

Why GAO Did This Study

During emergencies, reliable communications are critical. Disasters, such as 2017's hurricanes, continue to test the nation's emergency communications capabilities. As disasters can cross jurisdictional boundaries, collaboration within and across regions is very important.

GAO was asked to review implementation of the Post-Katrina Act's provisions related to disaster preparedness, response, and recovery. This report examines: (1) challenges related to emergency communications that selected stakeholders have experienced; (2) their views on DHS's emergency communications assistance; and (3) the regional working groups established by the Post-Katrina Act and their effect on emergency communications capabilities. GAO reviewed DHS's reports and grant data for fiscal years 2011–2016 and conducted case studies of three cities—Houston, Los Angeles, and Boston—selected based on the number of declared disasters, DHS grant funding, and geographic diversity. GAO interviewed DHS officials; leaders of all 10 regional working groups and other stakeholders, including public safety officials in the case study cities; and others chosen for their expertise.

What GAO Recommends

FEMA should work with regional working-group members to reach consensus and implement an ongoing mechanism, such as a national-level working group, to encourage nationwide collaboration across regions. DHS concurred with this recommendation.

View [GAO-18-379](#). For more information, contact Mark Goldstein at (202) 512-2834 or GoldsteinM@gao.gov.

EMERGENCY COMMUNICATIONS

Increased Regional Collaboration Could Enhance Capabilities

What GAO Found

Selected first responders and public safety officials identified various challenges related to emergency communications. These challenges include attaining the interoperability of communication systems, obtaining funding, ensuring ongoing training, and increasing the emphasis on communications during emergency response exercises. For example, some stakeholders told GAO about challenges related to equipment that is not interoperable, and others said first responders need training after investments are made in new interoperable communications equipment.

To help address these challenges and as required by the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act of 2006 (Post-Katrina Act), the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has provided technical assistance, such as training, and Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) grants. It has also established regional emergency communications coordination working groups, which bring together stakeholders from different levels of government and the private sector within FEMA's 10 regions.

While emergency communications challenges persist, stakeholders told GAO that DHS's technical assistance generally meets their needs and that FEMA grants have helped them enhance emergency communications capabilities. In particular, stakeholders found training for specific communications positions was useful. Houston-area officials said this training was critical in preparing first responders for Hurricane Harvey. Some stakeholders told GAO that FEMA grants helped them address needs that would otherwise go unfunded, including interoperable communications networks and equipment.

GAO found that the regional working groups have enhanced emergency communications capabilities through building relationships and sharing information. Within the respective regions, group members have:

- assisted each other during disasters and emergencies,
- developed technical solutions to enhance interoperability, and
- addressed policy concerns, such as the use of interoperable radio channels during emergencies.

However, most regional group leaders told GAO that more collaboration across the groups was needed. GAO's prior work has also found that including all relevant participants can enhance collaborative efforts. Further, DHS's strategic plan for emergency communications established a vision of collaboration among stakeholders across the nation. While FEMA has encouraged collaboration among regional working-group leaders, cross-regional efforts have been limited and do not involve all group members. Developing and implementing an appropriate ongoing mechanism for collaboration could enhance emergency communications capabilities, such as by helping group members address common challenges. Without ways for all members of these groups to collaborate across regions, members may be missing opportunities to share information and leverage the knowledge and experiences of their counterparts throughout the nation.