



Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

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Chair

Sam Graves
Ranking Member

Katherine W. Dedrick, Staff Director

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February 11, 2022

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 “FEMA Priorities for 2022: Stakeholder Perspectives.”

PURPOSE

The Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management will meet on Wednesday, February 16, 2021, at 2:00 p.m. in 2167 Rayburn House Office Building and via Zoom to receive testimony on “FEMA Priorities for 2022: Stakeholder Perspectives.” At the hearing, Members will receive testimony from witnesses who are emergency management experts and represent key external Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) stakeholders to gauge their perspective regarding what efforts the agency should prioritize in this year. The Subcommittee will hear from the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), National Emergency Management Association, and International Association of Emergency Managers.

BACKGROUND

When disaster strikes, state, territorial, and Tribal governments may request the President declare a major disaster or emergency pursuant to the *Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act* (*Stafford Act*).¹ If the president declares a major disaster or emergency, FEMA is authorized to provide response and recovery assistance in the form of individual assistance, public assistance, or both funded from the Disaster Relief Fund.

¹ 42 U.S.C. § 5121 et seq.

FEMA also provides assistance through specialized programs and grants to assist state, local, Tribal, and territorial governments prepare for, mitigate against, and respond to disasters. These include the Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMAC) which facilitates mutual aid across jurisdictions;² the Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) teams which are deployed to support search and rescue options;³ Emergency Management Performance Grants (EMPG) to support preparation and capacity at the state and local levels of government;⁴ Building Resilience Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) grant program supporting pre-disaster mitigation investments;⁵ and the post-disaster Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP).⁶

Public Assistance (PA)

Pursuant to a declaration under the *Stafford Act*, FEMA PA programs reimburse state, local, Tribal, and territorial governments and certain non-profit organizations for the cost of emergency protective measures, debris removal, and repair and replacement of public infrastructure damaged in a disaster.⁷ Due to the increased frequency and intensity of natural disasters, fiscal year (FY) 2020 marked the largest obligation for PA to date—even when excluding PA obligations related to COVID-19.⁸ FEMA’s National Advisory Council found that applicants consistently report that “the PA process feels disjointed, is overburdensome, and has far too many requirements.”⁹ Some communities with limited resources have reported that navigating the PA process is so challenging that they opt to forgo the program.¹⁰

PA recipients are responsible for a percentage of recovery costs, which is termed the non-federal cost-share.¹¹ The President has the authority through the *Stafford Act* to reduce or waive the non-federal cost-share. FEMA recommends that the federal cost share be increased from 75% to 90% if the estimated cost of PA exceeds \$151 dollars per capita.¹² The Committee received testimony that suggested that even a reduced cost share may still be burdensome for some communities.¹³

² 6 U.S.C. § 761.

³ 6 U.S.C. § 722; 42 U.S.C. § 5165f.

⁴ 6 U.S.C. § 762.

⁵ Section 1234, Disaster Recovery Reform Act of 2018, Public Law 115-254.

⁶ 42 U.S.C. 5170c

⁷ GAO. (December 2021). *Disaster Recovery: Additional Actions Needed to Identify and Address Potential Recovery Barriers*. GAO-22-104039

⁸ CRS. (2021). FEMA’s Public Assistance Program: A Primer and Considerations for Congress.

⁹ National Advisory Council. (December 2021). *Report to the Administrator*.

https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/documents/fema_nac-2021-report-211216.pdf

¹⁰ Id.

¹¹ GAO. (December 2021). *Disaster Recovery: Additional Actions Needed to Identify and Address Potential Recovery Barriers*. GAO-22-104039

¹² CRS. (April 1, 2021). FEMA’s Public Assistance Program: A Primer and Considerations for Congress.

<https://sgp.fas.org/crs/homesec/R46749.pdf>

¹³ Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management. (October 27, 2021). Hearing: *Are FEMA’s Programs Adequately Designed to Assist Communities Before, During, and After Wildfire?* Testimony submitted by Casey Hatcher.

PA funds sourced through PA mitigation and the post-disaster Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) can be used by communities to build back more resiliently after a disaster.¹⁴ FEMA funds PA mitigation projects with a minimum 75 percent federal share.¹⁵ Proposed PA mitigation projects are evaluated by FEMA by considering four factors: risk reduction, cost-effectiveness, technical feasibility, and compliance with applicable laws and regulations.¹⁶ Confusion surrounds the eligible uses of PA mitigation and HMGP funds for the same project.¹⁷ FEMA's Public Assistance Program and Policy Guide states:¹⁸

"The Applicant may use both PA mitigation and HMGP mitigation funds to implement mitigation measures on the same facility, but not for the same work. The Applicant cannot use funds from one of these mitigation programs to meet the non-Federal cost share of work funded under the other mitigation program."

"Eligible PA mitigation measures are those the Applicant performs on the damaged portion(s) of the facility. If the Applicant proposes mitigation measures that are distinct and separate from the damaged portion(s) of the facility, FEMA evaluates the proposal and determines eligibility on a case-by case basis considering how the mitigation measure protects the damaged portion(s) of the facility and whether the mitigation measure is reasonable based on the extent of damage."

A survey conducted by FEMA's National Advisory Council found that PA applicants want to leverage mitigation funds.¹⁹ However, spending on mitigation through the PA program has not been consistent with the increase in spending on recovery due to the increased frequency and intensity of natural disasters.²⁰ The complexity of the PA mitigation and HMGP guidance has created an equity issue since applicants with limited resources are often unable to navigate this process.²¹ As a result, these applicants cannot build back to be more resilient, which increases their vulnerability and likelihood for repetitive loss.²²

Individual Assistance (IA)

FEMA IA programs include 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.²³ IHP is the primary FEMA program to assist disaster survivors; it covers housing needs such as home repair,

¹⁴ FEMA. (2020). *Mitigate Disaster Damage with FEMA Public Assistance*.
<https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/2020-06/fema-pa406-mitigation-brochure.pdf>

¹⁵ Id.

¹⁶ Id.

¹⁷ National Academies Press. (June 2014). *Disaster Recovery Funding: Achieving a Resilient Future?* & National Advisory Council. (December 2021). *Report to the Administrator*.

https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/documents/fema_nac-2021-report-211216.pdf

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK316517/>

¹⁸ FEMA. (June 2020). *Public Assistance and Policy Guide: Version 4*.

https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/documents/fema_papppg-v4-updated-links_policy_6-1-2020.pdf

¹⁹ National Advisory Council. (December 2021). *Report to the Administrator*.

https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/documents/fema_nac-2021-report-211216.pdf

²⁰ Id.

²¹ Id.

²² Id.

²³ FEMA. (May 2021). *Individual Assistance Program and Policy Guide (IAPPG)*.

https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/documents/fema_iapppg-1.1.pdf

limited property replacement, and rental assistance.²⁴ While FEMA's IA programs—authorized by the *Stafford Act*—are not intended to replace insurance or meet the full post-disaster needs of survivors, recent declared events have been a cause for concern regarding both denial rates for IA, as well as suspected fraudulent registrations for FEMA assistance.²⁵

In May 2021, Chairs DeFazio and Titus, along with Ranking Members Graves (MO) and Webster, sent a letter to the FEMA Administrator expressing frustration that the approval rate for IHP applications has reached an all-time low.²⁶ Following the September 2020 wildfires in Oregon, FEMA denied 70 percent of IHP assistance requests after it filtered out applications that were potentially fraudulent.²⁷ Following the 2017 and 2018 fire seasons in California, 48,856 individuals applied for IHP and about only one-fifth received some amount of assistance.²⁸

The application process for IHP has repeatedly been described as overwhelming and confusing by disaster survivors.²⁹ Applicants must navigate a series of steps before FEMA registers a decision on their application. Survivors of the December 2021 Kentucky tornadoes have told Committee staff that their IA denial letters did not clearly state the reason for a denial. Without a reason for denial, disaster survivors feel they do not have enough information to successfully navigate the appeal process.

In December 2021, GAO reported that federal recovery programs, including FEMA's IA programs, lack key information that would enable officials to identify barriers to access and disparate outcomes and establish processes to overcome such barriers and disparities.³⁰ In 2021, FEMA requested authority from the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to begin asking IA applicants for demographic information.³¹ Advocacy groups, such as the National Low Income Housing Coalition, have urged FEMA to make this data accessible to the public—once it is available.³²

²⁴ CRS. (December 5, 2019) *FEMA Individual Assistance Programs: An Overview* (R46014) <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/homesecc/R46014.pdf>.

²⁵ NPR. (July 1, 2021). *As Western Wildfires Worsen, FEMA is Denying Most People Who Ask for Help. As Climate Change Worsens Wildfires, FEMA Denies Most California, Oregon Claims* : NPR

²⁶ T&I. (May 13, 2021) *Letter to FEMA Administrator*. <https://transportation.house.gov/news/press-releases/committee-leaders-question-fema-after-approvals-for-disaster-survivor-aid-program-falls-to-all-time-low>.

²⁷ NPR. (July 1, 2021). *As Western Wildfires Worsen, FEMA is Denying Most People Who Ask for Help. As Climate Change Worsens Wildfires, FEMA Denies Most California, Oregon Claims* : NPR

²⁸ University of Pennsylvania Risk Management and Decision Processes Center. (April 16, 2020). *Wildfires and Recovery: FEMA's Individual Assistance Funding Provides Important Support – But Unfunded Damages Remain. Wildfires and Recovery: FEMA's Individual Assistance funding provides important support-but unfunded damages remain - Risk Management and Decision Processes Center (upenn.edu)*

²⁹ GAO. (October 2019). *Wildfire Disasters: FEMA Could Take Additional Actions to Address Unique Response and Recovery Challenges*.

³⁰ GAO. (December 2021). *Disaster Recovery: Additional Actions Needed to Identify and Address Potential Recovery Barriers*. GAO-22-104039.

³¹ *Id.*

³² E&E News. (December 3, 2021). *FEMA Wants to Track Race of Disaster Victims for First Time*. <https://www.eenews.net/articles/fema-wants-to-track-race-of-disaster-victims-for-first-time/>

Hazard Mitigation Assistance (HMA)

Implementing mitigation measures is a proven way to reduce the impact of natural disasters.³³ To make communities more resilient to future hazard events and minimize the financial strain of disaster recovery, this Committee has stressed that investing in mitigation efforts should be a federal priority, and established permanent authorizations for both pre- and post-disaster mitigation programs as well as funding them via calculations from response and recovery expenses from FEMA's Disaster Relief Fund.³⁴

As with FEMA's PA program, applicants have expressed difficulty navigating FEMA's mitigation grants applications, particularly small, rural, and disadvantaged communities with limited staff and resources. Communities with large tax-bases often can afford hiring professional consultants to complete successful mitigation grant applications. The Committee has received information from small, rural, and disadvantaged communities that cannot afford to hire such consultants that they do not have the fiscal resources for consultants nor the staff with enough bandwidth or expertise to write grant applications in addition to their day-to-day emergency management responsibilities. FEMA's own summary of stakeholder feedback for its Building Resilient Infrastructure Communities (BRIC) grants quoted subgrantees that said the BRIC grant was, "too hard and not worth the time and effort to apply."³⁵

Removing barriers and simplifying the mitigation assistance process will make FEMA's programs more equitable and communities more resilient. Unprecedented investments across FEMA's HMA suite—\$500 million for BRIC and \$3.5 billion for Flood Mitigation Assistance (FMA) as part of the recently enacted *Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act* (IIJA, Pub. L. 117-58), as well as the president's approval of some Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) assistance for COVID-19 major disaster declarations—make reforming the mitigation grant process a timely issue.³⁶

Workforce Challenges

FEMA's workforce is divided into 23 cadres that are organized by responsibilities of work.³⁷ Each cadre is composed of permanent full-time (PFT) workers, Cadre of On-Call Response Recovery Employees (CORE), and Reservists.³⁸ PFTs are full-time workers eligible for career tenure.³⁹ CORE employees are hired to work for a period of two to four years; their positions may be renewed if disaster work is ongoing at the end of the term and funding is available from the

³³ GAO. (February 2021). *FEMA Should Take Additional Steps to Streamline Hazard Mitigation Grants and Assess Program Effects*, GAO-21-140,

³⁴ Robert T. *Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act* (*Stafford Act*, P.L. 93-288, as amended), Sections 203, 404, 404(d).

³⁵ FEMA ((March 2020). *Summary of Stakeholder Feedback: Building Resilient Infrastructure Communities (BRIC)*. https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/2020-06/fema_bric-summary-of-stakeholder-feedback-report.pdf

³⁶ CRS.(November 16, 2021). *Recent Funding Increases for FEMA Mitigation Assistance*. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IN/IN11733>

³⁷ <https://www.fema.gov/careers/position-types/cadres>

³⁸ Id.

³⁹ Id.

Disaster Relief Fund.⁴⁰ Reservists serve on an on-call basis and assist disaster survivors and first responders on the site of major disasters.⁴¹

FEMA's PFT workforce volume has remained steady over time. The volume of CORE and Reservist employees has increased by approximately 30 percent since 2018.⁴² However, in January 2022, a FEMA panel told the GAO that the agency is still struggling to adequately address its workload.⁴³ Every major disaster declaration adds to FEMA's backlog of work; presently, the agency is actively managing more than 1,000 incidents.⁴⁴

Workforce challenges impact FEMA's ability to successfully fulfill its mission. The GAO has reported that workforce-related issues has impacted the quality of recovery services in Puerto Rico; high turnover rates among employees responsible for overseeing PA projects has created unnecessary confusion according to municipal and Commonwealth of Puerto Rico agency officials.⁴⁵ Low morale and inadequate training within FEMA's call centers prevented employees from adequately assisting survivors seeking IA following the catastrophic 2017 and 2018 hurricane seasons.⁴⁶ Most recently, burnout and low morale have made it challenging for FEMA's workforce to implement the COVID-19 funeral assistance program.⁴⁷

In January 2022, the GAO identified three factors limiting FEMA's workforce readiness:⁴⁸

- **Staffing shortages:** The 2017 and 2018 disaster seasons resulted in the deployment of over 10,000 FEMA personnel. A workforce shortage existed when the disaster season began and 18 of 23 cadres operated with staffing levels that were 25 percent lower than full capacity. Additionally, nearly 50 percent of FEMA reservists declined deployments to certain disasters citing burnout and poor working conditions in the field. GAO expressed concern that FEMA may be unable to manage a catastrophic natural disaster because of its workforce shortages.⁴⁹
- **Workforce Qualifications:** FEMA's qualification and training processes have not adequately kept pace with need. Field leaders have told GAO that new hires do not have the training necessary to fulfill their duties during deployments.⁵⁰
- **Staff Development:** Reservists make up 35 percent of FEMA's workforce during a disaster deployment. Reservists have reported that they often receive training to fulfill their duties on the

⁴⁰ Id.

⁴¹ Id.

⁴² Federal News Network. (January 26, 2022). *FEMA Suffering Staffing Shortages and Natural Disasters Intensify*. <https://federalnewsnetwork.com/agency-oversight/2022/01/fema-suffering-staffing-shortages-as-natural-disasters-intensify/>

⁴³ Id.

⁴⁴ Id.

⁴⁵ GAO. (January 2022). *FEMA Workforce: Long-Standing Challenges and New Challenges Could Affect Mission Success*. GAO-22-105631

⁴⁶ Id.

⁴⁷ Washington Post. (December 2021). "My Sincere Condolences." <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2021/12/21/fema-covid-funeral-assistance/>

⁴⁸ GAO. (January 20, 2022). *FEMA Workforce: Long Standing and New Challenges Could Affect Mission Success*. GAO-22-105631.

⁴⁹ Id.

⁵⁰ Id.

job site; they are unable to receive compensation for participating in training programs prior to a disaster deployment. FEMA hired 3,200 Reservists from June 2017 to May 2019; these new hires now make up 40 percent of the Reservist work force. Lack of adequate training, increased frequency of disasters, a workplace culture that contributes to harassment and discrimination, and few benefits have negatively impacted workplace morale and retention.⁵¹

Conclusion

Given the recent intensity and frequency of natural disasters, it is critical that FEMA make reforms to improve its mitigation and recovery programs. Improvements to FEMA's workforce will enable the agency to better assist disaster stakeholders and survivors. The GAO has provided numerous recommendations to FEMA (see supplementary information) regarding reforms that may rectify FEMA's current shortcomings—many of which remain outstanding.

⁵¹ Id.

WITNESS LIST

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Supplementary Information

The following are GAO recommendations to FEMA marked as ‘open’:

Disaster Recovery: Additional Actions Needed to Identify and Address Potential Recovery Barriers. (December 2021)⁵²

- The FEMA Administrator should, in coordination with the SBA Associate Administrator of the Office of Disaster Assistance and the HUD Assistant Secretary for Community Planning and Development, develop, with input from key recovery partners, and implement an interagency plan to help ensure the availability and use of quality information that includes (1) information requirements, (2) data sources and methods, and (3) strategies for overcoming information challenges – to support federal agencies involved in disaster recovery in identifying access barriers and disparate outcomes.
- The FEMA Administrator should coordinate with the SBA Associate Administrator of the Office of Disaster Assistance and the HUD Assistant Secretary for Community Planning and Development to design and establish routine processes to be used within and across federal disaster recovery programs to address identified access barriers and disparate outcomes on an ongoing basis.

COVID-19: Additional Actions Needed to Improve Accountability and Program Effectiveness of Federal Response. (October 2021)⁵³

- The FEMA Administrator should improve the consistency of the agency's interpretation and application of the COVID-19 Public Assistance policy within and across regions by further clarifying and communicating eligibility requirements nationwide. See the FEMA's Disaster Relief Fund and Assistance to state, local, Tribal, and territorial Governments enclosure.
- The FEMA Administrator should require the agency's Public Assistance Program employees in the regions and at its Consolidated Resource Centers to attend training on changes to COVID-19 Public Assistance policy to help ensure it is interpreted and applied consistently nationwide. See the FEMA's Disaster Relief Fund and Assistance to state, local, Tribal, and territorial Governments enclosure.
- The FEMA Administrator should direct the Head of Contracting Activity to establish a formal process to (1) collect contracting lessons learned from COVID-19 and future emergency response efforts; and (2) ensure contracting lessons learned are shared with the Continuous Improvement Program for inclusion in FEMA's formal lessons learned process to inform FEMA's contracting efforts in response to ongoing and future emergencies.

⁵² GAO. (December 2021). *Disaster Recovery: Additional Actions Needed to Identify and Address Potential Recovery Barriers*. GAO-22-104039

⁵³ GAO. (October 2021). *COVID-19: Additional Actions Needed to Improve Accountability and Program Effectiveness of Federal Response*. GAO-22-105051

Puerto Rico Recovery: FEMA Made Progress in Improving Projects but Should Identify and Assess Risks to the Recovery. (May 2021)⁵⁴

- The FEMA Administrator should, in coordination with the Government of Puerto Rico and relevant federal agencies, identify and assess the risks to the remainder of Puerto Rico's recovery, including internal and external factors, such as Puerto Rico's capacity to carry out projects.
- The FEMA Administrator should, in coordination with the Government of Puerto Rico and relevant federal agencies, identify potential actions to manage the risks to the remainder of Puerto Rico's recovery and continuously monitor risks.

COVID-19: Sustained Federal Action is Crucial as Pandemic Enters Its Second Year. (March 2021)⁵⁵

- The FEMA Administrator should adhere to the agency's protocols listed in its updated 2019 Tribal Consultation Policy by obtaining Tribal input via the four phases of the Tribal consultation process when developing new policies and procedures related to COVID-19 assistance.
- The FEMA Administrator should provide timely and consistent technical assistance to support tribal governments' efforts to request and receive Public Assistance as direct recipients, including providing additional personnel, if necessary, to ensure that Tribal nations are able to effectively respond to COVID-19.

Disaster Resilience: FEMA Should Take Additional Steps to Streamline Hazard Grants and Assess Programs Effects. (February 2021)⁵⁶

- The FEMA Administrator should establish a plan with time frames to develop pre-calculated benefits for additional project types, where appropriate.
- The FEMA Administrator should establish a plan with time frames to assess PA, HMGP, FMA, and BRIC hazard mitigation grant processes to identify and implement steps to reduce the complexity of and time required for grant applications, including steps to facilitate the use of funding from more than one FEMA mitigation grant program on a project.
- The FEMA Administrator should create a centralized inventory of hazard mitigation resources on the FEMA website.
- The FEMA Administrator should develop a plan for conducting future loss avoidance studies to ensure they can include more hazard types.

⁵⁴ GAO. (May 2021). *Puerto Rico Recovery: FEMA Made Progress in Improving Projects but Should Identify and Assess Risks to the Recovery*. GAO-21-264

⁵⁵ GAO. (March 2021). *COVID-19: Sustained Federal Action is Crucial as Pandemic Enters Its Second Year*. GAO-21-387

⁵⁶ GAO. (February 2021). *Disaster Resilience: FEMA Should Take Additional Steps to Streamline Hazard Grants and Assess Programs Effects*. GAO-21-140

- The FEMA Administrator should ensure that as new methods and metrics to assess the effectiveness of hazard mitigation are developed, FEMA officials consider opportunities to adopt common methods and metrics across all of its hazard mitigation programs.
- The FEMA Administrator should publicly share pre-calculated benefits studies and state developed records of effectiveness, such as by posting them to its website.
- The FEMA Administrator should assess the need for an agency-wide consolidated standard operating procedures document for the HMGP that provides detailed information on the roles and responsibilities, requirements, and key tasks and milestones for monitoring and closing out program projects.

2018 Pacific Island Disasters: Federal Actions Helped Facilitate the Response, But FEMA Needs to Address Long-Term Recovery Challenges. (February 2021)⁵⁷

- The FEMA Administrator should consider the unique challenges of recovery missions for large-scale disaster in U.S. insular and other remote areas to establish appropriate timeliness goals for the pre-award phase of the Public Assistance program specific to these types of disasters.
- The FEMA Administrator should use data relating to the timeliness of completing various steps of the pre-award phase of the Public Assistance program to help identify and address any inefficiencies occurring during this phase of the program.
- The FEMA Administrator should develop guidance to streamline the process to assist direct housing applicants with proof of residency and proof of ownership requirements in those locations, such as in insular areas, where the nature of housing may otherwise result in processing delays due to the volume of required waivers or modifications to these requirements.
- The FEMA Administrator should incorporate lessons learned from earlier Permanent Housing Construction missions and address long-standing issues, such as the lack of architecture and engineering services in its existing contracts, in guidance that outlines necessary steps to better plan for and implement the Permanent Housing Construction program in insular and other remote areas.

Disaster Housing: Improved Cost Data and Guidance Would Aid FEMA Activation Decisions. (December 2020)⁵⁸

- The FEMA Administrator should identify and make changes to the applicable data system to capture cost data, including administrative costs for each of its housing assistance programs that will allow the agency to analyze the full cost of providing assistance under each program.

⁵⁷ GAO. (February 2021). *2018 Pacific Island Disasters: Federal Actions Helped Facilitate the Response, But FEMA Needs to Address Long-Term Recovery Challenges*. GAO-21-91

⁵⁸ GAO. (December 2020). *Disaster Housing: Improved Cost Data and Guidance Would Aid FEMA Activation Decisions*. GAO-21-116

- The FEMA Administrator should specify the information needed to compare the projected costs of each direct housing program in its guidance for assessing which programs to activate.

Disaster Assistance: Additional Actions Needed to Strengthen FEMA’s Individuals and Households Program. (September 2020)⁵⁹

- The FEMA Administrator should improve the completeness and consistency of its communication of the requirement to apply for an SBA disaster loan prior to being considered for SBA-dependent other needs assistance.
- The FEMA Administrator should assess the extent to which its process for determining an applicant's eligibility for SBA-dependent other needs assistance limits or prevents survivors' access to IHP assistance, and work with SBA to identify options to simplify and streamline the disaster assistance application process for survivors.
- The FEMA Administrator should improve the IHP award determination letters by using federal guidance and best practices for communicating with the public to ensure that applicants understand that an "ineligible" determination does not mean they cannot continue to pursue assistance.
- The FEMA Administrator should identify and implement strategies to provide additional information to applicants about how FEMA determined their eligibility for assistance and the amount of assistance to award.
- The FEMA Administrator should identify and implement strategies to provide readily accessible information and resources, such as guidance and training, about the Individuals and Households Program to state, local, Tribal, and territorial officials.
- The FEMA Administrator should correct and refine the methodology used to survey survivor experiences with the IHP by (1) weighting the survey data to reflect the stratification of its survey design, (2) adjusting the base sampling weights for survey nonresponse within each stratum, and (3) calculating the sampling error for the survey data after adjusting the base sampling weights for nonresponse.
- The FEMA Administrator should complete the following key process improvement activities as part of its effort to redesign the Individual Assistance Program: (1) engage with additional program customers and stakeholders to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of their needs; (2) assess performance gaps between current processes and customer and stakeholder needs, and develop measurable and achievable improvement goals to address any identified performance gaps; and (3) prioritize the processes that need improvement based on documented selection criteria.

⁵⁹ GAO. (September 2020). *Disaster Assistance: Additional Actions Needed to Strengthen FEMA’s Individuals and Households Program*. GAO-20-503

- The FEMA Administrator should establish time frames for finalizing the Individual Assistance Division's draft strategic plan and developing implementation plans that integrate its IHP improvement efforts.
- The FEMA Administrator should use desirable characteristics of employee engagement—including performance feedback, career development, communication, and attention to work-life balance—while completing planned activities for improving morale among call center staff.
- The FEMA Administrator should use desirable characteristics of employee engagement—including performance feedback, career development, communication, and attention to work-life balance—when assessing NPSC staff satisfaction scores and identifying additional steps to strengthen employee morale.
- The FEMA Administrator should assess the effectiveness of the IHP training and support for NPSC staff during surge events and implement any necessary changes.
- The FEMA Administrator should identify and implement strategies to help ensure staff deployed to Disaster Recovery Centers (DRC) have the needed skills and capabilities to provide support and consistent service to survivors.

Disaster Assistance: FEMA Should Take Additional Actions to Strengthen Fraud Risk Management for Public Assistance Emergency Work Grants. (September 2020)⁶⁰

- The FEMA Administrator should plan and conduct regular fraud risk assessments of PA emergency work grants to determine a fraud risk profile that aligns with leading practices as provided in the Fraud Risk Framework. Specifically, this process should include (1) identifying inherent fraud risks to PA grant funds, (2) assessing the likelihood and impact of inherent fraud risks, (3) determining fraud risk tolerance, (4) examining the suitability of existing fraud controls, and (5) documenting the fraud risk profile.
- The FEMA Administrator should designate one entity as the lead entity with responsibility for providing oversight of agency-wide efforts to manage fraud risks to PA emergency work grants, including managing the fraud risk assessment process, consistent with leading practices.
- The FEMA Administrator should update key training and guidance documents for the PA grant program to include information on where and how to report suspected fraud, and direct PA recipients to include such information in key training and guidance documents they provide to subrecipients.

⁶⁰ GAO. (September 2020). *Disaster Assistance: FEMA Should Take Additional Actions to Strengthen Fraud Risk Management for Public Assistance Emergency Work Grants*. GAO-20-604

- The FEMA Administrator should update key resources, such as training and guidance documents, FEMA makes available to PA applicants to ensure these resources consistently communicate information on the highest fraud risks to PA emergency work grant funds and applicants' responsibilities for managing those risks. The highest fraud risks may include risks related to procurement and debris removal, and other risks FEMA identifies through fraud risk assessments.
- The FEMA Administrator should implement program-specific antifraud training for PA staff who work directly with PA applicants; this training should include information on the highest fraud risks to PA emergency work grants. The highest fraud risks may include risks related to procurement and debris removal, and other risks FEMA identifies through fraud risk assessments.

FEMA Disaster Workforce: Actions Needed to Address Deployment and Staff Development Challenges. (May 2020)⁶¹

- The FEMA Administrator should develop a plan—with time frames and milestones and input from field leadership—to address identified challenges that have hindered FEMA's ability to provide reliable and complete information to field leaders and managers about staff knowledge, skills, and abilities.
- The FEMA Administrator should develop mechanisms, including collecting relevant data, to assess how effectively FEMA's disaster workforce was deployed to meet mission needs in the field.
- The FEMA Administrator should create a staff development program for FEMA's disaster workforce that, at a minimum, addresses access to training, delivery of on-the-job training and mentoring, use of performance evaluations, and consistent developmental opportunities regardless of deployment status.

Disaster Assistance: FEMA Action Needed to Better Support Individuals Who Are Older or Have Disabilities. (May 2019)⁶²

- The FEMA Administrator should communicate to Regional Administrators and Regional Disability Integration Specialists a written plan for implementing its new disability integration staffing approach, consistent with the objectives established for disability integration. Such a plan should include an implementation timeline and details on staff responsibilities, which regions could use to evaluate staff performance.
- The FEMA Administrator should develop a plan for delivering training to FEMA staff that promotes competency in disability awareness. The plan should include milestones and performance measures, and outline how performance will be monitored.

⁶¹ GAO. (May 2020). *FEMA Disaster Workforce: Actions Needed to Address Deployment and Staff Development Challenges*. GAO-20-360

⁶² GAO. (May 2019). *Disaster Assistance: FEMA Action Needed to Better Support Individuals Who Are Older or Have Disabilities*. GAO-19-318

- The FEMA Administrator should develop and publicize guidance for partners working to assist individuals who are older or have disabilities for requesting data and working with FEMA staff throughout the data sharing process to obtain Individual Assistance data, as appropriate.

Disaster Contracting: Actions Needed to Improve the Use of Post Disaster Contracts to Support Response and Recovery. (April 2019)⁶³

- The FEMA Administrator should take the lead to work together with the Coast Guard and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to revise the mission assignment policy and related guidance to better incorporate consideration of contracting needs, such as demobilization, and to ensure clear communication of coordination responsibilities related to contracting.
- The FEMA Administrator should assess its workforce needs—including staffing levels, mission needs, and skill gaps—for contracting staff, to include regional offices and DART; and develop a plan, including timelines, to address any gaps.

Disaster Recovery: Additional Actions Would Improve Data Quality and Timeliness of FEMA's Public Assistance Appeals Processing. (December 2017)⁶⁴

- The Assistant Administrator for Recovery should develop a detailed workforce plan that documents steps for hiring, training, and retaining key appeals staff. The plan should also address staff transitions resulting from deployments to disasters.

Federal Disaster Assistance: Improved Criteria Needed to Assess a Jurisdiction's Capability to Respond and Recovery on Its Own. (September 2012)⁶⁵

- To increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the process for disaster declarations, the FEMA Administrator should develop and implement a methodology that provides a more comprehensive assessment of a jurisdiction's capability to respond to and recover from a disaster without federal assistance. This should include one or more measures of a jurisdiction's fiscal capacity, such as TTR, and consideration of the jurisdiction's response and recovery capabilities. If FEMA continues to use the PA per capita indicator to assist in identifying a jurisdiction's capabilities to respond to and recover from a disaster, it should adjust the indicator to accurately reflect the annual changes in the U.S. economy since 1986, when the current indicator was first adopted for use. In addition, implementing the adjustment by raising the indicator in steps over several years would give jurisdictions more time to plan for and adjust to the change.

⁶³ GAO. (April 2019). *Disaster Contracting: Actions Needed to Improve the Use of Post Disaster Contracts to Support Response and Recovery*. GAO-19-281

⁶⁴ GAO. (December 2017). *Disaster Recovery: Additional Actions Would Improve Data Quality and Timeliness of FEMA's Public Assistance Appeals Processing*. GAO-18-143

⁶⁵ GAO. (September 2012). *Federal Disaster Assistance: Improved Criteria Needed to Assess a Jurisdiction's Capability to Respond and Recovery on Its Own*. GAO-12-838