2017 HURRICANES
Update on FEMA's Disaster Recovery Efforts in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands

What GAO Found
In response to recommendations GAO made in prior reports, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has taken steps to improve its management of disaster recovery programs in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI). For example, GAO found in February 2020 that Puerto Rico government officials did not always understand what FEMA guidance was in effect for the Public Assistance grant program. Thus, GAO recommended that FEMA develop a repository of current applicable Public Assistance policies and guidance for Puerto Rico and make it available to all recovery partners. In response, FEMA made these documents accessible to Puerto Rico recovery partners through an internal application management system.

As of August 2022, GAO found that FEMA has obligated about $32.2 billion in funding for Public Assistance projects in response to hurricanes Irma and Maria. In turn, the governments of Puerto Rico and the USVI have expended approximately $7.7 billion of the Public Assistance obligations as of the same period. About $1 billion of these Public Assistance expenditures were for permanent work projects that support long-term rebuilding, such as rebuilding schools, the power grid, water systems, and other damaged infrastructure. GAO also visited Puerto Rico in March 2022 and July 2022 as part of its ongoing work, in part to observe disaster-damaged areas and assess the progress of projects it had visited for prior work (see figure).

Status of Selected Recovery Projects in Puerto Rico

(left to right) A damaged water tank from the winds of Hurricane Maria observed in February 2020. The largely repaired water tank observed in March 2022. A school with internal mold and water damages caused by Hurricane Maria observed in March 2019. The same school observed in March 2022 awaiting repairs. According to a FEMA official, a construction crew removed doors, windows, and some walls due to asbestos and lead in the building.

Source: GAO. | GAO-22-106211

In GAO’s ongoing work, officials interviewed thus far have described potential challenges to the continuing disaster recovery efforts in Puerto Rico, including the increasing cost of projects due to inflation and difficulties procuring resources to construct projects, among others. Preliminary observations from GAO’s ongoing work also indicate that FEMA and the government of Puerto Rico are regularly communicating through formal and informal means to, among other things, discuss the status of projects and related grant funding or construction issues. Further, FEMA has taken actions, such as providing trainings, to help address some of these issues.

GAO will continue to evaluate disaster recovery efforts in Puerto Rico and plans to report its findings in 2023.