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# Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-06-297T](#), a report to House Committee on Ways and Means Subcommittee on Oversight

## Why GAO Did This Study

The devastation and dislocation of individuals experienced throughout the Gulf Coast in Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Texas in the wake of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita has raised concern about both the charitable sector's and the government's abilities to effectively respond to such disasters. To strengthen future disaster response and recovery operations, the government needs to understand what went right and what went wrong, and to apply these lessons.

The National Response Plan outlines the roles of federal agencies and charities in response to national disasters. Recognizing the historically large role of charities in responding to disasters, the plan included charities as signatories and gave them considerable responsibilities.

In addition to carrying out the responsibilities outlined in the National Response Plan, charities served as partners to the federal government in providing both immediate and long-term assistance following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

GAO was asked to provide an overview of lessons learned from charities' response to previous disasters as well as preliminary observations about the role of charities following the Gulf Coast hurricanes. As part of our ongoing work, GAO will continue to analyze federal and charitable efforts following the hurricanes.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-297T](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-297T).

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Cynthia Fagnoni at (202) 512-7215 or [fagnonic@gao.gov](mailto:fagnonic@gao.gov).

# HURRICANES KATRINA AND RITA

## Provision of Charitable Assistance

### What GAO Found

Following September 11, 2001, GAO reported lessons learned that could help charities enhance their response to future disasters. These included easing access to aid for eligible individuals, enhancing coordination among charities and between charities and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), increasing attention to public education, and planning for future events. GAO also recommended that FEMA convene a working group of charities to coordinate lessons learned following September 11. Following the GAO report, seven disaster response charities partnering with FEMA formed the Coordinated Assistance Network to improve collaboration and facilitate data sharing.

Following the Gulf Coast hurricanes, charities raised more than \$2.5 billion dollars, according to Indiana University's Center of Philanthropy, with more than half of these funds going to the American Red Cross. GAO's preliminary work shows that these charities have taken steps to improve coordination of relief efforts by sharing information through daily conference calls and electronic databases. Despite these efforts, charities faced some challenges in coordinating service delivery. For example, some charities reported that their volunteers needed additional training to use the databases.

GAO teams that visited the Gulf Coast region in October 2005 observed that in areas where the American Red Cross did not provide services, the Salvation Army and smaller organizations—often local churches—were able to meet many of the charitable needs of hard-to-reach communities. The American Red Cross's efforts to protect service providers may have prohibited it from operating in some of the harder-to-reach areas. Additionally, some concerns were raised about smaller charities' abilities to provide adequate disaster relief services.

### Charitable distribution center in Harrison County, Mississippi



Source: GAO.