DISASTER RESPONSE

HHS Should Address Deficiencies Highlighted by Recent Hurricanes in the U.S. Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico

What GAO Found

The catastrophic destruction encountered as a result of Hurricanes Irma and Maria proved overwhelming to the U.S. Virgin Islands and Puerto Rican governments and resulted in a large federal disaster response, complicated by losses of power, communication, and health care infrastructure. The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) led the federal public health and medical services response and undertook numerous actions to address the needs in the territories—including evacuating critical care and dialysis patients from the U.S. Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico and providing medical personnel and facilities.

However, GAO identified several shortcomings in HHS’s leadership. While the scale, location, and timing of these storms complicated response efforts, the deficiencies GAO identified were in many cases a function of preparedness policies, or lack thereof. As a result, they could adversely affect future large-scale responses unless addressed. For example, as the lead agency, HHS is responsible for ensuring that appropriate planning activities are undertaken, including monitoring the federal ability to provide core public health and medical services response capabilities. However, GAO found that

- HHS did not have a full understanding of the capabilities and limitations of its support agencies, including the Departments of Defense, Homeland Security, and Veterans Affairs. Consequently, HHS’s needs were not always aligned with the resources that its support agencies could provide, resulting in some deployed resources not being properly and efficiently utilized. For example, HHS requested Department of Defense medical teams, but these teams specialized in trauma and surgical care, not the chronic and primary care needed.
- HHS lacked plans for the territories that accounted for the chronic and primary care needs in isolated communities. This care was greatly needed, given that many, especially the elderly, could not easily access hospitals.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making seven recommendations, including that HHS develop agreements with support agencies that include response capability and limitation information, and develop response plans for providing care in isolated communities. HHS disagreed with two of the seven citing, among other things, territory responsibility for plans. GAO clarified the intent of the two recommendations and believes that all seven are warranted.

Example of Downed Power Lines in Puerto Rico, November 2017

Source: Federal Emergency Management Agency | GAO-19-592