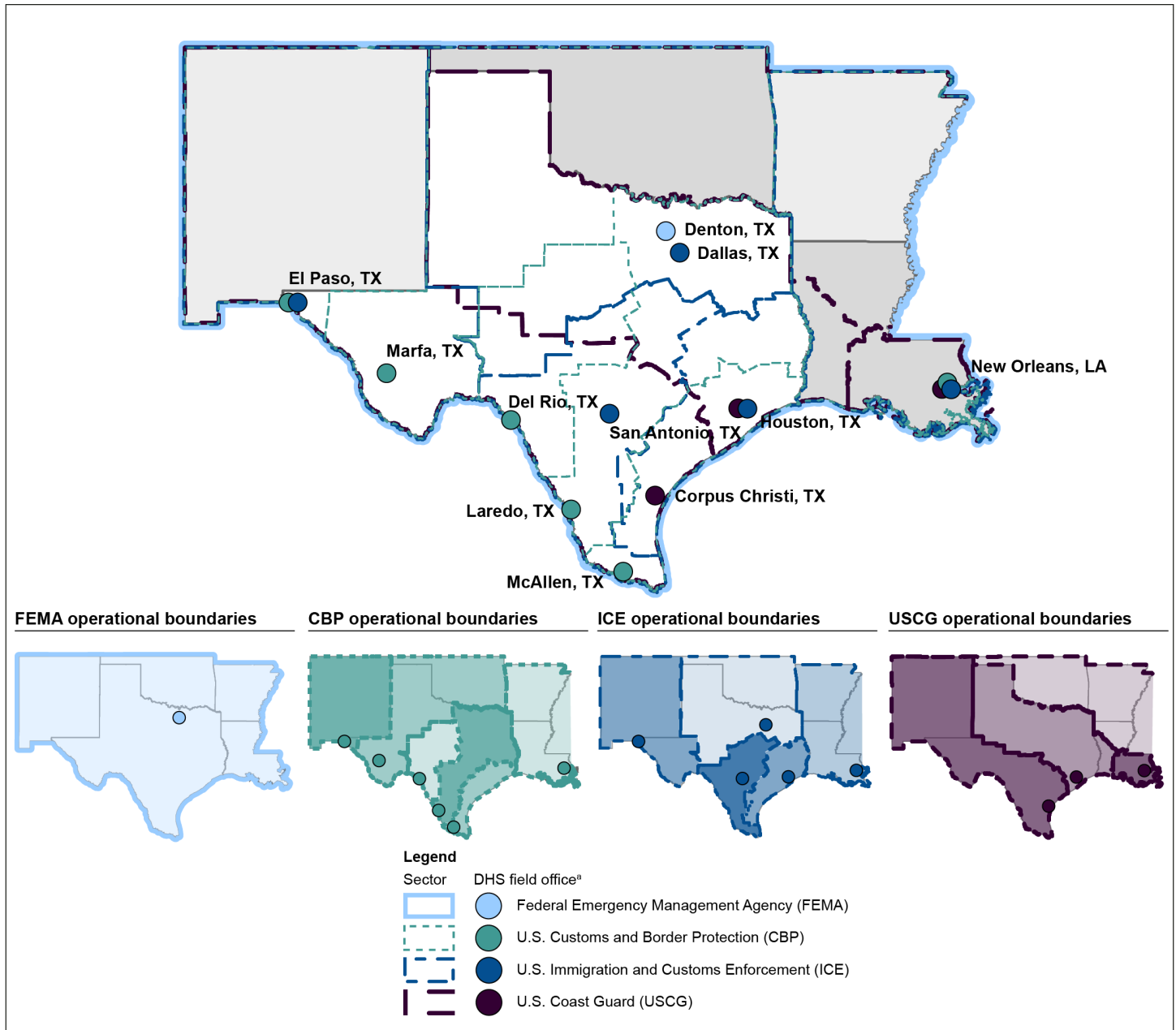
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<sup>3</sup>GAO, *Border Security: Additional Actions Needed to Better Ensure a Coordinated Federal Response to Illegal Activity on Federal Lands*, [GAO-11-177](#) (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 18, 2010).

<sup>4</sup>DHS, Office of Inspector General, *An Assessment of the Proposal to Merge Customs and Border Protection with Immigration and Customs Enforcement*, OIG-06-04 (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 1, 2005), and *DHS' Progress in Addressing Coordination Challenges Between Customs and Border Protection and Immigration and Customs Enforcement*, OIG-07-38 (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 13, 2007).

<sup>5</sup>GAO, *Managing for Results: GPRA Modernization Act Implementation Provides Important Opportunities to Address Government Challenges*, [GAO-11-617T](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 10, 2011).

**Figure 1: Geographic Overlap among FEMA, CBP, ICE, and USCG Operational Boundaries in the Southwestern Region of the United States**



Source: GAO; MapInfo (map).

<sup>a</sup>The map represents geographic and operational boundaries for FEMA Region VI, CBP Office of Border Patrol sectors, ICE Homeland Security Investigations special agent in charge field offices, and USCG sectors.



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Recognizing the overlapping geographic and operational boundaries of its components and the potential coordination and other benefits to be gained by better aligning its field organizational structure, DHS has considered potential organizational changes to its field structure twice since its inception in 2003. These efforts included a recommendation in DHS's 2010 *Bottom-Up Review Report* (BUR) that the department create a single unified field structure for its key operational components to improve intra-agency coordination, among other things.<sup>6</sup> However, we reported in September 2012 that creating a single unified field structure was no longer DHS's preferred approach because of operational and budgetary constraints.<sup>7</sup> We also reported that DHS could have better documented its examination of the potential costs and benefits of a single unified field structure. The department agreed with our findings and acknowledged that its efforts to assess regionalization, colocation, consolidation, and operational integration options could have been better documented.

Even without a single unified field structure, increasing regional collaboration across DHS components may help facilitate more effective and efficient mission execution. For example, increasing collaboration across components could facilitate information sharing and allow agencies to coordinate their patrols within a common geographic region, allowing them to more effectively and efficiently conduct their missions. Increasing collaboration within DHS also aligns with both congressional and executive branch recognition of the need for improved collaboration across the federal government as indicated by the Government Performance and Results Act Modernization Act of 2010 (GPRAMA), which, among other things, establishes a new framework aimed at taking a more crosscutting and integrated approach to focusing on results and improving government performance.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, DHS reported in its fiscal

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<sup>6</sup>The BUR report recommended the realignment of component regional configurations into a single DHS regional structure. The report also identified priority initiatives, such as strengthening aviation security and enhancing the department's risk management capability, to strengthen DHS's mission performance, improve departmental management, and increase accountability. DHS, *Bottom-Up Review Report*, (Washington, D.C.: July 2010).

<sup>7</sup>[GAO-12-185R](#).

<sup>8</sup>Pub. L. No. 111-352, 124 Stat. 3866 (2011). GPRAMA amends the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993, Pub. L. No. 103-62, 107 Stat. 285.

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years 2012-2016 strategic plan<sup>9</sup> that while effective mechanisms exist for interagency and intradepartmental operational and intelligence coordination, the department must learn from the successes of the Joint Interagency Task Force-South (JIATF-South) and other similar constructs to further integrate and enhance domain awareness across its efforts to secure the border and expedite lawful travel and trade.<sup>10</sup>

This report is a follow-on to our September 2012 report on DHS's efforts to improve collaboration and integrate its field operations.<sup>11</sup> It responds to your request that we review the extent to which DHS and key operational components are using collaborative field mechanisms—that is, multiagency groups such as task forces, committees, and teams that enhance stakeholder collaboration across the participating agencies in order to more effectively and efficiently achieve their missions.<sup>12</sup> This report (1) assesses the extent to which DHS has identified the collaborative field mechanisms of its key operational components, and (2) describes factors that participants of selected mechanisms identified that enhance or are challenges to their collaboration, and assesses the extent to which DHS has collected and disseminated successful collaborative practices.

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<sup>9</sup>DHS, *Department of Homeland Security Strategic Plan, Fiscal Years 2012-2016*, (Washington, D.C.: February 2012).

<sup>10</sup>JIATF-South, located in Key West, Florida, serves as the catalyst for integrated and synchronized interagency counterdrug operations and is responsible for the detection and monitoring of suspected air and maritime drug activity in the Caribbean Sea, the Gulf of Mexico, and the eastern Pacific. In efforts to reduce the drug threat, JIATF-South works with partner nations; the Department of Defense; U.S. law enforcement agencies, such as the Drug Enforcement Administration, CBP, and USCG; the Central Intelligence Agency; and the National Security Agency. Center for Strategic Research, Institute for National Strategic Studies, National University, *Strategic Perspectives 5: Joint Interagency Task Force-South: The Best Known, Least Understood Interagency Success*, (Washington, D.C.: June 2011).

<sup>11</sup>[GAO-12-185R](#).

<sup>12</sup>For the purpose of this review *collaboration* is defined as any joint activity by two or more organizations that is intended to produce more public value than could be produced when the organizations act alone. Collaboration can involve federal and nonfederal governmental organizations as well as nongovernmental organizations. In 2012, we reported on collaboration mechanisms and the subject matter specialists interviewed defined an interagency mechanism for collaboration as any arrangement or application that can facilitate collaboration between agencies. GAO, *Managing for Results: Key Considerations for Implementing Interagency Collaborative Mechanisms*, [GAO-12-1022](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 27, 2012).

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To address the first objective, we contacted DHS officials to identify a list of collaborative mechanisms that they deemed to be successful examples of field component collaboration while we also independently identified such mechanisms. Of the 13 mechanism types ultimately identified, 11 mechanisms focused on law enforcement activities.<sup>13</sup> For these 13 mechanisms, we examined organizational documents related to mechanism mission, objectives, stakeholder composition, locations, and date organized, among other things. We also interviewed officials from the DHS Office of Operations Coordination and Planning about the establishment and operation of these 13 mechanism types. We analyzed documentation (i.e., component daily activity reports) obtained from senior DHS headquarters officials to identify the extent to which the department has visibility over the collaborative field mechanism activities—including any plans to increase visibility over the mechanisms in the future.

To address the second objective, we selected 4 types of collaborative field mechanisms from the list of 13, including the Regional Coordinating Mechanism (ReCoM), the Border Enforcement Security Task Force (BEST), the South Texas Campaign Joint Targeting Team (JTT), and the Regional Interagency Steering Committee (RISC). We based our selection of these 4 types of mechanisms on the following factors: geographic location, continuity of the mechanism (established for at least 16 months), participation of multiple DHS component agencies, and variation in the lead component agency. Except for JTT, we selected mechanism types that existed in more than one location to allow for geographic comparison—such as BEST, with 35 locations throughout the United States. Appendix I describes each of the selected mechanisms in detail. Among these 4 different mechanism types, we then selected 10 individual mechanism sites—3 ReCoMs, 4 BESTs, 1 JTT, and 2 RISCs—for more in-depth review. For each of the selected mechanisms, we interviewed senior headquarters officials to discuss their views on the successes and challenges experienced with collaboration, including how the successes are replicated and communicated across the mechanisms and how challenges are addressed. At each of the 10 mechanisms we visited, we gathered information from participants on what they believed to be promising practices that helped them to succeed as collaborative

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<sup>13</sup>Each collaborative field mechanism type may have units or entities in multiple locations throughout the United States; however, for the purposes of this review, we are considering mechanisms that have the same title and mission as one general type of mechanism.

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mechanisms, as well as the factors they viewed as challenges to their collaboration. We also discussed their efforts to establish performance measures to assess mechanism effectiveness. We reviewed planning, operations, and management integration documents such as strategic plans, annual performance reports, and memorandums of understanding or agreements among the participating agencies. We compared these documents and their responses with the information-sharing and collaboration practices identified in our past work on this subject.<sup>14</sup> We interviewed responsible senior DHS headquarters officials to determine the extent to which the department has collected and reported on the collaborative practices identified by the mechanisms. We also interviewed component officials at the selected mechanisms to identify the extent to which information, such as information about performance, successes, challenges, and collaborative practices used are provided to DHS headquarters officials who have departmental-level oversight of these mechanisms. Appendix II provides a listing and description of the remaining 9 mechanisms not selected for a more in-depth review. For a more detailed discussion on our scope and methodology, see appendix III.

We conducted this performance audit from October 2012 to September 2013 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.

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<sup>14</sup>See, for example, [GAO-12-1022](#), and *Interagency Collaboration: Key Issues for Congressional Oversight of National Security Strategies, Organizations, Workforce, and Information Sharing*, [GAO-09-904SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 25, 2009). Key collaboration practices were identified from literature reviews, government agency and research institution studies, interviews with academics and practitioner experts, as well as a detailed analysis of prior GAO reports and testimonies on collaboration.

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## Background

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### Past DHS Efforts to Integrate Component Field Operations

DHS's interest in better integrating its legacy agencies has been long-standing, and on several occasions since 2004 the department has identified an approach or vision for establishing a more unified field structure to enhance mission coordination among its component agencies but has not implemented such a structure. As we reported in September 2012, according to senior DHS officials, the fragmentation associated with each operational component having different boundaries for its area of responsibility prompted some in DHS and other stakeholders to promote the idea of a single unified DHS field structure, sometimes referred to as regionalization.<sup>15</sup> Proponents believed that a more unified structure of DHS regional offices could foster better collaboration and integration of multiple components' operations, making DHS as a whole more responsive and better prepared to counter man-made or natural threats. In addition to improving operational effectiveness, proponents of a single DHS field structure envisioned opportunities for long-term cost savings through the sharing of assets, including office space.

For example, in 2005 and 2006, DHS considered implementing an overarching plan to unify its components under a single unified field structure, but then opted not to pursue this vision because of component resistance to the concept and significant up-front costs associated with collocating components. Again, in 2010, DHS chose not to realign its component regional configurations into a single DHS regional structure, as recommended in its BUR. In 2012, DHS and component officials stated that transforming the existing structure into a single unified DHS system would be a huge undertaking, and those not in favor of large-scale regionalization cited numerous challenges, including budgetary constraints, and other drawbacks to such a plan. As we reported in September 2012, while DHS's intention of improving collaboration among its agencies is a sound goal—whether through regionalization or other means—its approach has lacked the systematic analyses and documentation needed to support its proposals for change. The department agreed with our findings and acknowledged that its efforts could have been better documented.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>[GAO-12-185R](#).

<sup>16</sup>[GAO-12-185R](#).

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In lieu of a single unified field structure, DHS has proposed other alternatives for enhancing collaboration among its components in the field, but has not implemented these proposals. For example, the department reported plans to harmonize operations and intelligence—utilizing concepts and structures modeled after JIATF-South. In 2012, DHS identified a new approach for enhancing regional collaboration among its components through virtual integration—that is, by improving component agencies’ coordination of mission activities and communication through the use of technology. According to a senior DHS official, virtual integration would allow for coordination of component functions without actually consolidating or merging the functions. DHS’s intention toward virtual integration was communicated in its fiscal years 2012-2016 strategic plan and reported to us in September 2012.<sup>17</sup> However, in 2013, DHS officials stated that the department was not specifically pursuing virtual approaches to regional coordination. DHS officials also reported that although DHS no longer planned to pursue virtual collaboration on a larger scale, it was occurring on a more limited scale, within the department and components, for certain efforts.<sup>18</sup>

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### Component Efforts to Integrate Field Operations through Collaborative Mechanisms

In the absence of a unified field structure, DHS’s operational components have established and utilized collaborative mechanisms, including virtual approaches, to better integrate their field operations. Specifically, DHS field components have employed collaborative mechanisms to coordinate their missions and share information among multiple stakeholders in order to increase their mission effectiveness and efficiencies. These mechanisms have both similarities and differences in how they are structured, which missions or threats they focus on, and which agencies participate in them, among other things. All of the mechanisms identified in this report involve multiple DHS components, as well as other federal, state, and local agency participants, and their purpose is to improve operational integration, coordination, and efficiency among DHS components. These mechanisms focus on a range of missions and are located throughout the United States. Figure 2 shows the states and

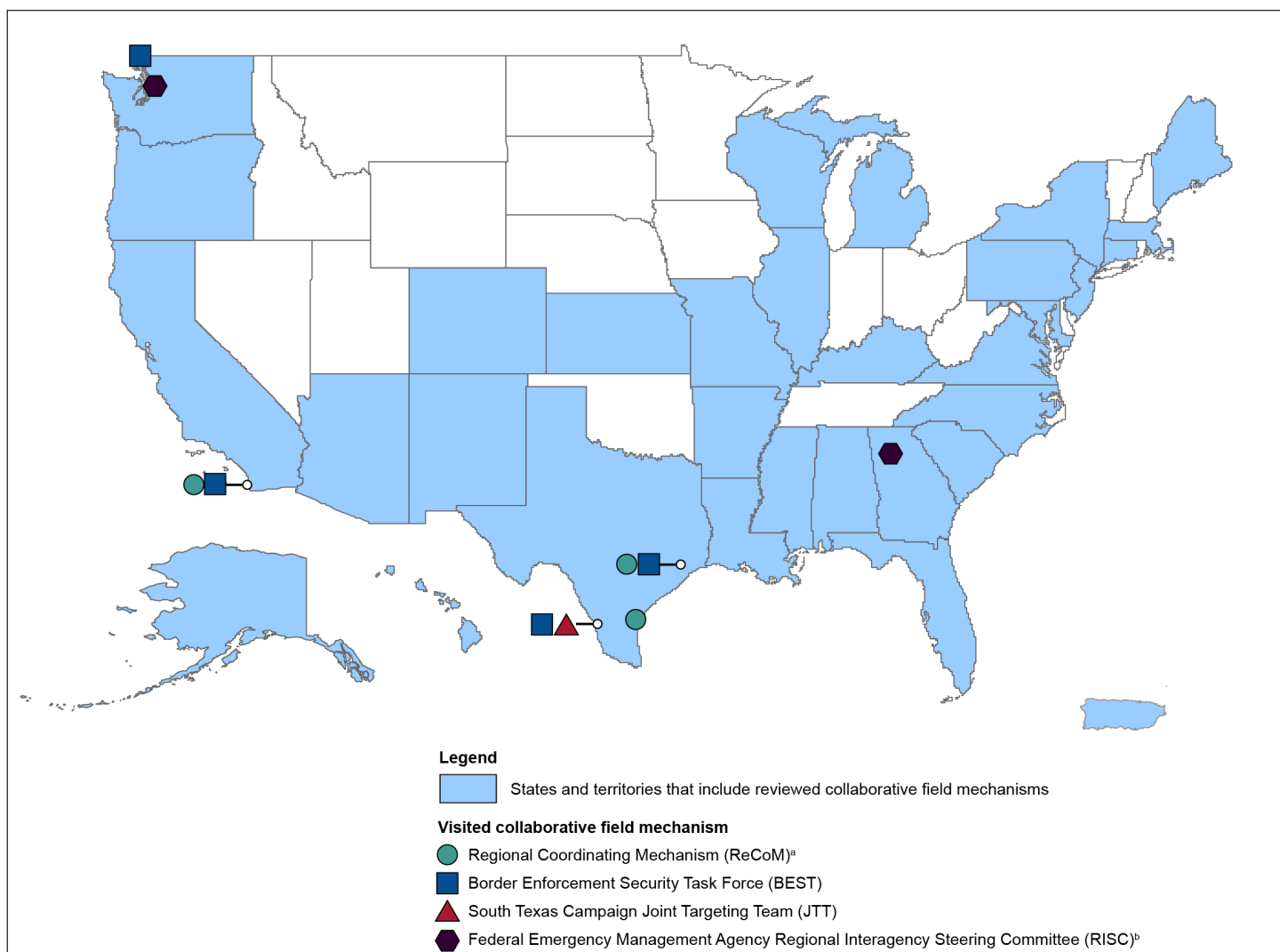
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<sup>17</sup>DHS, *Department of Homeland Security Strategic Plan, Fiscal Years 2012-2016*.

<sup>18</sup>For example, according to senior DHS officials, one virtual collaboration effort is DHS’s Common Operational Picture (COP), which provides an unclassified consolidated information “hub” for homeland security partners to ensure critical terrorism- and disaster-related information is available. According to these officials, there are currently over 3,500 partners and users in the COP.

territories that contain 1 or more of the 13 collaborative field mechanism types (including the 4 mechanism types we selected for further study) involving DHS's key operational components that we identified in conjunction with the department and these components.

**Figure 2: States and Territories That Include Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and Key Operational Component Collaborative Field Mechanisms and Our Site Visit Locations**



Source: GAO analysis of DHS information; MapInfo (map).

Notes: The shaded areas reflect only the states and territories containing the coordination mechanisms reviewed for this report. This figure does not represent the locations of DHS mechanisms that were not reviewed.

<sup>a</sup>An additional ReCoM not depicted on the map is located in the U.S. territory of Guam.

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<sup>b</sup>Each of the 10 FEMA regional offices manages a RISC. While the geographic area covered by the RISC aligns with that covered by each region, the RISC meetings are not necessarily located at a specific geographic point and can occur throughout the region or be held virtually.

All 4 mechanism types we selected for a more in-depth review (ReCoM, BEST, JTT, and RISC) had been established through formal organizing documents (e.g., a charter or memorandum of understanding); involve stakeholders from various federal, state, and local agencies; and have an established lead agency to provide oversight and guidance to participants. In addition, all 4 of these mechanism types are funded by the participating agencies—no funding has been allocated or budgeted specifically for these collaborative mechanisms.<sup>19</sup>

- ReCoMs were officially established in 2011 through the Maritime Operations Coordination Plan, which was signed by their Executive Team of the Senior Guidance Team, composed of the Director of ICE Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), the Commissioner of CBP, and the Commandant of the Coast Guard. The Maritime Operations Coordination Plan directs these agencies to utilize the fusion of intelligence, planning, and operations to target the threat of transnational terrorist and criminal acts along the coastal border. USCG serves as the lead agency responsible for planning and coordinating among components, and as of June 2013, 32 ReCoMs had been established aligning with the USCG sectors' geographic areas of responsibility.
- In 2005, the first BEST unit was organized and led by ICE HSI, in partnership with CBP, in Laredo, Texas, and as of June 2013, 35 BESTs had been established throughout the United States. The BESTs have a mission to identify, disrupt, and dismantle existing and emerging threats at U.S. land, sea, and air borders.
- The first JTT was organized in November 2011 as a CBP-led partnership among the U.S. Border Patrol, CBP Office of Field Operations, ICE HSI, and the government of Mexico to support the South Texas Campaign (STC). The purpose of the STC is to integrate intelligence, pursue enhanced coordination with the government of Mexico, and conduct targeted operations to disrupt and dismantle

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<sup>19</sup>The Jaime Zapata Border Enforcement Security Task Force Act provided that the Secretary of Homeland Security may provide financial assistance, as appropriate, for the operational, administrative, and technological costs associated with the participation of BEST participants (e.g., federal, state, local, and tribal law enforcement agencies). Pub. L. No. 112-205, § 3(a), 126 Stat. 1487, 1488 (2012) (codified at 6 U.S.C. § 240). As of June 2013, no funding has been appropriated for this purpose.



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transnational criminal organizations.<sup>20</sup> As of June 2013, JTTs had been established across four geographic boundary areas in Del Rio, Laredo, McAllen, and Houston, Texas.

- The first RISC was organized in 2003 to provide a forum for senior DHS officials to enhance emergency management and homeland security for all hazards through a collaborative, regional approach involving federal, state, local, tribal, nongovernmental organization and private sector partners. As of June 2013, a RISC had been established in each of the 10 FEMA regions.

The purpose of all of these selected mechanisms includes increasing operational effectiveness through greater collaboration and leveraging of resources and expertise. Our review identified commonalities within the same type of mechanism across multiple locations, as well as commonalities across the 4 types of mechanisms that we focused on for our review. Table 1 provides a summary description of the 4 selected collaborative field mechanism types that we reviewed and the locations we visited for each of them.

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<sup>20</sup>Transnational criminal organization refers to crime coordinated across national borders, involving groups or networks of individuals working in more than one country to plan and execute illegal business ventures. In order to achieve their goals, these criminal groups utilize systematic violence and corruption.

**Table 1: Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Operational Component Collaborative Field Mechanisms Selected for Our Site Visits**

Description of the DHS operational component field mechanisms selected for site visits <sup>a</sup>		
Mechanism name	Selected agencies <sup>b</sup>	Mechanism purpose/description
Regional Coordinating Mechanism (ReCoM)	<p>Lead agencies: U.S. Coast Guard (USCG), U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), and U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP)</p> <p>Stakeholders: Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI); Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA); U.S. Attorney’s Office (USAO); state, local, and tribal law enforcement agencies; and foreign law enforcement agencies</p> <p>Sites we visited: San Diego, California; Houston, Texas; and Corpus Christi, Texas</p>	The purpose of the ReCoM is to plan and conduct joint operations that target terrorist and criminal activity along the coastal border.
Border Enforcement Security Task Force (BEST)	<p>Lead agency: ICE HSI</p> <p>Stakeholders: CBP; DEA; Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF); FBI; USCG; USAO; state, local, and tribal law enforcement agencies; and foreign law enforcement agencies</p> <p>Sites we visited: San Diego, California; Houston, Texas; Laredo, Texas; and Blaine, Washington</p>	The purpose of the BEST is to provide a platform for coordination across all levels of government—both domestic and international—to investigate border-related crimes.
South Texas Campaign Joint Targeting Team (JTT)	<p>Lead agency: CBP</p> <p>Stakeholders: ICE HIS; DEA; FBI; ATF; Department of Defense (DOD); USAO; U.S. Marshals Service; Texas Department of Public Safety; state, local, and tribal law enforcement agencies; and foreign law enforcement agencies</p> <p>Site we visited: Laredo, Texas</p>	The primary purpose of the JTT is to gather and deconflict information on South Texas Campaign targets and initiate operations against those identified targets.
Federal Emergency Management Agency Regional Interagency Steering Committee (RISC)	<p>Lead agency: FEMA</p> <p>Stakeholders: CBP; ICE; Federal Protective Service; DHS Science and Technology Directorate; DHS National Protection and Programs Directorate; TSA; USCG; federal emergency support agencies; state, local, and tribal agencies; voluntary organizations; educational institutions; private sector entities; and nongovernmental organizations</p> <p>Sites we visited: Atlanta, Georgia, and Bothell, Washington</p>	The purpose of the RISC is to provide senior-level officials with a forum to share their expertise and engage with other stakeholders on addressing issues related to disaster planning and emergency preparedness.

Source: GAO analysis of DHS information.

<sup>a</sup>See appendix I for additional information (i.e., description and locations) on the selected mechanisms.

<sup>b</sup>We included the lead agency (or agencies) for each mechanism, but did not provide a comprehensive listing of stakeholders, which may include other federal, state, local, tribal, and private sector agencies.

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## Opportunities Exist for DHS to Enhance Its Visibility over Collaborative Field Mechanisms of Its Key Operational Components

DHS, at the departmental level, has limited awareness of the universe of component field collaborative mechanisms and of the types and quality of collaborative practices they employ to better coordinate and integrate mission operations. As a result of its limited visibility over these mechanisms, DHS headquarters is not well positioned to routinely identify valuable information obtained from the mechanisms that could inform decisions about DHS field structures or further enhance collaboration across components.

According to senior DHS Office of Operations Coordination and Planning (OPS) officials, DHS headquarters does not actively catalog or routinely monitor the universe of collaborative field mechanisms because they are organized and monitored by their respective lead operational components or participants. However, although the collaborative mechanisms may be monitored by individual components, the components do not have the same high-level perspective—or accountability—as the department as a whole, to look across all components and assess the state of collaboration occurring in the field. Moreover, according to senior OPS officials, their departmental-level office is focused on the specific outcomes of operational activities and not whether the activities are carried out by a certain collaborative mechanism, as the collaborative mechanisms employed to accomplish tasks are not as important as the end results. Therefore, these DHS headquarters officials believe they have visibility—primarily through the components—over activities carried out by collaborative mechanisms, but stated that they have little or no visibility over the nature of the collaboration itself, since they do not collect this type of information. OPS officials also noted that the Program Analysis & Evaluation Division (PA&E), within the Office of the Chief Financial Officer, which is involved with performance measurement, monitors whether the operational components are meeting their performance requirements or goals, but does not track performance or other information on cross-component field mechanisms. PA&E officials stated that their division is responsible for strategic-level management and oversight, not operational-level, and per various laws and policy frameworks, their division measures performance of higher-level DHS programs.

DHS's limited visibility at the departmental level of the number and type of existing collaborative field mechanisms was demonstrated in part by the challenges DHS headquarters experienced in providing us with a list of mechanisms. Specifically, when we asked for a list of formalized mechanisms that DHS headquarters considered to be successful examples of field collaboration, this information was not readily available

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at the departmental level, according to senior DHS officials. After consulting with operational component officials, DHS headquarters provided 6 of the 13 examples that constituted our final list of mechanisms. We acknowledge that identifying a universe of successful collaborative field mechanisms can be difficult, in part because of the relatively large size of DHS and the breadth of activities involving component agencies. However, systematically collecting information (e.g., related to operational mission, capabilities, performance, etc.) about the mechanisms from the component agencies that sponsor them would yield important information about which mechanisms are effective.

Senior DHS headquarters officials stated that although they have limited visibility over the universe of collaborative mechanisms and the specific collaborative practices utilized by the groups, the department does obtain regular knowledge of component operational activities and results. For example, senior OPS officials said that they receive situation reports about daily operational actions broken out by lead component, regardless of whether the operation is affiliated with a particular collaborative mechanism. They also noted their DHS Common Operational Picture (COP), which provides an unclassified consolidated information hub for homeland security partners to ensure critical terrorism- and disaster-related information is available.<sup>21</sup> However, senior DHS officials agreed that having increased visibility and additional mechanism information at the headquarters level could benefit departmental and component efforts to improve collaboration in the field and better integrate operations. For example, obtaining and analyzing this information, which DHS has lacked in recent deliberations about revamping its field structure, could provide DHS with a stronger basis for decision making regarding the establishment of new mechanisms, the effective allocation of scarce resources, or other changes to its field structure. Having some access to this information gains importance because the potential increase in mission effectiveness and efficiencies that may have been realized from earlier regionalization plans that were not adopted could be accomplished through other means—including through collaborative field mechanisms.

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<sup>21</sup>DHS officials stated that the COP allows for a greater understanding and geospatial awareness of actual and emerging homeland security events and enables senior leadership to identify more effective courses of action, and make informed decisions before, during, and after an event.

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DHS's limited ability to monitor the collaborative mechanisms operating under the DHS umbrella is inconsistent with its own departmental-level strategic goals. Specifically, several key DHS initiatives and documents, including the *Quadrennial Homeland Security Review* (QHSR), BUR, and the DHS fiscal years 2012-2016 strategic plan, contain strategic goals aimed at greater unification and integration of efforts across individual DHS components.<sup>22</sup> In particular, DHS's strategic plan specifically outlines objectives related to the goals of "improving cross-departmental management, policy, and functional integration," as well as "enhancing intelligence, information sharing, and integrated operations." DHS's limited departmental visibility over these mechanisms is also inconsistent with elements of the *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, which calls for the establishment of control activities, such as a mechanism to identify and monitor the activities of components within an organization, to help ensure achievement of the organization's objectives.<sup>23</sup> The internal control objective pertaining to effectiveness and efficiency of operations is of particular relevance to DHS's oversight of the collaborative mechanisms and relates more to the assessment of the efficiency of the mechanisms themselves in addition to the operational-level visibility that we discuss above. Collecting information on the existing collaborative mechanisms will enable the department to better monitor these mechanisms. Doing so could also better position DHS to judge at a more strategic level which mechanisms offer potential for replication in other geographic or mission areas. Given current budget constraints, it is important for DHS to identify and promote the most effective and efficient collaborative field mechanisms as possible.

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<sup>22</sup>DHS, *Quadrennial Homeland Security Review Report: A Strategic Framework for a Secure Homeland* (Washington, D.C.: February 2010); *Bottom-Up Review Report*; and *Department of Homeland Security Strategic Plan, Fiscal Years 2012-2016*.

<sup>23</sup>GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, GAO/AIMD-00-21.3.1 (Washington, D.C.: November 1999).

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**Participants Identified  
Practices That  
Enhanced or Served  
as Challenges to  
Collaboration; DHS  
Could Benefit from  
Collecting and  
Disseminating  
Promising Practices**

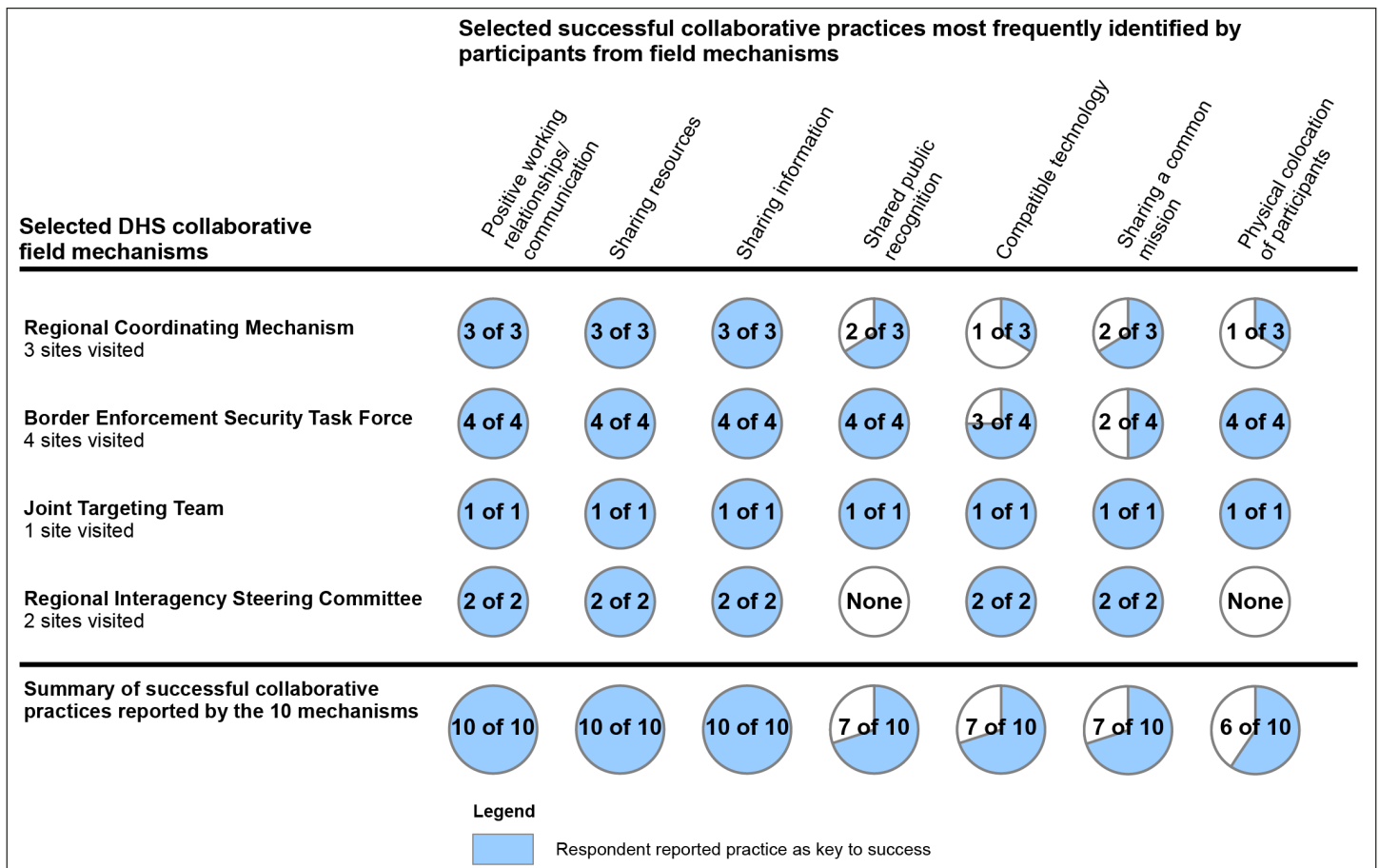
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**Participants Identified  
Common Practices That  
Enhanced Collaboration,  
Which DHS Could Benefit  
from Collecting and  
Disseminating on a  
Broader Scale**

**Common Practices That  
Enhanced Collaboration**

During the course of our review, participants from the four selected DHS collaborative mechanism types provided information on successful practices that enhanced their collaboration that could be useful for DHS to collect and disseminate on a broader scale. At each of our 10 site visits, we asked cognizant participants to identify and provide examples of collaborative practices or other factors that they considered particularly important to the success of their group's collaboration and operations. We evaluated their responses and summarized them into seven broad categories, as shown in figure 3, based upon the practices that were reported most frequently. This summary information provides valuable insights on approaches for enhancing collaboration among the DHS component agencies—information that could also be beneficial for DHS to collect from a larger group of component mechanisms.

**Figure 3: Successful Collaborative Practices Most Frequently Identified by Participants from Selected Field Mechanisms**



Source: GAO analysis of DHS information.

Among participants that we interviewed, there was consensus that certain practices facilitated more effective collaboration, which, according to participants, contributed to the groups' overall successes. In many cases, the same or similar successful collaborative practices were reported by participants of different mechanism types as well as by participants of the same mechanism type in different geographic regions. For example, despite having a different mission focus or operating in different geographic regions, participants we interviewed from all three ReCoMs, all four BESTs, the JTT, and both RISCs—the total sample population that we met with with—identified three of the seven categories of practices as keys to success: (1) positive working relationships/communication, (2) sharing resources, and (3) sharing information.

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DHS Could Benefit from  
Collecting and Disseminating  
Information on Successful  
Collaboration

Furthermore, participants from most mechanisms also drew connections among the successful collaborative factors. For example, participants from all 10 mechanisms stated that forming positive working relationships was tied to better information sharing among them. Specifically, in our interviews, BEST mechanism officials stated that developing trust and building relationships helps participants respond quickly to a crisis, and communicating frequently helps participants eliminate duplication of efforts. Participants from the ReCoMs, BESTs, and JTT also reported that having positive working relationships built on strong trust among participants was a key factor in their law enforcement partnerships because of the sensitive nature of law enforcement information, and the risks posed if it is not protected appropriately. In turn, building positive working relationships was facilitated by another collaborative factor identified as important by 6 of the 10 mechanisms: physical collocation of participants. Specifically, participants from the mechanisms focused on law enforcement investigations, such as the BESTs and JTT, reported that being physically colocated with members from other agencies was important for increasing the groups' effectiveness. Participants from one of the three ReCoMs we visited also stated that collocation enables operations planning and database/information sharing. It also helps build trust and overcome cultural barriers among agency participants.

Successful collaboration practices can help the participating components mitigate a variety of challenges, and they are generally consistent with the seven key issues to consider when implementing collaborative mechanisms that we identified in our 2012 report on interagency collaboration.<sup>24</sup> DHS leadership could benefit from engaging the mechanisms—soliciting promising collaboration practices information and organizing it through the lens of our seven key collaborative issues. As noted earlier in this report, DHS does not collect this type of information at the departmental level primarily because the mechanisms operate under the components. However, collecting promising practices information from the collaborative mechanisms at the departmental level and disseminating it to components throughout DHS would inform components about specific practices from which they could also benefit. Senior DHS officials agreed with this assessment. In addition, it may be more efficient for a single DHS departmental-level office to collect and

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<sup>24</sup>[GAO-12-1022](#). See appendix IV for the key issues to consider when implementing interagency collaborative mechanisms.



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disseminate this type of information than all the components individually, especially given DHS's higher-level, strategic perspective across the department. Also, given that our fieldwork indicated similar collaboration issues are relevant to multiple components, a more centralized DHS clearinghouse of collaborative promising practices information could be more easily accessed by a wide range of DHS component stakeholders than under the current structure, where such information is now stovepiped and may not be readily shared outside of individual components or mechanisms.

Key features of interagency collaboration include agencies establishing or clarifying guidelines, agreements, or procedures for sharing information. Among other things, these guidelines, agreements, and procedures should identify and disseminate practices to facilitate more effective communication and collaboration among federal, state, and local agencies.<sup>25</sup> The benefit of sharing promising practices includes the ability to replicate positive program outcomes by leveraging the experiences of different stakeholders with the same or similar goals.<sup>26</sup> Key features of interagency collaboration also identify the sharing of promising practices as an example of government agencies building capacity for improved efficiency.<sup>27</sup> Accordingly, DHS component agencies could benefit from better access to collaborative promising practices, as this would help them in their own efforts to leverage the experiences of many collaborative mechanisms.

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## Officials Identified Common Barriers to Successful Collaboration

Participants from the 10 collaborative field mechanisms we visited also identified challenges or barriers that affected their collaboration across components and made it more difficult. Using the same approach as that for eliciting successful collaborative practices, at each of the 10 locations we visited, we asked cognizant participants to identify challenges to

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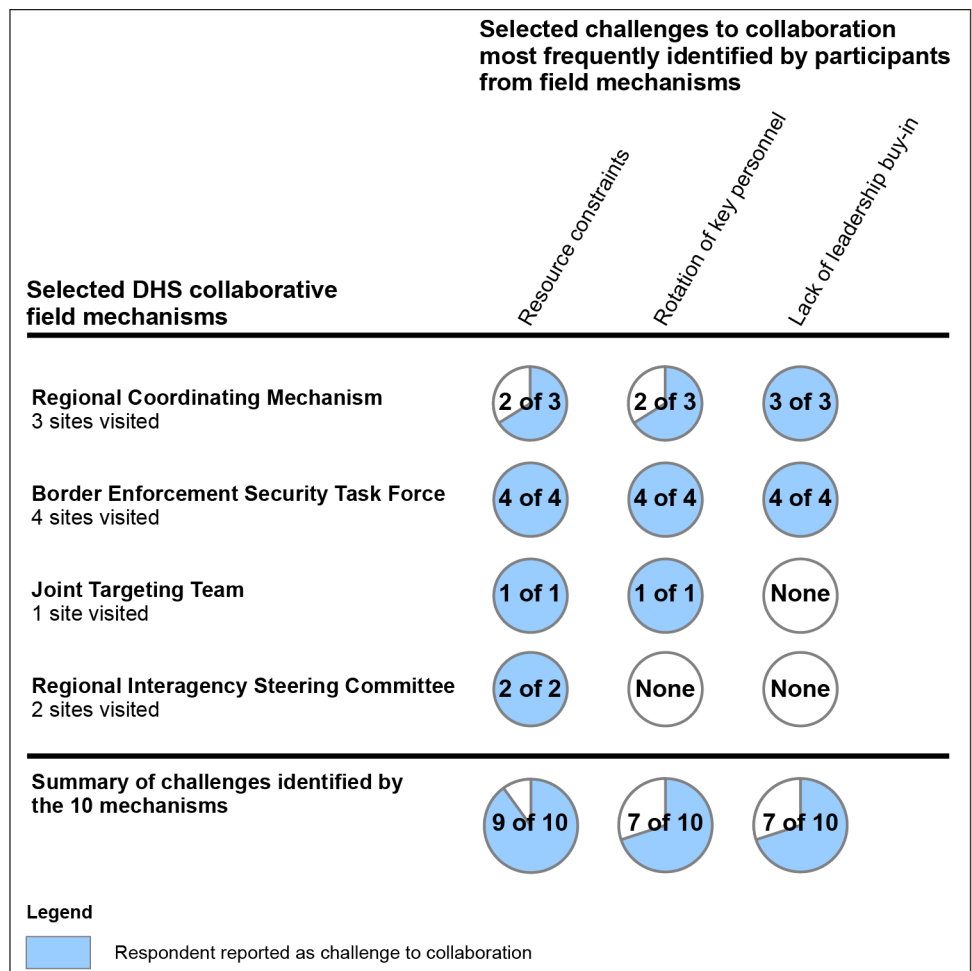
<sup>25</sup>[GAO-09-904SP](#).

<sup>26</sup>See, for example: GAO, *VA Education Benefits: VA Needs to Improve Program Management and Provide More Timely Information to Students*, [GAO-13-338](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 22, 2013), and *School Meal Programs: Sharing Information on Best Practices May Improve Programs' Operations*, [GAO/RCED-97-126](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 21, 1997). Findings from these reports demonstrate the benefits of collecting, analyzing, and disseminating promising practices information.

<sup>27</sup>GAO, *Streamlining Government: Key Practices from Select Efficiency Initiatives Should Be Shared Governmentwide*, [GAO-11-908](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 30, 2011).

collaboration that they believed had impeded their groups' operations or effectiveness. We evaluated their responses and created three broad categories, as shown in figure 4, based on the challenges that they reported most frequently.

**Figure 4: Challenges to Collaboration Identified Most Frequently by Participants from Selected Field Mechanisms**



Source: GAO analysis of DHS information.

Our discussions with participants representing the 10 mechanisms identified three barriers that participants most frequently believed hindered effective collaboration within their mechanisms: (1) resource constraints, (2) rotation of key personnel, and (3) lack of leadership buy-in. For example, when discussing resource issues, participants from 9 of

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the 10 collaborative mechanisms said that funding for their group's operation was critical and identified resource constraints as a challenge to sustaining their collaborative efforts. These participants also reported that since none of the mechanisms receive dedicated funding, the participating federal agencies provide support for their respective representatives assigned to the selected mechanisms. This support included such things as funding for employee salaries, office space, and law enforcement equipment (e.g., night vision capability and surveillance vehicles), among other things. A lack of resources also affected state and local law enforcement participation in some of these collaborative mechanisms, and mechanism participants explained that ensuring state and local participation has been challenging because of resource constraints, which, in some cases, have led to a mechanism missing key participants. For example, participating agencies fund ReCoM positions out of their respective operating budgets—no dedicated ReCoM funding has been provided. As a result, some agencies are not able to participate (such as state and local law enforcement) because of resource constraints. Also, there was a majority opinion among mechanism participants we visited that rotation of key personnel and lack of leadership buy-in hindered effective collaboration within their mechanisms. For example, JTT participants stated that the rotation of key personnel hinders the JTT's ability to develop and retain more seasoned personnel with expertise in investigations and surveillance techniques. In addition to collecting promising practices information from the collaborative mechanisms and disseminating it to components throughout DHS, collecting and disseminating information on any ways to address identified challenges or barriers to collaboration would similarly help leverage the experiences of other collaborative mechanisms.

Collaborative field mechanism participants could also benefit from DHS sharing information related to performance measurement. While sharing such information is not a challenge to collaboration itself, officials from all mechanisms agreed that establishing metrics that could measure the impact of their collaboration, including whether the benefits of the collaborative mechanisms outweigh the costs, were difficult to establish or did not yet exist. Nonetheless, officials reported that the ReCoMs, BESTs, and JTT have all undertaken efforts to develop output or outcome performance measures to track the accomplishments of their

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collaborative mechanisms.<sup>28</sup> For example, the fiscal years 2012-2016 BEST Strategic Plan states that BESTs are to be evaluated annually on their overall performance, which is quantified by output enforcement metrics (e.g., number of arrests, indictments, convictions, and seizures). The JTT's efforts to develop performance measures include identifying emerging threats, risks, and vulnerabilities in the South Texas corridor where it operates. Developing output and outcome measures can provide insight into the performance of each mechanism; however, ReCoM, BEST, JTT, and RISC officials all stated that is very difficult to develop a metric that isolates the benefits of their collaboration from the benefits that they may have achieved operating separately under their respective agencies. Despite these measurement challenges, ReCoM, BEST, JTT, and RISC officials were able to provide anecdotal examples of the positive benefits of their collaboration and coordination. For example, ReCoM officials in one location told us that they were able to make significant progress toward meeting their goal of "persistent presence" along a coastal ship channel because they had coordinated the schedules of the USCG and CBP Office of Air and Marine resources that conducted these patrols.<sup>29</sup> BEST and JTT officials stressed the value of leveraging their participating agencies' legal authorities to develop more robust cases, which increased the likelihood that their cases would be successfully prosecuted, and that convicted criminals would receive longer sentences. RISC participants in both locations cited their collaborative mechanisms as important to identifying emergency response capability gaps across different levels of government and integrating courses of action to take in response to disasters. Leveraging mechanism participants' experiences and insights regarding the development of performance metrics to quantify their accomplishments and the impacts of their collaboration, and disseminating promising practices that they have identified could provide benefits to other DHS collaborative efforts.

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<sup>28</sup>An output measure describes the level of activity to be provided over a period of time, including a description of the characteristics (e.g., timeliness) established as standards for the activity. Outcome measures describe the intended results of carrying out a program or activity. They define an event or condition that is external to the program or activity and that is of direct importance to the intended beneficiaries or the public.

<sup>29</sup>The Office of Air and Marine (OAM) is a subcomponent of CBP that has primary responsibility for the management, control, and protection of U.S. borders. OAM performs various missions in response to requests for air and marine support from other DHS components—primarily Border Patrol, within CBP, and ICE, as well as other federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies.

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## Conclusions

Effective collaboration within and among federal agencies is important for improving operational success, especially in a resource-constrained environment. DHS component agencies have made progress in developing and evolving collaborative field mechanisms that have allowed them to better coordinate mission activities in the field, and these collaborative efforts are even more important in light of DHS's decision in 2012 to not pursue a single unified field structure to integrate component field operations. Given the overlapping geographic areas of responsibility and authorities, and the many operational activities that DHS components are conducting, component efforts to collaborate are important. However, DHS's limited visibility over the universe of collaborative field mechanisms operating under its purview reduces its ability to maximize the effectiveness and efficiency of these mechanisms to enhance cross-departmental management and integrated operations. DHS senior officials believe the components, not the department, are responsible for the mechanisms' oversight because the department is more focused on strategic rather than operational-level management activities. We agree that the components are capable of operating and monitoring their collaborative field mechanisms. However, consistent with its own departmental-level strategic goals, we believe that DHS could benefit from greater awareness of the mechanisms themselves and the collaborative practices that they employ. Not only is the department ultimately accountable for the resources that support these mechanisms, it is also responsible for making important decisions about the overall field structure of its components, and for moving the department closer to its goal of greater component integration. By collecting information about the universe of collaborative mechanisms and developing a fuller understanding of them and the promising practices they employ, DHS could be in a better position to utilize these practices across components to help move the department toward its strategic goal of increased operational integration.

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## Recommendations for Executive Action

To help ensure that any future efforts to analyze or implement changes to DHS's regional field office structure, including the establishment of collaborative field mechanisms, are informed by current collaborative practices, we recommend that the Secretary of Homeland Security direct the appropriate department official to take the following two actions: (1) collect information on the existing collaborative mechanisms to have better visibility of them, and (2) collect information on promising practices, including such things as potential ways to address any identified challenges or barriers to collaboration as well as any identified

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performance metrics, from the collaborative mechanisms and disseminate them to components.

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## Agency Comments

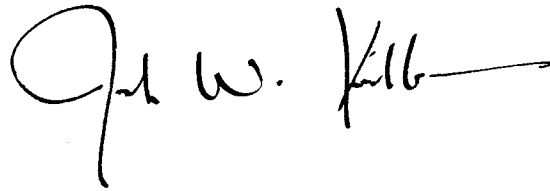
We provided a draft copy of this report to the Secretary of Homeland Security for review and comments. DHS provided official written comments, which are reprinted in appendix V. In response to our first recommendation, DHS concurred and stated that the Office of Operations Coordination and Planning (OPS), in coordination with other DHS components, as appropriate, will develop a method to enhance the collection of information on collaborative field coordination and integration mechanisms. OPS will schedule appropriate data calls to collect the information and leverage the Homeland Security Information Network as a means for sharing information among the components. DHS also concurred with our second recommendation and stated that OPS, in coordination with other DHS components, as appropriate, will develop and implement a method of collecting and disseminating information to the components regarding promising practices, including challenges or barriers to collaboration, from various field coordination and integration mechanisms. DHS estimated completion of actions related to both recommendations by September 30, 2014. DHS provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate. We also changed some specific descriptions of DHS component operations and removed others because DHS identified them as sensitive.

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As agreed with your offices, unless you publicly announce the contents of this report earlier, we plan no further distribution until 30 days from the report date. We are sending copies of this report to the Secretary of Homeland Security and interested congressional committees as appropriate. In addition, this report will be available at no charge on the GAO website at <http://www.gao.gov>. If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-9971 or

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[kirschbaumj@gao.gov](mailto:kirschbaumj@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 VI.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Joe W. Kirschbaum" with a long horizontal stroke extending from the end of the name.

Joseph Kirschbaum  
Acting Director, Homeland Security and Justice Issues

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*List of Requesters*

The Honorable Thomas Carper  
Chairman  
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs  
United States Senate

The Honorable Susan Collins  
United States Senate

The Honorable Candice Miller  
Chairman  
The Honorable Sheila Jackson Lee  
Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Border and Maritime Security  
Committee on Homeland Security  
House of Representatives

The Honorable Henry Cuellar  
House of Representatives



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# Appendix I: Description of DHS Collaborative Field Mechanisms Selected and Visited

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## Regional Coordinating Mechanism (ReCoM)

The Maritime Operations Coordination Plan was signed in June 2011 by the senior leadership of the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)<sup>1</sup>, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), and the U.S. Coast Guard (USCG), directing these agencies to form ReCoMs for maritime homeland security enforcement and intelligence integration.<sup>2</sup> USCG, ICE HSI, and CBP serve as the lead agencies responsible for planning and coordinating among stakeholders, and as of June 2013, 32 ReCoMs have been established aligning with the USCG sectors' geographic areas of responsibility.<sup>3</sup> In addition to ICE HSI, CBP, and USCG, ReCoM stakeholders include other federal, state, local, tribal, and international agencies including, but not limited to, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), U.S. Attorney's Office (USAO), state agencies, local police departments, and foreign law enforcement partners.

According to the Maritime Operations Coordination Plan, the ReCoM was established for each region to coordinate component maritime operational activities. All ReCoM members are responsible for participating in integrated planning efforts with a goal to maintain active patrol and targeted monitoring. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Senior Guidance Teams (composed of senior USCG, ICE HSI, and CBP officials) are to assign a working group to monitor ReCoM operational performance, coordination efforts, and information sharing.<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, the components must measure the performance of the ReCoMs to ensure the most effective use of resources.

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<sup>1</sup>ICE Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) is the directorate within ICE that participates in the ReCoM.

<sup>2</sup>The Maritime Operations Coordination Plan states that ReCoMs are required to reside in a physical or virtual location.

<sup>3</sup>A USCG sector is a shore-based operational unit that is responsible for the execution of all USCG missions within its area of responsibility. As of June 2013, 32 ReCoMs have been established in each of the following states and territories: (1) Alabama, (2) Alaska, (3) California, (4) Connecticut, (5) Florida, (6) Hawaii, (7) Louisiana, (8) Maine, (9) Maryland, (10) Massachusetts, (11) Michigan, (12) New York, (13) North Carolina, (14) Oregon, (15) Pennsylvania, (16) South Carolina, (17) Texas, (18) Virginia, (19) Washington, (20) Wisconsin, and (21) the U.S. territories of Guam and Puerto Rico.

<sup>4</sup>DHS Senior Guidance Teams are established for each ReCoM area of responsibility.

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Border Enforcement  
Security Task Force  
(BEST)

In 2005, the first BEST unit was organized and led by ICE HSI, in partnership with CBP, in Laredo, Texas, and as of June 2013, 35 BESTs have been established throughout the United States.<sup>5</sup> BEST stakeholders include CBP; DEA; the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF); FBI; USCG; USAO; and other key state, local, tribal, and international law enforcement and intelligence resources, which partner with one another to identify, disrupt, and dismantle existing and emerging threats at U.S. land, sea, and air borders. The BEST concept is built upon the guiding principles of colocation and cross-designation.<sup>6</sup>

According to the 2012-2016 BEST Strategic Plan, ICE HSI serves as the “executive agent” for BEST and provides a standardized platform of policy and procedure for BEST units, as well as primary resourcing.<sup>7</sup> The BEST units use qualitative and quantitative risk assessment methods to efficiently allocate resources. The National BEST unit (NBU) serves as the programmatic lead on establishment, deployment, and oversight of the BEST units nationwide, including overseeing policy and implementation of the BEST program. As stated in the 2012-2016 BEST Strategic Plan, BEST units are also evaluated annually on their overall performance, including their effectiveness and efficiency of operations based on established criteria. The overall success of the BEST program

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<sup>5</sup>As of June 2013, there are 35 BEST units in 16 states and one territory: (1) Arizona (Phoenix, Tucson, Nogales, Yuma, and Casa Grande), (2) California (Imperial Valley, Los Angeles Seaport, San Diego Seaport, San Ysidro, San Francisco Seaport), (3) Florida (Miami Seaport, Fort Lauderdale Seaport), (4) Michigan (Detroit), (5) New Mexico (Albuquerque, Deming, Las Cruces), (6) New York (Buffalo, Massena, New York Seaport), (7) New Jersey (Newark Seaport), (8) Texas (El Paso, Laredo, Rio Grande Valley, Houston Seaport, Big Bend), (9) Washington (Blaine, Seattle Seaport), (10) Louisiana (New Orleans Seaport), (11) Alabama (Mobile Seaport), (12) Mississippi (Gulfport Seaport), (13) South Carolina (Charleston Seaport), (14) Georgia (Savannah Seaport), (15) Virginia (Hampton Roads), (16) Hawaii (Honolulu Seaport), and (17) Puerto Rico (San Juan Seaport).

<sup>6</sup>ICE HSI is authorized under 19 U.S.C. § 1401 to cross-designate other federal, state, and local law enforcement officers to investigate and enforce customs laws. Customs cross-designation authority can also be extended to foreign law enforcement partners for cases that cross international boundaries. This authority enhances ICE HSI’s ability to work more closely with these counterparts and foster cooperation between the United States and other countries.

<sup>7</sup>Through the Jaime Zapata Border Enforcement Security Task Force Act, the Secretary of Homeland Security may provide financial assistance to the BESTs. Jaime Zapata Border Enforcement Security Task Force Act, Pub. L. No. 112-205, § 3(a), 126 Stat. 1487, 1488 (2012) (codified at 6 U.S.C. § 240).

is measured by its impact on border-related criminal activity levels. The 2012-2016 BEST Strategic Plan also states that the NBU is required to provide a written evaluation to the ICE HSI Executive Associate Director and Executive Steering Committee within 90 days following the end of each fiscal year. These reports, which are to continue through fiscal year 2016, are to include an evaluation of the field metrics, as well as the implementation of the strategic plan by headquarters, the field offices, and their BEST units.

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**South Texas Campaign  
Joint Targeting Team (JTT)**

The JTT originated in November 2011 as a CBP-led partnership among the Del Rio area U.S. Border Patrol, CBP Office of Field Operations, and ICE HSI, and was expanded to support the South Texas Campaign (STC).<sup>8</sup> The purpose of the STC is to disrupt and dismantle transnational criminal organizations (TCO).<sup>9</sup> As of August 2013, JTTs had been established across four geographic boundary areas in Del Rio, Laredo, McAllen, and Houston, Texas. In addition to ICE HSI, JTT stakeholders include DEA; FBI; ATF; USAO; U.S. Marshals Service; and state, local, tribal, and international law enforcement agencies. To the greatest extent practicable, each participating agency within the JTT is structured to be colocated and function as a unified team to ensure deconfliction of intelligence information while focusing on STC targets.

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**Regional Interagency  
Steering Committee  
(RISC)**

According to Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) officials, FEMA established the first RISC in 2003 to provide a forum for senior DHS officials to enhance emergency management and homeland security for all hazards through a collaborative, regional approach involving federal, state, local, tribal, nongovernmental organization, and private sector partners.<sup>10</sup> According to FEMA officials, the majority of RISCs

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<sup>8</sup>CBP developed and implemented the STC to identify and address current and emerging threats along the border in South Texas. The STC conducts targeted operations to disrupt and degrade the ability of transnational criminal organizations to operate throughout the South Texas corridor while it simultaneously facilitates legitimate trade and travel.

<sup>9</sup>TCO refers to self-perpetuating associations of individuals who operate transnationally for the purpose of obtaining power, or monetary or commercial gains, wholly or in part by illegal means. In order to achieve their goals, these criminal groups utilize systemic violence and corruption.

<sup>10</sup>As of June 2013, a RISC had been established for each of the 10 FEMA regions.

include representatives of the following DHS components: FEMA, CBP, ICE, Federal Protective Service, Science and Technology Directorate, National Protection and Programs Directorate, Transportation Security Administration, and USCG, among others.<sup>11</sup> In addition, other federal agencies representing the emergency support community participate in RISCs, such as the Department of Transportation, Department of Defense, and the Department of Agriculture. The authority to establish RISCs derives from the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act of 2006, which provides the FEMA regional administrators with the responsibility to ensure effective, coordinated, and integrated regional preparedness, protection, response, recovery, and mitigation activities and programs for natural disasters, acts of terrorism, and other man-made disasters (including planning, training, exercises, and professional development) and perform such other duties relating to such responsibilities as the Administrator may require.<sup>12</sup> According to FEMA officials, representatives from the FEMA regions developed a draft RISC charter in 2010, and several regions subsequently used this document as a basis for developing their own charters. For example, a FEMA RISC charter may contain (1) objectives and scope of RISC activities, (2) membership requirements, (3) annual operating costs, and (4) executive committee governance.<sup>13</sup>

According to FEMA officials, in general, most FEMA regions convene RISC meetings on a quarterly or semiannual basis to discuss various topics, such as making preparedness, protection, response, recovery, or mitigation more easily accomplished and increasing regional capability. RISC meetings typically include presentations, workgroups, training workshops, and panel discussions led by DHS components. During these RISC meetings, DHS components are able to share lessons learned and

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<sup>11</sup>The FEMA RISCs also include other DHS components, including the Office of Emergency Communications, the Office of the Inspector General, the U.S. Secret Service, and the Intelligence and Analysis Office.

<sup>12</sup>6 U.S.C. § 317. The law requires the regional administrators to work in partnership with federal, state, local, and tribal governments; emergency managers; emergency response providers; medical providers; the private sector; nongovernmental organizations; multijurisdictional councils of governments; and regional planning commissions and organizations in geographical areas served by the regional office.

<sup>13</sup>Although annual operating costs for each RISC vary by region, FEMA officials stated that many FEMA regions have begun hosting virtual RISCs via teleconference and video-teleconference to reduce expenses associated with the RISCs.

best practices with members, as well as develop plans that identify resource capabilities and integrated courses of action to take in response to disasters. One FEMA official explained that FEMA has not developed any specific performance-reporting requirements regarding the content or output from RISC meetings; however, the value of the coordination and communication gained through these meetings supports various planning, response, and recovery activities.

# Appendix II: Description of DHS Collaborative Field Mechanisms Identified, but Not Visited

Mechanism name, number of mechanisms, and year established	Description of Department of Homeland Security (DHS) collaborative field mechanisms <sup>a</sup>		
	Selected agencies <sup>b</sup>	Mechanism purpose/description	Locations
<b>Counterterrorism and Criminal Exploitation Unit Terrorist Tracking and Pursuit Group (CTCEU/TTPG)</b>  <b>Total number of CTCEU/TTPGs: 1</b>  <b>CTCEU/TTPG was established in 2003.<sup>c</sup></b>	<b>Lead agency:</b> ICE HSI  <b>Stakeholders:</b> CBP DOD  The Office of Biometric Identity Management (OBIM) National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) DHS Office of Intelligence and Analysis (I&A)	The CTCEU/TTPG leverages ICE HSI expertise across partnering agencies dedicated to promoting national security. The group leads the DHS National Security Overstay Initiative in cooperation with CBP, OBIM, and NCTC to identify and apprehend nonimmigrants who have overstayed or violated the terms of their admission and pose a potential risk to the national security of the United States, as well as to prevent terrorists and other criminals from exploiting the nation's immigration system.	Rosslyn, Virginia
<b>Homeland Security Task Force Southeast (HSTF-SE)</b>  <b>Total number of HSTF-SEs: 1</b>  <b>HSTF-SE was established in 2003.</b>	<b>Lead agency:</b> None  <b>Stakeholders:</b> CBP ICE U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) USCG U.S. Department of Justice State and local law enforcement agencies	HSTF-SE is a joint task force that provides the framework for coordination of a unified response command and control organization for all DHS agencies. HSTF-SE is responsible for the development and execution of Operations Plan Vigilant Sentry (OVS), which includes interdiction, detention, protection screening, processing, and repatriation during a mass migration from a Caribbean nation. HSTF-SE is a standing task force that is in effect at all times, although full activation of the task force does not occur until a mass migration plan is implemented.	Miami, Florida
<b>Caribbean Border Interagency Group (CBIG)</b>  <b>Total number of CBIGs: 1</b>  <b>CBIG was established in 2006.</b>	<b>Lead agency:</b> None  <b>Stakeholders:</b> CBP ICE USAO USCG Puerto Rican Police Department's Forces United for Rapid Action (FURA)	CBIG serves to coordinate the operations of USCG, CBP, ICE, and USAO, targeting illegal migration and narcotics trafficking near Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. <sup>d</sup>	San Juan, Puerto Rico

**Appendix II: Description of DHS Collaborative  
Field Mechanisms Identified, but Not Visited**

Mechanism name, number of mechanisms, and year established	Description of Department of Homeland Security (DHS) collaborative field mechanisms <sup>a</sup>		
	Selected agencies <sup>b</sup>	Mechanism purpose/description	Locations
<b>Operational Integration Center (OIC)</b> <b>Total number of OICs: 1</b>  <b>OIC was established in 2011.</b>	<b>Lead agency:</b> CBP  <b>Stakeholders:</b> USCG Michigan State Police Royal Canadian Mounted Police Ontario Provincial Police	OIC provides a centralized location for CBP, along with federal, state, local, and international partners, to gather, analyze, and disseminate operational and strategic data in the Great Lakes region of the northern border for use by frontline agents and officers.	Detroit, Michigan
<b>National Search and Rescue Committee (NSARC)</b> <b>Total number of NSARCs: 1</b>  <b>NSARC was established in 1973.</b>	<b>Lead agency:</b> None  <b>Stakeholders:</b> DOD Department of Interior Department of Commerce Department of Transportation Federal Communication Commission National Aeronautics and Space Administration State and local search and rescue authorities USCG	The purpose of NSARC is to coordinate interagency search and rescue matters. NSARC works with other state and local search and rescue authorities to coordinate implementation of the national search and rescue system.	Washington, D.C.
<b>South Texas Border Intelligence Center (STBIC)</b> <b>Total number of STBICs: 1</b>  <b>STBIC was established in 2012.</b>	<b>Lead agency:</b> CBP  <b>Stakeholders:</b> ICE HSI FBI DEA Texas Department of Public Safety Webb County Sherriff's Office Laredo Police Department	STBIC is a facility designed to intensify and integrate intelligence gathering and sharing activity among law enforcement agencies across South Texas.	Laredo, Texas
<b>The Alliance to Combat Transnational Threats (ACTT)</b> <b>Total number of ACTTs: 1</b>  <b>ACTT was established in 2009.</b>	<b>Lead agency:</b> DHS  <b>Stakeholders:</b> CBP ICE HSI USAO Bureau of Land Management U.S. Forest Service TSA State, local, and tribal law enforcement agencies	ACTT was established to counter the threats posed by transnational criminal organizations operating in the Arizona corridor. Specifically, ACTT leverages the capabilities and resources of more than 60 federal, state, local and tribal agencies in Arizona and the government of Mexico to combat individuals and criminal organizations that pose a threat to communities on both sides of the border.	Tucson, Arizona

**Appendix II: Description of DHS Collaborative  
Field Mechanisms Identified, but Not Visited**

Mechanism name, number of mechanisms, and year established	Description of Department of Homeland Security (DHS) collaborative field mechanisms <sup>a</sup>		
	Selected agencies <sup>b</sup>	Mechanism purpose/description	Locations
<b>Interagency Operations Centers (IOCs)</b> <b>Total number of IOCs: 35</b>  <b>IOC was established in 2006.<sup>e</sup></b>	<b>Lead agency:</b> DHS; delegated to USCG  <b>Stakeholders:</b> CBP ICE State and local law enforcement agencies	Mandated by the Security and Accountability for Every Port Act of 2006 (SAFE Port Act), IOCs were established to improve multiagency maritime security operations and enhance cooperation among partner agencies at 35 U.S. ports. Specifically, IOCs transformed the Coast Guard sector command centers by upgrading their information management tools. IOCs also help port agencies to collaborate on first response, law enforcement, and homeland security operations.	Mobile, Alabama Anchorage, Alaska Juneau, Alaska San Diego, California San Francisco, California San Pedro, California New Haven, Connecticut Atlantic Beach, Florida Key West, Florida Miami Beach, Florida St. Petersburg, Florida Honolulu, Hawaii Louisville, Kentucky New Orleans, Louisiana South Portland, Maine Baltimore, Maryland Boston, Massachusetts Woods Hole, Massachusetts Detroit, Michigan Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan St. Louis, Missouri Buffalo, New York Staten Island, New York Wilmington, North Carolina Warrenton, Oregon Philadelphia, Pennsylvania Charleston, South Carolina Memphis, Tennessee Corpus Christi, Texas Houston, Texas Portsmouth, Virginia Seattle, Washington Milwaukee, Wisconsin San Juan, Puerto Rico U.S. territory of Guam



**Appendix II: Description of DHS Collaborative Field Mechanisms Identified, but Not Visited**

Mechanism name, number of mechanisms, and year established	Description of Department of Homeland Security (DHS) collaborative field mechanisms <sup>a</sup>		
	Selected agencies <sup>b</sup>	Mechanism purpose/description	Locations
<b>Special Event Working Group (SEWG)</b> <b>Total number of SEWGs: 1</b>  <b>SEWG was established in 2004.</b>	<b>Lead agency:</b> DHS Office of Operations Coordination and Planning (OPS)  <b>Stakeholders:</b> DHS National Protection and Programs Directorate U.S. Secret Service FEMA FBI	SEWG is an interagency forum that ensures comprehensive, coordinated interagency awareness of, and federal support to, special events.	Washington, D.C.

Source: GAO analysis of DHS information.

<sup>a</sup>Although DHS provided two additional examples of collaborative field mechanisms for our consideration, we eliminated them from our sample because they did not meet our criteria for a collaborative mechanism. These two examples were (1) USCG's area, district, and sector offices and (2) the Transportation Security Administration's (TSA) federal security directors. We eliminated them because they are part of the organizational structures of the components rather than mechanisms established for the purpose of enhancing collaboration across components.

<sup>b</sup>We included the lead agency (or agencies) for each mechanism, but did not provide a comprehensive listing of stakeholders, which may include other federal, state, local, tribal, and private sector agencies.

<sup>c</sup>In June 2003, ICE established the Compliance Enforcement Unit (CEU) as the first national program dedicated to the enforcement of nonimmigrant visa violations. In September 2010, ICE HSI redesignated the unit as the Counterterrorism and Criminal Exploitation Unit (CTCEU) because of the changing landscape of the national security arena and the expanded responsibilities and mission of CEU.

<sup>d</sup>The Regional Concurrence Team (RCT) is one of the mechanisms the CBIG uses to coordinate specific responses and develop courses of action to a maritime threat. The purpose of RCT is to rapidly and effectively coordinate interagency decision making and, as authorized, resolve maritime threats associated with people, cargo, or vessels (e.g., migrant smuggling).

<sup>e</sup>The Security and Accountability for Every Port Act of 2006 (SAFE Port Act) mandated the establishment of IOCs in all high-priority ports. Pub. L. No. 109-347, 120 Stat. 1884, 1892-93 (codified as amended at 46 U.S.C. § 70107A). High-priority ports have been defined as those ports with a designated captain of the port, which currently correlate to all 35 USCG sectors, except Humboldt Bay and North Bend. However, because of their virtual operation, IOCs are not necessarily located at specific geographic points.

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# Appendix III: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

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We were asked to continue our work on DHS's efforts to improve collaboration and integrate its field operations.<sup>1</sup> This report (1) assesses the extent to which DHS has identified the collaborative field mechanisms—that is, multiagency groups such as task forces, committees, and teams that enhance stakeholder collaboration across the participating agencies in order to more effectively and efficiently achieve their mission—of its key operational components, and (2) describes factors that participants of selected mechanisms identified that enhance or are challenges to their collaboration, and assesses the extent to which DHS has collected and disseminated successful collaborative practices.

To address the first objective, we contacted DHS officials to identify a list of collaborative mechanisms that they deemed to be successful examples of field component collaboration while we also independently identified such mechanisms.<sup>2</sup> Upon receiving DHS's list of mechanisms, we combined this list with our own and sought input from DHS and the seven key operational component agencies to create a master list of agreed-upon collaborative field mechanisms. Our final list included 13 collaborative mechanisms that DHS and operational component officials agreed were models of collaboration among component agencies in the field.<sup>3</sup> The 13 collaborative mechanisms we identified are used by federal agencies to implement interagency collaborative efforts, such as agencies colocating within one facility or establishing interagency task forces.<sup>4</sup> In addition, all of the identified mechanisms involved multiple DHS component agencies, as well as other federal, state, and local agency participants, and their purpose was to improve operational integration,

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<sup>1</sup>[GAO-12-185R](#).

<sup>2</sup>Subject matter specialists have defined an interagency mechanism for collaboration as any arrangement or application that can facilitate collaboration among agencies.

<sup>3</sup>For purposes of this report, these mechanisms refer to those that are organized through a charter, directive, memorandum of understanding, or other such agreement.

<sup>4</sup>GAO, *Managing for Results: Key Considerations for Implementing Interagency Collaborative Mechanisms*, [GAO-12-1022](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 27, 2012). For example, geographically based offices or colocated offices are places where one office maintains responsibility for collaborating with federal agencies or departments that are located in the same geographic region. Also, in some cases, more than one program office from different federal agencies can be located in a facility with the intention of personnel from the agencies collaborating with one another. Interagency groups, whether led by agency and department heads or component- and program-level staff, are sometimes referred to as task forces, working groups, councils, and committees.

coordination, and efficiencies among DHS agencies. Of those we identified, 11 of the 13 mechanisms focused on law enforcement activities.<sup>5</sup> For these 13 mechanisms, we examined organizational documents related to mechanism mission, objectives, stakeholder composition, locations, and date organized, among other things. We also interviewed officials from DHS's Office of Operations Coordination and Planning about the establishment and operation of these 13 mechanism types. We also interviewed DHS officials and analyzed documentation (i.e., components daily activity reports) obtained from responsible senior DHS headquarters officials to identify the extent to which the department has visibility over the collaborative field mechanisms activities—including any plans to increase visibility over the mechanisms in the future. We compared DHS's efforts to identify and collect information on the collaborative field mechanism with criteria in *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, which call for the establishment of control activities, such as a mechanism to identify and monitor the activities of components within an organization, to help achieve the organization's objectives.<sup>6</sup>

To address the second objective, we selected 4 types of collaborative mechanisms in 10 locations from the list of 13—ReCoM, BEST, JTT, and RISC.<sup>7</sup> We based our selection of these 4 types of mechanisms on the following factors: geographic location, continuity of the mechanism (established for at least 16 months), participation of multiple DHS component agencies, and variation in the lead component agency. Except for the JTT, we selected mechanism types that existed in more than one location to allow for geographic comparisons—such as BEST, with 35 locations throughout the United States. To describe the factors

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<sup>5</sup>Although DHS provided 2 additional examples of collaborative mechanisms for our consideration, we eliminated them from our sample because they did not meet our criteria for a collaborative mechanism. These two examples were (1) USCG's area, district, and sector offices and (2) TSA's federal security director regions. We eliminated these examples because they are part of the organizational structures of the components rather than mechanisms established for the purpose of enhancing collaboration across components.

<sup>6</sup>[GAO/AIMD-00-21.3.1](#).

<sup>7</sup>The 10 locations we visited included: BEST and RECoM in San Diego, California; FEMA in Atlanta, Georgia; ReCoM in Corpus Christi, Texas; BEST and ReCoM in Houston, Texas; and BEST and JTT in Laredo, Texas; BEST in Blaine, Washington; and FEMA in Bothell, Washington.

that participants of the selected collaborative mechanisms identified that enhance or are challenges to collaboration, we conducted site visits to interview operational component officials directly participating in each of the 4 types of mechanisms, and in total we met with over 55 participants from 10 mechanisms—including officials from three ReCoMs, four BESTs, one JTT, and two RISCs. The BEST, ReCoM, and JTT are law enforcement–focused, while the RISC focuses on emergency management activities and exercises. For each of the selected mechanisms, we also interviewed senior headquarters officials to discuss their views on the successes and challenges experienced with collaboration, including how the successes are replicated and communicated across the mechanisms and challenges are addressed. At each of the 10 mechanisms we visited, we gathered information from participants on what they believed to be promising practices that helped them to succeed as collaborative mechanisms, as well as the factors they viewed as challenges to their collaboration. We also discussed their efforts to establish performance measures to assess mechanism effectiveness. While we cannot generalize our work from visits to these collaborative mechanisms, we chose these locations to provide examples of the way in which the mechanisms identify, communicate with others, and address the successes and challenges experienced with collaboration.

We also reviewed planning, operations, and management integration documents such as strategic plans, annual performance reports, and memorandums of understanding or agreements among the participating agencies. We compared these documents and their responses with the information-sharing and collaboration practices identified in our past work on this subject.<sup>8</sup> Our past work on interagency collaboration has highlighted the importance of agencies establishing or clarifying guidelines, agreements, or procedures for sharing information. These guidelines, agreements, and procedures should identify and disseminate practices to facilitate more effective communication and collaboration

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<sup>8</sup>See, for example, [GAO-09-904SP](#). These practices were identified from a literature review, government agency and research institution studies, and an analysis of prior GAO reports and testimonies on collaboration.

among federal, state, and local agencies.<sup>9</sup> In addition, our prior work has demonstrated the benefits of sharing promising practices as a means to replicate positive program outcomes by leveraging the experiences of different stakeholders with the same or similar goals.<sup>10</sup> We have also identified the sharing of promising practices as an example of government agencies building capacity for improved efficiency.<sup>11</sup> At each of the 10 mechanisms we visited, we noted any alignment or divergence from the mechanisms' reported successes and challenges with key features identified in our 2012 report on interagency collaboration.<sup>12</sup> These key features include seven categories, (1) outcomes and accountability, (2) bridging organizational cultures, (3) leadership, (4) clarity of roles and responsibilities, (5) participants, (6) resources, and (7) written guidance and agreements. We interviewed component officials responsible for managing the selected mechanisms and determined that our work and past recommendations related to information sharing and collaborative practices are still valid and were deemed reasonable by the respective officials. We then assessed the extent to which the mechanism participants' responses regarding integration, coordination, and collaboration practices utilized by their mechanisms aligned with those identified in our 2012 report. See appendix IV for a list of key issues to consider when implementing interagency collaborative mechanisms that were identified in our 2012 report. We interviewed responsible senior DHS headquarters officials to determine the extent to which the department has collected and reported on the collaborative practices identified by the mechanisms. We also interviewed component officials at the selected 4 mechanisms to identify the extent to which information,

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<sup>9</sup>GAO, *Results-Oriented Government: Practices That Can Help Enhance and Sustain Collaboration among Federal Agencies*, GAO-06-15 (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 21, 2005). Prior to our site visits, we provided the respective mechanisms with a listing of the identified promising practices for review and to obtain comments on their applicability and relevance to the mechanism(s).

<sup>10</sup>See, for example: GAO, *VA Education Benefits: VA Needs to Improve Program Management and Provide More Timely Information to Students*, [GAO-13-338](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 22, 2013), and *School Meal Programs: Sharing Information on Best Practices May Improve Programs' Operations*, RCED-97-126 (Washington, D.C.: May 21, 1997). Findings from these reports demonstrate the benefits of collecting, analyzing, and disseminating promising practices information.

<sup>11</sup>GAO, *Streamlining Government: Key Practices from Select Efficiency Initiatives Should Be Shared Governmentwide*, [GAO-11-908](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 30, 2011).

<sup>12</sup>[GAO-12-1022](#).

such as information sharing and collaborative practices are provided to DHS headquarters officials who are responsible for oversight of the collaborative field mechanisms.

We conducted this performance audit from October 2012 to September 2013 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.

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# Appendix IV: Key Issues to Consider when Implementing Interagency Collaborative Mechanisms

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In September 2012, we identified 12 mechanisms that the federal government uses to lead and implement interagency collaboration.<sup>1</sup> Although these mechanisms differ in complexity and scope, our September 2012 report notes that these mechanisms all benefit from the seven features below. Key issues to consider when implementing collaborative mechanisms are listed under each feature.

## 1. Outcomes and accountability

- Have short-term and long-term outcomes been clearly defined?
- Is there a way to track and monitor progress toward the short-term and long-term outcomes?
- Do participating agencies have collaboration-related competencies or performance standards against which individual performance can be evaluated?
- Do participating agencies have the means to recognize and reward accomplishments related to collaboration?

## 2. Bridging organizational cultures

- What are the missions and organizational cultures of the participating agencies?
- What are the commonalities between the participating agencies' missions and cultures and what are some potential challenges?
- Have participating agencies developed ways for operating across agency boundaries? How did they develop these ways?
- Have participating agencies agreed on common terminology and definitions?

## 3. Leadership

- Has a lead agency or individual been identified?
- If leadership will be shared between one or more agencies, have roles and responsibilities been clearly identified and agreed upon?

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<sup>1</sup>GAO, *Managing for Results: Key Considerations for Implementing Interagency Collaborative Mechanisms*, [GAO-12-1022](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 27, 2012). Identified mechanisms for interagency collaboration are (1) presidential assistants and advisors, (2) collaboration structures within the Executive Office of the President, (3) national strategies and initiatives, (4) interagency groups, (5) designation of leadership, (6) geographically based offices/colocation, (7) positions and details, (8) specially created interagency offices, (9) interagency agreements and memorandums of understanding, (10) joint program efforts, (11) conferences and communities of practice, and (12) collaboration technologies.

- How will leadership be sustained over the short term? How will it be sustained over the long term?
- 4. Clarity of roles and responsibilities
  - Have participating agencies clarified the roles and responsibilities of the participants?
  - Have participating agencies articulated and agreed to a process for making and enforcing decisions?
- 5. Participants
  - Have all relevant participants been included?
  - Do the participants have
    - full knowledge of the relevant resources in their agency;
    - the ability to commit these resources;
    - the ability to regularly attend activities of the collaborative mechanism; and
    - the appropriate knowledge, skills, and abilities to contribute?
- 6. Resources
  - How will the collaborative mechanism be funded? If interagency funding is needed, is it permitted?
  - If interagency funding is needed and permitted, is there a means to track funds in a standardized manner?
  - How will the collaborative mechanism be staffed?
  - Are there incentives available to encourage staff or agencies to participate?
  - If relevant, do agencies have compatible technological systems?
  - Have participating agencies developed online tools or other resources that facilitate joint interactions?
- 7. Written guidance and agreements
  - If appropriate, have the participating agencies documented their agreement regarding how they will be collaborating? A written document can incorporate agreements reached in any or all of the following areas:
    - leadership,
    - accountability,
    - roles and responsibilities, and
    - resources.
  - Have participating agencies developed ways to continually update or monitor written agreements?



# Appendix V: Comments from the Department of Homeland Security

U.S. Department of Homeland Security  
Washington, DC 20528



**Homeland  
Security**

September 6, 2013

Joseph Kirschbaum  
Acting Director, Homeland Security and Justice Issues  
U.S. Government Accountability Office  
441 G Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20548

Re: Draft Report GAO-13-734, "DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY:  
Opportunities Exist to Enhance Visibility over Collaborative Field Mechanisms"

Dear Mr. Kirschbaum:

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 conducting its review and issuing this report.

DHS is pleased to note GAO's recognition of progress made in developing and evolving collaborative field mechanisms to better integrate field operations by better coordinating missions and sharing information. These efforts are critical to the Department's "One-DHS" principle of cross-component collaboration and its success in building and strengthening a homeland security enterprise to better mitigate and defend against dynamic threats, minimize risks, and maximize the ability to respond to and recover from attacks and disasters of all kinds.

DHS agrees that collecting additional information on existing collaborative field mechanisms may be beneficial. However, it is important to note that day-to-day management of operational collaborative field mechanisms is best accomplished through the Components acting within their authority with DHS Headquarters' oversight for situational awareness. For example, field activities are reported daily through Component operations centers to the DHS National Operations Center, in accordance with established reporting protocols.

The Department also coordinates with its Components and prepares a Future Operations Week-Ahead reports highlighting, on average, more than 100 ongoing and planned operations of the U.S. Customs and Border Protection, Federal Emergency Management Agency, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, National Protection and Programs Directorate, U.S. Secret Service, Transportation Security Administration, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, and U.S. Coast Guard, that provide visibility of multi-component operations across the Department.

The draft report contained two recommendations with which the Department concurs. Specifically, GAO recommended that the Secretary of Homeland Security direct the appropriate Departmental official to:

**Recommendation 1:** Collect information on the existing collaborative mechanisms to have better visibility of them.

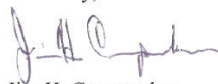
**Response:** Concur. DHS's Office of Operations Coordination and Planning (OPS), in coordination with other DHS Components, as appropriate, will develop a method to enhance the collection of information on collaborative field coordination and integration mechanisms. DHS OPS will schedule appropriate data calls to collect the information and leverage the Homeland Security Information Network (HSIN) as a means for sharing the information among the Components. Estimated Completion Date (ECD): September 30, 2014.

**Recommendation 2:** Collect information on promising practices, including such things as potential ways to address any identified challenges or barriers to collaboration as well as any identified performance metrics, from the collaborative mechanisms and disseminate them to Components.

**Response:** Concur. DHS OPS, in coordination with other DHS Components, as appropriate, will develop and implement a method of collecting and disseminating information to the Components regarding promising practices, including challenges or barriers to collaboration, from various field coordination and integration mechanisms. DHS OPS anticipates using HSIN as a means to share information with the Components. ECD: September 30, 2014.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to review and comment on the 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  
Director  
Departmental GAO-OIG Liaison Office

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# Appendix VI: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

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## GAO Contact

Joseph Kirschbaum, (202) 512-9971 or [kirschbaumj@gao.gov](mailto:kirschbaumj@gao.gov)

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## Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, Stephen L. Caldwell, Director, Dawn Hoff, Assistant Director, and Frederick Lyles, Jr., Analyst-in-Charge, managed this engagement. Chuck Bausell, Eric Hauswirth, Tracey King, David Lutter, Jess Orr, Janay Sam, and Cynthia Saunders made significant contributions to the report.

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