



Highlights of [GAO-07-88](#), a report to congressional addressees

Why GAO Did This Study

In 2005, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita destroyed thousands of homes and displaced over 1 million people. In light of widespread Congressional and public interest in U.S. agencies' performance in assisting hurricane victims, GAO initiated work under the Comptroller General's authority to examine federal housing assistance. Specifically, this report examines (1) the extent to which the National Response Plan (NRP) clearly described the responsibilities and capabilities of federal agencies and the Red Cross; (2) the extent to which these organizations had plans for providing sheltering and housing assistance; and (3) the perceptions of victims and others regarding the assistance needed and provided. GAO reviewed the NRP and related documents, interviewed Red Cross and federal agency officials and a limited number of storm victims, and convened a group of experts to discuss these issues.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that HUD, Treasury, USDA, and VA propose revisions to ESF-6 that fully reflect their capabilities; that these agencies and Defense develop fact sheets as required by standard operating procedures; and that HUD, USDA, and VA develop operational plans for their ESF-6 responsibilities. These agencies generally concurred with our recommendations.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-88.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact David G. Wood at (202) 512-8678 or woodD@gao.gov.

DISASTER ASSISTANCE

Better Planning Needed for Housing Victims of Catastrophic Disasters

What GAO Found

In general, the NRP, including its annex covering sheltering and temporary housing (emergency support function no. 6 or ESF-6) clearly described the overall responsibilities of the two primary agencies—the Red Cross and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). However, the responsibilities described for the support agencies—the Departments of Agriculture (USDA), Defense, Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Treasury, and Veterans Affairs (VA)—did not, and still do not, fully reflect their capabilities. For example, USDA provided temporary housing for victims, and Treasury acted to make available vacant rental units subsidized through a tax program, but the ESF-6 annex did not reflect these capabilities. Further, the support agencies had not, and have not yet, developed fact sheets laying out their roles and responsibilities, notification and activation procedures, and agency specific authorities, as called for by ESF-6 operating procedures. FEMA's ability to effectively coordinate federal housing assistance was limited because the agency was not aware of the support agencies' full capabilities.

The Red Cross and federal agencies generally lacked plans for providing shelter and temporary housing in response to catastrophic disasters such as Hurricanes Katrina and Rita but have since taken some steps to improve their response capabilities. Some ESF-6 support agencies had not developed operational plans for meeting their ESF-6 responsibilities, and while they were ultimately able to contribute much-needed assistance, it was not as timely as it might have been. For example, HUD and VA worked out agreements with FEMA after the storms to provide vacant properties, but it took several months before some were available to victims. HUD, USDA, and VA have formed an informal working group to work out procedural details for providing housing assistance, in order to avoid the need to do so after a disaster event. However, this group is not intended to address the full range of these agencies' responsibilities under ESF-6, and does not have a specific timetable for its activities.

The specific needs of victims and their perceptions of the assistance that was provided varied, depending in part on circumstances such as where they were located after the disaster, whether they were homeowners or renters, and whether they had special needs. Most victims were eligible for some form of federal temporary housing assistance—such as rental assistance or a travel trailer—and those we contacted had mixed perceptions of the assistance they received. Our interviews with victims, as well as our expert group, indicate that temporary housing needs include not just shelter, but also access to medical facilities, public transportation, schools, employment opportunities, and other social services—and, particularly for those displaced to distant locations, information about all of these things. Legislation enacted in October 2006 requires a strategy that is to address a number of these ancillary needs for victims of future catastrophic disasters, and FEMA has initiated this effort.