



Testimony  
Before the Subcommittee on Economic  
Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency  
Management, Committee on Transportation  
and Infrastructure, House of Representatives

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## FEMA

# Opportunities Exist to Address Mission Challenges and Increased Workload

Statement of Chris Currie, Director,  
Homeland Security and Justice Team

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-24-107351](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

FEMA leads the nation's efforts to prepare for, respond to, and recover from disasters. In recent years, the increasing frequency and costs of disasters, the COVID-19 pandemic, and other responsibilities have placed additional pressures on FEMA.

This statement discusses GAO's prior work and recommendations related to FEMA's (1) roles and responsibilities outside of natural disasters and (2) workforce challenges.

This statement is based on products GAO issued from May 2020 through May 2023, along with selected updates to address GAO recommendations, and updates from FEMA. For those products, GAO reviewed and analyzed federal laws, agency guidance, and other agency documents. GAO also analyzed data on FEMA's workforce, and disaster assistance, among others. GAO interviewed knowledgeable officials from FEMA; other selected federal agencies; and state, local, and territorial officials impacted by disasters.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO has made 24 recommendations in prior reports designed to address the various mission and management challenges discussed in this statement. FEMA has taken steps to address these recommendations. GAO will continue to monitor FEMA's efforts to determine if they fully address the challenges GAO has identified.

View [GAO-24-107351](#) For more information, contact Chris Currie at (404) 679-1875 or [curriec@gao.gov](mailto:curriec@gao.gov).

March 12, 2024

## FEMA

### Opportunities Exist to Address Mission Challenges and Increased Workload

#### What GAO Found

The increasing frequency of disasters overall and the additional responsibilities for responding to other events have stretched the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) workforce in unprecedented ways. GAO's work has identified various challenges FEMA has faced in its efforts to respond to these additional events.

The scale and scope of federal efforts and funding required to address the COVID-19 pandemic tested FEMA's and other federal agencies' capacity to mount an equitable and effective nationwide response. FEMA's role included lost wages assistance; COVID-19 funeral assistance; public assistance to state, tribal, and territorial governments; mission assignments to other federal agencies; and mobile vaccination units. For example, GAO reported in April 2022 that FEMA had received and was processing more than 444,000 applications for COVID-19 funeral assistance since April 2021—when it began accepting applications—compared to the approximately 6,000 cases of funeral assistance the agency had processed over the decade prior to the pandemic. FEMA reported that as of December 2023 it has obligated \$123 billion in response to the pandemic and projected that it will obligate a total of \$144 billion by the end of fiscal year 2024. In addition to the 59 major disaster declarations for COVID-19, as of July 2022, FEMA had about 500 non-COVID-19 active major disaster declarations in various states of response and recovery. At the same time, FEMA recently reported a projected deficit of nearly \$6.4 billion in the fund by September 2024.

GAO has also identified several gaps in FEMA's internal controls meant to prevent improper or potentially fraudulent payments in funeral assistance. In April 2022, GAO recommended that FEMA implement additional control activities to ensure that consistent and accurate data are available to prevent and detect improper payments and potential fraud. FEMA has fully addressed this recommendation implementing additional controls but as of April 2023 has only partially addressed the recommendation on data consistency and accuracy. Until FEMA fully addresses this recommendation, they will continue limited ability oversee and prevent and detect fraud.

GAO's past work has identified longstanding challenges facing the FEMA workforce, which have been exacerbated given FEMA's additional responsibilities. Specifically, in May 2023, GAO reported that FEMA had a disaster workforce strength of approximately 11,400 employees at the beginning of fiscal year 2022, a gap of 35 percent between the actual number of staff and the staffing target of 17,670. FEMA officials stated that they faced additional responsibilities due to COVID-19, while also managing the traditional seasonal peaks of disaster activity during the year. This created burnout for many employees and increased employee attrition. GAO recommended that FEMA document plans to monitor and evaluate the agency's hiring efforts to address staffing gaps, among other recommendations. As of January 2024, FEMA has taken some steps to address these recommendations, including developing yearly hiring targets to ensure they are on pace to meet overall hiring goals. To fully address the recommendation, FEMA should finalize its staffing plans.

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March 12, 2024

Chairman Graves, Chairman Perry, Ranking Members Larsen and Titus, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss our work on the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) mission challenges and the increasing workload and expectations on the agency.

FEMA, within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), leads our nation's efforts to prepare for, protect against, respond to, recover from, and mitigate the risk of disasters. Under the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act (Stafford Act), the President's declaration of a major disaster or emergency is the key mechanism by which FEMA gets involved in coordinating and funding disaster response and recovery activities.<sup>1</sup> The Disaster Relief Fund is a primary source of federal disaster assistance. In addition to providing assistance after natural disasters, the Disaster Relief Fund can be used to assist in response and recovery from other disasters such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

In recent years, FEMA has faced an unprecedented demand for its services and played a significant role in various disasters and emergencies. For example, FEMA played a key role in the federal response to the COVID-19 pandemic and responded to other emergencies such as the condominium collapse in Surfside, Florida in June 2021. FEMA also assisted with the February 2023 Norfolk Southern train derailment in East Palestine, Ohio, Afghan refugee resettlement efforts and at the southwest border as directed by the President and Secretary of Homeland Security.

In August 2023, funding requirements threatened to exceed available resources in the Disaster Relief Fund. In response FEMA implemented measures to prioritize response and immediate recovery efforts, and to pause new obligations that were not essential for lifesaving and life-sustaining activities. Such steps may be necessary again in fiscal year

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<sup>1</sup>42 U.S.C. §§ 5170, 5191.

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2024. Specifically, FEMA recently reported a projected deficit of nearly \$6.4 billion by September 2024.<sup>2</sup>

Additionally, the increasing frequency of disasters overall and the additional responsibilities for responding to other events have stretched FEMA's workforce in unprecedented ways. For example, the number of disasters FEMA reported managing at the peak of the hurricane season more than doubled in the last seven years, from 30 disasters in 2016 to 71 disasters in 2023. Similarly, the average daily deployments increased from 3,331 employees before 2017, to 7,113 after 2017.

FEMA's role during COVID-19 and other events has raised questions about its capacity to handle additional responsibilities on top of its normal natural disaster workload. My statement today discusses our prior work on FEMA's: 1) roles and responsibilities outside of natural disasters; and 2) workforce challenges.

My statement today is based on products we issued from May 2020 to May 2023, along with selected updates from FEMA's January 2024 Disaster Relief Fund Monthly Statement and FEMA's COVID-19 funeral assistance website.<sup>3</sup> To perform our prior work, we reviewed and analyzed federal law, agency guidance, and other agency documentation. We also analyzed data on FEMA's workforce, and disaster assistance programs, among others. We interviewed officials from FEMA, and selected federal agencies, as well as officials from states, local jurisdictions, and territories impacted by disasters. More detailed information on the scope and methodology of our prior work can be found in each of the issued reports cited throughout this statement.

We conducted the work on which this statement is based in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained

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<sup>2</sup>Department of Homeland Security, Federal Emergency Management Agency, *Disaster Relief Fund: Monthly Report as of December 31, 2023— January 8, 2024 Fiscal Year 2024 Report to Congress*.

<sup>3</sup>For a complete list of products this statement is based on see GAO Related Products at the end of the statement.

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provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

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## FEMA's Roles and Responsibilities Outside of Natural Disasters have Increased

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### COVID-19 Pandemic

We have previously noted that the scale and scope of federal efforts and funding required to address the COVID-19 pandemic tested FEMA's and other federal agencies' capacity to mount an equitable and effective nationwide response. We continue to be concerned about challenges FEMA faces managing a significant number of concurrent disaster operations—including for remaining COVID-19 assistance—and the demands on the Disaster Relief Fund. Our concerns about the ability of the Disaster Assistance Fund to meet demands continue. In addition to the 59 major disaster declarations for COVID-19, as of July 2022, the agency had 494 open non-COVID-19 active major disaster declarations in various states of response and recovery. We previously reported that the number of concurrent demands on the Disaster Relief Fund and the unpredictability of future response needs raised questions about its availability for the significant number of active disasters in different stages of recovery, including the ongoing recovery in Puerto Rico—one of the largest recovery efforts in FEMA history and other events.<sup>4</sup> As of December 2023, FEMA reported \$123 billion in obligations for COVID-19 and projected obligations to increase to \$144 billion by the end of fiscal year 2024.<sup>5</sup> FEMA's COVID-19 pandemic response efforts are discussed below.

**Individual Assistance.** FEMA provides Individual Assistance to eligible individuals and households who have sustained losses as a direct result

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<sup>4</sup>GAO, *COVID-19: Urgent Actions Needed to Better Ensure an Effective Federal Response* [GAO-21-191](#) (Washington, D.C.: November 30, 2020).

<sup>5</sup>Department of Homeland Security, Federal Emergency Management Agency, *Disaster Relief Fund: Monthly Report as of December 31, 2023— January 8, 2024 Fiscal Year 2024 Report to Congress*.

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of a disaster. For weather- and climate-related and earthquake disasters, many of these needs consist of sheltering and housing, and assistance includes repairing damaged dwellings and providing immediate and interim shelter for individuals whose homes were damaged. For COVID-19, Individual Assistance consisted primarily of Lost Wages Assistance and COVID-19 funeral assistance.

**Lost Wages Assistance.** In response to COVID-19, the President issued a presidential memorandum that directed that up to \$44 billion be made available from the Disaster Relief Fund to provide Lost Wages Assistance to supplement unemployment insurance programs.<sup>6</sup> FEMA approved Lost Wages Assistance grant applications totaling more than \$37.3 billion in grant obligations for 49 states, four territories, and the District of Columbia. As of April 2022, \$36.5 billion had been expended by the state workforce agencies. This program resulted in particularly rapid expenditures from the Disaster Relief Fund. In order to administer supplemental payments for lost wages FEMA leveraged existing state unemployment insurance systems or agencies.<sup>7</sup>

**COVID-19 Funeral Assistance.** We previously reported that from April 2021—when it began accepting applications—through February 2022, FEMA received and was processing more than 444,000 applications for COVID-19 funeral assistance and had awarded more than \$1.92 billion for more than 296,000 approved applications, as shown in the figure below.<sup>8</sup> According to FEMA, as of January 1, 2024, there were more than 488,338 applications totaling more than

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<sup>6</sup>The White House, Memorandum on Authorizing the Other Needs Assistance Program for Major Disaster Declarations Related to Coronavirus Disease 2019 (Aug. 8, 2020).

<sup>7</sup>A state's or territory's delivery of supplemental payments for lost wages was contingent upon an approval of a state's administrative plan, which describes the partnership between FEMA and the state or territory for delivering assistance. We have reported on unemployment insurance programs and their programs' susceptibility to fraud. See GAO, *Unemployment Insurance: Data Indicate Substantial Levels of Fraud during the Pandemic; DOL Should Implement an Antifraud Strategy*, [GAO-23-105523](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 22, 2022). For example, in December 2022, we reported that measures and estimates indicate substantial levels of fraud and potential fraud in unemployment insurance programs during the pandemic. We found that based on formal determinations of fraud by states and territories, unemployment insurance fraud during the pandemic is at least \$4.3 billion. However, this does not account for potential fraud that has not been formally determined as such.

<sup>8</sup>GAO, *COVID-19: Current and Future Federal Preparedness Requires Fixes to Improve Health Data and Address Improper Payments* [GAO-22-105397](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 27, 2022).

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\$3.15 billion for 499,096 decedents.<sup>9</sup> Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, FEMA had processed approximately 6,000 cases of funeral assistance over the past decade. FEMA announced that it will continue to provide funeral assistance until September 30, 2025, to those who have lost loved ones due to the pandemic.

In April 2022, we identified several gaps in FEMA's internal controls meant to prevent improper or potentially fraudulent payments in funeral assistance. We recommended that the FEMA Administrator implement additional control activities, where needed, and ensure that consistent and accurate data are available to prevent and detect improper payments and potential fraud. FEMA has fully addressed our recommendation on implementing additional control activities. In April 2022, we also recommended that FEMA address deficiencies in the COVID-19 Funeral Assistance data by updating data records as data are verified, and adding data fields where necessary, to ensure that consistent and accurate data are available for monitoring of potential fraud trends and identifying control deficiencies. However, as of April 2023, the agency had only partially addressed this recommendation. FEMA officials noted that it has established a new payment integrity and fraud prevention section tasked with the review and analysis of potentially fraudulent funeral assistance cases. Additionally, agency officials stated that they were performing an audit of a random sample of applications intended to assess the agency's controls more broadly. While these efforts could help identify inconsistent data elements and lead to improvements, we continue to believe that the agency should make targeted efforts to improve the consistency and accuracy of the COVID-19 funeral assistance data to facilitate oversight and prevent and detect fraud.

**Public Assistance.** FEMA provides disaster assistance through its Public Assistance program to state, local, tribal, and territorial governments, and certain types of private nonprofit organizations so that communities can quickly respond to, and recover from, major disasters or emergencies. After natural disasters, Public Assistance tends to be used for emergency cleanup and for permanent reconstruction projects—for example, to rebuild damaged public infrastructure. For all 59 major disaster declarations for COVID-19, FEMA authorized Public Assistance for emergency protective measures only. This included eligible medical care, purchase and distribution of food, non-congregate medical sheltering,

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<sup>9</sup>Department of Homeland Security, Federal Emergency Management Agency, *COVID-19 Funeral Assistance*, accessed on Feb. 1, 2024, COVID-19 Funeral Assistance | FEMA.gov

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operation of Emergency Operations Centers, and the purchase and distribution of personal protective equipment. As of December 2023, FEMA has reported obligating a total of approximately \$74.3 billion for thousands of COVID-19 Public Assistance projects.<sup>10</sup>

In October 2021, we found that FEMA inconsistently interpreted and applied its policies for expenses eligible for COVID-19 Public Assistance within and across its 10 regions.<sup>11</sup> These inconsistencies were due to, among other things, changes in policies as FEMA used the Public Assistance program for the first time to respond to a nationwide public health emergency. FEMA officials stated that it was difficult to ensure consistency in policies as different states and regions were not experiencing the same things at the same time. We recommended that FEMA ensure consistency of the agency's interpretation and application of the COVID-19 Public Assistance policy and require training to ensure policies are applied consistently nationwide. FEMA has implemented both recommendations. For example, to ensure consistency of COVID-19 guidance, as of November 2023, FEMA has conducted continued outreach to all FEMA regions to further clarify and communicate Public Assistance eligibility requirements nationwide. FEMA also conducted trainings with staff to help ensure staff interpret and apply COVID-19 policies consistently.

**Mission Assignments.** FEMA issues mission assignments—work orders directing other federal agencies to provide direct assistance to state, local, tribal, and territorial governments—to support disaster response and recovery, which FEMA may reimburse through the Disaster Relief Fund. FEMA issued mission assignments to multiple federal agencies—

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<sup>10</sup>Department of Homeland Security, Federal Emergency Management Agency, *Disaster Relief Fund: Monthly Report as of December 31, 2023— January 8, 2024 Fiscal Year 2024 Report to Congress*.

<sup>11</sup>GAO, *COVID-19: Additional Actions Needed to Improve Accountability and Program Effectiveness of Federal Response*, [GAO-22-105051](#) (Washington, D.C. October 27, 2021). FEMA has 10 regional offices located across the United States as follows: Region I: Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Vermont; Region II: New Jersey, New York, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands; Region III: Delaware, District of Columbia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Virginia and W. Virginia; Region IV: Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, N. Carolina, S. Carolina and Tennessee; Region V: Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio and Wisconsin; Region VI: Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas; Region VII: Iowa, Kansas, Missouri and Nebraska; Region VIII: Colorado, Montana, N. Dakota, S. Dakota, Utah and Wyoming; Region IX: Arizona, California, Hawaii, Nevada, American Samoa, Guam, Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Republic of the Marshall Islands, and Federated States of Micronesia; and Region X: Alaska, Idaho, Oregon and Washington.



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the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Department of Labor, Environmental Protection Agency, and Department of Defense, among others—to assist in the COVID-19 response. For example, FEMA issued mission assignments to the National Guard to help set up public vaccination sites in some U.S. territories.<sup>12</sup> As we reported in April 2022, according to FEMA, the estimated cost for National Guard assistance totaled nearly \$6.6 billion as of February 28, 2022.<sup>13</sup>

**Mobile Vaccination Units.** FEMA personnel along with other federal personnel also ran mobile vaccination units that offered primary vaccinations, booster shots, and pediatric vaccines for children ages 5 and above. All states, tribes, and territories could request mobile vaccination units. FEMA started 10 mobile vaccination units between December 15, 2021, and January 18, 2022; two in Washington, four in New Mexico, three in Oregon, and one in Pennsylvania. FEMA reported that as of March 4, 2022, the 10 mobile vaccination units had administered 136,770 vaccinations.

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## FEMA Assistance in Sheltering at U.S. Southern Border

Outside of declared disasters, FEMA has taken on additional responsibilities to help local communities around the country better manage the costs of noncitizen arrivals in their communities. FEMA's Emergency Food and Shelter Program has provided funding to organizations assisting individuals and families encountered by the Department of Homeland Security.<sup>14</sup> In fiscal years 2019-2023, FEMA provided \$715 million in humanitarian relief grants to nonprofit and governmental organizations that provided services to noncitizens.<sup>15</sup>

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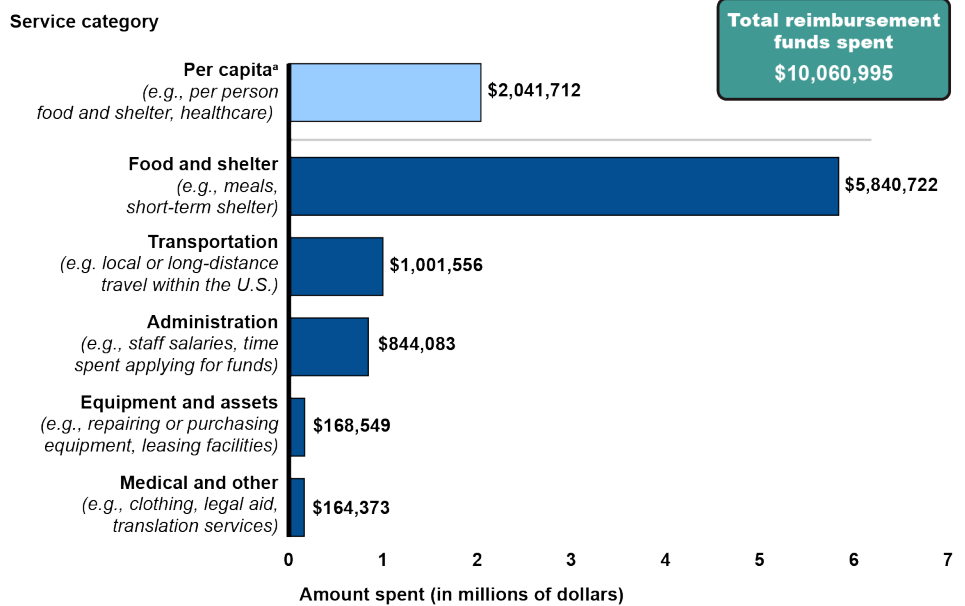
<sup>12</sup>GAO, *COVID-19: U.S. Territory Experiences Could Inform Future Federal Relief*, [GAO-23-106050](#), (Washington D.C.: Sept. 19, 2023).

<sup>13</sup>GAO, *COVID-19: Current and Future Federal Preparedness Requires Fixes to Improve Health Data and Address Improper Payments* [GAO-22-105397](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 22, 2022).

<sup>14</sup>GAO, *Southwest Border: DHS Coordinates with and Funds Nonprofits Serving Noncitizens*, [GAO-23-106147](#), (Washington D.C.: Apr 19, 2023).

<sup>15</sup>The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023, appropriated \$800 million for a new Shelter and Services Program that is to be administered by FEMA. Pub. L. No. 117-328, 136 Stat. 4459, 4730 (2022). The Shelter and Services Program is to replace the humanitarian relief funding provided as part of FEMA's Emergency Food and Shelter Program, which has provided funding to organizations assisting individuals and families encountered by the Department of Homeland Security. A portion of the appropriation for the Shelter and Services Program for fiscal year 2023 was awarded through the Humanitarian Emergency Food and Shelter Program while FEMA establishes the new program.

**Figure 1: Fiscal Year 2021 Emergency Food and Shelter Program Humanitarian Relief Funding, Nonprofit Spending by Service Category**



Source: GAO analysis of Emergency Food and Shelter Program data. | GAO-24-107351

Note: Emergency Food and Shelter Program Humanitarian Relief Funding is provided as advanced funding and reimbursements. Advanced funding is for designated nonprofits or governmental organizations that further disburse the funds to local service providers in their area and may also use the funds for services they provide directly. Reimbursements are payments made to nonprofits to reimburse them for expenses incurred when providing services to noncitizens. In fiscal year 2021, of the nearly \$123 million distributed, about \$113 million was advanced funding and about \$10 million was reimbursement funding. Figure 1 shows the nonprofit spending of reimbursement funding on different categories of services. Per capita represents a set reimbursement rate that nonprofits can receive for each noncitizen they serve. Nonprofits can choose to request reimbursement at a per capita rate instead of requesting reimbursement for their actual expenditure amounts in the food and shelter and medical and other categories.

FEMA also assists in other DHS efforts at the border. For example, in February 2022, DHS launched the Southwest Border Coordination Center—comprised of officials from U.S. Customs and Border Protection, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and FEMA, among others—to establish a unified approach to the increased number of noncitizens encountered at the southwest border. According to responsible officials, the Southwest Border Coordination Center works with DHS field locations and nonprofits located along the southwest border to increase the efficiency of that coordination. The Center also works to build a network of nonprofits, cities, and counties located in the interior of the U.S. to further support noncitizens traveling to their communities.

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## Increasing Workload Contributes to Continuing Workforce Management Challenges

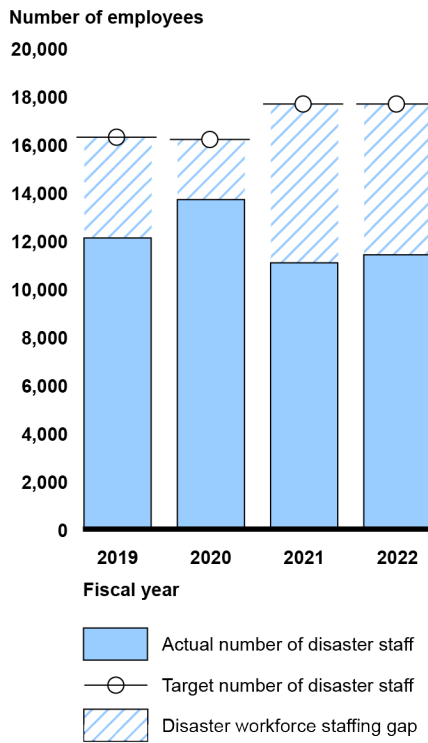
Our past work has identified longstanding challenges facing the FEMA workforce which have been exacerbated under FEMA's additional responsibilities. Specifically, we reported on issues related to: (1) staffing shortages; (2) workforce qualifications; (3) staff development; and (4) workplace morale. We have made recommendations to address challenges we have identified, and FEMA has taken steps to address our recommendations. We will continue to monitor staffing shortages and other workplace challenges as they affect staff's morale and FEMA's ability to deliver required assistance.

**Staffing shortages.** Increasingly complex and severe natural disasters coupled with the COVID-19 pandemic and responsibilities at the southern border have created an unprecedented demand for FEMA's disaster workforce. In May 2023, we reported that as of the beginning of fiscal year 2022, FEMA had approximately 11,400 disaster employees on board and a staffing goal of 17,670, creating an overall staffing gap of approximately 6,200 staff (35 percent) across different positions.<sup>16</sup> This means that FEMA's disaster workforce was operating at 65 percent force capacity during the pandemic.

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<sup>16</sup>GAO, *FEMA Disaster Workforce: Actions Needed to Improve Hiring Data and Address Staffing Gaps*, [GAO-23-105663](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 2, 2023).

**Figure 2: Staffing Gaps for the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s (FEMA’s) Disaster Workforce, Fiscal Years 2019 through 2022**



Source: GAO analysis of FEMA data. | GAO-24-107351

FEMA officials attributed these staffing gaps to the loss of staff due to the year-round pace caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and increasing number of disasters, a combination which officials said caused burnout for many employees and increased employee attrition. During fiscal year 2020, which included the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the disaster workforce lost 20 percent of its staff (over 2,600 employees). These losses resulted in staffing gaps in certain positions, and an overall decline in force strength.

Specifically, the Public Assistance cadre lost over 400 staff (approximately 16 percent) in fiscal year 2020.<sup>17</sup> With the increase in

<sup>17</sup>Cadres are groups of FEMA employees organized by type of work (organizational or programmatic function). These groups are based on skills and experience and generally deploy to an incident at varying points in the response and recovery phases, depending on their functions.

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staffing targets and reduction in staff, the Public Assistance cadre's force capacity decreased from over 100 percent to about 55 percent during the pandemic. This cadre serves important functions including administering assistance to state, territorial, and local governments, a responsibility that greatly increased during the COVID-19 pandemic.

We recommended that FEMA document plans to monitor and evaluate the agency's hiring efforts to address staffing gaps, among other recommendations. Such plans would help FEMA determine how effective hiring efforts are at closing staffing gaps and prioritize these efforts accordingly. FEMA has taken steps to address these recommendations, including developing yearly hiring targets to ensure they are on pace to meet overall hiring goals. We will continue to monitor FEMA's implementation of its efforts to determine if they address the challenges we identified.

**Workforce qualifications.** In May 2020, we also reported that FEMA faced challenges deploying staff with the right qualifications and skills at the right times to meet disaster needs.<sup>18</sup> Qualification status in the qualification and deployment systems FEMA uses to identify staff qualification status and skillsets, was not a reliable indicator of staff's ability to perform in the field. For example, in 14 of the focus groups we held with FEMA staff, participants said that staff who were designated as qualified in FEMA's system did not always have the necessary skills for their position. We recommended that FEMA develop a plan to address challenges in providing quality information to field leaders about staff qualifications. In June 2022, FEMA developed plans to inform field leadership about staff skills and abilities, among other things. We also recommended that FEMA develop mechanisms to assess deployment outcomes. FEMA said it is modifying its force structure targets, with input from field leadership, and has implemented continuous data collection efforts. FEMA has fully addressed these recommendations as we believe these actions could better enable the agency to use its disaster workforce as flexibly and effectively as possible to meet mission needs in the field.

**Staff development.** In May 2020, we also found shortcomings in FEMA's ability to ensure staff training and development for the skills needed in the field.<sup>19</sup> For example, Reservists—often comprising the greatest proportion

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<sup>18</sup>GAO, *FEMA Disaster Workforce: Actions Needed to Address Deployment and Staff Development Challenges* [GAO-20-360](#), (Washington D.C; May 4, 2020).

<sup>19</sup>[GAO-20-360](#).

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of FEMA staff in the field during a disaster—faced barriers to staff development and inconsistently received performance evaluations.<sup>20</sup> We recommended that FEMA create a staff development program that addresses access to training, development, and feedback. FEMA has fully addressed this recommendation by, for example including process improvements for development opportunities, and creating a plan to consistently conduct performance reviews.

**Workplace morale.** We have reported multiple times that workforce challenges can affect FEMA staff's morale.<sup>21</sup> For example, in May 2020 we reported that planning managers in a joint field office we visited said that staff inaccurately designated as qualified in FEMA's qualification system were sometimes only able to complete half of the tasks expected of them, which hindered the cadre's ability to support mission needs. They noted that this affected morale, added to others' workload, and could turn a 12-hour day into a 14-hour day.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, in September 2020, we reported that for several years leading up to our reporting, FEMA's call center workforce faced challenges using program guidance to assist survivors and struggled with low morale.<sup>23</sup> In that report, we also found that opportunities existed to improve employee engagement and morale among these staff. Staff we spoke to consistently cited engagement challenges that undermined morale in all four call center locations. According to staff at all four locations, poor employee engagement from their management and supervisors resulted in pressures related to productivity, among other challenges, particularly since the 2017 hurricane season generated a high work volume for certain call center staff. Staff in all four locations stated they felt pressured to meet productivity standards, which conflicted with providing quality service to the survivor.

We recommended FEMA use desirable characteristics of employee engagement—including performance feedback, career development, communication, and attention to work-life balance—while completing planned activities for improving morale. FEMA has since fully addressed

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<sup>20</sup>Reservists are on-call FEMA employees that work intermittently as required during a disaster or emergency incident.

<sup>21</sup>GAO, *FEMA Workforce: Long-Standing and New Challenges Could Affect Mission Success*, [GAO-22-105631](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 20, 2022).

<sup>22</sup>[GAO-20-360](#)

<sup>23</sup>GAO, *Disaster Assistance: Additional Actions Needed to Strengthen FEMA's Individuals and Households Program*, [GAO-20-503](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sep. 30, 2020).

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this recommendation by implementing a Wellness and Morale program and providing additional resources, such as peer support and professional support through its Employee Health and Wellness Hub.

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Thank you, Chairman Graves, Chairman Perry, Ranking Members Larsen and Titus, and Members of the Subcommittee. This concludes my prepared statement. I would be happy to respond to any questions you may have at this time.

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## GAO Contacts and Staff Acknowledgments

If you or your staff members have any questions about this testimony, please contact me at (404) 679-1875 or [curriec@gao.gov](mailto:curriec@gao.gov). Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this statement. Key contributors to this statement include Aditi Archer (Assistant Director), Edith Sohna (Analyst-in-Charge), Elizabeth Dretsch, Taylor Gauthier, Alana Finley, Tracey King, and Kevin Reeves.

Key contributors to the previous work discussed in this statement are listed in each of the cited reports.

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# Related GAO Products

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*COVID-19: U.S. Territory Experiences Could Inform Future Federal Relief*, [GAO-23-106050](#). (Washington D.C.: September 19, 2023)

*FEMA Disaster Workforce: Actions Needed to Improve Hiring Data and Address Staffing Gaps* [GAO-23-105663](#) (Washington, D.C. May 2, 2023)

*Southwest Border: DHS Coordinates with and Funds Nonprofits Serving Noncitizens*, [GAO-23-106147](#), (Washington D.C.: Apr 19, 2023).

*Unemployment Insurance: Data Indicate Substantial Levels of Fraud during the Pandemic; DOL Should Implement an Antifraud Strategy*, [GAO-23-105523](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 22, 2022).

*Disaster Recovery: Actions Needed to Improve the Federal Approach*, [GAO-23-104956](#) (Washington, D.C. Nov 15, 2022)

*FEMA Workforce: Additional Actions Needed to Help Prevent and Respond to Discrimination and Harassment*. [GAO-23-105243](#) (Washington, D.C., Oct 20, 2022)

*COVID-19: Current and Future Federal Preparedness Requires Fixes to Improve Health Data and Address Improper Payments* [GAO-22-105397](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 27, 2022).

*FEMA Workforce: Long-Standing and New Challenges Could Affect Mission Success*, [GAO-22-105631](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 20, 2022).

*COVID-19: Additional Actions Needed to Improve Accountability and Program Effectiveness of Federal Response*, [GAO-22-105051](#) (Washington, D.C. October 27, 2021).

*COVID-19: Urgent Actions Needed to Better Ensure an Effective Federal Response* [GAO-21-191](#) (Washington, D.C.: November 30, 2020).

*Disaster Assistance: Additional Actions Needed to Strengthen FEMA's Individuals and Households Program*, [GAO-20-503](#) (Washington, D.C., Sep. 30, 2020).

*FEMA Disaster Workforce: Actions Needed to Address Deployment and Staff Development Challenges* [GAO-20-360](#), (Washington D.C; May 4, 2020).



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