



Highlights of [GAO-06-618](#), a report to congressional committees

## Why GAO Did This Study

Hurricane Katrina was the largest, most destructive natural disaster in our nation's history. The problems experienced in responding to Katrina resulted in a number of investigations—by congressional committees, the White House Homeland Security Council, and others—regarding the preparations for and response to Katrina. GAO assisted the congressional investigations and, under the Comptroller General's authority, initiated a number of Katrina-related reviews. In March 2006 testimony, GAO provided its preliminary observations to Congress.

The purpose of this report is to summarize what went well and why, what did not go well and why, and what changes are needed to improve the nation's readiness to respond to a catastrophic disaster; and to identify selected issues associated with the Gulf Coast's recovery. This report is based on GAO's prior work on catastrophic disasters, including Hurricane Andrew in 1992, the over 30 GAO reports completed to date on Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, ongoing GAO work, and other Hurricane Katrina reviews and lessons learned.

## What GAO Recommends

This report includes six recommendations to the Secretary of Homeland Security with which DHS generally agreed, describing actions taken to implement them. The report also includes a matter for congressional consideration.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-618](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-618). To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact William O. Jenkins, Jr. at (202) 512-8757 or [jenkinswo@gao.gov](mailto:jenkinswo@gao.gov).

# CATASTROPHIC DISASTERS

## Enhanced Leadership, Capabilities, and Accountability Controls Will Improve the Effectiveness of the Nation's Preparedness, Response, and Recovery System

### What GAO Found

Hurricane Katrina was a catastrophic disaster whose scope and destruction severely tested all levels of governments in the affected areas and the nation as a whole. It almost immediately overwhelmed state and local first responders, and the response required outside action and support from many sources. The heroic efforts by many saved thousands of lives. The federal government, many states, local governments, plus nonprofit and private sector organizations provided substantial personnel and resources to assist in the response, but these proved insufficient to meet the immediate challenges posed by Hurricane Katrina's effects.

The three basic elements in preparing for, responding to and recovering from any catastrophic disaster are (1) leadership; (2) capabilities; and (3) accountability. Leadership in the form of legal authorities, roles and responsibilities, and lines of authority at all levels of government must be clearly defined, effectively communicated, and well understood in order to facilitate rapid and effective decision making. DHS has made revisions to the National Response Plan designed to further clarify federal roles and responsibilities, but their effect has not yet been tested in an actual disaster.

Developing the capabilities needed for catastrophic disasters should be part of an overall national effort designed to integrate and define what needs to be done, where, by whom, and how well. Ensuring needed capabilities are ready requires effective planning and coordination, plus robust training and exercises in which the capabilities are realistically tested, problems identified, and subsequently addressed in partnership with federal, state, local, and nongovernmental stakeholders. In addition, integrating an all-hazards risk management framework into decision making is central to assessing catastrophic disaster risks and guiding the development of national capabilities to prevent or mitigate where possible and respond to such risks. DHS has announced a number of actions to improve readiness and response for catastrophic disasters, but there is little information available on the extent to which these changes are operational.

Accountability controls and mechanisms ensure that resources are used appropriately for valid purposes. Following a catastrophic disaster, decision-makers face a tension between the demand for rapid response and recovery assistance—including assistance to victims—and implementing appropriate controls and accountability mechanisms. Our work and that of others found, for example, the processes for confirming disaster victims' eligibility for assistance were insufficient and resulted in millions of dollars in questionable payments to fraudulent claimants. Also, some contracts had insufficient provisions to ensure that prices were fair and reasonable. DHS has reported that it has taken steps to address some of the concerns, including working to complete more contracts for key services in advance of a disaster and improving its ability to verify individual claimant eligibility for disaster benefits and assistance.