



Testimony

Before the Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives

FEMA

Opportunities to Help Address Mission and Management Challenges

Accessible Version

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Why GAO Did This Study

FEMA leads our nation's efforts to prepare for, protect against, respond to, recover from, and mitigate against the risk of disasters. In recent years, the increasing frequency and costs of disasters, the COVID-19 pandemic, and other responsibilities have placed additional pressures on FEMA.

This testimony discusses GAO's prior work and recommendations related to FEMA's challenges in four key areas: (1) workforce management; (2) long-term disaster recovery efforts; (3) potential barriers to disaster assistance and disparate recovery outcomes; and (4) future disaster resilience and mitigation.

This statement is based on products GAO developed and issued from January 2015 to December 2021. For those products, GAO reviewed and analyzed federal law, federal data, post-disaster contracts, agency guidance, and other agency documentation and interviewed federal, state, and local officials as well as representatives of stakeholder groups impacted by disasters. GAO also conducted some of these interviews as part of visits to locations affected by hurricanes in 2017 and 2018. Additionally, GAO conducted 17 focus groups with FEMA staff.

What GAO Recommends

GAO has made numerous recommendations in prior reports designed to address the various mission and management challenges discussed in this testimony. FEMA has taken steps to address these recommendations and GAO is monitoring FEMA's ongoing efforts.

View [GAO-22-105786](#). For more information, contact Chris Currie at (404) 679-1875 or CurrieC@gao.gov

February 16, 2022

FEMA

Opportunities to Help Address Mission and Management Challenges

What GAO Found

GAO's past work has identified various mission and management challenges the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is facing in four key areas: (1) workforce management; (2) long-term disaster recovery efforts; (3) potential barriers to disaster assistance and disparate recovery outcomes; and (4) future disaster resilience and mitigation. For example:

Workforce management. GAO found that FEMA faced challenges with deploying staff with the right skills and training to best meet the needs of various disasters. For example, at the height of workforce deployments in October 2017, 54 percent of staff were serving in a capacity in which they were not qualified according to FEMA's qualification system standards. GAO recommended that FEMA develop a plan to address challenges that have hindered FEMA's ability to provide reliable and complete information to field leaders about staff abilities. FEMA told GAO in December 2021 that it is developing qualification plans to better inform field leaders about staff knowledge, skills and abilities.

Long-term recovery. GAO found that opportunities exist to improve survivors' understanding of FEMA's eligibility and award determinations for the Individual and Household Program, which provides housing and other needs assistance. For example, GAO recommended providing more information to survivors about their eligibility for assistance and clarifying that an ineligible determination is not always final but may mean FEMA needs more information to decide the award. As of fall 2021, FEMA was planning to revise its communications to survivors.

Potential barriers to assistance and disparate recovery outcomes. GAO reported that six federal disaster recovery programs had taken some actions to address social and institutional barriers, but these programs generally lacked quality information to identify potential access barriers and disparate recovery outcomes. GAO recommended that FEMA work with federal partners to develop and implement an interagency plan to help ensure the availability and use of quality information. FEMA is planning to address the recommendation by the end of 2022.

Disaster resilience and mitigation. GAO found that FEMA had developed more flood maps and other flood risk products, but the agency faced challenges ensuring they comprehensively reflected current and future flood hazards, such as heavy rainfall and the best available climate science. FEMA was addressing some of these challenges, but was operating under an out-of-date plan that did not include new goals or objectives. GAO recommended that FEMA update its plan to address challenges in reflecting current and future flood hazards. FEMA is working to address GAO's recommendation by the end of 2022.

GAO will continue to monitor FEMA's actions and assess the extent to which these actions address GAO's recommendations.

In light of more frequent and costly disasters, and with FEMA supporting numerous efforts outside of its normal core responsibilities, FEMA could continue taking actions to strengthen its mission and management operations.

Chair Titus, Ranking Member Webster, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss our work on challenges facing the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

FEMA leads our nation's efforts to prepare for, protect against, respond to, recover from, and mitigate against the risk of disasters. The historic 2017 and 2018 disaster seasons pushed FEMA well beyond its routine disaster response posture. In 2017, hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria, and the severe wildfires in California, collectively affected 47 million people—nearly 15 percent of the nation's population. In 2018, hurricanes Florence and Matthew and another severe California wildfire season again necessitated a major federal response. Furthermore, Hawaii, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, and Guam experienced an unprecedented number of disasters in 2018—including typhoons, earthquakes, mudslides, and volcanic eruptions. In 2020, FEMA responded to 230 presidentially declared emergencies and major disasters—an all-time high—including a record-breaking hurricane season in the Atlantic Ocean, and the most active fire year on record for the West Coast. In 2021, there were 20 weather and climate-related disaster events with losses exceeding \$1 billion each in the United States, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

In addition to its responsibilities responding to the rising number of disasters and other emergencies, FEMA has been tasked with new responsibilities. FEMA has played a key role in the federal response to the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, it established mass vaccination sites and provided funeral assistance to families, the scope of which is unprecedented for the agency. According to FEMA data, as of August 30, 2021, the agency's call center had received and was processing 264,544 applications, and FEMA had awarded more than \$1 billion for funeral assistance. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, FEMA had processed approximately 6,000 cases of funeral assistance over the past decade. It has also assisted in the Afghan refugee resettlement efforts and at the southwest border.

While we recognize the difficult job FEMA has been tasked with, in recent years, we have reported on various mission and management challenges

the agency faces. For instance, FEMA management has had to redeploy response personnel from one disaster to the next, and the agency has reported facing staffing shortfalls in response to some disasters. In addition, a large influx of new employees has added to the challenges of providing timely, program-specific training. FEMA hazard mitigation programs and disaster recovery programs sometimes have complex and lengthy processes and mechanisms that have affected access to, as well as the speed and delivery of assistance. Some programs also lack information that would allow them to examine patterns and indicators to identify access barriers and differing outcomes for different groups of survivors.

My statement today discusses our prior work and recommendations related to FEMA's challenges in four key areas: (1) workforce management; (2) long-term disaster recovery efforts; (3) potential barriers to disaster assistance and disparate recovery outcomes; and (4) future disaster resilience and mitigation. Successfully addressing these challenges is important because the rising number and costs of disasters and the increasing reliance on the federal government for disaster assistance will likely continue as the climate changes.¹

My statement today is based on products we developed and issued from January 2015 to December 2021. To perform our prior work, we reviewed and analyzed federal law, a non-generalizable sample of post-disaster contracts, agency guidance, and other agency documentation. We also analyzed data on FEMA's workforce, disaster assistance programs, and flood mapping efforts, among others. We interviewed officials from FEMA and other selected federal agencies; and state, territory, local, and nonprofit officials impacted by disasters. We conducted some of these interviews as part of visits to locations affected by hurricanes in 2017 and 2018, where we also met with disaster survivors. Additionally, we conducted 17 focus groups with FEMA staff. More detailed information on the scope and methodology of our prior work can be found in each of the issued reports cited throughout this statement.

We conducted the work on which this statement is based in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions

¹GAO, *Climate Change: Information on Potential Economic Effects Could Help Guide Federal Efforts to Reduce Fiscal Exposure*, [GAO-17-720](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 28, 2017).

based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Workforce Management

FEMA has faced longstanding challenges related to its workforce, which have affected its ability to achieve its mission. In recent years, we have reported on these challenges—(1) staffing shortages; (2) workforce qualifications; and (3) staff development—and their impact. We have also made recommendations to address various aspects of these challenges.

Staffing shortages. Several large-scale disasters and concurrent emergencies have created an unprecedented demand for FEMA’s workforce. In May 2020, we reported that during the 2017 and 2018 disaster seasons, FEMA deployed 14,684 and 10,328 personnel, respectively, at the peak of each of these seasons and reported staffing shortages.² FEMA faced shortages across over half of its cadres—groups organized by operational or programmatic functions—during the 2017 and 2018 disaster seasons. For instance, according to FEMA’s deployment data, 18 of 23 cadres operated with 25 percent or fewer staff available to deploy when Hurricane Maria made landfall in Puerto Rico. In addition, many staff members who were available to deploy declined when requested to do so, in part due to the austere conditions and burnout, FEMA officials told us. For example, 48 percent of FEMA staff declined a deployment to Puerto Rico in 2017 after Hurricane Maria, and 40 percent declined a deployment to California in response to the November California wildfires in 2018.

In light of the aforementioned issues, we are continuing to monitor FEMA’s ability to deploy personnel to catastrophic disasters or concurrent disasters. We recently initiated work related to FEMA’s recruitment, hiring, and retention.

Workforce qualifications. In addition to staffing shortages, we found that FEMA faced challenges identifying and deploying staff with the right qualifications and skills at the right time to best meet disaster needs. We reported challenges with the reliability of information from FEMA’s qualification and deployment processes and systems. According to FEMA

²GAO, *FEMA Disaster Workforce: Actions Needed to Address Deployment and Staff Development Challenges*, [GAO-20-360](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 4, 2020).

managers and staff in the field, an employee's recorded qualification status was not a reliable indicator of staff's ability to perform their positions in the field. For example, at the height of FEMA workforce deployments in October 2017, 54 percent of staff were serving in a capacity in which they did not hold the title of qualified—according to FEMA's qualification system standards—a past challenge we also identified in 2015.³

In 2020, we recommended that FEMA develop a plan to address identified challenges that have hindered FEMA's ability to provide reliable and complete information to field leaders and managers about staff abilities. FEMA concurred and reported progress in developing qualification plans for cadre personnel to better inform field leaders about staff knowledge, skills, and abilities, among other actions, as of December 2021. We are conducting follow-up to assess the extent to which FEMA is taking a comprehensive approach and developing a plan that considers cross-cutting solutions to the complex and interrelated challenges we identified in our report.

Staff development. Our previous work found shortcomings in FEMA's ability to ensure staff development—training courses, on-the-job learning, coaching, and mentoring—for the skills and abilities needed in the field. We found that at the start of their deployment during the 2017 and 2018 disaster seasons, 36 percent of FEMA's incident management workforce did not have an official assigned to coach and evaluate their task performance—the primary mechanism the agency depends on for coaching. Furthermore, when such officials were assigned, they often lacked time to coach staff. For example, officials at one of the joint field offices we visited said mission needs always come first and coaching and evaluating responsibilities are frequently not a priority. Supervisors in the field also often inconsistently completed performance evaluations for deployed staff.

Additionally, reservists—who often comprise the greatest proportion of FEMA staff in the field during a disaster and made up 35 percent of FEMA's workforce as of August 2021—faced barriers to accessing developmental opportunities when not deployed, including lack of paid time and technology needed to access training. Effective and consistent staff development is particularly important because FEMA has hired a

³GAO, *2017 Hurricanes and Wildfires: Initial Observations on the Federal Response and Key Recovery Challenges*, [GAO-18-472](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 4, 2018).

large number of reservists over the past few years. The challenges associated with underqualified staff underscore the need for a comprehensive staff development program that would equip all staff to meet mission needs in the field.

We recommended that FEMA create a staff development program that addresses access to training, use of performance evaluations, and consistent developmental opportunities regardless of FEMA employees' deployment status. FEMA concurred with our recommendation and, as of December 2021, has taken steps to improve staff development efforts, including steps to allow training to be more accessible to staff, implementing assessments for coaching, and establishing a process for providing annual performance appraisals for reservists. We are monitoring FEMA's actions to assess the extent to which they constitute an integrated and cohesive program for workforce development.

We have reported examples of how these workforce challenges affect FEMA's operations and those FEMA serves, including that (1) shortages in contracting staff exacerbated challenges for recovery efforts, and (2) low morale and high attrition rate affected service delivery.

Shortages in contracting staff exacerbated challenges for recovery efforts. In 2019, we found that during the 2017 hurricanes and California wildfires, FEMA experienced shortages in their workforce of contracting staff, which exacerbated challenges for disaster response and recovery.⁴ For example, eight of FEMA's 10 regional offices had only one permanent full-time contracting official.⁵ Regional offices are responsible for managing post-disaster contracts that can last for years, even if regional procurement staff were not involved in the initial award of those contracts.

We also found that FEMA had not assessed its contracting workforce needs since 2014 and recommended it assess its workforce needs—including staffing levels, mission needs, and skill gaps—and develop a plan to address any gaps. FEMA concurred with our recommendation and officials told us they planned on hiring additional contracting staff and conducting competency modeling for its contracting staff, as well as a

⁴GAO, *2017 Disaster Contracting: Actions Needed to Improve the Use of Post-Disaster Contracts to Support Response and Recovery*, [GAO-19-281](#) (Washington, D.C.: April 24, 2019).

⁵FEMA's 10 regional offices cover all the U.S. states and territories.

workforce analysis to identify skill gaps. As of May 2021, these actions were still in progress.

Low morale and high attrition rates affected service delivery. In May 2020, participants in our focus groups and field managers we interviewed cited operational challenges that hindered the cadre’s ability to support mission needs, including low morale.⁶ Furthermore, in September 2020, we reported on FEMA’s call center workforce’s struggles with low morale and their challenges in using program guidance to assist survivors.⁷ For example, call center staff worked without adequate training, in part due to high disaster activity in 2017 and 2018. In addition, the training FEMA provided did not effectively support staff in applying guidance to answer survivors’ questions and process cases encountered in their work, according to National Processing Service Center staff. These limitations resulted in missed opportunities to help survivors quickly.

Additionally, in 2016, we found that the FEMA’s Cadre-of-On-Call Response Employee (CORE) Incident Management Assistance Teams (IMAT)—rapid-response teams of FEMA employees that deploy to disaster sites with little to no notice and remain there for unspecified amounts of time, depending on mission needs—had experienced high attrition since its implementation in fiscal year 2013.⁸ According to IMAT officials from nine of 10 regions and one of three national IMATs, key reasons cited for the attrition in the initial years of implementing the program were the relatively low pay and lack of upward mobility for CORE IMAT team members. This high attrition can be costly because of the investment required to hire and train new staff.

In 2020, we recommended, among other things, that FEMA use desirable characteristics of employee engagement while completing planned activities for improving morale among call center staff, assessing staff satisfaction scores, and identifying additional steps to strengthen employee morale.⁹ FEMA concurred and is taking steps to address our

⁶GAO-20-360.

⁷GAO, *Disaster Assistance: Additional Actions Needed to Strengthen FEMA’s Individuals and Households Program*, GAO-20-503 (Washington, D.C.: Sep. 30, 2020).

⁸GAO, *Disaster Response: FEMA Has Made Progress Implementing Key Programs, but Opportunities for Improvement Exist*, GAO-16-87 (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 05, 2016).

⁹GAO-20-503.

recommendation. In 2016, we also recommended FEMA develop a process for systematically gathering attrition data and a workforce strategy for retaining IMAT staff.¹⁰ FEMA concurred with the recommendation and implemented it with a series of actions, such as an assessment of attrition in the IMAT workforce and policy changes informed by the assessment, which they completed in June 2021.

Long-Term Disaster Recovery

The federal government has dozens of programs that provide recovery assistance in the wake of a disaster to eligible state, local, tribal, and territorial governments; businesses; and individuals and communities. We have reported on the extent to which FEMA provides recovery assistance after disasters through its Public Assistance and Individual Assistance programs, among other initiatives. During our work relating to disasters that affected the Pacific and Caribbean regions and California in 2017 and 2018, we found that these recovery programs can be complex and slow to provide assistance.

Challenges Facing FEMA's Public Assistance Program

FEMA's Public Assistance program reimburses state, local, tribal, and territorial governments and certain types of nonprofit organizations for the cost of disaster-related debris removal, emergency protective measures to protect life and property, and permanent work to repair or replace damaged or destroyed infrastructure. According to FEMA's January 2022 Disaster Relief Fund report, total projected obligations for the Public Assistance programs from August 1, 2017 through fiscal year 2022 are approximately \$112 billion.¹¹

DHS's *Fiscal Year 2019-2021 Annual Performance Report* states that the speed at which FEMA obligates funding for Public Assistance projects is a priority for advancing the recovery process. However, this report also states that in fiscal year 2019, FEMA awarded only 28 percent of Public Assistance projects within FEMA's target time frames. In February 2021, we found that FEMA met its goal of awarding Public Assistance funds

¹⁰GAO-16-87.

¹¹DHS, FEMA, *Disaster Relief Fund: Monthly Report as of December 31, 2021*. (Jan. 7, 2022).

within 189 days of a disaster for only 14 percent of Public Assistance projects in the Pacific region (70 of 492 projects).¹² On average, it took 13 months for FEMA to award funding for these projects. Similarly, we reported in November 2019 and May 2021 on slow time frames for awarding Public Assistance funding in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.¹³ In February 2021, we recommended that FEMA analyze Public Assistance program data to identify causes of funding delays and take actions to address those delays.¹⁴ FEMA concurred and is working to address this recommendation.

We have reported on several additional factors that may have contributed to FEMA's slowness in awarding Public Assistance funding:

Reimbursement model. Most Public Assistance projects utilize a reimbursement model in which award recipients—state or territorial governments where the President has declared a major disaster—must provide upfront funding for projects and later seek reimbursement from FEMA. We found that this model delayed recovery in some locations. Specifically, we reported in November 2019 that, due to the U.S. Virgin Islands' fiscal situation and inability to provide upfront funding for all Public Assistance projects, the territory had to prioritize certain projects over others.¹⁵ Similarly, we reported in May 2021 that Puerto Rico's fiscal situation made it difficult for Public Assistance award recipients to provide upfront project funding, and consequently, construction for many approved projects had not started. For example, we found that as of January 2021—over 3 years since hurricanes Irma and Maria struck the island—Puerto Rico had expended less than \$158 million (or less than 1 percent) of the \$17.5 billion that FEMA obligated to reimburse award recipients for permanent work Public Assistance projects.¹⁶

¹²GAO, *2018 Pacific Island Disasters: Federal Actions Helped Facilitate the Response, but FEMA Needs to Address Long-Term Recovery Challenges*, [GAO-21-91](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 3, 2021).

¹³GAO, *U.S. Virgin Islands Recovery: Additional Actions Could Strengthen FEMA's Key Disaster Recovery Efforts*, [GAO-20-54](#) (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 19, 2019); GAO, *Puerto Rico Recovery: FEMA Made Progress in Approving Projects, But Should Identify and Assess Risks to the Recovery*, [GAO-21-264](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 19, 2021).

¹⁴[GAO-21-91](#).

¹⁵[GAO-20-54](#).

¹⁶[GAO-21-264](#).

In May 2021, we recommended that FEMA coordinate with the Government of Puerto Rico and relevant federal agencies to identify and assess risks—and potential actions to manage those risks—to the remainder of Puerto Rico’s disaster recovery, including factors such as Puerto Rico’s capacity to carry out Public Assistance projects. FEMA agreed with this recommendation and has started a formal risk assessment process. In addition, officials in the U.S. Virgin Islands told us that pursuing projects under the Public Assistance alternative procedures program may help to address issues with the reimbursement model by providing more flexibility regarding when and how projects are funded. These alternative procedures are discussed below.

Fixed-cost estimates. FEMA developed alternative procedures in which FEMA provides funding for Public Assistance projects based on a fixed-cost estimate, which may help alleviate the challenges associated with the reimbursement model. FEMA intended to expedite the provision of assistance with these alternative procedures. However, in 2019, 2020, and 2021, we reported that Public Assistance applicants in the Pacific and Caribbean regions found the process of developing fixed-cost estimates to be difficult and lengthy, and this estimation process delayed disaster recovery.¹⁷ We have made recommendations to help FEMA improve the use of fixed-cost estimates, and identify and address related inefficiencies. FEMA concurred and has taken actions to address these recommendations.

Wildfire debris removal. We also found in October 2019 that the unique challenge of removing wildfire debris led to confusion over soil excavation standards and led to over-excavation of some homeowners’ lots, lengthening the recovery process.¹⁸ To address this and other wildfire-related challenges, we recommended that FEMA comprehensively assess operations to identify any additional updates to its management controls—such as policies, procedures, or training—that could enhance future response and recovery from large-scale and severe wildfires. FEMA is taking steps to address this recommendation, including by

¹⁷GAO-20-54; GAO-21-91; and GAO, *Puerto Rico Disaster Recovery: FEMA Actions Needed to Strengthen Project Cost Estimation and Awareness of Program Guidance*, GAO-20-221 (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 5, 2020).

¹⁸GAO, *Wildfire Disasters: FEMA Could Take Additional Actions to Address Unique Response and Recovery Challenges*, GAO-20-5 (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 9, 2019).

developing analyses to update disaster assessment efforts and working to update guidance.

Challenges Facing FEMA's Individual Assistance Program

FEMA's Individual Assistance program provides financial assistance and, if necessary, direct assistance to eligible individuals and households who, as a direct result of a major disaster or emergency, have necessary expenses and serious needs, and are unable to meet such expenses or needs through other means. According to FEMA's January 2022 Disaster Relief Fund report, total projected obligations for Individual Assistance programs from August 1, 2017 through fiscal year 2022 are approximately \$5 billion.¹⁹

Individuals and Households Program (IHP). In September 2020, we reported that survivors faced numerous challenges obtaining aid and understanding the IHP—one of FEMA's Individual Assistance programs that provides housing and other needs assistance to individuals affected by a major disaster or emergency.²⁰ We found FEMA, state, territory, and local officials said that disaster survivors did not understand and were frustrated by the requirement that certain survivors first be denied a Small Business Administration (SBA) disaster loan before receiving certain types of IHP assistance. FEMA did not fully explain the requirement to survivors and its process for the requirement may have prevented many survivors from being considered for certain types of assistance, including low-income applicants who are less likely to qualify for an SBA loan. For instance, we identified tens of thousands of potentially low-income IHP applicants who were referred to the SBA but did not submit a loan application. As a result, FEMA could not consider these applicants for personal property assistance—for millions of dollars in verified losses—under its current process.

We also found that opportunities exist to improve survivors' understanding of FEMA's eligibility and award determinations for the IHP; for example, clarifying that an ineligible determination is not always final but may mean FEMA needs more information to decide the award. In addition, we reported that state and local officials generally had trouble

¹⁹DHS, FEMA, *Disaster Relief Fund: Monthly Report as of December 31, 2021* (Jan. 7, 2022).

²⁰[GAO-20-503](#).

understanding the IHP. For example, these officials said that FEMA did not provide sufficient training, support, and guidance that was needed in order for them to be able to effectively work with FEMA to facilitate IHP assistance.

To address these and other challenges relating to the IHP, we made 14 recommendations, including identifying ways to simplify the IHP application process and providing more information to survivors about their award, among others. FEMA agreed with our recommendations and is working to address them. For example, as of October 2021, FEMA officials told us that they are pursuing a regulatory change to alter the requirement that disaster survivors apply to SBA and be denied before seeking assistance from FEMA for some types of IHP assistance. Additionally, as of fall 2021, FEMA was planning revisions to its communications to survivors and published guidance for state and local officials, among other steps in progress.

Permanent housing in remote areas. We have also identified challenges relating to FEMA's Permanent Housing Construction program—another Individual Assistance program. Specifically, in February 2021, we reported that 2 years after typhoons struck the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, FEMA had completed 60 percent (73 out of 121) of home repairs, and only completed about 11 percent (20 out of 182) of new construction for survivors enrolled in the Permanent Housing Construction program (93 of 303 houses).²¹ These delays were due, in part, to a lack of expertise within FEMA relating to soliciting and awarding construction contracts and construction errors made by contracted entities.

We found that these housing assistance challenges were consistent with lessons learned from prior FEMA missions in other remote areas of the United States. To address these challenges, we recommended that FEMA incorporate lessons learned from earlier Permanent Housing Construction missions and address long-standing issues in guidance that outlines necessary steps to better plan for and implement the program in remote areas. FEMA concurred and is planning to implement this recommendation in a Direct Housing Guide it is developing.

²¹[GAO-21-91](#).

Potential Barriers and Disparate Outcomes with Disaster Recovery Assistance

As we highlighted above, disaster recovery is a complex process with many factors that affect individual and community outcomes, including in various socioeconomic and demographic groups. While federal disaster recovery programs are not typically targeted toward only low-income or vulnerable populations, our recent work and recommendations have identified areas that could help these populations. Specifically, we have reported on FEMA's efforts to (1) identify and address potential access barriers to disaster recovery programs; (2) prioritize flood map investments for vulnerable populations; and (3) provide assistance to individuals who are older or who have disabilities.

Identifying and addressing potential access barriers and disparate outcomes. In December 2021, we reported on six federal disaster recovery programs with historically large obligations and found the programs have taken some actions that could help officials identify and address social and institutional barriers.²² However, these recovery programs generally lacked quality information that would allow them to identify potential access barriers and disparate recovery outcomes. Additionally, FEMA and federal partners administering disaster recovery programs have not established processes to address any potential barriers and disparate outcomes they identify on an ongoing basis. However, FEMA and other federal agencies with large recovery programs can and should work together to devise workable approaches to identify and address barriers to accessing federal recovery programs and disparate outcomes.

We recommended that FEMA, along with federal partners, (1) develop and implement an interagency plan to help ensure the availability and use of quality information; and (2) design and establish routine processes to be used within and across federal disaster recovery programs to identify and address potential barriers and disparate outcomes on an ongoing basis. FEMA agreed with both of the recommendations and is planning to take actions to address them by the end of 2022.

²²GAO, *Disaster Recovery: Additional Actions Needed to Identify and Address Potential Recovery Barriers*, [GAO-22-104039](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 15, 2021).

Prioritizing flood map investments for vulnerable populations. In October 2021, we reported that the FEMA flood mapping investments for fiscal years 2012 through 2020 were lower for communities with higher levels of social vulnerability and underserved populations, other factors being equal.²³ More specifically, we found communities with relatively higher levels of social vulnerability and underserved populations had (1) more unmapped miles or paper maps in fiscal year 2012; (2) a smaller increase in the percentage of mapped miles that met FEMA’s quality standard metric; and (3) longer cycle times between the stages of FEMA’s mapping process.

We recommended that FEMA better use flood risk data to prioritize flood mapping investments toward priority areas, such as vulnerable communities. FEMA leadership was interested in examining ways the agency could use data to inform future annual mapping investment decisions and agreed with our recommendation. They are taking steps to address the recommendation and we will continue to monitor their efforts.

Access to specialized assistance for older and disabled individuals. In May 2019, we reported that officials from entities that partnered with FEMA reported challenges providing assistance to individuals who are older or who have disabilities following the 2017 hurricanes.²⁴ For example, officials said that many of these individuals required specialized assistance obtaining food, water, medicine, and oxygen, but aid was sometimes difficult to provide. We also reported that aspects of the process to apply for assistance from FEMA were challenging for older individuals and those with disabilities and that FEMA did not provide individuals clear opportunities to disclose disability-related needs.

We recommended, among other things, that FEMA implement new registration-intake questions to improve FEMA’s ability to identify and address survivors’ disability-related needs. FEMA agreed with this recommendation and implemented it in May 2019 by using revised registration-intake questions that asked directly if survivors had a

²³GAO, *FEMA Flood Maps: Better Planning and Analysis Needed to Address Current and Future Flood Hazards*. [GAO-22-104079](#), (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 25, 2021). Social vulnerability is broadly defined as the susceptibility of social groups to the adverse impacts of natural hazards, including disproportionate death, injury, loss, or disruption of livelihood. Social vulnerability considers the social, economic, demographic, and housing characteristics of a community.

²⁴GAO, *Disaster Assistance: FEMA Action Needed to Better Support Individuals Who Are Older or Have Disabilities*. [GAO-19-318](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 14, 2019).

disability. According to FEMA's analysis, the percentage of survivors that identified having a disability-related need increased substantially after implementing the revised questions.

Future Disaster Resilience and Mitigation

We have previously reported on the extent to which FEMA programs encourage resilience before a disaster and as part of recovery efforts following a disaster. We have found that federal and local efforts to improve resilience can reduce the effects and costs of future disasters. FEMA has made progress in this area by establishing an investment strategy to help federal, state, and local officials identify, prioritize, and guide federal investments in disaster resilience. FEMA published the *National Mitigation Investment Strategy* in August 2019. However, our prior work highlights opportunities to improve disaster resilience. Specifically, we reported on FEMA efforts to (1) to identify flood hazards and (2) improve hazard mitigation:

Identify flood hazards. We found that FEMA had increased its development of flood maps and other flood risk products, but the agency faced challenges ensuring they comprehensively reflect current and future flood hazards.²⁵ For example, its flood risk products do not reflect hazards such as heavy rainfall and the best available climate science. FEMA was addressing some of these challenges, but many may require years to address. Also, the agency was operating under an out-of-date plan that did not reflect new goals, objectives and timeframes, among other things. In order to address challenges in reflecting current and future flood hazards, we recommended, among other things, that FEMA update its plan to identify program goals, objectives, activities, performance measures and time frames for its various efforts. FEMA concurred and is working to update its "Risk MAP Multi-Year Plan," to include the items we identified, by December 2022 to address our recommendation.

Improving hazard mitigation. In February 2021, we found that state and local officials from selected jurisdictions reported challenges with FEMA's

²⁵[GAO-22-104079](#)

hazard mitigation grant programs.²⁶ Specifically, officials we interviewed from 10 of 12 jurisdictions said grant application processes were complex and lengthy. To address this, FEMA officials augmented guidance and began monitoring application review time frames to identify opportunities to streamline the programs. However, the agency had no documented plan to do this. In addition, officials from eight of the 12 jurisdictions cited challenges with applicants' technical capacity to successfully apply for grants. To address this, FEMA developed training and guidance, but we found that these resources could be difficult for state and local officials to locate on different parts of FEMA's website.

We recommended that FEMA establish a plan with time frames to assess hazard mitigation grant processes to identify and implement steps to reduce the complexity of and time required for grant applications. FEMA concurred with this recommendation. As of January 2022, the agency stated it had several ongoing efforts to address our recommendation, such as drafting strategic plans meant to reduce complexity. To address difficulties in locating application resources, we recommended that FEMA create a centralized inventory of hazard mitigation resources on the FEMA website. FEMA concurred with this recommendation and, as of January 2022, the agency said it was in process of updating its web pages and guidance. We will continue monitoring FEMA's efforts to fully address both recommendations.

Thank you Chair Titus, Ranking Member Webster, and Members of the Subcommittee. This concludes my prepared statement. I would be happy to respond to any questions you may have at this time.

GAO Contacts and Staff Acknowledgments

If you or your staff members have any questions about this testimony, please contact me at (404) 679-1875 or curriec@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this statement. Key contributors to this statement include Joel Aldape, Assistant Director; Kelsey Hawley, Analyst-in-Charge; Koffi Dogbevi; Alana Finley; Elizabeth Poulsen; and

²⁶GAO, *Disaster Resilience: FEMA Should Take Additional Steps to Streamline Hazard Mitigation Grants and Assess Program Effects*, [GAO-21-140](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 2, 2021). Hazard mitigation is any sustainable action that reduces or eliminates long-term risk to people and property from future disasters.

Letter

Steven Rocker. Key contributors to the previous work discussed in this statement are listed in each of the cited reports.

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