



Highlights of [GAO-10-404](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

The administration is developing the National Disaster Recovery Framework (NDRF) in order to enhance the nation's ability to deliver recovery assistance. The Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) Long-Term Community Recovery Branch (LTCR) is responsible for leading a network of primarily federal agencies, known as ESF-14, that supports long-term recovery. LTCR's experiences offer potential insights for developing the NDRF.

GAO was asked to report on (1) the roles that LTCR played in recent disasters, (2) broad criteria and timing challenges that affected this assistance, (3) the effectiveness of specific coordination practices, and (4) the effectiveness of specific planning assistance practices. GAO focused on three disasters with significant LTCR involvement: the Greensburg tornado (2007), the Iowa floods (2008), and Hurricane Ike (2008). GAO reviewed agency documents and policies and interviewed relevant federal, state, and local officials.

What GAO Recommends

Among GAO's recommendations are that FEMA (1) more effectively align the timing and level of long-term recovery assistance to match the capacity and needs of affected states and localities and (2) evaluate the level of authority needed to effectively coordinate federal agencies involved in disaster recovery. In commenting on a draft of this report the Department of Homeland Security agreed with the recommendations.

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For more information, contact Stanley J. Czerwinski at (202) 512-6806 or czerwinkis@gao.gov.

DISASTER RECOVERY

FEMA's Long-Term Assistance Was Helpful to State and Local Governments but Had Some Limitations

What GAO Found

As the federal lead for long-term disaster recovery, FEMA's LTCR played two major roles in the three disasters that we reviewed—facilitating the coordination of federal, state, and nongovernmental assistance for recovery and helping communities to develop long-term recovery plans. GAO found two broad challenges related to this assistance. First, the criteria for when to involve LTCR and ESF-14 in a specific disaster are vague, which resulted in uncertainty among other federal agencies in the ESF-14 network and state recovery officials. Second, in some cases assistance began before state and local governments had the capacity to effectively work with LTCR and ended before critical long-term recovery coordination and planning needs were fully addressed.

Federal, state, and local officials said that LTCR's facilitation of regular interagency meetings to coordinate federal and state partners helped to identify and effectively leverage recovery resources, as well as identify coordination problems and other concerns. For example, the town of Greensburg, Kansas, determined that replacing its destroyed water tower with one of the same capacity it had before the tornado would be insufficient for the community's expected future growth. As a result of interagency meetings conducted by LTCR, federal and state agencies, and others found a way to leverage resources from their programs in order to build a higher-capacity water tower that better addressed the city's long-term recovery needs. Federal, state, and local officials also identified two barriers to LTCR's coordination efforts. LTCR was not always able to obtain or sustain the participation of all of the agencies that it sought to coordinate with. Even when it did have full agency participation, LTCR was not always able to secure the involvement of agency officials with sufficient authority to resolve the program problems that arose.

LTCR's planning assistance—including facilitating community meetings and identifying potential funding resources for recovery projects—helped affected communities to develop and implement long-term recovery plans. In Iowa City, LTCR identified possible federal funding sources for specific projects in the city's recovery plan and advised the city on how to prepare effective project proposals. Local officials credit this assistance with helping the city to be able to secure federal funding that it expects to receive for its top two recovery priorities. However, state and local officials also identified areas where LTCR assistance could be improved. State and local officials in Texas recovering from Hurricane Ike said that LTCR's process of ranking projects in Galveston's recovery plan had the effect of fostering unrealistic expectations among the public about what projects would be funded. In addition, in one of the three disasters that we reviewed, LTCR did not effectively transfer recovery planning tools, such as a guide on federal funding timelines, to the relevant officials prior to their withdrawal from the state. LTCR officials recognized that their transfer of information in Texas could have been more effective, citing time limitations as one reason for the challenge.