

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-17-200](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

In 2005, individuals with disabilities, individuals with limited English proficiency, and families with children were disproportionately affected by Hurricane Katrina. For example, some of those who had to abandon their wheelchairs could not evacuate because they were unable to wait in long lines for evacuation buses. The Post-Katrina Act required FEMA and other entities to take certain actions to assist these individuals, such as through the establishment of a Disability Coordinator within FEMA. GAO was asked to examine implementation of the Post-Katrina Act.

This report assesses the extent to which FEMA and other entities provide disaster services to individuals with disabilities, individuals with limited English proficiency, and children in need of family reunification. GAO examined federal, state, and local disaster assistance efforts for six major disasters that occurred from March 2014 through October 2015, where federal response and recovery efforts included assistance to the three target groups and that varied in location and type of disaster. GAO interviewed relevant officials, visited three of the six sites, and analyzed emergency operations plans and disaster summary reports.

What GAO Recommends

FEMA should establish written procedures for involving ODIC in regional activities; set goals for the number of state and local emergency managers who will take a key training on disability integration; and evaluate alternative delivery methods for the training. FEMA concurred with all of the recommendations.

View [GAO-17-200](#). For more information, contact Kay Brown at (202) 512-7215 or BrownKE@gao.gov.

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FEDERAL DISASTER ASSISTANCE

FEMA's Progress in Aiding Individuals with Disabilities Could Be Further Enhanced

What GAO Found

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has taken steps to improve its disaster services for people with disabilities and its support to other entities, such as state and local governments. FEMA established the Office of Disability Integration and Coordination (ODIC) following enactment of the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act of 2006 (Post-Katrina Act) to lead the agency's efforts to promote inclusiveness in disaster planning, response, and recovery. However, there is no established procedure for FEMA Regional Administrators, who oversee disability integration staff in the regions, to involve ODIC in the activities of these staff. As a result, regions vary in the extent to which they consult with ODIC, which has led to a lack of clarity in regional disability integration staff roles, a lack of awareness of potentially underperforming staff, and inconsistent communication between the regions and headquarters. Federal internal control standards state that organizational structures should allow the organization's components to communicate information necessary to fulfill their respective responsibilities. Communication gaps between ODIC and the regions may prevent regional disability integration staff from effectively supporting state and local governments in meeting the needs of individuals with disabilities affected by disasters. ODIC also has not established goals for how many state and local emergency managers should take its key training on integrating the needs of individuals with disabilities into disaster planning. Nor has ODIC evaluated alternative methods to deliver the training more broadly, such as virtually in addition to classroom training. As a result, state and local emergency managers may be ill-prepared to provide effective disaster services to those with disabilities.

FEMA and other entities assist individuals with limited English proficiency by translating information on disaster assistance programs. FEMA provides information about its assistance programs using print materials in other languages, bilingual staff, and a helpline with translators for more than 50 languages. State, local, and voluntary organizations also disseminate information on health and safety information, such as evacuations and sheltering: In five of the six disasters GAO reviewed where translation was needed, these entities reported using a range of services, from bilingual staff to multilingual helplines.

FEMA worked with the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) to establish a national call center designed to field calls with information about children separated from their families during disasters. NCMEC also maintains a registry that serves as a web-based repository created to collect this information. However, according to FEMA officials, no disasters since Hurricane Katrina have required national child reunification support. Nevertheless, FEMA continues to work with NCMEC on maintaining reunification resources, such as by funding the deployment of NCMEC personnel following disasters.