

Representative Jared Moskowitz (FL-23)

Thank you, Chairman Amodei, Ranking Member Underwood, and Members of the Committee. As the Representative for Florida's 23<sup>rd</sup> Congressional District — and the only former statewide Emergency Management Director to ever serve in Congress — I've seen firsthand the devastation that disasters bring and the lifesaving difference that FEMA makes.

The truth is, these disasters are becoming larger and more widespread. In recent weeks alone, catastrophic tornados and floods tore through the South and Midwest, upending communities and taking the lives of too many. It comes as we continue to navigate what's been a deadly tornado season and as places, like my home state of Florida, prepare for this year's hurricane season.

FEMA is a cornerstone of the preparation, response, and recovery to disasters like these. Many states just don't have the budgets, operations, or manpower to take these events on alone, and without the critical resources that FEMA provides, they would have to raise taxes or raid other funds to support disaster response. Doing that — taking funds away from places like education or transportation — just won't help these communities build towards a full recovery.

Unfortunately, some are calling to abolish FEMA entirely. This can't be a solution. FEMA isn't perfect, just as no organization is perfect — but we can improve it. We can save FEMA by enacting commonsense reforms that make it faster, more efficient, and more effective, and I've been working on bipartisan proposals to do that. We have a real opportunity to make the agency deliver as the American people deserve it to.

The worst thing Congress could do in this moment, though, is to defund or dismantle the only federal agency whose sole mission is to respond when Americans

are at their most vulnerable. We must provide FEMA the necessary resources in the FY2026 budget.

It goes back to what I said: the rate of disasters isn't just increasing — it's also intensifying, and the facts back it up. In 2023 alone, the United States faced 28 separate billion-dollar disasters, the highest number ever recorded, totaling more than \$91.3 billion in damages.<sup>1,2</sup> Events like these aren't concentrated in one region, either — they strike nearly every part of the country, and the damage is such that communities simply can't recover alone.

We saw it in Hawaii, when wildfires tore through Maui, decimating the historic town of Lahaina in what became the deadliest U.S. wildfires in more than 100 years. Nearly 100 people were killed, and thousands of families lost their homes and businesses at incredible emotional and financial cost — more than \$5.7 billion in damage.<sup>2,3</sup>

We saw it in my home state of Florida, when Hurricane Ian made landfall as a Category 4 storm, flattening coastal communities, cutting power to millions, and causing nearly \$120 billion in damage.<sup>1</sup> It was one of the costliest storms on record.

And of course, during COVID-19, our country experienced our first-ever nationwide Major Disaster Declaration. All 50 states, all five territories, and the District of

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<sup>1</sup> Wu, Shuang-Ye. "Billion-Dollar Weather and Climate Disasters Broke U.S. Record in 2023, NOAA Says." PBS NewsHour, January 10, 2024. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/science/a-record-28-billion-dollar-weather-and-climate-disasters-struck-the-u-s-in-2023-noaa>

<sup>2</sup> National Centers for Environmental Information (NCEI). *U.S. Billion-Dollar Weather & Climate Disasters 1980–2024*. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. <https://www.ncei.noaa.gov/access/billions/events.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Blake, Mike, and Marco Garcia. "Maui Wildfires Deadliest in Century as Death Toll Hits 93." *Reuters*, August 13, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/death-toll-maui-fires-hits-least-80-damages-billions-dollars-2023-08-12/>.

Columbia were under active declarations at the same time.<sup>4</sup> It was the first time a public health emergency triggered a response under the Stafford Act.<sup>5</sup>

These are just a few of the many examples, but in all of them, who showed up to help? It was FEMA — working alongside state and local responders — that helped provide shelter, coordinate aid, and begin the long but necessary recovery process.

In the years after Ian, FEMA provided \$1.15 billion in direct grants to help nearly 400,000 Florida households repair and rebuild, and another \$2.3 billion to local communities for debris cleanup and infrastructure repair.<sup>6</sup> In total, federal support for Ian's recovery topped \$10.2 billion.<sup>6</sup> In Hawaii, FEMA is still around almost two years later, offering direct housing assistance. And during COVID, the agency helped deliver billions of units of PPE, supported field hospitals and vaccine sites, and provided more than \$125 billion in emergency aid to state and local governments.<sup>4,5</sup> If there was ever any doubt about FEMA's importance, COVID made it clear.<sup>4,5</sup> FEMA delivered the national response that the pandemic required.

All of this to say, this is not a regional issue. It is national. As more and more Americans live in high-risk areas and the climate continues to change, the scale and costs of these disasters will keep rising. And FEMA is the only federal agency with the expertise and infrastructure to coordinate response and recovery at this magnitude.

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<sup>4</sup> Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). *FEMA Led Historic Pandemic Response, Supported Record Number of Disasters in 2020*. U.S. Department of Homeland Security, January 11, 2021. <https://www.fema.gov/press-release/20210111/fema-led-historic-pandemic-response-supported-record-number-disasters-2020>.

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Government Accountability Office. *Disaster Relief Fund: Lessons Learned from COVID-19 Could Improve FEMA's Estimates*. GAO-24-106676. Washington, D.C.: Government Accountability Office, July 9, 2024. <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-24-106676>.

<sup>6</sup> Federal Emergency Management Agency. "Hurricane Ian: Two Years into Recovery." *FEMA.gov*, September 19, 2024. <https://www.fema.gov/press-release/20250122/hurricane-ian-two-years-recovery>.

But FEMA can only do that work if it has the resources to do so, and right now, that mission is at risk. Last year, we saw what happens when the budget comes up short. In August 2024, FEMA was forced to implement Immediate Needs Funding (INF) restrictions as its Disaster Relief Fund (DRF) neared depletion.<sup>7</sup> This emergency measure meant that FEMA was forced to halt funding for more than 3,000 recovery and mitigation projects, pausing roughly \$9 billion in targeted aid, so that the remaining funds could be reserved for only the most urgent, life-saving disaster responses.<sup>7</sup> Long-term but still critical recovery work in disaster-hit communities across the country suddenly ground to a halt. Projects to rebuild homes, schools, roads, and hospitals were paused mid-stream, leaving neighborhoods in limbo.

When FEMA's budget runs dry, communities everywhere feel it. Families waiting to return home are told they have to wait longer. Cities and towns hit by hurricanes and floods are forced to delay rebuilding schools, roads, and water systems. Some are left taking out loans just to keep recovery projects moving.<sup>8</sup> (Business 1) These delays mean kids are kept out of classrooms. Families stay displaced. Critical infrastructure goes unrepaired while communities wait on resources they were promised.

And this was just a funding shortfall. Imagine the impact if FEMA were eliminated entirely. Unfortunately, that's not hypothetical. It's being proposed right now in Washington.

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<sup>7</sup> Federal Emergency Management Agency. "FEMA Lifts Immediate Needs Funding (INF) Restrictions." *FEMA Advisory*, October 1, 2024. [https://homeland.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/FEMA\\_Advisory\\_Lifting\\_INF\\_20241001.pdf](https://homeland.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/FEMA_Advisory_Lifting_INF_20241001.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> Boudreau, Catherine. "FEMA Was Strapped for Cash Even Before America's Hurricane Double Whammy." *Business Insider*, October 10, 2024. <https://www.businessinsider.com/fema-helene-milton-relief-funding-congress-disaster-victims-2024-10>.

FEMA is not a luxury. It is a lifeline. Whether it's hurricanes in Florida or Texas, wildfires in Hawaii or California, floods in Vermont or Iowa, tornados in Kentucky or Mississippi, or heat waves in Nevada or Arizona, FEMA shows up with the people and resources to help. That work doesn't replace state or local efforts — it supports and strengthens them when the scale exceeds what a single community can manage.

But that partnership only works if Congress chooses to fund it and defend it. I welcome the conversation on how to make FEMA better, and trust me, I have plenty of ideas. But that conversation starts with fully funding FEMA and keeping the agency alive. I urge this Committee to fully fund FEMA in the FY2026 budget and to reject any proposal that puts its mission or its future at risk.