



Testimony

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COUNTERING WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION

DHS Office Has Opportunities to Improve Partner Services and Employee Morale

Statement of Tina Won Sherman, Director, Homeland
Security and Justice, and Allison B. Bawden, Director,
Natural Resources and Environment

Chairman Peters, Ranking Member Portman, and Members of the Committee:

We are pleased to be here today to discuss our April 2022 report on the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction Office (CWMD).¹ Chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear weapons—collectively known as weapons of mass destruction—have the potential to kill thousands of people in a single incident. A federal statute established CWMD in December 2018 to plan for, detect, deter, respond to, and defend against the threats of such weapons.²

In carrying out this mission, CWMD coordinates with partners at the federal, state, and local levels and provides them with technology, training, and information. CWMD's partners include DHS components, such as U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and the Coast Guard; other federal agencies, such as the Department of Defense, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Department of Health and Human Services, and the Department of Energy's National Nuclear Security Administration; and first responders and public health officials.

Our testimony today will summarize the key findings from our April 2022 report. Specifically, we will discuss CWMD's efforts and ongoing challenges in two key areas: (1) serving its federal, state, and local partners and (2) improving morale within CWMD.

For our April 2022 report, we reviewed documents that establish requirements and goals for the functions that CWMD performs, including the statute that established CWMD and the office's strategic and implementation plans. We also reviewed documents that provide information on employee morale within CWMD, including employee satisfaction surveys conducted by the Office of Personnel Management.

¹GAO, *Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction: DHS Could Improve Its Acquisition of Key Technology and Coordination with Partners*, [GAO-22-104498](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 19, 2022).

²Homeland Security Act of 2002, Pub. L. No. 107-296, title XIX, §§ 1900-1931, 116 Stat. 2135, as added by the Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction Act of 2018, Pub. L. No. 115-387, § 2(a)-(c), (e), (g) 132 Stat. 5162 (classified at 6 U.S.C. §§ 590-597, including § 591 notes). CWMD's primary statutory missions are defined at 6 U.S.C. §§ 591g, 592. On October 6, 2017, before the legislation was enacted, DHS notified Congress of its intent to exercise its authority under 6 U.S.C. § 452 to consolidate some offices having chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear functions into a new office, effective December 5, 2017.

In addition, we interviewed officials from CWMD, other DHS components, and other federal agencies.

We also convened a total of 12 discussion groups, each consisting of state and local officials from one to three jurisdictions that coordinate with CWMD.³ The discussion groups were composed of officials from police departments, fire departments, and public health offices in 15 jurisdictions. We selected these jurisdictions to represent a variety of CWMD's state and local partners that participate in CWMD programs to address chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear threats. We determined that the views presented in the discussion groups, while not generalizable to jurisdictions that did not participate, provided useful information on CWMD's coordination with its state and local partners. More information on our objectives, scope, and methodology for that work can be found in the April 2022 report.

We conducted the work on which this statement is based 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.

³In our April 2022 report, we use the term "local officials" to refer to city-level and county-level officials, as well as officials representing multiple municipalities. The discussion groups focused on CWMD's programs as follows: five were BioWatch, two were Chemical Defense Demonstration Cities Initiative, and six were Securing the Cities. In our first discussion group, we interviewed officials who participated in both the BioWatch and Securing the Cities programs. We determined that the programs were sufficiently different that in the remainder of the discussion groups, we kept the programs separate. We count that first interview in both the BioWatch and Securing the Cities groups, bringing the total number of discussion groups to 12.

CWMD's Partners Are Satisfied with Services in Some Areas but Identified the Need for Improvement in Others

In our April 2022 report, we found that CWMD carries out a range of functions to serve its federal, state, and local partners in combating chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear threats. CWMD's partners were satisfied with CWMD's services in some areas, including technology acquisition and training, but saw room for improvement in others. Areas for improvement included communicating with and convening state and local partners, acquiring a key radiation detection technology, and assessing gaps in radiological and nuclear threat detection capabilities.

Chemical threats. CWMD officials described their efforts to combat chemical threats as a work in progress, and outlined their efforts to provide training and develop plans for future efforts to combat these threats. For example, according to CWMD officials, CWMD engaged with 17 U.S. cities to provide training on chemical threats to the mass transit sector. CWMD also led the effort to develop DHS's Chemical Defense Strategy, issued in December 2019, and its Chemical Defense Strategy Implementation Plan, issued in September 2021.

However, in both of the discussion groups with state and local partners who participated in the Chemical Defense Demonstration Cities Initiative—which ended in 2015, before CWMD's establishment, but on which CWMD issued a report in June 2018—officials said they had not heard from CWMD since its establishment.⁴ These officials said they would like to have maintained a relationship with CWMD to leverage their expertise in chemical detection and follow up on action items identified during the initiative. They also told us they were not aware of DHS's Chemical Defense Strategy or Implementation Plan.

Biological threats. CWMD performs a range of information-sharing, training, and support functions in this threat area. For example, according to CWMD officials, in fiscal year 2021, CWMD produced more than 635 biosurveillance reports that it distributed to 350 state, local, tribal, and territorial agencies and 27 federal departments or agencies. CWMD also manages the BioWatch program in over 30 U.S. jurisdictions. Under this program, CWMD's state and local partners in public health agencies monitor BioWatch's network of aerosol collectors and retrieve samples

⁴From 2010 through 2015, DHS's Office of Health Affairs, one of CWMD's predecessors, managed the Chemical Defense Demonstration Cities Initiative as a pilot program in five U.S. jurisdictions to help communities define best practices to respond to a high-consequence chemical event. CWMD's June 2018 report on the initiative stated that DHS continued to collaborate closely with these jurisdictions. See Department of Homeland Security, *Chemical Defense Demonstration Cities Initiative Report* (June 2018).

from them daily to detect biological agents of concern. CWMD officials said that, during fiscal year 2021, CWMD supported more than 100 exercises and drills in BioWatch jurisdictions to improve coordination, communication, and decision-making in the event of a bioterrorist attack.

State and local partners who participated in the BioWatch discussion groups generally praised CWMD for its communication and spoke highly of the regionally based CWMD contractors known as jurisdictional coordinators. They said that the coordinators help convey requests for assistance from CWMD, such as with exercises or special events such as the Super Bowl.

However, state and local officials in two of the five BioWatch discussion groups said that while they communicated regularly with their jurisdictional coordinators, they had not heard from the program office in headquarters. Officials in one of these discussion groups said more interaction at that level would benefit their understanding of the national landscape and DHS's priorities.

Radiological and nuclear threats. CWMD serves federal, state, and local partners in this threat area by acquiring technologies, providing training, and producing threat assessments. Coast Guard officials told us that CWMD-provided technologies filled a gap in their secure transmission capabilities. Officials at CBP said that CWMD helped them obtain software that enhances their ability to analyze information that the Coast Guard transmits to them. Similarly, state and local partners in all six of the Securing the Cities discussion groups said that CWMD helped them acquire radiation detection and identification equipment.⁵

In addition, officials in four of these six discussion groups said that CWMD coordinated needed training with experts from the Counterterrorism Operations Support Center.⁶ CWMD also continues to

⁵According to DHS officials, the Securing the Cities program was instituted in fiscal year 2007 to enhance the nuclear detection capabilities of federal, state, local, tribal, and territorial agencies.

⁶This center, within the National Nuclear Security Administration, trains first responders to prevent or mitigate terrorist use of radiological or nuclear devices.

produce nuclear and radiological threat assessments formerly issued by a predecessor agency within DHS.⁷

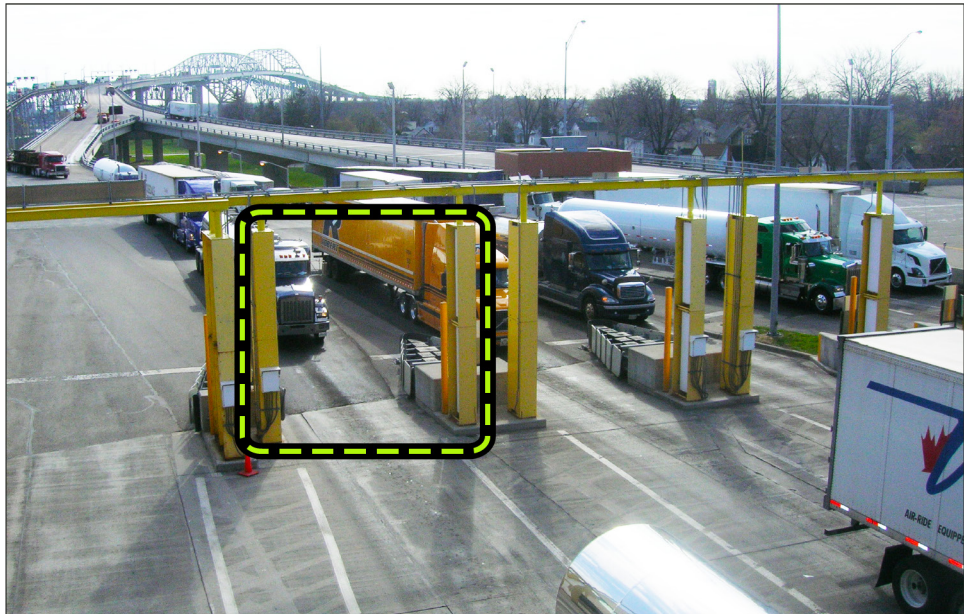
However, CWMD has not completed a program to acquire new radiation portal monitors to replace older ones that CBP operates at high-volume ports.⁸ Moreover, CBP officials told us that tests of replacement monitors resulted in higher nuisance alarm rates than originally planned.⁹ Reducing such alarms is a key goal of the replacement program. Figure 1 shows a radiation portal monitor at a land port of entry.

⁷Specifically, DHS's former Domestic Nuclear Detection Office coordinated with DHS components and federal and state partners to assess nuclear and radiological threats, and U.S. capabilities to address these threats, under a framework sometimes referred to as the Global Nuclear Detection Architecture. Capability assessment included assessing any gaps in the Global Nuclear Detection Architecture.

⁸CBP uses radiation portal monitors to scan incoming cargo and vehicles for elevated radiation levels that may be indicative of smuggled nuclear or radiological materials.

⁹Nuisance 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. CBP officials estimated at the time of our April 2022 report that the higher nuisance alarm rates of the replacement portal monitors under development would result in an additional 30 to 40 minutes of secondary scanning per day per portal monitor unit.

Figure 1: Radiation Portal Monitor at a Land Port of Entry



Source: GAO. | GAO-22-106133

Note: The dashed yellow square highlights a single radiation portal monitor.

In addition, CWMD officials told us that the threat assessments they produce do not include an analysis of capability gaps—an element of earlier DHS threat assessments that Department of Defense and CBP officials said was a vital one that no other government agency performed.

Moreover, officials in eight of our 12 discussion groups across the threat areas said they would appreciate CWMD convening jurisdictions to discuss programs and lessons learned. In the absence of CWMD convening them, officials in five of these discussion groups contacted counterparts in other municipalities to learn about their programs.

Our April 2022 report made recommendations to improve CWMD's services to its partners. These included recommendations to (1) coordinate with CBP to reassess the acquisition strategy for replacement radiation portal monitors, (2) specify how often CWMD will convene its state and local partners in all threat areas, and (3) specify a plan for reconstituting the capability gap analysis function in the radiological and nuclear threat area. DHS agreed with our recommendations. It also identified steps that it is taking, or plans to take, to address them. We will

continue to monitor the actions DHS takes to address our recommendations.

CWMD Has Taken Steps to Improve Employee Morale and Sense of Mission

As noted in our April 2022 report, DHS has faced challenges with low morale and low employee engagement since its inception in 2003.¹⁰ CWMD ranked lowest of all DHS components in employee engagement in 2019 and lowest of all federal agency subcomponents in the 2019 Best Places to Work in the Federal Government® rankings.¹¹

CWMD has taken steps to identify causes of morale problems and enhance employees' shared sense of mission. For example, CWMD used surveys and listening sessions to gather information on the causes of low morale. According to CWMD officials, one cause was different cultures within the predecessor offices that merged under CWMD. For example, CWMD officials said one of these offices coordinated with physicists and law enforcement officials and focused on detection and prevention; another coordinated with public health officials and focused on preparedness and response. As a result, some employees had difficulty understanding how their missions should mesh under the new structure.

According to CWMD employees, another cause of morale issues was frequent leadership changes. CWMD has had three assistant secretaries since its establishment in December 2018.¹² CWMD employees said these assistant secretaries' different visions contributed to confusion about their mission.¹³

¹⁰The Office of Personnel Management defines employee engagement as employees' sense of purpose that is evident in their display of dedication, persistence, and effort in their work or overall attachment to their organization and its mission.

¹¹The Partnership for Public Service and the Boston Consulting Group calculate these rankings using responses to questions in the Office of Personnel Management's Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey.

¹²The current Assistant Secretary has served two nonconsecutive terms.

¹³We have previously reported that successful mergers and transformations must involve employees and their representatives from the beginning to gain their ownership for the changes that are occurring in the organization. GAO, *Results-Oriented Cultures: Implementation Steps to Assist Mergers and Organizational Transformations*, [GAO-03-669](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 2, 2003).

CWMD has taken steps to improve employees' understanding of their shared mission. For example, CWMD instituted town hall meetings in which employees share how they help accomplish CWMD's mission.

Some survey data suggest that such steps may be having a positive effect on morale. Selected Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey questions related to the challenges identified above—including leadership, communication, and understanding of the mission—had an increase in positive responses from 2019 to 2020, as shown in table 1.¹⁴

Table 1: Selected Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey Responses for the Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction Office, 2019 and 2020

Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey question	2019 percent positive	2020 percent positive
I know how my work relates to the agency's goals.	45	75
My agency is successful at accomplishing its mission.	28	48
In my organization, senior leaders generate high levels of motivation and commitment in the workforce.	13	48
Managers communicate the goals of the organization.	29	55
Managers promote communication among different work units (for example, about projects, goals, needed resources).	25	54
I have a high level of respect for my organization's senior leaders.	14	46
How satisfied are you with your involvement in decisions that affect your work?	20	46

Source: Office of Personnel Management. | GAO-22-106133

Note: The 2019 survey was administered May 23–July 5, 2019, and had an 82.7 percent response rate, with 124 surveys completed of 150 administered. The 2020 survey was administered September 24–November 5, 2020, and had a 68.4 percent response rate, with 119 surveys completed of 174 administered. "Percent positive" refers to the sum of the percentage of "agree" and "strongly agree" responses or their equivalents ("very good," "good," "very satisfied," and "satisfied").

However, CWMD's overall ranking in the Best Places to Work in the Federal Government[®] survey remained low in 2020; specifically, CWMD ranked 403 of 411 agency subcomponents. In our prior work, we found that a single survey cycle may not provide enough time to implement changes and see results because real change in improving employee engagement usually takes multiple years.¹⁵

¹⁴Results from the 2021 survey were not available at the time of our April 2022 report.

¹⁵GAO, *Federal Workforce: Additional Analysis and Sharing of Promising Practices Could Improve Employee Engagement and Performance*, [GAO-15-585](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 14, 2015).

Chairman Peters, Ranking Member Portman, and Members of the Committee, this concludes my prepared statement. I would be pleased to respond to any questions that you may have at this time.

GAO Contacts and Staff Acknowledgments

If you or your staff have any questions about this statement, please contact Tina Won Sherman at (202) 512-8461 or shermant@gao.gov or Allison B. Bawden at (202) 512-3841 or bawdena@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this statement. GAO staff who made key contributions to this testimony are Ben Atwater and Ned Woodward (Assistant Directors), Rob Grace (Analyst in Charge), Ellen Fried, Cynthia Norris, Sara Sullivan, and Kelsey N. Wilson. Additional staff who contributed to our April 2022 report are identified in that report.

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