

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-19-526](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Three catastrophic hurricanes affected more than 28 million people living in Texas, Florida, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands in 2017. Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria—which all made landfall within four weeks—caused a combined \$265 billion in damage, and led to unprecedented demands for food and shelter, according to FEMA. FEMA and the Red Cross are the primary agencies responsible for coordinating mass care under the federal disaster response framework. GAO was asked to review their efforts.

This report examines (1) FEMA's and the Red Cross' coordination of mass care in response to the 2017 hurricanes, and (2) FEMA's support and use of assessments of mass care capabilities for the 2017 hurricanes.

GAO reviewed relevant federal laws, federal frameworks, and written agreements between federal, state, or local governments and various voluntary organizations providing mass care services. GAO also interviewed state, territorial, local, and voluntary organization officials in Florida, Puerto Rico, Texas, and the U.S. Virgin Islands; as well as officials from Red Cross, FEMA, other relevant federal agencies, and voluntary organizations.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making six recommendations, including that FEMA emphasize the importance of defining roles and responsibilities in its guidance to states and localities, require them to solicit information from key mass care providers in assessing capabilities, and develop protocols for providing feedback to grantees on capability assessments. FEMA agreed with all but one of GAO's recommendations; GAO maintains its recommendations are valid.

View [GAO-19-526](#). For more information, contact Kathryn A. Larin at (202) 512-7215 or larink@gao.gov.

September 2019

DISASTER RESPONSE

FEMA and the American Red Cross Need to Ensure Key Mass Care Organizations are Included in Coordination and Planning

What GAO Found

Following the three major U.S. hurricanes in 2017, disaster relief efforts of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the American Red Cross (Red Cross) benefitted from locating key partners in the same place. In-person coordination was critical to maintaining communication in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands given the prolonged power outages and damage to public structures (see photo). However, some needs related to mass care—such as shelter, food, and supply distribution—were unmet. For example, local officials in Texas said flooded roads prevented trucks from delivering supplies. Providers encountered challenges in part because state and local agreements with voluntary organizations did not always clearly detail what mass care services could be provided. Additionally, FEMA guidance and training materials do not explicitly encourage states and localities to include in their written agreements the specific assistance each agency or organization can provide. This limits the benefits of mass care coordination and may put disaster victims at risk.

Public School in Puerto Rico Damaged by Hurricane Maria



Source: GAO photo. | GAO-19-526

State, territorial, and local grantees of federal disaster preparedness grants are required to regularly submit information on their capabilities to FEMA, and FEMA has provided related guidance and technical assistance. However, the information some grantees provided to FEMA was not specific enough to aid its response in 2017. Moreover, FEMA does not require grantees to specify the organizations providing mass care services in their capabilities assessments. Also, FEMA does not have systematic protocols for providing feedback to grantees to improve their assessments. These limitations hinder FEMA's efforts to strengthen emergency preparedness.