In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, questions remain concerning the availability of hospital inpatient care and emergency department services in the greater New Orleans area—which consists of Jefferson, Orleans, Plaquemines, and St. Bernard parishes. Because of broad-based congressional interest, GAO, under the Comptroller General’s statutory authority to conduct evaluations, assessed efforts to restore the area’s hospitals by the Department of Homeland Security’s (DHS) Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA); the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS); and the Louisiana State University (LSU) public hospital system, which operated Charity and University hospitals in New Orleans. GAO examined (1) the availability of hospital inpatient care and the demand for emergency department services, (2) steps taken to reopen Charity and University hospitals, and (3) the activities that HHS has undertaken to help hospitals recover. To fulfill these objectives, GAO reviewed documents and interviewed federal officials and hospital, state, and local officials in the greater New Orleans area. GAO also obtained information on the number of inpatient beds for April 2006, which was the most recent data available when GAO did its work. GAO’s work did not include other issues related to hospitals such as outpatient services or financial condition.

Rebuilding the health care infrastructure of the greater New Orleans area will depend on many factors, including the health care needs of the population that returns to the city and the state’s vision for its future health care system. In light of the current sufficiency of hospital beds for most inpatient services, GAO believes a major challenge facing the greater New Orleans area is attracting and retaining enough nurses and support staff.

HHS and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) agreed with the draft report. DHS said it had no formal comments on the draft. HHS, VA, DHS, and Louisiana’s Department of Health and Hospitals provided technical comments, which GAO incorporated where appropriate. LSU did not provide comments.