EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

FEMA’s Disaster Recovery Efforts in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands

What GAO Found

GAO’s prior and ongoing work found that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) obligated about $7.4 billion in Public Assistance grant funding to Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI) as of April 2019, in response to the 2017 hurricanes. FEMA obligated about $6.2 billion in Public Assistance grants for emergency work—debris removal activities, power restoration, and other emergency measures—and about $965 million in Public Assistance grants for permanent work—including the repair or replacement of public infrastructure such as roads, electrical utilities, and damaged buildings. Further, FEMA is continuing to work with Puerto Rico and the USVI to develop additional permanent work projects to repair damaged public infrastructure, such as schools and hospitals (see figure).

Why GAO Did This Study

In September 2017, two major hurricanes—Irma and Maria—struck Puerto Rico and the USVI, causing billions of dollars in damage to infrastructure, housing, and the economy. FEMA—a component of the Department of Homeland Security—is the lead federal agency responsible for assisting Puerto Rico and the USVI to recover from these natural disasters. Among other responsibilities, FEMA is administering the Public Assistance program in partnership with the governments of Puerto Rico and the USVI, providing them grant funding for response and recovery activities, including debris removal efforts, life-saving emergency protective measures, and the repair, replacement, or restoration of public infrastructure.

This statement describes (1) the status of FEMA’s Public Assistance grant funding in Puerto Rico and the USVI in response to the 2017 hurricanes as of April 2019, (2) the establishment of recovery offices in Puerto Rico and the USVI, and (3) challenges in implementing the Public Assistance program and actions FEMA has taken to address them. This statement is based on GAO reports issued in February, March, and June 2019, and includes preliminary observations from ongoing GAO reviews of FEMA operations. For ongoing work, GAO analyzed program documents and data on obligations and expenditures; interviewed agency officials; and visited disaster-damaged areas in Puerto Rico and the USVI, where GAO also interviewed FEMA and local officials.

GAO will continue to monitor the progress of Puerto Rico’s and the USVI’s recovery as part of its ongoing work.

View GAO-19-662T. For more information, contact Chris Currie at (404) 679-1875 or curriec@gao.gov.