DISASTER RECOVERY

Past Experiences Offer Recovery Lessons for Hurricanes Ike and Gustav and Future Disasters

What GAO Found

Lessons from past disasters provide a potentially valuable source of information for all levels of government as they seek to meet the many challenges of recovering from a major disaster. For affected state and local jurisdictions, good practices to consider include the following:

- Creating a clear, implementable, and timely recovery plan can provide communities with a road map for the recovery process. Just 2 months after the 1995 Kobe earthquake in Japan, the city created a recovery plan with these elements.
- Providing financial and technical capacity facilitates jurisdictions’ ability to implement federal disaster programs. For example, loans and technical assistance provided after past disasters helped communities better navigate the wide range of federal disaster programs.
- Implementing business recovery strategies to minimize business relocations helps small businesses adapt to postdisaster market conditions. For example, to encourage businesses to remain in the city Grand Forks after the 1997 flood, the city forgave loans for businesses that stayed in the city.
- Adopting a comprehensive approach toward combating fraud, waste, and abuse protects both disaster victims from contractor fraud and public funds from fraudulent applicants. Controls to combat such activities before, during, and after a disaster can deter such activities, including instances of contractor fraud.

On the federal level, experiences with FEMA’s Public Assistance grant program after the 2005 Gulf Coast hurricanes illustrated a variety of challenges in the day-to-day operation of the program that could be faced again by Gulf Coast states recovering from Hurricanes Ike and Gustav or other disasters in the future. These include the following:

- Challenges using program flexibilities to respond to the postdisaster needs of grant applicants and determining project scope. For example, applicants reported needing additional flexibility when rebuilding to address significant population changes after the storm.
- Challenges in sharing information among federal, state, and local officials during project development that at times slowed the process. For example, some applicants in Louisiana told us of the need to repeatedly resubmit key project documents because of the lack of an effective system to share such documentation.

Opportunities exist for the federal government to further refine FEMA’s Public Assistance grant program to better address these and other challenges as recovery continues on the Gulf Coast and in advance of future disasters.