



Highlights of [GAO-09-369](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Hurricane Katrina was the most destructive disaster in our nation's history and it highlighted gaps in preparedness for a catastrophic disaster. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), a component within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), is the lead federal agency responsible for developing a national preparedness system. The system includes policies and plans as well as exercises and assessments of capabilities across many public and private entities. GAO was asked to assess the extent to which FEMA has (1) developed policies and plans that define roles and responsibilities; (2) implemented the National Exercise Program, a key tool for examining preparedness; (3) developed a national capabilities assessment; and (4) developed a strategic plan that integrates these elements of the preparedness system. GAO analyzed program documents, such as after-action reports, and visited six states located in disaster regions. While the results of these visits are not generalizable, they show how select states carry out their efforts.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that FEMA improve national preparedness by, among other things, establishing a program management plan, better ensuring exercises follow program guidance, enhancing its project management plan for assessing capabilities, and developing a strategic plan that integrates system elements. DHS concurred with our recommendations.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-09-369](#). For more information, contact William O. Jenkins, Jr., at (202) 512-8757 or jenkinswo@gao.gov.

NATIONAL PREPAREDNESS

FEMA Has Made Progress, but Needs to Complete and Integrate Planning, Exercise, and Assessment Efforts

What GAO Found

While most policies (41 of 50) that define roles and responsibilities have been completed, such as the National Response Framework, 68 percent (49 of 72) of the plans to implement these policies, including several for catastrophic incidents, are not yet complete. As a result, the roles and responsibilities of key officials involved in responding to a catastrophe have not been fully defined and, thus, cannot be tested in exercises. The lack of clarity in response roles and responsibilities among the diverse set of responders contributed to the disjointed response to Hurricane Katrina and highlighted the need for clear, integrated disaster preparedness and response policies and plans. Although best practices for program management call for a plan that includes key tasks and their target completion dates, FEMA does not have such a plan. With such a plan, FEMA would be better positioned to ensure that the policies and plans are completed and integrated with each other as intended as well as with other elements of the preparedness system.

Since 2007, FEMA has taken actions to implement the National Exercise Program at the federal and state levels by developing, among other things, program guidance and systems to track corrective actions; however, FEMA faces challenges in ensuring that the exercises are carried out consistent with program guidance. For example, the Homeland Security Council (an interagency entity responsible for coordinating homeland security policy) and state participants did not systematically track whether corrective actions had been taken to address deficiencies identified by exercises as called for by program guidance. As a result, FEMA lacks reasonable assurance that entities have taken actions aimed at improving preparedness.

FEMA has made progress in developing a system for assessing national preparedness capabilities by, among other things, establishing reporting guidance for state preparedness, but it faces challenges in completing the system and required reports to assess preparedness. While FEMA has developed a project management plan for the new system, the plan does not fully identify milestones and program risks for developing quantifiable metrics necessary for measuring preparedness capabilities. A more complete project plan that identifies milestones and program risks would provide FEMA with greater assurance that it can produce a system to assess capabilities and inform decisions related to improving national preparedness.

FEMA's strategic plan for fiscal years 2008-2013 recognizes that each of its components need to develop its own strategic plans that integrate the elements of national preparedness. FEMA's National Preparedness Directorate has yet to develop its strategic plan, but instead plans to use a draft annual operating plan to guide its efforts. This plan does not include all elements of a strategic plan, such as how the directorate will integrate the various elements of the system over time to improve national preparedness. Having a strategic plan would provide FEMA with a roadmap for addressing the complex task of guiding and building a national preparedness system.