



Highlights of [GAO-10-64](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

The Department of Homeland Security, through the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), awards grants to fire departments and other organizations for equipment, staffing, and other needs. As of July 2009, FEMA had received about 25,000 and 22,000 applications for its fiscal years 2007 and 2008 fire grant programs, respectively, and had awarded more than 5,000 grants in both years. GAO was congressionally directed to review the application and award process for these grants. This report addresses the (1) extent to which FEMA has met statutory and program requirements for distributing the grant funds; (2) actions FEMA has taken to provide assistance to grant applicants and involve the fire service community in the grant process; and (3) extent to which FEMA has ensured that its grant process is accessible, clear, and consistent with requirements, including its grant guidance. GAO analyzed relevant laws and interviewed 36 randomly selected grant applicants to obtain their views, but the results are not generalizable.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that FEMA, among other things, establish a procedure to track Emergency Medical Service (EMS) awards, ensure that grant priorities are aligned with application questions and scoring values, and provide specific feedback to rejected applicants. DHS agreed with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-10-64](#) or [key components](#).
For more information, contact William O. Jenkins, Jr. at (202) 512-8777 or jenkinswo@gao.gov.

FIRE GRANTS

FEMA Has Met Most Requirements for Awarding Fire Grants, but Additional Actions Would Improve Its Grant Process

What GAO Found

FEMA met seven of eight statutory requirements and two of three FEMA established program requirements for distributing fiscal years 2007 and 2008 grant funds. (GAO used fiscal year 2007 data for two requirements because not all fiscal year 2008 funds had been awarded by July 2009.) For example, FEMA met the statutory requirement that volunteer and combination fire departments (which have both paid and volunteer firefighters) collectively receive at least a minimum of 55 percent of fiscal year 2008 grant funds, and also met the program requirement that volunteer departments receive at least 22 percent. GAO was unable to determine whether FEMA met the statutory requirement that at least 3.5 percent of fiscal year 2008 grant funds be awarded for EMS. FEMA reported that its system is not designed to separately track grants awarded to fire departments for EMS purposes and, therefore, it could not determine if it met this requirement. FEMA reported that while it conducted research to determine that it met this requirement for 1 year, doing so was laborious. Establishing procedures to track awards for EMS purposes would allow FEMA to readily determine if it met statutory requirements.

FEMA assists grant applicants by sponsoring workshops and involves representatives of the fire service community in establishing criteria and reviewing applications. Each year, FEMA convenes leaders of nine major fire service organizations to conduct a criteria development meeting to develop the program's criteria and funding priorities. FEMA's peer review process—which members of the fire service organizations assess grant applications—also helps ensure that the fire service community is involved in the grant process. FEMA officials stated that they strive to provide an even chance for as many fire departments and other organizations as possible to serve on peer review panels. They also stated that they are considering conducting outreach efforts to expand peer review participation, such as announcing opportunities to serve on an upcoming peer review panel at workshops.

FEMA has taken actions to ensure that its fire grants award process is accessible and clear to grant applicants—28 of 36 applicants GAO interviewed found the guidance to be clear—but GAO also identified inconsistencies between the stated grant application priorities and the application questions and scoring values. For example, the fiscal year 2008 guidance for the grant that funds the recruitment and retention of firefighters states that continuity—maintaining recruitment and retention efforts beyond the life of the grant—was a priority for grant awards. However, no grant application question addressed this priority and the scoring values did not include it. Thus, it is difficult for FEMA to ensure that grant funds are awarded in accordance with the agency's funding priorities. Further, four of the nine major fire service organizations voiced concerns about feedback FEMA provided to rejected applicants, and 22 of the 36 applicants stated that the feedback was helpful to little or no extent. FEMA officials stated that they could strengthen efforts to improve feedback. Providing specific feedback to rejected applicants could help FEMA strengthen future grant application processes.