



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

Sam Graves
Chairman

Jack Ruddy, Staff Director

Rick Larsen
Ranking Member

Katherine W. Dedrick, Democratic Staff Director

May 12, 2023

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 “*The Impacts of FEMA’s Strategic Plan on Disaster
Preparedness and Response*”

I. PURPOSE

The Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management will meet on Wednesday, May 17, 2023, at 10:00 a.m. ET in 2167 of the Rayburn House Office Building to receive testimony on “*The Impacts of FEMA’s Strategic Plan on Disaster Preparedness and Response*.” The hearing will examine the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s (FEMA’s) Strategic Plan (2022-2026), its goals, and how it impacts FEMA’s mission and disaster preparedness and response. At the hearing, Members will receive testimony from FEMA, and the Government Accountability Office (GAO).

II. BACKGROUND

Federal Assistance for Disasters

FEMA is the Federal Government’s lead agency in 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. 93-288, as

¹ See FEMA, 2022-2026 FEMA STRATEGIC PLAN: BUILDING THE FEMA OUR NATION NEEDS AND DESERVES 4–5 (2021), available at https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/documents/fema_2022-2026-strategic-plan.pdf [hereinafter STRATEGIC PLAN].

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

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 and the affected local governments,”⁴ the Governor of the affected state may request the President declare a major disaster.⁵ FEMA’s primary *Stafford Act* programs for disaster recovery in the aftermath of a major disaster are the Public Assistance Program and the Individual Assistance Program.⁶ Following a major disaster declaration, FEMA also provides Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) funds.⁷

The Public Assistance Program, authorized primarily by Sections 406 and 428 of the *Stafford Act*, reimburses state, tribal, and territorial governments as well as certain private non-profits for rebuilding damaged public infrastructure.⁸ The Public Assistance Program does not provide direct assistance to citizens for private property damage. The Federal cost-share for Public Assistance is 75 percent but may be increased by the President.⁹

The Individual Assistance Program is authorized primarily by Section 408 of the *Stafford Act*. The Individual Assistance 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.¹⁰ The current limits for IHP assistance is \$37,900 for housing assistance and \$37,900 for other needs assistance.¹¹

Section 404 of the *Stafford Act* authorizes HMGP which is based on a percentage of Public Assistance funding. HMGP provides grants to state, tribal, and territorial governments to fund mitigation projects that: (1) are cost effective and (2) reduce the risk of future damage, hardship, and loss from natural hazards.¹² The purpose of this grant program is to fund practical

² *Stafford Act*, Pub. L. No. 93-288, 88 Stat. 143.

³ *Id.*

⁴ 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.

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ See FEMA, *Assistance for Governments and Private Non-Profits After a Disaster* (Feb. 23, 2023), available at <https://www.fema.gov/assistance/public>.

⁹ 42 U.S.C. § 5172.

¹⁰ FEMA, *Individuals and Households Program* (Feb. 3, 2023), available at <https://www.fema.gov/assistance/individual/program>.

¹¹ 42 U.S.C. § 5174

¹² FEMA, *Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP)* (Dec. 27, 2022), available at <https://www.fema.gov/grants/mitigation/hazard-mitigation>.

mitigation measures that effectively reduce the risk of loss of life and property from future disasters.¹³ For example, state, tribal, and territorial governments may use their HMGP funds to help families reduce natural disaster risk to their homes.¹⁴ 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).¹⁵

The Disaster Recovery Reform Act of 2018 (DRRA)

On October 5, 2018, the President signed the *Disaster Recovery Reform Act (DRRA)*; P.L. 115-254) into law.¹⁶ *DRRA* addresses the rising costs of disasters in the United States and reformed Federal disaster programs to ensure communities are better prepared for future hazards such as hurricanes, flooding, earthquakes, and wildfires. The intent of this legislation was to improve pre-disaster planning and mitigation in order to reduce future loss of life and the rising costs of disasters through investment. FEMA implemented the key pre-disaster mitigation provision of *DRRA* as the Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) program.¹⁷ Studies have shown for every \$1 spent in mitigation, between \$4 and \$11 is saved in avoided disaster recovery costs.¹⁸

DRRA also addressed other critical issues such as wildfire prevention, eligibility for disaster assistance, and agency efficiency and accountability.

III. FEMA’S STRATEGIC PLAN

FEMA’s mission is simple—to help people before, during, and after disasters.¹⁹ The 2022-2026 Strategic Plan lists three goals for the agency to better achieve their mission: (1) Instill equity as a foundation of emergency management, (2) Lead whole of community in climate resilience, and (3) Promote and sustain a ready FEMA and prepared Nation.²⁰

Goal 1: Equity

In its 2021 Executive Order 13985 on “Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government,” the Biden Administration defines equity as:

[T]he consistent and systematic fair, just, and impartial treatment of all individuals, including individuals who belong to underserved communities that have been denied such treatment, such as Black, Latino, and Indigenous

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ *DRRA*, Pub. L. No. 115-254.

¹⁷ FEMA, *Building Resilient Infrastructure And Communities* (Dec. 1, 2022), available at <https://www.fema.gov/grants/mitigation/building-resilient-infrastructure-communities>.

¹⁸ NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF BUILDING SCIENCES, NATURAL HAZARD MITIGATION SAVES 2019 REPORT (2019), available at https://www.nibs.org/files/pdfs/NIBS_MMC_MitigationSaves_2019.pdf.

¹⁹ STRATEGIC PLAN, *supra* note 1 at 3.

²⁰ *Id.*

and Native American persons, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders and other persons of color; members of religious minorities; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) persons; persons with disabilities; persons who live in rural areas; and persons otherwise adversely affected by persistent poverty or inequality.²¹

To achieve this goal, FEMA has vowed to ensure its employees “increasingly reflect the diversity of the [N]ation.”²² The Agency plans to make their programs more accessible through a people first approach, to ensure FEMA resources can be accessed by underserved communities.²³ FEMA commits to periodically assess their programs and policies for inequities and redirect resources to eliminate any identified shortcomings.²⁴

Goal 2: Climate Resilience

FEMA’s Strategic Plan asserts that the number and severity of disasters is increasing, and consequently some communities are barely able to recover before another disaster strikes.²⁵ In order to increase climate literacy among the emergency management community, FEMA plans to integrate climate science into “policy, programs, partnerships, field operation, and training.”²⁶ The Agency also plans to use mitigation grant programs to allow communities to mitigate against climate change.²⁷ Finally, FEMA plans to expand “the availability of, access to, and understanding of future conditions data and modeling”²⁸ to empower risk-informed decision making.

Goal 3: FEMA Readiness

FEMA’s Strategic Plan asserts that an increasing number of disasters requires FEMA to need more staff readily deployable in advance of disasters.²⁹ To do this, FEMA will invest in professional development and improve employee retention.³⁰ Further, as evident with the COVID pandemic, FEMA needs to be ready to respond to non-traditional *Stafford Act* disaster categories. The Agency plans to increase their capacity to mitigate against critical national capability gaps for all disasters.³¹ FEMA also plans to unify coordination and delivery of Federal assistance by working with other Federal disaster partners to streamline the burdensome process.³²

²¹ See Exec. Or. No. 13,985, 86 Fed. Reg. 7,009 (2021), available at <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2021-06-30/pdf/2021-14127.pdf>.

²² STRATEGIC PLAN, *supra* note 1 at 10.

²³ *Id* at 11.

²⁴ See *id* at 13.

²⁵ *Id* at 14.

²⁶ *Id* at 15.

²⁷ *Id* at 16.

²⁸ *Id* at 18.

²⁹ *Id* at 21.

³⁰ *Id* at 22.

³¹ *Id* at 24.

³² *Id* at 25.

IV. CONCLUSION

The hearing will focus on how FEMA's Strategic Plan for 2022 to 2026 is informing and impacting how FEMA is leading disaster preparedness and response for the Nation for current and emerging threats.

V. WITNESSES

The Honorable Erik Hooks
Deputy Administrator
Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)
U.S. Department of Homeland Security

Mr. Chris Currie
Director, Homeland Security and Justice
U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO)