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Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-07-193](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

Concerns about the safety and health of workers involved in the response to Hurricane Katrina included their exposure to contaminated floodwaters and injuries from working around debris. The Department of Labor's Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) is responsible for coordinating federal efforts to protect the safety and health of workers involved in the response to large national disasters. Under the Comptroller General's authority, GAO initiated a number of Katrina-related reviews. For this review, GAO examined (1) what is known about the number of response and recovery workers deployed to the Gulf Coast in response to Hurricane Katrina; (2) the extent to which OSHA tracked injuries and illnesses sustained by these workers; and (3) how well OSHA met the safety and health needs of workers. To address these issues, GAO reviewed reports; analyzed data; interviewed federal, state, and local officials; and conducted site visits.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making recommendations to the Secretaries of Labor, Homeland Security, and Health and Human Services designed to improve OSHA's efforts during future disasters. Labor agreed with the recommendation to establish a system to better track injuries and illnesses but disagreed with some of the findings on which the other recommendations were based. The other two agencies agreed with the recommendations in the report.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-193.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Daniel Bertoni at (202) 512-5988 or bertonid@gao.gov.

DISASTER PREPAREDNESS

Better Planning Would Improve OSHA's Efforts to Protect Workers' Safety and Health in Disasters

What GAO Found

No one, including OSHA, was responsible for collecting information on the total number of response and recovery workers deployed to the Gulf Coast in response to Hurricane Katrina and no one collected it, but 10 federal agencies provided estimates showing that, on October 1, 2005, the agencies had about 49,000 federal workers in the Gulf Coast area. In addition, six of these agencies estimated that their contractors had about 5,100 workers in the area on December 1, 2005, but the other four either did not track the number of workers employed by their contractors or did not employ contractors.

Although OSHA was responsible for tracking the injuries and illnesses that federal response and recovery workers sustained during the response to Hurricane Katrina, the agency's efforts to collect it were delayed and it was unable to collect usable information. According to OSHA, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) must assign and fund specific responsibilities for each disaster. However, FEMA did not direct OSHA to collect injury and illness data until more than 3 weeks after the hurricane struck. OSHA attempted to collect the data, but the information federal agencies provided were incomplete and unreliable. OSHA and other agencies did track fatalities. They reported nine worker fatalities attributed to work-related accidents: three employees of federal contractors and six nonfederal workers or volunteers.

OSHA provided assistance to many response and recovery workers who responded to Hurricane Katrina, but not all workers' safety and health needs were met. OSHA quickly established operations in the Gulf area; intervened in thousands of potentially hazardous situations; and assessed air, water, soil, and noise hazards at many work sites. However, disagreements between OSHA and FEMA about which agency was in charge of providing safety and health assistance to federal agencies and workers and how it would be provided delayed some of OSHA's efforts. Also, some agencies' lack of awareness about the role OSHA plays in a disaster further hindered its ability to provide assistance. As a result, OSHA did not fully meet workers' safety and health needs, particularly their need for training and protective equipment. OSHA also did not coordinate with the Department of Health and Human Services to ensure that workers had needed mental health services, and OSHA was not assigned responsibility for coordinating the needs of nonfederal workers, including state and local agency workers; many immigrants; and volunteers.

Workers at an EPA Hazardous Waste Collection Facility near New Orleans, Louisiana



Source: GAO.