

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-15-515](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

The Disaster Relief Appropriations Act of 2013 appropriated about \$50 billion for recovery from Hurricane Sandy, part of which was intended for disaster resilience and hazard mitigation. In March 2015, GAO identified the cost of disasters as a key source of federal fiscal exposure. GAO and others have advocated hazard mitigation to help limit the nation's fiscal exposure.

GAO was asked to review federal efforts to strengthen disaster resilience during Hurricane Sandy recovery. This report addresses (1) how federal recovery funds were used to enhance resilience, (2) the extent to which states and localities were able to maximize federal funding to enhance resilience; and (3) actions that could enhance resilience for future disasters.

To conduct this work, GAO reviewed key federal documents such as the *National Mitigation Framework*, interviewed federal officials responsible for programs that fund disaster resilience, and administered structured interviews and surveys to all 12 states, the District of Columbia, and New York City in the Sandy affected-region.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that (1) FEMA assess the challenges state and local officials reported and implement corrective actions as needed and (2) MitFLG establish an investment strategy to identify, prioritize, and implement federal investments in disaster resilience. The Department of Homeland Security agreed with both.

View [GAO-15-515](#). For more information, contact Chris Currie at (404) 679-1875 or curriec@gao.gov.

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HURRICANE SANDY

An Investment Strategy Could Help the Federal Government Enhance National Resilience for Future Disasters

What GAO Found

During the Hurricane Sandy Recovery, five federal programs—the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) Public Assistance (PA), Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP), the Federal Transit Administration's Public Transportation Emergency Relief Program, the Department of Housing and Urban Development's Community Development Block Grant-Disaster Recovery, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Hurricane Sandy program—helped enhance disaster resilience—the ability to prepare and plan for, absorb, recover from, and more successfully adapt to disasters. These programs funded a number of disaster-resilience measures, for example, acquiring and demolishing at-risk properties, elevating flood-prone structures, and erecting physical flood barriers.

State and local officials from the states affected by Hurricane Sandy GAO contacted reported that they were able to effectively leverage federal programs to enhance disaster resilience, but also experienced challenges that could result in missed opportunities. The challenges fell into three categories:

- implementation challenges with PA and HMGP—for example, officials reported that FEMA officials did not always help them pursue opportunities to incorporate mitigation into permanent construction recovery projects;
- limitations on comprehensive risk reduction approaches in a postdisaster environment—for example, officials reported difficulties with navigating multiple funding streams and various regulations of the different federal programs funded after Hurricane Sandy; and
- local ability and willingness to participate—for example, officials reported that some home and business owners were unwilling or unable to bear the required personal cost share for a home-elevation or other mitigation project.

FEMA officials told us that they were aware of some of these challenges and recognize the need to further assess them. Assessing the challenges and taking corrective actions, as needed, could help enhance disaster resilience.

There is no comprehensive, strategic approach to identifying, prioritizing and implementing investments for disaster resilience, which increases the risk that the federal government and nonfederal partners will experience lower returns on investments or lost opportunities to strengthen key critical infrastructure and lifelines. Most federal funding for hazard mitigation is available after a disaster. For example, from fiscal years 2011-2014, FEMA obligated more than \$3.2 billion for HMGP postdisaster hazard mitigation while the Pre-Disaster Mitigation Grant Program obligated approximately \$222 million. There are benefits to investing in resilience postdisaster. Individuals and communities affected by a disaster may be more likely to invest their own resources while recovering. However, there are also challenges. Specifically, the emphasis on the postdisaster environment can create a reactionary and fragmented approach where disasters determine when and for what purpose the federal government invests in disaster resilience. The Mitigation Framework Leadership Group (MitFLG) was created to help coordinate hazard mitigation efforts of relevant local, state, tribal, and federal organizations. A comprehensive investment strategy, coordinated by MitFLG, could help address some challenges state and local officials experienced.