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Testimony

Before the Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Communications, Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives

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DISASTER RECOVERY

Selected Themes for
Effective Long-Term
Recovery

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Highlights of [GAO-12-813T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Communications, Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

The many challenges and difficulties experienced in the wake of Hurricane Katrina and other catastrophes have led to considerable reflection on what lessons might be learned regarding disaster recovery. Congress has recognized the importance of improving the way our nation approaches disaster recovery by including in the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act of 2006 the requirement that FEMA develop a National Disaster Recovery Strategy. The administration has also placed a greater focus on recovery, as demonstrated by its development of the National Disaster Recovery Framework (NDRF) with the goal of helping federal agencies and others to more-effectively organize in order to promote recovery.

GAO was asked to testify on themes from its previous work on disaster recovery that may assist the subcommittee in its oversight of disaster-recovery issues.

What GAO Recommends

In multiple reports between 2008 and 2010, we made several recommendations to FEMA and others addressing recovery challenges involving coordination, communication, and information sharing, among other topics. The NDRF is directly responsive to several of the recommendations contained in these reports. However, it will require the successful implementation of this framework in order to ultimately resolve these issues.

View [GAO-12-318T](#). For more information, contact Stanley J. Czerwinski at (202) 512-6808 or czerwinkis@gao.gov.

June 6, 2012

DISASTER RECOVERY

Selected Themes for Effective Long-Term Recovery

What GAO Found

From 2008 to 2010, GAO produced a body of work on disaster recovery, including reviews of the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) Long-Term Community Recovery efforts, recovery lessons based on past experiences at home and abroad, the use of Community Development Block Grants and Public Assistance grants and the operation of the Office of the Federal Coordinator for Gulf Coast Rebuilding (OFC). Among other things, this work highlighted themes that are important to successful disaster recovery efforts. Three of these key themes are: (1) the need for clearly defined recovery roles and responsibilities; (2) the importance of effective coordination and collaboration among recovery stakeholders; and (3) the value of periodic evaluation of, and reporting on, recovery progress.

When recovering from a major disaster, having clearly defined and well-understood roles and responsibilities is a critical first step in coordinating and implementing the responsibilities of the various parties involved in the long-term recovery process. These roles, responsibilities, and lines of authority for all levels of government must be clearly defined, communicated, and understood in order to be effective. GAO's previous work provides numerous examples of the challenges that result when this does not take place and, conversely, illustrations of benefits that can occur when it does. For example, GAO's 2009 review of the OFC found confusion and disagreements among key recovery stakeholders as well as with the Federal Coordinator himself regarding the office's appropriate scope and function. This confusion, accompanied by the lack of clear decision-making authority on the part of OFC, may have ultimately slowed down the resolution of some recovery problems.

Recovery from a major disaster is a long, complex process that involves an extensive group of participants both across the federal government and at the state and local level. At least 14 federal departments and agencies are responsible for administering dozens of recovery-related programs, many of which rely heavily on active participation by state and local government for their implementation. Because these parties are dependent on each other to accomplish recovery goals, effective coordination and collaboration is essential. GAO's past work has explored this issue in considerable detail. For example, in the wake of the 2008 Midwest floods, federal, state, and local officials said that FEMA's facilitation of regular interagency meetings to coordinate federal and state partners helped to identify and effectively leverage recovery resources, as well as identify coordination problems and other concerns.

Finally, the collaboration between recovery partners can be enhanced by periodically evaluating and reporting on what worked, what can be improved, and what progress is still needed to address long-term recovery goals. This last step will assist decision makers, clients, and stakeholders to obtain the feedback needed to improve both the policy and operational effectiveness of recovery efforts. For example, after a 1995 earthquake, the city of Kobe, Japan and the surrounding region held periodic external reviews over a span of 10 years on the progress made toward achieving recovery goals. As a result, the city of Kobe gained insight into unintended consequences of how it relocated elderly earthquake victims, which subsequently led to a change in policy.

Chairman Bilirakis, Ranking Member Richardson, and Members of the Subcommittee:

I appreciate the opportunity to discuss with you today some key themes from GAO's previous work on long-term recovery after disasters. In contrast to the response phase, which takes place in the immediate aftermath of a disaster and focuses on essential lifesaving activities, recovery is a much longer process that can last years or sometimes decades where attention shifts to restoring both the individual and the community, including the redevelopment of damaged areas. The many recovery challenges experienced after Hurricane Katrina affected the Gulf Coast in 2005—including difficulties with coordination, communication, and the loss of attention and focus—during the long recovery process, have led to considerable reflection on what lessons might be learned in how we, as a nation, approach disaster recovery. Congress has recognized the importance of improving the way our nation approaches disaster recovery by including in the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act of 2006 (PKEMRA) the requirement that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) develop a National Disaster Recovery Strategy.¹

We also have seen the administration place a greater focus on the issue of recovery, as demonstrated by its development of—for the first time ever—a National Disaster Recovery Framework (NDRF) with the goal of helping federal agencies and others to more effectively organize in order to promote recovery. This effort represents a welcomed emphasis on thinking seriously about the challenges and possibilities presented by the disaster-recovery process, and the NDRF generally represents a step in the right direction. Yet challenges in this area remain. As the recently issued 2012 National Preparedness Report points out, states and territories ranked core capabilities related to disaster recovery among the lowest of all the areas assessed.

With this in mind, and as agreed with the subcommittee, my testimony today will focus on three themes drawn from our previous work on

¹The Post-Katrina Act was enacted as Title VI of the Department of Homeland Security Appropriations Act, 2007, Pub. L. No. 109-295, 120 Stat. 1355 (2006). Most provisions of the Post-Katrina Act became effective upon enactment, October 4, 2006. Under PKEMRA, DHS was required to submit a National Disaster Recovery Strategy no later than 270 days after enactment.

disaster recovery that may prove useful in the subcommittee's ongoing oversight of disaster-recovery issues. These themes are (1) the need for clearly defined recovery roles and responsibilities; (2) the importance of effective coordination and collaboration among recovery stakeholders; and (3) the value of periodic evaluation of, and reporting on, recovery progress.

My statement is largely based on a body of work that we have developed on the topic of disaster recovery that dates from 2008 to 2010. These include our March 2010 review of FEMA's Long-Term Community Recovery Branch (LTCR) in providing and coordinating assistance to support long-term recovery; a July 2009 report that identified recovery lessons based on past experiences at home and abroad; an April 2009 examination of the use Community Development Block Grants on the Gulf Coast; an April 2009 overview of the Office of the Federal Coordinator for Gulf Coast Rebuilding (OFC); as well as our December 2008 examination of FEMA's Public Assistance Grant program.² These reports contain multiple recommendations to FEMA and others aimed at addressing recovery challenges involving coordination, communication and information sharing, among others. The NDRF is directly responsive to several of the recommendations contained in these reports; however it will require the successful implementation of this framework in order to ultimately resolve these issues. More complete information on our scope and methodology, findings, and recommendations is available in each published report.

We conducted these reviews 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

²See GAO, Disaster Recovery: FEMA's Long-term Assistance Was Helpful to State and Local Governments but Had Some Limitations, [GAO-10-404](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 30, 2010); Disaster Recovery: Experiences from Past Disasters Offer Insights for Effective Collaboration after Catastrophic Events, [GAO-09-811](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 31, 2009); Gulf Coast Disaster Recovery: Community Development Block Grant Program Guidance to States Needs to Be Improved, [GAO-09-541](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 19, 2009); Office of the Federal Coordinator for Gulf Coast Rebuilding: Perspectives and Observations, GAO 09 411R (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 10, 2009); Disaster Recovery: FEMA's Public Assistance Grant Program Experienced Challenges with Gulf Coast Rebuilding, [GAO-09-129](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 18, 2008); Disaster Recovery: Past Experiences Offer Insights for Recovering from Hurricanes Ike and Gustav and Other Recent Natural Disasters, [GAO-08-1120](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 26, 2008).

objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Clearly Defining Recovery Roles and Responsibilities Is a Critical First Step for Effective Recovery

When recovering from a disaster, having clearly defined and well understood roles and responsibilities is a critical first step in coordinating and implementing the responsibilities of the various parties involved in the long-term recovery process. Roles, responsibilities, and lines of authority at all levels of government must be clearly defined, communicated, and understood in order to be effective. Our previous work provides examples of the challenges that result when this does not take place, and conversely, illustrations of benefits that can occur when it does, which I describe below.

Our 2009 review of the operations of the Office of the Federal Coordinator (OFC) for Gulf Coast Rebuilding found confusion and disagreements among key recovery stakeholders as well as with the Federal Coordinator himself regarding the office's appropriate scope and function.³ According to OFC and officials from several state and local governments located on the Gulf Coast, one of the functions of the office was to work to resolve problems and obstacles in the recovery process by directly intervening in program-specific matters such as FEMA's Public Assistance Grant program. However, FEMA believed that such actions were outside the scope of a coordination office, and instead viewed OFC's proper role as being responsible for broad cross-agency concerns, such as alleviating inconsistencies across federal programs or looking for program gaps. This confusion, accompanied by the lack of clear decision-making authority on the part of OFC, may have ultimately slowed down the resolution of recovery problems in some cases by increasing the number of meetings and the amount of paperwork involved.

In 2010, we reported that misunderstandings about the role of LTRC and its recovery partners working under National Response Framework's Long-term Community Recovery Annex (ESF-14) had an adverse effect on the timing of federal recovery assistance.⁴ For example, federal, state, and local officials working in Texas in the wake of Hurricane Ike reported that LTRC and ESF-14's involvement ended before critical long-term recovery coordination and planning needs were addressed. Among the

³GAO-09-411R.

⁴GAO-10-404.

reasons cited for this were differing interpretations of FEMA's mission and authorities and varying interpretations of LTCR's mission by Federal Coordinating Officers. A senior FEMA official told us that, based on his experience, Federal Coordinating Officers generally believe that FEMA's long-term recovery mission is primarily to work with the states immediately after a disaster to develop a long-term recovery plan. Under this view, assisting states and local communities with coordinating federal assistance to implement their recovery plans is not the responsibility of staff working under ESF-14, but rather that of regional staff or other FEMA recovery officials who remain in the disaster area. However, FEMA regional staff sometimes did not take on this role. As a result, in some cases, such as in Texas after Hurricane Ike, state and local officials found that they were left without federal coordination and planning assistance during a critical period in the recovery process.

An effective way to avoid conflicts and misunderstandings regarding the roles and responsibilities of the many entities involved in the disaster recovery process is to clearly delineate them ahead of time through planning. On the state and local level, we found several examples of jurisdictions that used predisaster recovery plans to do this. For example, in 1987, several years before the Northridge Earthquake hit in 1994, the City of Los Angeles created a Recovery and Reconstruction Plan that clearly identified the roles and responsibilities of key officials involved in recovery. Specifically, the plan identified which city departments have responsibility for implementing predetermined activities before and after a disaster in several functional categories, including residential, commercial, industrial rehabilitation, and economic recovery. To be most helpful, such a plan must be more than simply paper instructions, rather it is a dynamic and inclusive process that is brought to life by periodic exercises. Long-term recovery planning exercises held by the City of Los Angeles brought police and fire officials together to engage in role-playing exercises in which they assumed the responsibilities of recovery officials. For example, a public safety officer played the role of a building inspector responsible for issuing building permits after an earthquake. A city official at the time of the earthquake told us that such exercises were an important part of developing relationships among stakeholders and ensuring city staff understood their postdisaster roles and responsibilities. According to a federally-funded evaluation of this plan, the contacts established during the planning process facilitated recovery after the Northridge earthquake. Communities in other areas including San Francisco, California, and Palm Beach, Florida, have taken action to develop recovery plans prior to a disaster that identify roles and responsibilities for recovery.

FEMA has taken steps to more-clearly define the roles and responsibilities of federal, state, and nongovernmental partners in the NDRF that was finalized in September 2011. The NDRF explicitly acknowledges that clearly defined roles and responsibilities form a foundation for unity of effort among all recovery partners to jointly identify opportunities, foster partnerships, and optimize resources. Toward this end, the framework has a section devoted to describing the roles and responsibilities for a range of participants in the recovery process including federal, state, tribal, and local governments, the private and nonprofit sectors, as well as individuals and households.

The NDRF also created the position of Federal Disaster Recovery Coordinator (FDRC) and established a process for involving this official in coordinating federal recovery assistance during various phases of recovery to help ensure that state and local needs are met, including extending this assistance beyond the closeout of federal disaster-response activities. Further, the NDRF provides clearer criteria regarding when and how recovery stakeholders become engaged in the process. It identifies the entities that will be involved in the decision-making process as well as the factors or criteria they will consider. In these ways, the NDRF provides the groundwork for addressing challenges identified in our previous work and thus represents a positive step forward, but still requires additional details regarding implementation.

Coordination and Collaboration among Stakeholders Facilitates Successful Recovery

Recovery from a major disaster is a long, complex process that involves an extensive group of participants both across the federal government and at the state and local level. At least 14 federal departments and agencies are responsible for administering dozens of recovery-related programs, many of which rely heavily on active participation by state and local government for their implementation. Because of this, and the fact that under federal law, states and localities have the lead in disaster recovery, the capacity of state and local governments to act effectively directly affects how well communities recover after a major disaster. Therefore, effective coordination and collaboration both within the federal community as well as with state and local partners is critical. Our past work has explored this issue in considerable detail. Today, I would like to briefly focus on three of the ways the federal government has sought to improve coordination and collaboration in order to facilitate disaster recovery.

First, the federal government has worked to foster coordination by bringing federal and state stakeholders together collectively and by

working one-on-one to identify and resolve recovery challenges. For example, in the wake of the 2008 Midwest floods, FEMA's LTCR branch held biweekly meetings in Iowa with federal and state agencies, such as the Small Business Administration, the Departments of Housing and Urban Development, Labor, Agriculture, Commerce, and Transportation, and the Environmental Protection Agency; the state counterparts to these agencies; state finance offices; and others.⁵ According to officials we spoke with, these meetings provided a forum to identify and leverage federal and state resources to support disaster recovery, as well as discuss potential coordination challenges such as gaps in funding or other long-term recovery concerns. Similarly, following the 2005 Gulf Coast hurricanes, OFC also worked to coordinate across agencies and with state and local partners, and address conflicts.⁶ Toward this end, OFC sponsored "workout sessions" focused on specific recovery topics and invited state and local agencies to address coordination challenges, and developed detailed matrices of the agreements reached, tasks to be performed, and stakeholders responsible for implementation.

Second, in addition to coordination at the federal level, we have previously reported on the federal government's efforts to work with state and local governments to help them take advantage of all available disaster assistance and achieve long-term recovery goals.⁷ For example, in the wake of the 2008 Midwest floods, LTCR provided technical assistance to affected communities by conducting or facilitating recovery assessments to identify the long-term effects of the disaster, providing staff to advise the communities on steps to take as they developed recovery plans, creating planning tools that the communities used to guide their planning activities, and hosting workshops to discuss and share recovery-planning lessons, among other things. In addition LTCR helped communities to prioritize their potential long-term recovery projects and identify potential sources of funding.

Third, collaboration between federal, state, and local recovery partners in jointly administering disaster-assistance programs is also improved by effectively sharing information. For example, in Mississippi after Hurricane

⁵ [GAO-10-404](#).

⁶ [GAO-09-411R](#).

⁷ [GAO-10-404](#).

Katrina, federal, state, and local officials adopted strategies that helped to facilitate the sharing of information on specific Public Assistance Grant projects. Following the disaster, FEMA's Mississippi Transitional Recovery Office and the Mississippi Emergency Management Agency were located in the same office complex in Biloxi, Mississippi, and officials from these agencies were also positioned together throughout the state. They reported that this collocation had multiple benefits for information sharing and exchange, including the timely sharing of critical documents and facilitation of daily meetings on project-development issues. In addition to collocating, FEMA and Mississippi state officials used Public Assistance Grant funding to secure an online accounting system that made operational documents associated with projects readily available to all parties. As a result, FEMA and the state had immediate access to key documents that helped them to make project-approval decisions, thereby improving collaboration.

Improving coordination and collaboration is one of the key objectives of the NDRF, and the framework contains several strategies to do so. One of these involves the creation of the position of Federal Disaster Recovery Coordinator (FDRC). The FDRC is assigned the responsibility and authority to facilitate the coordination of information and activities among the federal agencies whose programs, technical assistance, and expertise are relevant to recovery, within the framework of the Recovery Support Strategy. In large-scale disasters and catastrophic incidents, the NDRF also states that the FDRC will take over as the lead from the Federal Coordinating Officer (FCO), when the FCO demobilizes, to continue management of federal recovery resources, for those incidents that require continued significant interagency disaster-recovery coordination. The NDRF also introduces the concept of recovery coordinators at the state/tribal and local level that will work with the FDRC to facilitate coordination across levels of government. Along with establishing the position of the FDRC, the NDRF creates six Recovery Support Functions (RSF) to facilitate coordination and collaboration among the many different players involved in recovery. The NDRF also outlines ways to improve collaboration between federal, state, and local communities in developing recovery plans. The framework states that federal officials should provide timely, accurate, and accessible information to the public and manage such expectations in coordination with local, state, tribal, and other stakeholders. However, the NDRF currently does not provide the details for how to do this.

Periodic Evaluation and Reporting of Recovery Progress Is Key

Periodic reporting on organizational activities can help decision makers, clients, and stakeholders obtain feedback for improving both policy and operational effectiveness of recovery efforts. Although “after action reports” often are a standard feature of response operations, they are less common in the recovery context. The City of Kobe, Japan, and Hyogo prefecture (the larger governmental unit, similar to a county, that covers the city’s surrounding region) both provide examples of how evaluation and reporting can be effectively incorporated into community and regional recovery. They established a process through which government officials, community members, and recovery experts worked together to assess the recovery progress and recommend improvements.

Hyogo prefecture and the City of Kobe created a system of periodic assessments of recovery in the wake of their 1995 earthquake. Both governments designed a two-phase approach to evaluating the progress they have made toward recovery, the first taking place about 5 years after the earthquake and the second about 10 years afterward. This design allowed for both a short- and longer-term assessment of the recovery. Although the Hyogo and Kobe governments funded these evaluations, neither prefecture nor city employees were directly involved in conducting these assessments; rather they used external staff to perform the reviews. Hyogo prefecture invited domestic and international disaster-recovery experts to serve on its evaluation panels, while the City of Kobe staffed its reviews with members of local community groups.

These evaluations focused on the goals established in the recovery plans approved by the national government 6 months after the earthquake. They enabled policymakers to measure the progress made by various stakeholders in achieving recovery goals, identify needed changes to existing policies, and learn lessons for future disasters. The panels examined several broad recovery topics—including health, industry, employment, and urban development—which resulted in many recommendations to improve recovery from the Kobe earthquake.

For example, as a result of its 10-year evaluation, Hyogo prefecture gained insight into the unintended consequences of its policies regarding the relocation of victims, an insight that subsequently led to policy revisions. After the earthquake, the prefecture gave priority to the relocation of elderly victims and grouped them together in special-care residences located outside the city. While this policy ensured that this vulnerable population received housing quickly, it also had the unintended effect of isolating the relocated seniors, who were removed from their communities. In fact, the verification committee attributed the untimely

deaths of some seniors to this housing arrangement. After learning of this finding, the prefecture built new types of residential housing that offer comprehensive lifestyle support for seniors. In addition, for future disasters the prefecture plans to develop a system to track displaced populations as they move from temporary to permanent housing to help maintain better contact with victims.

While the NDRF does briefly address the issue of measures and metrics, the document emphasizes neither this concept nor the potential value of regular evaluations as the recovery process moves forward.

Concluding Observations

Disaster recovery can be a long, complex, and expensive process involving a large number of federal, state, and local parties. This makes it especially important to have clearly defined roles that are well understood by all participants. Because these parties often depend on each other to accomplish recovery goals, effective coordination and collaboration is essential. Experience shows us that successful collaborative relationships are not built overnight. Such coordination requires building effective relationships among participants before, during, and after a disaster occurs. Since such collaboration often must continue for years, it can be enhanced by periodically looking back to evaluate what worked, what can be improved, and what progress is still needed. Clearly defining roles and responsibilities, effective coordination, and evaluation are critical ingredients in going beyond a recovery framework to a useful implementation plan. While the creation of the NDRF is a significant step, the implementation of this broad framework will be a key to determining its ultimate success.

Chairman Bilirakis, Ranking Member Richardson, and Members of the Subcommittee, this concludes my statement. I would be happy to respond to any questions you may have at this time.

GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgements

For information about this testimony, please contact Stanley J. Czerwinski, Director, Strategic Issues, at (202) 512-6806 or czerwinkis@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this statement. Major contributors to this testimony include Peter Del Toro, Assistant Director, and Latesha Love.

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