GAO Highlights

Highlights of GAO-18-354, a report to congressional requesters

September 2018

HOMELAND SECURITY GRANT PROGRAM

Additional Actions Could Further Enhance FEMA's Risk-Based Grant Assessment Model

Why GAO Did This Study

FEMA, a component of DHS, provides preparedness grants to state, local, tribal, and territorial governments to help prepare for, prevent, protect against, respond to, recover from and mitigate terrorist attacks or other disasters. SHSP grants fund the nation's 56 states and territories, while UASI grants fund eligible urban areas. Grant allocations have been based, in part, on FEMA's risk-based grant assessment model, with states and urban areas deemed to be at higher risk receiving more grant dollars than those deemed at lower risk. Since 2008, GAO and others have assessed the model and made recommendations to strengthen it.

This report 1) describes SHSP and UASI grant awards during fiscal years 2008 through 2018, and factors affecting grant distributions; and 2) examines the steps that FEMA has taken to strengthen its risk assessment model for allocating preparedness grants, and any additional opportunities to improve the model. GAO analyzed the information in FEMA's model, and data on SHSP and UASI grant awards for fiscal years 2008 through 2018. GAO also interviewed FEMA and DHS officials and collected documents.

What GAO Recommends

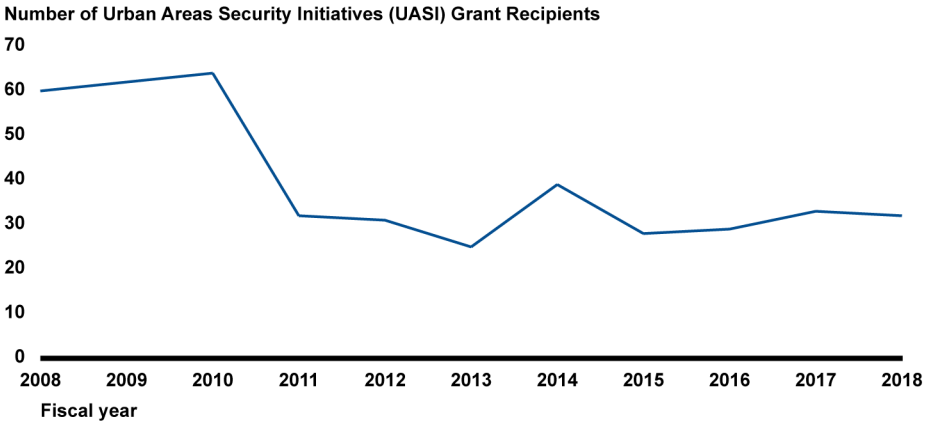
GAO is making three recommendations to FEMA to further strengthen its risk-based grant assessment model by (1) fully documenting the model's assumptions and justifications, (2) performing additional in-depth analyses, and (3) coordinating an external peer review. FEMA concurred with our recommendations.

View GAO-18-354. For more information, contact Chris P. Currie at (202) 512-8777 or CurrieC@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

GAO found that various factors affected Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) State Homeland Security Program (SHSP) and Urban Area Security Initiative (UASI) grant awards from fiscal year 2008 through 2018. SHSP grant awards to states were based on two factors—(1) minimum amounts set in law each year, and (2) FEMA's risk model. For example, in fiscal year 2012, each state was to receive a minimum of approximately $2.74 million, with each state receiving additional funds based on its relative risk score. Conversely, UASI grant awards are made based on its FEMA's risk-based grant assessment model, which ranks each urban area relative to others in that year, and Department of Homeland Security (DHS) leadership decisions on how funding should be allocated. From fiscal year 2008 through 2018, the number of USAI grantees varied from year to year (see figure below).

Annual Number of Urban Area Security Initiative (UASI) Grantees for Fiscal Years 2008 through 2018



Source: GAO analysis of DHS and FEMA documents and information provided in interviews. | GAO-18-354

Since 2008, FEMA has taken steps to strengthen its risk-based grant assessment model, but has not incorporated additional scientific practices into its model. For example, in 2011 FEMA included more information in its model on potential targets and their vulnerability in each state and urban area, addressing a prior GAO recommendation. More recently in 2018, FEMA added additional factors to better assess vulnerability in each state and urban area, such as the number of special events where large crowds gather and soft targets susceptible to lone wolf attacks, among other things. However, GAO found that FEMA does not fully utilize scientific practices recognized by the National Research Council and the Office of Management and Budget as best practices. Specifically, FEMA did not fully document its model's underlying assumptions, such as the weights in its model or the justification for changes to these weights. FEMA also did not perform the level of analysis needed to determine how changes to its model could affect the resulting risk scores. Finally, FEMA has not coordinated an independent external peer review of its model. Applying such scientific practices could assist FEMA in further strengthening its model.