

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-16-38](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

DHS's FEMA is responsible for coordinating with state, local, and tribal governments to prepare for disasters. Specifically, FEMA provides preparedness grants to states and localities, and works to implement the National Incident Management System nationwide, among other things.

GAO was asked to review FEMA's efforts to enhance coordination for regional preparedness. This report addresses the extent to which FEMA and regional offices have (1) addressed preparedness grant management coordination challenges, (2) established a system to assess NIMS implementation, and (3) collaborated with RAC stakeholders. GAO analyzed FEMA documentation on grant management, NIMS evaluation, and RACs. GAO surveyed RAC members, visited 4 regional offices selected for their geographic representation, spoke with state emergency management officials from 10 states, and interviewed FEMA officials. The site visits cannot be generalized but provided insights.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommended, among other things, that FEMA develop a plan for addressing long-standing coordination challenges with grant management, review after action reports to assess NIMS implementation, and improve coordination with RACs. Although DHS did not concur with the grants management recommendation, GAO continues to believe challenges documented in the report support the recommendation. DHS concurred with the other 4 recommendations and described the actions they planned to take in response.

View [GAO-16-38](#). For more information, contact Chris P. Currie at (404) 679-1875 or curriec@gao.gov.

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FEDERAL EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AGENCY

Strengthening Regional Coordination Could Enhance Preparedness Efforts

What GAO Found

GAO found that the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has taken some steps, but has not fully addressed, preparedness grant management coordination challenges between headquarters and its regions. For several preparedness grant programs, FEMA headquarters and regions share management and monitoring responsibilities. Assessments by FEMA and others since 2009 have recommended that FEMA regions manage and monitor preparedness grants to avoid confusion and duplication and strengthen coordination with state and local grantees. However, in 2012 FEMA changed course and decided to continue sharing grant management between headquarters and regions. Since then, FEMA officials said they are taking steps to address coordination challenges that exist in this structure. However, GAO found that challenges continue to exist. For example, states and FEMA regional officials told GAO that FEMA headquarters and regions did not always coordinate monitoring visits and provided inconsistent guidance to grantees. Further, while FEMA officials identified some steps to address the challenges, FEMA lacks a plan with time frames and goals for addressing them. Doing so will better enable FEMA to effectively address the long-standing challenges in managing preparedness grants.

FEMA uses states' self-assessments to determine if states have implemented the National Incident Management System (NIMS), as required, but does not assess NIMS implementation using the results of preparedness exercises. NIMS is a comprehensive, national approach to incident management and provides a framework to enable all levels of government and the private sector to work together to prepare for, prevent, respond to, and recover from incidents. Although states generally report high levels of NIMS implementation, officials from all four FEMA regional offices and 9 of 10 states GAO spoke with said that the NIMS self-assessments are perfunctory and do not measure whether, or how well, NIMS is being implemented. FEMA officials said they do not verify states' self-reported NIMS implementation information because of the scope and breadth of the information. All of the FEMA regions and 8 states said the best way to assess NIMS implementation is to review states' performance in after-action reports following exercises and real-world events. However FEMA officials do not review these reports to assess NIMS implementation. Doing so could allow FEMA to better assess NIMS implementation and identify areas for improvement.

All 10 FEMA regions established Regional Advisory Councils (RAC) to provide advice on emergency management issues specific to the region, and about 90 percent of RAC members reported in a GAO survey that meetings are useful for collaborating with their FEMA regional office. However, some regions do not routinely meet with their RACs, and some do not consistently report back to RAC members on the status of their recommendations to FEMA. By more routinely obtaining input from RAC members and by providing timely feedback on recommendations, FEMA regional offices could better ensure they are coordinating with key stakeholders and identifying areas for strengthening preparedness.