

Department of Homeland Security **Office of Inspector General**

FEMA's Initial Response in New York to Hurricane Sandy





OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL
Department of Homeland Security

Washington, DC 20528 / www.oig.dhs.gov

SEP 26 2013

MEMORANDUM FOR: Joseph L. Nimmich
Associate Administrator, Response and Recovery
Federal Emergency Management Agency

FROM: John V. Kelly
Assistant Inspector General
Office of Emergency Management Oversight

SUBJECT: *FEMA's Initial Response in New York to Hurricane Sandy*

Attached for your information is our final letter report, *FEMA's Initial Response in New York to Hurricane Sandy*.

We audited the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) initial response to Hurricane Sandy in New York from November 2012 to May 2013. We discussed the results of this audit with FEMA officials during the course of the audit and provided a discussion draft report to them on May 14, 2013. The report contains no recommendations.

Consistent with our responsibility under the *Inspector General Act*, we will provide copies of our report to appropriate congressional committees with oversight and appropriation responsibility over the Department of Homeland Security. We will post the report on our website for public dissemination.

Please call me with any questions, or your staff may contact David Kimble, Director, Eastern Regional Office, Office of Emergency Management Oversight, at (404) 832-6702.

Attachment



Background

Hurricane Sandy made landfall on October 29, 2012 as a post-tropical cyclone just south of Atlantic City, New Jersey. The storm was the second largest Atlantic hurricane on record, with a diameter of tropical storm force winds spanning more than 900 miles. The storm affected one of the most densely populated areas in the northeastern United States, resulting in loss of life, major flooding, structural damage to real property, and loss of power throughout the region.

The President declared an emergency on October 28, 2012, and declared a major disaster on October 30, 2012 for Individual Assistance and Public Assistance in seven counties in New York. A major snowstorm occurred 9 days later, causing additional damage and power outages. FEMA is providing 90 percent Federal funding for this disaster with the exception of 100 percent Federal funding for 15 days after Hurricane Sandy struck for emergency power restoration and emergency public transportation.

The *Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Act* (§401), requires that all requests for a Presidential declaration that a major disaster exists shall be made by the Governor of the affected State. The Governor makes a request through the regional FEMA office. Based on the Governor's request, the President may declare that a major disaster or emergency exists, thus activating an array of Federal programs to assist in the response and recovery effort.

Results of Audit

FEMA provided an effective and efficient response to the damages caused by Hurricane Sandy. In its response, FEMA proactively prepared for Hurricane Sandy, overcame operational and staffing challenges, overcame resource shortfalls, used a variety of sourcing mechanisms, and effectively coordinated response activities. As of April 2, 2013, FEMA had—

- Obligated \$459 million in mission assignments to 39 Federal agencies to support FEMA and the State of New York with resources, such as emergency medical personnel and assistance with debris clearance and power restoration;
- Registered more than 270,000 Individual Assistance applicants; and
- Obligated more than \$806 million for Public Assistance.

In evaluating FEMA's initial response to this disaster, we focused on answering the following questions:



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1. What activities did FEMA perform before the major disaster declaration?
2. What were the most pressing challenges FEMA faced in this disaster?
3. What were the most significant resource shortfalls?
4. How did FEMA make disaster sourcing decisions?
5. How well did FEMA coordinate its activities?

FEMA Proactively Prepared for Hurricane Sandy

FEMA effectively coordinated activities in New York before the President's major disaster declaration. On October 26, 2012, FEMA Region II began coordinating pre-deployment activities with the State. After the Emergency Declaration on October 28, 2012, FEMA moved quickly to mobilize an Incident Management Assistance Team, set up the Initial Operating Facility, and respond to requests for initial assistance and needed supplies using internal resources and mission assignments.¹

Incident Management Assistance Team: Because of Hurricane Sandy's effect on New York City, New York, FEMA Region II relocated its Regional Response Coordination Center from its New York City offices to Earle Naval Weapons Station, New Jersey. The Regional Response Coordination Center location contained the Federal Emergency Support Function partners for Region II, which covers both New Jersey and New York. FEMA's Federal Coordinating Officer and FEMA Region II personnel deployed to Brooklyn, New York to coordinate with the Incident Management Assistance Team.² The team supports the initial establishment of a unified command and provides situational awareness for Federal and State decision-makers crucial to determining the level and type of immediate Federal support required. FEMA first deployed the Incident Management Assistance Team to Brooklyn, New York to establish the Initial Operating Facility.

Initial Operating Facility: FEMA operated the Initial Operating Facility from the Brooklyn Bridge Marriott in Brooklyn, New York. The facility supported the initial establishment of a unified command and provided situational awareness for Federal and State

¹ Incident Management Assistance Teams are full-time, rapid-response teams with dedicated staff able to deploy within 2 hours and arrive at an incident within 12 hours to support the local incident commander.

² The role of Federal Coordinating Officers in disaster operations is to make an initial appraisal of the types of relief most urgently needed, establish field offices, coordinate the administration of relief, and take such other actions necessary to assist local citizens and public officials in promptly obtaining the assistance to which they are entitled.



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decision-makers crucial to determining the level and type of immediate Federal support required. The FEMA staff at the Initial Operating Facility transitioned to the Joint Field Office.

Initial Assistance and Needed Supplies: FEMA used the logistics process and pre-negotiated plans for supplies it previously set up in the event of disasters in New York. For Hurricane Sandy, FEMA deployed trailer loads of water, meals, cots, blankets, toddler and medical kits, and generators. FEMA deployed the trailers to three neighboring areas: Republic Field in Long Island, New York; Floyd Bennett Field in Brooklyn, New York; and Lakehurst Naval Air Station, New Jersey. Additionally, FEMA tasked other Federal agencies to support the Federal response with mission assignments.³ FEMA used mission assignments to mobilize Federal personnel to the FEMA Initial Operating Facility before the hurricane's landfall.

FEMA Successfully Overcame Operational and Staffing Challenges

FEMA performed well at managing the response and recovery challenges of Hurricane Sandy. During the first 30 days, the most pressing challenges included (1) obtaining housing for the thousands of people the hurricane displaced, especially given the high population density in the New York City area, and (2) obtaining experienced disaster staff.

Obtaining Housing for Displaced Survivors: As the response and recovery effort progressed, FEMA realized that, because the hurricane affected the most populated area in the nation, providing shelter would be a major concern. Traditional sheltering options were not necessarily possible or practicable. The New York City area lacked open space to place temporary housing units, and the holiday season limited hotel availability. Further, the hurricane occurred late in the hurricane season, and winter weather had arrived. To help solve this problem, FEMA implemented the Sheltering and Temporary Essential Power Pilot Program (STEP), which allows residents to return to their homes and shelter in place as they complete permanent repairs.

Experienced FEMA Staff: FEMA's Joint Field Office managers overcame initial concerns about their ability to obtain experienced staff early in the disaster. FEMA managers said that they could no longer request personnel by name through the Automated Deployment Database system, which precludes their ability to request staff they know to be qualified. To resolve these concerns, FEMA implemented the FEMA Qualification

³ FEMA issues mission assignments to direct other Federal agencies and DHS components to complete specified tasks in response to a Presidentially-declared emergency or major disaster.



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System to capture staff skill sets, enabling the Agency to identify and deploy qualified staff to disasters more quickly. The FEMA Qualification System establishes the process for qualification and certification of the FEMA incident workforce through experience, training, and demonstrated performance. The system requires formal certifications for FEMA employees who work in certain incident management and support positions. Qualification and certification processes provide consistent standards for every field position at FEMA while also adding credibility to the entire emergency management profession. By establishing qualification standards that are consistent across the Agency, the FEMA Qualification System helps to ensure that FEMA employees have the knowledge, skills, and experience to perform in their incident management and incident support positions.

FEMA Overcame Resource Shortfalls

FEMA successfully obtained and managed resources needed for this disaster. FEMA officials said their most significant resource shortfall was obtaining qualified, experienced Federal personnel to support the response and recovery effort.

Qualified Staff: As discussed previously, FEMA officials were initially concerned about obtaining qualified, experienced staff to support the timely delivery of disaster services. In addition to using the FEMA Qualification System to resolve this concern, the Federal Coordinating Officer and FEMA Region II officials coordinated with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), FEMA Headquarters, and other FEMA regions to quickly deploy the Surge Capacity Force, full-time FEMA employees, and FEMA reservists to the Joint Field Office. Obtaining and managing these resources efficiently allowed FEMA to overcome potential shortfalls in qualified staffing.

Surge Capacity Force: A cadre of skilled and trained Federal personnel known as the Surge Capacity Force augmented the initial surge of FEMA staff responding to Hurricane Sandy. FEMA uses the Surge Capacity Force when its list of Tier 1 employees is exhausted. When Hurricane Sandy made landfall, the Secretary of DHS activated the DHS Surge Capacity Force at the request of the FEMA Administrator. The Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act directs DHS to create the Surge Capacity Force with volunteers from other Federal agencies. FEMA worked with the leadership of several other DHS components and, as of November 1, 2012, deployed about 1,700 volunteers from a roster of 2,142 volunteers that participating components made available to support the Hurricane Sandy response.



FEMA Relied on a Variety of Methods for Disaster Sourcing Decisions

FEMA made effective sourcing decisions for this disaster. The primary sourcing methods for Hurricane Sandy included mission assignments; requisitions for supplies, equipment, services, and personnel; and acquisitions. FEMA also requested the Emergency Management Assistance Compact.⁴

Mission Assignments: As of April 2, 2013, FEMA had obligated \$459 million in mission assignments to 39 Federal agencies to support FEMA and the State of New York with resources, such as emergency medical personnel, assistance with debris clearance, and power restoration. In its response to Hurricane Sandy, FEMA used three types of mission assignments:

1. Federal Operations Support—FEMA requests another Federal agency to assist in disaster response. FEMA pays all costs;
2. Technical Assistance—FEMA provides technical expertise to States. FEMA pays all costs; and
3. Direct Federal Assistance—States request this type of mission assignment when they do not have the resources to provide specific types of disaster assistance. States pay a share of the costs.

FEMA provided New York with 34 Direct Federal Assistance mission assignments valued at \$306 million. Direct Federal Assistance mission assignments are a particularly effective sourcing method because they require completion within 60 days of the emergency or disaster declaration. FEMA experienced some delays in obtaining New York officials' signatures on Direct Federal Assistance mission assignments. According to New York Joint Field Office staff, these delays occurred because the person authorized to approve mission assignments had left the State emergency management agency. Ultimately, New York officials signed all Direct Federal Assistance mission assignments. The DHS Office of Inspector General published a report with a recommendation aimed at improving the mission assignment process, thus addressing monetary risks associated with delays in the approval process.⁵

Requisitions for Supplies, Equipment, Services, and Personnel: New York Joint Field Office finance staff members reviewed the justification for all requisitions for supplies,

⁴ The Emergency Management Assistance Compact offers assistance during governor-declared states of emergency through a responsive, straightforward system that allows States to send personnel, equipment, and commodities to help disaster relief efforts in other States.

⁵ *The State of New York Needs To Sign Mission Assignments More Quickly*, OIG-13-85, April 30, 2013.



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equipment, services, and personnel. They also confirmed that FEMA charged the correct account from the Disaster Relief Fund.

Acquisitions: FEMA Headquarters awarded contracts and blanket purchase agreements for this disaster. The majority of the contracts supported the Regional Recovery Command Center operations. At the time of our fieldwork, the Joint Field Office employed five contracting officers, one contract specialist, and one procurement specialist. Before the Joint Field Office assumed operational responsibility, FEMA entered into 43 advance contracts, of which 2 were with small local vendors. At the time of our fieldwork, the Joint Field Office's acquisition group had awarded 41 additional contracts totaling \$3.9 million, of which 31 were local awards totaling \$2.6 million.

Emergency Management Assistance Compact: According to FEMA officials, Emergency Management Assistance Compacts are an excellent and relatively inexpensive option that enables one State to help another when the disaster exceeds the State's ability to recover. For this disaster, FEMA requested the Emergency Management Assistance Compact. Within a week of the disaster, 27 States deployed 1,956 personnel to aid the affected areas. For example, law enforcement teams provided security, while National Guard units assisted with staging and delivery of food and water. Other areas of support included (1) law enforcement strike teams, incident management teams, and emergency operations center personnel to assist with planning, logistics, and operations and (2) Emergency Advance Teams to assist affected areas through interstate coordination of mutual aid assistance.

FEMA Coordinated its Activities Effectively

During its response to Hurricane Sandy, FEMA coordinated its major activities with other Federal agencies and State officials effectively. These activities included (1) establishing and supplying staging and mobilization sites, (2) responding to temporary housing needs, (3) tracking and monitoring mission assignments, and (4) obtaining appropriate staffing.

Federal Staging Areas: The FEMA Logistics Management Directorate in Washington, DC, activated the Federal staging areas at McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, a U.S. military installation in Burlington and Ocean Counties, New Jersey. FEMA also deployed staging teams that arrived before Sandy made landfall. The staging areas received commodities and equipped personnel before area assignments. Operating under a joint effort, the staging teams handled response needs of both New York and New Jersey.



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Coordination with State Officials to Resolve Temporary Housing Needs: As discussed previously, FEMA responded to temporary housing needs by using its newly implemented Sheltering and Temporary Essential Power Pilot Program. FEMA worked closely with State of New York officials to implement that program. FEMA and State officials also worked closely in implementing the State's Rapid Repairs program. New York's Rapid Repairs program hired contractors to make emergency repairs for approved residential property owners. The emergency repairs allowed residents to stay in their homes so they could complete permanent repairs. Emergency repairs include the restoration of heat, power and hot water, and temporary exterior repairs to protect a home from further damages. The collaborative use of these programs removed some of the pressure on a housing system that was stressed before the storm and that now faced the housing needs of tens of thousands of displaced survivors.

Tracking and Monitoring Mission Assignments: FEMA's Request Action Tracking System helped staff monitor and coordinate mission assignments FEMA issued from different locations to avoid duplication and ensure delivery of requested items. The Request Action Tracking System is a fully functional, web-based tool that tracks Action Request Forms from initiation/acceptance through completion. Users can download reports and email them to other stakeholders to provide updates for easy sharing with State or other Federal agencies.

Coordination with Other Federal Agencies to Obtain Staffing: FEMA worked closely with other Federal agencies to obtain staffing needed to respond to this disaster. We observed cohesive, hard working teams fully committed to accomplishing the mission they were charged to complete. As discussed previously, the Federal Coordinating Officer and FEMA Region II officials coordinated with DHS, FEMA Headquarters, and other FEMA regions to quickly deploy the Surge Capacity Force. Additionally, for this disaster, FEMA used the services of young Americans who belong to FEMA Corps. FEMA Corps is an innovative partnership between FEMA and the Corporation for National and Community Service, which established a devoted unit of 1,600 service corps members within AmeriCorps National Civilian Community Corps solely devoted to disaster preparedness, response, and recovery.⁶ FEMA personnel expressed that the FEMA Corps is a win all around—benefiting communities and individuals affected by disasters, disaster response organizations, public servants, and American taxpayers.

⁶ The Corporation for National and Community Service is a Federal agency. In addition to AmeriCorps, it operates Senior Corps, the Social Innovation Fund, the Volunteer Generation Fund, and other volunteer groups.



Conclusion

FEMA performed well in its initial response to Hurricane Sandy in New York. FEMA proactively deployed staff to the Regional Response Coordination Center and the Joint Field Office. The ability to draw upon the Surge Capacity Force and the FEMA Corps helped facilitate FEMA's fast and effective response to the disaster. FEMA prepared well for this disaster, overcame operational and staffing challenges, quickly resolved resource shortfalls, made efficient disaster sourcing decisions, and coordinated its activities effectively with State and local officials.

Recommendations

We are not making any recommendations.

Management Comments and OIG Analysis

FEMA concurs with the report and its conclusion.



Appendix A

Objective, Scope, and Methodology

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Office of Inspector General (OIG) was established by the *Homeland Security Act of 2002* (Public Law 107-296) by amendment to the *Inspector General Act of 1978*. This is one of a series of audit, inspection, and special reports prepared as part of our oversight responsibilities to promote economy, efficiency, and effectiveness within the Department.

The objective of this audit was to determine whether FEMA's response to Hurricane Sandy in New York was effective and efficient, and to evaluate FEMA's actions, resources, and authorities according to Federal regulations and FEMA guidelines in effect at the time of our fieldwork. To accomplish our objective, we focused on answering the following questions:

1. What activities did FEMA perform before the major disaster declaration?
2. What were the most pressing challenges FEMA faced in this disaster?
3. What were the most significant resource shortfalls?
4. How did FEMA make disaster sourcing decisions?
5. How well did FEMA coordinate its activities?

We interviewed FEMA Region II officials and FEMA Disaster Assistance Employees; reviewed FEMA Situation Reports and Incident Action Plans; observed operations at FEMA's Joint Field office in Queens, New York; and performed other procedures considered necessary to accomplish our objective. We did not assess the adequacy of FEMA's internal controls applicable to disaster response because it was not necessary to accomplish our audit objective.

We also observed operations at the following sites in New York:

- Disaster Recovery Centers in Far Rockaway, Breezy Point, and Staten Island, New York.
- FEMA/State Applicant Briefings in Manhattan and Suffolk County, New York.
- Damage sites in Roxbury and Staten Island, New York.

We conducted this performance audit between November 2012 and May 2013, pursuant to the *Inspector General Act of 1978*, as amended, and according to generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based upon our audit objectives. We believe that



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the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based upon our audit objectives.



Appendix B

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Appendix C

Major Contributors to this Report

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