Why GAO Did This Study

Each year, disasters affect hundreds of American communities and cause billions of dollars of damage. Disaster recovery is a complex process with many factors that affect individual and community outcomes, including various socioeconomic and demographic groups. Recently, federal actions have focused on equitable administration of federal recovery assistance.

What GAO Found

GAO’s past work has shown areas where improvements can be made to federal disaster recovery programs to help disaster survivors and state, local, territorial, and tribal governments. While these programs are not typically targeted toward only low income or vulnerable populations, GAO’s past work and recommendations identified areas that could help these populations. Specifically,

- GAO reported in October 2021 that the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s (FEMA) flood mapping investments for fiscal years 2012 through 2020 were lower for communities with higher levels of social vulnerability and underserved populations than communities with lower levels of social vulnerability and underserved populations, other factors being equal. GAO recommended that FEMA better use flood risk data to prioritize flood mapping for vulnerable communities;

- in September 2020, GAO found that disaster survivors, including low-income individuals, faced numerous challenges obtaining aid and understanding the Individuals and Households Program, a FEMA program that provides housing assistance and other needs assistance to individuals affected by a major disaster or emergency. GAO recommended, among other things, that FEMA simplify and streamline the disaster assistance process for survivors;

- in 2019, GAO found that officials from entities that partnered with FEMA reported challenges following the 2017 hurricanes providing assistance to individuals who are older or who have disabilities. GAO recommended that FEMA revise its application process to better serve survivors with disabilities.

FEMA is taking actions to address many of these recommendations.

What GAO Recommends

GAO made recommendations to FEMA in prior reports designed to address the challenges in this statement. For example, GAO has made recommendations to FEMA to help disaster survivors navigate the application process and to revise processes to better serve survivors with disabilities. FEMA has taken actions to address many of these recommendations.

View GAO-22-105488. For more information, contact Chris Currie at (404) 679-1875 or CurrieC@gao.gov.