

Rules Subcommittee on Legislative & Budget Process Hearing Testimony

September 24, 2019, 2:30 p.m., United States Capitol

Good afternoon Chairman McGovern, Congressman Hastings, and Subcommittee members:

The desire to make our communities more disaster resilient is not new. Experience has repeatedly demonstrated that lives can be saved, damage to property can be reduced significantly, and economic recovery can be accelerated by consistently building safer and stronger buildings, strengthening existing infrastructures, enforcing building codes, and making the proper preparations BEFORE a disaster occurs. Modern-day mitigation has been evident since the late 1980's when the Stafford Disaster Relief & Emergency Assistance Act was passed. In 1990, the Community Rating System was establishedⁱ. Later, James Lee Witt, FEMA Administrator from 1993-2001, launched the Project Impact program in 1997 to build community partnerships, identify community hazards and vulnerabilities, and prioritize risk reduction strategies. I witnessed first-hand the benefits of Project Impact. We elevated homes, improved storm drainage systems, fortified or relocated structures, and hardened buildings and homes.

In 2005, we learned that every \$1 spent on mitigation results in a \$4 return of avoided future losses. More recently, we're learning that the ratio is closer to 7:1 – a dollar investment in mitigation can save an average of \$6 to \$7 in response and recovery spendingⁱⁱ.

It seems to me that current federal mitigation programs are built backwards, or at least, upside down. Despite plenty of evidence proving the value and efficacy of mitigation strategies, funding for mitigation is a mere fraction of the funding for after-the-fact, post-disaster response. Instead of focusing its efforts on minimizing the impacts of national disasters, FEMA is mired with cleaning up after them.

In the 1970s and 1980s, spending on the federal disaster relief averaged an annual \$1 billion in today's dollars. It soared to \$4 billion in the late 1990s, before nearly doubling again to \$8 billion in the two decades since. In 2017, funding was over \$140 billionⁱⁱⁱ.

In terms of mitigation however, over its 12-year history, funding levels for the Pre-disaster Mitigation Program (PDM) have risen and fallen, ranging between \$50 and \$150 million^{iv}. Despite the success of the Project Impact Program, mitigation funding has continued to be well below the need. In 2018, only \$235 million in PDM funds were appropriated; a drop in the bucket compared to the \$89 billion in supplemental appropriations alone for disaster response^v.

The Hazard Mitigation Grant Program aims to reduce loss of life and property damage from future natural disasters by providing funding to state and local governments for mitigation projects after a major disaster declaration. HMGP funds are by far the majority of mitigation dollars appropriated by the federal government today. Essentially, we must wait for a major disaster to be eligible for the great majority of mitigation funds.

Another example, not related to hurricanes, but it further emphasizes my point for a re-think. The Homeland Security Grant Program began in 2003 for the purpose of procuring surveillance equipment, weapons, and advanced training for local first responders in order to heighten our preparedness. We have purchased personal protective equipment, rescue equipment, communications systems, and more. All aimed at the immediate response to a terrorist incident. \$1 billion were allocated to HSGP for 2019^{vi}. Now while I am absolutely committed to protecting our first responders and ensuring their safety, after 16-years, we have allocated billions of dollars focused on the first seven (7) minutes of a terrorism incident. However, we are learning from our post-incident analyses of terrorist and mass shooting events, that recovery from these incidents is a prolonged process. After seven (7) minutes or less, nearly all incidents are over^{vii}, but the hard work lasting for more than seven (7) years, just begins. The trauma/medical care, physical rehabilitation, economic recovery, and mental anguish will linger for years. Only to resurface annually on the anniversary of the incident. Yet unfortunately, funding for the lengthy recovery period is essentially non-existent. In Palm Beach County, we are using creative strategies to steer more funding toward recovery. We have drafted a Family Assistance and Survivor Support Center plan and have exercised it twice. Addressing mental and behavioral health symptoms immediately after a mass shooting event can help mitigate the long-term post-traumatic stress, depression, and suicides^{viii}. Our next phase will plan for Community Resiliency Centers which will serve as an on-going resource and referral center for those affected by a terrorist and active shooter event.

Another example: we all remember the photo of the single home still standing, nearly unscathed, on Mexico Beach, Florida, after the entire neighborhood was annihilated by *Hurricane Michael*. The 3-story home, was built on 40-foot pilings, constructed of reinforced concrete, steel cables, and a metal roof. Estimates on the construction costs were only 15-20% above standard costs^{ix}. This may sound expensive, but only the windows in one room, a set of stairs, and an air conditioning unit were damaged – a far cry from the total rebuild costs throughout the catastrophic destruction of the surrounding neighborhood.



Figure 1. Hurricane-resistant home still standing

Even the private sector is engaged in mitigation. For example, Florida Power & Light, the largest energy company in the U.S. with over 5 million customers, has made over \$4 billion in investments to install concrete poles and bury critical transmission lines to make their energy grid stronger and more storm-resilient^x.

The take-away here is that building materials matter, building codes work, and mitigation works.

Let's talk about sustainability. *Hurricane Hermine* (2016) was the first hurricane to make landfall in Florida since *Wilma* (2005). Emergency managers worked hard during the 11 -year funding

drought to keep our partners engaged, interested, and enthusiastic about in mitigation. We shared best practices, success stories, and maintained our Project Priority Lists (PPLs), which went unfunded for years. We put a lot of time, effort, and resources into mitigation, without any incentive. Luckily, Emergency Management Performance Grants (EMPG) fund local emergency management programs to staff and promulgate mitigative campaigns such as the Local Mitigation Strategy. Local Mitigation Strategies are on-going programs that need to survive even during disaster droughts. However, Local Mitigation Strategies must have the resources behind them to maintain them – to prioritize mitigation projects, facilitate them, and make sure they are shovel ready. Further support of local EMPG, or at least maintenance of the EMPG program, assures that mitigation remains at the forefront of local preparedness programs, nationwide. Let me repeat, however, that when communities are trying to dig themselves out of a major disaster, it seems to be an odd time to throw migration dollars at them.

Let me conclude by recommending a rethink of current mitigation programs and funding. Let's flip them over 180° so they are right-side up. Let's change the focus to mitigation, and less on cleaning up after-the-fact. As done with Project Impact, let's showcase creative resiliency strategies, best practices, and let's celebrate success stories instead of incentivizing salvage operations. Finally, let's sustain local emergency management programs which are at the forefront of resiliency.

Thank you for your time and consideration.



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Lesson:

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Endnotes and references

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- ^v Supplemental Appropriations for Disaster Relief and Recovery. <https://www.appropriations.senate.gov>
- ^{vi} FEMA. (2019, August 2). DHS Announces Grant Allocations for Fiscal Year 2019 Preparedness Grants. <https://www.fema.gov/news-release/2019/08/02/dhs-announces-grant-allocations-fiscal-year-2019-preparedness-grants>
- ^{vii} Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ). (2013, September 16). A Study of Active Shooter Incidents in the United States Between 2000 and 2013. <https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/active-shooter-study-2000-2013-1.pdf>
- ^{viii} Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services (SAMHSA), U.S. Department of Health & Human Services (DHHS). (2017, September). Mass Violence and Behavioral Health. <https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/dtac/srb-mass-violence-behavioral-health.pdf>
- ^{ix} Fedschun, T. (2018, October 15). Beach house still standing after hurricane Michael devastates nearby homes. *Fox News*. <http://www.nypost.com/2018/10/15>
- ^x Florida Power & Light. (2019). Improving our Systems. <https://www.fpl.com/reliability/system-improvements.html>