

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-14-512](#), a report to the Chairman, Subcommittee on Transportation, Housing, and Urban Development and Related Agencies, Committee on Appropriations, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

In October 2012, Hurricane Sandy devastated portions of the Mid-Atlantic coast causing severe damage to transit facilities and infrastructure and disrupting mobility in the New York metropolitan region. In January 2013, the President signed the DRAA, which provided approximately \$50.5 billion in federal aid for expenses related to Hurricane Sandy. GAO was asked to examine DRAA emergency relief assistance for transportation.

This report addresses (1) the progress DOT has made allocating, obligating, and disbursing DRAA surface transportation funds, (2) how FTA's new Public Transportation Emergency Relief program compares to FEMA's and FHWA's emergency relief programs, and (3) the extent to which FTA and FEMA have implemented their memorandum of agreement to coordinate their roles and responsibilities when providing assistance to transit agencies. GAO analyzed relevant laws, regulations, and agency documentation, and interviewed DOT, FEMA, and New Jersey and New York area transit officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DOT and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) direct FTA and FEMA to establish specific guidelines to monitor, evaluate, and report the results of collaborative efforts—including their communications program and protocol as contemplated in their memorandum of agreement. DHS agreed with our recommendation, and DOT took no position. DHS and DOT also provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate.

View [GAO-14-512](#). For more information, contact Dave Wise at (202) 512-2834 or wised@gao.gov

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EMERGENCY TRANSPORTATION RELIEF

Agencies Could Improve Collaboration Begun during Hurricane Sandy Response

What GAO Found

The Department of Transportation (DOT) is in the process of allocating, obligating, and disbursing the \$13 billion appropriated by the Disaster Relief Appropriations Act, 2013 (DRAA) for surface transportation relief. Most of the DRAA surface transportation funds—over \$10 billion—were appropriated to the Federal Transit Administration's (FTA) new Public Transportation Emergency Relief Program. An FTA damage assessment in January 2013 estimated the costs of repairing facilities damaged by Hurricane Sandy in New York and New Jersey to be about \$5.7 billion. To date, FTA has obligated about \$1.5 billion for 15 grants and disbursed about \$499 million to reimburse transit agencies for emergency response, recovery, and repair costs. These disbursements are consistent with Congressional Budget Office estimates, and transit projects can take years to complete. Furthermore, FTA plans to use nearly half of its DRAA appropriation for resiliency projects (or projects to protect facilities from future damage), most of which will be carried out through a competitive grant process. FTA was evaluating applications when GAO completed its review.

FTA's new Public Transportation Emergency Relief Program has more flexibility and fewer restrictions in funding projects compared to the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) Public Assistance and Hazard Mitigation programs and the Federal Highway Administration's (FHWA) Emergency Relief Program. For example, FEMA's Hazard Mitigation program places limits on the amount of emergency relief funds that can be used for resiliency projects, while FTA's program does not. FTA's program also has more flexibility in how funds can be used for repairs, allowing transit agencies to improve facilities beyond pre-disaster conditions. The use of emergency relief funds for projects that go beyond recovery efforts is not new—activities funded by FHWA's Emergency Relief Program have also expanded beyond repair and reconstruction. The expanding scope of emergency relief assistance illustrates the fiscal exposure the federal government faces and the challenges of establishing long-term sustainable funding for disaster relief and recovery.

Although FTA and FEMA have a memorandum of agreement for assisting transit providers during emergencies, they are limited in their ability to delineate specific roles and responsibilities for future disasters. This limit is because while FEMA receives funding on an ongoing basis, FTA, to date, has only received a supplemental appropriation for Hurricane Sandy and does not know what resources it will have for future disasters. Because FTA and FEMA have the authority to fund many of the same activities by law, transit agencies may experience confusion when seeking assistance under some circumstances. FTA and FEMA have not determined how collaborative efforts, including their communications program and protocol contemplated in the memorandum of agreement, will be monitored, evaluated, and reported, but instead rely on informal communication. As GAO has previously concluded, creating a means to evaluate the results of collaborative efforts can enhance and sustain them, and informal communications between federal agencies do not ensure that collaboration is effective. Establishing more formal monitoring and evaluation of combined efforts could help FTA and FEMA ensure effective collaboration.