

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-20-54](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

In September 2017, two major hurricanes—Irma and Maria—struck the USVI, causing billions of dollars in damage. FEMA is the lead federal agency responsible for assisting the USVI to recover from natural disasters. FEMA administers the Public Assistance program and Hazard Mitigation Grant Program in partnership with the USVI government, providing grant funding for response and recovery activities, including life-saving emergency protective measures, the repair or replacement of public infrastructure, and measures to increase the territory's resilience during future disasters.

GAO was asked to review the federal government's response and recovery efforts in the USVI. This report examines (1) the status of Public Assistance program and Hazard Mitigation Grant Program funding and challenges, if any, with implementation, (2) the STEP pilot program, and (3) the oversight of these programs. GAO reviewed documentation and data on the Public Assistance program and Hazard Mitigation Grant Program in the USVI as of June 30, 2019. GAO interviewed FEMA and USVI officials regarding the status of recovery efforts and associated challenges, and conducted site visits to the USVI islands of St. Croix, St. Thomas, and St. John.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that FEMA (1) evaluate its options for providing emergency sheltering and (2) assess the need for a consolidated standard operating procedures document for the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program. The Department of Homeland Security concurred with these recommendations.

View [GAO-20-54](#). For more information, contact Chris Currie at (202) 512-8777 or curriec@gao.gov.

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U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS RECOVERY

Additional Actions Could Strengthen FEMA's Key Disaster Recovery Efforts

What GAO Found

As of June 30, 2019, FEMA obligated more than \$1.9 billion in grant funding for 640 projects in the U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI) through the Public Assistance program and Hazard Mitigation Grant Program in response to the 2017 hurricanes. However, the limited availability of local USVI personnel to staff key recovery positions and the territory's difficult fiscal situation presented challenges in implementing these programs. Further, FEMA and USVI officials stated they faced challenges with implementing the Public Assistance alternative procedures program, which provides the USVI with flexibility in determining when and how to fund projects. Specifically, these officials stated that developing accurate fixed-cost estimates and using new flexibilities authorized by law delayed longer-term recovery projects. USVI officials told GAO they plan to take a cautious approach when deciding whether to pursue projects using the alternative procedures.

2017 Hurricane Damage in the U.S. Virgin Islands



The Virgin Islands Housing Authority office in St. Thomas sustained significant damage during the storms.



Hurricane force winds completely destroyed apartments in a public housing facility in St. Thomas.

Source: GAO. | [GAO-20-54](#)

FEMA expanded its Sheltering and Temporary Essential Power (STEP) pilot program in the USVI to address the lack of other sheltering options for survivors, such as hotels. The program aimed to provide minimal, temporary repairs to damaged homes to quickly make them habitable. In May 2019, FEMA decided it would not use the STEP pilot program in the future since it did not provide assistance as rapidly as intended. Historically, the program was used to address survivors' emergency sheltering needs. However, since ending it, FEMA has not evaluated options for providing future emergency sheltering assistance. Doing so could help FEMA plan for when the next disaster inevitably strikes.

The USVI and FEMA established structures for overseeing recovery efforts. For example, the USVI established a new office to oversee federal recovery programs and FEMA has processes in place to oversee recovery projects at the local, regional, and headquarters levels. However, GAO found that FEMA does not have a consolidated standard operating procedures document for monitoring Hazard Mitigation Grant Program projects. Assessing the need for a consolidated document would help FEMA determine whether its existing guidance should be strengthened.