



Highlights of [GAO-08-823](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Voluntary organizations have traditionally played a major role in the nation's response to disasters, but the response to Hurricane Katrina raised concerns about their ability to handle large-scale disasters. This report examines (1) the roles of five voluntary organizations in providing mass care and other services, (2) the steps they have taken to improve service delivery, (3) their current capabilities for responding to mass care needs, and (4) the challenges they face in preparing for large-scale disasters. To address these questions, GAO reviewed the American Red Cross, The Salvation Army, the Southern Baptist Convention, Catholic Charities USA, and United Way of America; interviewed officials from these organizations and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA); reviewed data and laws; and visited four high-risk metro areas—Los Angeles, Miami, New York, and Washington, D.C.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that FEMA update and document the Red Cross's role in a catastrophic event, take steps to incorporate voluntary organizations' capabilities in its assessments, and clarify funding guidance for certain disaster preparedness grants. In commenting on the draft report, FEMA agreed with two recommendations, but disagreed with the recommendation to better incorporate voluntary organizations in assessments. We continue to believe such efforts are important for preparedness.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-823](#). For more information, contact Cynthia Fagnoni at (202) 512-7215 or fagnonic@gao.gov.

VOLUNTARY ORGANIZATIONS

FEMA Should More Fully Assess Organizations' Mass Care Capabilities and Update the Red Cross Role in Catastrophic Events

What GAO Found

The five voluntary organizations we reviewed are highly diverse in their focus and response structures. They also constitute a major source of the nation's mass care and related disaster services and are integrated into the 2008 National Response Framework. The Red Cross in particular—the only one whose core mission is disaster response—has a federally designated support role to government under the mass care provision of this Framework. While the Red Cross no longer serves as the primary agency for coordinating government mass care services—as under the earlier 2004 National Plan—it is expected to support FEMA by providing staff and expertise, among other things. FEMA and the Red Cross agree on the Red Cross's role in a catastrophic disaster, but it is not clearly documented. While FEMA recognized the need to update the 2006 Catastrophic Incident Supplement to conform with the Framework, it does not yet have a time frame for doing so.

Since Katrina, the organizations we studied have taken steps to strengthen their service delivery by expanding coverage and upgrading their logistical and communications systems. The Red Cross, in particular, is realigning its regional chapters to better support its local chapters and improve efficiency and establishing new partnerships with local community-based organizations. Most recently, however, a budget shortfall has prompted the organization to reduce staff and alter its approach to supporting FEMA and state emergency management agencies. While Red Cross officials maintain that these changes will not affect improvements to its mass care service infrastructure, it has also recently requested federal funding for its governmental responsibilities.

Capabilities assessments are preliminary, but current evidence suggests that in a worst-case large-scale disaster, the projected need for mass care services would far exceed the capabilities of these voluntary organizations without government and other assistance—despite voluntary organizations' substantial resources locally and nationally. Voluntary organizations also faced shortages in trained volunteers, as well as other limitations that affected their mass care capabilities. Meanwhile, FEMA's initial assessment does not necessarily include the sheltering capabilities of many voluntary organizations and does not yet address feeding capabilities outside of shelters. In addition, the ability to assess mass care capabilities and coordinate in disasters is currently hindered by a lack of standard terminology and measures for mass care resources, and efforts are under way to develop such standards.

Finding and training more personnel, dedicating more resources to preparedness, and working more closely with local governments are ongoing challenges for voluntary organizations. A shortage of staff and volunteers was most commonly cited, but we also found they had difficulty seeking and dedicating funds for preparedness, in part because of competing priorities. However, the guidance for FEMA preparedness grants to states and localities was also not sufficiently explicit with regard to using such funds to support the efforts of voluntary organizations.