



February 2017

# FEDERAL DISASTER ASSISTANCE

## FEMA's Progress in Aiding Individuals with Disabilities Could Be Further Enhanced

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-17-200](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

In 2005, individuals with disabilities, individuals with limited English proficiency, and families with children were disproportionately affected by Hurricane Katrina. For example, some of those who had to abandon their wheelchairs could not evacuate because they were unable to wait in long lines for evacuation buses. The Post-Katrina Act required FEMA and other entities to take certain actions to assist these individuals, such as through the establishment of a Disability Coordinator within FEMA. GAO was asked to examine implementation of the Post-Katrina Act.

This report assesses the extent to which FEMA and other entities provide disaster services to individuals with disabilities, individuals with limited English proficiency, and children in need of family reunification. GAO examined federal, state, and local disaster assistance efforts for six major disasters that occurred from March 2014 through October 2015, where federal response and recovery efforts included assistance to the three target groups and that varied in location and type of disaster. GAO interviewed relevant officials, visited three of the six sites, and analyzed emergency operations plans and disaster summary reports.

## What GAO Recommends

FEMA should establish written procedures for involving ODIC in regional activities; set goals for the number of state and local emergency managers who will take a key training on disability integration; and evaluate alternative delivery methods for the training. FEMA concurred with all of the recommendations.

View [GAO-17-200](#). For more information, contact Kay Brown at (202) 512-7215 or [BrownKE@gao.gov](mailto:BrownKE@gao.gov).

February 2017

## FEDERAL DISASTER ASSISTANCE

### FEMA's Progress in Aiding Individuals with Disabilities Could Be Further Enhanced

#### What GAO Found

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has taken steps to improve its disaster services for people with disabilities and its support to other entities, such as state and local governments. FEMA established the Office of Disability Integration and Coordination (ODIC) following enactment of the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act of 2006 (Post-Katrina Act) to lead the agency's efforts to promote inclusiveness in disaster planning, response, and recovery. However, there is no established procedure for FEMA Regional Administrators, who oversee disability integration staff in the regions, to involve ODIC in the activities of these staff. As a result, regions vary in the extent to which they consult with ODIC, which has led to a lack of clarity in regional disability integration staff roles, a lack of awareness of potentially underperforming staff, and inconsistent communication between the regions and headquarters. Federal internal control standards state that organizational structures should allow the organization's components to communicate information necessary to fulfill their respective responsibilities. Communication gaps between ODIC and the regions may prevent regional disability integration staff from effectively supporting state and local governments in meeting the needs of individuals with disabilities affected by disasters. ODIC also has not established goals for how many state and local emergency managers should take its key training on integrating the needs of individuals with disabilities into disaster planning. Nor has ODIC evaluated alternative methods to deliver the training more broadly, such as virtually in addition to classroom training. As a result, state and local emergency managers may be ill-prepared to provide effective disaster services to those with disabilities.

FEMA and other entities assist individuals with limited English proficiency by translating information on disaster assistance programs. FEMA provides information about its assistance programs using print materials in other languages, bilingual staff, and a helpline with translators for more than 50 languages. State, local, and voluntary organizations also disseminate information on health and safety information, such as evacuations and sheltering: In five of the six disasters GAO reviewed where translation was needed, these entities reported using a range of services, from bilingual staff to multilingual helplines.

FEMA worked with the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) to establish a national call center designed to field calls with information about children separated from their families during disasters. NCMEC also maintains a registry that serves as a web-based repository created to collect this information. However, according to FEMA officials, no disasters since Hurricane Katrina have required national child reunification support. Nevertheless, FEMA continues to work with NCMEC on maintaining reunification resources, such as by funding the deployment of NCMEC personnel following disasters.

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## Abbreviations

ADA	Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, as amended
council	Interagency Coordinating Council on Emergency Preparedness and Individuals with Disabilities
ESF	emergency support function
External Affairs	FEMA's Office of External Affairs
FEMA	Federal Emergency Management Agency
IMAT	Incident Management Assistance Team
NCMEC	National Center for Missing and Exploited Children
ODIC	FEMA's Office of Disability Integration and Coordination
Post-Katrina Act	Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act of 2006
Red Cross	American Red Cross
Stafford Act	Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act, as amended

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February 7, 2017

### Congressional Requesters

In a disaster, voluntary organizations and government agencies at the federal, state, and local levels are each called on to provide assistance to communities with differing characteristics and a range of needs. At the federal level, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is responsible for taking the lead in supporting nonfederal entities, including state and local emergency managers that provide direct response and recovery assistance to disaster survivors.<sup>1</sup> In 2005, Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast and caused more damage than any other natural disaster in the history of the United States. The storm revealed weaknesses in the nation's ability to prepare for, respond to, and recover from catastrophic disasters and demonstrated that a one-size-fits-all model of emergency response and recovery may result in poor outcomes for certain groups of people. Individuals with additional needs, such as those with disabilities or limited English proficiency, as well as families with children, were disproportionately affected by the storm. For example, the National Council on Disability reported that people with mobility disabilities who had to abandon wheelchairs could not evacuate from affected areas because they were unable to wait in lines for evacuation buses.<sup>2</sup> In addition, no official system to reunite children with their families existed at the time, and according to reports from Save the Children<sup>3</sup> and others, many of the more than 5,000 children reported as separated from their families during the disaster remained so for several weeks or months.

The Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act of 2006 (Post-Katrina Act) was enacted to address various shortcomings identified

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<sup>1</sup>FEMA refers to all individuals directly affected by disasters as "survivors". We will use this term throughout this report.

<sup>2</sup>National Council on Disability, *The Impact of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita on People With Disabilities: A Look Back and Remaining Challenges*, (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 3, 2006). The National Council on Disability is an independent federal agency charged with advising the President, Congress, and other federal agencies regarding policies, programs, and procedures that affect people with disabilities.

<sup>3</sup>Save the Children is an international nonprofit organization that, among other things, focuses on reducing the impact of disasters on children through programs on preparedness, response, recovery, and advocacy.

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following the hurricane.<sup>4</sup> A number of provisions in the Post-Katrina Act directed FEMA and other entities to make changes to assist specific groups of individuals, such as establishing a center to help reunify displaced children with their families. Hurricane Sandy in 2012, the first large-scale disaster to test the provisions of the Post-Katrina Act, and the 191 major U.S. disasters declared between then and October 2016, have highlighted continued challenges in emergency planning, response, and recovery for certain groups, including individuals with disabilities, those with limited English proficiency, and children requiring reunification support. For example, people with disabilities were trapped in buildings for days after Hurricane Sandy and unable to locate accessible transportation. You asked us to examine the implementation of the Post-Katrina Act.<sup>5</sup>

This report addresses the extent to which FEMA and other entities provide disaster services to (1) individuals with disabilities, (2) individuals with limited English proficiency, and (3) families with children.

To determine FEMA's role in providing disaster assistance, we reviewed and analyzed relevant federal laws, including the Post-Katrina Act; regulations; and GAO's prior work examining the initial implementation of the Post-Katrina Act.<sup>6</sup> We interviewed staff from FEMA headquarters, such as staff implementing FEMA's financial assistance programs and those focused on the needs of disaster survivors with disabilities, referred to in this report as disability integration staff. We also reviewed FEMA documents, including guidance and policy documents, summary reports, and work-plans developed by FEMA staff deployed to select disasters, discussed further below. In addition, we observed a key training course FEMA offered in April 2016 on disability integration in disaster

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<sup>4</sup>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 Post-Katrina Act amended the Homeland Security Act of 2002 and the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act.

<sup>5</sup>This is one of a number of reports GAO has published in response to a 2013 request to review FEMA's implementation of the Post-Katrina Act. Other reports have addressed such issues as workforce management, regional coordination, and disaster contracting. See the Related GAO Products page.

<sup>6</sup>GAO, *Actions Taken to Implement the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act of 2006*, [GAO-09-59R](#) (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 21, 2008).

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preparedness,<sup>7</sup> as well as operations at the National Response Coordination Center during a national training exercise that FEMA held in June 2016.<sup>8</sup> Finally, we interviewed representatives of relevant voluntary organizations, selected for their expertise in providing disaster assistance to individuals with access and functional needs, including Portlight Strategies, Inc. and Save the Children. We assessed the information we obtained against relevant criteria, including *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, GAO's *Guide for Assessing Strategic Training and Development Efforts in the Federal Government*, and the Program Management Institute's *The Standard for Program Management*.<sup>9</sup>

To examine the role of FEMA and other entities during recent disasters, we reviewed a nongeneralizable sample of six federally declared disasters that occurred from March 2014 through October 2015.<sup>10</sup> (See fig. 1.) We selected disasters that varied by geographic location, type of disaster, and urban concentration, as well as those for which FEMA, as the primary federal coordinating agency, activated federal response and recovery functions that address the specific needs of our target populations. To help ensure accurate accounts of disaster response and recovery activities, we focused on the most recent disasters that also met these criteria.

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<sup>7</sup>As discussed later in this report, FEMA officials characterized the course we observed as the agency's key training related to disability integration.

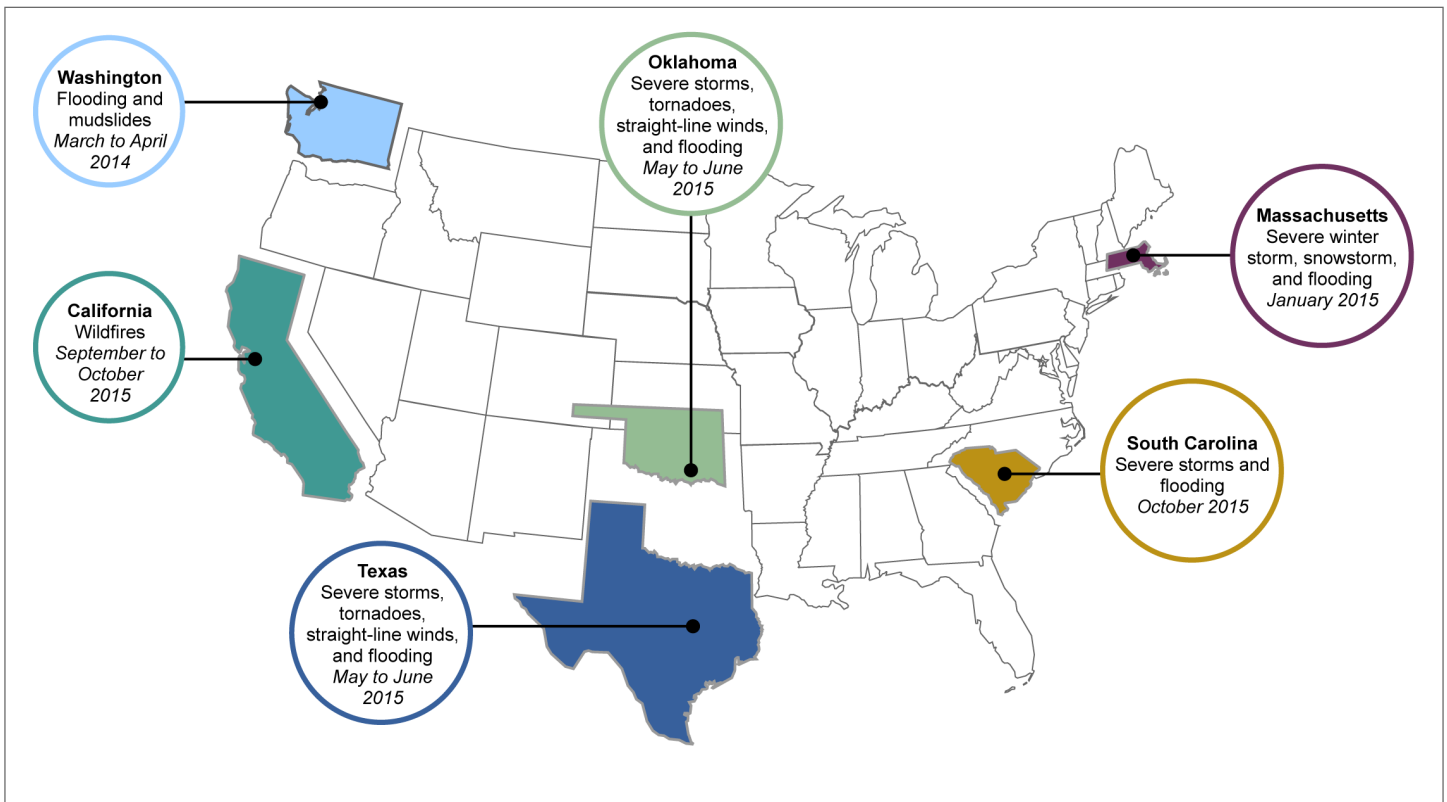
<sup>8</sup>The National Response Coordination Center is a multiagency coordination center located in FEMA headquarters in Washington, D.C. that coordinates the overall federal support for major disasters. FEMA's most recent exercise, *Cascadia Rising 2016 Exercise*, tested the scenario of a 9.0 magnitude earthquake and tsunami and is an example of the biennial national-level exercises carried out through FEMA's National Exercise Program. *Cascadia Rising 2016 Exercise* was the only national-level exercise held during the course of our review.

<sup>9</sup>See GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, [GAO-14-704G](#), (Washington, D.C.: September 2014); GAO, *Human Capital: A Guide for Assessing Strategic Training and Development Efforts in the Federal Government*, [GAO-04-546G](#) (Washington, D.C.: March 2004); and Project 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.

<sup>10</sup>As discussed later in this report, to be eligible for certain federal disaster assistance, the governor of the affected state must request the President to declare that a major disaster or emergency exists. In this report we refer to presidentially declared major disasters as "federally declared disasters" or simply "disasters."



**Figure 1: Map of Selected Disasters Included in GAO Review of Post-Katrina Act Implementation**



Sources: GAO analysis of Federal Emergency Management Agency documentation, Map Resources (map). | GAO-17-200

For these six disasters, we examined efforts related to preparedness, response, and recovery assistance for three groups of individuals with access and functional needs, which FEMA defines as individuals who may have additional needs before, during, and after a disaster in any number of functional areas.<sup>11</sup> We obtained this information primarily through interviews with FEMA staff from the regional offices where each

<sup>11</sup>FEMA considers these functional areas to include, but not be limited to, maintaining health, independence, communication, transportation, support, services, self-determination, and medical care. Individuals in need of additional response assistance may include those who have disabilities, live in institutionalized settings, are older adults, are children, are from diverse cultures, have limited English proficiency or are non-English speaking, or have limited access to transportation. The three groups we selected for review were individuals with disabilities, individuals with limited English proficiency, and families with children. We selected these groups because the Post-Katrina Act included specific provisions focused on them.

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disaster occurred, including those focused on assisting survivors with disabilities, state emergency managers, and other key officials involved in disaster response and recovery, as identified by FEMA regional staff and state officials. We also analyzed emergency operations planning documentation for the six states where the disasters occurred. For three disasters (in California, South Carolina, and Texas), we conducted site visits to interview a range of officials in person, including those from state and local emergency management offices, local departments of health and human services, and local components of voluntary organizations involved in disaster response and recovery, such as the American Red Cross.

We conducted this performance audit from August 2015 to February 2017 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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## Background

### Assistance Available under Major Disaster Declarations

A major disaster declaration makes available a wide range of federal assistance programs for individuals and public infrastructure, including funds for both emergency and longer-term repairs. Not all programs are activated for every disaster. The determination of which programs are authorized is based on the types of assistance specified in the governor's request and the needs identified during assessments of the affected area to determine the extent of the disaster.

FEMA disaster assistance programs include:

- **Individual Assistance**, which provides financial assistance or direct services to individuals and households in the form of cash, housing, crisis counseling, disaster case management, and other services;
- **Public Assistance**, which provides financial assistance to state and local governments for activities such as emergency work and the repair and replacement of disaster-damaged facilities; and
- **Hazard Mitigation Assistance**, which provides financial assistance to state and local governments for actions taken to prevent or reduce long-term risk to life and property from natural hazards

Source: Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). | GAO-17-200

State and local governments are primarily responsible for preparing for and responding to natural and manmade disasters.<sup>12</sup> However, if these governments need assistance, the federal government can provide critical support. The Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act, as amended (Stafford Act) outlines the process state and local governments can use to obtain federal support under the act in response to a disaster. First, a governor must submit a request to the President to declare a major disaster or emergency.<sup>13</sup> Once the declaration is granted, the state becomes eligible for various types of assistance from FEMA, such as personnel, funding, and technical assistance, among others (see sidebar).

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<sup>12</sup>Throughout this report we use the phrase “state and local” to include state, tribal, territorial, insular area, and local governments as well as the government of the District of Columbia.

<sup>13</sup>The governor's request for a major disaster or emergency shall be based on a finding that the disaster is of such severity and magnitude that effective response is beyond the capabilities of the state and the affected local governments and that federal assistance is necessary. The President can declare a major disaster for any natural catastrophe (e.g., a hurricane, tornado, snowstorm, or earthquake) or, regardless of cause, any fire, flood, or explosion, in any part of the U.S., which in the determination of the President causes damage of sufficient severity and magnitude to warrant major disaster assistance under the act to supplement the efforts and available resources of states, local governments, and disaster relief organizations. The President can declare an emergency for any occasion or instance for which, in the determination of the President, federal assistance is needed to supplement state and local efforts and capabilities to save lives and to protect property and public health and safety, or to lessen or avert the threat of a catastrophe in any part of the U.S. 42 U.S.C. §§ 5170, 5122; 44 C.F.R. §§ 206.31-206.48. For purposes of this report, we focus only on presidentially-declared major disasters.

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## National Response Framework

The Department of Homeland Security, of which FEMA is a component, developed the National Response Framework in 2008 to define the roles of federal, state, and local governments; the private sector; and voluntary organizations, such as the American Red Cross (Red Cross)<sup>14</sup> and faith-based organizations, in response to all types of incidents, including disasters.<sup>15</sup> The framework is designed around the principle that response efforts must adapt to meet evolving requirements resulting from changes in disaster size, scope, and complexity. Under the framework, state and local agencies are primarily responsible for response and recovery activities in their locations, including those involving health and safety. For example, state and local agencies are responsible for carrying out evacuations and administering shelters, when necessary, for those affected by a disaster. When an incident occurs that exceeds or is expected to exceed state or local resources, the federal government may use the National Response Framework to organize the federal response by involving all necessary department and agency capabilities and

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<sup>14</sup>Red Cross is the nation's largest nonprofit organization involved in disaster relief. It is a federally chartered instrumentality of the United States, which confers certain tax and other advantages. In addition, it is officially designated in the National Response Framework as a primary agency for mass care, which includes services such as sheltering. For more information about Red Cross, see *American Red Cross: Disaster Assistance Would Benefit from Oversight through Regular Federal Evaluation*, GAO-15-565 (Washington, D.C., Sept. 9, 2015).

<sup>15</sup>FEMA is responsible for, among other things, consolidating existing federal government emergency response plans into a single, coordinated "national response plan," and administering and ensuring the implementation of the plan. 6 U.S.C. § 314(a)(6), (a)(13). The most current version of the framework, issued in June 2016, is available at <https://www.fema.gov/national-response-framework>.

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ensuring coordination with response partners.<sup>16</sup> In the case of a federally declared disaster under the Stafford Act, FEMA has primary responsibility for coordinating the federal response, and it targets the level of federal support to the needs specified by states' requests for assistance.

FEMA works with Red Cross and a number of federal agencies—including the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Agriculture—as well as voluntary organizations to provide support in the area of mass care, which includes such services as sheltering, reunification of families, and counseling.<sup>17</sup> In addition, FEMA coordinates with voluntary organizations to ensure immediate needs that are beyond the scope of traditional mass care services are addressed. For example, this may include providing replacement mobility or communication aids to individuals with disabilities.

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## FEMA Support of Individuals with Access and Functional Needs

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<sup>16</sup>The Framework designates 14 emergency support functions (ESF) that address specific disaster response needs. These ESFs are described in separate ESF Annexes to the Framework, which describe the federal coordinating structures that group resources and capabilities into functional areas that are most frequently needed in a national response. The Framework also includes Support Annexes that describe the essential supporting processes and considerations most common to the majority of incidents. In 2014, GAO assessed federal ESF preparedness to respond to catastrophic disasters and FEMA's oversight of federal capability gaps. See *Emergency Preparedness: Opportunities Exist to Strengthen Interagency Assessments and Accountability for Closing Capability Gaps*, [GAO-15-20](#) (Washington, D.C., Dec. 4, 2014). We made three recommendations, and FEMA has since taken steps to address two of the recommendations by (1) issuing guidance to ESF coordinators that details minimum standards for ESF preparedness and (2) developing a detailed program management plan for its improvised nuclear device attack response and recovery efforts. FEMA also took action on our third recommendation to provide management oversight of federal interagency efforts to close previously identified capability gaps by reporting on implementation of corrective actions for national-level exercises, but it has not yet developed a comprehensive means of tracking the status and resolution of federal interagency disaster response issues associated with major disasters.

<sup>17</sup>Mass care, emergency assistance, temporary housing, and human services—under ESF-6—is one of the ESFs that most directly provides disaster assistance to individuals with access and functional needs. Others include ESF-8 (public health and medical services) and ESF-15 (external affairs, including public communications). Appendix I includes a list of agencies involved in these emergency support functions.

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## At Disaster Sites

While the nature and complexity of a disaster and state requests for assistance determine the extent of support FEMA provides under the Stafford Act, agency staff are often deployed to the sites of major disasters to assist state and local emergency managers with response and recovery activities. The first FEMA team to deploy is called the Incident Management Assistance Team (IMAT). When the President declares a major disaster, the IMAT, made up of FEMA emergency management staff in areas such as operations, logistics, planning, and finance and administration, travels to the site of the disaster within 12 hours.<sup>18</sup> The IMAT helps identify what federal support may be required and may support first responders in providing shelter (including for individuals with access and functional needs), emergency food, and supplies, as well as in restoring government services.

FEMA staff deployed to disasters work alongside state counterparts and voluntary organizations at a centralized location, called the joint field office, to facilitate coordination of disaster response and recovery efforts. Staffing at the joint field office depends on the requirements of the disaster but may include the following FEMA offices.

- **Individual Assistance:** Staff from this office are generally responsible for providing survivors with information about who may be eligible for assistance and help them complete the application materials.<sup>19</sup> Staff may provide this information at survivors' homes or temporary residences as part of Disaster Survivor Assistance Teams or at Disaster Recovery Centers, which are readily accessible facilities

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<sup>18</sup>The IMAT program includes three national teams that typically respond to events that require significant federal assistance, and 13 regional teams, which respond to events across FEMA's 10 regions that may require a high or moderate amount of federal assistance. In 2016, GAO assessed FEMA's efforts to implement, assess, and improve selected disaster response programs including IMATs. See *Disaster Response: FEMA Has Made Progress Implementing Key Programs, but Opportunities for Improvement Exist*, [GAO-16-87](#) (Washington, D.C., Feb. 5, 2016). We made three recommendations to improve the IMAT program and FEMA has since taken steps but has not yet fully implemented efforts to develop a comprehensive training plan, a retention strategy, and a process to assess and implement lessons learned from IMAT deployments.

<sup>19</sup>Individual Assistance provides financial assistance, among other supports, to survivors of qualifying disasters to help with the cost of repairing or replacing their homes or obtaining temporary housing and other disaster-related necessary expenses. According to FEMA officials, in certain cases FEMA financial assistance may not fully address the needs of individuals with disabilities or others with access and functional needs. However, the administration of the program must comply with applicable federal civil rights laws and nondiscrimination requirements.

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or mobile offices where disaster survivors can go for information about FEMA financial assistance programs. One set of staff—Voluntary Agency Liaisons—gathers information about the capacity of voluntary organizations to provide assistance to all disaster survivors, including individuals with access and functional needs, and coordinate the activities of the organizations and FEMA.

- **Office of Disability Integration and Coordination (ODIC):** Staff may be deployed from FEMA headquarters or regional offices as part of the Disability Integration Cadre and may include positions such as American Sign Language interpreters. Staff are deployed to provide assistance to federal, state, and local emergency managers on physical, programmatic, and communication accessibility issues. For example, staff may provide guidance and technical assistance to Individual Assistance staff to ensure that Disaster Recovery Centers are physically accessible and provide disaster-related information, such as requirements about qualifying for FEMA financial assistance, in accessible formats, such as sign language interpretation.
- **Office of External Affairs (External Affairs):** These staff are generally responsible for working with state and local staff, such as those from emergency management departments, to communicate disaster-related information. For example, they may provide guidance on how to apply for FEMA Individual Assistance in the languages spoken within the affected area.

## At Regional Offices

In addition to onsite disaster response and recovery, staff in FEMA's 10 regional offices conduct ongoing efforts to support individuals with access and functional needs that may be affected in future disasters. Regional Administrators in each of the regional offices report directly to the FEMA Administrator and are responsible for the day-to-day management and administration of regional activities and staff. FEMA has assigned one staff person at each of the regional offices to focus on disability integration.<sup>20</sup> Disability integration includes integrating recommended practices and applicable requirements related to individuals with disabilities—such as requirements that may apply under the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 or the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), both as amended—into all aspects of emergency preparedness

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<sup>20</sup>According to FEMA officials, these staff have the title of Regional Disability Integration Specialists and maybe deployed to disasters that occur in any of the 10 regions. When deployed, these disability integration staff assume the title of Disability Integration Advisors and work together with staff in other roles, such as American Sign Language Interpreters, as part of the Disability Integration Cadre. In this report, we refer to these staff as “regional disability integration staff.”

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and disaster response, recovery, and mitigation.<sup>21</sup> Staff do this by promoting inclusive practices in FEMA regional activities and through outreach to local emergency managers. Inclusive practices are efforts to ensure people with disabilities have equal opportunities to participate in, and receive the benefits of, emergency programs and services. Such practices could include involving people with disabilities in emergency evacuation planning, ensuring that shelters are physically accessible, and providing guidance on post-evacuation residency for individuals with disabilities. Regional disability integration staff are also generally expected to track information about service and support shortfalls and about the demographics in each of the FEMA regions, such as local and state statistics on individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing, to help keep track of what FEMA should be prepared to address in the event of a disaster.

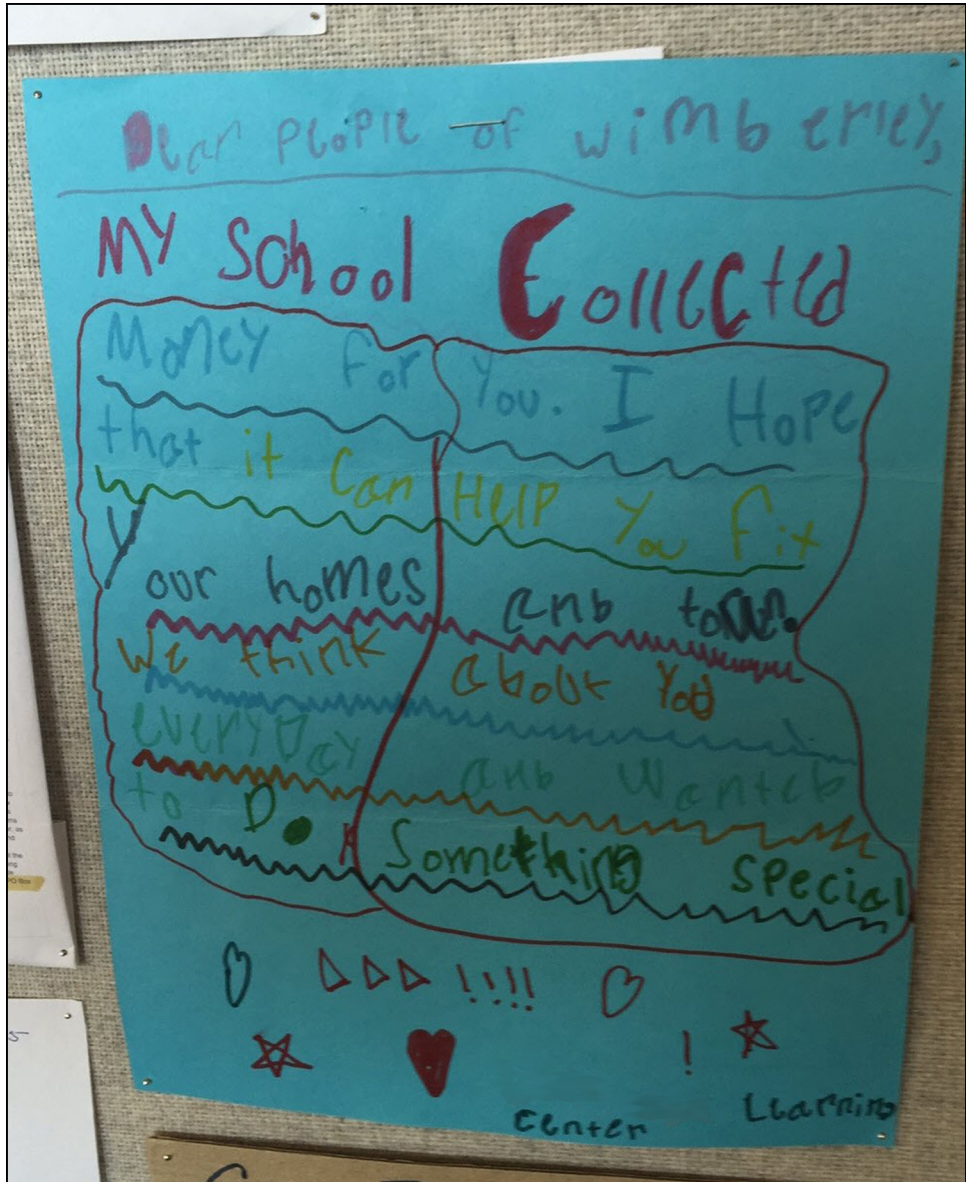
In addition, FEMA coordinates closely with voluntary organizations to increase their capacity. Voluntary Agency Liaisons working in the regional offices are tasked with building relationships among federal and state governments and voluntary organizations, including national, state, and local voluntary organizations active in disaster. As a part of these efforts, they may also work with local organizations such as schools or churches that are not typically involved in disaster assistance but that may provide spontaneous services in response to disasters (see fig. 2).

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<sup>21</sup>In addition to its obligations under the Post-Katrina Act, FEMA is also responsible for ensuring compliance with applicable provisions of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended, which, among other things, prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability by the federal government, federal contractors, and by recipients of federal financial assistance. 29 U.S.C. § 701 *et seq.* FEMA's implementing regulations may be found at 44 C.F.R. pt. 16. Other laws may also apply, depending on the circumstances. For example, the ADA and associated regulations establish certain non-discrimination and other requirements for employers, state and local governments, public accommodations, and telecommunication services with respect to people with disabilities. 42 U.S.C. § 12101 *et seq.* For the regulations implementing Title II (which applies to state and local governments) and Title III (which applies to public accommodations), generally enforced by the Department of Justice, see 28 C.F.R. parts 35 and 36. FEMA and DOJ have also developed guidance for serving individuals with disabilities in a disaster.



Figure 2: Poster Offering Assistance in Response to 2015 Flooding in Hays County, Texas



Source: GAO. | GAO-17-200

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## Relevant Provisions of the Post-Katrina Act

The Post-Katrina Act set forth specific provisions requiring FEMA to take actions to improve disaster assistance for individuals with access and functional needs. Several of the provisions identify activities related to individuals with disabilities, individuals with limited English proficiency, and children. These provisions include, among others:

- **Disability Coordinator** (§ 611):<sup>22</sup> The FEMA Administrator is required to appoint a Disability Coordinator to help ensure that the needs of individuals with disabilities are being properly addressed in emergency preparedness and disaster relief. The Disability Coordinator is charged with consulting with government agencies, such as the National Council on Disability, and organizations that represent the interests and rights of individuals with disabilities, regarding their needs. Other responsibilities of the Disability Coordinator include ensuring coordination and dissemination of best practices; developing training materials for emergency managers; promoting accessibility of phone hotlines, websites, and video broadcasts regarding emergency information; and providing guidance and implementing policies to ensure the rights of individuals with disabilities regarding post-evacuation residency are respected.<sup>23</sup>
- **Accommodations Guidelines for People with Disabilities** (§ 689(a)):<sup>24</sup> The FEMA Administrator is required, in coordination with the Disability Coordinator and other government entities, including the National Council on Disability, to develop guidelines to accommodate individuals with disabilities regarding (1) the accessibility of, and communications and programs in, shelters, recovery centers, and other facilities; and (2) devices used in disaster operations, including first aid stations, mass feeding areas, portable payphone stations, portable toilets, and temporary housing.
- **Disaster-Related Information Services** (§ 689e):<sup>25</sup> The FEMA Administrator is required, in coordination with state and local governments, to identify population groups with limited English proficiency and take them into account when planning for a major disaster. The Administrator must ensure that information is made

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<sup>22</sup>Codified at 6 U.S.C. § 321b.

<sup>23</sup>The Post-Katrina Act provides that the Disability Coordinator is to report directly to the Administrator of FEMA.

<sup>24</sup>Codified at 6 U.S.C. § 773.

<sup>25</sup>Codified at 42 U.S.C. § 5196f.

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available in formats that can be understood by individuals with limited English proficiency and with disabilities. The Administrator is required to develop and maintain an informational clearinghouse of model language assistance programs and best practices for state and local governments in providing services related to a major disaster.

- **Child Reunification** (§ 689b(b)):<sup>26</sup> The FEMA Administrator is required to establish, in coordination with the Attorney General, the National Emergency Child Locator Center within the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children,<sup>27</sup> and establish procedures to make all relevant information available to the Child Locator Center in a timely manner to facilitate reunification of children and families who have been displaced as a result of a major disaster.

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## Individuals with Disabilities Receive a Range of Disaster Assistance from FEMA and Other Entities, but FEMA Could Improve Its Support of Some Efforts

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### FEMA Assists Individuals with Disabilities by Promoting Inclusive Practices to Groups That Respond to Disasters

Since the Post-Katrina Act was enacted, FEMA has promoted inclusive practices for assisting disaster survivors with disabilities in several ways. To comply with the Post-Katrina Act requirement to appoint a Disability Coordinator, FEMA created the Office of Disability Integration and Coordination (ODIC) in 2010 to increase attention to disaster assistance that considers the needs of people with disabilities across FEMA and among groups responding to disasters, such as state and local

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<sup>26</sup>Codified at 6 U.S.C. § 774.

<sup>27</sup>The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children is a non-profit organization whose mission is to help find missing children, reduce child sexual exploitation, and prevent child victimization.

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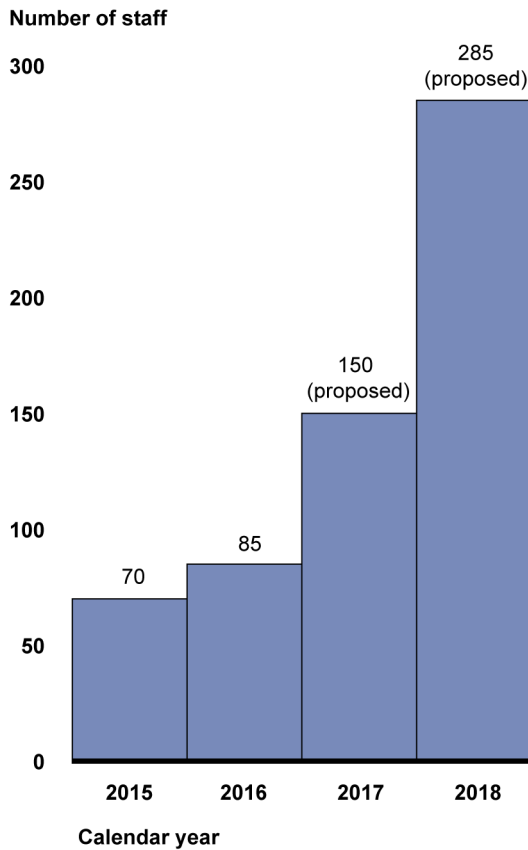
emergency managers.<sup>28</sup> ODIC officials said that while the role of the Disability Coordinator under the Post-Katrina Act is to ensure that the needs of individuals with disabilities are properly addressed in disaster relief, FEMA has no enforcement authority with state and local agencies. Therefore, they said that ODIC and disability integration staff in FEMA's regional offices focus on providing guidance to and developing relationships with other FEMA divisions, such as Individual Assistance; other federal agencies; state and local governments; and public, private, and faith-based voluntary organizations. FEMA's guidance and relationships are focused on building greater awareness of what is required to adequately serve people with disabilities impacted by disasters, such as requirements that may apply under the ADA. As of August 2016, ODIC reported approximately 85 disability integration staff in headquarters and the regions and anticipated increasing the staff to 285 by calendar year 2018 (see fig. 3).<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>6 U.S.C. § 321b.

<sup>29</sup>ODIC officials said that these anticipated workforce additions are exclusively for the Disability Integration Cadre staff that work at disaster locations, and that the number of ODIC staff at FEMA headquarters will remain the same. On January 23, 2017 the President issued a memorandum to the heads of executive departments and agencies ordering a freeze on the hiring of federal civilian employees in the executive branch. It is not clear how this hiring freeze will affect FEMA's plans to increase the number of Disability Integration Cadre staff.

**Figure 3: Actual and Proposed Number of Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Disability Integration Staff, Calendar Years 2015 through 2018**



Source: GAO analysis of information provided by Federal Emergency Management Agency officials. | GAO-17-200

Disability integration staff we spoke with in FEMA headquarters and in five of the six regional offices where the selected disasters occurred<sup>30</sup> said they work with staff in other FEMA divisions, such as Individual Assistance, to ensure that FEMA programs and facilities are accessible to individuals with disabilities and to develop guidance for state and local

<sup>30</sup>FEMA did not provide Individual Assistance or disability integration support following the 2015 snowstorms in Massachusetts because the state did not request this assistance.

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emergency managers.<sup>31</sup> For example, ODIC officials told us they helped FEMA's Individual Assistance division develop guidance in 2010 for state and local emergency managers and shelter operators, *Guidance on Planning for Integration of Functional Needs Support Services in General Population Shelters*.<sup>32</sup> This document includes, for example, guidance on equipping shelters with durable medical supplies, communication devices, and assistive technology, such as wheelchairs, accessible cots, hearing aids, teletypewriter phones, and screen readers. ODIC officials said they have contributed to several other key documents, including the National Response Framework and its Mass Evacuation Incident Annex, to help integrate the needs of people with disabilities in emergency management.<sup>33</sup> ODIC officials said they also worked closely with FEMA's Exercise Branch to plan and participate in emergency preparation exercises.<sup>34</sup> For example, during FEMA's most recent exercise, a disability integration representative was tasked with assessing how well exercise participants across the agency integrated disability-related

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<sup>31</sup>As previously mentioned, the Post-Katrina Act requires FEMA to ensure that information made available to individuals affected by a major disaster is made available in formats that can be understood by individuals with disabilities or other special needs and to develop guidelines to accommodate individuals with disabilities. See 42 U.S.C. § 5196f(a)(2)(B) and 6 U.S.C. § 773.

<sup>32</sup>FEMA's Individual Assistance division contracted with BCFS Health and Human Services, a network of non-profit organizations that operates health and human services programs, to create this guidance document. BCFS Health and Human Services collected data to develop the guidance, wrote and edited the document, and delivered training on how to use the guidance to support shelter planning and operations. According to the guidance document, a Functional Needs Support Services Review Panel, including ODIC officials and other FEMA representatives, other federal agencies, national voluntary organizations, and state emergency management agencies, also helped direct and define the guidance document.

<sup>33</sup>The Mass Evacuation Incident Annex to the National Response Framework provides an overview of mass evacuation functions, agency roles and responsibilities, and overall guidelines for the integration of federal, state, tribal, and local support in the evacuation of large numbers of people in incidents requiring a coordinated federal response.

<sup>34</sup>The Homeland Security Act of 2002, as amended by the Post-Katrina Act, requires FEMA to carry out a national exercise program to test and evaluate the national preparedness goal and to conduct periodic national exercises. 6 U.S.C. § 748(b). These exercises serve to assess interagency preparedness and identify corrective actions needed to close gaps in required emergency response capabilities.

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considerations in their response efforts.<sup>35</sup> In the five disasters we reviewed at which disability integration staff were deployed, these staff helped assess potential Disaster Recovery Center locations to ensure they were accessible to individuals with disabilities. This included the physical accessibility of parking lots, entrances, water fountains, and bathrooms, as well as equipping these centers with items to ensure communication accessibility, such as assistive listening devices, documents in braille, and tablet computers that connected to remote American Sign Language translation services.

Disability integration staff we spoke with also reported taking a number of steps to engage external stakeholders, including those representing localities, states, other federal agencies, and voluntary organizations, on strategies to assist people with disabilities impacted by disasters. For example:

- FEMA disability integration staff in California said they worked with state officials, along with other FEMA staff, to provide training to local disability partners on the role of long-term recovery groups<sup>36</sup> and identified grant opportunities for these partners to strengthen their ability to provide recovery support services following disasters. According to ODIC officials, it is standard practice for disability integration staff to create strategies for each disaster to which they deploy to guide their activities, including their coordination with state and local stakeholders.
- ODIC chairs the Interagency Coordinating Council on Emergency Preparedness and Individuals with Disabilities (council), which was

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<sup>35</sup>While FEMA has yet to formally assess its performance on the exercise, ODIC officials shared their preliminary conclusions, stating that the exercise demonstrated both successes and challenges in disability integration efforts. For example, they said disability integration staff formed strong partnerships with different disaster response teams across FEMA, and issues related to people with disabilities were addressed in conversations about critical response activities, such as mass care. However, officials said the agency could further improve accessible public notifications about disasters for people with disabilities. Officials also said they began to address this issue during the exercise by working with External Affairs to develop and test an accessible video message, which included captioning, using an online social networking service.

<sup>36</sup>Long-term recovery groups are coalition groups comprising representatives from faith-based, nonprofit, government, and other organizations working within a community to assist individuals and families as they recover from disaster. Their mission and focus include strengthening area-wide disaster coordination by sharing information and jointly resolving cases with unmet needs, particularly the needs of individuals that have not been met by federal and state disaster assistance programs.

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created in 2004 specifically to strengthen emergency preparedness for individuals with disabilities.<sup>37</sup> The council's membership represents 25 federal agencies and, according to ODIC officials discusses, among other topics, how interagency partners can engage in preparing for, responding to, recovering from, and mitigating all hazards inclusive of people with disabilities and others with access and functional needs. For example, ODIC officials said that one council meeting included a discussion about integrating the needs of people with disabilities into an active shooter training curriculum.

- ODIC facilitated the development of memorandums of agreement between FEMA and several nongovernmental stakeholders to better support these organizations' efforts to assist disaster survivors with disabilities. For example, FEMA and one national disability advocacy organization agreed to participate in disaster exercises together and share best practices for delivering services to people with disabilities.

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### Lack of Procedure Limits ODIC's Potential Effectiveness with Regional Disability Integration Activities

Despite the progress made by FEMA to promote practices to address the needs of individuals with disabilities, these efforts may be hindered because, according to ODIC officials, there is no established procedure for involving ODIC in certain efforts related to regional disability integration staff. ODIC officials said that FEMA's Regional Administrators—not ODIC—determine the reporting chain for these staff, and regions vary in the extent to which they consult with ODIC on disability integration issues. We identified three areas where FEMA's lack of established procedures for involving ODIC may result in challenges pursuing common goals and effectively sharing and leveraging information to achieve those goals:

- **Role of regional disability integration staff.** According to ODIC officials, FEMA's disability integration efforts are focused on supporting access to disaster-related facilities, programs, and

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<sup>37</sup>The council was established by Executive Order 13347, signed by then-president George W. Bush. Individuals With Disabilities in Emergency Preparedness, 69 Fed. Reg. 44,573 (July 26, 2004). The Executive Order directed executive departments and agencies to consider, in their emergency preparedness planning, the needs of individuals with disabilities; encourage consideration of the needs of individuals with disabilities served by state and local governments and private organizations; and facilitate cooperation among federal, state, and local governments and private organizations in the implementation of emergency preparedness plans as they relate to individuals with disabilities. The Executive Order designated the Secretary of Homeland Security as the chair of the council; however, the Secretary delegated this role to the Administrator of FEMA in 2012.



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communication for individuals with disabilities. However, ODIC officials told us that some Regional Administrators do not involve ODIC when determining the duties of regional disability integration staff and may not assign these staff to certain key duties. For example, disability integration staff in some regions may be assigned to focus on recovery activities, such as working with community partners to ensure that individuals with disabilities are included in local long-term recovery group efforts. However, according to ODIC, these staff may have little involvement in promoting public communication that is accessible to individuals with disabilities following disasters. In addition, ODIC officials said that regions do not consistently include a position for disability integration staff on their IMATs, which are the first FEMA teams to deploy to disaster sites. ODIC officials said that regional IMATs that do not include this position may not have adequate knowledge about guidelines for accessibility for emergency alerts, evacuation processes, and shelters, hindering the ability to plan for the needs of the whole community at the onset of FEMA's disaster response. Moreover, according to ODIC officials, disability integration staff have misunderstood their roles and responsibilities during disasters. ODIC officials said they have clarified these roles and responsibilities through a FEMA guidance document they issued in December 2016, which they said may help resolve these misunderstandings.<sup>38</sup>

- **Performance goals for regional disability integration staff.** ODIC officials said they provided suggested performance goals for regional disability integration staff to these staff's supervisors in the regions, which included goals related to community engagement, information collection, and coordination with ODIC. ODIC officials told us that FEMA's Deputy Administrator and Chief of Staff directed Regional Administrators to include ODIC when setting performance goals and conducting assessments of regional disability integration staff. Nevertheless, according to ODIC officials, there are no established procedures for how Regional Administrators are to involve ODIC, and while some regions engage ODIC in this performance management role, others do not. As a result, ODIC may be unaware of regional disability integration staff who are not performing well and may need

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<sup>38</sup>Officials said that the guidance document is a directive, which generally explains the roles and responsibilities of disability integration staff in headquarters and the regions. They said that the accompanying instructions, to be issued at some point in the future, should provide more details about how disability integration staff in the regions and ODIC staff in headquarters can implement the directive.

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additional guidance, thereby decreasing the effectiveness of disaster services for people with disabilities.

- **Communication among disability integration staff.** ODIC hosts weekly phone calls with regional disability integration staff to build cohesion and discuss promising practices and progress on challenges. However, ODIC officials reported that in the first 6 months of 2016, 2 of the 10 regions repeatedly missed weekly calls with ODIC. In addition, 2 other regions were not represented on the calls for a majority of that time because they did not have disability integration staff. ODIC officials in headquarters said they do not directly oversee disability integration staff in the regions so they cannot require these staff to participate in the weekly calls. Additionally, they said regions with vacancies for key disability integration positions may not have other staff with the expertise to coordinate disability integration activities and report these activities at weekly ODIC meetings. As a result of this inconsistent communication, ODIC officials may not receive information on disability integration activities from all regions, which may affect their ability to oversee and assess these activities. Additionally, regional disability integration staff who do not consistently participate in these calls may lose opportunities to gain important information from each other and from ODIC to use in their disaster assistance efforts.

ODIC officials and stakeholders shared several examples of the effect of the lack of procedures for involving ODIC in regional disability integration activities on FEMA's ability to provide informative, responsive support to stakeholders and to leverage existing relationships with partners. For example, ODIC officials said that at times they were unaware that regional disability integration staff were invited to represent FEMA at national conferences, despite reminders that such invitations were required to be cleared through ODIC. Officials said they later learned that these staff provided inaccurate information to state and local emergency managers. Emergency managers with inaccurate information may be less effective at integrating the needs of people with disabilities in their disaster preparedness efforts.

Our prior work on other aspects of FEMA's coordination between headquarters and regional offices has identified similar challenges, including limitations in FEMA's ability to coordinate monitoring activities for certain grant programs and cohesively manage its regional contracting

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workforce.<sup>39</sup> Internal control standards state that, in establishing an organizational structure, agencies should consider how their components interact and define reporting lines that allow the components to communicate information necessary to fulfill their respective responsibilities.<sup>40</sup>

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### Localities, Voluntary Organizations, and States in Selected Disasters Provided Assistance to Individuals with Disabilities but Entities May Have Difficulty Accessing FEMA Training

Local agencies and voluntary organizations involved in the six disasters we reviewed served central roles in responding to the needs of residents impacted by the disasters, including people with disabilities. For example:

- **Communicating information.** In South Carolina, local officials and FEMA disability integration staff said they both provided American Sign Language interpreters to communicate disaster-related information to people who are deaf or hard of hearing. Local officials in California similarly said they made these services available. In California, local officials in one county told us they maintained a list of elderly residents receiving in-home health support services and called every person on the list during the September 2015 wildfires to see if they needed assistance evacuating their homes.
- **Providing shelter.** Local officials and representatives of voluntary organizations we spoke with said they provided or supported shelters for those affected by the disasters, including those with disabilities. In the three disaster areas we visited, local officials and representatives of voluntary organizations<sup>41</sup> said shelter facilities were generally

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<sup>39</sup>For example, GAO previously found that for several preparedness grant programs, FEMA headquarters and regions did not always coordinate their monitoring approach and provided inconsistent guidance to grantees. See GAO, *Federal Emergency Management Agency: Strengthening Regional Coordination Could Enhance Preparedness Efforts*, [GAO-16-38](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 4, 2016). In addition, GAO found that FEMA established an agreement concerning disaster contracting for regional contracting officers to report to headquarters supervisors for technical oversight while continuing to respond to regional supervisors for everyday operations. The agreement led to workforce challenges for FEMA, including heightening the potential for an environment of competing interests for regional contracting officers. See GAO, *Disaster Contracting: FEMA Needs to Cohesively Manage its Workforce and Fully Address Post-Katrina Reforms*, [GAO-15-783](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 29, 2015).

<sup>40</sup>[GAO-14-704G](#).

<sup>41</sup>In the three other disasters we reviewed, we did not speak with local officials. In these three disasters, state officials confirmed that localities and voluntary organizations were primarily responsible for sheltering.

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compliant with ADA requirements or met other accessibility guidelines, as applicable.<sup>42</sup>

- **Assisting with daily living activities.** According to representatives of voluntary organizations, local officials, and FEMA regional staff in the three disaster areas we visited, voluntary organizations helped individuals with disabilities maintain independence with their daily living activities, such as by replacing durable medical equipment that was lost or damaged. For example, local officials and FEMA regional staff in Texas said that voluntary organizations helped provide individuals with oxygen tanks, wheelchairs, walkers, motorized scooters, communication devices, glasses, and accommodated their needs for personal assistance services.<sup>43</sup>

State officials in the three disaster areas we visited said they supported local and voluntary organizations' response efforts with strategic initiatives designed to address the needs of individuals with disabilities. For example, state officials from Texas told us that the state established a Disability Task Force on Emergency Management. Convened in 2011, the Task Force helped produce guidance to assist local emergency managers and shelter planners in understanding certain requirements and best practices for assisting disaster survivors with disabilities. The guidance includes tips on interacting with and assisting people who use service dogs, canes, crutches, wheelchairs, or have mental illnesses.

In recognition of the central role that localities, voluntary organizations, and states serve in disaster assistance activities, FEMA has developed guidance and training to increase their awareness of requirements and best practices for including individuals with disabilities in emergency planning.<sup>44</sup> Specifically, ODIC officials said that in 2013 FEMA began

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<sup>42</sup>For example, Red Cross, which provides shelter and other disaster services, developed a shelter accessibility survey and instructions that it issued in August 2011. The survey instructions direct Red Cross staff and volunteers to use the survey to review shelter locations and address structural issues that might impact individuals with disabilities.

<sup>43</sup>Personal assistance services are services that assist individuals with activities of daily living, such as eating, bathing, and toileting.

<sup>44</sup>Under the Homeland Security Act of 2002, as amended by the Post-Katrina Act, FEMA is required to provide training, among other types of assistance, to build tribal, local, state, regional, and national capabilities (including communications capabilities) necessary to respond to disasters. 6 U.S.C. § 313(b)(2)(G). In addition, under the Stafford Act, FEMA is authorized to conduct training programs for the instruction of emergency preparedness officials and other persons in the organization, operation, and techniques of emergency preparedness. 42 U.S.C. § 5196(f)(1).

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offering a key course—*Integrating Access and Functional Needs into Emergency Planning*—to state and local emergency managers and other stakeholders. Participants can take the 2-day course free-of-charge at FEMA’s Emergency Management Institute in Maryland or, as FEMA resources allow, from FEMA instructors from ODIC who travel to locations across the country to deliver the course. The course includes substantial information on incorporating the needs of people with disabilities in emergency planning, including information that could have helped address certain challenges we heard about from local officials. For instance, during the September 2015 wildfires in California, local officials said that staffing constraints and a lack of onsite clinical expertise prompted them to redirect individuals with disabilities from general population shelters to hospitals or other facilities where officials felt they could be more safely accommodated. One module of FEMA’s training addresses the importance of accommodating individuals with disabilities in general population shelters unless they have acute medical needs. Similarly, disability advocates caution against redirecting individuals with disabilities to medical facilities for shelter during disasters as this practice can have negative impacts on these individuals’ personal independence.<sup>45</sup> In another example, local officials in one Texas county described challenges communicating with the deaf population following the 2015 flooding and noted a recent effort to add video capabilities to their 9-1-1 system to reach such populations. FEMA’s training also covers practical tips on how to ensure access to communication about disaster assistance, including through video relay services.

ODIC officials said that all state and local emergency managers, public health officials, community leaders, and other stakeholders would benefit from the training, but officials do not have specific goals or milestones in place for the number who receive it. ODIC officials estimated that at least 843 federal, state, and local emergency managers participated in the training from June 2013 through July 2016.<sup>46</sup> However, given the number

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<sup>45</sup>We also previously found that such practices could place greater demands on more resource intensive services provided in medical shelters. For more information see GAO, *National Disaster Response: FEMA Should Take Action to Improve Capacity and Coordination between Government and Voluntary Sectors*, [GAO-08-369](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 27, 2008)

<sup>46</sup>ODIC officials used the number of applications submitted for each training to estimate the number of participants. Officials were unable to report the number of participants in 10 of the 44 trainings offered outside of FEMA’s Emergency Management Institute during this time period, or in trainings held after July 2016. As a result, the number of participants to-date may be higher than the estimate provided here.

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of local officials who play a role in disaster response, many state and local emergency managers have yet to take the training.<sup>47</sup> Officials said they have not gathered information about how many additional emergency managers and other local officials could benefit from this training and have not set goals for future participation.

Further, ODIC faces challenges in satisfying current requests for training, according to officials. Some state and local officials have not taken the course because of the cost of traveling to Maryland to access it in person and have requested the training be offered locally.<sup>48</sup> As of July 2016, course instructors from ODIC have delivered the training locally in 22 states and in the District of Columbia. However, ODIC officials reported that many of these states have requested additional training in other locations within the state and ODIC has been unable to fulfill these requests. ODIC officials said they have limited travel funding to deliver the training onsite for all who request it and that FEMA cannot legally accept funding from states for travel expenses for its employees to conduct the course.<sup>49</sup> ODIC officials also said they rely on a small pool of staff—including the ODIC director—to teach the course. ODIC staff said they recently began to consider alternative training delivery methods, such as a virtual course to supplement the in-person course in Maryland. However, they have not evaluated such alternatives and, as yet have no specific plans to offer the course using an alternative method.

We have previously reported that agencies should consider learning that provides trainees with the flexibility to choose among different training

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<sup>47</sup>According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in addition to U.S. states and territories, there are more than 3,000 counties in the United States, which include entities such as parishes, organized boroughs, independent cities, and districts. Many of these counties have their own emergency managers, public health officials, and other stakeholders serving substantial roles in providing disaster assistance.

<sup>48</sup>Under 42 U.S.C. § 5196(f), FEMA has the authority to cover up to 50 percent of the cost of travel expenses and per diem allowances for those students attending the course who are not federal employees.

<sup>49</sup>ODIC officials said that pursuant to 31 U.S.C. § 1353, and subject to federal travel regulations issued by the General Services Administration, FEMA may accept payment of travel and related expenses from non-federal sources for attendance at meetings or similar functions relating to the official duties of its employees. However, the regulations specifically exclude any “meeting or other event required to carry out an agency’s statutory or regulatory functions (i.e., a function that is essential to agency’s mission).” 41 C.F.R. §§ 304-1.2, 304-2.1. Because the training is carried out pursuant to statute, according to officials, FEMA cannot accept an offer to pay for its employees’ travel and related expenses under these provisions.

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delivery methods (such as web-based and instructor-led) while leveraging resources in the most efficient way possible.<sup>50</sup> We also previously recommended that FEMA establish and use goals, milestones, and performance measures to monitor the performance of its programs designed to help state and local stakeholders determine their readiness to respond to disasters.<sup>51</sup> Leading practices identified in the Program Management Institute's *The Standard for Program Management* call for agencies to develop meaningful measures to monitor program performance and to track the accomplishment of the program's goals and objectives.<sup>52</sup> Without collecting information about the potential pool of participants, identifying goals for the number of state and local officials who receive the training, and providing the training in the alternative formats needed to meet the goals, ODIC may be missing opportunities to ensure its training reaches a sufficiently wide audience. Further, state and local officials who have a central role in assisting people with disabilities impacted by disasters may lack awareness of how to adequately serve this population.

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<sup>50</sup>[GAO-04-546G](#).

<sup>51</sup>Specifically, GAO recommended that to enable more comprehensive and consistent regional implementation of a program intended to assist state, local, and tribal officials improve their logistics processes and procedures, the FEMA Administrator should establish goals, milestones, and performance measures to monitor program performance and report on program implementation progress. While FEMA developed a document to describe tasks and activities related to implementation of the program, it has yet to report on its progress. For more information, see GAO, *Emergency Management: FEMA Collaborates Effectively with Logistics Partners but Could Strengthen Implementation of Its Capabilities Assessment Tool*, [GAO-15-781](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 10, 2015).

<sup>52</sup>Project Management Institute, Inc., *The Standard for Program Management*®.

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## Individuals with Limited English Proficiency Receive Disaster Information in Different Languages from FEMA and Other Stakeholders

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### FEMA Provides Translations of Written and Verbal Information about Its Programs to Individuals with Limited English Proficiency

FEMA provides information on its programs to individuals with limited English proficiency through written and oral translations in other languages and through additional resources, such as a coordinator and support team focused on limited English proficiency. As a general approach, FEMA officials said they identify languages spoken in each state through data from the Census Bureau.<sup>53</sup> FEMA's External Affairs staff maintain these data to use when an area is impacted by a disaster. FEMA officials said that these data represent an initial language assessment to determine the language needs of the affected population.<sup>54</sup> After a disaster is declared, officials said they continue to refine their understanding of the language needs in the area by collecting additional demographic information from state and local officials, volunteer organizations, and disaster survivors. For example, the Census data that FEMA used in 2015 indicated that 170 languages were spoken in Texas. Following that state's flooding, FEMA officials said they reached out to officials in the most affected areas and identified Spanish and Vietnamese as the languages that were most commonly spoken in the area.

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<sup>53</sup>Because these data are based on the most recent population census, they may be outdated. Officials told us that in 2015 they used 2010 Census data, which are based on samples collected from 2006 to 2008 as part of the American Community Survey.

<sup>54</sup>As previously mentioned, the Post-Katrina Act requires FEMA to work with state and local governments to identify population groups with limited English proficiency and take them into account in disaster planning. 42 U.S.C. § 5196f(a)(1).



**Languages FEMA Used in Translating Hurricane Sandy Disaster Information**

FEMA provided disaster information on topics including recovery and community relations for Hurricane Sandy in 2012 through written documents and web content in more than 20 languages, including:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Albanian</li><li>• Arabic</li><li>• Bengali</li><li>• Cambodian</li><li>• Chinese</li><li>• Estonian</li><li>• French</li><li>• German</li><li>• Greek</li><li>• Gujarati</li><li>• Haitian Creole</li><li>• Hebrew</li><li>• Hindi</li><li>• Hungarian</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Italian</li><li>• Japanese</li><li>• Korean</li><li>• Nepali</li><li>• Polish</li><li>• Portuguese</li><li>• Punjabi</li><li>• Russian</li><li>• Spanish</li><li>• Tagalog</li><li>• Turkish</li><li>• Urdu</li><li>• Vietnamese</li><li>• Yiddish</li></ul>
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Source: Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). | GAO-17-200

FEMA maintains many previously-translated documents in commonly encountered languages in an agency library that it can readily access when disaster occurs. According to the plan that summarizes how FEMA ensures disaster assistance communications are accessible to those with limited English proficiency,<sup>55</sup> the online library contains news releases, flyers, and other written information in more than 20 languages that FEMA produced following Hurricane Sandy in 2011 (see sidebar).<sup>56</sup> Such translated documents may include Individual Assistance program brochures explaining the registration process and correspondence about the status of individual applications, disaster preparedness and recovery activities, and press releases with pertinent disaster-related information. In all five disasters we reviewed at which FEMA provided Individual Assistance,<sup>57</sup> officials told us FEMA provided printed materials, such as those about FEMA financial assistance, in multiple languages at locations such as the Disaster Recovery Centers.

The results of the language assessment process also help inform FEMA decisions about the number of staff proficient in multiple languages to deploy to the disaster-affected location. FEMA deploys these staff to explain the benefits and registration process for FEMA programs to individuals who are not proficient in English. External Affairs can also deploy members of a support team to assist regional office staff with new strategies to reach limited English proficiency populations affected by a disaster and can initiate contracts for additional translation services. For example, during the 2015 wildfires in California, External Affairs both deployed a support team member and contracted with a translation service to assist with media communications to Spanish speakers. To identify survivors' preferred languages, staff can use aids produced by

<sup>55</sup>FEMA, *Draft Language Access Plan* (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 3, 2014). Pursuant to Executive Order 13166 and guidance issued by the Department of Justice, federal agencies are required to develop and implement a system by which individuals with limited English proficiency can meaningfully access services provided by federal agencies. They are also required to work to ensure that recipients of federal assistance, such as grantees, also provide meaningful access for this population and thus do not discriminate on the basis of national origin in violation of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, as amended, and its implementing regulations. Improving Access to Services for Persons With Limited English Proficiency, 65 Fed. Reg. 50,121 (Aug. 16, 2000).

<sup>56</sup>According to FEMA's *Draft Language Access Plan*, in instances where FEMA does not have documents in a specific language, FEMA can have the information translated for disaster survivors.

<sup>57</sup>FEMA did not provide Individual Assistance following the 2015 snowstorms in Massachusetts.

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FEMA and the Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties (another component of the Department of Homeland Security), such as language identification guides (see fig. 4).

**Figure 4: Department of Homeland Security’s “I Speak” Language Identification Guide, Used in Disaster Assistance by Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Staff**

**I Speak... Language Identification Guide**

Executive Order 13166 requires DHS to take reasonable steps to provide meaningful access to its programs and activities for persons with limited English proficiency and - as also required by Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 - to ensure that recipients of federal financial assistance do the same.

*I Speak* is provided by the Department of Homeland Security Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties (CRCL). Other resources at [www.lep.gov](http://www.lep.gov)

Contact the DHS Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties' CRCL Institute at [CRCLTraining@dhs.gov](mailto:CRCLTraining@dhs.gov) for digital copies of this poster or a "I Speak" booklet.

Download copies of the DHS LEP plan and guidance to recipients of financial assistance at [www.dhs.gov/crcl](http://www.dhs.gov/crcl)

**Homeland Security**

Source: Department of Homeland Security. | GAO-17-200

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If staff proficient in a specific language are not available at Disaster Recovery Centers, individual survivors can call FEMA's helpline, which provides translation services. The toll-free number is posted online and on FEMA documents. These translation services are offered through FEMA's National Processing Service Centers. According to FEMA's *Draft Language Access Plan*, FEMA can provide disaster assistance information in more than 50 languages. FEMA publicizes these services through flyers, news releases, outreach to the community, and other promotion efforts. In addition, throughout a disaster, staff from these service centers and External Affairs continuously share information on the language needs of a location, officials said, and may adjust their resources based on changes in language requests.

In four of the five disasters we reviewed where FEMA provided Individual Assistance, FEMA deployed bilingual staff to work in Disaster Recovery Centers, as part of Disaster Survivor Assistance Teams, or as Voluntary Agency Liaisons.<sup>58</sup> For example, following the 2015 flooding in Oklahoma, officials told us that while visiting a community that primarily speaks Spanish, Disaster Survivor Assistance Team members proficient in Spanish were able to communicate information about FEMA assistance to survivors. However, state officials in Texas told us that while FEMA provided some bilingual staff following the 2015 Memorial Day flooding, those resources were inadequate in some areas, such as along the Texas border. As a result, the officials said that voluntary organizations assisting in the recovery provided translation services to fill this gap. According to regional FEMA officials, FEMA deployed 30 Spanish interpreters to Disaster Recovery Centers and Disaster Survivor Assistance Teams in Texas following the 2015 flooding. They also noted that while FEMA initially could not provide sufficient resources to fulfill requests for these personnel, additional bilingual staff were deployed within 3 weeks of the disaster declaration. Individuals affected by the flooding were able to apply for FEMA assistance until approximately 4 months after the date of declaration.

FEMA also engages in activities during non-disaster times to ensure access to disaster-related information for individuals with limited English proficiency. For example, FEMA officials said External Affairs has established two positions to work with stakeholders before a disaster

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<sup>58</sup>Federal officials said bilingual staff were not deployed for the recovery from the mudslide in Washington because language assessments did not identify a community with limited English proficiency that was affected.

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occurs: a Limited English Proficiency coordinator and a media relations specialist. The coordinator is responsible for ensuring access to FEMA program information for individuals with limited English proficiency, such as by ensuring that FEMA's website includes translated information. The coordinator also conducts strategic planning and leverages relationships with national and local organizations to broaden FEMA's reach into communities with limited English proficiency. The media relations specialist focuses specifically on building relationships with Spanish-speaking media. In addition, FEMA offers training to FEMA staff and state and local emergency managers that includes elements intended to ensure access to information for individuals with limited English proficiency. FEMA requires all of its employees to complete civil rights training, which includes a module on the federal laws that prohibit discrimination and require meaningful access to services for this population,<sup>59</sup> how to identify language needs, available multilingual FEMA resources, and different strategies for conducting outreach in communities. FEMA also developed a series of trainings designed for state and local officials—which is offered in a variety of formats, including at FEMA's Emergency Management Institute and online—on effective approaches to disseminating information publicly following disasters. For example, objectives of one course include identifying critical audiences and learning to recognize the functional needs and challenges of different audiences.

FEMA officials noted that all of these efforts, including the language assessment, translated materials, oral interpretation services, and trainings, represent FEMA's efforts to share best practices with state and local emergency managers on providing services to individuals with limited English proficiency, to comply with the Post-Katrina Act.<sup>60</sup> Rather

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<sup>59</sup>For example, Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 provides that no person shall, on the ground of race, color, or national origin, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance. 42 U.S.C. § 2000d. In certain circumstances, failure to ensure that individuals with limited English proficiency can effectively participate in or benefit from federally assisted programs and activities may violate the prohibition against national origin discrimination under Title VI and the associated regulations.

<sup>60</sup>The Post-Katrina Act requires FEMA to ensure that information made available to individuals affected by a major disaster is made available in formats that can be understood by those with limited English proficiency, and to develop and maintain an informational clearinghouse of model language assistance programs and best practices for state and local governments in providing services related to a major disaster or emergency. 42 U.S.C. § 5196f(a)(2)(A), (a)(3).

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than maintaining an informational clearinghouse in the form of a central website or database that may become quickly outdated, officials told us that these efforts allow them to tailor FEMA assistance for disaster survivors to the unique resources available and needs of each location affected by a disaster.

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### State and Local Agencies and Voluntary Organizations in Selected Disasters Provided Health and Safety Information to Individuals with Limited English Proficiency

State, local, or voluntary organizations in all six disasters we reviewed disseminated information on evacuations and shelters using a range of communication methods and translation services to assist individuals with limited English proficiency in accessing resources. For example, officials said that local agencies communicated through hotlines and reverse 9-1-1 calls to relay evacuation and shelter information to the general public.<sup>61</sup> As described in the National Response Framework, state and local agencies are generally responsible for distributing health and safety information—including information related to evacuations and shelters.<sup>62</sup> We found that state emergency planning documentation for all six disasters we reviewed assigned responsibility to state and local agencies for disseminating this type of information.

To provide access to such information specifically to individuals with limited English proficiency, state, local, or voluntary organizations in five of the six disasters we reviewed reported providing a range of translation services. State or local agencies in two of the disasters had bilingual staff members available, and state or voluntary organizations in three other disasters provided access to interpreters by phone.<sup>63</sup> In three of the six disasters, state or local agencies relied on support from voluntary organizations to provide interpreters for those who were not English proficient. For example, during the 2015 snowstorms in Massachusetts, state officials said that a voluntary organization's call center provided information, such as shelter locations, in multiple languages. State and local officials in two disasters relied on local churches to provide information to their members or other Spanish-speaking residents. For example, officials in Oklahoma said they relied on churches in a large

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<sup>61</sup>Reverse 9-1-1 systems send prerecorded messages from a central 9-1-1 center to threatened areas to provide emergency information, such as evacuation or shelter-in-place instructions.

<sup>62</sup>*National Response Framework, Second Edition* (Washington, D.C.: May 2013).

<sup>63</sup>As noted earlier, language assessments in Washington did not identify a need for bilingual staff.

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Spanish-speaking community in Oklahoma City to spread information on recovery resources following flooding in 2015.

State and local agencies can also leverage FEMA resources to translate or distribute recovery information. According to FEMA officials, state and local emergency managers can obtain the results of FEMA's language assessments, which include information about populations with limited English proficiency, to better target resources to needs.<sup>64</sup> In addition, FEMA officials said they fulfilled requests from California officials to translate state documents into Spanish following the 2015 wildfires. Similarly, following the 2015 flooding in South Carolina, state officials said they requested help from FEMA to print information about registering for FEMA assistance in English and Spanish on fans, which were then distributed to flood victims in churches (see fig. 5).

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<sup>64</sup>Officials stated that collecting and disseminating this information is another way FEMA meets the Post-Katrina Act requirements related to individuals with limited English proficiency. 42 U.S.C. § 5196f(a)(2)(A), (a)(3).

Figure 5: Bilingual Information on Recovery Resources Printed on Two-Sided Fans Distributed in Churches by Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) after South Carolina Flooding



Source: GAO. | GAO-17-200

In addition to these efforts to reach individuals with limited English proficiency during disasters, local officials in two of the disasters we reviewed said limited resources prevented them from translating disaster information into other languages. To address this problem, local officials may seek assistance from external resources. For example, local officials in Texas said that although emergency communications are not currently translated into other languages, they are considering partnering with private organizations to facilitate translations when needed. According to FEMA's *Draft Language Access Plan* and External Affairs officials, FEMA can also provide support in the form of translating disaster materials into the languages spoken by those affected by disasters.



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## Families with Children May Access Reunification Resources in Future Disasters

FEMA has worked to develop resources to reunite children separated from their families during disasters, but it has not had to activate them in an actual disaster since they were developed. Following the need for reuniting children with their families and for other assistance for children highlighted during Hurricane Katrina,<sup>65</sup> the Post-Katrina Act required that FEMA establish the National Emergency Child Locator Center, a child reunification call center operated by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC).<sup>66</sup>

The first step in establishing this center was to enhance information-sharing during federally declared disasters, which FEMA officials said they did with NCMEC, Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, and Red Cross through a memorandum of understanding signed in 2007. Following a disaster declaration, FEMA may request that NCMEC activate the National Emergency Child Locator Center and then refer child-specific inquiries to NCMEC. NCMEC uses a call center as part of its day-to-day operations, but following a disaster, it can increase staffing to meet anticipated call volume.<sup>67</sup> Following a disaster, call center staff would work with law enforcement, NCMEC staff, counterparts at FEMA, and Red Cross to learn the ground-level context of a disaster to more effectively field calls. NCMEC also maintains the Unaccompanied Minors Registry, a national repository for information about children who may be separated from their families as a result of a disaster. The first of

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<sup>65</sup>One report that documents the reunification challenges during Hurricane Katrina is Save the Children, *Still at Risk: U.S. Children 10 Years After Hurricane Katrina*, 2015 National Report Card on Protecting Children in Disasters (Fairfield, CT: 2015).

<sup>66</sup>U.S.C. § 774. In addition to establishing a toll-free telephone number to receive reports of displaced children, the Post-Katrina Act established other responsibilities of the National Emergency Child Locator Center, including creating a website to provide information about displaced children, deploying staff to the location of a declared event to gather information about displaced children, and providing technical assistance in locating displaced children, among other things. NCMEC is a non-profit organization whose mission is to help find missing children, reduce child sexual exploitation, and prevent child victimization, and it has served as a national resource center for families, victims, law enforcement, and the public. A number of NCMEC programs provide this assistance to states that have been affected by disasters. In addition to the National Emergency Child Locator Center, the Post-Katrina Act also required FEMA to establish the National Emergency Family Registry and Locator System to facilitate the voluntary reunification of adults who are separated due to a disaster. 6 U.S.C. § 775.

<sup>67</sup>Prior to the establishment of the National Emergency Child Locator Center, NCMEC fielded calls about children separated from their families during disasters on top of its normal volume of calls, which officials estimated at between 10,000 and 15,000 each year. Hurricanes Katrina and Rita alone prompted over 34,000 such calls to NCMEC.

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its kind, the registry would allow entities such as law enforcement, medical facilities, shelter operators, and individuals to submit reports about children that are displaced due to a disaster. It was designed with a web-based portal that could allow for one-way communication from these external sources. Law enforcement and NCMEC staff could use the information submitted to the registry to reunite families by cross-referencing it against any information they may have collected through other means.

According to FEMA officials and emergency managers, no disasters have required national child reunification support since Hurricane Katrina, where an estimated 5,000 children were reported to be separated from their families and guardians during the storm. As a result, FEMA has not called upon NCMEC to activate the National Emergency Child Locator Center. Nevertheless, FEMA continues to work with NCMEC and other partners on maintaining reunification resources. For example, in 2015 FEMA renewed an agreement it has with NCMEC to provide funding for deploying NCMEC personnel onsite following disasters.<sup>68</sup> In addition, FEMA addressed child reunification during its 2016 Cascadia Rising training exercise, and FEMA participants assembled a child reunification task force. One challenge members of that task force identified during the exercise was related to communicating with children and parents with auditory or visual impairments.

Since the enactment of the Post-Katrina Act, FEMA has worked with governmental and non-governmental entities more generally to address the needs of families with children who are affected by disasters. In 2007, FEMA joined other federal agencies and voluntary organizations, such as the Red Cross, in the establishment of the National Commission on Children in Disasters. Established by the Kids in Disasters Well-being, Safety, and Health Act of 2007, the group worked to identify gaps in policy for disaster assistance for children, and it issued reports in 2009 and 2010 that recommended changes to close those gaps, such as improving the capacity to provide child care services in the immediate

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<sup>68</sup>NCMEC deploys members of Team Adam and Project ALERT, who are retired law enforcement professionals, to leverage their expertise in providing assistance to state and local law enforcement agencies in reuniting children with their families.

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aftermath of a disaster.<sup>69</sup> In 2009, FEMA established a working group on children in disasters to engage representatives of multiple FEMA divisions in addressing the recommendations. The official leading the working group was appointed in 2015 to be the National Advisor on Children and Disasters. The responsibility of this advisor is to coordinate efforts and implement resources across FEMA and externally. FEMA and NCMEC also co-led the effort to issue a report in 2013 as guidance for post-disaster reunification.<sup>70</sup> A primary goal of the report was to support reunification processes and procedures by identifying the roles and responsibilities of governments and voluntary organizations, among other stakeholders. It was designed as a guidance tool to assist these stakeholders in developing reunification plans that are inclusive, such as considering the needs of children who are nonverbal or who have disabilities.

FEMA officials from two of the six disasters we reviewed described other assistance provided to children. Following the California wildfires, FEMA worked with school districts in the affected areas to bus students temporarily living outside their communities, in shelters or temporary housing, to their regular schools. Following the mudslide in Washington, the state provided similar assistance for students and teachers separated from their schools by the mudslide area by opening up an alternative access route. In addition, FEMA provided individual families with reimbursements for the extra cost of child care resulting from the extended commuting time required by the detour.<sup>71</sup> Staff from another federal agency involved in disaster recovery, the Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families, initiated a task force designed to provide mental and emotional health resources for area children affected by the mudslide. For example, the organizations involved in the task force funded a full-time counselor at an area school.

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<sup>69</sup>Pub. L. No. 110-161, div. G, tit. VI, 121 Stat. 1844, 2213-17. For the Commission's 2010 report, see National Commission on Children and Disasters, *2010 Report to the President and Congress*, AHRQ Publication No. 10-M037 (Rockville, MD: October 2010). In accordance with the act, the Commission terminated 180 days after submission of the final report.

<sup>70</sup>FEMA, *Post-Disaster Reunification of Children: A Nationwide Approach* (Washington, D.C.: November 2013).

<sup>71</sup>These reimbursements were funded by FEMA's Other Needs Assistance, part of the Individuals and Households Program, which provides grants for uninsured, disaster-related necessary expenses and serious needs.

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## Conclusions

FEMA has taken steps since Hurricane Katrina to promote inclusive emergency management practices through its Office of Disability Integration and Coordination (ODIC). However, this progress may be hampered because FEMA lacks procedures to help ensure regions consistently involve ODIC in their disability integration activities and because of ODIC's limited approach to delivering critical disability integration training. The lack of established procedures for involving ODIC in the disability integration activities of the regional staff has resulted in misunderstood roles, a lack of awareness about potentially underperforming staff, and inconsistent communication between the regions and headquarters. In addition, the limited training delivery methods ODIC uses for its key disability integration course, as well as ODIC's lack of understanding about the pool of potential participants, may mean a substantial number of state and local emergency managers do not receive it. Both the use of regional disability integration staff and the training serve as important methods of communicating with state and local emergency managers to provide them with knowledge and tools to best support individuals with disabilities during a disaster. Without improvements in these areas, FEMA may be missing opportunities to help these emergency managers better meet the needs of individuals with disabilities affected by disasters.

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## Recommendations for Executive Action

1. To better ensure FEMA's regional activities effectively support individuals with disabilities, the Secretary of Homeland Security should direct the FEMA Administrator to take steps to establish written procedures for how regions should involve the Office of Disability Integration and Coordination in clarifying disability integration staff's roles, evaluating staff performance, and setting expectations for how staff communicate with headquarters and the regions.
2. To better position FEMA to expand access to key training on incorporating access and functional needs into emergency planning for state, local, and voluntary organization emergency management officials, the Secretary of Homeland Security should direct the FEMA Administrator to evaluate alternative cost-effective methods for delivering its course on access and functional needs, such as via virtual classes.
3. To help ensure its key training on incorporating access and functional needs into emergency planning reaches a sufficiently wide audience, the Secretary should direct the FEMA Administrator to collect information about the potential pool of participants, set general goals for the number of state and local emergency managers that will take

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this course, and implement the delivery methods needed to meet these goals.

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## Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), for review and comment. Officials provided written comments, which are reproduced in appendix II and described below, as well as technical comments, which we incorporated in the report as appropriate.

FEMA agreed with all three of our recommendations and outlined steps it plans to take to implement them.

Regarding our first recommendation to establish written procedures to clarify the role of regional disability integration staff, officials noted FEMA's plans to convene a working group to identify effective communication channels and foster collaborative relationships among ODIC, Regional Administrators, and regional disability integration staff. More specifically, FEMA expects the workgroup to build on the directive issued in December 2016 and establish written procedures on (1) the roles and responsibilities of regional disability integration staff; (2) developing performance goals to assess their performance; and (3) opening clearer communication channels among these staff, Regional Administrators, and disability integration staff in headquarters. We applaud FEMA's effort to clarify the roles and responsibilities of regional disability integration staff in its recently issued directive. We believe that FEMA's proposed plan to further encourage collaboration through the issuance of instructions for implementing the directive will help to better ensure support for and inclusion of individuals with disabilities affected by disasters across all FEMA regions.

Regarding our second and third recommendations related to the delivery method and participants for FEMA's key course on integrating access and functional needs into emergency planning, FEMA officials said they plan to explore additional delivery methods through various means, including through participant feedback. Additionally, they plan to develop a baseline of the number of emergency managers taking the course, including identifying specific numbers for the target audience by state and establishing a reasonable metric for the annual delivery of the course. FEMA officials stated that these metrics will also help inform FEMA leadership on the potential need to develop alternative delivery methods. We encourage FEMA to pursue these efforts and continue to believe that such efforts, if implemented, will provide a greater number of state and

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local emergency managers and others with the knowledge and tools to best support people with disabilities before, during, and after disasters.

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We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Secretary of Homeland Security, and other interested parties. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at <http://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-7215 or [brownke@gao.gov](mailto:brownke@gao.gov). Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report are listed in appendix III.

*Kay C. Brown*

Kay Brown  
Director, Education, Workforce, and Income Security Issues

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*List of Requesters*

The Honorable Ron Johnson  
Chairman  
The Honorable Claire McCaskill  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs  
United States Senate

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

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

The Honorable Martha McSally  
Chairwoman  
Subcommittee on Border and Maritime Security  
Committee on Homeland Security  
House of Representatives

The Honorable Susan Brooks  
House of Representatives

# Appendix I: Emergency Support Function Descriptions and Coordinating or Primary Agencies

**Table 1: Emergency Support Function Descriptions and Coordinating or Primary Agencies**

<b>Emergency Support Function<sup>a</sup></b>	<b>Purpose</b>	<b>Coordinating Agency or Agencies</b>	<b>Primary Agency or Agencies</b>
1. Transportation	Provides support by assisting local, state, tribal, territorial, insular area, and federal governmental entities; voluntary organizations; nongovernmental organizations; and the private sector in the management of transportation systems and infrastructure during domestic threats or in response to actual or potential incidents.	Department of Transportation	Department of Transportation
2. Communications	Supports the restoration of communications infrastructure, coordinates communications support to response efforts, facilitates the delivery of information to emergency management decision makers, and assists in the stabilization and reestablishment of systems and applications during incidents.	Department of Homeland Security	Department of Homeland Security
3. Public Works and Engineering	Coordinates and organizes the resources of the federal government to facilitate the delivery of multiple core capabilities.	Department of Defense	Department of Defense
4. Firefighting	Provides federal support for the detection and suppression of wildland, rural, and urban fires resulting from, or occurring coincidentally with, an all-hazard incident requiring a coordinated national response for assistance.	Department of Agriculture; Department of Homeland Security	Department of Agriculture
5. Information and Planning	Collects, analyzes, processes, and disseminates information about a potential or actual incident and conducts deliberate and crisis action planning activities to facilitate the overall activities in providing assistance to the whole community.	Department of Homeland Security	Department of Homeland Security
6. Mass Care, Emergency Assistance, Temporary Housing, and Human Services	Coordinates and provides life-sustaining resources, essential services, and other support when the needs of disaster survivors exceed local, state, tribal, territorial, and insular area government capabilities.	Department of Homeland Security	Department of Homeland Security; American Red Cross
7. Logistics	Integrates whole community logistics incident planning and support for timely and efficient delivery of supplies, equipment, services, and facilities. It also facilitates comprehensive logistics planning, technical assistance, training, education, exercise, incident response, and sustainment that leverage the capability and resources of federal logistics partners, public and private stakeholders, and nongovernmental organizations in support of both responders and disaster survivors.	General Services Administration; Department of Homeland Security	General Services Administration; Department of Homeland Security



**Appendix I: Emergency Support Function  
Descriptions and Coordinating or Primary  
Agencies**

<b>Emergency Support Function<sup>a</sup></b>	<b>Purpose</b>	<b>Coordinating Agency or Agencies</b>	<b>Primary Agency or Agencies</b>
8. Public Health and Medical Services	Provides the mechanism for federal assistance to supplement local, state, tribal, territorial, and insular area resources in response to a disaster, emergency, or incident that may lead to a public health, medical, behavioral, or human service emergency, including those that have international implications.	Department of Health and Human Services	Department of Health and Human Services
9. Search and Rescue	Deploys federal search and rescue resources to provide lifesaving assistance to local, state, tribal, territorial, and insular area authorities, including local Search and Rescue Coordinators and Mission Coordinators when there is an actual or anticipated request for federal search and rescue assistance.	Department of Homeland Security	Department of Homeland Security; Department of the Interior; Department of Defense
10. Oil and Hazardous Materials Response	Provides federal support in response to an actual or potential discharge and/or release of oil or hazardous materials when activated.	Environmental Protection Agency	Environmental Protection Agency; Department of Homeland Security
11. Agriculture and Natural Resources	Organizes and coordinates federal support for the protection of the nation's agricultural and natural and cultural resources during national emergencies. ESF #11 works during actual and potential incidents to provide nutrition assistance; respond to animal and agricultural health issues; provide technical expertise, coordination and support of animal and agricultural emergency management; ensure the safety and defense of the nation's supply of meat, poultry, and processed egg products; and ensure the protection of natural and cultural resources and historic properties.	Department of Agriculture	Department of Agriculture; Department of the Interior
12. Energy	Provides support to the Department of Homeland Security by assisting local, state, tribal, territorial, and federal government entities; nongovernmental organizations; and the private sector by coordinating government capabilities, services, technical assistance, and engineering expertise during disasters and incidents that require a coordinated federal response. The term "energy" includes producing, storing, refining, transporting, generating, transmitting, conserving, building, distributing, maintaining, and controlling energy systems and system components.	Department of Energy	Department of Energy
13. Public Safety and Security	Provides federal public safety and security assistance to local, state, tribal, territorial, and federal organizations overwhelmed by the results of an actual or anticipated natural/manmade disaster or an act of terrorism.	Department of Justice	Department of Justice

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<b>Emergency Support Function<sup>a</sup></b>	<b>Purpose</b>	<b>Coordinating Agency or Agencies</b>	<b>Primary Agency or Agencies</b>
15. External Affairs	Provides accurate, coordinated, timely, and accessible information to affected audiences, including governments, media, the private sector, and the local populace, including children; those with disabilities and others with access and functional needs; and individuals with limited English proficiency.	Department of Homeland Security	Department of Homeland Security

Source: GAO analysis of Federal Emergency Management Agency documentation. | GAO-17-200

<sup>a</sup>ESF 14, "Long Term Community Recovery," was superseded in 2011 by the National Disaster Recovery Framework.

# Appendix II: Comments from the Department of Homeland Security

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



**Homeland  
Security**

January 17, 2017

Kay E. Brown  
Director, Education, Workforce, and Income Security  
U.S. Government Accountability Office  
441 G Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20548

Re: Management's Response to Draft Report GAO-17-200, "Federal Disaster Assistance: FEMA's Progress Aiding Individuals with Disabilities Could be Further Enhanced"

Dear Ms. Brown:

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) work in planning and conducting its review and issuing this report.

The Department is pleased to note GAO's recognition of the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) efforts and progress in improving the delivery of disaster assistance and services to people with disabilities through its Office of Disability Integration and Coordination (ODIC), established in 2010. The ODIC coordinates emergency preparedness, response and recover for children and adults with disabilities during and after a disaster. FEMA is committed to preparing individuals and strengthening communities before, during, and after disasters, and considers all members of a community to be equal during the planning, response, and recovery phases of emergencies.

For example, FEMA began to further clarify the roles and responsibilities of its Regional Disability Integration Specialists (RDIS) by issuing a Directive titled "Disability Integration and Coordination – Inclusive Emergency Management" on December 9, 2016. This Directive provides a formal foundation on which to build better coordination between ODIC and FEMA Regional Administrators with respect to the shared responsibility of clarifying RDIS roles and responsibilities, as well as establishing performance goals and providing performance evaluations for RDIS. FEMA plans to develop an accompanying Instruction with procedures and guidance for implementing the Directive.

The draft report contained three recommendations with which the Department concurs. Attached find our detailed response to the recommendations.

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

Sincerely,



J. H. CRUMPACKER, CIA, CFE  
Director  
Departmental GAO-OIG Liaison Office

Attachment

**Attachment: DHS Management Response to Recommendations  
Contained in GAO-17-200**

GAO recommended that the Secretary of Homeland Security direct the FEMA Administrator to:

**Recommendation 1:** Establish written procedures for how regions should involve the ODIC in clarifying disability integration staff's roles, evaluating staff performance, and setting expectations for how staff communicate with headquarters and the regions.

**Response:** Concur. FEMA agrees that establishing written procedures to clarify the roles, responsibilities, and communication flow among ODIC, Regional Administrators, and RDIS would enhance FEMA's capacity to include and consider the needs of people with disabilities with greater consistency across the country. ODIC will convene a working group to identify effective communication channels and foster a collaborative relationship among ODIC, Regional Administrators, and RDIS during steady state and disaster operations to continue to fulfill the mandate set forth in the Post-Katrina Emergency Reform Act. In particular, the working group will build on the recently issued Directive (Disability Integration and Coordination – Inclusive Emergency Management) and contribute to an accompanying Instruction, while establishing specific written procedures on the role and responsibilities of RDIS, developing performance goals to assess the performance of RDIS, and opening clearer channels of communication among the ODIC, Regional Administrators, and RDIS. Estimated Completion Date (ECD): December 31, 2017.

**Recommendation 2:** Evaluate cost-effective methods for delivering its course on access and functional needs, such as via virtual classes.

**Response:** Concur. "Integrating Access and Function Need into Emergency Planning" is FEMA's key course used to educate, train and prepare state, local, tribal and territorial emergency planners, including those organizations that manage the needs of the disabled. FEMA agrees that evaluating expanding the access to this course and supplementing the in-person delivery model through alternative, cost-effective delivery methods, such as virtual modules, is worthwhile. ODIC will explore additional delivery methods for this course through various means, including participant feedback. ECD: December 31, 2017.

**Recommendation 3:** Collect information about the potential pool of participants, set goals for the number of state and local emergency managers that will take this course, and implement the delivery methods needed to meet these goals.

**Response:** Concur. FEMA agrees that reaching a wide audience in connection with its key training course, “Integrating Access and Functional Need into Emergency Planning,” will improve our ability to support disabled persons before, during and after a disaster. ODIC, in collaboration with the appropriate FEMA partners, will develop a baseline of emergency managers taking the course and subsequent metrics for delivery of the course, identifying specific numbers for the target audience by state, and then establishing a reasonable metric for the annual delivery of the course. These metrics will inform FEMA leadership on the potential need to develop an alternative cost-effective delivery method. ECD: December 31, 2017.

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# Appendix III: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

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## GAO Contact

Kay E. Brown, (202) 512-7215, [brownke@gao.gov](mailto:brownke@gao.gov)

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## Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, Sara Schibanoff Kelly (Assistant Director), Sara Pelton (Analyst-in-Charge), Aimee Elivert, and Lauren Friedman made key contributions to this report. Also contributing to this report were Susan Aschoff, Jessica Botsford, Sarah Cornetto, Lauren Gilbertson, Kristen Jones, Jean McSween, Mimi Nguyen, Debra Prescott, Almeta Spencer, and Erica Varner.

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# Related GAO Products

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*Emergency Communications: Effectiveness of the Post-Katrina Interagency Coordination Group Could Be Enhanced.* [GAO-16-681](#). Washington, D.C.: July 14, 2016.

*Disaster Recovery: FEMA Needs to Assess Its Effectiveness in Implementing the National Disaster Recovery Framework.* [GAO-16-476](#). Washington, D.C.: May 26, 2016.

*Disaster Response: FEMA Has Made Progress Implementing Key Programs, but Opportunities for Improvement Exist.* [GAO-16-87](#). Washington, D.C.: February 5, 2016.

*Federal Emergency Management Agency: Strengthening Regional Coordination Could Enhance Preparedness Efforts.* [GAO-16-38](#). Washington, D.C.: February 4, 2016.

*Emergency Management: FEMA Has Made Progress since Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy, but Challenges Remain.* [GAO-16-90T](#). Washington, D.C.: October 22, 2015.

*Disaster Contracting: FEMA Needs to Cohesively Manage Its Workforce and Fully Address Post-Katrina Reforms.* [GAO-15-783](#). Washington, D.C.: September 29, 2015.

*Emergency Management: FEMA Collaborates Effectively with Logistics Partners but Could Strengthen Implementation of Its Capabilities Assessment Tool.* [GAO-15-781](#). Washington, D.C.: September 10, 2015.

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