

June 2006

# HURRICANES KATRINA AND RITA

## Coordination between FEMA and the Red Cross Should Be Improved for the 2006 Hurricane Season





Highlights of [GAO-06-712](#), a report to congressional committees

## Why GAO Did This Study

The Red Cross played a key role in providing relief to victims of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, mounting its largest ever disaster response. Under the National Response Plan, and its emergency support function-6 (ESF-6), the Red Cross and FEMA are tasked with working together to coordinate federal mass care assistance in support of voluntary organizations, as well as state and local governments, as they meet mass care needs—such as shelter, food, and first aid. Questions have been raised about how the Red Cross and FEMA operated following the Gulf Coast hurricanes and what improvements can be made for the 2006 hurricane season.

This report includes GAO's interim findings on the Red Cross and FEMA's hurricane operations. GAO will continue to analyze federal and charitable hurricane relief efforts.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that 1) FEMA work with the Red Cross to reach agreement on 2006 hurricane season operating procedures, 2) the Red Cross implement staffing strategies that would improve working relationships and retention of institutional knowledge, and 3) that FEMA obtain the Red Cross's input when developing its resource tracking system. FEMA had no comments on the recommendations. The Red Cross endorsed or is taking actions, as applicable, to address the recommendations.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-712](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-712).

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

## Coordination between FEMA and the Red Cross Should Be Improved for the 2006 Hurricane Season

### What GAO Found

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the Red Cross—working together for the first time as co-primary agencies for ESF-6 under the National Response Plan—disagreed about their roles and responsibilities, and this disagreement strained working relationships and hampered their efforts to coordinate relief services for hurricane victims. Specifically, FEMA and the Red Cross disagreed about the role of the ESF-6 coordinator, a FEMA official charged with leading mass care, housing, and human services assistance. FEMA officials told us that the Red Cross should direct all requests for FEMA assistance through the ESF-6 coordinator, while Red Cross officials stated that the organization should be able to take requests directly to the FEMA Operations Section Chief—not the ESF-6 coordinator. As a result, the two organizations spent time negotiating operating procedures, rather than focusing solely on coordinating mass care services in the early days of the hurricane response effort. FEMA and the Red Cross have noted that they are working to clarify their roles and responsibilities under ESF-6, but as of May 24, 2006, had not reached agreement on these responsibilities, including the role of the ESF-6 coordinator.

Red Cross staff assigned to perform ESF-6 functions, such as working with FEMA to coordinate federal mass care assistance in support of sheltering and feeding, rotated frequently—often every 2 to 3 weeks—making it difficult for them to maintain strong working relationships and gain expertise. These short rotations hindered communications among staff, thus making it more difficult to mobilize resources. Additionally, government officials stated that these short rotations led to the loss of institutional knowledge about ESF-6 processes, such as how to collect shelter data correctly. Red Cross officials said that 2- to 3- week rotations are standard because most disasters do not require longer rotations, but acknowledged that short rotations were a problem. Red Cross officials also told us they are hiring permanent staff at the state level to help coordinate relief services, including mass care under ESF-6, and are also considering staffing options for national-level positions. However, as of May 24, 2006, the Red Cross has not implemented policies that would address the issue at the national or local level.

FEMA did not have a comprehensive system to track requests for assistance it received from the Red Cross on behalf of voluntary organizations and state and local governments for items such as water, food, and cots; the absence of such a system created more work for the Red Cross and slowed the delivery of relief services. These organizations often did not know when, or if, they would be receiving needed supplies and, as a result, scaled back relief services in some instances. The Red Cross was only able to follow up on these requests informally—a process that took time and was often ineffective.

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## Abbreviations

DHS	Department of Homeland Security
ESF	emergency support function
FEMA	Federal Emergency Management Agency
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross

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United States Government Accountability Office  
Washington, DC 20548

June 8, 2006

### Congressional Committees

Following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in August and September 2005, the American National Red Cross (Red Cross) mounted its largest disaster response effort in its more than 100 year history. The Red Cross, which is chartered by Congress to provide volunteer aid to the military as well as relief services to the public in the event of a disaster, raised over \$2 billion in private donations for its hurricane relief efforts. Following the Gulf Coast hurricanes, it opened nearly 1,100 shelters in 27 states and the District of Columbia and estimates that it will have provided financial assistance to more than 3.7 million hurricane victims.

In addition to providing hurricane relief services, the Red Cross also was tasked to perform another role in the aftermath of the hurricanes—coordinating federal mass care assistance. In this role, the Red Cross takes requests for assistance from state governments to meet the needs of state or local governments or voluntary organizations and identifies resources to fill those requests or calls upon the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), a federal agency under the jurisdiction of the United States Department of Homeland Security (DHS), to fill those requests with federal resources. This role is outlined in the National Response Plan—the purpose of which is to provide a single, comprehensive framework for the federal response to incidents of national significance, such as natural disasters and terrorist attacks. The plan—issued by DHS in December 2004—identifies specific emergency support functions and names federal agencies and other entities responsible for meeting needs in those areas in the event of a natural disaster or other incident of national significance, such as a terrorist attack. Under the plan’s sixth emergency support function (ESF-6), the Red Cross is the primary agency responsible for coordinating federal mass care assistance in support of states and local governments and other voluntary organizations, as they meet needs, such as shelter, food, and emergency first aid. The Red Cross is the only voluntary organization named as a primary agency in the plan, although other voluntary organizations are included in the plan under an umbrella organization and given support responsibilities. The Gulf Coast hurricanes marked the first time the National Response Plan was activated and the first time that the Red Cross served in a primary agency capacity under the new, expanded version of ESF-6.

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In preparation for the 2006 hurricane season, which officially began on June 1, this interim report focuses on how FEMA and the Red Cross fulfilled their responsibilities under ESF-6 and identifies immediate improvements both organizations can make to better coordinate federal mass care assistance in the event that another devastating hurricane hits the United States. This report—which builds on GAO’s previously issued work related to disasters, including a report about the coordination of voluntary assistance following the events of September 11, 2001—presents the initial findings of GAO’s ongoing work on how voluntary organizations coordinated with the government to provide mass care services following the Gulf Coast hurricanes. We issued preliminary observations in a December 2005 testimony, finding that voluntary organizations took steps following September 11 to improve coordination of relief efforts but still faced challenges coordinating service delivery following the Gulf Coast hurricanes.<sup>1</sup> We anticipate releasing a final report later in 2006.

To gain a better understanding of how FEMA and the Red Cross worked together following the Gulf Coast hurricanes, we visited Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas in January and March of 2006. During these site visits, we toured federal disaster operations centers and distribution centers that the Red Cross and other national and local voluntary organizations established to provide services to hurricane victims. We also met with representatives from federal, state, and local governments and held discussion groups with officials from both national and local voluntary organizations. In addition to conducting site visits, we analyzed FEMA and Red Cross documents, including documented requests for assistance that the Red Cross, as the primary agency for mass care under ESF-6, had placed to FEMA and the operating procedures that the Red Cross and FEMA said they used to carry out its ESF-6 responsibilities. We interviewed officials from DHS’s Office of Inspector General and FEMA’s national headquarters, as well as representatives from national voluntary organizations, including the Red Cross, the Salvation Army, and the Southern Baptist Convention. Finally, we reviewed reports on the response to the Gulf Coast hurricanes issued by the DHS Office of Inspector General,<sup>2</sup> the House of Representatives,<sup>3</sup> the White House,<sup>4</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup>GAO, *Hurricanes Katrina and Rita: Provision of Charitable Assistance*, GAO-06-297T (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 13, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Department of Homeland Security, Office of Inspector General. *A Performance Review of FEMA’s Disaster Management Activities in Response to Hurricane Katrina*. OIG-06-32 (Washington, D.C.: March 2006).

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International Committee of the Red Cross, the British Red Cross, and the American Bar Association.<sup>5</sup>

We conducted our work between October 2005 and June 2006 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

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## Results in Brief

FEMA and the Red Cross's differing views about their roles and responsibilities under ESF-6 hampered efforts to coordinate federal mass care assistance. The two organizations differed in their understanding of the role of the ESF-6 coordinator, a key FEMA official tasked with providing strategic vision and leading efforts to coordinate federal mass care, housing, and human services assistance. FEMA officials said that the Red Cross should direct all requests for FEMA assistance through the ESF-6 coordinator, while Red Cross officials stated that the Red Cross needed to communicate directly with the FEMA Operations Section Chief—not the ESF-6 coordinator. This difference in expectations about the role of the ESF-6 coordinator created tension between FEMA and the Red Cross and affected the organizations' working relationship. Although Red Cross and FEMA officials have stated they are working to clarify future roles and responsibilities, they had not reached agreement on these roles and responsibilities as of May 24, 2006.

Red Cross staff assigned to fulfill specific ESF-6 functions rotated frequently, making it difficult for these staff to develop strong working relationships and gain specific knowledge about ESF-6 processes. In general, Red Cross staff who worked for ESF-6 rotated every 2 to 3 weeks. Officials from FEMA and state and local governments told us that these short rotations presented two problems during Gulf Coast hurricane relief efforts. First, these short rotations hampered the ability of Red Cross staff to establish and maintain relationships with officials from FEMA and other government agencies. Maintaining strong relationships was particularly important following the hurricanes because normal communication channels were disrupted and staff needed to rely on personal contact to

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<sup>3</sup> United States House of Representatives, Select Bipartisan Committee to Investigate the Preparation for and Response to Hurricane Katrina. *A Failure of Initiative*. (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 15, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> The White House. *The Federal Response to Hurricane Katrina: Lessons Learned*. (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 2006).

<sup>5</sup> American Bar Association. *In the Wake of the Storm: The ABA Responds to Hurricane Katrina*. (Chicago, Illinois: 2006).

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call upon needed resources. Second, these short rotations made it difficult for Red Cross staff to gain institutional knowledge about processes and procedures, such as data collection procedures, that were part of their ESF-6 roles. The International Committee of the Red Cross, in its review of various aspects of the American Red Cross's response to the hurricanes, also cited short rotations as problematic, stating that rapid volunteer turnover resulted in the loss of knowledge volunteers had acquired on the job. Officials from the Red Cross said that 2- to 3- week rotations are standard because most disasters do not require longer rotations, but acknowledged that short rotations were a problem after the Gulf Coast hurricanes. In addition, Red Cross officials stated that they are hiring permanent staff at the state level to help coordinate relief services, including mass care under ESF-6, and are also considering staffing options to address this issue at the national level. However, as of May 24, 2006, the Red Cross had not yet implemented staffing strategies to address this issue at the national or local level.

FEMA did not have a comprehensive system to determine the status of official requests for assistance it had received, which slowed service delivery and required the Red Cross to expend resources trying to determine when and if mass care service providers would receive promised goods. As the DHS Office of Inspector General noted in its review of FEMA's response to Katrina, FEMA did not have a system in place to track requests for assistance, including those requests it received from the Red Cross in its ESF-6 capacity. FEMA officials therefore were often unable to provide the Red Cross with accurate information about when expected items would be delivered, or if FEMA would be able to fulfill a request, causing many requests to go unfilled or be filled too late to be of use. The unreliability of FEMA's supply systems required the Red Cross to try to follow up on requests through other informal channels—a process the Red Cross reported as being inefficient and only marginally effective. Other voluntary organizations also told us that in many cases the unreliability of FEMA's supply systems challenged their attempts to provide mass care services, and as a result they had to scale back on their service provision.

To clarify roles and responsibilities within ESF-6 for the 2006 hurricane season, we are recommending that FEMA work with the Red Cross as soon as possible to reach agreement on the operating procedures that they will both use in the event of an incident of national significance. We are also recommending that the Red Cross implement ESF-6 staffing strategies that would enable them to better facilitate the development of working relationships and retain institutional knowledge. In addition, to help



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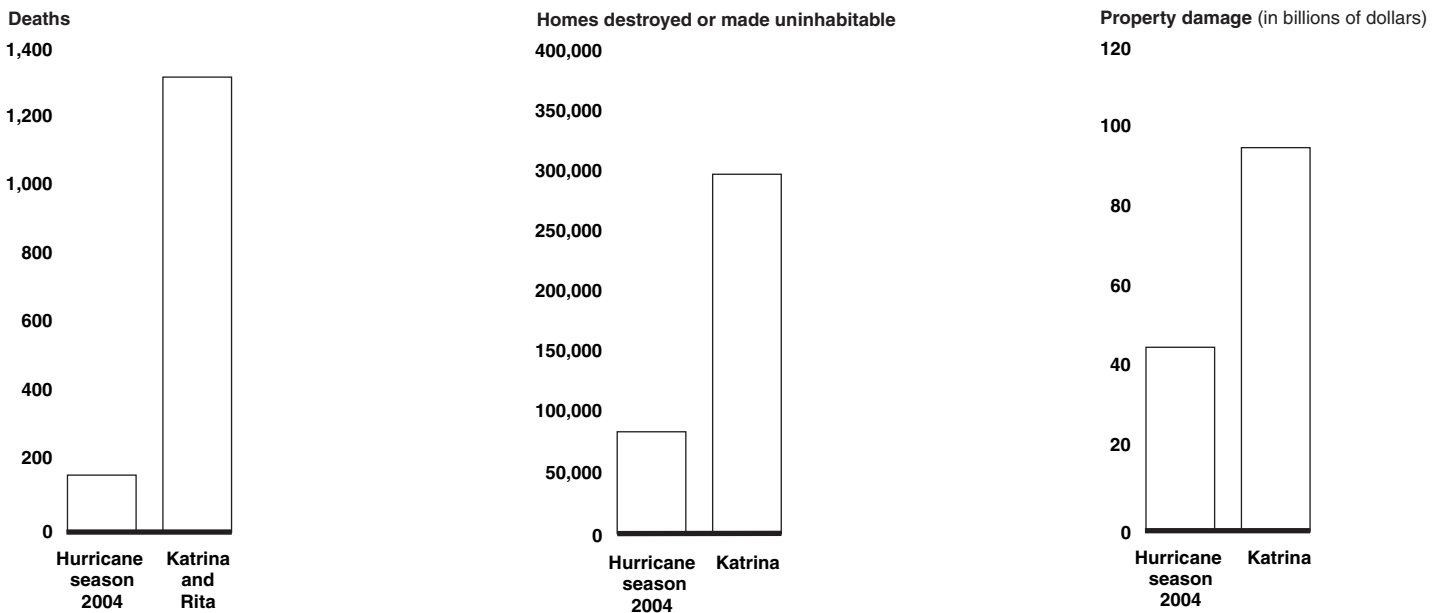
ensure that FEMA's resource tracking system will meet the needs of those requesting FEMA assistance, we are recommending that FEMA obtain input from the Red Cross to aid in the system's design.

In comments on a draft of this report, DHS officials indicated that they had no comments on the draft, except for a few technical clarifications, which we incorporated as appropriate in this report. The Red Cross also provided comments on the draft and expressed general agreement with our conclusion that coordination between FEMA and the Red Cross could be improved for the 2006 hurricane season. The Red Cross highlighted actions it is taking with respect to our first two recommendations, and said that it heartily endorsed our third recommendation. Additionally, the Red Cross provided important contextual information about its role under the National Response Plan and the length of its ESF-6 staff rotations. We incorporated this information into the final report. Finally, the Red Cross maintained that our draft report's characterization of problems pertaining to the operating procedures used by FEMA and the Red Cross following the hurricanes was not fully accurate, and specifically that the versions of procedures used by FEMA and the Red Cross were the same in every relevant respect. In response to the Red Cross's comments, we again requested FEMA's operating procedures, which we received. We compared the operating procedures FEMA and the Red Cross said they used and determined the wording was the same in relevant respects. Specifically, the versions stated that the Red Cross would not be precluded from taking priorities directly to the FEMA Operations Section Chief, as necessary, but that the Red Cross would coordinate with other designated FEMA officials. Subsequently, we modified the report to focus on disagreements between FEMA and the Red Cross regarding their roles and responsibilities during the relief efforts, rather than specific versions of operating procedures. Even though the wording of the operating procedures the Red Cross and FEMA said they used during hurricane relief efforts was the same, it is clear that they disagreed about their roles and responsibilities, and specifically the role of the ESF-6 coordinator, following the hurricanes. Additionally, our evidence indicates that this disagreement strained FEMA and Red Cross working relationships and may have led to breakdowns in the provision of mass care services. Both FEMA and Red Cross officials have confirmed they are working to finalize a memorandum of understanding to clarify ESF-6 roles and responsibilities for future incidents of national significance. As both organizations work to finalize this memorandum, they need to clearly define key terms pertaining to their roles and responsibilities that may be ambiguous to avoid future confusion resulting from differing interpretations of the same document.

## Background

Hurricanes Katrina and Rita caused extensive human suffering and damage in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas. Hurricane Katrina made landfall in Mississippi and Louisiana on August 29, 2005, and alone caused more damage than any other single natural disaster in the history of the United States. Hurricane Katrina destroyed or made uninhabitable an estimated 300,000 homes—more than three times the total number of homes destroyed by the four major hurricanes that hit the continental United States in August and September 2004. Hurricane Rita followed on September 24, 2005, making landfall in Texas and Louisiana and adding to the devastation. Hurricane Katrina alone caused \$96 billion in property damage, more than any other natural disaster in the history of the United States. (See fig. 1.)

**Figure 1: Comparison between the 2005 Gulf Coast Hurricanes and the 2004 Hurricane Season**



Source: GAO analysis of Red Cross documents and the White House report *The Federal Response to Hurricane Katrina: Lessons Learned*.

Note: Hurricane season 2004 refers to the four major hurricanes that struck the continental United States in August and September 2004: Charley, Francis, Ivan, and Jeanne. Regarding the 2005 Gulf Coast Hurricanes, we were unable to obtain comparable home and property damage data for Hurricane Rita.

## The Red Cross

The Red Cross provides relief services after disasters, such as hurricanes or terrorist attacks, and is the nation's largest disaster relief organization. Since its founding in 1881, the Red Cross has offered humanitarian care to

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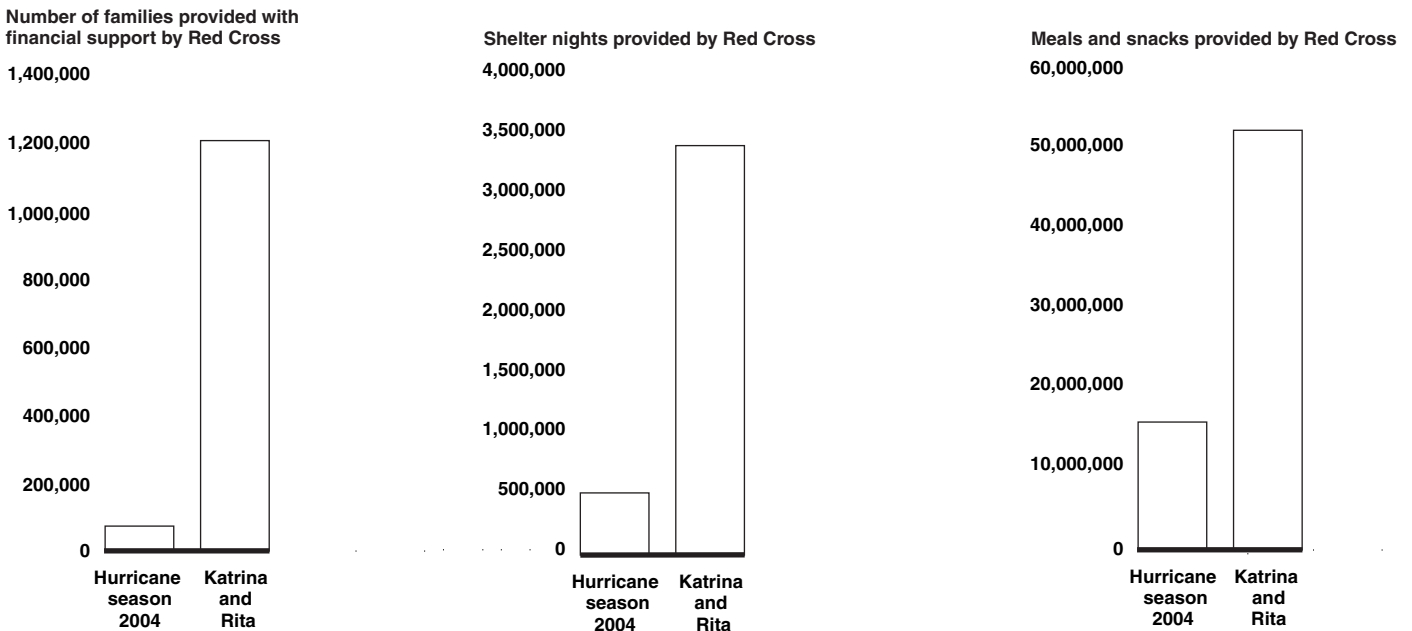
the victims of war and devastating natural disasters. The organization is unique in that it is a private nonprofit entity but, since 1905, has had a congressional charter. The congressional charter requires that the organization provide volunteer humanitarian assistance to the armed forces, serve as a medium of communication between the people of the United States and the armed forces, and provide disaster prevention and relief services. Eight of the 50 members of the Red Cross Board of Governors are appointed by the President of the United States, and 7 of these individuals must be federal officials.

Following an incident of national significance, the Red Cross serves as a direct service provider to disaster victims. In this capacity, the organization provides services that include

- feeding,
- sheltering,
- financial assistance, and
- emergency first aid.

After Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, the Red Cross estimated that it will have provided more than 3.7 million hurricane victims with financial assistance, 3.4 million overnight stays in almost 1,100 shelters, and more than 27.4 million hot meals and 25.2 million snacks for survivors of the Gulf Coast hurricanes. According to the Red Cross, its efforts after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita were larger than for any previous disaster relief effort. For example, the Red Cross provided more than six times the number of shelter nights after Katrina and Rita than it did in the entire 2004 hurricane season. (See fig. 2.)

**Figure 2: Comparison of Services Provided by the Red Cross: Hurricane Season 2004 and Hurricanes Katrina and Rita**



Source: GAO analysis of Red Cross documents.

Note: Hurricane season 2004 refers to the four major hurricanes that struck the continental United States in August and September 2004: Charley, Francis, Ivan, and Jeanne.

## National Response Plan

The National Response Plan is designed to provide the structure for the coordination of federal support for disaster response, including support for voluntary organizations providing shelter, food, and other mass care services. Major federal government agencies, the Red Cross, and an umbrella organization of voluntary organizations are signatories to the plan. DHS released the plan in December 2004, and Hurricane Katrina was the first time the plan was used in response to an incident of national significance. The plan incorporates and replaces several previous plans for disaster management, including the Federal Response Plan, which was originally signed in 1992. The Red Cross is the only voluntary organization named as a primary agency under both the Federal Response Plan and the National Response Plan. One way the National Response Plan changed the Federal Response Plan was by incorporating the services of other voluntary organizations under an umbrella organization, National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster.

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The National Response Plan is designed on the premise that disaster response is generally handled by local jurisdictions. In the vast majority of disasters, local emergency personnel, such as police, fire, public health, and emergency management personnel, act as first responders and identify needed resources to aid the community. Local jurisdictions can also call on state resources to provide additional assistance. If an incident is of such severity that it is deemed an incident of national significance, DHS and FEMA coordinate with other federal agencies to provide the affected state and local governments with additional resources and supplemental assistance. In these instances, state and local governments can request federal assistance for needed items.

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## Emergency Support Function-6

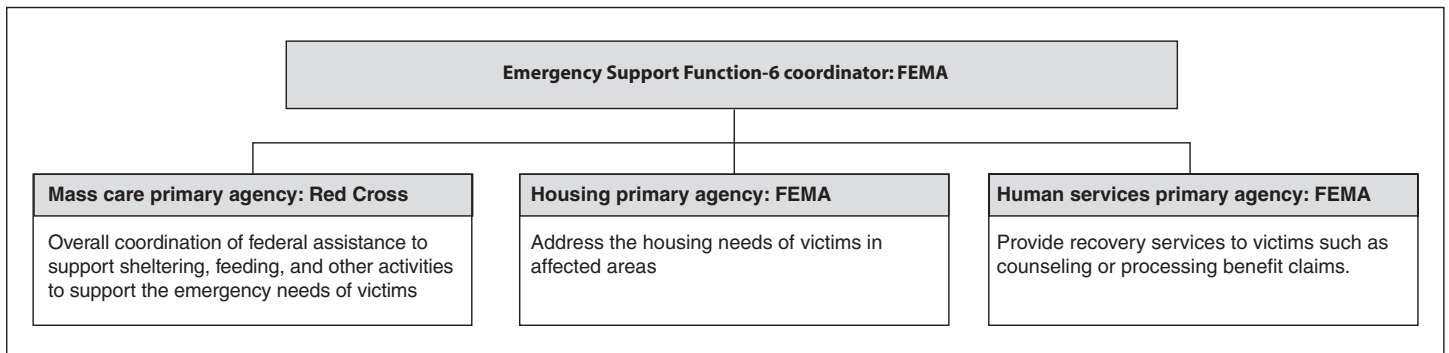
In addition to outlining the organizational structure used to respond to disasters, the National Response Plan designates 15 emergency support functions that address specific disaster response needs. ESF-6, the function most relevant to voluntary organizations involved in disaster relief, creates a working group of key federal agencies and voluntary organizations to coordinate federal assistance in support of state and local efforts to provide

- mass care, including sheltering, feeding, and emergency first aid;
- housing, both short- and long-term; and
- human services, such as counseling, processing of benefits, and identifying support for persons with special needs.

Under the Federal Response Plan, ESF-6 included only the mass care function. The National Response Plan marks the first time these three functions were included under one emergency support function.

FEMA and the Red Cross both serve important leadership roles in ESF-6. FEMA—an agency within DHS—serves as both the ESF-6 coordinator and as the primary agency for housing and human services. (See fig. 3.) In its role as ESF-6 coordinator, FEMA oversees the implementation of ESF-6 and ensures coordination among mass care, housing, and human services. In its role as primary agency for housing and human services, FEMA has responsibility for leading and coordinating federal efforts to provide these services to the victims of disasters.

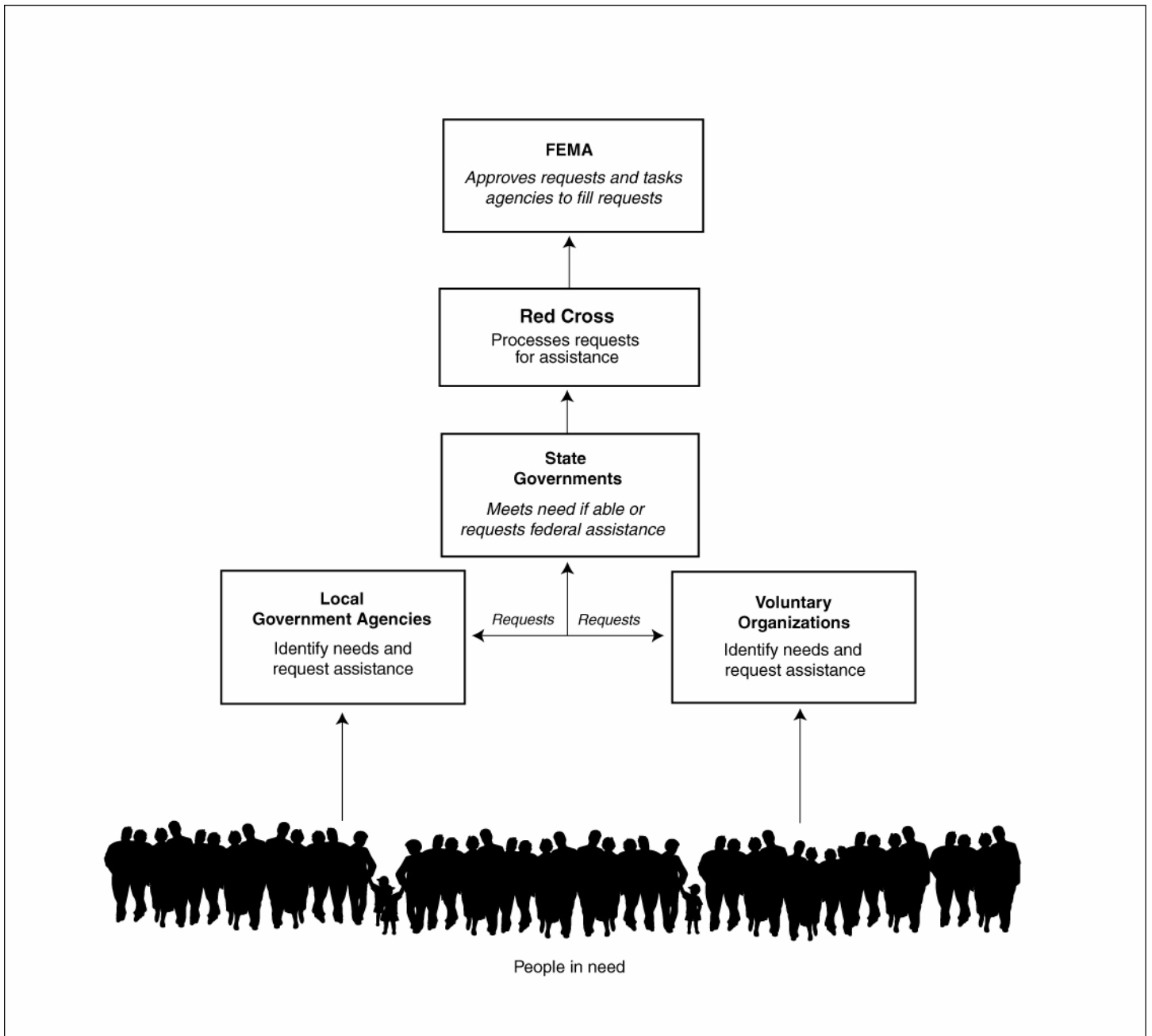
**Figure 3: Emergency Support Function-6**



Source: GAO analysis of the National Response Plan.

In addition to its role as a direct service provider, the Red Cross serves as the primary agency for mass care under ESF-6, which includes sheltering, feeding, and the provision of emergency first aid. In this role, the Red Cross is responsible for coordinating federal mass care assistance in support of state and local efforts. Red Cross staff work at FEMA headquarters and field offices to help coordinate ESF-6 relief efforts across organizations. In this role, the Red Cross takes requests for assistance from state governments to meet the needs of state or local governments or voluntary organizations. The Red Cross then identifies resources to meet those needs or calls upon FEMA to meet those needs with federal resources. (See fig. 4.) In addition to being the only voluntary organization to serve as a primary agency in the National Response Plan, the Red Cross also has responsibilities under other emergency support functions, such as providing counseling services under ESF-8, Public Health and Medical Services.

**Figure 4: Standard Process for Requesting Assistance**



Source: GAO analysis of FEMA and Red Cross interviews and Art Explosion images.

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## The Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act

The Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act (Stafford Act) specifies additional roles for the Red Cross—and other voluntary organizations—after a disaster.<sup>6</sup> The Stafford Act authorizes FEMA—under a delegation from the President—to coordinate the relief activities of government and private disaster assistance organizations (including the Red Cross). These organizations agree to operate under a federal coordinating officer, who coordinates relief following major disasters and emergencies declared by the President. The Stafford Act also specifies that in providing relief and assistance, FEMA may use—with consent—the personnel and facilities of disaster relief organizations in the distribution of medicine, food, supplies, or other items, and in the restoration, rehabilitation, or reconstruction of community services housing and essential facilities. Specifically named in the statute are the Red Cross, the Salvation Army, and the Mennonite Disaster Service.

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## Disagreement about Roles and Responsibilities Strained Working Relationships between FEMA and the Red Cross

Before the hurricanes made landfall, FEMA and the Red Cross—working together under ESF-6 for the first time—disagreed about their roles and responsibilities under the National Response Plan. This disagreement strained working relationships both before and during the response effort. Immediately following the hurricanes, each organization had a different understanding of certain ESF-6 operating procedures, according to both FEMA and Red Cross officials. This disagreement was primarily about the role of the ESF-6 coordinator, a FEMA official tasked with providing strategic vision and leading efforts to coordinate mass care, housing, and human services assistance. FEMA officials told us that according to their understanding of the operating procedures, the Red Cross should direct all requests for FEMA assistance through the ESF-6 coordinator. The Red Cross maintained that the operating procedures permitted it to take priorities directly to the FEMA Operations Section Chief—not the ESF-6 coordinator.

Tensions resulting from this disagreement negatively affected the working relationship between FEMA and the Red Cross. Because of the lack of clarity about roles and responsibilities, the agencies spent time during the response effort trying to establish operations and procedures, rather than focusing solely on coordinating services. For example, FEMA and the Red Cross debated if the Red Cross would attend and present information at daily FEMA policy meetings. Specifically, Red Cross officials reported that

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<sup>6</sup> 42 U.S.C. §§ 5121-5201.



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in the early days of the response effort, the ESF-6 coordinator informed the Red Cross that she would represent all components of ESF-6 at FEMA policy meetings. Under this model, the Red Cross attended but did not present information. Red Cross officials expressed concern with this model because they indicated that it undermined their authority as the primary agency for mass care. The Red Cross additionally told us that FEMA's vision of the ESF-6 coordinator did not best use the Red Cross's expertise in mass care service provision. FEMA officials have argued that the ESF-6 coordinator role is important because the coordinator can provide a broad vision for all of ESF-6, which includes housing and human services as well as mass care. Additionally, FEMA officials have reported that confusion about the role of the ESF-6 coordinator may have led to breakdowns in service provision.

In its review of operations following the Gulf Coast hurricanes, the DHS Office of Inspector General also noted that FEMA and the Red Cross held different expectations of their responsibilities. To address this issue, the Inspector General recommended that the FEMA director establish an ESF-6 working group to define the explicit roles and responsibilities of FEMA and the Red Cross, develop standard operating procedures, and implement a concept of operations plan. FEMA and the Red Cross have stated they are working to clarify future roles and responsibilities, but as of May 24, 2006, had not reached agreement on these responsibilities, including the role of the ESF-6 coordinator.

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## Short Rotations Made It Difficult for Red Cross ESF-6 Staff to Develop Effective Working Relationships and Gain Expertise

Red Cross staff assigned to perform ESF-6 functions rotated frequently, often working from several different locations in the aftermath of the Gulf Coast hurricanes. These staff—who were responsible for coordinating federal mass care assistance in support of state and local efforts to provide shelter and food to evacuees—generally rotated every 2 to 3 weeks. For example, one Red Cross employee told us that in a 3 1/2-month period, which began immediately before Hurricane Katrina made landfall, he rotated on seven occasions to different ESF-6 offices in Washington, D.C., Atlanta; New Orleans; and Baton Rouge. During this time, he also worked for short periods at Red Cross headquarters on five separate occasions.

Short rotations made it difficult for Red Cross ESF-6 staff to develop and maintain effective working relationships with staff from other organizations, which were critical to relief efforts. Specifically, FEMA officials told us that short rotations hindered coordination by requiring that Red Cross ESF-6 staff members develop new working relationships every time they rotated. For example, when rotating into a new state, ESF-

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6 staff would have to form new working relationships with the FEMA officials in that state, state and local government officials, and officials from various local voluntary organizations. These short rotations were problematic because strong relationships between ESF-6 workers and other organizations facilitate communication between workers and ensure that individuals are aware of the roles and capacities of other disaster response organizations. In addition, officials told us that following the hurricanes, strong relationships were particularly important because usual communication channels were often not functioning and people needed to rely on personal relationships to mobilize resources.

Short rotations also limited Red Cross ESF-6 staff members' knowledge of ESF-6 processes. For example, FEMA officials said that frequent rotations resulted in Red Cross staff sometimes not knowing how to correctly fill out forms and collect shelter data. FEMA officials said that inconsistencies in data collected by Red Cross ESF-6 staff made it difficult to track trends in mass care and identify where additional services were needed. Red Cross officials noted that FEMA processes and procedures were not always clear and required time to learn. Although not specifically addressing ESF-6, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), a humanitarian nongovernmental agency based in Geneva, Switzerland, also found that short rotations by Red Cross volunteers in various positions were problematic. According to an ICRC review of the American Red Cross's overall response to the hurricanes, "the volunteers remain normally for a period between 2-3 weeks...Due to the rapid change-over training is difficult and acquired knowledge is lost."

Red Cross officials gave several reasons for using short rotations after the Gulf Coast hurricanes. Officials told us that short rotations for ESF-6 staff are standard because most disasters are not large enough to require an ESF-6 role for more than 2 or 3 weeks. In contrast, the Gulf Coast hurricanes required that Red Cross staff fill ESF-6 functions from August 27, 2005, until December 16, 2005, a period of approximately 3 1/2 months. In addition, Red Cross officials said that short rotations made it easier to fill ESF-6 staff positions because volunteers were more likely to accept work for a short time period than for a long period.

Officials from the Red Cross have recognized the problems posed by short rotations by ESF-6 staff—who included both paid employees and trained volunteers—and stated that they are working to resolve the problem. The Red Cross told us that it is hiring 14 additional employees at the state level who will work with state emergency management agencies to help coordinate relief services, including mass care under ESF-6. Red Cross

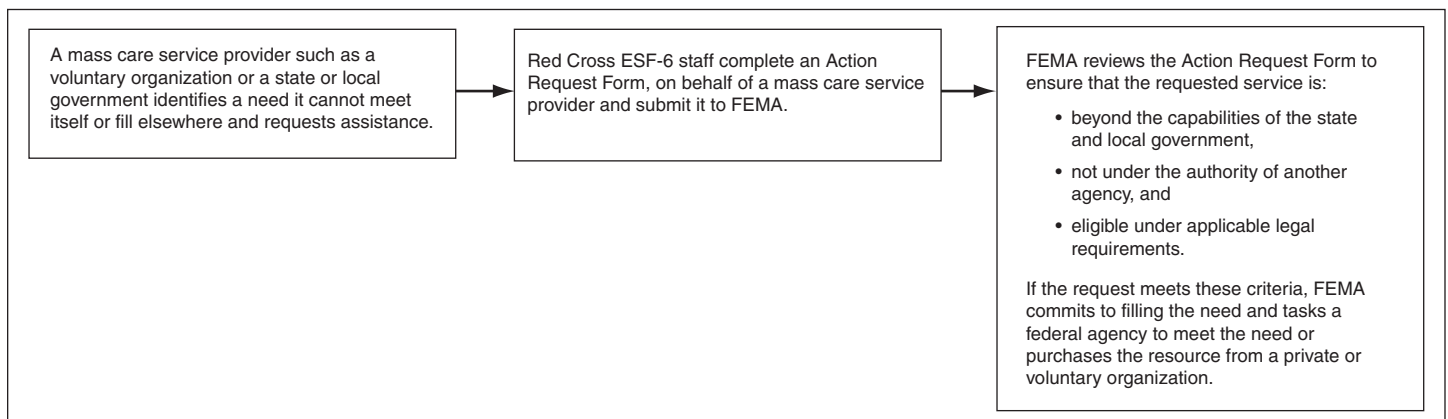
officials also told us that they are considering hiring reserve staff that could fill ESF-6 positions at the national level for longer periods. However, as of May 24, 2006, no new staffing policies had been implemented to resolve the problem of frequent rotations at the national or local levels.

## FEMA's Inability to Track Requests Created More Work for the Red Cross and Slowed Relief Services

FEMA did not have a comprehensive system to track the requests for assistance that the Red Cross submitted—in its official ESF-6 role—on behalf of state and local governments and other voluntary organizations. (See fig. 5.) Red Cross records indicate that it submitted 16 requests to FEMA headquarters and dozens more to field offices in Atlanta, Georgia; Denton, Texas; Baton Rouge, Louisiana; Jackson, Mississippi; and Austin, Texas during the response effort. According to the Red Cross, FEMA approved the majority of these requests for assistance such as requests for water, fuel, and cots for shelters, but did not have a system in place to determine whether

- the appropriate FEMA unit received the request,
- the requested items had been located,
- these items had been loaded and shipped to the intended location, and
- these items had been delivered.

**Figure 5: Process for Submitting Action Request Forms**



Source: GAO analysis of FEMA and Red Cross interviews.

Without a comprehensive system to keep track of requests for assistance, many requests were lost before FEMA could fill them. For example, FEMA officials were only able to provide us with records of less than one-third of the 16 requests that Red Cross documents indicate were submitted to FEMA headquarters. Additionally, other voluntary organizations and state

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and local government officials have told us that because of FEMA's inability to track requests, they did not know when, or if, they would receive the supplies that they needed to continue providing mass care services. The DHS Office of Inspector General noted this problem in its report, indicating that FEMA's inability to monitor requests for assistance often resulted in requests being lost or filled too late. In some instances, lost requests resulted in duplicate requests being submitted to FEMA. The DHS Office of Inspector General has recommended that FEMA develop a means to standardize and streamline the resource ordering and tracking process as well as develop and implement a resource-tracking system that is capable of documenting whether resources were delivered and the efficiency with which the resource was provided. The Under Secretary for Preparedness of DHS has stated that FEMA is working on the development of a resource-tracking system. However, FEMA officials told us they would not be able to create such a system before the 2006 hurricane season.

Red Cross officials have reported that often, the only way for them to determine the status of previously submitted requests was through informal channels, a situation that created more work for Red Cross staff. Because there was no comprehensive system in place to formally track the status of requests, Red Cross staff followed up on requests primarily through telephone calls, a procedure that was particularly challenging because the Gulf Coast hurricanes compromised communication systems. Furthermore, when the Red Cross officials were able to follow up on requests by telephone, FEMA officials were often not able to provide the needed information, according to Red Cross officials.

State and local governments that submitted requests for assistance to FEMA through the Red Cross and ESF-6 reported service delivery problems as a result of FEMA's inability to track and meet requests. For example, the city of Austin, Texas, had difficulties meeting the needs of evacuees when FEMA did not fill its request for 6,000 cots as expected. According to Austin officials, FEMA had indicated that it had processed the request and shipped the cots, which would arrive the same day. However, the cots did not arrive until much later in the response effort, and in the interim, FEMA was unable to determine where they were. As a result, the city of Austin needed to develop alternate sheltering strategies and later had to redirect the cots, which arrived too late to be of use to the city. An official from the state of Texas reported similar fulfillment and reliability problems with FEMA's system and stated that in preparation for the next hurricane season, the state is developing alternate plans with the

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private sector to reduce its dependency on FEMA to meet its mass care needs.

Voluntary organizations also reported that, in many cases, the unreliability of FEMA's supply systems challenged their attempts to provide mass care services. For example, the Southern Baptist Convention submitted several requests to FEMA through the Red Cross on September 1, 2005, for items such as refrigerated vehicles, forklifts, and hand washing stations to establish 13 large-scale kitchens that would serve Southern Baptist Convention and Red Cross shelters in Mississippi. A Southern Baptist Convention official told us that FEMA was unable to provide information about these requests after the requests had been submitted. Consequently, the organization's ability to continue providing food for hurricane evacuees was compromised because most of the supplies it requested did not arrive until approximately September 10—a week and a half after placing the requests.

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## Conclusions

In 2005, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita brought widespread devastation and challenged all levels of government and voluntary organizations to help thousands of victims get food, medical help, shelter, and other assistance. As we and others have reported, the agencies responsible for disaster relief after the Gulf Coast hurricanes were clearly overwhelmed, and there was widespread dissatisfaction with the level of preparedness and the collective response. The Red Cross and FEMA—the two organizations responsible for working together to coordinate federal mass care assistance under the National Response Plan—also faced challenges coordinating with each other to ensure that critical aid and resources from the federal government reached workers on the ground in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas.

As the 2006 hurricane season begins, these two organizations, with their access to vast resources and long histories of providing disaster relief services, are uniquely positioned to improve the level of care provided following a disaster. But this partnership cannot function efficiently in the aftermath of a disaster without improved working relationships. Coordination between FEMA and the Red Cross will continue to be difficult unless they reach agreement on their respective roles and responsibilities and find ways to ensure that staff in critical positions serve at sites long enough to make contacts and retain on-the-job experience. Furthermore, as FEMA works to develop a system to track requests for assistance, it has an opportunity to improve service delivery by engaging the Red Cross. As the primary agency for mass care under the National

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Response Plan and the entity charged with submitting mass care-related requests to FEMA, the Red Cross could provide valuable input in identifying end user needs of a resource-tracking system and aiding in the design of system capabilities. The DHS Office of Inspector General has made longer-term recommendations for improving ESF-6 processes. However, changes are needed to enable this partnership to function more effectively as the 2006 hurricane season is beginning.

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## Recommendations for Executive Action

To clarify roles and responsibilities within ESF-6 for the 2006 hurricane season, we recommend that the Secretary of DHS direct FEMA to work with the Interim President and Chief Executive Officer of the Red Cross as soon as possible to reach agreement on the operating procedures that they will both use in the event of an incident of national significance. Given the lack of progress FEMA and the Red Cross have made thus far in reaching agreement on the operating procedures and that the new hurricane season is beginning, they may wish to use mediation to speed the agreement.

We recommend that the Interim President and Chief Executive Officer of the Red Cross implement ESF-6 staffing strategies that better facilitate the development of working relationships and retain institutional knowledge. For example, such strategies might include lengthening ESF-6 staff rotations in incidents of national significance or primarily using permanent staff to fill ESF-6 positions.

To help ensure that FEMA's resource tracking system will meet the needs of those requesting FEMA assistance, we recommend that the Secretary of DHS direct FEMA to ensure that it obtains input from the Red Cross as it develops a resource tracking system.

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## Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

We provided a draft of this report to the Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security. DHS officials indicated that they had no comments on the draft, except for a few technical clarifications, which we incorporated as appropriate in this report. DHS did not provide a response to our recommendations, noting that FEMA was actively preparing for the hurricane season. DHS's written comments are reproduced in appendix II at the end of this report.

We also provided a draft of this report to the Interim President and Chief Executive Officer of the Red Cross. The Red Cross's written comments on the draft are reproduced in appendix III. Overall, the Red Cross agreed with our conclusion that coordination between FEMA and the Red Cross

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could be improved for the 2006 hurricane season. The Red Cross also highlighted actions under way with respect to our first two recommendations. For example, the Red Cross said it has been working closely with FEMA in recent months to develop and finalize a memorandum of understanding that outlines areas of mutual support and cooperation with respect to response and recovery in presidentially declared disasters and emergencies. With respect to our recommendation about staffing strategies, the Red Cross said that it is in the process of hiring ESF-6 reservists who will be deployed for extended periods of time to perform Red Cross ESF-6 mass care functions at the federal level. Additionally, the Red Cross said that it heartily endorsed our third recommendation about FEMA's resource tracking system.

In its response, the Red Cross also provided additional information to help clarify the Red Cross's role under the National Response Plan and its ESF-6 operations. Specifically, the Red Cross maintained that in several places in the draft, our characterization of its role under the National Response Plan and ESF-6 was too broad. In response, we revised the report to clarify that under the National Response Plan, the Red Cross is responsible for coordinating federal mass care assistance in support of state and local mass care efforts. The Red Cross also provided additional information about the length of ESF-6 staff rotations, which we incorporated into the final report.

Finally, in its written comments, the Red Cross maintained that in our draft report the manner in which we characterized problems pertaining to the operating procedures used by FEMA and the Red Cross following the hurricanes was not fully accurate. FEMA and Red Cross officials had previously told us that the organizations used different versions of the operating procedures. However, in its comments on our draft report, the Red Cross said that statements we made in the draft regarding differences in the versions of the operating procedures it and FEMA used were not accurate, as the versions were the same in every relevant respect. Further, the Red Cross stated that the use of two different versions of operating procedures by FEMA and the Red Cross—if it ever occurred—did not result in negative consequences, as our draft reported. In response to the Red Cross's comments, we again requested the version of the operating procedures used by FEMA during hurricane relief efforts. We subsequently received a version of the operating procedures from FEMA; our review of this document indicated that the versions the Red Cross and FEMA said they used were the same in relevant respects. Specifically, the versions stated that the Red Cross would not be precluded from taking priorities directly to the FEMA Operations Section Chief, as necessary, but

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that the Red Cross would coordinate with other designated FEMA officials. As such, we modified the report to focus on disagreements between FEMA and the Red Cross regarding their roles and responsibilities during the relief efforts, rather than specific versions of operating procedures. Even though the wording of the operating procedures the Red Cross and FEMA said they used during hurricane relief efforts was the same, it is clear that FEMA and the Red Cross disagreed about their roles and responsibilities following the hurricanes and specifically the role of the ESF-6 coordinator. Further, our evidence indicates this difference strained their working relationships. High-ranking officials from both the Red Cross and FEMA confirmed to us on numerous occasions that there was confusion and differing views over how the agencies should operate under ESF-6 and specifically how the role of the ESF-6 coordinator should be defined. After reviewing our draft, FEMA officials did not disagree with our characterization that disagreement over the operating procedures and the role of the ESF-6 coordinator may have led to breakdowns in the provision of mass care services. Further, both FEMA and Red Cross officials have confirmed they are working to finalize the aforementioned memorandum of understanding to clarify ESF-6 roles and responsibilities for future incidents of national significance. As both organizations work to finalize this memorandum, they need to clearly define key terms pertaining to their roles and responsibilities that may be ambiguous to avoid future confusion resulting from differing interpretations of the same document.

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We are sending copies of this report to the Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, the Red Cross, appropriate congressional committees, and other interested parties. We will also make copies available to others upon request. In addition, the report will be available at no charge on GAO's Web site at <http://www.gao.gov>. Please contact me at (202) 512-7215 if you or your staff have any questions about this report. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. Other major contributors to this report are listed in appendix IV.



Cynthia M. Fagnoni  
Managing Director, Education, Workforce  
and Income Security Issues



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*List of Committees*

The Honorable Charles E. Grassley  
Chairman

The Honorable Max Baucus  
Ranking Minority Member  
Committee on Finance  
United States Senate

The Honorable Michael B. Enzi  
Chairman

The Honorable Edward M. Kennedy  
Ranking Minority Member  
Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions  
United States Senate

The Honorable Susan Collins  
Chairwoman

The Honorable Joseph Lieberman  
Ranking Minority Member  
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs  
United States Senate

The Honorable Tom Davis  
Chairman

The Honorable Henry A. Waxman  
Ranking Minority Member  
Committee on Government Reform  
House of Representatives

The Honorable Peter T. King  
Chairman

The Honorable Bennie G. Thompson  
Ranking Minority Member  
Committee on Homeland Security  
House of Representatives

The Honorable William M. Thomas  
Chairman

The Honorable Charles B. Rangel  
Ranking Minority Member  
Committee on Ways and Means  
House of Representatives

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# Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

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As part of GAO's ongoing body of work examining the response of the federal government and others to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, we conducted a review of how Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and voluntary organizations operated in concert with one another after the Gulf Coast hurricanes. To obtain information about coordination between FEMA and the voluntary organizations during the response to the Gulf Coast hurricanes, we interviewed officials from FEMA's national headquarters and from national offices of voluntary organizations, including the Red Cross, National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster, the Salvation Army, the United Way, Habitat for Humanity, the Southern Baptist Convention, and Louisiana Association of Nonprofit Organizations. Additionally, to better understand two key tools used in coordination, we observed a National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster conference call in November 2005. These conference calls took place daily after the Gulf Coast hurricanes and included representatives from local and national voluntary organizations, as well as federal agencies, such as FEMA. We also observed the Coordinated Assistance Network database, a database that allowed multiple organizations to access information about the services provided to evacuees. To coordinate efforts with other oversight entities, we met in person and by telephone with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Office of Inspector General, Congressional Research Service, Congressional Budget Office, the Urban Institute, and the RAND Corporation. Finally, we reviewed reports on the response to the Gulf Coast hurricanes issued by the DHS Office of Inspector General, the House of Representatives, the White House, the International Committee of the Red Cross, the British Red Cross, and the American Bar Association.

We conducted our work between October 2005 and June 2006 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

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## Site Visits

To learn about the operations of voluntary organizations in the field, we conducted site visits to Baton Rouge and New Orleans, Louisiana, as well as Biloxi and Jackson, Mississippi, in January of 2006. Additionally, we visited Austin and Houston, Texas, in March of 2006. We toured damage caused by the hurricanes in New Orleans, Louisiana, and Biloxi, Mississippi. Additionally we toured the FEMA Joint Field Offices that were located in Baton Rouge, Biloxi, and Austin; local emergency operations centers in Baton Rouge and Austin; as well as distribution centers established by the Red Cross and the Salvation Army.

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We spoke with FEMA Voluntary Agency Liaisons in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas. Additionally, we met with local chapters of the Red Cross, the Salvation Army, Catholic Charities, and the United Way. In addition, we spoke with key officials from the East Baton Rouge Parish Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness, Office of Homeland Security and Public Safety: City of New Orleans, Texas Office of Homeland Security, Austin/Travis County Health and Human Services Department, City of Austin Office of Emergency Management, City of Houston Mayor's Office of Public Safety and Homeland Security, the Harris County Citizen Corps, and the Harris County Judge's office. We also met with representatives from the OneStar Foundation, a charitable organization established in coordination with Texas' Governor Perry's office.

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## Discussion Groups

To gain additional perspectives on disaster response, we conducted discussion groups of voluntary organizations that responded to the hurricanes. We attended the January Board of Directors meeting for the National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster. At this meeting, we observed the board members offering guidance to an organization that was new to disaster response and conducted a discussion group with board members, including representatives from the United Methodist Committee on Relief, America's Second Harvest, and Lutheran Disaster Response. We held two additional discussion groups—one in Jackson, Mississippi, and one in Houston, Texas—to learn the perspectives of local voluntary organizations that provided disaster relief. At these discussion groups, we heard from representatives of local chapters of the United Way and Catholic Charities USA, the Houston Food Bank, Independence Heights Ministerial Alliance, community action agencies from two counties in Mississippi, and the Christian Outreach Center.

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## Analysis of Red Cross Documents

To better understand the Red Cross's responsibilities and response to the Gulf Coast hurricanes, we analyzed numerous documents provided to us by the Red Cross. These documents included an August 2005 draft of the Standard Operating Procedures for Emergency Support Function-6; the American Red Cross Responsibilities under the Federal Response Plan; a statement of understanding between FEMA and the Red Cross; key statements of understanding between the Red Cross and other voluntary organizations that pertain to the Gulf Coast Response—including memorandums with Catholic Charities and the Salvation Army; training materials for Red Cross Emergency Support Function-6 personnel and disaster operation summary reports; after-action report by the Red Cross; and a spreadsheet of all Red Cross shelters. We also reviewed a Red Cross

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summary document that listed each action request form it, as a primary agency for Emergency Support Function-6, submitted to FEMA between August 29, 2005, and September 30, 2005. Red Cross officials told us that they created this document after the Gulf Coast hurricanes in response to inquiries by us and others about their role as the primary agency for mass care. Additionally, we reviewed documents that the Red Cross provided to the Senate Committee on Finance, including documentation of Board of Governors' meeting agendas from the years 2001 through 2005 and communication from Red Cross executives to board members. As aforementioned, we also reviewed mission reports of the response to the Gulf Coast hurricanes by the International Committee of the Red Cross and the British Red Cross.

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## **Analysis of FEMA Documents**

To gain a better understanding of how FEMA worked with voluntary organizations after the Gulf Coast hurricanes, we reviewed documents that it provided to us. Specifically, we reviewed copies of the action request forms that FEMA had records of the Red Cross submitting to FEMA headquarters and a list documenting the status of these action request forms. We also reviewed FEMA maps of shelter locations. Following agency comments, we also reviewed a version of the ESF-6 standard operating procedures FEMA said it used during hurricane relief efforts and compared it to the version the Red Cross said that it used.

# Appendix II: Comments from the Department of Homeland Security

U.S. Department of Homeland Security  
Washington, DC 20528



**Homeland  
Security**

May 24, 2006

Ms. Cynthia M. Fagnoni  
Managing Director  
Education, Workforce, and Income Security Issues  
U. S. Government Accountability Office  
441 G Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Ms. Fagnoni:

Re: Draft Report GAO-06-712, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita: Coordination between FEMA and the Red Cross Could Be Improved for the 2006 Hurricane Season (GAO Job Code 130529)

The Department of Homeland Security appreciates the opportunity to review and comment on the Government Accountability Office's draft report. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) officials have been actively preparing for hurricane season. At the present time, FEMA officials have no comments on the draft report.

We will provide technical comments under separate cover.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Steven J. Pecinovsky".

Steven J. Pecinovsky  
Director  
Departmental GAO/OIG Liaison Office

MMcP

[www.dhs.gov](http://www.dhs.gov)

# Appendix III: Comments from the Red Cross



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May 24, 2006

**BY E-MAIL**


Cynthia M. Fagnoni, Managing Director  
Education, Workforce, and  
Income Security Issues  
U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO)  
441 G Street N.W.  
Washington D.C. 20548

RE: GAO Draft Report

Dear Ms. Fagnoni:

Attached please find Comments of the American Red Cross on the U.S. Government Accountability Office Draft Report, "Hurricanes Katrina and Rita: Coordination between FEMA and the Red Cross Could Be Improved for the 2006 Hurricane Season." Please feel free to contact me with any questions.

Sincerely,

  
Lori Polachek  
Senior Counsel

*Together, we can save a life*

**Comments of the American Red Cross on the U.S. Government Accountability Office Draft Report, "Hurricanes Katrina and Rita: Coordination between FEMA and the Red Cross Could Be Improved for the 2006 Hurricane Season"**

The American Red Cross appreciates the opportunity to comment on the GAO Draft Report, "Hurricanes Katrina and Rita: Coordination between FEMA and the Red Cross Could Be Improved for the 2006 Hurricane Season" ("Draft Report"). Overall, the Red Cross agrees with the GAO's conclusion that the coordination between FEMA and the Red Cross could be improved for the 2006 hurricane season. That is why the Red Cross has been working closely with FEMA in recent months to develop a new Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that outlines areas of mutual support and cooperation with respect to response and recovery in Presidentially-declared disasters and emergencies. The finalization of this MOU is imminent. In addition, the Red Cross and FEMA are working together to reach a better understanding regarding their respective roles under Emergency Support Function ("ESF") #6 of the National Response Plan ("NRP"), which was activated for the first time in the response to the Gulf Coast hurricanes. They expect to document their understanding in a separate document.

*The Red Cross role in disaster response and ESF #6 of the NRP*

The GAO correctly notes that the Red Cross is chartered by Congress to provide a system of disaster relief and that in response to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita the Red Cross mounted the largest disaster response in its history. For more than 125 years, the mission of the Red Cross -- a non-profit, charitable organization -- has been to help Americans prevent, prepare for and respond to emergencies. The Red Cross accomplishes this mission with a unique, community-based network of more than 800 local chapters, together with regional service areas and our national headquarters in Washington D.C. The Red Cross has expertise in meeting the human needs associated with disasters and it often partners with governmental entities in providing emergency shelter, food and other mass care services as well as short-term financial assistance to address basic human needs. The Red Cross' response to Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Wilma included serving nearly 65 million meals and snacks, sheltering nearly 500,000 hurricane survivors with approximately 3.4 million shelter nights, and providing emergency financial assistance to nearly 1.4 million families.

The Red Cross is concerned, however, that the Draft Report does not accurately characterize the Red Cross' *other* role in disaster response: its role under ESF #6 of the NRP. ESF #6 covers mass care, housing and human services. Under the NRP, the Red Cross is the Primary Agency for the mass care part of ESF #6, while FEMA is the Primary Agency for housing and human services. In the words of the NRP, the Red Cross' function as Primary Agency for mass care is to "coordinate Federal mass care assistance in support of State and local mass care efforts." National Response Plan, ESF #6 Annex, page 5. This means that the Red Cross works within the federal government structure to help bring federal resources to state and local governments. Among other things, the Red Cross receives resource requests from state and local governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and transmits them to FEMA. FEMA then

decides which resource requests will be filled and assigns them to the appropriate federal agency

The Red Cross' role under ESF #6 of the NRP has been the subject of much confusion. For example, in its Draft Report the GAO erroneously states that under ESF #6 the Red Cross is tasked with "coordinating the nation's delivery of mass care services" (Draft Report, page 1), "coordinating the provision of mass care" (Draft Report, page 8), and "meeting the nation's mass care needs" (Draft Report, page 17). Similar erroneous statements are found throughout the Draft Report, including in the Highlights and on pages 3, 9, and 13. In fact, under the NRP the Red Cross' ESF #6 role is much more limited. The Red Cross' responsibilities as Primary Agency for mass care under ESF #6 relate solely to the system by which the federal government provides resources to support local disaster relief activities.

During the response to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, the Red Cross fulfilled its responsibilities as Primary Agency for mass care under ESF #6 by, among other things, sending specially-trained Red Cross staff to FEMA locations to serve as contacts for state and local governmental entities and NGOs seeking federal resources to support their local relief efforts. Red Cross ESF #6 staff documented these resource requests and submitted them to FEMA's logistics system; FEMA, not the Red Cross, decided which resource requests would be funded. Red Cross ESF #6 staff also supplied subject matter expertise to state and local government entities regarding mass care activities and worked with liaisons from other voluntary agencies and ESFs to help on issues relating to the federal resourcing of state and local mass care response efforts.

The Red Cross' activities as Primary Agency for mass care under the NRP are quite different from the sheltering, feeding, and other mass care activities the Red Cross performs due to its humanitarian mission and Congressional Charter. In its ESF #6 role, the Red Cross' staff do not manage or direct the delivery of mass care by the Red Cross, other NGOs, or state and local governments.

*ESF #6 Standard Operating Procedures and the role of the ESF #6 coordinator*

The Draft Report's discussion of the ESF #6 standard operating procedures (Highlights, pages 11-12) contains a number of errors. First, the draft report erroneously suggests that FEMA and the Red Cross generated separate, conflicting standard operating procedures for ESF #6. In fact, the draft ESF #6 standard operating procedures were developed jointly by FEMA and the Red Cross. Throughout the spring and summer of 2005, the Red Cross and FEMA had a continuing dialog about the standard operating procedures, with FEMA circulating updated drafts and the Red Cross providing comments. Contrary to the statement in the Draft Report, the Red Cross did not develop any ESF #6 standard operating procedures on its own.

Second, the Draft Report erroneously states that the August 2005 version of the standard operating procedures differed significantly from the June 2005 standard operating procedures and that the Red Cross' and FEMA's adherence to different



versions resulted in tension that affected the working relationship. (Draft Report, pages 11-12) In fact, the June 2005 and August 2005 versions are the same in every relevant respect. Most importantly, both versions contain the same description of the role of the ESF #6 coordinator. There is no basis for saying that the use of different versions of the standard operating procedures (if it even occurred) had any negative consequences. Furthermore, the Red Cross and FEMA did not continue negotiating the standard operating procedures while the response to the Gulf Coast hurricanes was underway.

Third, with respect to the Draft Report's discussion of the role of the ESF #6 coordinator (pages 3, 11-12), it is important to note that the Red Cross followed the appropriate chain of command, processed requests for federal resources through the appropriate channels, and worked closely with FEMA's designated ESF #6 coordinator. FEMA and the Red Cross continue to work together to ensure that they share an understanding about the role of the coordinator for purposes of the next major disaster, and they will develop policies and procedures incorporating that agreement.

*Rotations of Red Cross ESF #6 staff*

The Draft Report's discussion of the rotations of Red Cross ESF #6 staff (Highlights, pages 3-4 and 13-14) omits important background and looks at the issue out of context. In the vast majority of major disasters, an ESF #6 assignment for a Red Cross staff member or volunteer will last from a few days to a few weeks. Hurricane Katrina was an extraordinary event making unusual demands on all of the ESFs to support numerous deployments at multiple locations for unprecedented lengths of time. Federal ESF #6 efforts continued for much longer than they ever had before. This is why Red Cross ESF #6 staff – many of whom are volunteers – often could not continue to serve in the ESF #6 role throughout the weeks or months that a particular FEMA office was in operation. During the response to hurricanes Katrina and Rita, the Red Cross tried to ensure as much consistency as possible in its staffing of the ESF #6 positions at FEMA locations. Contrary to the statement in draft report, no Red Cross employee rotated 12 times. The employee to which the Draft Report refers rotated to six ESF #6 assignments and then returned to his home duty station at Red Cross national headquarters.

The Red Cross is taking various steps to lengthen the rotations of its ESF #6 personnel and ensure that ESF #6 personnel have the strong working relationships and ESF #6 expertise that are necessary to provide the highest level of service. Among other things, the Red Cross has revised its training course for ESF #6 staff so that they will be more knowledgeable about ESF #6 processes and policies. The Red Cross is in the process of hiring ESF #6 reservists, who will be deployed for extended periods of time to perform the Red Cross' ESF #6 mass care function at the federal level. In addition, the Red Cross is hiring 14 additional employees who will work in specific states and focus on coordination with state emergency management agencies concerning mass care issues, including ESF #6. These new staff will be knowledgeable about the mass care activities of state and local governments and will work closely with the Red Cross ESF #6 mass care personnel who will be deployed to FEMA locations during a disaster, thereby enhancing the communications about the state and local resource needs that can be

addressed through the federal system. These new staff will not, however, “fill ESF 6 positions at the state level,” as the GAO reports (Draft Report, pages 4, 14), because the Red Cross does not perform the ESF #6 role at the state government level.

*Tracking resource requests*

Although coordination between FEMA and the Red Cross is important, the more fundamental issue is FEMA’s fulfillment of the requests for federal resources that are processed by ESF #6. Thus, the Red Cross heartily endorses the GAO’s recommendation that FEMA should develop a comprehensive and effective system for tracking requests for federal mass care resources and incorporate Red Cross input in the development process.

*Other issues*

Draft Report, page 1, 7: The Red Cross is the only voluntary organization specifically named in the plan as a *primary agency*. The National VOAD represents other voluntary organizations and is designated as a Support Agency.

Draft Report, pages 4, 13: The report issued by the International Committee for the Red Cross (“ICRC”) does not pertain to ESF #6. The ICRC report contains only a general statement regarding the normal deployment period for a Red Cross disaster volunteer and does not mention either ESF #6 or the NRP.

Draft Report, page 6: Pursuant to the Red Cross’ Congressional Charter, 36 U.S.C. §§ 300101 et seq., the Red Cross’ purposes include carrying out a nationwide system of disaster prevention and relief and serving as a medium of communication between the people of the United States and the members of the armed forces.

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# Appendix IV: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

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## GAO Contact

Cynthia M. Fagnoni, (202)512-7215, fagnonic@gao.gov

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## Staff Acknowledgments

Andrew Sherrill, Assistant Director, and Tamara Fucile, Analyst in Charge, managed this assignment and made significant contributions to all aspects of this report. Mallory Barg Bulman, Scott Spicer, and Matthew Kunding also made significant contributions. Additionally, Norm Rabkin, Bill Jenkins, Gale Harris, Mike Brostek, Michael Zola, Brodi Fontenot, and Walter Vance aided in this assignment. In addition, Jessica Botsford assisted in the legal analysis, and Rachael Valliere assisted in the message and report development.

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# Related GAO Products

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*Lessons Learned for Protecting and Educating Children after the Gulf Coast Hurricanes.* [GAO-06-680R](#). Washington, D.C.: May 11, 2006.

*Hurricane Katrina: Planning for and Management of Federal Disaster Recovery Contracts.* [GAO-06-622T](#). Washington, D.C.: April 10, 2006.

*Hurricane Katrina: Comprehensive Policies and Procedures Are Needed to Ensure Appropriate Use of and Accountability for International Assistance.* [GAO-06-460](#). Washington, D.C.: April 6, 2006.

*Hurricane Katrina: Policies and Procedures Are Needed to Ensure Appropriate Use of and Accountability for International Assistance.* [GAO-06-600T](#). Washington, D.C.: April 6, 2006.

*Hurricane Katrina: Status of the Health Care System in New Orleans and Difficult Decisions Related to Efforts to Rebuild It Approximately 6 Months after Hurricane Katrina.* [GAO-06-576R](#). Washington, D.C.: March 28, 2006.

*Agency Management of Contractors Responding to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.* [GAO-06-461R](#). Washington, D.C.: March 15, 2006.

*Hurricane Katrina: GAO's Preliminary Observations Regarding Preparedness, Response, and Recovery.* [GAO-06-442T](#). Washington, D.C.: March 8, 2006.

*Emergency Preparedness and Response: Some Issues and Challenges Associated with Major Emergency Incidents.* [GAO-06-467T](#). Washington, D.C.: February 23, 2006.

*Disaster Preparedness: Preliminary Observations on the Evacuation of Hospitals and Nursing Homes Due to Hurricanes.* [GAO-06-443R](#). Washington, D.C.: February 16, 2006.

*Expedited Assistance for Victims of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita: FEMA's Control Weaknesses Exposed the Government to Significant Fraud and Abuse.* [GAO-06-403T](#). Washington, D.C.: February 13, 2006.

*Investigation: Military Meals, Ready-to-Eat Sold on eBay.* [GAO-06-410R](#). Washington, D.C.: February 13, 2006.

*Statement by Comptroller General David M. Walker on GAO's Preliminary Observations Regarding Preparedness and Response to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.* [GAO-06-365R](#). Washington, D.C.: February 1, 2006.

*Federal Emergency Management Agency: Challenges for the National Flood Insurance Program.* [GAO-06-335T](#). Washington, D.C.: January 25, 2006.

*Hurricane Protection: Statutory and Regulatory Framework for Levee Maintenance and Emergency Response for the Lake Pontchartrain Project.* [GAO-06-322T](#). Washington, D.C.: December 15, 2005.

*Hurricanes Katrina and Rita: Provision of Charitable Assistance.* [GAO-06-297T](#). Washington, D.C.: December 13, 2005.

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