

GAO@100 Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-21-105202](#), a testimony before the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

In response to the public health and economic crises created by the COVID-19 pandemic, Congress provided billions of dollars across a range of agencies to mitigate the effects of COVID-19. This included billions to:

- FEMA's Disaster Relief Fund to provide assistance to individuals as well as state, local, tribal, and territorial governments, and
- DOT and Treasury to provide financial assistance to the transportation sector.

This statement describes: (1) the federal response and selected relief programs administered by FEMA, DOT, and Treasury and (2) lessons learned based on GAO's reviews of selected COVID-19 relief programs, including related recommendations and their implementation status. This statement is based on GAO's body of work on the CARES Act issued from June 2020 through July 2021. To update this information, GAO reviewed agency documentation; and interviewed agency officials, industry associations, and selected businesses that applied to these programs on the latest implementation efforts.

What GAO Recommends

GAO has made numerous recommendations to help improve the government's ongoing response and recovery efforts and prepare for future public health emergencies, including the six identified in this statement. While Treasury took action to develop a compliance monitoring program, the other five recommendations to FEMA and DOT still need to be implemented.

View [GAO-21-105202](#). For more information, contact Heather Krause at (202) 512-2834 or krauseh@gao.gov or Chris P. Currie at (404) 679-1875 or curriec@gao.gov

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COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Actions Needed to Improve Federal Oversight of Assistance to Individuals, Communities, and the Transportation Industry

What GAO Found

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), Department of Transportation (DOT), and Department of the Treasury (Treasury), among others, continue to provide financial assistance to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

- FEMA reported obligating over \$79 billion from its Disaster Relief Fund to respond to COVID-19. Through several programs, FEMA is providing help to individuals with funeral costs; reimbursing communities for vaccine distribution; and funding federal agencies' efforts to support communities, including National Guard deployments.
- DOT and Treasury continue to make available the over \$200 billion appropriated by COVID-19 relief laws for financial assistance to the transportation sector, including to air carriers, airports and airport tenants, Amtrak, and transit agencies. Through several financial assistance programs, GAO's work has found DOT and Treasury have provided critical support to the transportation sector during a period of sharp declines in travel demand and uncertainty about the pace and nature of the recovery. Depending on the program, financial assistance has reportedly enabled recipients to avoid layoffs, maintain service, and ramp up operations as demand for their services improves.

Based on GAO's prior work examining responses to public health and fiscal emergencies, including the COVID-19 pandemic, GAO has (1) identified key lessons learned that could improve the federal response to emergencies, and (2) made several related recommendations, including ones that highlight the importance of applying these lessons learned.

Lessons learned

- Coordinate, establish, and define roles and responsibilities among those responding to the crisis and address key capability gaps.
- Provide clear, consistent communication.
- Collect and analyze data to inform decision-making and future preparedness.
- Establish mechanisms for accountability and transparency to help ensure program integrity and address fraud risks.
- Consider challenges posed by setting up new programs quickly.

Source: GAO. | [GAO-21-105202](#)

For example, DOT has not developed a national aviation preparedness plan to **coordinate, establish, and define roles and responsibilities** for communicable diseases across the federal government. GAO recommended in 2015 that DOT work with federal partners to develop such a plan, but it has not taken any action. Without such a plan, the U.S. is less prepared to respond to future communicable disease events. In addition, FEMA has faced challenges **collecting and analyzing data** on requests for supplies, such as personal protective equipment, made through the federal government. In 2020, GAO recommended that FEMA work with relevant stakeholders to develop an interim solution to help states track the status of their supply requests and plan for supply needs. FEMA has not taken action on this recommendation, and until the agency develops a solution, states, tribes, and territories will likely continue to face challenges that hamper the effectiveness of their COVID-19 response.