Better Data Are Needed to Ensure Equitable Delivery of HUD Block Grant Funds to Vulnerable Populations

What GAO Found

Recent Federal Register notices for the Department of Housing and Urban Development’s (HUD) Community Development Block Grant Disaster Recovery (CDBG-DR) funds direct grantees to demonstrate how their programs will promote housing for vulnerable populations. Grantees generally have been required to spend 70 percent of their funds on low- and moderate-income people. Draft action plans that grantees submit to HUD are to describe how grant funds will be used and the populations to be served, including vulnerable populations such as racial minorities, the elderly, or persons with disabilities. HUD provides tools, such as strategies for reaching people with limited English proficiency, to help grantees serve these populations.

When reviewing grantees’ draft plans, HUD officials told GAO they typically require revisions to clarify the populations defined as vulnerable, how funds will help them, and how grantees will reach out to traditionally underserved populations. HUD officials also noted that vulnerable populations can be difficult to define because they may vary locally and regionally based on factors such as geography, housing stock, and policy. They described plans to define vulnerable populations in upcoming Federal Register notices.

Grantees we reviewed seek to assist vulnerable populations, but HUD does not collect and analyze key demographic data needed to fully assess the extent of CDBG-DR assistance to these populations.

- HUD requires grantees to collect selected data (race and ethnicity and the gender of single-headed households) on activities that directly benefit households or individuals (such as housing).
- However, HUD requires grantees to report these data only for those actually served and not for all applicants.
- The six grantees GAO reviewed gather additional demographic information on both applicants and those served, including age, disability status, and primary language.

A 2021 Executive Order cited the need for better data and transparency on assistance to vulnerable populations, noting that a lack of data impedes efforts to measure and advance equity. By collecting, analyzing, and publicly reporting these additional demographic data, HUD and grantees could better assess whether they effectively reach the populations CDBG-DR activities are intended to serve.

Vulnerable populations may experience several challenges accessing CDBG-DR assistance, according to grantees and organizations GAO interviewed and studies GAO reviewed. These include language barriers (individuals with limited English proficiency may need translation services), limited access to transportation (to get to assistance centers), and program requirements (individuals may not be able to produce or complete the documentation required). Some grantees said they addressed these challenges by acquiring translation services and developing outreach plans for vulnerable populations.