



Highlights of [GAO-08-243](#), a report to the Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

Major disasters can disrupt transit operations, destroy vehicles and facilities, and impede the ability of people to reach essential relief and medical services and return to their homes and jobs. GAO determined (1) the federal role in assisting transit agencies after a major disaster; (2) the amounts, sources, and uses of federal disaster assistance for transit since 1998; (3) the factors that affected the timeliness and effectiveness of transit assistance after the 2005 Gulf Coast hurricanes; and (4) additional options for providing assistance to transit after a major disaster. GAO reviewed laws, regulations, and guidance; analyzed DOT and FEMA data; and interviewed officials with FEMA, DOT, state and local agencies, and others.

What GAO Recommends

To promote timely and effective assistance to transit, FEMA should develop guidance on the types of transit services that it will fund after a disaster and criteria for the duration of funding. DOT should evaluate the feasibility of options to increase FTA's authority to provide financial disaster assistance to transit, and seek legislative authority as appropriate. DHS and DOT generally agreed with the facts presented, and DHS stated it would take the recommendations under advisement. DOT agreed with the recommendations and said these options would be considered by FTA in developing DOT's legislative proposal for reauthorizing surface transportation programs.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-243](#). For more information, contact Katherine Siggerud at (202) 512-2834 or siggerudk@gao.gov.

EMERGENCY TRANSIT ASSISTANCE

Federal Funding for Recent Disasters, and Options for the Future

What GAO Found

The federal government provides transit services and assists transit agencies after a major disaster, primarily through two federal agencies—the Department of Homeland Security's Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the Department of Transportation's (DOT) Federal Transit Administration (FTA). FEMA is authorized to provide emergency transportation services under the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act (the Stafford Act). FTA administers federal support for transit but does not have a specific ongoing program or funding to help restore transit after disasters.

FEMA and FTA have provided approximately \$5.0 billion in disaster assistance to fund transit services and assist transit agencies since 1998, primarily through supplemental appropriations. The agencies provided nearly \$4.7 billion to New York City after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, primarily to rebuild destroyed transit infrastructure, and another \$232 million after the 2005 Gulf Coast hurricanes, largely to provide transit services for displaced populations. FEMA and FTA have also provided at least \$51 million for other disasters since 1998. FEMA's database for its Public Assistance program does not have the capability to sort transit projects from other projects. GAO took steps to identify this funding, but the information presented should be considered minimum amounts. Additional funds may have been dedicated for transit purposes. GAO believes the magnitude of uncertainty is small compared with the \$5.0 billion in assistance for transit.

After the 2005 Gulf Coast hurricanes, FEMA and FTA faced challenges that impeded both the timeliness and effectiveness of their assistance to transit. Although the Stafford Act authorizes federal assistance to meet emergency needs, neither FEMA nor FTA had mechanisms to provide transit funding immediately after the disasters. FEMA also lacked guidance on the types of transit services it would fund and criteria for determining the duration of funding. As a result, funding approvals after the 2005 Gulf Coast hurricanes took from 1 month to as long as 4 months, and FEMA ended funding even though transit agencies in Louisiana and Mississippi believed that they had continuing needs.

Additional options exist—at the state, local, and federal levels—for providing assistance to transit after a major disaster. At the state and local levels, mutual aid agreements between states and others can direct needed resources to transit agencies following a disaster. Existing programs and temporary authorities that Congress had provided to DOT also suggest options, including giving FTA permanent authority to allow transit agencies to use existing grant funds for disaster recovery. As another option, Congress could establish an emergency relief program for FTA, similar to the DOT program for highways, or expand the scope of the highway program to include transit. Such a program could include "quick release"—a mechanism used to approve and release emergency highway funds within 1 to 2 days. Each of these options has advantages, such as expedited release and better targeting of funds, and consequences, such as potentially increased costs to the federal government.