



# FEMA

STATEMENT

OF

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BEFORE

THE

COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, PUBLIC BUILDINGS,  
AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT  
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
WASHINGTON, D.C.

*“In The Eye of the Storm: Oversight of FEMA's Disaster Readiness and Response”*

Submitted

By

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Chairman Perry, Ranking Member Titus, and Members of the Subcommittee: thank you for the opportunity to testify regarding the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) efforts in response to Hurricanes Helene and Milton. We value this committee's legislative support and oversight of our agency, and I look forward to our conversation today.

On September 26, Hurricane Helene made landfall in Florida as a powerful and fast-moving Category 4 storm, with hurricane-force winds extending 40 miles and tropical-storm-force winds extending 310 miles from its center. Helene then entered Georgia as a Category 2 hurricane, before becoming a powerful tropical storm that continued to release historic rainfall over already saturated soils as it marched through South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. And while not as widespread or catastrophic, there were also significant impacts in West Virginia and Kentucky. Helene's powerful winds, floodwaters, and landslides altered landscapes and devastated communities in many places not accustomed to experiencing such storms, including the areas around Asheville, forcing residents to seek higher ground from rapidly rising waters. The destruction caused by Helene was catastrophic.

Less than two weeks later, Hurricane Milton rapidly intensified into a Category 5 storm in the Gulf of Mexico. After making landfall in Florida as a Category 3, it moved across the state into the Atlantic, spurring the formation of tornados, and leaving an overlapping trail of destruction in many communities still reeling from Hurricane Helene. Sadly, many of these same communities are still recovering from Hurricanes Ian, Idalia, and Debby.

Our hearts have been heavy with the stories of survivors we have encountered — people who lost their loved ones, their homes, and their businesses. These two catastrophic storms led to the tragic loss of over 200 lives, and in their wake, caused extensive damages to homes and neighborhoods across impacted states. There was also widespread disruption of critical services across the southeastern United States. This included losses of power, water, and cellular services, as well as the obstruction of transportation routes which isolated some homes and communities.

The magnitude of damages across an expansive, geographically diverse, and topographically challenging range of impacted areas has required a whole-of-government response and recovery effort. FEMA has led the coordination of our federal colleagues in support of our state, local, and tribal partners to provide lifesaving assistance and help communities begin to rebuild.

FEMA's mission is helping people before, during, and after disasters. In today's testimony, I will describe FEMA's response to Hurricanes Helene and Milton in the order of this powerful mission statement.

## **Before**

Before the storms hit, FEMA drew upon lessons learned from major hurricanes of the past to preposition personnel and supplies, ensure constant communication with impacted states and tribes, and quickly process requests for pre-landfall Emergency Declarations from impacted states for the President's review.

## **Coordination with NOAA**

In partnership with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), FEMA began tracking Helene as soon as it became a tropical disturbance on September 18 – eight days before the storm’s eventual landfall. NOAA has meteorologists embedded across FEMA providing regular weather updates and forecasts to support disaster operations. Additionally, FEMA has personnel embedded across various NOAA offices, including the National Hurricane Center, to support analysis of any impacts to FEMA operations and enable FEMA decision making on preparatory actions, such as prepositioning supplies and personnel, and ensuring our state and local partners have access to the latest information to support their decision making. On September 23, NOAA advised a Tropical Depression or Tropical Storm was likely to form within a day or two as the system moved northward, and the potential for impacts to the Florida Panhandle and portions of the Florida west coast were highlighted for later in the week.

## **NRCC and RRCC Activations**

FEMA activated its National Response Coordination Center (NRCC) on September 23, three days before Helene’s landfall, enabling increased federal coordination for the approaching storm. As part of this, FEMA leveraged its Stafford Act authorities to task other federal agencies to provide disaster assistance in support of FEMA response operations. The NRCC also partnered with FEMA’s Regional Response Coordination Centers (RRCC) in the affected FEMA Regions, which were Regions 3 and 4 in the case of Helene. FEMA’s Regional Offices generally serve as the first point of communication with our state and tribal partners and are often the first to receive a state’s Emergency Declaration request. Emergency Declarations enable FEMA to provide federal resources to the potentially impacted states and aid critical, initial upfront response and stabilization efforts.

## **Pre-Landfall Declarations and Prepositioning**

On September 23, Florida was the first state to request an Emergency Declaration, and the President swiftly approved the request on September 24. FEMA deployed Incident Management Assistance Teams (IMATs) and Federal Coordinating Officers (FCOs) to Florida to integrate with state emergency management operations. At the same time, FEMA deployed an Urban Search and Rescue (US&R) Incident Support Team to Florida to initiate coordination and integration of federal search and rescue resources, as well as emergency communications capabilities across the state.

On September 24, NOAA advised that the now Potential Tropical Cyclone Nine was forecast to become a hurricane the following day and a major hurricane as it approached the northeastern Gulf Coast later in the week. At this time, NOAA issued the first storm surge, hurricane, and tropical storm watches for Florida and advised of a moderate risk of flash flooding across portions of Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, and North Carolina. On this day, FEMA’s Region 4 RRCC activated to initiate and coordinate response activities across the impacted states. Later this day, NOAA advised that the storm had officially become Tropical Storm Helene, with maximum sustained winds of 45 mph. Continuing on September 24, FEMA deployed emergency communications capabilities with federal response teams to Georgia, as well as an

FCO to Alabama, and began staging Disaster Survivor Assistance personnel in Atlanta, Georgia for immediate onward deployment to affected areas once conditions would allow.

On September 25, NOAA advised that Tropical Storm Helene had maximum sustained winds of 65 mph and began expanding watches and warnings for portions of the United States, forecasting a major hurricane to approach the Big Bend of Florida late the next day. It was at this time that the NOAA first forecast a high chance of flash flooding for portions of Georgia, South Carolina, and North Carolina over the following five days. Shortly after that forecast, Georgia, Alabama, and North Carolina requested Emergency Declarations, which were all approved on September 26.

Also on September 25, FEMA enhanced the NRCC's activation to its highest level, with federal departments and agencies representing all Emergency Support Functions activated to provide support. Concurrently, FEMA deployed IMATs and Federal Coordinating Officers to Georgia and North Carolina to integrate with state emergency operations and deployed an IMAT with emergency communications capabilities to the state emergency operations center in Alabama.

Early on September 26, NOAA advised Helene had maximum sustained winds of 90 mph (Category 1) and was 385 miles south of Apalachicola, Florida; hurricane warnings extended from Florida into Georgia and tropical storm warnings extended across Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, and into portions of North Carolina. FEMA staged federal search and rescue capabilities and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) deployed health and medical capabilities under a mission assignment, including healthcare site assessment teams and health and medical task forces, in Georgia and Florida for rapid deployment. At the same time, FEMA deployed search and rescue capabilities throughout western North Carolina to rapidly respond to impacted areas as soon as there was a need, as well as emergency communications capabilities to augment and ensure interoperability across all federal response teams.

By mid-afternoon on September 26, Helene had reached major hurricane status (Category 3 and higher) with maximum sustained winds nearing 120 mph. On this same day, South Carolina requested and received approval for an Emergency Declaration. Later that evening, at approximately 11:10 pm EDT, Helene made landfall as a Category 4 hurricane in Dekle Beach, Florida just east of the mouth of the Aucilla River, with maximum sustained winds estimated at 140 mph. On the day of Helene's landfall, there were already over 1,500 FEMA personnel deployed across Florida, Georgia, Alabama, North Carolina, and South Carolina.

On September 27, Helene entered the State of Georgia as a Category 2 hurricane, and NOAA downgraded it to Tropical Storm status by 5:00 AM EDT on Friday morning. The storm continued to track across Georgia, South Carolina, and North Carolina, causing widespread damage. Additional search and rescue teams deployed by FEMA arrived in North Carolina along with health and medical resources, including HHS healthcare site assessment teams. FEMA deployed a Federal Coordinating Officer to the South Carolina State Emergency Operations Center, with emergency communications capabilities. Tennessee requested, and received, an Emergency Declaration.

By September 28, the storm’s windspeed diminished further, but its effects – especially its associated rainfall – continued. Virginia requested an Emergency Declaration, which the President quickly approved the following day. FEMA continued to deploy additional personnel and teams, including search and rescue teams, health and medical resources to North Carolina, an IMAT to South Carolina, and moved thousands of FEMA and other Federal personnel into all impacted states. In total, over 3,300 total federal personnel were deployed as of September 28.

During the response to Helene, FEMA continued to monitor for future threats and maintain mission readiness for additional disaster activity. Beginning on September 26, NOAA identified another tropical disturbance, which later became Hurricane Milton. FEMA and our interagency partners immediately began developing a multi-incident threat outlook, analyzing the ongoing response to Hurricane Helene, potential impacts from an additional tropical cyclone, and its effects on federal response operations. The threat outlook was updated daily as the forecast for Hurricane Milton became clearer, informing our efforts to begin preparations for another hurricane landfall in the U.S.

Using this information, FEMA took similar steps to coordinate with our state partners and reposition federal assets in anticipation of Hurricane Milton. The NRCC, which remained activated to its highest-level throughout the Hurricane Helene response began to simultaneously support for Hurricane Milton preparations on October 6, including coordinated pre-planning with the State of Florida. Throughout this time, FEMA led the coordination with the interagency to prioritize resource movements and staging of assets to ensure ongoing response needs from Hurricane Helene were being met, while preparing for anticipated impacts in Florida from Hurricane Milton. On October 6 and 7, FEMA received requests from the State of Florida and the Seminole Tribe of Florida for Emergency Declarations, which were subsequently approved on October 7 and 8, respectively. Hurricane Milton later made landfall on October 10 near Siesta Key, Florida.

Ahead of both of these storms, FEMA stayed in consistent communications with our partners, including all levels of state government. For example, I communicated with governors from states such as Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia ahead of both Helene and Milton, in order to ensure their needs were being met. Partnerships such as these are vital for ensuring that the right resources are delivered to where they are needed most before, during, and after the disaster.

<b>Emergency Declarations for Helene</b>		
<b>State</b>	<b>Date Requested</b>	<b>Date Approved</b>
Florida	September 23	September 24
Georgia	September 25	September 26
North Carolina	September 25	September 26
Alabama	September 25	September 26
South Carolina	September 26	September 26
Tennessee	September 27	September 27

Virginia	September 28	September 29
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<b>Emergency Declarations for Milton</b>		
<b>State or Tribe</b>	<b>Date Requested</b>	<b>Date Approved</b>
Florida	October 6	October 7
Seminole Tribe of Florida	October 7	October 8

The FEMA-led federal prepositioning efforts ahead of Hurricanes Helene and Milton were massive. For Helene, FEMA staged Urban Search and Rescue Task Forces across the states anticipated to be impacted, as well as U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) rotary wing aircraft, USCG fixed wing aircraft, USCG water rescue teams, Department of Interior (DOI) water rescue teams, and Department of Defense (DOD) high clearance vehicles and rotary wing aircraft. Ahead of Hurricane Milton, additional federal search and rescue resources were staged and re-positioned to rapidly respond to impacts across Florida while maintaining search and rescue capabilities for continuing Helene requirements. In total, FEMA deployed 24 Urban Search and Rescue Task Forces, over 15 USCG fixed and rotary wing aircraft, numerous USCG and DOI water rescue teams, 41 DOD rotary wing aircraft, and 60 DOD high clearance vehicles were deployed and pre-positioned to support search and rescue operations across impacted states.

Additionally, using the National Medical Transport Services contract, FEMA activated over 700 ambulances, medical helicopters, and medical airplanes ahead of Helene and Milton to provide rapid emergency medical services capabilities across impacted states. And in coordination with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), FEMA directed water and wastewater system, temporary power, and debris assessment teams or subject matter experts to be pre-positioned along both Helene and Milton storm tracks to support restoration of critical services.

Ahead of Hurricane Helene, FEMA and its federal partners also established staging operations for commodities, equipment, and fuel, in coordination with state emergency officials, across several sites. These sites include FEMA’s Distribution Center in Atlanta, Maxwell Air Force Base (AFB) and Craig Field in Alabama as well as Warner Robbins AFB, in Georgia. This footprint was quickly expanded with operations at Conley, Georgia; Charlotte and Hickory, North Carolina; and Ft. Campbell, Kentucky. FEMA sustained these operations through Hurricane Milton’s landfall and response.

As part of these efforts, FEMA initially staged 9 million meals, 10 million liters of water, over 300 generators, ample supplies of tarps and protective roof sheeting, as well as bulk supplies of diesel and gasoline and other commodities. FEMA ensured continuous availability of these commodities by resupplying staging areas with meals and water from the Defense Logistics

Agency (DLA) and General Services Administration (GSA), as well as through pre-negotiated contingency contracts with a wide variety of vendors.

## **During**

### **Lifesaving Operations**

In further support of these efforts to save lives during the immediate response to these storms, FEMA mobilized the Federal Search and Rescue Coordination Group to bring together all federal, state, and local search and rescue organizations to develop and execute a unified and coordinated search and rescue strategy across the six impacted states.

The 24 National Urban Search and Rescue (US&R) task forces that FEMA deployed saved lives during the responses to Hurricanes Helene and Milton. This included over 1,500 US&R task force personnel, 110 canines, and 90 swift water resources such as flood skiffs during deployments which stretched from September 25 to October 18. Due to prepositioning efforts, many of these teams were able to engage in lifesaving operations before impacts from the storms had subsided. For example, in North Carolina, from September 27 to 29, FEMA US&R teams conducted more than 2,000 structural evaluations; rescued, assisted, or evacuated 121 people and 12 pets; and checked on the wellbeing of more than 500 people who were sheltering in place.

In addition to FEMA US&R task forces, USCG, DOI, and DOD provided rotary and fixed wing aircraft, water rescue capabilities, and high clearance vehicles to further augment and support federal search and rescue operations. USCG resources arrived and were pre-positioned ahead of the storm beginning on September 25, and conducted search and rescue operations September 27 through October 13. DOI resources were pre-positioned and staged beginning September 27 and conducted operations from October 6 through October 12. DOD resources were initially pre-positioned on Sept. 26th, with additional resources becoming available October 1. DOD began search and rescue operations on September 27 and continued through October 12. In total across all federal departments and agencies, federal personnel searched over 375,000 specific sites across the impacted states and had over 18,000 interactions with survivors for both Hurricanes Helene and Milton.

### **Life Sustaining Operations**

Beyond their immediate lifesaving needs during response operations, many survivors required life sustaining resources such as shelter, food, and water.

During the response to Helene and Milton, state and local governments, as well as non-profit organizations, operated evacuation and emergency shelters throughout the impacted areas. At the peak of Hurricane Helene, more than 30,000 people sought safe shelter in 130 facilities across the States of Georgia, Florida, South Carolina, and North Carolina. During Hurricane Milton, more than 83,000 people in more than 280 shelters sought safety across Florida while the storm made landfall.

The pre-landfall Emergency Declarations approved by the President authorized FEMA to reimburse costs for sheltering actions taken by state, local, and tribal governments. FEMA also provided food, water, and medical supplies for shelter facilities.

During the responses to Helene and Milton, FEMA made food and water available to impacted communities not only for those in shelters, but also for those who had sheltered in place and were in need, making initial use of the prepositioned 9 million meals and 10 million liters of water. FEMA has continued to push deliveries of food, water, and other items from our staging sites, our distribution centers, from the DLA, GSA, and through pre-negotiated contracts with a variety of vendors to the affected states at their request. As of November 13, FEMA has delivered over 16 million meals, 18 million liters of water, over 3,000 rolls of blue roof sheeting, more than 700,000 gallons of fuel, and other products, representing deliveries of over 2,000 tractor trailer loads of critical supplies across six states.

FEMA delivered these requested commodities to states, and the states then distributed these supplies to impacted communities, through state Points of Distribution (PODs). And states coordinated with local voluntary agencies who specialize in volunteer and donations management on feeding missions. For example, voluntary partners served over 2.1 million meals to survivors following Hurricane Helene, and over 467,000 meals following Hurricane Milton.

In certain regions, the extensive damage from Helene created unique obstacles to delivering these critical supplies. These obstacles required a whole-of-government approach to overcome.

Every disaster is unique, and Helene resulted in widespread road and bridge damages across locations, including the mountainous terrain of Western North Carolina. Intense rainfall saturated steep slopes, triggering landslides that buried roads. Narrow valleys across Appalachia funneled floodwaters into confined river channels, washing away critical transportation routes, such as portions of I-40, which provide key connections for communities in western North Carolina and eastern Tennessee. In western North Carolina alone, a total 655 roads were closed. As a result, many communities were isolated and significantly more difficult for emergency responders to reach.

The National Guard is often activated by states to fulfill a wide range of missions during disaster response, including distributing commodities. In North Carolina, they proved pivotal. In addition, given the scale of this disaster, on October 2, FEMA, at the request of Governor Cooper, directed 1,000 active-duty troops to partner with the North Carolina National Guard on the ground to support critical missions, including commodity distribution and emergency route clearance. Governor Cooper requested this assistance on October 1. On October 6, the Administration ordered another 500 active-duty troops to move into western North Carolina to surge additional resources and capacity at the request of the Governor. The relief efforts by both State National Guard and Title 10 personnel were consolidated under a Dual Status Commander to ensure efficiency and unity of effort. Using a combination of air and ground assets, the force multiplier of our DOD partners further enabled the rapid delivery of these critical resources. DOD personnel directly supported 11 PODs across western North Carolina and eastern Tennessee and facilitated the delivery of over 10.5 million pounds of commodities through air



and ground distribution efforts. This included delivering over 3.4 million liters of water and over 30 thousand meals.

Getting these life sustaining supplies to the last mile, and into the hands of survivors in isolated communities, was part of what became known as the *PODs to People* effort. National Guard and Title 10 trucks and ground vehicles delivered commodities to isolated communities identified by the state, including right to individual survivor's doorsteps. And when heavy vehicles could not travel by ground, helicopters were used to lift commodity shipments and drop them at designated locations within the impacted community. From there, more nimble trucks and other ground vehicles would transport them to the identified POD locations where they were needed most. Members of the National Guard, together with active duty servicemembers, conducted more than 1,200 ground missions and more than 400 air missions in coordination with the state of North Carolina. Service members supported these operations across Ashe, Avery, Buncombe, Burke, Caldwell, Haywood, Madison, McDowell, Mitchell, Polk, Rutherford, Watauga, and Yancey counties, as well as with the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians.

### **Whole of Government Response - Mission Assignments**

In responding to Hurricanes Helene and Milton, FEMA leveraged its authorities to mission assign over 64 other federal agencies to conduct a variety of response and recovery operations. As of November 13, FEMA issued 612 mission assignments across the operation, totaling over \$1.8 billion in obligations. Federal agencies which received a mission assignment include: AmeriCorps; other components of the Department of Homeland Security, including the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA); Department of Commerce and its components, including the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA); DOD and its components, including DLA and the USACE; Department of Energy and its components; DOI and its components, including National Park Service and US Geological Survey (USGS); Department of Justice and its components, including the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) and Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF); Department of Labor; Department of State and its components; Department of Transportation and its components, including Federal Aviation Administration (FAA); National Transportation and Safety Board (NTSB); Department of Veterans Affairs and its components, including the Veterans Health Administration; Environmental Protection Agency (EPA); Federal Communications Commission (FCC); GSA; Department of Health and Human Services and its components, including Administration for Strategic Preparedness and Response (ASPR); Department of Housing and Urban Development; National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA); Small Business Administration (SBA); Department of the Treasury; US Agency for International Development (USAID); as well as the U.S. Department of Agriculture and its components, including US Forest Service (USFS).

These mission assignments and contributions from our federal partners have supported response operations in fundamental ways, such as by clearing debris and roads, repairing water facilities, and conducting damage assessments.

As previously referenced, Hurricanes Helene and Milton left landslides and debris strewn across landscapes, creating dangerous obstructions that blocked roadways and complicated recovery efforts. To help our state partners overcome these obstacles, USACE, the USFS, and the USGS have provided technical assistance and direct support to impacted states for debris removal actions. To date, they have supported the removal of millions of cubic yards of debris across Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia, and assisted in clearing over 120 miles of roadways. Additionally, DOD personnel are deployed into western North Carolina and eastern Tennessee to support ongoing debris removal operations. To date, DOD personnel have supported clearing over 375 miles of blocked roadways across these specific impacted areas. Additionally, all local and state response operations for eligible debris removal and emergency protective measures in these six states will be reimbursed at 100 percent federal share by FEMA for specific and limited periods of time.

In addition to clearing debris and roadways, our federal partners played a vital role in helping impacted states to stabilize critical infrastructure impacted by the storms, such as damaged water and wastewater facilities. For example, catastrophic flash flooding in western North Carolina comprehensively damaged water and wastewater facilities across the region, resulting in significant structural breaks in places like Asheville, which impacted over 510,000 customers. Federal resources were deployed to bolster state and private sector efforts and bring this critical infrastructure back online. By October 31, the EPA and USACE provided 32 detailed assessments for the most heavily damaged rapid water and wastewater facilities to help state and local officials determine the best courses of action for both the immediate term and long recovery. And during this time, USACE installed a reverse osmosis unit to support potable water needs at the University of North Carolina-Asheville campus. Additionally, USACE is working with the City of Asheville to obtain and install a large-scale filtration unit at the Burdett Reservoir to expand potable water access across the community.

In the weeks that followed Helene, Asheville regained water, representing a significant step for residents, though boil water advisories remain in place. FEMA continues to proactively identify temporary solutions to water and wastewater service restoration in these highly impacted areas. And in collaboration with local, state, and federal partners like USACE and EPA, phased assessments of impacted facilities are continuing to identify appropriate courses of action for repair and restoration. FEMA will continue to work with USACE to assist in the installation of emergency temporary systems as identified and requested by the state.

Whole-of-government partnerships such as these have also helped FEMA to increase the speed of damage assessments during the response to Hurricanes Helene and Milton. In addition to leveraging our internal capabilities, FEMA coordinated closely with numerous federal departments and agencies, including NOAA; DOD and component agencies, such as the National Geospatial Intelligence Agency (NGA) and USACE through the Army Geospatial Center and Field Force Engineering program, other components of DHS, such as the USCG; and NASA to capture aerial and satellite imagery immediately following the storms using advanced imaging, analysis, and modeling technologies. This information was then used to more rapidly inform lifesaving response operations across Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia.

These damage assessments are additionally used to inform the Major Disaster Declaration process. In order to swiftly process state requests for major disaster declarations and get assistance to survivors faster, FEMA rapidly sourced and assessed the overhead aerial imagery mentioned above, and supplemented it with ground-level photos, and observed hazard data such as wind speeds, flood gauge depths, precipitation accumulation, power outages, and modeled inundation depths. FEMA’s team of trained analysts then reviewed this information to expeditiously assemble and route disaster declaration requests with supporting data to the President.

## Major Disaster Declarations

FEMA’s Major Disaster Declarations provide a wide range of federal assistance programs for impacted individuals and public infrastructure that exceeds the assistance available under pre-landfall Emergency Declarations. For individual survivors, this can include help with urgent needs, such as food, water, and diapers, temporary housing, home repair and many other types of assistance. For public infrastructure, this can include federal support for the repair and replacement of disaster damaged roads, bridges, water control facilities, utilities, and schools. FEMA also provides assistance to state, tribal, and local governments for emergency protective measures and debris removal. Declared states additionally receive hazard mitigation grants to employ cost effective measures that will reduce future disaster losses.

In order to jumpstart the recovery process after Helene and Milton, FEMA worked closely with state, tribal, and local officials to expedite assistance to survivors impacted by these disasters. To ensure FEMA was getting aid to survivors as quickly as possible, the initial Major Disaster Declarations included a subset of counties where major damage could be clearly and rapidly identified, either through on-the-ground damage assessments or utilizing geospatial technology as described above. Following these initial Major Disaster Declarations, FEMA has continued to work closely with state and local partners to conduct additional damage assessments which enable additional counties to be added to the original declaration. Once additional counties are assessed and confirmed to qualify for assistance, they can be quickly added on a rolling basis. By utilizing this approach, FEMA was able to rapidly process Major Disaster Declaration requests for the President’s approval, as demonstrated below.

<b>Major Disaster Declarations for Helene</b>		
<b>State</b>	<b>Date Requested</b>	<b>Date Approved</b>
North Carolina	September 27	September 28
Florida	September 28	September 28
South Carolina	September 28	September 29
Georgia	September 30	September 30

Virginia	September 30	October 1
Tennessee	September 30	October 2

<b>Major Disaster Declaration for Milton</b>		
<b>State or Tribe</b>	<b>Date Requested</b>	<b>Date Approved</b>
Florida	October 11	October 11
Seminole Tribe of Florida	October 25	November 5*

\*Not an expedited request

### **Individual Assistance**

These expedited declarations led to positive and tangible impacts for survivors. Under the Major Disaster Declarations, the President approved Individual Assistance (IA), which is one of the principal ways FEMA can directly help households impacted by the storms. The IA program provides two primary types of support. The first is financial assistance, and the second is housing assistance.

Impacted individuals and families can apply for IA by registering online at [disasterassistance.gov](https://disasterassistance.gov); calling the FEMA hotline; by talking with Disaster Survivor Assistance (DSA) teams that work in impacted areas going door-to-door, in congregate shelters, and at other established locations in communities like fire departments; or by visiting one of the 116 Disaster Recovery Centers (DRC) opened for Helene and Milton. The first DSA teams began working in the field on September 29, and at its peak on October 30, more than 1,400 FEMA DSA team members are in affected neighborhoods helping survivors apply for assistance. Additionally, survivors can register within one of FEMA’s 37 Mobile Registration Intake Centers (MRICs). These mobile vehicles move around throughout impacted communities to assist survivors with registering for FEMA assistance.

So far in 2024, nearly 4.3 million households have registered for assistance and more than \$3.6 billion in assistance has been provided. Specifically for Hurricanes Helene and Milton, more than 2.4 million households have registered and FEMA has already provided more than \$1.6 billion in assistance, with millions more being awarded each day.

One of the initial ways in which FEMA can financially help survivors is through Serious Needs Assistance (SNA). SNA is upfront, initial assistance intended to help survivors with costs such as food, clothing, baby formula, diapers, or medications when they have serious needs created by the disaster. This program offers survivors a one-time payment of \$750 for disasters declared in FY24 and \$770 for disasters declared in FY25 that does *not* need to be repaid. To receive SNA, the survivor must be eligible for assistance generally, have had their identity verified, and have a

completed home inspection. When it is apparent to FEMA that damage is so widespread in a particular area that it is more likely than not that someone applying for assistance will be eligible for SNA, FEMA may expedite the assistance before a home inspection, for survivors that indicate they have a need. FEMA took this expedited approach for the areas hardest hit by Hurricanes Helene and Milton. For Hurricanes Helene and Milton, the average time from registration to approval of SNA is two days. Following approval, it takes approximately one to two business days for funds to be deposited in the survivor’s account.

SNA helps survivors begin their recovery by providing real-world, tangible benefits in their time of greatest need, and ensuring financial access to vital resources such as food, water, medication, and other emergency supplies. As of November 13, more than 671,000 households affected by Hurricane Helene have received over \$503 million in SNA, while more than 218,000 households affected by Hurricane Milton have received over \$145 million in SNA.

This program is, however, by no means the only type of FEMA assistance directly available to survivors. SNA is a single tool among many that can be used to help individuals during the immediate aftermath of the disaster. FEMA also provides financial assistance to individuals and households to make critical repairs to their disaster damaged residences and to address other vital needs, such as damaged personal property, damaged vehicles, and medical care, as well as rental assistance.

Residents in many of the counties impacted by Hurricanes Helene and Milton who have applied for disaster assistance are also eligible for FEMA’s Transitional Sheltering Assistance (TSA) program. Under the TSA program, survivors can temporarily stay in a hotel paid for by FEMA and the State while they work on their long-term housing plan. Survivors do not need to request this assistance. FEMA will notify them of their eligibility through an automated phone call, text message, or email, depending upon the method of communication preferred by the survivor. Individuals and households may be eligible if they cannot return to their disaster-damaged home and their housing needs cannot be met by insurance, shelters, or rental assistance provided by FEMA or another agency. In the weeks following Helene and Milton, FEMA has provided TSA to more than 30,000 households who have checked into participating hotels since the storms. FEMA has also provided more than \$3 million in rental assistance to more than 1,000 households.

<b>Transitional Sheltering Assistance</b>			
<b>State</b>	<b>Total Sheltered</b>	<b>Currently Checked In</b>	<b>Checked Out</b>
FL-Helene	8,568	6,618	8,568
FL-Milton	13,530	10,684	2,846
NC - Helene	8,715	4,506	4,209
SC - Helene	5,620	3,953	1,667
<b>Total</b>	<b>36,433</b>	<b>25,761</b>	<b>10,672</b>
<small>*As of 11/13/2024</small>			

FEMA is also providing Direct Temporary Housing Assistance (DTHA) in certain counties in North Carolina, Tennessee, and Florida. DTHA provides safe, secure housing to eligible disaster survivors who are unable to obtain temporary housing through other means. Multiple approaches are used to provide direct housing. These include manufactured housing units, the Direct Lease Program, and the Multi-Family Lease and Repair Program. FEMA determines which forms of direct housing are used in each county based on survivor preferences, logistical considerations, and availability of resources.

Direct temporary housing solutions are tailored to meet individual survivors' needs, so they take time to implement. FEMA is actively working with survivors in all three states to assess eligibility and housing needs. FEMA is also working to identify property owners interested in participating in direct lease or multi-family lease and repair as well as evaluating potential commercial park and other properties for placement of temporary housing units. FEMA works with survivors and to secure potential properties in parallel to meet survivors' needs as quickly as possible. Survivors are already moving into temporary housing units in North Carolina, and we will see similar progress in Florida and Tennessee in the coming weeks.

## **After**

### **Recovery**

In the immediate weeks that followed Helene and Milton, FEMA and our partners prioritized search and rescue efforts, reopening roads to reconnect hard-to-reach areas, delivering essential commodities to residents, restoring critical infrastructure, and getting help to those who need it most. As these operations began to stabilize, we initiated long-term recovery efforts across the six impacted states.

The long-term recovery goals of each state are unique to the specific needs and challenges of their impacted communities. Recognizing this, FEMA is working closely with each state and with critical federal partners to coordinate a whole-of-government recovery effort that addresses the specific goals of each community. In support of this mission, FEMA has activated Interagency Recovery Coordination (IRC) teams in Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. The IRC teams are focusing on coordinating assistance in areas such as housing, infrastructure, community support, natural and cultural resources, health, education, human services, and economic recovery. Using the National Disaster Recovery Framework, which organizes federal recovery support into six Recovery Support Functions (RSFs), the IRC team collaborates with state partners to maximize the resources and support the federal government can provide for recovery efforts.

These RSFs are the Community Assistance Recovery Support Function.; the Economic Recovery Support Function; the Health and Social Services Recovery Support Function; the Housing Recovery Support Function; the Infrastructure Systems Recovery Support Function; and the Natural and Cultural Resources Recovery Support Function.

### **Flexibilities**

FEMA is focused on cutting red tape to expedite the road to recovery wherever possible. For example, FEMA has authorized a series of waivers and flexibilities to accelerate the clearance and appropriate disposal of disaster debris. This was especially critical in Florida, where our state partners had to move very quickly to move debris following Hurricane Helene that posed an immediate public safety risk prior to Hurricane Milton. And then following the widespread impact of both hurricanes in Florida, FEMA has worked to help communities overcome the challenges associated with indistinguishable damages from the two storms. In order to do this, FEMA is considering all work that cannot be obviously attributed to only Hurricane Helene, to be the result of Hurricane Milton. This includes debris removal in jurisdictions impacted by and designated for assistance under the declarations for both hurricanes. This approach is intended to simplify the process for the development and submission of project applications under the FEMA Public Assistance Program.

FEMA is also exploring flexibilities to help repair the thousands of private roads and bridges washed away by the catastrophic flooding or landslides. Many residences, particularly those in mountainous areas, rely upon these private roads and bridges to cross steep terrain and access their homes or communities. First responders and emergency services, such as ambulances and firetrucks, also rely upon these same roads and bridges to deliver lifesaving assistance. In order to rebuild these vital connections between survivors and their communities, FEMA is utilizing its Home Repair Assistance to help cover these uninsured costs and ensure that local government emergency services are able to reach these residences. FEMA has also authorized limited, emergency repairs to enable emergency access through the Public Assistance program. FEMA is doing this by providing policy flexibility to permit state and local governments to conduct emergency repair of private bridges as a Category B emergency protective measure, making the work eligible for Public Assistance funding in limited circumstances when it is necessary to restore emergency access to private residences. As an emergency protective measure to protect public health and safety, such repairs will be conducted as quickly as possible. Repairs are limited to only what is necessary to restore emergency access to provide emergency services to private residences in accordance with issued Disaster Specific Guidance (DSG). The DSG offers multiple flexibilities including the ability to make repairs utilizing volunteer labor, authorization to spend up to \$40,000 per property for repairs, exclusive of overhead, and the ability to request an increase on a case-by-case basis when greater repairs are in the public interest. FEMA will also allow repairs to roads and bridges to access private property if the owner is eligible for direct housing assistance and the site is suitable for a temporary housing unit.

As another example of increased flexibilities, FEMA has authorized – for the first time – expedited funding for projects less than \$1 million. This policy waiver allows FEMA to advance up to 50% of the project costs while jurisdictions complete final paperwork. Many of the communities impacted by these disasters are small, and the budgets of local governments can quickly become overwhelmed by the scale of these challenges. To help our local partners overcome this, FEMA authorized this kind of expedited funding for projects below the large project threshold in Public Assistance. This will provide communities with immediate access to capital to help cover the costs of the emergency protective measures they had to take. Additionally, FEMA has streamlined the process for Community Disaster Loans to make them more readily accessible to communities and help support their normal operating costs while their

tax base recovers. The Community Disaster Loan Program provides funding for local governments to operate their essential community services after substantial revenue loss caused by a disaster, such as police and fire protection, trash collection, revenue collection, public facilities maintenance, and hazard insurance.

FEMA will continue to identify ways to remove bureaucratic barriers and find new opportunities to help survivors. For example, USACE contractors in North Carolina are removing damaged trees from the North Carolina Arboretum and delivering logs to identified staging areas. Volunteers are sorting wood under the guidance of the USDA subject matter experts according to potential use such as furniture, firewood, or mulch. Appropriately trained volunteers are cutting wood that is unsuitable for furniture into firewood. Municipalities and local volunteers are then distributing wood to artisans and other residents for use. This innovative approach has the opportunity to create new business opportunities, reduce home heating costs, and lessen landfill requirements.

## **Resilience**

As we rebuild in these communities, we must also ensure that we build back better with more resilient infrastructure. During the rebuilding process, communities will have access to FEMA's Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP), which provides funding to state, local, and tribal governments so they can develop hazard mitigation plans and rebuild in a way that reduces, or mitigates, future disaster losses in their communities.

During Hurricanes Helene and Milton, we have seen examples of the ways in which past mitigation grant funding helped to blunt the impact of these disasters. For example, in Surry County, North Carolina, generators had been purchased and installed at two different wastewater facilities using HMGP grants. During power outages from Helene, the generators provided continuous service without interruption to both Mount Airy and the nearby town of Pilot Mountain, in a region where many other wastewater facilities went offline for extended durations. Similarly, the Georgia Emergency Management Agency had purchased 18 generators using HMGP funding, and each of them played an important role during Hurricane Helene. All 18 were deployed during the response to provide power for water, wastewater, hospitals, nursing homes, and 911 Centers across the affected areas. In Florida, the Flood Mitigation Assistance (FMA) grant program had mitigated 415 homes across the state against flood damage. In Pinellas County alone, there are numerous examples of these homes that had been elevated out of harm's way. These are homes that families could return to after evacuating and not have to worry about the damage and challenges of rebuilding. The broad usages of mitigation grants program funding has the power to keep critical facilities operational, such as the wastewater facilities, and mitigate individual residential structures – allowing the returned families access and usage of the residence, thus minimizing the time in temporary housing or shelters.

As we move forward, FEMA will work with our partners to ensure that mitigation opportunities are identified and maximized during recovery, and every opportunity is taken to rebuild in more resilient ways.



## **Road Ahead**

In the weeks since Helene and Milton, FEMA has provided more than \$1.6 billion in assistance to more than 910,400 households, as well as \$1.29 billion in total Public Assistance obligations to impacted states. And as of November 13, more than 7,500 FEMA employees remain deployed, along with 800 Surge Capacity Force members, to support the ongoing response and recovery operations for Helene and Milton. But the road ahead is long. And FEMA with its partners, will remain on the ground until the job is done.

To that end, we continue to seek out ways to expand our workforce and incorporate local insights. In addition to growing our ranks through local hire programs across impacted states, FEMA is launching a new Community Liaison Program in North Carolina. These community-based staff will be embedded in every impacted county in North Carolina, and work directly with county administrators, mayors, and local leaders to ensure that the community has a leading role in the recovery process.

As we look to the challenges and opportunities ahead, we recognize the importance of leveraging and relying upon the relationships we have built with leadership from all levels of federal, tribal state, and county governments, non-profit organizations, private sector, and impacted communities. As previously stated, the scale of this disaster will require a coordinated recovery effort at all levels of government and civil society.

And the Members of the Committee here today represent one of the fundamental federal partnerships during this process. I ask for continued support from each of you, and to ensure that both FEMA and our partners have the resources needed as we all work together to rebuild a more ready and resilient nation.

I would also like to thank the Members here today for favorably passing the Disaster Management Costs Modernization Act out of committee just days before Hurricane Helene made landfall. As we all seek opportunities to empower our state and local emergency manager partners, this bill would allow state, tribal, and territorial governments to repurpose unused FEMA funding previously allocated for management costs after a disaster. These funds would be used to bolster their administrative capacities to prepare for, recover from, or mitigate future disasters. FEMA cannot accomplish this mission alone. It requires mature and strong partnerships, and this bill that would provide additional flexibilities that can help to build the emergency management capacities of state, tribal, and territorial governments. Thank you for your support as this bill continues to work its way through the legislative process.

## **Conclusion**

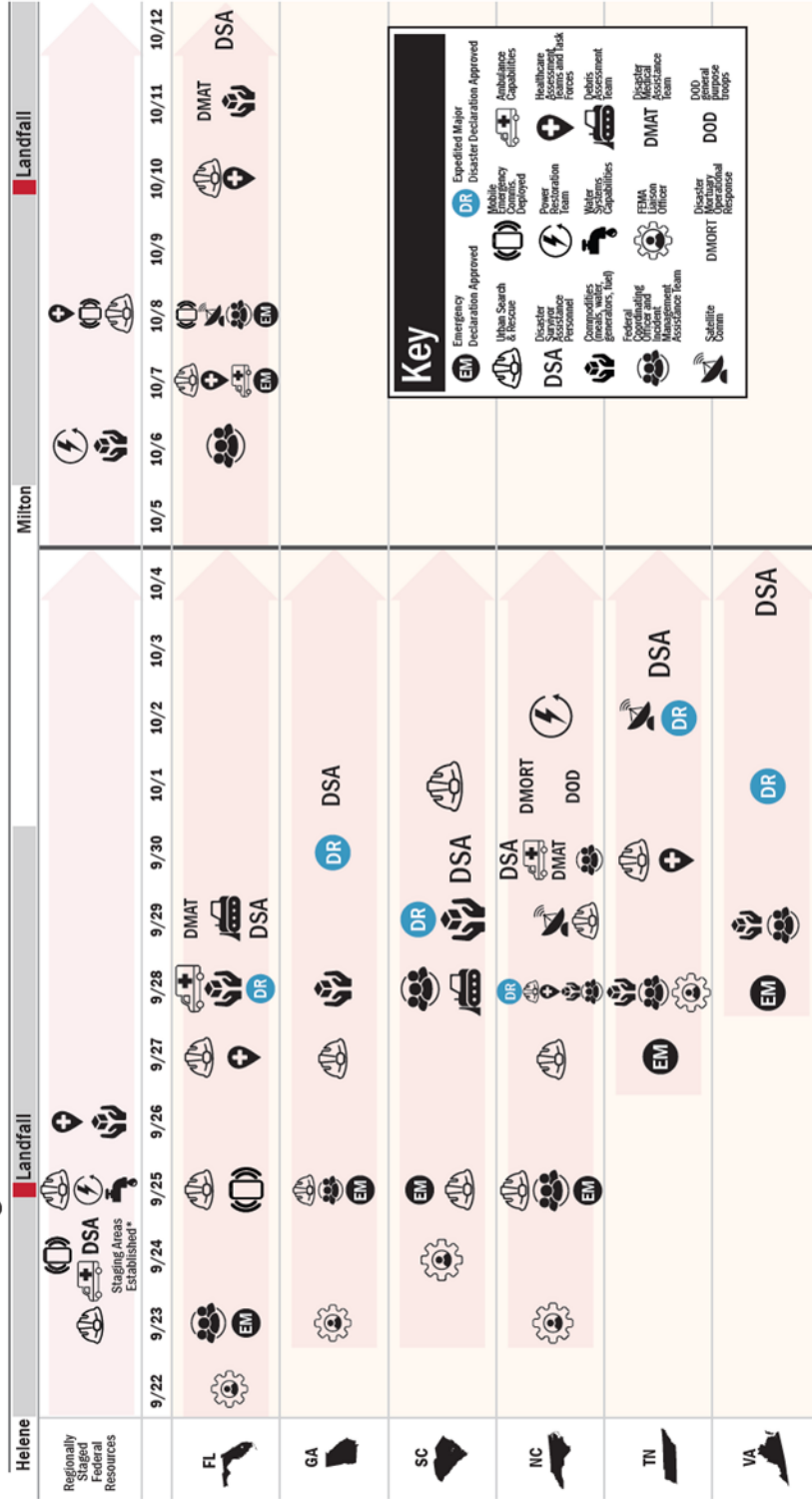
In closing, I want to extend my deepest condolences to the families of those who lost loved ones or their homes in the storms. I would also like to emphasize my gratitude to the first responders, state, local, and tribal emergency managers, FEMA personnel, and partner agencies for their adaptability and endurance. Many of them put themselves in harm's way during the response and continued to answer the call while feeling the impact of the storms firsthand. I also want to recognize the heroic work of community groups and everyday people – our neighbors and friends – who sprang into action and supported their community during a time of great need.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I look forward to your questions.

# Federal Personnel and Resource Deployment:

## State Support for Hurricane Helene & Milton

### Federal Pre-Positioning and Activation



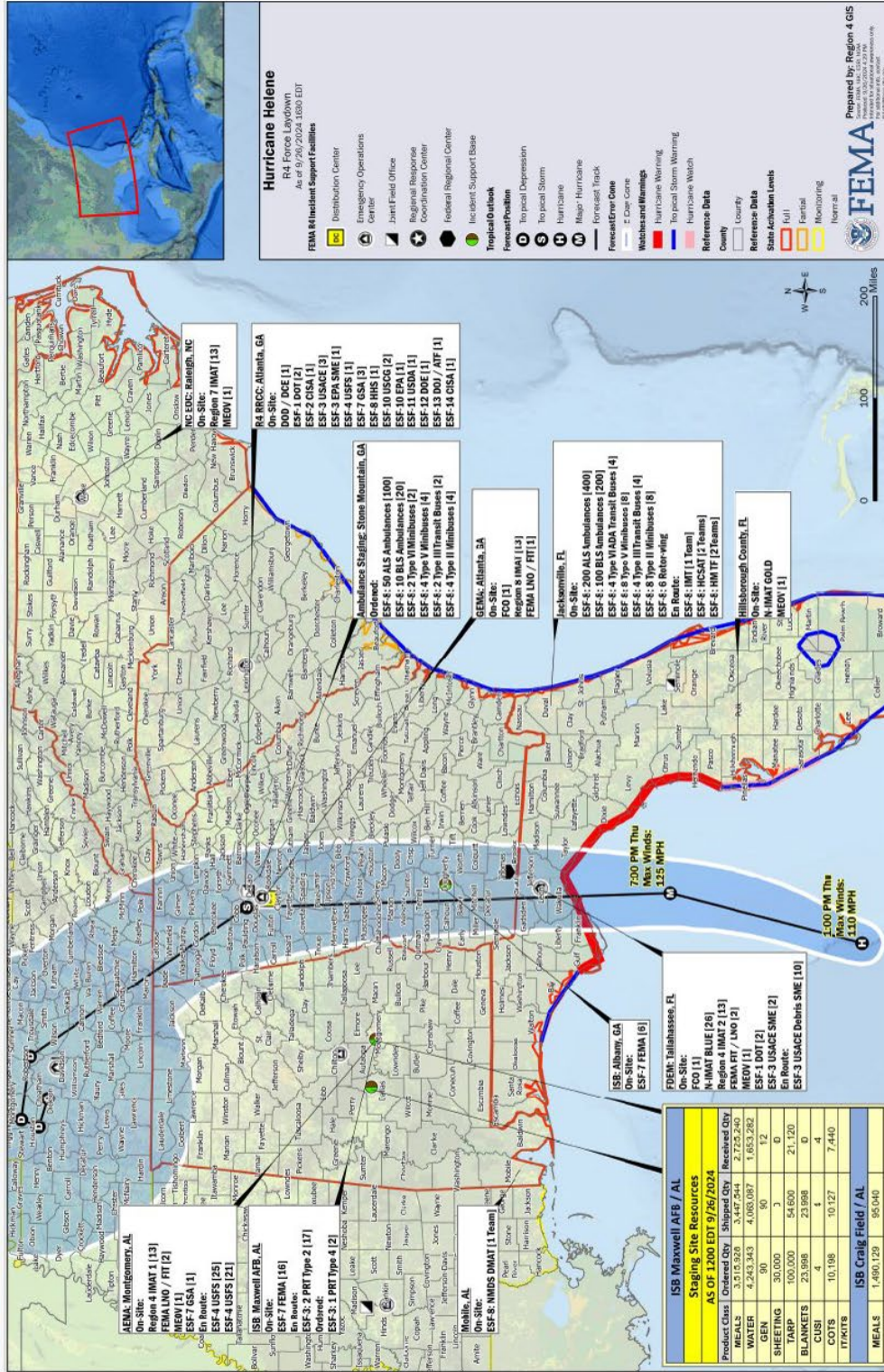
Data represents federal resources which supplement state and local resources.





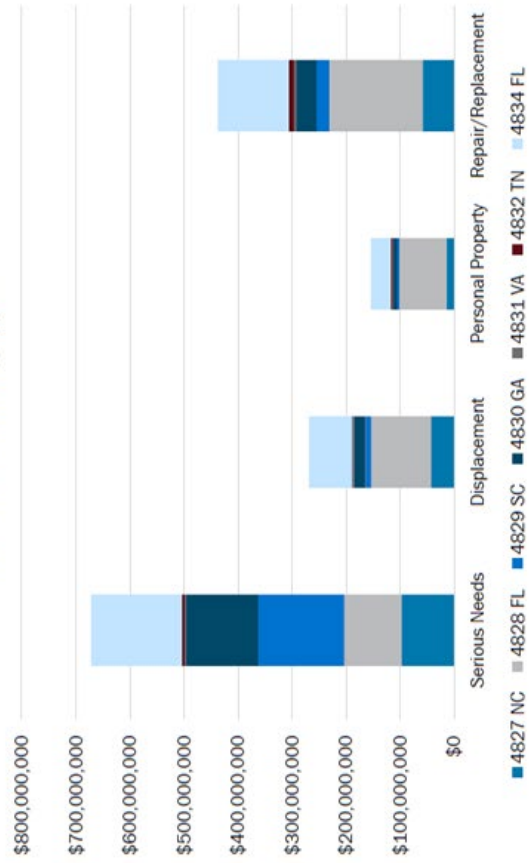
FEMA

# Resource Laydown





### IHP Assistance by Type

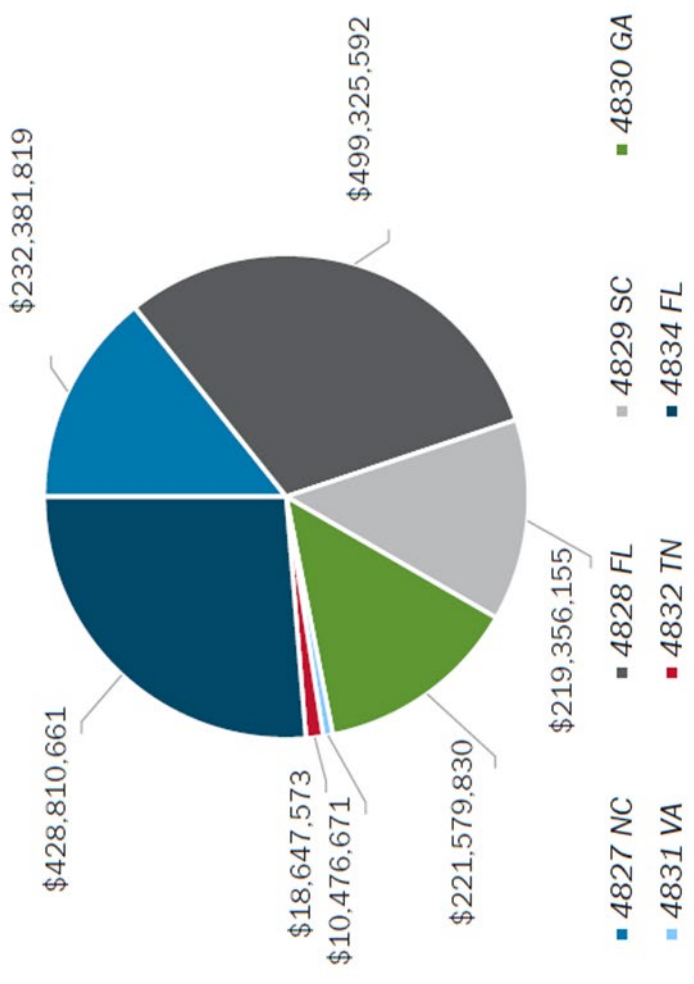


**FEMA**

Data as of 11/13/2024 10:01 AM EST

Federal Emergency Management Agency

**All IHP Assistance  
Total: \$1,630,578,300**



**FEMA**

Data as of 11/13/2024 10:01 AM EST