

IN THE EYE OF THE STORM: OVERSIGHT OF FEMA'S DISASTER READINESS AND RESPONSE

(118-74)

HEARING
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, PUBLIC BUILDINGS, AND
EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT
OF THE
COMMITTEE ON
TRANSPORTATION AND
INFRASTRUCTURE
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
ONE HUNDRED EIGHTEENTH CONGRESS
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Washington, DC 20515

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NOVEMBER 15, 2024

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

I. PURPOSE

The Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management of the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure will meet on Tuesday, November 19, 2024, at 10:00 a.m. ET in 2167 of the Rayburn House Office Building to receive testimony at a hearing entitled, “*In the Eye of the Storm: Oversight of FEMA’s Disaster Readiness and Response*.” The hearing will examine the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s (FEMA’s) preparedness and response to 2024 disasters, including Hurricanes Helene and Milton. At this hearing, Members will receive testimony from Members of Congress and the FEMA Administrator.

II. BACKGROUND

FEDERAL ASSISTANCE FOR DISASTERS

FEMA is the Federal Government’s lead agency for 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. 100–707, as 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 The Stafford Act authorizes the President to approve states’ requests for a Federal disaster declaration when “the situation is of such severity and magnitude that effective response is beyond the capabilities of the state and affected local governments.”⁴

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

¹ DHS, *FEMA*, (Feb. 3, 2023), available at <https://www.dhs.gov/employee-resources/federal-emergency-management-agency-fema>.

² Stafford Act, Pub. L. No. 100–707.

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Id.*

and the affected local governments,”⁵ the Governor of the affected state may request the President declare a major disaster.⁶ FEMA’s primary Stafford Act programs for disaster recovery in the aftermath of a major disaster are in the Public Assistance Program and the Individual Assistance Program.⁷ Following a major disaster declaration, FEMA also provides Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) funds.⁸

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 buildings and infrastructure.⁹ The Federal cost-share for Public Assistance is 75 percent but may be increased by the President.¹⁰

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.¹¹ The current limits for IHP assistance is \$37,900 for housing assistance and \$37,900 for other needs assistance.¹²

Section 404 of the Stafford Act authorizes HMGP, which is based on a percentage of Public Assistance funding, to provide grants to state, tribal, and territorial governments for mitigation projects that: (1) are cost effective and (2) reduce the risk of future damage, hardship, and loss from natural hazards.¹³ The purpose of this grant program is to fund practical mitigation measures that effectively reduce the risk of loss of life and property from future disasters. State, tribal, and territorial governments may use their HMGP funds to assist families in reducing the risk to their homes from natural disasters. 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).¹⁴

III. STATUS OF THE DISASTER RELIEF FUND

IMMEDIATE NEEDS FUNDING GUIDANCE

The Disaster Relief Fund (DRF) is a no-year appropriation against which FEMA can direct, coordinate, manage, and fund eligible response and recovery efforts associated with domestic major disasters and emergencies that overwhelm state resources pursuant to the Stafford Act.¹⁵ Through the DRF, FEMA can fund authorized Federal disaster support activities as well as eligible state, territorial, tribal, and local actions such as providing emergency protection and debris removal.¹⁶ The DRF also funds the repair and restoration of qualifying disaster-damaged public infrastructure, hazard mitigation initiatives, financial assistance to eligible disaster survivors, and FMAGs for qualifying large forest or grassland wildfires.¹⁷

From January to June 2024, FEMA’s monthly obligations from the DRF averaged high levels, with significant monthly expenditures due to both new major disaster and open disaster declarations.¹⁸ Due to projected shortfalls in the DRF and concern

⁵ 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.

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ See FEMA, *Assistance for Governments and Private Non-Profits After a Disaster* (Feb. 23, 2023), available at <https://www.fema.gov/assistance/public>.

¹⁰ 42 U.S.C. § 5172.

¹¹ FEMA, *Individuals and Households Program* (Feb. 3, 2023), available at <https://www.fema.gov/assistance/individual/program>.

¹² 42 U.S.C. § 5174.

¹³ FEMA, *Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP)* (Dec. 27, 2022), available at <https://www.fema.gov/grants/mitigation/hazard-mitigation>.

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ FEMA, DISASTER RELIEF FUND: MONTHLY REPORTS, (Aug. 29, 2023), available at <https://www.fema.gov/about/reports-and-data/disaster-relief-fund-monthly-reports>.

¹⁶ FEMA, FACT SHEET: FEMA’S PUBLIC ASSISTANCE PROCESS, (June 7, 2018), available at <https://www.fema.gov/press-release/20210318/fact-sheet-femas-public-assistance-process>.

¹⁷ FEMA, DISASTER RELIEF FUND: MONTHLY REPORTS, (Aug. 29, 2023), available at <https://www.fema.gov/about/reports-and-data/disaster-relief-fund-monthly-reports>.

¹⁸ FEMA, DISASTER RELIEF FUND: MONTHLY REPORTS, (Oct. 9, 2024), available at *July 2024 Disaster Relief Fund Report*, available at <https://www.fema.gov/about/reports-and-data/disaster-relief-fund-monthly-reports>.

that the agency may be unable to meet its Stafford Act obligations, FEMA enacted Immediate Needs Funding (INF) on August 29, 2024. Under INF, FEMA restricts the use of funds to prioritize life-saving operations over longer-term recovery projects until additional funds are allocated by Congress.¹⁹ 2024 was the tenth time FEMA has implemented INF guidance since 2001.²⁰

In September, a Continuing Resolution (CR) passed by Congress provided an additional \$20.261 billion in budget authority to FEMA. FEMA lifted INF restrictions on October 2, 2024.²¹ That same day, Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas told reporters at a press conference that “FEMA does not have the funds to make it through the [hurricane] season.”²² By October 9, 2024, FEMA had spent approximately \$9 billion, or 45 percent, of its disaster allocation on projects delayed during the INF period.²³ FEMA is monitoring the balance of the DRF and will reimplement INF to preserve the availability of funds for immediate disaster response efforts if needed.²⁴

COVID-19 REIMBURSEMENTS

During the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting Nationwide emergency, the President authorized the provision of assistance to states and territories through the DRF. While supplemental appropriations were allocated to help cover the costs of the Federal pandemic response, funding levels have not kept pace with FEMA’s actual obligations. In 2020, FEMA estimated spending \$17.6 billion for COVID-19 assistance.²⁵ As of March 2024, FEMA reported expending \$125.3 billion from the DRF for COVID-19 assistance and expects to continue obligating funds through August 2026.²⁶

According to the Congressional Budget Office (CBO), outlays for the COVID-19 response have accounted for 20 percent of all DRF expenditures between 1992 and 2021, making it the costliest single event in DRF history.²⁷ In 2024, FEMA anticipated spending around \$19.8 billion, or 40 percent of its total obligations for the year, on reimbursements related to pandemic activities.²⁸

DHS OIG REPORT

On August 14, 2024, the DHS Office of Inspector General (OIG) released a report estimating that FEMA has more than 847 open disaster declarations, totaling \$73 billion in unliquidated obligations.²⁹ Of these, \$8.3 billion were associated with 79 disasters declared in 2012 or earlier, including 26 with expired Periods of Performance (POP).³⁰ Under the statute, these expired POPs represent \$9.4 million that could be returned to the DRF and made available for other Stafford Act activities. The OIG has recommended that FEMA conduct a thorough review of all expired POPs across authorized grant programs and appropriately deobligate the funds to return them to the DRF.³¹

¹⁹ FEMA, FACT SHEET: IMMEDIATE NEEDS FUNDING, (Aug. 1, 2024), available at https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/documents/fema_ocfo-inf-fact-sheet.pdf.

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ Press Release, FEMA, *Continuing Resolution Allows FEMA to Lift Restrictions in Disaster Relief Funding*, available at <https://www.fema.gov/press-release/20231003/continuing-resolution-allows-fema-lift-restrictions-disaster-relief-funding>.

²² Kevin Freking and Colleen Long, *Mayorkas Warns FEMA Doesn’t Have Enough Funding to Last Through Hurricane Season*, AP NEWS (Oct. 2, 2024), available at <https://apnews.com/article/hurricane-helene-congress-fema-funding-5be4f18e00ce2b509d6830410cf2c1cb>.

²³ Thomas Frank and Anne C. Mulkern, *FEMA Spent Nearly Half Its Disaster Budget In Just 8 Days*, POLITICO (Oct. 10, 2024), available at <https://politico.com/news/2024/10/10/fema-disaster-budget-hurricane-helene-melton-00183219>.

²⁴ Letter from the Hon. Deanne Criswell, Administrator, FEMA, to the Hon. Sam Graves, Chairman, H. Comm. on Transp. and Infrastructure (Oct. 25, 2024), (on file with Comm.).

²⁵ GAO, *Disaster Relief Fund: Lessons Learned from COVID-19 Could Improve FEMA’s Estimates*, available at <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-24-106676.pdf>.

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ CBO, *FEMA’s Disaster Relief Fund: Budgetary History and Projections*, available at <https://www.cbo.gov/publication/58840>.

²⁸ GAO, *Disaster Relief Fund: Lessons Learned from COVID-19 Could Improve FEMA’s Estimates*, available at <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-24-106676.pdf>.

²⁹ DHS OIG, FINAL REPORT: FEMA’S INADEQUATE OVERSIGHT LED TO DELAYS IN CLOSING OUT DECLARED DISASTERS, (Aug. 14, 2024), available at <https://www.oig.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/assets/2024-08/OIG-24-45-Aug24.pdf>.

³⁰ *Id.*

³¹ *Id.*

IV. FEMA'S RESPONSE TO 2024 DISASTERS

CURRENT STAFFORD ACT DECLARATIONS

In 2024, FEMA has provided assistance for 89 Presidentially declared emergencies and major disasters including: Hurricane Beryl, Hurricane Debby, Hurricane Francine, Hurricane Helene, Hurricane Milton, western wildfires, and multiple unnamed severe storms, landslides, and an active tornado seasons that impacted many states across the country.³² The 2024 Atlantic Hurricane Season has a death toll of at least 326.³³ Although disaster damage estimates are still being calculated, the latest overall estimates exceed \$300 billion.³⁴ While 2020 holds the all-time record for Presidentially declared emergencies and major disasters due to declarations related to COVID-19, at 230,³⁵ the size and severity of Stafford Act declarations in 2024 have drawn congressional attention to FEMA's resource constraints and response challenges, particularly as it relates to Hurricanes Helene and Milton.³⁶

Hurricane Helene made landfall near Perry, Florida on September 26, 2024, as a Category 4 hurricane with maximum sustained winds of 140 miles per hour.³⁷ As Helene traveled across the Appalachian Region, it resulted in catastrophic flooding, landslides, and tornadoes. Currently, six states (Florida, Georgia, Tennessee, Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina) have major declared disasters associated with Helene, and Alabama is under an emergency declaration.³⁸ Just two weeks later, Hurricane Milton formed in the Gulf of Mexico and rapidly intensified to a Category 5 hurricane with peak windspeeds of 180 miles per hour.³⁹ By the time Milton made landfall near Siesta Key on October 9, 2024, the storm had weakened to a Category 3 hurricane, but it brought a front of deadly tornados and storm surge to Florida.⁴⁰

To respond to these two catastrophic events, FEMA has obligated \$4.5 billion for Hurricane Helene and \$1.6 billion for Hurricane Milton as of late October, and deployed more than 8,300 staff, or approximately 37 percent of all FEMA personnel.⁴¹ Under various Stafford Act authorities, FEMA is supporting states, local governments, and nonprofit organizations in the operation of 410 safe shelter facilities, and coordinating logistics for commodities, whole-of-government response teams, and lifesaving supplies.⁴²

As a result of Hurricane Helene, power outages in North Carolina impacted more than one million people and, as of October 30, 2024, 2,700 remain without power.⁴³ As of October 30, 2024, two school systems remain closed, 600 National Guard were stationed on the ground, and the death toll rose to 101.⁴⁴ Portions of I-40 between Tennessee and Asheville, North Carolina, were completely destroyed.⁴⁵ Significant

³² FEMA, *Declared Disasters*, available at <https://www.fema.gov/disaster/declarations>.

³³ Fernando Cervantes Jr. and Dinah Voyles Pulver, *Beyond Helene: Hurricane Death Toll Tops 300 Lives, With Month Left in Season*, USA TODAY (Oct. 15, 2024), available at <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/weather/2024/10/15/hurricane-deaths-2024-helene-milton-atlantic-season/75678995007/>.

³⁴ *Helene, Milton Losses Could Top \$50 Billion Each As Hurricanes Are Rare*, CBS NEWS (Oct. 16, 2024), available at <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/helene-milton-losses-50-billion-each-hurricanes-rare/>.

³⁵ Adam B. Smith, *2023: A Historic Year of U.S. Billion-Dollar Weather and Climate Disasters*, NOAA, (Jan. 8, 2024), available at <https://www.climate.gov/news-features/blogs/beyond-data/2023-historic-year-us-billion-dollar-weather-and-climate-disasters>.

³⁶ Letter from Sam Graves, Chairman, H. Comm. on Transp. & Infrastructure to Deanne Criswell, Administrator, FEMA (Oct. 11, 2025) (On file with Comm.).

³⁷ Kate Payne, *Hurricane Helene Kills At Least 44 and Cuts A Swath of Destruction Across the Southeast*, AP NEWS (Sept. 27, 2024), available at <https://apnews.com/article/hurricane-helene-florida-georgia-carolina-e5769b56dea81e40fae2161ad1b4e75d>.

³⁸ FEMA, *Hurricane Helene*, available at <https://www.fema.gov/disaster/current/hurricane-helene>.

³⁹ Brad Brooks and Leonora LaPeter Anton, *Hurricane Milton Leaves At Least 10 Dead, Millions Without Power in Florida*, REUTERS (Oct. 10, 2024), available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/hurricane-milton-weakens-it-marches-across-central-florida-homes-destroyed-2024-10-10/>.

⁴⁰ *Id.*

⁴¹ Letter from Deanne Criswell, Administrator, FEMA to Sam Graves, Chairman, H. Comm. on Transp. & Infrastructure (Oct. 25, 2025) (On file with Comm.).

⁴² *Id.*

⁴³ FEMA Briefing for Staff of the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, Oct. 30, 2024.

⁴⁴ *Id.*

⁴⁵ Joyce Orlando, *I-40 collapse: Will it really take to 2025 for repairs between North Carolina and Tennessee? What we know*, ASHEVILLE CITIZEN TIMES, (Oct. 2, 2024), available at <https://www.citizen-times.com/story/news/2024/10/02/i-40-collapse-updates-when-will-it-reopen-alternate-routes-out-of-western-nc/75483578007/>.

parts of North Carolina, particularly in Yancey County, remain inaccessible via car with roads washed away, downed trees, and rugged terrain.⁴⁶

V. CONCLUSION

FEMA currently has active disaster declarations for recent floods, hurricanes, and wildfires that have impacted multiple regions across the United States, including the aftermath of Hurricanes Helene and Milton. Given the intensity and frequency of these 2024 disasters and the current fiscal state of the DRF, the hearing will focus on evaluating the Nation's current state of disaster readiness, response, and recovery efforts under FEMA's leadership. The hearing will examine FEMA's resource allocation strategies, coordination with state and local partners, and response agility, with an emphasis on identifying improvements to support communities facing repeated and complex disasters.

VI. WITNESSES

PANEL I

- The Honorable Chuck Edwards, Member of Congress, United States House of Representatives
- The Honorable Kathy Castor, Member of Congress, United States House of Representatives

PANEL II

- The Honorable Deanne Criswell, Administrator, Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), United States Department of Homeland Security

⁴⁶Committee Staffdel (Oct. 30, 2024).

IN THE EYE OF THE STORM: OVERSIGHT OF FEMA'S DISASTER READINESS AND RE- SPONSE

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 19, 2024

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, PUBLIC
BUILDINGS, AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT,
COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE,
Washington, DC.

The subcommittee met, pursuant to call, at 10:02 a.m. in room 2167 Rayburn House Office Building, Hon. Scott Perry (Chairman of the subcommittee) presiding.

Mr. PERRY. The Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management will come to order.

The Chair asks unanimous consent that I be authorized to declare a recess at any time during today's hearing.

Without objection, so ordered.

The Chair also asks unanimous consent that Members not on the subcommittee be permitted to sit with the subcommittee at today's hearing and ask questions.

Without objection, so ordered.

As a reminder, if Members wish to insert a document into the record, please also email it to DocumentsTI@mail.house.gov.

The Chair now recognizes himself for the purposes of an opening statement for 5 minutes.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. SCOTT PERRY OF PENNSYLVANIA, CHAIRMAN, SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, PUBLIC BUILDINGS, AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

Mr. PERRY. I thank the witnesses for being here today to discuss FEMA's response to Hurricane Helene and other 2024 disasters, as well as the broader impact of FEMA's disaster recovery policies on the Agency's response efforts.

First and foremost, our hearts go out to everyone affected by these disasters. Communities impacted by these storms are clearly facing a long and difficult road to recovery. While we might not always agree on who should be the tip of the spear when it comes to emergency response, disaster survivors deserve to know that help is available, and taxpayer resources intended to provide for their recovery should be used effectively and fairly.

Just last week, there were extremely concerning press reports from Lake Placid, Florida, that FEMA skipped over homes im-

pacted by Hurricane Milton that displayed signs supporting President-elect Trump. While the FEMA Administrator quickly responded that the employee was terminated, it is very clear from a recent interview that the employee believes she was carrying out direction from the Agency and suggested that this avoidance tactic occurred not only in Florida, but also in the Carolinas.

Last month, while FEMA was quick to issue a rumor control page arguing that criticisms of the response would discourage people from applying for aid, FEMA workers themselves were apparently avoiding the very disaster victims we are talking about.

Let me be clear. The thousands of men and women who deploy to help communities across this Nation serve an important role for the American people. I am not disparaging those workers. To the contrary, it seems this particular worker believes she is being treated like the scapegoat, and if that is the case, more people at FEMA must be held accountable.

In response to these claims, the committee sent a letter to the Administrator last week requesting information and documents pertaining to the allegations of this FEMA employee. The Chair asks unanimous consent that this letter be included in the record.

Without objection, so ordered.

I hope we will get responses to the questions posed in that letter and that the Administrator is prepared to discuss the issue today.

More broadly, as we assess FEMA's response to recent disasters, I believe there are other critical areas we also need to address. First, aid needs to reach impacted communities quickly without unnecessary bureaucratic obstacles. Early on, there were reports from North Carolina, in particular, residents concerned about FEMA's slow reaction pace to the storm and feeling as though they were left to fend for themselves. In fact, there are still areas FEMA has not reached to assess the damage. I can't wrap my head around the fact that the Federal agency charged with leading our response to disasters cannot seem to maneuver to homes in the mountains of western North Carolina. I mean, as an editorial, my goodness, one of the Members of Congress was somehow able to navigate to these areas. I was in contact with him asking for the information because I couldn't get it anywhere else, and he was giving me firsthand accounts at the time.

Well, then we learned how long of a process it has been for FEMA to deliver temporary housing trailers to communities in western North Carolina living without power and heat. Clearly, something is wrong with FEMA's process. I hope that my congressional colleagues on our first panel will provide us with candid insights into FEMA's response to Hurricane Helene, the successes you have seen, and the areas where there is cause for concern.

In past disasters, we have seen delays in relief reaching the ground, sometimes due to the scope of the disaster's impact and the resulting infrastructure damage, but also because of redtape and complex requirements. It seems at every turn, there is some regulation, policy, or "this is the way we have always done it" approach that defies common sense.

For example, as Secretary Mayorkas mentioned recently that the Disaster Relief Fund was being depleted, right after we appro-

priated \$20 billion, the DHS inspector general noted billions of unspent funds tied to delayed disaster closeouts of up to 16 years.

Congress and this committee continue to pass bills to streamline FEMA assistance, but it seems the more we try to cut redtape, FEMA adds more or just simply doesn't change course. I am eager to hear from FEMA today on how they have worked with the Federal, State, and local partners to speed up this process.

In response to concerns about FEMA's response to the recent disasters, on October 11, Chairman Sam Graves and I sent a letter to FEMA raising critical questions about the response to Hurricane Helene, reports of the slow pace of FEMA aid, and the state of the DRF.

The Chair now asks unanimous consent that this letter be included in the record.

Without objection, so ordered.

The response from the FEMA Administrator described how the continuing resolution passed by Congress brought the balance of the DRF to \$21.9 billion, and FEMA immediately obligated \$8.8 billion in previously delayed projects. This reduced available funds for future disasters to \$13.1 billion.

The Chair asks unanimous consent that FEMA's response letter also be included in the record.

And, without objection, so ordered.

[The three letters referenced by Mr. Perry are on pages 71–88.]

Mr. PERRY. I am deeply troubled by how fast the DRF was depleted. Equally troubling are FEMA's forays into providing sheltering assistance to illegal aliens at the southern border, which has cost taxpayers more than \$1 billion since 2019. Although these funds have not come from the DRF, they are certainly taking dollars and staffing resources away from helping American citizens in need.

FEMA's focus should be—correction—FEMA's focus should remain on helping communities respond to and recover from natural disasters, rather than on diverting taxpayer resources towards political initiatives like exacerbating the crisis at the southern border, climate change, or picking and choosing which homes to canvas based on political signs.

With that, I look forward to hearing from our witnesses on these topics.

[Mr. Perry's prepared statement follows:]

Prepared Statement of Hon. Scott Perry, a Representative in Congress from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and Chairman, Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management

I want to thank our witnesses for being here today to discuss FEMA's response to Hurricane Helene and other 2024 disasters, as well as the broader impact of FEMA's disaster recovery policies on the agency's response efforts.

First and foremost, our hearts go out to everyone affected by these disasters. Communities impacted by these storms are clearly facing a long and difficult road to recovery.

While we might not always agree on who should be the tip of the spear when it comes to emergency response, disaster survivors deserve to know what help is available, and taxpayer resources intended to provide for their recovery should be used effectively and fairly. Just last week, there were extremely concerning press reports

from Lake Placid, Florida, that FEMA skipped over homes impacted by Hurricane Milton that displayed signs supporting President-elect Trump.

While the FEMA Administrator quickly responded that the employee was terminated, it is very clear from a recent interview that the employee believes she was carrying out direction from the agency and suggested that this “avoidance” tactic occurred not only in Florida but also in the Carolinas.

Last month, while FEMA was quick to issue a rumor control page arguing that criticisms of the response would discourage people from applying for aid, FEMA workers themselves were apparently avoiding disaster victims. Let me be clear—the thousands of men and women who deploy to help communities across this nation serve an important role for the American people. I am not disparaging those workers.

To the contrary—it seems this particular worker believes she is being treated like the scapegoat and, if that is the case, more people at FEMA must be held accountable. In response to these claims, the Committee sent a letter to the Administrator last week requesting information and documents pertaining to the allegations of this FEMA employee. I ask unanimous consent that this letter be included in the record. I hope we will get responses to the questions posed in that letter and that the Administrator is prepared to discuss the issue today.

More broadly, as we assess FEMA’s response to recent disasters, I believe there are other critical areas we also need to address. First, aid needs to reach impacted communities quickly, without unnecessary bureaucratic obstacles. Early on, there were reports from North Carolina residents concerned about FEMA’s slow reaction pace to the storm and feeling as though they were left to fend for themselves. In fact, there are still areas FEMA has not reached to assess damage. I cannot wrap my head around the fact that the federal agency charged with leading our responses to disasters cannot seem to maneuver to homes in the mountains of western North Carolina.

Then we learned how long of a process it’s been for FEMA to deliver temporary housing trailers to communities in western North Carolina living without power and heat. Clearly something is wrong with FEMA’s process.

I hope that my Congressional colleagues on our first panel will provide us with candid insights into FEMA’s response to Hurricane Helene, the successes you’ve seen, and the areas where there is cause for concern.

In past disasters, we’ve seen delays in relief reaching the ground—sometimes due to the scope of the disaster’s impacts and the resulting infrastructure damage, but also because of red tape and complex requirements. It seems at every turn, there’s some regulation, policy, or “this-is-the-way-we’ve-always-done-it” approach that defies common sense.

For example, as Secretary Mayorkas mentioned recently that the Disaster Relief Fund (DRF) was being depleted—right after we appropriated \$20 billion—the DHS Inspector General noted billions of unspent funds tied to delayed disaster closeouts of up to 16 years.

Congress and this committee continue to pass bills to streamline FEMA assistance, but it seems the more we try to cut red tape, FEMA adds more or just simply doesn’t change course. I’m eager to hear from FEMA today on how they have worked with federal, state, and local partners to speed up this process.

In response to concerns about FEMA’s response to the recent disasters, on October 11th, Chairman Sam Graves and I sent a letter to FEMA raising critical questions about the response to Hurricane Helene, reports of the slow pace of FEMA aid, and the state of the DRF. I ask unanimous consent that this letter be included in the record.

The response from the FEMA Administrator described how the continuing resolution passed by Congress brought the balance of the DRF to \$21.9 billion, and FEMA immediately obligated \$8.8 billion in previously delayed projects. This reduced available funds for future disasters to \$13.1 billion. I ask unanimous consent that FEMA’s response letter also be included in the record.

I am deeply troubled by how fast the DRF was depleted. Equally troubling are FEMA’s forays into providing sheltering assistance to illegal aliens at the Southern Border, which has cost taxpayers more than \$1 billion since 2019. Although these funds have not come from the DRF, they are certainly taking dollars and staffing resources away from helping American citizens in need.

FEMA’s focus should remain on helping communities respond to and recover from natural disasters, rather than on diverting taxpayer resources toward political initiatives, like exacerbating the crisis at the Southern Border, climate change, or picking and choosing which homes to canvas based on political signs.

With that, I look forward to hearing from our witnesses on these topics.

Mr. PERRY. The Chair now recognizes the Ranking Member Titus for 5 minutes for an opening statement.

**OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. DINA TITUS OF NEVADA,
RANKING MEMBER, SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT,
PUBLIC BUILDINGS, AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT**

Ms. TITUS. Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank our witnesses for joining us, the Administrator, and our colleagues, Representatives Edwards and Castor, whose districts and communities have been greatly impacted by this year's deadly and devastating hurricane season.

As I have said many times before, in this committee and beyond, climate change and its related severe weather events have changed the disaster landscape, and they have strained capacity for all levels of Government to respond. What's more, the data shows that these disasters are becoming more expensive, they are lasting longer, and they are having a greater impact on our communities than ever before. While we still await exact figures, preliminary estimates show that the combined pricetag for just Hurricanes Milton and Helene will eclipse \$170 billion.

So far this year, FEMA has provided assistance for 89—89—Presidentially declared emergencies and major disasters, including those covering hurricanes, wildfires, landslides, and tornadoes.

One of the main sources for providing support to disaster-stricken communities, as you mentioned, Mr. Chairman, is FEMA's Disaster Relief Fund, the DRF, which funds repair and restoration of public infrastructure. It supports hazard mitigation initiatives, and it provides financial assistance to disaster survivors. When the program is nearing depletion, however, it enters Immediate Needs Funding, INF, which pauses all DRF-funded projects that are not lifesaving operations. Since 2001, INF has been implemented 10 times, the most recent being just August of this year.

The current continuing resolution provides \$20 billion in budget authority for the DRF, so, FEMA is no longer operating under INF. We know, however, these funding challenges will continue as fewer than \$5 billion currently remains in that budget. That is why President Biden submitted a \$100 billion supplementary request to Congress yesterday, and that includes \$40 billion for FEMA. Congress must pass the supplemental to sufficiently fund the DRF so FEMA can continue to support ongoing recovery efforts, as well as address those that will undoubtedly emerge in the future. This funding is not for FEMA. It is for FEMA to provide to communities and individuals impacted.

We also need to provide solutions for survivors and communities so they can recover more quickly and to ensure that resources are deployed fairly. One of those solutions is my Disaster Survivors Fairness Act, which I introduced with my colleagues Congressmen Garret Graves and Troy Carter, and Congresswoman Jennifer González-Colon. It also has the support of Congressman Chuck Edwards, who you will hear from later today.

One of the most important aspects of the bill, which has already passed this committee unanimously at the beginning of the Congress, is to simplify the process for seeking assistance following a

major disaster. It does this by creating a universal relief application across Federal agencies so that we can ease the burden on families and small businesses, get rid of some of the redtape, speed up the process, because these are the worst days of their lives, and they need to have at least some assistance in the application process.

In this committee, we have held numerous hearings on the challenges faced by FEMA's workforce, and I look forward to discussing those today. As we move forward, however, we must also acknowledge the impact misinformation has on the ability to respond to these events. I was disgusted with the ridiculous rumors that were floating around, cautioning people that Government was going to bulldoze over their communities, seize their homes, and divert disaster aid to other programs. And those who perpetuated these claims, spread the claims, claimed that they were legitimate, well, shame on you. That just makes the process even worse.

I was also very upset to learn that a FEMA employee directed her Disaster Survivor Assistance Team to skip homes that had Trump signs. I condemn the employee's decision about discriminating with aid, that should never be the case, and Administrator Criswell immediately did the right thing when she learned about this incident by firing the employee and referring the case to the Office of Special Counsel.

To my colleagues testifying today and to Administrator Criswell, we recognize the challenges you are facing, and this committee wants to do what it can to help aid your help to those in the recovery process. So, I look forward to your testimony and hope that we can stick to the issues at hand and not use this as a springboard to get into politics.

And I yield back.

[Ms. Titus' prepared statement follows:]

Prepared Statement of Hon. Dina Titus, a Representative in Congress from the State of Nevada, and Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I want to thank our witnesses for joining us today, including my colleagues Reps. Edwards and Castor, whose communities are among the many that have been impacted by this year's deadly and devastating hurricane season.

As I have said time and time again, climate change and its related severe weather events have changed the disaster landscape and strained capacity for all levels of government to respond. What's more is that data shows these disasters are becoming more expensive and have a greater impact on our communities than ever before. While we still await exact figures, preliminary estimates show that the combined price tag for just Hurricanes Milton and Helene will eclipse \$90 billion.

So far this year, FEMA has provided assistance for 89 Presidentially declared emergencies and major disasters including those covering hurricanes, wildfires, landslides, and tornadoes.

One of the main sources for providing support to disaster-stricken communities is FEMA's Disaster Relief Fund (DRF) which funds repair and restoration of public infrastructure, supports hazard mitigation initiatives, and provides financial assistance to disaster survivors. When the program is nearing depletion, however, it enters Immediate Needs Funding (INF) which pauses all DRF-funded projects which are not life-saving operations. Since 2001, INF has been implemented ten times, the most recent being August of this year.

The current Continuing Resolution provides \$20 billion in budget authority for the DRF, so FEMA is no longer operating under INF. We know, however, these funding

challenges will continue as fewer than \$5 billion currently remains in the DRF. That is why President Biden submitted a \$100 billion supplemental request to Congress yesterday, which includes \$40 billion for FEMA. Congress must pass a supplemental to sufficiently fund the DRF so FEMA can continue to support ongoing recovery efforts, as well as address those that will undoubtedly emerge in the future.

We also need to provide solutions for survivors and communities to recover more quickly and to ensure resources are being deployed fairly. One of those solutions is my Disaster Survivors Fairness Act, which I introduced with my colleagues Congressman, Garret Graves, Congressman Troy Carter, and Congresswoman Jennifer González-Colón, and has the support of my colleague Congressman Chuck Edwards who is testifying today. One of the most important aspects of this bill, which already passed this Committee unanimously at the beginning of the Congress, is simplifying the process for seeking assistance following a major disaster by creating a universal relief application across federal agencies so that we can ease the burden on families and small businesses after what might have been the worst days of their lives.

In this Committee, we have held numerous hearings on the challenges faced by FEMA's workforce, and I look forward to discussing those today. As we move forward, however, we must also acknowledge the impact misinformation has on the ability to respond to these events. I was disgusted with the ridiculous rumors that were floating around cautioning people that the government was going to bulldoze over stricken communities, seize homes, and that FEMA was diverting disaster aid to other programs. To those who permeated these claims, shame on you!

I was also outraged to learn that a FEMA employee directed her disaster survivor assistance team to skip helping homes with Trump signs. I firmly condemn that employee's decision; FEMA should never discriminate when providing disaster aid. Administrator Criswell immediately did the right thing when she learned of this incident—the employee was fired and the case referred to the Office of Special Counsel.

To my colleagues testifying today, and to Administrator Criswell, we recognize the challenges you are facing, and this committee wants to do everything it can to aid with your recovery efforts. I look forward to your testimony and I yield back.

Mr. PERRY. The Chair thanks the gentlewoman. The Chair now recognizes the chairman of the full committee, Mr. Graves, for 5 minutes for his opening statement.

**OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. SAM GRAVES OF MISSOURI,
CHAIRMAN, COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRA-
STRUCTURE**

Mr. GRAVES OF MISSOURI. Thank you, Chairman Perry, and I do want to thank our witnesses for testifying today.

This hearing comes at a crucial time. We are being told that a supplemental appropriations bill is needed after Congress recently appropriated \$20 billion to the Disaster Relief Fund. There have been ongoing concerns about how long FEMA takes to provide aid and rebuild after a disaster.

Further, this committee has highlighted concerns that the Biden administration has prioritized equity, climate change, and assistance to migrants over disaster victims and readiness and response efforts. And then we add, on top of all of this, the recent shocking reports that FEMA workers purposely avoided hurricane-impacted homes that displayed signs in support of President Trump. Each of these reports alone are unacceptable, but combined, they show a pattern of incompetence within the Agency.

For more than a decade, I have sponsored and supported numerous pieces of legislation aimed at speeding up FEMA aid, cutting the bureaucracy and the redtape, and creating more transparency. But it seems that, despite these efforts, FEMA somehow finds new ways to make the recovery process more difficult for impacted communities.

The Agency is accountable directly to the President, and so, the buck stops with the President regarding the constant mismanagement and lack of focus on its core mission.

I trust that under new leadership, we will finally be able to reform FEMA in a way that works to support all Americans and refocus the Agency on what it is supposed to do, and that is: help people prepare for and recover from disasters without regard to an individual's political views.

And with that, Mr. Chairman, I would yield back.

[Mr. Graves of Missouri's prepared statement follows:]

Prepared Statement of Hon. Sam Graves, a Representative in Congress from the State of Missouri, and Chairman, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure

This hearing comes at a critical time. We are being told a supplemental appropriations bill is needed after Congress recently appropriated \$20 billion to the Disaster Relief Fund. There have been ongoing concerns about how long FEMA takes to provide aid and rebuild after a disaster.

Further, this committee has highlighted concerns that the Biden Administration has prioritized equity, climate change, and assistance to migrants over disaster victims and readiness and response efforts. And then we add on top of all of this the recent shocking reports that FEMA workers purposefully avoided hurricane impacted homes that displayed signs in support of President Trump. Each of these reports alone is unacceptable—but combined they show a pattern of incompetence from the agency.

For more than a decade, I have sponsored and supported numerous pieces of legislation aimed at speeding up FEMA aid, cutting bureaucracy and red tape, and creating more transparency. But it seems like despite these efforts, FEMA somehow finds new ways to make the recovery process more difficult for impacted communities.

The agency is accountable directly to the President, and so the buck stops with the President regarding the constant mismanagement and lack of focus on its core mission.

I trust that under new leadership, we will finally be able to reform FEMA in a way that works to support all Americans and refocus the agency on what it is supposed to do—help people prepare for and recover from disasters without regard for an individual's political views.

Mr. PERRY. The chairman thanks the gentleman. The Chair now recognizes the ranking member of the full committee, Mr. Larsen, for 5 minutes for his opening statement.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. RICK LARSEN OF WASHINGTON, RANKING MEMBER, COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Mr. LARSEN OF WASHINGTON. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I thank the subcommittee Ranking Member Dina Titus. Just one more speech, and then we will get to the Members of Congress panel, but thanks for calling this hearing today.

The devastation that Hurricanes Helene and Milton created in the Southeast and Appalachia is gut-wrenching. Over 200 individuals lost their lives to Hurricanes Helene and Milton. The storms have left over \$170 billion of damage in their wakes. So, that is the dollar amount we know of. Damage to water infrastructure in western North Carolina was so severe that much of the region still does not have drinkable tap water.

To aid affected communities, the administration approved major disaster declarations for Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. So, the recovery will take a lot of work, and we are ready to provide the resources needed, and I am grateful that Representatives Edwards and Castor are here today to share what they have seen on the ground in their districts as a result. And I think they, along with the rest of Congress, would agree that we have to focus on passing a disaster supplemental immediately.

Without funding, Federal agencies, including FEMA and the Small Business Administration, cannot fulfill their missions and help disaster survivors. For over a month now, the Small Business Administration disaster fund has been empty. In that time, the applications of over 11,000 survivors have been approved for disaster loan assistance, but they will not receive any money until Congress makes more funding available.

It is not a new problem. Congress has failed to approve critical, long-term recovery funds for disasters in 2023 and 2024 that occurred in 21 States, ranging from Alabama and Arkansas to Texas, Vermont, and Washington State.

FEMA's Disaster Relief Fund is once again approaching concerningly low levels, with less than \$5 billion remaining. That sounds like a lot of money, but it is not a lot of money when you consider the cost of these disasters. Disaster survivors should not be left wondering if promised disaster aid is coming. After losing everything, families should be focused on rebuilding their lives, not worrying about congressional dysfunction.

Again, this is not isolated to the challenges that the people in North Carolina and Florida are facing; they are challenges that even my constituents are facing from previous disasters. So, I would just call on the Speaker to schedule a vote for Congress to consider President Biden's \$100 billion disaster supplemental request as soon as possible.

Now, in the wake of catastrophic disasters, it is important for Congress and FEMA to take stock of lessons learned. The misinformation that has circulated after recent disasters is creating barriers to recovery and putting disaster relief workers at risk. The presence of misinformation after disasters is not new. After Hurricane Katrina, false reports of widespread looting bred chaos and led to the tragic shooting of civilians, as an example. After the Maui wildfires, bogus claims that the Federal Government would steal survivors' land were widely circulated, harming those in need of assistance.

False rumors following Hurricane Helene, especially in North Carolina, were described by Administrator Criswell as the worst misinformation she has ever heard. These rumors increased distrust in the Federal Government, resulting in armed threats against FEMA workers in the field and caused some survivors to refuse Federal assistance. The spread of misinformation on social media after disasters is increasing, and this committee needs to work with FEMA to find solutions that can contain this phenomenon in the future.

I am disappointed that the President-elect himself amplified the misinformation by falsely claiming FEMA spent all of their funding

on housing undocumented migrants. We can have a difference of opinion on whether that funding should occur, but that information was false. He also said FEMA would provide only \$750 to disaster survivors who lost everything, which, again, is false.

To set the record straight, disaster survivors may be eligible for up to \$42,500 of home repair assistance and \$42,500 of other needs assistance from FEMA. And perhaps the debate we should have is whether that should be increased or not.

And it is the responsibility of all Members of Congress to correct that record, regardless of who is providing the misinformation, and lead rather than amplify, lead in providing good information, like Representative Edwards did unapologetically and consistently in western North Carolina.

Now, reports following Helene and Milton also indicate it is still too difficult for survivors to access FEMA assistance. Again, not isolated to Helene and Milton. Same problem in my district and many other districts around the country in previous disasters.

First, the lack of a universal application for Federal assistance means survivors may have to complete separate applications for several Federal agencies to receive the assistance they are entitled to. That is why this committee supports Ranking Member Titus' and Representative Garret Graves' bipartisan bill to create a universal application for Federal disaster assistance.

Second, I am troubled by reports that 47 percent of calls made to FEMA during the week of October 14 through 20 were not answered, and that of the more than 260,000 survivors that registered for FEMA assistance, nearly 50 percent have been denied. Difficulty accessing this assistance is not unique to this disaster. The Government Accountability Office conducted nationwide interviews about disaster responses occurring between 2016 and 2020 and found that FEMA regularly faces challenges managing its call center and field staff.

FEMA often responds to high denial rates by saying survivors can appeal their award decision. That is not an adequate response, nor is that an adequate solution. Eligible survivors should have to fill out one application for FEMA assistance, and it should be this committee's intent to make accessing FEMA aid simple and easy.

Finally, when Administrator Criswell gets here, we will have questions for her, but I do want to thank her for her service to this country as the first female FEMA Administrator and for all the positive policies she has implemented during her tenure.

I want to thank you all for being here, and I look forward to our Members' views on Helene and Milton.

With that, I yield back.

[Mr. Larsen of Washington's prepared statement follows:]

Prepared Statement of Hon. Rick Larsen, a Representative in Congress from the State of Washington, and Ranking Member, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure

Thank you, Subcommittee Chairman Perry and Subcommittee Ranking Member Titus, for calling today's hearing on FEMA's readiness and response to recent disasters.

The devastation caused by Hurricanes Helene and Milton in the Southeast and Appalachia is gut wrenching.

Over 200 individuals lost their lives to Hurricanes Helene and Milton, and these storms have left over \$170 billion of damage in their wakes.

Damage to water infrastructure in western North Carolina was so severe that much of the region still does not have drinkable tap water.

To aid affected communities, the Administration approved major disaster declarations for Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee and Virginia.

The recovery will take a lot of work and we are ready to provide the resources needed.

I am grateful Representatives Edwards and Castor are here to share what they have seen on the ground in their districts following Hurricanes Helene and Milton.

I think they, along with the rest of Congress, agree that we must focus on passing a disaster supplemental immediately. Without funding, federal agencies including FEMA and the Small Business Administration cannot fulfill their missions and help disaster survivors.

For over a month, the Small Business Administration disaster fund has been empty. In that time, the applications of over 11,000 survivors have been approved for disaster loan assistance, but they won't receive any money until Congress makes more funding available.

This isn't a new problem. Congress has failed to approve critical long-term recovery funds for disasters in 2023 and 2024 that occurred in 21 states ranging from Alabama and Arkansas to Texas, Vermont, and Washington State.

FEMA's Disaster Relief Fund is once again approaching concerning low levels, with less than \$5 billion remaining.

Disaster survivors shouldn't be left wondering if promised disaster aid is coming. After losing everything, families should be focused on rebuilding their lives, not worrying about congressional dysfunction.

I call on the Speaker to schedule a vote for Congress to consider President Biden's \$100 billion disaster supplemental request as soon as possible.

In the wake of such catastrophic disasters, it is important for Congress and FEMA to take stock of the lessons learned.

The misinformation that has circulated after recent disasters is creating barriers to recovery and putting disaster relief workers at risk.

The presence of misinformation after disasters is not new. After Hurricane Katrina, false reports of widespread looting bred chaos and led to the tragic shooting of civilians.

After the Maui wildfires, bogus claims that the federal government would steal survivors' land were widely circulated, harming those in need of assistance.

However, false rumors following Hurricane Helene, especially in North Carolina, were described by Administrator Criswell as the worst misinformation she has ever heard.

These rumors created distrust in the federal government, resulted in armed threats against FEMA workers in the field and has caused some survivors to refuse federal assistance.

The spread of misinformation on social media after disasters is increasing.

And this Committee needs to work with FEMA to find solutions that can contain this phenomenon in the future.

I am disappointed that the President-elect amplified misinformation by falsely claiming FEMA spent all of their funding on housing undocumented migrants.

He also said FEMA would only provide \$750 to disaster survivors who lost everything, which, again, is false.

To set the record straight, disaster survivors may be eligible for up to \$42,500 of home repair assistance and \$42,500 of other needs assistance from FEMA.

Reports following Helene and Milton indicate that it is still too difficult for survivors to access FEMA assistance.

First, the lack of a universal application for federal disaster assistance means survivors may have to complete separate applications for several federal agencies to receive the assistance they are entitled to.

That is why this Committee supports Ranking Member Titus and Rep. Garret Graves' bipartisan bill to create a universal application for federal disaster assistance.

Second, I am troubled by reports that 47 percent of calls made to FEMA during the week of October 14–20 were not answered and that, of the more than 260,000 survivors that registered for FEMA assistance in North Carolina, nearly 50 percent have been denied.

Difficulty accessing FEMA assistance is not unique to this disaster. The Government Accountability Office conducted nationwide interviews about disaster responses occurring between 2016 and 2020. They found that FEMA regularly faces challenges managing its call center and field staff.

FEMA often responds to high denial rates by saying survivors can appeal their award decision. That is not an adequate response nor is it an adequate solution. Eligible survivors should only have to fill out one application for FEMA assistance.

It is this Committee's intent to make accessing FEMA aid simple and easy.

Finally, I want to thank Administrator Criswell for her service to this country as the first female FEMA Administrator and for all of the positive policies she has implemented during her tenure.

Thank you all for being here. I look forward to your testimony.

Mr. PERRY. Mr. Larsen yields. I would like to now welcome our witnesses, and thank you both for being here.

Briefly, I would like to take a moment to explain our lighting system to you in case you are unaware. There are three lights in front of you. Green means go, yellow means you are running out of time, and red means to conclude your remarks.

The Chair asks unanimous consent that the witnesses' full statement be included in the record.

Without objection, so ordered.

The Chair also asks unanimous consent that the record of today's hearing remain open until such time as our witnesses have provided answers to any questions that may be submitted to them in writing.

Without objection, so ordered.

The Chair also asks unanimous consent that the record remain open for 15 days for additional comments and information submitted by Members or witnesses to be included in the record of today's hearing.

Without objection, so ordered.

As your written testimony has been made part of the record, the subcommittee asks that you limit your oral remarks to 5 minutes.

We will now turn to our first panel. With that, Congressman Edwards, you are recognized for 5 minutes for your testimony.

TESTIMONY OF HON. CHUCK EDWARDS, A REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM THE STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA

Mr. EDWARDS. Thank you, Chairman Perry, Ranking Member Titus, and the members of the subcommittee. I appreciate this opportunity to speak to you today about FEMA's response to Hurricane Helene in North Carolina's 11th Congressional District. As a former member of this subcommittee, it is a privilege to offer a unique perspective, especially after being on the ground for 7 weeks during one of the deadliest storms to hit the mainland United States in the last 50 years.

To put this disaster into perspective, Hurricane Helene took 230 lives across 7 States; 102 of those lives were in North Carolina. And tragically, 80 of those were from the district that I represent. Eighty of those were from the district that I represent. Only three storms since 1950 have claimed more lives, with Hurricane Katrina being the most notable among those.

The storm struck western North Carolina on September 27, 2024. The National Weather Service issued early and dire warnings about the threat of catastrophic flooding, as 10 to 15 inches of rain had already swelled rivers and creeks over the previous 3 days. And while this storm claimed 230 lives, I think it is important for me to tell you that NOAA and the National Weather Service worked expertly to save countless more lives.

However, the destruction that followed was immense. In some areas, water crested up to 40 feet above its normal levels, destroying entire communities as it rushed through the mountain valleys, carrying away homes, cars, and roads. And massive landslides crushed many unsuspecting victims while they thought they were in the safety of their homes from the raging waters.

The economic damage in North Carolina alone is estimated at \$53 billion, with only about 5 percent of this damage covered by insurance. In the aftermath, FEMA's response was in some ways effective, but there were significant issues that need to be addressed. FEMA's core responsibility is to coordinate Federal emergency management efforts and support State and local officials with critical resources. It seemed to me and many local officials in western North Carolina that it took up to 3 days before there was any real visibility from FEMA, and that is just simply not good enough.

Allow me to put this in perspective. The storm was over on September 27, for all practical purposes, at about 10 a.m. We had 1 million people without power. We had 25 water systems destroyed. And for it to take 3 days for the visibility of FEMA is just not acceptable. There were folks in their homes not only without power, they couldn't flush toilets, they had no drinking water. We were shut off from the rest of the world.

And I can't help but think, had this been an attack on American soil, would it take, should it take 3 days to see any real evidence of help from our Federal Government? I would hope not.

The distribution of supplies in the immediate aftermath of Helene left much to be desired. For example, on day 3 after the storm, FEMA announced to me that it had delivered 400 pallets of desperately needed water to western North Carolina. But when asked where those supplies had been delivered, FEMA couldn't provide one single location. They deferred responsibility to the State, which left local officials in the dark about where resources were going, and who could also not answer my simple question.

A major concern in my district was FEMA's slow response in getting boots on the ground in some areas. For example, in one county, FEMA didn't arrive until over a week after the storm, and it wasn't until 20 days later that a disaster recovery center was opened.

In addition, FEMA's communication with local governments and the public was inconsistent and at times confusing. On one occasion, FEMA sent out a press release stating that a disaster recovery center would close temporarily without informing local officials, only to retract it hours later after confusion, numerous inquiries, and local demands.

Other failures include FEMA personnel changes with little or no notice to county governments, no-shows for scheduled appointments, issuing hotel vouchers to displaced families that could only be redeemed 2 hours from those displaced families' work or school, an inefficient inspection process that slows consideration of critical benefits, and the 50-percent threshold for "substantial improvement" and "substantial damage" definitions and their required actions are riddled with inconsistencies and irrational think-

ing. I could share with you many other breakdowns in the FEMA response, but 5 minutes is just not enough time.

My office is also seeing a significant number of casework issues related to FEMA's Individual Assistance process. Constituents have reported receiving confusing correspondence, especially regarding initial denials, which only adds to the stress and confusion for people already dealing with the aftermath of the storm.

I don't share these issues to criticize FEMA or its employees on the ground. Many hard-working men and women are doing everything that they can in incredibly difficult circumstances. However, as Congress, it is our job to conduct rigorous oversight and ensure that FEMA is held accountable and improves upon their processes. We must address the flaws in FEMA's response to prevent further delays and confusion in the recovery process.

And in conclusion, the people of western North Carolina are tired. The grief that they are experiencing is compounded by bureaucratic missteps, delays, and poor communication.

Thank you again for this opportunity, and I would welcome any questions that you may have.

[Mr. Edwards' prepared statement follows:]

Prepared Statement of Hon. Chuck Edwards, a Representative in Congress from the State of North Carolina

Chairman Perry, Ranking Member Titus, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today regarding FEMA's response to Hurricane Helene in North Carolina's 11th Congressional District.

I have the unique pleasure of being a former Member of this very subcommittee and am heartened by your willingness and interest in having me testify ahead of FEMA's Administrator, The Honorable Deanne Criswell, to give you an alternate perspective to FEMA disaster response that I gained by being on the ground during one of the most recent and deadliest storms to hit the mainland United States in the last 50 years.

Before diving into FEMA response, I want to briefly take a moment to put this disaster into perspective for you. Hurricane Helene took 230 lives across seven states. 102 of those lives were from my home state of North Carolina, and 80 of those 102 were direct constituents of the community I represent, North Carolina's 11th Congressional district.¹ Only three storms since 1950 have surpassed the death toll from Hurricane Helene, and only one of those storms, Hurricane Katrina, has taken place since 2000.²

In the days prior to the storm's arrival in Western North Carolina on September 27, the National Weather Service's Greenville-Spartanburg team were deeply concerned by the 10–15 inches of rain that had already swelled rivers and creeks in the mountains to dangerous levels, and issued numerous dire warnings for individuals to evacuate well before conditions became catastrophic.

In my view, the men and women of the National Weather Service (NWS) saved many thousands of lives by getting critical warnings into the community as early as possible. In a statement posted to X on September 28, the NWS team characterized Helene as "the worst event in our office's history."

Helene not only ravaged our people, but nearly 30-foot flooding crests absolutely destroyed our communities too. It was not quick flooding like you might expect on the coast where water comes in and goes out in one fell swoop. Water swelled over 20–30 feet in areas, forming rapids as the water got caught between mountains and rushed to funnel out at singular flow points, picking up and taking homes, cars, and entire roadways, with it.³

¹ <https://www.ncdhhs.gov/assistance/hurricane-helene-recovery-resources/hurricane-helene-storm-related-fatalities>

² <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1356183/deadliest-us-hurricanes-since-1980/>

³ <https://climate.ncsu.edu/blog/2024/09/rapid-reaction-historic-flooding-follows-helene-in-western-nc/>

In American history, only *eight* hurricanes have reached the \$50 billion damage threshold across the multiple states they impacted.⁴ For Hurricane Helene, the NC Office of State Budget and Management has calculated *at least \$53 billion* in damage in North Carolina *alone*, not including the six other states of impact. Even worse, Aon Edge Insurance Agency, which specializes in flood coverage, estimates an average of 44% of all hurricane damage being insured. In the case of Helene, a generous 5% of damage has been estimated as insured, though the company believes that estimate is high.⁵ Also, according to Census Bureau and National Flood Insurance Program data, only 0.7% of residences of NC-impacted counties had flood insurance.

FEMA's response was bound to be a bit clunky; the mountains are not a traditional location for flooding of this magnitude. And while I would like to applaud FEMA for their overall response to Helene, there are quite a few sticking points that I think, with the help of this committee, could be improved.

First and foremost, the Federal Emergency Management Agency's core responsibility following a hurricane is to coordinate federal emergency management efforts and provide support, resources, and expertise to state and local emergency managers. Within this responsibility is the distribution of pre-staged resources like water and food to hard-hit communities.

Hurricane Helene hit on September 27, 2024. Immediately following the storm, local governments were focused on emergency services. Contracted FEMA teams, called Urban Search & Rescue, were there on day one alongside county folk, conducting search and rescue operations, providing emergency medical services, and the like; however, by day two, local folks started to turn their attention to the greater community's basic needs, beginning with food and water.

During a FEMA briefing on hurricane response on September 29, 2024, FEMA stated that they had delivered 400 pallets of water to Western North Carolina. When pressed about *where* in Western North Carolina those truckloads were delivered, Federal Emergency Management personnel could not name *one single location* where *one single pallet* had been delivered. Instead, FEMA kicked the bucket to the state, sharing that they had provided the pallets to North Carolina Emergency Management who was then responsible for distribution.

For days, seemingly nobody in Western North Carolina was receiving supplies and nobody with the State or Federal government could share where the resources they were promoting had been sent. NC Emergency Management had their own hiccups in this whole process, but if the federal government is going to use taxpayer dollars to purchase recovery resources for impacted communities, does it not feel prudent to follow those resources to their final location so the government can ensure resources are making it to the people they were meant to support?

In the past 5 years, FEMA has been activated to respond to 911 disasters and other declarations.⁶ How much fraud, waste, and abuse and do you think has or could take place if FEMA is dishing out resources and not following up on final delivery to the final recipient? It is not unreasonable to think that FEMA should know where the resources they are providing get delivered, and it's my belief that this committee can and should address this issue for future disasters.

A major concern my staff and I have encountered through our local government counterparts is the inconsistency of both delivery of services and reliability of information provided by FEMA officials to the community, especially in the early and most dire weeks following the storm.

I'd like to use Transylvania County as an example. County leadership, thanks in large part to the early warnings of the National Weather Service, issued a first-ever mandatory evacuation order and conducted over 60 swift-water rescues, underscoring the catastrophic nature of Helene's impact on the community.

However, county officials were frustrated that it took FEMA over a week to get boots on the ground in their area, and it took until October 17 for a Disaster Recovery Center to be opened in the county. This delay in direct assistance on the ground, particularly in an area where internet capability was severely lacking, only served to slow the delivery of much-needed benefits.

On October 16, officials in one of the counties in my district were provided by FEMA with confirmation that a Disaster Survivor Assistance (DSA) crew was going door-to-door in the county, but that was not the case—FEMA representation in the area that day was at a fixed location. Every day counts in the wake of a major disaster, and we can't afford lapses in accurate communication like what occurred that day.

⁴ <https://www.ncei.noaa.gov/access/billions/dcmi.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/helene-milton-losses-50-billion-each-hurricanes-rare/>

⁶ <https://www.fema.gov/disaster/declarations>

On October 21, we encountered a prime example of how FEMA miscommunication can sow confusion in the community, both among the public and local governments. That day, FEMA sent a media advisory that a DRC will be temporarily closed without informing the County manager, County liaison managing the facility or the County emergency Management Director. After a barrage of emails and calls, including from my office, FEMA retracted the press release and kept the facility open, all in the span of about three hours.

This issue is compounded by the fact that FEMA, in their staff's own words to me at a DRC visit I made on that exact same day, relied in part on my office to spread the word about FEMA information, shifting disaster center sites, and the like. As my staff and I work to keep constituents informed through daily newsletters for over a month after the storm and once a week currently, we must be able to trust the information we receive from FEMA as factual, and instances like this are a cause for concern in that regard.

As we moved from relief to recovery in Western North Carolina, my office has seen see a massive influx of FEMA-related casework. I hear a lot of the same things from my casework team and folks in the community—the correspondence they receive after filing their applications are not well-written and cause confusion, especially related to initial denials.

FEMA inspections, a crucial component of the application process for individuals, are also in need of fine-tuning. On October 18, a constituent in Waynesville asked if the FEMA inspector that was coming to conduct a neighbor's inspection for their Individual Assistance application could do all of the applicants on their private road that day, as all of their applications related to clearing their road. FEMA told my office that the inspections are issued to the inspector's tablets and worked accordingly in the order they are received, and they have no control over inspection scheduling.

This issue has also been proven frustrating in congregate living facilities, where multiple individuals are denied just because they are applying from the same address, and there is no ability in the application process to explain the situation, and the time-consuming appeal process is the only path forward.

I also want to touch on a newer aspect of the FEMA assistance regime, the \$750 in Serious Needs Assistance (SNA) program has served to help a lot of folks in my district with immediate needs, but it is evident that FEMA can learn from this disaster for improving the program's administration in the future.

Based on my office's experience on the casework side, some people applied for just the SNA program and received it immediately while others applied for it and waited weeks. Others received a denial letter and then received the \$750 afterward.

Another prominent issue with SNA is that FEMA does not notify an individual when they deposit this into your account. One must constantly check their bank to know if they've received it.

I share this report from the front-line not to disparage FEMA and the tireless work that thousands of its employees have carried out in Western North Carolina and other states. However, Congress, through rigorous oversight responsibilities, must hold the Agency accountable. To do so, we must delve deep into the good, the bad, and the ugly of FEMA's responses in impacted areas.

I'll be frank—the folks back home are worn-out, and the frustration and grief that result from the unnecessary difficulties that FEMA's adjudication of their applications is stress that they do not need.

I hope that in her testimony and through the question-and-answer that Administrator Criswell will face in the next panel, she lays out a clear and well-developed plan to remedy the shortfalls in their response that have held back the recovery of many in Western North Carolina.

Chairman Perry and Ranking Member Titus, I thank you again for this opportunity and I welcome any of your questions.

Mr. PERRY. We thank the gentleman from North Carolina. The Chair now recognizes Congresswoman Castor for 5 minutes for her testimony.

TESTIMONY OF HON. KATHY CASTOR, A REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM THE STATE OF FLORIDA

Ms. CASTOR OF FLORIDA. Well, thank you, Chair Perry and Ranking Member Titus, Chair Graves, and Ranking Member Larsen, and the entire committee for the opportunity to testify before the

committee today. I really appreciate the opportunity to be here with Congressman Edwards.

My heart goes out to your community, Congressman. Many Floridians have a special relationship with western North Carolina. We always think that this is a place that we can go to escape many of the impacts of the extreme summer heat, so, I don't think there is anywhere you can go right now to escape a lot of these extreme events. So, we have got to do a better job providing for our neighbors, strengthening our infrastructure.

But this hurricane season was particularly costly and deadly for my community and the State of Florida. Think of the west coast. Think of from Congresswoman Cammack's district in the Big Bend, down through Representatives Bilirakis to Luna to Buchanan over to probably Congressman Webster. When Milton came over, it even spawned hurricanes over on the east coast in Representative Mast's district.

So, this had really started in August. Hurricane Debby dumped an extraordinary amount of rainfall, 10 to 14 inches, on the State. But the real damage came September 26 with Hurricane Helene. It roared up the gulf, bringing a record 7 feet 8 inches of storm surge along the coast. So, it has flooded out thousands of homes. It swamped the Coast Guard Air Station. It swamped MacDill Air Force Base that is the home to Special Operations Command and Central Command. It washed away the navigational channel markers for Port Tampa Bay so fuel could not be delivered. Whole neighborhoods were ruined, businesses ruined.

But then, 2 weeks after that, on October 9, with some of our neighbors still in shelters, Hurricane Milton slammed into the State with wind speeds up to 105 miles per hour and a new record rainfall total of up to 18 inches in some areas that they said was a 1-in-1,000-year flood event. So, if you survived the storm surge of Helene, it is likely that you were flooded out weeks later by Milton, and many of the rivers took weeks to crest. There were widespread power outages; for some people, well over a week. This inhibited the ability of small businesses to bounce back. Many of these small business owners, are just—they have a very limited range of what they can take. So, when power was out, when fuel could not be distributed, when we have police officers guarding gas stations, folks are really asking—there must be a better way.

So, here are a few recommendations on the aftermath and what I saw leading up to the catastrophes and the aftermath.

The misinformation regarding FEMA was a real distraction. It was unnecessary. A lot of time was spent on combating that false information, rather than encouraging people to sign up. Communities need to understand where the damage has occurred, and people need those emergency funds right away.

I am grateful for the Federal resources and personnel that were surged into the region, including Administrator Criswell being there a couple of times, pre-positioning of resources, search and rescue, the medical assistance teams, but also the guarantee that debris could be cleaned up. Local communities—you would not believe the heartache and the cost of people having their lives out on the street. We have never seen anything like the scale of this. And to be able to say that FEMA is going to be there, that Congress

is going to be there to help you clean up your communities is absolutely vital.

The massive damage is going to require extensive rebuilding of homes and infrastructure across the area. And Floridians are resilient, but the impact of these back-to-back monster storms is straining our local resources. People are—my neighbors are already spending more on property insurance than any other place in the country. Electric bills are out of sight. They need Congress now to follow through with help and helping them rebuild their lives.

What Ranking Member Larsen highlighted as the Small Business Administration to—there are so many homeowners and businesses that need to tap those low-interest loans. There is nowhere else to turn. You don't want them going on a credit card with those high interest rates to rebuild their lives. We have got to replenish the SBA fund right away.

President Biden's proposal of the \$98 billion disaster relief bill is good, it is robust. But the Congress now has to take the wheel and make sure that these dollars are getting to where they need to be.

I understand the large-scale water and wastewater rebuilding that has to go on in North Carolina, but it is also all across the State of Florida. They were swamped. They have polluted bays, rivers, the Gulf of Mexico. And we are a tourism economy. We cannot rebound with polluted waterways. We have got to be able now to build back stronger, build back in a more resilient way, one that protects the taxpayer dollars so we don't go through this time and time again.

Fifth, during widespread power outages, the traditional grid is destroyed. Like I highlighted, it took weeks in some places to get the power turned back on. We have got to be smarter about our electrical systems in this country and build in a more resilient way with microgrids, solar battery systems that can safeguard our critical infrastructure. We had hospitals lose power with patients inside. We had community health centers massively damaged. We had shelters where people were trying to stay safe, and the power went out for weeks. We have got to do a better job making sure that these places are safe and resilient from these extreme weather events.

I will highlight a few other things in written testimony and answers to the committee, but thank you for inviting me to this important hearing today. The heating climate is costing us a lot, and we need to better adapt for our pocketbooks and for our people. Thank you very much for the chance to be here.

[Ms. Castor of Florida's prepared statement follows:]

**Prepared Statement of Hon. Kathy Castor, a Representative in Congress
from the State of Florida**

Chair Perry, Ranking Member Titus and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Committee about the devastating, back-to-back hurricanes, the coordinated response so far, and next steps for FEMA and the Congress.

This was the most destructive hurricane season ever for the Tampa Bay area on the west coast of Florida. On August 5th, Hurricane Debby unleashed torrential rainfall across the state, where many of my neighbor experienced 10–14 inches of rain.

The real damage came on September 26th, Hurricane Helene roared up the Gulf, bringing with it a record of 7'8" of storm surge in Tampa Bay, unlike anything we have seen in our lifetimes. Whole neighborhoods were flooded out and thousands of homes and businesses were ruined.

And two weeks after that on October 9th, with some neighbors still in shelters, Hurricane Milton slammed into the state with wind speeds of up to 105 mph and a new record rainfall total of 12–18 inches—a 1-in-1,000-year extreme rain event.

This year (2024) is by far the wettest year on record in the Tampa Bay area—77.11" of rain which is 33" over the average yearly amount, and we still have over a month to go!

My Tampa Bay area community was not the only community impacted by these extreme storms, but our experience grappling with the aftermath is instructive for how to better prepare and respond.

First, I have spent the last seven weeks assessing the damage and speaking with my neighbors directly about the tragic losses of homes, livelihoods and property. Most people are of the view, and I agree, that the local, state and federal coordination in the immediate aftermath of the disasters was very good. FEMA personnel was embedded in county emergency operations centers and the State EOC. Emergency shelter, food, and water were distributed across the damaged areas right away. I also was pleased to see FEMA inspectors immediately out in the field assessing the damage, talking with homeowners and disbursing needed emergency funds.

I am so grateful for the federal resources and personnel that were surged into our region, including a visit from Administrator Criswell. FEMA's prepositioning of strike force teams on the ground helped relieve pressure on state and local authorities and saved lives.

Yet, I can tell you that the mis- and dis-information regarding FEMA was pervasive and harmful. We were constantly trying to beat back rumors that FEMA was out of money. If someone is discouraged from signing up for disaster assistance it risks a delay in resources or worse, endangers lives and property.

FEMA has approved more than \$2.1 billion in disaster assistance in Florida so far after the 3 hurricanes. This includes \$975.5 million in awards directly to survivors, and over \$1.18 billion in grants to state and local governments.

Second, the massive damage will require extensive rebuilding of homes and infrastructure across the area.

Floridians are resilient, but the impact of these back-to-back monster storms is straining local resources, as well as the bank accounts of my neighbors who are already paying more for property insurance and electric bills than just about anywhere else.

It will require Congress to fund a comprehensive, forward-looking disaster supplemental package that allows us to rebuild in the smartest and most cost-effective way.

Nearly everyone I have spoken to—from families to business owners to local officials—has said they need to use disaster assistance to rebuild with mitigation measures that will protect property from future damage. This is imperative in low-lying coastal areas like Tampa Bay, where natural disasters are becoming more costly, frequent and severe. If Congress wants to avoid costs in the future, we need to make smart investments now.

Third, and more specifically, rebuilding homes and bringing them up to code is cost-prohibitive for many people. So while my neighbors appreciate the ability to secure a low-interest SBA loan for home repairs, they are disappointed to learn that they can only use up to 20% of their loan to make upgrades.

And while FEMA's Hazard Mitigation Grant Program and Flood Mitigation Assistance can be used to help homeowners rebuild in a safer and stronger manner, these initiatives take years to arrive and are very competitive.

We need to address this now to allow for flexible and larger loans to homeowners and small businesses to encourage more cost-saving mitigation and upgrades. This would go a long way towards keeping our communities whole and resilient.

Fourth, instead of simply rebuilding water and wastewater infrastructure as they were before, communities need to be able to modernize now to avoid future costly disasters, such as installing upgraded pump stations and elevated lift stations and connecting the infrastructure to solar and resilient backup power sources. This could help municipalities avoid the spillage of tens of millions of gallons of sewage or communities being left without potable water for days.

Fifth, during widespread power outages when the traditional grid is destroyed, hospitals, emergency shelters and food banks must be able to operate autonomously. Microgrids and solar/battery systems could play a lifesaving role by allowing critical

infrastructure to continue functioning without waiting days for gas- and diesel-powered fuel distribution lines to restart after the next natural disaster.

The losses from the triple-whammy of Hurricanes Debby, Helene and Milton exposed our outdated infrastructure. We can avoid future devastating hits to our economy, environment, public health and safety, and national security *if* Congress leads the way in mitigating future flood and disaster risks.

Thank you for inviting me to this important hearing today as Congress begins to craft a disaster supplemental package with the goal of strengthening our communities and avoiding costs and loss in the future. Our planet, our pocketbooks, and our people depend on it.

Mr. PERRY. The Chair thanks our witnesses. Are there questions?

Mr. GRAVES OF LOUISIANA. Mr. Chairman?

Mr. PERRY. Mr. Graves.

Mr. GRAVES OF LOUISIANA. I don't have any questions. I just want to, first of all, tell you how much I appreciate your efforts on behalf of your constituents.

I did have the opportunity to visit western North Carolina with Congressman Chuck Edwards, and I am just so sorry for what happened to you and your constituents. I know that you are both working really hard to get them back on their feet. I want to thank you for your service and, again, just know that we are praying for you all's folks, and really sorry that you all are having to go through this, but thank you.

Mr. PERRY. Others?

All right. Seeing none, thank you for being here today, and thank you for your testimony and your comments.

This concludes the first panel, and I will give you a couple of minutes to go ahead and exit, and we are going to introduce the second panel. Thank you.

[Pause.]

Mr. PERRY. All right. Administrator Criswell, thanks for your patience here, and thanks for your service. I am going to welcome you, as the FEMA Administrator, to our second panel.

As a reminder, your written testimony has also been made part of the record, so, the subcommittee asks that you limit your oral remarks to 5 minutes. And with that, you are now recognized for that 5 minutes.

**TESTIMONY OF HON. DEANNE CRISWELL, ADMINISTRATOR,
FEDERAL EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AGENCY, U.S. DE-
PARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY**

Ms. CRISWELL. Thank you, Chairman Perry, Ranking Member Titus, and members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify regarding FEMA's efforts in response to Hurricanes Helene and Milton. We value this committee's legislative support and oversight of our Agency, and I really look forward to our conversation today.

On September 26, Hurricane Helene made landfall in Florida as a powerful, 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. There were also impacts in West Virginia and Kentucky.

Helene's powerful winds and floodwaters altered landscapes and devastated communities in many places not accustomed to experiencing such storms. The destruction caused by Helene was catastrophic. Less than 2 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 a formation of tornadoes and leaving an overlapping trail of destruction in many communities still reeling from Hurricanes Helene and Debby. Many of these same communities were still recovering from Ian, Idalia, and Debby from previous years.

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 loss of over 200 lives and caused extensive damages to homes and neighborhoods across the impacted States.

There was also widespread disruption of critical services across the Southeastern United States, including the obstruction of transportation routes which isolated some homes and communities.

FEMA's mission statement is a simple one, spelled out in seven powerful words: helping people before, during, and after disasters. And in my written testimony, I have provided a detailed account of FEMA's preparation, pre-positioning of assets and personnel, and coordination with other Federal agencies in support of our State, local, and Tribal partners. I have described in detail how FEMA responded to these two storms across eight States, mobilizing the full weight of the Federal Government to help impacted areas that were not accustomed to this kind of disaster, prioritizing search and rescue efforts; reopening roads to reconnect hard-to-reach areas; delivering essential food, water, and other supplies to residents; and restoring critical infrastructure.

And I have described how FEMA is leading recovery efforts in the impacted States, doing everything we can to cut through red-tape and expedite assistance to survivors. This has been a challenging time for our workforce of over 22,000 dedicated, hard-working people, many of whom were also impacted by one of these storms themselves and delayed their personal and family recovery to meet our mission and respond to the disaster.

Our workforce persevered through all of the challenges I have just described, and they also persevered through a difficult security environment generated by misinformation about FEMA's work spread through social media. We help all survivors, all people obtain all of the assistance that they are qualified for under the law, and misinformation was making that work much more difficult.

I greatly appreciate the voices from Members of Congress from across both sides of the aisle who attested to the work that FEMA was doing on the ground. So, I was very concerned when I learned that a FEMA employee had given directions to her Disaster Survivor Assistance Team that were completely at odds with FEMA's mission. A critical function of these teams is to go door to door, meet with survivors, meet them where they are, make them aware of available FEMA resources, and help them register for assistance.

This employee wrote to about 11 staffers under her supervision that they should, “avoid homes advertising Trump.”

My senior leadership team provided me with this visual evidence that the employee had, in fact, issued this statement, these instructions, and they recommended that this employee be terminated. I concurred and directed the termination, and the employee was fired. I released a statement that day, and I will repeat what I said to all of my employees and the American people: This type of behavior and action will not be tolerated at FEMA, and we will hold people accountable if they violate our standards of conduct.

I do not believe that this employee’s actions are indicative of any widespread cultural problems at FEMA. FEMA, however, has taken appropriate action to ensure that this matter is fully investigated, and I am committed to ensuring that nothing like this ever happens again. In the meantime, we have sent a different team to the field to contact all of the homes that had been skipped over at this one employee’s direction, and that work has been completed.

Now, I know that this incident is on the minds of many members of this committee, and I will be happy to answer all of your questions about it. However, I hope that we will also have a chance to discuss the great work of our workforce and responses to both Hurricanes Helene and Milton, as well as the important challenges that lie ahead in the recovery effort across these States.

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

[Ms. Criswell’s prepared statement follows:]

Prepared Statement of Hon. Deanne Criswell, Administrator, Federal Emergency Management Agency, U.S. Department of Homeland Security

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 preposition 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.

Emergency Declarations for Helene

State	Date Requested	Date Approved
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.

Emergency Declarations for Milton

State or Tribe	Date Requested	Date Approved
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 di-

rect 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.

Major Disaster Declarations for Helene

State	Date Requested	Date Approved
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.

Major Disaster Declaration for Milton

State or Tribe	Date Requested	Date Approved
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; 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.

Transitional Sheltering Assistance

State	Total Sheltered	Currently Checked In	Checked Out
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
Total as of 11/13/2024	36,433	25,761	10,672

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.

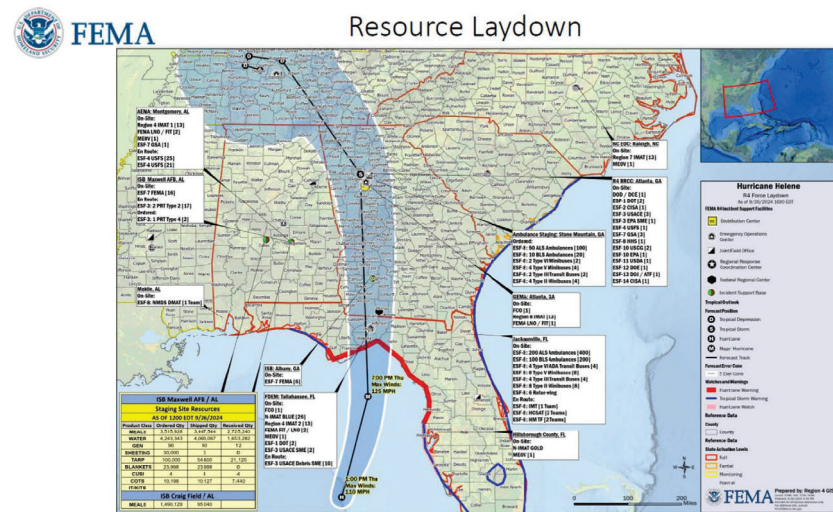
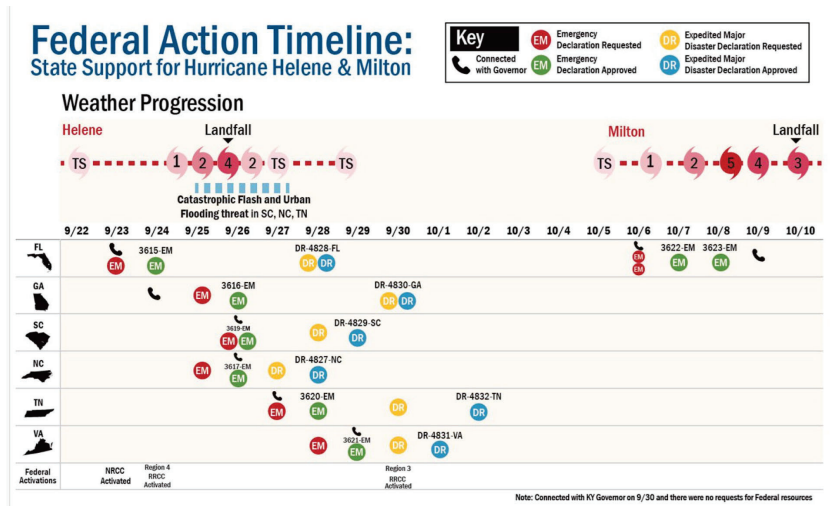
Road Ahead

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.

Federal Staging Areas Established Maxwell AFB & Craig Field

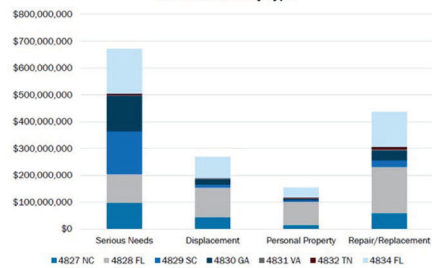




Resource Laydown

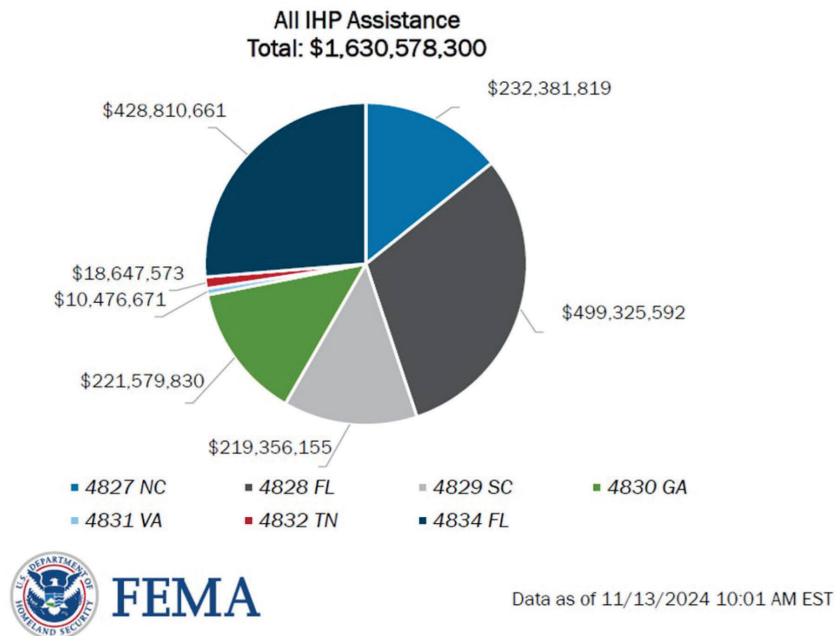


IHP Assistance by Type



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

Federal Emergency Management Agency



Mr. PERRY. Thank you, Administrator, for your testimony. We will now turn to questions from Members. The Chair recognizes himself for 5 minutes.

Administrator, last week, we sent a letter signed by myself and all the committee's Republican Members to you about the recent allegations that you just mentioned: FEMA workers skipped the homes of supporters of the President-elect. Following the allegations, you issued a statement that one FEMA employee departed from FEMA's values and was terminated. However, she alleges that those were the instructions from FEMA when she was deployed. She asserts that FEMA supervisors and leadership were aware. And independently, we have received reports of similar practices in places like North Carolina.

Tell me about the investigation. Tell me about the investigation. Who is conducting it? And has there been an IG investigation initiated by yourself or anybody in FEMA?

Ms. CRISWELL. Chairman Perry, there is nothing in our policies, in our procedures, in our training that would direct any employee to bypass anybody's home based on their political party. I cannot speak to what her motivations were, but this came to my attention again on November 7. I directed my team to get me information. They gave me factual information on November 9, which is when I directed the termination of this employee.

This first came to our Office of Professional Responsibility on October 28 through the team member from TSA who was working under this individual. She immediately raised it to the Office of the Special Counsel, who took the case as a potential violation of the Hatch Act. There were ongoing investigations with that, and the

Office of Professional Responsibility is currently working with the IG to determine what the investigative matters will be going forward. The IG has not of yet stated they want to investigate this, but I highly encourage them to take on this case and look and see if this was a widespread issue or if this was just a single incident.

Mr. PERRY. So, you are working with them, and you have encouraged them, but you haven't requested they do so.

Now, according to the your employee, Ms. Washington, who was asked—and this is a public report—“So, you are telling me these orders came from somebody above?”

And she said, “Correct.”

So, what has your investigation gleaned regarding her direct supervisors or the people above her? Have you questioned them? And what have your answers been?

Ms. CRISWELL. Chairman Perry, we do have an ongoing investigation, and we have questioned other personnel in this chain of command, and we find no information at this point that there was anything beyond her direction to her employees to skip and bypass a home.

Mr. PERRY. So, the same employee alleged that the Florida team had already been avoiding Trump voters' homes prior to her work there, and that this was, as she said, the culture. Now, these aren't my words. These are the words from a FEMA employee who is claiming that she is being the scapegoat. She said, “But I am just simply executing again what was coming down from my supervisors.”

Do you know—how many supervisors does she have? How many people above her before she gets to you?

Ms. CRISWELL. She is a crew lead, which is the lowest level of supervision.

Mr. PERRY. So, there are a lot of people above her, so to speak—

Ms. CRISWELL [interposing]. There are several people.

Mr. PERRY [continuing]. In the chain of command, if you—

Ms. CRISWELL [interrupting]. I would be happy to forward an organizational chart that would show where she sits within the organization.

Mr. PERRY. And your investigation has spoken to, certainly, the immediate and maybe two or three steps above that?

Ms. CRISWELL. We have an ongoing investigation, Chairman Perry, to determine if there were any additional acts that violated our core values of compassion, fairness, integrity, and respect.

Mr. PERRY. Okay—

Ms. CRISWELL [interrupting]. And at this time we have found—

Mr. PERRY [interrupting]. So, I get there is an ongoing investigation. But this isn't a law enforcement thing, where you can't say, well, we have an investigation, so, we can't talk about it. You can talk about this. Does the investigation include her immediate supervisors and several steps above them?

Ms. CRISWELL. The investigation includes those that were deployed in this particular incident, and we have found no evidence that there is anything beyond this one employee's specific direction.

Mr. PERRY. You found no evidence at this point.

Let me ask you this. Now, you can understand that, from America's perspective—certainly the people that weren't visited when FEMA was in town—that it would be in FEMA's best interest to just investigate this internally, say this is a one-off employee, that this claim of hers that it is a culture is just her trying to kind of make sure that the responsibility, the accountability doesn't fall on her. Why shouldn't this be an independent investigation by at least somebody like the IG?

Ms. CRISWELL. The actions that this employee took are unacceptable—

Mr. PERRY [interrupting]. I know that, and you know that. We agree on that.

Ms. CRISWELL. I would welcome an investigation by the IG.

Mr. PERRY. But you haven't requested. Will you request one?

Ms. CRISWELL. I will request one.

Mr. PERRY. Thank you.

The Chair now recognizes the gentlelady, the ranking member from Nevada, Ms. Titus.

Ms. TITUS. Thank you.

I mentioned in my opening statement about how FEMA, in the new reality, has to deal with misinformation. And then you heard one of our witnesses, the Congresslady from Florida, mention how it had been a problem as they tried to recover from the hurricanes. I wonder if you could talk to us about what kind of policy or official strategy you all might be developing to deal with misinformation, and how it does indeed hurt your attempts to get relief out to people who have been hit by these disasters.

Ms. CRISWELL. Ranking Member Titus, we have experienced some level and type of misinformation probably throughout FEMA's history. We have a standard practice of standing up a rumor control page, where we can put factual evidence out there because part of it is we also have a lot of people that are trying to defraud those that have just lost so much, and pretending to be a Federal agency such as FEMA to register even on their behalf.

So, we have had a standing practice of, when we identify this information, of standing up some type of mechanism to ensure that the general public can get factual information from a validated Government source. In this case, it would be our source. But we continue to see this rise. We saw an increase in the amount of misinformation during the response to the Maui wildfires. But the amount of information and misinformation that we saw during the responses to Hurricanes Helene and Milton was at a scale that I had never seen before.

And so, this requires us to now include in our planning and preparedness how we are going to be able to reach people. The goal is not necessarily to take down misinformation, but how do we ensure that people are getting actual correct information so they are not afraid to reach out to their Federal agency and apply for the assistance that they need, that they deserve, and that they are eligible for under the law.

Ms. TITUS. Did you provide this information in different languages? And do you work with community leaders who can help you to get the information out? Just not elected officers, but church leaders or civic leaders?

Ms. CRISWELL. We work in a number of ways. For example, during Maui, we had one of our Native Hawaiian employees develop a public security safety announcement and deliver that out through her own social media channels to let people within her community know that they could and should apply for assistance.

I remember an opportunity during Hurricane Ida in Louisiana, where we found a Vietnamese community, and we developed information in their native language and sent it out through their channels. And it was one of our most watched videos on FEMA, so we could get them actual information about what resources were available for them.

We have a strong network through our faith-based leadership team to reach out to local faith leaders to help us get the information out to individuals and communities that may be apprehensive to try to reach out and apply for assistance.

This is a team effort. It takes all of us in this holistic approach to be able to ensure anyone that was impacted by any natural disaster has access to the programs that we have, and that we remove the barriers for them receiving the critical assistance to start their recovery process.

Ms. TITUS. Thank you for that.

GAO consistently reports that you all are drastically understaffed. We have tried to address that by having people be able to take time off and go back to their jobs to go and fight disasters. I think the most recent figure was 35 percent below what is needed, and we continue to put increasing demands on the Agency. We point out how they fail to be there in a certain amount of time, or not enough people on the ground, or not fast enough. But if you don't have the people and the resources to do this work, what can you expect?

So, could you talk to us a little bit about how you are addressing those staffing challenges, and what we might do to be able to help you?

Ms. CRISWELL. The number that we report on our daily operations brief, which has been in the news as of late showing that we had less than 5 percent of our personnel available, is one very specific part of our workforce, and that is those that are solely responsible to deploy to disasters, our disaster workforce.

We have a layered staff to approaching—to approach—when we have multiple events or catastrophic events like we experienced during Hurricanes Helene and Milton. We reach out to our steady state staff, and we deploy them out into the field. We have our surge capacity force, which can bring in members from across the Federal Government that can go out into the field for 30 days. And we had over 800 members from across the Federal Government that went out into the communities to support them.

This type of layered staffing approach is what we plan for. We plan for multiple events like this, but we appreciate tools like the CREW Act that was passed recently that give us the flexibility to recruit more people into our reservists, our intermittent workforce, which are really the heart of what we do. And that is the workforce that we need to continue to focus on because we don't need everybody every day. But given the amount of disasters that we are ex-

periencing, this surge availability of our intermittent, our reservist workforce is critical to us being able to do the work.

Ms. TITUS. Thank you.

I yield back.

Mr. PERRY. The Chair thanks the gentlelady. The Chair now recognizes the gentleman from Louisiana, Representative Graves.

Mr. GRAVES OF LOUISIANA. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Administrator, thank you for being here.

I want to make note, Mr. Chairman, we have discussed Hurricane Helene and Hurricane Milton. We have not discussed Hurricane Francine.

Administrator, I want to thank you for coming down to Louisiana for that. But I want to tell you why we are not talking about that today. We are not talking about that today because the citizens of Lafourche and Terrebonne Parish, where that hurricane made landfall, imposed both a sales tax and a property tax on themselves, have invested nearly \$1 billion in building hurricane protection. We are at an interim phase of protection. We have built an 11-foot levee. Storm surge for Hurricane Francine was 11 feet. If that levee had not been there, if we had not done what we did, we would be having a very different hearing today.

Administrator, I want to ask you a quick question. There are rumors, reports that FEMA is having discussions with Department of the Treasury about using ARP funds, American Rescue Plan funds, to help out with recovery. Is that accurate?

Ms. CRISWELL. So, with the National Flood Insurance Program, at this moment, we are outpacing our payments, over \$800 million in payments from the National Flood Insurance Program—

Mr. GRAVES OF LOUISIANA [interrupting]. So, you all are having discussions about using American Rescue Plan funds for recovery?

Ms. CRISWELL. We are not using American Rescue Plan—

Mr. GRAVES OF LOUISIANA [interrupting]. There are no discussions about doing that?

Ms. CRISWELL. Not for FEMA using American Rescue Plan funds.

Mr. GRAVES OF LOUISIANA. Okay, okay, because there were reports that FEMA was having discussions about—

Ms. CRISWELL [interrupting]. No.

Mr. GRAVES OF LOUISIANA [continuing]. Using those—okay, thank you for clarifying.

Now something else I would like for you to clarify. There has been a lot of discussion about FEMA's Emergency Food and Shelter Program and how it is handled. And I just, number one, that is a FEMA program. Number two, that is funded with taxpayer dollars. And so, whenever folks say that, well, no, no, no, you got to understand, it is a different program. These are all taxpayer dollars. And what you do is you triage or you prioritize what is needed, what is most important, and that is where we need to focus. I mean, do you agree with that?

Ms. CRISWELL. The Shelter and Services Program is a program that was directed by Congress for FEMA to administer, yes—

Mr. GRAVES OF LOUISIANA [interrupting]. Right, and so, these are all Federal taxpayer dollars. And so, if we need taxpayer dollars in a higher priority area, it would make sense to take funds from a lower priority area.

What I am really struggling with is, as I understand—is that in North Carolina, for example, where I visited, you could have a flood or disaster victim that can get a check for \$750. Yet when I go through and I look at the programs and resources that are available to a citizen of a different country that came illegally into the United States under the FEMA administered program using nonprofits, you could be eligible for housing, for food, for transportation, for healthcare costs, and others.

I was able to come, and looking at the very documents that these nonprofits were using, I was able to get to a figure in excess of \$10,000 for an individual—let me make note again—as a citizen of a foreign country. How would I explain to a taxpayer that a taxpayer, a citizen of the United States, is eligible for \$750, yet a citizen of a foreign country under your Agency is still eligible for assistance of \$10,000? How would I explain that to somebody?

Ms. CRISWELL. Congressman, the resources that are available to people impacted by disasters are a variety of resources, and that \$750 payment is just to cover those immediate needs. They are eligible for \$42,500 in fiscal year 2024 for housing assistance, and \$42,500 for other needs assistance. Those are the programs that are available to people that were impacted by disasters.

Mr. GRAVES OF LOUISIANA. So, it is very clear that today—and I just visited North Carolina just a few weeks ago—it is very clear to me that there are folks that are in need right now. The disparity that exists in that a citizen of a foreign country that broke the law and came here illegally is they can get a plane ticket paid for, they can get a hotel room paid for—I think 200-and-something bucks a night if I remember right in some of the areas of maybe around Midland, Texas, somewhere around there. Again, healthcare, food, clothing. We have citizens of our own country that I engaged in North Carolina weeks and weeks after the disaster that have some of those same needs.

This is ridiculous. It really is. And I understand that all of these decisions aren't yours. But, Administrator, you understand the ridiculousness of this situation, that we are not helping our own citizens yet we are out there using our own taxpayer dollars when we have a debt right now of \$35 trillion as a Nation, and we are helping out citizens of other countries when we are not even meeting the fundamental needs of our own citizens. This really is an unacceptable situation.

And I think if I were in your situation—yes, I understand you are asking for \$100 billion, but I think that we should be looking and asking for reprogramming opportunities, because we have got to prioritize the limited resources that our Nation has and focus upon our own citizens.

I yield back.

Mr. PERRY. The gentleman yields. The Chair now recognizes the ranking member of the full committee, Mr. Larsen.

Mr. LARSEN OF WASHINGTON. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Just to sum up, I heard you say, in the case of North Carolina and probably in the case of Washington State if something similar happened, someone would be eligible for up to \$85,000 of aid. Is that what I heard you say, \$42,500 plus \$42,500?

Ms. CRISWELL. Yes, sir, \$42,500 for fiscal year 2024. That went up in fiscal year 2025. But that also does not include the amount that we pay to support people in hotels, the amount that we put in to support people in manufactured housing units, or rent reimbursements. Those do not come out of the \$42,500.

Mr. LARSEN OF WASHINGTON. And on the emergency shelter support program, did FEMA create that program?

Ms. CRISWELL. That program was directed by Congress.

Mr. LARSEN OF WASHINGTON. Congress created that program.

Ms. CRISWELL. Congress created that program.

Mr. LARSEN OF WASHINGTON. And told you to do it.

Ms. CRISWELL. And asked me to do it, directed me to do it.

Mr. LARSEN OF WASHINGTON. Yes, they didn't—we don't ask you to do things.

Ms. CRISWELL. Yes, you don't.

Mr. LARSEN OF WASHINGTON. We told you to do it. So, it is really up to Congress to decide—

Ms. CRISWELL [interrupting]. Congress directed FEMA to administer the legacy program of EFSP humanitarian assistance—

Mr. LARSEN OF WASHINGTON [interrupting]. All right—

Ms. CRISWELL [continuing]. And then the establishment—

Mr. LARSEN OF WASHINGTON [interrupting]. I got it. I think we should just issue a mirror to every Member of Congress who complains to you about the emergency shelter program, so they can look at who is responsible for doing anything about it, which—you are responsible for administering it, but you are not responsible for creating it.

Ms. CRISWELL. Correct.

Mr. LARSEN OF WASHINGTON. On the disaster relief, so, it is a \$100 billion request, not \$100 million?

Ms. CRISWELL. \$100 billion.

Mr. LARSEN OF WASHINGTON. Yes, with a B.

Ms. CRISWELL. \$40 billion of which is FEMA's request.

Mr. LARSEN OF WASHINGTON. \$40 billion which is FEMA's request. And tell me why FEMA needs that supplemental funding for the—especially for the Disaster Relief Fund before the end of the year.

Ms. CRISWELL. We were given the ability to spend against the fiscal year 2025 budget with the continuing resolution—

Mr. LARSEN OF WASHINGTON [interposing]. Right.

Ms. CRISWELL [continuing]. Which was just over \$20 billion.

Mr. LARSEN OF WASHINGTON. Right.

Ms. CRISWELL. We went into that with a negative, because we had paused close to \$9 billion in payments through our Immediate Needs Funding for fiscal year 2024.

Mr. LARSEN OF WASHINGTON. Right.

Ms. CRISWELL. So, the first bills that we paid were those recovery projects in communities across the United States.

In Hurricane Helene and Milton, those costs are expensive. And the cost to respond to these two disasters is outpacing all other disasters in the previous 10 years, except for Hurricane Maria. And so, that is—

Mr. LARSEN OF WASHINGTON [interrupting]. And I don't want to diminish the importance of Helene and Milton, but in that \$9 bil-

lion, some of that money went to places that weren't in the Southeast or Appalachia because of outstanding disaster recovery requests. Is that right?

Ms. CRISWELL. Correct. It was projects—over 3,000 recovery projects across the United States we were not able to reimburse while we were in Immediate Needs Funding.

Mr. LARSEN OF WASHINGTON. And so, that was the \$20 billion. And now you are spending the \$11 billion, plus that which you need otherwise because of Helene and Milton and because of the other outstanding requests that Congress hasn't funded since October 2023 in the last supplemental disaster request. Is that right?

Ms. CRISWELL. We have been very transparent with Congress about what the health of the DRF is, and anticipated a shortage going into fiscal year 2024 as well as fiscal year 2025. We have put forth two supplemental requests in fiscal year 2024, neither of which were allowed. And so, we find ourselves in a situation—

Mr. LARSEN OF WASHINGTON [interrupting]. Neither of which were passed.

Ms. CRISWELL. Weren't passed, correct.

Mr. LARSEN OF WASHINGTON. Yes, right, yes. No, we are allowed to pass them. We chose, as a Congress, not to, which is, again, we should—for some of this, we need to be looking at ourselves. But a lot of—for some of these things, we need to be looking at you.

For instance, on Individual Assistance, a universal application as a for-instance, we want to get Representative Titus' and Representative Graves' bill passed so there is a universal application instead of having to fill out several applications just to get, sort of—it is like trying to fund a road, you've got to go for five or six different grants to get a road funded in transportation, rather than just get the one pot of money to do this. And for someone who is in a situation where they are trying to find a place to live because of a disaster, we need to cut down on the time and on the paperwork that they have to do to get access to this.

So, can you talk a little bit about the need for universal application?

Ms. CRISWELL. Yes, the Disaster Survivors Fairness Act, we really appreciate the efforts that have gone forth with this because it gives us a lot of flexibilities. It allows us to do direct repair to homes. But the other piece is about the universal application. We want to reduce the burden that these individuals are facing after they have just experienced probably the worst day in their life. And so, to be able to make it easier on them is the goal of the universal application.

Mr. LARSEN OF WASHINGTON. That is great. I want to just conclude by talking a little bit about the politics of the situation. And I condemn what this employee did, as well. And playing politics with disaster aid hurts Americans. It hurts all of us, especially when they need the Government most. And so, it is troubling that even the President-elect said he would deny disaster aid to California if the Governor there doesn't listen to him. And at an event in September, the President-elect said that the Governor of California is going to sign those papers—if he doesn't sign those papers related to California water policy, he won't get money to put out all the fires, and we won't give him the money to put out fires, and

then he has got problems. It is not the first time he has done something like this.

In 2019, the President-elect tweeted, “Billions of dollars are being sent to the State of California for forest fires that, with proper forest management, would never happen. Unless they get their act together, which is unlikely, I have ordered FEMA to send no more money.”

The point I want to make is that it is up to this committee to responsibly hold anyone accountable who is seeking to politicize disaster aid, from a crew leader at FEMA to the President-elect or the President. None of this is acceptable, and we have a responsibility to hold everyone accountable for these comments that get in the way of getting disaster aid to people.

And with that, I yield back.

Mr. PERRY. The Chair thanks the gentleman. The Chair now recognizes the Representative from Mississippi, Mr. Ezell.

Mr. EZELL. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And thank you, Administrator Criswell, for being here today. A few months ago, you agreed to consider the flood maps fully funded by the Mississippi State Legislature and implemented by the Southern Mississippi Planning and Development District. I appreciate your commitment, as so many of my constituents are suffering due to FEMA’s outdated, inaccurate flood maps.

Last month, I hosted a roundtable on this issue, and was pleased to hear that your staff is working in good faith with district stakeholders. I will give credit where credit is due. However, as we have discussed today, the recent reports of one of your staffers intentionally withholding Federal aid solely on political preference is beyond unacceptable, and dramatically increases the political divide in our country. Unfortunately, we could keep hammering this point. But today I am not here—I want to focus on something else, some of the things going on in my district.

One of my goals as a Congressman is to improve the efficiency of FEMA. During my first term, I have engaged with region 4 regarding the dozens of projects in my district, from the gulf coast to the Pine Belt, that have drug out far too long without a resolution or, in some cases, even without a clear update. These include projects throughout Biloxi, Gulfport, Long Beach, Pass Christian, and Bay St. Louis, Waveland, and Hattiesburg.

Here is a timeline of events my staff and I have discussed with your team at region 4.

[Poster displayed.]

Mr. EZELL. Administrator Criswell, this upcoming August will be a 20-year anniversary for Hurricane Katrina, 20 years. That is nearly two decades the city of Biloxi is still waiting on some of their infrastructure projects. How, 20 years later, are there still unresolved projects from Katrina?

Ms. CRISWELL. Congressman, recovery is very complicated, and every project has its own unique situation. I am happy to look into the specific projects that you are most—

Mr. EZELL [interposing]. And thank you—

Ms. CRISWELL [continuing]. Concerned about.

Mr. EZELL. Thank you for that. As you can see, this is pretty hard to defend. Twenty years, you know, twenty years is a long

time waiting on to get some infrastructure projects fixed, which have been funded.

Another answer I hope you can clarify for me today: If an applicant identifies an error or omission in the original cost estimate, do you believe FEMA may increase funding for an improved project, yes or no?

Ms. CRISWELL. Congressman, I would have to understand the specifics of that to be able to answer it accurately.

Mr. EZELL. If an applicant identifies an error or an omission in the original cost estimate, do you believe FEMA may increase funding for an improved project?

Ms. CRISWELL. Again, Congressman, without understanding the specifics of that project, I don't have an accurate answer.

Mr. EZELL. Okay, let's move on. I take that as a no.

According to FEMA, this project—and this is in Biloxi and Waveland—Biloxi, correction. According to FEMA, this project has not been finished because it was not accurately estimated. But I have in writing a letter from FEMA right here [indicating letter] that the most recent CEF in 2019 accurately reflected the complexity of the project. Can you follow up with this letter—and we will make sure that you get it—that FEMA has already confirmed, and direct your staff to fund the project at the cost accurately reflected?

Ms. CRISWELL. Congressman, I would be happy to follow up on that specific project.

Mr. EZELL. Thank you very much. I take that as a yes.

The second project that I would like to raise with you today is the Waveland Mississippi Pier. In October, I learned that the original reason why this project was not funded was because the scope of the work had changed. However, the city has told me the project has not changed since day one of the disaster. Now I am hearing the original project reflected what the city says, but your Agency claims it should not have.

So, now we are kind of back to step 1. This stuff just gets so confusing, our people just don't know which way to go sometimes. So, what is it going to be? Was the mitigation work never included to begin with, or did FEMA include this work by mistake?

Again, confusing. We get one answer from you sometimes, and we try to go along with it, and things just keep changing until it gets so confusing until nobody really knows what to do. So, we got to get this figured out, as we can see how this creates so much uncertainty and confusing the people who are trying to navigate through the process, because Waveland has got issues going on right now.

My staff and I have worked tirelessly to try to work some of these things out with FEMA. But still, if you look at 20 years for projects from Katrina that have been funded that have not been completed, and again, I don't want to keep beating the drum about what one employee said or what may be the policy, but I truly hope that the lack of funding these projects isn't due to Mississippi being a red State.

And with that being said, I need a commitment from you today that you will look into all these projects, that they will be handled,

and that my constituents will get the help that they need back home.

Ms. CRISWELL. Congressman, you have my commitment that we will look into all of those projects, and you have my absolute determination that we do not discriminate against any State. We provide support for everyone impacted by disasters.

Mr. EZELL. And we appreciate that. But when you are looking at 20 years from Katrina, we should not be having this discussion. So, thank you very much.

With that, Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Mr. PERRY. The Chair thanks the gentleman. The Chair now recognizes the gentlelady from Washington, DC, Representative Norton.

Ms. NORTON. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Climate change has fueled an alarming rise in the number and severity of natural disasters. With once-in-a-century storms becoming a matter of course, it is critical to continue to invest in our emergency management workforce to respond to these increasing emergencies and help rebuild affected communities. Yet the Government Accountability Office found that in recent years, FEMA has been significantly understaffed.

Administrator Criswell, what actions should Congress take to train, expand, and retain FEMA's emergency management workforce?

Ms. CRISWELL. Congresswoman Norton, our workforce is the heart and soul of what we do. These are often people that I have talked to that have been disaster survivors themselves and have chosen to come work for FEMA because they wanted to be able to give back like they received assistance when they were impacted.

We appreciate the passage of the CREW Act that was instrumental in allowing us the flexibilities to have a more diverse and expansive workforce through our intermittent workers of our reservists, giving them the ability to keep a full-time job, yet deploy when needed to come support people that have been impacted by disasters.

I encourage you to continue to reach out to your communities and have them reach out to FEMA. We often hire local hires in communities who turn into our reservists, our core employees, or our full-time employees, and we appreciate Congress' continued support of our workforce, making sure that they have all of the tools and the resources they need to continue to do the critical work of helping people before, during, and after disasters.

Ms. NORTON. Thank you. Administrator Criswell, what would be the impact on communities and disaster survivors if Congress does not pass the disaster supplemental appropriation bill?

Ms. CRISWELL. Our current balance within the Disaster Relief Fund is just under \$5 billion. We went into Immediate Needs Funding earlier this year in August, when we reached a \$3 billion mark. We expect, without a supplemental, that we will have the need to go back into Immediate Needs Funding within the next few weeks without a supplemental.

What that means is we will continue to support the lifesaving, life-sustaining work, especially what is going on in western North Carolina and all of the States impacted by Hurricanes Helene and

Milton. But we have to pause the reimbursement to communities that are rebuilding. FEMA reimburses communities as they rebuild and repair their critical infrastructure. Many of these small, rural communities often can't move on to the next project until they get reimbursed from the one that they are waiting for, and so, this has a significant impact on a community's ability to have an effective recovery when they don't have the cash flow because they are waiting for the Federal Government to reimburse them for what they are eligible for under the disaster declaration.

Ms. NORTON. I commend you and FEMA's thousands of staff from across the country who left their homes to deploy to communities in need and provide them with assistance in the face of destruction, trauma, and loss.

And I urge the House to bring a disaster supplemental appropriations bill to the floor immediately. And I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. PERRY. The Chair thanks the gentlelady. The Chair now recognizes the Representative from Utah, Representative Maloy.

Ms. MALOY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Administrator Criswell, I have been sitting here listening to some of my colleagues talk about how FEMA is battling underfunding and understaffing and misinformation, and I just want it noted that I think the willingness of the public to believe information is a symptom of distrust of Federal agencies. And being here and answering questions and addressing these problems is probably the best thing we can do to battle misinformation. If FEMA employees are making political decisions that they shouldn't make and being fired for it, and we are talking about it here, I think that will help.

And then as far as funding and staffing issues, they have got to be at least partly caused by deploying FEMA to non-Stafford Act events. And as a member of the legislative branch, I have a responsibility, as a member of this committee, to exercise oversight of FEMA. And one of the things that we have to look into is whether FEMA is understaffed and underfunded, or if they are outside of their mission. I think it is critical, as a Member of Congress, that we hold agencies accountable to be doing the things they are authorized by Congress and only the things they are authorized to do by Congress.

So, with those observations, I am going to yield the remainder of my time to Mr. Graves to continue his line of questioning from earlier.

Mr. GRAVES OF LOUISIANA. Thank you very much, Ms. Maloy. I appreciate it.

Administrator, I want to get something clear here. I mean, I understand you are saying that there is \$42,500 in programs that are available. Let me say it again. There is still \$10,000 and maybe even more available for citizens that have come here illegally from other countries that are not citizens of the United States. So, I don't think that we reconcile by saying that, oh, yes, but they could potentially be eligible for this much. There still is \$10,000 or more that we are potentially giving to people that broke the law, that are citizens of other countries that came to the United States illegally.

I understand what Mr. Larsen said, Ranking Member Larsen said. But the reality is, you are the Administrator of this Agency. You are the one who prepares the budget request and asks for these funds, and you are the one who is sitting here now saying we need \$100 billion more.

I think it is appropriate in this case to reprioritize funds and say this isn't an appropriate use of taxpayer funds under the fact that we are facing a \$35 trillion debt.

One of the other issues, the inspector general report came out just in August and said in excess of \$70 billion in unliquidated assets, unliquidated obligations dating back to Hurricane Katrina in 2005 are still out there and aren't being used. Why can't those funds be tapped and get the resources out to the people that need them right now?

Ms. CRISWELL. Congressman, again, the Shelter and Services Program was directed by Congress for FEMA to administer. The funding for that program was given to CBP and directed by Congress to be transferred to FEMA to administer that program, and we are administering it in accordance with the law at the direction of Congress.

As far as the programs and the funds that you are talking about as it relates to unobligated projects dating back to Hurricane Katrina, we consistently review all of the projects that are out there. Projects are obligated at what they expect the cost to be, and we are always reviewing to see which funds are no longer going to be needed because the estimates came in lower, and bringing those back in. We provide this in detail to Congress on a monthly basis on what those recoupments are.

Mr. GRAVES OF LOUISIANA. Thank you, Administrator. Look, the last thing I want to say is that I am very concerned about this prejudice about the Trump signs. I have seen other policies coming out of FEMA that I believe also are prejudiced. You and I have had discussions about some of those, and I look forward to getting to the bottom of this.

I yield the remaining time to the chair.

Mr. PERRY. Did you—who do you—who did you yield to? Okay.

Ms. MALOY. I will take the remainder of my time——

Mr. PERRY [interrupting]. All right, thank you.

Ms. MALOY [continuing]. And yield it to the chairman.

Mr. PERRY. Administrator, just a followup on my friend from Louisiana here. Look, you are an American citizen. Shelter and Services Program, we get it, we agree. Look, not something I would vote for, but it happened, and you have the job of administering it. But you are an American citizen. You see illegal foreign nationals receiving money to the tune of billions of dollars in this administration alone, while your own citizens in your own country dealing with an Agency for which you work, and are being criticized right now because they are not getting the money—have you requested a reprogramming of this money?

I understand it has been thrown in your lap, I get it, not something I agreed with, but it is in your lap. But you see it. Have you requested a reprogramming of the money?

Ms. CRISWELL. This is funding, Chairman, that we were directed to administer by Congress. We are administering it at the direction of Congress.

Mr. PERRY. And you have no interest in reprogramming it.

Ms. CRISWELL. This is funding that was directed to us to administer—

Mr. PERRY [interrupting]. I understand, but you are a citizen, too. You are working here. So, do you see this as a misalignment of priorities when you are asking for more money—maybe rightly so—asking for more personnel, knowing that millions, hundreds of millions, billions of dollars sent to people here illegally while people, the citizens of this country for which the administration and the organization that you work is supposed to be there for them, aren't receiving that money. Do you have any interest in requesting a reprogramming of that funding?

Ms. CRISWELL. This is funding that was given to CBP and directed by Congress to transfer to FEMA to administer the Shelter and Services—

Mr. PERRY [interrupting]. Yes, ma'am. I understand that, and I guess I get your answer.

I would just say this in support of this organization called the Cajun Navy. People are frustrated and upset with FEMA's response. Maybe rightly so, maybe not rightly so. But it seems to me that this nonprofit known as the Cajun Navy can get in the game immediately, make changes on the fly that impact people's lives. They don't have to go through a bunch of redtape and cry "We don't have people, we don't have money." They get people and equipment to the site on time and make a difference. And quite honestly, that is what FEMA should be doing.

So, maybe FEMA should go talk to the Cajun Navy and say, "Why can't we do what you are doing? What have we got to change here to do that?"

And with that, I yield, and I now recognize the gentleman from California, Representative Garamendi.

Mr. GARAMENDI. No, Mr. Chairman, I am not going to take the bait. I think she identified the problem, however. It is us. If you have a problem with what the CBP is doing in transferring their responsibility to FEMA, well, why don't you write the bill?

Now, let me move on to what I really want to get to here. Yes, there is a shortfall of funding. I think it has been discussed multiple times here. In that funding program, or the shortfall, there is a question about unpaid obligations. We have heard about 20 years ago with Katrina, but there are some that are much more recent, specifically the COVID response in 2021, 2022. There was a Federal program authorized in the American Rescue Plan that hospitals and other agencies were directed to provide services, and FEMA programs would reimburse them. You have made good effort on reimbursing them as far as the money would go. Still, about 40 percent of the money—specifically to hospitals—in California and other States have yet to be paid in the supplemental that you are requesting.

Do you intend to use some of that supplemental money to pay for those obligations that were incurred by public agencies—hos-

pitals, specifically—so that they would be reimbursed? You are at 60 percent. There is another 40 percent to go.

Ms. CRISWELL. Congressman, part of our supplemental request does include the anticipated cost to reimburse jurisdictions, hospitals, and other eligible entities for the costs that they incurred through COVID-19.

For the hospitals specifically, we are undergoing an extensive review with a third party to make sure that we are not duplicating funding that they already received. We feel that this is an important step to ensure that we are using the taxpayer dollars to support the actual needs, and not duplicating payments that they may have received from other sources or from insurance, et cetera. And so, both of those will work in unison.

As we continue to review the submissions from hospitals, we validate that the costs have not been paid by another source. This supplemental request will include then reimbursing those jurisdictions, those hospitals, those entities for those costs.

Mr. GARAMENDI. I really like your “yes, but” answer. Normally we don’t like the “but” part, but I am pleased to hear that FEMA is auditing and also very carefully looking into these payments. I am confident that you won’t find a problem in California. I say that with certainty. However, nonetheless, it is important that you do the audits and that you make sure that—and it applies to other programs also, some of those that may date back 20 years or more. So, thank you for doing that.

I will note that the California Hospital Association believes that there is \$1.3 billion that would be appropriately owed to California. However, check to be sure.

Moving on, there are other issues that are also in play, some of which are really important in small communities. And I want to thank you for a change that you have made in your policies of prior funding for very small projects for across mostly small communities, some urban, some rural. I believe it is at a \$1 million level. That might have enough money to get a large culvert repaired. I would ask you to take a look at that, and probably better to add a zero.

And once again, the “but” part of your answer, really important here. So, if you are going to put money out ahead of the normal process of reimbursement, good. It is necessary, the—many small communities, counties, cities simply cannot front the money for 3, 4 years before they get reimbursed. However, \$1 million is a good step. Add a zero and you are probably at a level that would allow those communities to get their projects underway.

I want to thank you for your courage. I want to thank you for your standing tall and honest about the incredible pressure that you have received from the two recent hurricanes and from those other disasters that have been declared. You have an incredibly difficult job, and you are leading in a way that is exemplary.

With that, I yield back.

Oh, by the way, I got 11 seconds. Mr. Chairman, if we’ve got a problem with illegals getting money, I look forward to your bill.

Mr. PERRY. You might see it there, Mr. Garamendi.

The Chair recognizes the gentleman from Louisiana to make a request.

Mr. GRAVES OF LOUISIANA. Mr. Chairman, I ask unanimous consent to include in the record a November 18 letter from United Cajun Navy official Brian Trascher that includes observations from Todd Terrell, Sara Galliano, and others related to Hurricane Milton and——

Mr. PERRY [interrupting]. Without objection, so ordered.
[The information follows:]

Letter of November 18, 2024, to Hon. Sam Graves, Chairman, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, and Hon. Scott Perry, Chairman, Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management, from Brian Trascher, National Vice President and Public Information Officer, United Cajun Navy, Submitted for the Record by Hon. Garret Graves

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NOVEMBER 18, 2024.

Hon. Chairman SAM GRAVES (MO),
House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure.

Hon. Chairman SCOTT PERRY (PA),
Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management,
United States House of Representatives.

DEAR CHAIRMAN PERRY:

My name is Brian Trascher, and I am the National Vice President and Public Information Officer for the United Cajun Navy. We are a 501c3 Nonprofit disaster response and relief organization based in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and we have more than a dozen state chapters. As Hurricane Helene approached the coast of Florida's "big bend" on September 27th, 2024 I was actually inside of the National Response Coordination Center at FEMA headquarters in Washington DC. This was by invitation and had been scheduled a couple of months prior to the visit. Coincidentally, our meetings and tour of FEMA headquarters took place on the same day that the NRCC was put on a Level 1 activation due to the impending Hurricane Helene. We were invited to sit in the main conference room as FEMA leadership participated in video meetings with regional offices, appointed and elected officials who were all coordinating the National Response to what was expected to be a catastrophic weather event.

Our President and Founder, Todd Terrell, flew back to Baton Rouge that evening so that he could ensure that supplies were being loaded onto trucks from our warehouse and ready to preposition in Florida. I stayed behind in DC with our Executive Director Sara Galliano to finish out our meeting schedule she had arranged with the Red Cross and Pentagon, then I flew back to Louisiana on September 28th.

We had prepositioned supply trucks and SAR teams in the Florida Panhandle to more efficiently mobilize into affected areas when the weather conditions became safe. Prior to Helene making landfall, the United Cajun Navy's chief meteorologist Jeff George warned Todd and I of his concern about the forward speed of the storm. He explained that by moving so fast, the high intensity center would not degrade quickly enough before reaching inland to the mountainous areas of Eastern Tennessee, Eastern Georgia, and Western North Carolina. He suggested that the rainfall amounts could cause massive mudslides and catastrophic flooding in those communities who were not likely expecting this type of weather event.

After watching this prediction unfold, and getting reports from team members within our Georgia chapter, we quickly realized that the greatest need was going to actually be in these mountainous regions well north of the Florida Coast. On September 29th, we redirected approximately half of our fleet of supply trucks northward to Eastern Georgia. We also received reports that traditional interstate routes going into parts of Tennessee and North Carolina were potentially washed out and impassable by vehicles. Todd ordered me to fly to North Carolina to get a sitrep from the ground since communications were very spotty. I arrived in Hickory, North

Carolina on October 1st and took a reconnaissance flight via helicopter into the mountains where I was able to survey the towns surrounding Asheville, North Carolina. When I made a fuel stop in Asheville, I did run into some FEMA executives who were already on the ground. They were coordinating the arrival of more of their own associates as well as planning missions with the National Guard. We can testify to the fact that FEMA was on the ground early, however there are many reasons that will no doubt be investigated as to why the execution of the response was largely viewed by the public as delayed at best. Some of the meetings we had participated in at FEMA headquarters the week before had to do with FEMA's desire to work with NGOs such as the United Cajun Navy to coordinate first response as FEMA is not technically a first responder. There are many regulations and parts of the Stafford Act that will need to be examined so that these relationships can be solidified and better coordinated in the future. We hope that whoever leads FEMA in the next administration will continue these efforts to work with groups like ours.

During my initial aerial surveillance, I was immediately able to surmise that our traditional method of swift water rescue was not going to be the appropriate response for this mission. We put out a call to our network for fixed and rotary wing aircraft pilots to deploy to the region as soon as possible. One of the first chopper pilots to contact me was a volunteer named Ezra Rickards from Delaware, who flew his long range Bel helicopter all the way down to North Carolina at his own expense. Ezra performed over 80 rescue missions with his aircraft alone and was the first aircraft to make a supply drop for the United Cajun Navy in Black Mountain in those first days. Our Georgia chapter president, Shannon Ross, coordinated a fleet of approximately 45 private fixed wing aircraft out of an airport in Peachtree, Georgia where the United Cajun Navy had delivered supplies and provided fuel for these aircraft to fly into Western North Carolina airfields. We then expanded the role of our helicopter vendor, Total Flight Solutions, out of Davidson County North Carolina. TFS was able to reach beyond their own fleet and coordinate approximately 50 total rotary aircraft that flew non-stop missions of supplies into the mountains and evacuating people out of the mountains. This air operation went on from dusk till dawn for at least 7 days. In addition to the United Cajun Navy, other NGOs such as Operation AirDrop, Operation Helo, and Mercury One were coordinating air operations in much of the same manner for roughly the same period and beyond. Congressman Cory Mills of Florida personally participated in airlift and heavy lift rescue operations for several days or a week, he can confirm that precise duration.

It's hard to estimate how many pounds of supplies were brought in to the affected areas and how many people were evacuated out, but between the joint operations of United Cajun Navy and our partner NGOs It's safe to say that hundreds of thousands of pounds of emergency supplies and hundreds of the flood victims were evacuated out of those towns. Some of our partner agencies may have more accurate numbers in this regard.

Since it took a while for routes to open for our semi-trucks, part of my job became to identify regional airports that were open and could handle airdrop supplies as the Hickory airport was starting to exceed capacity. On October 4th I came upon the regional airport in Stanley County, North Carolina and I noticed there were a lot of National Guard troops in uniform at this location. It turns out that Stanley County is home to the 235th ATC Squadron and the 118th ASOS Squadron of the NC Air Guard. These are two air guard units whom one specializes in air traffic control and landing zones, while the other specializes and aerial surveillance and SAR. These are skills that were crucially necessary to the ongoing rescue ops in Western North Carolina. The reason why there wasn't much activity at that location was because neither squadron had been activated yet. Imagine my incredulity of learning this information after UCN and many other small nonprofits and volunteers had spent days risking life and limb to save strangers while these two native North Carolinian expert squadrons sat idle and frustrated by their lack of orders to go in and help. The 235th and 118th were eventually activated, but not until at least 6 days after Helene made landfall in North Carolina.

As we canvased the affected areas in the mountain towns surrounding Asheville, the United Cajun Navy was able to make local contacts and partner on staging sites with landing zone capabilities. We first set up at Excel College in Black Mountain, where the Director and many of the students of that school volunteered sorting and making supply runs to victims in the community. Excel is still participating in relief operations to this day. We also coordinated with a gentleman named Adam Smith, a retired special forces soldier who was able to set up a supply drop and staging area with the landing zone at the Harley-Davidson dealership in Swannanoa.

The typical UCN deployment to a disaster area usually ranges from 7 to 14 days, because by that time the locals are up to speed and we're able to pass the baton to the long-term recovery groups. Since Western North Carolina has, in our opinion, been so badly neglected and the damage is so vast, we have made an exception and have joined the long-term recovery group and will participate for as long as we have the resources to support the mission. We've made many partnerships with local, national, and international nonprofits who are committed to the long-term recovery for Helene victims. UCN has secured warehouse space as well as land where we have been able to place camper and RV donations dedicated to housing displaced families. Winter has arrived in Western North Carolina and far too many of our fellow Americans are still sleeping in tents without electricity or potable water. We're doing everything within our power to help these people, but we can only operate within our means, and we can't help but wonder when the cavalry will finally arrive for them.

Many people ask us why we do what we do. The answer is simple, this happened to us, and we know the path forward. In 2005 Hurricane Katrina caused the levees surrounding New Orleans to fail and the city rapidly flooded forcing many unsuspecting residents out of their homes and neighborhoods, and unfortunately drowned an untold number of innocent people. The world watched as Good Samaritans came in their own boats at their own expense to rescue their fellow Louisianians from the floodwaters. Our Founder Todd Terrell was part of the original 68 vessels informally deputized by Lt. General Russell Honore, then Commander of Joint Task Force Katrina. And thus, the "Cajun Navy" was born. It's been 19 years, and the federal government still doesn't seem to understand the concept of a rapid response to a natural disaster. Again, we do this because it happened to us, and we don't want to see it happen again to any of our fellow Americans. The federal response in Western North Carolina has brought back many bad memories for us, but being able to respond quickly, save lives, and give hope to our new Appalachian friends has helped to heal some old wounds. But that doesn't change the fact that in the richest country on earth, we should have a better coordinated response between government agencies and experienced NGOs like the United Cajun Navy and others to make sure that the loss of life is minimal after the next major weather event. We like to say that we are the "First Shrimp Boots on the Ground, From Landfall to Light". Western North Carolina, Eastern Georgia, and Eastern Tennessee are still waiting for the light. We thank all members of Congress for their service and commitment to finding the answers we're all seeking. We stand ready to continue serving in our own capacities as well as field any questions Members may have. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

Respectfully submitted,

BRIAN TRASCHER,

National Vice President and Public Information Officer, United Cajun Navy.

Mr. PERRY. The Chair now recognizes the gentleman from New York, Representative Molinaro.

Mr. MOLINARO. Thank you, Mr. Perry, Mr. Chairman, and thank you, Administrator.

I want to just take issue with—this could be my last 5 minutes on this committee, so, I am going to take all 4 minutes and 10 seconds. My colleague across the aisle, with all due respect, offered what is by far the easiest and most disingenuous argument.

You administer the one department in domestic policy that has to triage and to set priorities, your department. And in the case of a declared emergency, either as it affords itself under the Stafford Act or by some extension by the President or your own determination, you are empowered and your department is empowered to decide what of the programs you are running today should take precedent or priority over the others.

Yes, sure, we can pass a law that limits the Shelter and Services funding that stops dollars getting to illegal immigrants, but you have to make that decision every day. It is the only department in the Federal Government that empowers you to do so.

My colleague, Mr. Graves, said earlier that you have to agree that it is absurd for Americans in the South, having now faced

what is, by far, among the worst emergencies to befall our country, that they see those who were placed here, illegal immigrants placed here by their Federal Government, they see the not-for-profits you engage with handing out ease-of-access dollars while they have to struggle to get first the \$750.

I administered emergency response for 20 years at the county level. Believe me, there is a lot of improvements and coordination that FEMA must engage in. But do you see the absurdity? Because I haven't heard an answer that suggests it. Do you see the absurdity that American citizens are getting their \$750 and then, yes, struggling through a very complicated process to meet the thresholds necessary to get the aid they need to have housing, food, and shelter, while your Agency is contracting with not-for-profits to easily hand out access to those who are here, placed here illegally? Do you see the absurdity?

Ms. CRISWELL. Congressman, our mission is to support people, help people before, during, and after disasters, and I—

Mr. MOLINARO [interrupting]. Do you think that there is—

Ms. CRISWELL [continuing]. [Inaudible] priority decisions—

Mr. MOLINARO [interrupting]. Ma'am, do you think that—do you think, in responding to an emergency, the priority of Government ought to be to ensure that American citizens are triaged, and that the services of FEMA are focused on responding to them and their service programs first?

Ms. CRISWELL. I absolutely believe that the services that FEMA provides should be supporting the people that have been impacted by disasters.

Mr. MOLINARO. Should there be equity in that distribution and response? Should there be fairness in that response?

Ms. CRISWELL. We should make sure that all people have access to our programs, and that we—

Mr. MOLINARO [interposing]. Fair enough.

Ms. CRISWELL [continuing]. Remove the barrier—

Mr. MOLINARO [interrupting]. So, this is my time, and I get 4 minutes—2 minutes to do it.

So, in fairness, do you not see the inequity in those placed here illegally having taxpayer support, a plane ticket, a house, a hotel, food, cell phones, access to healthcare—do you not see the inequity that they have access immediately?

I want us to be a welcoming Nation, but if we cannot respond to those who are living in emergencies, then we do not have the right to claim that we are the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Do you not see the inequity?

Ms. CRISWELL. Congress directed—

Mr. MOLINARO [interrupting]. No, Congress established law. You have to prioritize, triage, and decide. During COVID, there were Federal agencies and local governments who were responsible for providing lots of services. We said in this emergency, you are not going to do that. We told Federal employees, "Get back out onto the ground, because you have got to respond to a public health pandemic," and most of them were never involved in public health response.

You established the priority. Why can you not say today that the priority ought to have been to make sure that American citizens

were getting first response, adequate response, and not distracted response? Why can you not say that?

Ms. CRISWELL. Our priority is the American people, and we administered our disaster programs——

Mr. MOLINARO [interrupting]. And you will not admit to or acknowledge the inequities. I am not trying to be combative. This is absurd. Today, you spent some time and my colleagues talked about misinformation, first, misinformation is freedom of speech, whether it is true or not. But you know what fuels misinformation? The inequity that FEMA has engaged in, because it allows for people to assume, whether true or not, a level of either incompetence, inefficiency, or lack of concern for those who are struggling the most when they see individuals entering this country illegally and then are transported here and receiving services.

And you know that it is easier to access the Shelter and Services funding than it is to access disaster relief aid, housing assistance, small business aid. You know that it is more complicated. Doesn't that, in and of itself, fuel the misinformation?

Ms. CRISWELL. Congressman, we are administering that program, as directed by Congress.

Mr. MOLINARO. You are not administering the program as directed by Congress. We established the law, we established the provisions, and we expect the person, whether it is the President or the Administrator of FEMA, to decide what is and is not priority in response to emergency. And by that very measure, with all due respect, the Agency has failed.

Ms. CRISWELL. Congressman——

Mr. MOLINARO [interrupting]. And it has lost focus.

My time is up. I yield back to the chairman.

Mr. PERRY. The Chair thanks the gentleman. The Chair now recognizes the gentlelady from Oregon, Representative Hoyle.

Ms. HOYLE OF OREGON. Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you for being here today.

A few things. We have a lot of fires, ice storms, floods that have gotten more and more severe. This year, we have had 1.9 million acres of land that was burnt with fires, and that is over twice the 10-year average.

But as things are getting hotter and drier, and climate is getting more extreme, some of my colleagues want to argue about why, but what I want to say is the fact of the matter is FEMA is set up for when natural disasters happen every once in a while, maybe every 6 months. And so, you have a lot of temporary Stafford Act employees. Is it true that four-fifths of your employees are in that temporary Stafford Act category?

Ms. CRISWELL. Ma'am, can you repeat the number that you said?

Ms. HOYLE OF OREGON. Four-fifths. My understanding is 20,000 out of your 25,000 employees are in that, is that——

Ms. CRISWELL [interrupting]. I believe that would be high. I believe about half of our workforce, maybe a little bit more than half, are direct employees out of the Disaster Relief Fund and support disasters directly. The rest support our steady state missions.

Ms. HOYLE OF OREGON. Okay. So, half of your employees. And the fact is this has become a full-time job.

I represent a lot of rural communities. I have never seen a difference between how FEMA treats my rural, conservative areas and my more blue areas. And it seems like you had an employee that acted inappropriately, unethically, in an untrustworthy manner, and then lied about who—apparently, according to the facts that we know so far—lied about who was responsible for that, right?

Ms. CRISWELL. We had a single employee that took actions that were unacceptable by directing her team to avoid homes.

Ms. HOYLE OF OREGON. Right. I just think that if you have an employee that acts in an unethical manner, it follows that maybe they are not telling the truth. But again, I have never seen any difference.

And I am going to go on to a different subject, because I do represent Oregon. We had 23 fires in mid-July at the same time, earlier than we had ever had fires, 23 incident command centers. Just following a massive ice storm, we had floods. We have our range land, our ranchers, our farms that were burnt.

Now, we have a mix of Federal and State and private land, and our Governor has asked for President Biden to approve a major disaster declaration for wildfire and storm damage between July 10 and September 7. Our requests include Public Assistance for our six frontier counties—Gilliam, Grant, Jefferson, Umatilla, Wasco, and Wheeler; Hazard Mitigation Grant Programs to support projects that reduce the impact of future disasters; and a State cost-sharing waiver waiving the State's costs for emergency work in response to this disaster. This has been the most expensive fire season ever.

And what it seems like is FEMA is looking at each of these fires individually, when really what we would like to see is for all of these to be taken together, because that is how we had to manage it. So, when can this—and if you have to get back to me, I understand because this isn't a committee hearing on this—but when can the State reasonably expect a response to the disaster declaration request? We have our farmers and ranchers that are really, really struggling, have lost everything, and they really need this help.

Ms. CRISWELL. Congresswoman, we did receive that request from the Governor, I believe, on October 21, and I recognize and know how important this is to you. I will certainly go back and follow up with my team to see where it is at in the process, and we will get back with your staff.

Ms. HOYLE OF OREGON. Okay. And then the disaster declaration process often feels slow to affected communities and—we have had this—again, blue and red districts. And I do think that your Agency has a giant job and doesn't necessarily always have the resources to do it. How can FEMA streamline the steps between the Agency receiving a disaster declaration request and submitting a recommendation to the President?

Ms. CRISWELL. The biggest thing that we see is really at the capacity of the State and local level, and whether or not they have the resources to be able to quickly and effectively determine the amount of damage and submit that paperwork. We have been increasing our support by putting what we call FEMA integration team members and embedding staff right with State offices so they

can assist with that process. We have 10 regions and a regional administrator over each of them that have great relationships with the State directors and work very closely with them to help them understand what the steps are, where they need to go, and to work through and provide technical assistance as needed.

Ms. HOYLE OF OREGON. We are over time. What I will say is these are cash-strapped—

Ms. CRISWELL [interposing]. Yes.

Ms. HOYLE OF OREGON [continuing]. Rural counties that lost a lot of their economic engine when the timber industry crashed. And so, they are doing the best they can. But what I would say is we really need to figure out how to get these answers quicker. And thank you for your response.

Ms. CRISWELL. I am happy to work with you on that.

Mr. PERRY. The gentlelady yields. The Chair now recognizes Representative Stauber.

Mr. STAUBER. Thank you very much.

Administrator, thanks for being here today. And also, thanks for your service in the Colorado National Guard, I appreciate that. I also appreciate your willingness to tell us—and you have been in several committee hearings—to talk about how you let that employee go who weaponized the Federal Government. The Federal Government has been weaponized against the American people. This is case in point. I think you did your job, and I think you did it well. You terminated that employee who weaponized the Federal Government as quickly as you can. And I think we need to do more of that.

With that being said, your mission statement is helping people before, during, and after disasters. When you were in the Colorado National Guard, did you have annual reviews?

Ms. CRISWELL. Did I have a what?

Mr. STAUBER. Annual reviews.

Ms. CRISWELL. I was a traditional Guard member, I wouldn't have had—

Mr. STAUBER [interrupting]. Well, you would still have annual reviews, okay? Outstanding, meets standards, and does not meet standards. Would that be fair enough?

Ms. CRISWELL. As I recall.

Mr. STAUBER. Okay. So, if you were in the Colorado National Guard, and you were in charge of disasters in Colorado, and the TAG said you are responsible, and there was a major disaster that the National Guard had to be brought out in Colorado, and it took 3 days for you to deploy and 5 days to even get into some neighborhoods, would the TAG say that is acceptable for you, as the leader of the management team, emergency management team?

Ms. CRISWELL. Congressman, FEMA was on the ground before the disaster happened.

Mr. STAUBER. So, let me—we had two Members of Congress that represent 778,000 people, stood here or sat here just within the hour and said there were people that didn't even get responded to for 3 days, and some in a week. So, that contradicts what you just said, okay? I am asking you, if you were in Colorado, what would the TAG do to you if you didn't respond for 3 days to the citizens of Colorado in a disaster?

Ms. CRISWELL. Well, Congressman——

Mr. STAUBER [interrupting]. What would the—would he be upset with you, or would she or he be upset with you?

Ms. CRISWELL. Congressman, our teams were on the ground before the disaster happens.

Mr. STAUBER. Ma'am, with all due respect, I am not asking——

Ms. CRISWELL [interrupting]. Our search and rescue teams——

Mr. STAUBER [interrupting]. Ma'am, I am not asking that question. I am not asking that question. I asked you, would the TAG be disappointed in you if it took you 3 days to help the citizens of Colorado or some neighborhood——

Ms. CRISWELL [interrupting]. I think the Adjutant General of Colorado——

Mr. STAUBER [continuing]. Would he be——

Ms. CRISWELL [continuing]. Would be impressed with the way FEMA responded to this disaster.

Mr. STAUBER. Ma'am, I am trying to help you here. I understand you have a tough job. I want you to be able to tell the American people that we could have done better. And as a traditional guardsmen, I totally respect your service. And I expect honesty. And you should expect honesty from my questioning.

I asked you, would the TAG be upset with you if you didn't send your people into a disaster in Colorado for 3 days—3 days—and sometimes some neighborhoods didn't get it for 5, would the TAG be upset with you?

Ms. CRISWELL. Well, that information is inaccurate, and I would hope he would look for accurate information.

Mr. STAUBER. Ma'am, do you—how would you score yourself in this response to Helene?

Ms. CRISWELL. I think that there is always room——

Mr. STAUBER [interrupting]. Would you score yourself outstanding? Would you score yourself outstanding, meets standards, or does not meet standards?

Ms. CRISWELL. I am incredibly proud of the work that the 22,000 members of this workforce have done to support the American people——

Mr. STAUBER [interrupting]. So, we had——

Ms. CRISWELL [continuing]. Across six States impacted by one of the most——

Mr. STAUBER [interrupting]. Administrator?

Ms. CRISWELL [continuing]. Catastrophic events in recent years.

Mr. STAUBER. Administrator, we had two Members of Congress that would challenge you on that statement. The American citizens needed you at the time. They needed you, and they are still needing you. For 3 days. I mean, we had a major disaster in Minnesota. We had a Governor for 3 days that watched Minneapolis burn. That is unacceptable, simply unacceptable. And I would just hope that as we go forward—I don't want to politicize this. I mean, we—there is enough. But your response—you are the leader, the buck stops with you. From what—the testimony I heard here from the Representatives of the people, it was disappointing. Do you think you could have done better?

Ms. CRISWELL. I encourage you, Congressman, to read my written testimony, which describes in detail how we were on the ground before the disaster happened.

Mr. STAUBER. Do you think——

Ms. CRISWELL [interrupting]. And I respect the testimony of the two panel Members earlier——

Mr. STAUBER [continuing]. Do you think you could have done better?

Ms. CRISWELL. We can always improve, and we will review all——

Mr. STAUBER [interrupting]. Is that a yes?

Ms. CRISWELL [continuing]. Of our response efforts.

Mr. STAUBER. Is that a yes?

Ms. CRISWELL. Nobody is perfect, Congressman. We can always improve, and we strive to always improve on the——

Mr. STAUBER [interrupting]. Do you think you could have done better, though? Yes?

Ms. CRISWELL. We can always do better.

Mr. STAUBER. Okay. Listen, I want to thank you for your service. It is not easy. But when we come and ask you questions, we just expect—this is a dialogue. You represent us, the people. And if it happens in Minnesota, I would expect you to be there as quickly as I can. And I would say that from the statements of the two Representatives, both a Democrat and a Republican, you could have done much better in the response.

And I yield back.

Mr. PERRY. The gentleman yields. The gentleman from South Dakota, Representative Johnson, is recognized.

Mr. JOHNSON OF SOUTH DAKOTA. So, under the heading of ways that we can all improve, I want to look at ways that the current legislative regime, I don't think, provides enough flexibility to States. I will tell you what I mean.

So, now, when a President declares a Federal disaster, in those affected areas, Governors can have the flexibility to increase the weight limits on interstates. Makes sense, makes the delivery of recovery and disaster supplies a lot more efficient.

I think we have heard two things from you today, Administrator, with your colloquies with some of my colleagues. Number one, as you said to Mr. Ezell, recovery is complicated and it can take a long time. We all know that is true. And number two, disaster supplies can get pulled in from a large geographic area.

So, here, I think, are the weaknesses in the current legislative regime, and you will tell me where my assumptions are wrong. So, first off, recovery can take a long time. Right now when the President issues this disaster declaration, I think Governors are only given the flexibility to increase those weight limits for 120 days. Clearly, recovery can take a lot longer than that. Number two, disaster supplies get pulled from a large geographic area. If you are a Governor in a State where the disaster supplies originate—so, you are not in the area that has been impacted directly by the disaster, but you have got supplies that can help those folks a couple of States away—you don't have the flexibility to increase the weight limits on the interstates within your State.

So, the MOVE Act, which is a bipartisan effort in this committee—Mr. Costa and myself—would provide flexibility in both those areas by moving the amount of time that Governors can have that flexibility from 120 days to 270 days; and then—again, large impacted area—allows Governors to waive those weight limits if they are in an area where the supplies originate.

So, Madam Administrator, the MOVE Act, does that sound like that would increase the efficiency and the effectiveness of disaster response?

Ms. CRISWELL. Congressman, I know that, as I have worked many disasters across the United States, we are often reaching out to the Department of Transportation to help waive some of the limitations to move supplies across. And so, I think anything that makes it easier to move resources in support of immediate response efforts would be welcomed.

Mr. JOHNSON OF SOUTH DAKOTA. Anything else you can think of in the transportation logistics supply chain space that would make it easier for us to get supplies to the people who need them?

Ms. CRISWELL. Congressman, I think the biggest thing that we have and the biggest resource we have is the Emergency Management Assistance Compact, which allows Governors to request resources from other States, which then, if a Federal disaster declaration is declared, those costs are all reimbursed through the disaster declaration. Those types of resources and tools to be able to share resources across States are the things that actually make a big difference in the speed and the delivery of Governors being able to support their communities that were impacted.

Mr. JOHNSON OF SOUTH DAKOTA. Yes, I do think those aspects, as well as passage of the MOVE Act, would help with recovery efforts.

We have talked a little bit about this terrible employee, this crew leader that you had, ma'am. Obviously, you have weathered a lot of questions about that. I think you have been upfront that this was a bad employee who was terminated from her job. Is there a culture problem within FEMA? I mean, is this a one-off, or are there other employees who would, as Mr. Stauber said, would be interested in weaponizing Government against citizens?

Ms. CRISWELL. The actions of this employee are unacceptable, and it is not indicative of the culture of FEMA, and I do not believe that there is a widespread cultural problem. I have directed ongoing investigations, working with the IG, working with the Office of the Special Counsel. And if we find any other acts of similar behavior, we will take appropriate disciplinary measures.

Mr. JOHNSON OF SOUTH DAKOTA. So, what should Congress, what should this committee look for? I mean, we want to take you at your word. We want to believe that we don't have a culture problem within FEMA. What should we be looking for over the course of the next 3 months to validate your assertions?

Ms. CRISWELL. I think that you should look at the results that we come out with from ongoing investigations and the amount of assistance that we continue to provide in communities and the support during their recovery process. We will be with them throughout their recovery, helping them rebuild, and rebuild in a way that is going to make them more resilient against future disasters.

Mr. JOHNSON OF SOUTH DAKOTA. Would an investigation from an inspector general or an ombudsman or some other third party help increase the confidence of this committee that your assertions are accurate?

Ms. CRISWELL. We are currently in conversations with the IG, and I would welcome an inspection from the IG. And as I stated to Chairman Perry earlier, I will personally request that investigation from the IG.

Mr. JOHNSON OF SOUTH DAKOTA. Very good. Thank you.

I yield back.

Mr. PERRY. The Chair thanks the gentleman. The Chair now recognizes Representative Webster from Florida.

Mr. WEBSTER OF FLORIDA. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. This question is on behalf of Lake County, one of the four counties I represent in Florida.

It is critical for communities to know what is and what is not eligible for FEMA reimbursement so they can plan, they can plan accordingly for a natural disaster. Counties may have in place, sort of, a debris removal contract in advance of the disaster so the debris removal can move quickly and follow up from the storm. However, depending on the circumstances, actual cost may exceed the contract. Unfortunately, my office has not been able to get a clear answer from FEMA on whether or not the increase is reimbursable.

And I just ask the Administrator, are those costs reimbursable, or are the communities only reimbursed at the amount that they had in a pre-existing contract?

Ms. CRISWELL. Congressman, I would need to understand the specifics of what they are asking for, and I am happy to follow up with you and your team on that case to see what is eligible and not eligible.

Mr. WEBSTER OF FLORIDA. I think what they are asking is, okay, there is this contract, they have it, and they perform that, although the contract was exceeded. And so, by exceeding it, do they only get what they had a contract for reimbursed, or can the excess also be reimbursed?

Ms. CRISWELL. On the basis of what you are saying, that doesn't sound like a reasonable approach from FEMA. We would be reimbursing all eligible costs. I mean, if they had to incur additional costs beyond their contract, that should, from what you are saying, fall under the eligible circumstances. But I would again have to see that specific case.

Mr. WEBSTER OF FLORIDA. Thank you very much.

I yield back.

Mr. PERRY. The Chair thanks the gentleman. The Chair now recognizes the gentleman from New York, Representative D'Esposito.

Mr. D'ESPOSITO. Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman, and good morning, Administrator. How are you?

First, I want to start off with, I am sure, as you have heard time and time again from colleagues on this committee, it is absolutely reprehensible to withhold aid and support based on political affiliation. As you know, in addition to being on this committee, I serve as the subcommittee chairman of the House Homeland Security Committee's Emergency Management and Technology Subcommittee that is also looking into this matter.

Additionally, I was the chief of the Island Park Fire Department when Hurricane Sandy brought destruction and devastation to Long Island. And I will tell you that no political affiliation, no campaign sign, nothing would have prevented me and those who served under me from helping our neighbors. So, I am sure you can understand why reports of FEMA employees skipping homes based on political affiliation and support of President-elect Donald Trump is both shocking and absolutely disturbing.

First off, what has FEMA done or planning to do to ensure the homes that were passed over because of President Trump's signs are made whole?

Ms. CRISWELL. Congressman, I appreciate your ongoing support of FEMA, and I share your concerns over the actions of this employee. We have, first, terminated that employee to ensure that we can continue to do the good work to support the American people. We have also sent in an additional team to go to those 20 homes that we have identified as having been skipped over to ensure that they have had an opportunity to register for assistance. And we have provided refresher training to all of our staff in the field to remind them about the importance of serving all people, meeting them where they are, and ensuring that anyone who has been impacted has an opportunity to apply for assistance.

Mr. D'ESPOSITO. Okay. So, the employee at the center of this who, as you said, was terminated, which—I appreciate that, and I think that that was the correct course of action—but she claims that her instructions were part of an “institutional FEMA policy of avoiding potentially hostile homes.”

So, I think you briefly touched on it, but what are your plans to change or clarify this, what could be a very bogus policy, but nonetheless one that people in FEMA feel that exists, to make sure that it never happens again?

Ms. CRISWELL. There is nowhere in any FEMA policy, any training material or information that would direct any of our staff to avoid a home because of a political sign in their yard. We do provide training to our staff about aggressive behavior, and how they can make sure that they can feel safe. And as we have conducted this refresher training, we have reminded them that this is reactive behavior when somebody is approaching you, not proactive, to discriminate against somebody.

Mr. D'ESPOSITO. All right, thank you. Now, I am going to bring it a little closer to home.

So, earlier this year on Long Island there was a 1-in-1,000-year rain event which produced nearly 10 inches of rain, leading to widespread flash flooding that caused road closures, travel disruptions, and significant damage to public and private property. Following the rain event, New York State applied for both Public and Individual Assistance from FEMA. The State was successful in receiving a declaration for Public Assistance. However, Individual Assistance was just denied last week. And I know that this is an issue both my colleagues from Long Island, Mr. LaLota and Mr. Garbarino, are working on.

But FEMA's Public Assistance Program has defined the threshold of \$37.5 million in damages for eligibility to New York State. However, according to the Division of Homeland Security and

Emergency Services in New York State, determining eligibility for Individual Assistance is more complex and cannot be assessed as straightforwardly as the Public Assistance threshold.

So, first, is there a comparable threshold or specific dollar amount for uninsured damages that must be met for a disaster to qualify for Individual Assistance?

Ms. CRISWELL. Our Individual Assistance Program does not use a very clear cut guideline like that, because we understand that the community impact could also be a consideration. And if a community has had such significant trauma to it, we wouldn't want an arbitrary line, an arbitrary number to prevent them from getting assistance. So, we have flexibility within our authorities to understand the impact of a community, but also what the availability and the capacity is of the State or the local jurisdiction to support them.

Mr. D'ESPOSITO. So, we are going to be talking about this in the Homeland Subcommittee. But if you wouldn't mind, if you could have you and your staff, if you would be willing to provide more detailed information on how those thresholds for Individual Assistance are determined. I understand that it is sort of a cloudy area, but that would be able to help us on Long Island assist our neighbors and give them concrete answers as to what they are dealing with.

I know that, again, Mr. LaLota and Mr. Garbarino are both dealing with a lot of phone calls, a lot of concerns, people that really don't know where to turn to next. And as we know, these storms were devastating, unexpected, which sometimes makes them even more devastating, and we just want to give them answers. So, if you could provide a little bit further detailed information, we would all appreciate it.

Mr. Chairman—

Ms. CRISWELL [interposing]. I would be happy to do that.

Mr. D'ESPOSITO [continuing]. I yield back.

Mr. PERRY. The chairman thanks the gentleman. The Chair now recognizes Representative Yakym.

Mr. YAKYM. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And thank you for being here, Administrator Criswell. The hard-working men and women at FEMA have an important role to play in our communities, helping lift up their fellow Americans when they have been knocked down by a disaster. But recent months have exposed a capabilities gap and a trust gap, and that trust gap is no act of God. And I want to better understand this recent scandal in which houses in Florida were skipped by FEMA canvassers because of Trump signs in their front yard.

You have referenced an investigation that is currently underway. There have been concerns expressed that FEMA is deleting emails related to the employee's assertion that it was a directive from her supervisors to skip homes displaying signs supporting President Trump. Ms. Criswell, can you commit to us today that all FEMA records, including Teams messages, emails, and text messages, have been and will be preserved for this investigation?

Ms. CRISWELL. Congressman, all of our records are preserved, and I can commit to you that any requests that you make we will make sure to send them to you.

Mr. YAKYM. Thank you. You have been fairly consistent and insistent that this was one employee who acted alone. But are you able to guarantee that no one at FEMA headquarters gave verbal or written guidance in the wake of Hurricanes Helene and Milton that recommended skipping or that otherwise warned canvassers about interacting with houses with Trump signs in their lawn?

Ms. CRISWELL. We are continuing to investigate the circumstances surrounding this, but I have been presented with no evidence at this point that there was anything beyond this one person's direction.

Mr. YAKYM. And what steps will you take as—it sounds like you cannot at this point guarantee that that is not taking place. What steps are you taking at FEMA headquarters to ensure and guarantee us that no guidance was given from headquarters to skip over houses that have Trump signs in the front yard?

Ms. CRISWELL. Again, we want to make sure that all people impacted by these disasters have the assistance that they are eligible for and that they deserve. We are continuing to conduct an investigation. Our Office of Professional Responsibility is currently working alongside the Office of the Inspector General, and we expect them to fully investigate the circumstances around this to ensure that this was only a single incident.

Mr. YAKYM. And the employee at the center of this scandal hinted that a policy to skip houses with Trump signs may have also been in place in North Carolina, as well. Are you able to guarantee that there was not a similar policy in North Carolina?

Ms. CRISWELL. Again, I have seen no evidence that shows that this was anything beyond this one person's specific instructions to her team.

Mr. YAKYM. The number-one goal under FEMA's strategic plan for 2022 through 2026 is what? What is the number-one goal under your strategic plan?

Ms. CRISWELL. Equity as a foundation of emergency management.

Mr. YAKYM. And for reference, what was the number-one goal under the 2018 through 2022 strategic plan?

Ms. CRISWELL. I do not know. That was before my time.

Mr. YAKYM. To build a culture of preparedness. Does skipping houses with Trump signs advance equity, which is your number-one strategic plan goal?

Ms. CRISWELL. Equity, as we look at it, is to make sure that we are reducing barriers for anybody that has a need to access our programs. And so, we are ensuring that we are taking down barriers so all people impacted by disasters have access to the programs that they need and that they are eligible for.

Mr. YAKYM. And equity, according to FEMA's own guidance in the Executive order signed by President Biden—Executive Order No. 13985 defines equity as “The consistent and systematic fair, just, and impartial treatment of all individuals.” Do you believe that the individuals with Trump signs in their front yard were treated fairly and impartially?

Ms. CRISWELL. They were not, which is why we terminated her.

Mr. YAKYM. Thank you, and I would like to yield the balance of my time to the chairman, Mr. Perry.

Mr. PERRY. Well, the Chair thanks the gentleman.

Administrator, you are in support of the supplemental request, you are in support of that, right? And you would kind of agree with the assertion that you don't have the staffing necessary to complete your mission in one form or another?

Ms. CRISWELL. That I don't have the staffing?

Mr. PERRY. Staffing, you don't have personnel.

Ms. CRISWELL. I have the staffing and personnel to complete our mission.

Mr. PERRY. You do?

Ms. CRISWELL. I need funding to continue to support reimbursing—

Mr. PERRY [interrupting]. You need the funding. Okay. So, let me ask you this.

You figure out your strategic plan, and it seems to me that your strategic plan bumped your core mission of helping people before, during, and after disasters. Can you explain? I mean, you sent, I think, is it two people to Azerbaijan? I don't know how far Azerbaijan is, but your organization sent, as I understand—is it more than two people or just two people to the—as it is stated, the Solidarity for a Green World Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change—COP, probably, 24 or 25, or whatever the heck it is. Two people? How many?

Ms. CRISWELL. COP29, I believe we sent two people.

Mr. PERRY. Two people? Who approves that?

Ms. CRISWELL. I do.

Mr. PERRY. You approve that? So, can you provide the committee the details on how much that cost, how much their stay was, and how that—look, people here talk about disinformation. One of the biggest portions of disinformation that I consistently see is that disasters are more frequent, they are more devastating. Simply, the data doesn't support any of that and it is all—and allegedly, that is all caused by us, and no data supports that either, yet those assertions are made.

And one of those assertions is, of course, about climate change itself. And of course, you are sending your staff, which apparently you have enough of, but you don't have enough money, but you are paying—so, we would like to know how much all that cost to send them to Azerbaijan.

With that, the Chair now recognizes the gentleman from New Jersey, Representative Van Drew.

Dr. VAN DREW. Chairman, thank you.

Administrator, you seem like a really nice person, and you have a very nice personality, and you seem calm and gentle. So, I am going to apologize in advance, because I am angry, and I am tired of it. I don't only sit on Transportation, I sit on Judiciary. And I have been at hearings for hours where we were told that there wasn't any plan to go into Roman Catholic Churches—and I am digressing, I realize that—and yet we found out there was, and they had to apologize. We were told that nobody was going to school board meetings because people were reflecting their individual opinions. And again, over time, we dug in and found out there was. There is a culture in America that this issue represents and sym-

bolizes. And I am a plain speaker, I am a plain talker, and I am very direct. So, I am going to ask you some things.

I know you have talked about it, but the reason we keep going back to it, Administrator, it is a really big deal. It is the First Amendment that people have the right to express their viewpoint, their feelings, who they want to vote for, what they believe, whether they are liberal or conservative, Republican or Democrat, Trump or Harris. Who cares? Because guess what? The folks on the other side of the aisle should know if it happened to us, it could happen to them. That is the reality.

And I believe that FEMA has blatantly neglected its core mission of providing emergency support to all Americans without prejudice or bias. And I also believe this doesn't happen in a vacuum. And I understand the person who has been fired, she swears that this came from above her. So, the first question I am going to ask you, that this was part of the administration: Is she a liar?

Ms. CRISWELL. Her allegations, I have not seen any evidence that this is beyond her specific direction. But we are conducting additional investigations to ensure that this is an isolated incident—

Dr. VAN DREW [interrupting]. So, the truth is we—

Ms. CRISWELL [continuing]. and that we will take disciplinary action if there was more than her—

Dr. VAN DREW [interrupting]. The truth is we don't know yet. It is the culture. It is the culture of what is going on.

And part of what they said, this individual, they called Trump supporters—and I know you got the—I know your answer is going to be “no” to this—as “vicious dogs.” I want to just say how deep and mean this was. Do you believe that Trump's supporters are vicious dogs?

Ms. CRISWELL. That was a comment that was not made by me, and I do not believe in that comment, no.

Dr. VAN DREW. Okay, I am sure you don't.

Do political affiliations with the Republican Party make someone inherently dangerous because they happen to be a Republican? Yes or no?

Ms. CRISWELL. That is not in alignment with our core mission and our values of integrity, compassion, fairness, and respect.

Dr. VAN DREW. And I agree, and I understand that. But think about this. People, when they are their most vulnerable, most in need, most scared, most worried, in the most trouble probably in their entire lives, hard-working men and women of America looking to a Federal agency to protect them, to help them, to take care of them, and they got literally a knife in the heart, I mean, that is what this really represented. Those people, how do they feel? They break their back, paying the taxes that keep us all going here. So, when we finally are supposed to do a job, this is what happens. How heartbreaking is that?

Ms. CRISWELL. Congressman, this was unacceptable, and it is heartbreaking.

Dr. VAN DREW. I know, and I—

Ms. CRISWELL [interrupting]. I have pushed for 3½ years to put people first—

Dr. VAN DREW [interrupting]. And you know what?

Ms. CRISWELL [continuing]. In everything that we do.

Dr. VAN DREW. And that is what kind of—and again, forgive me, I am going to editorialize for a minute. We speak of equity, which is different than equality, and it has become a political symbol to some degree, whether folks want to admit it or not. We are worried about pronouns. We are worried about illegals. We are worried about everything, and I get it. But how about just worrying about the average man and woman who is working, who lives in America, who is legal, who pays their taxes, who obeys the laws, and finally, finally needs help?

Because most of these people never need help. They don't want anything. They get their Social Security when they retire, and that is about it. Just think how they feel. And I am concerned, and I have to tell you I have personally asked Joe Cuffari, who is the inspector general in Homeland Security, personally asked him, sent him a letter—he is a good man, he is an honest broker—to look into this and really dissect this and see what is going on.

I think we are going to find it is more than one person. That culture allowed this one person to think it was okay. That culture that we have had, whether it is in the Department of Justice, in my—or whether it is here in Homeland Security or other areas, that culture has allowed this to take place. That culture is wrong, and it denies the most fundamental values of Americanism.

Somebody said to me humorously, hey—this wasn't humorous—President Trump had a really good result in the State of New Jersey. It didn't quite make it, but it is usually a very, very blue State. It is the State I am from, New Jersey. Because we are having wildfires right now, as you probably know, people wonder: Are we going to be punished because it was so supportive of President Trump?

I would hope not, because, to be honest with you, I do my job—I was a dentist in my other life, and your job is kind of like that. We have to take care of people not in the political end, but in the governmental end, regardless of who they are, what they believe, what they feel, what they have said. That is our responsibility and job. This is so unbelievably, fundamentally wrong. And I am not showboating here as a politician. I swear to God, this really bothers me. It really bothers Americans. It is a grievous mistake. It is awful that it happened, and it has to be fixed.

I wanted to see if there are any other questions. Hold on for a second.

Mr. PERRY. The gentleman's time——

Dr. VAN DREW [interrupting]. I completely——

Mr. PERRY [continuing]. The gentleman's time——

Dr. VAN DREW. Oh, my time is up. Well, there are no more questions, right, Chairman?

Chairman, thank you for making me aware of that. I yield back.

Mr. PERRY. The gentleman yields. He might seek time from the next Representative if he has any left, the next Representative, Representative Bean from Florida, is recognized.

Mr. BEAN OF FLORIDA. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. A very good morning to you. Good morning, T&I Committee, and good morning, Administrator. Welcome.

Let's cut through the disinformation that has been talked about. So, let's play a game called true or false. I will say a statement. You say true or false, Madam Administrator.

After Helene, it was widely reported that a FEMA supervisor told aid workers to avoid homes advertising Trump. Is that true or false?

Ms. CRISWELL. A single employee directed her team to not go to homes with Trump signs.

Mr. BEAN OF FLORIDA. I am going to put you down for a true, then. Is that correct? True?

Ms. CRISWELL. A single employee.

Mr. BEAN OF FLORIDA. I am putting you down for a true.

FEMA—here is the next one—FEMA is supposed to be non-partisan. FEMA is supposed to be like the police or fire department. When they come, they are going to deliver aid. They don't care about your race, political affiliations, or anything. They are supposed to just get the job done. Is that true or false, Madam Administrator?

Ms. CRISWELL. True. FEMA is a nonpartisan agency.

Mr. BEAN OF FLORIDA. Another true. Putting you down for a true.

According to an email to committee staff, that person responsible was fired from FEMA. Is that true or false, Madam Administrator?

Ms. CRISWELL. That individual was terminated at my direction.

Mr. BEAN OF FLORIDA. I am going to put you down as a true. How do you know, though, it is only one person? How do we know?

Ms. CRISWELL. This is why I have ongoing investigations, and we will be working with the IG to establish that it was just a single incident.

Mr. BEAN OF FLORIDA. You are working with the IG. That is fantastic.

The Daily Wire has obtained screenshots of multiple entries in the system that said, "Trump sign, no contact per leadership." So, that could be evidence. At least it is a trail to begin your investigation. Would you say that is true? That is a good lead. Is that a good lead?

Ms. CRISWELL. Those were the staff that the individual in question directed not to go to Trump homes.

Mr. BEAN OF FLORIDA. I am going to put you down for another true.

So, here is the question: Do you understand why Americans lack confidence in FEMA leadership? You understand that.

Ms. CRISWELL. Trust is the most important thing that we can have in Government.

Mr. BEAN OF FLORIDA. Again, you would say yes?

Ms. CRISWELL. And to have one individual—

Mr. BEAN OF FLORIDA [interrupting]. Can I put you down as a yes, that you do understand why so many people are upset?

Ms. CRISWELL. It is unacceptable why this one person made this direction—

Mr. BEAN OF FLORIDA [interrupting]. I am going to put you down for a yes.

Ms. CRISWELL [continuing]. And I can understand why they are upset.

Mr. BEAN OF FLORIDA. Yes is so much easier to say. Yes, I understand it. You understand why people are mad. I am not trying—it is not a gotcha question.

Ms. CRISWELL. No, I said that.

Mr. BEAN OF FLORIDA. I am just saying——

Ms. CRISWELL [interrupting]. I said yes——

Mr. BEAN OF FLORIDA [continuing]. You understand.

Ms. CRISWELL [continuing]. I understand why the actions of this one individual can be so hurtful.

Mr. BEAN OF FLORIDA. Very good. And I want to—I am going to congratulate you on saying we might need some help from the inspector general, because Americans just need trust in their fire department, their police department, and in FEMA.

So, what is the plan to restore Americans' trust in FEMA? What is the plan?

Ms. CRISWELL. We are going to continue with our absolutely committed 22,000-plus employees to assist in the recovery efforts across these disasters, and the over 100 other open disasters across the United States, helping them rebuild and restore their lives to get back to some sense of normalcy.

Mr. BEAN OF FLORIDA. Thank you, Administrator.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Mr. PERRY. The gentleman yields. Are there further questions from any members of the subcommittee who have not yet been recognized?

Seeing none, that concludes our hearing for today. I would like to—and I am going to—thank each of the witnesses.

Administrator, it has been tough, but we do appreciate you being here. I know it is not always fun or pleasant, but we are very appreciative that you took the time to come and hear our questions and provide your answers.

So, with that, this subcommittee stands adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 12:19 p.m., the subcommittee was adjourned.]

SUBMISSIONS FOR THE RECORD

Letter to Hon. Deanne Criswell, Administrator, Federal Emergency Management Agency, from Hon. Sam Graves, Chairman, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure; Hon. Scott Perry, Chairman, Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management, et al., Submitted for the Record by Hon. Scott Perry

COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE,
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
WASHINGTON, DC 20515.

The Honorable DEANNE CRISWELL,
Administrator,
Federal Emergency Management Agency, United States Department of Homeland Security, 500 C St. SW, Washington, DC 20472.

DEAR ADMINISTRATOR CRISWELL:

The Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure (Committee) is aware of disturbing news reports detailing how a Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) employee tasked with leading recovery efforts in and around Lake Placid, Florida, directed FEMA workers to avoid homes with Trump campaign signs.¹ These reports have surfaced while thousands of Americans continue to deal with the devastation and loss inflicted by Hurricanes Helene and Milton. As the FEMA Administrator, you are responsible for leading the Nation's efforts to prepare for, protect against, and respond to natural disasters.² The Committee is troubled that under your leadership FEMA failed to aid all Americans, regardless of party affiliation.

In reporting that first emerged from *The Daily Wire*, it was revealed that a FEMA supervisor sent a best practices message to FEMA workers canvassing the Florida area impacted by Hurricane Milton, which instructed the workers to "avoid homes advertising Trump."³ As a result, FEMA workers passed over homes with Trump campaign signs or flags, and reported that approximately 20 homes were skipped from the end of October and into November.⁴ In a system used by FEMA to track which homes were contacted, FEMA worker entries show that homes were skipped as a direct result of the guidance issued by FEMA leadership.⁵ Screenshots obtained by *The Daily Wire* show entries in the system which state "Trump sign, no contact per leadership."⁶

You issued an official statement on November 9, 2024, asserting that the actions of the FEMA supervisor were a "clear violation of FEMA's core value and principles"⁷ and that the employee had been terminated and the matter referred to the Office of Special Counsel.⁸ Yet, under the Biden Administration, FEMA's number one strategic goal, per its Strategic Plan, is focused on equity, while preparedness

¹ Leif Le Mahieu, *EXCLUSIVE: FEMA Official Ordered Relief Workers To Skip Houses With Trump Signs*, THE DAILY WIRE (Nov. 8, 2024), available at <https://www.dailywire.com/news/exclusive-fema-official-ordered-relief-workers-to-skip-houses-with-trump-signs> [hereinafter Daily Wire Article].

² 6 U.S.C. § 313.

³ Daily Wire Article, *supra* note 1.

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ Press Release, FEMA, *Statement from FEMA Administrator Deanne Criswell on Employee Misconduct*, (Nov. 9, 2024), available at <https://www.fema.gov/press-release/20241109/statement-fema-administrator-deanne-criswell-employee-misconduct>.

⁸ E-mail from FEMA Congressional Affairs Staff, to H. Comm. on Transp. and Infrastructure staff (Nov. 9, 2024, 1:48 PM EST) (on file with Comm.).

and readiness were relegated to FEMA's third goal, after climate change.⁹ In fact, the FEMA employee disputes the notion that her actions were out of line with direction from FEMA leadership and that as of November 11, 2024, she had not received anything in writing with respect to her termination.¹⁰ She further asserts a trend of avoidance by FEMA, not just in Florida but also in the Carolinas.¹¹

Your inability to ensure that FEMA provide relief to all Americans affected by disasters, free of discrimination, represents a substantial failure of leadership. The blatant disregard of President-elect Trump supporters directly contradicts FEMA's core mission and values. This reporting follows previous media coverage, which found that residents in North Carolina felt they had been left to fend for themselves, and FEMA was too slow in providing relief, compounding the Committee's concerns related to FEMA's capacity to aid disaster victims.¹² It is clear that, under the Biden-Harris Administration, FEMA has been ill-prepared to provide assistance and relief to many Americans in need.

The Committee is continuing its oversight of FEMA's ability to adequately respond to natural disasters. In order to assist the Committee with its investigation, please provide a briefing to Committee staff by December 2, 2024. At the briefing FEMA should be prepared to discuss concerns related to the agency's failure to aid Americans regardless of party affiliation, including the steps FEMA has taken to assist unaided families, policies implemented to prevent future political discrimination, and the prevalence at which the agency fell derelict in its duty to assist victims. In addition, please provide the requested documents and information, as soon as possible, but no later than 5:00 p.m. ET on December 2, 2024:

1. Please provide all documents and communications sufficient to show when FEMA leadership became aware of the discriminatory guidance given to FEMA workers in Florida.
2. Please provide all documents and communications, if any, related to FEMA's efforts to contact and provide assistance to the Florida residences skipped as a result of the discriminatory guidance.
3. Please provide all documents and communications, if any, related to FEMA's effort to notify state and local officials of the discriminatory guidance.
4. Please provide all documents and communications, if any, related to FEMA's efforts to notify the skipped residences of Federal grants and assistance that may be available.
5. Please provide all documents and communications related to any actions taken to investigate whether homes in other communities and states were similarly impacted.
6. Please provide copies of any guidance documents and policies for field workers on canvassing in response to Hurricanes Helene and Milton.

Pursuant to House Rule X, clause 1(r), the Committee has jurisdiction over these issues and shall conduct appropriate oversight of these actions. This request and any documents created as a result of this request will be deemed Congressional documents of the Committee. An attachment contains additional instructions for responding to this request. When producing documents to the Committee, please deliver production sets to the Majority Staff in Room 2165 of the Rayburn House Office Building and the Minority Staff in Room 2164 of the Rayburn House Office Building.

If you have any questions about this request, please contact Johanna Hardy with the Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management. Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

HON. SAM GRAVES,
*Chairman, Committee on
Transportation and Infrastructure.*

HON. SCOTT PERRY,
*Chairman, Subcommittee on Economic
Development, Public Buildings, and
Emergency Management.*

⁹FEMA, 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.

¹⁰@Blackstarnetwork, YouTube (Nov. 11, 2024), *available at* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BL3hibZebhA>.

¹¹*Id.*

¹²Emily Cochrane, et al., *After Flooding, FEMA Aid is Arriving. But Some Are Still on Their Own.*, N.Y. TIMES (Oct. 2, 2024).

BRIAN BABIN, D.D.S.,
Member of Congress.

AARON BEAN,
Member of Congress.

MIKE BOST,
Member of Congress.

TIM BURCHETT,
Member of Congress.

ERIC BURLISON,
Member of Congress.

LORI CHAVEZ-DEREMER,
Member of Congress.

MIKE COLLINS,
Member of Congress.

ERIC A. "RICK" CRAWFORD,
Member of Congress.

ANTHONY D'ESPOSITO,
Member of Congress.

JOHN S. DUARTE,
Member of Congress.

MIKE EZELL,
Member of Congress.

VINCE FONG,
Member of Congress.

JENNIFFER GONZALEZ-COLÓN,
Member of Congress.

GARRET GRAVES,
Member of Congress.

DUSTY JOHNSON,
Member of Congress.

THOMAS H. KEAN, JR.,
Member of Congress.

KEVIN KILEY,
Member of Congress.

DOUG LAMALFA,
Member of Congress.

CELESTE MALOY,
Member of Congress.

TRACEY MANN,
Member of Congress.

THOMAS MASSIE,
Member of Congress.

BRIAN MAST,
Member of Congress.

MARCUS J. MOLINARO,
Member of Congress.

TROY E. NEHLS,
Member of Congress.

BURGESS OWENS,
Member of Congress.

DAVID ROUZER,
Member of Congress.

PETE STAUBER,
Member of Congress.

JEFF VAN DREW,
Member of Congress.

DERRICK VAN ORDEN,
Member of Congress.

DANIEL WEBSTER,
Member of Congress.

BRUCE WESTERMAN,
Member of Congress.

BRANDON WILLIAMS,
Member of Congress.

RUDY YAKYM III,
Member of Congress.

CC: The Honorable Rick Larsen, Ranking Member
Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
The Honorable Dina Titus, Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency
Management

Enclosure

Attachment A—Requirements for Responding to the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure Records Requests in the 118th Congress

Letter of October 11, 2024, to Hon. Deanne Criswell, Administrator, Federal Emergency Management Agency, from Hon. Sam Graves, Chairman, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, and Hon. Scott Perry, Chairman, Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management, Submitted for the Record by Hon. Scott Perry

COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE,
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
WASHINGTON, DC 20515,
OCTOBER 11, 2024.

Hon. DEANNE CRISWELL,
Administrator,
Federal Emergency Management Agency, U.S. Department of Homeland Security,
500 C St. SW, Washington, DC 20472.

DEAR ADMINISTRATOR CRISWELL:

On September 26, 2024, Hurricane Helene made landfall on the Florida Gulf Coast and progressed up the East Coast as a Category 4 storm that devastated states and local communities in its path. To date, at least 227 Americans have lost their lives to Hurricane Helene as people continue to search for missing loved ones

and local officials rebuild their towns and neighborhoods.¹ Less than two weeks later, on October 9, 2024, Hurricane Milton made landfall along the west coast of Florida.²

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is charged with leading the Nation's efforts to prepare for, protect against, respond to, recover from, and mitigate against the risk of natural disasters, acts of terrorism, and other man-made disasters.³ The Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure (Committee) is aware of troubling media reports of how FEMA, under your leadership, has failed to rise to the challenge and adequately respond to Hurricane Helene. Therefore, the Committee seeks to understand FEMA's preparation and strategies for response, as well as its capacity to provide relief for disaster victims.

On October 2, 2024, Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas told reporters that FEMA lacked sufficient funding to make it through the current hurricane season as the agency works to support communities devastated by Hurricane Helene.⁴ Secretary Mayorkas's comments were made just weeks after Congress passed legislation that provided \$20 billion to the agency for disaster relief spending.⁵

In July 2022, concerns were raised with the use of FEMA's Emergency Food and Shelter Program (EFSP) to support the crisis at the Southern Border.⁶ Because of insufficient responses, another letter was sent on January 23, 2023, more broadly requesting information on FEMA's role in the crisis at the border and requesting documents related to FEMA's activities related to the border.⁷ In response, FEMA indicated that FEMA personnel, including a Regional Administrator, had been reassigned for a period of time to assist at the border.⁸ While FEMA has maintained that these diversions of resources were small in number, given FEMA's overall staffing shortage of approximately 6,200 personnel, any diversion of FEMA resources is concerning.⁹

One of the most troubling media reports has been from residents in North Carolina who have voiced complaints with the Federal response to Hurricane Helene, and in particular criticized FEMA's reaction pace to the storm.¹⁰ The New York Times reported that individuals in rural areas of North Carolina affected by the storm are skeptical of FEMA's ability to provide assistance and feel that they have been left to fend for themselves.¹¹ The Committee remains concerned by reports detailing FEMA's slow response and ability to provide aid to victims, as well as FEMA's interactions with non-Federal efforts to assist Americans in need.

In response to negative news coverage surrounding FEMA's response to Hurricane Helene, FEMA created a "Rumor Control" page specific to Hurricane Helene. Unfortunately, the information on that page, as well as FEMA social media postings, do little to provide disaster victims the help they need. For example, FEMA clarifies that \$750 is not the only assistance survivors may receive. However, the agency ignores the challenge survivors face with online applications, that survivors who have successfully applied have raised concerns about denials of aid, and the reality that \$750 in this economy with high inflation is not enough to cover the items FEMA claims the assistance can be used for—"food, water, baby formula, breastfeeding

¹ Anna Betts, Aliya Uteuova, & Dharna Noor, *Hurricane Helene: more than 200 dead as search for missing people continues*, THE GUARDIAN (Oct. 3, 2024) available at <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/oct/03/hurricane-helene-death-toll-power-outages>.

² Leonara LaPeter Anton and Brad Brooks, *Hurricane Milton kills four, destroys homes in Florida, but worst scenario avoided*, Reuters, (Oct. 10, 2024) available at <https://reuters.com/world/us/hurricane-milton-weakens-it-marches-across-central-florida-homes-destroyed-2024-10-10/>.

³ 6 U.S.C. § 313.

⁴ *Mayorkas Warns FEMA Doesn't Have Enough Funding to Last Through Hurricane Season*, U.S. NEWS & WORLD REPORT (Oct. 2, 2024) available at <https://www.usnews.com/news/politics/articles/2024-10-02/mayorkas-warns-fema-doesnt-have-enough-funding-to-last-through-hurricane-season>.

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ Letter from Rep. Sam Graves, Ranking Member, H. Comm. on Transp. & Infrastructure, to Hon. Deanne Criswell, Administrator, FEMA (July 27, 2022).

⁷ Letter from Rep. Sam Graves, Chairman, H. Comm. on Transp. & Infrastructure, to Hon. Deanne Criswell, Administrator, FEMA, (Jan. 23, 2023) (on file Comm.).

⁸ E-mail from Deanne Criswell, Administrator, FEMA, to Alejandro Mayorkas, Secretary, Department of Homeland Security (March 17, 2022) (on file with Comm.).

⁹ *The Impacts of FEMA's Strategic Plan of Disaster Preparedness and Response: Hearing Before the H. Comm. on Transp. and Infrastructure*, 118th Cong. (May 17, 2023) (statement of Chris Currie, Government Accountability Office).

¹⁰ Emily Cochrane, et al., *After Flooding, FEMA Aid is Arriving. But Some Are Still on Their Own.*, N.Y. TIMES (Oct. 2, 2024) available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/02/us/fema-floods-north-carolina.html>.

¹¹ *Id.*

supplies, medication and other supplies.”¹² The Committee is committed to ensuring that FEMA’s emphasis on messaging has not detracted from efforts to provide aid to victims.

Since Hurricane Helene, officials from the National Security Council (NSC) have participated in, and appeared to lead, some of the Congressional briefings on the response. The NSC has no statutory authority with respect to managing disasters, and its capabilities and expertise in emergency management is questionable and unclear. Under the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act of 2006 (PKEMRA), you are the Principal Advisor to the President during a disaster.¹³ In light of the questions surrounding the Federal Government’s response, the Committee seeks clarification about NSC’s role in the response and information to determine whether NSC created additional bureaucratic hurdles to providing relief.

We are seeking clarity as to the actions FEMA has taken in our efforts to assess FEMA’s preparedness and response to Hurricanes Helene and Milton. In order to assist the Committee with its investigation, please provide the requested documents and information by October 25, 2024:

1. Please provide specific details regarding the NSC’s involvement in response to Hurricanes Helene and Milton.
 - a. Has this involvement been the same as in previous disasters? Please explain.
 - b. What is the role of the NSC in managing disasters? Where does the NSC derive its statutory authority to support this role?
 - c. Is FEMA providing direct advice to the President on disaster response as required by law? Please describe the frequency and method of communications with the President on disaster advice.
 - d. Have you been advised to report to anyone other than the President in relation to the recent disasters? If so, to whom have you been instructed to report, and who gave that instruction?
2. Earlier this year, FEMA made significant changes to the Individual Assistance (IA) Program. These changes included implementing a Serious Needs Assistance program, which would provide individuals with cash payments of \$750.
 - a. Does FEMA characterize the implementation of the Serious Needs Assistance program as a success? Please explain.
 - b. Has there been any discussion about adjusting the amount of assistance provided to victims? If so, please describe.
 - c. There are reports that this assistance is not provided immediately and that some victims have even been denied.
 - i. What is the average period of time from application to the time the \$750 would be received by the applicant?
 - ii. What are the eligibility requirements for FEMA’s IA Program, and how are they communicated to disaster victims?
 - iii. On what basis are people denied, and what does the appeal process entail?
 - iv. Does FEMA’s notification of denial provide clear information about the appeals process?
 - v. How does FEMA ensure that victims without cellphone service or access to internet are able to apply for assistance? Can individuals apply outside of congregate housing shelters by working directly with FEMA officials?
3. Please provide details of the number, locations, and functions of FEMA personnel deployed for Hurricane Helene and Hurricane Milton.
 - a. Does FEMA still have a staffing gap? If so, please detail the staffing gap.
 - b. What percentage of FEMA’s disaster personnel were called up for each Hurricane?
 - c. What percentage of FEMA disaster personnel was unavailable for each Hurricane?
 - d. Did FEMA have any challenges with deployments due to unavailable FEMA disaster personnel? Please explain.
4. Please provide details of shelters, distribution centers, and other resources for disaster victims, including locations and number of people served.
 - a. Has FEMA been involved in efforts to redirect supplies, donations, and volunteer activities? Has FEMA’s involvement included confiscating or refusing supplies or services?

¹² Federal Emergency Management Agency, *Hurricane Helene: Rumor Response*, available at <https://www.fema.gov/disaster/current/hurricane-helene/rumor-response>.

¹³ 6 U.S.C. § 313.

- b. Does every FEMA operated facility have adequate signage and staffing from FEMA?
5. How has the Shelter and Services Program (SSP) impacted FEMA's ability to respond to Hurricanes Helene and Milton?
 - a. Please provide a detailed breakdown of the resources that FEMA has allocated for SSP, including staffing and funding.
 - b. Within the last six months, have any FEMA resources or personnel been diverted or reassigned to assist at the Southern Border or on migrant issues, generally? If so, please provide details.
6. On October 3, 2024, FEMA began publishing a "Hurricane Helene: Rumor Response" resource on its website. Please provide all documents and communications relating to FEMA's decision to establish the "Hurricane Helene: Rumor Response" webpage.
 - a. The webpage clarifies that \$750 is not the only assistance an individual may be eligible to receive, yet ignores complaints about denials and whether the assistance is enough to cover basic needs. How does FEMA determine which "rumors" are included on the website and what questions the agency will respond to?
 - b. How does FEMA determine what is a "rumor" or "misinformation"?
 - c. Did any Biden-Harris Administration official, outside of FEMA, direct the agency to establish its "Hurricane Helene: Rumor Response" webpage?
 - d. Has FEMA previously published an agency webpage to counter "misinformation" in the aftermath of a significant storm or natural disaster?
7. Please provide a detailed timeline and summary of the Federal response to Hurricane Helene, beginning from pre-positioning prior to the disaster to the present. Please include details on which Federal agencies and departments were activated, what assets and resources were deployed and where, and which Emergency Support Functions were activated.
8. On September 30, 2024, President Biden signed a Continuing Resolution into law which provided \$20 billion in funds to the Disaster Relief Fund (DRF), bringing an end to FEMA's Immediate Needs Funding status. Days later, DHS Secretary Mayorkas stated that FEMA did not have sufficient funds to last through the Hurricane Season.
 - a. What is the basis for the Secretary's statement? When does FEMA estimate returning to INF status?
 - b. What funding level did FEMA indicate to the House and Senate Appropriations Committees would be sufficient?
 - c. Please provide a detailed accounting of FEMA's project approvals since the last appropriation to the DRF. Specifically, include details showing the rate of project approvals leading up to and during INF.
 - d. Please describe the amounts FEMA estimates obligating in response to Hurricanes Helene and Milton.

Pursuant to House Rule X, clause 1(r), the Committee has jurisdiction over these issues and shall conduct appropriate oversight of these actions. This request and any documents created as a result of this request will be deemed Congressional documents of the Committee. An attachment contains additional instructions for responding to this request. When producing documents to the Committee, please deliver production sets to the Majority Staff in Room 2165 of the Rayburn House Office Building and the Minority Staff in Room 2164 of the Rayburn House Office Building.

If you have any questions about this request, please contact Johanna Hardy, Staff Director, Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management. Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

SAM GRAVES,
Chairman, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure.

SCOTT PERRY,
Chairman, Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management.

cc: The Honorable Rick Larsen, Ranking Member, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure

Enclosure
Attachment A

Letter of October 25, 2024, to Hon. Sam Graves, Chairman, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, from Hon. Deanne Criswell, Administrator, Federal Emergency Management Agency, Submitted for the Record by Hon. Scott Perry

U.S. Department of Homeland Security
Washington, DC 20472



FEMA

October 25, 2024

The Honorable Sam Graves
Chairman
House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Graves:

Thank you for your letter to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) regarding response and recovery efforts following Hurricanes Helene and Milton. I appreciate your support and partnership as we help the states and tribal nations impacted by these disasters to recover and build resilience. Due to ongoing Helene and Milton operations, the following constitutes FEMA's initial response to your questions and requests for information and documents; supplemental information and documentation can be provided at a later date.

Hurricanes Helene and Milton, which impacted the southeastern U.S. only 13 days apart, were extraordinary – millions of Americans were affected. As we do with all potential hazards, FEMA leaned forward aggressively with our state, local, Federal, and voluntary agency partners in a number of ways. We supported our state and local partners pre-landfall by coordinating Emergency Declaration requests days before impact, mobilizing resources across the Federal family and pre-positioning critical lifesaving assets across the area of impact such as Federal search and rescue teams, Federal Incident Management Assistance Teams (IMATs), Federal health and medical teams, emergency power restoration teams, and life-sustaining commodities, such as food and water.

In the weeks since these hurricanes made landfall, I have been on the ground across the area of impact and met hundreds of survivors to hear their stories of loss and survival. These stories are both heartbreaking and inspiring. The FEMA and Federal interagency team have been imbedded with these communities since before the storm made landfall, and we will be with them throughout their long road to recovery.

Below are our initial responses to your questions:

1. Please provide specific details regarding the National Security Council's (NSC) involvement in response to Hurricanes Helene and Milton.
 - a. Has this involvement been the same as in previous disasters? Please explain.
 - b. What is the role of the NSC in managing disasters? Where does the NSC derive its statutory authority to support this role?
 - c. Is FEMA providing direct advice to the President on disaster response as required by law? Please describe the frequency and method of communications with the President on disaster advice.
 - d. Have you been advised to report to anyone other than the President in relation to the recent disasters? If so, to whom have you been instructed to report, and who gave that instruction?

RESPONSE: As the FEMA Administrator, I am the principal advisor to the President for all matters relating to emergency management. I remain in direct contact with the President regarding the status of the response to Hurricanes Helene and Milton, via daily calls and reports, in addition to joining him on his visits to disaster-impacted areas. Per National Security Memorandum-2 (NSM-2), the National Security Council (NSC) serves as the principal forum for consideration of national security policy issues requiring Presidential determination, including the development and implementation of national security policy. The NSC remains engaged with the interagency through formal Interagency Policy Committee meetings focused on Hurricanes Helene and Milton, in addition to joining the standard operational meetings FEMA convenes with the interagency. The NSC's posture of engagement and inquiry for these hurricanes is similar to that during the response and recovery following the devastating Maui fires in 2023.

2. Earlier this year, FEMA made significant changes to the Individual Assistance (IA) Program. These changes included implementing a Serious Needs Assistance program, which would provide individuals with cash payments of \$750.
 - a. Does FEMA characterize the implementation of the Serious Needs Assistance program as a success? Please explain.
 - b. Has there been any discussion about adjusting the amount of assistance provided to victims? If so, please describe.
 - c. There are reports that this assistance is not provided immediately and that some victims have even been denied.
 - d. What is the average period of time from application to the time the \$750 would be received by the applicant?
 - e. What are the eligibility requirements for FEMA's IA Program, and how are they communicated to disaster victims?
 - f. On what basis are people denied, and what does the appeal process entail?
 - g. Does FEMA's notification of denial provide clear information about the appeals process?
 - h. How does FEMA ensure that victims without cellphone service or access to internet are able to apply for assistance? Can individuals apply outside of congregate housing shelters by working directly with FEMA officials?

RESPONSE: Serious Needs Assistance (SNA) is a new form of Individual Assistance (IA). Since FEMA launched this assistance in March 2024, SNA has provided critical, initial assistance totaling, as of October 23, 2024, more than \$1.1 billion to over 1.5 million survivors across the country through 38 major disaster declarations, providing real-world, tangible benefits to survivors in their time of greatest need, ensuring vital resources such as food, water, medication, and other emergency supplies. Specifically for Hurricane Milton, SNA has provided over \$109.6 million to over 142,000 survivors. And across all six states that have received major disaster declarations due to Hurricane Helene, more than 526,000 survivors have received over \$395.3 million.

FEMA helps households impacted by major disasters through its IA program. Individuals and families apply for IA by registering online at disasterassistance.gov; calling a FEMA helpline; 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 visiting a Disaster Recovery Center (DRC). FEMA and applicable state or tribal governments and communities work together to quickly establish DRCs in convenient locations within an area impacted by a disaster. The variety of services available at DRCs give survivors the ability to “one-stop shop” for disaster related programs and receive help in navigating their path toward recovery. DRCs are usually opened quickly after a disaster. They are accessible and equipped to accommodate disaster survivors who need disability-related communication aids. FEMA staff can assist with completing registrations or checking their application status.

Eligibility requirements for the IA program are communicated to survivors through a variety of ways, including via [FEMA's website](https://disasterassistance.gov), through direct communication with call center agents when survivors call to register for assistance, through fact sheets and pamphlets distributed on the ground by DSA teams, and by FEMA personnel working directly with survivors at DRCs.

These general conditions must be met for a survivor to be eligible to receive assistance:

- The applicant must be a U.S. citizen, non-citizen national, or qualified non-citizen.
- FEMA must be able to verify the applicant's identity.
- The applicant's insurance, or other forms of disaster assistance received, cannot meet their disaster-caused needs.
- The applicant's necessary expenses and serious needs are directly caused by a major disaster.

The eligibility of each survivor for the IA program is assessed based on the specific information provided in their application. In some cases, FEMA may not initially be able to make an eligibility determination because specific information may not be included in the survivor's assistance application. In these instances, FEMA may request additional information from an applicant prior to making an eligibility determination. Once FEMA does make an eligibility determination, as with any form of assistance FEMA provides, individuals who disagree with that eligibility determination have the right to appeal that decision by sending documents that show how they qualify and need more assistance, like estimates for repairs, receipts, bills, etc. Regardless of whether the letter a survivor receives from FEMA is asking for additional information or provides an eligibility determination that the survivor chooses to appeal, each letter a survivor receives from FEMA explains the types of documents that may help them. Survivors can submit this additional documentation on disasterassistance.gov, by fax, via mail, or may visit a DRC to work with FEMA personnel to update their application. And Beginning in March 2024, FEMA simplified the

eligibility determination appeals process by no longer requiring a survivor to submit a signed, written letter to accompany their supporting documentation. FEMA always seeks to maximize the assistance we provide to survivors based on their eligibility, and although we do everything we can to help the first time, we welcome appeals and work expeditiously to provide assistance whenever we can.

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. To be eligible for 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 2 days. Following approval, it takes approximately 1 to 2 business days for funds to be deposited in the survivor's account.

FEMA established the amount of SNA in January 2024 at \$750, as an amount for a survivor's initial costs in the days immediately following a disaster. This amount is adjusted each year using the U.S. Department of Labor Consumer Price Index. The SNA award amount for disasters declared in FY 2025 is now \$770.

3. Please provide details of the number, locations, and functions of FEMA personnel deployed for Hurricane Helene and Hurricane Milton.

- a. Does FEMA still have a staffing gap? If so, please detail the staffing gap.
- b. What percentage of FEMA's disaster personnel were called up for each Hurricane?
- c. What percentage of FEMA disaster personnel was unavailable for each Hurricane?
- d. Did FEMA have any challenges with deployments due to unavailable FEMA disaster personnel? Please explain.

RESPONSE: As of October 23, a total of more than 8,300 personnel from across the entire FEMA enterprise are deployed as disaster support to Hurricanes Helene and Milton, representing approximately 37% of all FEMA personnel. Many more FEMA personnel are supporting response and recovery from our Headquarters, Regional, and other facilities.

FEMA has plans, methods, and resources in place for staffing large scale, multi-state, catastrophic disasters as well as multiple, simultaneous disasters. Of course, FEMA does not and cannot rely on FEMA staff alone – disaster response and recovery is a whole-of-government and whole-of-community mission. With respect to FEMA personnel, our primary method of staffing disasters is our more than 13,000 Incident Management-titled (IM) personnel and our 18 National and Regional IMATs. FEMA augments our IM personnel with full-time Headquarters and Regional Offices personnel, as well as through our Local Hire Program. Additionally, through the Emergency Support Function (ESF) construct, FEMA coordinates support from across the Federal Government, and ESFs deliver core capabilities to reduce impacts to survivors and stabilize communities following a disaster. FEMA further bolsters our disaster staffing through, for example, other Federal Department and Agency personnel through the DHS Surge Capacity Force; partnerships with State

Supplemental Response Teams; AmeriCorps National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC) FEMA Corps; and United States Coast Guard Reservists. FEMA brings all of these resources to bear when necessary to manage multiple simultaneous disasters, as demonstrated, for example during the 2017 hurricane season, 2020 when responding to COVID-19 and hurricanes, and this past spring during one of the most active tornado seasons on record.

For response to Hurricanes Helene and Milton specifically, FEMA did not experience challenges with deployments due to unavailability of staff. FEMA builds into its staffing plans discussed above the practical reality that on any given day, not all of its full-time employees can be available for deployment; and its reservists, many of whom comprise our IM workforce, are intermittent employees who commit to being available for only portions of a given year. Due to the complexity and wide-reaching impacts from Hurricanes Helene and Milton, staffing demand was high, and as such, FEMA implemented, as discussed above, a coordinated staffing approach across all levels of the response – Headquarters, Regional, and the field – to ensure balanced staff across the totality of these disasters. For each state, FEMA has met priority staffing requirements and has employed all available augmentation solutions, to include redirecting and training staff in programs of immediate need.

4. Please provide details of shelters, distribution centers, and other resources for disaster victims, including locations and number of people served.

- a. Has FEMA been involved in efforts to redirect supplies, donations, and volunteer activities? Has FEMA's involvement included confiscating or refusing supplies or services?**
- b. Does every FEMA operated facility have adequate signage and staffing from FEMA?**

RESPONSE: State and local governments determine what support to request, and direct where it is to be provided. FEMA, in assisting states with their priorities, does not direct or divert supplies, donations, or volunteers. States, local governments, and non-profit organizations operated evacuation and emergency shelters throughout all the states affected by Hurricanes Helene and Milton. At the peak of Hurricane Helene, more than 30,000 individuals sought safe shelter in 130 facilities across the States of Georgia, Florida, South Carolina, and North Carolina. During Hurricane Milton more than 80,000 individuals in more than 280 shelters sought safety across Florida while the storm made landfall. FEMA provided support to states for congregate sheltering operations and for those who sheltered in place, by ensuring life-sustaining food and hydration commodities, including durable medical equipment and consumable medical supplies for those with disabilities and access and functional needs, could be made available to those with the greatest need. In addition, the pre-landfall emergency declarations approved by the President authorized FEMA to reimburse the costs for sheltering actions taken by state, local, and tribal governments.

Before Helene's landfall, and in coordination with the potentially impacted states, FEMA established disaster staging operations for commodities, equipment, response teams, and fuel, reflective of standing plans with the states and anticipated needs, across several sites. These sites include our Distribution Center in Atlanta, which began processing movements of supplies on September 23; Maxwell Air Force Base (AFB), our main staging site, which established operations on September 24; and then subsequently expanding operations to Craig Field in Alabama, as well as Warner

Robbins AFB in Georgia. This footprint was quickly further expanded after landfall with operations in Conley, Georgia; Charlotte and Hickory, North Carolina; and Fort Campbell, Kentucky. We have sustained these operations through Hurricane Milton's landfall and response.

FEMA initially staged 9 million meals, 10 million liters of water, over 300 generators, ample supplies of tarps and protective roof sheeting, bulk supplies of diesel and gasoline, and other commodities. Further, we immediately began continuously reinforcing flows of these commodities through pre-negotiated contracts with a wide variety of vendors starting on October 1 and from the Defense Logistics Agency on October 4. We partnered with the American Red Cross for a delivery of meals on October 7 and from October 9 through October 14 further integrated meals from the General Services Administration.

While these near-simultaneous impacts are unique, we have been, and continue to be able to fulfill state resource requests. As of October 23, 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.

Every FEMA facility available for disaster survivors has adequate signage and staffing. Specifically, FEMA DRCs are fixed facilities and mobile offices set up after a disaster. DRCs are open to all disaster survivors, located in or near affected communities, in places that offer the same access and resources to everyone. DRCs are also designed to meet the unique needs of people with disabilities or people with access and functional needs. Assistive devices are available for people who are deaf, hard of hearing, blind or have low vision, intellectual or communication disabilities. These include assistive listening devices, magnifying readers, reading glasses, tablets, manual communication boards, and video remote interpreting (VRI). By providing these tools and services, DRCs enable all people to receive information in their preferred method of communication.

5. How has the Shelter and Services Program (SSP) impacted FEMA's ability to respond to Hurricanes Helene and Milton?

- a. Please provide a detailed breakdown of the resources that FEMA has allocated for SSP, including staffing and funding.
- b. Within the last six months, have any FEMA resources or personnel been diverted or reassigned to assist at the Southern Border or on migrant issues, generally? If so, please provide details.

RESPONSE: FEMA's delivery of the SSP has not impacted its ability to respond to Hurricanes Helene and Milton. No FEMA responders are currently deployed to the Southern Border, and no resources have been diverted away from disaster response or recovery to assist at the Southern Border or on migrant issues.

FEMA manages SSP on behalf of Customs and Border Protection (CBP), just as FEMA manages the State and Local Cybersecurity Grant Program on behalf of the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Agency. Congress appropriated funds specifically for SSP—\$800 million appropriated to CBP and transferred to FEMA under the Department of Homeland Security Appropriations Act, 2023, and \$650 million appropriated to CBP and transferred to FEMA under the Department of Homeland Security Appropriations Act, 2024—and those funds are separate from

FEMA's Disaster Relief Fund. Each appropriation included a specific amount for the management and administration of the program. For FY24, this was \$9.1 million; FEMA uses this funding for contract support to supplement the six full-time FEMA employees who currently administer the grant program and allow for travel for required monitoring and site visits. Through the DHS Volunteer Force, DHS employees from any component may volunteer to deploy for 60-days to support DHS agencies with Secretary-approved homeland security domestic incidents (non-Stafford Act events). In February 2024, the Secretary approved a Volunteer Force mission to support U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services with work authorization processing at ports of entry along the Southwest Border and in interior cities. In June 2024, FEMA stopped allowing employees to volunteer for a deployment for this mission for the remainder of the 2024 hurricane season; the last FEMA responder to support the mission ended their deployment in July 2024.

6. On October 3, 2024, FEMA began publishing a "Hurricane Helene: Rumor Response" resource on its website. Please provide all documents and communications relating to FEMA's decision to establish the "Hurricane Helene: Rumor Response" webpage.
 - a. The webpage clarifies that \$750 is not the only assistance an individual may be eligible to receive, yet ignores complaints about denials and whether the assistance is enough to cover basic needs. How does FEMA determine which "rumors" are included on the website and what questions the agency will respond to?
 - b. How does FEMA determine what is a "rumor" or "misinformation"?
 - c. Did any Biden-Harris Administration official, outside of FEMA, direct the agency to establish its "Hurricane Helene: Rumor Response" webpage?
 - d. Has FEMA previously published an agency webpage to counter "misinformation" in the aftermath of a significant storm or natural disaster?

RESPONSE: Following Hurricane Helene, FEMA leadership decided to implement a "Rumor Response" webpage to counteract false and misleading information that could impede disaster response and recovery efforts. The use of a rumor response webpage is a standard practice in disaster communication. FEMA has implemented similar webpages following other major events, such as Hurricane Harvey in 2017, Hurricane Michael in 2018, the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the Texas Winter Storms in 2021, and the Hawaii Wildfires in 2023. FEMA's experience has proven rumor response webpages to be impactful tools to counter harmful misinformation, while also directing survivors toward the accurate, actionable information they need for their recovery.

Widespread misinformation can significantly obstruct FEMA's mission by discouraging people from applying for assistance or creating confusion around available resources. When FEMA identifies information that has the potential to impact our operations and mission in this way, we work as quickly as possible to address it by publishing accurate and clear information. It is critical we ensure people affected by disasters have the information they need to take action to get help and stay safe.

To this end, FEMA created the rumor response webpage as part of established and standardized protocols under ESF #15 – External Affairs. The webpage was a strategic messaging decision and part of a broader communications strategy, designed to ensure that the public has access to clear, accurate, and timely information during disaster events. This decision was made entirely within FEMA, with no directive external to the Agency.

To identify which rumors to address, FEMA evaluates information that has spread widely enough to potentially impact survivors' engagement with resources, disrupt operations, or discourage people from taking the necessary steps to ensure safety and access assistance. When harmful rumors reach this threshold, FEMA considers the most effective way to address them, with a rumor response webpage being one of several tactics used to clarify high-impact, misleading information.

For Hurricane Helene, a prominent rumor claimed that \$750 was the maximum aid FEMA was providing. The truth is that \$750 for SNA is only one type of assistance available from FEMA's IA Program, and not the limit for all FEMA aid. FEMA included this clarification in the rumor page to ensure that individuals were not discouraged from applying due to a misunderstanding about the value of assistance. Other rumors, such as claims that FEMA was seizing donations or had exhausted its funds, were also addressed through FEMA's unified communications strategy, as they could deter people from seeking support. FEMA's partners, including organizations like the American Red Cross, state officials, and local representatives, were also actively engaged in sharing accurate information, creating a unified front to counteract misinformation.

FEMA's priority in addressing rumors or misleading information is to clarify the facts and support recovery efforts. FEMA does not distinguish between "rumor" and "misinformation" when responding to inaccurate information; both terms describe content that can mislead survivors and disrupt critical disaster operations. Much like communication and power services, accurate, clear information supports lifesaving response and recovery needs. FEMA ensures people affected by disasters have the accurate, clear information they need to take action to receive assistance and stay safe.

7. Please provide a detailed timeline and summary of the Federal response to Hurricane Helene, beginning from pre-positioning prior to the disaster to the present. Please include details on which Federal agencies and departments were activated, what assets and resources were deployed and where, and which Emergency Support Functions were activated.

RESPONSE: On September 23, the National Weather Service (NWS) advised on 97L, a broad area of low pressure, with showers and thunderstorms, located over the northwestern Caribbean Sea. At that time, NWS 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. On that same day, FEMA's National Response Coordination Center (NRCC) activated to initiate national coordination and response activities to prepare for 97L becoming a tropical storm or hurricane that would threaten the U.S. Also on September 23, FEMA deployed Liaison Officers to Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, and Alabama to initiate unified coordination activities. Florida was the first state to request an Emergency Declaration on September 23; the President approved this request on September 24. Additionally on September 23, FEMA deployed IMATs and Federal Coordinating Officers (FCOs) to Florida to integrate with state emergency management operations. At the same time, FEMA deployed the Urban Search and Rescue (US&R) Incident Support Team to Florida to initiate coordination of search and rescue resources, as well as emergency communications capabilities across the state to ensure interoperability across all federal response teams.

On September 24, NWS advised that 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, NWS 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 Regional Response Coordination Center (RRCC) activated to initiate and coordinate response activities across the impacted states. Later this day, NWS 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, established commodity staging areas as discussed previously, and began staging DSA personnel in Atlanta, Georgia for immediate onward deployment to affected areas once conditions would allow.

On September 25, NWS advised that Tropical Storm Helene had maximum sustained winds of 65 mph and began expanding watches and warnings for portions of the U.S., forecasting a major hurricane to approach the Big Bend of Florida late the next day. It was at this time that NWS first forecast a high chance of flash flooding for portions of Georgia, South Carolina, and North Carolina over the following five days. This same day, the NRCC enhanced the activation to its highest level, with federal Departments and Agencies representing all ESFs activated to provide support. All occurring at this same time, FEMA deployed search and rescue capabilities to stage adjacent to the forecast track of the storm to be protected from impacts and rapidly deployable once conditions allowed, deployed IMATs and FCOs to Georgia and North Carolina to integrate with state operations, deployed an IMAT with emergency communications capabilities to the state emergency operations center in Alabama, and continued to stage DSA personnel in Atlanta. Additionally, Georgia, Alabama, and North Carolina all requested Emergency Declarations on September 25; these requests were all approved on September 26. Later during September 25, Helene reached Hurricane strength.

Early on September 26, NWS advised Hurricane 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. This same day, healthcare site assessment teams and health and medical task forces were pre-staged in Florida and FEMA staged search and rescue capabilities and healthcare site assessment teams in Georgia, as well as additional DSA personnel for rapid deployment across the area of impact. At the same time, FEMA deployed search and rescue teams throughout the western part of North Carolina to rapidly respond to the impacted areas once conditions allowed as well as emergency communications capabilities to augment and ensure interoperability across all federal response teams in the state.

By mid-afternoon on September 26, Hurricane 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 this evening, at approximately 11:10 P.M. EDT, Hurricane Helene made landfall as a Category 4 hurricane in the Florida Big Bend just east of the mouth of the Aucilla River, with maximum sustained winds estimated to be at 140 mph.

On September 27, NWS downgraded the storm to Tropical Storm status. On this day, the storm continued to track across Georgia, South Carolina, and North Carolina, causing widespread impacts across the southeastern U.S. During this time, additional search and rescue teams arrived in North

Carolina along with health and medical resources, including healthcare site assessment teams. At the same time, FEMA deployed an FCO to the South Carolina State Emergency Operations Center, including emergency communications capabilities. Additionally, Tennessee requested and received an Emergency Declaration. On September 28, the storm had dissipated, and additional deployments of personnel and teams continued, including additional search and rescue teams and health medical resources to North Carolina, an IMAT to South Carolina, and the steady flow of thousands of FEMA and other Federal personnel into all impacted states fully ramped up, now that the storm had passed and conditions allowed. Also on September 28, Virginia requested an Emergency Declaration, which was approved the next day.

8. On September 30, 2024, President Biden signed a Continuing Resolution into law which provided \$20 billion in funds to the Disaster Relief Fund (DRF), bringing an end to FEMA's Immediate Needs Funding status. Days later, DHS Secretary Mayorkas stated that FEMA did not have sufficient funds to last through the Hurricane Season.

- a. What is the basis for the Secretary's statement? When does FEMA estimate returning to INF status?
- b. What funding level did FEMA indicate to the House and Senate Appropriations Committees would be sufficient?
- c. Please provide a detailed accounting of FEMA's project approvals since the last appropriation to the DRF. Specifically, include details showing the rate of project approvals leading up to and during INF.
- d. Please describe the amounts FEMA estimates obligating in response to Hurricanes Helene and Milton.

RESPONSE: On October 1, FEMA was provided access to \$20.261 billion from the Continuing Resolution, bringing the balance of the Disaster Relief Fund (DRF) to \$21.9 billion. FEMA lifted Immediate Needs Funding (INF) that same day and began obligating more than \$8.8 billion in previously delayed projects, meaning the available DRF balance was \$13.1 billion. By October 3, FEMA had obligated more than \$380 million for Hurricane Helene, and it was obvious the total cost of Helene would be in the billions of dollars. At the height of hurricane season and given the known impact of Hurricane Helene, there was a significant concern that FEMA's current funding might not last through the end of the hurricane season on November 30, 2024. This remains true, as the behavior of hurricanes can be unpredictable. Balancing ongoing response and recovery efforts, while conserving resources for a potential catastrophic event, is challenging. The Secretary's remarks aimed to underscore the importance of securing supplemental funding to ensure FEMA can continue supporting survivors before, during, and after disasters.

FEMA is closely monitoring and managing our resources daily to ensure we are able to sustain the ongoing response and recovery efforts for Hurricanes Helene and Milton without interruption. To maintain a proactive stance, we are evaluating several factors, such as additional resources required as we obtain more information on the extensive damage caused by Hurricane Helene, which is surpassing that of previous major disasters; assessing the damages from Hurricane Milton; and monitoring for possible additional hurricane activity. This is essential to safeguard funding for lifesaving, life-sustaining, and critical disaster operations, as well as to preserve funds for any potential new catastrophic events.

Prior to Hurricanes Helene and Milton, FEMA estimated \$46.9B was needed to fund DRF resource needs through FY25. This includes an additional need of \$24.5B over the disaster cap adjustment, of which \$1.0B is for the DRF Base. However, these do not include funding needs for Hurricanes Helene or Milton. FEMA is still evaluating the extent of damages for Helene and Milton, which are substantial. As of October 23, FEMA has obligated \$4.5B and \$1.6B for Hurricanes Helene and Milton, respectively. Initial estimates will be available in early November. However, these will be preliminary and will continue to be refined as additional information becomes available.

Below is a detailed accounting of FEMA's project approvals since the last appropriation to the DRF, including details showing the rate of project approvals leading up to and during INF.

Fiscal Year 2024 Public Assistance Approved Projects and Dollars						
Month	Approved Obligated	Federal Share	Approved INF	Federal Share	Total Count	Total Fed Share
October*	4,656	\$ 4,650,237,781	-	\$ -	4,656	\$ 4,650,237,781
November	2,669	2,436,109,784	-	-	2,669	2,436,109,784
December	2,262	2,225,245,848	-	-	2,262	2,225,245,848
January	2,642	2,788,813,122	-	-	2,642	2,788,813,122
February	2,501	3,497,324,272	-	-	2,501	3,497,324,272
March	3,050	1,567,356,244	-	-	3,050	1,567,356,244
April	2,852	2,013,265,340	-	-	2,852	2,013,265,340
May	2,371	2,007,098,909	-	-	2,371	2,007,098,909
June	1,918	1,841,945,025	-	-	1,918	1,841,945,025
July	2,005	3,190,505,727	-	-	2,005	3,190,505,727
August	656	306,329,706	1,523	5,844,766,408	2,179	6,151,096,114
September	-	-	1,363	2,842,269,725	1,363	2,842,269,725
PA Total**	27,582	\$ 26,524,231,757	2,886	\$ 8,687,036,133	30,468	\$ 35,211,267,890
Fiscal Year 2024 Hazard Mitigation Approved Projects and Dollars						
Month	Approved Obligated	Federal Share	Approved INF	Federal Share	Total Count	Total Fed Share
October*	282	\$ 201,997,497	-	-	282	\$ 201,997,497
November	173	101,643,173	-	-	173	101,643,173
December	173	130,070,830	-	-	173	130,070,830
January	209	163,720,291	-	-	209	163,720,291
February	154	90,942,237	-	-	154	90,942,237
March	173	91,702,859	-	-	173	91,702,859
April	177	110,926,055	-	-	177	110,926,055
May	186	152,712,756	-	-	186	152,712,756
June	195	231,142,964	-	-	195	231,142,964
July	209	125,415,581	-	-	209	125,415,581
August	127	67,653,688	111	93,288,444	238	160,942,132
September	1	56,941	116	69,838,577	117	69,895,518
HMGP Total**	2,059	\$ 1,467,984,871	227	\$ 163,127,021	2,286	\$ 1,631,111,892
Grand Total	29,641	\$ 27,992,216,628	3,113	\$ 8,850,163,154	32,754	\$ 36,842,379,782

* October is influenced by FY23 INF held projects

** Totals include Obligated and De-obligations approved during FY24

Source data is IFMIS, Grant Manager, and INF delayed project list

I hope this information is helpful. A separate response will be mailed to all who signed this letter. We will continue to provide the Committee with briefings on the ongoing response and recovery efforts to Hurricanes Helene and Milton, including additional information responsive to your questions above. In the meantime, if you have any questions, please have a member of your staff contact FEMA's Office of External Affairs' Congressional Affairs Division at (202) 646-4500.

Sincerely,



Deanne Criswell
Administrator

APPENDIX

QUESTIONS TO HON. DEANNE CRISWELL, ADMINISTRATOR, FEDERAL EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AGENCY, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY, FROM HON. SCOTT PERRY

Question 1. Administrator Criswell, on November 14, 2024, the Committee's Republican Members sent a letter to you about the recent allegations that FEMA workers skipped the homes of supporters of President-elect Trump. Following the allegations, you issued a statement that "one" FEMA employee "departed from" FEMA's values and was terminated.¹ You reiterated this at the hearing. These statements directly conflict with the assertions of Ms. Washington who claims that these directives already existed when she arrived for deployment. The Committee has received information from sources, unrelated to Ms. Washington, that substantiates her assertion that this may have been commonplace across multiple states and multiple FEMA personnel.

Question 1.a. Please describe in detail the investigation that FEMA conducted prior to terminating Ms. Washington's employment that concluded that she was the source of this directive.

ANSWER. A response was not received at the time of publication.

Question 1.b. Has there been any investigation into who released Ms. Washington's name and contact information to the public, and information around her message about the Trump signs, and whether such a leak violates the Privacy Act or any other laws related to Personal Identifiable Information (PII)?

ANSWER. A response was not received at the time of publication.

Question 1.c. You mentioned at the hearing that FEMA is still investigating whether or not the practice of skipping homes with Trump signs was isolated to this one FEMA employee.

Question 1.c.i. Please provide information on who, within the agency, is specifically conducting this investigation, including their title and position.

ANSWER. A response was not received at the time of publication.

Question 1.c.ii. Please provide a timeline for when this investigation will be concluded.

ANSWER. A response was not received at the time of publication.

Question 1.c.iii. Is the investigation solely focused on the activities in Florida, or is it investigating allegations that similar actions occurred in other states? Please explain.

ANSWER. A response was not received at the time of publication.

Question 1.d. There have been allegations that records related to this issue may have been deleted. During the hearing, you mentioned that there would be a record of deletions, if any happened.

Question 1.d.i. Please detail what steps FEMA has taken to determine whether any records have been deleted and provide the results on that analysis.

ANSWER. A response was not received at the time of publication.

Question 1.e. Please describe FEMA's official policy and procedures for workers canvassing following a disaster on how they are to handle what they perceive as a "hostile" encounter or if they feel unsafe.

ANSWER. A response was not received at the time of publication.

¹ FEMA, *Statement from FEMA Administrator Deanne Criswell on Employee Misconduct* (Nov. 9, 2024), available at <https://www.fema.gov/press-release/20241109/statement-fema-administrator-deanne-criswell-employee-misconduct>

Question 1.e.i. Please describe the training provided to FEMA workers on how to handle any discomfort in the field and what is or is not appropriate.

ANSWER. A response was not received at the time of publication.

Question 1.f. Please provide details of the team(s), with whom Ms. Washington was deployed in Florida, including who was her supervisor, who else was working with her, a breakdown of whether they were full time FEMA employees, FEMA Reservists, surge capacity workers, and the areas they were to cover.

ANSWER. A response was not received at the time of publication.

Question 1.f.i. To the extent that surge capacity workers were involved, were these workers Federal employees or managed through a contractor?

ANSWER. A response was not received at the time of publication.

Question 1.f.ii. If managed through a contractor, please indicate the name, describe the role of the contractor, and provide details of what training occurred with the contract workers.

ANSWER. A response was not received at the time of publication.

Question 1.f.iii. During the hearing, you offered to provide an organizational chart that would describe the chain of command that Ms. Washington served under. Please provide that organizational chart.

ANSWER. A response was not received at the time of publication.

Question 2. Administrator Criswell, your written testimony states that FEMA's mission is helping people before, during, and after disasters. However, your Strategic Plan bumped that core mission below the missions of equity and climate change. While communities across this Nation are recovering from devastating hurricanes, wildfires, floods and other disasters, we've learned that instead of focusing on efforts to rebuild, your resiliency office leadership have been in Azerbaijan for the "In Solidarity for a Green World Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change."

Question 2.a. Please describe how FEMA's participation in the conference falls under the core mission of helping Americans before, during, and after disasters.

ANSWER. A response was not received at the time of publication.

Question 2.b. Can you provide the Committee details on this travel, including who from FEMA attended, who approved this travel, length of stay, and the total costs to the taxpayer?

ANSWER. A response was not received at the time of publication.

Question 3. The Biden Administration's request for supplemental funding included a request for \$40 billion for the Disaster Relief Fund, but requested authority to transfer up to \$1.5 billion for the Hermit's Peak/Calf Canyon claims. Congress provided authority for FEMA to manage this claims office, but it seems that FEMA is being asked to pay out the claims from its own budget, despite the allegations that liability falls with another Federal agency.

Question 3.a. Please provide a breakdown of all costs to FEMA of managing this claims office, including actual claims paid out, staffing, and other administrative costs.

ANSWER. A response was not received at the time of publication.

Question 3.b. Is FEMA receiving any reimbursement from the Federal agency found liable for these claims?

ANSWER. A response was not received at the time of publication.

Question 3.c. A major disaster declaration was issued for these fires and, as a result, FEMA has also provided disaster assistance. How much FEMA disaster assistance has been obligated for these fires?

ANSWER. A response was not received at the time of publication.

Question 4. In your response to the October 11, 2024, letter sent from Chairman Sam Graves and myself, you indicated that through the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Volunteer Force, DHS employees from any component may volunteer to deploy for six days to support other DHS agencies with homeland security domestic incidents. You further note that the Secretary approved a mission to assist at the Southwest border and interior cities, but that FEMA stopped allowing employees to volunteer for deployment for this mission for the remainder of the 2024 hurricane season, and the last FEMA responder ended their deployment in July 2024.

Question 4.a. How many FEMA personnel volunteered for this mission and what are the dates of their deployments?

ANSWER. A response was not received at the time of publication.

Question 4.b. Following the Subcommittee hearing in March 2024, FEMA provided documents detailing intragovernmental reimbursable agreements between FEMA and Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and FEMA and the United States Citizenship & Immigration Services (USCIS). One agreement does not expire until 2028.

Question 4.b.i. In responding to our October 11th letter, was your response inclusive of any personnel or resources deployed pursuant to any of these agreements?

ANSWER. A response was not received at the time of publication.

Question 4.b.ii Were any FEMA personnel, assets, or resources deployed to support any immigration or border mission when Hurricanes Helene and Milton hit or at any point following landfall? If so, please provide details.

ANSWER. A response was not received at the time of publication.

Question 5. On October 3, 2024, FEMA began publishing a Hurricane Rumor Response resource on its website. What process does FEMA go through when deciding to set up a Rumor Response page?

ANSWER. A response was not received at the time of publication.

Question 5.a. With Hurricane Helene specifically, what led FEMA to decide to set up the Rumor Response resource?

ANSWER. A response was not received at the time of publication.

Question 5.b. How does FEMA decide what “rumors” to include on the website?

ANSWER. A response was not received at the time of publication.

Question 5.c. Do you see any problems with a Federal agency using its authority to dictate what is and is not “misinformation”?

ANSWER. A response was not received at the time of publication.

Question 5.d. What process does FEMA use to verify that the “rumors” that are posted on the website are actually false?

ANSWER. A response was not received at the time of publication.

Question 5.e. Are there any checks on this, or is it just at the discretion of FEMA?

ANSWER. A response was not received at the time of publication.

Question 6. Following Hurricanes Helene and Milton, FEMA established Disaster Recovery Centers (DRCs) across the impacted area. In total, how many DRCs did FEMA set up in response to Hurricane Helene and to Hurricane Milton?

ANSWER. A response was not received at the time of publication.

Question 6.a. Please provide the specific locations for each DRC.

ANSWER. A response was not received at the time of publication.

Question 6.b. Please provide the total number of survivors who received assistance at each DRC location.

ANSWER. A response was not received at the time of publication.

Question 6.b.i. Please provide the total number of survivors who have successfully received FEMA assistance after visiting a DRC location.

ANSWER. A response was not received at the time of publication.

Question 6.c. Please provide the total number of survivors, broken down by state, who FEMA has assisted following Hurricane Helene and Hurricane Milton.

ANSWER. A response was not received at the time of publication.

Question 6.c.i. Please provide the total number of survivors, broken down by state, who have successfully received assistance from FEMA following Hurricane Helene and Hurricane Milton.

ANSWER. A response was not received at the time of publication.

QUESTION TO HON. DEANNE CRISWELL, ADMINISTRATOR, FEDERAL EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AGENCY, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY, FROM HON. RICK LARSEN

Question 1. Following catastrophic disasters, including Hurricanes Helene and Milton, one of the most common frustrations cited by disaster survivors is difficulty navigating the complex application system for federal disaster aid.

Does FEMA have the resources necessary to maintain modern application system software? Would additional funding for the modernization of FEMA's survivor intake software improve the disaster survivor experience?

ANSWER. A response was not received at the time of publication.

QUESTIONS TO HON. DEANNE CRISWELL, ADMINISTRATOR, FEDERAL
EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AGENCY, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HOME-
LAND SECURITY, FROM HON. JOHN GARAMENDI

Question 1. The Tahoe Regional Planning Agency and other local agencies in California have brought to my attention that FEMA's current guidance for the Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) program and Hazard Mitigation Grant Program do not allow grant awards to water infrastructure projects specifically for fire suppression to protect at-risk communities. Will FEMA commit to making water infrastructure projects for fire suppression eligible for these two FEMA disaster preparedness programs?

ANSWER. A response was not received at the time of publication.

Question 2. FEMA is advancing up to 50% of costs while jurisdictions complete final paperwork for projects under \$1 million. What additional authorities or funding does FEMA need to expand these programs to help small, impoverished communities or areas of persistent poverty and facilitate recovery efforts in small communities?

ANSWER. A response was not received at the time of publication.

Question 3. The Public Assistance Alternative Procedures Program (PAAP) provides an alternative route to traditional public assistance funding, incentivizing cost-saving and simplifying reporting requirements. However, the program's status as a pilot program may lead to inconsistent implementation. Are there particular difficulties smaller communities face when applying for assistance through the Alternative Procedures Program? Moreover, would the Alternative Procedures program benefit from being made permanent, allowing FEMA to promulgate necessary regulations to administer the program?

ANSWER. A response was not received at the time of publication.