

GAO@100 Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-21-297](#), a report to the Chairman, Committee on Energy and Commerce, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Hurricane Maria battered Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands in 2017, causing great physical harm to residents and severely damaging the islands' critical infrastructure, including telecommunications networks (see photo). Federal agencies faced unprecedented challenges in the hurricane's aftermath that complicated efforts to address telecommunications outages. While DHS is the lead agency in federal disaster response, FCC has a supporting role related to telecommunications issues.

GAO was asked to review FCC's response to telecommunications outages after Hurricane Maria. This report examines (1) FCC's actions to support telecommunications restoration after Hurricane Maria and the extent to which FCC's disaster response role is clearly defined, and (2) FCC's efforts to identify lessons learned with public input and the extent to which FCC publicly communicated those efforts. GAO analyzed agency reports, assessed agency efforts against applicable criteria, and interviewed government officials and industry and advocacy representatives to obtain a range of non-generalizable viewpoints.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making two recommendations including that DHS should update its emergency support function guidance to clearly define FCC's disaster response role, and that FCC should enhance the transparency of its operations by publicly reporting on its Hurricane Recovery Task Force. FCC and DHS concurred with the recommendations.

View [GAO-21-297](#). For more information, contact Andrew Voh Ah at (202) 512-2834 or vonaha@gao.gov.

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TELECOMMUNICATIONS

FCC Assisted in Hurricane Maria Network Restoration, but a Clarified Disaster Response Role and Enhanced Communication Are Needed

What GAO Found

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) took several actions to support telecommunications restoration following Hurricane Maria. For example, FCC collected network outage information, provided staff assistance to Puerto Rico, created the Hurricane Recovery Task Force to support communications restoration in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, and made funds available for network restoration. However, GAO found that FCC's disaster response role was unclear in guidance published by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), even though the guidance states that all levels of government should understand their respective roles. In particular, DHS did not define specific actions for FCC in the emergency support function guidance related to restoring communications infrastructure; this lack of clarity could have contributed to confusion and delays in the hurricane's aftermath. By updating the emergency support guidance with FCC's role clearly defined, DHS could help to reduce confusion and leverage FCC's knowledge on new or evolving technologies that could assist in faster network recovery following disasters.

Aerial View of Downed Tower in Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria, September 2017



Source: Telecommunications Regulatory Board of Puerto Rico. | GAO-21-297

FCC identified lessons learned to enhance its disaster response and recovery efforts following the 2017 Atlantic hurricane season and issued a report in August 2018 that included observations from four hurricanes, including Hurricane Maria. For example, FCC noted that it could enhance its role in training and improve its coordination with federal partners. However, specifically related to Hurricane Maria, GAO found that FCC obtained limited public input and that the Hurricane Recovery Task Force's efforts lacked transparency because FCC had not publicly communicated the task force's actions or findings. Lacking transparent communications on the task force's actions and findings, the public does not have a complete and accurate account of FCC's response efforts for Hurricane Maria; such an account could aid future disaster preparation. By publicly reporting the task force's efforts, FCC could help ensure territorial government officials and others understand what FCC has accomplished and what additional actions are needed to build telecommunications networks that are more resilient.