



Testimony

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

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# FEMA

## Opportunities to Strengthen Management and Address Increasing Challenges

Statement of Chris Currie, Director, Homeland Security and Justice Team

Accessible Version

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-23-106840](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

FEMA leads our nation's efforts to prepare for, respond to, and recover from 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 workforce management and coordination of federal disaster recovery programs, among other issues.

This statement is based on products GAO issued from October 2019 to May 2023. For those products, GAO reviewed and analyzed federal law, agency guidance, and other agency documentation and analyzed data on FEMA's workforce, and disaster assistance, among others. GAO also interviewed knowledgeable officials from FEMA and other selected federal agencies, state, local, and territorial officials impacted by disasters. 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.

## 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. GAO will continue to monitor FEMA's implementation of its efforts to determine if they address the challenges we identified.

View [GAO-23-106840](#). For more information, contact Chris Currie at (404) 679-1875 or [CurrieC@gao.gov](mailto:CurrieC@gao.gov).

May 17, 2023

# FEMA

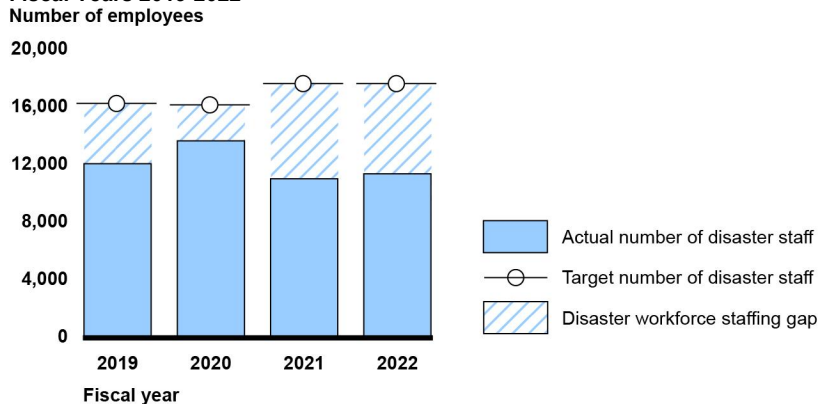
## Opportunities to Strengthen Management and Address Increasing Challenges

### What GAO Found

GAO's past work has identified various mission and management challenges the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is facing in implementing its 2022 to 2026 strategic plan to achieve its goals.

For example, FEMA faces workforce challenges that have affected its ability to achieve its mission. In May 2023, GAO reported that at the beginning of fiscal year 2022, FEMA had an overall staffing gap of approximately 35 percent (6,200 staff) across different positions such as logistics and information technology. While FEMA is taking steps to address staffing gaps such as hiring events and use of contractors, GAO found that it is unclear if these efforts are effective. GAO recommended that FEMA document plans to monitor and evaluate the agency's hiring efforts to address staffing gaps, among other recommendations. Such plans would help FEMA determine how effective hiring efforts are at closing staffing gaps and prioritize these efforts accordingly. FEMA concurred and described planned actions such as developing a recruiting implementation plan by September 2023.

**Staffing Gaps for the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA's) Disaster Workforce, Fiscal Years 2019-2022**



Source: GAO analysis of FEMA data. | GAO-23-106840

**Data for Staffing Gaps for the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA's) Disaster Workforce, Fiscal Years 2019-2022**

Fiscal year	Actual number of disaster staff	Target number of disaster staff
2019	12096	16290
2020	13690	16195
2021	11062	17670
2022	11401	17670

Source: GAO analysis of FEMA data. | GAO-23-106840

In November 2022, GAO reported that the federal approach to disaster recovery involves numerous programs fragmented across 30 federal agencies and departments. While there are benefits to having multiple entities involved, state and local officials GAO met with said that they had difficulty navigating multiple federal recovery programs and their differing requirements, time frames, federal

authorities, and limited data sharing by federal agencies. These challenges complicate disaster recovery as a whole. GAO recommended that FEMA and other agencies identify and take steps to better manage fragmentation. Agencies agreed, but have made little progress in this area. Additionally GAO recommended that Congress consider establishing an independent commission to recommend reforms.

May 17, 2023

Chairman Perry, Ranking Member Titus, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss our work on the challenges facing the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the agency's strategic plan.

Each year, natural disasters such as, hurricanes, floods, wildfires, and earthquakes affect hundreds of American communities. In 2022, FEMA reported providing assistance for 57 major disaster and emergency declarations, such as Hurricane Ian and Hurricane Fiona, 34 fire incidents, and awarded approximately \$1.7 billion in grants to disaster survivors.

FEMA, within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), leads our nation's efforts to prepare for, protect against, respond to, recover from, and mitigate the risk of disasters. In recent years, FEMA has faced an unprecedented demand for its services and played an increasing role in various disasters and emergencies. For example, FEMA played a key role in the federal response to the COVID-19 pandemic and also assisted in the Afghan refugee resettlement efforts and at the southwest border.

In December 2021, FEMA released the agency's 2022-2026 strategic plan outlining three goals designed to address key challenges the agency faces.<sup>1</sup> Specifically the goals were to (1) instill equity as a foundation of emergency management, (2) lead the whole of community in climate resilience and (3) promote and sustain a ready FEMA and prepared nation.

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<sup>1</sup>FEMA. *2022-2026 FEMA Strategic Plan, Building the FEMA our Nation Needs and Deserves*, (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 9, 2021).

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In February 2023, the FEMA Administrator announced progress in addressing the agency's three strategic goals. Specifically, she noted agency efforts to simplify the grant application process for individuals, expanded access to some mitigation grant programs to benefit underserved communities, and the development of toolkits to assist individuals, states, territories, local governments and Tribal Nations to better respond and recover from disasters.

While we recognize the difficult job FEMA is tasked with, in recent years, we have reported on various mission and management challenges the agency faces. My statement today discusses our prior work and recommendations related to FEMA's challenges in four key areas: (1) workforce management; (2) removing barriers for disaster survivors; (3) building resilience to future disasters; and (4) coordination of federal assistance. FEMA has made progress in some areas. However, there are still opportunities to strengthen the agency and make progress towards implementing its strategic goals.

My statement today is based on products we issued from October 2019 to May 2023. To perform our prior work, we reviewed and analyzed federal law, agency guidance, and other agency documentation. We also analyzed data on FEMA's workforce, and disaster assistance programs, among others. We interviewed officials from FEMA, and selected federal agencies, as well as officials from states, local jurisdictions, and territories impacted by disasters. Additionally, we conducted a panel discussion with experts. 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 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.

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## Workforce Management

FEMA has faced challenges related to its workforce, which have affected its ability to achieve its mission. Recently, we reported on these challenges, specifically related to—(1) hiring processes and staffing gaps

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and (2) discrimination and harassment. We made recommendations to address various aspects of these challenges.<sup>2</sup>

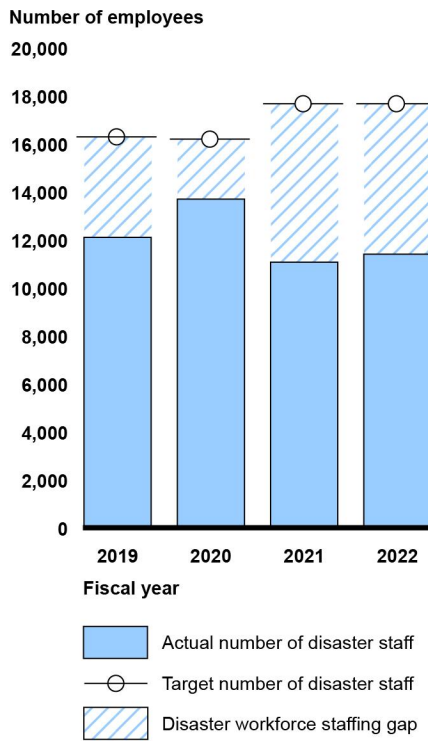
**Hiring processes and staffing gaps.** In May 2023, we reported that FEMA uses different processes under various statutory authorities to hire employees by type such as full-time employees and temporary reservists. At the beginning of fiscal year 2022, FEMA had approximately 11,400 disaster employees on board and a staffing goal of 17,670, creating an overall staffing gap of approximately 6,200 staff (35 percent) across different positions, such as logistics and information technology. While FEMA is taking steps to address staffing gaps, such as hiring events and use of contractors, we found that it is unclear if these efforts are effective.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>GAO, *FEMA Disaster Workforce: Actions Needed to Improve Hiring Data and Address Staffing Gaps*, [GAO-23-105663](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 2, 2023); GAO, *FEMA Workforce: Additional Actions Needed to Help Prevent and Respond to Discrimination and Harassment*, [GAO-23-105243](#) (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 20, 2022)

<sup>3</sup>FEMA can augment its workforce with technical assistance contractors who are specialized contractors hired to perform specific responsibilities. Additionally, FEMA sought additional support from contractors and other federal agencies to support efforts to increase staff and expand recruitment. For example, contractors reviewed applicant resumes to support FEMA hiring specialists.

**Figure 1: Overall Staffing Gaps for the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA's) Disaster Workforce, Fiscal Years 2019-2022**



Source: GAO analysis of FEMA data. | GAO-23-106840

**Data for Figure 1: Overall Staffing Gaps for the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA's) Disaster Workforce, Fiscal Years 2019-2022**

Fiscal year	Actual number of disaster staff	Target number of disaster staff
2019	12096	16290
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2021	11062	17670
2022	11401	17670

Source: GAO analysis of FEMA data. | GAO-23-106840

We recommended that FEMA document plans to monitor and evaluate the agency's hiring efforts to address staffing gaps in the disaster workforce. Such plans would help FEMA determine how effective hiring efforts are at closing staffing gaps and prioritize these efforts accordingly. DHS concurred with this recommendation and described FEMA's current and planned actions. For example, FEMA described its November 2022 recruitment plan to achieve the agency's strategic priority of building a more diverse workforce through four cross-agency goals. FEMA also described efforts to develop an implementation plan to accompany the

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recruitment plan. The estimated completion date for these efforts is September 2023.

FEMA also reports its time frames for hiring employees, known as time-to-hire, on a quarterly basis to DHS. However, we found FEMA has challenges calculating and reporting consistent and accurate time frames for hiring to DHS. We recommended that FEMA establish and document clear and consistent procedures to collect and calculate accurate time-to-hire information. DHS concurred with this recommendation, stating that FEMA will create a job aid to communicate the time-to-hire process and train additional HR professionals to make these calculations and ensure consistency. The estimated completion date for these efforts is September 2023. Moving forward, we will monitor FEMA's implementation of these efforts to determine if they address the challenges we have identified.

**Discrimination and harassment.** We reported in October 2022 that FEMA took action to prevent and respond to discrimination and harassment; however, additional actions may enhance FEMA's ability to show commitment to improving workplace culture.<sup>4</sup> For example, FEMA made organizational changes and issued or revised policies on discrimination and harassment. Further, FEMA created an office to investigate harassment allegations, developed response policies and issued a *Culture Improvement Action Plan*.<sup>5</sup> Though these actions are helpful, overall, we found that the outcome of these actions is unclear because the agency has not taken steps that would enable it to oversee the effectiveness of its efforts.

Specifically, FEMA addressed some but not all areas of noncompliance identified by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in its 2017 evaluation of FEMA's compliance with regulations and management directives on equal employment opportunity programs. In an April 2022 review, the commission determined that since its previous review, though FEMA corrected three deficiencies, 13 remain, 10 of which were categorized as critical. Additionally, we found that FEMA's harassment complaint system generally met recommended practices, but FEMA does

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<sup>4</sup>GAO, *FEMA Workforce: Additional Actions Needed to Help Prevent and Respond to Discrimination and Harassment*, [GAO-23-105243](#) (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 20, 2022).

<sup>5</sup>The Action Plan focuses on six areas of engagement and advocacy, training and education, messaging and communications, employee resources, performance, and accountability and monitoring and assessment. FEMA, *Culture Improvement Action Plan*, (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 2020).



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not consistently notify employees who allege harassment whether the agency took, or will take, corrective action. Lastly, though FEMA has implemented many actions identified in its *Culture Improvement Action Plan*, it has not assessed the effectiveness of its efforts.

In our October 2022 report, we made nine recommendations to FEMA. DHS concurred and described planned actions FEMA will take to address them. For example, we recommended FEMA implement a control to ensure—consistent with agency policy—those who allege harassment are notified whether corrective action has been or will be taken. FEMA issued a standard operating procedure to ensure decision makers notify individuals who make allegations of harassment whether corrective action has been or will be taken. However, FEMA has not implemented this recommendation because while the standard operating procedure outlines the decision maker’s responsibility, it does not serve as a control to ensure officials consistently take action as expected. Additionally, FEMA has not addressed the remaining eight recommendations and we are monitoring FEMA’s efforts to address these issues.<sup>6</sup>

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## Removing Barriers for Disaster Survivors

Disaster recovery is a complex process with many factors that affect individual and community outcomes, including in various socioeconomic and demographic groups. Our prior work and recommendations discuss a number of challenges that disaster survivors face as they apply for FEMA assistance. Specifically, we have reported on FEMA’s efforts to (1) provide assistance to disaster survivors through the individuals and household programs (IHP); and (2) strengthen FEMA’s housing inspection process.

**Individuals and Households Program.** 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.<sup>7</sup> FEMA, state, territory, and local

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<sup>6</sup>Additional recommendations include FEMA should update the agency’s anti-harassment training, collect data on time frames for key steps in the adjudication process, and DHS should provide an opportunity for employees to evaluate its anti-harassment training on a reoccurring basis, among others.

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

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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, including low-income applicants who are less likely to qualify for an SBA loan, from being considered for certain types of assistance.. 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.

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. DHS agreed with our recommendations and has implemented 11 of these. For example, as of July 2022, FEMA implemented a recommendation by providing more information on how FEMA determines eligibility in the letter it sends to survivors after they apply for assistance (known as a cover letter) and more information about how FEMA determined award amounts in decision letters. However, FEMA still needs to address the three remaining recommendations which include improving the completeness and consistency of its communication of the requirement to apply for an SBA disaster loan prior to being considered for SBA-dependent other needs assistance.<sup>8</sup>

**Housing inspection process.** In October 2022, we reported that FEMA has taken actions to improve its housing inspection process since 2018.<sup>9</sup> For example, FEMA streamlined its approach in April 2020 for estimating damages to homes. Instead of recording itemized damages, inspectors estimated the overall damage level of a home based on a smaller set of key indicators (e.g., height of floodwater in a home). However, we reported that FEMA had not assessed this new approach to determine if it accurately estimates damages. We found that mean awards were 35 percent lower under the new approach than under the prior approach.

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<sup>8</sup>Some types of other needs assistance are only provided if an individual does not qualify for a disaster loan from SBA, such as personal property, transportation assistance and group flood insurance policies.

<sup>9</sup>GAO, *Disaster Assistance: Actions Needed to Strengthen FEMA's Housing Inspection Process*, [GAO-23-104750](#) (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 26, 2022).

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Additionally, we found that FEMA had not assessed remote inspection fraud risks or developed a strategy to mitigate them. To address these and other challenges related to the IHP, we made seven recommendations including that FEMA assess the accuracy of its damage level approach for IHP housing inspections and adjust the model as needed. In response, FEMA stated that it will gather and analyze data to determine if any updates will be made to the current damage level model. The estimated completion date for this effort is June 30, 2023. To address fraud risks, FEMA hired a fraud contractor to assess its existing fraud controls and approved the creation of a new unit dedicated to fraud-related work. DHS anticipates staffing this unit by October 31, 2023.

DHS did not concur with two recommendations, specifically that FEMA (1) develop and implement a policy to consistently report on IHP and applicants' statuses and (2) take steps to ensure its policies on the use of applicants' self-assessments are supported by evidence. Based on the evidence provided in the original report, we continue to believe that FEMA should implement both recommendations in addition to the other five it has not yet addressed.

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**Figure 2: Hurricane Ian Damage to Home in Pine Island, Florida**



Source: GAO. | GAO-23-106840

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## Building Resilience to Future Disasters

We created the Disaster Resilience Framework to serve as a guide for analysis of federal actions to facilitate and promote resilience to natural disasters.<sup>10</sup> It is organized around three broad overlapping principles and a series of questions that those who provide oversight or management of federal efforts can consider when analyzing opportunities to enhance their contribution to national disaster resilience. Key principles include information, integration and incentives.

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, which FEMA has taken steps to address. Specifically, we reported on FEMA efforts to (1) identify flood hazards and (2) improve hazard mitigation:

**Identify flood hazards.** We previously reported 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.<sup>11</sup> For example, its flood risk products do not reflect hazards such as heavy rainfall and the best available climate science.

FEMA is 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. 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, according to officials,

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<sup>10</sup>GAO, *Disaster Resilience Framework: Principles for Analyzing Federal Efforts to Facilitate and Promote Resilience to Natural Disasters*, [GAO-20-100SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 23, 2019).

<sup>11</sup>GAO, *FEMA Flood Maps: Better Planning and Analysis Needed to Address Current and Future Flood Hazards*, [GAO-22-104079](#) (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 25, 2021).

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has updated its “Risk MAP Multi-Year Plan,” to include the items we identified. We are currently reviewing documentation to assess the extent to which FEMA’s update meets the intent of our recommendation.

**Improving hazard mitigation.** In February 2021, we found that state and local officials from selected jurisdictions reported challenges with FEMA’s hazard mitigation grant programs.<sup>12</sup> 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 has not documented plans 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. DHS concurred with this recommendation and in July 2022 provided documentation of FEMA’s planned steps and timeframes. For example, FEMA plans to have a common application portal for its programs in the fourth quarter of fiscal year 2023. Additionally in May 2022, officials confirmed that they began revising their grant application process. As a result of these actions, FEMA has implemented this recommendation.

To address difficulties in locating application resources, we recommended that FEMA create a centralized inventory of hazard mitigation resources on the FEMA website. DHS concurred with this recommendation and, as of June 2022, FEMA finished re-designing portions of its website to centralize guidance and other resources on its hazard mitigation programs. The reorganization makes the resources easier to find and better positions FEMA to help state and local applicants successfully apply for grants for mitigation products that enhance disaster resilience. As a result, FEMA has implemented this recommendation.

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<sup>12</sup>GAO, *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.

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Additionally, in August 2021, FEMA launched the National Risk Index in an effort to help communities support mitigation planning, data-driven decision making and other actions to create resilient communities. This dataset is an online tool to help illustrate the U.S. communities most at risk for 18 natural disasters. According to FEMA documentation, FEMA designed and built this tool in close collaboration with various stakeholders and partners in academia; local, state and federal government; and private industry.

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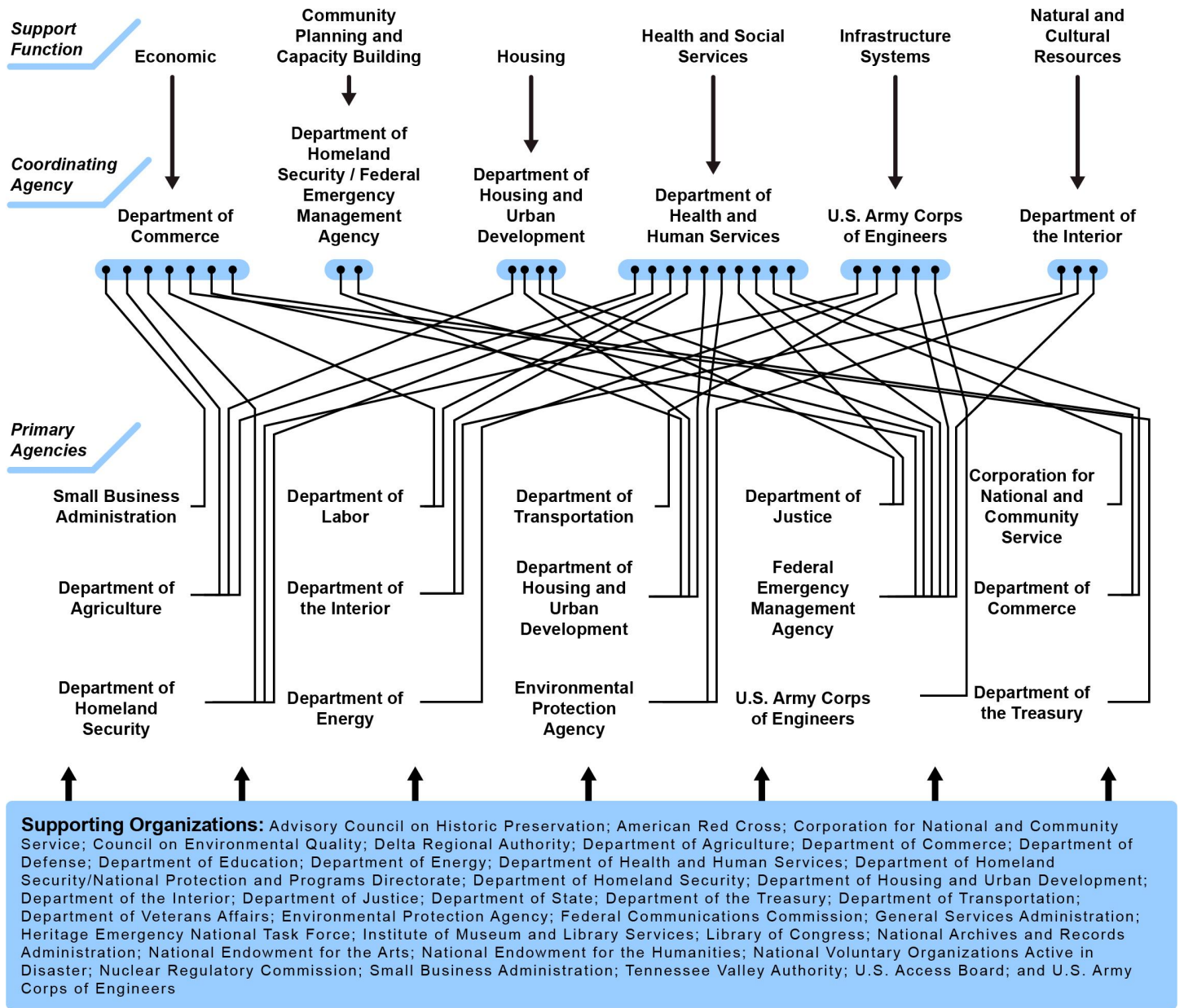
## Improving Coordination of Federal Disaster Assistance

The federal approach is fragmented and no single federal agency or congressional committee has responsibility for managing the system as a whole. In November 2022, we reported that there are over 30 federal agencies and departments involved in disaster recovery and at least 32 congressional committees with responsibility overseeing federal disaster recovery programs.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>GAO, *Disaster Recovery: Actions Needed to Improve the Federal Approach*, [GAO-23-104956](#) (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 15, 2022). This count includes full committees only. However, each of the 32 committees may also have multiple subcommittees with jurisdiction over disaster recovery programs. For example, the House and Senate Committees on Appropriations each have 12 subcommittees that oversee disaster recovery programs.

**Figure 3: Recovery Support Functions and the Various Federal Entities Involved in Disaster Recovery**



Source: National Disaster Recovery Framework. | GAO-23-106840

**Text for Figure 3: Recovery Support Functions and the Various Federal Entities Involved in Disaster Recovery**

<b>Support Function</b>	<b>Economic</b>	<b>Community Planning and Capacity Building</b>	<b>Housing</b>	<b>Health and Social Services</b>	<b>Infrastructure Systems</b>	<b>Natural and Cultural Resources</b>
<b>Coordinating Agency</b>	Department of Commerce	Department of Homeland Security / Federal Emergency Management Agency	Department of Housing and Urban Development	Department of Health and Human Services	U.S. Army Corps of Engineers	Department of the Interior
<b>Primary Agencies</b>	Small Business Administration Department of Agriculture Department of Homeland Security Department of Labor Federal Emergency Management Agency Department of Commerce Department of the Treasury	Department of Housing and Urban Development Federal Emergency Management Agency	Department of Agriculture Department of Housing and Urban Development Department of Justice Federal Emergency Management Agency	Department of Agriculture Department of Homeland Security Department of Labor Department of the Interior Department of Housing and Urban Development Environmental Protection Agency Department of Justice Federal Emergency Management Agency Corporation for National and Community Service Department of Commerce	Department of Homeland Security Department of Energy Department of Transportation Federal Emergency Management Agency U.S. Army Corps of Engineers	Department of the Interior Environmental Protection Agency Federal Emergency Management Agency



Support Function	Economic	Community Planning and Capacity Building	Housing	Health and Social Services	Infrastructure Systems	Natural and Cultural Resources
<b>Coordinating Agency</b>	Department of Commerce	Department of Homeland Security / Federal Emergency Management Agency	Department of Housing and Urban Development	Department of Health and Human Services	U.S. Army Corps of Engineers	Department of the Interior
<b>Supporting Organizations</b>	Advisory Council on Historic Preservation; American Red Cross; Corporation for National and Community Service; Council on Environmental Quality; Delta Regional Authority; Department of Agriculture; Department of Commerce; Department of Defense; Department of Education; Department of Energy; Department of Health and Human Services; Department of Homeland Security/National Protection and Programs Directorate; Department of Homeland Security; Department of Housing and Urban Development; Department of the Interior; Department of Justice; Department of State; Department of the Treasury; Department of Transportation; Department of Veterans Affairs; Environmental Protection Agency; Federal Communications Commission; General Services Administration; Heritage Emergency National Task Force; Institute of Museum and Library Services; Library of Congress; National Archives and Records Administration; National Endowment for the Arts; National Endowment for the Humanities; National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster; Nuclear Regulatory Commission; Small Business Administration; Tennessee Valley Authority; U.S. Access Board; and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers					

Source: National Disaster Recovery Framework. | GAO-23-106840

Note: According to the National Disaster Recovery Framework, each recovery support function has a designated coordinating agency along with primary agencies and supporting organizations with programs relevant to the functional area. Coordinating Agencies provided significant engagement and management for the support function. Primary agencies are designated on the basis of their authorities, resources, and capabilities as well as supporting organizations which may bring relevant subject matter expertise and technical assistances as needed.

Specifically, we reported on (1) reported challenges managing multiple disaster recovery programs and (2) additional options for improving the federal approach to disaster recovery.

**Reported challenges managing multiple disaster recovery programs.**

The current federal approach is the product of over 40 years of incremental efforts to address emerging issues in disaster recovery through legislative reform. These efforts have created a complex system of programs that were not always designed to work together effectively. State and local officials involved in recovery that we interviewed for our November 2022 report noted the importance of the support provided by the federal government after disasters, but told us they experienced a range of challenges obtaining support. Specifically, they reported challenges with navigating multiple disaster recovery programs, including: (1) different requirements across FEMA, Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and Department of Transportation (DOT) grant programs; (2) differing time frames across programs; (3) multiple federal authorities; and (4) limited data sharing. These officials also noted

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that these challenges could create or exacerbate state and local capacity challenges.

In an effort to increase overall coordination, we recommended that FEMA, HUD, and DOT identify and take steps to better manage fragmentation between their individual disaster recovery programs and other federal programs. We also recommended that FEMA—as administrator of several disaster recovery programs—take steps to better manage fragmentation across its own programs, which could make the programs simpler, more accessible, and more user-friendly and improving the effectiveness of its federal disaster recovery efforts. All three agencies agreed with the recommendations.

DHS officials told us that in response to our recommendations, FEMA is coordinating with HUD and DOT to identify specific actions they could take to address the issues we raised. DHS officials also indicated FEMA would examine ways to streamline its disaster assistance programs. HUD officials indicated they would consider the options in our report as they examine ways to streamline disaster assistance across programs. They estimated completing this review by December 2023. DOT officials agreed with the recommendation, but have not shared what specific actions they have taken or are planning. We are continuing to monitor agency progress to implement our recommendations.

The magnitude and significance of the negative effects of the current fragmented approach—inefficient use of federal resources and slower and less effective recovery from disasters—heighten the need for federal agencies to do so. In addition, by identifying and taking steps to better manage the negative effects of the fragmented approach, agencies could improve service delivery to disaster survivors and communities, and improve the effectiveness of recovery efforts.

**Additional options for improving the federal approach.** Based on our review of relevant literature; interviews with federal, state and local officials; and our panel of experts, we identified 11 options to improve the federal government’s approach to disaster recovery.<sup>14</sup> A consistent theme throughout options includes better coordination among federal agencies and programs. For example, options might include developing new coordinated efforts to clearly and consistently communicate about

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<sup>14</sup>[GAO-23-104956](#).

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recovery programs and providing coordinated technical assistance throughout disaster recovery, among others.

Reforming the federal government's approach to disaster recovery is a policy challenge and requires complex tradeoffs, including consideration of the strengths and limitations of the many options. We recommended that Congress consider establishing an independent commission to recommend reforms to the federal government's approach to disaster recovery. By establishing an independent commission to reform disaster recovery Congress may identify actions it and federal agencies could take to improve the effectiveness of the federal approach. Such efforts could reduce the federal government's fiscal exposure; improve service delivery to disaster survivors and state and local governments; and increase the speed of disaster recovery.

Thank you Chairman Perry, Ranking Member Titus, 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.

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## GAO Staff Contacts and Staff Acknowledgements

If you or your staff members have any questions about this testimony, please contact me at (404) 679-1875 or [curriec@gao.gov](mailto: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 Aditi Archer (Assistant Director), Jennifer Kamara (Analyst-in-Charge), Elizabeth Dretsch, Eric Hauswirth, Tracey King, Herrica Telus, and Janet Temko-Blinder.

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

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## GAO Related Products

*FEMA Disaster Workforce: Actions Needed to Improve Hiring Data and Address Staffing Gaps* [GAO-23-105663](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 2, 2023).

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*Disaster Recovery: Actions Needed to Improve the Federal Approach*, [GAO-23-104956](#) (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 15, 2022)

*Disaster Assistance: Actions Needed to Strengthen FEMA’s Housing Inspection Process*, [GAO-23-104750](#) (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 26, 2022).

*FEMA Workforce: Additional Actions Needed to Help Prevent and Respond to Discrimination and Harassment*. [GAO-23-105243](#) (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 20, 2022).

*Flood Mitigation: Actions Needed to Improve Use of FEMA Property Acquisitions*, [GAO-22-104694](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sep. 13, 2022).

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

*Disaster Recovery: Better Data Are Needed to Ensure HUD Block Grant Funds Reach Vulnerable Populations*, [GAO-22-104452](#) (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 10, 2021).

*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).

*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).

*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).

*Disaster Housing: Improved Cost Data and Guidance Would Aid FEMA Activation Decisions*, [GAO-21-116](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 15, 2020).

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