



Highlights of [GAO-07-44](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

During the evacuation of New Orleans in response to Hurricane Katrina in 2005, many of those who did not own a vehicle and could not evacuate were among the over 1,300 people who died. This raised questions about how well state and local governments, primarily responsible for disaster planning, integrate transportation-disadvantaged populations into such planning. GAO assessed the challenges and barriers state and local officials face; how prepared these governments are and steps they are taking to address challenges and barriers; and federal efforts to provide evacuation assistance. GAO reviewed evacuation plans; Department of Homeland Security (DHS), Department of Transportation (DOT), and other studies; and interviewed officials in five major city and four state governments.

What GAO Recommends

DHS should clarify federal agencies' roles and responsibilities for providing evacuation assistance when state and local governments are overwhelmed. DHS should require state and local evacuation preparedness for transportation-disadvantaged populations and improve information to assist these governments. DOT should encourage its grant recipients to share information to assist in evacuation preparedness for these populations. DOT and DHS agreed to consider our recommendations, and DHS stated it has partly implemented some of them.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-44.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Kate Siggerud at (202) 512-2834 or SiggerudK@gao.gov.

TRANSPORTATION-DISADVANTAGED POPULATIONS

Actions Needed to Clarify Responsibilities and Increase Preparedness for Evacuations

What GAO Found

State and local governments face evacuation challenges in identifying and locating transportation-disadvantaged populations, determining their needs, and providing for their transportation. These populations are diverse and constantly changing, and information on their location is often not readily available. In addition, these populations' evacuation needs vary widely; some require basic transportation while others need accessible equipment, such as buses with chair lifts. Legal and social barriers impede addressing these evacuation challenges. For example, transportation providers may be unwilling to provide evacuation assistance because of liability concerns.

State and local governments are generally not well prepared—in terms of planning, training, and conducting exercises—to evacuate transportation-disadvantaged populations, but some have begun to address challenges and barriers. For example, DHS reported in June 2006 that only about 10 percent of state and about 12 percent of urban area emergency plans it reviewed adequately addressed evacuating these populations. Furthermore, in one of five major cities GAO visited, officials believed that few residents would require evacuation assistance despite the U.S. Census reporting 16.5 percent of car-less households in that major city. DHS also found that most states and urban areas significantly underestimated the advance planning and coordination required to effectively address the needs of persons with disabilities. Steps being taken by some such governments include collaboration with social service and transportation providers and transportation planning organizations—some of which are DOT grantees and stakeholders—to determine transportation needs and develop agreements for emergency use of drivers and vehicles.

The federal government provides evacuation assistance to state and local governments, but gaps in this assistance have hindered many of these governments' ability to sufficiently prepare for evacuations. This includes the lack of any specific requirement to plan, train, and conduct exercises for the evacuation of transportation-disadvantaged populations as well as gaps in the usefulness of DHS's guidance. Although federal law requires that state and local governments with mass evacuation plans incorporate special needs populations into their plans, this requirement does not necessarily ensure the incorporation of all transportation-disadvantaged populations. Additionally, while DHS has made improvements to an online portal for sharing related information, this information remains difficult to access because of poor search and organizational functions. Moreover, although the federal government can provide evacuation assistance when state and local governments are overwhelmed, the federal government is not prepared to do so. Amendments to the Stafford Act in October 2006 affirmed that FEMA (an agency within DHS) is responsible for leading and coordinating evacuation assistance. DHS has not yet clarified, in the National Response Plan, the lead, coordinating, or supporting agencies in such cases.