



February 2024

DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY

Additional Actions Needed to Improve Oversight of Joint Task Forces

Accessible Version

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-24-106855](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

In 2014, the Secretary of Homeland Security directed the development of intradepartmental joint task forces to respond to long-term, multi-faceted challenges such as the smuggling of illicit drugs. The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017 established in statute the Secretary of Homeland Security's authority to create joint task forces. In 2019, GAO reported on DHS's management of joint task forces, and recommended improvement to DHS's performance measures.

The James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023 includes new requirements related to joint task forces and a provision for GAO to review how DHS uses them. This report examines (1) the missions and activities of Joint Task Force-East; (2) criteria for establishing or terminating a joint task force; and (3) performance measures and targets for Joint Task Force-East. GAO analyzed DHS documentation on management and oversight of joint task forces, including actions taken since GAO's prior report ([GAO-19-441](#)). GAO also interviewed DHS headquarters, Joint Task Force-East, and component officials on task force activities and performance management.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making four recommendations, including that DHS develop and document criteria for establishing and terminating joint task forces, and establish targets and develop and document its methodology for Joint Task Force-East's performance measures. DHS concurred and identified ongoing and planned steps to address these recommendations.

View [GAO-24-106855](#). For more information, contact Rebecca Gambler at (202) 512-8777 or GamblerR@gao.gov.

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What GAO Found

The Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Joint Task Force-East coordinates activities across DHS components and U.S. government and international partners in the U.S. southern maritime environment. In fiscal year 2023, Joint Task Force-East officials stated they focused on activities such as preparing for maritime mass migration incidents and combatting transnational criminal organizations in the eastern Caribbean.

DHS has not developed and documented criteria for establishing or terminating joint task forces, as of November 2023. From 2015 to 2020, DHS operated three task forces, but terminated two in 2020 (see table).

Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Joint Task Force Operating Status, as of November 2023

Joint task force	Scope of operations	Lead DHS component	Operating status
East	The southern maritime environment, such as Puerto Rico and the coastline along the Gulf of Mexico and Florida.	U.S. Coast Guard	Active
West	The land border with Mexico from California to the Gulf of Mexico, among other surrounding areas.	U.S. Customs and Border Protection	Terminated September 2020
Investigations	Responsible for supporting DHS-wide investigations and sharing information to support the other two task forces.	U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement	Terminated September 2020

Source: GAO analysis of DHS documentation. | [GAO-24-106855](#)

DHS is statutorily required to inform Congress within 7 days after establishing or terminating a joint task force of the criteria and conditions required to establish or terminate it. Further, DHS is required to establish the criteria for terminating each joint task force using leading practices in performance management and lessons learned by other law enforcement task forces and joint operations. DHS officials stated they recognize the need for criteria but did not provide GAO with drafts or interim documents to support planned actions, as of November 2023. Such criteria could better position the department to convey the conditions under which the Secretary decides to establish or terminate a joint task force.

DHS has taken some steps to develop performance measures for Joint Task Force-East but had not finalized them, as of November 2023. In 2019, GAO recommended that DHS develop outcome-based performance measures for joint task forces. Developing and implementing such measures would better position DHS to demonstrate task force effectiveness. Subsequently, DHS was statutorily required to establish targets—numeric values indicating the level of performance expected—for joint task force performance measures. DHS is also required to include, as part of its performance measures for joint task forces, a description of the methodology used to establish such measures. As of November 2023, DHS had not developed targets or its methodology for joint task force performance measures. Establishing targets and developing and documenting the methodology for Joint Task Force-East's performance measures would better position DHS to measure the task force's results.

Contents

GAO Highlights	ii
Why GAO Did This Study	ii
What GAO Recommends	ii
What GAO Found	ii
Letter	1
Background	5
Joint Task Force-East Coordinates Border Security Activities in the U.S Southern Maritime Environment	9
DHS Has Not Developed and Documented Criteria for Establishing or Terminating Joint Task Forces	11
DHS Has Efforts Underway but Has Not Developed Performance Measures or Established Targets for Joint Task Force-East	16
Conclusions	21
Recommendations for Executive Action	21
Agency Comments	22
Appendix I: Timeline of Department of Homeland Security Joint Task Forces, Fiscal Years 2015–2023	25
Appendix II: Comments from the Department of Homeland Security	27
Accessible Text for Appendix II: Comments from the Department of Homeland Security	32
Appendix III: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments	35
GAO Contact	35
Staff Acknowledgments	35
Tables	
Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Joint Task Force Operating Status, as of November 2023	ii
Table 1: Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Joint Task Force Responsibilities and Operating Status, as of November 2023	6
Table 2: Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Joint Task Force-East Activity Types and Selected Examples, Fiscal Year 2023	11
Figures	
Figure 1: Joint Task Force-East Organizational Chart	8
Accessible Text for Figure 1: Joint Task Force-East Organizational Chart	8

Figure 2: Timeline of Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Joint Task Forces, Fiscal Years 2015-2023 25

Accessible Text for Figure 2: Timeline of Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Joint Task Forces, Fiscal Years 2015-2023 26

Abbreviations

DHS	Department of Homeland Security
CBP	U.S. Customs and Border Protection
ICE	U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement
FY 2017 Act	National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017
FY 2023 Act	James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023
OMA	Office of the Military Advisor

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February 7, 2024

Congressional Committees

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) is responsible for a wide variety of functions that are critically important to maintaining the security of the U.S. Its missions include countering terrorism and securing U.S. land, air, and sea borders against those conducting illegal activities. In 2014, the Secretary of Homeland Security directed the development of intradepartmental joint task forces to provide a coordination mechanism to resolve long-term, multi-faceted challenges facing the homeland. In response, DHS established three joint task forces as pilot programs to enhance and unify DHS efforts and those of its component agencies to secure the U.S. southern border and approaches to the U.S. via land, air, or sea.¹

Subsequently, the National Defense Authorization Act for 2017 (the FY 2017 Act) established in statute the Secretary of Homeland Security's authority to create joint task forces.² The James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023 (the FY 2023 Act), enacted in December 2022, extended the Secretary's discretionary authority to establish and operate DHS joint task forces through fiscal

¹For the purposes of this report, the term "approaches" refers to air, land, and sea domains leading to U.S. borders, such as the international waters of the Caribbean Sea and the Eastern Pacific Ocean southward to the North Coast of South America.

²Section 708 of the Homeland Security Act of 2002, Pub. L. No. 107-296, title VII, § 708, 116 Stat. 2135, as added by Pub. L. No. 114-328, div. A, title XIX, § 1901(b), 130 Stat. 2000, 2665-70 (2016) (classified as amended, at 6 U.S.C. § 348). The Secretary of Homeland Security has the discretion to create joint task forces to conduct joint operations using the department's personnel and capabilities for the purposes of securing U.S. borders, addressing homeland security crises, and establishing regionally-based operations. Joint task forces are led by a presidentially appointed director who may serve for up to 2 years. The director's responsibilities include exercising operational direction over personnel and equipment from DHS components and offices allocated to the joint task force to achieve its objectives. The FY 2017 Act also provides that the Secretary generally may not establish a joint task force for any major disaster or emergency declared under the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act (42 U.S.C. 5121 et seq.) or an incident for which the Federal Emergency Management Agency has primary responsibility for management and response. 6 U.S.C. § 348(b)(2)(B). The Secretary's authority to establish joint task forces was to expire on September 30, 2022 (6 U.S.C. § 348(b)(13)). According to DHS officials, unless the DHS Secretary requested, and Congress approved, an extension, all three task forces were projected to end in accordance with the September 30, 2022 date.

year 2024.³ In addition, the FY 2023 Act includes new requirements related to DHS's management and oversight of its joint task forces.

In 2020, DHS terminated two of its three task forces, noting at the time that the department was not able to reach a consensus on their roles in conducting joint operations.⁴ As of November 2023, DHS continued to operate Joint Task Force-East. This task force aims to help coordinate operations, prepare for, and respond to mass maritime migration, and respond to emerging threats along the U.S. southern maritime border.

We have reported previously on the structure of DHS's joint task forces and their effectiveness in coordinating and conducting missions.⁵ In particular, in 2019, we found that DHS's performance measures for its task forces were not outcome-based and did not fully assess the effectiveness of their activities. Therefore, we recommended that DHS develop outcome-based performance measures to better position the department to demonstrate joint task force contributions and convey trends in the overall effectiveness of their activities. DHS concurred with this recommendation and, as of November 2023, the department had taken some steps to address it, which we discuss later in this report.

The James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023 includes a provision for us to review DHS's use and oversight of joint task forces.⁶ This report examines (1) the missions and activities of Joint Task Force-East; (2) the extent to which DHS has developed and documented criteria for determining whether to establish or terminate a joint task force; and (3) the extent to which DHS has developed performance measures and established targets for Joint Task Force-East.

To address all three objectives, we collected and analyzed DHS documentation on its management and oversight of joint task forces. This

³DHS Joint Task Forces Reauthorization Act of 2022, Pub. L. No. 117-263, div. G, title LXXI, subtitle B, § 7111(b), 136 Stat. 2395, 3625-28 (2022) (classified at 6 U.S.C. § 348).

⁴In 2020, DHS terminated Joint Task Force-West and Joint Task Force-Investigations, which we discuss in more detail later in this report. These task forces focused on threats along the southwest land border and on supporting DHS-wide investigations and sharing information to support the other two task forces, respectively.

⁵GAO, *Drug Control: Certain DOD and DHS Joint Task Forces Should Enhance Their Performance Measures to Better Assess Counterdrug Activities*, [GAO-19-441](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 9, 2019).

⁶6 U.S.C. § 348(b)(12).

includes departmental policy directives and decision memoranda, as well as the 2015 *DHS Southern Border and Approaches Campaign Plan*, which is the founding guidance document for the joint task forces.⁷ We also collected and analyzed Joint Task Force-East-specific documentation, such as memoranda from the task force to DHS on its activities. In addition, we analyzed DHS's statutorily mandated reports to Congress.⁸ Specifically, we analyzed DHS's May 2023 report to Congress on task force funding, personnel, and other resources allocated by each DHS component or office to carry out Joint Task Force-East's mission during the prior fiscal year.⁹ We also analyzed DHS's June 2023 report to Congress on Joint Task Force-East's mission, strategic goals, objectives, and performance metrics.¹⁰

We interviewed DHS headquarters officials in DHS's Office of Strategy, Policy, and Plans, as well as the Office of the Military Advisor (OMA), which is responsible for coordinating between DHS headquarters and Joint Task Force-East. We also interviewed Joint Task Force-East officials, including the director and deputy director and other task force officials responsible for strategy, planning, and performance management. We interviewed officials from DHS components who participated in or coordinated previously with joint task forces to

⁷Department of Homeland Security, *Department of Homeland Security Campaign Plan for Securing the U.S. Southern Border and Approaches* (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 23, 2015).

⁸6 U.S.C. § 348(b)(6)(F) (DHS is required to report to Congress as part of the annual budget process on task force funding, personnel, and other resources allocated by each DHS component or office to carry out the joint task force's mission during the prior fiscal year; this report must include a description of the degree to which the resources drawn from each component or office impact the primary mission of such component or office), (9)(B) (DHS must submit an initial 120-day report to specified congressional committees on joint task force mission, strategic goals, objectives, and performance metrics; and then is to report within 120 days after establishment of a new joint task force), (9)(C) (DHS is also required to submit an annual report to specified congressional committees containing information on the progress in implementing the outcome-based and other appropriate metrics for evaluating joint task force effectiveness).

⁹Department of Homeland Security, *DHS Joint Task Force-East Funding, Personnel, and Other Resources, Fiscal Year (FY) 2021 and 2022: FY 2023 Report to Congress* (Washington D.C.: May 19, 2023).

¹⁰Department of Homeland Security, *DHS Joint Task Force-East Mission, Strategic Goals, Objectives, and Metrics: Fiscal Year 2023 Report to Congress* (Washington, D.C.: June 23, 2023). In addition, after we submitted a draft of our report to DHS for review and comment, DHS submitted to congressional committees its required annual report on Joint Task Force-East. The report included updates to the task force's goals, objectives, performance measures, and targets, which we discuss later in this report. Department of Homeland Security, *DHS Joint Task Force-East Annual Report, December 2023* (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 12, 2024).

understand their management structure and activities since our 2019 report.¹¹ This includes officials from the U.S. Coast Guard, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

To address our second objective, in addition to the steps noted above, we collected and analyzed DHS documentation on the department's process for terminating the two task forces in 2020. We interviewed DHS and component officials regarding that process, as well as the factors the department considers when establishing coordination mechanisms like joint task forces. We assessed the information noted above against requirements in the FY 2023 Act. In addition, we examined DHS's processes for establishing or terminating joint task forces against *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*.¹² Specifically, we determined that the control activities component of internal control was significant to this objective, along with the underlying principle that management should implement control activities through policies.

To address our third objective, we collected and analyzed documentation on DHS's actions to develop performance measures for Joint Task Force-East, such as DHS's June 2023 report to Congress. We interviewed OMA officials and Joint Task Force-East officials responsible for performance management regarding the actions DHS has taken since our 2019 report to address our prior recommendation that DHS develop outcome-based performance measures for joint task forces. We compared DHS's actions to develop performance measures for joint task forces against the requirements provided in the FY 2023 Act, DHS guidance on performance measures,¹³ and key practices for performance management in the federal government.¹⁴

We conducted this performance audit from May 2023 to February 2024, 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

¹¹[GAO-19-441](#).

¹²GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, [GAO-14-704G](#) (Washington, D.C.: September 2014).

¹³Department of Homeland Security, *DHS Organizational Performance Management Guidance* (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 30, 2020).

¹⁴GAO, *Evidence-Based Policymaking: Practices to Help Manage and Assess the Results of Federal Efforts*, [GAO-23-105460](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 12, 2023).

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.

Background

DHS Joint Task Forces' Responsibilities, Organization, and Operating Status

In 2014, the DHS Secretary directed the establishment of three joint task forces: (1) Joint Task Force–East, (2) Joint Task Force–West, and (3) Joint Task Force–Investigations.¹⁵ These task forces aimed to address terrorism threats, the smuggling of illicit drugs, unlawful migration, and other security concerns along the southern border and approaches to the U.S. According to the 2015 *DHS Southern Border and Approaches Campaign Plan*, the goal for DHS's joint task forces is to strengthen the unity of effort within the department toward common goals.¹⁶ In September 2020, DHS terminated Joint Task Force–West and Joint Task Force–Investigations, which we discuss later in this report (see app. I for a timeline of DHS joint task forces from fiscal years 2015 to 2023).

In January 2023, the DHS Secretary issued a directive designating OMA as the lead office responsible for coordinating between DHS headquarters and Joint Task Force–East. According to OMA officials, the office serves as a liaison between the task force and the Secretary's office, as well as other departmental offices and components. For example, if Joint Task Force–East has a need for additional personnel or other resources, OMA officials stated they would help task force officials

¹⁵Joint Task Force–Investigations and Joint Task Force–West began operations in January 2015. Joint Task Force–East began operations in November 2016.

¹⁶According to the *DHS Southern Border and Approaches Campaign Plan*, task forces' key objectives are to (a) minimize the risk of terrorism; (b) increase the perceived risk of engaging in or facilitating illegal transnational or cross-border activity; (c) interdict people and goods attempting to enter illegally at and between U.S. ports of entry; (d) increase situational awareness in the air, land, and sea border and approaches; (e) decrease or disrupt the profitability and finances of transnational criminal activities at the optimal points; (f) dismantle criminal and terrorist organizations and networks; (g) prevent the illegal exploitation of legal flows; (h) maximize the resiliency of key nodes, conveyances, pathways, and transportation infrastructure; (i) minimize the cost to travelers and delays to shippers in being screened and vetted at ports of entry; and (j) maximize the number of travelers and value of imported goods that undergo screening before arriving at ports of entry.

coordinate resource requests at DHS headquarters and across relevant components. See table 1 for the status of DHS’s joint task forces as of November 2023.

Table 1: Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Joint Task Force Responsibilities and Operating Status, as of November 2023

Joint task force	Scope of operations ^a	Executive agent ^b	Operating status
Joint Task Force-East	Joint Task Force-East’s joint operating area is the southern maritime environment. Specifically, its area of responsibility includes Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, the coastline along the Gulf of Mexico and Florida, international waters of the Caribbean Sea and the eastern Pacific Ocean southward to the north coast of South America, the airspace spanning U.S. territorial land and waters, and international airspace in the approaches.	U.S. Coast Guard	Active
Joint Task Force-West	Joint Task Force-West was responsible for the land border with Mexico from California to the Gulf of Mexico and the land approaches to this border, the littorals in the Gulf of Mexico off Texas and the Pacific off California, and the airspace spanning U.S. territorial land and waters.	U.S. Customs and Border Protection	Terminated September 2020 ^c
Joint Task Force-Investigations	Joint Task Force-Investigations was responsible for supporting DHS-wide investigations and sharing information to support the other two task forces.	U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement	Terminated September 2020

Source: GAO analysis of DHS documentation and interviews with DHS officials. | GAO-24-106855

^aThe scope of operations of DHS joint task forces is known as the joint operating area, which defines the primary responsibilities—geographic or otherwise—for specific joint task forces. Task force directors conduct cross-boundary coordination to ensure departmental unity of effort across the operating area (cross-boundaries includes land and maritime-based operations).

^bThe executive agent is the lead DHS component responsible for providing resources and direction to joint task forces.

^cIn May 2020, the then-Acting DHS Secretary issued a memo directing the termination of Joint Task Force -West and -Investigations, which was to be completed before October 1, 2020. DHS officials confirmed that the task forces were terminated in September 2020 before the deadline.

Joint Task Force-East

The Coast Guard is the executive agent, or lead responsible component, for Joint Task Force-East. In that capacity, the Coast Guard is responsible for ensuring that the task force has the personnel and non-personnel resources to support its mission.¹⁷ According to a senior Coast Guard official, the Coast Guard was assigned as executive agent for Joint

¹⁷Examples of non-personnel resources include secure office spaces and technology.

Task Force-East because the service's jurisdiction and missions most closely align with those of the task force.

Joint Task Force-East is located in Portsmouth, Virginia, in offices it shares with the Coast Guard's Atlantic Area Command.¹⁸ As of October 2023, Joint Task Force-East had 38 personnel on-board, largely comprised of staff from the Coast Guard, CBP, and ICE. According to OMA and Joint Task Force-East officials, the task force is primarily staffed by full-time positions allocated by DHS components, with a smaller number serving in temporary duty positions.¹⁹ Joint Task Force-East officials said that components allocate positions to the task force voluntarily. Specifically, in fiscal year 2023, the Coast Guard allocated 28 permanent positions to Joint Task Force-East. According to task force officials, these are primarily uniformed Coast Guard personnel serving in 2-year rotations.²⁰

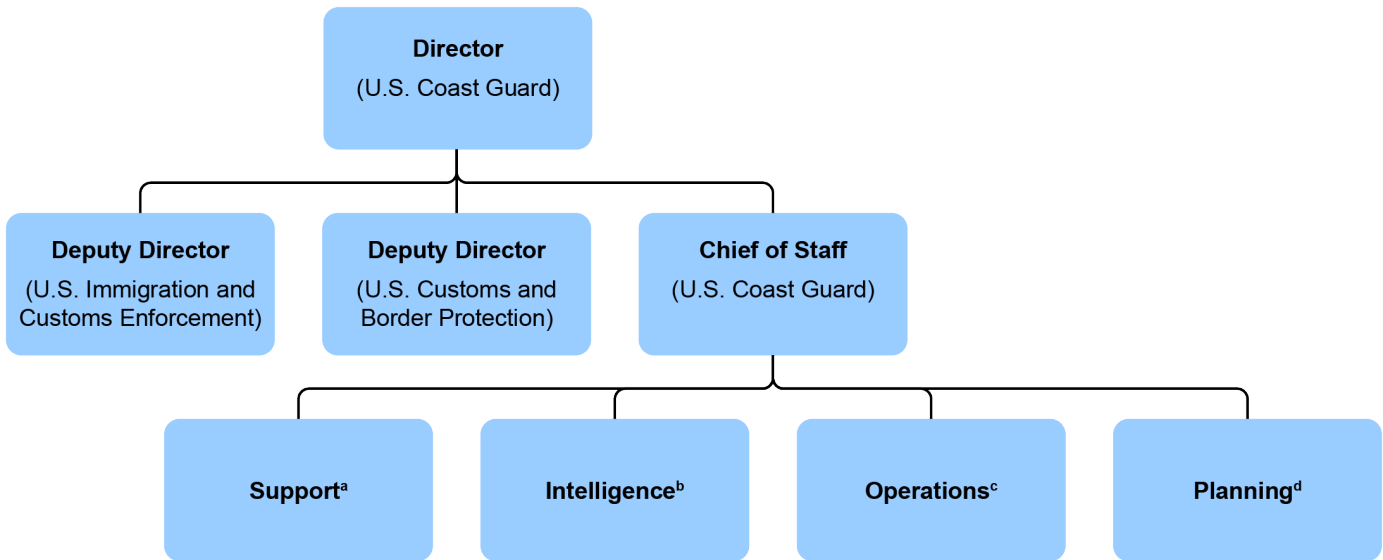
A Coast Guard official leads Joint Task Force-East, with CBP and ICE personnel filling additional deputy positions. The task force has four operational units: (1) support, (2) intelligence, (3) operations, and (4) planning (see fig. 1).

¹⁸The Coast Guard's Atlantic Area Command oversees all Coast Guard domestic operations east of the Colorado Rockies to the Arabian Gulf from Canada to the Caribbean. It is responsible for coordinating and deploying Coast Guard vessels, aircraft, pollution response equipment, and personnel between regional districts when major events occur.

¹⁹The number of staff on-board at the task force at a given point in time will vary as personnel rotate through positions, according to Joint Task Force-East officials. As of August 2023, according to DHS documentation, Joint Task Force-East had 26 staff on-board from the Coast Guard; seven staff from CBP (of which five were from CBP's Office of Air and Marine Operations, one was from CBP's Office of Field Operations, and one was from CBP's Office of Intelligence); three staff from ICE's Homeland Security Investigations; and two staff detailed from DHS headquarters offices—such as DHS's Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction Directorate.

²⁰According to Joint Task Force-East officials, a small number of Coast Guard civilian staff are permanently assigned to the task force and do not rotate.

Figure 1: Joint Task Force-East Organizational Chart



Source: GAO analysis of DHS documentation and interviews with DHS officials. | GAO-24-106855

Accessible Text for Figure 1: Joint Task Force-East Organizational Chart

- Director (U.S. Coast Guard)
 - Deputy Director (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement)
 - Deputy Director (U.S. Customs and Border Protection)
 - Chief of Staff (U.S. Coast Guard)
 - Support^a
 - Intelligence^b
 - Operations^c
 - Planning^d

Source: GAO analysis of DHS documentation and interviews with DHS officials. | GAO-24-106855

^aThe support unit is primarily responsible for administrative tasks in the task force, such as information technology, human resources, communications, and the budget.

^bThe intelligence unit is responsible for coordinating intelligence across Department of Homeland Security (DHS) components, U.S. government agencies, and international partners.

^cThe operations unit is responsible for coordinating major departmental resource movements in response to incidents within the task force's operating area, such as technology, weaponry, boats, or aircraft.

^dThe planning unit is responsible for aligning the task force's goals, objectives, and activities with DHS strategies for unifying efforts across the department.

Joint Task Force-East Coordinates Border Security Activities in the U.S Southern Maritime Environment

Joint Task Force-East is responsible for coordinating among DHS components and U.S. government and international partners in the U.S. southern maritime environment. According to OMA and Joint Task Force-East officials, the task force continues to operate under the strategic guidance in the 2015 *DHS Southern Border Approaches Campaign*.²¹ As of fiscal year 2023, the task force had three primary areas of focus, according to senior Joint Task Force-East officials.²² These officials said that the task force is focused on immediate threats, particularly those related to transnational criminal organizations, while also supporting department efforts to secure the southern maritime environment in the longer term. According to task force documentation and officials, the task force's three primary areas of focus are as follows:

- **Strengthen coordination within the joint operating area.** The task force is focused on enhancing regional coordination among U.S. government and international partners in the task force's joint operating area. For example, in October 2022, Joint Task Force-East led a departmental effort to update the 2011 DHS maritime operations coordination plan.²³ The plan serves as cross-component guidance for resource, intelligence, and information integration among CBP, ICE, and the Coast Guard, in cooperation with other U.S. government partners and other countries. The plan's objectives include preventing terrorist, criminal, and hostile acts in the maritime domain. The plan also established regional coordination mechanisms, which are designed to serve as operational coordinating bodies to fulfill the

²¹Since 2016, DHS directed Joint Task Force-East to prioritize operational coordination activities that disrupt and dismantle transnational criminal organizations to support broader DHS goals and objectives.

²²Joint Task Force-East refers to these areas of focus as lines of efforts. According to Joint Task Force-East officials, these areas of focus align with the Secretary's priorities, and are also part of the task force's broader strategy for fiscal years 2021-2025. Department of Homeland Security, *Joint Task Force-East Strategy Implementation Guide, Fiscal Years 2021-2025* (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 31, 2022).

²³Department of Homeland Security, *Maritime Operations Coordination Plan* (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 20, 2022).

objectives of the plan.²⁴ Joint Task Force-East officials said that they are focused on building these regional coordination mechanisms.

- **Prepare for maritime mass migration incidents.** The task force supports efforts to prepare for, and respond to, possible incidents of maritime mass migration in the region. Specifically, Joint Task Force-East supports DHS's Operation Vigilant Sentry, which the department initiated in 2004 to respond to irregular maritime migration in the Caribbean and the Straits of Florida.²⁵ In January 2023, Joint Task Force-East established an incident management team to support Operation Vigilant Sentry. As part of this team, task force officials stated they briefed DHS senior leaders on situational data and incident forecasts using a risk assessment model that the task force developed to assess the risk of an escalation of maritime mass migration.
- **Combat transnational criminal organizations in the eastern Caribbean.** The task force initiated a campaign to combat transnational criminal organizations in the eastern Caribbean. Specifically, in May 2022, Joint Task Force-East developed an eastern Caribbean regional campaign plan to help DHS components and partner agencies coordinate and counter criminal elements in the region.²⁶ For example, in fiscal year 2023, Joint Task Force-East and partner agencies conducted an operation to counter threats from illicit pathways for drug and migrant smuggling in the region.

In particular, Joint Task Force-East officials also stated the task force implemented four types of activities in fiscal year 2023 across these three primary areas of focus: (1) operations planning and collaboration, (2)

²⁴According to the plan, senior staff from CBP, ICE, and the Coast Guard lead regional coordination mechanisms and are responsible for carrying out the objectives that component-led steering groups identify.

²⁵Joint Task Force-East supports Homeland Security Task Force-Southeast in its implementation of Operation Vigilant Sentry. DHS established Homeland Security Task Force-Southeast in 2003. This interagency task force is comprised of resources and assets from the Coast Guard; the departments of Homeland Security, State, Defense, Health and Human Services; as well as those from state and local agencies. These agencies provide the organizational framework to monitor migration trends to detect and respond to a maritime mass migration.

²⁶According to the eastern Caribbean regional campaign plan, the campaign defines the eastern Caribbean as the islands of Puerto Rico, U.S. Virgin Islands, and the Lesser Antilles (where the eastern boundary of the Caribbean Sea meets the Atlantic Ocean).

intelligence and investigative integration, (3) contingency planning and development, and (4) strategic communications (see table 2).

Table 2: Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Joint Task Force-East Activity Types and Selected Examples, Fiscal Year 2023

Activity	Description	Selected examples of activities
Operations planning and collaboration	Develop plans and support combined operations in combat threats and illicit activities in collaboration with U.S. government and international partners.	In fiscal year 2023, Joint Task Force-East officials conducted site visits to the Caribbean islands to identify opportunities to better coordinate with partners to support its Eastern Caribbean Regional Campaign. ^a
Intelligence and investigative integration	Support stakeholder investigations and operations through unclassified information and intelligence sharing.	In fiscal year 2023, Joint Task Force-East provided, on an ongoing basis, daily updates to partnering agencies—such as U.S. Immigrations and Customs Enforcement’s Homeland Security Investigations—concerning vessels of interest, such as those suspected of trafficking humans, drugs, and other illegal content.
Contingency planning and development	Plan and prepare support for a departmental response to a maritime mass migration event or other incidents within the Joint Task Force-East’s joint operating area.	In January 2023, Joint Task Force-East participated in a joint training exercise with the Department of Defense to prepare for incidents of mass migration in the Caribbean.
Strategic communications	Build and integrate collaborative networks within DHS, across the U.S. government, and with international partners to strengthen partnerships and foster unity of efforts and actions.	In January 2023, Joint Task Force-East provided an overview of its Eastern Caribbean Campaign to European and South American partner agencies.

Source: GAO analysis of Joint Task Force-East documentation. | GAO-24-106855

^aJoint Task Force-East leads the Eastern Caribbean Campaign, which is designed to facilitate coordination among DHS components, U.S. government agencies, and international partners to combat transnational criminal organizations in the region.

DHS Has Not Developed and Documented Criteria for Establishing or Terminating Joint Task Forces

DHS had not developed and documented criteria for establishing or terminating joint task forces as of November 2023. DHS officials recognize the need for such criteria, which could better position the department to convey the conditions under which the Secretary decides to use the discretionary authority to establish or terminate a joint task force.

DHS is required to establish the mission, strategic goals, objectives, and the criteria for terminating each joint task force, as added by the FY 2023 Act.²⁷ In doing so, DHS is to use leading practices in performance management and lessons learned by other law enforcement task forces and joint operations. The FY 2023 Act also requires DHS to inform Congress within 7 days after establishing or terminating a joint task force of certain items, including the criteria and conditions required to establish or terminate the task force.²⁸

Criteria for establishing joint task forces. In June 2023, DHS submitted its required report to Congress on the mission, strategic goals, and objectives for Joint Task Force-East.²⁹ However, DHS has not developed and documented the criteria that would lead the department to establish future joint task forces. OMA officials stated that they recognize the need for such criteria but did not provide documentation that they had taken demonstrable steps to develop it as of November 2023.

In the absence of documented criteria, DHS officials explained several conditions under which DHS might establish a joint task force. For example, officials stated that DHS may establish a joint task force to address a persistent threat that requires a coordinated response from multiple DHS components and offices. In addition, officials described key characteristics of joint task forces, as differentiated from other DHS coordination mechanisms. For example, DHS has used unified coordination groups to coordinate a response to a threat or disaster across federal and non-federal agencies, as well as private sector and

²⁷6 U.S.C. § 348(b)(9)(A)(i), (ii).

²⁸6 U.S.C. § 348(b)(11)(A). Notification of joint task force formation or termination is to be submitted to the Senate majority and minority leaders, the Speaker of the House, the House majority and minority leaders, and specified congressional committees. Prior to the enactment of the FY 2023 Act, the Secretary was required to notify these specified congressional entities regarding the establishment of a joint task force 90 days before establishing it. The Secretary may waive the congressional notification requirement in the event of an emergency imminently threatening the protection of human life or property.

²⁹*DHS Joint Task Force-East Mission, Strategic Goals, Objectives, and Metrics: Fiscal Year 2023 Report to Congress* (Washington D.C.: June 23, 2023).

non-governmental entities.³⁰ DHS officials noted three characteristics that differentiate joint task forces and unified coordination groups, which could help the department in determining whether to establish a task force, as specified below.

- **Timeframes.** DHS officials said that joint task forces are designed to be permanent coordination mechanisms responsible for continuous monitoring of threats and crises. They stated unified coordination groups are designed to respond to a specific threat.
- **Authorities.** DHS officials said that joint task forces can leverage the combined authorities and missions of the components that comprise the task forces.³¹ According to these officials, this allows task forces to address potential gaps or overlap between component's authorities and resources as it coordinates responses to threats. In contrast, DHS officials said that unified coordination groups work across

³⁰According to DHS's *National Response Framework*, a unified coordination group coordinates operations, planning, public information, and logistics to achieve a unified response across the government. (See Department of Homeland Security, *National Response Framework*, Fourth Edition (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 28, 2019).) For example, in 2021, the President directed DHS to lead and coordinate the federal government's efforts to resettle evacuated Afghans to the U.S. via Operation Allies Welcome. The President further directed the DHS Secretary to establish a unified coordination group to ensure that federal resources, authorities, and expertise were used in a unified manner to support the operation's goals. The coordination group was comprised of senior-level representatives from several federal departments and agencies, including the Department of Defense, Department of State, Department of Health and Human Services, Department of Housing and Urban Development, and the Veterans Administration.

³¹The joint task force director is to exercise operational direction over personnel and equipment from components and offices of the department allocated to the joint task force to accomplish its objectives, and shall be provided sufficient resources (which shall be under the director's operational authority, direction, and control) from relevant components and offices of the department and the authority necessary to carry out the missions and responsibilities of such joint task force required under this section. 6 U.S.C. § 348(b)(5)(E), (b)(7). For example, as we have previously reported, both the Coast Guard and CBP use aircraft and vessels to secure U.S. borders, support criminal investigations, and ensure maritime security and safety to achieve their unique missions. The Coast Guard, the principal federal agency charged with ensuring the security and safety of vessels on the high seas and waters subject to U.S. jurisdiction, enforces laws to prevent illicit activity in the maritime environment, among other responsibilities. CBP's Air and Marine Operations and U.S. Border Patrol are the uniformed law enforcement arms responsible for securing U.S. borders between ports of entry in the air, land, and maritime environments. These three entities—the Coast Guard, CBP Air and Marine Operations, and the U.S. Border Patrol—share responsibility for patrolling and enforcing U.S. law along the U.S. maritime borders, and territorial sea. GAO, *Department of Homeland Security: Assessment of Air and Marine Operating Locations Should Include Comparable Costs across All DHS Marine Operations*, [GAO-20-663](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 24, 2020).

different offices and agencies, with each participant retaining their distinct authorities.

- **Resources.** DHS officials said that joint task forces have the authority to command resources across the department.³² In contrast, unified coordination groups are largely comprised of voluntary component and office participants.

Although DHS officials noted examples of the conditions under which the department might establish a joint task force, they stated they had not developed and documented criteria for doing so, as of November 2023. OMA officials stated they recognize the need for such criteria should the Secretary decide to establish a new joint task force, pursuant to the FY 2023 Act. They noted they have not made progress developing such criteria because OMA prioritized responding to mandated congressional reports and deliverables that contained fiscal year 2023 due dates. Further, OMA officials stated they had not developed and documented criteria because OMA had not received notice that the department had plans to establish a new task force.

Criteria for terminating joint task forces. OMA officials stated that the department also recognizes the need to establish the criteria for terminating each joint task, consistent with the FY 2023 Act, but they had not yet done so as of November 2023.

As noted above, DHS terminated two joint task forces in 2020, Joint Task Force-West and Joint Task Force-Investigations. According to DHS documentation, the then-Acting Secretary obtained input from DHS headquarters officials, as well as senior officials at each of the components, regarding the benefits and challenges associated with continuing to operate all three task forces. For example, the documentation indicates that the components provided feedback on joint task forces staffing levels and budgets, as well as the value that task forces added to departmental and component missions. DHS, CBP, and ICE officials who worked on or interacted with the tasks forces at that time told us the then-Secretary of Homeland Security decided to terminate Joint Task Force -West and -Investigations after considering the

³²6 U.S.C. § 348(b)(5)(E), (b)(7). According to Joint Task Force-East officials, while Joint Task Force-East has command authority over resources across DHS, the task force has never used that authority. These officials said that they have opted to encourage voluntary participation among offices and components across the department.

components' input and weighing the costs and benefits of continuing to operate them.³³

In the absence of documented criteria, OMA officials described potential conditions under which the department might terminate a joint task force. For example, they noted that the department might terminate a task force if it had completed its mission or was not accomplishing its goals. However, OMA officials said that the department has not established criteria for determining whether to terminate joint task forces because it was not required to report such information to Congress prior to enactment of the FY 2023 Act.

OMA officials stated that OMA had received approval from the Office of the Secretary of Homeland Security to begin working with stakeholders in the fall of 2023, during the course of our review, to develop and document such criteria in a management directive. They noted that the criteria would apply to factors that might lead the department to terminate Joint Task Force-East, as well as any potential new task forces. They stated they expect to provide the Secretary with options for such criteria—in the form of a draft management directive—by the end of calendar year 2024.³⁴ However, OMA did not provide us with documentation of their coordination with stakeholders or to clarify how they intend to incorporate leading practices in performance management and lessons learned by other law enforcement task forces and joint operations in developing such criteria, as required. Further, they did not provide evidence to indicate the department's plans to document such criteria, though they acknowledged that having documented criteria would be beneficial.

OMA officials told us they acknowledge the need to develop criteria for establishing and terminating joint task forces. However, they did not provide us with drafts or interim documents to support the above planned actions, which they aim to complete by December 31, 2024, 2 years after the FY 2023 Act's enactment.

Federal internal control standards state that management should implement control activities—such as developing and documenting

³³The Secretary of Homeland Security has the discretion to establish, operate, and terminate departmental joint task forces within the boundaries established by law. 6 U.S.C. § 348(b).

³⁴Specifically, OMA indicated its intention to develop draft criteria for establishing and terminating Joint Task Forces for the Secretary of Homeland Security during fiscal year 2024 and not later than December 2024.

criteria for establishing or terminating joint task forces—through policies.³⁵ For example, management should document in policies each unit's responsibility for an operational process's objectives and related risks, and control activity design, implementation, and operating effectiveness.³⁶ Ensuring that OMA develops and documents criteria for establishing and terminating joint task forces would help DHS address statutory requirements established by the FY 2023 Act, and would better inform decisions on joint task forces going forward.

DHS Has Efforts Underway but Has Not Developed Performance Measures or Established Targets for Joint Task Force-East

DHS Has Taken Some Steps to Develop Performance Measures for Joint Task Force-East but Has Not Finalized Them

DHS has taken some steps to develop performance measures for Joint Task Force-East, consistent with statute and the recommendation in our 2019 report. However, as of November 2023, the department had not finalized them.

The FY 2017 Act required the Secretary of DHS to establish outcome-based and other appropriate performance measures to evaluate the effectiveness of each joint task force.³⁷ The FY 2023 Act amended that provision such that DHS's metrics must relate specifically to the joint task force's established mission, strategic goals, and objectives.³⁸

³⁵[GAO-14-704G](#).

³⁶Each unit, with guidance from management, determines the policies necessary to operate the process based on the objectives and related risks for the operational process. Each unit also documents policies in the appropriate level of detail to allow management to effectively monitor the control activity.

³⁷6 U.S.C. § 348(b)(9)(A)(iii) (prior to enactment of the FY 2023 Act).

³⁸6 U.S.C. § 348(b)(9)(A)(iii) (upon enactment of the FY 2023 Act).

In 2019, we found that DHS had established performance measures for its joint task forces in fiscal year 2018, but they focused on outputs and not outcomes.³⁹ For example, an output-based measure might be the number of operations conducted in combating transnational criminal organizations. An outcome-based measure might be the number or percentage of leads that resulted in seizures of illicit drugs. We also found that, starting in 2017, DHS changed its performance measures for joint task forces each year through an annual performance assessment process. As we reported, a consistent set of performance measures across years would allow DHS to better assess and convey the task forces' progress over time. Therefore, we recommended that the Secretary of Homeland Security develop outcome-based performance measures for joint task forces that are consistent over time. DHS concurred with the recommendation.

In June 2023, DHS submitted a required report to Congress with 11 proposed performance measures for Joint Task Force-East.⁴⁰ For example, the report included a proposed measure related to the number of intelligence products provided by Joint Task Force-East to partner agencies as a share of all requests that the task force received by such agencies in a given year. The report also included a proposed measure related to the number of operations Joint Task Force-East supported as a share of all planned operations for the fiscal year.

According to OMA and Joint Task Force-East officials, these proposed measures were DHS's initial attempt to revise the performance measures for Joint Task Force-East and are subject to change. In particular, task force officials stated that, historically, they collected performance information that was focused on outputs such as how many people or illegal goods were intercepted. These officials noted that such information was duplicative of that already collected and reported by Coast Guard or CBP, for example.

³⁹GAO-19-441.

⁴⁰6 U.S.C. § 348(b)(9)(B). DHS is statutorily required to report 120 days after enactment, and 120 days after establishment of a new joint task force, as appropriate, on the mission, strategic goals, objectives, and metrics for each joint task force. In its report in response to this requirement, DHS outlined eight objectives and three strategic goals for Joint Task Force-East, under which its proposed measures fall. Further, the report identified 11 unique proposed performance measures, with one performance measure used twice to support two strategic goals. Department of Homeland Security, *DHS Joint Task Force-East Mission, Strategic Goals, Objectives, and Metrics, Fiscal Year 2023 Report to Congress* (Washington, D.C.: June 23, 2023).

In August 2023, during our review, we asked OMA officials about the extent of their coordination with performance improvement subject matter experts in the DHS's Program Analysis and Evaluation office. This office—located within the Office of the Chief Financial Officer—coordinates, implements, and provides oversight for the department's program evaluation functions and is responsible for building knowledge and expertise for evaluation. OMA officials stated that they were not aware of this office before our inquiry but planned to coordinate with them moving forward as they worked to finalize performance measures for Joint Task Force-East.

Subsequently, OMA officials stated they began consulting with Program Analysis and Evaluation officials between August and October 2023. As a result, officials told us they had taken some initial steps to further improve and refine the proposed performance measures contained in the June 2023 report to Congress. For example, Program Analysis and Evaluation officials stated they are working with OMA and Joint Task Force-East officials to ensure that the performance measures, when finalized, align with DHS guidance.⁴¹

OMA officials stated that the department is continuing to work on finalizing its performance measures for Joint Task Force-East, consistent with the requirements set forth in the FY 2023 Act, DHS performance management guidance, and our prior recommendation. These officials stated that they expected to submit the final version of its performance measures to the Secretary for approval by the end of calendar year 2024.⁴² As we previously recommended, developing and implementing outcome-based performance measures for Joint Task Force-East would better position DHS to demonstrate its effectiveness.

⁴¹Such standards include ensuring that DHS program evaluations, and those who conduct or manage them, follow principles of relevance and utility, rigor, independence and objectivity, ethics, and transparency. See Department of Homeland Security, *U.S. Department of Homeland Security FY 2024 Annual Evaluation Plan* (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 12, 2023).

⁴²In January 2024, after we had submitted a draft of our report to DHS for review and comment, DHS submitted to congressional committees its required annual report on Joint Task Force-East. In its January 2024 report, DHS no longer referred to its performance measures for Joint Task Force-East as proposed. However, the report also outlined steps that the Joint Task Force-East plans to take in fiscal year 2024 to continue revising its performance measures. Department of Homeland Security, *DHS Joint Task Force-East Annual Report, December 2023* (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 12, 2024).

DHS Has Not Established Targets or Developed and Documented its Methodology for Joint Task Force-East Performance Measures

DHS had not established targets for its performance measures for Joint Task Force-East as of November 2023, as required. In addition, DHS had not developed and documented a description of the methods it is using—or that it used in its June 2023 report to Congress—to develop performance measures for the task force.

- **Performance targets.** DHS is statutorily required to establish targets for each joint task force to achieve no later than 1 and 3 years after the establishment of the joint task force outcome-based measures.⁴³ DHS's performance management guidance defines targets for performance measures as the level of performance expected to be delivered for each performance measure.⁴⁴ It characterizes targets as numeric values indicating the level of performance expected for the performance period. DHS did not include targets for any of the 11 proposed performance measures in its June 2023 report to Congress. According to OMA and Joint Task Force-East officials, they did not prioritize establishing targets and they were initially focused on finalizing the May and June 2023 reports to Congress required in the FY 2023 Act.
- **Methodology for performance measures.** DHS is also statutorily required to include, as part of its performance metrics for joint task forces, a description of the methodology used to establish such metrics.⁴⁵ OMA and Joint Task Force-East officials stated they have not developed and documented such a methodology.⁴⁶ These officials told us they expect to be able to develop and document the methodology but have not done so since the performance measures they initially reported to Congress in June 2023 were still in flux as of November 2023.

⁴³6 U.S.C. § 348(b)(9)(A)(iii)(I).

⁴⁴Department of Homeland Security, *DHS Organizational Performance Management Guidance* (Washington, D.C., Sept. 30, 2020).

⁴⁵6 U.S.C. § 348(b)(9)(A)(iii)(II).

⁴⁶Joint Task Force-East officials said they used the task force's March 2022 strategy implementation guide to help establish the proposed performance measures its DHS's June 2023 report to congressional committees.

As previously noted, OMA began consulting with DHS Program Analysis and Evaluation officials during our review, and officials stated they expect to provide the Secretary with finalized performance measures by the end of calendar year 2024. As part of this process, OMA officials told us they intend to work with the department's subject matter experts to establish targets for its measures for Joint Task Force-East.⁴⁷ They stated that it will likely take several years after implementation to fully validate and refine the measures and targets to ensure they effectively capture Joint Task Force-East's contributions. OMA officials also stated that they plan to develop and document the methodology used for the performance measures when they finalize the measures.

Our prior work indicates that agencies should break down strategic goals and strategic objectives into target levels of performance to be accomplished within a specific time frame.⁴⁸ In addition, we have identified nine key attributes of successful performance measures.⁴⁹ For example, successful performance measures have measurable targets—that is, quantifiable, numerical targets or other measurable values that allow for easier comparison with actual performance. Further, DHS performance management guidance provides a structured form that program officials can use to describe measures that DHS reports in its performance products, referred to as the Performance Measure Definition Form. This form is part of DHS's guidance and can help document the methodology used for Joint Task Force-East's performance measures. For example, for each measure, the form requires the measure's name and description, the scope of data included and excluded in the measure, where such data is collected and stored, a summary of the data collection

⁴⁷DHS is also required to submit an annual report to specified congressional committees containing information on the progress in implementing the outcome-based and other appropriate metrics for evaluating joint task force effectiveness. 6 U.S.C. § 348(b)(9)(C). In January 2024, after we submitted a draft of our report to DHS for its review and comment, DHS submitted to congressional committees its required annual report on Joint Task Force-East. The report included targets for some, but not all, of its performance measures for the joint task force. The report also identified steps that Joint Task Force-East plans to take to continue revising its performance measures in fiscal year 2024 in coordination with DHS's Program Analysis and Evaluation office. Department of Homeland Security, *DHS Joint Task Force-East Annual Report, December 2023* (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 12, 2024).

⁴⁸[GAO-23-105460](#).

⁴⁹Recent work has used these key attributes to evaluate agencies' performance measures. See, for example, GAO, *Broadband Infrastructure: Middle-Mile Grant Program Lacked Timely Performance Goals and Targeted Measures*, [GAO-24-106131](#) (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 19, 2023).

and the computation process, and a description of the processes that exist to double-check the accuracy of the data to ensure its reliability.

OMA and task force officials told us that coordination activities are difficult to measure, and it is challenging to establish targets. In our 2019 report, we acknowledged that the types of coordination activities that Joint Task Force-East performs are inherently more difficult to measure.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, establishing targets for its finalized performance measures and developing and documenting the methodology for those measures, consistent with the FY 2023 Act and DHS guidance, would help ensure that DHS is better positioned to measure the task force's results.

Conclusions

DHS is responsible for a wide variety of homeland security functions. In carrying out its responsibilities, the department faces many challenges, such as combating transnational criminal organizations in the U.S. southern maritime environment. Since 2015, DHS has used joint task forces to help ensure that department-wide responses to threats and other crises are coordinated and unified. However, the department has not developed or documented criteria for when it will establish or terminate a joint task force in response to changes in the threat environment. By developing and documenting such criteria, DHS would be in a better position to communicate the conditions under which it would establish or terminate a joint task force. In addition, Joint Task Force-East has been operational for nearly 8 years, and DHS has reported numerous benefits as a result of the task force's contributions. However, as of November 2023, DHS had not established targets for the task force's performance measures or developed and documented its methodology for establishing such measures. Doing so would better position the department to assess the added-value and effectiveness of Joint Task Force-East.

Recommendations for Executive Action

We are making the following four recommendations to DHS:

⁵⁰[GAO-19-441](#).

The Secretary of Homeland Security should ensure the Office of the Military Advisor develops and documents criteria for establishing a joint task force. (Recommendation 1)

The Secretary of Homeland Security should ensure the Office of the Military Advisor develops and documents criteria for terminating a joint task force. (Recommendation 2)

The Secretary of Homeland Security should ensure the Office of the Military Advisor, as it finalizes performance measures for Joint Task Force-East, establishes targets for those measures, as required. (Recommendation 3)

The Secretary of Homeland Security should ensure the Office of the Military Advisor develops and documents the methodology used in establishing the performance measures for Joint Task Force-East. (Recommendation 4)

Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to DHS for review and comment. DHS provided written comments, which are reproduced in full in appendix II. DHS also provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate.

In its written comments, DHS stated that it concurred with all four of our recommendations and identified actions that it has taken, or plans to take, to implement them. For example, DHS noted that OMA plans to draft guidance documenting criteria for establishing and terminating joint task forces for the DHS Secretary's consideration. DHS also stated that Joint Task Force-East, in coordination with DHS's Program Analysis and Evaluation Division, plans to review its performance measures for the task force and document the methodology used calculate such measures, including performance targets.

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees and the Secretary of Homeland Security. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at <https://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact Rebecca Gambler at (202) 512-8777 or GamblerR@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 III.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rebecca Gambler". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Rebecca Gambler
Director, Homeland Security and Justice

List of Committees

The Honorable Maria Cantwell
Chair
The Honorable Ted Cruz
Ranking Member
Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation
United States Senate

The Honorable Gary C. Peters
Chairman
The Honorable Rand Paul, M.D.
Ranking Member
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
United States Senate

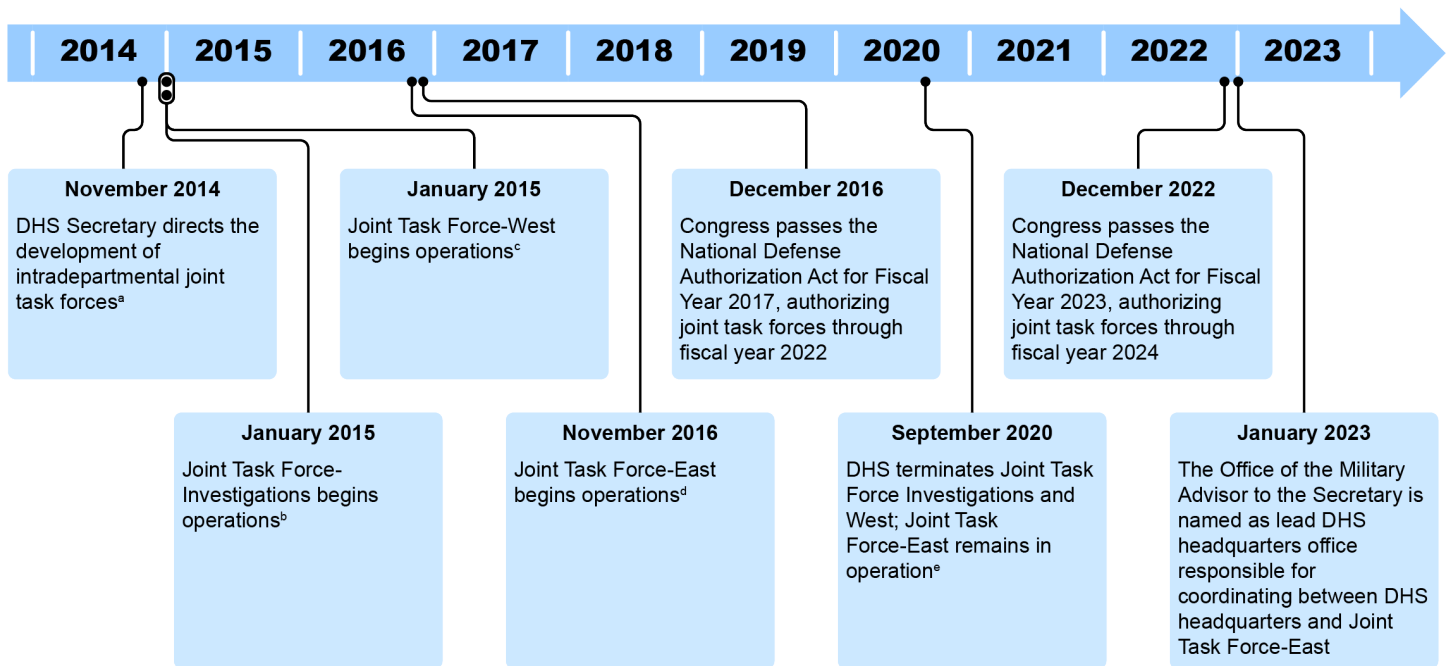
The Honorable Mark E. Green, M.D.
Chairman
The Honorable Bennie G. Thompson
Ranking Member
Committee on Homeland Security
House of Representatives

The Honorable Sam Graves
Chairman
The Honorable Rick Larsen
Ranking Member
Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
House of Representatives

Appendix I: Timeline of Department of Homeland Security Joint Task Forces, Fiscal Years 2015–2023

In November 2014, the Secretary of Homeland Security directed the development of intradepartmental joint task forces to provide a coordination mechanism to resolve long-term, multi-faceted challenges facing the homeland. In response, DHS established three joint task forces as pilot programs. In 2020, DHS terminated two of its three task forces, and as of November 2023, DHS continues to operate one task force: Joint Task Force-East (see fig. 2).

Figure 2: Timeline of Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Joint Task Forces, Fiscal Years 2015-2023



Source: GAO analysis of DHS documentation and interviews with DHS officials. | GAO-24-106855

Appendix I: Timeline of Department of Homeland Security Joint Task Forces, Fiscal Years 2015–2023

Accessible Text for Figure 2: Timeline of Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Joint Task Forces, Fiscal Years 2015-2023

Date	Event
November 2014	DHS Secretary directs the development of intradepartmental joint task forces ^a
January 2015	Joint Task Force-Investigations begins operations ^b
January 2015	Joint Task Force-West begins operations ^c
November 2016	Joint Task Force-East begins operations ^d
December 2016	Congress passes the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017, authorizing joint task forces through fiscal year 2022
September 2020	DHS terminates Joint Task Force Investigations and West; Joint Task Force-East remains in operation ^e
December 2022	Congress passes the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023, authorizing joint task forces through fiscal year 2024
January 2023	The Office of the Military Advisor to the Secretary is named as lead DHS headquarters office responsible for coordinating between DHS headquarters and Joint Task Force-East

Source: GAO analysis of DHS documentation and interviews with DHS officials. | GAO-24-106855

^aThe Secretary included these task forces as part of DHS’s January 2015 campaign plan for securing the U.S. southern border and approaches. According to DHS officials, this plan is still the guiding document for Joint Task Force-East in 2023. Department of Homeland Security, Department of Homeland Security Campaign Plan for Securing the U.S. Southern Border and Approaches (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 23, 2015).

^bU.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement was the lead agency for Joint Task Force-Investigations. The task force was responsible for supporting DHS-wide investigations and sharing information to support the other two task forces.

^cU.S. Customs and Border Protection was the lead agency for Joint Task Force-West. The task force primarily focused on threats along the southwest land border.

^dThe U.S. Coast Guard is the lead agency for Joint Task Force-East. The task force primarily focuses on threats along the southern maritime border of the U.S.

^eIn May 2020, the then-Acting DHS Secretary issued a memo directing the termination of Joint Task Force-West and -Investigations, which was to be completed before October 1, 2020. DHS officials confirmed that the task forces were terminated in September 2020 before the deadline.

Appendix II: Comments from the Department of Homeland Security

**Appendix II: Comments from the Department
of Homeland Security**

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



January 17, 2024

Ms Rebecca Gambler
Director, Homeland Security and Justice
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20548-0001

Re: Management Response to Draft Report GAO-24-106855, "DEPARTMENT OF
HOMELAND SECURITY: Additional Actions Needed to Improve Oversight of
Joint Task Forces"

Dear Ms. Gambler:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this draft report. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS or the Department) appreciates the U.S. Government Accountability Office's (GAO) work in planning and conducting its review and issuing this report.

DHS leadership is pleased to note GAO's recognition of the steps DHS has taken to develop outcome-based performance measures that demonstrate Joint Task Forces (JTF) contributions to the Department's mission accomplishment. This included, for example, submitting a report to Congress in June 2023 with 11 proposed performance measures for Joint Task Force-East (JTF-E). DHS remains committed to fulfilling all requirements under the DHS Joint Task Forces Reauthorization Act of 2022.

The draft report contained four recommendations with which the Department concurs. Enclosed find our detailed response to each recommendation. DHS previously submitted technical comments addressing several accuracy, contextual, and other issues under a separate cover for GAO's consideration.

**Appendix II: Comments from the Department
of Homeland Security**

Again, thank you for the opportunity to review and comment on this draft report. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions. We look forward to working with you again in the future

Sincerely,

JIM H CRUMPACKER Digitally signed by JIM H
CRUMPACKER
Date: 2024.01.17 08:22:12 -05'00'

JIM H. CRUMPACKER, CIA, CFE
Director
Departmental GAO-OIG Liaison Office

Enclosure

**Enclosure: Management Response to Recommendations
Contained in GAO-24-106855**

GAO recommended that the Secretary of Homeland Security ensure the Office of the Military Advisor [OMA]:

Recommendation 1: Develops and documents criteria for establishing a joint task force.

Response: Concur. The OMA will expand prior research efforts, which included military JTF experiences, to include law enforcement task forces and performance management insights. Using lessons learned from this research, OMA will then draft guidance documenting criteria for establishing a JTF for the Secretary of Homeland Security's consideration, as appropriate. Estimated Completion Date (ECD): December 31, 2024.

Recommendation 2: Develops and documents criteria for terminating a joint task force.

Response: Concur. In conjunction with developing guidance for establishing a JTF, the OMA will also draft guidance documenting criteria for terminating a JTF for the Secretary of Homeland Security's consideration, as appropriate. ECD: December 31, 2024.

Recommendation 3: As it finalizes performance measures for Joint Task Force-East, establishes targets for those measures, as required.

Response: Concur. The OMA and JTF-E have partnered with the DHS Management Directorate, Office of the Chief Financial Officer, Program Analysis and Evaluation Division (PA&E) since August 2023 to leverage the Department's existing procedures, tools, and techniques used for developing reliable performance measures and targets. For example, JTF-E and PA&E have established weekly coordination to develop performance measures and targets for JTF-E, and are developing a logic model to assess desired outcomes and associated performance measure areas. To ensure that new measures have a sound methodology and targets, JTF-E will utilize the Department's Performance Measure Definition Form (PMDF) for each new performance measure. The PMDF is a DHS internal measure control tool which documents the methodology used to calculate results for each measure, and contains information such as performance name, description, targets, data source, data collection methodology, and data reliability. ECD: January 31, 2025.

Recommendation 4: Develops and documents the methodology used in establishing the performance measures for Joint Task Force-East.

Response: Concur. The OMA and JTF-E, working with PA&E, will utilize the PMDF to ensure that new measures established for JTF-E have a sound methodology and targets, as the PMDF documents the methodology used to calculate results for each measure, and contains information such as performance name, description, targets, data source, data collection methodology, and data reliability. Once these new measures are implemented JTF-E will have more reliable data for internal decision-making and to inform key stakeholders of their progress in coordinating activities across DHS Components, U.S. government, and international partners in the U.S. southern maritime environment. ECD: January 31, 2025.

Accessible Text for Appendix II: Comments from the Department of Homeland Security

January 17, 2024

Ms Rebecca Gambler
Director, Homeland Security and Justice
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20548-0001

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Sincerely,

Digitally signed by JIM H CRUMPACKER
Date: 2024.01.17 08:22:12 -05'00'

JIM H. CRUMPACKER, CIA, CFE
Director
Departmental GAO-OIG Liaison Office

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coordination to develop performance measures and targets for JTF-E, and are developing a logic model to assess desired outcomes and associated performance measure areas. To ensure that new measures have a sound methodology and targets, JTF-E will utilize the Department's Performance Measure Definition Form (PMDF) for each new performance measure. The PMDF is a DHS internal measure control tool which documents the methodology used to calculate results for each measure, and contains information such as performance name, description, targets, data source, data collection methodology, and data reliability. ECD: January 31, 2025.

Recommendation 4: Develops and documents the methodology used in establishing the performance measures for Joint Task Force-East.

Response: Concur. The OMA and JTF-E, working with PA&E, will utilize the PMDF to ensure that new measures established for JTF-E have a sound methodology and targets, as the PMDF documents the methodology used to calculate results for each measure, and contains information such as performance name, description, targets, data source, data collection methodology, and data reliability. Once these new measures are implemented JTF-E will have more reliable data for internal decision-making and to inform key stakeholders of their progress in coordinating activities across DHS Components, U.S. government, and international partners in the U.S. southern maritime environment. ECD: January 31, 2025.

Appendix III: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

Rebecca Gambler at (202) 512-8777 or GamblerR@gao.gov

Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, Kathryn Bernet (Assistant Director), Adrian Pavia (Analyst-in-Charge), Ben Crossley, Michele Fejfar, Benjamin Licht, Sasan J. “Jon” Najmi, Conor O’Donnell, DeAndrea Porch, and Kevin Reeves made key contributions to this report.

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