



Highlights of [GAO-09-811](#), a report to the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

In the wake of the 2005 Gulf Coast Hurricanes, coordination and collaboration challenges created obstacles during the government's response and recovery efforts.

Because of the many stakeholders involved in recovery, including all levels of government, it is critical to build collaborative relationships. Building on GAO's September 2008 report which provided several key recovery practices from past catastrophic disasters, this report presents examples of how federal, state, and local governments have effectively collaborated in the past.

GAO reviewed five catastrophic disasters—the Loma Prieta earthquake (California, 1989), Hurricane Andrew (Florida, 1992), the Northridge earthquake (California, 1994), the Kobe earthquake (Japan, 1995), and the Grand Forks/Red River flood (North Dakota and Minnesota, 1997)—to identify recovery lessons. GAO interviewed officials involved in the recovery from these disasters and experts on disaster recovery. GAO also reviewed relevant legislation, policies, and the disaster recovery literature.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends the Secretary of Homeland Security direct the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to create a mechanism focused on sharing information and lessons learned regarding disaster recovery, including good collaborative practices. The Department of Homeland Security concurred with our recommendation.

View [GAO-09-811](#) or [key components](#). For more information, contact Stanley J. Czerwinski at (202) 512-6808 or CzerwinskiS@gao.gov.

DISASTER RECOVERY

Experiences from Past Disasters Offer Insights for Effective Collaboration after Catastrophic Events

What GAO Found

Effective collaboration among stakeholders can play a key role in facilitating long-term recovery after a catastrophic event. Toward that end, GAO has identified four collaborative practices that may help communities rebuild from the Gulf Coast hurricanes as well as future catastrophic events:

- **Develop and communicate common goals to guide recovery.** Defining common recovery goals can enhance collaboration by helping stakeholders overcome differences in missions and cultures. After the Grand Forks/Red River flood, federally-funded consultants convened various stakeholders to develop recovery goals and priorities for the city of Grand Forks. The city used these goals as a basis to create a detailed recovery action plan that helped it to implement its recovery goals.
- **Leverage resources to facilitate recovery.** Collaborating groups bring different resources and capacities to the task at hand. After the Northridge earthquake, officials from the Federal Highway Administration and California's state transportation agency worked together to review highway rebuilding contracts, discuss changes, and then approve projects all in one location. This co-located, collaborative approach enabled the awarding of rebuilding contracts in 3 to 5 days—instead of the 26 to 40 weeks it could take using normal contracting procedures. This helped to restore damaged highways within a few months of the earthquake.
- **Use recovery plans to agree on roles and responsibilities.** Organizations can collectively agree on who will do what by identifying roles and responsibilities in recovery plans developed either before or after a disaster takes place. Learning from its experiences from the Loma Prieta earthquake, San Francisco Bay Area officials created a plan that clearly identifies roles for all participants in order to facilitate regional recovery in the event of a future disaster.
- **Monitor, evaluate, and report on progress made toward recovery.** After the 1995 earthquake, the city of Kobe and the surrounding region established processes to assess and report on recovery progress. These jurisdictions required periodic external reviews over 10 years on the progress made toward achieving recovery goals. As a result of one of these reviews, the city of Kobe gained insight into unintended consequences of how it relocated elderly earthquake victims, which subsequently led to a change in policy.

Past recovery experiences—including practices that promote effective collaboration—offer potentially valuable lessons for future catastrophic events. FEMA has taken some steps to facilitate the sharing of such experiences among communities involved in disaster recovery. However, the agency can do more to build on and systematize the sharing of this information so that recovery lessons are better captured and disseminated for use in the future.