

Fact Check: FEMA disaster funds not diverted to migrants by Biden administration

By Reuters Fact Check

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Reuters

FACT CHECK

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) only runs a program to house migrants that is funded by U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), contrary to posts online saying that FEMA disaster relief funds were diverted by the Biden Administration to house migrants in the U.S. illegally.

FEMA and its Disaster Relief Fund have been targets of [disinformation](#) in the wake of Hurricane Helene, which [devastated](#) parts of the U.S. Southeast in late September.

A [post on Facebook](#)  said: "The Biden-Harris administration took more than a billion tax dollars that had been allocated to FEMA for disaster relief and used it to house illegal immigrants."

Reuters Image

The narrative sprang up in early October after a [post on X](#) said the Biden administration had used \$941 million of FEMA funds in 2023 and 2024 to “house illegal immigrants.”

The X post refers to a federal grant program that is funded from the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) budget and administered by FEMA called the [Shelter and Services Program](#) (SSP).

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However, the transfers cited in the Oct. 6 X post were funds re-allocated by Congress from CBP to FEMA to run the SSP. No funds for the SSP program came out of FEMA’s Disaster Relief Fund, according to appropriations acts by Congress and budget reports by the Congressional Research Service for the 2023 and 2024 fiscal years.

The FEMA website also said on a page [responding](#) to hurricane-related rumors, “No money is being diverted from disaster response needs.”

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Both CBP and FEMA are part of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and a DHS spokesperson told Reuters in an email that the claim FEMA disaster relief funds were diverted to the SSP is “completely false.”

There are also no credible news reports and no evidence to suggest that money from the FEMA Disaster Relief Fund was transferred to SSP in 2023 or 2024.

SEPARATE PROGRAMS

The SSP is a “separate, appropriated grant program that was authorized and funded by Congress and is not associated in any way with FEMA’s disaster-related authorities or funding streams,” the DHS spokesperson said.

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Congress appropriates funding for the DHS, whose budget has 17 [subcomponents](#) including FEMA and CBP.

A DHS overview of the FEMA budget [shows](#) the Disaster Relief Fund listed as having its own budget for “Base” and “Major” disaster relief, while the SSP is under the separate heading “Federal Assistance.”

CONGRESSIONAL TRANSFER TO FEMA

For the 2023 fiscal year, Congress moved funds from the CBP’s budget to FEMA for SSP.

The SSP was created during the 2023 fiscal year and [replaced](#) a similar FEMA Emergency Food and Shelter Program-Humanitarian Relief ([EFSP-H](#)) that also helped local government and nonprofit organizations provide shelter and other services to migrants.

In December 2022, Congress [directed](#) the CBP to transfer \$800 million in funds from its Operations and Support appropriation for the 2023 fiscal year to FEMA for the SSP, which was still in being established, according to a FEMA report about the program.

When the SSP was launched, Congress [authorized](#) \$785 million of the \$800 million to be used for the EFSP-H, which was being phased out, according to a May 2023 Congressional Research Service Insight report.

That authorization was “intended to serve as a bridge to continue funding food, shelter, and supportive services to migrants while the SSP is developed,” the CRS Insight report said.

For the 2024 fiscal year, Congress appropriated [\\$650 million](#) for SSP, according to the FEMA website.

TRANSFER IN 2019

During hurricane season in 2019, U.S. Representative Lucille Roybal-Allard complained that the Trump administration was circumventing Congress by taking \$115 million of FEMA’s disaster relief funds and transferring them to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), [Reuters reported](#).

A figure of \$155 million was mentioned in an August 2019 DHS [press release](#) saying the agency had notified Congress one month prior of its intent to transfer the funds.

A DHS notice obtained by [NBC News](#) in 2019 also said that [\\$155 million](#) from recovered disaster relief funds from prior years would be reallocated to the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to fund temporary hearing facilities for migrants near the U.S.-Mexico border.

An August 2019 monthly report on the Disaster Relief Fund showed an “anticipated” [\\$38 million](#) transfer to ICE.

The DHS declined to comment in October 2024 on the authenticity of the notice obtained by NBC in 2019.

VERDICT

False. Funds were not diverted from the FEMA Disaster Relief Fund to “house illegal immigrants” under the Biden administration. The Shelter and Services Program housing migrants and administered by FEMA is funded from the U.S. Customs and Border Patrol budget.

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