

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

FEMA's Initial Response to Hurricane Isaac in
Louisiana Was Effective and Efficient





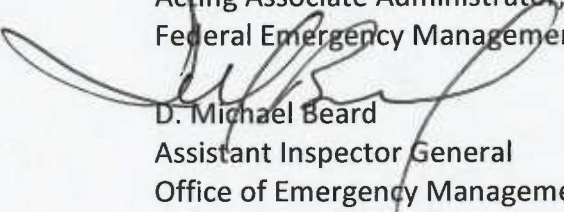
OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL

Department of Homeland Security

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

APR 30 2013

MEMORANDUM FOR: Elizabeth Zimmerman
Acting Associate Administrator, Response and Recovery
Federal Emergency Management Agency

FROM: 
D. Michael Beard
Assistant Inspector General
Office of Emergency Management Oversight

SUBJECT: *FEMA's Initial Response to Hurricane Isaac in Louisiana
Was Effective and Efficient*
FEMA Disaster Number 4080-DR-LA
Audit Report Number OIG-13-84

Attached for your information is our final letter report, *FEMA's Initial Response to Hurricane Isaac in Louisiana Was Effective and Efficient*.

Our office audited the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) initial response to Hurricane Isaac in Louisiana from early September to mid-October 2012. We discussed the results of this audit with FEMA officials during the audit. We also provided a discussion draft report to FEMA Joint Field Office officials on February 4, 2013, and to FEMA headquarters on February 12, 2013, and discussed it at exit conferences held on February 7 and 12, 2013, respectively. The report does not contain any recommendations; therefore, you do not need to provide our office with a written response.

Consistent with our responsibility under the *Inspector General Act*, we are providing 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 John Kelly, Deputy Assistant Inspector General, Office of Emergency Management Oversight, at (202) 254-4100.

Attachment



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BACKGROUND

Hurricane Isaac struck southeast Louisiana on August 28, 2012, causing widespread flooding in the low-lying areas impacting Ascension, Assumption, Jefferson, Lafourche, Livingston, Orleans, Plaquemines, St. Bernard, St. Charles, St. James, St. John the Baptist, St. Tammany, Terrebonne, Tangipahoa, and Washington parishes (15 parishes). As the hurricane moved inland and downgraded to a tropical storm and later to a tropical depression, it continued to move slowly and took several days to exit the state.

FEMA cannot provide disaster assistance under the *Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act*, Public Law 93-288, as amended, until the President declares a “major disaster” or an “emergency.”¹ When an incident occurs or threatens to occur that would not qualify under the definition of a major disaster, the Governor of a State may request that the President declare an emergency. Based on the Governor’s request and all available information, FEMA forwards the Governor’s request to the President with a recommendation for or against an emergency declaration.

In the case of Hurricane Isaac, FEMA recommended and the President declared an emergency for the 15 affected parishes on August 27, 2012. Later, on August 29, 2012, the President declared a major disaster for Individual Assistance and Public Assistance in 55 of Louisiana’s 64 parishes. FEMA is providing 75 percent Federal funding for this disaster.

RESULTS OF AUDIT

FEMA’s initial response to Hurricane Isaac was overall effective and efficient. In evaluating FEMA’s initial response to this disaster, 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 that 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?

¹ 42 U.S.C. §5121, et seq., as amended.



1. FEMA Proactively Prepared for Hurricane Isaac

FEMA effectively coordinated activities in Louisiana before the President’s major disaster declaration. On August 25, 2012, FEMA Region VI began coordinating predeployment activities with the State. After the Emergency Declaration, 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.

Incident Management Assistance Team: For Hurricane Isaac, FEMA’s Federal Coordinating Officer and the FEMA Region VI Acting Regional Administrator deployed to Baton Rouge to coordinate with the Incident Management Assistance Team 2 days before the hurricane made landfall.² 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. The teams support the initial establishment of a unified command and provide situational awareness for Federal and State decision-makers crucial to determining the level and type of immediate Federal support required. The Incident Management Assistance Team initially deployed 11 people to Baton Rouge to establish the Initial Operating Facility.

Initial Operating Facility: FEMA operated the Initial Operating Facility from several trailers connected together. The Initial Operating Facility trailers came ready to use with computer connections and equipment that allowed FEMA personnel to set up their computers and start working immediately. Set-up time for operations usually takes several days, but this “plug-‘n’-play” setup enhanced readiness.

Initial Assistance and Needed Supplies: FEMA used the logistics process and prenegotiated plans for supplies it previously set up in the event of disasters in Louisiana. Shortly before this hurricane, FEMA began ordering commodities and 25 fully equipped mobile housing units from Selma, Alabama, to the Initial Operating Facility location in anticipation of housing requests. FEMA also tasked other Federal agencies to support the Federal response through the use of mission assignments. FEMA used mission assignments to mobilize Federal personnel to the FEMA Regional Response Coordination Center in Denton, Texas, and to other operational facilities within the State before the hurricane’s landfall.

² The role of Federal Coordinating Officers in disaster operations is to manage Federal resources during a disaster. They help FEMA accomplish its core missions of saving lives, preventing suffering, protecting property, and conducting recovery operations. Their primary mission is to coordinate the timely delivery of Federal assistance to State and local governments, individual victims, and the private sector.



2. FEMA Successfully Overcame Staffing, Operational, and Funding Challenges

FEMA performed well at managing the challenges that Hurricane Isaac presented. During the first 30 days, the most pressing challenges that faced FEMA included moving staff from the Initial Operating Facility to the Joint Field Office, obtaining experienced disaster staff, and expediting operational and funding requests.³

Initial Operating Facility Move to Joint Field Office: As the response and recovery effort developed, FEMA needed more office space. This required relocating staff from the Initial Operating Facility to the Joint Field Office, a four-story leased building in downtown Baton Rouge, 9 miles away. FEMA's Safety Officer identified several safety and security issues with the Joint Field Office facility that needed attention before the move. After resolving these issues, FEMA quickly accomplished the move on September 12, 2012.

Experienced Staff: FEMA's Operations Section experienced some difficulty obtaining experienced staff early in the disaster. FEMA staff said that they can no longer request staff by name through the Automated Deployment Database system, which precludes their ability to request individuals that they know are qualified. However, FEMA is implementing a FEMA Qualification System to capture staff skill sets, which will enable FEMA to identify and deploy qualified staff to disasters more quickly in the future.

Operational and Funding Requests: Logistics personnel voiced concerns about the need to speed up the process time for operational/action requests. To resolve this issue, FEMA is moving toward a new web-based emergency operations center called WebEOC® to track and approve action requests. This system speeds the process by reducing the number of people involved in approving the requests. FEMA tested WebEOC® in recent Texas disasters and found it very effective.

Finance personnel were concerned about the length of time it took to analyze funding requests and submit them to FEMA Headquarters for approval. However, they said that, although the many steps and the manual aspects of collecting information to complete the analyses were challenging, the increased interaction with the program areas led to better overall information, communication, and coordination.

³ The Joint Field Office is a temporary Federal facility that provides a central location for the coordination of Federal, State, tribal, and local governments and private-sector and nongovernmental organizations with primary responsibility for response and recovery.



3. FEMA Overcame Staffing and Equipment Issues

FEMA successfully obtained and managed resources needed for this disaster. FEMA officials said that their most significant resource shortfalls included (1) obtaining qualified, experienced people to support the needs of the disaster and (2) quickly providing ready-to-use equipment to deployed staff.

Qualified Staff: FEMA officials were concerned about obtaining qualified, experienced staff to support the timely delivery of disaster services using the current staff deployment system. However, most FEMA officials said that they were fortunate to obtain the experienced staff they needed for this disaster, and most staff started working immediately. As stated previously, FEMA is working on initiatives, such as the FEMA Qualification System, to broaden its capability to ensure that staff members hold the correct skill sets to draw upon during a disaster.

Equipment: The initial surge of staff during the first week of this disaster overwhelmed the limited Information Technology (IT) staff and created servicing problems. However, FEMA increased the number of IT staff and resolved these problems quickly. Further, FEMA is eliminating the transportation and distribution backlog of equipment by directly assigning equipment to FEMA reservists to keep in their possession to bring to their next disaster assignment. This new process will expedite the time for reservists to start working.

4. FEMA Relied on a Variety of Mechanisms for Disaster Sourcing Decisions

FEMA effectively made disaster sourcing decisions for this disaster. The primary sourcing mechanisms for Hurricane Isaac included mission assignments; requisitions for supplies, equipment, services, and personnel; and acquisitions. FEMA also discussed with the State whether to use Emergency Management Assistance Compact.

Mission Assignments: The Federal Coordinating Officer in this disaster identified three individuals to sign and approve mission assignment requests. The FEMA Operations Section Chief located at the State Emergency Operations Center determined the eligibility of mission assignment requests. If the State could not fulfill a request, the State sent it to FEMA for review, approval, and action. This process appears to have worked very well.

Requisitions for Supplies, Equipment, Services, and Personnel: Finance staff members reviewed all requisitions for supplies, equipment, services, and personnel for proper justification and need. This step verified the need for these resources before funding



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and reduced the likelihood of duplication by ensuring that FEMA did not use mission assignments to obtain the same resources.

Acquisitions: FEMA's Finance and Acquisitions staff used advance General Services Administration, FEMA, and Department of Homeland Security (DHS) contracts for purchases. In addition, Acquisitions personnel made every effort to award contracts to local companies. At the time of our fieldwork, Acquisitions had awarded 15 contracts, 12 of which were to local companies. In addition, working under the umbrella of FEMA Region VI, the Disaster Acquisition Response Team provided contract support to the Joint Field Office. The team assisted in completing the contract for disaster housing in only 23 days. This process normally takes 45 days or more.

Emergency Management Assistance Compact: FEMA considers Emergency Management Assistance Compacts to be a relatively inexpensive option that enables one state to help another when the disaster exceeds the state's ability to recover. For this disaster, FEMA and State officials discussed the option of using an Emergency Management Assistance Compact, and the State decided not to request this type of assistance.

5. FEMA Effectively Coordinated Its Activities

FEMA effectively coordinated major activities during its response to Hurricane Isaac. 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.

Staging and Mobilization Sites: Before the storm made landfall, FEMA activated the Federal Staging Area at Camp Beauregard, a Federal facility located north of Alexandria, Louisiana, and deployed a staging team there. As needs changed, FEMA moved staging and mobilization sites to various locations. When needed, General Services Administration staff assisted FEMA with moving trucks in and out of the various locations.

Temporary Housing Needs: The Louisiana Housing Authority managed the response for temporary housing needs. A Direct Housing Specialist at FEMA Region VI worked closely with the State and helped obtain assistance from various key Federal agencies. The coordination between both State and Federal agencies enabled the Temporary Housing Program for this disaster to run smoothly.

Mission Assignments: The close coordination of mission assignment requests among FEMA, State, and local officials was very effective. FEMA's Request Action Tracking System helped staff to monitor and coordinate mission assignments issued at different



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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 or email them to provide updates for easy sharing with State or other Federal agencies.

Staffing: FEMA and the State worked together to ensure the availability of experienced staff. FEMA's Office of Chief Counsel deployed seven attorneys authorized to make decisions about the disaster to work at the Initial Operating Facility, Joint Field Office, and branch locations. This group of attorneys enabled FEMA and the State to overcome several potential problem areas. In addition, staff experienced in environmental and historic preservation and hazard mitigation addressed potential problems in those areas. Environmental Specialists provide guidance on compliance with environmental and historic preservation laws and analyze potential problem areas including analyzing mixed debris and disposing of animal remains.

CONCLUSION

Based on our observations, FEMA performed very well in its response to Hurricane Isaac. Normally, FEMA needs several days to deploy and position staff to the areas needed to respond to a disaster. In this case, FEMA was fortunate to have facilities and staff already operating in Louisiana when Hurricane Isaac made landfall. The ability to draw upon these resources allowed FEMA to respond faster and more effectively than usual. FEMA prepared well for this disaster, faced challenges with innovative solutions, quickly resolved resource shortfalls, made efficient disaster sourcing decisions, and coordinated its activities effectively with State and local officials. All disasters generate unexpected issues, but the FEMA disaster team was able to adjust and adapt quickly to fulfill its mission.



Appendix A

Objective, Scope, and Methodology

The objective of this audit was to determine whether FEMA's initial response to Hurricane Isaac 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.

We interviewed FEMA officials, FEMA Incident Management Assistance Team members, FEMA Disaster Assistance Employees, and Louisiana Governor's Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness officials; observed operations at FEMA's Initial Operating Facility and Joint Field Office in Baton Rouge, Louisiana; and performed other procedures considered necessary to accomplish our objective. We did not assess the adequacy of the agency'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 the State of Louisiana:

- State Emergency Operating Center (EOC) in Baton Rouge.
- Parish EOCs in East Baton Rouge Parish and St. John the Baptist Parish.
- Disaster Recovery Centers in Livingston, Plaquemines, and St. James parishes.
- FEMA/State Applicant Briefings in Gretna, Baton Rouge, and Laplace.
- Damage sites in Ascension, Livingston, and St. John the Baptist parishes.
- Debris operations at the Killona Landfill in St. Charles Parish.

We conducted this performance audit between September and October 2012, 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 the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based upon our audit objectives.



Appendix B

Major Contributors to This Report

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Appendix C

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