

Why GAO Did This Study

Three sequential hurricanes—Harvey, Irma, and Maria—affected more than 28 million people in 2017, according to FEMA. Hurricane survivors aged 65 and older and those with disabilities faced particular challenges evacuating to safe shelter, accessing medicine, and obtaining recovery assistance. In June 2018, FEMA began implementing a new approach to assist individuals with disabilities.

GAO was asked to review disaster assistance for individuals who are older or have disabilities. This report addresses (1) challenges FEMA partners reported in providing assistance to such individuals, (2) challenges such individuals faced accessing assistance from FEMA and actions FEMA took to address these challenges, and (3) the extent to which FEMA has implemented its new approach to disability integration.

GAO analyzed FEMA data and reviewed relevant federal laws, agency policy, and federal frameworks. GAO also interviewed state, territorial, local, and nonprofit officials in Florida, Puerto Rico, Texas, and the U.S. Virgin Islands; FEMA officials at headquarters, in regional offices, and deployed to disaster sites; and officials at relevant nonprofit organizations.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making seven recommendations to FEMA, including that it establish new registration questions, objectives for its new disability integration approach, and a training plan for FEMA staff. The agency concurred with all but one of the recommendations.

View [GAO-19-318](#). For more information, contact Elizabeth Curda at (202) 512-7215 or curdae@gao.gov.

DISASTER ASSISTANCE

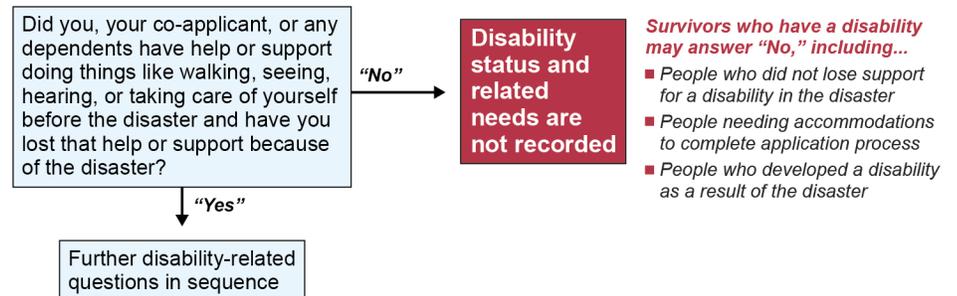
FEMA Action Needed to Better Support Individuals Who Are Older or Have Disabilities

What GAO Found

A range of officials from entities that partner with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)—including states, territories, localities, and nonprofits—reported challenges providing assistance to individuals who are older or have disabilities following the 2017 hurricanes. For example, officials said that many of these individuals required specialized assistance obtaining food, water, medicine, and oxygen, but aid was sometimes difficult to provide. Officials in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands cited particular difficulties providing this assistance due to damaged roads and communication systems, as well as a lack of documentation of nursing home locations.

Based on GAO’s analysis of FEMA data and interviews with FEMA officials and stakeholders, aspects of the process to apply for assistance from FEMA after the 2017 hurricanes were challenging for older individuals and those with disabilities. According to stakeholders and FEMA officials, disability-related questions in the registration materials are confusing and easily misinterpreted. For example, FEMA’s registration process does not include an initial question that directly asks individuals if they have a disability or if they would like to request an accommodation for completing the application process (see figure below). While FEMA has made efforts to help registrants interpret the questions, it has not yet changed the language of the questions to improve clarity. As a result, individuals with disabilities may not have requested accommodations or reported having disabilities, which may have hindered FEMA’s ability to identify and assist them.

Sequence of Disability-Related Questions in FEMA’s Registration Process



Source: GAO analysis of Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) documentation. | GAO-19-318

FEMA did not establish objectives before implementing its new approach to disability integration, which includes adding new disability integration staff in the regions and decreasing the number of disability integration advisors deployed to disaster sites. Without documented objectives for the new approach, regional leadership across the nation may implement changes inconsistently. In addition, the new approach shifts the responsibility for directly assisting individuals with disabilities to all FEMA staff. FEMA has taken some initial steps to provide training on the changes; however, it has not established a plan for delivering comprehensive disability-related training to all staff who will be directly interacting with individuals with disabilities. Developing a plan to train all staff would better position FEMA to achieve its intended goals and better equip deployed staff to identify and assist these survivors.