



Testimony

Before the Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

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INFLUENZA PANDEMIC

Federal Executive Boards' Ability to Contribute to Pandemic Preparedness

Statement of Bernice Steinhardt, Director
Strategic Issues





Highlights of [GAO-07-1259T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

The federal executive boards (FEB) bring together federal agency and community leaders in major metropolitan areas outside Washington, D.C., to discuss issues of common interest, including pandemic influenza. This testimony addresses the FEBs' emergency support roles and responsibilities, their potential role in pandemic influenza preparedness, and some of the key challenges they face in providing emergency support services.

The issues discussed in the testimony are based on the GAO report, *The Federal Workforce: Additional Steps Needed to Take Advantage of Federal Executive Boards' Ability to Contribute to Emergency Operations* ([GAO-07-515](#), May 2007). GAO selected 14 of the 28 FEBs for review because they coordinate the greatest number of federal employees or had recent emergency management experience. In this report, GAO recommended that the Director of the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) work with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to formally define the FEBs' role in emergency planning and response. In completing the FEB strategic plan, OPM should also establish accountability for the boards' emergency support activities and develop a proposal to address the uncertainty of funding sources for the boards. While not commenting specifically on the recommendations, OPM said it is building a business case through which to address the resources FEBs need to continue operations.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-07-1259T](#). For more information, contact Bernice Steinhardt at (202) 512-6806 or steinhardt@gao.gov.

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What GAO Found

Located in 28 cities with a large federal presence, the FEBs are interagency coordinating groups designed to strengthen federal management practices and improve intergovernmental relations. The FEBs bring together the federal agency leaders in their service areas and have a long history of establishing and maintaining communications links, coordinating intergovernmental activities, identifying common ground, and building cooperative relationships. The boards also partner with community organizations and participate as a unified federal force in local civic affairs.

OPM, which provides direction to the FEBs, and the boards have designated emergency preparedness, security, and safety as an FEB core function and are continuing to work on a strategic plan that will include a common set of performance standards for their emergency support activities. Although not all FEB representatives agreed that the boards should play an expanded role in emergency service support, many of the FEB representatives cited a positive and beneficial working relationship with FEMA. As one of their emergency support activities, the FEBs and FEMA, often working with the General Services Administration, host emergency planning exercises and training for federal agencies in the field.

The FEBs' emergency support role with its regional focus may make the boards a valuable asset in pandemic preparedness and response. The distributed nature of a pandemic and the burden of disease across the nation dictate that the response will be largely addressed by each community it affects. As a natural outgrowth of their general civic activities and through activities such as hosting emergency preparedness training, some of the boards have established relationships with, for example, federal, state, and local governments; emergency management officials; first responders; and health officials in their communities. Some of the FEBs are already building capacity for pandemic influenza response within their member agencies and community organizations by hosting pandemic influenza training and exercises. The communications function of the FEBs is also a key part of their emergency support activities and could be an important asset for pandemic preparedness and response.

The FEBs, however, face key challenges in providing emergency support, and these interrelated issues limit the capacity of the FEBs to provide a consistent and sustained contribution to emergency preparedness and response. First, their role is not defined in national emergency plans, which may contribute to federal agency officials being unfamiliar with their capabilities. In addition, with no congressional appropriations, the FEBs depend on host agencies and other member agencies for their resources. This has resulted in inconsistent funding for the FEBs nationwide and creates uncertainty for the boards in planning and committing to provide emergency support services.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to be here today to discuss the federal executive boards (FEB) and, in particular, their ability to contribute to the nation's efforts to prepare for a potential influenza pandemic and help protect federal employees, approximately 85 percent of whom work outside the greater Washington, D.C., area. Located in 28 cities with a large federal presence, the FEBs are interagency coordinating groups designed to strengthen federal management practices and improve intergovernmental relations. FEBs bring together the federal agency leaders in their service areas and have a long history of establishing and maintaining communication links, coordinating intergovernmental activities, identifying common ground, and building cooperative relationships. The boards also partner with community organizations and participate as a unified federal force in local civic affairs.

In a recent report to you, we examined the FEBs and concluded that the regional focus of the FEBs' emergency support services could aid in pandemic influenza planning and preparedness efforts.¹ We also observed that the boards face several key challenges in carrying out their emergency support role. My statement today will review our findings and present the actions we believe need to be taken to take better advantage of these unique organizations.

Background

The nature of pandemic influenza presents distinctive challenges. Unlike incidents that are discretely bounded in space or time (e.g., most natural or man-made disasters), a pandemic is not a singular event, but is likely to come in waves, each lasting weeks or months, and pass through communities of all sizes across the nation and the world simultaneously. While a pandemic will not directly damage physical infrastructure, such as power lines or computer systems, it will threaten the operation of critical systems by potentially removing from the workplace the essential personnel needed to operate them. According to the National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza Implementation Plan, the center of gravity of the pandemic response will be in communities.² The distributed nature of a

¹GAO, *The Federal Workforce: Additional Steps Needed to Take Advantage of Federal Executive Boards' Ability to Contribute to Emergency Operations*, [GAO-07-515](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 4, 2007).

²Homeland Security Council, *National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza Implementation Plan* (Washington, D.C.: May 2006).

pandemic, as well as the sheer burden of disease across the nation over a period of months or longer, means that the federal government's support to any particular state, tribal nation, or community will be limited in comparison to the aid it mobilizes for disasters such as earthquakes or hurricanes, which strike a more confined geographic area over a shorter period of time. This makes it essential to have joint and integrated planning across all levels of government and the private sector to ensure that available plans and response actions are complementary, compatible, and coordinated.

Created by a Presidential Directive in 1961, the FEBs are composed of the federal field office agency heads and military commanders in the FEBs' areas of service. The FEBs' overall mission over the past 46 years has included supporting and promoting national initiatives and responding to the local needs of federal agencies and their communities through activities such as the Combined Federal Campaign and local scholarship programs. The regulations that guide the boards³ describe emergency operations as one of their functions, although the boards are not intended to be first responders. The regulations also state that the Director of the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) is responsible for overseeing and directing the operations of all of the FEBs consistent with the law and with the directives of the President. Research has shown that systems like the FEBs have proven to be valuable public management tools because they can operate horizontally, across agencies in this case, and integrate the strengths and resources of a variety of organizations in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors to effectively address critical public problems, such as pandemic influenza.⁴

However, determining the appropriate emergency operations for the FEBs to provide is challenging because of several limitations. Although membership by agency heads on the boards is required, active participation is voluntary in practice, and the boards operate with no independent authority. The FEBs also have no congressional charter and receive no congressional appropriation but rather depend on voluntary

³5 C.F.R. § 960.

⁴See, for example, GAO, *Results-Oriented Government: Practices That Can Help Enhance and Sustain Collaboration among Federal Agencies*, [GAO-06-15](#) (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 21, 2005), and Donald P. Moynihan, *Leveraging Collaborative Networks in Infrequent Emergency Situations* (Washington, D.C.: IBM Center for the Business of Government, June 2005).

contributions from their member agencies. The boards also rely on a host agency, generally the one with the greatest number of employees in the area, to provide staff, usually one or two full-time personnel, including an executive director.

Scope and Methodology

This statement is based on our May 4, 2007, report, requested by the Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia, Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs.⁵ Our objectives in that report were to (1) identify the actions FEBs have taken to fulfill their emergency preparedness and response roles and responsibilities, (2) describe the key challenges facing the FEBs in fulfilling these roles and responsibilities, and (3) evaluate the extent to which the FEBs can contribute to emergency preparedness and response to pandemic influenza. We selected 14 of the 28 FEBs for review because they coordinated the greatest number of federal employees or had recent emergency management experience. The selected FEBs were Atlanta, Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Dallas-Fort Worth, Denver, Minnesota, Los Angeles, New Orleans, New York City, Oklahoma, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and Seattle. We interviewed at least two key FEB representatives, including the chairs or vice chairs and the executive directors from the 14 selected boards. Additionally, we reviewed FEB documents, such as annual reports, monthly activity reports, minutes, and correspondence, at the selected sites. We also interviewed OPM and Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) officials at their headquarters in Washington, D.C., and two FEMA regional directors based in Chicago, Illinois, and Denton, Texas. We conducted our work from March 2006 through February 2007 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

⁵[GAO-07-515](#).

FEB Emergency Preparedness and Response Roles and Responsibilities Are Being Developed as a Core Function of the Boards

To assist in standardizing emergency activities across the FEB system, OPM and the boards are developing a multiyear strategic plan that will include a core function for the FEBs called emergency preparedness, security, and employee safety. The plan will increase accountability by including expectations and measures to assess how well each FEB is performing the activities. OPM officials recognize that the FEBs can add value to regional preparedness efforts as vehicles for communication, coordination, and capacity building but acknowledge that the emergency activities of the FEBs have varied from board to board. The inclusion of the emergency support function in the strategic plan is intended to provide a more consistent delivery of FEB emergency preparedness and response programs and activities for the federal workforce across the system of 28 boards.

At the time of our review, all of the 14 boards in our study had some type of emergency communications network and emergency preparedness council in place. The FEBs are charged with providing timely and relevant information to support emergency preparedness and response coordination, and OPM expects the boards to establish notification networks and communications plans to be used in emergency and nonemergency situations. The boards are also expected to disseminate relevant information received from OPM and other agencies regarding emergency preparedness information and to relay local emergency situation information to parties such as OPM, FEB members, media, and state and local government authorities.

According to OPM, the FEB role in emergency service support also includes coordination activities. For example, OPM reported that it expects the boards to serve as federal liaisons for state and local emergency officials and to assess local emergency situations in cooperation with federal, state, and local officials. Although all of the boards reported some involvement of state and local officials in their emergency activities, the degree of board connections with state and local officials varied. The Minnesota FEB and the Oklahoma FEB, for example, reported strong relationships with state and local government officials, state and local emergency management leaders, and private sector businesses. The Dallas-Fort Worth FEB executive director reported that the board partners with state and local government representatives, the private sector, law enforcement, and first responders, all of which are key players in assessing local emergency situations. On the other hand, the Chicago FEB executive director said that because Chicago is so large, the board has few established relationships with state and local officials. The

chair of the Boston FEB said its board had 24-hour contact numbers for some state officials but not city officials.

The FEBs have played a role in responding to past emergencies. For example, when the Oklahoma City Murrah Federal Building was bombed on April 19, 1995, the FEB staff knew all of the agencies in the Murrah Building; the home telephone numbers of critical staff; the city, county, and state principals in Oklahoma City; and which federal agencies were available to provide immediate relief and support. During hurricanes Katrina and Rita, according to a FEMA official, the New Orleans FEB executive director established and maintained an essential communication link between FEMA's Office of National Security Coordination and OPM. The New Orleans FEB also served as a conduit for information between Washington and local federal agencies and was able to provide status updates to identify common needs or problems that agency leaders were facing that required expedited assistance to resolve. As another example, during nonemergency but disruptive events, such as political conventions or rallies, the FEBs in the affected areas have helped to contain the potential disturbance to federal agencies' operations.

Looking ahead, however, representatives from 14 of the 28 FEBs disagreed on the role the boards should play in emergency service support, particularly during an emergency. Without adequate staff and resources, some of the executive directors expressed concern that they will not be able to meet expectations. One executive director, for example, commented that there was a general expectation within his board's metropolitan federal community that the FEB will assume a significant leadership role during a possible future emergency. He observed, however, that limited and declining funding does not provide for an effective communication system. Consequently, he felt that this expectation was unrealistic and may contribute to major misunderstandings in the event of a significant emergency. On the other hand, several of the executive directors felt that the FEBs would be able to accomplish much more in this area with additional resources. For example, one executive director, with an emergency operations background, emphasized that if the boards were given dependable funding and increased stature within the federal government by formal recognition of their emergency support role, their return on investment in terms of emergency support functions would be substantial.

Despite the varying perspectives on an expanded emergency support role for the FEBs, many of the executive directors or chairs from the boards cited a positive and beneficial working relationship with FEMA. An

important FEB emergency support responsibility is facilitating continuity of operations (COOP)⁶ and other emergency planning, and the FEBs work with FEMA and the General Services Administration (GSA) to develop and strengthen agency COOP and other emergency plans. For example, most of the boards have COOP working groups or emergency committees, often lead by FEMA and GSA, which help conduct various emergency exercises. The exercises are designed to provide insight and guidance that can be used to develop specific action plans that address interruptions in services provided by their agencies. For example, a FEMA official testified in May 2006 that the COOP working groups established with the FEBs in New Orleans, Houston, and Miami prior to the hurricanes of 2005 and the many COOP training and exercise activities conducted by these organizations were instrumental in facilitating federal agency recovery and reconstitution efforts following hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Wilma.⁷ According to a FEMA director, many of the agencies in the field have COOP policies, procedures, and planning in place in part because the FEBs have assisted FEMA in accomplishing its responsibilities as lead agent for federal executive branch COOP programs.

FEBS' Unique Role in the Local Federal Community Can Aid in Pandemic Influenza Preparedness and Response

As mentioned previously, the nature of pandemic influenza, which presents different concerns than localized natural disasters, may make the FEBs a valuable asset in pandemic preparedness and response. The distributed nature of a pandemic and the burden of disease across the nation dictate that the response will be largely addressed by each community it affects. The FEBs' connections to their local communities could play an important part, as predisaster relationship building and planning are often the cornerstones of this type of incident management.

Many of the FEBs have cultivated relationships within their federal, state, and local governments and their metropolitan area community organizations as a natural outgrowth of their general activities. For example, FEB activities, such as the Combined Federal Campaign and scholarship programs, bring the boards into contact with local charities and school boards. Through activities such as hosting emergency preparedness training or through participation in certain committees,

⁶COOP planning is an effort conducted by agencies to ensure that the capability exists to continue essential agency functions across a wide range of potential emergencies.

⁷Statement of Robert Shea, Acting Director of Operations, Federal Emergency Management Agency, House Committee on Government Reform, May 24, 2006.

some of the FEBs have established relationships with emergency management officials, first responders, and health officials in their communities. In addition, through their facilitation of COOP exercises and training, the FEBs bring together government leaders, health officials, and first responders in a venue where the parties can share ideas, discuss plans, and coordinate approaches.

In terms of current pandemic planning, some of the FEBs are already building capacity for pandemic influenza response within their member agencies and community organizations by hosting pandemic influenza training and exercises. For example, some of the boards have been involved in pandemic influenza-related activities that range from informational briefings to coordinating pandemic exercises that included nonprofit organizations, the private sector, and government. A number of FEBs have held pandemic influenza tabletop exercises. Pandemic influenza tabletop exercises are based on a series of possible events that could occur during an outbreak of pandemic influenza with scenarios constructed to facilitate problem solving and to provoke thinking about gaps and vulnerabilities. For example, the Boston FEB, together with the Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency and FEMA, held a pandemic influenza tabletop exercise in November 2006. The exercise objectives included goals such as helping to increase the awareness of federal, state, local, and tribal government agencies of the requirement to incorporate pandemic influenza procedures into COOP planning and identifying special considerations for protecting the health and safety of employees and maintaining essential government functions and services during a pandemic outbreak. The Seattle FEB, with the assistance of FEMA and the City of Seattle, sponsored an all-day conference in October 2006 called “Pandemic Flu: Get Smart, Get Ready! Conversation Tools and Tips.”

The Minnesota FEB has been a leader among the boards in pandemic influenza planning. Using a tabletop exercise it created, the board hosted its first pandemic influenza exercise in February 2006, with a follow-up exercise in October 2006. The October exercise included approximately 180 participants from 100 organizations within federal agencies, state and local government, and the private sector. The Minnesota FEB executive director noted that Minnesota has excellent state and local government relationships, which help to facilitate planning of this nature. Examples of partnerships the board has with state and local entities include those with the State of Minnesota Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Management, the Minnesota Department of Health, the St. Paul Chamber of Commerce, and the American Red Cross. In addition, the Minnesota

FEB executive director serves on the board of directors of the Association of Minnesota Emergency Managers as the federal agency liaison, a newly created partnership with the organization.

The communications function of the boards is also a key part of their emergency support activities and could be an important asset for pandemic preparedness and response. For example, many of the FEBs are already active in disseminating pandemic influenza preparedness materials. The National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza Implementation Plan also emphasizes that government and public health officials must communicate clearly and continuously with the public throughout a pandemic, and the plan recognized that timely, accurate, credible, and coordinated messages will be necessary. For example, when asked about the role they envision the FEBs playing in the response to a pandemic, the Dallas-Fort Worth FEB representatives said that because the board is viewed by its member agencies as a credible source of information, the board's role should be to coordinate communications among member agencies. They gave the example of the Department of Health and Human Services working through the board to disseminate medical information to the local community.

During pandemic influenza, the FEBs have the potential to broaden the situational awareness of member agency leaders and emergency coordinators and provide a forum to inform their decisions, similar to what the FEBs provide for other hazards, such as inclement weather conditions. A FEMA official noted that FEBs have vital knowledge of the federal agencies in their jurisdictions, which can provide valuable situational awareness to community emergency responders.

Finally, some of the FEBs are considering the role they can play during pandemic influenza in assisting member agencies by supporting human capital functions, such as supporting the federal workforce and coordinating the deployment of personnel among member agencies as may be appropriate. Several FEB representatives said, for example, that they were considering how they could provide assistance in coordinating support to federal agencies responding to pandemic influenza, such as addressing personnel shortages by locating available resources among member agencies.

The FEBs Face Key Challenges in Providing Emergency Support Services

The FEBs face key challenges in carrying out their emergency support role. Several interrelated issues limit the capacity of FEBs to provide a consistent and sustained contribution to emergency preparedness and response.

First, their role is not defined in national emergency plans. According to both FEB directors and FEMA officials, the FEBs could carry out their emergency support role more effectively if their role was included in national emergency management plans. FEMA officials from two different regions said they felt the boards could be used more effectively and that they add value to the nation's emergency operations. They agreed with several of the FEB executive directors we interviewed who said the boards lack recognition within the federal government's emergency response structure and their value in emergency support was often overlooked by federal agency officials unfamiliar with their capabilities. A FEMA regional director noted that it is very important that the FEB emergency support role is understood, and he believed including the boards in emergency management plans was an opportunity to communicate the role of the FEBs and how they could contribute in emergencies involving the federal workforce.

In addition, varying FEB capabilities test the boards' ability to provide consistent levels of emergency support services across the country. The FEBs differ substantially in the size of their formal jurisdictions and in the number of federal employees and agencies served by each board. The map in appendix I shows the varying service areas of the 28 boards, and the table in appendix II shows how the number of federal employees and agencies served varies by FEB. As noted earlier, the FEBs also have no congressional charter and receive no congressional appropriation but rather rely on voluntary contributions from their member agencies. This has resulted in inconsistent funding for the FEBs nationwide, and the levels of support provided to the boards in terms of operating expenses, personnel, and equipment vary considerably.

The FEBs' dependence on host agencies and other member agencies for their resources also creates uncertainty for the boards in planning and committing to provide emergency support services. The lack of funding in a particular year may curtail the amount of emergency support an individual board could provide. Many of the FEB representatives characterized the board funding structure as dysfunctional, and some expressed concern that their activities will be further affected by reduced agency funding and resource support as agency budgets grow more constrained. When boards' funding is precarious, the executive directors

spend the majority of their time soliciting resources from member agencies, without adequate time or resources to focus on mission-related activities. Some federal agencies that have voluntarily funded FEB positions in the past have begun to withdraw their funding support. Several FEB representatives felt the uncertainty about the funding of the FEBs raises questions as to the survivability of the system and its ability to fulfill its emergency support function.

To address these challenges, our report recommended that OPM work with FEMA to develop a memorandum of understanding, or some similar mechanism, that formally defines the FEB role in emergency planning and response. We also recommended that OPM initiate discussion with the Department of Homeland Security and other responsible stakeholders to consider the feasibility of integrating the FEB emergency support responsibilities into the established emergency response framework, such as the National Response Plan. Finally, we recommended that OPM continue its efforts to establish measures and accountability for the FEBs' emergency support responsibilities and develop a proposal for an alternative to the current voluntary contribution mechanism that would address the uncertainty of funding sources for the boards. OPM's work on a strategic plan with the FEBs affords the opportunity to complete the development of clear expectations for the FEBs in emergency operations and to develop appropriate performance measures for these expectations. OPM also has an opportunity, as part of this planning process, to consider alternative funding arrangements that would better match the roles envisioned for the FEBs. OPM said it is building a business case through which to address the resources FEBs need to continue operations and that institutionalized relationships with partners such as FEMA can help address funding issues.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, this completes my statement. I would be pleased to respond to any questions that you might have.

Contacts and Acknowledgments

For further information on this testimony, please contact Bernice Steinhardt, Director, Strategic Issues, at (202) 512-6806 or steinhardtb@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this testimony. Individuals making key contributions to this testimony include William J. Doherty, Assistant Director, and Judith C. Kordahl.

Appendix I: Jurisdictional Boundaries of the 28 FEBs



Source: GAO presentation of OPM information.

^aIncludes civilian agencies in Guam.

Appendix II: Number of Federal Employees and Agencies Served by Each FEB in Descending Order of Employees Served

| FEB | Federal employees served | Number of federal agencies |
|-------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|
| Los Angeles | 118,250 | 230 |
| San Antonio | 91,130 | 68 |
| Oklahoma | 78,681 | 252 |
| Honolulu-Pacific | 72,155 | 96 |
| San Francisco | 70,000 | 150 |
| Baltimore | 69,488 | 140 |
| Chicago | 64,803 | 180 |
| St. Louis | 62,155 | 82 |
| New York City | 61,578 | 152 |
| Atlanta | 58,020 | 120 |
| Dallas-Fort Worth | 49,855 | 144 |
| Philadelphia | 48,238 | 154 |
| Seattle | 47,233 | 147 |
| Boston | 45,479 | 150 |
| Denver | 39,161 | 160 |
| Kansas City | 38,906 | 134 |
| Newark | 38,270 | 79 |
| Minnesota | 35,806 | 120 |
| South Florida | 35,672 | 129 |
| Detroit | 32,733 | 85 |
| New Mexico | 32,102 | 94 |
| Oregon | 31,000 | 225 |
| Houston | 29,419 | 115 |
| Cleveland | 25,842 | 91 |
| Pittsburgh | 24,898 | 107 |
| New Orleans | 20,141 ^a | 71 ^a |
| Buffalo | 15,935 | 100 |
| Cincinnati | 14,727 | 90 |

Source: OPM.

^aNumbers are under review because of Hurricane Katrina.

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