

Watchdog group says HHS not ready to battle future health crises

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The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services is falling down on

the job when it comes to dealing with numerous public health crises, a nonpartisan government watchdog said Thursday.

This includes its communications to the public and healthcare providers, coordinating with federal and state agencies, and managing the medical supply chain, according to a new [report](#) from the Government Accountability Office (GAO).

As a result, leadership and coordination of public [health](#) emergencies is a "high risk" area for the government, the [report](#) noted. The health crises the GAO was referring to include the COVID [pandemic](#), extreme weather disasters and potential bioterrorism attacks.

The report did not point to any specific individuals in current or past administrations as being responsible for the failure.

"Waiting to address the deficiencies we have identified in HHS's leadership and coordination of public health emergencies is not an option, as it is not possible to know precisely when the next threat will occur; only that it will come," the GAO said in its report.

The high-risk designation gives notice to Congress that it should more closely oversee the agency's operations.

Legislators have expressed some of the same concerns this week.

In releasing bipartisan legislation to overhaul the government's pandemic response, Sen. Richard Burr, R-N.C., said, "The American people have stopped listening to the CDC because of their confusing and conflicting guidance – justifiably so," the *Associated Press* reported.

Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., said, "the pain of this pandemic is unforgettable, and we have a responsibility to make sure its lessons are

unforgettable, too."

The GAO specified five areas where it found "persistent deficiencies." These included establishing clear roles and responsibilities for federal, state and local agencies; collecting and analyzing data to inform decision-makers; providing clear and consistent communication to the public; establishing transparency and accountability; and understanding the strengths and weaknesses of other federal agencies it works with.

"If left unaddressed, these deficiencies will continue to hamper the nation's ability to be prepared for, and effectively respond to, future threats," the GAO said in its report.

"We're in a much stronger position than we were a year ago," HHS spokesperson Sarah Lovenheim told the *AP*. "We look forward to reading GAO's feedback on these important issues and sharing progress in this whole-of-government effort as we continue to work to ensure the American people are protected from future health-related emergencies."

The GAO report also called [data collection](#) and analysis a critical weakness, leaving decision-makers without all the information they needed during the pandemic.

The GAO noted that HHS has still not begun a nationwide "public health situational awareness" surveillance system, even though Congress required it in 2010. During the pandemic, this forced the federal government to rely on data collected in different ways by thousands of state health departments and labs, as well as multiple federal agencies.

The report also cited a pattern of "unclear and inconsistent communications" on confusing guidance from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, part of HHS.

One example the GAO cited of not setting clear roles and responsibilities was not addressing the 2020 recommendations for resolving supply chain issues, including COVID tests.

"Shortages of such supplies continue to plague the nation's pandemic response," the report noted.

Boosting the supply of at-home COVID tests has become a [priority](#) for the White House in recent weeks.

More information: The World Health Organization has more on [COVID-19](#).

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