



Highlights of [GAO-09-796](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Concerns over the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) provision of temporary housing assistance, including travel trailers at group sites, after the 2005 hurricanes led to the development of the *National Disaster Housing Strategy*. GAO was asked to assess (1) the challenges households faced in transitioning to permanent housing, (2) the extent to which FEMA measured its performance in closing and transitioning households in group sites, (3) the strategy's effectiveness in defining FEMA's roles and responsibilities for closing and transitioning households in group sites, and (4) the alternatives to travel trailers in group sites and how well the strategy assessed them. GAO reviewed the strategy and interviewed officials from FEMA, state agencies, and selected nonprofit and housing research groups.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security direct FEMA to (1) develop results-oriented performance measures for assistance in group sites, (2) update its planning documents to reflect key characteristics of effective national strategies and plans, and (3) clearly describe in FEMA's guidance how travel trailers or other options identified by the states can be deployed when other preferred options are not available. FEMA generally agreed with GAO's recommendations.

[View GAO-09-796 or key components.](#)
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DISASTER HOUSING

FEMA Needs More Detailed Guidance and Performance Measures to Help Ensure Effective Assistance after Major Disasters

What GAO Found

Households living in FEMA group sites encountered various challenges in transitioning to permanent housing. A significant challenge cited by several reports and officials GAO contacted was the availability of affordable rental housing. Other challenges that were cited included insufficient financing to fund repairs of homes, significantly higher insurance premiums, and the availability of full-time employment to support disaster victims' return to permanent housing.

FEMA's overall effectiveness in measuring its performance in closing and transitioning households in group sites was limited because the agency's measures do not provide information on program results that would be helpful in gauging whether the program is achieving its goal. Previously, GAO reported that performance measures should be aligned with program goals and cover the activities that an entity is expected to perform to support the purpose of the program. However, FEMA's performance measures for Katrina and Rita group sites primarily describe program outputs and do not provide information on results, such as the timeliness or efficiency of closing group sites and transitioning households into permanent housing. Having such information could help identify potential problems in meeting goals and could be used to make decisions about resources needed and steps to be taken.

The *National Disaster Housing Strategy* broadly defines FEMA's roles and responsibilities for closing group sites and assisting households with the transition into permanent housing. Although the strategy states that FEMA is responsible for closing group sites and assisting households find permanent housing, the strategy does not reflect the key characteristics of effective national strategies and plans that GAO identified in prior work. For example, the strategy does not explain how FEMA will work with other agencies in closing these sites and transitioning households into permanent housing. A lack of a detailed plan that includes information on the steps FEMA needs to take to assist households with transitioning into permanent housing could lead to delays in the future in helping disaster victims return to more stable and conventional living arrangements.

Officials contacted and reports reviewed by GAO identified a number of housing options that could serve as alternatives to travel trailers in group sites—for example, providing rental assistance for existing housing and repairing damaged rental housing. However, FEMA's strategy does not assess alternatives, in part, because evaluations are ongoing. Also, it does not provide clear guidance on the specific temporary housing options that states can use instead of travel trailers while FEMA completes these evaluations. Without more specific information on what these temporary housing options are, including alternatives to travel trailers, state officials will not have the information needed to expedite the selection of temporary housing options. As a result, FEMA and the states may not be fully prepared to quickly respond to the temporary housing needs of those displaced by major disasters.