

Why GAO Did This Study

Disasters, such as hurricanes, cause billions of dollars in damage each year. People experiencing homelessness, who may be in shelters or on the streets, may be vulnerable and most severely affected by disasters.

The 2019 Additional Supplemental Appropriations for Disaster Relief Act provided funding for GAO to conduct audits related to 2018 disasters. This report examines (1) how federal disaster programs can provide shelter or housing assistance to the homeless population, (2) how federal homelessness programs can provide housing assistance to this population during disasters, and (3) coordination by FEMA and HUD on these issues. GAO reviewed federal agency documentation and interviewed staff at FEMA and HUD offices and at state and local governments, selected program grantees and recipients, emergency managers, and homeless service providers in four states affected by 2018 disasters (California, Florida, North Carolina, and Wisconsin). GAO selected 2018 disasters in these states due to the significance of their impact and for geographic diversity.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making three recommendations, including that HUD establish time frames for reviewing information on ESG CARES Act waivers and alternative program requirements and that HUD and FEMA coordinate on federal disaster sheltering and housing assistance for the homeless population. FEMA agreed and HUD neither agreed nor disagreed with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-23-105379](#). For more information, contact Alicia Puente Cackley at (202) 512-8678 or cackleya@gao.gov.

HOMELESSNESS

Enhanced Coordination Could Improve Disaster Shelter and Housing Assistance

What GAO Found

No federal programs are specifically designed to address the housing needs of the homeless population in a disaster. However, the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) Public Assistance program can provide this population with emergency shelter (available to the entire community after a disaster). In addition, grantees of the Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) Community Development Block Grant Disaster Recovery (CDBG-DR) program can use program funds to provide the homeless population with housing assistance, such as transitional and permanent supportive housing.

Two homelessness programs—HUD's Continuum of Care and Emergency Solutions Grants (ESG) program—can provide housing assistance during a disaster, although they generally do not receive supplemental disaster funding. HUD may waive program requirements during a disaster to give affected recipients more flexibility. In 2020, the CARES Act provided \$4 billion in ESG grants to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and authorized HUD to provide statutory and regulatory waivers and alternative program requirements for all recipients. For example, the act waived the 60 percent cap on street outreach and emergency shelter expenses. Recipients and homeless service providers GAO spoke with generally found these waivers to be useful. As of November 2022, HUD said it planned to evaluate the use of ESG waivers and alternative program requirements during the pandemic but did not provide an estimated time frame for doing so. Such a review would better inform HUD and Congress on the use of ESG waivers and alternative program requirements in future disasters.

FEMA and HUD do not regularly coordinate on issues related to disaster sheltering and housing assistance provided to the homeless population. While both agencies participate in some interagency efforts on disaster response, these efforts either do not address the homeless population or do not occur regularly. Stakeholders GAO interviewed shared lessons learned regarding the importance of having established relationships between emergency management and homelessness stakeholders to collaborate on providing assistance for the homeless population. The United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH), which includes HUD and FEMA, plans to implement a federal strategy to strengthen coordination among homelessness, public health, and emergency management agencies. However, it has not yet determined when or how to do so. By regularly coordinating—for example, through efforts being undertaken through USICH to implement the federal strategy on improving collaboration in the event of a disaster—FEMA and HUD could help increase knowledge sharing and disseminate information among federal and local partners.