



Highlights of [GAO-07-395T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Homeland Security, Committee on Appropriations, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

The Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act of 2006 stipulates major changes to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to improve the agency's preparedness for and response to catastrophic disasters. For example, the act establishes a new mission for and new leadership positions within FEMA

As GAO has reported, DHS faces continued challenges, including clearly defining leadership roles and responsibilities, developing necessary disaster response capabilities, and establishing accountability systems to provide effective response while also protecting against waste, fraud, and abuse. This testimony discusses the extent to which DHS has taken steps to overcome these challenges

This testimony summarizes earlier GAO work on: (1) leadership, response capabilities, and accountability controls; (2) organizational changes provided for in the Post-Katrina Reform Act; and (3) disaster management issues for continued Congressional attention.

What GAO Recommends

This testimony contains no new recommendations but does identify issues that Congress and DHS may wish to give continued attention to so that FEMA may more effectively fulfill the requirements of the Post-Katrina Reform Act.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-395T.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact William O. Jenkins, Jr. at (202) 512-8757 or jenkinsWO@gao.gov.

HOMELAND SECURITY

Preparing for and Responding to Disasters

What GAO Found

GAO reported in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina that DHS needs to more effectively coordinate disaster preparedness, response, and recovery efforts. GAO analysis showed improvements were needed in leadership roles and responsibilities, development of necessary disaster capabilities, and accountability systems that balance the need for fast, flexible response with the need to prevent waste, fraud, and abuse. To facilitate rapid and effective decision making, legal authorities, roles and responsibilities, and lines of authority at all government levels must be clearly defined, effectively communicated, and well understood. Improved capabilities were needed for catastrophic disasters—particularly in the areas of (1) situational assessment and awareness; (2) emergency communications; (3) evacuations; (4) search and rescue; (5) logistics; and (6) mass care and sheltering. Effectively implementing the provisions of the Post-Katrina Reform Act will address many of these issues, and FEMA has initiated reviews and some actions in each of these areas. But their operational impact in a major disaster has not yet been tested.

As a result of its body of work, GAO's recommendations included that DHS (1) rigorously re-test, train, and exercise its recent clarification of the roles, responsibilities, and lines of authority for all levels of leadership; (2) direct that more robust and detailed operational implementation plans support the National Response Plan (NRP); (3) provide guidance and direction for all planning, training, and exercises to ensure such activities fully support preparedness, response, and recovery responsibilities at a jurisdictional and regional basis; (4) take a lead in monitoring federal agencies' efforts to prepare to meet their responsibilities under the NRP and the interim National Preparedness Goal; and (5) use a risk management approach in making its investment decisions. We also recommended that Congress give federal agencies explicit authority to take action to prepare for all types of catastrophic disasters when there is warning.

In his oversight letter to Congress, the Comptroller General suggested that one area needing fundamental reform and oversight is ensuring a strategic and integrated approach to prepare for, respond to, recover, and rebuild from catastrophic events. Congress may wish to consider several specific areas for immediate oversight. These include (1) evaluating development and implementation of the National Preparedness System, including preparedness for an influenza pandemic; (2) assessing state and local capabilities and the use of federal grants to enhance those capabilities; (3) examining regional and multi-state planning and preparation; (4) determining the status of preparedness exercises; and (5) examining DHS polices regarding oversight assistance.