



Highlights of [GAO-09-433T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Emergency Communications, Preparedness and Response, Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Hurricane Katrina severely tested disaster management at the federal, state, and local levels and revealed weaknesses in the basic elements—leadership, capabilities, and accountability—of preparing for, responding to, and recovering from disasters. In its 2006 work on the response to Hurricane Katrina, GAO noted that these elements needed to be strengthened. In October 2006, Congress enacted the Post-Katrina Act to address issues identified in the response to Hurricane Katrina. GAO reported in November 2008 that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) had at least preliminary efforts under way to address most of the provisions, but also identified a number of areas that required further action. This statement discusses select issues within the basic elements related to (1) findings from the response to Hurricane Katrina, (2) provisions of the Post-Katrina Act, and (3) specific actions DHS and FEMA have taken to implement these provisions. GAO's comments are based on GAO products issued from February 2006 through November 2008, and selected updates in March 2009. To obtain updated information, GAO consulted program officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO has made recommendations to DHS in prior reports, with which DHS generally agreed, regarding leadership, capabilities, and accountability controls for disaster management.

View [GAO-09-433T](#) or key components. For more information, contact William O. Jenkins, Jr. at (202) 512-8777 or jenkinswo@gao.gov.

EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

Actions to Implement Select Provisions of the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act

What GAO Found

GAO reported in September 2006 that the experience of Hurricane Katrina showed the need to improve leadership at all levels of government to respond to catastrophic disasters. For example, GAO reported that, in the response to Hurricane Katrina, there was confusion over roles and responsibilities under the National Response Plan, including the roles of the DHS Secretary, the FEMA Administrator, the Principal Federal Official (PFO), and the Federal Coordinating Officer (FCO). The Post-Katrina Act clarified FEMA's mission within DHS and set forth the role and responsibilities of the FEMA Administrator. The act also required that the FEMA Administrator provide a clear chain of command that accounts for these roles. In revising the National Response Plan—now called the National Response Framework—FEMA articulated specific roles for the PFO and FCO, which are described in GAO's November 2008 report.

GAO reported in September 2006 that various congressional reports and GAO's own work on FEMA's performance before, during, and after Hurricane Katrina suggested that FEMA's capabilities were insufficient to meet the challenges posed by the degree of damage and the number of hurricane victims. The capabilities issues GAO identified related to, among others, (1) emergency communications, (2) evacuations, (3) logistics, (4) mass care, (5) planning and training, and (6) human capital. The Post-Katrina Act included a variety of provisions that related to these issues. For example, related to emergency communications, the act established an Office of Emergency Communications (OEC) within DHS. GAO reported in November 2008 that, in response to specific responsibilities outlined in its authorizing provision, OEC has been working with Urban Area Working Groups and states to assess gaps in communications infrastructure and to determine technical requirements to enhance interoperable communications systems.

GAO reported in February 2006 that accountability mechanisms—specifically, internal controls—were lacking or nonexistent in processing applications for individual and household assistance following Hurricane Katrina, which left the government vulnerable to fraud and abuse. For example, GAO estimated that through February 2006, FEMA made about 16 percent (\$1 billion) in improper and potentially fraudulent payments to applicants who used invalid information to apply for disaster assistance. The Post-Katrina Act required the development of a system, including an electronic database, to counter improper payments. GAO reported in November 2008 that FEMA established a process to identify and collect duplicative payments by, among other things, enabling its disaster assistance database to check automatically for duplicate applications.