

Staff Reductions and Lack of Planning May Impact Mission Readiness

GAO-26-108427

August 2026

A report to congressional committees

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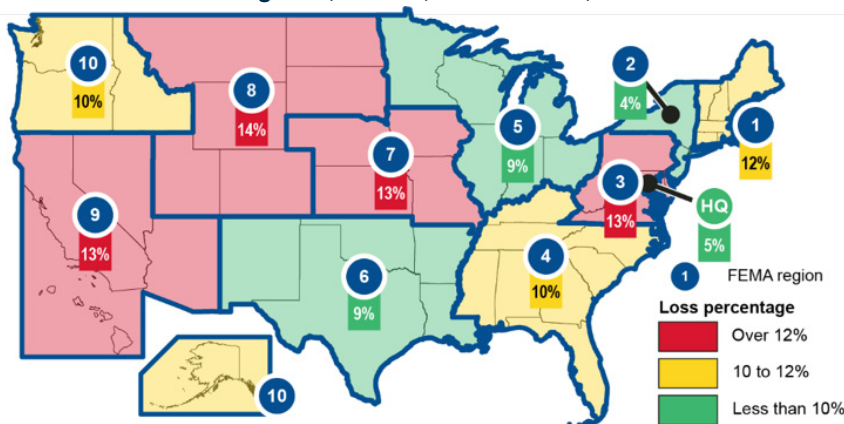
What GAO Found

The increasing number and complexity of disasters demonstrates the need to ensure that the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) workforce can meet its core mission to help people before, during, and after disasters. In response to 2025 presidential directives, many federal agencies have taken steps to reduce the size of their workforces. In fiscal year 2025, FEMA employed about 25,134 employees, on average. However, over 4,300 employees separated from FEMA in fiscal year 2025—a 55 percent increase in separations from fiscal year 2024 (see figure). These separations have resulted in a loss of institutional knowledge and experienced personnel, according to FEMA officials, and have exacerbated longstanding workforce challenges.

In 2025, FEMA rescinded its strategic plan. As a result, the agency has no overall strategic direction on which to base workforce planning—a systematic and continuous process for identifying the size and composition of a workforce needed to achieve an agency's mission. Without a strategic plan that outlines clear goals and objectives, FEMA cannot effectively determine its future workforce needs, potentially putting its mission at risk.

In addition, GAO found that FEMA did not base its 2025 and 2026 workforce reduction decisions, proposed future workforce actions, or workforce policy changes on the results of a workforce analysis—an assessment of the current state of the workforce and a forecast of future organizational requirements. FEMA took these actions without assessing whether it had the necessary staffing capacity to meet its mission, including its statutory requirements. Without workforce planning, FEMA is not positioned to determine whether it has the right number of people with the right skills in the right positions at the right time to meet its mission. Further, for more than a decade, GAO has identified challenges FEMA has encountered in maintaining a sufficient workforce to effectively meet its mission. Although FEMA has made progress towards addressing some of these challenges, actions by Congress would provide additional accountability to ensure that FEMA maintains a workforce capable of meeting its mission while addressing long-standing workforce management challenges.

Percentage of Headquarters and Regional FEMA Staff Separations Due to Voluntary Workforce Reduction Programs, Jan. 20, 2025–Jan. 10, 2026



Source: GAO analysis of Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) data; U.S. Census Bureau (map). | GAO-26-108427

Why GAO Did This Study

FEMA has long-standing workforce management challenges that make supporting disaster response and recovery difficult. As such, GAO added strengthening FEMA's disaster workforce and capacity to its High Risk List in February 2025.

GAO was asked to review FEMA's ability to provide effective staffing for disaster response and recovery and how FEMA is addressing any workforce challenges. This report examines (1) how FEMA's workforce changed in 2025 and 2026; (2) the extent to which FEMA has strategic direction to identify workforce needs; and (3) the extent to which FEMA has assessed the ability of its workforce to meet its mission needs.

GAO evaluated FEMA's workforce planning efforts against key practices for workforce planning and analyzed data on FEMA's workforce size and composition. GAO also reviewed documentation related to (1) workforce changes and decisions in 2025 and 2026 and (2) FEMA's strategic direction. Lastly, GAO interviewed FEMA officials in headquarters and all 10 regions.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that Congress consider requiring that significant FEMA workforce decisions be informed by the results of the agency's workforce planning process. Congress should also consider requiring FEMA to report to Congress on the results of its workforce planning process prior to the start of each year's hurricane season.

GAO is also making three recommendations to FEMA, including that it issue a strategic plan with clear goals and objectives and develop and implement a workforce planning process that includes a workforce analysis. DHS agreed with the recommendations.