GAO Highlights

DISASTER ASSISTANCE

Opportunities to Enhance Implementation of the Redesigned Public Assistance Grant Program

Why GAO Did This Study

FEMA, an agency of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), has obligated more than $36 billion in PA grants to state, local, and tribal governments to help communities recover and rebuild after major disasters since 2009. Further, costs are rising with disasters, such as Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria in 2017. FEMA recently redesigned how the PA program delivers assistance to state and local grantees to improve operations and address past challenges identified by GAO and others. FEMA tested the new delivery model in selected disasters and announced implementation in September 2017.

GAO was asked to assess the redesigned PA program. This report examines, among other things, the extent to which FEMA's new delivery model addresses (1) past workforce management challenges and assesses future workforce needs; and (2) past information sharing challenges and key IT management controls. GAO reviewed FEMA policy, strategy, and implementation documents; interviewed FEMA and state officials, PA program applicants, and other stakeholders; and observed implementation of the new model at one test location following Hurricane Matthew in 2016.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making five recommendations, including that FEMA assess the workforce needed for the new delivery model and improve key IT management controls for its new information sharing and case management system, FAC-Trax. DHS concurred with all recommendations.

View GAO-18-30. For more information, contact Chris Currie at (404) 679-1875 or curryc@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) redesigned the Public Assistance (PA) grant program delivery model to address past challenges in workforce management, but has not fully assessed future workforce staffing needs. GAO and others have previously identified challenges related to shortages in experienced and trained FEMA PA staff and high turnover among these staff. These challenges often led to applicants receiving inconsistent guidance and to PA project delays. As part of its new model, FEMA is creating consolidated resource centers to standardize and centralize PA staff responsible for managing grant applications, and new specialized positions, such as hazard mitigation liaisons, program delivery managers, and site inspectors, to ensure more consistent guidance to applicants. However, FEMA has not assessed the workforce needed to fully implement the new model, such as the number of staff needed to fill certain new positions, or to achieve staffing goals for supporting hazard mitigation on PA projects. Fully assessing workforce needs will help to ensure that FEMA has the people and the skills needed to fully implement the new PA model and help to avoid the long-standing workforce challenges the program encountered in the past.

FEMA designed a new PA information and case management system—called the FEMA Applicant Case Tracker (FAC-Trax)—to address past information sharing challenges, such as difficulties in sharing grant documentation among FEMA, state, and local officials and tracking the status of PA projects, but additional actions could better ensure effective implementation. Both FEMA and state officials involved in testing of the new model stated that the new information system allows them to better manage and track PA applications and documentation, which could lead to greater transparency and efficiencies in the program. Further, GAO found that this new system fully addresses two of four key information technology (IT) management controls—project planning and risk management—that are necessary to ensure systems work effectively and meet user needs. However, GAO found that FEMA has not fully addressed the other two controls—requirements development and systems testing and integration. By better analyzing progress on high-level user requirements, for example, FEMA will have greater assurance that FAC-Trax will meet user needs and achieve the goals of the new delivery model.

Enhancements to the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) Public Assistance Program under the New Delivery Model
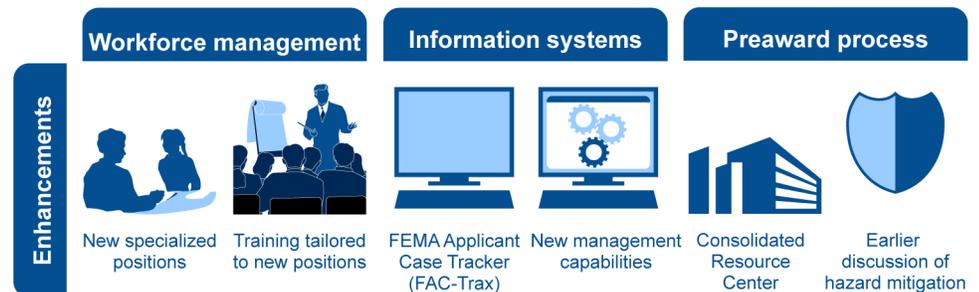
Source: GAO analysis of FEMA documentation; Art Explosion (clip art). | GAO-18-30