

## Why GAO Did This Study

In both 2016 and 2017, 15 separate U.S. disasters resulted in losses exceeding \$1 billion each. FEMA provides PA grants to state and local governments to help communities recover from such disasters. If applicants disagree with FEMA's decision on their PA grant application, they have two chances to appeal: a first-level appeal to be decided by the relevant FEMA regional office and, if denied, a second-level appeal to be decided within FEMA's Recovery Directorate. Each is subject to a 90-day statutory processing timeframe.

GAO was asked to review FEMA's appeals process. This report examines: (1) the extent to which FEMA ensures the quality of its appeals data and what these data show about PA appeals inventory and timeliness; (2) what steps FEMA has taken to improve its management of the appeals process and what challenges, if any, remain; and (3) the extent to which FEMA developed goals and measures to assess program performance. GAO analyzed FEMA policies, procedures, and data on appeals and interviewed officials from headquarters and from regional offices with the highest number of pending appeals. GAO also spoke to state officials from the two states within each of the three regions with the highest number of pending appeals.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO is making four recommendations, including that FEMA implement a consistent approach for tracking appeals and ensuring data quality, develop a workforce plan, and develop measurable goals for processing first-level appeals. FEMA concurred with all four recommendations.

View [GAO-18-143](#). For more information, contact Allison Bawden at (202) 512-6806 or [bawdena@gao.gov](mailto:bawdena@gao.gov).

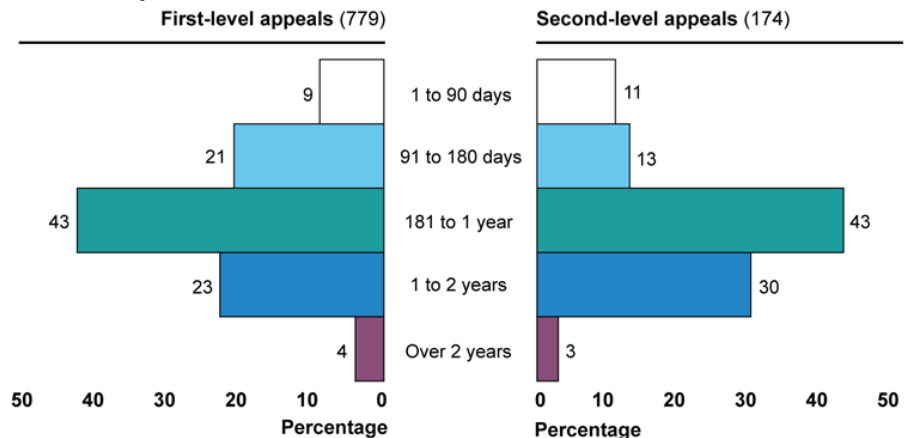
# DISASTER RECOVERY

## Additional Actions Would Improve Data Quality and Timeliness of FEMA's Public Assistance Appeals Processing

### What GAO Found

Weaknesses in the quality of Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) Public Assistance (PA) appeals data limit its ability to oversee the appeals process. For example, FEMA's data are inaccurate and incomplete because regional offices do not consistently track first-level appeals and FEMA does not have processes to ensure data quality. When GAO discussed these weaknesses with FEMA officials, they acknowledged them and provided GAO with corrected data for January 2014 through July 2017. GAO's analyses of the corrected data show fluctuations in the appeal inventory from year to year depending on the number of disasters declared and delays in processing. For example, as shown in the figure, only 9 percent of first-level and 11 percent of second-level appeals were processed within the 90-day statutory timeframe.

**Processing Times for Decided Appeals, Based on Appeals FEMA Received between January 2014 and July 2017**



Source: GAO analysis of Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) data. | GAO-18-143

FEMA has taken steps to improve its management of the appeals process—including issues that GAO and the Department of Homeland Security's Office of Inspector General identified in 2008 and 2011. For example, FEMA increased its appeal staffing levels and developed standard operating procedures. Despite these efforts, FEMA continued to face a number of workforce challenges that contributed to processing delays, such as staff vacancies, staff turnover, and delays in training. FEMA has not developed a workforce staffing plan to identify hiring, training, and retention needs across its headquarters and regional offices, though FEMA officials acknowledge the potential benefits of having such a plan and stated that they are focused on filling vacancies. In the absence of a workforce plan, FEMA will continue to experience workforce challenges that could further contribute to delays in processing appeals.

FEMA has not established goals and measures for assessing first-level appeals processing performance, but has done so for second-level appeals. FEMA views establishing these first-level goals and measures as the responsibility of its regional offices. Without goals and measures, FEMA is limited in its ability to assess the efficiency and effectiveness of its overall appeals process and identify and address weaknesses that may lead to delays in making appeal decisions.