

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-16-90T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Communications, Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

A little more than 10 years ago, Hurricane Katrina caused an estimated \$108 billion in damage, making it the largest, most destructive natural disaster in our nation's history. Following the federal response to Hurricane Katrina in 2005, Congress passed the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act of 2006 (Post-Katrina Act). The act contained over 300 provisions that are intended to enhance national preparedness, emergency response and recovery, and the management of select disaster programs. In October 2012, another catastrophic hurricane—Hurricane Sandy—caused \$65 billion in damage and once again tested the nation's preparedness and emergency response and recovery functions.

GAO has issued multiple reports that discuss a wide variety of emergency management issues reflecting the federal government and FEMA's efforts to implement provisions of the Post-Katrina Act and address various aspects of emergency management.

This statement discusses GAO's work on the progress FEMA has made and challenges that it still faces in three areas: (1) national preparedness, (2) disaster response and recovery, and (3) selected FEMA management areas. This statement is based on previously issued GAO reports from 2012 to 2015.

What GAO Recommends

GAO has made numerous recommendations in its prior reports to FEMA designed to address the challenges discussed in this statement. FEMA has taken actions to address many of these recommendations.

View [GAO-16-90T](#). For more information, contact Chris Currie at 404-679-1875, curriec@gao.gov

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EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

FEMA Has Made Progress since Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy, but Challenges Remain

What GAO Found

GAO's recent work highlights both the progress and challenges in the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) efforts to lead national preparedness efforts, particularly efforts to assess emergency support capabilities and enhance logistics capabilities. Assessing capabilities is critical to ensure that they will be available when needed in emergencies. For example, GAO found in December 2014 that federal departments have identified emergency response capability gaps through national-level exercises and real-world incidents, but the status of agency actions to address these gaps is not collected by or reported to Department of Homeland Security or FEMA. GAO recommended that FEMA—in collaboration with other federal agencies—regularly report on the status of corrective actions. FEMA agreed with GAO's recommendation and is taking action to address it but has not established a timeframe for completion.

GAO's recent work on disaster response and recovery programs also identified progress and challenges in a number of areas. From fiscal years 2004 through 2013, FEMA obligated over \$95 billion in federal disaster assistance for 650 major disasters declared during this timeframe. With the growing cost of disasters it is vital for the federal government to address its fiscal exposure and ensure that response and recovery programs are as efficient and effective as possible. For example, in December 2014, GAO found that FEMA demonstrated progress controlling for potentially fraudulent payments to individuals during Hurricane Sandy as compared to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. However, GAO reported continued challenges, including weaknesses in validation of Social Security numbers and made recommendations to strengthen these processes. Further, in July 2015, GAO reported that states and localities affected by Hurricane Sandy were able to effectively leverage federal programs to enhance resilience during their recovery. However, states experienced continued challenges in implementing certain FEMA recovery programs, such as Public Assistance. GAO also found that there was no comprehensive, strategic approach to identifying, prioritizing, and implementing investments for disaster resilience. GAO made recommendations to address these continued challenges and FEMA is taking a range of actions to address them.

FEMA has also taken steps to strengthen a number of its management areas, but GAO reported that additional progress is needed in several areas. Specifically, in December 2014, GAO found that FEMA had taken steps to control its administrative costs—the costs of providing and managing disaster assistance—by issuing guidelines and reduction targets. However, GAO reported that FEMA does not require the targets to be met and continued to face challenges tracking the costs. Among other things, GAO recommended that FEMA develop an integrated plan to better control and reduce its administrative costs for major disasters. Further, in July 2015 GAO reported that FEMA had taken action to address various long-standing workforce management challenges, but faced multiple challenges, including implementing and managing its temporary workforces and completing strategic workforce planning efforts. FEMA agreed with GAO's recommendations and is taking action to address them.