Easy Read

FEMA Assistance for People with Disabilities

November 2026 | GAO-27-109349



GAO U.S. GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE

Contents

Introduction	1
The Federal Government's Role	4
Federal Laws	8
What Is in This Report	9
Working with States and Communities to Help People with Disabilities	10
Helping People with Disabilities and Their Families	16
GAO's Recommendations	26
Appendix	28

Easy Read: GAO-27-109349

Introduction



This is an **Easy Read** version of a report we wrote. **Easy Read** is a way that some groups have made their written information easier to understand. This can include shorter sentences or simpler language.

In this document, certain words and phrases are in **bold**. These words are important to the content of this report. We explain what these words and phrases mean when we use them.



Some words are blue and underlined. These are links that will go to GAO reports and other helpful information.

Why is GAO creating this document?



We created this Easy Read to make our work easier for everyone to use, including some people with intellectual or developmental disabilities. This is one way we are working for full inclusion of people with disabilities.

You can see the full report on our website (https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-26-108057).

GAO and Congress

What is GAO?

The **Government Accountability Office**, or **GAO**, is part of the Legislative Branch of the United States government. We are an independent agency that works for Congress. We give Congress information about how agencies are working. If we find ways agencies can work better, we make **recommendations**.

Recommendations are changes we think agencies should make to improve.

Why did we make this report?

A law called the **Think Differently About Emergencies Act** says GAO should review the help that the **Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)** gives to states, communities, and others to support people with disabilities.

The Federal Government's Role

The federal government has a role in helping people with disabilities get ready for and recover from disasters.

What is the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)?

The **Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)** is the federal agency in charge of how the federal government responds to major disasters, such as hurricanes and wildfires.

FEMA helps states, communities, and people before, during, and after disasters. It gives money to states to help rebuild things like roads and bridges after a disaster. And it may give money to people who have been through a disaster to help them.

Who responds to disasters first?

States and communities respond to disasters before FEMA does. When a disaster is too big for them to manage, FEMA may help.

How Is FEMA set up?

FEMA is set up in 10 regions across the country. FEMA regions can be as small as four states and as large as nine states.

FEMA has offices in each region. These offices are in charge of the federal government's response to disasters. They also work with state governments in the region.

Which FEMA staff help people with disabilities?

The Integration and Coordination Division tries to make sure that people with disabilities can use FEMA programs.



The Disability Coordinator tries to help make sure that FEMA develops training on what people with disabilities in disasters need. The Coordinator also has other job duties.



Civil Rights staff can look into whether some people were treated worse than other people when using FEMA programs for reasons that aren't legal, such as because they have a disability.

Which staff in FEMA's regions help people with disabilities?

Regional Disability Integration Specialists (disability specialists) can work with people in states and communities in their regions to make sure they understand what people with disabilities need.



How is FEMA changing?

The President has said he wants states and communities to be more in charge of disaster response. FEMA also does not have as many staff as it used to.

Federal Laws

Some laws help people with disabilities before, during, and after disasters.

These laws generally say that



- people with disabilities should not be treated worse in everyday life;
- any program that receives federal money must be available to people with disabilities; and
- staff who help people in disasters cannot treat people worse because they have a disability.

What Is in This Report?



This report looks at two questions:

- How does FEMA work with states and communities to help people with disabilities?
- How does FEMA directly help people with disabilities and their families?

To answer these questions, we

- reviewed laws and rules;
- reviewed FEMA policies, documents, and data;



- talked to people who work at FEMA;
- talked to groups that help people with disabilities, including after disasters; and
- talked to people who helped in disasters in Hawaii, Kentucky, and Louisiana.

For more information on how we did our work, see our full report.

Working with States and Communities to Help People with Disabilities

In this section we answer the question: How does FEMA work with states and communities to help people with disabilities?



FEMA gives information to states and communities, and gives money to help states after a disaster is declared. Sometimes, FEMA works with states and communities before disasters.

What information does FEMA share with states and communities to help people with disabilities in disasters?



Some of the information FEMA shares with states and communities is about how they can include the needs of people with disabilities when they make plans before a disaster. Other information is about how they can include the needs of people with disabilities when they do work after a disaster.



For example, FEMA says that shelters should have tools that help people communicate, such as hearing aids and screen readers.

What training does FEMA have for states and communities to help people with disabilities in disasters?



FEMA used to have training for state and community governments on helping people with disabilities in disasters. Government employees could take this training for free.

FEMA stopped this training in 2025. However, this kind of training is important if state and community governments are going to be more in charge of responding to disasters in the future. Bringing the training back could help states and communities be more ready to help people with disabilities in disasters and help ensure people with disabilities are not treated worse.

How does the money FEMA gives to states help people with disabilities in disasters?



FEMA's **Public Assistance** program gives money to states after a disaster. Local groups can apply for some of this money to pay for work they have done related to disasters. This can be for work they have done to help people with disabilities.

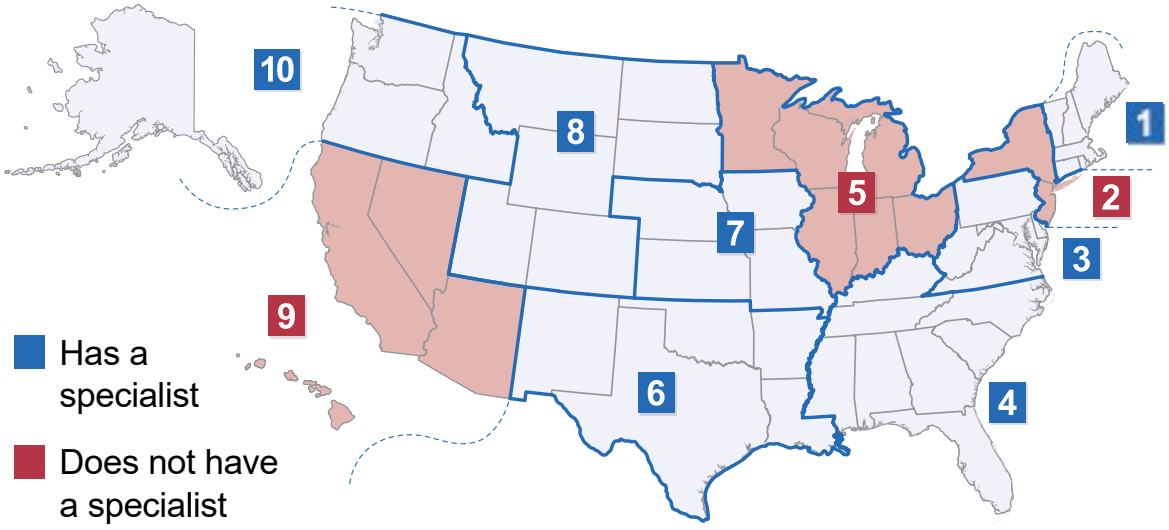
Do the disability specialists work with states and communities in every FEMA region?

Some states and communities said that they had worked with the disability specialist for their region.

Others said they did not know who the disability specialist for their region was.

This may be because some disability specialists have left their jobs. As of May 2026, FEMA regions two, five, and nine did not have a disability specialist.

FEMA Regions With and Without out a Disability Specialist



Source: GAO analysis of Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) documentation. U.S. Geological Survey (base map). | GAO 27-109349.

What are disability specialists' job duties?

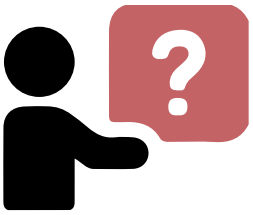
FEMA disability specialists' job duties are not always clear. States and communities said their work with disability specialists can be different in different regions and depends on the person who is in the disability specialist job.



Because FEMA does not make it clear that disability specialists should be working with states and communities before disasters, this work may not happen. This could mean that states and communities are not able to help people with disabilities in disasters.

Helping People with Disabilities and Their Families

In this section we answer the question: How does FEMA directly help people with disabilities and their families?



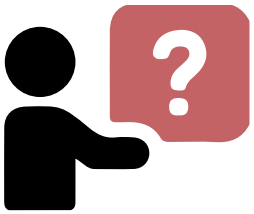
FEMA gives information about disasters to people with disabilities and their families. It may give money to people to help them recover after disasters. FEMA also can help people who have been treated worse than other people because they have a disability.

What information does FEMA give people with disabilities and their families about disasters?

FEMA's website has some information for people with disabilities and their families about planning for and recovering from disasters. For example, the website says that people should:



- **Pack an emergency kit before disasters.** For example, a person with autism may need noise-canceling headphones.
- **Develop a plan before disasters to decide what information or things they will need.** This could include important phone numbers or medical information.

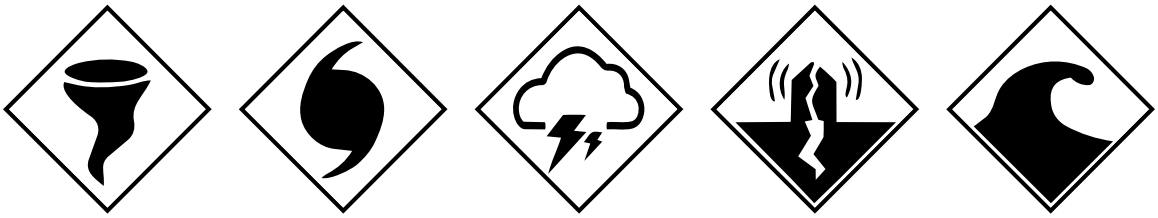


How does FEMA warn people with disabilities about disasters?

FEMA has a warning system that states and communities can use to send emergency messages to the public. State or community governments make the messages and use the system to send them.

Messages can include pictures so that they are easier for people with visual or hearing disabilities to understand.

Common Disaster Pictures



Tornado | Hurricane | Severe or extreme storms | Earthquake | Tsunami

Source: National Alliance for Public Safety GIS Foundation. | GAO-27-107934



How does FEMA help people recover from a disaster?

FEMA may give people **Individual Assistance** to help them recover from a disaster. Individual Assistance is money that FEMA gives some people who have been through a disaster. People fill out an application to get this money.

People with disabilities whose homes were broken in a disaster can sometimes use this money to add things to their homes to make it easier to live there. For example, a person who uses a wheelchair might add a new ramp to the front door of their home.

How many people with disabilities have applied for disaster money from FEMA?

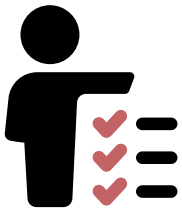
From January 2022 through December 2025, more than 7 million people applied for disaster money from FEMA. More than 1 million people who applied said they had a disability.



During the same time, people with disabilities got about $8 billion in disaster money to help make it easier for them to live in their homes. This included money for ramps, beds, and wheelchairs.

What questions about disability are on the application for disaster money from FEMA?

FEMA's application for disaster money asks



- whether someone has a disability and the type of disability;
- whether any devices related to a disability, such as wheelchairs, were broken during the disaster; and
- whether a person needs help, such as sign language interpretation or braille, to use FEMA programs.

How can people with disabilities apply for disaster money from FEMA?

- **Calling the FEMA Helpline.** The Helpline offers video relay services for people who cannot hear.



- **Visiting DisasterAssistance.gov or using FEMA's mobile app.** FEMA has updated its online application to be more visual.

- **Going to a Disaster Recovery Center.** People can get help at these centers after a disaster. Each FEMA center should have tools like a tablet for sign language interpretation and information in braille.



- **Finding a FEMA team.** These teams sometimes help people in one place in a community, such as a park. FEMA used to have teams that went to people's houses after a disaster. FEMA stopped these teams in June 2025.

What can make it hard for people with disabilities to apply for disaster money from FEMA?



- **Questions on the application** may use difficult words without explaining them.
- The **letters** that tell applicants if they will receive money can be hard for some people with disabilities to understand.
- The application does not ask for a **special phone number** for video that some people who cannot hear use.
- If a person needs a friend or family member to help them with their application, they have to complete a **special form** and give it to FEMA.
- People applying to replace medications, a wheelchair, or hearing aids may need to send **more paperwork**, such as a receipt.

Has FEMA asked people with disabilities about the application process?

FEMA has not asked people with disabilities about the application for disaster money.



FEMA talked to a group of people to learn how to make its letters to applicants easier to understand. However, FEMA did not know if people with disabilities were part of this group. FEMA did make changes to its letters to help make them easier to understand. It changed how the letter looks on paper and put some words in bold.

Where can people with disabilities complain to FEMA if they think they have been treated worse than other people in FEMA programs?



People can complain to any FEMA staff if they feel like they have been treated worse than other people. They can also make a written complaint to FEMA's Integration and Coordination Division. However, FEMA does not have the power to look at all types of complaints and may send some complaints to other agencies.

Do FEMA staff who work in the places where disasters have happened understand the needs of people with disabilities?



FEMA used to have a group of staff who were experts in the needs of people with disabilities in disasters. FEMA is working to train more people about the needs of people with disabilities so they can help after a disaster.

GAO's Recommendations

Recommendations are changes we think agencies should make to improve.

We are making three recommendations to FEMA:

- FEMA should **bring back its training** for states and communities on meeting the needs of people with disabilities in disasters.
- FEMA should make sure that the disability specialist role in all regions includes **working with states and communities before disasters** to make sure they include the needs of people with disabilities during disasters.
- FEMA should **ask people with disabilities** about its application for disaster money and use this information to make the application better for people with disabilities.

FEMA agreed with our ideas. For more information, see our full report.

GAO's Commitment to People with Disabilities



In line with GAO's core values, we work for full inclusion of people with disabilities. We show our commitment to the disability community through accessibility efforts for our employees and the public who read our reports.



GAO has also provided Congress with analysis of accessibility and disability issues in several areas, including veterans with disabilities, health care access, voting, disability benefits, equal employment opportunity, and more.

Appendix

GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments



GAO Contact

Elizabeth Curda

(202) 512-7215

curdae@gao.gov

Easy Read Staff Acknowledgments



Lorin Obler (Assistant Director), Amy Sweet (Analyst in Charge), James Bennett, Alison Cashin, Alex Galuten, Anne Ordway, Joy Solmonson, and Haley Wall.

Additional Acknowledgments

Christina Cuthbertson, Michael Murray, and Amanda Panko.

Sources for Images

This appendix contains source information for images in this product.

Stock.adobe.com



GAO



Federal agencies



Front cover: GAO and Stafeeva/stock.adobe.com.

GAO's Mission

The Government Accountability Office, the audit, evaluation, and investigative arm of Congress, exists to support Congress in meeting its constitutional responsibilities and to help improve the performance and accountability of the federal government for the American people. GAO examines the use of public funds; evaluates federal programs and policies; and provides analyses, recommendations, and other assistance to help Congress make informed oversight, policy, and funding decisions. GAO's commitment to good government is reflected in its core values of accountability, integrity, and reliability.

Obtaining Copies of GAO Reports and Testimonies

The fastest and easiest way to obtain copies of GAO documents at no cost is through our website. Each weekday afternoon, GAO posts on its website newly released reports, testimony, and correspondence. You can also subscribe to GAO's email updates to receive notification of newly posted products.

Order by Phone

The price of each GAO publication reflects GAO's actual cost of production and distribution and depends on the number of pages in the publication and whether the publication is printed in color or black and white. Pricing and ordering information is posted on GAO's website, https://www.gao.gov/ordering.htm.

Place orders by calling (202) 512-6000, toll free (866) 801-7077, or TDD (202) 512-2537.

Orders may be paid for using American Express, Discover Card, MasterCard, Visa, check, or money order. Call for additional information.

Connect with GAO

Look for GAO on **X**, **LinkedIn**, **Instagram**, and **YouTube**. Subscribe to our **Email Updates**. Listen to our **Podcasts**. Visit GAO on the web at **https://www.gao.gov**.

To Report Fraud, Waste, and Abuse in Federal Programs

Contact FraudNet:

Website: https://www.gao.gov/about/what-gao-does/fraudnet

Automated answering system: (800) 424-5454.

Congressional Relations

David A. Powner, Acting Managing Director, **CongRel@gao.gov**, (202) 512-4400,
U.S. Government Accountability Office, 441 G Street NW, Room 7125, Washington, DC 20548

Public Affairs

Sarah Kaczmarek, Managing Director, **Media@gao.gov**, (202) 512-4800,
U.S. Government Accountability Office, 441 G Street NW, Room 7149 Washington, DC 20548

Strategic Planning and External Liaison

Stephen J. Sanford, Managing Director, **spel@gao.gov**