

Highlights of [GAO-12-813T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Communications, Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

The many challenges and difficulties experienced in the wake of Hurricane Katrina and other catastrophes have led to considerable reflection on what lessons might be learned regarding disaster recovery. Congress has recognized the importance of improving the way our nation approaches disaster recovery by including in the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act of 2006 the requirement that FEMA develop a National Disaster Recovery Strategy. The administration has also placed a greater focus on recovery, as demonstrated by its development of the National Disaster Recovery Framework (NDRF) with the goal of helping federal agencies and others to more-effectively organize in order to promote recovery.

GAO was asked to testify on themes from its previous work on disaster recovery that may assist the subcommittee in its oversight of disaster-recovery issues.

What GAO Recommends

In multiple reports between 2008 and 2010, we made several recommendations to FEMA and others addressing recovery challenges involving coordination, communication, and information sharing, among other topics. The NDRF is directly responsive to several of the recommendations contained in these reports. However, it will require the successful implementation of this framework in order to ultimately resolve these issues.

View [GAO-12-318T](#). For more information, contact Stanley J. Czerwinski at (202) 512-6808 or czerwinskis@gao.gov.

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DISASTER RECOVERY

Selected Themes for Effective Long-Term Recovery

What GAO Found

From 2008 to 2010, GAO produced a body of work on disaster recovery, including reviews of the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) Long-Term Community Recovery efforts, recovery lessons based on past experiences at home and abroad, the use of Community Development Block Grants and Public Assistance grants and the operation of the Office of the Federal Coordinator for Gulf Coast Rebuilding (OFC). Among other things, this work highlighted themes that are important to successful disaster recovery efforts. Three of these key themes are: (1) the need for clearly defined recovery roles and responsibilities; (2) the importance of effective coordination and collaboration among recovery stakeholders; and (3) the value of periodic evaluation of, and reporting on, recovery progress.

When recovering from a major disaster, having clearly defined and well-understood roles and responsibilities is a critical first step in coordinating and implementing the responsibilities of the various parties involved in the long-term recovery process. These roles, responsibilities, and lines of authority for all levels of government must be clearly defined, communicated, and understood in order to be effective. GAO's previous work provides numerous examples of the challenges that result when this does not take place and, conversely, illustrations of benefits that can occur when it does. For example, GAO's 2009 review of the OFC found confusion and disagreements among key recovery stakeholders as well as with the Federal Coordinator himself regarding the office's appropriate scope and function. This confusion, accompanied by the lack of clear decision-making authority on the part of OFC, may have ultimately slowed down the resolution of some recovery problems.

Recovery from a major disaster is a long, complex process that involves an extensive group of participants both across the federal government and at the state and local level. At least 14 federal departments and agencies are responsible for administering dozens of recovery-related programs, many of which rely heavily on active participation by state and local government for their implementation. Because these parties are dependent on each other to accomplish recovery goals, effective coordination and collaboration is essential. GAO's past work has explored this issue in considerable detail. For example, in the wake of the 2008 Midwest floods, federal, state, and local officials said that FEMA's facilitation of regular interagency meetings to coordinate federal and state partners helped to identify and effectively leverage recovery resources, as well as identify coordination problems and other concerns.

Finally, the collaboration between recovery partners can be enhanced by periodically evaluating and reporting on what worked, what can be improved, and what progress is still needed to address long-term recovery goals. This last step will assist decision makers, clients, and stakeholders to obtain the feedback needed to improve both the policy and operational effectiveness of recovery efforts. For example, after a 1995 earthquake, the city of Kobe, Japan and the surrounding region held periodic external reviews over a span of 10 years on the progress made toward achieving recovery goals. As a result, the city of Kobe gained insight into unintended consequences of how it relocated elderly earthquake victims, which subsequently led to a change in policy.