



Highlights of GAO-06-746T, a testimony before the Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

The size and strength of hurricane Katrina resulted in one of the largest natural disasters in our nation's history and raised major questions about our nation's readiness and ability to respond to catastrophic disasters. GAO has a large body of completed and ongoing work on a range of issues relating to all phases of the preparation, response, recovery, and rebuilding efforts related to hurricane Katrina as well as a wealth of historical experience in reviewing the federal government's response to disasters and catastrophic events.

A great deal of attention has been focused on lessons learned from the 2005 hurricane season and many recommendations have been advanced on how to improve the nation's preparedness and ability to effectively respond to catastrophic disasters. GAO's testimony today describes some factors for success and other issues that Congress may wish to consider as it determines what changes to make, including those of the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) organizational placement, to improve the nation's readiness and ability to respond effectively to major disasters, including catastrophic disasters, regardless of cause.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is not making recommendations at this time.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-746T.

To view the full product, click on the link above. For more information, contact William O. Jenkins, Jr., at (202)-512-8757 or jenkinswo@gao.gov.

FEDERAL EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AGENCY

Factors for Success and Issues to Consider in Organizational Placement

What GAO Found

Because of FEMA's mission performance during hurricane Katrina, questions have been raised regarding the agency's organizational placement, including whether FEMA should be disbanded and functions moved to other agencies, remain within the Department of Homeland Security, or again become an independent agency.

The history of the federal government's approach to emergency management reflects experience with specific disasters and differences in opinion regarding the most effective structure for this function. Prior to 1979, emergency management was led by the Federal Disaster Assistance Administration within the Department of Housing and Urban Development. FEMA was established as an independent agency in 1979. Based on recommendations following the response to Hurricane Andrew in 1992, FEMA was elevated to a cabinet level agency whose director reported to the President. In March 2003, FEMA became part of DHS.

As Comptroller General Walker has noted previously, a number of factors may be ultimately more important to FEMA's success in responding to and recovering from future disasters than its organizational placement. These include

- the clarity of FEMA's mission and its related responsibilities and authorities;
- the experience of and training provided to FEMA leadership;
- the adequacy of its human, financial, and technological resources; and
- the effectiveness of planning, exercises, and related partnerships.

As Congress considers changing FEMA's organizational placement, it may also wish to consider key issues affecting organizational structure, including

- the relevance of FEMA's mission to the broader organization in which it resides;
- the extent to which goals and objectives are shared;
- the ability to leverage effectively the resources of other agencies and programs; and
- gains in efficiency and effectiveness through eliminating duplications and overlaps.

The nation's next major response and recovery challenge, whether natural or man-made, will provide another important test of FEMA's efforts to improve its preparedness and capability. Although organizational structure is important, future success is likely to principally depend upon focus, skilled leadership, clear roles and responsibilities, operational plans realistically exercised, and key resources appropriately and effectively deployed.