

Why GAO Did This Study

During the 2017 and 2018 disaster seasons, several large-scale disasters created an unprecedented demand for FEMA's workforce. FEMA deployed 14,684 and 10,328 personnel at the peak of each of these seasons and reported staffing shortages during the disasters. GAO was asked to review issues related to the federal response to the 2017 disaster season.

This report addresses (1) how FEMA's disaster workforce is qualified and deployed, (2) how effective FEMA's qualification and deployment processes were during the 2017 and 2018 disaster seasons in ensuring workforce needs were met in the field, and (3) the extent to which FEMA's disaster workforce receives staff development to enhance skills and competencies. GAO analyzed documentation and data on incident workforce qualification and deployment; conducted 17 focus groups with 129 staff members; and interviewed FEMA officials in headquarters, field, and regional offices.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making three recommendations, including that FEMA develop (1) a plan to address identified challenges that have hindered its ability to provide reliable information to field officials about staff skills and abilities and (2) a staff development program for its disaster workforce that addresses training access, delivery of on-the-job training, and other development methods. The Department of Homeland Security concurred with GAO's recommendations.

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FEMA DISASTER WORKFORCE

Actions Needed to Address Deployment and Staff Development Challenges

What GAO Found

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has established mechanisms to qualify and deploy staff to disasters. For example, the FEMA Qualification System tracks training and task performance requirements for disaster workforce positions and has a process to designate staff as qualified in their positions once they have completed these requirements. FEMA's deployment process uses an automated system to deploy staff members to disasters that match field requests for positions and proficiency levels. The process depends on the agency's qualification and deployment systems to identify staff qualification status and skillsets to meet field needs.

However, FEMA's qualification and deployment processes did not provide reliable and complete staffing information to field officials to ensure its workforce was effectively deployed and used during the 2017 and 2018 disaster seasons. Specifically, GAO's focus groups with over 100 incident staff members and interviews with field and regional officials indicate that disaster personnel experienced significant limitations with qualification status matching performance in the field, due in part to challenges with how staff are evaluated through the qualification process. In all focus groups with applicable incident personnel, participants cited issues with staff members who were qualified in the FEMA Qualification System not having the skills or experience to effectively perform their positions. For example, one participant described supervising staff members who were qualified in the system but did not know the eligibility requirements for applicants to receive housing assistance, or what information needed to be included in the applicant's file. In addition, participants in the majority of the focus groups reported challenges with using FEMA's deployment processes to fully identify staff responsibilities, specialized skillsets, and experience. FEMA headquarters officials acknowledged the identified information challenges but said they have not developed a plan to address them in part because of competing priorities. Developing a plan to address identified challenges with providing reliable staffing information to field officials would enhance FEMA's ability to use staff as flexibly and effectively as possible to meet disaster needs.

Further, FEMA's disaster workforce experienced challenges with receiving staff development through the agency's existing methods to enhance the skills and competencies needed during disaster deployments—challenges FEMA headquarters officials acknowledged. Specifically, GAO's focus groups and interviews indicate that disaster personnel encountered challenges related to the availability of courses, providing and receiving on-the-job training and mentoring, and consistently receiving performance evaluations. For example, in 10 of 17 focus groups, participants cited barriers to taking courses that in their view would help them better perform their jobs. In addition, participants in seven focus groups stated that they did not receive coaching or feedback on the job. Relatedly, FEMA data show that at the start of deployments during the 2017 and 2018 disaster seasons, 36 percent of staff did not have an official assigned to coach and evaluate task performance—the primary mechanism the agency depends on for coaching. Creating a staff development program would help better ensure FEMA's disaster workforce develops the skills and competencies needed to meet mission needs in the field.