



February 2016

DISASTER RESPONSE

FEMA Has Made Progress Implementing Key Programs, but Opportunities for Improvement Exist

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-16-87](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

In a disaster requiring a federal response, the Department of Homeland Security's FEMA provides various response resources to state, local, and tribal governments. Such assistance can include deploying US&R teams to help locate survivors and human remains, IMAT teams to help coordinate and provide federal support, and evacuation assistance, when applicable.

GAO was asked to review aspects of FEMA's disaster response programs. Specifically, this report addresses FEMA's efforts to implement, assess, and improve selected disaster response programs for urban search and rescue, incident management, and evacuation tracking. GAO reviewed documentation such as policies, procedures, after action reports, and readiness assessments for these programs and deployments to select disasters for fiscal years 2010 through 2014—capturing pre and post Hurricane Sandy disasters. GAO also interviewed FEMA and state officials, and a nongeneralizable sample of nine US&R task forces to gain insights into FEMA's efforts.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that FEMA develop a plan to prioritize and fund the replacement of US&R task force equipment; a plan to ensure that IMAT teams receive required training, and a workforce strategy for retention of IMAT staff; and document, track, and analyze recommendations and lessons learned from disaster deployments. DHS concurred with the recommendations and described plans to implement them.

View [GAO-16-87](#). For more information, contact Chris Currie at (404) 679-1875 or curriec@gao.gov.

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What GAO Found

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has taken steps to implement, assess, and improve select disaster response programs, but GAO identified opportunities to strengthen program management. Specifically, GAO found that FEMA uses leading management practices in implementing its Urban Search and Rescue (US&R) program. For example, FEMA has aligned the mission of the US&R Program—to save lives and reduce suffering in communities impacted by a disaster—with its goal setting efforts in its US&R Strategic Plan. It also communicates program risks to stakeholders and assesses performance so the program can be continuously strengthened. However, all nine US&R task forces GAO interviewed reported challenges funding the maintenance and replacement of their aging equipment to ensure that it is not outdated and adheres to manufacturer standards. FEMA has not developed a plan to prioritize and fund the replacement of this equipment and doing so would help ensure that these task forces are capable of meeting their important response mission.

FEMA applies some leading program management practices in implementing, assessing, and improving its Incident Management Assistance Teams (IMAT)—such as setting strategic goals and identifying program risks—but does not use other practices that would enhance program management. National and regional IMAT team members are comprised of FEMA employees hired on temporary 4-year contracts. GAO found that FEMA lacks a standardized plan to ensure that all national and regional IMAT members receive required training, and IMAT teams do not always develop after action reports after disaster deployments and document lessons learned. GAO also found that the IMAT program has experienced high attrition across national and regional IMAT teams—since its implementation in fiscal year 2013—and FEMA has not developed a strategy to address these challenges. Developing a plan to address training and retention challenges would help FEMA better meet IMAT program goals.

FEMA's efforts to implement, assess, and improve its evacuation tracking system nationwide have been inconsistent due to lack of state and local resources and interest in using the system. However, FEMA officials said they are taking steps to address concerns raised by users of the system, including technical issues with the software. For example, FEMA has developed a new implementation plan to provide guidance to its regional offices for better communicating and training state and local officials on the use of its tracking software and intends to finalize a system strategic plan in the next nine to 15 months. Since these efforts are ongoing, GAO cannot yet assess the extent that they will address the inconsistencies or user concerns with the system.

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Abbreviations

AAR	after-action report
CORE	Cadre-of On-Call Response Employee
DHS	Department of Homeland Security
FEMA	Federal Emergency Management Agency
FQS	FEMA Qualification System
Hazmat	hazardous materials
IMAT	incident management assistance team
9/11	terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001
NMETS	National Mass Evacuation Tracking Systems
NSSE	National Special Security Event
PMI	Project Management Institute, Inc.
Post-Katrina Act	Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act of 2006
US&R	urban search and rescue

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February 5, 2016

Congressional Requesters

The decisions and actions of emergency personnel determine the cost, duration, and success of the response to a disaster. In an emergency that requires a federal response, the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) assists state, local, and tribal governments in coordinating response and recovery efforts and provides federal disaster response resources including search and rescue teams, incident response teams, and evacuation assistance, when applicable.¹ For example, in March 2014, a mudslide traveling about 200 miles per hour flooded the city of Oso, Washington without warning and spread debris over 300 acres. The slide was massive, covering 6,000 feet of highway, destroying over 50 homes, blocking the North Fork of the Stillaguamish River, and creating a dam that then formed a lake where none had existed before. On this day, there were 59 people at home when the slide hit; only 16 survived. FEMA deployed its urban search and rescue (US&R) task forces to help locate survivors and human remains as well as its incident management assistance teams (IMAT) to assist with response efforts. These FEMA disaster response programs are called for in the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act of 2006 (Post-Katrina Act) along with a requirement that FEMA assist state and local officials with evacuation planning.² One way in which FEMA is meeting this requirement is the creation of the National Mass Evacuation Tracking System (NMETS). These programs along with

¹FEMA bases incident types on levels of complexity in order to make decisions about resource requirements. Type 1 incidents are the most complex, requiring national resources to safely and effectively manage and operate. Type 2 incidents extend beyond the capabilities for local jurisdictions and may require the response of resources out of the area, including regional or national resources, to effectively manage the operations, command, and general staffing. Type 3 incidents are also managed by utilizing assistance from outside the local jurisdiction when the incident needs exceed capabilities but fewer resources are needed.

²6 U.S.C. §§ 721, 722; 42 U.S.C. § 5144. The 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 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.

several other FEMA programs were established in response to disasters such as Hurricane Katrina which severely tested disaster management at the federal, state, and local levels and revealed weaknesses in response programs.

You asked us to review aspects of select FEMA disaster response programs. This report addresses FEMA's efforts to implement, assess and improve disaster response programs for urban search and rescue, incident management, and evacuation tracking.

To answer our objective, we gathered and reviewed relevant documentation such as policies and procedures, program directives, strategic plans, guides, memoranda and internal documents for each of the programs.³ We also gathered data on program expenditure costs, and the type and number of deployments for each of the programs for fiscal years 2010 through 2014. We selected disasters during this time frame to which FEMA deployed both a US&R task force and an IMAT team, and to capture any changes made to the US&R and IMAT programs based on their response to Hurricane Sandy which struck the United States in October 2012. As a result, we selected seven disasters for review. For FEMA's US&R program, we interviewed 10 US&R task forces to discuss their response to recent disasters, coordination with federal, state, and local officials, and strengths and challenges with the program.⁴ We selected 3 task forces from each US&R division that responded to at least

³For the US&R program these documents include: the *US&R Operations Manual* which lays out the roles and responsibilities of task force members, the US&R Strategic Plan 2013-2017 which sets forth the US&R mission, and US&R Administrative Readiness Evaluations which documents task forces' readiness for deployments. For the IMAT program, these documents include: the *Incident Management Handbook* which lays out the roles and responsibilities of IMAT members, the IMAT Draft Procedures Document which provides details on IMAT protocols and the IMAT role in supporting FEMA's mission, the IMAT Program Directive which outlines the agency-wide policy for administration, implementation, and oversight of the program; and FEMA's Response Directorate Operating plan and Response Directorate Strategic plan which outline the IMAT role and include strategic goals for IMAT development and performance. For the NMETS program, these documents include the FEMA *NMETS Field Operations Guide* June 2015 which provides instructions on the operations of the NMETS application and the NMETS Draft Strategic Implementation Plan 2015, which lays out the scope, objectives, and goals of NMETS.

⁴We interviewed 9 task forces that were in operational status during our period of review, and 1 task force that was deemed by FEMA as either conditional or non-operational status.

one disaster that an IMAT responded to from 2010 to 2014, and that included a mix of types of responses (e.g. responses to hurricanes, tornadoes, and mudslides), as well as 1 inactive task force. We also observed an US&R exercise in April 2015 to gather information on the US&R roles, response, and specialized equipment used during an incident or disaster. Although the information obtained cannot be generalized across all 28 task forces, it provides a broad understanding of the challenges and incidents task forces encounter in responding to disasters.

For FEMA's IMAT program, we interviewed team leaders from each of the three national IMAT teams and regional IMAT team leaders or response directors who manage the IMATs from each of FEMA's 10 regions. We gathered information on each region's deployment history, and performance, and any differences or challenges in program management across the 10 regions. We obtained data on attrition for Cadre-of-On-Call Response Employee (CORE) IMAT employees for fiscal years 2013-2015 from FEMA's response directorate. In addition, we interviewed state emergency managers from each state affected by the disasters we selected. We also reviewed and analyzed US&R and IMAT after-action reports (AAR) for the seven disasters in our review and readiness assessments of US&R task forces for fiscal years 2012 through 2014 and IMAT readiness assessments for fiscal years 2012 through 2014.

For FEMA's NMETS program, we obtained information on its features and use by states and localities. We interviewed officials from FEMA headquarters and from each of FEMA's 10 regional offices, and nine state managers responsible for evacuations and sheltering for their states.

To determine the reliability of the deployment, assessment, and attrition data, we reviewed relevant documentation and internal and third-party reviews of data collection methods, and interviewed agency officials. We determined that the data were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of our review. (See appendix I for list of disasters and selected states.) Finally, we reviewed the documents and information we gathered and compared

them against leading practices identified in the Program Management Institute's (PMI) Standard for Program Management.⁵

We conducted this performance audit from January 2015 to January 2016 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our finding and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Background

Urban Search and Rescue Task Forces

The National US&R task forces are designed to assist state and local governments in responding to structural collapse incidents and in conducting search and rescue operations.⁶ When a state requests federal search and rescue assistance, FEMA program managers identify one or multiple task forces for deployment and issue an activation order. Once a task force has been activated, all team members are to report to their point of departure within 4 hours if traveling by ground and within 6 hours if traveling by air.⁷

⁵Project Management Institute, Inc., *The Standard for Program Management*®, Third Edition (Newton Square, PA: 2013). *The Standard for Program Management*® describes, among other things, how resource planning; goals, milestones, and performance measures; and program monitoring and reporting are good practices that can enhance management for most programs.

⁶For the purposes of this report we will refer to the US&R Response System as the US&R program.

⁷In addition, FEMA deploys an Incident Support Team in advance of the task force deployment. The incident support team is comprised of members from multiple task forces and helps direct US&R resources during the incident response. Upon arrival at an incident, the Task Force Leader, incident support team representative, and Mobilization Center manager will coordinate to issue specific task force assignments and provide the task force with a briefing of the incident response.

Urban Search and Rescue Exercise-April 2015 sponsored by Virginia Task Force 1

From April 24th-25th FEMA's Virginia Task Force 1 hosted a full-scale training exercise in Lorton, VA. Maryland Task Force 1, Pennsylvania Task Force 1, members of foreign US&R teams from Chile, Mexico, Argentina, and Peru, and USAID's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance also participated. The exercise began with a simulation of an international deployment to a natural disaster. The exercise involved 62 role players reacting to multiple training scenarios including an apartment building collapse, a parking garage collapse, and a highway bridge collapse. The exercise was designed to practice and evaluate the deployment of a heavy US&R team in a field setting, the set-up and management of base operations, and coordination with the Department of Homeland Security and others.



Source: GAO; GAO (photograph) | GAO-16-87

Support Function 9 designates FEMA as the federal coordinating agency for search and rescue operations, with support from the U.S. Coast Guard, the National Park Service, and the Department of Defense.⁸ Following the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma the US&R program added the ability to field task forces for National Special Security Events and first exercised this ability at the 1996 Atlanta Olympics and the 1997 presidential inauguration in Washington D.C. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (9/11), the US&R program developed operational capabilities for chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, and explosive environments. In addition to receiving annual appropriations, in 2002, Congress appropriated \$54 million to the task forces, as part of a supplemental appropriation.⁹ Between 1992 and 2014, the US&R task forces have deployed to 77 events (see appendix II for the list of events), including the attacks on 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, Hurricane Sandy, the earthquake in Haiti, and repositioning for National Special Security Events.¹⁰

The US&R program includes 28 US&R task forces across the United States, as shown in figure 1. Each task force is sponsored by an emergency management response agency, typically a fire department. Task force members are career or volunteer first responders, such as

⁸The *National Response Framework*, first developed in 2008 by FEMA and updated in 2013, is an essential component of the National Preparedness System mandated in *Presidential Policy Directive 8: National Preparedness* which aimed at strengthening the security and resilience of the United States through systematic preparation for the threats that pose the greatest risk to the security of the Nation. The Framework is a guide to how the Nation responds to all types of disasters and emergencies. It describes specific authorities, key roles and responsibilities, and best practices for managing incidents that range from the serious but purely local to large-scale terrorist attacks or catastrophic natural disasters. It is composed of a base document and three annexes consisting of the Emergency Support Function Annexes, Support Annexes, and Incident Annexes. These annexes provide detailed information to assist with the implementation of the Framework. Department of Homeland Security, Federal Emergency Management Agency, *National Response Framework, Second Edition* (Washington, D.C.: May 2013).

⁹Pub. L. No. 107-206, 116 Stat. 820, 896 (2002).

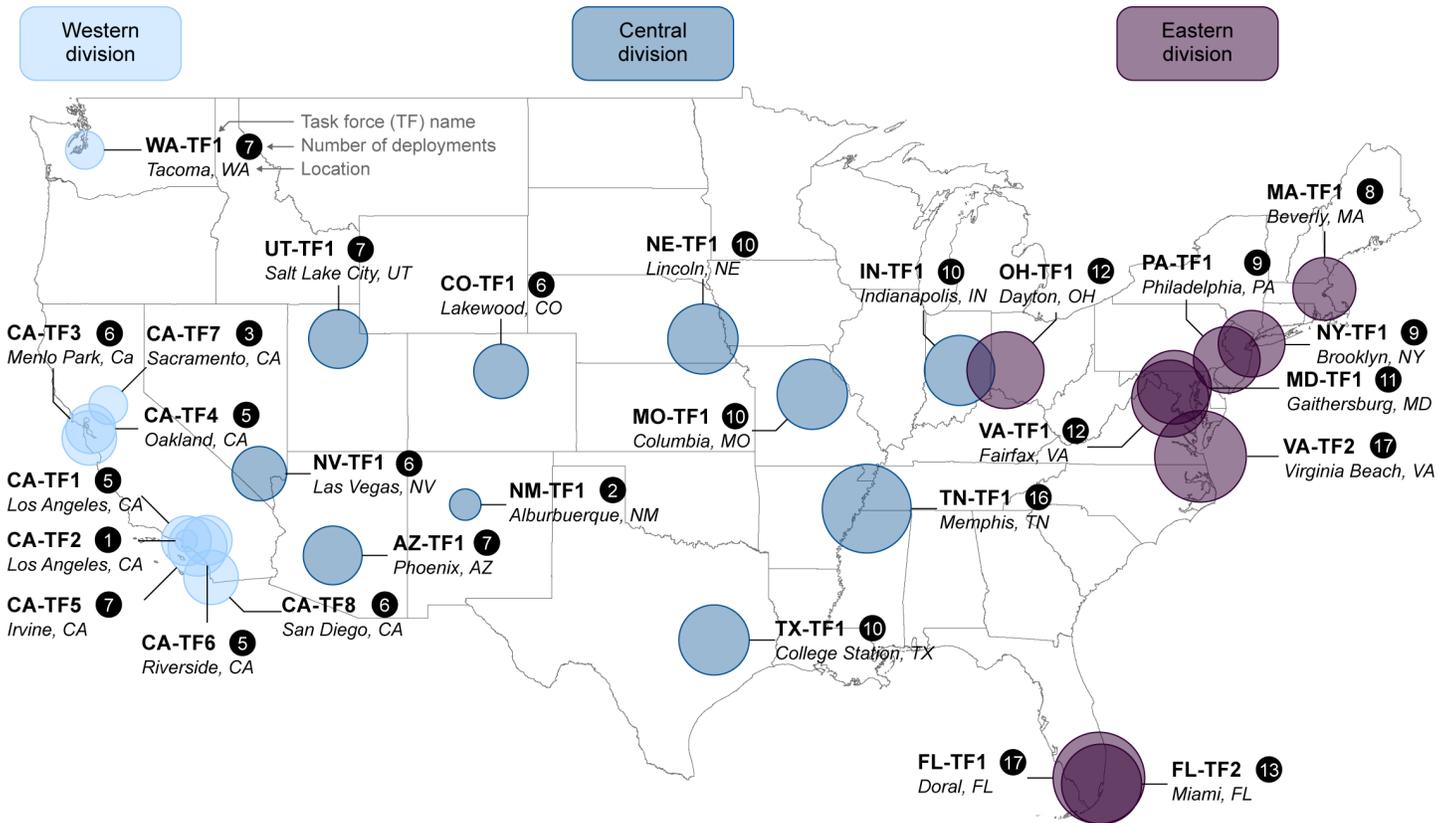
¹⁰Of the 28 US&R task forces, 2 have cooperative agreements with the U.S. Agency for International Development to respond to international incidents- Virginia Task Force One (VA-TF1) and California Task Force Two (CA-TF2). When these task forces are deployed to international disasters they are known as US Task Force 1 and US Task Force 2. FEMA coordinates with the U.S. Agency for International Development's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance for international disasters. If an international incident requires assistance from more than 2 FEMA US&R task forces, FEMA may be directed to deploy additional task forces as it did in response to the Haitian earthquake.

canine handlers, physicians, and structural engineers. Every task force has up to 210 members that are to be capable of arriving on scene at a disaster within 16 hours of notification. The task forces are designed with “three-deep” rosters, meaning they strive to have at least three people to fill each staff position on the roster. The positions on the roster differ based on the type of team. Type 1 teams have 70 personnel with a full equipment cache and the capacity to respond to hazardous materials (Hazmat) and chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, and explosive incidents.¹¹ Type 3 teams have 28 personnel and a smaller equipment cache that is primarily designed to response to weather-driven disasters.¹²

¹¹The term “cache” refers to the stock of equipment that each task force maintains in preparation of an incident and mobilizes in the event of an incident. Each task force is responsible for storing its own cache, transporting its cache, and upgrading its cache.

¹²One task force may be capable of deploying both Type 1 and Type 3 teams and will deploy the type of team that best serves the needs of the state requesting assistance. Type 2 and Type 4 task forces have been developed, but are not currently in use.

Figure 1: 2015 Map of Urban Search and Rescue Task Force Locations



Source: GAO analysis of FEMA data; MapInfo (map). | GAO-16-87

Each US&R task force is to maintain a cache of equipment in eight categories: communications, Hazmat, logistics, medical, planning, rescue, technical, and water, as shown in figure 2. The cache requirements are uniform for each task force, a fact that promotes interoperability among

task forces when they are working together on a deployment.¹³ Each task force maintains a cache of more than 2,000 types of items and there may be more than one of each item. For example, hydrogen peroxide is one item on the cache list used for wound care, but the team is required to carry 10 units, or bottles, of that item. The items in each category range from small, easy to transport items like hand held radios and hammers, to large items that require special transportation, such as water rescue boats. Some items require replacement after use, like bandages, while others should last years, like a canine kennel. Some items in the cache are low-cost and routinely replaced, while others require regular maintenance and are costly to replace. For example, the 2014 unit price of the Raker Shore System, a pneumatic powered tool that is used for rescue, is \$16,832, while aspirin used for medical treatment costs \$0.03 per tablet.

¹³According to the US&R Strategic Plan each task force currently has two caches, an "original" cache and an "additional" cache. The original cache was accumulated between 1990 and 2005, and it includes specialty caches that were added after 9/11, such as Hazmat/chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, explosive, and water safety equipment. The additional cache was added between 2005 and 2007, and replaced obsolete communications equipment, but excluded new medical, Hazmat/chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, explosive, or water safety equipment. In addition, from 2004 to 2005 task forces received funding specifically to standardize their transportation fleet, including movers, trailers, box trucks, and command vehicles.

Figure 2: 2015 Urban Search and Rescue Standard Equipment Cache for Task Forces



Source: GAO analysis of FEMA data; Art Explosion (clip art). | GAO-16-87

The US&R program is managed by FEMA's Operations Division's US&R Branch of the Response Directorate. The US&R Branch develops policies, procedures, and guidance for the US&R program and is available to provide technical assistance to task forces. In accordance with guidance from the US&R program's Strategic Group, FEMA allocates a portion of its annual appropriation to each task force for training exercises, equipment acquisition and maintenance, program management, and other support functions. Annual costs are funded through readiness cooperative agreements between FEMA and each of the 28 task force sponsoring agencies. Between fiscal year 2010 and fiscal year 2014, each US&R task force received an average of \$1.1 million per year in cooperative agreement funds. Task forces' disaster-specific costs are funded through the Disaster Relief Fund. Between fiscal year 2010 and fiscal year 2014 the US&R task forces received approximately \$25 million in reimbursements from the Disaster Relief Fund.

Incident Management Assistance Teams

When states request federal assistance and the President declares a major disaster, IMATs must arrive at the affected state or jurisdiction within 12 hours.¹⁴ IMATs are made up of FEMA emergency management staff in areas such as operations, logistics, planning, and finance and administration. The IMAT program includes 3 national teams and 13 regional teams across FEMA's 10 regions. (See appendix III for a map with IMAT locations).¹⁵ National IMAT teams typically respond to Level I catastrophic events which require significant federal assistance and coordination in response and recovery. Regional teams typically respond to Level II and III incidents that may require a high or moderate amount of federal assistance.¹⁶ IMATs can also provide assistance in events that are not disasters, such as National Special Security Events. For example, the national IMAT teams assisted the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the Ebola response as well as providing support during the influx of unaccompanied minors in 2014. Regional IMAT teams have provided support at the Democratic and Republican National Conventions and Superbowl, as well as the United Nations African Leaders Summit in Washington, D.C.

During a response, IMAT members establish a unified command structure with state counterparts. As part of this process, IMAT teams are to provide situational awareness and identify what federal support may be

¹⁴12 hour timeframe pertains to any deployment within the continental United States affected by a major disaster or emergency.

¹⁵FEMA Response Directorate officials were responsible for managing the IMAT program until the Office of Response and Recovery transferred responsibility for the IMAT program to the Field Operations Directorate on October 16, 2015.

¹⁶According to FEMA, because of their potential impact on public health, welfare, and infrastructure, Level I disasters require extraordinary coordination among federal, state, tribal, and local entities, as well as FEMA's Regional Response Coordination Center, National Response Coordination Center and Emergency Support Functions, to address the potential breadth of damage. Level II events include disasters that, because of their severity, size, location, or potential impact on public health, welfare and infrastructure require a high amount of direct federal assistance for response and recovery efforts, requiring elevated coordination among federal, state, tribal and local entities. These events also require significant involvement from FEMA, other federal agencies, and possible deployment of initial response resources to support state requirements. Level III events require a moderate amount of direct federal assistance, primarily in the case of recovery efforts with minimal response requirements, in which existing federal and regional resources will meet requests.

Oso, Washington Mudslide

On Saturday, March 22, 2014 at 10:45 am a large and unprecedented landslide occurred north of the Stillaguamish River, along State Route 530 in Washington State, two miles east of the small town of Oso. The slide was massive, covering 6,000 feet of highway, destroying over 50 homes, blocking the North Fork of the Stillaguamish River, and creating a dam which then formed a lake where none existed before. On this day, there were 59 people at home when the slide hit. Only 16 survived this horrific event that occurred with no warning.

The local and regional community responded and initiated immediate lifesaving and incident command operations. Affecting numerous rescues and rapidly determining the size, scale and complexity of the devastation. Additional requests for assistance were initiated from local to State and the Federal Government. FEMA deployed resources to the incident to include its Urban Search Rescue (US&R) Task Force and its 20 Canine Search Teams - Human Remains Detection Teams; and a National Incident Management Assistance Team among other resources.



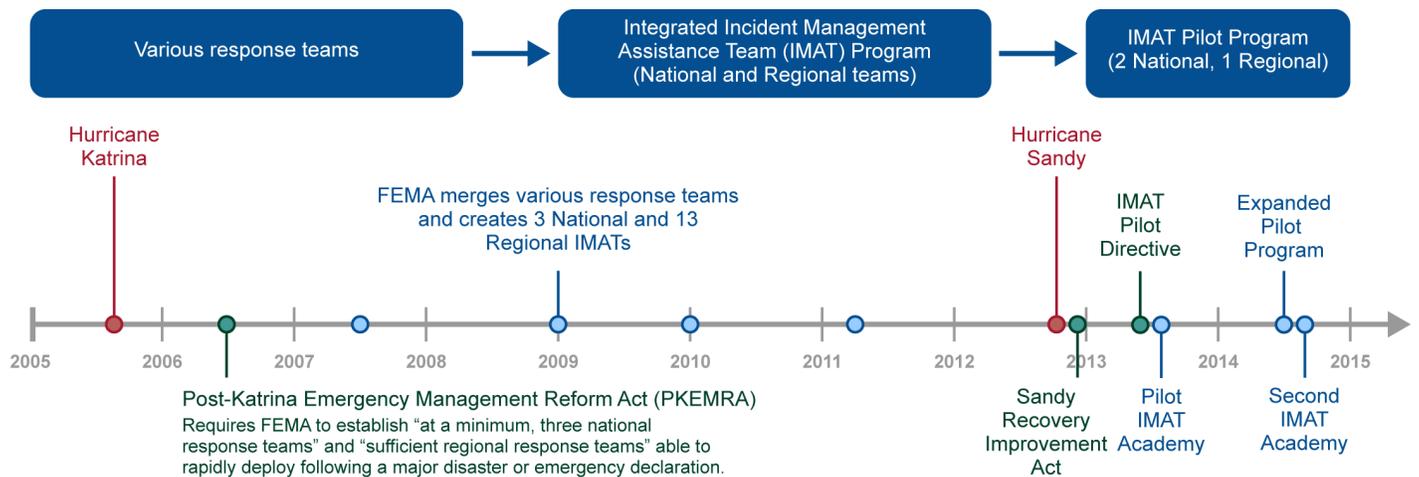
Source: DHS IG; FEMA (photograph). | GAO-16-87

required to respond to the incident.¹⁷ The IMAT may support first responders in providing shelter, emergency food and supplies, and restoration of government services. IMAT team members may also help state and local officials in obtaining temporary housing or counseling for disaster victims and providing estimates for replacement of damaged infrastructure. IMAT teams have responded to a range of disasters including Hurricanes Isaac and Sandy in 2012; the 2013 floods in Colorado; and the 2014 mudslide in Oso, Washington.

The IMAT program was historically staffed by permanent full time FEMA employees, whose salaries and benefits were supplemented by funds from the disaster relief fund for expenses when the teams were deployed to specific disasters. After FEMA used nearly all of its IMAT teams in response to Hurricane Sandy, the agency increased the number of IMAT staff. FEMA increased total program staffing by replacing its 97 permanent full time employees in fiscal year 2010 with 255 new CORE positions for fiscal year 2015. CORE IMAT employees are hired on 4-year contracts, and the positions may be renewed if there is ongoing disaster work and funding is available. Under the new team composition, the 3 national IMAT teams grew from 16-member teams staffed by permanent full time employees to 32-member teams staffed by CORE employees. At the same time, the regional IMAT teams grew from teams of 4 permanent full time employees to teams of 12 CORE employees (See appendix IV for national and regional IMAT position organizational charts). In establishing the CORE teams, FEMA shifted all program funding to the disaster relief fund and program expenditures increased from approximately \$13 million in fiscal year 2010 to \$35 million obligated from the disaster relief fund for fiscal year 2015 (to include all salaries and benefits and available program costs, but not including disaster-specific costs). (See appendix V for detailed IMAT positions and program funding.) As of July 2015, all IMATs have transitioned to the new CORE teams. Figure 3 shows the evolution of FEMA's incident response teams and changes in IMAT size and composition since 2006.

¹⁷According to Response Directorate officials, IMAT members support state, local, tribal, and territorial partners and provide support authorized under the Stafford Act. The primary mission of an IMAT is to rapidly deploy to an incident or incident-threatened venue, provide leadership in the identification and provision of federal assistance, and coordinate and integrate inter-jurisdictional response in support of an affected state, tribe or territory.

Figure 3: Incident Management Assistance Team Size and Composition 2006-2015



Source: FEMA. | GAO-16-87

FEMA Emergency Evacuation Assistance and National Mass Evacuation Tracking System

Emergency evacuations are the responsibility of state and local governments. However, FEMA is responsible for providing direction, guidance, and technical assistance on state and local evacuation plans that contain integrated information on transportation operations, shelters, and other elements of a successful evacuation. FEMA provides evacuation support and response through its Office of Response and Recovery primarily through three programs: the National Hurricane Program, the National Evacuations Contracts, and NMETS, a database tool that is intended to support state transportation-assisted evacuees and facilitate data sharing among declared and host states or jurisdictions.¹⁸

¹⁸The National Hurricane Program is a multi-agency partnership involving numerous Federal agencies, including FEMA, National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration, National Weather Service, U.S. Department of Transportation and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers that, among other things, conducts Hurricane Evacuation Studies that guide the decision-making process for protecting the public when a hurricane threatens an area. The National Evacuation Contracts (including the National Medical Transport and Support Contract and the National Motor Coach Evacuation and Operational Support Contract) are intended to provide FEMA with the ability to plan, execute, and exercise multi-modal evacuation capability in the event of catastrophic disaster. Program activities address evacuation capabilities by motor coach, rail, air, and ambulance. These contracts are funded through the disaster relief fund for approximately \$2.5 million annually.

In fiscal year 2007, FEMA developed NMETS with initial program funding of \$2 million.¹⁹ NMETS is designed to assist state and local officials in registering persons, pets, and personal property requiring government-assisted evacuation in response to a disaster or impending disaster; identifying their individual needs; accounting for them as they move through embarkation, and debarkation; and connecting them with other family members, pets, and personal items. During evacuation, electronic barcodes link all household members and their possessions and key information collected consists of name, date of birth, gender, pre-evacuation address, family members, medical needs or equipment, and service animals.

FEMA Has Taken Some Steps to Implement, Assess, and Improve Three Disaster Response Programs but Opportunities for Improvement Exist

FEMA Uses Leading Practices for Implementing and Assessing the US&R Program, but Lacks a Plan for Replacing Aging Task Force Equipment

¹⁹According to FEMA officials, from fiscal years 2009 through 2014; approximately \$498,000 was spent on NMETS: \$1,552 (2009), \$358,000 (2010), and \$70,194 (2013); and \$68,185 (2014).

FEMA Uses Leading Practices to Implement the US&R Program

FEMA uses leading program management practices for goal setting, communication, and program execution to provide urban search and rescue services for a wide variety of disasters.

- **Goal setting:** FEMA has ensured that the mission of the US&R program aligns with the goals and resources of the program. The US&R Strategic Plan outlines six mission goals including response, readiness, communication, collaboration, accountability, and implementation of the US&R strategic training plan. US&R program officers established specific objectives, strategies, and performance measures to support the goals. For example, one goal is to save lives and protect property in an all-hazards environment. An objective supporting this goal is refinement of the structural collapse mission. In an effort to achieve this objective, the US&R program plans to develop, review, and update deployment concepts of operations for potential secondary missions such as Hazmat and human remains detection canine missions. State emergency managers we spoke with said that during a disaster, US&R task forces will do whatever is needed to achieve their mission. During recent disasters, this has meant that the US&R task forces provided assistance beyond traditional structural collapse operations. For example, in response to Hurricane Sandy, task forces were needed to provide humanitarian assistance in conducting wellness checks in affected neighborhoods. After the mudslide in Oso, Washington, US&R task forces were needed to conduct canine human remains detection searches, and the task forces deployed 22 canine units. The clear mission, objectives, and strategies set by the program gives the task forces the authority to take action to save lives and help the task forces achieve their overarching mission. This alignment of agency mission with strategic goals and resources is a leading practice for effective program management.²⁰
- **Communication:** FEMA communicates US&R program risks and performance issues through the US&R Advisory Organization. The advisory organization is composed of senior members or specialists from the 28 task forces. When the task forces raise an issue to the advisory organization, it is to assign subgroups to examine the issue in order to propose a solution or course of action. For example, at a

²⁰Project Management Institute, Inc., *The Standard for Program Management*®, Third Edition (Newtown Square, PA: 2013).

September 2015 meeting of the organization, the Logistics sub-group briefed the advisory organization on a plan they are developing to reduce the equipment cache to ensure they are able to rapidly respond to incidents. The advisory organization maintains an Action Tracker List with priority issues that the group addresses. A majority of the task forces (6 of the 9 we contacted) said the advisory organization was an effective mechanism for collaboration and communication and addressing challenges within the US&R program. Creating a venue for communicating program risks and uncertainties and addressing issues that arise during the course of program performance is another leading practice for effective program management.²¹

- **Program execution:** Each of the 28 US&R task forces uses the same operations manual, which outlines procedures for task force activation, operation in the field, and demobilization. All 9 task forces we interviewed reported that they rely on the operations manual as a reference to conduct task force operations. In addition, each of the 28 US&R task forces is governed by a similar cooperative agreement between its sponsoring agency and FEMA and the members of each task force must meet the same training standards and carry the same equipment cache. This uniformity in management of the task forces promotes interoperability and reliability, both for task forces collaborating in a disaster response and for states anticipating US&R assistance after a request to FEMA. This is also a leading practice for effective program management.²²

FEMA officials cited several benefits of the US&R program. For example, they said the US&R program is more cost-efficient than a full-time federal US&R resource. They estimated that, in order to staff three shifts (or 24 hour coverage) of an equivalent, federally-maintained 70 member US&R team, it would cost \$22.7 million per task force. In comparison, the fiscal year 2014 budget for the US&R program (all 28 task forces) was

²¹Project Management Institute, Inc., *The Standard for Program Management*®, Third Edition (Newtown Square, PA: 2013).

²²Project Management Institute, Inc., *The Standard for Program Management*®, Third Edition (Newtown Square, PA: 2013).

FEMA Uses Leading Practices to Assess the US&R Program

approximately \$35 million.²³ They also said that US&R sponsoring agencies benefit from sponsoring a task force because the training and equipment they receive is often valuable for their primary function as a fire department or emergency response agency. Eight out of nine state emergency managers we interviewed expressed a positive opinion of the US&R program and said that they would request search and rescue assistance from FEMA if it was ever needed.²⁴ None of the state emergency managers we spoke with identified challenges or issues in requesting US&R assistance from FEMA.

We also found that FEMA uses leading program management practices for conducting periodic reviews based on program standards to assess the US&R program. FEMA uses after action reports (AAR), administrative readiness evaluations, and the Operational Readiness Exercise Evaluation Program to assess the US&R program.

After action reports: After every deployment or exercise, each task force produces an AAR with a chronology of events, an evaluation of team effectiveness, recommendations for improvement, and lessons learned. We reviewed 32 AARs on responses to Hurricane Irene, Hurricane Isaac, Hurricane Sandy, the 2013 Oklahoma Tornadoes, the 2013 Colorado flooding, the 2013 Arkansas Tornado, and the Oso, Washington Mudslide. We found that each AAR includes a standard format for communicating and addressing issues that arose during the course of US&R's Task Forces' response to specific disasters. For example, in response to the 2013 Colorado flooding, each task force deployed (four in total) issued an AAR containing the areas cited above—which included a section on the task force's performance on six elements: search, medical, rescue, safety, communications, and logistics. For each element, a description of the task, analysis of performance, and improvement action to be taken was reported, if applicable.

²³FEMA's Response Directorate conducted an internal review of the US&R program in 2012, which included this cost estimate. While we did not independently validate the cost estimate, we found the underlying assumptions to be reasonable and agree that funding the full time, year round operations of a 200+ person team would be much more expensive than the annual support FEMA provides through the US&R cooperative agreement.

²⁴The one state that said it would not need search and rescue assistance from FEMA said it has a robust state search and rescue system and strong relationships with search and rescue teams in neighboring states.

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- **Administrative readiness evaluations:** These evaluations assess task forces on their readiness for deployment and include two parts: an annual self-assessment conducted by each task force and a triennial peer review, led by members of peer task forces. Both reviews use the same assessment instrument to evaluate task forces based on their operational, logistics, and management readiness. We reviewed 28 evaluations which included one evaluation for each of the 28 task forces for fiscal years 2012 through 2014. On the basis of the results of the peer evaluation, task forces may be deemed “fully operational”, “conditional,” or “non-operational”.²⁵ If a task force is not fully operational, it must develop a corrective action plan in collaboration with officials from the FEMA US&R Branch and implement that plan. We found that 1 of the 28 US&R task forces has been in a conditional or non-operational status for 7 years. That task force was first placed on non-operational status in 2007 and regained conditional status in 2010, only to fall back to non-operational status in 2012. That task force was again placed on conditional status in 2013, non-operational in 2014, and in September 2015, FEMA announced that it would be removed from the US&R program. FEMA US&R officials said they had provided sufficient time for the task force to take corrective actions, but the task force failed to effectively respond. During our review, FEMA issued a draft program memorandum with administrative procedures for removing task forces that fail to regain fully-operational status within 2 years of being placed on non-operational status.²⁶ According to the draft program memorandum, the task force will have the opportunity to appeal the decision for its removal.²⁷
 - **Operational Readiness Exercise Evaluation Program:** This program requires task forces to conduct a large-scale training exercise every 3 years, develop a training plan based on that

²⁵Those task forces that are fully operational maybe deployed. Those task forces that are on conditional status maybe considered for deployment based on their proximity to an incident, but they will be removed from the national rotation matrix which determines how to rotate deployments among the task forces. If a task force is non-operational, it will not be deployed.

²⁶FEMA, *US&R General Memorandum 2015-019 – US&R Task Force Readiness Requirements Non-Compliance Management Process Draft Memorandum*, (Washington, D. C.), Feb. 3, 2015

²⁷See 44 C.F.R. § 208.7

exercise, and update the plan annually. Task forces use the Exercise Evaluation Guide to assess their performance. We observed one of FEMA's large-scale exercises in April 2015, where US&R task forces conducted three rescue scenarios and were evaluated on their performance. In addition, we reviewed the results for another large-scale training exercise and found that the reporting followed the criteria laid out in the US&R evaluation guide. Task forces receive a score of fully, partially, or not complete for tasks such as the ability to assemble personnel and equipment at designated location. Task force mobilization, deployment, tactical operations, and demobilization are some of the broad tasks assessed at the exercise conducted by Texas Task Force 1.

Leading program management practices include conducting periodic reviews of the progress of the program in delivering its expected benefits, thereby enabling the organization to assess and enforce program conformance with organizational standards.²⁸ By establishing these multiple approaches to assessing the program, and continually incorporating program changes thorough AARs, the advisory organization, and corrective action reviews, FEMA is positioned to respond to US&R program changing needs and requirements.

FEMA Lacks a Comprehensive Plan to Improve Replacement of US&R Task Force Equipment

The aging status of the task forces' equipment has not yet been an operational issue identified by the various US&R assessments, but all 9 task forces we interviewed reported challenges funding the maintenance and replacement of their equipment caches. FEMA originally funded the caches between 1990 and 2005, including specialty equipment such as Hazmat/chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, explosive, and water safety equipment (added after 9/11) and new communications equipment added between 2005 and 2007. While some items are low-cost and routinely replaced after use, like bandages, other items have a much longer service life, may require regular maintenance, and are costly to replace. For example, each task force has pneumatic powered tools, such as the strut system which is used to support collapsed buildings for search and rescue. The total strut kit, which consists of multiple expandable struts and other support equipment, cost about \$72,000 in 2014, see figure 4 for an example of its use.

²⁸Project Management Institute, Inc., *The Standard for Program Management*®.

Figure 4: Example of Strut System Used by an Urban Search and Rescue Task Force



Source: Federal Emergency Management Agency. | GAO-16-87

Task force leaders we interviewed identified challenges in funding maintenance and upgrade of the equipment in their cache, along with adhering to recommended manufacturer shelf life requirements. For example, the standard US&R radio system is 10 years old and is becoming outdated. In addition, US&R hazmat equipment has a 5-year replacement cycle and is due for replacement. Through the US&R cooperative grant agreements, FEMA allocates about \$155,000 to each task force annually, identified for equipment maintenance and acquisition. US&R team leaders said that the allocation covers equipment maintenance but is not sufficient to acquire or replace equipment.

The 2013-2017 US&R Strategic Plan identified the need for the Logistics Functional Group within the advisory organization to develop a replacement life cycle analysis as part of a strategy to finance the replacement of high-cost items in the equipment caches. While FEMA program officials have not yet developed this strategy, they have drafted a position paper detailing the life cycle and costs (along with multiple

replacement options) for one piece of critical equipment in the US&R cache—the self-contained breathing apparatus. In September 2015, FEMA replaced this piece of equipment (approximately \$1.1 million) using funding that had been intended for the task force that was decommissioned during the course of our review. In addition, FEMA changed the funding cycle for the annual grants from 1 year to 3 years beginning in 2015 in an effort to provide task forces more flexibility for high-dollar purchases. Task force managers we spoke with reported that a longer funding cycle could help them budget for equipment replacement. The increased flexibility in the annual grant funding cycle and the position paper for one of the high-cost items in the equipment caches represent progress towards aligning task force resources with US&R program goals.

However, FEMA has not developed a comprehensive plan that would enable program managers and task force leaders to prioritize and fund the replacement of all items in the equipment cache. A key component of effective program management is committing resources that support the goals and strategic mission of the program. The Standard for Program Management calls for agencies to engage in resource planning to determine which resources are needed and when they are needed to successfully implement the program. FEMA program managers agreed that a comprehensive plan would help them better prioritize future high-cost equipment purchases, noting that they had not yet focused their management attention on this issue. Developing a plan to prioritize and fund equipment needs will help FEMA to ensure US&R teams have the equipment they need to fulfill their mission.

FEMA Uses Some Leading Practices to Implement, Assess, and Improve the IMAT Program but Additional Actions Would Strengthen this Program

FEMA uses some leading program management practices in implementing, assessing, and improving the IMAT program components but does not use other practices that would enhance program management. Specifically, FEMA lacks a standardized training plan for all national and regional IMAT members to effectively implement the program and has an inconsistent assessment process that limits its effectiveness. FEMA also has not developed a plan to address challenges related to staff attrition.

FEMA Uses Some Leading Practices to Implement the IMAT Program but Has Not Effectively Implemented Program Training and Assessments

FEMA Response Directorate officials have developed a number of strategic documents and policy guidance to provide goals and a management structure for implementing and managing the IMAT program in accordance with leading practices in program management. For example, FEMA's Response Directorate Operating Plan outlines the IMAT role in disaster response, while the Response Directorate Strategic Plan establishes strategic goals for IMAT development and performance.²⁹ The Response Directorate Strategic Plan also calls for continuing emphasis on quality of response teams, promoting a stable, flexible, and fully qualified workforce, and ensuring a robust training curriculum. The draft IMAT Procedures Guide provides details on IMAT protocols and the IMAT role in supporting FEMA's mission, while the IMAT Program Directive outlines the agency-wide policy for administration, implementation, and oversight of the program.³⁰ These documents also offer guidance outlining the overall disaster response procedure and position-specific duties on the IMAT. Establishment of clear goals and managerial structure is a leading practice for effective program management.³¹

Additionally, FEMA Response Directorate officials developed mechanisms to communicate program risks and address issues in IMAT program performance, another leading practice.³² For example, to share lessons learned and best practices after deployments and exercises, IMAT team leaders hold monthly meetings. These meetings provide an opportunity for team leaders to address challenges or problems that arise during incidents and work to establish strategies to resolve these issues. FEMA Response Directorate officials also told us that IMAT members participate in monthly meetings so that those performing the same job functions can share experiences and strategies for effective disaster

²⁹FEMA, *Response Directorate Strategic Plan*, (Washington, D.C.: 2014). FEMA, *Response Directorate Operating Plan*, (Washington, D.C.:2014)

³⁰FEMA, *IMAT Procedures Guide (Draft)*, (Washington, D.C.: 2015). FEMA, *IMAT Program Directive* (Washington, D.C.:2015).

³¹Project Management Institute, Inc., *The Standard for Program Management*®.

³²Project Management Institute, Inc., *The Standard for Program Management*®.

response.³³ FEMA officials also communicate potential program risks and performance issues through three strategic working groups, which address program-specific challenges in the areas of retention, training, and equipment. These groups allow IMAT members to discuss issues and share findings and recommendations for program changes. For example, one working group is exploring ways to centralize certain types of equipment to be used during catastrophic incidents.

With the implementation of the new CORE IMAT program in 2013, FEMA Response Directorate officials also employed leading practices in program management for promoting program execution by enabling staff to obtain training. Specifically, they established a preliminary training program through the IMAT Academy and long-term training requirements for staff to acquire the requisite skills and abilities to effectively conduct their position-specific responsibilities and become fully qualified under the FEMA Qualification System (FQS). As part of their training, IMAT members first participate in the 14-week IMAT Academy, which includes orientation to FEMA's emergency management system, team building, and real-world exercises. IMAT members are then to complete subsequent cadre-specific training courses at the Emergency Management Institute and build experience through on-the-job training during disaster deployments and exercises to become qualified under FQS.

However, IMAT leaders at the regional and national levels expressed concerns about limited access to training opportunities after the academy as well as limited funds available to enable IMAT members to fulfill training requirements. Specifically, all 10 regional IMAT representatives and 1 of 3 national team leaders said that there was not sufficient funding or access to training opportunities for staff during their 4-year contracts as CORE employees. Regional IMAT team leaders said that many required

³³To effectively address the needs of survivors, FEMA has established 22 specialized incident workforce cadres capable of responding to and recovering from the unique complexities of each disaster. Each cadre may consist of staff across FEMA headquarters and regional offices, including cadre managers at headquarters who oversee all members of their cadre. Cadres include: Acquisitions, Alternate Dispute Resolution, Disaster Emergency Communications Disaster Field Training Operations, Disability Integration, Disaster Survivor Assistance, External Affairs, Environmental/Historic Preservation, Equal Rights, Financial Management, Hazard Mitigation, Human Resources, Individual Assistance, Information Technology, Logistics, National Disaster Recovery Support, Office of Chief Counsel-Legal, Operations, Public Assistance, Planning, Safety, and Security.

courses through the Emergency Management Institute are not offered frequently enough for IMAT members to attend, or have not yet been developed.³⁴ IMAT leaders also said that limited funds and infrequent disasters result in inconsistent training across teams. They also said that since their regions do not have budgets dedicated to IMAT training, they do not track costs associated with regional IMAT training. FEMA Response Directorate officials told us that cadre managers in FEMA headquarters are responsible for ensuring that staff in their cadres have access to appropriate courses. Regional officials from one region also told us that without planning to ensure consistent access to required courses, it could take 2 years for some IMAT CORE members to complete all their cadre-specific requirements.

Although state emergency managers reported having positive experiences and strong relationships with the previous IMAT teams staffed by more experienced permanent full time FEMA employees, they expressed concerns about a lack of qualified staff on the new CORE IMATs.³⁵ For example, officials from two states said that the previous IMATs were very experienced and performed a key role in providing management assistance during Hurricane Sandy in 2012. An official from another state described crucial support provided by the previous IMATs during the response to the Oso mudslide in 2014, including providing technical and subject matter assistance and coordinating federal resources. State officials had limited interactions with new CORE IMATs but described mixed experiences. For example, officials in two states expressed positive views of IMAT assistance and the states' overall relationships with the new IMATs, while officials from two other states where the new IMAT teams had deployed expressed concerns about the lack of experience among the new teams in performing key duties during disaster response. Specifically, they told us that they spent additional time and resources "training FEMA staff on their state processes," taking up

³⁴The Emergency Management Institute provides training to federal, state, local, tribal, volunteer, public, and private sector officials to strengthen emergency management core competencies for professional, career-long training and is located on the campus of FEMA's National Emergency Training Center in Emmitsburg, Maryland.

³⁵We spoke with officials from nine states, four of which had an IMAT deployed during a disaster before or during Hurricane Sandy, and four of which had an IMAT deployed during a disaster after Hurricane Sandy. Though they had not experienced a disaster requiring an IMAT during our timeframe, we also spoke to officials in California because of the state's large size and large number of disaster response teams.

time that they could have spent working on their state's disaster response.

We have assessed FEMA's workforce planning, including similar issues related to training and the FQS system, in our prior work on FEMA's Reservists (temporary disaster response employees that FEMA deploys, as needed, to specific disasters). Specifically,

- In 2012, we reported that FEMA lacked long term plans and goals related to training, and we identified the need for FEMA to establish timelines and a system to track training costs for its Reservist workforce. To improve FEMA's workforce planning and training efforts, we recommended that they identify long-term goals, establish timeframes for developing performance measures, and develop a process to collect and analyze workforce and training data. In April 2015, FEMA said it would issue a Human Capital Strategic Plan addressing these recommendations by September 2015. However, we have not yet received documentation of this new plan.³⁶ To improve management and training in the Reservist program, we recommended that FEMA take steps to improve monitoring and communication of program policies across all regions, establish criteria for program hiring, establish a more rigorous performance appraisal system, and implement training milestones and a mechanism to track training costs. FEMA has taken steps to address these including updating policies and guidance, centralizing management of the program, implementing a new communication strategy, standardizing hiring criteria, establishing a training plan with milestones, and establishing a system to track training costs. According to FEMA officials, agency guidance regarding the performance management system for Reservists was due to be developed by July 2015. We have not yet received pending documentation confirming issuance of this guidance.³⁷
- In 2015, we also identified continuing challenges associated with FEMA's implementation and management of FQS, finding that staff

³⁶GAO, *Federal Emergency Management Agency: Workforce Planning and Training Could Be Enhanced by Incorporating Strategic Management Principles*, [GAO-12-487](#), (Washington D.C.: Apr. 26, 2012).

³⁷GAO, *Disaster Assistance Workforce: FEMA Could Enhance Human Capital Management and Training*, [GAO-12-538](#), (Washington D.C.: June 1, 2012).

FEMA Qualification System (FQS)

FEMA's FQS is the latest initiative in FEMA's ongoing efforts to credential its workforce. According to agency officials, FQS is intended to standardize and streamline the certification process for all FEMA employees, in comparison to prior credentialing efforts which focused on temporary Disaster Assistance Employees. As part of FQS, FEMA established performance and training standards for each FEMA disaster-related position.

The FQS system is intended to certify an employee's status based on the employee's recognized performance and knowledge, as well as the training the employee has completed, measured against established standards. Under the FQS, individuals are assigned a qualification title of entry-level "trainee" or the more experienced title of "qualified" based on training and experience levels.

Source: FEMA. | GAO-16-87

deploying to disasters were not all trained to the FQS level to which they were assigned. We found that these long-standing challenges continue to impact the IMAT program. In particular, we reported on steps FEMA is taking to address longstanding workforce challenges related to the DHS Surge Capacity Force and FEMA Corps. We made five recommendations, including for FEMA to improve recruitment track costs associated with its workforce, and improve program performance tracking. FEMA concurred with our recommendations; however we have not received documentation on actions it has taken or plans to take in response to these recommendations.³⁸

According to leading practices on workforce training, agencies should plan to ensure sufficient training opportunities as well as track cost and performance of training programs to ensure effective program execution.³⁹ Further, leading practices in human capital management call for federal agencies to develop long-term strategies for developing staff to achieve programmatic goals. Finally, the 2015 IMAT Program Directive requires all IMAT members to be trained according to FQS guidelines for incident management and incident support positions.

FEMA Response Directorate officials said they had not developed an IMAT workforce plan to meet the training and funding needs of the new CORE IMATs because the program was early in its implementation. The officials also said that ensuring access to training specific to each cadre is the responsibility of cadre managers, not the IMAT program. To address regional officials' concerns about access to IMAT training opportunities, FEMA Response Directorate officials said they intended to develop a standard IMAT training program by forming a strategic working group.⁴⁰ The working group's proposed IMAT training program will include ongoing training at the IMAT Academy for both experienced and new IMAT members, annual validation training, and quarterly exercises and training to improve interoperability among regional and national IMAT teams.

³⁸GAO, *Federal Emergency Management Agency: Additional Planning and Data Collection Could Help Improve Workforce Management Efforts*, [GAO-15-437](#), (Washington D.C.: July 9, 2015).

³⁹GAO, *Human Capital: A Guide for Assessing Strategic Training and Development Efforts in the Federal Government* ([GAO-04-546G](#), (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 1, 2004).

⁴⁰According to officials, this working group includes a National IMAT Team Leader, representatives from all 10 FEMA regions, FEMA's Incident Workforce Management Division, and the Emergency Management Institute.

They intend to work with the Emergency Management Institute to make courses available for IMAT members and implement the new training program by January 1, 2016. However, these efforts do not address the cadre-specific training needs of CORE IMAT members.

FEMA Response Directorate officials said they also intended to take steps in response to concerns about limited training budgets raised by regional officials. Specifically, FEMA Response Directorate officials said they updated their budget planning documents in September 2015 to account for funds for IMAT training and program costs in fiscal year 2016; IMAT leaders told us that previously the FEMA Response Directorate did not have a budget allocation specific to IMAT training. They said they intend to provide annual funding for the new regional CORE IMAT teams from the Disaster Relief Fund.

Though FEMA Response Directorate officials have established a working group to develop a training program and intend to begin accounting for regional IMAT training and other program costs, the process is ongoing, and we cannot yet assess the its effectiveness or determine whether these steps will help to address the challenges we have identified related to access to and funding for IMAT training. Further, FEMA has not developed a comprehensive training plan for its IMAT members that links the IMAT training and cadre-specific training requirements to available training opportunities to ensure timely completion of the requirements. Such a plan would also help program officials better anticipate and budget for the costs of implementing the training needed for the new CORE IMAT teams to become fully qualified under FQS. Without a comprehensive plan to ensure sufficient training opportunities as well as to track cost and performance of IMAT-specific and cadre training programs, IMAT program managers will continue to face challenges in implementing their new 2015 IMAT Program Directive and ensuring that IMAT teams consistently have the skills and qualifications to fulfill their disaster response duties.

FEMA Uses Leading Practices to Assess the IMAT Program but Inconsistent After-Action Reporting, Tracking, and Guidance May Limit Program Improvements

FEMA demonstrates leading practices in program management including conducting periodic program reviews, developing metrics to track program performance, and creating a venue to address issues of program performance. FEMA demonstrates these leading practices through several assessment mechanisms that evaluate IMAT readiness, report on IMAT performance, and gather information that can be used to make program-wide changes.

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- **Operational readiness evaluations:** These annual assessments measure the IMATs' ability to deploy to disasters and assist state and local partners, including measuring performance in the areas of personnel, management, training, and equipment of each IMAT team. In our review of all 10 operational readiness evaluations conducted in 2014 for both regional and national IMAT teams, we found that each team received a 90 percent (or higher) score.⁴¹ For example, according to their 2014 operational readiness evaluation, the national IMAT West team demonstrated a strong performance in the areas of management and personnel, as well as effective use of communications equipment during its 2014 exercise. However, the exercise evaluation also pointed out that the team had several personnel vacancies that needed to be filled, as well as a lack of FQS qualification for many team members. Of the 10 teams that conducted an annual operational readiness exercise evaluation in 2014, the national IMAT West team was the 1 team that had adopted the new CORE IMAT structure, while the 9 other teams being reviewed were previous teams staffed by permanent full-time employees.⁴² As a result, the majority of the most recent operational readiness evaluations available at the time of our review did not assess FEMA's IMAT teams under its new staffing model.
 - **Thunderbolts:** FEMA conducts annual "Thunderbolt" exercises, which are no-notice events to evaluate IMAT readiness in such areas as mobilization, communications readiness, and deployment to operations-based exercises simulating a catastrophic disaster environment. FEMA has previously used findings from these exercises to make changes to the IMAT program, including implementing recommendations to expand the teams and improve IMAT training.
 - **DHS Annual Performance Reports:** FEMA also gathers and reports on IMAT preparedness and performance as part of the DHS Annual Performance Report. As part of this reporting, FEMA has developed annual performance metrics for IMATs, including the ability of IMAT

⁴¹In 2014, 10 of the 16 IMAT teams conducted operational readiness evaluations.

⁴²Previous teams were staffed by permanent full time employees, with 4 permanent full time employees and 8 collateral duty staff on the regional IMAT teams, while 16 permanent full time employees staffed the national IMATs. These teams were disbanded and staff reassigned upon implementation of the new CORE teams beginning in fiscal year 2013.

teams to deploy to and stabilize an incident within 72 hours and establish joint objectives with state partners within 18 hours. FEMA Response Directorate officials capture and analyze this data through the National Watch Center, which tracks IMAT status and deployment time after disaster declarations. For fiscal year 2014, the DHS Annual Performance Report stated that 100 percent of IMAT teams met their targets for these two measures. In addition, the IMAT program has established individual and team-based performance measures to evaluate each individual's ability to carry out his or her own responsibilities within a given time frame.

- **After-action reports:** IMATs are required to produce AARs after disaster deployments to assess functions and tasks carried out during the deployment along with lessons learned, best practices, and areas needing improvement. Program officials in FEMA headquarters are to review these reports after every deployment. Additionally, FEMA Response Directorate officials drafted an IMAT Procedures Guide with requirements and a template for AARs that all regions are expected to use after every deployment. These requirements for after-action reporting create a venue for FEMA Response Directorate officials to review and address issues of IMAT program performance.
- **FEMA Readiness Assessment Program:** The FEMA readiness assessment program evaluates performance and overall team readiness of IMAT teams as well as other teams involved in response and recovery. The readiness assessment program is a group within the Office of Response and Recovery that gathers data through observing exercises and conducting reviews after disaster deployments. Reviewers may then record their observations and, in some cases make recommendations in an Excel spreadsheet.⁴³ FEMA program officials may then use these findings to conduct trend analyses to identify common themes or areas for improvement after exercises or a response.

Conducting annual reviews, developing metrics and tracking performance, assessing progress and addressing issues of program performance of the IMAT program reflects leading practices in program

⁴³FEMA officials referred to the Excel spreadsheet, available to employees on FEMA's intranet, as the Joint Lessons Learned System.

management.⁴⁴ However, while FEMA has demonstrated some leading program management practices in establishing requirements for these assessments, we found inconsistencies in IMAT program after-action reporting as well as limitations in FEMA's use of the FEMA Readiness Assessment Program to conduct comprehensive IMAT program analysis. Specifically, we found a lack of consistency in how frequently IMATs produce AARs after deployments to disasters or after full scale exercises, what information they include in the reports, and how they share the results.

According to our discussions with regional teams and our analysis of data provided by FEMA, not all regions produce AARs after every deployment. For example, 6 out of 10 regional IMATs stated that they produce AARs after every major deployment and none of the 3 national IMAT teams produced AARs since the implementation of the CORE staff in 2013. Four of 10 regional IMATs do not include improvement plan matrices in their AARs to track lessons learned and recommendation implementation. Despite the fact that IMAT guidance requires an AAR after every deployment, five of 10 regional IMATs said that they do not produce and share AARs with FEMA headquarters after every disaster deployment. In addition, the 2015 IMAT directive does not include requirements for FEMA headquarters IMATs or regional IMATs to track implementation of AARs' recommendations, perform trend analysis across teams and AARs, or use findings to enact system-wide policy changes. Similarly, while the FEMA Readiness Assessment Program creates a venue to analyze IMAT program trends, there is no guidance for how these assessments will be used to evaluate the IMAT program. Specifically, while FEMA Response Directorate officials described the readiness assessment program as the primary means to analyze IMAT program trends, IMAT guidance does not establish policies or procedures detailing what are to be included in the assessments, when program officials are to conduct them, or how program officials plan to use the results. Furthermore, IMAT guidance includes no mention of the Excel spreadsheet or how it should be used. Response Directorate officials told us that IMAT teams do not generally use the spreadsheet to share feedback on program performance.

⁴⁴Project Management Institute, Inc., *The Standard for Program Management*®.

According to The Standards for Program Management, “agencies should collect, measure, and disseminate performance information and analyze program trends, and point to areas in need of adjustment” and programs should conduct periodic program reviews to assess program viability and provide a venue to assess program conformance with organizational standards.⁴⁵

FEMA Response Directorate officials acknowledged the inconsistent implementation of the AAR requirement in their program directive. They also said that they had not required that all teams use the template for AARs in the IMAT Procedures Guide because the document was in draft, but as of September 2015 they are requiring teams to use this template. Finally, Response Directorate officials told us that, although they do not have a system to track and document recommendations and their implementation, IMAT leaders share lessons learned and best practices during monthly team leader conference calls. However, without documenting the issues raised and tracking their resolution, FEMA’s ability to effectively use the information shared during these discussions to improve the program will be limited. Similarly, without policies or procedures that describe how FEMA Response Directorate officials will track recommendation implementation, perform trend analysis, or otherwise use readiness assessment program’s findings to enact system-wide policy change for the IMAT program, FEMA lacks assurance that the data gathered will be used to improve the effectiveness of the IMAT program.

FEMA Lacks a Strategy for Managing IMAT Attrition to Improve Program Retention

Since implementing the new CORE IMAT concept in 2013, the IMAT program has experienced high attrition rates of new CORE employees across all regional and national IMATs but program managers do not routinely gather data on attrition and have not developed a strategy to improve program retention. According to data provided by FEMA in September 2015, the IMAT program has experienced approximately 40 percent attrition across its 3 national teams since 2013, and all 7 regional IMATs that transitioned to the CORE concept in 2013 and 2014 reported

⁴⁵Project Management Institute, Inc., *The Standard for Program Management*®.

some attrition.⁴⁶ Discussions with IMAT leaders conducted by the strategic working group on retention revealed that turnover can have a negative impact on IMAT performance, relationships with state and other partners, and team cohesion, and it may limit the return on investment of hiring and training new CORE staff. See table 1 for FEMA's transition to its new IMAT teams and attrition.

Table 1: Cadre of On-Call Response Employees (CORE) Incident Management Assistance Team (IMAT) Composition and Attrition as of September 2015

Team	Date activated	Total team composition	Fiscal year 2013 attrition	Fiscal year 2014 attrition	Fiscal year 2015 attrition	Total attrition
National teams						
National IMAT West	April 2013	32				
National IMAT East-1	April 2013	32	7	22	10	39
National IMAT East-2	June 2014	32				
Regional teams						
Region IX Team 1	April 2013	12	1	5	1	7
Region II	June 2014	12	-	0	2	2
Region IV Team 1	June 2014	12	-	0	3	3
Region V	June 2014	12	-	1	0	1
Region VI Team 1	June 2014	12	-	0	1	1
Region VII	June 2014	12	-	0	2	2
Region X	June 2014	12	-	0	2	2
Total national and regional IMAT team members		180		Total national and regional IMAT attrition		57

Source: GAO Analysis based on FEMA data | GAO-16-87

According to IMAT officials from 9 of 10 regions and 1 of 3 national IMATs key reasons cited for the attrition in the initial years of implementing the program are the relatively low pay and lack of upward mobility for CORE

⁴⁶FEMA Human Resources Management staff in the FEMA headquarters Response Directorate said they tracked national IMAT employees who had left but to gather regional attrition data in June, they contacted Human Resources staff in each region. In addition, we found that FEMA's Human Capital Office does not have a process to systematically collect attrition data; however FEMA's Response Directorate obtained this data from its IMAT team leaders, in response to our request for this data. We validated these data through our interviews with FEMA's regions and determined the data were reliable for our purposes.

IMAT members. FEMA's new pay-for-performance system for CORE employees starts new staff at a pay rate lower than that of the permanent full time employees previously staffing the IMATs, and team members rely on disaster deployments and training exercises to receive performance-based pay raises and bonuses. Because pay-for-performance is tied to disasters and training, team leaders said that it can be challenging for team members to earn higher pay when there are not opportunities to deploy to disasters and limited training opportunities. Further, high attrition in the IMAT program can be costly because of the investment required to hire and train new staff. For example, as described above, all new IMATs must participate in a 14-week IMAT Academy. According to FEMA, this costs approximately \$39,000 per team member. High attrition results in additional costs to FEMA to continually train new staff to replace those who leave before completing their 4-year contracts. For example, total IMAT attrition cost FEMA \$2.2 million in additional IMAT Academy training costs for training replacement CORE IMAT team members in fiscal years 2013, 2014 and 2015, based on FEMA's estimated cost per member.

In response to concerns about attrition, FEMA Response Directorate officials established a working group to address IMAT retention in July 2015. According to FEMA officials, they plan to speak with all team leaders and begin to gather data on the reasons for IMAT staff attrition. FEMA Response Directorate officials stated that the team will analyze and present its findings to program managers in December 2015. However, FEMA officials told us that their Human Capital Office does not have a process for systematically tracking IMAT attrition. Our prior work on leading practices in human capital management has found that federal agencies should develop long-term strategies for acquiring, developing, and retaining staff to achieve programmatic goals.⁴⁷ Additionally, according to The Standards for Program Management, "agencies should collect, measure, and disseminate performance information and analyze program trends."⁴⁸ Without a strategy that includes a process for systematically gathering attrition data and a plan to retain CORE employees, FEMA will continue to face potential impairments to IMAT

⁴⁷GAO, *Human Capital: Key Principles for Effective Strategic Workforce Planning*, [GAO-04-39](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 11, 2003).

⁴⁸Project Management Institute, Inc., *The Standard for Program Management*®.

readiness and increased program costs as team members continue to leave.

FEMA's Efforts to Implement NMETS Have Been Inconsistent but Officials Have Developed a New Implementation Plan

After developing the original NMETS program in 2007, NMETS program officials decided to discontinue development and support of NMETS in 2008. They said this was the result of their discussions with state officials in Gulf Coast states, including Louisiana and Texas who said they had purchased their own evacuation tracking systems and did not need NMETS.⁴⁹ NMETS program managers decided to resurrect the program in 2009, after Louisiana officials identified continuing issues associated with their ability to track critical transportation needs of survivors in Louisiana during Hurricane Gustav.⁵⁰ Program managers said although there were issues regarding the system software, they provided test versions of NMETS to 8 states (in 5 of FEMA's 10 regions) in 2010 to solicit feedback.⁵¹ However, in 2011 and 2012, due to deployments to Hurricanes Irene and Sandy, the associated demands on the program managers significantly limited the work and funding on NMETS. As a result, they did not follow up with the eight states that had tested the most recent iteration of NMETS to identify any suggestions for improving the system.

Following Hurricanes Irene and Sandy in 2013, NMETS program officials participated in two workshops in Chicago sponsored by a Regional Catastrophic Planning Team because of the focus on evacuations of several of the team's projects as grantees of FEMA's Regional

⁴⁹FEMA officials stated that another reason for halting the use of NMETS was that disaster survivors were resistant to the use of wearing barcoded wristbands, an initial feature of NMETS.

⁵⁰Hurricane Gustav was a category 2 hurricane (i.e. a hurricane with sustained winds at 96 to 110 miles per hour) that made landfall in the state of Louisiana in September 2008. *State of Louisiana After Action Report and Improvement Plan Hurricanes Gustav and Ike* (January 2009).

⁵¹According to FEMA officials, the 8 states within the 5 FEMA regions that the test versions were sent to consisted of New Jersey and New York (Region II); Maryland (Region III); Illinois, Indiana, and Wisconsin (Region V); Missouri (Region VII); and California (Region IX).

Catastrophic Grant Program.⁵² During the workshops in 2013 and 2014, program officials worked with the team to test and assess aspects of NMETS, such as the ability to access NMETS from a state's information system at multiple locations to generate reports and enroll evacuees into NMETS. According to NMETS program officials, they used the results of these assessments to further improve and revise the system. For example, they said they developed a way to access NMETS via the Internet and use the system to locate evacuees and unaccompanied minors to facilitate reunification of family members.

In order to more consistently manage the program, NMETS program officials drafted an NMETS Strategic Implementation Plan in January 2015 to provide guidance to FEMA regional offices for communicating and training state and local officials on the use and implementation of NMETS.⁵³ The draft plan establishes goals and objectives and calls for a routine forum of NMETS users to review issues and concerns on application functionality and lessons learned.⁵⁴ Officials also said they developed a licensing agreement, which includes the terms and conditions of NMETS use. During 2015, NMETS program officials provided the NMETS software and conducted webinars with all 10 FEMA regions and provided the NMETS licensing agreement to several states.⁵⁵ NMETS program officials also told us that they plan to conduct additional presentations to FEMA Regions II, III, and IV in fiscal year 2016. (See figure 5 for the NMETS implementation and assessment timeline since fiscal year 2007.)

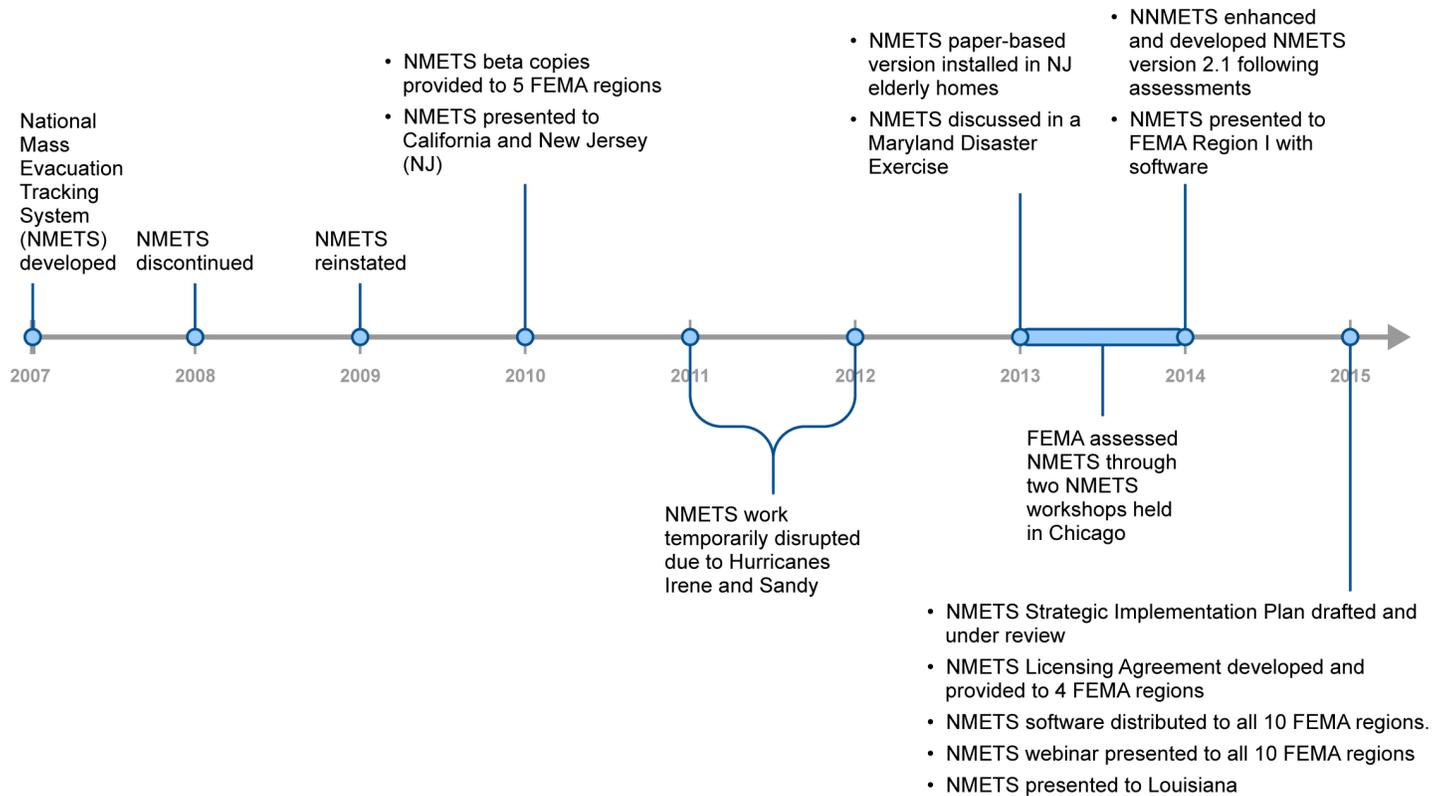
⁵²FEMA's Regional Catastrophic Preparedness Grant Program provided funding to enhance catastrophic incident preparedness in selected sites to support coordination of regional all-hazard planning for catastrophic events, including the development of integrated planning communities, plans, protocols, and procedures to manage a catastrophic event.

⁵³Federal Emergency Management Agency, *NMETS Strategic Implementation Plan-2015 (Draft)* (Washington, D.C.: 2015).

⁵⁴As of September 2015, FEMA officials stated that the Strategic Implementation Plan is still in the process of being finalized; and the final approval of the draft Plan with all its contents will depend on the finalization of the National Response Framework Annexes' revisions that is underway which may take 9 to 15 months.

⁵⁵According to NMETS program officials, FEMA provided the license agreements to Arkansas, Florida, Louisiana, New Jersey, Oklahoma, and Pennsylvania. Of the 6 states, all except 1 (Oklahoma) reported either planning to use NMETS or are considering using the system.

Figure 5: National Mass Evacuation Tracking System (NMETS) Implementation and Assessment Timeline Fiscal Years 2007-2015



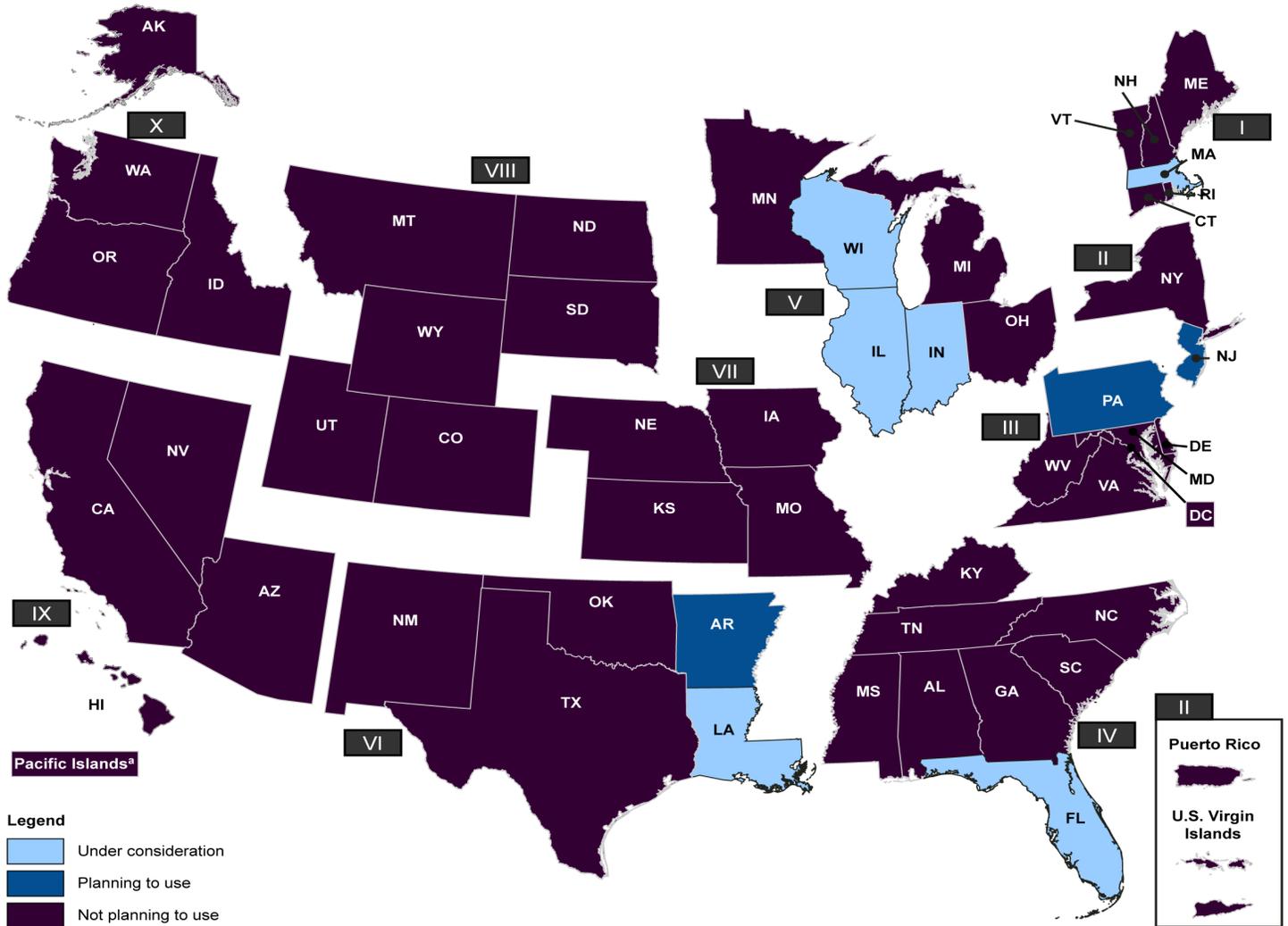
Source: GAO analysis of FEMA information. | GAO-16-87

FEMA regional officials emphasized that NMETS is an optional evacuation tracking tool and most said that states' interest in the system was limited. Specifically, FEMA regional officials in 7 out of the 10 FEMA regions (accounting for about 39 states and territories) reported that their states and territories were either not planning to use NMETS or, still considering whether to use it. Regional officials reported that 3 states are planning to use NMETS in case of an evacuation.⁵⁶ FEMA regional and

⁵⁶The U.S. states and territories include 50 states, 1 federal district (District of Columbia), and 3 territories and groupings of territories (Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, and the Pacific Islands, which includes Guam, American Samoa, Commonwealth of Northern Mariana Islands, Republic of Marshall Islands, and Federated State of Micronesia and more than 150 sovereign tribal entities). The U.S. states and territories that are not planning to use NMETS or have use of NMETS under consideration consist of 45 states and territories and 6 states, respectively.

selected state officials told us that positive features such as the ability to track unaccompanied minors, or the states' ability to own the NMETS software without paying leasing fees were the reasons they are electing to use the software. Conversely, regional and selected state officials told us that reasons for not electing to use the NMETS software included a lack of resources to support or maintain the NMETS system (e.g. laptops and wristbands) or staff to manage the system (e.g. staff needed to enter information into the system), a lack of system compatibility between NMETS and the state's internal database system to exchange data, a pre-existing state tracking system, or the lack of a perceived need for an evacuation tracking system. States' use of NMETS as of fiscal year 2015 is depicted in figure 6.

Figure 6: National Mass Evacuation Tracking System (NMETS) Use by Region and State as of Fiscal Year 2015



Source: GAO analysis based on FEMA information; Map Resources (map). | GAO-16-87

^aPacific Islands consist of Guam, American Samoa, Commonwealth of Northern Mariana Islands, Republic of Marshall Islands, and Federated State of Micronesia and more than 150 sovereign tribal entities.

NMETS program officials said they are taking steps to address NMETS concerns identified by states such as finalizing the implementation plan and conducting a workshop on mass care and evacuation assistance in fiscal year 2016. FEMA intends to finalize the Strategic Implementation Plan as part of a national planning effort to revise the Mass Evacuation Incident Annex (for Emergency Support Function 6) to the National

Response Framework; they estimated the process would take 9 to 15 months. Because the process is ongoing, we cannot yet determine whether the steps described by the program officials will help to address historical inconsistencies of FEMA management of the NMETS program.

Conclusions

In the years since Hurricane Katrina, FEMA has taken steps to improve its ability to respond rapidly and effectively to disasters for three key programs and has incorporated many leading program management practices into these efforts. By clearly defining the US&R program's goals, communicating its guidance and policies, and ensuring the goals are met through continual program assessments and refinements; FEMA has created an environment for continuing assessment and improvement. However, FEMA does not have a program strategy for replacing and maintaining high-cost equipment, which would help further improve its management of the US&R program and better prioritize future equipment purchases to strengthen the task forces' readiness and capabilities to respond to disasters. Similarly, the clear policies and procedures, readiness goals and assessment mechanisms, FEMA has established for the IMAT program, will help program managers in transitioning to its new CORE IMAT approach. However, changes in the program since Hurricane Sandy have created new challenges for program officials in training IMAT members and assessing the results of deployments, as well as costly and disruptive attrition at both the national and regional levels. Without a comprehensive plan to ensure sufficient training opportunities, FEMA lacks assurance that teams will have the skills and qualifications to fulfill their disaster response duties. Further, without policies or procedures that describe how FEMA will track implementation of recommendations and lessons learned from past deployments, FEMA's ability to improve the effectiveness of the IMAT program will be limited. Finally, until FEMA develops a more organized and systematic approach to understanding and addressing underlying attrition issues, FEMA will continue to face potential impairments to IMAT readiness and increased program costs as team members continue to leave.

Recommendations for Executive Action

To enable FEMA to and more effectively respond to disasters, we recommend the Secretary of Homeland Security direct the FEMA Administrator to:

1. develop a comprehensive plan to prioritize and finance the replacement of equipment for the US&R task forces,

-
2. develop a comprehensive training plan that links the IMAT training and cadre-specific training requirements to available training opportunities to help ensure timely completion of the requirements.
 3. implement a process to document, track, and analyze recommendations and implement lessons learned from Regional and National IMAT teams after disaster deployments, and
 4. develop a workforce strategy to manage and improve retention that includes a process for systematically gathering attrition data and a plan to retain IMAT CORE employees.

Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

We provided a draft of this report to DHS for their review and comment. DHS provided written comments on January 21, 2016, which are summarized below and reproduced in full in appendix VI. DHS concurred with all four recommendations and described planned actions to address them. In addition, DHS provided written technical comments, which we incorporated into the report as appropriate.

DHS concurred with our first recommendation that FEMA develop a comprehensive plan to prioritize and finance the replacement of equipment for its US&R task forces. DHS stated that FEMA's US&R program managers and its Strategic Group have been working with FEMA Operations Division leadership to determine the appropriate method to address necessary equipment replacement for US&R task forces. They plan to develop a comprehensive strategy that prioritizes needed equipment replacements, as well as potential courses of action to finance these replacements. DHS estimated that the will be completed by November 30, 2016. These actions, if implemented effectively, should address the intent of our recommendation.

DHS also concurred with our second recommendation that FEMA develop a comprehensive training plan that links the IMAT training and cadre-specific training requirements to available training opportunities to help ensure timely completion of the requirements. DHS stated that the FEMA Field Operations Directorate is currently conducting an analysis of the IMAT program that will identify key operational requirements for National and Regional teams. As an outcome of this analysis, the Directorate plans to develop a comprehensive training and exercise program for the IMATs. DHS estimates that these actions will be completed by August 31, 2016. These actions, if implemented effectively, should address the intent of our recommendation.

DHS concurred with our third recommendation that FEMA implement a process to document, track, and analyze recommendations and implement lessons learned from Regional and National IMAT teams after disaster deployments. DHS stated that FEMA is developing and implementing formal procedures to document, track, analyze and incorporate lessons learned into annual training and exercise requirements as well as policies and performance measures applicable to the IMAT program. DHS estimates that these actions will be completed by June 30, 2016. These actions, if implemented effectively, should address the intent of our recommendation.

DHS concurred with our last recommendation that FEMA develop a workforce strategy to manage and improve retention that includes a process for systematically gathering attrition data and a plan to retain IMAT CORE employees. DHS stated that FEMA is conducting an analysis of the IMAT program to include a review of attrition data. FEMA stated that it is also conducting an IMAT employee satisfaction survey to develop a greater understanding of employee concerns within the Program and plans to use the findings of the analysis and employee satisfaction survey to develop a strategy to address workforce management of IMAT CORE employees. DHS estimates that these actions will be completed by June 30, 2016. These actions, if implemented effectively, should address the intent of our recommendation.

We will send copies of this report to the Secretary of Homeland Security, the FEMA Administrator, and appropriate congressional committees. If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (404) 679-1875 or curriec@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. Other key contributors to this report are listed in appendix VII.



Chris P. Currie
Director
Homeland Security and Justice

List of Requesters

The Honorable Ron Johnson
Chairman
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
United States Senate

The Honorable Michael T. McCaul
Chairman
The Honorable Bennie G. Thompson
Ranking Member
Committee on Homeland Security
House of Representatives

The Honorable Martha McSally
Chairman
The Honorable Donald M. Payne, Jr.
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Response, and
Communications
Committee on Homeland Security
House of Representatives

The Honorable Susan W. Brooks
House of Representatives

Appendix I: Disasters Requiring FEMA Disaster Response Assistance from Urban Search and Rescue (US&R) Task Forces and Incident Management Assistance Teams (IMATS) for Fiscal Years 2010 to 2014

Disaster/DR number ^a	Year	US&R Response	National IMAT Response	Regional IMAT Response	Impacted States
Hurricane Irene (DR-4019 & 4025)	2011	X	X	X	Pennsylvania ^b North Carolina
Hurricane Isaac (DR-4080)	2012	X	X	X	Louisiana ^b
Hurricane Sandy (DR-4085)	2012	X	X	X	New Jersey ^b
Oklahoma Tornado (DR-4117)	2013	X	X	X	Oklahoma
Colorado Flooding (DR-4145)	2013	X	X	X	Colorado
Washington Mudslides (DR- 4168)	2014	X	X	X	Washington
Arkansas Tornado (DR-4174)	2014	X		X	Arkansas ^b
Not Applicable					California ^b

Source: GAO | GAO-16-87

Notes: Eight states affected as noted above, in addition selected California because of the location of eight US&R task forces, National IMAT-West, and potential need for evacuation in the event of a major disaster.

^aFEMA assigns each major disaster a “disaster declaration number,” preceded by the abbreviation “DR.”

^bAnnotates that the state received license agreements or beta-tested FEMA’s NMETS for evacuations.

Appendix II: Urban Search and Rescue (US&R) Deployment Event History 1992-2014

#	Year-month	Incident name	US&R task force type 1	US&R task force type 3	US&R miscellaneous
1	1992-08	Hurricane Andrew	5	Not applicable (n/a)	0
2	1992-09	Hurricane Iniki	2	n/a	0
3	1992-09	Typhoon Brian	2	n/a	0
4	1993-08	Hurricane Emily	2	n/a	0
5	1994-01	Northridge Earthquake	6	n/a	0
6	1994-07	Hurricane Emelia	2	n/a	0
7	1995-04	Oklahoma City Bombing	11	n/a	0
8	1995-09	Hurricane Luis	3	n/a	0
9	1995-09	Hurricane Marilyn	5	n/a	0
10	1995-10	Hurricane Opal	7	n/a	0
11	1996-07	Atlanta Olympics National Special Security Events (NSSE)	12	n/a	0
12	1996-07	Hurricane Bertha	1	n/a	0
13	1996-09	Hurricane Fran	3	n/a	0
14	1996-11	Humberto Vidal Gas Explosion	2	n/a	0
15	1998-04	Nashville Tornadoes	1	0	0
16	1998-06	DeBruce Grain Elevator Explosion	1	0	0
17	1998-08	Hurricane Bonnie	2	n/a	0
18	1998-09	Hurricane Georges	6	n/a	0
19	1999-04	North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Anniversary Summit NSSE	1	0	0
20	1999-05	Oklahoma City Tornado	4	n/a	0
21	1999-08	Hurricane Brett	1	n/a	0
22	1999-09	Hurricane Floyd	3	n/a	0
23	1999-09	Hurricane Lenny	1	0	0
24	1999-09	United Nations Millennium NSSE	1	0	0
25	2000-01	Year 2000 NSSE	1	0	0
26	2000-07	Operation Sail 2000 Exercise	2	0	0
27	2000-12	Mobilization Exercise 2000 Exercise	3	0	0
28	2001-01	Presidential Inauguration NSSE	2	0	0
29	2001-02	Seattle Earthquake	2	0	0
30	2001-09	World Trade Center Terrorist Attacks	22	0	0
31	2001-09	Pentagon Terrorist Attacks	5	0	0
32	2001-11	Flight 587 Crash, Queens, New York	2	0	0
33	2002-02	Salt Lake City Winter Games NSSE	6	0	0

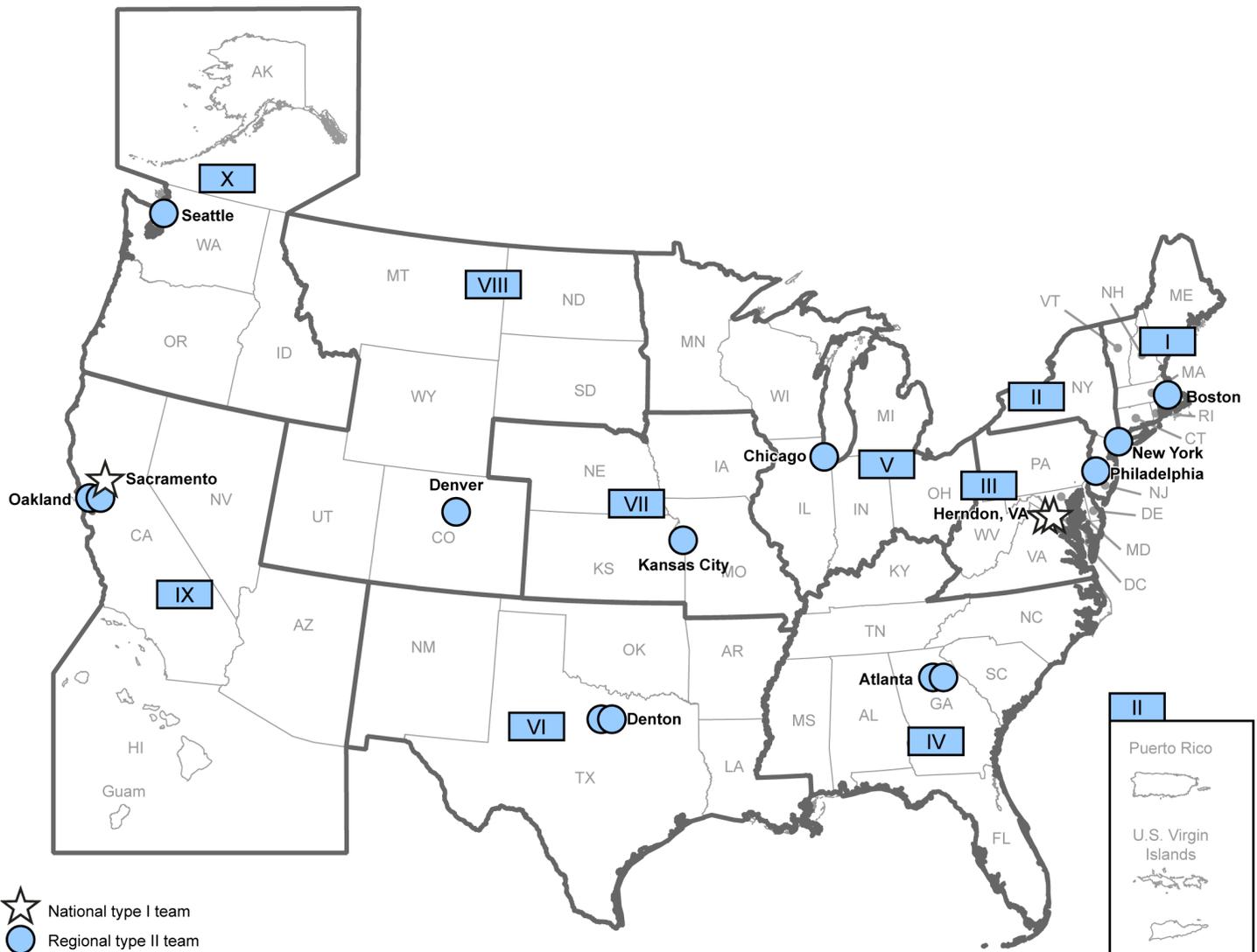
#	Year-month	Incident name	US&R task force type 1	US&R task force type 3	US&R miscellaneous
34	2003-02	Shuttle Columbia Recovery	1	0	6
35	2003-09	Hurricane Isabel	0	4	0
36	2003-12	Orange Alert NSSE	8	0	0
37	2004-06	Group of Eight Summit NSSE	1	0	0
38	2004-07	Democratic National Committee NSSE	1	0	0
39	2004-08	Hurricane Charley	1	5	0
40	2004-08	Republican National Committee NSSE	1	0	0
41	2004-09	Hurricane Francis	3	1	0
42	2004-09	Hurricane Ivan	2	5	0
43	2004-09	Hurricane Jeanne	0	3	0
44	2005-07	Hurricane Dennis	3	4	0
45	2005-08	Hurricane Katrina	17	11	8
46	2005-09	Hurricane Katrina 2	6	3	0
47	2005-09	Hurricane Ophelia	2	4	0
48	2005-09	Hurricane Rita	6	13	0
49	2005-09	Hurricane Wilma	2	4	0
50	2006-08	Hurricane Ernesto	4	10	0
51	2007-05	Greensburg Kansas Tornado	1	0	0
52	2007-08	Hurricane Dean	2	4	0
53	2008-02	Space Object Re-Entry Response	7	0	0
54	2008-07	Hurricane Dolly	1	2	0
55	2008-06	Midwest Floods	0	0	2
56	2008-08	Hurricane Gustav	6	12	0
57	2008-08	2008 RNC	1	0	0
58	2008-08	Hurricane Hannah	6	11	0
59	2008-09	Hurricane Ike	10	15	0
60	2008-10	Hurricane Omar	1	2	0
61	2009-01	2009 Pres Inauguration	4	0	0
62	2009-09	Group of Twenty Alert	1	0	0
63	2009-10	American Samoa Alert	2	0	0
64	2010-01	Haiti Earthquake	8	0	0
65	2010-03	Northeast Flood	0	0	1
66	2010-08	Hurricane Earl	6	0	0
67	2011-04	Alabama Tornadoes Alert	1	0	0
68	2011-08	Virginia Earthquake Alert	3	0	0
69	2011-08	Hurricane Irene	6	0	0

#	Year-month	Incident name	US&R task force type 1	US&R task force type 3	US&R miscellaneous
70	2011-09	Thunderbolt Exercise. (9/11 Anniversary Alert)	14	0	0
71	2012-06	Midwest Storms Alert	1	0	0
72	2012-09	Hurricane Isaac	1	0	0
73	2012-10	Hurricane Sandy	11	0	0
74	2013-05	Oklahoma Tornado	3	0	0
75	2013-09	Colorado Flooding	4	0	0
76	2014-03	Washington Mudslide	1	0	22
77	2014-04	Arkansas Tornado	1	0	0

Source: FEMA | GAO-16-87

Note: This table excludes incidents for which US&R task forces were alerted, activated, or prepositioned, but not deployed. Type 1 teams consist of 70 personnel with a full equipment cache, including capability to respond to hazardous materials and chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, and explosive incidents. Type 3 teams have 28 personnel with a smaller equipment cache that is primarily designed to operate in weather-driven disasters. The miscellaneous column refers to partial deployments, such as the deployment of canine units.

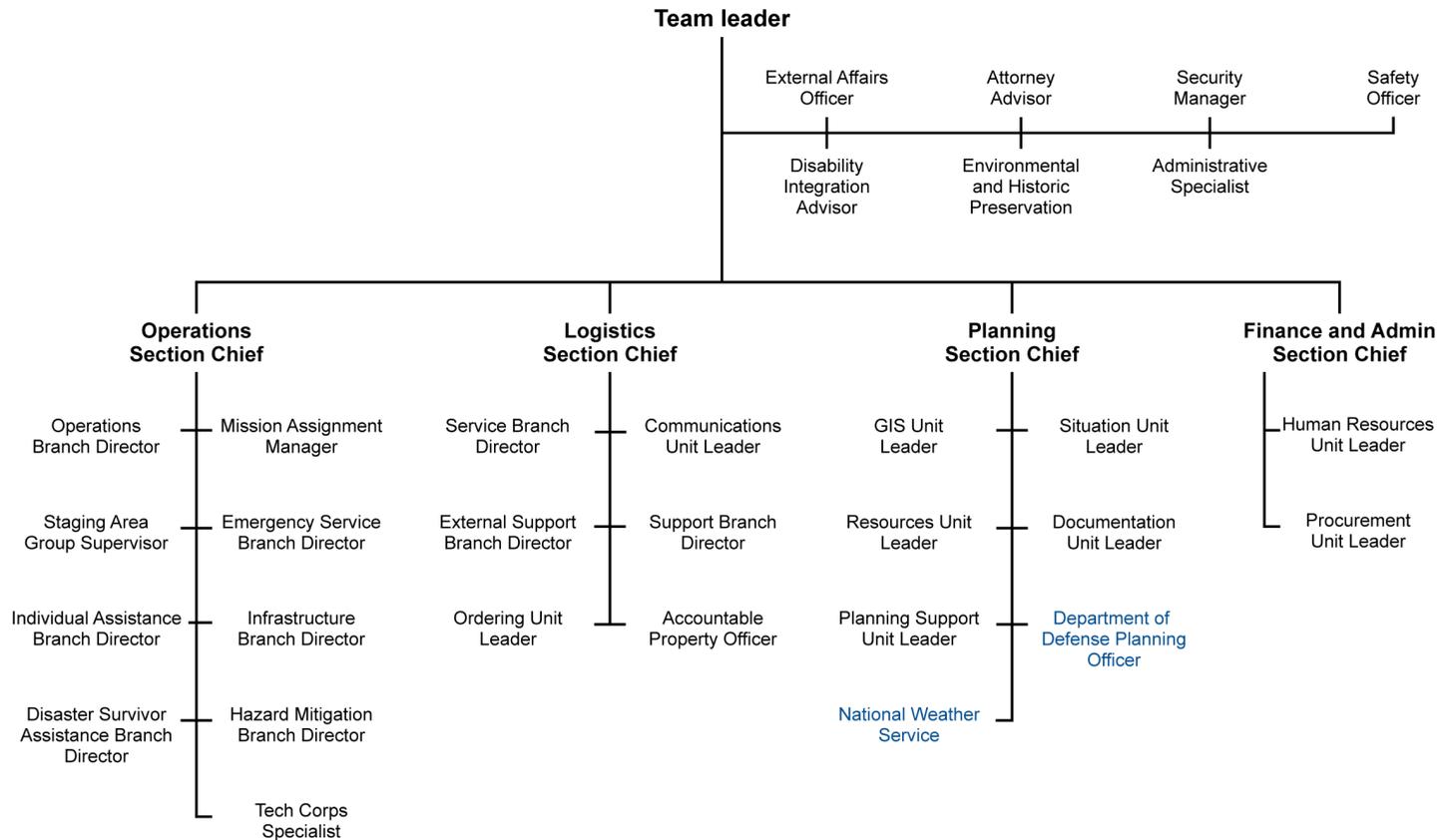
Appendix III: National and Regional Incident Management Assistance Team (IMAT) Locations¹



¹ Regions IV, VI and IX each have 2 Regional IMAT teams.

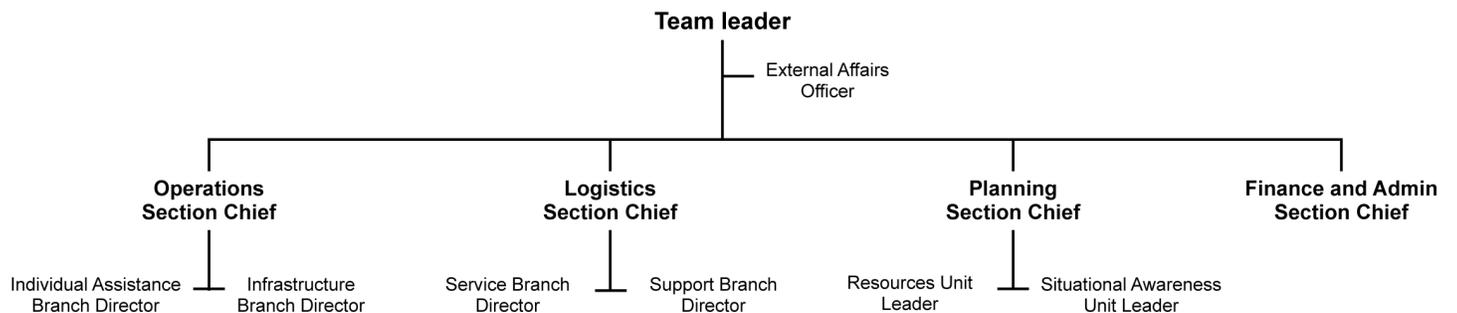
Appendix IV: Incident Management Assistance Teams-National and Regional Organizational Charts

National Incident Management Assistance Team:



Source: FEMA. | GAO-16-87

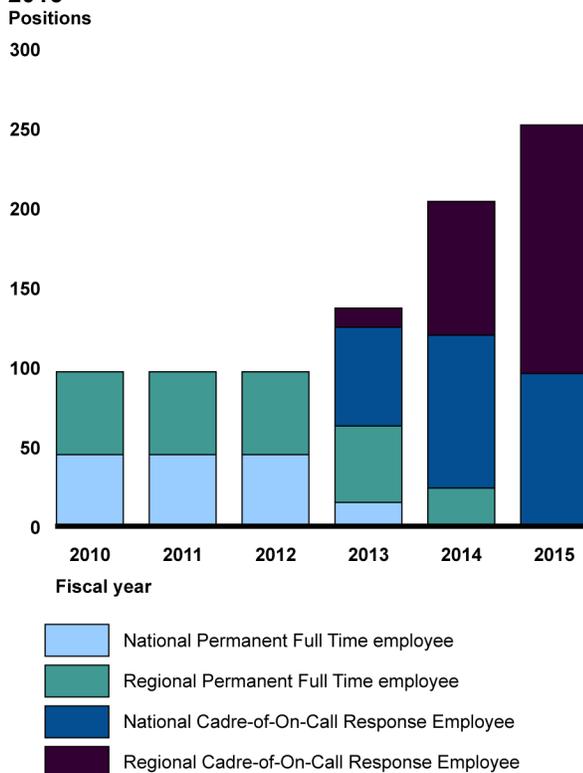
Regional Incident Management Assistance Team:



Source: FEMA. | GAO-16-87

Appendix V: Incident Management Assistance Teams Positions and Expenditures for Fiscal Years 2010-2015

Figure 7: Incident Management Assistance Teams Positions for Fiscal Years 2010-2015



Source: GAO analysis based on information provided by FEMA officials. | GAO-16-87

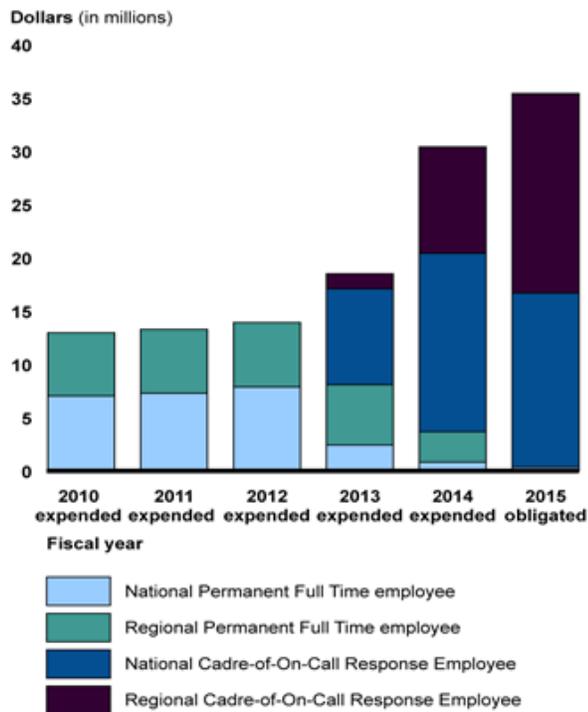
Table 2: Number of Incident Management Assistance Team Positions for Fiscal Years 2010-2015

Team	Fiscal year 2010	Fiscal year 2011	Fiscal year 2012	Fiscal year 2013	Fiscal year 2014	Fiscal year 2015
National Permanent Full Time Employee	45	45	45	15	3	3
Regional Permanent Full Time Employee	52	52	52	48	24	
National Cadre-of-On-Call Response Employee				62	96	96
Regional Cadre-of-On-Call Response Employee				12	84	156
Total Positions	97	97	97	137	207	255

Source: GAO analysis based on information provided by FEMA officials. | GAO-16-87

Figure 8: Incident Management Assistance Teams Costs for Fiscal Years 2010-2015

Incident Management Assistance Teams Costs for Fiscal Years 2010-2015



Source: GAO analysis based on information provided by FEMA officials. | GAO-16-87

Appendix VI: Comments from the Department of Homeland Security

U.S. Department of Homeland Security
Washington, DC 20528



**Homeland
Security**

January 21, 2016

Chris P. Currie
Director, Homeland Security and Justice
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20548

Re: Draft Report GAO-16-87, "DISASTER RESPONSE: FEMA Has Made Progress Implementing Key Programs, but Opportunities for Improvement Exist"

Dear Mr. Currie:

Thank you for the opportunity to review and comment on this draft report. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) appreciates the U.S. Government Accountability Office's (GAO's) work in planning and conducting its review and issuing this report.

The Department appreciates GAO's recognition that since Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has taken steps to improve its ability to respond rapidly and effectively to disasters and has incorporated many leading program management practices into these efforts. FEMA is committed to supporting our citizens and first responders to ensure that as a Nation we work together to build, sustain, and improve our capability to prepare for, protect against, respond to, recover from, and mitigate all hazards.

The draft report contained four recommendations with which the Department concurs. Specifically, GAO recommended the Secretary of Homeland Security direct the FEMA Administrator to:

Recommendation 1: Develop a comprehensive plan to prioritize and finance the replacement of equipment for the US&R [Urban Search and Rescue] task forces.

Response: Concur. The US&R Response System and its Strategic Group have been working with FEMA Operations Division leadership to determine the appropriate method to address necessary equipment replacement for System task forces. The US&R Branch will assume responsibility for finalizing and submitting a comprehensive plan to leadership that prioritizes needed equipment replacement within the System, as well as potential courses of action to finance these replacements. Estimated Completion Date (ECD): November 30, 2016.

Recommendation 2: Develop a comprehensive training plan that links the IMAT [Incident Management Assistance Team] training and cadre-specific training requirements to available training opportunities to help ensure timely completion of the requirements.

Response: Concur. The FEMA Field Operations Directorate is currently conducting a thorough mission analysis of the IMAT program that will identify key operational requirements for National and Regional teams. As an outcome of this analysis, the Directorate will develop a comprehensive training and exercise program for the IMATs, as well as a readiness cycle that promotes greater team readiness. ECD: August 31, 2016.

Recommendation 3: Implement a process to document, track, and analyze recommendations and implement lessons learned from Regional and National IMAT teams after disaster deployments.

Response: Concur. The recent re-alignment of the FEMA Office of Response and Recovery and the creation of the Field Operations Directorate, allows for greater integration of entities like the IMAT program with policy, performance, and assessment offices. Recently, the Field Operations Directorate designated staff to support the IMAT program in conducting after action reviews for all teams that deployed to South Carolina as part of the South Carolina Severe Storms and Flooding (Disaster Declaration Number 4241). Going forward, the Directorate will institutionalize this process by developing and implementing formal procedures to document, track, analyze and incorporate lessons learned into annual training and exercise requirements as well as policies and performance measures applicable to the IMAT program. ECD: June 30, 2016.

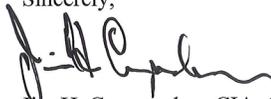
Recommendation 4: Develop a workforce strategy to manage and improve retention that includes a process for systematically gathering attrition data and a plan to retain IMAT CORE [Cadre-of-On-Call Response Employee] employees.

Response: Concur. As part of the previously mentioned IMAT mission analysis, the FEMA Field Operations Directorate is reviewing attrition data. The Directorate is also conducting an IMAT employee satisfaction survey to develop a greater understanding of employee concerns within the Program. The Directorate will use the findings of the

mission analysis and employee satisfaction survey to develop a strategy to address workforce management of IMAT CORE employees. ECD: June 30, 2016.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to review and comment on this draft report. Technical comments were previously provided under separate cover. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions. We look forward to working with you in the future.

Sincerely,



Jim H. Crumpacker, CIA, CFE
Director
Departmental GAO-OIG Liaison Office

Appendix VII: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

Chris P. Currie, (404) 679-1875 or curriec@gao.gov

Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, Christopher A. Keisling (Assistant Director), Aditi S. Archer (Analyst-in-Charge), Lorraine Ettaro, Jillian Feirson, Eric Hauswirth, Tracey King, Amanda Parker, Rachel Pittenger, Tovah Rom, and Su Jin Yon made key contributions to this report.

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