

GAO

Testimony

Before the Subcommittee on Emergency
Communications, Preparedness and
Response, Committee on Homeland
Security, House of Representatives

For Release on Delivery
Expected at 10:00 a.m. EDT
Tuesday, March 17, 2009

EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

Actions to Implement Select Provisions of the Post- Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act

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Homeland Security and Justice



GAO

Accountability * Integrity * Reliability



Highlights of [GAO-09-433T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Emergency Communications, Preparedness and Response, Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Hurricane Katrina severely tested disaster management at the federal, state, and local levels and revealed weaknesses in the basic elements—leadership, capabilities, and accountability—of preparing for, responding to, and recovering from disasters. In its 2006 work on the response to Hurricane Katrina, GAO noted that these elements needed to be strengthened. In October 2006, Congress enacted the Post-Katrina Act to address issues identified in the response to Hurricane Katrina. GAO reported in November 2008 that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) had at least preliminary efforts under way to address most of the provisions, but also identified a number of areas that required further action. This statement discusses select issues within the basic elements related to (1) findings from the response to Hurricane Katrina, (2) provisions of the Post-Katrina Act, and (3) specific actions DHS and FEMA have taken to implement these provisions. GAO's comments are based on GAO products issued from February 2006 through November 2008, and selected updates in March 2009. To obtain updated information, GAO consulted program officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO has made recommendations to DHS in prior reports, with which DHS generally agreed, regarding leadership, capabilities, and accountability controls for disaster management.

View [GAO-09-433T](#) or key components. For more information, contact William O. Jenkins, Jr. at (202) 512-8777 or jenkinswo@gao.gov.

EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

Actions to Implement Select Provisions of the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act

What GAO Found

GAO reported in September 2006 that the experience of Hurricane Katrina showed the need to improve leadership at all levels of government to respond to catastrophic disasters. For example, GAO reported that, in the response to Hurricane Katrina, there was confusion over roles and responsibilities under the National Response Plan, including the roles of the DHS Secretary, the FEMA Administrator, the Principal Federal Official (PFO), and the Federal Coordinating Officer (FCO). The Post-Katrina Act clarified FEMA's mission within DHS and set forth the role and responsibilities of the FEMA Administrator. The act also required that the FEMA Administrator provide a clear chain of command that accounts for these roles. In revising the National Response Plan—now called the National Response Framework—FEMA articulated specific roles for the PFO and FCO, which are described in GAO's November 2008 report.

GAO reported in September 2006 that various congressional reports and GAO's own work on FEMA's performance before, during, and after Hurricane Katrina suggested that FEMA's capabilities were insufficient to meet the challenges posed by the degree of damage and the number of hurricane victims. The capabilities issues GAO identified related to, among others, (1) emergency communications, (2) evacuations, (3) logistics, (4) mass care, (5) planning and training, and (6) human capital. The Post-Katrina Act included a variety of provisions that related to these issues. For example, related to emergency communications, the act established an Office of Emergency Communications (OEC) within DHS. GAO reported in November 2008 that, in response to specific responsibilities outlined in its authorizing provision, OEC has been working with Urban Area Working Groups and states to assess gaps in communications infrastructure and to determine technical requirements to enhance interoperable communications systems.

GAO reported in February 2006 that accountability mechanisms—specifically, internal controls—were lacking or nonexistent in processing applications for individual and household assistance following Hurricane Katrina, which left the government vulnerable to fraud and abuse. For example, GAO estimated that through February 2006, FEMA made about 16 percent (\$1 billion) in improper and potentially fraudulent payments to applicants who used invalid information to apply for disaster assistance. The Post-Katrina Act required the development of a system, including an electronic database, to counter improper payments. GAO reported in November 2008 that FEMA established a process to identify and collect duplicative payments by, among other things, enabling its disaster assistance database to check automatically for duplicate applications.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I appreciate the opportunity to participate in today's hearing to discuss the efforts of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to strengthen emergency management by implementing provisions of the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act of 2006 (Post-Katrina Act), which Congress enacted in October 2006 to address shortcomings in the preparation for and response to Hurricane Katrina.¹ My remarks today are grounded in our prior work on FEMA's and DHS's response to Hurricane Katrina and the actions they have taken to implement the Post-Katrina Act.² In September 2006, we identified leadership, capabilities, and accountability as elements that FEMA and DHS needed to strengthen to respond to catastrophic disasters. This testimony discusses these three elements in terms of our 2006 findings about select issues within the elements; provisions of the Post-Katrina Act that relate to those issues; the actions we reported in November 2008 that FEMA and DHS have taken to implement those provisions; and where possible, updates to these actions as of March 2009.

To conduct our 2006 work on Hurricane Katrina we visited the areas affected by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita—Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas—and interviewed the governors of those states and the mayor of New Orleans. We also interviewed senior federal officials. To conduct our 2008 work about actions to implement provisions of the Post-Katrina Act, we analyzed the text of the act and identified well over 300 discrete provisions within the legislation that called for FEMA or DHS action to implement requirements or exercise authorities. We reviewed agency documents and discussed the act's implementation with numerous senior-

¹The Post-Katrina Act was enacted as Title VI of the Department of Homeland Security Appropriations Act, 2007, Pub. L. No. 109-295, 120 Stat. 1355 (2006). The provisions of the Post-Katrina Act are codified in numerous sections of the U.S. Code. The applicable U.S. Code citations are included in this statement. The provisions of the Post-Katrina Act became effective upon enactment, October 4, 2006, with the exception of certain organizational changes related to FEMA, most of which took effect on March 31, 2007.

²The results of this work were included in products published from February 2006 through November 2008. GAO, *Emergency Preparedness and Response: Some Issues and Challenges Associated with Major Emergency Incidents*, [GAO-06-467T](#) (Washington, D.C.: February 2006); GAO, *Catastrophic Disasters: Enhanced Leadership, Capabilities, and Accountability Controls Will Improve the Effectiveness of the Nation's Preparedness, Response, and Recovery System*, [GAO-06-618](#) (Washington, D.C.: September 2006); and GAO, *Actions Taken to Implement the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act of 2006*, [GAO-09-59R](#) (Washington, D.C.: November 2008).

level program officials at FEMA and DHS to identify the actions that had been taken. In March 2009, we consulted program officials about the status of select actions to provide updates in this statement.

We conducted our work in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. More detailed information on our scope and methodology appears in our published work.

This statement provides information about select actions related to our 2006 work on the response to Hurricane Katrina that FEMA and DHS have taken to implement the Post-Katrina Act. The actions described are drawn from our November 2008 report and, where possible, March 2009 updates from program officials. As we reported in November 2008, for most of the provisions we examined, FEMA and DHS had at least preliminary efforts underway to address them. We also identified a number of areas that still required action, and noted that it was clear that FEMA and DHS have work remaining to implement the act.

Background

On August 29, 2005, and in the ensuing days, Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Wilma devastated the Gulf Coast region of the United States. Hurricane Katrina alone affected more than a half million people located within approximately 90,000 square miles spanning Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama, and ultimately resulted in over 1,600 deaths.

Hurricane Katrina severely tested disaster management at the federal, state, and local levels and revealed weaknesses in the basic elements of preparing for, responding to, and recovering from a catastrophic disaster. Beginning in February 2006, reports by the House Select Bipartisan Committee to Investigate the Preparation for and Response to Hurricane Katrina, the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, the White House Homeland Security Council, the DHS Inspector General, DHS, and FEMA all identified a variety of failures and some strengths in the preparation for, response to, and initial recovery from Hurricane Katrina. Our findings about the response to Hurricane Katrina in a March 2006 testimony and a September 2006 report focused on the need for strengthened leadership, capabilities, and accountability to improve emergency preparedness and response.³

³See GAO, Hurricane Katrina GAO's Preliminary Observations Regarding, Preparedness, Response and Recovery, [GAO-06-442T](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 8, 2006) and [GAO-06-618](#).

The Post-Katrina Act was enacted to address various shortcomings identified in the preparation for and response to Hurricane Katrina. The act enhances FEMA's responsibilities and its autonomy within DHS. FEMA is to lead and support the nation in a risk-based, comprehensive emergency management system of preparedness, protection, response, recovery, and mitigation. Under the act, the FEMA Administrator reports directly to the Secretary of Homeland Security; FEMA is now a distinct entity within DHS; and the Secretary of Homeland Security can no longer substantially or significantly reduce the authorities, responsibilities, or functions of FEMA or the capability to perform them unless authorized by subsequent legislation. The act further directs the transfer to FEMA of many functions of DHS's former Preparedness Directorate. The statute also codified FEMA's existing regional structure, which includes 10 regional offices, and specified their responsibilities. It also contains a provision establishing in FEMA a National Integration Center, which is responsible for the ongoing management and maintenance of the National Incident Management System (NIMS)—which describes how emergency incident response is to be managed and coordinated—and the National Response Plan (NRP)—now revised and known as the National Response Framework (NRF). In addition, the act includes several provisions to strengthen the management and capability of FEMA's workforce. For example, the statute calls for a strategic human capital plan to shape and improve FEMA's workforce, authorizes recruitment and retention bonuses, and establishes requirements for a Surge Capacity Force.

The Post-Katrina Act extends beyond changes to FEMA's organizational and management structure and includes legislative reforms in other emergency management areas that were considered shortcomings during Hurricane Katrina. For example, the Post-Katrina Act includes an emergency communications title that requires, among other things, the development of a National Emergency Communications Plan, as well as the establishment of working groups within each FEMA region dedicated to emergency communications coordination. The act also addresses catastrophic planning and preparedness; for example, it charges FEMA's National Integration Center with revising the NRF's catastrophic incident annex, and it makes state catastrophic planning a component of one grant program. In addition, the act addresses evacuation plans and exercises and the needs of individuals with disabilities.

In November 2008, we reported the actions FEMA and DHS had taken in response to more than 300 distinct provisions of the Post-Katrina Act that we had identified. We also reported on areas where FEMA and DHS still needed to take action and any challenges to implementation that FEMA

and DHS officials identified during our discussions with them. In general, we found that FEMA and DHS had made some progress in their efforts to implement the act since it was enacted in October 2006. For most of the provisions we examined, FEMA and DHS had at least preliminary efforts under way to address them. We also identified a number of areas that still required action, and noted that it was clear that FEMA and DHS had work remaining to implement the provisions of the act. Throughout this statement, unless otherwise noted, the actions reported that DHS and FEMA have taken to address provisions of the Post-Katrina Act are drawn from our November 2008 report.

Leadership

Our 2006 report noted that in preparing for, responding to, and recovering from any catastrophic disaster, the legal authorities, roles and responsibilities, and lines of authority at all levels of government must be clearly defined, effectively communicated, and well understood in order to facilitate rapid and effective decision making. We further noted that the experience of Hurricane Katrina showed the need to improve leadership at all levels of government to better respond to a catastrophic disaster. Specifically, we reported that in the response to Hurricane Katrina there was confusion regarding roles and responsibilities under the NRP, including the roles of the Secretary of Homeland Security and two key federal officials with responsibility for disaster response—the Principal Federal Official (PFO), and the Federal Coordinating Officer (FCO).

Updating the National Response Framework and Clarifying the Role of the FEMA Administrator

The Post-Katrina Act clarified FEMA's mission within DHS and set forth the role and responsibilities of the FEMA Administrator. These provisions, among other things, required that the FEMA Administrator provide advice on request to the President, the Homeland Security Council, and the Secretary of Homeland Security, and that the FEMA Administrator report directly to the Secretary of Homeland Security without having to report through another official.⁴

As a result of the limitations in the NRP revealed during the response to Hurricane Katrina and as required by the Post-Katrina Act, DHS and FEMA undertook a comprehensive review of the NRP. The result of this process was the issuance, in January 2008, of the NRF (the name for the revised

⁴See generally 6 U.S.C. §§ 313-14. For specific information on the Administrator's reporting relationship and role as principal advisor on emergency management, see 6 U.S.C. § 313(c).

NRP).⁵ The NRF states that it is to be a guide to how the nation conducts an all-hazards response and manages incidents ranging from the serious but purely local to large-scale terrorist attacks or catastrophic natural disasters. The NRF became effective in March 2008.

As reflected in the NRF and confirmed by FEMA's Office of Policy and Program Analysis and FEMA General Counsel, there is a direct reporting relationship between the FEMA Administrator and the Secretary of Homeland Security. According to officials in FEMA's Office of Policy and Program Analysis, the FEMA Administrator gives emergency management advice as a matter of course at meetings with the President, the Secretary of Homeland Security, and the Homeland Security Council.

The NRF also states that the Secretary of Homeland Security coordinates with other appropriate departments and agencies to activate plans and applicable coordination structures of the NRF, as required. The FEMA Administrator assists the secretary in meeting these responsibilities. FEMA is the lead agency for emergency management under NRF Emergency Support Function #5, which is the coordination Emergency Support Function for all federal departments and agencies across the spectrum of domestic incident management from hazard mitigation and preparedness to response and recovery.

Clarifying the Roles of the PFO and FCO

We reported in 2006 that in response to Hurricane Katrina, the Secretary of Homeland Security initially designated the head of FEMA as the PFO, who then appointed separate FCOs for Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi. It was not clear, however, who was responsible for coordinating the overall federal effort at a strategic level. Our fieldwork indicated that the lack of clarity in leadership roles and responsibilities resulted in disjointed efforts of federal agencies involved in the response, a myriad of approaches and processes for requesting and providing assistance, and confusion about who should be advised of requests and what resources would be provided within specific time frames.

⁵The Post-Katrina Act predated the NRF and referred to the NRF's predecessor, the NRP, which was then the name of the document that served as the nation's comprehensive framework for the management of domestic incidents where federal involvement was necessary. Because the Post-Katrina Act encompasses any successor plan to the NRP, it applies to the NRF just as it did the NRP. See 6 U.S.C. § 701(13). Therefore, this statement uses the term NRF, rather than NRP, in discussing any relevant Post-Katrina Act provisions and the status of their implementation, unless otherwise appropriate.

The Post-Katrina Act required that the Secretary of Homeland Security, through the FEMA Administrator, provide a clear chain of command in the NRF that accounts for the roles of the FEMA Administrator, the FCO, and the PFO.⁶ According to the NRF, the Secretary of Homeland Security may elect to designate a PFO to serve as his or her primary field representative to ensure consistency of federal support as well as the overall effectiveness of federal incident management. The NRF repeats the Post-Katrina Act's prohibition that the PFO shall not direct or replace the incident command structure or have directive authority over the FCO or other federal and state officials. Under the NRF, the PFO's duties include providing situational awareness and a primary point of contact in the field for the secretary, promoting federal interagency collaboration and conflict resolution where possible, presenting to the secretary any policy issues that require resolution, and acting as the primary federal spokesperson for coordinated media and public communications.

According to DHS officials, at the time of our 2008 report, no PFO had been operationally deployed for any Stafford Act event since the response to Hurricane Katrina. DHS's appropriations acts for fiscal years 2008 and 2009 have each included a prohibition that "none of the funds provided by this or previous appropriations acts shall be used to fund any position designated as a Principal Federal Official" for any Stafford Act declared disasters or emergencies.⁷ Our Office of General Counsel plans to address the implications of this funding prohibition in future work.⁸

According to the NRF, the primary role and responsibilities of the FCO include four major activities:

- representing the FEMA Administrator in the field and discharging all FEMA responsibilities for the response and recovery efforts under way;

⁶U.S.C. § 319(c).

⁷The Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act (Stafford Act), 42 U.S.C. §§ 5121-5208, primarily establishes the programs and processes for the federal government to provide major disaster and emergency assistance to states, local governments, tribal nations, individuals, and qualified private nonprofit organizations. Upon a governor's request, the President can declare an "emergency" or a "major disaster" under the Stafford Act, which triggers specific types of federal relief.

⁸The funding prohibition is set forth at Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2008, Pub. L. No. 110-161, Div. E, Title V, § 541, 121 Stat. 1844, 2079 (2007) and Consolidated Security, Disaster Assistance, and Continuing Appropriations Act, 2009, Pub. L. No. 110-329, Div. D, § 526, 122 Stat. 3574 (2008).

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- administering Stafford Act authorities, including the commitment of FEMA resources and the issuance of mission assignments to other federal departments or agencies;
 - coordinating, integrating, and synchronizing the federal response, within the Unified Coordination Group at the Joint Field Office; and
 - interfacing with the State Coordinating Officer and other state, tribal, and local response officials to determine the most urgent needs and set objectives for an effective response in collaboration with the Unified Coordination Group.

Updating the Catastrophic Incident Annex and Supplement

The Catastrophic Incident Annex to the NRP (now NRF) was a source of considerable criticism after Hurricane Katrina. The purpose of this annex is to describe an accelerated, proactive national response to catastrophic incidents and establish protocols to pre-identify and rapidly deploy essential resources expected to be urgently needed. Lack of clarity about the circumstance under which the annex should be activated contributed to issues with clear roles and lines of responsibility and authority. Because questions surrounded whether the annex should apply only to events that occur with little or no notice rather than events with more notice that have the potential to evolve into incidents of catastrophic magnitude, like a strengthening hurricane, it did not provide a clear guidance about the extent to which the federal government should have been involved in the accelerated response role that it describes. We noted in 2006 that our review of the NRP and its catastrophic incident annex—as well as lessons from Hurricane Katrina—demonstrated the need for DHS and other federal agencies to develop robust and detailed operational plans to implement the catastrophic incident annex and its supplement in preparation for and response to future catastrophic disasters.

Under the Post-Katrina Act, FEMA's National Integration Center is statutorily responsible for revising the Catastrophic Incident Annex and for finalizing and releasing an operational supplement—the Catastrophic Incident Supplement.⁹ The annex was revised and released in November 2008.¹⁰ Officials from FEMA's National Preparedness Directorate told us in March 2009 that operational annexes of the Catastrophic Incident Supplement are being updated to reflect the current response capabilities of the federal government. FEMA officials told us that the annex and its

⁹6 U.S.C. § 319(b)(2)(C)

¹⁰The Catastrophic Incident Annex is available online via the NRF Resource Center, www.fema.gov/nrf.

operational supplement were not activated during the 2008 hurricane season because none of the storms resulted in a catastrophic incident that would require their use.

Capabilities

In our 2006 report, we noted that developing the capabilities needed for large-scale disasters is part of an overall national preparedness effort that is designed to integrate and define what needs to be done, where, based on what standards, how it should be done, and how well it should be done. The response to Hurricane Katrina highlighted the limitations in the nation's capabilities to respond to catastrophic disasters. Various reports from Congress and others, along with our work on FEMA's performance before, during, and after Hurricane Katrina suggested that FEMA's human, financial, and technological resources and capabilities were insufficient to meet the challenges posed by the unprecedented degree of damage and the resulting number of hurricane victims. Among other things, in 2006 we reported on problems during Hurricane Katrina with (1) emergency communications, (2) evacuations, (3) logistics, (4) mass care, (5) planning and training, and (6) human capital.

Emergency Communications

Our 2006 report noted that emergency communications is a critical capability common across all phases of an incident. Agencies' communications systems during a catastrophic disaster must first be operable, with sufficient communications to meet internal and emergency communication requirements. Once operable, they then should have communications interoperability whereby public safety agencies (e.g., police, fire, emergency medical services) and service agencies (e.g., public works, transportation, hospitals) can communicate within and across agencies and jurisdictions in real time as needed. Hurricane Katrina caused significant damage to the communication infrastructure—including commercial landline and cellular telephone systems—in Louisiana and Mississippi, which further contributed to a lack of situational awareness for military and civilian officials.

Among other provisions aimed at strengthening emergency communications capabilities, the Post-Katrina Act established an Office of Emergency Communications (OEC) within DHS. The statutory responsibilities of OEC include, but are not limited to, conducting outreach, providing technical assistance, coordinating regional emergency

communications efforts, and coordinating the establishment of a national response capability for a catastrophic loss of local and regional emergency communications.¹¹

Stakeholder Outreach

OEC's stakeholder outreach efforts have included coordinating with 150 individuals from the emergency response community to develop the National Emergency Communications Plan. OEC officials stated that the outreach was primarily carried out through several organizations that represent officials from federal, state, and local governments and private-sector representatives from the communications, information technology, and emergency services sectors.

Technical Assistance

Through the Interoperable Communications Technical Assistance Program, OEC has been working with Urban Area Working Groups and states to assess their communications infrastructure for gaps and determine technical requirements that can be used to design or enhance interoperable communications systems. According to the Deputy Director of OEC, OEC provided technical assistance to 13 recipients of the 2007 Urban Area Security Initiative grants by providing guidance on technical issues such as engineering solutions and drafting requests for proposals, as well as providing best practices information. In addition, OEC offered assistance to states and territories in developing their Statewide Communication Interoperability Plans and, as of August 1, 2008, had conducted plan development workshops for the 30 states and five territories that requested such help.

Coordinating Regional Communications

Officials from OEC stated that they have been coordinating to minimize any overlap between the roles and responsibilities of various DHS regional staff offices related to emergency communications. According to the officials, officials from these regional staff offices plan to attend and share information through the Regional Emergency Communications Coordination Working Groups—also established by the Post-Katrina Act.¹² OEC officials said that OEC had hired a federal employee to represent OEC at working group meetings. In addition, OEC officials stated their intention to hire regional interoperability coordinators for each of the 10 FEMA regions in fiscal year 2009 to work with FEMA on the activities of the working groups.

¹¹6 U.S.C. § 571.

¹²6 U.S.C. § 575(a).

Establishing a National Response Capability

FEMA officials told us in March 2009 that FEMA's Disaster Emergency Communications Division has filled one national and nine regional positions to coordinate the working groups. FEMA's Region II has not yet filled the regional position. As of March 2009, all working groups, with the exception of Regions II and IX, have been established. According to FEMA officials, the eight established groups have had various levels of activity, with the number of meetings ranging from one time (Regions VI and X) to eight times (Regional IV). No updated information about specific efforts to minimize overlap or to achieve the Post-Katrina Act objectives for the working groups was provided.

To establish a national response capability for a catastrophic loss of local and regional emergency communications, OEC officials told us they had been working with FEMA and the National Communications System (NCS)¹³ to coordinate policy and planning efforts relating to the existing response capability managed through the NRF's Communication Annex, Emergency Support Function 2.¹⁴ According to OEC officials, an example of this coordination was the inclusion of continuity of emergency communications and response operations in the National Emergency Communications Plan.

The officials also said that OEC would represent NCS in regions where the system has no presence and would support the system's private-sector coordination role, as appropriate. In addition, the Director and Deputy Director of OEC told us that OEC, FEMA, and the NCS were developing a strategy that involved the OEC's regional interoperability coordinators providing technical support, playing a role as needed in Emergency Support Function 2, and providing response capabilities within their designated regions, among other things.

¹³Established by Presidential Memorandum on August 21, 1963, the National Communications System was created to be a single unified communications system to serve the President, Department of Defense, diplomatic and intelligence activities, and civilian leaders. The National Communications System mandate included linking, improving, and extending the communications facilities and components of various federal agencies, focusing on interconnectivity and survivability. NCS membership currently stands at 24 federal department and agency members and is managed by the DHS Under Secretary for National Protection and Programs.

¹⁴Emergency Support Function 2 provides a structure for coordinating federal actions to assist in the restoration of public communications infrastructure, public safety communications systems, and first responder networks.

FEMA officials told us in March 2009 that FEMA and NCS have worked closely to develop revised operating procedures that define their roles and responsibilities under Emergency Support Function 2. In addition, they said that NCS recently hired three Regional Emergency Communications Coordinators with responsibility for coordinating with regional, private-sector communications providers. The NCS coordinators are working with FEMA regional coordinators to ensure that infrastructure communications restoration efforts are supported by and consistent with FEMA tactical communications support to state and local response efforts.

To improve the national response capability, FEMA officials also reported in March 2009 that they had defined an integrated response framework and five critical disaster emergency communications incident support functions—mission operations, facilities, tactical, restoration, and planning and coordination. Additionally, the officials also reported acquiring assets, assessing networks, and establishing prescribed mission assignments to enhance response capabilities. Finally, the officials said that FEMA Disaster Emergency Communications Division has coordinated the development of 24 state and territory disaster emergency communications annexes. They noted that some of these state and territorial annexes were used in Hurricanes Gustav and Ike, as well as during the Presidential Inauguration to support response activities, understand state and local communications capabilities, and prepare for any shortfalls that may arise.

In terms of tactical support, FEMA officials told us that FEMA's Mobile Emergency Response Support mission carried out a variety of support activities during Hurricanes Gustav and Ike. For example, among other activities reported by the officials, FEMA provided mobile emergency communications infrastructure to support continuity of local government and supported maintenance and repair of communications equipment for local first responders on Galveston Island.

Evacuations

We reported in 2006 that by definition, a catastrophic disaster like Hurricane Katrina would impact a large geographic area necessitating the evacuation of many people—including vulnerable populations, such as hospital patients, nursing home residents, and transportation-disadvantaged populations who were not in such facilities.

Transportation Assistance

The Post-Katrina Act amended the Stafford Act to authorize transportation assistance to relocate displaced individuals to and from alternate locations for short- or long-term accommodations, or to return them to their

predisaster primary residences.¹⁵ FEMA officials in the Disaster Assistance Directorate told us that they have developed a draft policy for implementing the transportation assistance authority. They noted that it would require implementation of proposed regulatory changes before becoming effective, and as of March 2009, it was on hold due to these required changes. In addition, they noted that according to FEMA's July 2006 Mass Sheltering and Housing Assistance Strategy, if the scale of the evacuation overwhelms affected states' sheltering capabilities, FEMA will coordinate and provide air or surface transportation in support of interstate evacuation. If the evacuated area is without extensive damage to residences, as stated in the strategy, FEMA will coordinate and fund return mass transportation to the point of transportation origin. If the evacuated area suffered extensive damage to residences, eligible evacuees are authorized, with host state consent, to use FEMA funding known as Other Needs Assistance to purchase return transportation when they are able to do so.

Mass Evacuation Planning and Technical Assistance

The Post-Katrina Act authorized grants made to state, local, and tribal governments through the State Homeland Security Program or the Urban Area Security Initiative to be used to establish programs for mass-evacuation plan development and maintenance, preparation for execution of mass evacuation plans, and exercises.¹⁶ According to the Director of Grants Development and Administration, FEMA informed state, local, and tribal governments that they may use the grant awards to assist mass evacuation planning via the fiscal year 2008 Homeland Security Grant Program written guidance, which covers both grants.

The act also required the FEMA Administrator, in coordination with the heads of other federal agencies, to provide evacuation preparedness technical assistance to state, local, and tribal governments.¹⁷ FEMA developed the Mass Evacuation Incident Annex to the NRF, which provides an overview of mass evacuation functions, agency roles and responsibilities, and overall guidelines for the integration of federal, state, tribal, and local support for the evacuation of large numbers of people during incidents requiring a coordinated federal response. However, according to officials in FEMA's Disaster Operations Directorate, as of

¹⁵ 42 U.S.C. § 5189c.

¹⁶ 6 U.S.C. § 321a.

¹⁷ 6 U.S.C. § 721.

March 10, 2009, FEMA had not finalized the Mass Evacuation Incident Annex Operational Supplement to the NRF to provide additional guidance for mass evacuations.

Officials in FEMA’s Disaster Operations Directorate also noted that the states participating in FEMA’s Catastrophic Disaster Planning Initiative—an effort to strengthen response planning and capabilities for select scenarios (e.g., a Category 5 hurricane making landfall in southern Florida)—benefit from detailed federal, state, and local catastrophic planning that includes examination of evacuation topics. These states include Florida, Louisiana, California, and the eight Midwestern states in the New Madrid Seismic Zone. National Preparedness Directorate officials also told us that FEMA had conducted mass evacuation workshops in Georgia and Florida and had provided technical assistance to the state of Louisiana, helping to develop a mass evacuation plan. FEMA officials told us that this plan—the Gulf Coast Evacuation Plan—was successfully implemented during Hurricane Gustav to evacuate 2 million people from New Orleans within 48 hours of the incident using a multimodal approach (air, bus, and rail) and to enable their return within 4 days.

The Post-Katrina Act requires FEMA to provide mass evacuation planning assistance to institutions that house individuals with special needs upon request by a state, local, or tribal government.¹⁸ FEMA officials in the Disaster Operations Directorate told us that they had not received any requests for such assistance. These officials said that the draft Mass Evacuation Incident Annex Operational Supplement will include a tab on evacuation issues related to people with special needs and, once issued, can provide guidance to hospitals, nursing homes, and other institutions that house individuals with special needs. Officials from FEMA’s National Preparedness Directorate also noted that the Homeland Security Preparedness Technical Assistance Program provides technical assistance upon request to jurisdictions interested in planning for mass evacuations. Additionally, they said the directorate was developing evacuation and reentry planning guidance for use by state and local governments, which is scheduled for interim release in the summer of 2009.

Evacuation for Special Needs Populations

In establishing a Disability Coordinator within FEMA to ensure that the needs of individuals with disabilities are addressed in emergency preparedness and disaster relief, the Post-Katrina Act charged the

¹⁸6 U.S.C. § 321a(c)(2).

Disability Coordinator with specific evacuation-related responsibilities, among other things. First, the act required the coordinator to ensure the coordination and dissemination of model evacuation plans for individuals with disabilities. Second, the act charged the coordinator with ensuring the availability of accessible transportation options for individuals with disabilities in the event of an evacuation.¹⁹ At the time of our 2008 report, FEMA had efforts under way for each provision, but provided little specific detail on the status of those efforts. The Disability Coordinator told us that FEMA was in the process of developing model evacuation plans for people with disabilities. She also told us that FEMA had begun to work with state emergency managers to help develop evacuation plans that include accessible transportation options, and that FEMA was working with states to develop paratransit options as well as to coordinate the use of accessible vans for hospitals and nursing homes.

Family and Child Locators

In 2006, we conducted work examining the nation's efforts to protect children after the Gulf Coast hurricanes and identified evacuation challenges for this population. We noted that thousands of children were reported missing to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, which used its trained investigators to help locate missing children after the evacuation. Officials from this Center stated that both the American Red Cross and FEMA had some information on the location of children in their databases; however, they said it was difficult to obtain this information because of privacy concerns. These officials told us that standing agreements for data sharing among organizations tracking missing children, the Red Cross, and FEMA could help locate missing persons more quickly.

The Post-Katrina Act established two mechanisms to help locate family members and displaced children. First, the act established the National Emergency Child Locator Center within the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children and enumerated the responsibilities of the center, among other things, to provide technical assistance in locating displaced children and assist in the reunification of displaced children with their families.²⁰ Second, the act required the FEMA Administrator to establish

¹⁹6 U.S.C. § 321b(b)(4), (b)(8).

²⁰6 U.S.C. § 774.

the National Emergency Family Registry and Locator System to help reunify families separated after an emergency or major disaster.²¹

The National Emergency Child Locator Center and the Family Registry and Locator System have each established a hotline and a Web site. The family locator system has a mechanism to redirect any request to search for or register displaced children to the National Emergency Child Locator Center.

FEMA officials told us in March 2009 that the family locator system was activated and used during Hurricanes Gustav and Ike after it was determined that the coastal evacuations of Louisiana and Texas would involve millions of people. Once activated, FEMA's Public Affairs Office informed the media in the affected areas about the availability of the service. Officials noted that use of the family locator system during Hurricane Gustav resulted in 558 registrants and 862 searches, and use during Hurricane Ike resulted in 1,162 registrants and 1,034 searches. The National Emergency Child Locator Center was not activated, but three referrals (one during Hurricane Gustav and two during Hurricane Ike) were forwarded to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children through the family locator system Web site.

At the time of our 2008 report, FEMA had established a memorandum of understanding (MOU), effective March 6, 2007, with the following organizations: the Department of Justice, the Department of Health and Human Services, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, and the American Red Cross that, among other things, requires signatory agencies to participate in a cooperative agreement, and for FEMA, through the National Emergency Family Registry and Locator System, to provide relevant information to the National Emergency Child Locator Center. The Disaster Assistance Directorate Unit Leader told us that the child locator center was, at that time, in the process of finalizing cooperative agreements with federal and state agencies and other organizations such as the American Red Cross to help implement its mission. FEMA officials told us that, as of March 2009, a cooperative agreement between FEMA and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children was being finalized. They said they expected the agreement to be tested during the 2009 hurricane season.

²¹6 U.S.C. § 775.

Logistics

We reported in 2006 that our work and that of others indicated that logistics systems—the capability to identify, dispatch, mobilize, and demobilize and to accurately track and record available critical resources throughout all incident management phases—were often totally overwhelmed by Hurricane Katrina. Critical resources apparently were not available, properly distributed, or provided in a timely manner. The result was duplication of deliveries, lost supplies, or supplies never being ordered.

FEMA is responsible for coordinating logistics during disaster response efforts, but during Hurricane Katrina, FEMA quickly became overwhelmed, in part because it lacked the people, processes, and technology to maintain visibility—from order through final delivery—of the supplies and commodities it had ordered. Similarly, our 2006 work examining the coordination between FEMA and the Red Cross to provide relief to disaster victims found that FEMA did not have a comprehensive system to track requests for assistance it received from the Red Cross on behalf of voluntary organizations and state and local governments for items such as water, food, and cots. The Post-Katrina Act required FEMA to develop an efficient, transparent, and flexible logistics system for procurement and delivery of goods and services necessary for an effective and timely emergency response.²²

Logistics Management

In November 2008, we reported that FEMA had taken multiple actions to improve its logistics management. First, seeking to develop an effective and efficient logistics planning and operations capability, FEMA elevated its logistics office from the branch to the directorate level, establishing the Logistics Management Directorate (LMD) in April 2007.

Second, FEMA and the U.S. General Services Administration—FEMA’s co-lead for Emergency Support Function 7²³—sponsored the National Logistics Coordination Forum in March 2008. The forum was intended to open a dialogue between the sponsors and their logistics partners, and to discuss how to better involve the private sector in planning for and recovering from disasters. The forum was attended by representatives

²²6 U.S.C. § 724.

²³Under Emergency Support Function #7: Logistics Management and Resource Support, FEMA is responsible for providing a comprehensive national disaster logistics planning, management, and sustainment capability that uses the resources of federal partners, public and private groups, and other stakeholders to meet disaster response and recovery needs.

from other federal agencies, public and private sector groups, nongovernmental organizations, and other stakeholders.

Third, to improve its supply chain management, FEMA brought in a supply chain expert from the United Parcel Service through its Loaned Executive Program. FEMA also has a Private Sector Office to exchange information on best practices and to facilitate engagement with the private sector. In addition, FEMA established a Distribution Management Strategy Working Group in January 2008 to analyze and develop a comprehensive distribution and supply chain management strategy.

Finally, in 2007, FEMA conducted the Logistics Management Transformation Initiative, a comprehensive assessment of FEMA's logistics planning, processes, and technology. LMD officials intend for this initiative to help inform the development of a long-term strategy to transform FEMA's business processes and identify information technology development opportunities. According to LMD officials, FEMA plans to complete this transformation by 2009, and review and refine business processes by 2014.

We noted in our November 2008 report, as an area to be addressed, that the DHS Office of Inspector General reported in May 2008 that, while FEMA had developed a logistics planning strategy that calls for developing three levels of logistics plans (strategic, operational, and tactical), the FEMA Incident Logistics Concept of Operations and a Logistics Management Operations Manual were still in draft.

Total Asset Visibility

Our 2006 findings about logistics challenges included FEMA's inability to maintain visibility over supplies, commodities, and requests for assistance. As of August 1, 2008, FEMA had fully implemented Total Asset Visibility (TAV) programs in FEMA Regions IV and VI to manage and track, electronically and in real time, the movement of its disaster commodities and assets. At that time, according to FEMA LMD officials, TAV was partially available in the other eight FEMA regions. FEMA officials told us in March 2009 that the strategy to fully implement TAV by 2011 was undergoing a comprehensive review. LMD had restricted spending to critical mission functions, pending completion of the review. In the meantime, they said LMD would focus on capabilities that could have the most significant impact during the 2009 hurricane season, specifically, the aspect of TAV used for warehouse management and the aspect that would allow FEMA to use the system to order materials and from and track shipments of its response partners. Initially LMD is working with four partners—the Defense Logistics Agency, the General Services

Administration, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and the American Red Cross. According to LMD officials, at the time of our November 2008 report, the aspect of TAV FEMA uses for warehouse management was only available at distribution centers in Atlanta, Georgia, and Fort Worth, Texas. The officials stated that FEMA expected to deploy the warehouse management portion of TAV to the other six FEMA distribution centers—in Berryville, Virginia; Frederick, Maryland; San Jose, California; Guam; Hawaii; and Puerto Rico—in fiscal years 2009 and 2010. Further, the officials said that shipments from FEMA’s logistics partners were not yet tracked through TAV, but FEMA and the four initial partners were working to provide full visibility of critical shipments to disaster areas.

FEMA officials told us in March 2009 that during Hurricanes Gustav and Ike, they used TAV to create and track commodity requirements fulfilled by FEMA or its partners and to track FEMA shipments in-transit. The officials noted that they were not able to track shipments from partners before they arrived at FEMA sites but that deficiency could be corrected when the partner-tracking aspect of TAV was fully implemented. They also said they used TAV’s warehouse management system, where available, to track and manage shipments, receipts and inventory for eight critical commodities daily. Other commodities that could not yet be tracked through TAV’s warehouse management system had to be manually entered into the system. Finally, they said they used TAV to track in-transit visibility of ambulances, buses, and temporary housing units.

In March 2009, FEMA officials also shared four major lessons learned and planned corrective actions resulting from the response to Hurricanes Ike and Gustav. The four lessons learned related to: (1) inconsistent use of TAV in the field during Hurricane Ike, (2) lack of TAV specialists to support all distribution sites, (3) slow and unreliable connectivity to the TAV system, and (4) use of standard operating procedures. To address inconsistent use of TAV, FEMA officials say they have increased standardized training and awareness at all levels within FEMA and have developed a TAV communications plan intended increase awareness of TAV capabilities. To address issues with the availability of TAV specialists, FEMA officials told us they have identified and screened additional TAV specialists, are planning to hire additional Disaster Assistance Employees, and are planning to crosstrain additional employees. To address connectivity issues, FEMA officials said they are testing use of portable satellite equipment and scanners that are hardwired to a satellite. They also said they are seeking to use extended wireless access to support operations during the 2009 hurricane season. To address issues with standard operating procedures, FEMA officials said they are reviewing and

updating the procedures and reemphasizing the appropriate use of TAV through training.

Mass Care

Mass care is the capability to provide immediate shelter, feeding centers, basic first aid, and bulk distribution of needed items and related services to affected persons. As we reported in 2006, during Hurricane Katrina, charities and government agencies that provide human services, supported by federal resources, helped meet the mass care needs of the hundreds of thousands of evacuees. The Post-Katrina Act contained multiple provisions aimed at strengthening capabilities to provide for immediate mass care and sheltering needs, particularly for special needs populations.

Accelerated Federal Assistance

The Post-Katrina Act amended the Stafford Act to authorize the President to provide accelerated federal assistance in the absence of a specific request where necessary to save lives, prevent human suffering, or mitigate severe damage in a major disaster or emergency. The act required the President to promulgate and maintain guidelines to assist governors in requesting the declaration of an emergency in advance of a disaster event.²⁴ FEMA issued an interim Disaster Assistance Policy in July 2007, which provides guidelines to assist governors in requesting the declaration of an emergency in advance of a disaster.

According to officials in FEMA's Disaster Operations Directorate, FEMA has established a program to preposition goods and services in advance of a potential disaster. For example, the officials explained that FEMA was able to respond quickly to a state that had been affected by ice storms because the agency, acting without an initial request from the state, had prepositioned goods in advance of the storms. FEMA officials told us FEMA was reviewing a draft policy directive that would allow FEMA to provide federal assistance without a declaration if a state would agree to assume the normal cost share after a declaration has been made or to assume total cost if no declaration is made.

Special Needs Populations

In establishing a Disability Coordinator within FEMA to ensure that the needs of individuals with disabilities are addressed in emergency preparedness and disaster relief, the Post-Katrina Act charged the coordinator with coordinating and disseminating best practices for special

²⁴42 U.S.C. §§ 5170a(5), 5192(a)(8), (c).

needs populations.²⁵ The Disability Coordinator shared with us two such practices that were in progress at the time of our November 2008 report. First, FEMA was developing “go kits” for people with developmental impairments, the hearing impaired, and the blind. The go kits are to contain visual and hearing devices. For example, the go kit for the hearing impaired will include a teletypewriter, a keyboard with headphones, and a clipboard with sound capabilities. The go kits are to be stored in the regions and include a list of their contents and directions for use. Second, the Disability Coordinator said FEMA was developing a handbook for federal, state, and local officials to use in the field to help them better accommodate those with disabilities.

In addition, the Post-Katrina Act required that the FEMA Administrator, in coordination with the National Advisory Council, the National Council on Disabilities, the Interagency Coordinating Council on Preparedness and Individuals with Disabilities, and the Disability Coordinator, develop guidelines to accommodate individuals with disabilities.²⁶

FEMA has published a reference guide titled *Accommodating Individuals with Disabilities in the Provisions of Disaster Mass Care, Housing, and Human Services*. The reference guide describes existing legal requirements and standards relating to access for people with disabilities, with a focus on equal access requirements related to mass care, housing, and human services. The reference guide states that it is not intended to satisfy all of the guideline requirements contained in the Post-Katrina Act.

In addition to the reference guide, FEMA released for public comment guidance titled *Interim Emergency Management Planning Guide for Special Needs Populations*. This interim guidance—also known as the *Comprehensive Preparedness Guide (CPG) 301*—addressed some of the requirements contained in the Post-Katrina Act, such as access to shelters and portable toilets and access to emergency communications and public information. However, it did not address other requirements, such as access to first-aid stations and mass-feeding areas.

FEMA officials told us in March 2009 that they had received final comments on CPG 301 and expected to release the final document in spring 2009. In addition, FEMA officials stated that they have developed

²⁵6 U.S.C. 321b(b)(4).

²⁶6 U.S.C. 773.

guidance for the Functional Needs Support Unit, which they expect to publish by the end of March 2009. According to the interim version of CPG 301, the Functional Needs Support guidance will serve as a template for developing sheltering plans for special needs populations. Once the Functional Needs Support program is in place, the Functional Needs Support Unit can be used in shelters, so that trained and certified shelter staff will be assigned to serve as caregivers and provide the assistance normally supplied by a family member or attendant. FEMA officials told us that the agency will contract to provide training to states and localities on how to implement the Functional Needs Support guidance—such as how to provide staff, caregivers, durable medical equipment, and facility access.

FEMA officials stated that, in the absence of completed guidance for the 2008 hurricane season, shelters received the Justice Department's Americans with Disabilities Act Checklist for Emergency Shelters. They also said that the 2008 hurricane season highlighted the need for a standardized but scalable approach to sheltering special needs populations, with attention given to durable medical equipment, caregivers, trained staff, and special diets for evacuees.

Planning and Exercises

As we reported in 2006, ensuring that needed capabilities are available requires effective planning and coordination, as well as training and exercises, in which the capabilities are realistically tested, and problems identified and lessons learned and subsequently addressed in partnership with other federal, state, and local stakeholders. Clear roles and coordinated planning are necessary, but not sufficient by themselves to ensure effective disaster management. It is important to test the plans and participants' operational understanding of their roles and responsibilities through robust training and exercise programs.

National Exercise and Training Programs

The Post-Katrina Act required the FEMA Administrator, in coordination with the heads of appropriate federal agencies, the National Council on Disabilities, and the National Advisory Council, to carry out a national training program and a national exercise program.²⁷ FEMA's National Preparedness Directorate has established a National Exercise Program. According to officials from FEMA's National Preparedness Directorate, the National Exercise Program conducts four Principal-Level Exercises

²⁷6 U.S.C. § 748.

and one National-Level Exercise annually. These FEMA officials said that the Principal-Level Exercises are discussion-based (i.e., tabletop or seminar) to examine emerging issues and that one is conducted in preparation for the annual National-Level Exercise. The National-Level Exercises are operations-based exercises (drills, functional exercises, and full-scale exercises) intended to evaluate existing national plans and policies, in concert with other federal and nonfederal entities. We have ongoing work examining the National Exercise Program, and we expect to publish a report on the results of our work this spring.

FEMA's Deputy for National Preparedness told us that DHS and FEMA were developing the Homeland Security National Training Program to oversee and coordinate homeland security training programs, increase training capacity, and ensure standardization across programs.

National Exercise Simulation Center

The Post-Katrina Act also required the President to establish a National Exercise Simulation Center (NESC) that uses a mix of live, virtual, and constructive simulations to, among other things, provide a learning environment for the homeland security personnel of all federal agencies, and that uses modeling and simulation for training, exercises, and command and control functions at the operational level.²⁸

According to FEMA officials, FEMA has been using FEMA Simulation Centers, Department of Defense facilities, and other facilities to support exercise simulation while it develops the NESC. For example, FEMA officials said that FEMA has provided initial exercise simulation support for exercises requiring the two highest levels of federal interagency participation in the National Exercise Program. According to an official in FEMA's National Integration Center, the NESC is currently under development and is estimated to take 3 to 4 years to fully establish.

Remedial Action Management Program

The Post-Katrina Act also required the FEMA Administrator, in coordination with the National Council on Disabilities and the National Advisory Council, to establish a remedial action management program to, among other things, track lessons learned and best practices from training, exercises, and actual events.²⁹

²⁸6 U.S.C. § 764.

²⁹6 U.S.C. § 750.

FEMA launched the Remedial Action Management Program (RAMP) in 2003 and released it as a Web application for all FEMA intranet users in January 2006. RAMP uses FEMA facilitators to conduct sessions immediately after exercises or events, and these facilitators are responsible for developing issue descriptions for remedial actions. In addition, FEMA has a related program called the Corrective Action Program (CAP) that is to be used for governmentwide corrective action tracking by federal, state, and local agencies. While RAMP is FEMA's internal remedial action program, CAP is designed to serve as an overarching program for linking federal, state, and local corrective actions. FEMA developed RAMP prior to enactment of the Post-Katrina Act. However, FEMA has not yet established any mechanisms to coordinate ongoing implementation of RAMP or CAP with the National Council on Disabilities or the National Advisory Council. We have ongoing work related to FEMA's efforts to track corrective actions from exercises and actual events. We plan to publish a report this spring.

Human Capital Issues

In 2006, we reported that the various Congressional reports and our own work on FEMA's performance before, during, and after Hurricane Katrina suggest that FEMA's human resources were insufficient to meet the challenges posed by the unprecedented degree of damage and the resulting number of hurricane victims.

Surge Capacity

The Post-Katrina Act requires the FEMA Administrator to prepare and submit to Congress a plan to establish and implement a Surge Capacity Force for deployment to disasters, including catastrophic incidents. The act requires the plan to include procedures for designation of staff from other DHS components and executive agencies to serve on the Surge Capacity Force. It also required that the plan ensure that the Surge Capacity Force includes a sufficient number of appropriately credentialed individuals capable of deploying to disasters after being activated, as well as full-time, highly trained, credentialed individuals to lead and manage.³⁰

The Director of FEMA's Disaster Reserve Workforce explained that unlike in the military model, FEMA's disaster reservists are the primary resource for disaster response and recovery positions, filling 70-80 percent of all Joint Field Office positions. FEMA has interpreted Surge Capacity Force to include its Disaster Reserve Workforce of 5,000-6,000 reserve Disaster

³⁰6 U.S.C. § 711.

Assistance Employees, who are full-time and contract staff. If additional capacity is necessary, another approximately 2,000 Disaster Assistance Employees are available to perform immediate, nontechnical functions that require large numbers of staff. Other sources FEMA has identified include local hires—additional staff hired from the affected area to perform the same functions as disaster reservists; contract support for activities that require specialized skill sets and for general disaster assistance functions; other full-time FEMA staff detailed to perform disaster assistance work; and other resources—particularly employees from other DHS components—detailed to perform disaster assistance work.

FEMA’s Disaster Reserve Workforce provided information on the deployment of FEMA workforce in response to Hurricanes Gustav and Ike, as outlined in table 1.

Table 1: Workforce Deployment during Hurricanes Ike and Gustav, 2008

Disaster reserve workforce	Local hire	Other	Permanent full time	Temporary full time	Total
1,987	4	1	486	46	2,524
3,127	213	2	519	62	3,923

Source: FEMA.

FEMA contracted to perform a baseline assessment and preliminary design for professionalizing the Disaster Reserve Workforce and its supporting program management function, including FEMA’s Surge Capacity Force planning. The contractor developed a preliminary design for the Disaster Reserve Workforce, which included an organizational concept, workforce size and composition, concept of operations, and a policy framework. An Interim Surge Capacity Force Plan was announced in a meeting of the DHS Human Capital Council in March 2008 and communicated to the heads of DHS components in a May 2008 memorandum from the FEMA Administrator.

Despite the initial actions FEMA has taken to assess its baseline capabilities and draft an interim Surge Capacity Force Plan, according to the Director of the Disaster Workforce Division, FEMA has not yet provided Congress with a plan for establishing and implementing a Surge Capacity Force. The director stated that her goal is to submit a plan to implement a surge capacity force by summer 2009 with timelines and information on select—but not all—positions in the disaster reserve workforce.

In May 2008, FEMA sent a list of job titles and positions needed in the Surge Capacity Force to all DHS Human Capital Officers and asked them to identify approximately 900 employees throughout DHS for the Surge Capacity Force. According to the director of the Disaster Reserve Workforce Division, the initial DHS Agency Surge Capacity designation lists were submitted in June 2008. However, she stated that upon review, there were inconsistencies with the different agencies' interpretation of requirements for personnel, training, and skill sets. Therefore, a Surge Capacity Force Working Group met to review surge staffing requirements and to develop a timeline for the development of processes and a Concept of Operations Plan. Agency participants in the working group included FEMA, the Transportation Security Administration, and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. The Disaster Reserve Workforce Division told us that, as of March 2009, a draft of the Concept of Operations Plan was being reviewed within these three component agencies and a final product is expected to be delivered for DHS review by June 30, 2009. According to the Disaster Reserve Workforce Division, because internal FEMA resources were sufficient to respond effectively to Hurricanes Gustav and Ike, FEMA did not require the assistance of other federal agency employees for those events.

The Disaster Reserve Workforce Division, in partnership with FEMA's Emergency Management Institute, has been developing standardized credentialing plans, which will incorporate existing position task books for the Disaster Assistance Employee workforce (a total of 230 positions organized in 23 cadres). FEMA officials told us in March 2009 that they had either initiated development of or completed credentialing plans for 102 positions. They said they expected to complete the remaining credentialing plans for all cadres and positions by spring 2010. Disaster Reserve Workforce Division officials explained that development of the credentialing plans in conjunction with the position task books will highlight gaps in the training curriculum that will assist in prioritizing curriculum development.

Apart from the Disaster Reserve Workforce Division's credentialing initiative, the FEMA workforce is to be credentialed by the National Preparedness Directorate's NIMS credentialing program, the administrative process for validating the qualifications of personnel, assessing their background, and authorizing their access to incidents involving mutual aid between states. FEMA officials told us in March 2009 that the NIMS Credentialing Guideline was posted to the Federal Register and issued for public comment on December 22, 2008, and the comment period closed on January 21, 2009. They said comments have been

Strike Teams and Emergency Response Teams

collected and were to be adjudicated March 11, 2009. According to the officials, following adjudication, the guideline is to be revised and submitted to the Executive Secretariat for formal FEMA adoption and release. According to FEMA officials, experiences from the 2008 hurricane season confirmed the basic need for the credentialing program.

The Post-Katrina Act requires each FEMA Regional Office to staff and oversee one or more strike teams within the region to serve as the focal point of the federal government's initial response efforts and to build federal response capabilities within their regions.³¹ The act also requires the President, acting through the FEMA Administrator to establish emergency response teams (at least three at the national level and a sufficient number at the regional level).³²

According to Disaster Operations Directorate officials, "strike teams" and "emergency response teams," the Post-Katrina Act's terms for the support teams deployed to assist in major disasters and emergencies under the Stafford Act, are now called Incident Management Assistance Teams (IMAT). IMATs are interagency national- or regional-based teams composed of subject matter experts and incident-management professionals, and are designed to manage and coordinate national response emergencies and major disasters. According to the officials, Regional Administrators oversee IMATs based within their regions. IMAT personnel are intended to be permanent, full-time employees whose duties and responsibilities are solely focused on their IMAT functions. The officials said that the IMATs' other functions include working with state and local emergency managers to plan, prepare, and train for disasters; running exercises; and building relationships with emergency managers and other IMAT personnel. National IMATs are to consist of 26 positions, including a designated team leader and senior managers for operations, logistics, planning, and finance and administration sections. This sectional organization mirrors the incident command structure presented in the NIMS.

FEMA has established a national IMAT in the National Capital Region and a second national IMAT in Sacramento, California, according to FEMA officials in the Disaster Operations Directorate. At the regional level, Disaster Operations Directorate officials said that IMATs had been

³¹6 U.S.C. § 317(c)(2)(D).

³²42 U.S.C. § 5144(b)(1).

established in FEMA Regions II, IV, V, and VI. According to these officials, they are in the process of establishing a fifth regional IMAT in Region VII, to become operational later this year. They said that FEMA's intention is to establish IMATs in all 10 regions by the end of fiscal year 2010 and a third national team in fiscal year 2011.

According to FEMA officials in the Disaster Operations Directorate, although the National IMAT established in the National Capital Region was fully staffed, when we reported in November 2008, some IMAT positions were not yet filled with permanent full-time employees, but rather with FEMA detailees who had been selected for their advanced training and expertise. In general, the detailees were to provide guidance and support to the permanent full-time employees until the teams were fully staffed with personnel capable of managing their respective IMATs.

According to officials in FEMA's Disaster Operations Directorate, at the time of our November 2008 report, FEMA had procured personal equipment for IMAT members and had ordered communications vehicles. In addition, the National IMAT had participated in the National-Level Exercise 2008. Also, Disaster Operations Directorate officials told us that IMATs supported a number of disasters and special events in 2008 (including recent storms and hurricanes and the Democratic and Republican National Conventions).

FEMA has established mandatory training courses for all IMAT personnel, in addition to the standard training required for all FEMA employees. According to officials in FEMA's Disaster Operations Directorate, they have been implementing a credentialing program for the IMATs. FEMA planned to incorporate training and credentialing for all hazards by identifying core competencies required for each IMAT position and assessing the competencies against existing task descriptions to guide the development of mandatory training and credentialing plans. According to these officials, as of March 2009, a draft of the credentialing plan was under review and they indicated that the credentialing process will be consistent with FEMA's Disaster Workforce Credentialing Plan.

At the time of our November 2008 report, Disaster Operations Directorate officials told us that FEMA was finalizing an IMAT doctrine and a Concept of Operations Plan. However, FEMA did not describe to us how it established or intended to establish target capabilities for the IMATs,

which are required by the Post-Katrina Act as the basis for determining whether the IMATs consist of an adequate number of properly planned, organized, equipped, trained, and exercised personnel.³³

Accountability

Our 2006 report noted that when responding to the needs of the victims of a catastrophic disaster, FEMA must balance controls and accountability mechanisms with the immediate need to deliver resources and assistance in an environment where the agency's initial response efforts must focus on life-saving and life-sustaining tasks. We reported in February 2006 that weak or nonexistent internal controls in processing applications left the government vulnerable to fraud and abuse, such as duplicative payments.³⁴ We estimated that through February 2006, FEMA made about 16 percent (\$1 billion) in improper and potentially fraudulent payments to applicants who used invalid information to apply for disaster assistance.

The Post-Katrina Act required the development of a system, including an electronic database, to counter improper payments in the provision of assistance to individuals and households.³⁵

FEMA has established a process to identify and collect duplicative Individual and Households Program (IHP) payments. This process includes, among other things, FEMA's disaster assistance database automatically checking specific data fields in every applicant record for potentially duplicate applications, having a FEMA caseworker and a supervisor review potentially duplicate applications to determine if FEMA is entitled to collect a payment already made, and notifying the applicant of FEMA's decision to collect a duplicate payment while providing an appeal process for the applicant.

In addition, FEMA provides applicants with a copy of its application and a program guide, *Help after a Disaster: Applicant's Guide to the Individuals and Households Program*. Updated and reissued in July 2008, this guide provides applicants with information on the proper use of IHP payments.

³³42 U.S.C. § 5144(b)(2)-(3).

³⁴See GAO, *Expedited Assistance for Victims of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita: FEMA's Control Weaknesses Exposed the Government to Significant Fraud and Abuse*, [GAO-06-403T](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 13, 2006).

³⁵42 U.S.C. § 5174(i).

Moreover, according to FEMA, the agency established identity verification processes, which include verifying that the applicant's social security number is valid, matches the applicant's name, and does not belong to a deceased individual. Further, FEMA reported that it has implemented procedures to validate that the address an applicant reports as damaged was the applicant's primary residence during the time of the disaster and that the address is located within the disaster-affected area.

According to FEMA's Information Technology Report submitted to Congress in September 2007 under section 640 of the Post-Katrina Act,³⁶ FEMA uses the National Emergency Management Information System to perform numerous disaster-related activities, including providing disaster assistance to individuals and communities. Although this system interfaces with FEMA's financial accounting system through a special module, FEMA has not yet taken action to ensure that applicant information collected in the system is integrated with disbursement and payment records to determine ineligible applicants.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, this concludes my statement. I would be pleased to respond to any questions you or other Members of the Committee may have.

³⁶ 6 U.S.C. § 727(b).

Appendix I: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

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Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, Leyla Kazaz, Assistant Director, and Kathryn Godfrey, Analyst-in-Charge, managed this assignment. Lara Kaskie, Christine Davis and Janet Temko made significant contributions to the work. Other contributors to the work include Jonathan Tumin, Sara Margraf, and Michael Blinde.

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