

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-22-104498](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

Chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear weapons have the potential to kill thousands of people. To enhance efforts to manage threats in these four areas, CWMD was established in statute in December 2018, reorganizing functions of predecessor offices in DHS. About a year later, CWMD ranked last in a review of best places to work in government.

GAO was asked to assess CWMD's ability to carry out its mission and serve federal, state, and local partners. This report (1) evaluates the extent to which CWMD continues to perform the functions of predecessor offices, (2) evaluates the extent to which CWMD has coordinated with state and local partners, and (3) describes CWMD's efforts to improve morale.

GAO reviewed strategic and implementation plans and employee surveys and interviewed CWMD officials about how the office has carried out its functions, coordinated with partners, and taken steps to improve morale. To obtain partners' views on CWMD's performance, GAO interviewed officials from other DHS components and federal agencies. GAO also selected a nongeneralizable sample of state and local partners from 15 jurisdictions based on their participation in CWMD programs covering the four threat areas.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO is making four recommendations, including that CWMD should reassess its current acquisition strategy for replacing radiation portal monitors and specify its plans for convening state and local partners. DHS agrees with the four recommendations.

View [GAO-22-104498](#). For more information, contact Allison B. Bawden at (202) 512-3841 or [bawdena@gao.gov](mailto:bawdena@gao.gov) or Tina Won Sherman at (202) 512-8461 or [shermant@gao.gov](mailto:shermant@gao.gov).

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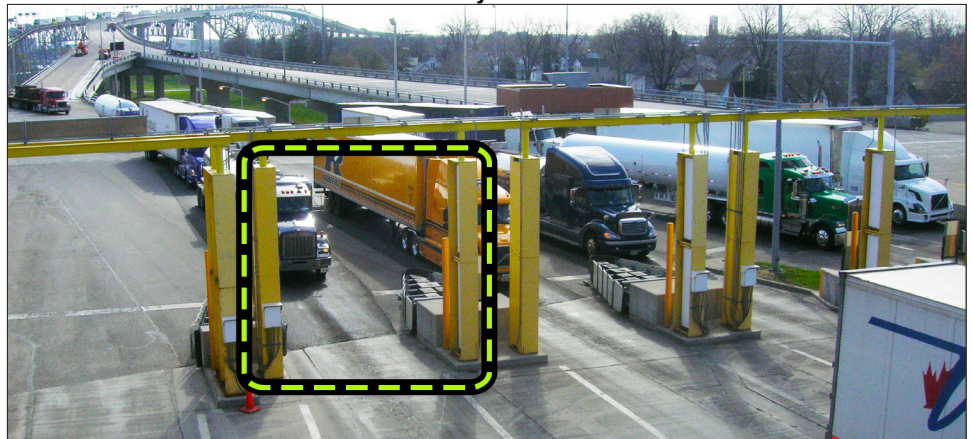
# COUNTERING WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION

## DHS Could Improve Its Acquisition of Key Technology and Coordination with Partners

### What GAO Found

The Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction Office (CWMD) continues to carry out functions of its predecessor offices. For example, CWMD continues to manage a program to acquire replacements for radiation portal monitors that U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) operates at high-volume ports (see fig.). However, the new radiation portal monitors will be late to deploy and may not meet user needs. For example, CBP officials told GAO that tests of replacement monitors resulted in higher nuisance alarm rates than originally planned. Nuisance alarms result from naturally occurring radioactive materials in certain consumer goods, requiring CBP officers to conduct a secondary scan to determine that the source of the alarm is not a threat before a cargo container or vehicle can leave the port. Reducing such alarms is a key goal of the replacement program. By coordinating with CBP to reassess its current acquisition strategy, CWMD may help ensure an acceptable nuisance alarm rate, better positioning CBP to prevent radiological and nuclear threats without unduly delaying U.S. commerce.

### Radiation Portal Monitor at a Land Port of Entry



Source: GAO. | [GAO-22-104498](#)

The state and local partners GAO interviewed were generally satisfied with CWMD's coordination of technology acquisition and training but said CWMD could improve in other areas, such as communicating with and convening the partners. In September 2021, CWMD issued a strategy to engage its state and local partners, but the strategy does not specify how often CWMD will communicate with and convene partners in all threat areas. Specifying this will help CWMD and its partners be prepared to deter and respond to an attack.

CWMD used employee surveys and listening sessions to identify the root causes of morale problems. CWMD also introduced town hall meetings in which employees share how they help accomplish the agency's mission. Data from 2019 and 2020 federal employee workplace surveys indicate that CWMD improved in measures of employee engagement. GAO recommended in January 2021 that DHS strengthen its plans to enhance employee engagement, an actionable measure of morale, and continues to monitor DHS's response to these recommendations.