



Highlights of [GAO-07-219](#), a report to congressional committees

HURRICANES KATRINA AND RITA

Federal Actions Could Enhance Preparedness of Certain State-Administered Federal Support Programs

Why GAO Did This Study

Hurricanes Katrina and Rita displaced over 1 million people and affected some of the poorest areas of the country. Many of those affected by the hurricanes received federal assistance from the Old Age, Survivors, and Disability Insurance (Social Security), Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Food Stamp, Unemployment Insurance (UI), and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) programs beforehand and others were newly eligible after the storms. Under the Comptroller General's authority, GAO assessed the (1) challenges the hurricanes created for programs to take applications and pay benefits, (2) factors that helped or hindered programs' efforts, and (3) areas that warrant further attention and actions being taken to improve programs' disaster response. To do this work, GAO reviewed policies, reports, and plans, and interviewed program officials at the federal level and in Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that HHS take steps, such as disseminating information on promising practices and further study of case management approaches as part of its efforts to improve delivery of human services during disasters, as well as work with states to collect information on the need for TANF disaster planning. HHS agreed with the recommendations on actions to strengthen its recent efforts but did not agree to address TANF planning specifically.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-219.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Barbara Bovbjerg at (202) 512-7215 or bovbjergb@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

The mass destruction and displacement of people caused by the hurricanes created new challenges, including an unprecedented demand for services from these five programs. The demand for food stamps and UI benefits, and the disaster assistance they provide, rose sharply. New evacuee policies were created to provide food stamps and TANF assistance to evacuees nationwide. In contrast, Social Security and SSI had a significant increase for replacement benefits, but did not have a large increase in new applications.

Disaster plans, flexible service delivery options, and access to contingency funding facilitated response, but not all programs had these elements in place. The federally administered Social Security and SSI programs had service delivery disaster plans in place to meet demand. However, such strategies were sometimes lacking for the state-administered Food Stamp, UI, and TANF programs. Flexible service delivery options such as 800 numbers and Internet application services and debit cards for issuing benefits expedited services. Last, access to contingency funding was key to facilitating disaster response.

Gaps remain in preventing improper payments, easing access to services, and improving disaster planning for the state-administered programs, although new efforts hold potential for addressing these areas. Some program officials said they relaxed program rules to better ensure that those in need received aid, which may have increased the risk of improper payments. Program officials are taking actions to address improper payments, although more sharing of information across programs and states would be useful. Regarding access to services, disaster victims sometimes faced difficulties accessing aid from multiple programs, a long-standing problem exacerbated by a disaster. The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) has begun a promising effort—with links to state program administrators—to improve delivery of human services during disasters. This effort would be strengthened by additional actions, including collecting and disseminating information on service delivery and improper payments during disasters. Finally, to address planning gaps, federal officials are working with states to improve service delivery planning for the Food Stamp and UI programs, although HHS needs to work more systematically with states to assess the need for additional planning for state TANF programs.

Federal and State Responsibilities for Key Program Functions Vary

Key functions	Social Security and SSI	Food Stamps	UI	TANF
Funding benefits	●	●	○	◐
Funding administrative costs	●	◐	●	◐
Establishing eligibility rules	●	◐	○	◐
Supplying program offices and staffing	●	○	○	○

Source: GAO analysis.

Legend: ● Federal responsibility ◐ Federal and state shared responsibility ○ State responsibility