



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.