REFORMING FEMA: BRINGING COMMON SENSE BACK TO FEDERAL EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

(119–13)

HEARING

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, PUBLIC BUILDINGS, AND
EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON
TRANSPORTATION AND
INFRASTRUCTURE
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Washington, DC 20515

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MARCH 21, 2025

SUMMARY OF SUBJECT MATTER

TO: Members, Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management

FROM: Staff, Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management

RE: Subcommittee Hearing on "*Reforming FEMA: Bringing Common Sense Back to Federal Emergency Management*"

I. PURPOSE

The Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management of the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure will meet on Tuesday, March 25, 2025, at 10:00 a.m. ET in 2167 of the Rayburn House Office Building to receive testimony at a hearing entitled, "*Reforming FEMA: Bringing Common Sense Back to Federal Emergency Management*." The hearing will broadly examine the current state of emergency management, including ways to reform the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and Federal disaster assistance. At this hearing, Members will receive testimony from stakeholders and experts in emergency management and disasters.

II. BACKGROUND

FEDERAL ASSISTANCE FOR DISASTERS

FEMA is the Federal Government's lead agency for preparing for, mitigating against, responding to, and recovering from disasters and emergencies related to all hazards—whether natural or man-made.[1] FEMA's primary authority in carrying out these functions stems from the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act (Stafford Act) (P.L. 100–707, as amended).[2] The Stafford Act authorizes three types of declarations: (1) major disaster declarations; (2) emergency declarations; and (3) fire management grant (FMAG) declarations.[3] The Stafford Act authorizes the President to approve states' requests for a Federal disaster declaration when "the situation is of such severity and magnitude that effective response is beyond the capabilities of the state and affected local governments."[4]

PRESIDENTIALLY DECLARED MAJOR DISASTER

When state and local resources are overwhelmed and the "disaster is of such severity and magnitude that effective response is beyond the capabilities of the state

[1] DEP'T OF HOMELAND SECURITY, *FEMA*, (Feb. 3, 2023), *available at* https://www.dhs.gov/employee-resources/federal-emergency-management-agency-fema.
[2] Stafford Act, Pub. L. No. 100–707.
[3] *Id.*
[4] *Id.*

and the affected local governments,"[5] the Governor of the affected state may request the President declare a major disaster.[6] FEMA's primary Stafford Act programs for disaster recovery in the aftermath of a major disaster are in the Public Assistance (PA) Program and the Individual Assistance (IA) Program.[7] Following a major disaster declaration, FEMA also provides Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) funds.[8]

The PA Program, authorized primarily by Sections 403, 406, and 428 of the Stafford Act, reimburses state, tribal, and territorial governments, as well as certain private non-profits for rebuilding damaged buildings and infrastructure.[9] The Federal cost-share for PA is 75 percent, but may be increased by the President.[10]

The IA Program is authorized primarily by Section 408 of the Stafford Act. The IA program includes the Individuals and Households Program (IHP), Mass Care and Emergency Assistance, the Crisis Counseling Assistance and Training Program, Disaster Unemployment Assistance, Disaster Legal Services, and Disaster Case Management. IHP is the primary FEMA program used to assist disaster survivors; it includes housing assistance and other needs assistance. Housing assistance includes money for repair, rental assistance, or "direct assistance," such as the provision of temporary housing.[11] The current limits for IHP assistance is $42,500 for housing assistance and $42,500 for other needs assistance.[12]

Section 404 of the Stafford Act authorizes HMGP, which is based on a percentage of PA funding, to provide grants to state, tribal, and territorial governments for mitigation projects that: (1) are cost effective and (2) reduce the risk of future damage, hardship, and loss from natural hazards.[13] The purpose of this grant program is to fund practical mitigation measures that effectively reduce the risk of loss of life and property from future disasters. State, tribal, and territorial governments may use their HMGP funds to assist families in reducing the risk to their homes from natural disasters. The Federal cost share for HMGP is 75 percent and the remaining 25 percent can come from a variety of sources (i.e. a cash payment from the state or local government).[14]

III. FEMA'S RESPONSE TO RECENT DISASTERS

HURRICANES HELENE AND MILTON

In 2024, FEMA provided assistance for 120 Presidentially declared emergencies and major disasters including: five hurricanes that made landfall, multiple unnamed severe storms, wildfires, and an active tornado season that impacted many states across the country.[15] However, the most significant disaster of 2024 was Hurricane Helene, which made landfall near Perry, Florida on September 26, 2024, as a Category 4 hurricane.[16] As Helene traveled across the Appalachian Region, it resulted in catastrophic flooding, landslides, and tornadoes. Six states (Florida, Georgia, Tennessee, Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina) received a major disaster declaration associated with Helene.[17] Alabama received an emergency declaration.[18] The destruction of Hurricane Helene resulted in 219 storm-related deaths,[19]

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[5] FEMA, A GUIDE TO THE DISASTER DECLARATION PROCESS AND FEDERAL DISASTER ASSISTANCE 1, *available at* https://www.fema.gov/pdf/rebuild/recover/dec__proc.pdf.
[6] *Id.*
[7] *Id.*
[8] *Id.*
[9] *See* FEMA, *Assistance for Governments and Private Non-Profits After a Disaster*, (Feb. 23, 2023), *available at* https://www.fema.gov/assistance/public.
[10] 42 U.S.C. § 5172.
[11] FEMA, *Individuals and Households Program*, (Feb. 3, 2023), *available at* https://www.fema.gov/assistance/individual/program.
[12] 42 U.S.C. § 5174.
[13] FEMA, *Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP)*, (Dec. 27, 2022), *available at* https://www.fema.gov/grants/mitigation/hazard-mitigation.
[14] *Id.*
[15] FEMA, *Declared Disasters, available at* https://www.fema.gov/disaster/declarations.
[16] Kate Payne, *Hurricane Helene Kills At Least 44 and Cuts A Swath of Destruction Across the Southeast*, AP NEWS, (Sept. 27, 2024), *available at* https://apnews.com/article/hurricane-helene-florida-georgia-carolina-e5769b56dea81e40fae2161ad1b4e75d.
[17] FEMA, *Hurricane Helene, available at* https://www.fema.gov/disaster/current/hurricane-helene.
[18] *Id.*
[19] NOAA, NATIONAL CENTERS FOR ENVIRONMENTAL INFORMATION, *U.S. Billion-Dollar Weather and Climate Disasters, available at* https://www.ncei.noaa.gov/access/billions/events.

including 106 in North Carolina alone.[20] That makes it the deadliest storm to hit the mainland United States since Hurricane Katrina.[21]

Just two weeks later, Hurricane Milton formed in the Gulf of Mexico and rapidly intensified to a Category 5 hurricane.[22] By the time Milton made landfall near Siesta Key on October 9, 2024, the storm had weakened to a Category 3 hurricane, but it brought a front of deadly tornadoes and storm surges to Florida.[23] This was the third hurricane in 13 months to impact Florida's Big Bend region.[24]

According to the February Disaster Relief Fund Report to Congress, FEMA has obligated $6.65 billion for Hurricane Helene and $2.7 billion for Hurricane Milton.[25] While 2020 holds the all-time record for Presidentially declared emergencies and major disasters due to declarations related to COVID–19, at 230, the size and severity of Stafford Act declarations in 2024 has drawn Congressional attention to FEMA's resource constraints and response challenges.[26]

LOS ANGELES WILDFIRES

Starting on January 7, 2025, a series of 12 wildfires, including the Palisades and Eaton fires, burned more than 40,000 acres across the greater Los Angeles area.[27] The wildfires burned for several weeks and were only 100 percent contained on January 31, 2025.[28] Twenty-nine people died as a result of the wildfires, and more than 18,000 structures were destroyed.[29]

According to the February Disaster Relief Fund Report to Congress, FEMA has obligated $1.27 billion for the Los Angeles wildfires.[30] The Los Angeles wildfires sparked a wider debate about California's resource management, after reports began circulating that water systems used to fight the Palisades and Eaton fires could not maintain the continuous high water pressures needed for fire hydrants at high elevations. In the first days of the fires, firefighters were forced to overly rely on water supplied by fire hydrants to suppress the wildfires since hurricane force winds meant they could not use planes and helicopters to drop water.[31]

IV. HISTORICAL ISSUES AND REFORMS

FEMA was originally created by Executive Order to carry out the President's authority in providing Federal disaster assistance.[32] FEMA was later merged into the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and its authorities dispersed throughout the Department under the direction of the Secretary of DHS.[33] Following the poor response after Hurricane Katrina in 2005, Congress enacted the Post Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act (PKEMRA) in 2006. PKEMRA re-established FEMA as a distinct entity within DHS, designated the FEMA Administrator as the Presi-

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[20] NORTH CAROLINA DEP'T OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES, *Hurricane Helene Storm Related Fatalities, available at* https://www.ncdhhs.gov/assistance/hurricane-helene-recovery-resources/hurricane-helene-storm-related-fatalities.

[21] Ana Faguy & Brandon Drenon, *Helene is Deadliest Mainland US Hurricane Since Katrina*, BBC, (Oct. 3, 2024), *available at* https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c1k70rnrp4xo.

[22] Brad Brooks and Leonora LaPeter Anton, *Hurricane Milton Leaves At Least 10 Dead, Millions Without Power in Florida*, REUTERS, (Oct. 10, 2024), *available at* https://www.reuters.com/world/us/hurricane-milton-weakens-it-marches-across-central-florida-homes-destroyed-2024-10-10/.

[23] *Id.*

[24] Chelsea Harvey, *Third Hurricane in 13 Months Slams Florida's Big Bend*, E&E NEWS by POLITICO, (Sept. 27, 2024), *available at* https://www.eenews.net/articles/third-hurricane-in-13-months-slams-floridas-big-bend/.

[25] FEMA, FEBRUARY 2025 DISASTER RELIEF FUND REPORT, (Feb. 12, 2025), *available at* https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/documents/fema__ocfo__feb-2025-disaster-relief-fund-report.pdf [hereinafter Disaster Relief Fund Report].

[26] Adam B. Smith, *2023: A Historic Year of U.S. Billion-Dollar Weather and Climate Disasters*, NOAA, (Jan. 8, 2024), *available at* https://www.climate.gov/news-features/blogs/beyond-data/2023-historic-year-us-billion-dollar-weather-and-climate-disasters; Letter from Sam Graves, Chairman, H. Comm. on Transp. & Infrastructure to Deanne Criswell, Administrator, FEMA (Oct. 11, 2025) (on file with Comm.).

[27] CAL FIRE, *2025 Incident Archive, available at* https://www.fire.ca.gov/incidents/2025.

[28] *Id.*

[29] Minyvonne Burke & Liz Kreutz, *What We Know About the Victims Killed in the California Wildfires*, NBC NEWS, (Feb. 12, 2025), *available at* https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/california-wildfires-what-we-know-victims-killed-rcna188240.

[30] Disaster Relief Fund Report, *supra* note 25.

[31] Karla Rendo, *More Pacific Palisades Residents Join Lawsuit Against LADWP, City Over Water Supply Failure*, NEWS4 LOS ANGELES, (Mar. 8, 2025), *available at* https://www.nbclosangeles.com/news/california-wildfires/more-pacific-palisades-residents-join-lawsuit-against-ladwp-city-over-water-supply-failure/3649420/.

[32] Exec. Order No. 12127 (Apr. 1, 1979).

[33] Homeland Security Act of 2002, Pub. L. No. 107–296.

dent's advisor on Federal emergency management, and authorized FEMA for the first time in statute.[34]

Since PKEMRA, Congress has enacted several other major reforms to improve FEMA, including:

- In 2013, Congress passed the Sandy Recovery Improvement Act (SRIA, P.L. 113–2) which included reforms to speed up and streamline recovery efforts, reduce costs, and improve the effectiveness of several disaster assistance programs authorized by the Stafford Act, namely the PA Program, the IA Program, and the HMGP.[35]
- In 2018, Congress passed the Disaster Recovery Reform Act of 2018 (DRRA) following Hurricanes Maria and Irma which hit Puerto Rico and the United States Virgin Islands.[36] DRRA made additional reforms to speed up and improve disaster response and recovery as well as established funding for FEMA's pre-disaster mitigation program, currently called Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC).[37] In 2018, Congress also enacted the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018 that included additional reforms intended to improve disaster recovery, generally, as well as specifically in Puerto Rico and the United States Virgin Islands.[38]

In addition to these major reforms, the Committee has moved, and Congress has enacted, targeted reforms intended to improve FEMA assistance and coordination across the Federal Government in responding to disasters. Despite these reforms, issues remain. For example, there are currently over 1,000 open major disaster, emergency, and fire management declarations dating back to Hurricane Katrina in 2005.[39] There are over 5,000 open projects from 2005 and 2017 (prior to Hurricanes Maria and Irma).[40]

V. RECENT PRESIDENTIAL ACTIONS

On January 24, 2025, President Trump announced, through Executive Order, the creation of the Federal Emergency Management Agency Review Council (Council).[41] The stated purpose of the Council is to, "[evaluate] whether FEMA's bureaucracy in disaster response ultimately harms the agency's ability to successfully respond."[42] The Executive Order highlights the need for the Council to review FEMA in the wake of recent disasters, like Hurricane Helene. The Executive Order also points out that despite spending $30 billion in disaster aid each of the past three years, FEMA has left many disaster survivors without the resources they need.[43]

The Council will be co-chaired by the Secretary of Homeland Security and the Secretary of Defense, with any additional members of the Council being appointed by the President. The Council must hold its first public meeting before April 24, 2025, and will need to issue a report to the President 190 days after that first meeting.[44]

VI. CONCLUSION

Last year was a challenging year for disaster response and recovery. Hurricanes Helene and Milton highlighted the need for additional reforms to our Nation's current emergency management system. The more recent California wildfires further charged the debate about what role states should play in reducing their own disaster risks. These disasters, along with President Trump's Federal Emergency Management Agency Review Council, have begun a broader conversation about what the future of FEMA should look like going forward. As this Subcommittee looks to bring back common sense in emergency management, the following witnesses will provide much-needed insights from a variety of perspectives.

[34] Post Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act, Pub. L. No. 109–295.
[35] Sandy Recovery Improvement Act, Pub. L. No. 113–2.
[36] FAA Reauthorization Act of 2018, Pub. L. No. 115–254.
[37] *Id.*
[38] Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018, Pub. L. No. 115–123.
[39] E-mail from FEMA Congressional Affairs to Elizabeth Granger, Professional Staff, H. Comm. on Transp. and Infrastructure (Mar. 3, 2025, 4:48 PM EST) (on file with Comm.).
[40] *Id.*
[41] Exec. Order No. 14180, (Jan. 24, 2025), *available at* https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/council-to-assess-the-federal-emergency-management-agency/.
[42] *Id.*
[43] *Id.*
[44] *Id.*

VII. WITNESSES

- Mr. Chris Currie, Director, Homeland Security and Justice Team, United States Government Accountability Office
- Mr. Kevin Guthrie, Executive Director, Florida Division of Emergency Management
- Ms. Jaime Laughter, County Manager, Transylvania County, North Carolina
- Adrian Garcia, Commissioner, Harris County, Texas, *on behalf of the* National Association of Counties

REFORMING FEMA: BRINGING COMMON SENSE BACK TO FEDERAL EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

TUESDAY, MARCH 25, 2025

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, PUBLIC BUILDINGS, AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT,
COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE,
Washington, DC.

The subcommittee met, pursuant to call, at 10:01 a.m., in Room 2167, Rayburn House Office Building, Hon. Scott Perry (Chairman of the subcommittee) presiding.

Mr. PERRY. The Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management will come to order.

The Chair asks unanimous consent that the chairman be authorized to declare a recess at any time during today's hearing.

Without objection, so ordered.

The chairman also asks unanimous consent that Members not on the subcommittee be permitted to sit with the subcommittee at today's hearing and ask questions.

Without objection, so ordered.

As a reminder, if Members wish to insert a document into the record, please also email it to DocumentsTI@mail.house.gov.

The Chair now recognizes himself for the purpose of an opening statement for 5 minutes.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. SCOTT PERRY OF PENNSYLVANIA, CHAIRMAN, SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, PUBLIC BUILDINGS, AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

Mr. PERRY. I want to thank our witnesses for being here today to discuss reforming FEMA and how we can bring common sense back to Federal emergency management.

After witnessing the Federal Government's response to Hurricane Helene last year and the recent Los Angeles wildfires, I, like many Americans, was shocked by many of the stories I heard coming from these communities. I know members of this committee have proposed, and Congress has enacted, reform after reform to make FEMA and the Federal emergency management system work better. Despite these efforts, it seems that nothing improves.

This is not meant to be a beatdown of FEMA, but we can't just keep going the way we have been and expect different outcomes.

In fact, the bureaucratic labyrinth seems to have only become more complicated, causing unnecessary delays when disaster strikes.

Taxpayers fund FEMA grant programs for States and local governments to invest in mitigation, preparedness, and response, yet many of these programs move too slowly, preventing timely and effective action when it is most direly needed.

I mean, for 46 years, individual regions should have been reducing risk, the impact of emergencies, and the number of emergencies themselves. Unfortunately, the metrics, including the cost and impact, have all gone in the wrong direction.

What we saw in the case of Hurricane Helene is demonstrative of that fact. FEMA was ill-prepared to support the response and recovery in the mountains of North Carolina. In California, we saw a lack of preparedness by State and local officials—from a lack of water for firefighting to disorganization on the ground, despite literally billions of taxpayer dollars going to California for mitigation, preparedness, and firefighting.

On top of all that, there are still over 1,000 open FEMA disaster declarations dating back to Hurricane Katrina—which is over 20 years ago—and well over 5,000 open projects. This raises serious questions about the Federal Government being the best institution to respond to localized disasters.

Federal disaster assistance was created to support State and local governments when absolutely necessary, when the resources required exceed the ability of local agencies to respond. Unfortunately, the result has been to utilize FEMA as the first responder to every disaster occurring throughout the Nation.

This almost absolute reliance on the Federal Government is dangerous and costly. FEMA was not designed to be the first responder in disasters. States and local governments are. They know their communities best. They understand the risks, what their communities need, the terrain, and how to navigate it to respond quickly to emergencies.

It is critical, therefore, that State and local governments make disaster preparedness a priority and that they budget for it—let me say that again—and that they budget for it, have the right people and training in place, and ensure that they have the capacity and capability to respond.

The current system creates a perverse incentive for States. States are mostly off the hook for meaningfully investing in their own emergency response and preparedness plans because they know they can rely on FEMA stepping in every time even if it is inartful at best.

Meanwhile, FEMA is stretched thin and is so weighed down by self-imposed bureaucratic requirements that they can't respond effectively when called upon or even close out projects going back 20 years.

FEMA's ability to function effectively was further undermined as the previous administration pushed its open border, equity, and climate agenda onto the Agency, resulting in disaster funding being diverted to ridiculous projects like planting trees to address urban heat islands. It's no wonder that President Trump created the FEMA Review Council and issued an Executive order on State and local preparedness.

I am hopeful that this hearing will provide valuable insight, as T&I is the lead House committee on FEMA and Federal emergency management, because meaningful reform is, obviously, absolutely urgently needed.

With that, I look forward to hearing from our witnesses on these topics.

[Mr. Perry's prepared statement follows:]

Prepared Statement of Hon. Scott Perry, a Representative in Congress from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and Chairman, Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management

I want to thank our witnesses for being here today to discuss reforming FEMA and how we can bring common sense back to federal emergency management.

After witnessing the federal government's response to Hurricane Helene last year and the recent Los Angeles wildfires, I, like most Americans, was shocked by many of the stories I heard coming from these communities. I know Members of this committee have proposed, and Congress has enacted, reform after reform to make FEMA and the federal emergency management system work better. Despite these efforts, it seems that nothing has improved. This is not meant to be a beatdown of FEMA, but we cannot just keep going the way we have been and expect different outcomes. In fact, the bureaucratic labyrinth has only become more complicated, causing unnecessary delays when disaster strikes.

Taxpayers fund FEMA grant programs for states and local governments to invest in mitigation, preparedness, and response, yet many of these programs move too slowly, preventing timely and effective action when it is most direly needed. For 46 years, individual regions should have been reducing risk, the impact of emergencies, and the number of emergencies themselves. Unfortunately, the metrics, including the cost and impact, have all gone in the wrong direction.

What we saw in the case of Hurricane Helene is demonstrative of that fact. FEMA was ill-prepared to support response and recovery in the mountains of North Carolina. In California, we saw a lack of preparedness by state and local officials—from a lack of water for firefighting to disorganization on the ground, despite billions of taxpayer dollars going to California for mitigation, preparedness, and firefighting.

On top of all of that, there are still over 1,000 open FEMA disaster declarations dating back to Hurricane Katrina, and well over 5,000 open projects. This raises serious questions about whether the federal government is the best institution to respond to localized disasters.

Federal disaster assistance was created to support state and local governments when absolutely necessary—when the resources required exceed the ability of local agencies to respond. Unfortunately, the trend has been to utilize FEMA as the first responder to every disaster occurring throughout the nation.

This increase in reliance on the federal government is dangerous and costly. FEMA was not designed to be the first responder in disasters. States and local governments are. They know their communities best—they understand the risks, what their communities need, the terrain, and how to navigate it to quickly respond to emergencies.

It is critical, therefore, that state and local governments make disaster preparedness a priority—that they budget for it, have the right people and training in place, and ensure that they have the capability to respond.

The current system creates a perverse incentive for states. States are mostly off the hook for meaningfully investing in their own emergency response and preparedness plans because they have come to rely on FEMA stepping in every time.

Meanwhile, FEMA is stretched thin and is so weighed down by self-imposed bureaucratic requirements that they can't respond effectively when called upon or even close out projects going back 20 years.

FEMA's ability to function effectively was further undermined as the previous administration pushed its open border, equity, and climate agenda onto the agency, resulting in disaster funding being diverted to projects like planting trees to address urban "heat islands." It is no wonder that President Trump created the FEMA Review Council and issued an executive order on state and local preparedness.

I am hopeful this hearing will provide valuable insight, as T&I is the lead House Committee on FEMA and federal emergency management, because meaningful reform is urgently needed.

Mr. PERRY. And the Chair now recognizes the ranking member, Representative Stanton, for 5 minutes for his opening statement.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. GREG STANTON OF ARIZONA, RANKING MEMBER, SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, PUBLIC BUILDINGS, AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

Mr. STANTON. Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you all for attending this important hearing titled "Reforming FEMA: Bringing Common Sense Back to Federal Emergency Management."

I am the new ranking member of this subcommittee, and I take Federal disaster assistance delivery very seriously, and I look forward to conducting oversight on FEMA's important work.

FEMA is where Americans look for help, critical help after what is likely the worst day of their lives. So it is critical that the Agency be postured to respond at all times. For most of its life, FEMA has been an apolitical entity: red State or blue State, it didn't matter. FEMA stayed focused on the mission to help all Americans and kept out of the political fray. Sadly, that is no longer the case today.

Following the recent catastrophic disasters in California and South Carolina, President Trump has focused more on spreading misinformation than helping Americans in need. Specifically, after the tragic wildfires in Los Angeles, he threatened to condition disaster relief on policy matters that have nothing to do with emergency management. This is simply wrong and shakes the trust that Americans have in their Government to come to their aid after a catastrophe. That is what FEMA is all about.

We should have a discussion about how to improve FEMA, but as a baseline, we should acknowledge the need that we have in the Federal Emergency Management Agency, specifically there to help States and localities when an emergency goes beyond their ability to immediately deal with it.

Yesterday, DHS Secretary Noem added to that uncertainty facing disaster survivors when she said that we are, quote, "we're going to eliminate FEMA," unquote, in a Presidential Cabinet meeting. President Trump responded by saying, quote, "great job," unquote.

I will never support eliminating FEMA or conditioning aid for emergency disaster assistance. Whether a State is red or blue, they are American, and they are entitled to the support of their fellow Americans on their worst day. So I condemn calls to condition emergency disaster assistance in the strongest possible terms and urge elected leaders to never make such comments again.

Unfortunately, threats of conditioning lifesaving assistance is not the only partisan game happening at FEMA. In February, Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency entered FEMA and has been wreaking havoc ever since. They have accessed secure Government systems that include disaster survivors' personal information and slowed the delivery of FEMA assistance.

I am deeply troubled to learn that all FEMA grants are now subject to additional review to ensure that they are complementary to President Trump's political agenda. And Federal employees are living in fear that they will be fired if they approve the wrong grant payment.

Federal employees should not be concerned about approving grant disbursements approved by this body, Congress, in a bipartisan way. In fact, it is the law that FEMA disburse payments that are mandated by Congress. Plain and simple. I will not stand by quietly if we see illegal action related to the disbursement of FEMA grants. The Agency cannot violate the Impoundment Control Act.

I am deeply concerned at the influence of DOGE at FEMA, which contains no emergency management experts at DOGE, and that they are going to steer the Agency in the direction of another Katrina.

Prior to Hurricane Katrina, FEMA was overhauled and tucked into the Department of Homeland Security without proper consultation from professional emergency managers. FEMA was weakened by being subsumed into DHS without proper consultation with emergency management professionals. The result was unnecessary catastrophic loss of life, the worst in modern disaster history. We cannot afford to repeat the mistakes of the past.

That said, reforming FEMA properly does not mean we should avoid change altogether.

In Arizona, we know that FEMA can do better. Last summer, extreme heat caused temperatures in my district that were nearly unlivable. We lost over 600 of our fellow citizens to extreme heat and extreme heat islands.

We experienced unending 100 degree temperatures for over a month. In the past, a break from the heat could be enjoyed during the night, but that is a luxury we no longer have. The heat in our State literally caused roads to crack, cars to melt, and hundreds of lives lost.

However, FEMA was not to be found in Arizona because the Agency has not yet adapted to emergency disasters like extreme heat. Heat is a silent killer. It advances quietly and lingers. The longer it lingers, the more devastating the impact.

So, we must reform FEMA to address extreme heat. I look forward to working with the Agency to ensure that they have the resources and authority they need to respond to disasters all across the country.

So, I look forward to this important hearing, hearing from my colleagues.

Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

[Mr. Stanton's prepared statement follows:]

Prepared Statement of Hon. Greg Stanton, a Representative in Congress from the State of Arizona, and Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management

Thank you, all, for attending today's hearing entitled, "Reforming FEMA: Bringing Common Sense Back to Federal Emergency Management." As the new Ranking Member of this Subcommittee, I take federal disaster assistance delivery very seriously, and I look forward to conducting oversight of FEMA's important work.

FEMA is where Americans look for help after what may have been the worst day of their life. So it is critical that the Agency be postured to respond at all times. For most of its life, FEMA has been an apolitical entity—red state or blue state, it didn't matter. FEMA stayed focused on the mission to help all Americans and kept out of the political fray. Sadly, that is no longer the case today.

Following the catastrophic disasters in South Carolina and California, President Trump has focused more on spreading misinformation than helping Americans in need.

Specifically, after wildfires devastated Los Angeles, he threatened to condition disaster relief on policy matters that have nothing to do with emergency management. This is simply wrong and shakes the trust that Americans have in their government to come to their aid after catastrophe.

Yesterday, Secretary Noem added to the uncertainty facing disaster survivors when she said that, "we're going to eliminate FEMA" in a cabinet meeting. President Trump responded by saying, "great job."

I will never support eliminating FEMA or conditions for emergency disaster assistance. Whether a state votes red or blue; they are American and are entitled to assistance. I condemn calls to condition emergency disaster assistance in the strongest possible terms and urge elected leaders to never make such comments again.

Unfortunately, threats to condition lifesaving assistance are not the only partisan game happening at FEMA. In February, Billionaire Musk's so-called "Department of Government Efficiency" entered FEMA and has been wreaking havoc ever since. They have accessed secure government systems that include disaster survivors' personal information and slowed the delivery of FEMA assistance.

I am deeply troubled to have learned that all FEMA grants are now subject to an additional review to ensure they are complementary to Trump's political agenda. And federal employees are living in fear that they will be fired if they approve the wrong grant payment. Federal employees should not be concerned about approving grant disbursements approved by Congress!

In fact, it is the law that FEMA disburse payments that are mandated by Congress. Plain and simple. I will not stand by quietly if we see illegal action related to the disbursement of FEMA grants. The Agency cannot violate the Impoundment Control Act.

I am deeply concerned that the influence of DOGE at FEMA, which contains no emergency management experts, are going to steer the Agency in the direction of another Katrina.

Prior to Hurricane Katrina, FEMA was overhauled and tucked into the Department of Homeland Security without proper consultation from professional emergency managers. FEMA was weakened by being subsumed into the Department of Homeland Security without proper consultation with emergency management professionals. The result was the most catastrophic loss of life in modern disaster history. We cannot afford to repeat the mistakes of the past.

That said, reforming FEMA thoughtfully does not mean we should avoid change altogether. In Arizona, we know that FEMA can do better.

Last summer, extreme heat caused temperatures in my district were nearly unlivable. We experienced unending 100 degree temperatures for over a month. In the past, a break from the heat could be enjoyed during the night, but that is a luxury we no longer have. The heat in our state literally caused roads to crack, cars to melt—and hundreds of lives were lost.

However, FEMA was nowhere to be found because the Agency has not yet adapted to emerging disasters like extreme heat. Heat is a silent killer. It advances quietly and lingers. The longer it lingers; the more devastating the impact.

We must reform FEMA to address extreme heat. I look forward to working with the Agency to ensure they have the resources and authority they need to respond to disasters all across the country—not just hurricanes on the east coast.

That is why I am grateful that this Committee has invited a panel of emergency management experts to testify here today about their suggested reforms for emergency management. You are all the kind of folks we should be consulting before making any change to FEMA function. Thank you for taking the time to be here today, and I look forward to hearing your testimony.

Mr. PERRY. The Chair thanks the gentleman.

The Chair now recognizes the ranking member of the full committee, Representative Larsen, for 5 minutes.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. RICK LARSEN OF WASHINGTON, RANKING MEMBER, COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Mr. LARSEN OF WASHINGTON. Thank you, subcommittee Chair Perry and subcommittee Ranking Member Stanton, for convening today's hearing.

Emergency management in the U.S. today stands at a crossroads. As the Nation grapples with the devastation caused by Hurricanes Helene and Milton, the wildfires in L.A., and other disasters across the country, FEMA's role has come under intense scrutiny.

The combined damage and economic losses from Hurricane Helene and the L.A. wildfires alone exceed $200 billion. Successfully managing recovery efforts for such catastrophic events will require robust congressional oversight, supplemental funding, and Presidential leadership.

Instead of uniting the Nation, though, to rebuild what has been lost, the administration has unfortunately exploited and politicized these disasters. The President has spread misinformation in the wake of these tragedies, threatened to condition disaster aid, and doubled down on the suggestion to eliminate FEMA altogether.

Just yesterday, Secretary Noem said, quote, "we're going to eliminate FEMA," end quote, during a Cabinet meeting. No, we are not.

These actions are harmful to disaster survivors and the women and men who work at FEMA and have dedicated their lives to helping fellow Americans respond to and recover from disasters.

FEMA's mission is clear: to assist people before, during, and after disasters.

States turn to FEMA when they have exceeded their capacity to respond to a disaster. As Pete Gaynor, FEMA Administrator during President Trump's first term, aptly stated, "Emergency management is locally executed, State managed, and federally supported."

FEMA provides a critical backstop when all other options and resources are exhausted. Eliminating FEMA would not make communities safer, would not reduce insurance premiums, would not improve outcomes for disaster survivors. Instead, it would shift the burden of disaster response and accountability from the Federal Government to State and local governments.

The Democrats have long championed improvements to the delivery of disaster assistance. It isn't new to us that FEMA needs to be reformed. Last year, many bipartisan FEMA-related bills were discussed in this committee, and we attempted to pass them out of the House: Representative Titus' Disaster Survivor Fairness Act to reform FEMA's Individual Assistance Program; Representative Stanton's Wildfire Response Improvement Act to make FEMA's programs better equipped to address the impacts of wildfires; and Representative Neguse's Disaster Management Costs Modernization Act to build State and local emergency management capacity.

Democrats remain committed to pursuing bipartisan FEMA reforms and getting reform right. However, it requires careful consideration and input from emergency management professionals.

For example, the President has suggested that disaster assistance could be fixed by simply providing block grants for recovery to impacted States. FEMA already offers a block grant option through the Public Assistance Alternative Procedures program authorized by section 428 of the Stafford Act. However, States rarely use this authority due to the perceived risks involved.

The Department of Housing and Urban Development's long-term disaster recovery block grant program has faced challenges in delivering outcomes and similarly has been the subject of bipartisan scrutiny.

If you want these reforms to Federal emergency management to succeed, the reforms must be informed by the challenges faced by existing programs and built on recent progress.

For instance, in 2019, Congress authorized the creation of a predisaster mitigation grant program, known as BRIC, to enhance community resilience against disasters while reducing recovery costs for individuals, as well as State and local governments as part of the Disaster Recovery Reform Act. And I want to thank the Trump 1.0 administration for advocating for this and for the President for signing that bill.

So, any reforms to FEMA should focus on expanding the Agency's capability to support resilience projects and not diminishing them.

So, I look forward to discussing possible solutions to improve FEMA and outcomes for disaster survivors with the panel of qualified experts that we have before us today.

I want to thank you all for being here, and I look forward to your testimony.

I yield back.

[Mr. Larsen of Washington's prepared statement follows:]

Prepared Statement of Hon. Rick Larsen, a Representative in Congress from the State of Washington, and Ranking Member, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure

Thank you, Subcommittee Chairman Perry and Subcommittee Ranking Member Stanton, for convening today's hearing.

Emergency management in the United States stands at a critical crossroads.

As the nation grapples with the devastation caused by Hurricanes Helene and Milton, the wildfires in Los Angeles and other disasters across the country, FEMA's role has come under intense scrutiny.

The combined damage and economic losses from Hurricane Helene and the Los Angeles wildfires exceed $200 billion.

Successfully managing recovery efforts for such catastrophic events will require robust congressional oversight, supplemental funding and presidential leadership.

Instead of uniting the nation to rebuild what has been lost, the Administration has unfortunately exploited and politicized these disasters.

The President has spread misinformation in the wake of these tragedies, threatened to condition disaster aid and doubled down on his suggestion to eliminate FEMA altogether.

Just yesterday, Secretary Noem said, "we are going to eliminate FEMA" during a cabinet meeting. No, we are not.

These actions are harmful to disaster survivors and the women and men who work at FEMA and have dedicated their lives to helping their fellow Americans respond to and recover from disasters.

FEMA's mission is clear: to assist people before, during and after disasters.

States turn to FEMA when they have exceeded their capacity to respond to a disaster.

As Pete Gaynor, FEMA Administrator during President Trump's first term, aptly stated, "Emergency management is locally executed, state-managed and federally supported."

FEMA provides a critical backstop when all other options and resources have been exhausted.

Eliminating FEMA would not make communities safer, would not reduce insurance premiums, would not improve outcomes for disaster survivors.

Instead, it would shift the burden of disaster response and accountability from the federal government to state and local governments.

Democrats have long championed improvements to the delivery of disaster assistance.

It isn't new to us that FEMA needs to be reformed.

Last year, among many FEMA-related bills, we attempted to pass:

- Rep. Titus' Disaster Survivor Fairness Act to reform FEMA's Individual Assistance Program;
- Rep. Stanton's Wildfire Response Improvement Act to make FEMA's programs better equipped to address the impacts of wildfires; and
- Rep. Neguse's Disaster Management Costs Modernization Act to build state and local emergency management capacity.

Democrats remain committed to pursuing bipartisan FEMA reforms. Getting reform right, however, requires careful consideration and input from emergency management professionals.

For example, President Trump has suggested that disaster assistance could be fixed by simply providing block grants for recovery to impacted states.

FEMA already offers a block grant option through the Public Assistance Alternative Procedures program authorized by Section 428 of the Stafford Act.

However, states rarely use this authority due to the perceived risks involved.

The Department of Housing and Urban Development's long-term disaster recovery block grant program has faced challenges in delivering outcomes and has similarly been the subject of bipartisan scrutiny.

If we want reforms to federal emergency management to succeed, they must be informed by the challenges faced by existing programs and built upon recent progress.

For instance, in 2019 Congress authorized the creation of a pre-disaster mitigation grant program, known as BRIC, to enhance community resilience against disasters while reducing recovery costs for individuals as well as state and local governments.

This passed as part of the Disaster Recovery Reform Act, and I want to thank the Trump 1.0 Administration for advocating for this and for the President signing that bill.

Any reforms to FEMA should focus on expanding the Agency's capability to support resilience projects—not diminishing it.

I look forward to discussing possible solutions to improve FEMA and outcomes for disaster survivors with the panel of qualified experts before the Subcommittee today.

Thank you all for being here, and I look forward to your testimony.

Mr. PERRY. The Chair thanks the gentleman.

I would like to welcome our witnesses and thank them for being here, especially the ones who have traveled a great distance today.

Briefly, I would like to take a moment to explain the lighting system to our witnesses who may not have been here recently or maybe ever. There are three lights in front of you. Green means go, yellow means you are running out of time, and red means to conclude your remarks.

The Chair asks unanimous consent that the witnesses' full statements be included in the record.

Without objection, so ordered.

The Chair also asks unanimous consent that the record of today's hearing remain open until such time as our witnesses have provided answers to any questions that may be submitted to them in writing.

Without objection, so ordered.

The Chair also asks unanimous consent that the record remain open for 15 days for any additional comments and information submitted by Members or witnesses to be included in the record of today's hearing.

Without objection, so ordered.

As your written testimony has been made part of the record, the subcommittee asks that you limit your oral remarks to 5 minutes.

With that, Mr. Currie, you are recognized for 5 minutes for your testimony, sir.

TESTIMONY OF CHRIS CURRIE, DIRECTOR, HOMELAND SECURITY AND JUSTICE, U.S. GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE; KEVIN GUTHRIE, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, FLORIDA DIVISION OF EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT; JAIME LAUGHTER, COUNTY MANAGER, TRANSYLVANIA COUNTY, NORTH CAROLINA; AND ADRIAN GARCIA, COMMISSIONER, HARRIS COUNTY, TEXAS, ON BEHALF OF THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF COUNTIES

TESTIMONY OF CHRIS CURRIE, DIRECTOR, HOMELAND SECURITY AND JUSTICE, U.S. GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE

Mr. CURRIE. Thank you, Chairman Perry, Ranking Member Stanton, and other members of the subcommittee. It is an honor to be here today to talk about GAO's work on FEMA.

I think the hearing and the discussions around reform are a great opportunity to address many longstanding challenges that we and many others have identified for years and years.

We have looked at Federal response and recoveries for years, going from Guam to Puerto Rico and everywhere in between. And what we have seen is an increasingly complicated, fragmented, inflexible, and lengthy process that seems to get harder and harder by the year.

FEMA and the rest of the Federal Government have spent over $500 billion in the last 10 years on disaster aid. There are currently over 30 Federal agencies that are involved in disaster assistance, and many of these programs, which pay for rebuilding the same types of infrastructure, have overlapping or duplicative requirements.

Just as an example, the Department of Transportation, FEMA, and HUD programs can all be used to build similar infrastructure, but they may require completely different paperwork, different environmental reviews, have different rules, and, most difficultly, are on different timelines, which makes it virtually impossible to synchronize those programs for recovery.

This is a major reason why recovery takes up to 20 years, as you said, Mr. Chairman. Two years ago, we actually issued a report outlining the systemic problem and came up with a number of options that Congress could take to reform the system. These ranged from simple options to better streamlining current programs, registration websites, things like that, all the way to more significant changes like complete reorganizations and overhauls of disaster agencies themselves.

On top of this, as you said, FEMA's workforce is overwhelmed. There are over 600 major disasters and, as you said, over 1,000 fire disasters, and all types of disasters going back many, many years that require staffing to address each one of those, and thousands of projects.

Last we looked at it, FEMA was 35 percent short of its staffing needs based on the expectations on the Agency, and there is now a never-ending disaster season.

The workforce structure was created at a time when large disasters were very rare, and it needs to be reformed. And it is not just about the numbers, but the whole structure needs to be reformed to be more responsive.

Also, I want to talk about individual survivors. We have to shift to programs that are not Government centric but are survivor centric. And when I say that, I mean they have to be geared towards helping a person get the assistance they need at the worst time of their life.

A big problem at FEMA are antiquated technology and financial management systems. These need to be fixed in order for FEMA to be able to deliver the technology solutions that we already have in the private sector to try to intake people and get them the assistance they need.

The last thing I would like to talk about are just a few cautions to consider for this committee as you look to reform the system and for the administration. First is the National Response Framework. I think we have to be really careful not to break what is not broken. We have to not forget Hurricane Katrina and what we fixed after that.

The National Response Framework provides steady funding and coordination mechanisms that all levels of Government understand at this point, and I think the structure works well.

We also have to remember the capacity differences across the country. Some States and counties and cities have the resources and the capacity to manage disasters. Many others we see just don't, and that is not going to change any time soon. These are always going to need State and Federal support to provide the response that we need to help those citizens.

And then last, it is not just about FEMA. If we look to reform FEMA but don't fix the whole disaster response and recovery system, it is not going to fix the problem, and I think that is very important to consider as we move forward.

So I look forward to your questions and the discussion.

[Mr. Currie's prepared statement follows:]

Prepared Statement of Chris Currie, Director, Homeland Security and Justice, U.S. Government Accountability Office

DISASTER ASSISTANCE: IMPROVING THE FEDERAL APPROACH

HIGHLIGHTS

What GAO Found

There is a growing emphasis on how the federal government can improve its approach to disaster recovery. In the last 10 years, appropriations for disaster assistance totaled at least $448 billion, plus an additional $110 billion in supplemental appropriations so far in fiscal year 2025. Recent disasters such as Hurricanes Helene and Milton, the wildfires in California, and this month's destructive tornadoes across the Midwest and South demonstrated the need for government-wide action to deliver assistance efficiently and effectively and reduce its fiscal exposure (see figures 1 and 4). Given the rise in the number and cost of disasters and increasing challenges related to the delivery of federal disaster assistance identified in GAO's work, *Improving the Delivery of Federal Disaster Assistance* was added to GAO's High-Risk List in February 2025.

To improve the federal government's delivery of disaster assistance, GAO has found that attention is needed to improve processes for assisting survivors, reduce fragmentation across federal disaster assistance programs, strengthen the disaster workforce and capacity, and invest in resilience. For example, GAO has recommended that Congress should consider establishing an independent commission to recommend reforms to the federal approach to disaster recovery, which is fragmented across more than 30 federal entities. GAO also reported on various options for reforming the federal approach to disaster recovery, such as better coordinating and consolidating programs across agencies and simplifying processes for survivors, among other things.

Further, GAO recommended that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) develop and implement a methodology that provides a more comprehensive assessment of a jurisdiction's ability to respond to a disaster without federal assistance. Without an accurate assessment, FEMA runs the risk of recommending to the President that federal disaster assistance be awarded to jurisdictions that may not need it. FEMA has taken past steps to do this but has not fully implemented this recommendation. GAO also found that FEMA's workforce is overwhelmed by the increasing number of disasters and other emergencies. Strengthening the disaster workforce will be a critical part of better delivering the assistance that communities and survivors need to recover.

Why GAO Did This Study

Natural disasters have become costlier and more frequent. In 2024, there were 27 disasters with at least $1 billion in damages, compared to 14 in 2018. Disasters in 2024 resulted in 568 deaths nationwide.

Further, federal disaster declarations and the expectation for federal support have increased. In addition, federal support for disaster recovery can last for years. For example, FEMA is managing over 600 open major disaster declarations—some of which occurred almost 20 years ago, according to the agency.

This statement discusses GAO's new disaster high-risk area, and related work on reducing fragmentation of the federal approach to disaster assistance, among other things.

This statement is based on products GAO issued from May 2020 through February 2025. For this work, GAO analyzed federal law and documents related to disaster assistance and interviewed officials across relevant federal, state and local agencies. GAO also conducted site visits to recent disasters areas, among other actions.

What GAO Recommends

As of March 2025, GAO has approximately 60 open recommendations related to disaster assistance. There are also four matters for congressional consideration. These recommendations and matters are designed to address the various challenges discussed in this statement. Agencies have taken steps to address some of these recommendations. GAO will continue to monitor agency efforts to determine if they fully address the challenges GAO has identified.

Chairman Perry, Ranking Member Stanton, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss our past work on the federal approach to disaster recovery.

Hurricanes, floods, wildfires, earthquakes, and other natural disasters affect hundreds of American communities each year. Due to the rising number of natural disasters, there has been a growing emphasis on how the federal government can improve its approach to disaster recovery. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration calculated that, in 2018 the U.S. experienced 14 disasters that each cost more than $1 billion in total economic damages. By 2024, the number of disasters costing at least $1 billion almost doubled to 27.[1] That same year, at least 568 people died, directly or indirectly, as a result of those disasters. Recent disasters

[1] National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's National Centers for Environmental Information, "U.S. Billion-Dollar Weather and Climate Disasters" (2025). These data are not direct costs to the federal government and are produced using a detailed methodology reflecting overall U.S. economic damages, including insured and uninsured losses to residential, commercial, and government/municipal buildings.

demonstrate the need for the federal government to take action to deliver assistance efficiently and effectively and reduce its fiscal exposure.

- Hurricanes Helene and Milton occurred within 2 weeks of one another in 2024 and affected some of the same areas in the Southeast (see fig. 1). These two disasters resulted in over 200 deaths and are expected to cost over $50 billion, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.
- On January 8, 2025, the President approved a major disaster declaration for historic wildfires in Los Angeles County, California. The wildfires were unprecedented in their size, scope, and the damage they caused. The Palisades and Eaton fires resulted in 29 deaths and the expected financial cost is still unknown as of March 2025.
- In mid-March 2025, destructive tornadoes and severe storms occurred across the Midwest and South over a three-day period. The storms resulted in over 40 deaths, and the number of states that will need federal assistance is still unclear as of March 2025.

Figure 1: Road Repair Following Hurricane Helene, North Carolina

Source: GAO. | GAO-25-108216

My statement today is based on our most recent High-Risk update in February 2025 as well as our prior work identifying key programmatic challenges the federal government faces related to the delivery of federal disaster assistance.[2] This statement includes information on our work related to 1) improving processes for assisting survivors, 2) reducing fragmentation of the federal approach to disaster assistance, 3) strengthening Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) workforce and capacity, and 4) investing in resilience.

To conduct our prior work, we analyzed relevant statutes such as the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act,[3] regulations, agency guidance and interagency coordination documents, such as the National Disaster Recovery Framework.[4] We also interviewed officials across relevant federal agencies and state and local officials involved in disaster assistance, and conducted site visits to communities impacted by recent disasters in California, Florida, and North Carolina, among other actions. More detailed information on the scope and methodology of our prior work can be found within each of the issued reports cited throughout this statement.

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[2] GAO, *High-Risk Series: Heightened Attention Could Save Billions More and Improve Government Efficiency and Effectiveness*, GAO–25–107743 (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 25, 2025).

[3] 42 U.S.C. § 5121 et seq.

[4] Department of Homeland Security, *National Disaster Recovery Framework*, 3rd ed. (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 2024).

We conducted the work on which this statement is based in accordance with all sections of our Quality Assurance Framework that are relevant to our objectives. The framework requires that we plan and perform the engagement to obtain sufficient and appropriate evidence to meet our stated objectives and to discuss any limitations in our work. We believe that the information and data obtained, and the analysis conducted, provide a reasonable basis for any findings and conclusions in this product.

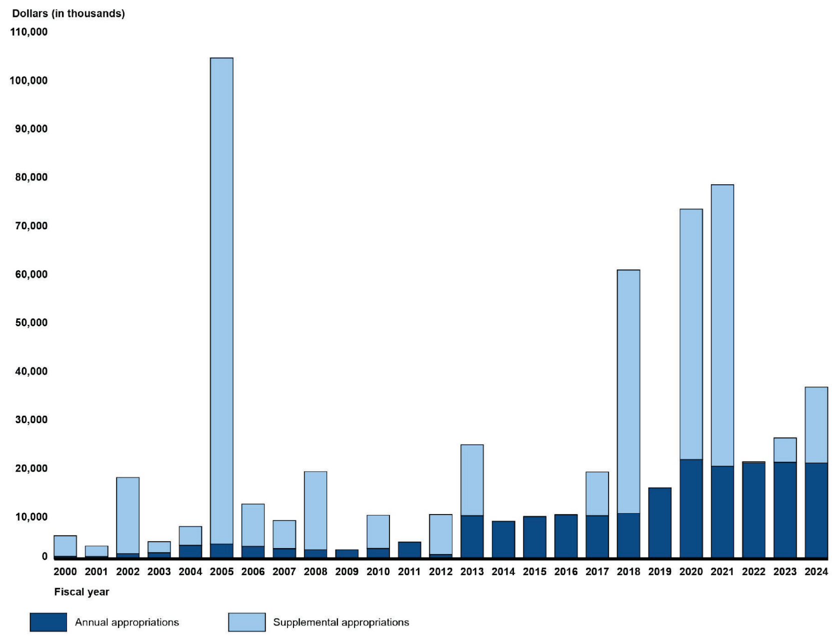
BACKGROUND

Disaster assistance includes providing support to communities and survivors for response to, recovery from, and resilience to man-made and natural disasters. For fiscal years 2015 through 2024, appropriations for disaster assistance totaled at least $448 billion.[5] In total, FEMA approved over two million households for federal disaster assistance in 2024.

The Disaster Relief Fund, administered by FEMA, pays for several key disaster response, recovery, and mitigation programs that assist communities impacted by federally declared emergencies and major disasters. Annual appropriations to this fund have varied but generally increased from fiscal year 2000 to fiscal year 2024, as shown in figure 2. Other federal agencies have specific authorities and resources outside of the Disaster Relief Fund to support certain disaster response and recovery efforts.

[5] This total includes $312 billion in selected supplemental appropriations to federal agencies for disaster assistance and approximately $136 billion in annual appropriations to the Disaster Relief Fund for fiscal years 2015 through 2024. It does not include other annual appropriations to federal agencies for disaster assistance. Of the supplemental appropriations, $97 billion was included in supplemental appropriations acts that were enacted primarily in response to the COVID–19 pandemic. Additionally, in December 2024, the Disaster Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act, 2025, appropriated $110 billion in supplemental appropriations for disaster assistance, not included in the $448 billion. Pub. L. No. 118–158, div. B, 138 Stat. 1722 (2024).

Figure 2: Disaster Relief Fund Appropriations in Fiscal Year (FY) 2023 Dollars, FY 2000–2024



Source: Congressional Research Service analysis of appropriations legislation. | GAO-25-108216

Note: Fiscal year 2013 numbers do not reflect the impact of sequestration. Supplemental data include contingent appropriations and all appropriations under the heading of ''Disaster Relief'' or ''Disaster Relief Fund'' including the language ''for an additional amount.'' Appropriations do not account for transfers or rescissions. Deflator used was drawn from the FY2024 Budget of the United States Government, ''Historical Tables: Table 1.3—Summary of Receipts, Outlays, and Surpluses or Deficits (–) in Current Dollars, Constant (FY 2012) Dollars, and as Percentages of GDP: 1940–2028.''

We have also previously reported that long-term recovery can be challenging, and project costs can increase the longer a recovery lasts.

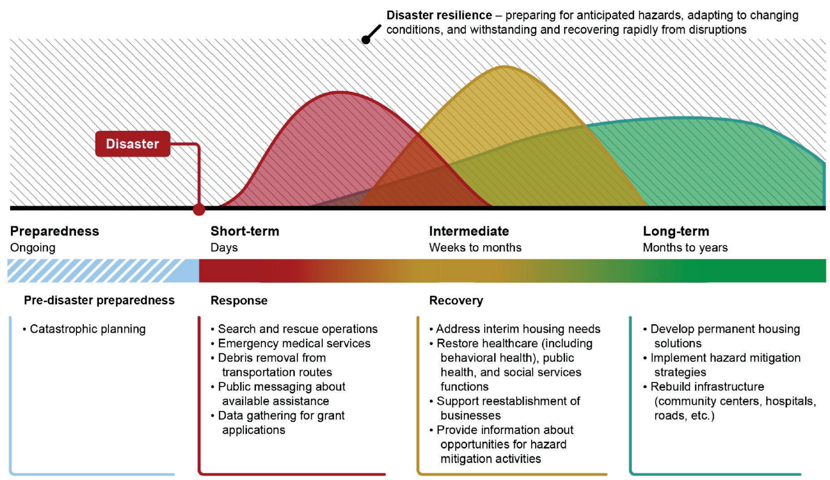
For example, in February 2024, over 6 years after Hurricanes Irma and Maria made landfall in Puerto Rico in 2017, we reported that FEMA and Puerto Rico had taken actions, such as providing advance disbursements of funds to grant recipients to help jump-start permanent work construction to rebuild.[6] However, grant subrecipients that received awards from FEMA through an expedited process identified increased project costs that pose risks to the completion of work. For example, officials from Puerto Rico's Aqueduct and Sewer Authority said that the costs for one water treatment plant project exceeded its original estimate by 42 percent.

Further, the number of federal disaster declarations and the expectation for long-term federal support have increased. As shown in figure 3, federal support for disaster recovery can last for years. For example, according to FEMA, the agency is managing over 600 open major disaster declarations—some of which occurred almost 20 years ago—in various stages of response and recovery. For instance, as of February 2025, FEMA continues to make obligations for recovery projects as part of the Public Assistance program for Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005.[7]

[6] GAO, *Puerto Rico Disasters: Progress Made, but the Recovery Continues to Face Challenges*, GAO–24–105557 (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 13, 2024).

[7] FEMA's Public Assistance program provides assistance for debris removal efforts; life-saving emergency protective measures; and the repair or replacement of disaster-damaged publicly owned or certain private non-profit facilities, roads and bridges, and electrical utilities, among other activities.

Figure 3: Time Frames and Activities in Disaster Preparedness, Response, Recovery, and Resilience



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Homeland Security policy. | GAO-25-108216

The frequency and intensity of recent disasters have severely strained FEMA, affecting its ability to deliver assistance as effectively and efficiently as possible. We added *Improving the Delivery of Federal Disaster Assistance* to our High-Risk List in February 2025, given the rise in the number and cost of disasters and increasing programmatic challenges identified in our work.[8]

There are approximately 60 open recommendations related to this new high-risk area, as of March 2025. In addition, there are four open matters for congressional consideration to help address the nation's delivery of disaster assistance, specifically related to fragmentation, property acquisitions, and housing issues.[9]

Improving Processes for Assisting Survivors

Rural Assistance

Survivors face numerous challenges receiving needed aid, including lengthy and complex application review processes. Federal agencies are taking steps to help improve disaster assistance to survivors. For example, in 2023, the Small Business Administration (SBA) implemented the Disaster Assistance for Rural Communities Act to simplify the process for a governor or tribal government chief executive to request an agency disaster declaration in counties with rural communities that have experienced significant damage.[10]

We found in February 2024 that rural areas face unique challenges in seeking SBA assistance following a disaster.[11] For example, we found that disaster survivors may not be aware of SBA's disaster loans. We recommended that SBA should distinguish between rural and urban communities in its outreach and marketing plan and incorporate actions to mitigate the unique challenges rural communities face in accessing its Disaster Loan Program. SBA agreed with our recommendation, and we will continue to monitor its progress to address it.

Block Grants

Administered by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the Community Development Block Grant Disaster Recovery (CDBG–DR) funds provide significant, flexible federal recovery funding for states and localities affected by disasters and generally support long-term recovery. However, in December 2022, we

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[8] At the beginning of each new Congress, we issue an update to our High-Risk series, which identifies government operations with serious vulnerabilities to fraud, waste, abuse, and mismanagement, or in need of transformation. See GAO–25–107743.

[9] GAO–25–107743.

[10] Pub. L. No. 117–249, § 2, 136 Stat. 2350 (2022) (codified at 15 U.S.C. § 636(b)(16)). See also at 13 C.F.R. § 123.3(a)(6).

[11] GAO, *Small Business Administration: Targeted Outreach about Disaster Assistance Could Benefit Rural Communities*, GAO–24–106755 (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 22, 2024).

reported that HUD does not require CDBG–DR grantees to collect accurate data on critical milestones.[12]

A HUD-funded 2019 study on the timeliness of CDBG–DR housing activities found that all but one of the eight grantees in the study faced challenges in developing a grant management system. HUD could better ensure that its grantees identify problem milestones and address delays in assisting survivors by requiring grantees to collect and analyze timeliness data, as we recommended. As of February 2025, HUD said it had explored options for requiring grantees to collect milestone data and was evaluating how best to address this recommendation to ensure the needs of disaster survivors are met in a timely manner. We will continue to monitor its progress to address this issue.

Flood Insurance

Federal law created the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP) to reduce the escalating costs of federal disaster assistance for flood damage, while also keeping flood insurance affordable. The NFIP transferred some of the financial burden of flood risk from property owners to the federal government. In our 2025 High-Risk List we reported that FEMA has developed a legislative proposal to improve the program's solvency and address affordability, among other reforms.[13]

However, Congress has yet to enact comprehensive reforms to NFIP that would address the program's challenges. We have other ongoing work about the state of the homeowner's insurance market, including concerns about the availability and affordability of coverage, and the issue of a lack of flood insurance coverage and what can be done to address it.

REDUCING FRAGMENTATION OF THE FEDERAL APPROACH TO DISASTER ASSISTANCE

The federal approach to disaster recovery is fragmented across more than 30 federal entities. These entities are involved with multiple programs and authorities and have differing requirements and timeframes. Moreover, data sharing across entities is limited. This fragmented approach can make it harder for survivors and communities to successfully navigate multiple federal programs.

Congress and federal agencies have taken steps to better manage fragmentation, such as through interagency agreements and reducing program complexity, but challenges remain. In our November 2022 report, we identified 11 options to improve the federal government's approach to disaster recovery based on our review of relevant literature, interviews with federal, state, and local officials; and a panel of experts.[14] See table 1.

Table 1: Options To Improve the Federal Government's Approach to Disaster Recovery

1. Develop new coordinated efforts to clearly and consistently communicate about recovery programs.
2. Provide coordinated technical assistance throughout disaster recovery.
3. Develop models to more effectively coordinate across disaster recovery programs.
4. Develop a single, online application portal for disaster recovery that feeds into one repository.
5. Standardize requirements of federal disaster recovery programs.
6. Simplify requirements of federal disaster recovery programs.
7. Further incentivize investments in disaster resilience as part of federally-funded recovery programs.
8. Identify desired recovery outcomes and develop a mechanism to track these across programs.
9. Prioritize disaster recovery funding for vulnerable communities across all federal programs.
10. Consolidate federal disaster recovery programs.
11. Adjust the role of the federal government in disaster recovery.

Source: GAO analysis of relevant literature; interviews with federal, state, and local officials; and a panel of experts. GAO–25–108216

[12] GAO, *Disaster Recovery: Better Information is Needed on the Progress of Block Grant Funds*, GAO–23–105295 (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 15, 2022).

[13] See GAO–25–107743.

[14] The panel included 20 experts with diverse backgrounds related to disaster recovery. They participated in discussions of each option and identified their strengths and limitations as they relate to improving the federal government's approach to disaster recovery. We attribute statements from experts collected as part of the panel discussions to the "panel of experts" or "experts." This includes statements made by individual experts. See, GAO, *Disaster Recovery: Actions Needed to Improve the Federal Approach*, GAO–23–104956 (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 15, 2022).

Certain options identified could be acted on within one or more agencies' existing authorities, while others may require congressional action to implement.[15] In our report, we detailed the key strengths and limitations that the panel of experts identified about each of these options. For example, one option is to develop a single application for disaster recovery assistance that feeds into one repository. This portal could help applicants, including state and local governments and individual disaster survivors, identify which federal programs fit their specific recovery needs based on their eligibility.

- For strengths, experts said implementing this option could improve the applicant experience by streamlining the application process for disaster survivors and state and local applicants. This option could also help address state and local government capacity limitations by reducing the amount of work needed to complete multiple applications for different disaster recovery programs.
- In terms of limitations, experts discussed the costs associated with the development and management of the system, cross-agency privacy and data sharing concerns, and the fact that this option would not necessarily reduce the complexity of the federal disaster recovery programs.

Another identified option is to consolidate disaster recovery programs across federal agencies. This option could be implemented by, for example, providing a single federal disaster recovery block grant that identifies funding options by sector. It could also be implemented by reorganizing existing federal disaster recovery programs into a single agency focused on disaster resilience and recovery efforts.

- For strengths, experts said that consolidating federal disaster recovery programs could reduce the administrative burden on disaster survivors and state and local governments. They also said that implementing this option could reduce the number of federal funding streams for disaster recovery, which could reduce the complexity of carrying out disaster recovery projects.
- In terms of limitations, experts said that implementing this option by reorganizing government agencies would be difficult and may create additional risks. Specifically, experts noted that consolidating programs or creating a new agency would not necessarily reduce the complexity of implementing programs.

In our November 2022 report, we recommended that Congress should consider establishing an independent commission to recommend reforms to the federal approach to disaster recovery.[16] Such a commission should follow our leading practices for interagency collaboration.[17] In January 2025, a bill was introduced in the U.S. Senate that would establish a Commission on Federal Natural Disaster Resilience and Recovery to examine and recommend reforms to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the federal government's approach to natural disaster resilience and recovery, and for other purposes.[18] We will continue to monitor the progress of this bill.

In addition, on January 24, 2025, the President established the Federal Emergency Management Agency Review Council (FEMA Review Council).[19] According to DHS, the goal of the FEMA Review Council is to advise the President on the existing ability of FEMA to capably and impartially address disasters occurring within the United States. The council shall also advise the President on all recommended changes related to FEMA to best serve the national interest.

As administrator of several disaster recovery programs, FEMA should also take steps to better manage fragmentation across its own programs, as we recommended in 2022. Such actions could make the programs simpler, more accessible and user-friendly, and improve the effectiveness of federal disaster recovery efforts.

Reforming the federal government's approach to disaster recovery and reducing fragmentation could improve service delivery to disaster survivors and communities

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[15] Other than where we have made prior recommendations related to certain options, we do not endorse any particular option. Rather, our November 2022 report identifies possible implementation methods and the strengths and limitations of each option. Experts who participated in our panel agreed that the federal government's approach to disaster recovery needs to be improved. They discussed ways to make it operate more efficiently and effectively and to better incorporate incentives for improving disaster resilience and address equity concerns. See GAO–23–104956.

[16] GAO–23–104956.

[17] GAO, *Government Performance Management: Leading Practices to Enhance Interagency Collaboration and Address Crosscutting Challenges*, GAO–23–105520 (Washington, D.C.: May 24, 2023).

[18] S. 270, 119th Cong. (2025).

[19] 90 Fed. 10,082 (Feb. 21, 2025).

and improve the effectiveness of recovery efforts. In response to our November 2022 recommendations, as of February 2024, FEMA had taken steps to streamline the applications for two of its recovery programs. However, FEMA will need to demonstrate that it has thoroughly considered available options to (1) better manage fragmentation across its own programs, (2) identify which changes FEMA intends to implement to its recovery programs, and (3) take any necessary steps to fully implement the recommendation to better manage fragmentation across disaster recovery programs.[20]

Further, we have found that communities continue to face challenges obtaining support to address wildfires. FEMA and multiple other federal entities have responsibilities for federal wildfire mitigation, response, and recovery efforts, to include the award and management of contracts awarded before and during wildfire seasons. Additionally, state, local, and tribal governments can enter into mutual aid agreements with federal agencies to enable coordinated wildfire responses.

In response to the challenges that wildfires pose for the nation, the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act required the establishment of the Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission in 2021.[21] In September 2023, the commission issued a set of policy priorities and recommendations calling for greater coordination, interoperability, collaboration, and simplification within the wildfire system. In addition, we have found that as the incidence and severity of massive wildfires increases, FEMA and other agencies could find additional opportunities to ensure their programs are effective.[22] For example, we recommended in December 2024 that FEMA assess ways to provide immediate post-wildfire mitigation assistance and establish a process to collect, assess, and incorporate ongoing feedback from Fire Management Assistance Grants recipients.[23] Taking these steps would help foster more resilient communities and reduce the future demand on federal resources. We are monitoring efforts to address this recommendation. See figure 4 for example of wildfire damage.

Figure 4: Fire Damage Following the Palisades Fire Los Angeles, California

Source: GAO. | GAO-25-108216

[20] GAO–23–104956.

[21] Pub. L. No. 117–58, §§ 70201–07, 135 Stat. 429, 1250–58 (2021).

[22] See GAO, *Wildfires: Additional Actions Needed to Address FEMA Assistance Challenges*, GAO–25–106862 (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 18, 2025) and GAO, *Disaster Contracting: Action Needed to Improve Agencies' Use of Contracts for Wildfire Response and Recovery*, GAO–23–105292 (Washington, D.C.: April 13, 2023).

[23] GAO–25–106862.

STRENGTHENING FEMA'S DISASTER WORKFORCE AND CAPACITY

FEMA has long-standing workforce management issues that make supporting response and recovery efforts difficult. In recent years, the increasing frequency and costs of disasters, the COVID–19 pandemic, and other responsibilities have placed additional pressures on FEMA. FEMA's management of its workforce challenges and staffing levels has limited its capacity to provide effective disaster assistance.

In May 2020, we reported that FEMA has faced challenges with deploying staff with the right qualifications and skills to meet disaster needs.[24] We recommended that FEMA develop a plan to address challenges in providing quality information to field leaders about staff qualifications. In June 2022, FEMA provided a plan that included both completed and ongoing actions to address our recommendation. FEMA officials told us that the actions in the plan enhance reliability of FEMA workforce qualifications and increases field leadership accessibility of workforce information. Such actions should better enable the agency to use its disaster workforce flexibility as effectively as possible to meet mission needs in the field.

In May 2023, we reported that FEMA uses different processes under various statutory authorities to hire full-time employees and temporary reservists.[25] We found that FEMA had an overall staffing gap of approximately 35 percent across different positions at the beginning of fiscal year 2022. While the gaps varied across different positions, Public Assistance, Hazard Mitigation, and Logistics generally had lower percentages of staffing targets met—between 44 and 60 percent at the beginning of fiscal year 2022. These positions serve important functions, including administering assistance to state and local governments, creating safer communities by managing risk reduction activities, and coordinating all aspects of resource planning and movement during a disaster.

In October 2024, FEMA had only 9 percent of its disaster-response workforce available for Hurricane Milton response as staff were deployed to other disasters such as Hurricane Helene in the southeast and flooding in Vermont.[26] In addition, FEMA had only 20 percent of its disaster-response workforce available for Los Angeles fire response in January 2025.[27] We have made numerous recommendations to help FEMA better manage catastrophic or concurrent disasters.

For example, we recommended that FEMA should develop and implement a methodology that provides a more comprehensive assessment of a jurisdiction's response and recovery capabilities including its fiscal capacity.[28] Without an accurate assessment, FEMA runs the risk of recommending to the President that federal disaster assistance be awarded to jurisdictions that may not need it. FEMA has taken steps to update the factors considered when evaluating a request for a major disaster declaration for Public Assistance, specifically the estimated cost of assistance, through the federal rulemaking process three times—in 2016, 2017, and 2020. However, as of January 2025, the agency has not issued a final rule updating the estimated cost of assistance.

The COVID–19 pandemic marked the first time the Disaster Relief Fund has been used to respond to a nationwide public health emergency. FEMA used its typical process to estimate its obligations for COVID–19. However, in July 2024 we reported that FEMA did not meet its accuracy goal for actual obligations for COVID–19 in any fiscal year from 2021 through 2023.[29] By identifying and documenting lessons learned for estimating obligations based on its experience with COVID–19, as we recommended, FEMA can better position itself to adapt to similar estimation challenges in the future. FEMA did not concur with our recommendation; however, we maintain that it is warranted. In January 2025, FEMA told us it believes the analyses it has already conducted, including an analysis of COVID–19 expenditure drawdowns, are sufficient to meet the intent of the recommendation. We have requested documentation of this analysis and of any associated lessons learned related

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

[25] GAO, *FEMA Disaster Workforce: Actions Needed to Improve Hiring Data and Address Staffing Gaps*, GAO–23–105663 (Washington, D.C.: May 2, 2023).

[26] FEMA National Watch Center, *National Situation Report* (Oct. 8, 2024).

[27] FEMA, National Watch Center, *Daily Operations Briefing* (Jan. 8, 2025).

[28] GAO, *Federal Disaster Assistance: Improved Criteria Needed to Assess a Jurisdiction's Capability to Respond and Recover on Its Own*, GAO–12–838 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 12, 2012).

[29] FEMA has a goal for its actual obligations to fall within 10 percent of the baseline estimate by the end of the fiscal year. This is for individual disasters and for the Disaster Relief Fund overall. See, GAO, *Disaster Relief Fund: Lessons Learned from COVID–19 Could Improve FEMA's Estimates*, GAO–24–106676 (Washington, D.C.: July 9, 2024).

to cost estimation. We will continue to monitor FEMA's efforts and provide further information when we confirm any actions taken to address the recommendation.

INVESTING IN RESILIENCE

Disaster resilience can reduce the need for more costly future recovery assistance. In our *Disaster Resilience Framework*, we reported that the reactive and fragmented federal approach to disaster risk reduction limits the federal government's ability to facilitate significant reduction in the nation's overall disaster risk.[30]

FEMA's hazard mitigation assistance programs provide assistance for eligible long-term solutions that reduce the impact of future disasters, thereby increasing disaster resilience. However, we have reported that FEMA can improve its hazard mitigation assistance grant programs.

For example, the Safeguarding Tomorrow through Ongoing Risk Mitigation Act of 2021 authorized FEMA to award capitalization grants—seed funding—to help eligible states, territories, Tribes, and the District of Columbia establish revolving loan funds for mitigation assistance.[31] In response, FEMA established the Safeguarding Tomorrow Revolving Loan Fund grant program in 2022. In February 2025, we found that while FEMA has identified some tools to collect information on the Revolving Loan Fund program, FEMA does not have a process for systematically collecting and evaluating the information to assess program effectiveness across all phases of the program.[32] We recommended that FEMA document and implement a process to regularly assess program effectiveness using evidence-based decision-making practices to help instill confidence in program participants and better ensure the long-term sustainability and success of the program. FEMA concurred with our recommendation.

FEMA's Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities program provides pre-disaster mitigation grants to help eligible state, territorial, federally recognized tribal and local governments invest in a variety of natural hazard mitigation activities. These activities focus on infrastructure projects and building capability and capacity among local communities. During the 5-year period from fiscal years 2020 through 2024, FEMA made about $5.5 billion available for these grants. As of January 2025, FEMA had announced awards of about $1 billion.[33] We are currently reviewing this program.

In addition, individuals who lack sufficient insurance coverage often face greater challenges in recovery. If disaster survivors are uninsured or underinsured, they may have to rely more on federal disaster assistance. Until recent regulatory changes, FEMA did not award any housing assistance to individuals who received at least the maximum FEMA award for housing repairs from their insurance company, even if there was a gap between their insurance coverage and their losses. For disasters with Individual Assistance declared on or after March 22, 2024, FEMA will now award housing assistance to those who receive insurance payouts that exceed the FEMA maximum award for their losses, up to the statutory maximums, if they have eligible unmet needs or uncovered losses.[34] FEMA officials said they expect the amounts of Individual Assistance awards to increase due to this change.

In conclusion, by identifying and taking steps to better manage disaster assistance and the negative effects of the fragmented approach to disaster assistance, federal agencies could improve service delivery to disaster survivors and communities, improve the effectiveness of disaster recovery, and potentially reduce the federal government's fiscal exposure. Our recommendations to the various agencies involved in disaster assistance can help Congress identify key areas to address the nation's delivery of disaster assistance and reduce the government's fiscal exposure. We will continue to monitor agency progress and congressional actions.

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[30] GAO, *Disaster Resilience Framework: Principles for Analyzing Federal Efforts to Facilitate and Promote Resilience to Natural Disasters*, GAO–20–100SP (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 23, 2019).

[31] Pub. L. No. 116–284, 134 Stat. 4869 (2021) (codified at 42 U.S.C. § 5135).

[32] GAO, *Disaster Resilience: FEMA Should Improve Guidance and Assessment of Its Revolving Loan Fund Program*, GAO–25–107331 (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 24, 2025).

[33] FEMA, *The Disaster Relief Fund: Monthly Report as of January 31, 2025*. (Washington D.C. Feb. 12, 2025) For example, of the $500 million made available in fiscal year 2020, FEMA had announced awards for $252 million, as of January 2025.

[34] FEMA's Individual Assistance program provides financial assistance and direct services to eligible individuals and households who have uninsured or underinsured necessary expenses and serious needs as a result of a disaster. FEMA has also made other regulatory changes to the Individual Assistance program intended to improve access to assistance for survivors. 89 Fed. Reg. 3990 (Jan. 22, 2024). See also FEMA, Biden-Harris Administration Reforms Disaster Assistance Program to Help Survivors Recover Faster, (Washington, D.C.: 2024) for more information.

Chairman Perry, Ranking Member Stanton, and Members of the Subcommittee, this completes my prepared statement. I would be pleased to respond to any questions that you may have at this time.

Mr. PERRY. The Chair thanks the gentleman for his testimony. The Chair now recognizes Mr. Guthrie for 5 minutes.

TESTIMONY OF KEVIN GUTHRIE, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, FLORIDA DIVISION OF EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

Mr. GUTHRIE. Thank you, Chairman Perry, Ranking Member Stanton, also Ranking Member Larsen, and other distinguished members of the committee for the invitation to testify today.

I am Kevin Guthrie. I am the executive director of the Florida Division of Emergency Management. Throughout my tenure, I have led the division through numerous major events, including hurricanes such as Ian, Michael, Dorian, Isaias; as well as wildfires, floods, tornadoes, and the Surfside building collapse.

I have also assisted in national immigration efforts, like Operation Vigilant Sentry in Florida and Operation Lone Star in Texas. In my 30-plus years of experience at the local and State level, I have responded to over 50 major incidents.

Under Governor Ron DeSantis' leadership, FDEM has become a model for the future of emergency management. This is due to our professionals' dedication and the lessons learned from our experience in a disaster-prone State.

Florida looks forward to working with you and President Trump's administration to improve the Federal Emergency Management Agency. We have learned the importance of effective coordination across all levels of Government.

FDEM allows the philosophy that emergencies are federally supported, State managed, and locally executed. We emphasize collaboration with local governments supporting the response efforts instead of dictating them. This approach has allowed us to build on local best practices and continuously improve Florida's emergency management capabilities. This collaborative model is enhanced by the critical support that the Federal Government provides.

FDEM operates year round, requiring funding even for nondisaster periods. While Federal grants help maintain our capabilities, we need to focus Federal support on expanding State and local capacities.

States must have flexibility to build their systems without relying on Federal funding during a noncrisis period. One way to solidify this approach is through Federal block grants for emergency management. Block grants will allow States to quickly allocate funding for response and recovery operations, reducing bureaucratic delays and staffing needs at the Federal level.

As we look to future improvements, one key area, as mentioned, is the integration of modern technology into our response systems. Florida has led the way and has modernized emergency management by digitizing workflows and improving data input processes. This has improved our efficiency, reduced delays, and expedited payment processing, cutting the time it takes to process invoices from 61 days during Hurricane Ian to just 16 days in recent hurricane season.

Our use of technology has also reduced administrative costs and helped streamline disaster response. Data sharing among Federal, State, and local agencies is essential to improving response times. Leveraging advanced analytics machine learning has empowered decisionmakers in Florida to act faster and be more accurate than ever before.

Another critical component of Florida's success has been our ability to collaborate with our other States through the Emergency Management Assistance Compact, known as EMAC. EMAC, which is financially supported by the Federal Government, has been essential in States receiving aid that they need when they lack the necessary resources to respond and recover independently.

Since 2022, Florida has leveraged EMAC in 6 major disasters receiving crucial support from 39 States. While collaboration has been effective, there are still areas where Federal processes could be streamlined to enhance disaster response.

There are several ways the Federal Government can improve disaster response, such as creating a combined Federal disaster declaration process. This would eliminate delays caused by separate declarations for separate agencies. Additionally, streamlining disaster case management. And last, grant closeout procedures would accelerate recovery efforts and reduce displacement for survivors.

All three of these have impacted me directly during my tenure with the State of Florida.

As we continue to enhance our capabilities, Florida also emphasizes the importance of operational readiness. FDEM maintains a network of strategically located warehouses for rapid resource deployment and implements emergency standby contracts to ensure fast access to critical resources.

Routine communication with State, local, and Federal partners through the State Emergency Response Team in Florida keeps Florida prepared for disaster.

Sir, in conclusion, I would like to express my gratitude for the opportunity to testify before you today. Emergency management is a public safety entity that is essential for protecting lives and property. By improving Federal support, we can strengthen our Nation's disaster response capabilities and ensure faster recovery for all Americans.

I look forward to continued collaboration with you, the committee, and the administration to improve these systems.

Thank you.

[Mr. Guthrie's prepared statement follows:]

Prepared Statement of Kevin Guthrie, Executive Director, Florida Division of Emergency Management

INTRODUCTION

Thank you, Chairman Graves, Ranking Member Larsen, and other distinguished members of the Committee for the invitation to testify here today.

I am Kevin Guthrie, Executive Director of the Florida Division of Emergency Management (FDEM). Today I want to share with you what I know about Emergency Management. Due to the leadership of Governor Ron DeSantis, the State of Florida and FDEM are proud to have become a model for the future of emergency management. Florida's success is also directly tied to the dedication of our emergency management professionals and experience that comes with being in a disaster-prone state.

Leading the profession in prepared and resilient communities, staff members provide technical assistance to local governments as they prepare emergency plans and procedures, as well as conduct emergency operations training for state and local governmental agencies with the mission of coordinating, collaborating and communicating with all community stakeholders for a more resilient Florida. As Executive Director and on behalf of my colleagues in State and Local emergency management, we thank you for this opportunity to provide a state perspective on the future of Federal Emergency Management. We are excited to work with you and President Trump's Administration to empower states in their emergency management efforts.

DISASTER HISTORY

Regarding disasters, as Executive Director, I have led the agency through numerous significant events, including Hurricanes Debby, Helene, Milton, Idalia, Ian, Nicole, Michael, Dorian, Isaias, Sally, and Eta, as well as Tropical Storms Elsa and Fred. Besides tropical systems, I have provided support to Floridians through a variety of events, including the tragic Surfside Building Collapse, wildfires, tornadoes, floods and more. We have also assisted efforts in the nation's fight against illegal immigration through Operation Vigilant Sentry in Florida and Operation Lone Star in Texas. Additionally, in my broader 30 plus years of experience, I have responded to, assisted in leading, or led the operations of over 50 additional incidents or events in Florida or across the nation.

STATE MANAGEMENT

We maintain our emergency management approach with conservative principles, emphasizing that emergencies should be federally supported, state-managed, and locally executed. Where possible, we utilize the federal government to bolster, rather than obstruct, state and local disaster response efforts. Local response efforts are amplified and supported by the State rather than dictated. Where additional support is needed, the Florida Division of Emergency Management does not hesitate to fill the need but does not take control or micromanage a response. We do not dictate what a local response looks like. Our willingness to support locals in their varied response efforts allows us to identify the best practices which are then shared and improved disaster after disaster. Again, we lead the industry in the field, but we are not perfect and believe in constant improvement at all ends of the emergency management system.

Regarding federal support, the potential implementation of block grants for emergency management is an exciting development. With a block grant, an allocation of funding is provided to meet a given purpose such as response or recovery operations. If it is properly and consistently utilized within the criteria determined by the federal government, bureaucratic delays at the federal level are removed and states can push out the funding more quickly and effectively. Block grants may also allow for large-scale decreases in the administrative functions at the federal level.

AMPLIFICATION OF EFFORTS THROUGH PARTNERSHIPS

FDEM is made up of 225 full-time employees and approximately 170 temporary employees. During a disaster, we activate our State Emergency Response Team (SERT) to maximize our capabilities. The SERT consists of our federal partners, State agencies, local emergency management, and private sector industries such as power, water, lodging, grocery, equipment, and materials. Additionally, Florida's First Lady, Casey DeSantis, has activated charitable foundations, volunteer organizations, and the faith community as part of our State Emergency Response Team (SERT). These entities provide tremendous assistance to disaster survivors without cost to the State. This assistance includes disaster cleanup, reconstruction, housing assistance, meal service, transportation, and more.

We are not afraid of leaning on and empowering the private sector to improve our response and recovery efforts. In many facets of emergency management, the State and local governments rely on the private sector to do the essentials, whether that be restoring power, removing debris, or getting businesses operational as quickly as possible to create the necessary environment for a speedy recovery. We are not afraid of the private sector and do not care about logos or patches during a disaster. We care only about getting the job done.

STATE AND LOCAL EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT ENHANCED BY FEDERAL SUPPORT

FDEM operates 24/7, 365 days a year regardless of activation level or disaster status. Our staff must maintain operations continually to be ready to respond to natural and man-made disasters. In the event of a weather event, we usually have notice and ability to make final preparations prior to the disaster. In other cases, no-notice disasters specifically, our team activates to full capacity and may activate the entire SERT. To satisfy continual operations for the State and local emergency management agencies, funding is necessary on a non-disaster cycle. Base FEMA grants currently fund much of these continual operations. Any change or end to these base grants would necessitate an alternative funding source either through the State or local governments. In the same way that a government continually funds its Law Enforcement and Fire Departments, State and local governments must find a way to establish emergency management functions without Federal financial support for blue sky periods. This will look different state-by-state and government-by-government. For more populous states, a stand-alone State-funded emergency management agency is certainly possible. In less populous states, incorporating the functions of an emergency management agency into existing capabilities such as the National Guard could be an option. Locally, in rural areas, incorporating the emergency management functions into the Sheriffs' offices or fire departments is expected. In metropolitan areas, the emergency management functions could be stand-alone due to the larger tax base.

When public safety, health, and critical infrastructure agencies need help they call on Emergency Management. Therefore, Emergency Management is a public safety agency and it is incumbent upon each government to treat it as such. This means providing funding and resources within existing resources and capabilities. Regardless of how each state or local government would establish emergency management functions without federal financial assistance, it is critical that all federal support be focused on expanding capability rather than maintaining capability. Federal grants should not support long-term staffing at the State or local level.

With this new paradigm in place, federal support can be targeted specifically for disaster events as the needs arise, and without a large bureaucracy in place at the federal level.

EMBRACING STANDARDIZATION OF DATA AND IMPROVED TECHNOLOGY

FDEM has embraced modern technology to improve how data is used for operations. The first step in embracing technology is to streamline business operations and gain efficiencies to digitize current document workflows. The second step is to focus on the inputs of good, structured, digital information into the system(s) at the lowest possible level eliminating the need for bureaucratic reviews and approvals. In Florida, this has accelerated disaster response efforts, improved efficiency, reduced bureaucratic delays, and expedited payment processing after disasters. Efforts have not only helped the State work faster during an emergency but also ensure taxpayer money is managed responsibly. Embracing technology and activating data assets directly impacts our ability to ensure residents can recover and the economy can get back up and running faster than ever before.

We have seen tremendous returns on investment in technology. For every dollar targeted at technology modernization, we have an estimated $530 in business efficiency. Additionally, the time it takes to process thousands of invoices following a disaster has decreased by 73%. During Hurricane Ian, FDEM averaged 61 days to process invoices. For Hurricanes Debby, Helene, and Milton, this improved to just 16 days.

The inability of data to flow from local to state to federal government through efficient use of technology is responsible for the delays and years long frustrations experienced in emergency management. We have proven that these delays can be reduced by up to 90% in some cases, all while decreasing long-term and temporary staffing needs.

Collecting, analyzing, and governing relevant data is integral for providing reliable, actionable information for emergency operation decision-makers before, during, and after an emergency. We deployed an anomaly detector to identify and mitigate financial risks, including potential fraud, waste, and abuse, by detecting abnormalities when processing invoices for payment. With 99% accuracy, the anomaly detector identified three major invoice irregularities in the first 30 days.

Data is essential for Federal, State, and local officials as well as emergency management leaders charged with protecting and serving residents. By leveraging advanced analytics and machine learning, FDEM has empowered its leaders to transition from manual information collection and research into a modern, data-drive approach.

EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT ASSISTANCE COMPACT (EMAC)

In the event of large disasters, the Federal government has supported Florida financially and operationally. Additionally, states across our nation have lent support to Florida when we have needed it most.

Since 2022, Florida has leveraged the Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMAC) to request aid during six (6) disaster events. Over these incidents, 39 states across the nation stepped up to assist Florida by providing crucial assistance and bolstering Florida's response efforts. Through EMAC, Florida has received essential assets such as Swiftwater and Urban Search & Rescue (USAR) teams, fire response units, Incident Management Teams (IMTs), Emergency Operations Center (EOC) support, voluntary liaisons, and National Guard assistance. These resources play a critical role in ensuring an effective disaster response.

Throughout the six (6) disasters since 2022, including Operation Vigilant Sentry (OVS) and five (5) hurricanes—Ian, Idalia, Debby, Helene, and Milton, Florida has received a total of 7,444 personnel and associated equipment with total costs amounting to $74,731,312.50. These coordinated efforts have been instrumental in helping the state navigate disaster impacts over the past several years.

The successful coordination of the EMAC, financially supported by the federal government, has been essential in ensuring states receive the aid they need when they lack the necessary resources to respond and recover independently. We want the federal government to continue administering and supporting EMAC to facilitate efficient and effective disaster response across the country.

While many states, including Florida, have received significant financial support from American taxpayers during disasters, few states could fully fund disaster response and recovery without federal assistance. Thanks to responsible fiscal stewardship and a positive economic climate, Florida remains resilient—but ongoing federal support remains critical in times of crisis.

ADDITIONAL FEDERAL EFFICIENCIES

Combined Federal Disaster Declaration: When a disaster occurs, the federal government often claims to bring all forces to bear in response. Unfortunately, this is not always the case due to separate disaster declaration processes for different federal agencies. While a declaration by the President may be declared quickly for FEMA, other agencies such as the US Department of Agriculture or the US Department of Commerce (Fisheries and Aquaculture) require a separate lengthy process for disaster declaration. This separate process leads to significant delays in response to the agriculture and aquaculture industries. A combined declaration for all federal agencies would end these delays.

Data Sharing: During response and recovery, the State and Federal agencies are often duplicating data gathering efforts as there is no "one-stop-shop" for services. Disaster survivors are constantly filling out federal and state forms, applications, portals, and more. While there are challenges associated with data sharing, it is absolutely crippling for federal agencies to be prohibited from data sharing agreements with the State and locals. Remedying data sharing issues, as part of an annual "blue sky" process, will ensure a coordinated and less burdensome delivery of services to survivors, rather than duplicative and siloed data collection efforts and programs.

Disaster Case Management: For disaster survivors, case management is a lengthy process, severely limiting available services and resources to survivors until months after the event occurred. By the time resources become available, many survivors have moved away or missed crucial deadlines in applications for assistance. The recovery of a community is stifled when its population moves away. Ensuring rapid deployment of disaster case management and funding can get survivors back on their feet more quickly will reduce the long-term costs of extended displacement.

Disaster Grant Closeout Procedures: Current policy implies that all work must be completed on a public assistance project prior to application for reimbursement. This requirement causes excessive delay and long-term extension of disaster closeout and creates significant vulnerability to de-obligation. Allowing grants to cover partial work will facilitate quicker project accomplishment while getting funding to those communities that struggle to facilitate project completion due to limited revenues and cash flow.

BEST PRACTICES

Warehousing & Deployable Resources: The Florida Division of Emergency Management (FDEM) maintains a network of strategically located warehouses, each designed to fulfill critical functions in statewide emergency response and disaster preparedness. These facilities serve as primary distribution hubs for essential resources, ensuring that life-sustaining supplies such as food, water, and emergency equipment are readily available for rapid deployment when disasters strike. In routine operations and smaller-scale emergencies, we are responsible for maintaining operational readiness, overseeing inventory management, and coordinating response efforts. However, in the event of a large-scale activation, additional surge personnel, including contractors, National Guardsmen, and State Guardsmen—are mobilized to expedite the efficient deployment of critical commodities. Beyond basic supplies, FDEM's warehouses are equipped with a wide range of specialized assets designed to support complex emergency operations. These include power generation equipment, high-capacity water pumps, personal protective equipment (PPE), flood prevention systems, mobile command vehicles (MCVs), heavy machinery, and sleeper trailers to accommodate on-site response teams. By maintaining these resources, we bolster the state's ability to respond swiftly and effectively to emergencies, mitigate disaster impacts, and safeguard lives and property.

Emergency Standby Contracts: FDEM has implemented Emergency Standby Contracts as a proactive disaster management strategy, recognized as a national best practice. These pre-established agreements allow vendors to stage and procure critical resources in advance, ensuring faster, more efficient response efforts. This approach streamlines logistics, reduces delays, and helps protect lives and property by securing essential personnel, equipment, and supplies ahead of time. The contracts cover vital resources such as disaster support personnel, incident management teams, shelter staffing, medical personnel, care sites, transportation services, equipment, and emergency fuels. Contracts for emergency supplies and services—mirror best practices found in our state-level logistics operations (e.g., resource bundling, turn-key solutions, multiple vendors, allow for state/local level piggy backing, etc.). This cuts red tape during procurement, accelerates resource deployment, and leverages economies of scale.

Routine Cycle of Preparedness: Throughout the year, the Florida State Emergency Resource Team (SERT) focuses on routine communication with our local, state, and contracted partners. Florida's emergency management framework is robust. The SERT is one of the most experienced in the Nation and is well-suited to address a wide range of complex incidents and events. For most natural and man-made emergencies, our state-level capacity, including rapid incident monitoring, logistical support, and specialized technical expertise (e.g., nuclear and radiological preparedness), ensures we can respond effectively. To better respond to these disasters, the SERT has digitized many of our mutual aid processes to include the FEMA reimbursement document. These efforts have allowed for quicker response and reimbursement for our first responders. Florida is the centralized emergency management coordination hub for disasters. To continue to excel in this, the SERT coordinates meetings with city, county, and tribal partners to forecast potential challenges and develop plans to address concerns. Quarterly, the SERT meets with command staff to strategize and discuss how to better respond to natural and man-made disasters. It is through these partnerships and routine communications that Florida leads the nation in mutual aid support provided across the country and our response times during a disaster.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. Emergency Management is critical, and the time is now to implement improvements that will change the way we do business and ultimately better serve the citizens of the United States.

Mr. PERRY. The Chair thanks the gentleman for his testimony.

The Chair now recognizes Ms. Laughter. You are recognized for 5 minutes.

TESTIMONY OF JAIME LAUGHTER, COUNTY MANAGER, TRANSYLVANIA COUNTY, NORTH CAROLINA

Ms. LAUGHTER. Thank you, Chairman and members of the committee.

Nine days. For 9 days, my county's emergency responders and I bore witness to the aftermath of the most devastating natural disaster to hit our community in over 100 years.

We witnessed a family's terror when their little boy was injured in a landslide, taking their home off its foundation. We witnessed a very pregnant mother desperately trying to dry out her empty trailer with dehumidifiers so that she would have somewhere to bring her baby home to—all of her possessions in a dumpster nearby.

We witnessed the elderly man in his home too overwhelmed to start the process, with mold creeping up the walls around him within days of the flood.

For those 9 long days, our community was trying to grapple with the destruction of Helene, trying to chart a path forward, searching for answers to questions, and without the key partner who was supposed to be at our aid, without FEMA. And it would be 2 weeks after the storm before more than a single worker arrived, despite repeated pleas for help.

Locally, we knew housing was going to be one of the greatest challenges. Immediate needs post-storm are the basic necessities we all understand: Clean water, food, and shelter.

FEMA's temporary shelter assistance is ill-fitted to meet the needs of rural America. Our citizens who qualified for TSA found hotel choices to be in Greenville, South Carolina, or Charlotte, North Carolina, both 2 hours outside of our county, leaving untenable options to stay in damaged homes, bunk with family and friends, or leave their job, school, and community behind for an unknown time.

Appalachians don't leave our home, our land, or the fabric of our community. So the TSA vouchers may as well have been Monopoly money.

Even after FEMA's arrival, the negative impact of delay in FEMA response was compounded by ongoing communication challenges, changing FEMA staff assignments, and contradicting information and directions that stalled progress for my community.

In the written testimony, you will even see where our sheriff and I were repeatedly given opposite updates on door-to-door response by FEMA representatives that could have resulted in conflicting public messages, except for the fact that in my community, the sheriff and I work side by side in emergency response, communicating regularly.

At 21 days and with tireless advocacy, we were granted a meeting with FEMA housing mission leaders. We received an overview of the housing options coming, along with identifying some obstacles that we would face.

For instance, we were able to explain the inadequacy of HUD's fair market rent methodology in our rural community and how that would hamstring any possibility of rentals being an option if the FMR was used to establish allowable rents.

We were heard and a request was elevated immediately to approve an increase in the allowable FEMA rate. Even with the increase, rental assistance could not meet the needs of those whose homes were destroyed, and more options would be needed.

Ultimately, we found that housing process requirements under FEMA are too rigid to apply effectively in our mountainous community. For those who could leverage that assistance option, progress was only made after establishing weekly FEMA and State EM calls with us locally to cut through miscommunication and establish accountable discussions.

At times, our county would face contradictions from different FEMA siloes, as you will also find documented in the written testimony. While putting our county resources to task trying to support the FEMA mission, we would also feel the sting of the deep conflict and contradiction of FEMA being both disaster response and regulator of local flood plain management programs.

Threats of losing NFIP status and future disaster funding in our community made it harder to assist families in repairing their homes, meet immediate human needs post-disaster, while at the same time, other FEMA workers were working with us to support housing among limited solutions.

Contradicting guidance and unclear processes were also frustrating to vulnerable survivors, and lack of answers led to deteriorating public trust and faith in FEMA, but not because the people deployed were not genuine and service-oriented people. It was because the workers themselves were stuck in a system designed to prioritize process and policy over common sense and responsiveness.

We saw these workers hamstrung to help us with a lack of training across functions and a system difficult to navigate even for them. While there were genuine attempts to be responsive to the local needs, like approving private roads and bridges for assistance in western North Carolina, the decisions on requirements attached were made in bubbles far away from our community that did not engage local leadership, meaning that guidance is still fraught with concerns about the ability to meet the requirements that will be imposed.

Transylvania County lost homes, infrastructure, and possessions, but somehow we did not lose lives [inaudible]. What I can't imagine is how our sister counties who lost whole towns are navigating these processes when the recovery is far more complex and the sting of loss so much deeper.

Communities facing recovery need assistance with our counties representing the frontline response and need realistic solutions and meaningful engagement before a disaster.

The stated mission of a responsive FEMA can be achieved, but only when the local voice is not just heard, but is also involved in solution building so that practical boots-on-the-ground insight can be engaged upfront. Only then can we effectively and efficiently support our survivors.

My community, all of our communities, our people across the country, and the FEMA workers themselves deserve better. Together we must do better.

Thank you for the opportunity to share about my community's experience.

[Ms. Laughter's prepared statement follows:]

Prepared Statement of Jaime Laughter, County Manager, Transylvania County, North Carolina

COUNTY POST-HURRICANE HELENE RESPONSE AND RECOVERY EXPERIENCE AND FEEDBACK

This document is intended to provide constructive feedback with our conclusive statements in bold and explanation of the elements of the response and recovery experience in Transylvania County post Hurricane Helene that led us to those conclusions. We have included suggestions for improvements from our perspective. The appendices included provide backup documentation to this document but are not the full scope of documented and undocumented communication that has occurred between Transylvania County and FEMA.

Statement 1: When a widespread disaster occurs, there must be a system in place to support response and recovery because local governments do not have the capacity to maintain the ability to handle a response at that scale during non-response times. Overall, FEMA staff our county engaged with seemed genuine in their desire to help, but faced some of the same frustrations with communication, procedures, processes, and difficulty navigating the system as we did. Any redesign of a system to deliver that support needs to prioritize the local government voice, be adaptable to different conditions and ensure responsiveness to local needs during and after disaster.

This document expresses the experience and frustrations that we faced with FEMA because that is the jurisdiction of the hearing, but we recognize that in some situations there seemed to be blame to be shared for difficulties between both state and federal agencies, but our main concern is that the system work at the point of delivery locally and we do not have a clear perspective on how the interface between state and federal helped or hindered the response. County government is the closest governance to our citizens and the very people who form local government live disasters alongside the community while also responding. There must be response infrastructure to support those efforts from other levels of government.

Statement 2: Transylvania County was left to manage emergency response without FEMA in early days and did not get FEMA support until numerous and repeated phone calls and emails were made to appeal for assistance. Even our federal legislators were puzzled by the delay in FEMA arriving or responding. No official reason has ever been offered, but this delayed citizens' being able to start the application process, left local resources strained without information and lowered confidence in the FEMA response from the beginning with our leaders and our community.

No FEMA representatives were present in Transylvania County until 9 days after Hurricane Helene created the worst disaster to hit our area in over 100 years. Flooding, landslides, and wind/tree damage left our county looking and feeling like a war zone with the vast majority without power, without communication and with devastating damage. Our Emergency Operations Center (EOC) received one phone call on day 6 from a FEMA representative stating they would be on site the following day without any arrival or additional call. Receiving any level of service took constant advocacy meaning some of our local resources were spent trying to get FEMA to engage instead of accomplishing other response activities. Status of damage incurred, and needs were communicated for days without response.

When I discussed the delay with one FEMA worker, they suggested the lack of assistance uptake from our county, such as those utilizing Transitional Sheltering Assistance (TSA), made it appear as if there was less need in our community because of low reported utilization of TSA. This seems like it could be a factor, and the data does reflect a lower measure of initial assistance uptake; however, data reports did not accurately convey the reasons people were not accepting assistance. Data points from these reports may still be limited in understanding the full impact of Helene in our county. Even damage assessment figures were slow to reflect total impact because flooding could be easily identified by inspecting floodplain areas, but our county suffered landslide and tree damage to homes that were spread out across the county and took longer to inventory.

I recently spoke with a county manager on the other side of the disaster in North Carolina that indicated they were not even sure why they were in the disaster declaration because they saw very little impact from the storm, but that FEMA representatives arrived promptly and unannounced right after the storm. The only other plausible reason for the delay we have been able to identify is that the main operation was put in Hickory, NC and our county was one of the furthest away from that base; but plenty of FEMA staff were in neighboring Buncombe and Henderson counties well before arriving here and even present in some counties during the storm. The FEMA shelter set up immediately at the NC Agriculture Center is less than 15 minutes from our county line.

Statement 3: Both short- and long-term housing response processes instilled in FEMA are not suited to be effective in rural America or in environments like the mountains. This created a disconnect in the practical connection of those who needed help and the options available to them with specific issues around what those options meant for their families. A lesson learned in our experience is that the FEMA data around assistance uptake in long term housing does not adequately reflect degree of need in a community and that options that allow people to stay on their own property would have been more supportive and utilized. Policy makers should consider how protocols apply in different settings with the ability to be responsive to communities, instead of a one-size-fits-all approach.

Once life safety is secured in an emergency, our priorities pivot to the basic immediate human needs of clean water, food, and shelter. The Temporary Shelter Assistance (TSA) program, FEMA's first line of assistance to those displaced from their homes, is not set up to provide immediate assistance in rural areas because the availability of major hotel chains, capacity and established contracts are inconsistent or unavailable completely. Our citizens who applied for assistance and were approved for TSA in the initial weeks following the disaster found that the closest availability for hotels accepting the TSA program were in Charlotte, NC, or Greenville, SC, requiring anywhere between a 1- and 3-hour drive away from their homes, jobs, and schools. The TSA numbers for our county do not reflect the ultimate need for housing after the storm because many were not willing to uproot their lives and either stayed with friends and family or in their damaged homes. We saw the most success for immediate housing needs with North Carolina Emergency Management and nonprofits that were able to secure RV units for households that could be placed at damaged home sites quickly and that did not require meeting floodplain elevation standards and other more stringent restrictions since they are mobile units. Unfortunately, those resources were not robust enough to assist to the full extent needed; however, similar resources could be an improved option in rural emergency response both for immediate needs and for the longer term while households navigate the lengthy process of determining whether to tear down, rebuild, relocate, etc.

FEMA housing leadership met with us to explain the options coming for our residents and explained that long-term housing implementation would take time. The long-term housing program has requirements that take a significant amount of time to deploy, with some of those found to be unrealistic for our community; so, there was no interim support unless citizens wanted to leave the area to use TSA. Rental assistance is one of the easier options, but there was an existing lack of rentals before the storm in our county. FEMA housing leadership explained that HUD's fair market rents are used to determine rental assistance limits early in our conversations. We provided a history of advocacy and data that shows that the methodology to estimate rural community fair market rent levels is not an accurate depiction of our county. FEMA representatives heard us on this issue and raised the request to increase the amount allowed. Even with an approval of doubling the fair market rent allowance, our county only saw 10 units immediately available under those limits. Households that pursued rental assistance and FEMA workers had challenges finding units within the limits. Addressing FMR helped the housing mission because it was responsive to the local characteristics of the community.

For long-term housing, FEMA units could not be placed in the floodplain, but the homeowners who needed a unit to allow them to repair or to have time to go through hazard mitigation/buy out processes to determine their best options are in the floodplain and could not use the FEMA units unless they could find property outside of the floodplain for placement. Most of the commercial mobile home parks are in or near the floodplain because in the mountains, floodplains provide flat land that can be developed and used for those purposes. Additionally, the mobile home parks had limited availability due to the pre-existing short housing supply. Our county even pulled tax record data to provide all commercial mobile home park sites in the county to FEMA personnel to facilitate locating sites, and few were identified as possibilities for either available space or for being in the floodplain.

People in our rural community did not want to leave their homes; around half those qualifying for long-term housing chose to stay in their damaged dwellings, as reflected in FEMA data, often because the options offered were not realistic. Even the federally owned campground in Pisgah National Forest was eventually excluded as a mass housing site because it is in a floodplain, despite it being a federally owned site and easily accessible in our county. Additionally, the logistics baked into the long-term housing unit placement—such as required inspections to meet standardized requirements—are lengthy processes even under ideal circumstances. The first FEMA unit placed in our county saw an over two-week delay because the fire suppression unit was not working, leading to attempted repairs and eventual replacement. Typical mobile home placements under building code do not even have similar fire suppression units.

Communication was a challenge in housing planning and response as detailed in another section, but systemic issues of policy, procedure and protocol were apparent once communication improved, and the requirements were understood locally. Weekly calls—which we established with NCEM and FEMA in December after repeated communication frustrations expressed by the county manager—were instrumental in getting consistent information on housing, understanding of the rules (such as learning that sites in the floodplain would be rejected) and having clear status updates on those being approved for housing and the process being followed. While it is our perspective that the process needs to be made more responsive and efficient with fewer obstacles, understanding the rules made the participation of local officials more effective and the communication with the public clearer.

Statement 4: Some processes were overly complicated, costing time and diverting resources from areas that would have addressed more immediate needs in the local community. This also created barriers to providing efficient and effective service, in addition to eroding trust in FEMA as a response partner.

An example of these overly complex processes occurred when we offered a conference room to house a Disaster Resource Center (DRC) to get one operational in our county. The site visit required review of the conference room to see if it could be used for a DRC involving at least 7 FEMA representatives on the site visit and, while here, a call had to be made to see if a handicapped bathroom stall in our public county government building being an inch too short could be approved in order for the DRC to locate. After over a week post-inspection and multiple follow-ups from our staff, we were finally cleared to get a DRC. We were then told on a Tuesday that the DRC would soft open on a Thursday, with staff and resources arriving on Thursday morning, and then officially open on Friday. We scheduled our county operations and IT staff to be available to assist for Thursday. Wednesday morning, we were contacted by our staff in that building that FEMA representatives were there to set up the DRC. We diverted our operations and IT staff immediately to assist, only to find that the people to staff the DRC had been sent to our location, but that the equipment necessary to operate had been sent to another county so setup could not occur that day. Later that day, a higher-level FEMA official assigned fault to the county for the failure to open on time, even though the issue was caused by FEMA staff and required equipment being sent to two different places.

When teams arrived to go door to door in impacted neighborhoods, we assigned a county staff person to accompany them for the two days we were told they would be going door to door. (Note: A third day they scheduled without informing county staff resulted in an incident referenced elsewhere in this report.) Including a county staff member on the visits was to help assure our citizens that these were not scams and to facilitate getting assistance to more of our households. While in one neighborhood, a homeowner came up to the team and said he knew an elderly man in one of the houses needed help with the application. He offered to go let the man know the team was coming and then came back to let them know he spoke to the man, who was ready and waiting to receive help. When the team got to the driveway, one of the FEMA workers stated they could not go to the door because there was a no solicitation sign and started to move on to the next house. While it is understandable to avoid issues with no trespass or no solicitation signs, there must be some flexibility when it is clear that help is welcomed, like in this situation.

Statement 5: Siloed internal FEMA communications and no clear communication protocols, along with inconsistent communication to the County Level Emergency Operations Center, created barriers and frustration. Communication challenges seemed to frustrate FEMA staff themselves when they worked with us to find answers to questions or connect to resources. Prior communication directly with counties before an event occurs and not just coordination through state without engagement of local government would improve this by establishing relationships in advance. This could be even more effective by having non-emergency regular opportunities for training and relationship building.

Communication between federal, state, and local governments and communication within FEMA posed challenges. Multiple examples throughout the response showcase those challenges; a few include:

- After receiving a phone call from FEMA to our EOC that someone would be coming the next day and then seeing two days pass with no arrivals, the county manager reached out to Congressman Edward's office to ask who we could contact at FEMA because we were still without support. A name and number were provided, and the county manager called that number. She was then handed off because the "internal affairs person" for our county had changed multiple times in the same day. Transylvania County staff communicated via phone and email with the internal affairs liaison assigned to the county once that person was finally identified. When the local government liaison arrived in person, it was a different person than anyone who had been identified days before, with no communication with us at the local level that a change had occurred. We also found none of the information we had shared prior had been passed to the new person. Details can be found in the timeline attached.

- The FEMA coordinator for our county arrived at our EOC on day 9, but with no communication to indicate he was coming that day. He began engaging with county staff to understand needs and submitting reports into some system, but did not seem to be getting any answers or information back. On day 13, the internal affairs liaison arrived with no prior communication to the FEMA coordinator already there; because the coordinator was unaware anyone else was coming, he could not coordinate the meeting who had no prior knowledge of the arrival. This prevented him from coordinating with our leadership.
- The Sheriff for our county is part of county government with the county manager, and his office is in the same building as the EOC. On numerous occasions, the county manager was told that FEMA teams were not going door to door, while Sheriff Chuck Owenby was receiving phone calls from a FEMA representative in Washington, DC, telling him teams were going door to door. This resulted in contradictory messages being pushed out to county residents. Both leaders shared with FEMA representatives that this was unacceptable, but the issue occurred and even damaging to have mixed messages, but it occurred at least two more times, and further confusion was only averted because the manager and Sheriff were coordinating locally with each other to prevent the contradictions from confusing the public. A FEMA representative from DC also called Transylvania County dispatch asking racially inappropriate questions referencing a racially charged incident has allegedly occurred four days prior that was never reported or documented with Transylvania County. See timeline and CAD report included in attachment.
- Transylvania County staff was given four different instructions for how to submit possible housing sites and followed all of them in the first six weeks after the storm. The concern over housing challenges in the community was communicated in writing prior to any FEMA staff arriving, because county staff were well aware of the lack of rentals and the challenges with available housing prior to the storm. County staff continued to raise the question about sites, including an easily accessible campground in the federally owned Pisgah National Forest and two private sites owners had offered for consideration.

  When county staff inquired about the status of the consideration of these sites for housing, FEMA staff would provide a new, different method to submit the sites for review, and there appeared to be no continuity of information shared among FEMA staff. After the manager requested weekly calls on housing with FEMA and NCEM representatives in December, the first meeting began with a discussion of the status of those sites being considered. The FEMA representative on the call pulled up a database which did not have any of the sites submitted by the county in it, meaning none of the site submittal pathways given previously had worked. The lack of clear pathways and having to re-explain community conditions around housing meant time and effort from our team that could have been spent addressing other recovery issues.

Statement 6: Changing contacts and inconsistent handoff of information established shaky infrastructure that impacted communication, trust in partnership and efficiency. We had to re-explain our local needs, challenges, culture and practical information over and over again without getting answers to questions or progress on addressing issues. A solid human resource infrastructure is necessary to make collaboration effective.

The timeline included in this report reflects examples of FEMA contacts being changed, often with no notice to the county EOC staff that a change was being made. Additionally, staff handoff of information was inconsistent, ranging from no transfer of information at all to a written handoff report and coordinated meetings. When an effective handoff occurred, it relieved local staff from the resource drain of having to keep re-orienting new FEMA representatives. An example of a handoff being well done in the timeline was Heather Long, who organized a handoff meeting and prepared a status report to review with the incoming replacement, as well as scheduling a meeting with county staff to introduce the incoming replacement and ensure information on challenges, current issues and needs was addressed in the meeting. The re-orientation required by local staff when those handoffs were not well facilitated was frustrating, time consuming and demoralizing to county staff, in addition to stalling progress of the response.

Statement 7: Conflicting guidance for public assistance process and items eligible for reimbursement created confusion and frustration. It also led to decisions being made on faulty information to spend local funds or make decisions on resource usage based on erroneous information that may create additional financial impact to the county budget already impacted by the impacts of the disaster.

The impact of contradicting and changing guidance on the county has been challenging and creates financial risk for the county. Guidance about reimbursable expenses created additional resource devotion to tracking expenses that would later be said could not be reimbursed. Early direction included that the local volunteer fire departments had to file their own public assistance only to find later that they could have fallen under the county's effort, meaning they had to figure out how to navigate that process or chose not to seek reimbursement due to the amount of resources it would take to pursue it.

Some of the contradictions and financial impact to the county were county resources used by FEMA and the Red Cross in the response. We did not charge FEMA or Red Cross rent on any of our properties used for shelters or DRC locations because staff recalled being told during a meeting the County would be able to claim dates of use and be reimbursed per square foot for the space used. This would offset utilities and programs that had to be cancelled from those locations so that those functions could occupy the space in response and recovery. After the DRC closed and all shelters closed, we added this information to our Cat B expenses and were then told this was not reimbursable despite the earlier guidance. We were told by PDMG we should have created a rental agreement with FEMA and Red Cross before they moved into those spaces to recoup the cost of our operations. There is no reimbursable claim for our facilities being inaccessible to regular entities renting space or programs that had to be cancelled. We had similar conflicting guidance on covering fees on behalf of survivors for debris disposal, permit fees for repair and other expenses that have a direct impact on county resources and budget.

Statement 8: The Just in Time training approach in the field was frustrating because there was not anyone available with broader knowledge and training, which impacted trust with county citizens. To be effective, this training method requires a readily accessible lead with a broader knowledge of disaster management.

An example of just-in-time training having an ineffective result occurred with the FEMA teams sent to go door to door for applications. County management was initially told the teams would be able to assist people who had applied and either did not know the status of their application or had been rejected and needed help. Instead, the teams told residents they would have to call the FEMA 1–800 number for any questions. Residents were not able to get through on the hotline and reported waiting hours, only to get disconnected (possibly because communications across the county were running on temporary cell infrastructure due to the storm damage). In speaking with those on the FEMA teams, we learned they had received "just in time training" and were only trained to help fill out applications. They could not assist beyond the form or even refer for assistance beyond the 1–800 number. While just in time training can be an efficient tool for deployment of resources, teams are ineffective if there is not someone deployed alongside that has broader information and context to support the services being delivered. The inability to assist beyond filling in information on tablets and referring to the hotline frustrated citizens and made them lose confidence in the FEMA support they were seeing.

Statement 9: Flexibility is required to meet unique needs in different disasters. Our county's recovery depends on the ability to address private roads and bridges, but decisions are made only to have FEMA's guidance shift (i.e. recent letter on requirements). It is unclear how the funding for this will be managed and what requirements would be imposed on local government in the process.

Western North Carolina has many bridges and roads privately owned and maintained. Initially private roads/bridges were not going to be eligible for any FEMA assistance except through individual assistance means. After consideration of the need in our area, FEMA changed course and announced that funds could be used for repair of damaged private roads and bridges, but processes and requirements are not yet clear. A recent FEMA memo indicates these bridges and roads will be required to have an engineer's certification stating the bridge/road was built to the same or greater level than prior to the storm. No reliable records exist on many of these bridges and roads, however, meaning it is unreasonable to expect an engineer to be able to provide this certification universally. Lack of clarity about how funds will be administered, who will be responsible for holding bonds, guarantees or where liabilities will fall mean that repairs are being delayed further.

Statement 10: FEMA as floodplain protection ordinance enforcer and FEMA as disaster response created conflicting purposes that were logistical challenges to the county being effective at meeting the more immediate needs in the community. Disaster funding assistance should not be tied to having floodplain control ordinances and programs in place as it has historically. The incentive for having floodplain management programs should solely be eligibility for subsidized flood insurance through NFIP in those communities. Early in the response, staff for the Flood Management and Insurance section put pressure on the county floodplain administrator to increase requirements on flood victims and institute unrealistic requirements for repair permits to be issued. Later in March, representatives from FEMA came to audit sample assessments conducted by the county floodplain administrator determining Substantial Damage or Non-Substantial Damage. Yet FEMA has still not resolved all housing placements for those who qualify for long term housing assistance from the disaster. The focus on compliance and the threat of loss of NFIP status, without consideration of immediate human needs, created contradictory priorities and additional pressure on the county.

Transylvania County administers a floodplain protection ordinance as required for the county to be eligible to receive funding and support from FEMA in a disaster. After the storm occurred, many of our residents were committed to staying at their property instead of using TSA that would take them out of the area. To restore their damaged homes to a livable condition, they were eager to make repairs. Initially, our building inspections department that administers the floodplain ordinance and our city planning department who also administers a floodplain ordinance were told by FEMA staff that they needed to require non-conforming structures to come into compliance before permitting any repairs. The steps to raise a home or flooded trailer include having a surveyor shoot base floor elevations and an engineer design the measures to safely raise the structure. There were no surveyors and engineers in the area available to even provide this kind of service, and the process would require time that the pending cold weather would not allow these families. Our staff witnessed families throwing away all their possessions and desperately trying to use dehumidifiers to make a safe place for their family to stay. I toured a flooded mobile home with a woman who was 9 months pregnant. Their outlets had been inundated, and there were volunteers eager to assist in repair; but our staff was told we might endanger our NFIP status if we did not require the floodplain compliance before issuing permits to make those repairs. Another elderly man was still living in his home even though mold had reached a foot high in the home, posing a health hazard to him while awaiting repairs.

Our staff found a document issued by FEMA indicating we had flexibility in the administration of repair permits and timeline of compliance with floodplain ordinances. We decided to use temporary occupancy permits to address the immediate need for healthy and safe shelter over forcing immediate floodplain compliance. FEMA staff from the floodplain administration side of the agency also put pressure on our building department to propose an increase in base floor elevation requirements in the ordinance, while the same department was in the middle of trying to address immediate assessment and building inspections needed to make homes livable for these families. The proposed FEMA changes would have increased the standard those impacted would have had to meet in the middle of the recovery.

An email included in this packet shows where a FEMA representative advised the city staff that the county was trying to skirt the ordinance because a county structure was being listed by the city as having flooded to 50% damage. This occurred despite both photographic evidence to the contrary and a sworn building inspector and a contractor providing written letters that the building did not have water above the basement of the structure. The push by these FEMA representatives on floodplain ordinance issues—and even implied threats of noncompliance and resulting ineligibility for future disaster funding—worked directly against the most urgent mission to restore safe shelter to affected families with winter weather pending. NFIP eligibility should be enough incentive for local governments to have floodplain administration ordinances, and assistance in a disaster should not be held hostage over floodplain compliance. Forcing compliance should never take precedence over meeting immediate needs in a disaster. (Additional documentation attached in appendix.)

Conclusion: FEMA workers generally want to support communities in disasters and are genuine in their desire to help, as evidenced by their willingness to leave *their own communities to come serve. Our experience has been that the issues in process, protocol, organizational structure, and ill-designed communication make those employees' efforts less effective and efficient in meeting the local community's needs. Improvements to the system and well thought out methods of creating flexibility to meet the unique needs of an impacted community will better serve those impacted in a disaster, as well as those who work within the FEMA system. Our county is thankful for the progress that has been made in response and recovery, but at the same time we recognize that more positive impact could be achieved in a more responsive and organized system. We appreciate the opportunity to share our experience and feedback.*

APPENDICES:

Appendix A: Timeline of FEMA communication through 11–2–24 and sample communication challenges

Appendix B: Sample Documentation of Flood Management and Insurance Challenges

Appendix C: Sample Documentation Challenges Specific to Housing

Appendix D: Sample Documentation of Conflicting Public Assistance Rules from FEMA

Appendix E: Documented Example of Effective Handoff between FEMA Liaisons by Heather Long

[Editor's note: The appendices, totaling 174 pages, are retained in committee files and available online at: https://docs.house.gov/meetings/PW/PW13/20250325/117940/HHRG-119-PW13-Wstate-LaughterJ-20250325.pdf]

Mr. PERRY. The Chair thanks the gentlelady for her testimony. The Chair now recognizes Mr. Garcia for 5 minutes.

TESTIMONY OF ADRIAN GARCIA, COMMISSIONER, HARRIS COUNTY, TEXAS, ON BEHALF OF THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF COUNTIES

Mr. GARCIA. Chairman Perry, Ranking Member Stanton, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for having me today.

My name is Adrian Garcia, and I am a county commissioner in Harris County, Texas, and I am here on behalf of the National Association of Counties where I serve as the cochair of the Intergovernmental Disaster Reform Task Force.

Among the many responsibilities entrusted to counties, we are on the frontlines of disaster mitigation response and recovery. Nearly 900 counties each year receive at least 1 disaster, Presidential disaster declaration. This results in major economic losses, serious effects on communities, and immense pressures on local resources.

Following a disaster, local elected officials and emergency managers are the first on the scene and play a key role in recovery and rebuilding efforts so our residents can return to their lives as quickly as possible.

As major owners and operators of public infrastructure, counties are uniquely positioned to mitigate the impacts of disasters. America's 3,069 counties, parishes, and boroughs own 44 percent of public roads, 38 percent of the national bridge inventory, over 900 hospitals, and directly support one-third of the Nation's airports.

I am here today to underscore the county role in strengthening our Nation against disasters and to discuss how we can best work together to meet the challenges of today and the demands of the future.

First, FEMA is crucial for communities before, during, and after disasters. That said, inefficiencies in the Agency do demand urgent reform. Disaster response, recovery, and mitigation starts local and absolutely ends local. However, these efforts would not be possible without the support from critical Federal programs. One such program that counties rely on is FEMA's Public Assistance Program.

PA is crucial for helping communities rebuild after disasters, but the lengthy process to receive reimbursement can delay recovery efforts and hinder our ability to restore critical services post-disaster.

Last year, NACo conducted a survey of its members that concluded that one in five counties' longest open PA claim had been in processing between 4 and 6 years. Counties urge Congress to take decisive action to expedite funding from this PA Program, ensuring communities receive the critical resources we need for timely disaster recovery and rebuilding.

Second, removing barriers to funding and resources for underserved and disadvantaged communities is absolutely critical. Requiring the completion of complex and burdensome paperwork by communities who are unfamiliar with the process during the most stressful times of their lives can significantly impede progress when it is most needed.

Populations that feel the biggest impact are often our underserved and disadvantaged communities who lack the resources and capacity to complete applications and meet critical deadlines. Implementing plain language into applications, reducing bureaucratic redtape, and identifying resources available to assist applicants is paramount to improving the overall resilience of our Nation.

Counties are supportive of bipartisan legislation like the Disaster Survivors Fairness Act and the Disaster Assistance Simplification Act, which would streamline the application process and reduce redundant paperwork.

Finally, counties understand that improving our Nation's disaster system relies on a strong Federal, State, local partnership. Counties are not merely stakeholders in this conversation. Rather, we are a part of the Federal, State, and local partnership of Government that together can work together to share the responsibility of protecting our Nation and its residents from disasters.

While disasters are inherently local, counties rely on our State and Federal partners for critical disaster recovery tools like funding, human capital, and technical assistance. Rebuilding our communities and making them more resilient is only possible with the support of our Federal and State partners.

Counties stand ready to work side by side with you to improve our Nation's disaster response, recovery, and mitigation capabilities to ensure the health, well-being, and safety of our Nation and our residents.

Chairman Perry and Ranking Member Stanton, thank you again for the invitation to discuss this critical issue on behalf of America's counties.

This concludes my testimony, and I am happy to take any questions. Thank you.

[Mr. Garcia's prepared statement follows:]

Prepared Statement of Adrian Garcia, Commissioner, Harris County, Texas, on behalf of the National Association of Counties

INTRODUCTION

Chairman Perry, Ranking Member Stanton and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, on behalf of the National Association of Counties (NACo), thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the important role counties play in disaster response, recovery and mitigation.

My name is Adrian Garcia, and I serve as a Commissioner in Harris County, Texas. I also serve as the Chair of the Justice and Public Safety Policy Steering Committee and Co-Chair of the Intergovernmental Disaster Reform Task Force at NACo.

NACo is the only national organization that represents county governments in the United States, including Alaska's boroughs and Louisiana's parishes. Founded in 1935, NACo assists America's 3,069 counties in pursuing excellence in public service to produce healthy, vibrant, safe and resilient communities. NACo works to strengthen county resiliency by advocating for federal policies and programs that help county leaders identify and manage risk and allow counties to become more flexible and responsive to disasters. Through sustainable practices and infrastructure, counties become better prepared to address these issues in a manner that can minimize the impact on our residents and businesses.

Harris County is home to over 4.8 million residents to whom we provide critical services, including public safety and emergency services, public housing, health and human services, transportation and more. We predominantly rely on local property taxes to ensure our many responsibilities are met; however, due to constraints on local revenues that are enforced at the state level, a strong intergovernmental partnership is critical as we work to meet the challenges of today and plan for the future.

For example, in 2017 Harris County was struck by Hurricane Harvey. This catastrophic event resulted in widespread flooding, affecting approximately 300,000 structures and displacing thousands of residents. The storm resulted in at least 89 fatalities in Harris County, with many occurring outside designated flood zones, underscoring the unpredictable nature of such disasters. The storm's unprecedented rainfall overwhelmed our infrastructure, leading to significant economic and social repercussions

More recently, Hurricane Beryl made landfall in July 2024, causing extensive power outages that affected over 2.7 million households and businesses. The prolonged loss of electricity, combined with extreme heat, led to at least six heat-related fatalities in Harris County.

Paramount among other critical county responsibilities is the role of counties in community preparedness. Counties are on the front lines of defense before, during and after disasters strike. While state statutes and organizational structures vary, local emergency management responsibilities are most commonly vested in county governments. Following a disaster, local elected officials and emergency managers are often the first on the scene and play a key role in the coordination of local emergency management efforts. Other key county staff involved in pre- and post-disaster efforts include local police, sheriffs, firefighters, 911 call center staff, public health officials and public records and code inspectors. In the aftermath of disasters, we coordinate clean-up, recovery and rebuilding efforts so our residents can return to their lives as quickly as possible.

Furthermore, because counties are major owners of public infrastructure, we are also uniquely positioned to mitigate the impacts of disasters before they occur. Collectively, we own 44 percent of public road miles, 38 percent of the National Bridge Inventory, 960 hospitals, more than 2,500 jails, over 650 nursing homes and directly support a third of the nation's airports and public transit systems. We also own and maintain a wide variety of public safety infrastructure, including roadside ditches, flood control channels, stormwater culverts and pipes and other infrastructure used to funnel water away from low-lying roads, properties and businesses. Counties provide extensive outreach and education to residents on water quality and stormwater impacts prior to and following disasters, and we work to reduce water pollution, adopt setbacks for land use plans and are responsible for water recharge areas, green infrastructure and water conservation programs.

Over the past 20 years, natural and man-made disasters have increased in frequency, severity and cost. On average, 25 percent of counties have experienced at least one disaster in each of the last three years. In 2023, 849 counties experienced at least one federally declared major disaster, 720 counties had at least one disaster declaration and 312 counties had at least one emergency declaration and. That same year, the nation experienced 28 separate billion-dollar disasters, which totaled approximately $93 billion in damages.

As a result of this uptick in frequency and cost, NACo has launched the Intergovernmental Disaster Reform Task Force to strengthen our nation's disaster mitigation, response and recovery capabilities. The Task Force brings together county officials from across the country to advocate for practical, common-sense reforms that improve disaster response, recovery and mitigation. Given that counties are on the frontlines of disaster management, our direct involvement in federal policy reforms is essential to ensure that policies are practical, effective, and address the unique challenges faced by local communities. By having a seat at the table, counties can advocate for streamlined processes and resources tailored to their specific needs, leading to more resilient and prepared communities nationwide.

Counties are not merely stakeholders in this conversation. Rather, we are a part of the federal-state-local partnership of governments that together share the responsibility of protecting our nation and its residents from both natural and man-made disasters. Like the federal government, counties are entrusted by taxpayers to provide a variety of important services to our residents, and we stand ready to work with our intergovernmental counterparts to improve community resiliency and mitigate the impacts of future disasters. To this end, counties offer the following considerations:

1. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is vital for disaster response and recovery, but operational challenges and bureaucratic inefficiencies demand urgent reforms to ensure more effective and equitable program delivery.
2. Federal policymakers must remove barriers to funding and resources, particularly for underserved and disadvantaged communities, by providing adequate technical assistance and decreasing paperwork.
3. County officials are effective stewards of federal investments, and a strong intergovernmental partnership is needed to meet the entirety of our public sector responsibilities.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is vital for disaster response and recovery, but operational challenges and bureaucratic inefficiencies demand urgent reforms to ensure more effective and equitable program delivery.

Disaster response, recovery and mitigation starts local and ends local. Counties across the country are currently managing large scale recovery efforts, while simultaneously continuing to meet our daily responsibilities around ensuring our communities remain safe and resilient to the next disaster. While we are doing our part at the local level, effective response and recovery efforts would not be possible without the continued support from agencies like FEMA, who administer programs that provide vital resources before, during and after disasters. Without FEMA, state and local governments would face significant challenges in recovering from disaster due to limited resources and coordination capabilities.

However, FEMA's effectiveness is often hindered by inflexible decision-making processes and excessive bureaucratic red tape, highlighting the need for reform. The agency's layered approval procedures and complex administrative requirements can delay the delivery of critical resources to communities in need. We have heard countless examples from counties about the challenges of navigating FEMA's stringent application processes and slow response times. Streamlining decision-making, increasing transparency, and reducing unnecessary administrative barriers would allow FEMA to respond more swiftly and effectively, ensuring communities receive timely support in the aftermath of a disaster.

One such program that is in desperate need of reform is FEMA's Public Assistance (PA) Program. PA is crucial for helping communities rebuild after disasters, but the lengthy process to receive reimbursement can delay recovery efforts and hinder our ability to restore critical services post disaster. Last year, NACo conducted a survey of members that concluded that one in five counties (20 percent) longest open PA claim had been in processing between four and six years; almost a third of respondents (28 percent) reported processing times exceeding six years. For counties with all outstanding claims paid, the majority (71 percent) report typical turnaround times between one and three years. Because PA operates as a reimbursement, the cost of response efforts is paid upfront using county funds placing significant financial strain on counties, who are often forced to take out large loans to cover upfront disaster costs.

NACo has strongly supported the FEMA Loan Interest Payment Relief Act—passed by this committee in the 118th Congress—and a proposal from the FEMA

National Advisory Council to treat the first few months of PA as a grant versus a reimbursement, which would dramatically improve disaster recovery for localities. By offering immediate relief through grants for the initial months, communities would have access to essential funds more quickly, allowing them to respond to urgent recovery needs without the burden of upfront costs. Additionally, the FEMA Loan Interest Payment Relief Act would reduce the financial pressure on communities, allowing for any interest incurred on disaster loans to be reimbursed by PA. These measures would help ensure that recovery efforts are not delayed due to bureaucratic hurdles or financial barriers, ultimately allowing communities to rebuild faster and more effectively.

Federal policymakers must remove barriers to funding and resources, particularly for underserved and disadvantaged communities, by providing adequate technical assistance and decreasing paperwork.

Unfortunately, bureaucratic red tape follows a disaster. For example, requiring the completion of complex and overly burdensome paperwork by communities who may be entirely unfamiliar with system protocols and who are attempting to undertake these processes during the most stressful times of their lives can significantly impede progress when it is needed most. Populations that feel the biggest impact are often our underserved and disadvantaged communities where resources and capacity to complete applications and meet critical deadlines can be severely exacerbated.

Ensuring no communities are left behind requires reexamining current procedures when applying for federal funding. Implementing plain language into applications, providing clear timelines and identifying resources available to assist applicants during the process are paramount to improving the resiliency of our communities. Excessive paperwork and lack of clarity can be particularly difficult for jurisdictions who may be under resourced or dealing with co-occurring disasters, as we saw with many parts of the country throughout the last few years.

Counties have long supported legislation like the Disaster Survivors Fairness Act (H.R.1245)—approved by this committee in the 118th Congress—and the Disaster Assistance Simplification Act (S.861). These critical pieces of legislation would streamline the application process for federal aid, reducing redundant paperwork and making it easier for survivors to access the support they need. By improving coordination between agencies and simplifying eligibility requirements, these reforms would alleviate the administrative burden on those recovering from disasters.

County officials are effective stewards of federal investments, and a strong intergovernmental partnership is needed to meet the entirety of our public sector responsibilities.

Counties across the country are working daily to address the needs of our residents and make decisions that drive the success of our jurisdictions. While we are doing our part at the local level, 45 states limit the ability of counties to raise revenue in various ways, making the intergovernmental partnership vital to meeting our public sector responsibilities. Only 29 states authorize counties to collect sales taxes, but almost always under various restrictions. 26 states impose a sales tax limit and 19 require voter approval. For western counties, who are at great risk of flooding and wildfires, state restrictions on local revenues can be even more impactful, as much of the land within western county boundaries is considered federal land, thus removing the ability of a county to levy property taxes.

While disasters are inherently local, counties rely on our state and federal partners for critical disaster recovery tools, like funding assistance, human capital and technical assistance. Without proper federal and state support, county recovery and mitigation efforts may lack the full capabilities necessary to rebuild our communities and make them more resilient against future disasters. In an environment where counties have limited financial flexibility, a strong intergovernmental partnership is crucial to community recovery and key to the success of future mitigation efforts.

With that in mind, Congress should prioritize legislation that seeks to strengthen intergovernmental partnerships in disaster recovery by enhancing coordination, streamlining communication and supporting resource-sharing between all levels of government. By promoting pre-disaster planning, simplifying aid processes and supporting local recovery efforts, lawmakers can ensure a more effective and coordinated response to disasters.

CONCLUSION

Counties are on the front lines of the pre- and post-disaster efforts, and without proper federal assistance, recovery and mitigation efforts may lack the full support necessary to rebuild our communities and return the lives of our residents to normal.

Chairman Perry, Ranking Member Stanton and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you again for inviting me to testify here today.

Counties stand ready to work side-by-side with our federal and state partners to make our communities more resilient and ensure the health, well-being and safety of our citizens.

Mr. PERRY. The Chair thanks the gentleman, as well as thanking all the witnesses for their testimony.

We will now turn to questions for the panel, and the Chair recognizes himself for the first round of questions.

I am going to start with you, Ms. Laughter. I read through a bunch of what you submitted. I will admit I didn't read through every single bit of it. It is voluminous: emails and correspondence. And as the county manager, I am not sure—maybe you never thought about the mission of FEMA, but it is to coordinate between the Federal agencies and, of course, State and local agencies. But it was never designed to be the command and control and do all the work, right. But that is kind of what is expected of it now.

And it seems to me, as the person that is trying to figure that out in the aftermath of this devastating disaster, like, you don't have time to figure it out. You are just trying to deliver, right.

I remember the two times we were flooded out of our home. One time we stayed in the fire hall before we moved to a neighbor's house that wasn't affected, somebody we didn't even know just offered to come take us in. And then the other time was at the township building.

And I am thinking about it, but it seems to me, as I read through your correspondence here, much of your county didn't even exist, right. There wasn't any—there might not have been a township building, a fire hall, or a neighbor's house to go to.

And so I am just wondering, from your experience, I mean, you couldn't get answers even about a federally owned property for which to place temporary housing on. You couldn't get any answers on that, let alone the housing.

If you were going to give everybody here, which I think are very interested in trying to figure out how to make this work, what would be the one message—as a person who has lived through it and experienced it and have been frustrated by it and seen people like you described, living in trailers filled with mold and having no prospect whatsoever of anything changing any time soon, what would be the one message regarding what FEMA—how it would be different in your eyes if it were going to work?

Ms. LAUGHTER. At local government, we were looking for resources. We needed assistance, and what we could not find were how to leverage those resources. The resources that we were offered, like TSA, were very clearly not suited for my community. And so I think the message that I would have is that, number one, communication.

If there are resources being offered, we need to understand what those terms are upfront so we can even evaluate whether or not they are going to be effective in the community.

The second is, there has to be some responsiveness. Wherever we identified issues, whenever we identified resources like the Federal property, we had to follow up on that ourselves.

We were living a disaster in our own lives. We were living a disaster with our community, and yet we were having to follow up repeatedly in order to try to get any progress or any answers or even find out if our requests were being heard anywhere.

I submitted that property no less than four times in four different ways and still when I got on a call in November to ask about housing, they pulled up a database, and none of those requests managed to get into the database.

So I think the two messages are that the communication structures have to be robust. They need to happen before the disaster so that we know who even to call. And we also need to know upfront how to use these resources or make those resources more flexible so that whenever we identify what the needs are and how that is going to play out in our community, we can use them.

Mr. PERRY. Do you have any indication at this point why it took so long for FEMA to even show up? Like, right after this happened, obviously everybody knows what has happened, but it took days and days. And I think, it is my understanding, when they finally did show up, they were headquartered like 90 miles away, which is a fair drive, right, especially in bad conditions.

Do you have any indication now what took them so long?

Ms. LAUGHTER. I have never been given a reason. I can hypothesize. I think the fact that we are on the edge of the disaster was part of it. It is hard to get through the mountains. You don't get places very easily.

The only other thing I can imagine is that our numbers, like, for TSA did not look like they were high, which could indicate on a data front point that we didn't need help, but they weren't high because it wasn't an applicable solution for Transylvania County.

Mr. PERRY. Okay.

I have got a lot of questions and a little bit of time here for each one of you.

Mr. Guthrie, you perfected I think or at least honed a fraud prevention program in your State. Can you briefly outline how that might be applicable to FEMA, because there is a huge amount of fraud in the FEMA dollars that are spent, and we would, obviously, like that not to be the case.

Mr. GUTHRIE. Thank you, Chairman Perry, for that question.

In Florida, we knew that there was the propensity to have fraud, waste, and abuse, and what we did, starting about 2 years ago, we built a program that we want to get good, structured data into our system that helps us get good, structured data and it allows us to utilize large language modeling machine learning and, to a certain point, some generative AI to predict when we may have a duplicate payment or the payment doesn't actually check the box for the contract. In other words, a vendor has charged us more than they should have.

So, again, it focuses from a standpoint of getting the good, structured data into the system, and then we use machine learning on the backside to do that. And we are detecting, just in the recent months, we had three situations for about $600,000 that we flagged for potential fraud, waste, or abuse. And then we put eyes on that to then investigate it and correct the anomalies that were in the invoices, and it was just that. It was an anomaly in the invoices where we were charged a different rate when we should have been charged a lower rate.

But it did end up saving taxpayer dollars just in the last 3 months, $600,000.

Mr. PERRY. I appreciate the response.

I am way over my time. So I yield and recognize the gentleman from Arizona, Ranking Member Stanton.

Mr. STANTON. Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

My first question is for Mr. Guthrie, Florida's executive director for emergency management.

Florida is arguably one of the States most capable of responding to disasters on its own, but you do rely on Federal assistance from FEMA and the Emergency Management Assistance Compact, EMAC system, when responding to catastrophic events.

At yesterday's Cabinet hearing, Secretary Noem did indicate her desire to eliminate FEMA. The President indicated support for that plan to eliminate FEMA.

From your perspective, how would post-disaster outcomes for Floridians be impacted if FEMA were eliminated?

Mr. GUTHRIE. Thank you for the question.

At the end of the day, we need Federal support. I go back to what you mentioned in your opening statement, sir. Federal support, State managed, locally executed. We need to focus on the State-managed part. That has been a part of that phrase since Brock Long was the FEMA Administrator.

But we haven't focused on the State-managed piece. We keep going back to the Federal Government. We need to focus more on that State-managed piece and actually make sure we are managing disasters at the State level we are allowing local levels to execute in a commonsense approach while we need Federal support.

Now, if that looks like a FEMA of the future, which I think all emergency managers nationwide would agree, FEMA needs to be reformed. That is a task that takes, obviously, Presidential and congressional action to eliminate FEMA.

So we want to work with the Federal Government. We want to work with the President. We want to work with the legislature on what that looks like in the future.

But to the point, we do need Federal support. Florida can probably handle 95 to 97 percent of what we do on a day-to-day basis, but, for example, in Hurricane Helene and Milton, we needed 1 million gallons of fuel. We went to FEMA. We went to the Department of Defense and the Defense Logistics Agency to meet that need.

So, again, even a highly capable capacity State like Florida from time to time needs Federal support.

Mr. STANTON. I appreciate it.

Mr. Currie, the Federal law is very clear about the qualification requirements for the FEMA Administrator. The President has named Cameron Hamilton the senior official performing the duties of Administrator.

In your opinion, does he possess the qualifications that are legally required to run the Agency?

Mr. CURRIE. Well, we have actually been asked to look at this and the legality of him serving in that role under the Federal Vacancies Reform Act, which GAO has a role in that. And so we will do that and have that result pretty quickly.

But I will say that the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act is pretty clear about the requirements for FEMA Administrator. It requires two things. One is the person have significant emergency management experience, and the other thing is at least 5 years of executive experience. So that is what the law says.

But I want to be very clear that the ideal state is have a Senate-confirmed Administrator. The Senate confirmation process is the process for vetting a candidate's experience and their ability to do that job effectively.

Mr. STANTON. We saw in Katrina just how horrifically wrong it can go if you have someone who is the head of FEMA who doesn't have experience in emergency management. It is critical. So we want to get that done as soon as possible.

Mr. Currie, in your role at the GAO, you understand the risk of overhauling Federal programs without proper consideration. FEMA underwent significant reorganization without proper input from emergency managers before Hurricane Katrina, and that did contribute to those tragic outcomes.

What should this administration and this Congress consider to ensure that we don't cripple FEMA's lifesaving responsibilities when attempting to reform this critical agency?

Mr. CURRIE. Thank you, sir.

Like I said in my opening statement, we can't break what is not broken, and the only people that can tell you that are our first line emergency managers and responders.

There are things that work well in the current system. The problem is, you don't hear good news often. There are things that work. We want to keep those. We want to fix the things that don't work.

The other thing I will say is we have to fix the root causes. If we just move agencies, rename agencies, rename programs, but don't fix the root causes, none of this is going to change.

Mr. STANTON. I appreciate it.

I want to go next to our local elected official, Mr. Garcia. Can you also explain how disaster response in your county would be impacted without access to Federal resources or support after a disaster?

Mr. GARCIA. Ranking Member, without access to Federal resources or funding, our county's disaster response would absolutely be severely compromised. Local governments simply don't have the financial capacity or staffing to manage large-scale recovery efforts, meaning vital services like debris removal, infrastructure repairs, emergency sheltering would be delayed or inaccessible.

Federal support is essential for ensuring a coordinated and effective response, allowing us to restore public safety, and meet the needs of our residents as quickly as possible.

Mr. STANTON. Thank you very much.

Mr. Chair, I yield back.

Mr. BRESNAHAN [presiding]. Thank you. The gentleman yields back, and I recognize the gentleman from Mississippi, Mr. Ezell, for 5 minutes of questions.

Mr. EZELL. That is Ezell, and I appreciate that.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

And thank you all for being here today.

Mississippi is no stranger to storms. Most notably, as we have talked about, Katrina, where we lost the lives of over 1,300 people and $125 billion in damages.

In 2005, Congress enacted the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act, which reestablished FEMA as a distinct entity within DHS.

As we approach the 20-year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, I am still waiting for FEMA to respond to claims in my district associated with this devastating storm. It is unacceptable and a perfect example of how the Federal Government has let our people down.

I am proud to have led, co-led, and passed several bills that seek to improve FEMA. Bills like H.R. 2254, the Don't Penalize Victims Act; H.R. 152, the Federal Disaster Assistance Coordination Act; and H.R. 153, the Post-Disaster Assistance Online Accountability Act.

I was thrilled when President Trump recently announced the creation of the FEMA Review Council to evaluate FEMA bureaucracy and disaster response. FEMA has spent $30 billion in disaster aid each of the past 3 years, yet many disaster survivors and taxpayers still lack the resources they need.

I have been working closely with FEMA to address outstanding issues in my district, and I look forward to seeing how we can improve the process for future disasters because we know they are going to happen.

Before I get too far, I want to enter a document from St. Charles Parish, Louisiana, reflecting some of the reforms we have discussed for the Agency.

I want to ask Mr. Currie——

Mr. BRESNAHAN [interrupting]. Without objection, so ordered.

[The information follows:]

Statement of Matthew Jewell, President, St. Charles Parish, Louisiana, Submitted for the Record by Hon. Mike Ezell

Chairman Perry, Ranking Member Stanton, and Members of the Subcommittee: Louisiana is no stranger to disaster. It has certainly shaped who we are as people, strengthening our resolve and reminding us to take care of our neighbors. As President of St. Charles Parish in Southeast Louisiana, I appreciate the opportunity to share some of the many challenges I've experienced firsthand with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) before, during, and after disasters. Thank you for allowing me to share the experiences of Southeast Louisiana as you consider critical reforms to this agency.

In recent years, St. Charles Parish and the State of Louisiana have faced significant challenges due to natural disasters coupled with skyrocketing insurance costs. Since 2020, five major storms hit the State of Louisiana—Hurricanes Laura, Delta, Zeta, Ida, and Francine. While we are unfortunately all too familiar with real-time emergency management and disaster recovery, I believe this experience makes our state a strong voice for the nation in shaping what federal emergency management should look like moving forward and ensuring FEMA returns to its core mission of helping people when disaster strikes.

One of President Trump's initial actions upon taking office this year was to sign an executive order establishing the FEMA Review Council. I applaud President Trump for taking bold actions early in his administration to underscore the importance of restructuring this agency. Just about anyone who has encountered FEMA knows all too well there is plenty of room for improvement. I welcome the opportunity to assist Congress in enacting real reforms to improve the federal government's ability to better deliver assistance to those in need.

One program in particular is in dire need of attention and has already negatively impacted tens of thousands of Americans, many of whom live in Southeast Louisiana. The National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP) has been essential in safeguarding American property owners against the financial devastation of floods. However, time and time again, we have been forced to fight with FEMA over the gross lack of transparency in the NFIP, particularly with the disastrous Biden-Harris enacted Risk Rating 2.0 system.

In 2023, I led a lawsuit on behalf of St. Charles Parish after we were denied public records requests demanding the calculations behind the Risk Rating 2.0 rate-setting system. Policyholders in my state have seen their premiums skyrocket, with some expected to increase from $500 to over $5,000. It is outrageous that FEMA simply will not justify the math that led to these premium hikes, even when subject to Congressional inquiries. As FEMA itself expected, this policy has forced hundreds of thousands to drop their coverage altogether, leaving an alarming number of uninsured property owners in Louisiana and across the nation and jeopardizing the financial stability of the entire NFIP.

This has led to deep mistrust of FEMA because the agency has refused to say how local and state mitigation initiatives affect their methodology. St. Charles Parish has invested millions of local taxpayer dollars to construct new levees and pumps. Yet, we still have residents priced out of their homes. Property owners implementing protective measures often see little to no reduction in their premiums. This oversight discourages proactive risk reduction and fails to reward efforts that decrease overall flood risk. Instead, FEMA should work with state and local governments to ensure their Risk Rating 2.0 model accurately reflects our communities' real risk so we can direct resources to mitigate, protect, and achieve affordable flood insurance rates. As a public entity, FEMA must reveal the calculations that have driven up prices and work with local leaders to implement a policy that maintains affordability—a goal it has significantly strayed from under the Biden-Harris administration.

Another problem that deserves the focus of the FEMA Review Council is how to improve the federal government's ability to better deliver assistance to those in need. The council should solicit input to implement reforms that ensure the swift and efficient deployment of FEMA aid to state and local governments, as well as to individuals and businesses in the immediate aftermath of a disaster. I believe states are better equipped to deliver disaster assistance. Currently, state agencies are responsible for administering FEMA regulations. We need to explore policy solutions that allow states to deliver aid efficiently without the cumbersome bureaucratic processes and environmental reviews that drastically slow recovery efforts when people are most in need. To that point, St. Charles Parish is still waiting for millions of dollars from Hurricane Ida in 2021. I firmly believe streamlining processes, cutting red tape, and empowering state and local governments to act quickly will accelerate recovery efforts, minimize economic losses and alleviate the suffering of impacted communities.

As President of St. Charles Parish, I urge the Subcommittee to consider the perspectives and recommendations of the local and state leaders who have responded to and managed the recovery efforts in the wake of natural disasters. By addressing the shortcomings of the NFIP and enhancing the efficiency of FEMA's assistance programs, we can better serve our communities in their darkest moments, ultimately saving lives and livelihoods.

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Mr. EZELL. Thank you.

Mr. Currie, the GAO has done a great job, has done great reports, on the problems with Risk Rating 2.0. Each community across the Nation has invested many resources to manage its membership in the NFIP.

The primary issue with the Risk Rating 2.0 is a lack of transparency regarding the algorithm. This results in communities being unable to make decisions to target resiliency projects, plan future growth, formulate effective policies, or simply ensure that they are not wasting resources.

Its impact today is felt more than ever. With the rising cost of housing, this policy hides the actual cost of home ownership.

Mr. Currie, could you reflect on the damage and concerns attached to the lack of transparency of Risk Rating 2.0?

Mr. CURRIE. Thank you.

FEMA has a huge challenge with the National Flood Insurance Program. The idea behind Risk Rating 2.0 is the right one, which is you want to assess each house's individual risk to a disaster and not just assume that everybody in an area has the same exact risk.

The challenge is that if your house is at higher rise, your premiums are going to be higher. So they are trying to get the program to the point of solvency or close to solvency because it has never been solvent. It is $20 billion in debt.

And honestly, sir, it is up to the Congress now to decide what they want this program to be. Do they want it to be an insurance program, or do they want it to be a Federal disaster assistance program?

As long as premiums do not cover the cost of the program, a large portion of the flood insurance program is a disaster aid program.

Mr. EZELL. Thank you.

What reforms could resolve the possible damage that Risk Rating 2.0 can have on families and communities, in general?

Mr. CURRIE. Well, there are a number of different options that have been put out there, for example, State or Federal programs to help supplement homeowners of a certain income level or a certain income threshold, just like we do with other programs who are basically going to be priced out of a certain market because they can't afford the flood—well, they barely afford the mortgage and then barely afford the flood insurance on top of that.

So there are a number of options like that, but, unfortunately, there are no easy options that will drive down the cost. It is going to be very expensive, and somebody has to pay for the cost, either the taxpayer, the State, or the Federal Government.

Mr. EZELL. Thank you.

Should some of the procedures within NFIP be standardized and transparent to ensure that communities can effectively use the resources?

Mr. CURRIE. Absolutely. I mean, that's key. And FEMA, through its flood mapping project, should be very transparent about the risk of each individual property. And so, I mean, they have a long way to go in implementing this program and making sure there is transparency.

Mr. EZELL. Thank you.

If I may have just another 30 seconds?

Mr. BRESNAHAN. No objection.

Mr. EZELL. In my home State of Mississippi and also along the gulf coast, after the hurricane, FEMA just came in there and blanketed just about the whole area that was flooded and just moved all the flood maps.

Since then and since I have been in Congress, I have worked tirelessly trying to get some sort of order back in place so that we could—this is a once-in-a-lifetime storm, and it has not happened again. And I've just got to say that it has been very frustrating. They have the flood maps, but they don't know how to implement them, and we are waiting for those things to get implemented. And that is very frustrating to people who are trying to buy, build, or have a life, a future on the Mississippi Gulf Coast.

So with that, if you have any way that you can tell them to hurry up and get those things adopted, we sure would appreciate it.

Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Mr. BRESNAHAN. Thank you. The gentleman yields back, and I recognize the gentlelady from Michigan, Ms. McDonald Rivet, for 5 minutes of questions.

Ms. MCDONALD RIVET. Thank you very much.

I want to start just by thanking Chairman Perry and Ranking Member Stanton for holding this hearing on what seems to be a bipartisan level of frustration.

I represent a community in Michigan, Midland, Michigan, that 5 years ago saw multiple dams fail after heavy rainfall. In fact, I personally ran one of the evacuation centers. It caused massive flooding and water levels reaching as high as 35 feet above normal levels.

Thankfully, no one died in that, which I actually just think is a miracle. But it resulted in over $200 million in damages, and not only did it decimate our infrastructure like our roads and bridges, it destroyed homes that families have lived in for generations and small businesses that families had dedicated their entire lives to.

So here we sit 5 years later. Ms. Laughter, I hear your story, and it just resonated so deeply with me. It is a continuous struggle, a continuing struggling in order to resolve the pieces that FEMA came in to help.

But what we see over and over again, like multiple Federal programs, is that the intent of FEMA and the amazing people who work there is dying under a cumbersome bureaucracy that is so frustrating, particularly for local people who don't have the experience of dealing with big Federal bureaucracies and are just at the point of giving up.

Our local communities are owed hundreds of thousands of dollars, which is nothing in a Federal budget but everything in a local budget.

So I do want to just say that I understand the frustration, but what I am not understanding is the suggested remedy, which is a suggested elimination of FEMA and also the suggestion that this actually can be solved at a local level if States and locals would just budget more appropriately, which having been a State senator on the Appropriations Committee, I can tell you States cannot handle this just by budgeting, handling this on their own and, in particular, when we are simultaneously considering extensive cuts, including $880 billion from our Medicare program. I mean, it just defies common sense.

But I do think we have to do something because we can't tolerate this. And my local community still sits there and waits, and I hope it doesn't take 5 years for you.

But I hear you, Mr. Currie, when you were talking about, okay, what can we do. We know that block granting is also a very difficult solution because most Federal block grants, again, as a State appropriator, come with burdens, like incredibly complex and burdensome regulations.

But you said, let's address the root causes. Everything isn't broken. But I didn't hear you say what those root causes are, and I would love to hear them.

Mr. CURRIE. Sure.

Let me take the grant issue. And so a lot has been talked about recently about switching FEMA to a block grant. I am not so much as concerned with the name of the grant. A block grant just means, theoretically, that you provide all the funding upfront, and the State manages it instead of the Federal Government holding the money and doling it out slowly, which is what the FEMA process is.

The root cause is that the process is too complicated, and there are too many rules and overlapping requirements and inconsistency for the years that go on with recovery.

Turnover in staffing plays into this, too, and different cultural changes at FEMA. So the problem is that you have an infrastructure project that could take 10 to 15 years to rebuild, and all throughout there are cost changes, and you have to go back and forth to the Federal Government. It is very, very confusing.

I think what we are trying to do is we want to come up with something where the Federal Government still provides the support that the States will never be able to come up with, like you said, but it does so in a way that they provide it to the States where there is flexibility, but there is still the appropriate oversight and control. And that is the balance you are trying to strike.

With block granting, you give up some of the control at the Federal level and the oversight, but you give the States more flexibility. But you don't design the block——

Ms. MCDONALD RIVET [interrupting]. I am sorry to interrupt you, but I am aware of my time. I just want to say, in your experience, and I know this is a bit of an unfair question, but have you ever seen a Federal-to-State block grant that did not come with its own set of rules and overlapping requirements?

Mr. CURRIE. It does. But we have to build it better in this case. So, for example, with the Community Development Block Grant, disaster recovery, one of the challenges with that is, is that you try to build the whole program upfront and then turn it over to the States, and that takes too long.

So the money doesn't get there quick enough. We have to build this system and the rules and requirements upfront, get the States up to speed on it, get everyone familiar with the process, build their system, so they can manage this amount of money so it can be turned over much quicker. And that is very possible to do.

Ms. MCDONALD RIVET. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. BRESNAHAN. Thank you. The gentlelady yields back, and I recognize the gentleman from Utah, Mr. Kennedy, for 5 minutes for questions.

Dr. KENNEDY OF UTAH. Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member Stanton. And today's hearing is more than just about FEMA reform. It is about shifting the center of gravity away from bloated Federal bureaucracy and toward capable States that are closest to the people that they serve.

In Utah, we know how to do more with less. We invest wisely and build strong partnerships between the State and local governments. That same principle—clear, locally led coordination between State and local governments—should guide how we approach emergency management across the country. Whether it is wildfires in California, hurricanes in the Southeast or earthquakes and flooding risks in Utah, we must ensure the Federal Government is a reliable partner, not a bureaucratic bottleneck. FEMA should be empowering States and counties, not burying them under redtape.

When agencies grow too large and too distant from the people they serve, they lose the ability to act with urgency, efficiency, or local understanding. Emergency management is just one example, but it is a critical one.

I support President Trump's Executive order establishing the FEMA Review Council. We need that top-to-bottom review, and I look forward to working with the committee to play a leading role in it.

I had a few questions for—we will start with Mr. Currie and Mr. Guthrie. We have talked about block grants and both of you have mentioned that in your testimonies.

Can you give me some more specifics about if we were to do something like that, how would you do that without fraud, waste, and abuse, but also cut the redtape and allow that money to be used immediately? And start with you, Mr. Currie.

Mr. CURRIE. Yes. Sure. Well, I think there is a misconception that with a block grant that there is no oversight; that Congress appropriates the money, and they write a check to the State, and it's done. That is not how it works.

Most block grants, the State and the Federal Government work together to develop very specific rules and requirements and controls and audit processes. It's just more of the money is delivered upfront. So it is going to take some time, if you develop this into a block grant, to train and build the States' capacities. Some States, like Florida, probably is going to be very quick; other States it is not, other communities it is not.

And so it is possible to do this. But I also think this needs to be very different than other block grants that we have created before.

Dr. KENNEDY OF UTAH. Thank you. Mr. Guthrie.

Mr. GUTHRIE. Thank you for the question. And it somewhat goes to the previous Congresswoman's question as well.

I will give you two examples of where we can really speed this up. Number one, environmental historical preservation. In the emergency management community—I have several State directors sitting behind me—that is where projects go to die. It could take 4 to 6 years to get that done.

Every State has an environmental and historical preservation officer. Why are we duplicating effort on that? Let the State do their job, let us document the file and put that as a part of the file. We can speed that process up by at least 90 percent savings and time.

I will give you another example. The Consolidated Resource Center. I would move to abolish the Consolidated Resource Center. Again, that is where people send us RFIs, numerous RFIs, hundreds of RFIs, requests for information. Again, the State is responsible for managing its grant. Whether it is a block grant or if it is a traditional grant, we do that.

But the number of RFIs that come out—and one of our individuals from Alabama talked about he literally had to give some type of minute piece of information in a debris removal claim. That's insane.

So those are two examples of where that is already happening at the State level. To document those State actions, it should be a part of the file, and we move on.

Dr. KENNEDY OF UTAH. Thank you for those suggestions.

And, Mr. Garcia, if I could ask you a question about the counties. And I agree with the potency of counties, and I think that was a big part of your statement.

The question that I had is, is the hierarchy that you would consider associated with counties? Because the Governor is generally in charge of the State.

The idea of the Federal Government, for example, giving grants to a county directly and subverting the role of the Governor, I am curious how you would—if you were to see Federal funds flowing, would you have those funds go directly to counties, or would you have them go to the Governor and subsequently to the counties? What is your thought about that?

Mr. GARCIA. Well, some counties have capacity like Harris County. We are very fortunate in that regard. But not everybody does. And so we absolutely need to find ways to work with both entities where you work through the States in some regards.

But, for example, in places like Oregon, Oregon is a State that has experienced some delays in reimbursements for the recovery process, but places like Hamilton County has had to suspend current bids because they are just struggling with some of that process. But I think you find ways to work both with the counties and the States who have capacity and some who struggle with it.

Dr. KENNEDY OF UTAH. Thank you very much for that answer.

Mr. Chair, I am committed to helping bring common sense and efficiency to this program. It is an essential program, but I think there are better ways that we can do that. And thank you to the witnesses for their willingness to come and educate us about this.

With that, I yield back.

Mr. BRESNAHAN. Thank you. The gentleman yields back, and I recognize the gentlewoman from Nevada, Ms. Titus, for 5 minutes for questions.

Ms. TITUS. Thank you very much. Earlier, the ranking member of the full committee mentioned—and I appreciated it—the Disaster Survivors Fairness Act that I have introduced with my colleague from North Carolina, Representative Edwards, Republican.

This would streamline Federal assistance for disaster victims and expand FEMA's authority to help make homes more resilient for future disasters. I am pleased that NACo endorsed this legislation. It was a pleasure speaking to you, Commissioner Garcia, and other members of NACo about this topic earlier.

In your testimony, you urge Federal policymakers to remove barriers to funding and resources for underserved and disadvantaged communities. How would creating a universal application for individual disaster assistance help in that effort that you mentioned?

Mr. GARCIA. Thank you for the question. The reality is that making sure that the barriers were removed, as I mentioned in my testimony, is very, very important. It is critical that we make it plain language, as suggested in the two pieces of legislation that I have mentioned, the survivors and simplification acts. Those speak to the challenges that many of our underserved and disadvantaged communities struggle with.

Ms. TITUS. Okay. Well, thank you for that. I appreciate the support. I was looking for a little more detail on how it will be helpful, but that is good enough.

I represent Las Vegas, and we don't have a lot of hurricanes in Las Vegas except we could probably make one if we decided that would be a tourist attraction. But anyway, one of the weather hazards that we do have is extreme heat. And this past year, we had the hottest day ever in Las Vegas, 120 degrees.

And statistics from the National Weather Service show that heat kills more people than hurricanes, floods, and tornadoes combined in any given year. There were over 520 heat-related fatalities in Clark County last year alone. So I have an Extreme Weather and Heat Response Modernization Act so FEMA can more aggressively include extreme temperatures, especially heat, in its disaster planning and have the resources to deal with it.

I wonder if all four of you would take a minute just to talk about how extreme heat is impacting the communities you serve and how this would be helpful. Maybe we start with Mr. Currie.

Mr. CURRIE. Sure. I am familiar with the statistic you mentioned, too, that heat kills more people than all the other disasters combined.

The challenge right now for FEMA is the whole system relies on quantifying damage to figure out if they provide help. And heat is a very difficult thing to quantify in their current system.

I agree with you that there is no better thing to quantify in terms of an impact and loss of life. But right now, their declaration process relies on damage to infrastructure, and it is very hard to show acute damage to infrastructure from heat.

And so that is one of the reasons that you don't see more disaster declarations. So I think we are going to have to look at that if we are going to change it.

Ms. TITUS. Kind of hard to say when it starts and when it stops, like a storm or something.

Mr. CURRIE. Yes. And it does damage infrastructure.

Ms. TITUS. Yes.

Mr. CURRIE. I mean, it damages roads, bridges. I mean, it is just harder to quantify it acutely because it happens, like you said, over a long period of time.

Ms. TITUS. Railroads. Anybody else?

Mr. GUTHRIE. We do have extreme heat situations inside of southeast Florida, specifically Miami. But this is a great example of the federally supported, State managed, locally executed.

In southeast Florida, they plan for that as a part of their hazards that they respond to on a local level, and they do that on a day-to-day basis when we have those issues. If they need assistance from the State, they ask for assistance from the State. So the system does work in Florida.

Ms. TITUS. With cooling stations and things like that?

Mr. GUTHRIE. Yes.

Ms. TITUS. I think the chairman mentioned it wasn't a good idea to plant trees to offset heat islands. I couldn't disagree more with that. But anyway—so locally you are doing some things?

Mr. GUTHRIE. Locally. Southeast Florida, southwest Florida, those counties approach it differently. But they are locally executing on that situation.

Ms. TITUS. Anybody else real quick?

Mr. GARCIA. I do want to offer that in my precinct, just as an example, I have a public works department. We absolutely and my staff told me that the heat damage can be identified in various pieces of infrastructure. But as it was stated, it is very difficult to quantify.

But we do know that extreme heat is an issue for many of our NACo members, and we do have data that we can pass along to you to help craft some thoughts around that issue.

Ms. TITUS. That would be great. I know our ranking member represents the Phoenix area, and we share some of these common problems. So that would be very helpful.

Thank you. I yield back.

Mr. BRESNAHAN. Thank you. The gentlelady yields back, and I recognize the gentleman from California, Mr. Kiley, for 5 minutes for questions.

Mr. KILEY OF CALIFORNIA. Good morning. Mr. Guthrie, I commend the work you have done in Florida to strengthen your State's capacity to respond to disasters quickly and effectively and to thereby mitigate and minimize the threat to life and property.

Unfortunately, my own State of California has not been quite so forward-looking in terms of its disaster response capabilities, and this was put on shocking display for the whole world with the recent tragic catastrophic fires in Los Angeles, as we bore witness to an empty reservoir, to fire hydrants that wouldn't release water, and other basic failures of preparedness for which the residents of Los Angeles are now paying such a high price.

So do you have, number one, some best practices that you might share with our State for how it can do better in the future, and, number two, thoughts on how the ongoing effort to reform FEMA might actually itself help to spread those sort of practices?

Mr. GUTHRIE. Thank you, Congressman, for the question. First and foremost, in Florida, we do not respond based on whether or not we are going to get federally reimbursed. The Governor of the State of Florida, the legislature, support emergency management holistically, and they expect us to respond not worrying about if we are going to get reimbursed or not.

Unfortunately, not every State, every city or county has that option. They have to wait to respond to see if they are going to meet a threshold or so on to seek FEMA reimbursement.

I think another thing that was very, very obvious to me in that particular disaster is you had the local officials, such as a fire chief, sheriff, and things of that nature, but nowhere on that dais or that podium did you see the emergency manager. They were treating it as—in my opinion, sir, they were treating it as still a fire. They were treating it still as a traffic issue.

They had a much more complex issue, and I know that Nancy, the California State director, was involved. But, again, emergency management was not there on the day. The Los Angeles County Emergency Management director was buried in the back. I never saw the city of Los Angeles Emergency Management director.

And this is more of a systemic problem across the country, in that, what is emergency management? That is something our own national emergency manager's association is grappling with, and we are going to try to help define for Congress and others in the future is, what is emergency management. We could all agree that this is what emergency management does.

I think those are some of the issues. As far as FEMA goes, I know that Regional Administrator Bob Fenton was there, and he was heavily involved during that timeframe in the Hurst fire that you speak of. FEMA was present.

However, again, State managed, getting it to the point where you can get that State involvement very early on, working with your local emergency managers to push funding down, start doing the things—for example, in the Hurst fire, the attorneys paralyzed that response worried about the environmental hazard that was going on to clean up the debris. We deal with that every single day across this country. We know what to do. Let us separate it, let us put it in the appropriate landfill—tier 1, 2, or 3—based on the hazardous material, and let us move forward.

Do not stop the operation because there is hazardous material. We deal with that every single day.

Mr. KILEY OF CALIFORNIA. Thank you. That is a great insight. And I should mention, the individuals you mentioned, Mr. Fenton, Ms. Ward, work well with my office. It is clearly a systemic issue here that we need to reform.

Mr. Currie, a question I had for you is that some of the grants that FEMA makes available for sort of predisaster efforts—like the BRIC grants, the PDM grants—they don't allow for predisaster water infrastructure for fire suppression to be an eligible use; so, fire hydrants, upgrading lines, tanks that would actually sort of be critical in some cases for immediate response.

And this is important for several communities I represent that are high fire risk, such as the Tahoe Basin. And, in fact, the Caldor fire, which is 2021, one of the factors that was cited for why it didn't ultimately engulf communities in South Tahoe was the availability of water infrastructure for fire suppression.

So why is it that that is not an eligible use, and is that something you think we ought to change?

Mr. CURRIE. Yes. What I found over the years is that a lot of times when people say it is not eligible under FEMA, it is just because it was not approved. There is not a law or a requirement that says they can't do it. All these mitigation programs rely on the State or the local government to provide a justification or a benefit-cost analysis to FEMA, and then FEMA decides based on all the other project requests it is getting, if it meets their threshold. And then in that case, they didn't.

It's not that it's not allowed. It's just that—and this is a very common problem with these mitigation issues. These are very complicated projects, and FEMA oftentimes—the paperwork required to get the approvals is just extremely difficult.

And if you are a large county or a large State with the capacity to do that, then you might have the resources to put that together. If you are a smaller county or a Tribe or something like that, you don't have the resources to put a good justification together, so you don't get the funding.

Mr. KILEY OF CALIFORNIA. I know we are a little over time here. But just to clarify, are you saying that for PDM and BRIC grants, that is an eligible use; it is just a matter of where the threshold is set, or is there a needed——

Mr. CURRIE [interrupting]. I will go back and check on the requirement. I am just saying that what I found is a lot of times when it is deemed ineligible or it is not approved, it is because FEMA—it doesn't meet some sort of cost-benefit threshold as opposed to that specific kind of project not being able to be approved. It is just they haven't demonstrated that the benefits are going to exceed the cost.

Mr. KILEY OF CALIFORNIA. Okay. Thank you. I yield back.

Mr. BRESNAHAN. Thank you. The gentleman yields back, and I recognize the gentlewoman from California, Ms. Friedman, for 5 minutes for questions.

Ms. FRIEDMAN. Thank you very much. And I want to thank the witnesses for their testimony, being here.

I have to say that it is hard as a Los Angeles Congress Member sometimes to hear Los Angeles, at the time when it is reeling from disasters and when victims are still living in hotels, somehow seeming to be blamed for their own disaster.

I really appreciate Mr. Guthrie's response to Mr. Kiley's question about what California could do better, because it is important that we do evaluate our response to disaster, do audits to make sure that we improve. And so your very good suggestions about disaster management are something that I am very interested in, and I appreciate your saying them.

I do feel that I have to respond a bit about the idea that somehow these fires were caused because of not having pressure in hydrants or reservoirs being empty. Yes, a reservoir was down for repair, and we should always look at what our timetables are, and fire hydrants were not designed to put out a thousand fires in a residential neighborhood simultaneously. There is not a fire system in this country that would be able to function adequately under those kinds of conditions.

But due to what's happening with climate change and changing conditions, we are going to have to look at our infrastructure and make investments to counter conditions that this country has never seen.

I grew up in Florida. And my entire childhood, I believe there were two hurricanes, my whole childhood. And now we see multiple hurricanes every single year.

So we have extreme weather events happening around this country, and we have got to make investments in our infrastructure and our emergency response to counter that. And we can't pretend that it is not because of climate change as well. And so efforts that we can make in this body to slow that change down are also going to help save lives.

So, I have been working on fire issues for many, many years in the California Legislature. California has invested hundreds of millions of dollars over the past several years, year after year, to beef up our response to, add more resources for fighting fires, for fire resiliency, and we saw those resources deployed in these fires with hundreds and hundreds of firefighters on the line, more air response than we have ever seen in this Nation's history; where really hurricane winds driving embers in a time of year that normally is wet, and with record dryness instead.

And we are going to, unfortunately, have to keep putting those resources on the ground. Now, I have introduced my first two bills around supporting wildfire victims with the Don't Penalize Victims Act, which would ensure that charitable donations are not used to unfairly penalize victims of natural disasters. I appreciate the members of this committee to making that a bipartisan bill.

We also have introduced a Stop Disaster Price Gouging Act to stop price gouging around this country after natural disasters.

I also believe in holding FEMA accountable. We have had a lot of concerns in Los Angeles around air quality, soil, and water pollution because of these disasters, and I would love to see FEMA doing more monitoring on a regular basis so that the people in Los Angeles know whether or not they need to take precautions if they send their kids to school in Pasadena or if their water has been contaminated or whether or not they can plant things in their garden if they are worried that their soil has become contaminated. We haven't seen FEMA take that seriously, and I would like to see that happen.

I do have a quick question about disaster aid, and we have heard a little talk about that. But, unfortunately, this administration has said that they want to hold Californians accountable, and that they, I think, want to punish the people of California, not for anything about their response, but just because this administration doesn't like their policies around things like voting rights or around our commitment to diversity.

So I have a simple yes-or-no question. For Ms. Laughter, when Hurricane Helene hit North Carolina last year, did President Biden condition disaster aid against major policy changes in that State? It was a yes-or-no question.

Ms. LAUGHTER. No.

Ms. FRIEDMAN. Thank you.

Mr. Guthrie, when Hurricane Milton hit Florida last year, did President Biden condition disaster aid on the people of Florida?

Mr. GUTHRIE. No.

Ms. FRIEDMAN. Thank you. I appreciate that. And I would hope that this administration does not play games with people's lives.

Lastly, I want to ask about staffing. FEMA has been on the ground in Los Angeles helping people, and they are very grateful that there are FEMA officials there. I am very worried about the mass layoffs that we are seeing to public employees, and I have had people in Los Angeles say, when I show up to that office, are there going to be enough people there to help me?

I want to know whether you think workplace cuts are going to make it easier or harder for people after a disaster to get a live person on the phone or someone to sit in front of them and help them out with whatever issue they have. I will start with Mr. Garcia, I think.

Mr. GARCIA. Absolutely, workforce depletions do bring challenges. Local communities and NACo county members need in many regards that human capital that brings that technical assistance that helps to get the funding necessary to help those communities recover and rebuild.

So we do need the people behind all the other Federal guidelines and framework.

Ms. FRIEDMAN. Thank you. Mr. Currie, would you like to respond?

Mr. CURRIE. It is not going to help. That is my easy answer.

FEMA will always marshal the resources towards response and the disasters that have just happened. What the cuts do is it affects the disasters that happened 6 months ago, 1 year ago, 6 years ago. So it is a cumulative effect because of how many disasters they are dealing with.

Ms. FRIEDMAN. Thank you, and I yield back.

Mr. BRESNAHAN. Thank you. The gentlelady yields back, and I recognize myself for 5 minutes for questions.

Some of my professional background lends a voice to this topic. In my previous life, I worked in the heavy highway construction, and my family company partnered with States and local communities on all efforts, like rebuilding Interstate I–95 after the tragic collapse. We also worked in Fort Myers after Hurricane Ian, rebuilding power distribution systems where I saw firsthand the devastation and how locally executed, State-managed, and federally supported programs could be exceptionally beneficial. I have also seen how bureaucratic redtape can impede relief.

During COVID, FEMA offered grants to hospitals to address challenges, like finding adequate PPE and medical supplies, as well as address workforce shortages. Even though the public health emergency ended nearly 2 years ago, Pennsylvania hospitals are still waiting on $690 million in grant applications.

In September of 2023, Lackawanna and Luzerne Counties in my district experienced historic flooding. Our State emergency agency estimated the damage to be $25 million, including the loss of lives. In April of 2024, FEMA denied the State's request for major disaster declaration.

As GAO points out, there are more than 30 Federal entities involved in disaster recovery. This was a clear sign to Pennsylvania that we can't always count on the support of FEMA for disaster relief, which brings me to my questions on how States can best prepare for and deliver relief before, during, and after disasters.

So my first question for Mr. Guthrie, in your written testimony, you discuss Florida's Division of Emergency Management implementing emergency standby contracts as part of your proactive management strategy.

How can States replicate this practice to have dedicated vendors on standby ready to deploy for various types of natural disasters that States can experience?

Mr. GUTHRIE. Thank you for the question, sir. It is very easy to do.

These are zero-dollar contingency contracts put in place where we already know who the bidders are. One of the issues with FEMA is, when you need a—for instance, a direct housing program, they have to then go to contracting right then and there. We know we are going to need direct housing all over this country. We should have that already done so that that speeds that process up by months.

We have done that in Florida. I will make it available—as I have already told my partners from other States, I will make all of our contracts available as a starting point to take the scope of work, copy and paste it, put it into their terms and conditions and fast forward that methodology for any State, any city, or any county that wants to do that, sir.

Mr. BRESNAHAN. So not all disasters can be predicted. What are some best practices Florida uses to have flexibility with these contracts to ensure adequate response from vendors while protecting taxpayer money?

Mr. GUTHRIE. So I have some of the best attorneys in the world. They always get to a yes. And what they allow us to do is they advise me of risk where we may be getting outside the four corners of a document, or they will get me to a yes where I can stay within the four corners of the document so that I don't have to do another emergency procurement to get into the four corners of the document.

And those that are attorneys understand what I am saying there. That is one way; having a good attorney that knows their job, which is to advise the principle on risk versus reward. Sometimes we have to take the risk. And knowing the consequences of that ahead of time, it is always good to have a good attorney for that.

Mr. BRESNAHAN. Mr. Guthrie, Ms. Laughter, and Mr. Garcia, when communities suffer from disasters, it can also be an opportunity to build back stronger, more resilient infrastructure. But oftentimes, we see 21st-century communities being rebuilt with 20th-century infrastructure.

How have your respective States and counties engaged in long-term planning to ensure rebuilt infrastructure is more resilient, more secure, and incorporates the latest in digital technologies and digital infrastructure? Mr. Garcia, Honorable Garcia.

Mr. GARCIA. Thank you. In Harris County, we are absolutely putting the Federal resources that we have been fortunate to receive into resilient initiatives. For example, in Harris County, we received $51 million to help with the buyout program to take people out of flood-prone areas. And we are doing a whole lot more to make sure that resilience is at the top of our work process.

Ms. LAUGHTER. We are interested in any way that we can improve for the future. I think one of the things that has to be taken into account, though, is that whenever we receive grants or we receive support from Federal or State agencies, if there are restrictions around that that make it harder for us to make decisions and make those investments, then it becomes counterproductive.

Mr. GUTHRIE. So we have done a comprehensive reform on this. We have come out with Florida legislation that preempts cities and counties from doing bureaucratic things when it comes to permitting. That is one thing that we have done.

We have worked with the Federal Alliance for Safe Homes and the national BuildStrong Coalition for ensuring we have good building codes. We have the best building code in the United States, and strong building codes do work. You can see that all up and down our coastline.

Those are just a couple of examples that we have done where we have been able to do this much faster.

Mr. BRESNAHAN. Thank you for the testimony and your time, and I yield back.

I recognize the gentleman from California, Mr. Garamendi, for 5 minutes for questions.

Mr. GARAMENDI. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Thank you for the issues that you are raising. I would like to just pick up on what Ms. Friedman was referring to earlier and make sure that we fully understand where we are with requirements in order to receive FEMA assistance.

Mr. Currie, is there any example in the past where a FEMA assistance program, disaster assistance, was conditioned on in any number, in any way? Are you familiar with any of that?

Mr. CURRIE. I am not familiar. The only thing I would be familiar with is if it is conditioned on using that for resilience purposes, for building back better than it was before.

Mr. GARAMENDI. I do want to come to that.

Mr. Guthrie, you answered no to the question that Ms. Friedman raised about conditions. Is it your view that there should be conditions for the emergency assistance being available to a disaster area? Should there be preconditions?

Mr. GUTHRIE. There should not be preconditions. However, again, to the mitigation piece, benefit-cost analysis, should we be applying a BCA to a situation where we want a house out of the flood plain, we want to build a house stronger; just because we meet a number, does that make sense? I don't think so.

So I think there should be some preconditions to some programs that say we should waive this or we should make this stronger.

Mr. GARAMENDI. Fair enough. And I would appreciate your coming back with the specifics that you are referring to. Certainly, flood, we have been in and out of that for the 15 years I have been here; and, yes, we are making some progress.

The other area that I want to go to deals with the GAO report. You had 60 recommendations in the GAO report. It would seem to me that this committee would be—its time would be very usefully spent going through those.

Mr. Currie, in your testimony, you highlighted, I think, four specific areas. I would like you to revisit those in the next minute or so, the four priorities that are on your mind for the legislative policy changes that this committee should spend time on—that you believe we should spend time on.

Mr. CURRIE. Yes. Those 60 recommendations cut across four areas, as you said. First is streamlining the Federal disaster recovery process because it is fragmented.

Mr. GARAMENDI. Fragmented among multiple agencies.

Mr. CURRIE. Exactly; 30 agencies, to be sure.

Better delivering disaster aid to survivors, making that easier for individual survivors.

Reforming the FEMA workforce is number three.

And then number four is using our resilience dollars and making resilience programs easier to navigate for State and local governments.

Mr. GARAMENDI. All right. And in each of those areas you had specific ways in which the improvements could be accomplished, that is, legislative.

Mr. CURRIE. Yes, absolutely. Well, actually, 2 years ago, before the reform discussions even started, we recommended that Congress set up its own commission to look at disaster recovery, because we were so frustrated that the agencies for years, we were making recommendations, they weren't implementing them. And also, this issue cuts across so many committees of jurisdiction. So it is rare that we recommend something like that, but we thought the problem was large enough that it was warranted.

Mr. GARAMENDI. Well, you have given me direction on how I should spend my time, and hopefully the committee would similarly spend time on the details of each of these, streamlining multiple Federal agencies, maybe eliminate or at least change the way in which they, presumably, should work together.

Individual Assistance Programs, could you be a little more specific about that?

Mr. CURRIE. Well, changing our aid programs to the individual survivor from being Government centric to customer centric. And what I mean by that is, right now, the survivor has to extract the money out of the Federal Government through a lengthy, frustrating process. And because of that, they don't get everything they could possibly get.

Mr. GARAMENDI. Thank you. Mr. Guthrie, you are nodding your head, and the rest of you would think this is something we ought to deal with?

Mr. GUTHRIE. Yes, sir. I mean, the mere fact that a homeowner may have to wait 4, 5, or 6 years to get back to where they need to be. What we want, all of us want, is that homeowner back on their property in their home.

Mr. GARAMENDI. I am almost out of time. For the four of you, if you could present to the committee, and certainly to me and my colleagues, the specific kinds of reform that you think are most necessary on the Individual Assistance.

On the workforce, we have already talked about the current reductions in workforce, and there has been a discussion on that.

With regard to resiliency, FEMA does have a bit of a problem in that build back better is not in their lexicon, at least in the regulations that they administer. So we need to be aware that we need to change and encourage FEMA to look to resiliency that is really do build back better, more details.

I am out of time. Thank you very much, gentlemen and lady.

Mr. BRESNAHAN. Thank you. The gentleman yields back, and I recognize the gentleman from Missouri, Mr. Onder, for 5 minutes for questions.

Dr. ONDER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you to the witnesses for being here today.

Mr. Currie, the GAO has conducted numerous audits of FEMA's disaster relief spending. Has your office identified instances where FEMA funds have been used to provide aid to illegal immigrants, whether it be housing assistance or otherwise, and could you provide examples?

Mr. CURRIE. Yes. We did a report a year or two ago—I will have to get back to you on the specifics—on the Emergency Food and Shelter Program, which, as you know, Congress authorized that program for FEMA to provide assistance to cities to help support the influx of migrants.

Dr. ONDER. Okay. Do you recall when Congress authorized that program?

Mr. CURRIE. It was in the last Congress, but I have to get back to you on the details.

Dr. ONDER. It was 118. Okay. Okay. Given FEMA's mission to assist American citizens and legal residents, are there oversight mechanisms currently in place to ensure that funds are used appropriately for disaster recovery as opposed to being diverted to other uses?

Mr. CURRIE. Yes, sir. The Disaster Relief Fund is closely monitored, and there are many controls over the payments that come out of that and go to the States. And it is not just at the Federal level. FEMA has its own controls, but then it goes to the States.

Like Mr. Guthrie's State, they have their own controls before it goes down to the local level, too. So it is a very highly overseen pot of money.

Dr. ONDER. Thank you.

And, Ms. Laughter, as a county official, have you encountered concerns about FEMA's aid distribution being inconsistent, influenced by nondisaster factors, perhaps political factors?

Ms. LAUGHTER. We have not seen that. We have seen frustration from our survivors of being able to access the funds that they should be able to access and difficulty in getting any answers.

The 800 number that a lot of our survivors were referred to for a long time could not be connected. So they really expressed a lot of the frustration around those components.

Dr. ONDER. Got it. So in your testimony, you also stated that, "When a widespread disaster occurs, there must be a system in place to support response and recovery because local governments do not have the capacity to maintain the ability to handle a response at that scale during nonresponse times."

Based on your experience with Hurricane Helene, what role do you think the Federal Government should play versus the State governments and perhaps the local governments?

Ms. LAUGHTER. I think they both need to play a role. And at the end of the day, at the local government level, we just need a system that works.

Dr. ONDER. What do you think can be done to improve communication between FEMA employees and the State and local officials involved in disaster recovery?

Ms. LAUGHTER. What we experienced was a lot of siloes where we could ask a single question to one worker, they did not even know themselves how to get an answer to a question that was outside of their training or outside of their silo. So communication is a huge component in training.

Dr. ONDER. Thank you. I yield back.

Mr. BRESNAHAN. Thank you. The gentleman yields back, and I recognize the gentleman from Alabama, Mr. Figures, for 5 minutes for questions.

Mr. FIGURES. Thank you, Mr. Chair and Mr. Ranking Member, for hosting this hearing and for all of the witnesses being here.

I want to start by recognizing Alabama's Director of Emergency Management, Jeff Smitherman, who is in the audience with us and also thank you for your near 30 years of service to this Nation's military. So thank you and thank you for being here, and thank you for what you do in the State.

Our State was just hit by a round of thunderstorms, and your office kept us abreast of what was going on and kept us well-prepared. Fortunately—well, I guess both fortunately and unfortunately, the damage did not rise to a level of a Federal—or at least that is my understanding as of this morning, that it will not likely rise to the level of a Federal emergency, but yet some rural areas did take hits and there were some lives lost in that storm.

Ms. Laughter, I want to do something that I don't think you have probably gotten in this process. And that is, I believe it was Maya Angelou who once said that people don't remember everything about you, but they will certainly remember how you made them feel. Sounds like FEMA didn't make you and your community feel very good.

And so on behalf of all of us—I was not in Congress at the time—but on behalf of everybody on this committee and everybody that serves in Federal Government, I want to say that I am sorry, because our Government should be there for our people, and I know you guys experienced that in Florida as well. So I want to apologize on behalf of all of us and commit to doing better and using my position here to make sure that we are not making other communities feel the way that you felt. And I mean that.

As a kid that was born in hurricane alley, where names like Erin and Opal and Danny and Georges and Katrina and Ivan, they mean a little bit something different to me. Hell, I was literally born during a hurricane in September 1985, Hurricane Elena.

So I know a little bit about FEMA, I know a little bit about communities that need their recovery, need their help. But we need it to be efficient, and we need it to be quick, and we need it to be effective.

And so, I want to start—at least my first question is, it seems that this problem is bigger than just FEMA. You have mentioned 30 agencies being involved in this process. So how by fixing FEMA are we resolving the entire problem, or is there a broader scope of inquiry that we need to be addressing these efforts on?

We can just go down the row. Mr. Currie.

Mr. CURRIE. Yes. Unfortunately, FEMA is the face of response and recovery for the Federal Government. But when you look at the funding, it is spread all over the Federal Government. And each of those agencies has their own rules, programs, requirements, and timeframes.

And so when those all come together, it creates a very confusing system and process if you are a State or local emergency manager.

Mr. FIGURES. Mr. Guthrie.

Mr. GUTHRIE. Thank you, Congressman. I would say yes, we need a comprehensive review of the scope, mission, and structure of FEMA, but I would even say take that to the back row. We need a comprehensive review of the scope, mission, and structure of every agency that is a part of the Federal family that responds to disasters.

Because, again, FEMA is a coordinating element. They are not the command and control element. They are the coordinating element. But when you have—if you are a fishery or aquaculture, you have to go through, I believe it is the Department of Commerce; if you are in agriculture, you go through the U.S. Department of Agriculture; if you have something that is on an FHWA roadway, you are going through DOT. That is at the public level.

Imagine if you were an individual that is dependent on section 8 housing, you are going through HUD, if you are with DCF, you are going through maybe another HHS agency. We have got to figure out, again, comprehensive review of the scope, mission, and structure of the Federal family to streamline that into one single application, whether it is for public sector or Individual Assistance sector, we've got——

Mr. FIGURES [interrupting]. I don't want to cut you off. I want to get Ms. Laughter because I want to get one more question in for Mr. Garcia.

Ms. LAUGHTER. I agree. I think it is more complicated than just FEMA. We have an example right now of private property debris removal. We have a farmer that has 300 bales of spoiled hay from a flood, and he cannot access the private property debris removal because he falls under USDA.

And he also cannot get direction from the same agency of how to access USDA in order to get relief. He just needs help.

Mr. FIGURES. Mr. Garcia.

Mr. GARCIA. With so many agencies involved, it does cause confusion—or would cause confusion—at all levels for the local community, as well as the residents at heart. So comprehensive review absolutely is necessary.

Mr. FIGURES. All right. Now, Mr. Garcia, just for you. You mentioned in your opening testimony, you mentioned about underserved and disadvantaged communities. And that particularly resonates with me. I am in a very poor district. For the most part, individual median income is just around $30,000. So these are people that can't afford to rebuild on their own.

So my question for you is, in those communities that have been hit by storms, particularly hurricanes, tornadoes where we see those blue tarps go on those roofs, we go back too often, and those blue tarps are still there years later; in fact, sometimes decades later. How can we better streamline resources to getting to those communities?

Mr. GARCIA. Thank you. And I will tell you that streamlining the process is absolutely critical. As I mentioned, both the legislation that is being proposed, the Disaster Survivors Fairness Act and the Disaster Assistance Simplification Act, all those things are going to help us remove the barriers that the communities could face. And so we need the support by FEMA. So staff shortages at FEMA do not help us move forward. All of this is important for us to address.

So simplification, plain language, universal portals, those things are absolutely helpful to get the resources where they are needed.

Mr. FIGURES. Thank you. I yield back, Mr. Chairman. Thank you for the overage.

Mr. BRESNAHAN. Thank you. The gentleman yields back.

Are there further questions from any members of the subcommittee who have not been recognized?

Seeing none, that concludes our hearing for today.

I would like to thank each of the witnesses for your testimony. The subcommittee stands adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 11:46 a.m., the subcommittee was adjourned.]

APPENDIX

QUESTIONS TO CHRIS CURRIE, DIRECTOR, HOMELAND SECURITY AND JUSTICE, U.S. GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE, FROM HON. KRISTEN MCDONALD RIVET

Question 1. My office received outreach from a number of constituents still affected by the historic 2020 Midland floods. The following questions are asked on behalf of members of my community. Thank you for your review and prompt response.

Question 1.a. Is there a process for FEMA to annually review Individual Assistance, Public Assistance, and Hazard Mitigation programs, by interviewing people who are impacted by the process to see what is working and what isn't?

ANSWER:

Individual Assistance

In 2020, GAO found that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) conducted three different telephone surveys to assess disaster survivors' experiences with its Individuals and Households Program and used these results to assess program performance.[1] However, GAO found that the methodology FEMA used did not fully align with federal standards for statistical surveys, limiting FEMA's ability to use the results to determine how well their efforts are working. As a result, GAO recommended that FEMA correct and refine the methodology used to survey survivors. In December 2022, FEMA took steps to correct and refine its methodology used to survey survivors.

Public Assistance

GAO is not aware of an annual review of the Public Assistance program or interviews with applicants for the purposes of identifying what is working well and what is not. However, in 2021, FEMA did conduct customer satisfaction surveys of Public Assistance applicants and grantees with the goal of program improvement. According to FEMA, the information collected from customers and stakeholders will help ensure that users have an effective, efficient, and satisfying experience with the Agency's programs. This feedback will provide insights into customer or stakeholder perceptions, experiences and expectations, provide an early warning of issues with service, or focus attention on areas where communication, training or changes in operations might improve delivery of products or service.

Additionally, in 2023, FEMA issued a report that included stakeholder feedback from Public Assistance applicants. The survey results were used to further program improvement and develop recommendations to FEMA management on streamlining the program.

Hazard Mitigation

In March 2020, FEMA issued a *Summary of Stakeholder Feedback* report summarizing stakeholder feedback on its hazard mitigation grant programs.[2] Ac-

[1] These surveys are (1) an initial survey to measure the quality of disaster assistance information and services received by survivors during the initial application process; (2) a contact survey to measure the quality of disaster assistance information and services received by survivors while they checked the status of their case online or during interactions with FEMA staff; and (3) an assessment survey to measure the quality of disaster assistance information and services received by survivors after FEMA determines their eligibility for Individuals and Households Program assistance. GAO, *Disaster Assistance: Additional Actions Needed to Strengthen FEMA's Individuals and Households Program*, GAO–20–503 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 30, 2020).

[2] See, FEMA, *Summary of Stakeholder Feedback: Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities*, (Washington D.C.: March 2020). See, GAO, *Disaster Resilience: FEMA Should Take*

Continued

cording to the report, FEMA solicited input from stakeholders as part of its effort to develop the BRIC program and reported that stakeholders were overwhelmingly dissatisfied with benefit-cost analysis requirements and said that they were a barrier to completing grant applications. FEMA received over 5,000 comments and 75 letters and summarized the contents of these in the *Summary of Stakeholder Feedback* report.

In February 2021, GAO reported on challenges state and local officials faced when applying for FEMA hazard mitigation grants. GAO found that FEMA had developed resources to help hazard mitigation applicants—guidance, Fact Sheets, project examples, studies, and technical publications.[3] However, the resources could be difficult to locate on FEMA's website and there was no centralized inventory of resources to help applicants locate the information. As a result, GAO recommended that FEMA create a centralized inventory of hazard mitigation resources on its website. FEMA concurred and has since taken steps to do so. In June 2022, FEMA finished re-designing portions of their website to centralize guidance and other resources on their hazard mitigation programs. The reorganization makes these resources easier to find and better positions FEMA to help state and local applicants successfully apply for grants for mitigation projects that enhance disaster resilience. As a result, this recommendation is closed as implemented.

In February 2025, GAO added *Improving the Delivery of Federal Disaster Assistance* to its High-Risk List.[4] In the new segment GAO emphasized the need for FEMA to take steps to better manage fragmentation across its own programs, as GAO has recommended. Such actions could make the programs simpler, more accessible and user-friendly, and improve the effectiveness of federal disaster recovery efforts. Reforming the federal government's approach to disaster recovery and reducing fragmentation could improve service delivery to disaster survivors and communities and improve the effectiveness of recovery efforts.[5] As of February 2024, FEMA had taken steps to streamline the applications for two of its recovery programs. However, FEMA will need to demonstrate that it has thoroughly considered available options to reduce fragmentation across its own programs, identified those FEMA intends to implement, and then taken steps to fully implement this recommendation.

In addition, GAO has found that as the incidence and severity of massive wildfires increases, FEMA and other agencies could find additional opportunities to ensure their programs are effective.[6] For example, GAO recommended in December 2024 that FEMA assess ways to provide immediate post-wildfire mitigation assistance and establish a process to collect, assess, and incorporate ongoing feedback from state, local, and tribal Fire Management Assistance Grants recipients. Taking these steps would help foster more resilient communities and reduce the future demand on federal resources.

Question 1.b. Has FEMA measured the number of disconnects between the initial approved project amount and the actual costs at closeout of said projects?

ANSWER. GAO has not assessed whether FEMA has systematically measured the initial costs of Public Assistance projects against their actual costs at closeout. However, it is common that initial project costs would increase as the project is completed and eventually closed out. For example, GAO reported in 2024 that in Puerto Rico, Public Assistance awardees have faced challenges related to disaster recovery projects due to the increased costs.[7] For example, GAO reported that subrecipients that have received Public Assistance awards under the Accelerated Award Strategy identified increased project costs that pose challenges to the full recovery of their facilities. According to officials from the four Accelerated Award Strategy subrecipient entities, inflation and labor shortages have increased the costs of projects beyond their anticipated estimated costs.

Additional Steps to Streamline Hazard Mitigation Grants and Assess Program Effects, GAO–21–140 (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 2, 2021).

[3] GAO, *Disaster Resilience: FEMA Should Take Additional Steps to Streamline Hazard Mitigation Grants and Assess Program Effects*, GAO–21–140 (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 2, 2021).

[4] GAO, *High-Risk Series: Heightened Attention Could Save Billions More and Improve Government Efficiency and Effectiveness*, GAO–25–107743 (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 25, 2025).

[5] GAO, *Disaster Recovery: Actions Needed to Improve the Federal Approach*, GAO–23–104956 (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 15, 2022).

[6] GAO, *Wildfires: Additional Actions Needed to Address FEMA Assistance Challenges*, GAO–25–106862 (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 18, 2024).

[7] GAO, *Puerto Rico Disasters: Progress Made, but the Recovery Continues to Face Challenges*, GAO–24–105557 (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 13, 2024).

Question 1.c. Has FEMA considered having a FEMA employee who walks through the whole recovery journey with the municipality rebuilding? What resources would be necessary?

ANSWER. GAO is not aware of any FEMA effort to assign an employee to each municipality to walk through the recovery process. However, GAO has found that FEMA staffing turnover throughout the lifecycle of public assistance projects is a long-standing challenge cited by state and local officials. For example, in March 2019 GAO reported that FEMA and Puerto Rico municipality officials cited concerns about FEMA staff turnover and lack of knowledge about how the Public Assistance alternative procedures are to be applied.[8] FEMA officials acknowledged that more personnel with expertise in the alternative procedures process were needed to administer Public Assistance and assist subrecipients.

FEMA officials stated that they faced additional responsibilities due to COVID–19, while also managing the traditional seasonal peaks of disaster activity during the year, which created burnout for many employees and increased employee attrition.[9] Such attrition and an increasing workload make it difficult for FEMA to provide individual technical support to all grantees as needed. FEMA's workforce challenges are a key area identified in GAO's recent high-risk report. In recent years, the increasing frequency and costs of disasters, the COVID–19 pandemic, and other responsibilities have placed additional pressures on FEMA. FEMA's management of its workforce challenges and staffing levels has limited its capacity to provide effective disaster assistance.

For example, GAO found in May 2023 that FEMA had an overall staffing gap of approximately 35 percent across different positions at the beginning of fiscal year 2022. The gaps varied, but Public Assistance, Hazard Mitigation, and Logistics generally had lower percentages of staffing targets filled—between 44 and 60 percent at the beginning of fiscal year 2022. These positions serve important functions, including administering assistance to state and local governments, creating safer communities by managing risk reduction activities, and coordinating all aspects of resource planning and movement during a disaster.

GAO also found that FEMA has fallen short of its yearly staffing target between 2019 and 2022, and that gap continues to grow. For example, FEMA only had nine percent of its disaster-response workforce available for Hurricane Milton response, according to its daily operations brief. Many responders have declined deployments in recent disasters because of burnout or severe conditions in the field. GAO has made numerous recommendations to help FEMA better manage catastrophic or concurrent disasters.

Question 1.d. Instead of each municipality learning to navigate the FEMA assistance process independently, has FEMA considered assigning a staffer to that municipality as their recovery expert?

ANSWER. GAO is not aware of any FEMA effort to assign an employee to each municipality to walk through the recovery process. However, FEMA does have methods for coordinating with municipalities following a disaster. Two of these methods include FEMA's Integration Teams and FEMA's Public Assistance Program Delivery Managers:

FEMA Integration Teams. Officials in all 10 FEMA regions that GAO interviewed in 2024 stated that they provide resources and support to states through FEMA Integration Teams, which are FEMA staff embedded within state emergency management offices.[10] Officials from six FEMA regions said that Integration Team members serve as liaisons between FEMA and the states in various aspects of responding to disasters. For example, officials from these six FEMA regions said that Integration Team members provide situational awareness during a disaster response. Officials in one region said they have an Integration Team member who serves as an Individual Assistance subject matter expert during Preliminary Damage Assessments. GAO has not comprehensively assessed this program to further determine how these teams may assist municipalities.

Public Assistance Program Delivery Managers. In addition, FEMA provides Program Delivery Managers following a disaster declaration. In 2017, GAO reported

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

[9] GAO, *FEMA Disaster Workforce: Actions Needed to Improve Hiring Data and Address Staffing Gaps*, GAO–23–105663 (Washington, D.C.: May 2, 2023).

[10] The FEMA Integration Teams were established in July 2017 with the goal of embedding FEMA staff with state and territorial partners, and to work alongside tribal partners. FEMA Integration Teams provide technical assistance and coordination to state, tribal, and territorial emergency management agencies in areas such as planning, logistics, recovery, and grants management.

that FEMA redesigned the delivery of the Public Assistance program to address past workforce management challenges, such as shortages in experienced and trained Public Assistance staff and high turnover among these staff.[11] As part of the redesigned program, FEMA created, among other things, Program Delivery Managers to ensure more consistent guidance to Public Assistance applicants. However, in February 2025, GAO reported that FEMA continues to have long-standing workforce management issues that makes supporting response and recovery efforts difficult.[12] GAO has started work examining FEMA's staffing gaps.

Question 1.e. How does FEMA measure if the disaster assistance process is working? Does FEMA measure the amount of time from the time of the incident to full recovery?

ANSWER. FEMA tracks the amount of time from the initial disaster to full recovery but does not set any targets or metrics for how long this process should take. Disaster recovery can take years to complete depending on the severity of the disasters and many other factors, such as state and local resources and capacity to manage the recovery. For example, according to FEMA, the agency is managing over 600 open major disaster declarations—some of which occurred almost 20 years ago—in various stages of response and recovery.[13] For instance, as of February 2025, FEMA continues to make obligations for recovery projects as part of Public Assistance for Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005.

GAO previously recommended in February 2021, that FEMA use data on the timeliness and performance of the Public Assistance application process.[14] GAO made this recommendation to help identify inefficiencies and root causes of delays in the Public Assistance process and provide FEMA and its local partners with the information needed to address them. To address this recommendation, in March 2021, FEMA's Recovery Analytics and Public Assistance Divisions published a live dashboard tool with timeliness metrics on FEMA's internet, accessible to FEMA staff, that captures metrics at the FEMA and applicant level and provides data under five performance goals. As a result, this recommendation was closed as implemented.

FEMA also has a performance measure on timeliness of assistance.[15] Specifically, FEMA measures the average timeliness of Individuals and Households Program awards in days. This measure assesses how quickly the program provides the first financial assistance received by qualified individuals and households through the Individuals and Households Program. By evaluating how quickly disaster survivors receive financial assistance, the program can assess the effectiveness of a critical, customer-facing element of the agency's mission.

Question 1.f. Does FEMA measure and/or track the amount of time it takes the municipality to receive its money at the time of closeout?

ANSWER. As noted above, FEMA does track the amount of time from the initial disaster to full recovery but does not set any targets or metrics for how long this process should take. Project closeout is dependent on a on a number of factors including the severity and complexity of the disaster and amount of time it takes for the state or municipality to provide all necessary projects documentation and justifications.

According to FEMA's Public Assistance Program and Policy Guide, project closeout requires timely and complete project-level information from the Recipient as work is completed.[16] To initiate project-level closeout, the Subrecipient must inform the Recipient that its project is complete and the date the work was completed. To ensure a timely closeout process, the Subrecipient should notify the Recipient immediate as it completes each Large Project and when its completed its last Small Project.

Further, the Public Assistance Program and Policy Guide states that they have a process for obligating Public Assistance funding based on the Applicant's schedule to execute the work. If a project is greater than one million and the applicant does not need funds for more than 180 days from the time the Project is ready for obligation, FEMA obligates funds based on the project completion schedule. In addition,

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[11] GAO, *Disaster Assistance: Opportunities to Enhance Implementation of the Redesigned Public Assistance Program Grant Program*, GAO–18–30 (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 8, 2017).
[12] GAO–25–107743
[13] GAO–25–107743
[14] GAO, *2018 Pacific Island Disasters: Federal Actions Helped Facilitate the Response, but FEMA Needs to Address Long-Term Recovery Challenges*, GAO–21–91 (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 3, 2021).
[15] Department of Homeland Security, *Annual Performance Report Fiscal Year 2024*.
[16] FEMA, *Public Assistance Program and Policy Guide*, Version 4 FP 104–009–2 (June 1, 2020).

according to FEMA's Public Assistance Program and Policy Guide, FEMA only provides Public Assistance funding for work completed and costs incurred within regulatory guidelines.

Question 1.g. Does FEMA measure the number of issues suffered by the municipality during the process, such as finding that key items were left off the disaster-recovery punch list and the assistance ($) estimated vs. the result of the bids?

ANSWER. FEMA has a performance measure that assesses the percent of applicants satisfied with the Public Assistance process and customer service. According to FEMA documentation, FEMA conducts a Public Assistance Assessment survey that collects satisfaction information from applicants after they received an award.

In addition, in May 2021, GAO reported on Puerto Rico's disaster recovery efforts, including its use of Public Assistance awards and difficulties it has faced implementing recovery projects.[17] For example, GAO reported that FEMA made progress in approving Public Assistance projects, but that FEMA had not comprehensively identified or assessed the risk that could affect the success of the remainder of Puerto Rico's recovery, such as Puerto Rico's ability to start construction on recovery projects. GAO recommended that FEMA, in coordination with Puerto Rico and relevant federal agencies, identify and assess the risks to Puerto Rico's recovery, including Puerto Rico's capacity to carry out projects, and identify potential actions to manage the risks. In 2024, FEMA finalized a risk management plan that documented its framework to manage and monitor risks to the remainder of Puerto Rico's recovery. Further, FEMA provided a memorandum documenting the FEMA executive leadership's approval to implement this plan. FEMA also provided additional documentation on its efforts to engage and coordinate with the Government of Puerto Rico on efforts to continuously manage and monitor risks to the recovery. As a result, these recommendations were closed as implemented.

Additionally, GAO has reported that the federal approach to disaster recovery is fragmented across more than 30 federal entities.[18] These entities are involved with multiple programs and authorities and have differing requirements and timeframes. This fragmented approach can make it harder for survivors and communities to successfully navigate multiple federal programs. Congress and federal agencies have taken steps to better manage fragmentation, such as through interagency agreements and reducing program complexity, but challenges remain. In November 2022, GAO identified 11 options to improve the federal government's approach to disaster recovery based on our review of relevant literature, interviews with federal, state, and local officials; and a panel of experts.[19]

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[17] GAO, *Puerto Rico Recovery: FEMA Made Progress in Approving Projects, But Should Identify and Assess Risks to the Recovery*, GAO–21–264 (Washington, D.C.: May 19, 2021).

[18] GAO, *Disaster Recovery: Actions Needed to Improve the Federal Approach*, GAO–23–104956 (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 15, 2022).

[19] The panel included 20 experts with diverse backgrounds related to disaster recovery. They participated in discussions of each option and identified their strengths and limitations as they relate to improving the federal government's approach to disaster recovery. GAO attributed statements from experts collected as part of the panel discussions to the "panel of experts" or "experts." This includes statements made by individual experts. See, GAO, *Disaster Recovery: Actions Needed to Improve the Federal Approach*, GAO–23–104956 (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 15, 2022).