



Why This Matters

The Office of Inspector General (OIG) serves as an independent body to deter, identify, and address fraud, abuse, mismanagement, and waste in Department of Homeland Security (DHS) programs and operations. To this end, the OIG is responsible for conducting and supervising audits, investigations, and inspections relating to the programs and operations of the Department. The OIG examines, evaluates and, where necessary, critiques these operations and activities, recommending ways for the Department to carry out its responsibilities in the most effective, efficient, and economical manner possible.

DHS Response

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) generally concurs with this report and its conclusions and recommendations.

For Further Information:

Contact our Office of Public Affairs at (202)254-4100, or email us at DHS-OIG.OfficePublicAffairs@oig.dhs.gov

FEMA Should Take Steps to Improve the Efficiency and Effectiveness of the Disaster Assistance Helpline

What We Determined

The overall objective of this audit was to determine FEMA's efficiency and effectiveness to register non-English/Spanish-speaking disaster survivors for disaster assistance and provide them with information through its Disaster Assistance Helpline.

We reviewed the capabilities, management, and policies and procedures of FEMA's Disaster Assistance Helpline from September 2013 to June 2014.

We determined that FEMA's Disaster Assistance Helpline could not consistently accommodate a variety of non-English/Spanish-speaking disaster survivors seeking to register for disaster aid and receive answers to their FEMA-related questions in an efficient or effective manner.

What We Recommend

The report recommends that FEMA's Associate Administrator, Response and Recovery: (1) (a) provide additional multilingual options to support the identification of disaster survivors' languages for FEMA Helpline's current telephonic capabilities, and (b) consider performing a cost/benefit analysis of available technology, including that which could notify the Helpline operator of the caller's requested language (to assist the operator in pairing the caller with the appropriate translator) and/or expanding the current pre-recorded options of selecting a numerical option on one's keypad beyond English and Spanish to include the most other widely-spoken languages (based on U.S. Census data) (e.g., "Press 3 for Mandarin/Chinese... press 4 for Tagalog...press 5 for Vietnamese," etc.); (2) provide a language identification tool to assist Helpline Operators in the identification of a disaster survivor's language for the top three languages encountered on FEMA's Helpline beyond English and Spanish and provide training on how to most effectively and efficiently use this resource; and (3) update FEMA's printed/written Helpline resources to indicate that the disaster survivor, prior to calling, should select option #3 for languages other than English or Spanish; as FEMA expands availability in other languages, incorporate updates into printed/written materials.