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# FEMA Focus: Updates on U.S. Emergency Preparedness and Responses

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Center Forward Basics

February 2025

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## Overview

The **Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)** coordinates within the federal government to help communities prepare for, respond to, recover from, and mitigate the effects of disasters and emergencies. FEMA operates under the Department of Homeland Security and is the nation's lead disaster and crisis management agency. Headquartered in Washington, D.C., its mission is to help citizens "before, during, and after disasters." While FEMA employs 20,000 civil servants, the workforce can swell to more than 50,000 during major disasters.

FEMA also emphasizes community resilience by promoting disaster preparedness and risk reduction. The agency educates the public on emergency planning, supplies, and evacuation strategies. It also fact-checks rumors online to nullify disinformation surrounding disasters. FEMA works closely with state, tribal, and local governments and private-sector partners to enhance nationwide preparedness.

While FEMA is critical in disaster response and recovery, it operates within specific eligibility guidelines. Eligibility is determined by the Stafford Act, which outlines the authority for most disaster response activities and prioritizes public and non-profit entities for disaster relief. For-profit organizations, such as taxpaying hospitals, are generally ineligible for FEMA funding despite their essential role in community recovery during crises.

## FEMA's History

FEMA was established in 1979 by an executive order from President Jimmy Carter. Carter gave the agency the dual mission of emergency management and civil defense. Before FEMA, disaster response was fragmented across numerous federal agencies, causing inefficiencies during emergency responses. The agency's powers were refined and broadened by the Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Amendments of 1988, which revised the Disaster Relief Act of 1974 and renamed it the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act (Stafford Act).

Reflecting a post-9/11 shift to integrate disaster response with national security, FEMA and 21 other federal agencies united under the Department of Homeland Security in March of 2003. The agency's scope expanded significantly again after Hurricane Katrina in 2005, which emphasized the need for emergency management in the United States and renewed focus on preparedness, inter-agency collaboration, and community resilience. Over the years, FEMA has evolved to address emerging threats such as climate change, cybersecurity, and pandemics while continuing its core mission of

## Center Forward Basics

Center Forward brings together members of Congress, not-for-profits, academic experts, trade associations, corporations and unions to find common ground. Our mission: to give centrist allies the information they need to craft common sense solutions, and provide those allies the support they need to turn those ideas into results.

In order to meet our challenges we need to put aside the partisan bickering that has gridlocked Washington and come together to find common sense solutions.

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swiftly helping communities recover and prepare for future disasters. For example, following a significant Atlantic hurricane season and extreme wildfire disasters, Congress provided FEMA with expanded authority and investment through the Disaster Recovery Reform Act of 2018.

## Recent FEMA Responses

FEMA has been pivotal in responding to recent disasters across the United States. One notable example is FEMA's response to the wildfires in Maui, Hawaii, which devastated the town of Lahaina and claimed over 100 lives in 2023. The agency worked closely with state and local officials to establish disaster recovery centers, offering temporary housing and home repair grants. FEMA's efforts extended to public infrastructure, helping restore essential services like power and water. FEMA's work in Maui is ongoing and illustrates its commitment to supporting communities during long-term recovery.

In October of 2024, FEMA played a critical role during Hurricane Milton, which caused catastrophic damage across Florida and resulted in significant loss of life and property. FEMA deployed personnel, coordinated search-and-rescue operations, and provided emergency supplies to affected communities, including food and water. The agency also facilitated financial assistance programs for individuals and businesses to help them rebuild and recover from the storm's devastating effects. On FEMA's website, disaster victims can still find support such as cleanup assistance and transitional sheltering.

Another significant use of FEMA's resources occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. While primarily known for disaster response, FEMA was integral in distributing medical supplies, coordinating vaccine shipments, and managing emergency response logistics nationwide. The pandemic underscored FEMA's ability to pivot to nontraditional emergencies and demonstrated its versatility in handling public health crises. By supporting community vaccination sites and helping deploy lifesaving resources, FEMA reinforced its mission to safeguard Americans from all hazards.

## Impactful Upcoming Legislation

In September 2024, the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs held a markup to consider 16 bills, including the [Disaster Survivors Fairness Act](#). The legislation passed out of committee with strong bipartisan backing and is designed to reform federal disaster assistance programs to support survivors better. The text enhances FEMA's ability to fund disaster mitigation projects and expands support for homeowners. The bill also emphasizes transparency and requires FEMA to collaborate with the Government Accountability Office (GAO) to address ongoing challenges in post-disaster assistance programs by expanding FEMA's capacity for disaster mitigation projects and streamlining assistance for states with innovative recovery solutions.

FEMA has requested additional appropriations to address shortfalls in the Disaster Relief Fund (DRF), which is annually funded by Congress and serves as the federal government's primary source of funding for disaster response, recovery, and preparedness. DRF's temporary budget authority will expire on December 20, 2024. Without funding, FEMA might have to pause some recovery activities and furlough staff, which could severely impact communities recovering from recent disasters.

FEMA's National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP) is a public-private partnership that provides insurance to help reduce the socio-economic impact of floods. FEMA administers the NFIP, which requires periodic congressional reauthorization to operate. President Biden signed legislation on September 26, 2024, to extend NFIP's authorization to December 20, 2024. Congress must reauthorize the NFIP by 11:59 p.m. on December 20, 2024, to prevent a lapse in its authority to sell flood insurance and borrow funds. FEMA has shared proposals like modernizing flood insurance policies to make them easier to comprehend and improving financial sustainability to address increasing claims from severe weather events. The upcoming reauthorization will help shape FEMA's continued approach to flood risk management and disaster recovery. These legislative efforts and funding requests underscore the critical role of Congress in ensuring FEMA's ability to respond quickly and effectively to disasters while addressing long-term challenges in disaster mitigation and recovery.

Another promising bill is the bipartisan Reforming Disaster Recovery Act which would permanently authorize the Community Development Block Grant-Disaster Recovery (CDBG-DR) program. CDBG-DR provides states, tribes, and communities with flexible, long-term recovery resources needed to rebuild affordable housing and infrastructure after a disaster. The lack of a permanent authorization delays aid to disaster survivors and reduces the effectiveness of the program.

The Reforming Disaster Recovery Act is designed to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of disaster recovery efforts across the United States. It aims to streamline the process for communities to receive federal disaster aid, cutting through bureaucratic red tape to reduce delays. A key focus of the act is on equity and inclusion, ensuring that vulnerable and underserved communities are not left behind and receive the support they need.

Additionally, the act promotes investments in resilience and mitigation projects to help communities better withstand future disasters. It also includes measures to increase transparency and accountability in the use of disaster recovery funds, ensuring that resources are used effectively and responsibly.

To support local governments, the act provides technical assistance to help them navigate the recovery process and implement best practices. It also encourages greater community involvement in disaster planning and recovery efforts, recognizing the importance of local knowledge and participation in building resilient communities.

## Links to Other Resources

- AARP - [AARP Disaster Resilience Tool Kit](#)
- Bipartisan Policy Center - [Status of Federal Disaster Assistance Funding](#)
- Congress.gov - [Disaster Survivors Fairness Act](#)
- FEMA - [About us](#)
- FEMA - [Congressional Reauthorization for the National Flood Insurance Program](#)