



Testimony

Before the Subcommittees on Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Recovery and Oversight, Management, and Accountability, Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives

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FEMA WORKFORCE

Long-Standing and New Challenges Could Affect Mission Success

Statement of Chris P. Currie, Director, Homeland Security and Justice

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-22-105631](#), a testimony before the Subcommittees on Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Recovery and Oversight, Management, and Accountability, Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

FEMA has long been tasked with the difficult job of leading the federal response to natural disasters. The increasing frequency of disasters and the additional responsibilities of responding to the COVID-19 pandemic and other events have stretched the FEMA workforce in unprecedented ways.

This testimony discusses GAO's prior work on various FEMA workforce challenges. This statement is based on products GAO issued from July 2015 to August 2021. For those products, GAO reviewed and analyzed federal law, federal data, and agency documentation and interviewed federal, state, and local officials as well as representatives of stakeholder groups impacted by disasters. GAO also conducted some of these interviews as part of visits to locations affected by hurricanes in 2017 and 2018. Additionally, GAO conducted 17 focus groups with FEMA staff.

What GAO Recommends

GAO has made numerous recommendations in prior reports designed to address the workforce challenges discussed in this testimony. FEMA has taken steps to address these recommendations and GAO is monitoring FEMA's ongoing efforts.

View [GAO-22-105631](#). For more information, contact Chris Currie at (404) 679-1875 or curriec@gao.gov

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What GAO Found

GAO's past work has identified longstanding challenges facing the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) workforce. In May 2020, for example, GAO reported on the following workforce challenges within FEMA:

Staffing shortages. The 2017 and 2018 disaster seasons created unprecedented demand for FEMA's workforce. FEMA deployed over 10,000 personnel during the peak of each season but faced shortages in over half of its cadres—operational or programmatic groups—when disasters began. For example, 18 of 23 cadres operated with 25 percent or less of staff available to deploy when Hurricane Maria made landfall in 2017. In addition, many employees—up to 48 percent in some cases—declined deployments due, according to FEMA officials, to burnout and austere conditions in the field.

Workforce qualifications. GAO found that FEMA faced challenges deploying staff with the right qualifications and skills at the right times to meet disaster needs. Qualification status in FEMA's systems was not a reliable indicator of staff's ability to perform in the field. For example, in 14 of the focus groups GAO held with FEMA staff, participants said that staff who were designated as qualified in FEMA's system did not always have the necessary skills for their position. GAO recommended that FEMA develop a plan to address challenges in providing quality information to field leaders about staff qualifications. FEMA told GAO in December 2021 that its Field Operations Directorate has created plans to inform field leadership about staff skills and abilities, among other things. GAO also recommended that FEMA develop mechanisms to assess deployment outcomes. FEMA said it is modifying its force structure targets, with input from field leadership, and has implemented continuous data collection efforts.

Staff development. GAO found shortcomings in FEMA's ability to ensure staff training and development for the skills needed in the field. For example, Reservists—often comprising the greatest proportion of FEMA staff in the field during a disaster—faced barriers to staff development and inconsistently received performance evaluations. GAO recommended that FEMA create a staff development program that addresses access to training, development, and feedback. In response, FEMA has taken a number of steps, including process improvements for development opportunities and creating a plan to consistently conduct performance reviews.

GAO will continue to monitor FEMA's actions and assess the extent to which these actions address GAO's recommendations.

These workforce challenges can affect FEMA's ability to achieve its mission to help people before, during, and after disasters. For example, GAO has reported on challenges with inadequate training and low morale for Disaster Recovery Center call center employees. Improving training and employee engagement and morale may help improve services provided to disaster survivors.

With an increase in the frequency and cost of disasters, and with FEMA supporting numerous efforts outside of its normal core responsibilities, GAO is concerned that FEMA personnel may not be prepared to manage a catastrophic natural disaster or concurrent disasters.

Chairwoman Demings, Chairman Correa, Ranking Members Cammack and Meijer, and Members of the Subcommittees:

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss our work on the challenges facing the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) workforce.

FEMA has long been tasked with the difficult job of leading the federal response to natural disasters and other emergencies. It funds, manages, and coordinates response and recovery efforts with other federal agencies; states; local, tribal, and territorial governments; and others. The increasing frequency of disasters and the additional responsibilities of responding to the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, assisting at the Southwest border, and resettling Afghan refugees have stretched the FEMA workforce in unprecedented ways. In recent years, we have reported on long-standing workforce management challenges within the agency. FEMA management has had to redeploy response personnel from one disaster to the next, and the agency has reported facing staffing shortfalls in response to some disasters. In addition, a large influx of new employees has added to the challenges of providing timely, program-specific training.

Successfully addressing these challenges is important because, as we reported in May 2020, FEMA's disaster workforce will be in high demand for the foreseeable future.¹ The U.S. Global Change Research Program and the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine project that extreme weather events will become more frequent and intense due to climate change.² The historic 2017 and 2018 disaster seasons pushed FEMA well beyond its routine disaster response posture. In 2017, Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria, and the severe wildfires in California, collectively affected 47 million people—nearly 15 percent of the nation's population. In 2018, Hurricanes Florence and Matthew and another severe California wildfire season again necessitated a major federal response. The numbers of FEMA staff deployed for each of these

¹GAO, *FEMA Disaster Workforce: Actions Needed to Address Deployment and Staff Development Challenges*, [GAO-20-360](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 4, 2020).

²GAO, *Climate Change: Information on Potential Economic Effects Could Help Guide Federal Efforts to Reduce Fiscal Exposure*, [GAO-17-720](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 28, 2017). Managing fiscal exposure due to climate change has been on our high-risk list since 2013, in part, because of concerns about the increasing costs of disaster response and recovery efforts. See [GAO-21-119SP](#); also <https://www.gao.gov/highrisk/limiting-federal-governments-fiscal-exposure-better-managing-climate-change-risks>.

seasons were more than double the roughly 5,000 personnel deployed at the peak of the 2016 disaster season.

These increased demands on the FEMA workforce persist. FEMA responded to many disasters in 2020, including a record-breaking hurricane season in the Atlantic Ocean, and the most active fire year on record for the West Coast, with record-breaking wildfires in several states.³

Concurrent with this increase in natural disasters, FEMA has been tasked with new responsibilities. In particular, FEMA has played a key role in the federal response to the COVID-19 pandemic. According to an assessment report issued by FEMA in January 2021, the scale and duration of COVID-19 operations challenged FEMA's capabilities. Among other things, FEMA established mass vaccination sites and provided funeral assistance to families, the scope of which is unprecedented for the agency. We found that between mid-April 2021 and late-June 2021, FEMA received and processed over 222,000 applications for funeral assistance. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, FEMA had processed approximately 6,000 cases of funeral assistance over the past decade.

The increased frequency and cost of disasters and FEMA's support of numerous efforts outside of its normal core responsibilities present challenges to FEMA, as it must ensure that its personnel are prepared to manage a catastrophic natural disaster or concurrent disasters.

My statement today discusses our prior work on FEMA's workforce, including challenges FEMA faces and how these challenges can affect FEMA achieving its mission.

My statement today is based on products we issued from July 2015 to August 2021. To perform our prior work, we reviewed and analyzed federal law, a non-generalizable sample of post-disaster contracts, agency guidance, and other agency documentation. We also analyzed data from FEMA, the General Services Administration, and the Office of Personnel Management. We interviewed officials from FEMA and other selected federal agencies; and state, territory, local, and nonprofit officials impacted by disasters. We conducted some of these interviews as part of

³In addition to supporting the COVID-19 response, FEMA supported California's largest fire in history and managed the response to 10 named storms in September 2020 alone. As of February 2021, FEMA had personnel deployed to 173 active disasters and was supporting 956 open disasters.

visits to locations affected by hurricanes in 2017 and 2018, where we also met with disaster survivors. Additionally, we conducted 17 focus groups with FEMA staff. More detailed information on the scope and methodology of our prior work can be found in each of the issued reports cited throughout this statement.

We conducted the work on which this statement is based 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 objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusion based on our audit objectives.

Workforce Challenges Could Affect FEMA Achieving Its Mission

FEMA's Workforce Challenges

In May 2020, we reported that FEMA has faced challenges with (1) staffing shortages, (2) workforce qualifications, and (3) staff development, and we made recommendations to address aspects of these challenges.⁴

- **Staffing shortages.** During the 2017 and 2018 disaster seasons, several large-scale disasters created an unprecedented demand for FEMA's workforce. FEMA deployed 14,684 and 10,328 personnel, respectively, at the peak of each of these seasons and reported staffing shortages. FEMA faced shortages across over half of its cadres—groups organized by operational or programmatic functions—when disasters made landfall or began during the 2017 season, and FEMA faced similar shortages during the 2018 disaster season. For instance, according to FEMA's deployment data, 18 of 23 cadres operated with 25 percent or less of staff available to deploy when Hurricane Maria made landfall in Puerto Rico. In addition, many staff members who were available to deploy declined when requested to do so. For example, 48 percent of FEMA staff declined a deployment to Puerto Rico in 2017 after Hurricane Maria, in part due to the austere conditions and burnout, and 40 percent declined a deployment to California wildfires in 2018.

⁴[GAO-20-360](#).

With an increase in the frequency and cost of disasters, and with FEMA simultaneously supporting numerous efforts outside of its normal core responsibilities, we are concerned that FEMA personnel may not be prepared to manage a catastrophic natural disaster or concurrent disasters. We recently initiated work related to FEMA's recruitment, hiring, and retention.

- **Workforce qualifications.** In addition to staffing shortages, we reported that FEMA faced challenges with deploying staff with the right qualifications and skills to meet disaster needs. FEMA field officials reported the qualification status in FEMA's qualification system was not a reliable indicator of staff's ability to perform in the field. For example, in 14 focus groups we held, participants stated they encountered staff members who were designated as qualified in FEMA's system but did not have the skills or experience to perform effectively in their positions.⁵ Additionally, planning managers in a joint field office we visited said that staff inaccurately designated as qualified in FEMA's qualification system were sometimes only able to complete half of the tasks expected of them, which hindered the cadre's ability to support mission needs. They noted that this affected morale, added to others' workload, and could turn a 12-hour day into a 14-hour day.

We recommended that FEMA develop a plan—with timeframes and milestones—to address identified challenges that have hindered FEMA's ability to provide reliable and complete information to field leaders and managers about staff knowledge, skills, and abilities. FEMA concurred with this recommendation. In December 2021, FEMA reported, among other things, developing qualification plans for cadre personnel to better inform field leaders about staff knowledge, skills, and abilities, and we are conducting additional follow-up to assess FEMA's actions. To address the complex and interrelated challenges we identified, it will be important for FEMA to take a comprehensive approach to this issue and consider crosscutting solutions.

We also found that FEMA did not have a plan to evaluate staffing challenges. Specifically, we found that FEMA lacked mechanisms to assess deployment outcomes or the extent to which it deployed the right mix of staff at the right time to meet mission needs. FEMA

⁵The number of focus groups in this section excludes the three focus groups we conducted with local hires. We excluded them from the counts because local hires do not consistently use the FEMA Qualification System.

collected data related to staffing levels and availability, such as comparing staff qualification rates to targets and tracking the number of staff deployed to disasters. However, these measures did not directly demonstrate deployment outcomes or how effectively FEMA deployed available staff. Without the ability to assess outcomes, FEMA officials lacked critical information to evaluate the effectiveness of its deployment strategies.

We recommended that FEMA develop mechanisms, including collecting data to determine how effectively its workforce was deployed to meet mission needs. FEMA concurred with this recommendation. FEMA officials have stated that the agency is making progress toward meeting the force structure targets it established in 2019 and has a process in place to modify the targets as needed. In December 2021, FEMA officials said FEMA is modifying its force structure targets, with input from field leadership, and has implemented continuous data collection efforts. We are continuing to assess whether these efforts address our recommendation, which focuses on FEMA systematically collecting feedback and relevant data on the extent to which its deployment processes met field needs during disasters.

We designated these two recommendations related to workforce qualifications as priority recommendations for the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), meaning we believe they warrant priority attention and can substantially improve or transform major government programs or agencies.⁶

- **Staff development.** Finally, we found shortcomings in FEMA’s ability to ensure staff development—which consists of training courses, on-the-job learning, coaching, and mentoring—for the skills and abilities needed in the field. Staff told us they received inadequate on-the-job training or coaching, even though most participants in our focus groups said that these types of learning are the most useful. We found that at the start of their deployment during the 2017 and 2018 disaster seasons, 36 percent of FEMA’s incident management workforce did not have an official assigned to coach and evaluate their task performance—the primary mechanism the agency depends on for coaching. Furthermore, when such officials were assigned, they often lacked time to coach staff. For example, officials at one of the joint

⁶See GAO, *Priority Open Recommendations: Department of Homeland Security*, [GAO-21-377PR](#) (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 13, 2021).

field offices we visited said mission needs always come first and coaching and evaluating responsibilities are frequently not a priority. Supervisors in the field also often inconsistently completed performance evaluations for deployed staff. Additionally, Reservists—who often comprise the greatest proportion of FEMA staff in the field during a disaster and make up 35 percent of FEMA’s workforce as of August 2021—faced barriers to accessing developmental opportunities when not deployed, including lack of paid time and technology needed to access training. Effective and consistent staff development is particularly important because FEMA has hired a large number of Reservists over the past few years. Our analysis of FEMA data showed that from June 1, 2017 to May 31, 2019, the agency hired over 3,200 Reservists, which was 40 percent of the agency’s entire reservist workforce as of June 1, 2019. The challenges associated with underqualified staff we noted previously underscore the need for a comprehensive staff development program that would equip all staff to meet mission needs in the field.

We recommended that FEMA create a staff development program that addresses access to training, on-the-job training, use of performance evaluations, and consistent developmental opportunities regardless of whether FEMA employees are deployed. FEMA concurred with our recommendation and has taken a number of steps to improve staff development. Steps FEMA has taken include developing processes to improve access to training and coaching and creating a plan to consistently conduct performance reviews during deployment. We are continuing to monitor FEMA’s actions to assess the extent to which these actions constitute an integrated and cohesive program to develop its workforce and help ensure the best results for disaster survivors.

We have also reported on the importance of employee engagement to achieving an agency’s mission.⁷ Based on the Federal Employee

⁷In 2015, we reported that a number of studies of private sector entities have found that increased levels of employee engagement result in better individual and organizational performance. This includes increased employee performance and productivity; higher customer service ratings; fewer safety incidents; and less absenteeism and turnover. Studies of the public sector, while more limited, have shown similar benefits. See GAO, *Federal Workforce: Additional Analysis and Sharing of Promising Practices Could Improve Employee Engagement and Performance*, [GAO-15-585](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 14, 2015). For more information about employee engagement at DHS and its component agencies, such as FEMA, see GAO, *DHS Employee Morale: Some Improvements Made, but Additional Actions Needed to Strengthen Employee Engagement*, [GAO-21-204](#) (Washington, D.C.: (Jan. 12, 2021).

Viewpoint Survey, FEMA's measure of employee engagement recently increased.⁸ In 2019, FEMA's Employee Engagement score was 65.8, placing it sixth out of 15 DHS components. That number trended upwards in 2020, to 72.2 in 2020, moving it to fourth within DHS and on par with the government-wide average of 72.4. Further, in the survey, 87.6 percent of FEMA employees said they know how their work is related to agency goals. FEMA has a critical mission to help people before, during, and after disasters, and each employee plays a role in achieving the agency's mission.

However, the stress of challenges we mentioned today, including staffing shortages, coupled with burnout associated with the increased frequency of disasters and an expanded scope of responsibility over time, have the potential to negatively affect FEMA employees' engagement and morale. Additionally, in recent years, there have been concerns about FEMA's workplace culture and climate, specifically regarding harassment and discrimination, which can affect workforce morale and retention.⁹ We have ongoing work on FEMA's actions to address harassment and discrimination. We expect to report these findings in fall 2022.

Examples of How Workforce Challenges Affect FEMA's Mission

Experiences from the 2017 and 2018 disaster seasons highlight the importance of continuing to make progress on addressing the long-standing workforce management challenges. Such workforce challenges can affect FEMA's ability to carry out its mission. We have reported examples of how these workforce challenges affect FEMA's operations and those FEMA serves, including that (1) contracting staff shortages exacerbated challenges for recovery efforts, (2) Public Assistance programs in Puerto Rico faced challenges due to high staff turnover, and

⁸The Office of Personnel Management administers the annual Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey and uses the responses to calculate the employee engagement index. The Office of Personnel Management defines employee engagement as employees' sense of purpose that is evident in their display of dedication, persistence, and effort in their work or overall attachment to their organization and its mission.

⁹In 2018, FEMA began an investigation into allegations of harassment and misconduct by a senior executive within the agency. In 2019, FEMA commissioned a survey from the RAND Corporation to estimate the prevalence of harassment and discrimination. In its 2020 report, the RAND Corporation estimated that 29 percent of FEMA employees experienced discrimination or harassment related to sex, gender, or race/ethnicity in the previous year. See RAND Corporation, *Harassment and Discrimination on the Basis of Gender and Race/Ethnicity in the FEMA Workforce* (2020).

(3) low morale and inadequate training at call centers decreased the quality of service delivery.

Contracting staff shortages exacerbated challenges for recovery efforts. In April 2019, we reported on the federal government’s contracting efforts for preparedness, response, and recovery efforts related to the 2017 hurricanes and California wildfires. We found, among other things, that FEMA experienced contracting staffing shortages, which exacerbated challenges for disaster response and recovery.¹⁰

As we reported in April 2019, FEMA cited that contracting workforce shortages severely taxed its contracting processes and personnel. For example, eight of FEMA’s 10 regional offices, which cover all U.S. states and territories, had only one permanent full-time contracting official. Regional offices are responsible for managing post-disaster contracts, which are awarded after a disaster hits, even if regional procurement staff were not involved in the initial award of those contracts. Post-disaster contracts can last for years after a disaster occurs.

In that report, we noted that FEMA took some steps to address gaps in its contracting workforce. For example, officials told us they planned to hire additional contracting staff; however, it was unclear when these staff would be hired or how they would be allocated across FEMA’s Office of the Chief Procurement Officer. Furthermore, we also found that FEMA had not assessed its contracting workforce needs since 2014. Without such an assessment, FEMA is at risk of not having a sufficient contracting workforce during a disaster. We recommended that FEMA assess its workforce needs—including staffing levels, mission needs, and skill gaps—for contracting staff, to include regional offices and Disaster Acquisition Response Teams; and develop a plan, including timelines, to address any gaps. FEMA concurred with this recommendation. FEMA identified a number of actions it would take to address this recommendation including competency modeling for its contracting staff and a workforce analysis to identify skill gaps. As of May 2021, these actions were still in progress.

Public Assistance programs in Puerto Rico faced challenges due to high staff turnover. In our March 2019 report on recovery efforts in

¹⁰GAO, 2017 *Disaster Contracting: Actions Needed to Improve the Use of Post-Disaster Contracts to Support Response and Recovery*, [GAO-19-281](#) (Washington, D.C.: April 24, 2019).

Puerto Rico, we found that workforce capacity constraints were a challenge.¹¹ We reported that both FEMA and municipal officials had concerns about FEMA staff turnover and lack of knowledge about how the Public Assistance alternative procedures were to be applied in Puerto Rico.¹² While several municipal officials we spoke to remarked positively on consistent communication with FEMA officials, municipal officials in six municipalities we visited cited high levels of turnover among FEMA staff as a challenge with the recovery process.¹³ For example, officials in three municipalities said that discontinuity in FEMA personnel had caused them to have duplicative conversations with FEMA.

This issue has persisted over time, as we reported in our February 2020 report on continuing disaster recovery efforts in Puerto Rico.¹⁴ Municipal and Puerto Rico agency officials we spoke to experienced confusion about changing FEMA Public Assistance guidance partly due to changing points of contact.¹⁵ We reported that reliance on the Central Office of Recovery, Reconstruction, and Resilience, which was created by the Government of Puerto Rico, or individual FEMA staff to deliver and distribute FEMA guidance posed a risk that the guidance would not be accessible to all partners involved in recovery efforts. FEMA officials acknowledged that they faced difficulties in disseminating information in Puerto Rico. We recommended FEMA develop a repository for all current

¹¹GAO, *Puerto Rico Hurricanes: Status of FEMA Funding, Oversight, and Recovery Challenges*, [GAO-19-256](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 14, 2019).

¹²Unlike in the standard Public Assistance program where FEMA will fund the actual cost of a project, the Public Assistance alternative procedures allow awards for permanent work projects to be made on the basis of fixed cost estimates to provide financial incentives for the timely and cost-effective completion of work. This makes the recipient or subrecipient responsible for any project costs that exceed the agreed-upon fixed-cost estimate. However, if actual costs are less than the fixed-cost estimate, the recipient or subrecipient may use all or part of excess funds for other eligible purposes, such as additional cost-effective hazard mitigation measures to increase the resilience of public infrastructure. See 42 U.S.C. § 5189f. For more information, see [GAO-19-256](#).

¹³During interviews with officials from 10 selected municipalities, officials identified various challenges during the course of our discussions. When we reported the number of municipalities that identified a particular challenge, this did not necessarily mean that the remaining municipalities did not also experience the challenge. It meant that those municipalities did not raise the challenge during the course of our interviews.

¹⁴GAO, *Puerto Rico Disaster Recovery: FEMA Actions Needed to Strengthen Project Cost Estimation and Awareness of Program Guidance*, [GAO-20-221](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 5, 2020).

¹⁵FEMA iteratively developed, refined, and clarified Public Assistance guidance in Puerto Rico to respond and adapt to changing recovery conditions since the 2017 hurricanes.

applicable Public Assistance policies and guidance for Puerto Rico and make it available to all recovery partners.

In response to this recommendation, FEMA made Public Assistance policies and guidance documents accessible to Puerto Rico recovery partners through its internal Public Assistance application management system. By doing so, FEMA improved the accessibility of information and its assurance that recovery partners are aware of current guidance. With real time access to FEMA's current applicable guidance, there could be less confusion and need for additional requests for clarification. Even with improved access to policies and guidance, FEMA employees will continue to be an important source of information and support for disaster survivors and local officials. The local officials' experiences we previously reported on highlight how FEMA's workforce challenges, including staff turnover, can affect disaster recovery efforts.

Low morale and inadequate training at call centers affected service delivery. Other examples of how workforce challenges can affect FEMA's services include challenges with call center employee morale and training. In September 2020, we reported that for several years leading up to our reporting, FEMA's call center workforce faced challenges using program guidance to assist survivors and struggled with low morale.¹⁶ We also reported that following the catastrophic 2017 hurricane season, call center staff worked without adequate training, in part due to high disaster activity in 2017 and 2018. The training FEMA provided did not effectively support staff in applying guidance to answer survivors' questions and process cases encountered in their work, according to National Processing Service Center staff. In addition, Disaster Recovery Centers provide an important resource to survivors who do not have electricity or reliable cellphone service, as is often the case following a disaster, as well as those who do not regularly use computers. However, the limitations of staff qualifications and capabilities at these locations resulted in missed opportunities to help survivors quickly.

In that report, we also found that opportunities existed to improve employee engagement and morale among National Processing Service Center staff. Staff we spoke to consistently cited engagement challenges that undermined morale in all four call center locations. According to National Processing Service Center staff at all four locations, poor

¹⁶GAO, *Disaster Assistance: Additional Actions Needed to Strengthen FEMA's Individuals and Households Program*, [GAO-20-503](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sep. 30, 2020).

employee engagement from their management and supervisors resulted in pressures related to productivity, among other challenges, particularly since the 2017 hurricane season generated a high work volume for Individual & Households Program call center staff. National Processing Service Center staff in all four locations stated they felt pressured to meet productivity standards, which conflicted with providing quality service to the survivor.

We recommended, among other things, that FEMA use desirable characteristics of employee engagement—including performance feedback, career development, communication, and attention to work-life balance—while completing planned activities for improving morale among call center staff, assessing staff satisfaction scores, and identifying additional steps to strengthen employee morale. We also recommended that FEMA assess the effectiveness of the staff training for the Individuals & Households Program and implement strategies to ensure staff deployed to the Disaster Recovery Centers has the needed capabilities to provide support to survivors. DHS concurred with our recommendations and has taken steps to address them, but has not yet completed planned work, partly due to increased disaster operations and the COVID-19 pandemic. Addressing these recommendations remains important, particularly given that FEMA has since established a dedicated call center number and staff to the COVID-19 funeral assistance program.

Thank you, Chairwoman Demings, Chairman Correa, Ranking Members Cammack and Meijer, and Members of the Subcommittees. This concludes my prepared statement. I would be happy to respond to any questions you may have at this time.

GAO Contacts and Staff Acknowledgments

If you or your staff members have any questions about this testimony, please contact me at (404) 679-1875 or curriec@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this statement. Key contributors to this statement include Alana Finley, Assistant Director; Steven Rucker, Analyst-in-Charge; Joel Aldape; Sierra Hicks; Elizabeth Poulsen; and Carlin Van Holmes. Key contributors to the previous work discussed in this statement are listed in each of the cited reports.

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