



Testimony before the Subcommittee on  
Emergency Preparedness, Response,  
and Recovery, Committee on Homeland  
Security, House of Representatives

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For Release on Delivery  
Expected at 10 a.m. ET  
Tuesday, July 23, 2019

# DISASTER ASSISTANCE

## FEMA Has Taken Steps toward Better Supporting Individuals Who Are Older or Have Disabilities

Statement of Elizabeth H. Curda, Director,  
Education, Workforce, and Income Security

Accessible Version

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-19-652T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Recovery, Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives

View [GAO-19-652T](#). For more information, contact Elizabeth Curda, (202) 512-7215 or [curdae@gao.gov](mailto:curdae@gao.gov).

## Why GAO Did This Study

Three sequential hurricanes—Harvey, Irma, and Maria—affected more than 28 million people in 2017, according to FEMA. Hurricane survivors aged 65 and older and those with disabilities faced particular challenges evacuating to safe shelter, accessing medicine, and obtaining recovery assistance. In June 2018, FEMA began implementing a new approach to assist individuals with disabilities.

This statement describes (1) reported challenges faced by these individuals in accessing disaster assistance from FEMA and its nonfederal partners following the 2017 hurricanes; and (2) the extent to which FEMA has implemented changes in how it supports these individuals. This statement is based on a May 2019 GAO report and selected updates. For the report, GAO analyzed FEMA documents and data from FEMA call centers and also visited 2017 hurricane locations to interview state, territorial, and local officials. GAO also interviewed FEMA officials from headquarters and deployed to each disaster location. To update FEMA's progress toward addressing its recommendations, GAO interviewed FEMA officials and analyzed agency documents.

## What GAO Recommends

In the May 2019 report, GAO made seven recommendations to FEMA; FEMA concurred with six. FEMA has established new registration questions and a timeline to offer training to its partners. GAO continues to believe its recommendations to develop a plan to train its staff on disability awareness, among other actions, are valid.

July 23, 2019

## DISASTER ASSISTANCE

### FEMA Has Taken Steps toward Better Supporting Individuals Who Are Older or Have Disabilities

## What GAO Found

GAO's May 2019 report found that some individuals who are older or have disabilities may have faced challenges registering for and receiving assistance from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and its nonfederal partners (such as state, territorial, and local emergency managers).

- FEMA's registration did not include an initial question that directly asks individuals if they have a disability or if they would like to request an accommodation. GAO recommended that FEMA use new registration-intake questions to improve the agency's ability to identify and address individuals' disability-related needs. FEMA concurred and, in May 2019, updated the questions to directly ask individuals if they have a disability.
- GAO found that the substantial damage caused by the 2017 hurricanes prevented or slowed some individuals with disabilities from obtaining food, water, and other critical goods and services from states, territories, and localities. Officials from one state reported that few public transportation services, including paratransit, were functional following the 2017 hurricane affecting the state. The officials said this may have prevented people with disabilities from maintaining their health and wellness—such as by shopping for groceries or going to medical appointments—after the storm.

GAO's May 2019 report also found that FEMA had taken limited steps to implement the agency's new approach to assist individuals with disabilities.

- GAO recommended the agency establish and disseminate objectives for implementing its new approach. FEMA concurred, and developed a draft strategic plan that includes strategic goals and objectives for the new approach, which the agency plans to finalize and disseminate in 2019.
- GAO recommended that FEMA, as part of its new approach, develop a plan for delivering training to all FEMA staff deployed during disasters that promotes competency in disability awareness. In concurring with this recommendation, FEMA described its plan to incorporate a disability awareness competency into the job requirements for all deployable staff, but has not yet developed a plan for training.
- GAO's May 2019 report also recommended that FEMA develop a timeline for completing the development of training on incorporating the needs of individuals with disabilities into emergency planning, which it planned to offer to its nonfederal partners. FEMA concurred with GAO's recommendation and, in June 2019, officials began procuring external consulting services to develop a replacement course. According to officials, the course will take about 1 year to develop and will be ready to field by August 2020.

Chairman Payne, Ranking Member King, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss our recent work on disaster assistance for individuals who are older or have disabilities.<sup>1</sup> For instance, individuals with disabilities that affect their ability to evacuate, shelter, or recover from hurricanes and other large-scale disasters can face particular challenges obtaining disaster assistance. Some of these individuals, who otherwise function independently in their day-to-day lives, may rely on supports that disasters can interrupt. For example, after Hurricane Maria made landfall on Puerto Rico as a category 4 hurricane, the two suppliers of oxygen on the island of Puerto Rico lost production capabilities due to a lack of power.<sup>2</sup> According to a disability rights organization's report, this lack of production capabilities threatened the health of approximately 50,000 Puerto Ricans who depended on oxygen.<sup>3</sup>

The sequential Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria caused widespread damage to critical infrastructure, livelihoods, and property in 2017. As a result, obtaining food, water, medicine, and transportation was challenging for those affected by the hurricanes, and was particularly challenging for some individuals with disabilities. State, territorial, and

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<sup>1</sup>GAO, *Disaster Assistance: FEMA Action Needed to Better Support Individuals Who Are Older or Have Disabilities*, [GAO-19-318](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 14, 2019). Under federal civil rights laws, an individual with a disability is generally defined as an individual who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) provides specialized services to those with "access and functional needs," which includes, among others, individuals with disabilities, older adults, and individuals with limited English proficiency, limited access to transportation, and/or limited access to financial resources to prepare for, respond to, and recover from a disaster. For the purposes of this statement, "individuals with disabilities" refers to individual disaster survivors, including those who are 65 or older, who have a disability that affects their ability to evacuate, shelter, or recover from a disaster. In addition, "individuals who are older" refers to individuals who are age 65 or older, regardless of whether they have a disability. For presentation purposes, we use "individuals with disabilities" to refer to both.

<sup>2</sup>As we reported in September 2018, Hurricane Maria caused widespread infrastructural damages that left 3.7 million of the island's residents without electricity and 95 percent of cell towers out of service. GAO, *2017 Hurricanes and Wildfires: Initial Observations on the Federal Response and Key Recovery Challenges*, [GAO-18-472](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 4, 2018).

<sup>3</sup>The Partnership for Inclusive Disaster Strategies, *Getting It Wrong: An Indictment with a Blueprint for Getting It Right. Disability Rights, Obligations and Responsibilities Before, During and After Disasters* (May 2018).

local emergency management and private organization partners turned to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) for help, including from FEMA disability integration staff who were responsible for providing assistance to individuals with disabilities.<sup>4</sup> In June 2018, near the start of the 2018 hurricane season, FEMA announced plans to reorganize its workforce to more thoroughly incorporate disability integration principles into all preparedness, response, and recovery activities nationwide and reduce reliance on disability integration staff in FEMA's Office of Disability Integration and Coordination (ODIC).

My statement today discusses information from our May 2019 report on disaster assistance for individuals who are older or have disabilities. Specifically, this statement addresses (1) reported challenges these individuals faced in accessing disaster assistance from FEMA and its nonfederal partners following the 2017 hurricanes; and (2) the extent to which FEMA has implemented changes in how it supports these individuals.

This statement is primarily based on the May 2019 report as well as selected updates. For that report we analyzed FEMA policies, procedures, guidance, and memoranda and assessed these documents against goals and objectives in FEMA's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, Department of Homeland Security (DHS) policy for ensuring nondiscrimination for individuals with disabilities, and federal standards for internal control.<sup>5</sup> We obtained and analyzed data from FEMA call centers that operate FEMA's helpline. We also visited Florida, Puerto Rico, Texas, and the U.S. Virgin Islands in June and July 2018 to interview state or territorial emergency managers, public health and human services officials, and representatives of nonprofit disability

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<sup>4</sup>Disability integration staff are responsible for focusing on inclusive practices in emergency management, and include those deployed to areas affected by disasters and those working permanently in FEMA's regional offices. Inclusive practices are intended to ensure people with disabilities have equal opportunities to participate in, and receive the benefits of, emergency management programs and services.

<sup>5</sup>See FEMA, 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, March 15, 2018; DHS Directive 065-01, Nondiscrimination for Individuals with Disabilities in DHS-Conducted Programs and Activities (Non-Employment), Sept. 25, 2013; and GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, [GAO-14-704G](#) (Washington, D.C.: September 2014). We did not independently assess whether any programs or activities conducted by FEMA or its partners during the period covered by our review complied with applicable non-discrimination or civil rights laws.

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organizations, among others.<sup>6</sup> We also interviewed FEMA officials from headquarters and staff deployed to each disaster location, including staff focused on assisting individuals with disabilities. More detailed information on the scope and methodology for that work can be found in appendix I of the issued report. To update progress FEMA has made toward addressing our recommendations from the May 2019 report, we interviewed FEMA officials and analyzed documents they provided.

We conducted the work on which this statement is based 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 findings 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.

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## Registering for and Receiving Assistance from FEMA and Its Partners Posed Challenges for Individuals with Disabilities Following the 2017 Disasters

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### Aspects of FEMA's Application Process for Assistance Created Challenges for Individuals with Disabilities

To receive FEMA assistance under FEMA's Individuals and Households Program, through which disaster survivors can receive help with housing and other needs, individuals must register by answering a standard series of intake questions.<sup>7</sup> In our May 2019 report, we found that some individuals with disabilities may have faced long wait times and unclear

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<sup>6</sup>Hurricane Harvey primarily affected the Gulf Coast of Texas; Hurricane Irma primarily affected the U.S. Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, and Florida; and Hurricane Maria primarily affected the U.S. Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico. We supplemented the information we obtained from the site visit interviews with summaries of eight public listening sessions across the four disaster locations. The summaries were published by DHS's Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties and co-hosted with FEMA between February 2018 and May 2018.

<sup>7</sup>Individuals can register by phone using a toll-free helpline, via the internet, or in person at FEMA-staffed Disaster Recovery Centers.

registration questions, and that FEMA's internal communication across its programs about survivors' disability-related needs was ineffective.

- **Long wait times:** Individuals who tried to apply for assistance using the helpline confronted long wait times, which may have posed greater challenges for those with disabilities. In the days after Hurricane Maria affected Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands—when survivors from Harvey and Irma were concurrently contacting the helpline—up to 69 percent of calls went unanswered and the daily average wait time for answered calls peaked at almost an hour and a half, according to our analysis of FEMA data. While long wait times could be burdensome for all individuals, state officials and disability advocates we interviewed said long wait times were especially burdensome for people with certain disabilities, such as those with attention disorders or whose assistive technology prevents multi-tasking when waiting on hold.
- **Unclear registration questions:** FEMA's registration process did not give individuals a clear opportunity to state they have a disability or request an accommodation because the registration did not directly ask registrants to provide this information.<sup>8</sup> According to FEMA officials at the time, information about disability-related needs can help FEMA staff match individuals with disabilities with appropriate resources in a timely and efficient manner and target additional assistance, such as help with the application process. However, individuals with disabilities may not have requested accommodations or reported their disability and related needs during FEMA's registration-intake due to the unclear questions. As a result, the registration process may have under-identified people with disabilities. For example, in Puerto Rico, an estimated 21.6 percent of people have disabilities, according to 2017 Census data. However, less than

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<sup>8</sup>According to a FEMA policy document, FEMA makes reasonable accommodations to policies, practices, and procedures to ensure physical, programmatic, and effective communication access to FEMA disaster assistance. We did not assess whether any accommodations or other services provided by FEMA or its partners complied with any applicable non-discrimination or civil rights laws.

3 percent of all registrants in the territory answered “yes” to the disability-related question in response to Hurricanes Irma and Maria.<sup>9</sup>

- **Ineffective communication across FEMA programs:** Individuals may have faced challenges receiving necessary assistance because FEMA did not effectively track and communicate information about individuals’ disability-related needs across its assistance programs after such needs were identified. FEMA officials we interviewed for the May 2019 report explained that accommodation requests and disability-related information identified after registration-intake are recorded in a general “notes” section of a registrant’s case file, which can be easily overlooked as a case file is passed along to subsequent FEMA officials.

In our May 2019 report we recommended that FEMA implement new registration-intake questions to improve FEMA’s ability to identify and address survivors’ disability-related needs. FEMA concurred with this recommendation, and officials reported that in May 2019 the agency updated the questions to directly ask individuals if they have a disability. According to FEMA’s analysis of applications for assistance following recent disasters, which used the updated questions, the percentage of registrants who reported having a disability increased. FEMA officials stated this increase gives them confidence the change has improved FEMA’s ability to identify and address disability-related needs of individuals affected by disasters.

We also recommended that FEMA improve its communication of registrants’ disability-related information across FEMA programs, such as by developing an alert within survivor files that indicates an accommodation request. FEMA did not concur with this recommendation, explaining that the agency lacks specific funding to augment the legacy data systems that capture and communicate registration information. In its comments on our May 2019 report, FEMA stated that it began a long-term initiative in April 2017 to improve data management and exchange,

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<sup>9</sup>The data are from the 2017 Puerto Rico Community Survey, a survey administered annually by the United States Census Bureau. The Puerto Rico Community Survey produces 1-year estimates for the total civilian noninstitutionalized population and is the equivalent of the American Community Survey for the 50 states and District of Columbia. Data results from both surveys are released together as a unified American Community Survey dataset. The estimate for Puerto Rico has a margin of error at the 90 percent confidence interval of plus or minus 0.5 percentage points.

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and improve overall data quality and standardization.<sup>10</sup> After FEMA completes this initiative, which officials said will be in 2024, FEMA expects that efforts to share and flag specific disability-related data will be much easier. We believe that in the interim, FEMA could explore other cost-effective ways to improve communication, such as through agency guidance that encourages program officials to review registrants' case file notes. As FEMA moves ahead with its initiatives to improve data, we encourage it to consider and ultimately implement technology changes, such as developing an alert within files that indicates an accommodation request, to help improve communication across FEMA programs.

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### Officials Reported that Individuals with Disabilities Faced Challenges Obtaining Critical Goods and Services

State, territorial, and local governments are primarily responsible for response and recovery activities in their jurisdictions, including those involving health and safety. In our May 2019 report, we found that the substantial damage caused by the 2017 hurricanes prevented or slowed some individuals with disabilities from obtaining food and water. According to territorial and nonprofit officials in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, as well as survivors we interviewed in the U.S. Virgin Islands, this was due to centralized distribution models, in which the majority of food and water was distributed to centralized locations around the islands. Officials from one governmental agency in Puerto Rico said this posed a major barrier to people with mobility challenges or without caregivers receiving food and water because they had to rely on home delivery, which took time and in some cases, did not happen. We also found that Hurricane Maria survivors faced challenges obtaining needed medication and oxygen in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, according to territorial and nonprofit officials.

State, territorial, and local agencies are also primarily responsible for administering shelters, when necessary, for those affected by a disaster. We found in our May 2019 report that individuals with disabilities affected by the 2017 hurricanes may have faced challenges accessing basic services from local shelters, including restrooms and food, according to state, territorial, local, and nonprofit officials in Florida, Puerto Rico,

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<sup>10</sup>The letter said that FEMA expects the initiative to include the development of a modern, cloud-based data storage system with a data analytics platform that will allow analysts, decision makers, and stakeholders more ready access to FEMA data.



Texas, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. For example, nonprofit officials in Florida and Puerto Rico described instances of shelter residents with impairments that prevented them from accessing shelter restrooms.

We also found that transportation was especially challenging for those who relied on public transportation or were unable to walk long distances, such as people with disabilities, according to state, territorial, local, and nonprofit officials we interviewed. For example, Florida state officials reported that few public transportation services, including paratransit, were functional following Hurricane Irma. This may have prevented some people with disabilities from maintaining their health and wellness—such as by shopping for groceries or going to medical appointments—after the storm, according to state officials.

Officials we interviewed from Texas, Florida, and Puerto Rico for our May 2019 report said they had difficulty obtaining FEMA data that could help them deliver assistance to individuals, including those with disabilities. The officials explained that data—including names and addresses—showing who has registered for and received assistance from FEMA can help local governments and nonprofits identify who in their community needs assistance.<sup>11</sup> To better facilitate authorized nonfederal partners obtaining these needed data, we recommended that FEMA develop and publicize guidance for partners who assist individuals with disabilities on how to request and work with FEMA staff to obtain the data, as appropriate. FEMA concurred with this recommendation and officials told us in July 2019 that the agency plans to publish data-sharing guidelines on its website, among other actions.

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<sup>11</sup>According to FEMA officials, the agency has broad authority to share its data on registrations, and follows the framework established under the Privacy Act of 1974 on the collection, use, maintenance, and dissemination of personally identifiable information. FEMA has published a number of routine uses under which FEMA may disclose such information to state, tribal, and local government agencies and emergency managers, including the type of information it can share and under what circumstances. See 78 Fed. Reg. 25,282 (Apr. 30, 2013). Generally, FEMA uses agreements with state and other partners to establish the terms and conditions of how it will share data; however, according to state and nonprofit officials, obtaining FEMA data has sometimes been challenging and time consuming.

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## FEMA Had Taken Limited Steps to Effectively Implement Its New Disability Integration Approach

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### FEMA Began Implementing Changes without Communicating Objectives to Regional Staff.

Before initiating its new approach to disability integration, ODIC distributed an explanatory memorandum and other documentation to FEMA staff. For example, an April 2018 memorandum to FEMA Regional Administrators outlined a proposal to add new disability integration staff in each FEMA region to foster day-to-day relationships with state, territorial, and local emergency managers and disability partners. Also, ODIC distributed a document that described FEMA's new approach to deployments. Under the new approach, fewer disability integration staff are to be deployed to disasters and all deployable staff and staff in programmatic offices are to receive training on disability issues during response and recovery deployments.

However, in our May 2019 report, we found that these documents did not articulate objectives that could help the agency define success for the new approach. We concluded that without a set of common objectives for FEMA's new disability integration approach, FEMA risks inconsistent application across its regions. In our report, we recommended that FEMA establish and disseminate a set of objectives for the new approach. FEMA concurred with this recommendation, and in July 2019 officials provided us with the draft of ODIC's strategic plan for 2019-2022, which includes strategic goals and objectives that the new disability integration approach can help achieve. ODIC officials told us they will be working throughout 2019 with FEMA's Office of External Affairs to disseminate the plan agency-wide and to nonfederal partners. We will continue to monitor FEMA's progress toward sharing the objectives of its new approach to disability integration with critical stakeholders.

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### FEMA Had Not Documented Plans for Training All Deployed Staff on Disability Competencies, but Has Taken Steps to Offer Training to Nonfederal Partners

To implement FEMA's new deployment model, which will shift the responsibility of directly assisting individuals with disabilities from

disability integration staff to all FEMA staff, FEMA planned to train all deployable staff and staff in programmatic offices on disability issues. We reported in May 2019 that FEMA officials emphasized the need to integrate disability competencies throughout FEMA's programmatic offices and deployable staff. However, we found that the agency did not have written plans—including milestones, performance measures, or a plan for monitoring performance—for developing new comprehensive training for all staff. Starting in the 2018 hurricane season, FEMA had taken initial steps toward training some deployed staff on disability issues. For example, FEMA required all staff to complete a 30-minute training on basic disability integration principles and offered targeted “just-in-time” training to deployed staff. We concluded that developing a training plan would better position FEMA to provide training to all staff to help achieve FEMA's intended goals.

In our May 2019 report, we recommended that FEMA develop a plan for delivering training to FEMA staff that promotes competency in disability awareness. In its letter commenting on our May 2019 report, FEMA stated that ODIC is developing a plan to introduce the disability competency in FEMA's position task books for all deployable staff.<sup>12</sup> The letter explained further that ODIC's plan will describe how FEMA will communicate the disability integration competency throughout the agency, establish milestones for measuring how effectively the competency is integrated across the agency, and outline how ODIC will monitor and measure integration of the competency across the deployable workforce.

In July 2019, FEMA officials told us ODIC plans to hire new staff to focus on integrating the disability competency FEMA-wide. According to the officials, after the position task books are updated, ODIC will work with FEMA's training components to ensure that disability-related training is consistent with the content of the position task books. FEMA officials also noted that the Field Operations Division, and not ODIC, is responsible for measuring how effectively the disability competency is integrated across FEMA. We will continue to monitor FEMA's progress toward developing a plan for delivering training to promote competency in disability awareness among its staff. As noted in our May 2019 report, the plan for delivering

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<sup>12</sup>Position task books outline the required activities, tasks, and behaviors for each job, and serve as a record for task completion.

such training should include milestones, performance measures, and how performance will be monitored.

In our May 2019 report, we found that deploying a smaller number of disability integration staff and shifting them away from providing direct assistance to individuals with disabilities may result in nonfederal partners (such as state, territorial, and local emergency managers) providing more direct assistance to individuals with disabilities than they did previously. In February 2017, we reported that the comprehensive introductory training course on disability integration that FEMA offered to its nonfederal partners included substantial information on how to incorporate the needs of people with disabilities in emergency planning.<sup>13</sup> However, according to officials, FEMA stopped offering this 2-day course in September 2017. ODIC officials told us during our 2019 review they had determined that the course, as designed, did not provide actionable training to emergency management partners to meet the needs of individuals with disabilities and planned to replace it.

However, we found in May 2019 that although officials had plans to replace the course with new training, they had not provided a timeline, which would help ensure that partners are provided with timely information on inclusive emergency management practices. We recommended that FEMA develop a timeline for completing the replacement course and, in June 2019, FEMA officials said they had begun procuring external consulting services to redevelop it. According to the officials, ODIC had evaluated alternatives to the suspended course and determined that an in-person, exercise-based course with remote participation capabilities would be an appropriate replacement. FEMA officials said the course will take about 1 year to develop and will be ready to field by August 2020.

In conclusion, FEMA has taken a number of steps toward addressing our recommendations related to how it supports individuals with disabilities in obtaining disaster assistance. ODIC's draft strategic plan for 2019-2022, which articulates objectives for the new approach to disability integration, is likely to help facilitate consistent implementation agency-wide. In addition, we are hopeful that FEMA's revised registration-intake questions, as well as data sharing guidance for nonfederal partners, will

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<sup>13</sup>*Federal Disaster Assistance: FEMA's Progress in Aiding Individuals with Disabilities Could Be Further Enhanced.* [GAO-17-200](#), (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 7, 2017).

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help FEMA and its partners better identify and assist registrants with disabilities. However, we continue to believe that implementing changes to disability integration before staff have been fully trained may leave FEMA staff ill-prepared to identify and address the challenges that individuals with disabilities face while recovering from disasters. We will continue to monitor FEMA's actions as it makes additional progress toward addressing our recommendations.

Chairman Payne, Ranking Member King, and Members of the Subcommittee, this completes my prepared statement. I would be pleased to respond to any questions that you may have at this time.

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## GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

If you or your staff have any questions about this testimony, please contact Elizabeth Curda, Director, Education, Workforce, and Income Security Issues at (202) 512-7215 or [curdae@gao.gov](mailto:curdae@gao.gov). Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this statement. GAO staff who made key contributions to this testimony are Sara Schibanoff Kelly (Assistant Director), Sara Pelton (Analyst-in-Charge), and David Reed.

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