



U.S. Government
Accountability Office

Disaster Assistance High-Risk Series: State and Local Response Capabilities

GAO-26-108599

Report to Congressional Addressees

December 18, 2025



Why This Matters

Twenty years after Hurricane Katrina, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)—the lead agency for federal disaster response—and state and local governments continue to face challenges preparing for and responding to large-scale disasters. Responsibility for responding to a disaster generally begins at the state and local level, with the federal government providing assistance for incidents that exceed state and local ability to respond.

The Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act of 2006 (Post-Katrina Act) required the development of a national preparedness system to enable the nation to achieve a target level of preparedness for disasters.¹ Recent disasters such as Hurricanes Helene and Milton in 2024, the Los Angeles wildfires in early 2025, and the July 2025 flooding in Texas demonstrate the need for government-wide action to deliver assistance effectively. Given this, we added *Improving the Delivery of Federal Disaster Assistance* to GAO's High-Risk List in February 2025.²

Congress and the President have signaled an interest in reforms to FEMA. For example, in January 2025, the President established a FEMA Review Council to assess FEMA's disaster response efforts and recommend improvements to the agency. We were asked to review long-standing challenges and emerging issues in federal response efforts for recent disasters.³ This report, the second in a series, provides information on federal disaster preparedness and response assistance provided before and during recent disasters, variation in state and local response capabilities, and considerations for potential changes to disaster response roles.⁴

¹6 U.S.C. § 744.

²GAO, *High-Risk Series: Heightened Attention Could Save Billions More and Improve Government Efficiency and Effectiveness*, [GAO-25-107743](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 25, 2025).

³GAO conducted this review in response to the American Relief Act, 2025, and requests from congressional members. The American Relief Act, 2025, included a provision for GAO to conduct audits and investigations related to Hurricanes Helene and Milton, and other disasters declared pursuant to the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act (Stafford Act) in calendar years 2023 and 2024. Pub. L. No. 118-158, 138 Stat. 1723, 1754 (2024).

⁴The first report in this series focused on the federal disaster response workforce, including workforce challenges during recent disasters and potential implications of recent workforce changes. See GAO, *Disaster Assistance High-Risk Series: Federal Response Workforce Readiness*, [GAO-25-108598](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 2, 2025).

Key Takeaways

- State and local governments rely extensively on assistance from FEMA and other federal agencies to prepare for and respond to major disasters. This assistance can include preparedness grants, training and technical support, and response support, such as direct federal assistance for debris removal, power restoration, and water system assessments.
- State and local disaster response capabilities vary widely across the country, including among states and within states at the local level. Our analysis of selected state preparedness assessments found wide variation in the extent to which states met their response targets—i.e., their ability to conduct critical response activities, such as restoration of water and power services. We found the percentage of targets these states reported they could meet varied widely, ranging from 12 percent to 90 percent of targets.
- Congress and the President have demonstrated an interest in reforms to FEMA. For example, the President has signaled support for transitioning more disaster response functions to state and local governments. According to federal and state officials, to the extent such changes occur, considerations for policymakers include (1) clear communication and guidance on potential changes, (2) sufficient time for state and local governments to prepare, (3) support needs for catastrophic or widespread disasters, and (4) FEMA's role in federal response coordination.

Disaster Preparedness and Response Assistance

The Federal Government Provides Extensive Support for State and Local Disaster Preparedness and Response

National Preparedness and Response Roles

Enacted after the preparedness and response failures associated with Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the Post-Katrina Act requires FEMA to develop the national preparedness system.⁵ The national preparedness system includes, among other elements, the *National Response Framework*. The Act also directs FEMA to establish a comprehensive system to assess the nation's overall preparedness, including at the state and local level.⁶

The national preparedness system helps guide the efforts at all levels of government to build and sustain 32 core capabilities across the five mission areas of prevention, protection, mitigation, response and recovery. Eleven of these capabilities focus specifically on response functions, such as mass search and rescue and logistics and supply chain management. Additionally, one capability crosses the response and recovery mission areas, and three capabilities extend across all five mission areas.⁷ For the purposes of this report, we refer to these 15 capabilities collectively as "response capabilities." FEMA

⁵6 U.S.C. § 744

⁶6 U.S.C. § 749.

⁷The 11 capabilities focused on response include (1) critical transportation; (2) environmental response/health and safety; (3) fatality management services; (4) fire management and suppression; (5) logistics and supply chain management; (6) mass care services; (7) mass search and rescue operations; (8) on-scene security, protection, and law enforcement; (9) operational communications; (10) public health, healthcare, and emergency medical services; and (11) situational assessment. Additionally, infrastructure systems is a cross-cutting capability that extends across both response and recovery. The three capabilities that extend across all five mission areas are planning, public information and warning, and operational coordination.

requires that state and local governments annually assess their preparedness for these response capabilities to receive certain FEMA grants.

The *National Response Framework* describes roles and responsibilities of governmental and non-governmental entities involved in disaster response and guides these activities.⁸ For example, the responsibility for responding to a disaster generally begins at the local level, and tribal, state, and territorial governments supplement as necessary.

When an incident occurs that exceeds or is anticipated to exceed their capabilities, the federal government may provide assistance through a major disaster or emergency declaration under the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act (Stafford Act).⁹ When a major disaster or emergency is declared, FEMA is the lead agency for coordinating response efforts and works with state and local governments to address gaps in their response capabilities.

FEMA coordinates and delivers federal disaster response assistance through several mechanisms, including

- direct assistance, such as meals, water, and tarps;
- mission assignments—i.e., work orders—to other federal agencies, such as for debris removal, power restoration, or water systems assessment and related emergency repairs;
- interagency agreements to acquire supplies or services directly from other government agencies; and
- contracts for supplies and services, such as for housing inspections.

FEMA also provides recovery grants to state and local governments to repair and rebuild public infrastructure and grants directly to individuals for housing and other needs.

Federal Support for Disaster Preparedness and Response

FEMA and other federal agencies provide extensive support to state and local governments for disaster preparedness and response, including through mechanisms developed in response to Post-Katrina Act requirements. For example, FEMA provides preparedness grants as well as training and technical support to strengthen state and local disaster response capabilities. Additionally, FEMA and other federal agencies, such as the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), supplement state and local efforts during disaster response.

Preparedness grants. FEMA administers a suite of preparedness grants designed to improve the nation's readiness in preventing, protecting against, responding to, recovering from, and mitigating terrorist attacks and other disasters. FEMA has traditionally provided three primary preparedness grants that jurisdictions can use to strengthen their emergency management core capabilities. These include the Emergency Management Performance Grant (EMPG) program, the State Homeland Security Program, and the Urban Area

⁸Department of Homeland Security, *National Response Framework*, 4th ed. (Oct. 28, 2019).

⁹42 U.S.C. §§ 5170, 5191. Under the Stafford Act, the President may declare a major disaster or emergency in response to a request by the governor of a state or territory or the chief executive of a tribal government. The request is to be based on a finding that the disaster is of such severity and magnitude that effective response and recovery are beyond state and local capabilities and that federal assistance is necessary. An emergency declaration authorizes more limited types of assistance.

Security Initiative.¹⁰ The EMPG program, codified by the Post-Katrina Act, is the federal government's primary source of support for developing and maintaining emergency management expertise.¹¹ For example, the grants can be used to support state and local emergency management personnel costs, among other things.

The State Homeland Security Program and the Urban Area Security Initiative, on the other hand, were established by the Implementing Recommendations of the 9/11 Commission Act and are intended to help state and local governments prevent, prepare for, protect against, and respond to acts of terrorism.¹² Grants from these programs may also be used in a manner that enhances preparedness for disasters unrelated to acts of terrorism, as long as they also support the primary goals of preventing, preparing for, protecting against, or responding to acts of terrorism. According to FEMA officials, some of the projects funded by these anti-terrorism grants can also enhance response capabilities required to respond to natural disasters. For example, a recipient could use the grant to purchase a mobile command center that could be used for coordinating response to a flood or wildfire.

FEMA awarded almost \$15 billion through these three preparedness grant programs in fiscal years 2014 through 2024, as shown in table 1.¹³ Additionally, we analyzed information for the 10 states impacted by Hurricanes Helene and Milton, the 2025 Los Angeles wildfires, and the July 2025 Texas floods.¹⁴ Each of these states reported relying on these grant programs to sustain their response capabilities in their annual preparedness assessments, identifying at least one FEMA preparedness grant as a funding source for at least one response capability.¹⁵

¹⁰See 6 U.S.C. §§ 604, 605, 762. FEMA also provides other grants to jurisdictions that could help enhance national preparedness—such as fire safety grants that fund resources to equip and train emergency personnel, enhance efficiencies, and support community resilience. See 15 U.S.C. §§ 2229, 2229a. For more information about the EMPG program, the State Homeland Security Program, and the Urban Area Security Initiative, see GAO, *National Preparedness: Additional Actions Needed to Address Gaps in the Nation's Emergency Management Capabilities*, [GAO-20-297](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 4, 2020).

¹¹6 U.S.C. § 762.

¹²6 U.S.C. §§ 604, 605.

¹³This total represents award amounts for the fiscal years 2014 through 2024 funding cycles, as of July 2025. FEMA receives appropriations for these three programs as part of the annual appropriations cycle. See, e.g., Pub. L. No. 118-47, 138 Stat. 460, 608 (2024). This total also includes grants awarded through the EMPG program based on supplemental appropriations in the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021. Pub. L. No. 117-2, § 4014, 135 Stat. 4, 80.

¹⁴We analyzed annual preparedness assessments for the 10 states that received major disaster declarations for these disasters: California, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia.

¹⁵In these assessments, states identify whether certain FEMA preparedness grant programs, including the EMPG program, the State Homeland Security Program, and the Urban Area Security Initiative, are an additional or primary funding source, or not a source of funding for each capability.

Table 1: Amounts Awarded for Selected FEMA Preparedness Grant Programs, Fiscal Years 2014-2024

Fiscal Year	Emergency Management Performance Grant	State Homeland Security Program	Urban Area Security Initiative	Total (all programs)
Total awarded by program, 2014-2024	\$4,035,000,000	\$4,438,000,000	\$6,494,000,000	\$14,967,000,000

Source: GAO summary of Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) data. | GAO-26-108599

Notes: amounts awarded are rounded to the nearest million. This total represents award amounts for the fiscal years 2014 through 2024 funding cycles as of July 2025, including grants awarded through the Emergency Management Performance Grant program based on supplemental appropriations in the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021. Pub. L. No. 117-2, § 4014, 135 Stat. 4, 80.

Federal, state, and local officials described the importance of FEMA grants for state and local level emergency management activities more broadly, providing examples of how state and local governments use FEMA grants.¹⁶ For example:

- FEMA headquarters officials stated that generally, about half of EMPG awards support state and local emergency management personnel costs.
- Six states affected by recent disasters reported funding from 42 to 74 percent of their emergency management workforce with FEMA grants.¹⁷
- A local government official mentioned using preparedness grants to maintain its Emergency Operations Center, in addition to supporting personnel costs.
- Officials from one FEMA region stated state and local governments use the agency's preparedness grants to fund staff, conduct exercises, and carry out preparedness and mitigation projects.¹⁸

Training and technical support. FEMA also provides extensive training and technical support to state and local governments to improve their ability to respond to disasters. FEMA developed a national training program and the National Exercise Program in response to requirements in the Post-Katrina Act.¹⁹ As part of this, FEMA sponsors exercises with state and local governments to help them assess their emergency management capabilities. According to a FEMA report, the agency supported 71 exercises at the federal, regional, state, and local levels in 2024 to strengthen preparedness and coordination among agencies and provide critical learning and development initiatives.²⁰ In addition to these response exercises, FEMA

¹⁶For this report, we analyzed information from 56 interviews with and written responses from federal agencies involved in disaster response, such as FEMA, USACE, and EPA; and state and local governments impacted by disasters in recent years. We collected this information as part of this review and for other recent and ongoing GAO reviews of related topics.

¹⁷We asked the 10 states that received major disaster declarations for Hurricanes Helene and Milton, the 2025 Los Angeles wildfires, and the July 2025 Texas floods about federal preparedness and response support they received and response challenges in recent disasters, among other things. We received responses from six of the 10 states. See *How GAO Did This Study* at the end of this report for more information.

¹⁸FEMA has 10 regional offices located across the U.S.

¹⁹6 U.S.C. § 748.

²⁰FEMA, *Resilience Rising: 2024 Year in Review* (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 2025).

- provides training and education for first responders and emergency managers, such as in-person multi-day training on incident management, mass casualty response, and emergency response to a catastrophic natural disaster or terrorist act;
- manages the National Emergency Training Center, including the Emergency Management Institute; and
- posts on-demand webinars and other online courses and materials.

Some federal and state officials we spoke with emphasized the importance of FEMA's training and technical support, including for relationship building with federal, state, and local partners and in setting a national and professional standard for emergency management. For example:

- FEMA officials told us that these trainings and exercises are also a forum for emergency managers to come together and share expertise and provide an opportunity for relationship building between FEMA, state, and local governments. According to officials, these relationships improve coordination and response after disasters because FEMA and the state and local governments better understand each other's capabilities and priorities.
- Officials from one FEMA region explained that while some states have robust training programs, many depend on FEMA for critical professional training to implement effective emergency management programs.
- Officials from one state said FEMA's training provides nation-wide best practices and foundational skillsets for emergency management and other state officials. FEMA regional officials also underscored the importance of consistency in training for emergency response. For example, officials from one region stated that FEMA's training ensures access, quality, consistency, and coverage regionally and nationwide.

Officials from another state discussed the potential consequences of any reduction in this support. Specifically, they said that losing access to FEMA's subject-matter expertise would require a complete redevelopment of the state's training curriculum, straining resources and diminishing instructional capacity. Reducing FEMA's training programs would lead to preparedness gaps at the state and local level, the officials continued.

Disaster response support. When disasters exceed state and local capacity to respond, FEMA coordinates federal support, including through mission assignments directing other federal agencies to support response efforts. During recent disasters, such as Hurricanes Helene and Milton and the 2025 Los Angeles wildfires, FEMA and other federal partners provided significant response support.²¹ According to its September Disaster Relief Fund report, FEMA reported obligating over \$16.6 billion for Hurricanes Helene and Milton and the 2025 Los Angeles wildfires in fiscal year 2025 alone.²²

Additionally, federal agencies such as FEMA, USACE, and EPA deployed thousands of personnel to assist response efforts for these disasters. For

²¹[GAO-25-108598](#).

²²The September Disaster Relief Fund Report includes data as of September 30, 2025. The report does not include data for the July 2025 Texas floods. The Disaster Relief Fund is the primary source of federal disaster assistance and funds eligible response and recovery efforts associated with major disaster declarations. This can include direct federal assistance, reimbursement for mission assignments to other federal agencies; and disaster assistance for tribal, state, local, and territorial governments and individuals and households. FEMA will likely continue to obligate funds for recovery from these disasters for years, based on recovery timeframes for previous disasters.

example, federal agencies provided federal assistance through about 1,300 mission assignments for these disasters, as of August 1, 2025. The Hurricane Helene response alone involved 1,017 of these mission assignments, such as assigning USACE for debris removal and EPA for water quality testing. USACE reported being reimbursed over \$338 million for conducting 34 FEMA mission assignments for Hurricane Helene as of October 25, 2024, about a month after the disaster.²³ Local officials also stated that they could not have achieved the same pace of debris removal following the 2025 Los Angeles wildfires without USACE leading the operation. Figure 1 shows USACE debris removal efforts after the Los Angeles wildfires.

Figure 1: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Debris Removal Efforts After the 2025 Los Angeles Wildfires, May 2025



Source: GAO. | GAO-26-108599

Six states also described how they used federal response resources from FEMA and other federal agencies. Some of the types of federal resources they reported using included

- specialized technical assistance and capabilities, such as disaster mortuary support, meteorological expertise, and technical support for dams;
- search and rescue;
- incident management and coordination, such as through embedded FEMA staff and FEMA's Incident Management Assistance Teams;²⁴
- goods and services, such as meals and bottled water; and
- aerial disaster assessments and imagery.

States emphasized the importance of these federal resources in helping with disaster response. For example, officials from one state said that the state does not have the resources or programs necessary to carry out the same level of coordinated incident management activities as FEMA does. Another state that described itself as having a high capacity for disaster response said it still uses FEMA's ambulances and search and rescue support to supplement state efforts. Lastly, officials from a third state said access to federal support and this

²³FEMA generally reimburses agencies from the Disaster Relief Fund for work performed as part of mission assignments. See 42 U.S.C. §§ 5147, 5170a, 5192.

²⁴FEMA's Incident Management Assistance Teams consist of staff with expertise in particular response functions—such as operations, logistics, and planning—that rapidly deploy to lead and coordinate federal response to incidents.

specialized technical assistance remains essential for responding to catastrophic disasters.

State and Local Government Disaster Capabilities

State and Local Governments' Disaster Response Capabilities Vary Widely

State Preparedness Assessments Show Variation in Response Capabilities

Our analysis of selected states' preparedness assessments found that states had different levels of response capabilities and did not always meet their capability targets. States create targets for each of the 32 capabilities established under the national preparedness system, including the 15 response capabilities we reviewed, as shown in figure 2.²⁵

Figure 2: Selected National Preparedness Core Capabilities Related to Disaster Response

Prevention	Protection	Mitigation	Response		Recovery
			Planning		
			Public Information and Warning		
			Operational Coordination		
			Infrastructure Systems		
			Critical Transportation	Mass Search and Rescue Operations	
			Environmental Response/Health and Safety	On-scene Security, Protection, and Law Enforcement	
			Fatality Management Services	Operational Communications	
			Fire Management and Suppression	Public Health, Healthcare, and Emergency Medical Services	
			Logistics and Supply Chain Management	Situational Assessment	
			Mass Care Services		

Source: GAO summary of Department of Homeland Security documentation. | GAO-26-108599

States identify and assess the threats and hazards that concern them most and determine the level of capability the state should have to address them. They do so using standardized language FEMA developed for creating targets for each response capability. The capability targets provide a measurable and quantifiable indicator of a state's ability to complete activities in managing a threat or hazard. Some capabilities have multiple targets. For example, the Environmental Response/Health and Safety response capability has two targets describing its

²⁵We assessed the 2024 self-assessments for the 10 states that received major disaster declarations for Hurricanes Helene and Milton, the 2025 Los Angeles wildfires, and the July 2025 Texas floods. The information in the states' assessments is self-reported, and states assess themselves against self-determined targets. Not all states provided information for all response capability targets. Additionally, the results presented for the states in our sample are not generalizable to all 50 states.

activities, one for hazardous materials clean-up and one for decontamination, as shown in table 2.

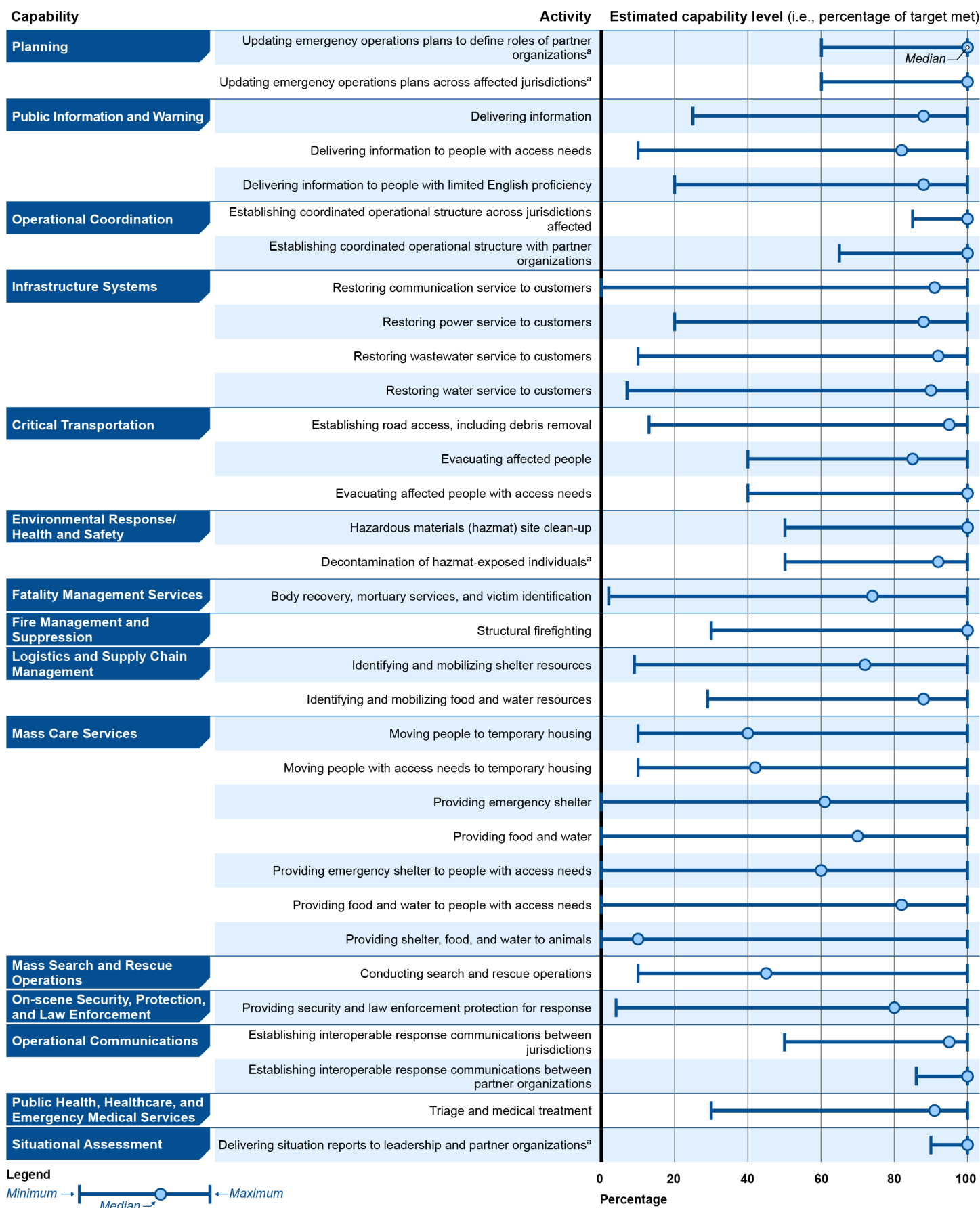
Table 2: Notional State Environmental Response/Health and Safety Capability Targets, Estimated Current Capabilities, and Estimated Capability Levels				
Activity	FEMA standardized target language	State capability target	State estimated current capability	State estimated capability level
Hazardous materials (hazmat) clean-up	Within ____ of an incident, assess, contain, and begin cleaning up hazardous material releases from ____ hazmat release sites	Within 1 week of an incident, assess, contain, and begin cleaning up hazardous material releases from 1,000 hazmat release sites	Within 1 week of an incident, assess, contain, and begin cleaning up hazardous material releases from 600 hazmat release sites	60 percent (600/1,000)
Decontamination	Within ____ of a hazmat incident, complete decontamination procedures for ____ exposed individuals (hazmat-related incidents).	Within 1 week of a hazmat incident, complete decontamination procedures for 400,000 exposed individuals (hazmat-related incidents).	Within 1 week of a hazmat incident, complete decontamination procedures for 300,000 exposed individuals (hazmat-related incidents).	75 percent (300,000/400,000)

Source: GAO notional example based on state annual preparedness assessments. | GAO-26-108599

Note: Some capabilities have multiple targets. States set their own targets and assess their abilities to meet those targets.

We found states varied in their estimated capability levels, or how close they came to fully meeting their response capability targets, as shown below in figure 3. Additionally, some states also reported variation between the response capabilities—assessing themselves higher in some capabilities than others.

Figure 3: Range in Estimated Response Capability Levels, Reported by Selected States in 2024



Source: GAO summary of selected state preparedness assessments. | GAO-26-108599

Notes: We analyzed 2024 state preparedness assessments for the 10 states that received major disaster declarations for Hurricanes Helene and Milton, the 2025 Los Angeles wildfires, and the July 2025 Texas floods: California, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia. States set their own targets for each capability and assess their ability to meet those targets, i.e. estimated capability levels. We analyzed information for 11 response-related capabilities, one capability that extends across the response and recovery mission areas, and three capabilities extend across the five mission areas of prevention, protection, mitigation, response and recovery. There are 33 targets for these capabilities, but some states did not provide data for all targets.

^aNot all states in our sample included this target in their assessments.

As shown above, there was wide variation in how states assessed their capabilities in some areas. For example:

- **Mass Search and Rescue.** For this capability, states set targets for search and rescue operations for a specific number of people within a certain timeframe of the disaster. There were noticeable differences in the estimated capability levels for the 10 states in our analysis, which ranged from 10 to 100 percent. Three states estimated their capability levels between 90 to 100 percent, two at 57 and 60 percent, respectively, and five at 33 percent or below.
- **Public Information and Warning.** This response capability covers delivering prompt and reliable information to the public and has three associated targets, including public alerts and warnings for certain populations. States in our sample also varied on this capability, estimating capability levels from 25 to 100 percent of their targets for all affected people. For the two targets related to reaching people with access needs and limited English proficiency, the lowest estimated capability levels states reported dropped to 10 and 20 percent, respectively.

The 15 response capabilities have a total of 33 targets, and states varied in how many of these targets they estimated they could meet (i.e., their estimated current capability reached 100 percent of their capability target). All 10 states impacted by recent disasters estimated falling short of at least one target. As shown in Figure 4, the percentage of targets these states reported they could meet varied widely, ranging from 12 percent to 90 percent of targets.

Figure 4: Variation in Percentage of Disaster Response Targets Selected States Reported They Could Meet



● State impacted by Hurricanes Helene and Milton, the 2025 Los Angeles wildfires, or the July 2025 Texas floods
Source: GAO summary of selected state preparedness assessments. | GAO-26-108599

Notes: We analyzed 2024 state preparedness assessments for the 10 states that received major disaster declarations for Hurricanes Helene and Milton, the 2025 Los Angeles wildfires, and the July 2025 Texas floods: California, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia. We did not identify the states in the figure because the individual state assessments are for official use only. States set their own targets for each capability and assess their ability to meet those targets, i.e. estimated capability levels. We analyzed information for 11 response-related capabilities, one capability that extends across the response and recovery mission areas, and three capabilities extend across the five mission areas of prevention, protection, mitigation, response and recovery. There are 33 targets for these capabilities, but some states did not provide data for all targets. To calculate the percentage of response capability targets met, we only considered targets for which states provided information.

Officials Described Variation in State and Local Disaster Response Capabilities

Federal, state, and local officials described factors that can contribute to differences in state and local disaster response capabilities, including between states and within states at the local level. FEMA regional officials stated that response capabilities are not evenly distributed across states. For example, during a previous review, FEMA officials told us that a limited number of states

participated in a disaster housing pilot program due to a lack of resources.²⁶ FEMA regional officials named several factors that may help increase state and local disaster response capabilities, including financial, personnel, and equipment resources. They also stated that staff continuity, experience with disasters, mutual aid agreements—i.e., emergency assistance agreements, and a focus on preparedness during “blue skies” improve response capabilities.

Officials also discussed variation at the local level, such as challenges for rural or less-resourced jurisdictions. These challenges can apply even for jurisdictions within a well-resourced state. Local emergency management departments in small or rural areas may only have one or two employees, and those employees may be fulfilling multiple roles. Additionally, such communities may have smaller tax bases and budgets for emergency management. Officials stated this can affect funds and personnel available for training and disaster response and recovery, among other things. We have previously reported that rural areas’ sparse populations, fewer or limited local resources, and great distances to critical infrastructure can underscore the need for federal assistance.²⁷

Officials indicated that past experience with disasters can also help an area prepare for and respond to future disasters. Officials from local governments who experienced a high volume of disasters described steps they took to prepare, such as a city acquiring advance (i.e., pre-disaster) debris removal contracts, and how past experience helped response move more efficiently. However, some recent disasters have affected areas that may not have historically experienced them. For example, according to Texas state and local officials, the major disaster declaration in Kerr County in July 2025 was the county’s first. Additionally, North Carolina and federal officials stated that the impacts in the western part of the state from Helene were unexpected for that area.

Implications for Future Disasters

Considerations for Changes to Disaster Roles in Light of State and Local Reliance on Federal Support

As previously reported, Congress and the President have demonstrated an interest in reforms to FEMA.²⁸ For example, the President has signaled support for transitioning more disaster response functions to state and local governments. In January 2025, he signed an Executive Order that established a FEMA Review Council to assess FEMA’s disaster response efforts, recommend improvements to the agency, and review existing reform proposals.²⁹ Additionally, the President signed an Executive Order in March 2025, that requires review and revision of response and preparedness policies to reformulate the process and metrics for federal responsibility.³⁰

²⁶GAO, *Wildfires: Additional Actions Needed to Address FEMA Assistance Challenges*, [GAO-25-106862](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 18, 2024).

²⁷GAO, *Disaster Assistance: Updated FEMA Guidance Could Better Help Communities Apply for Individual Assistance*, [GAO-25-106768](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 14, 2025).

²⁸[GAO-25-108598](#). See, e.g., H.R. 152, 119th Cong. (2025), H.R. 316, 119th Cong. (2025), H.R. 1245, 119th Cong. (2025), H.R. 2342, 119th Cong. (2025), H.R. 4669, 119th Cong. (2025), S. 861, 119th Cong. (2025).

²⁹Exec. Order No. 14,180, *Council to Assess the Federal Emergency Management Agency*, 90 Fed. Reg 8743 (Jan. 31, 2025).

³⁰Exec. Order No. 14,239, *Achieving Efficiency Through State and Local Preparedness*, 90 Fed. Reg 13,267 (March 21, 2025).

GAO has previously reported on challenges with FEMA and other federal agencies' disaster assistance, including challenges state and local officials have raised with administrative burdens and timeliness of assistance.³¹ We added *Improving the Delivery of Disaster Assistance* to GAO's High-Risk list in February 2025 to highlight the recommendations we have made to improve federal disaster efforts.³² Implementing our recommendations would help improve federal assistance to state and local governments after a disaster.³³

Broader reform of FEMA's mission, structure, or operations may also address long-standing challenges with federal disaster efforts. Given the current levels of federal support and wide variation in state and local response capabilities, officials at the federal and state levels provided the following considerations for policymakers for communicating and implementing any such changes:

Clear communication and guidance. State officials raised concerns about the uncertainty of the future of FEMA's role. Officials from one state described preparing contingency plans, including for potential reductions in federal assistance. Officials from two other states responded that it is challenging to plan in the absence of clear, consistent, and accurate guidance and emphasized the importance of consistent messaging about any changes, including to technical assistance and training.

We have previously reported on the importance of clear communication about roles and responsibilities in disaster preparedness and response. For example, our work on the response to Hurricane Katrina indicated that the lack of clarity in leadership roles and responsibilities resulted in disjointed efforts of many federal agencies involved in the response. As a result, there were a myriad of approaches and processes for requesting and providing assistance and confusion about who should be advised of requests and what resources would be provided within specific time frames.³⁴ We emphasized that leadership roles, responsibilities, and lines of authority must be clearly defined and effectively communicated to facilitate rapid and effective incident response.³⁵ To the extent there are changes to FEMA's role and responsibilities that involve a greater reliance on state capacity to prepare and respond to disasters, and to continue to benefit from lessons learned from disasters like Hurricane Katrina, states will need clear communication and guidance from the federal government.

Time to prepare. Federal and state officials emphasized the need for adequate time for state and local governments to prepare for any changes in disaster

³¹See, e.g., GAO, *Tornadoes: Agencies Promote Resilience but Actions Needed to Improve Access to FEMA Assistance*, [GAO-25-107384](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 2, 2025); [GAO-25-106862](#); *Disaster Recovery: Additional Actions Needed to Identify and Address Potential Recovery Barriers*, [GAO-22-104039](#), (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 15, 2021); *Disaster Resilience: FEMA Should Take Additional Steps to Streamline Hazard Mitigation Grants and Assess Program Effects*, [GAO-21-140](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 2, 2021).

³²[GAO-25-107743](#).

³³For example, in November 2022, we recommended that Congress should consider establishing an independent commission to recommend reforms to the federal approach to disaster recovery. GAO, *Disaster Recovery: Actions Needed to Improve the Federal Approach*, [GAO-23-104956](#) (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 15, 2022). See [GAO-25-107743](#) for more discussion of GAO's past recommendations in this area.

³⁴GAO, *Catastrophic Disasters: Enhanced Leadership, Capabilities, and Accountability Controls Will Improve the Effectiveness of the Nation's Preparedness, Response, and Recovery System*, [GAO-06-618](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 6, 2006).

³⁵GAO, *Hurricane Katrina: GAO's Preliminary Observations Regarding Preparedness, Response, and Recovery*, [GAO-06-442T](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 8, 2006).

response roles since they currently rely on significant federal disaster support. For example, the National Emergency Management Association reported that many states do not have their own programs to help survivors or rebuild public infrastructure.³⁶

Additionally, FEMA regional officials identified post-disaster housing as an area where states often rely on FEMA to fill the need. FEMA officials also stated that implementation strategies for changes to disaster response roles should set states up for success by incentivizing them to build their own capacity and develop feasible plans prior to removing FEMA or federal support.

In 2012, we recommended that FEMA re-assess one of its criteria for evaluating a state's request for an emergency or major disaster declaration to ensure the federal government was not providing assistance for disasters that states have the capacity to handle.³⁷ As part of this recommendation, we stated that FEMA should change the relevant criterion over time to give jurisdictions time to prepare for the change. As of September 2025, FEMA has not yet completed actions to address this recommendation.

State officials described the importance of an implementation timeline that would allow time for states to adjust and prepare. One state cautioned that a reduction in federal assistance, particularly if done hastily, would have significant negative impacts, as states need time to prepare and budget to take on some of the assistance the federal government has provided in the past. Another state agreed, stating that it would require sufficient time to plan, develop, and implement alternative funding models. A third state noted that establishing a state-level individual assistance program, for example, would require funding, rulemaking, and policy efforts.

Catastrophic or widespread disasters. FEMA regional officials underscored that there will always be catastrophic disasters for which even the most well-equipped states would require some level of federal financial or other support. Additionally, officials stated that regional events impacting multiple states simultaneously and nationwide events could also pose challenges for state and local governments to manage effectively.

Recent disasters demonstrate that even states with higher levels of disaster capacity can rely on federal support for particularly catastrophic incidents. For example, the 2025 Los Angeles wildfires represented the first time since 2017 that California requested direct federal assistance for debris removal. According to state officials, the state did so because of the size and scope of the disaster—over 13,000 impacted properties—and because they had five other state-led debris removal missions ongoing at the time of the disaster.

North Carolina also used federal assistance to resolve challenges responding to Hurricane Helene, such as water testing and treatment. The city of Asheville, for example, experienced high levels of sediment in its water systems and broken supply lines after the hurricane. This left residents without safe drinking water for

³⁶The National Emergency Management Association's 2024 biennial report states that 27 states have a public assistance program, 16 have an individual assistance program, and eight have an assistance program strictly for unmet needs. See National Emergency Management Association, *Biennial Report 2024*, (Lexington, KY: 2024).

³⁷GAO recommended that FEMA 1) develop and implement a methodology that provides a more comprehensive assessment of a jurisdiction's response and recovery capabilities, including its fiscal capacity, and 2) adjust its measure of fiscal capacity for inflation by raising the indicator in steps over several years. GAO, *Federal Disaster Assistance: Improved Criteria Needed to Assess a Jurisdiction's Capability to Respond and Recover on Its Own*, [GAO-12-838](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 12, 2012).

nearly two months. FEMA mission assigned both USACE and EPA to assist with restoring this critical resource, including for water testing and filtration.

Officials from one FEMA region stated that state and local capacities can be rapidly exceeded in multi-state events like Helene, even in states with existing mutual aid agreements. Other FEMA regional officials stated that FEMA is the only agency scalable enough to mobilize enough responders in the event of a disaster with nationwide impacts. For example, FEMA took over leading the federal response to the COVID-19 pandemic from the Department of Health and Human Services due to the agency's unique role in coordinating federal government-wide relief efforts.

Federal-level coordination. FEMA also plays a vital role as the coordinating agency for the federal response to disasters. As we have previously reported, many federal agencies provide assistance for disasters, with FEMA as the lead agency for federal disaster response and recovery.³⁸ Additionally, through the mission assignment process, FEMA has the statutory authority to assign other federal agencies to perform disaster response tasks that those agencies might not otherwise have authority to perform independent of the Stafford Act.³⁹ For example, EPA officials said that the mission assignment process provides EPA more flexibility to address certain types of hazardous materials during natural disaster response, such as appliances and household hazardous materials, that they may not be able to address under EPA's authorities alone.

Additionally, FEMA's role as the focal point in the federal government that can request assistance from other agencies for specific challenges is more efficient than contacting multiple federal agencies individually, according to officials from one state. For example, there were technical issues with the public alerting system during the response to the 2025 Los Angeles wildfires. As a result, people received incorrect or out-of-date alerts, such as when reconnecting to cell towers after a lapse in service. As the lead for federal response, FEMA contacted the Federal Communications Commission to work with the relevant cellular service providers to address these issues. California officials stated that it would be more difficult for the state to resolve these types of response challenges without FEMA's support as the touchpoint for other federal agencies.

We found that state and local governments currently rely on extensive federal support for disaster preparedness and response. Additionally, disaster response capabilities vary at the state and local levels. To the extent any changes are made to disaster response roles that would shift responsibility to state and local governments, states with high levels of experience that already dedicate significant resources to building and sustaining response capabilities may have an easier time stepping into a more prominent role. Regardless, as federal and state officials noted, states would need to understand what changes, if any, are made and have adequate time to adjust and build capacity.

Moreover, even more experienced, well-resourced states can have smaller communities that experience challenges preparing for and responding to disasters. With an increase in the frequency of natural disasters and disasters affecting areas that have not historically experienced major disasters, officials underscored the importance of ensuring that federal, state, and local entities have a clear understanding of their roles in disaster response. We will continue to monitor developments in this area as part of our ongoing work.

³⁸[GAO-23-104956](#).

³⁹42 U.S.C. §§ 5170a, 5192.

Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to the Department of Homeland Security, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the Department of Defense for review and comment. The Department of Homeland Security provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate. The Environmental Protection Agency and the Department of Defense did not provide comments on our draft report.

How GAO Did This Study

This report focuses on federal disaster preparedness and response assistance provided before and during recent disasters, variation in state and local response capabilities, and considerations for potential changes to disaster response roles.

For information on federal disaster preparedness and response assistance provided during recent disasters, we summarized data from FEMA's September Disaster Relief Fund report, which contains data on obligations through September 30, 2025. Additionally, we obtained summary-level data from FEMA on amounts awarded through its preparedness grant programs for the fiscal years 2014 through 2024 funding cycles.

To provide information on the federal support provided through mission assignments, we obtained and analyzed data from FEMA's web-based Emergency Operations Command. To assess the reliability of these data, we used information collected for prior and ongoing GAO work, including interviews with agency officials and reviews of database documentation. Based on these steps, we determined that the data presented in this report were sufficiently reliable for our purposes.

To provide context for variation in state capabilities, we analyzed states' 2024 assessments of their response capabilities for the 10 states that received major disaster declarations for Hurricanes Helene and Milton, the 2025 Los Angeles wildfires, and the July 2025 Texas floods: California, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia. As noted in the report, the information in the states' assessments is self-reported and states assess themselves against targets they set. Additionally, the results presented for the states in our sample are not generalizable to all 50 states.

We also analyzed information from 56 interviews with and written responses from federal agencies involved in disaster response, such as FEMA, USACE, and EPA; and state and local governments impacted by disasters in recent years. We collected this information as part of this review and for other recent and ongoing GAO reviews of related topics.

Additionally, we asked all 10 states listed above about FEMA preparedness and response support they received and response challenges in recent disasters, among other things. We received responses from six of the 10 states. Information from these interviews and written responses is intended to provide illustrative examples and perspectives on the topics of this report but is not generalizable.

To identify changes proposed to disaster response roles, we reviewed Executive Orders and relevant proposed legislation.

We conducted this performance audit from June 2025 to December 2025 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

List of Addressees

The Honorable Charles E. Schumer
Minority Leader
United States Senate

The Honorable Rand Paul, M.D.
Chairman
The Honorable Gary C. Peters
Ranking Member
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
United States Senate

The Honorable Andy Kim
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Disaster Management, District of Columbia and the Census
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
United States Senate

The Honorable Katie Britt
Chair
The Honorable Chris Murphy
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Homeland Security
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate

The Honorable Andrew Garbarino
Chairman
The Honorable Bennie G. Thompson
Ranking Member
Committee on Homeland Security
House of Representatives

The Honorable Sam Graves
Chairman
The Honorable Rick Larsen
Ranking Member
Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
House of Representatives

The Honorable Mark Amodei
Chairman
The Honorable Lauren Underwood
Acting Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Homeland Security
Committee on Appropriations
House of Representatives

The Honorable Thom Tillis
United States Senate

The Honorable Greg Casar
House of Representatives

The Honorable Joaquin Castro
House of Representatives

The Honorable Jasmine Crockett
House of Representatives

The Honorable Henry Cuellar
House of Representatives

The Honorable Lloyd Doggett
House of Representatives

The Honorable Veronica Escobar
House of Representatives

The Honorable Lizzie Fletcher
House of Representatives

The Honorable Sylvia R. Garcia
House of Representatives

The Honorable Vicente Gonzalez
House of Representatives

The Honorable Al Green
House of Representatives

The Honorable Julie Johnson
House of Representatives

The Honorable Marc A. Veasey
House of Representatives

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Department of Homeland Security, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the Secretary of Defense, the Assistant Secretary of the Army for Civil Works, and the Chief of Engineers and Commanding General of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at <https://www.gao.gov>.

GAO Contact Information

For more information, contact: Chris Currie, Director, Homeland Security and Justice, CurrieC@gao.gov.

Public Affairs: Sarah Kaczmarek, Managing Director, Media@gao.gov.

Congressional Relations: A. Nicole Clowers, Managing Director, CongRel@gao.gov.

Staff Acknowledgments: Aditi Archer, Lauri Barnes, Haley Dunn, Eric Hauswirth, Tracey King, Amelia Koby, Caryn Kuebler, Daniel Kuhn, Katie Minch, Amanda Panko, and Breana Stevens.

Source (cover photo): Federal Emergency Management Agency photo by Patrick Moore/FEMA.gov

Connect with GAO on [Facebook](#), [X](#), [LinkedIn](#), [Instagram](#), and [YouTube](#).
Subscribe to our [Email Updates](#). Listen to our [Podcasts](#).

Visit GAO on the web at <https://www.gao.gov>.

This is a work of the U.S. government but may include copyrighted material. For details, see <https://www.gao.gov/copyright>.