

“A Prepared Community is a Resilient Community”
Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Communications
House Committee on Homeland Security
Staten Island Field Hearing
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Testimony of Brad Gair, Disaster Recovery Expert
(Testifying as a private subject matter expert, not representing any organization.)

Good morning. My name is Brad Gair. I am currently Vice-President of Emergency Management & Enterprise Resilience at NYU Langone Medical Center. After Hurricane Sandy, I was Director of Housing Recovery Operations in the Mayor’s Office and also coordinated the City’s multi-billion dollar FEMA recovery program. Previously, I have served as Deputy Commissioner with the New York City Office of Emergency Management and as a FEMA Federal Coordinating Officer, during which time I worked on numerous large-scale disasters, including serving as Federal Recovery Officer in New York City after 9/11 and in Louisiana after Hurricane Katrina.

I am grateful for this opportunity to address the Subcommittee today. Based upon more than two decades of experience in the business of disaster recovery and resilience, I offer the following four points for your consideration:

1. We need a national dialogue to agree upon recovery values.

As citizens of a caring nation, we have a natural inclination to want to assist our neighbors after the devastating losses that accompany large-scale disasters. Unfortunately, we have yet to agree at the national level upon how much we should do to aid disaster survivors. As a result, we have created a set of programs that in the end serve neither the taxpayers nor those families who may have lost everything.

Every time a major disaster occurs in this country, the same unanswered questions plague recovery efforts. “How much help is fair and reasonable?” “Should taxpayers across the nation share this burden?” “Who is responsible for getting families back into their homes?” “Why not require insurance?” “How much should we invest in making communities more disaster resilient?” “Are there areas where we should not build back at all?”

The answer to these questions and many similar ones depends upon whom you ask. FEMA’s mantra is “We are not here to make you whole.” Does that represent the collective wisdom of our federal agencies and our nation’s lawmakers, or is it simply a rationale for inadequate programs that have filled the vacuum created by a lack of consensus, unclear guidance and muddled authorities?

Until we agree upon the basic parameters of post-disaster assistance grounded in full consideration of these types of issues, even the best conceived programs would fail to meet the expectations of government, the disaster survivors and the American people.

2. Existing recovery and resilience programs are poorly structured and badly implemented.

The federal government often speaks of the sequence of delivery in disaster assistance as if there is a coherent plan behind it all, when in reality it is a series of patchwork programs that more than anything else confuse, frustrate and demoralize both those in need of aid and those trying to provide it.

Our existing recovery programs do not work for the majority of families impacted by disasters, not individually and not collectively. The National Flood Insurance Program is broken, possibly beyond repair; FEMA's cap on assistance to families at barely \$30,000 makes little economic sense; asking families to take on new debt through Small Business Administration loans is always a hard sell to those who have already lost so much; charitable organizations trying to fill gaps without sufficient data on the needs and little coordination with government agencies end up wasting millions of donated dollars; and the HUD CDBG-DR program, when authorized, is expected to be the magic bullet and instead just ends up being another self-inflicted wound for the federal government.

From the Road Home program in post-Hurricane Katrina Louisiana to Build-it-Back in post-Hurricane Sandy New York City, HUD CDBG-DR programs have generally been categorical failures in supporting timely and effective housing recovery. Once Congress authorizes the funds, the process for getting funds from the federal treasury to those in need is unacceptably long, inexplicably convoluted and inexcusably wasteful. It would be easy to simply blame bumbling bureaucrats and greedy contractors – no doubt we must all do better – but the root of the problem is that no local or state government, regardless of its capability, can successfully create and setup in a few months what amounts to a multibillion dollar corporation with hundreds of employees and contractors, numerous storefront locations, a broad-based marketing campaign, and integrated customer service operations while tens of thousands of desperate customers must wait anxiously for help as hope dwindles.

HUD touts the flexibility of CDBG-DR, which does indeed give communities considerable latitude in program design, but I would trade much of this flexibility for a pre-approved, off-the-shelf program, complete with reasonable environmental waivers, a unified damage inspection process, unrestricted data sharing across government to minimize the paperwork burden on our customers, and a proven electronic case management system that could be quickly and efficiently operationalized. A properly designed recovery program would be integrated with all other federal programs to avoid the twin obstacles of excessive bureaucracy and unavoidable duplications of benefits that currently lead to extensive delays and universally bad results.

3. Post-disaster coordination across the federal agencies is insufficient.

In the ten block stretch along the East River in Manhattan in the area known as Hospital Row, FEMA, HUD and VA have individually funded hundreds of millions of dollars of resilience improvements without making any attempt whatsoever to coordinate these critical infrastructure projects at NYU Langone Medical Center, Bellevue Hospital, the VA Hospital and the Rebuild by Design East Side Coastal Resiliency Project (formerly known as the Big U).

Similarly, right here on Staten Island, one federal agency's funds are being used to buyout homes and convert the land to open space due to the extreme long-term

flooding risk, while another federal agency is designing a seawall that will ultimately provide substantially increased flood protection for this exact same property.

I am not saying that anything has been done wrong in these or any other countless similar cases – and at NYU Langone, we are extremely thankful for the federal assistance – the point is that maybe with better coordination, we could have done even more right. As a result, the federal government continues to miss opportunities to enhance flood protection, maximize the use of tax dollars and ensure that investments in resilience are properly integrated.

The challenge is that no single federal agency has appropriate authority to directly coordinate these recovery programs in the way that FEMA does during disaster response. The second version of National Disaster Recovery Framework was just issued last month and still does not include any formal mechanisms empowering FEMA or any other agency to oversee and manage across the federal recovery programs. Until this occurs, each agency will continue to work in isolation, and hundreds of millions of dollars in missed opportunities to leverage federal funding will continue to accrue.

4. We need comprehensive national resilience strategy.

FEMA has four different hazard mitigation programs and has devoted billions of dollars to resilience post-Hurricane Sandy. HUD encourages resilience in its CDBG-DR programs by state and local governments, and separately dedicated one billion dollars to the Rebuild by Design resilience competition. The Federal Transit Administration awarded three billion dollars of resilience grants to local and state governments after Hurricane Sandy, and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers received authorization for four billion dollars of Hurricane Sandy related resilience projects.

While this commitment to resilience is commendable, each agency is left to establish its own ideas of what resilience means and how best to achieve it. As a result, there is no coherent overarching national resilience strategy in place to guide our investments.

In the months after Hurricane Sandy, the City of New York devoted significant time and resources to devising the Special Initiative for Rebuilding & Resiliency (SIRR) report to guide recovery based upon locally derived resilience values. In a completely separate initiative at the federal level, twenty-three agencies comprising the Hurricane Sandy Rebuilding Task Force developed a Hurricane Sandy Rebuilding Strategy, including sixty-nine recommendations, many of which are focused on resilience but few of which have been formally implemented. These initiatives are a good start, but a few months of hard work in the immediate aftermath of a single major hurricane cannot be expected to set long-term national policy.

We need the federal government, in cooperation with state, tribal and local governments and the private sector to develop a comprehensive national resilience strategy, establishing clear and measurable resilience objectives, and taking into account the latest scientific evidence, the values that communities hold dear and everything in between. Furthermore, this federally driven resilience strategy must include an implementation plan and be tied directly to all federal funding assistance – or else it will be summarily ignored.

We are all here today for the exact same reason that many similar Congressional committees and subcommittees have been convened in the aftermath of virtually every major disaster over the past several decades – the system is broken, everyone is mad, and billions of dollars continue to be wasted. The Post-Katrina Reform Act reformed next to nothing; the Hurricane Sandy Recovery Improvement Act improved far too little. Now let's try something different. Let's start over, decide who and how much we want to help, establish a comprehensive policy for disaster resilience and recovery, devise an implementation strategy, build an integrated set of programs that get the job done, and empower our public servants to lead genuine, sustainable, cost effective efforts that restore communities and support families in times of need.

Thank you very much, and I would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.

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