

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-23-104956](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

Each year, disasters such as floods, hurricanes, and wildfires affect hundreds of American communities. The federal government provides billions of dollars to support community recovery. According to the U.S. Global Change Research Program, extreme weather events are projected to become more frequent and intense in parts of the U.S. as a result of changes in the climate. This and an increasing reliance on federal assistance are key sources of federal fiscal exposure.

Federal law included a provision for GAO to review issues related to federal response and recovery following the 2018 disasters. This report addresses: 1) the federal approach to disaster recovery and challenges state and local officials have identified in using federal recovery assistance, and 2) actions Congress or federal agencies could take to improve the federal approach.

GAO analyzed relevant statutes, policies, and other documentation; interviewed state and local officials involved in recovery for a non-generalizable sample of nine disasters selected to capture a range of experiences; and convened 20 experts to discuss options for improving federal disaster recovery efforts.

What GAO Recommends

Congress should consider establishing an independent commission to recommend reforms to the federal government's approach to disaster recovery. GAO is also making four new recommendations for agencies to identify and take steps to better manage fragmentation across disaster recovery programs. All three agencies concurred.

View [GAO-23-104956](#). For more information, contact Chris Currie at (404) 679-1875 or CurrieC@gao.gov

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DISASTER RECOVERY

Actions Needed to Improve the Federal Approach

What GAO Found

The federal approach to disaster recovery is fragmented across more than 30 federal entities. This approach is the product of over 40 years of incremental efforts to address emerging issues in disaster recovery through legislative reform as well as differing agency regulations and policies.

There have been benefits to having multiple entities involved in disaster recovery, but it has also created challenges. Specifically, state and local officials GAO met with said that they experienced challenges navigating multiple federal recovery programs, including their differing requirements and time frames; multiple federal authorities; and limited data sharing. They noted that these challenges could make it harder for communities—and particularly vulnerable communities, such as lower income areas—to successfully navigate multiple federal programs. Congress and federal agencies have taken steps to address aspects of these challenges—by creating interagency agreements to increase communication and by reducing program complexity—but the challenges remain.

Based on a literature review, interviews with federal, state and local officials, and a panel of experts, GAO identified 11 options that could improve the federal approach to disaster recovery. Determining the best option is a policy choice and requires complex tradeoff decisions. Other than where GAO has made prior recommendations related to certain options, GAO does not endorse any particular option. This report identifies ways the options could be implemented and the strengths and limitations of each.

Options to Improve the Federal Government's Approach to Disaster Recovery

1. Develop new efforts to clearly and consistently communicate about recovery programs.
2. Provide coordinated technical assistance throughout disaster recovery.
3. Develop models to more effectively coordinate across disaster recovery programs.
4. Develop a single online application portal for disaster recovery that feeds into one repository.
5. Standardize requirements of federal disaster recovery programs.
6. Simplify requirements of federal disaster recovery programs.
7. Further incentivize investments in disaster resilience as part of federal recovery programs.
8. Identify desired recovery outcomes and develop a mechanism to track these across programs.
9. Prioritize disaster recovery funding for vulnerable communities across all federal programs.
10. Consolidate federal disaster recovery programs.
11. Adjust the role of the federal government in disaster recovery.

Source: GAO analysis of relevant literature; interviews with federal, state, and local officials; and a panel of experts. | [GAO-23-104956](#)

Experts who participated in GAO's panel agreed that the federal approach to disaster recovery needs to be improved. They discussed ways to make it more efficient and effective; better incentivize disaster resilience; and more equitably distribute assistance. No single federal entity or Congressional committee oversees disaster recovery as a whole. Establishing an independent commission to recommend disaster recovery reforms—including consideration of these 11 options—could provide Congress and agencies specific actions to improve the federal approach.

Short of government-wide reform, GAO found that agencies could do more to effectively manage fragmentation across federal disaster recovery programs. Doing so could improve service delivery to disaster survivors and communities; reduce federal fiscal exposure; and improve the effectiveness of recovery efforts.