

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-19-652T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Recovery, Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Three sequential hurricanes—Harvey, Irma, and Maria—affected more than 28 million people in 2017, according to FEMA. Hurricane survivors aged 65 and older and those with disabilities faced particular challenges evacuating to safe shelter, accessing medicine, and obtaining recovery assistance. In June 2018, FEMA began implementing a new approach to assist individuals with disabilities.

This statement describes (1) reported challenges faced by these individuals in accessing disaster assistance from FEMA and its nonfederal partners following the 2017 hurricanes; and (2) the extent to which FEMA has implemented changes in how it supports these individuals. This statement is based on a May 2019 GAO report and selected updates. For the report, GAO analyzed FEMA documents and data from FEMA call centers and also visited 2017 hurricane locations to interview state, territorial, and local officials. GAO also interviewed FEMA officials from headquarters and deployed to each disaster location. To update FEMA's progress toward addressing its recommendations, GAO interviewed FEMA officials and analyzed agency documents.

What GAO Recommends

In the May 2019 report, GAO made seven recommendations to FEMA; FEMA concurred with six. FEMA has established new registration questions and a timeline to offer training to its partners. GAO continues to believe its recommendations to develop a plan to train its staff on disability awareness, among other actions, are valid.

View [GAO-19-652T](#). For more information, contact Elizabeth Curda, (202) 512-7215 or curdae@gao.gov.

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DISASTER ASSISTANCE

FEMA Has Taken Steps toward Better Supporting Individuals Who Are Older or Have Disabilities

What GAO Found

GAO's May 2019 report found that some individuals who are older or have disabilities may have faced challenges registering for and receiving assistance from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and its nonfederal partners (such as state, territorial, and local emergency managers).

- FEMA's registration did not include an initial question that directly asks individuals if they have a disability or if they would like to request an accommodation. GAO recommended that FEMA use new registration-intake questions to improve the agency's ability to identify and address individuals' disability-related needs. FEMA concurred and, in May 2019, updated the questions to directly ask individuals if they have a disability.
- GAO found that the substantial damage caused by the 2017 hurricanes prevented or slowed some individuals with disabilities from obtaining food, water, and other critical goods and services from states, territories, and localities. Officials from one state reported that few public transportation services, including paratransit, were functional following the 2017 hurricane affecting the state. The officials said this may have prevented people with disabilities from maintaining their health and wellness—such as by shopping for groceries or going to medical appointments—after the storm.

GAO's May 2019 report also found that FEMA had taken limited steps to implement the agency's new approach to assist individuals with disabilities.

- GAO recommended the agency establish and disseminate objectives for implementing its new approach. FEMA concurred, and developed a draft strategic plan that includes strategic goals and objectives for the new approach, which the agency plans to finalize and disseminate in 2019.
- GAO recommended that FEMA, as part of its new approach, develop a plan for delivering training to all FEMA staff deployed during disasters that promotes competency in disability awareness. In concurring with this recommendation, FEMA described its plan to incorporate a disability awareness competency into the job requirements for all deployable staff, but has not yet developed a plan for training.
- GAO's May 2019 report also recommended that FEMA develop a timeline for completing the development of training on incorporating the needs of individuals with disabilities into emergency planning, which it planned to offer to its nonfederal partners. FEMA concurred with GAO's recommendation and, in June 2019, officials began procuring external consulting services to develop a replacement course. According to officials, the course will take about 1 year to develop and will be ready to field by August 2020.