COAST GUARD
Observations on the Preparation, Response, and Recovery Missions Related to Hurricane Katrina

What GAO Found

Of the estimated 60,000 people left stranded by Hurricane Katrina, over 33,500 were saved by the Coast Guard. Precisely identifying why the Coast Guard was able to respond as it did may be difficult, but underpinning these efforts were factors such as the agency’s operational principles. These principles promote leadership, accountability, and enable personnel to take responsibility and action, based on relevant authorities and guidance. Another key factor was the agency’s reliance on standardized operations and maintenance practices that provided greater flexibility for using personnel and assets from any operational unit for the response. Up-to-date and regularly exercised hurricane plans were also key—preserving Coast Guard personnel and resources first, so they could then respond to search and rescue, marine environmental protection, and facilitation of commerce needs after the storm. These various factors are consistent with previous GAO findings on lessons learned from past catastrophic disasters.

GAO’s work shows that the Coast Guard was most relevant in search and rescue, marine environmental protection, and management of maritime commerce missions. While the Coast Guard performs these missions daily, the severity of Hurricane Katrina presented the agency with several challenges that required innovative approaches. The Coast Guard was able to mitigate challenges caused by Hurricane Katrina’s damage as a result of planning, preparation, and assistance from Coast Guard Auxiliary members.

According to Coast Guard officials, the agency incurred no significant damage to personnel, assets, operations, or financial resources as a result of sending people and assets to the Gulf region. Although continuing operations at ports nationwide while conducting Katrina operations presented challenges, these challenges have been addressed to mitigate negative impacts on the Coast Guard. Finally, the Coast Guard has collected after-action reports from Hurricane Katrina and has made them available to Coast Guard personnel through an internal database.

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<th>Helicopter Rescue</th>
<th>Stranded Vessel in the Greater New Orleans Area</th>
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Source: U.S. Coast Guard.  
Source: GAO.