

Why GAO Did This Study

Hurricane Katrina in 2005 highlighted gaps in the nation’s preparedness to respond effectively to catastrophic incidents. The Department of Homeland Security’s (DHS) Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) designed the Task Force for Emergency Readiness (TFER) pilot program to advance and integrate state and federal catastrophic planning efforts. TFER, first envisioned by the Department of Defense (DOD), ran from September 2008 to September 2010, and FEMA provided the five participating states—Hawaii, Massachusetts, South Carolina, Washington, and West Virginia—with \$350,000 each to develop plans, build relationships with stakeholders, and document lessons learned (i.e., TFER’s stated objectives). As requested, GAO evaluated the extent to which (1) FEMA followed sound management practices in designing, administering, and evaluating TFER and (2) the five participating states satisfied TFER’s stated objectives. GAO analyzed FEMA guidance, such as the TFER Pilot Information Package, conducted site visits to all five participant states, and met with relevant FEMA and DOD officials, to evaluate FEMA’s management of TFER and the states’ implementation of it.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that FEMA develop policies and guidance that follow sound management practices for future pilot programs, and share TFER results with stakeholders. FEMA agreed with GAO’s recommendations.

View [GAO-11-383](#) or key components. For more information, contact Davi M. D’Agostino at (202) 512-5431 or dagostinod@gao.gov or William O. Jenkins, Jr. at (202) 512-8777 or jenkinswo@gao.gov

CATASTROPHIC PLANNING

States Participating in FEMA’s Pilot Program Made Progress, but Better Guidance Could Enhance Future Pilot Programs

What GAO Found

FEMA developed program objectives and procedures for administering the TFER pilot, but did not develop other elements of sound management practices in designing, administering, and evaluating pilot programs that GAO identified from its prior work and social science literature. FEMA developed objectives for the pilot, but did not document standards for determining the pilot’s success. FEMA also provided resources such as funding, training, and support, but FEMA did not always follow the procedures it established for TFER. For example, FEMA did not consistently conduct biweekly conference calls with the states, and four states reported that it would have been helpful if FEMA provided more guidance. FEMA did not develop a data analysis plan, which could have better ensured FEMA collected data on the extent to which the pilot states coordinated with key stakeholders and provided reasonable assurance that FEMA conducted a systematic assessment of TFER using comparable data across the five pilot states. In Spring 2010, FEMA announced TFER would not continue past the pilot stage before evaluating TFER on its merits in strengthening and advancing state catastrophic planning, but FEMA allowed the states to draw down the remaining TFER funds and continue to complete initiatives started under TFER through August 2011. GAO previously reported in April 2009 that FEMA faced challenges in assessing pilot program data, and FEMA officials reported the agency does not have pilot program policy guidance. In the absence of this, FEMA lacks a systematic approach to developing, administering, and evaluating pilot programs. FEMA could better ensure other pilot programs meet their intended goals by developing policies and guidance that include sound management practices.

All five states have taken steps to follow FEMA’s guidance to address TFER’s objectives, but no state has fully addressed them all (see table below). First, two of the five states have completed draft catastrophic plans, and all five states reported following FEMA’s planning process. Second, all five states built relationships with stakeholders such as state agencies and FEMA, but state officials said coordination with DOD—a key federal stakeholder who may be called upon to assist in disaster response—was limited. State officials reported not coordinating with DOD because they did not have draft plans for DOD officials to review. Third, all states have documented lessons learned to date, but four states have not exercised TFER plans to determine their effectiveness in the event of an emergency.

Progress in Meeting FEMA’s TFER Pilot Program Objectives

	Hawaii	Massachusetts	South Carolina	Washington	West Virginia
Develop plans	●	●	●	●	●
Build relationships	●	●	●	●	●
Document lessons learned	●	●	●	●	●

- Substantial progress: average state progress was greater than 80 percent
- Some progress: average state progress ranged from 20 percent to 80 percent
- Little to no progress: average state progress was less than 20 percent

Source: GAO analysis of state information.