

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-22-106211](#), 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

In September 2017, hurricanes Irma and Maria struck Puerto Rico and the USVI, causing billions of dollars in damage. FEMA is the lead federal agency responsible for assisting Puerto Rico and the USVI to recover from these natural disasters. Among other responsibilities, FEMA is responsible for administering grant programs in partnership with the governments of Puerto Rico and the USVI, to rebuild damaged infrastructure and restore services.

This statement describes, among other things, (1) actions FEMA has taken to address GAO recommendations to improve disaster recovery efforts in Puerto Rico and the USVI, (2) the status of FEMA's Public Assistance funding in Puerto Rico and the USVI as of August 2022, and (3) potential challenges related to ongoing disaster recovery efforts in Puerto Rico and actions FEMA is taking to address them.

This statement is based on prior GAO reports issued between November 2019 and May 2021; it also includes preliminary observations from an ongoing GAO review of FEMA operations in Puerto Rico. For ongoing work, GAO analyzed documents and data on obligations and expenditures; interviewed agency officials; and visited disaster-damaged areas in Puerto Rico, where GAO also interviewed FEMA and local officials.

GAO will continue to monitor FEMA's progress toward implementing GAO's prior recommendations.

View [GAO-22-106211](#). For more information, contact Chris Currie at (404) 679-1875 or curriec@gao.gov.

2017 HURRICANES

Update on FEMA's Disaster Recovery Efforts in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands

What GAO Found

In response to recommendations GAO made in prior reports, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has taken steps to improve its management of disaster recovery programs in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI). For example, GAO found in February 2020 that Puerto Rico government officials did not always understand what FEMA guidance was in effect for the Public Assistance grant program. Thus, GAO recommended that FEMA develop a repository of current applicable Public Assistance policies and guidance for Puerto Rico and make it available to all recovery partners. In response, FEMA made these documents accessible to Puerto Rico recovery partners through an internal application management system.

As of August 2022, GAO found that FEMA has obligated about \$32.2 billion in funding for Public Assistance projects in response to hurricanes Irma and Maria. In turn, the governments of Puerto Rico and the USVI have expended approximately \$7.7 billion of the Public Assistance obligations as of the same period. About \$1 billion of these Public Assistance expenditures were for permanent work projects that support long-term rebuilding, such as rebuilding schools, the power grid, water systems, and other damaged infrastructure. GAO also visited Puerto Rico in March 2022 and July 2022 as part of its ongoing work, in part to observe disaster-damaged areas and assess the progress of projects it had visited for prior work (see figure).

Status of Selected Recovery Projects in Puerto Rico



(left to right) A damaged water tank from the winds of Hurricane Maria observed in February 2020. The largely repaired water tank observed in March 2022. A school with internal mold and water damages caused by Hurricane Maria observed in March 2019. The same school observed in March 2022 awaiting repairs. According to a FEMA official, a construction crew removed doors, windows, and some walls due to asbestos and lead in the building.

Source: GAO. | [GAO-22-106211](#)

In GAO's ongoing work, officials interviewed thus far have described potential challenges to the continuing disaster recovery efforts in Puerto Rico, including the increasing cost of projects due to inflation and difficulties procuring resources to construct projects, among others. Preliminary observations from GAO's ongoing work also indicate that FEMA and the government of Puerto Rico are regularly communicating through formal and informal means to, among other things, discuss the status of projects and related grant funding or construction issues. Further, FEMA has taken actions, such as providing trainings, to help address some of these issues.

GAO will continue to evaluate disaster recovery efforts in Puerto Rico and plans to report its findings in 2023.