DISASTER RESILIENCE

Actions Are Underway, but Federal Fiscal Exposure Highlights the Need for Continued Attention to Longstanding Challenges

What GAO Found

GAO has identified various challenges to resilience building—actions to help prepare and plan for, absorb, recover from, and more successfully adapt to adverse events including those caused by extreme weather. These include challenges for communities in balancing hazard mitigation investments with economic development goals, challenges for individuals in understanding and acting to limit their personal risk, and broad challenges with the clarity of information to inform risk decision making. GAO’s work over more than 30 years demonstrates that these are longstanding policy issues, without easy solutions. The Department of Homeland Security’s (DHS) May 2013 release of a National Mitigation Framework and establishment of a group to help coordinate interagency and intergovernmental mitigation efforts offers one avenue for leadership on these issues.

In ongoing work on federal resilience efforts in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, GAO identified three high-level actions that demonstrated an intensified federal focus on incorporating resilience-building into the recovery.

• The President issued an executive order to coordinate the recovery effort and created a task force that issued 69 recommendations aimed at improving recovery from Sandy and future disasters—including recommendations designed to facilitate resilient rebuilding.

• Congress appropriated about $50 billion in supplemental funds for multiple recovery efforts, including at least five federal programs that help support resilience-building efforts. One of these, FEMA’s Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP), is the only federal program designed specifically to promote mitigation against future losses in the wake of a disaster; while, another, the Public Transportation Emergency Relief Program made more than $4 billion available for transit resilience projects.

• The Sandy Recovery Improvement Act of 2013 provided additional responsibilities and authorities related to FEMA’s mitigation and recovery efforts. In response, FEMA has undertaken efforts to make HMGP easier for states to use—for example by streamlining application procedures. The act also provided additional authorities for FEMA to fund hazard mitigation with other disaster relief funds and required FEMA to provide recommendations for a national strategy on reducing the cost of future disasters to Congress, which FEMA finalized in September 2013.

For the purposes of this statement GAO reviewed studies that discuss resilience building and climate change adaptation and identified examples efforts at the state and local levels that illustrate a variety of nonfederal initiatives that may drive communities to build resilience. For example, a nonprofit group is creating report cards to assess the resilience of a building to earthquakes and plans to extend these efforts to wind and flood risk. In some localities public-private partnerships have helped promote efforts to buy properties that were at risk from repeat losses.

Highlights of GAO-14-603T, a testimony before the Subcommittee on Emergency Management, Intergovernmental Relations, and the District of Columbia; Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs; U.S. Senate.