



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

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Katherine W. Dedrick
Staff Director

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April 1, 2022

SUMMARY OF SUBJECT MATTER

TO: Members, Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and
Emergency Management
FROM: Subcommittee Staff
RE: Subcommittee Hearing on “FEMA Priorities for 2022 and the 2022-2026 Strategic
Plan”

PURPOSE

The Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management will meet on Tuesday, April 5, 2022, at 10:00 a.m. in 2167 Rayburn House Office Building and via Zoom, to receive testimony from the Honorable Deanne Criswell, Administrator of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) regarding “FEMA Priorities for 2022 and the 2022-2026 Strategic Plan.”

BACKGROUND

Developments Since Subcommittee’s Last Hearing with the FEMA Administrator

The subcommittee last received testimony from Administrator Deanne Criswell on June 23, 2021.¹ There have been many notable developments since that hearing, including:

- On August 5, 2021, President Biden approved a more than \$3.26 billion increase for the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP)², which was authorized by COVID-19 major disaster declarations.³ The approval makes states eligible for HMGP funds with a 75 percent

¹ Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management. (June 23, 2021). Hearing: *FEMA’s Priorities for FY22 and Beyond: Coordinating Mission, Vision, and Budget*.

² 42 U.S.C. 5170c.

³ FEMA. (August 5, 2021). *Biden Administration Commits Historic \$3.46 Billion in Hazard Mitigation Funds to Reduce the Effects of Climate Change*. Available at <https://www.fema.gov/press-release/20210805/biden-administration-commits-historic-346-billion-hazard-mitigation-funds>

federal share that equal 4 percent of their COVID-19 disaster costs.⁴ This one-time investment represents a 23 percent increase in HMGP funding made available for declared disasters since the program's inception in 1988;⁵

- On September 2, 2021, FEMA announced it will now accept additional forms of documentation to verify the occupancy and ownership requirements of disaster survivors seeking Individual Assistance (IA).⁶ The policy change has made IA more accessible to underserved communities and homeowners that do not have access to a deed or formal proof of homeownership.⁷ The agency will also now provide Other Needs Assistance (ONA) grants to qualifying homeowners and renters that sustained real property damage but did not render their home uninhabitable; revise inspection procedures and training to better identify and address disaster caused mold; and expanded assistance for disaster caused disability;⁸
- On October 1, 2021, FEMA implemented the first round of policy updates as part of the agency's Risk Rating 2.0 initiative, which will reform the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP).⁹ The updated program will offer more equitable and risk informed rates that consider climate change and the cost to rebuild a structure when calculating flood insurance premiums;¹⁰
- On October 28, 2021, FEMA created the Climate Adaptation Enterprise Steering Group that will focus on developing a unified agency approach to address the impacts of climate change across all agency programs and operations.¹¹ This includes continued implementation of the Federal Flood Risk Management Standard (FFRMS) for all federal investments; and¹²
- On March 15, 2022, FEMA's funeral assistance for COVID-19 topped \$2 billion and supported over 300,000 applicants.¹³ FEMA also announced the launch of an outreach campaign to spread awareness regarding the funeral assistance program in communities with high COVID-19 death rates and low funeral assistance application rates.¹⁴

⁴ Id.

⁵ Id.

⁶ FEMA. (September 2, 2021). *FEMA Makes Changes to Individual Assistance Policies to Advance Equity for Disaster Survivors*. Available at [FEMA Makes Changes to Individual Assistance Policies to Advance Equity for Disaster Survivors | FEMA.gov](https://www.fema.gov/fema-makes-changes-to-individual-assistance-policies-to-advance-equity-for-disaster-survivors)

⁷ Washington Post. (September 2, 2021). *FEMA Changes Policy that Kept Thousands of Black Families from Receiving Disaster Aid*. Available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2021/09/02/fema-policy-change/>

⁸ FEMA. (September 2, 2021). *FEMA Makes Changes to Individual Assistance Policies to Advance Equity for Disaster Survivors*. Available at [FEMA Makes Changes to Individual Assistance Policies to Advance Equity for Disaster Survivors | FEMA.gov](https://www.fema.gov/fema-makes-changes-to-individual-assistance-policies-to-advance-equity-for-disaster-survivors)

⁹ FEMA. (September 24, 2021). *FEMA Offers More Equitable Flood Insurance Rates Beginning Oct. 1*. Available at [FEMA Offers More Equitable Flood Insurance Rates Beginning Oct. 1 | FEMA.gov](https://www.fema.gov/fema-offers-more-equitable-flood-insurance-rates-beginning-oct-1)

¹⁰ Id.

¹¹ FEMA. (October 28, 2021). *FEMA Announces Initial Initiatives to Advance Climate Change Resilience*. Available at [FEMA Announces Initial Initiatives to Advance Climate Change Resilience | FEMA.gov](https://www.fema.gov/fema-announces-initial-initiatives-to-advance-climate-change-resilience)

¹² Id.

¹³ FEMA. (March 15, 2022). *FEMA Tops \$2 Billion of COVID-19 Funeral Assistance, Announces New Campaign to Increase Program Awareness*. Available at <https://www.fema.gov/press-release/20220315/fema-tops-2-billion-covid-19-funeral-assistance-announces-new-campaign>

¹⁴ Id.

FEMA's 2022-2026 Strategic Plan

Every four years FEMA publishes a strategic plan to outline the agency's vision and identify three goals to address challenges. FEMA engaged with a diverse range of stakeholders, including Tribes, FEMA employees, and external partners to develop the 2022-2026 Strategic Plan.¹⁵ FEMA collected public input through a Climate and Equity Request for Information.¹⁶ Upon review of the feedback, Administrator Criswell identified the following goals as FEMA's priorities for 2022-2026.¹⁷

Goal 1: Instill Equity as a Foundation of Emergency Management

The *Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act* (*Stafford Act*, P.L. 93-288, as amended) requires FEMA assistance to be delivered in an equitable manner without discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, nationality, sex, age, disability, language accessibility, or economic status.¹⁸ The Strategic Plan recognizes that FEMA's programs are not being implemented equitably and asserts that the agency will work to achieve equity.¹⁹ To meet this objective, FEMA plans to curate a workforce that reflects the nation's diversity, remove barriers to FEMA programs so that they can be effectively accessed and leveraged by underserved communities, and allocate resources to eliminate disparate program outcomes.²⁰ FEMA's Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) and Flood Mitigation Assistance (FMA) were selected during the interim implementation stage for Biden Administration's pilot Justice 40 Initiative, which aims to provide at least 40 percent of program benefits to disadvantaged communities.²¹

Goal 2: Lead the Whole Community in Climate Resilience

Climate change and the increasing frequency and severity of natural disasters impacted an already prolonged amount of time it takes for communities to recover from a disaster.²² FEMA plans to make the whole emergency management community more climate literate and resilient by building a foundational understanding of climate science and climate adaptation strategies, developing tools to anticipate climate risk, allocating resources informed by future risk estimates, and targeting investments to build resilience and enhance equity.²³ The Strategic Plan highlights that building to modern hazard resistant codes and standards is also key to avoiding future losses.²⁴

Existing grant programs at FEMA help communities adapt to climate change and increase resilience including the BRIC program, which was allocated \$1 billion in funding in 2021, and the

¹⁵ FEMA. (December 2021). *2022-2016 FEMA Strategic Plan: Building the FEMA our Nation Needs and Deserves*. Available at https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/documents/fema_2022-2026-strategic-plan.pdf

¹⁶ Federal Register. (April 22, 2021). Request for Information on FEMA Programs, Regulations, and Policies. Available at <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2021/04/22/2021-08444/request-for-information-on-fema-programs-regulations-and-policies>

¹⁷ Id.

¹⁸ 42 U.S.C. § 5121 et seq.

¹⁹ FEMA. (December 2021). *2022-2016 FEMA Strategic Plan: Building the FEMA our Nation Needs and Deserves*. Available at https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/documents/fema_2022-2026-strategic-plan.pdf

²⁰ Id.

²¹ FEMA. (August 2021). *Where Equity Fits into the BRIC/FMA Program Design and Community Resilience*. Available at https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/documents/fema_equity-webinar-final_8-17-21.pdf

²² National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), "Billion-Dollar Weather and Climate Disasters: Events." Available at: <https://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/billions/events>.

²³ FEMA. (August 2021). *Where Equity Fits into the BRIC/FMA Program Design and Community Resilience*. Available at https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/documents/fema_equity-webinar-final_8-17-21.pdf

²⁴ Id.

Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP), which received an additional \$3.46 billion in funding in 2021 due to the major disaster declarations issued for COVID-19.²⁵

Goal 3: Promote and Sustain a Ready FEMA and Prepared Nation

The new frequency and intensity of natural disasters has stressed FEMA’s workforce.²⁶ The change in tempo was marked by the 2017 hurricane and wildfire seasons and has kept pace due to the nationwide COVID-19 major disaster declaration and other major hazard events such as the 2020 wildfire season and Hurricane Ida in 2021.²⁷ Prior to the 2017 disaster season FEMA was managing 26 emergency and major disaster declarations; by November 2020 it was managing 166 emergency and major disaster declarations.²⁸ To meet this challenge, FEMA plans to increase capacity at the community level by implementing revised training initiatives, recruiting a more diverse FEMA workforce, developing a comprehensive readiness framework, and improving interagency coordination to streamline the delivery of disaster assistance.²⁹

Summary of FEMA Stakeholder Priorities for 2022:

On February 16, 2022, the Committee received testimony from emergency management stakeholders and the Government Accountability Office (GAO) during the hearing titled “FEMA priorities for 2022: Stakeholder Perspectives.”³⁰ The Committee received testimony from 16 additional stakeholder for the hearing record. The testimony provided recommendations to FEMA regarding all four phases of emergency management: mitigation, planning, response, and recovery.

Testimony submitted by the National Emergency Management Association (NEMA) underscored that FEMA’s programs, policies, and response strategies have not kept pace with the heightened threat of wildfire exacerbated by climate change and an expanding wildland urban interface.³¹ Testimony submitted by the International Association of Emergency Managers (IAEM) praised FEMA’s priorities for the 2022-2026 Strategic plan and reiterated the need to consider equity in all FEMA programs.³²

GAO’s testimony identified four areas for improvement within FEMA: workforce management, long-term recovery, potential barriers to assistance and disparate recovery outcomes, and disaster resilience and mitigation.³³ GAO identified these priority areas using evidence it has gathered while drafting reports and recommendations during the 2015-2022 period.³⁴

²⁵ CRS. (March 23, 2022). Recent Funding Increases for FEMA Hazard Mitigation Assistance. Available at <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IN/IN11733>

²⁶ FEMA. (December 2021). *2022-2016 FEMA Strategic Plan: Building the FEMA our Nation Needs and Deserves*. Available at https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/documents/fema_2022-2026-strategic-plan.pdf

²⁷ Id.

²⁸ Id.

²⁹ Id.

³⁰ Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management. (February 16, 2022). Hearing: *FEMA Priorities for 2022: Stakeholder Perspectives*.

³¹ Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management. (February 16, 2022). Hearing: *FEMA Priorities for 2022: Stakeholder Perspectives*. Testimony submitted by Erica Bornemann.

³² Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management. (February 16, 2022). Hearing: *FEMA Priorities for 2022: Stakeholder Perspectives*. Testimony submitted by Carolyn Harshman.

³³ Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management. (February 16, 2022). Hearing: *FEMA Priorities for 2022: Stakeholder Perspectives*. Testimony submitted by Chris Currie.

³⁴ Id.

To improve workforce management, GAO recommends FEMA address staffing shortages, implement new training initiatives to produce a more qualified workforce, and expand its contracting workforce to improve the quality of recovery efforts.³⁵

GAO asserted that FEMA's recovery programs are complex and slow to provide post-disaster assistance.³⁶ To improve recovery programs for communities and survivors, GAO recommends FEMA reconsider its Public Assistance (PA) reimbursement model, which most often requires state, local, Tribal, and territorial governments to provide upfront funding for recovery projects and seek reimbursement at a later date. This reimbursement model is a recovery barrier for communities that lack the upfront funds.³⁷ *Stafford* Sec. 428 authorizes FEMA to develop alternative procedures for PA for state, local, Tribal, territorial, or non-profit applicants and provide upfront funding for recovery projects based on a fixed-cost estimate.³⁸ However, the GAO's testimony reported that communities utilizing the alternative procedures authorized by *Stafford* Sec. 428 find the process of developing fixed-cost estimates to be difficult and lengthy.³⁹

GAO also recommended that FEMA consider equity across all its programs by identifying potential disaster recovery access barriers and disparate outcomes, prioritizing flood map investments for vulnerable populations, and developing specialized disaster assistance for older and disabled individuals. To address equity challenges in FEMA's IA Program, GAO recommends the agency simplify the Individual Housing Program (IHP) application process and make it more accessible to low-income and vulnerable populations.⁴⁰

Finally, to build resilience prior to disaster and reduce the need for complex recovery efforts, GAO recommends that FEMA update flood maps and flood risk products.⁴¹ To ensure all small, rural, and underserved communities can access hazard mitigation grant funds, GAO recommends that FEMA reduce the complexity and length of hazard mitigation grant applications.⁴²

CONCLUSION

FEMA has been tested in recent years by COVID-19 and by disasters that are becoming more costly and frequent.⁴³ The FEMA Administrator leads the federal government's crisis management agency during a time of overlapping management and mission challenges. This hearing provides the subcommittee an opportunity to hear directly from Administrator Criswell how the administration will achieve the Strategic Plan goals and meet these challenges.

³⁵ Id.

³⁶ Id.

³⁷ Id.

³⁸ Section 428, *Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act (Stafford Act)* P.L. 93-288, as amended)

³⁹ Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management. (February 16, 2022). Hearing: *FEMA Priorities for 2022: Stakeholder Perspectives*. Testimony submitted by Chris Currie.

⁴⁰ Id.

⁴¹ Id.

⁴² Id.

⁴³ National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), "Billion-Dollar Weather and Climate Disasters: Events." Available at: <https://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/billions/events>.

WITNESS LIST

The Honorable Deanne Criswell
Administrator
Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)
U.S. Department of Homeland Security