

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-18-366](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

FEMA's IA program provides help to individuals to meet their immediate needs after a disaster, such as shelter and medical expenses. When a state, U.S. territory, or tribe requests IA assistance through a federal disaster declaration, FEMA evaluates the request against regulatory factors, such as concentration of damages, and provides a recommendation to the President, who makes a final declaration decision.

GAO was asked to review FEMA's IA declaration process. This report examines (1) the number of IA declaration requests received, declared, and denied, and IA actual obligations from calendar years 2008 through 2016, (2) the extent to which FEMA accounts for the regulatory factors when evaluating IA requests, and (3) any challenges FEMA regions and select states reported on the declaration process and factors and any FEMA actions to revise them. GAO reviewed FEMA's policies, IA declaration requests and obligation data, and FEMA's RVARs from July 2012 through December 2016, the most recent years for which data were available. GAO also reviewed proposed rulemaking comments and interviewed FEMA officials from all 10 regions and 11 state emergency management offices selected based on declaration requests and other factors.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that FEMA evaluate why regions are not completing the RVARs for each element of the current IA regulatory factors and take corrective steps, if necessary. DHS concurred with the recommendation.

View [GAO-18-366](#). For more information, contact Chris P. Currie at (404) 679-1875 or curriec@gao.gov.

May 2018

FEDERAL DISASTER ASSISTANCE

Individual Assistance Requests Often Granted, but FEMA Could Better Document Factors Considered

What GAO Found

From calendar years 2008 through 2016, the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Federal Emergency and Management Agency (FEMA) received 294 Individual Assistance (IA) declaration requests from states, U.S. territories, and tribes to help individuals meet their immediate needs after a disaster. Of these, the President declared 168 and denied 126 requests. Across the various types of IA declaration requests, severe storms (190) were the most common disaster type and drought (1) was among the least common. FEMA obligated about \$8.6 billion in IA for disaster declarations during this period.

GAO found that FEMA regions did not consistently obtain and document information on all elements of established IA regulatory factors when making IA recommendations to headquarters. Following a declaration request, a FEMA region is to prepare a Regional Administrator's Validation and Recommendation (RVAR)—a document designed to include data on each of the six IA regulatory factors for each declaration request as well as the regional administrator's recommendation. GAO reviewed all 81 RVARs from July 2012—the date FEMA began using the new RVAR template—through December 2016. GAO found that regions did not consistently obtain and document information for the elements required under the six regulatory factors (see table). For example, only 44 of the 81 RVARs documented all elements under the concentration of damage factor. By evaluating why regions are not completing all elements of each current IA regulatory factor, FEMA could identify whether any corrective steps are needed.

Analysis of 81 Regional Administrator's Validation and Recommendations by Element for Each Individual Assistance (IA) Regulatory Factor Documented from July 2012 through December 2016

IA Regulatory Factor	All elements documented	Some elements documented	No elements documented
Concentration of damages	44	37	0
Trauma	30	51	0
Special populations	72	8	1
Voluntary agency assistance	76	5	0
Insurance coverage	5	73	3
Average amount of IA by state	11	66	4

Source: GAO analysis based of Federal Emergency Management Agency's Regional Administrator's Validation and Recommendations. | GAO-18-366

Officials from the 10 FEMA regions and 11 states GAO interviewed, reported positive relationships with each other, but also cited various challenges with the IA declaration process and regulatory factors. For example, these officials told GAO that there are no established minimum thresholds for IA, making final determinations more subjective and the rationale behind denials unclear. However, as required by the Sandy Recovery Improvement Act of 2013, FEMA has taken steps to revise the IA factors by issuing a notice of proposed rulemaking. According to FEMA, the proposed rule aims to provide more objective criteria, clarify the threshold for eligibility, and speed up the IA declaration process. As of April 2018, the proposed rule was still under consideration. According to FEMA officials, they plan to finalize the rule in late 2018; therefore, it is too early to know the extent to which it will address these challenges.