

GAO Highlights

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

Why GAO Did This Study

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

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

What GAO Recommends

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

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

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DISASTER RESPONSE

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

What GAO Found

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

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

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