



# COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

## Hearing Statement of Chairman Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS)

### *Ensuring Equity in Disaster Preparedness, Response, and Recovery*

October 27, 2021

Today, the Committee is meeting to examine how the Federal government can ensure equity in disaster preparedness, response, and recovery. Last summer, almost one in three Americans experienced a disaster. Disasters are increasing, and as they do, the number of people in need of assistance will also increase. However, not everyone who needs assistance will get it. In fact, those who need it the most are often the least likely to get help. Some believe that ‘disasters are great equalizers.’

To the contrary, disasters expose and worsen inequities, in part because disaster assistance programs favor some groups over others. For example, internal FEMA analyses reported by NPR showed that low-income applicants were twice as likely to be denied FEMA housing assistance due to “insufficient” damage. These outcomes lead to long-term impacts that are detrimental to already marginalized groups. Put simply, a growing body of evidence shows that in the wake of a disaster, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Race also appears to play a role in outcomes.

According to a 2018 study, white Americans living in counties that received disaster aid gained over \$100,000 in wealth compared to white Americans living in counties that did not experience a disaster. In contrast, Black and Latino Americans in areas that received disaster assistance lost thousands compared to their peers that had not experienced a disaster. A person’s ZIP code or skin color should not affect how he or she fares in a disaster, but this is exactly what happens. Low-income and rural communities are especially at risk. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is aware of these inequities.

In November of 2020, FEMA’s own National Advisory Council delivered a stunning rebuke of the status quo, stating “FEMA does not meet the equity requirements of the Stafford Act.” The Advisory Council defined equity as “to provide the greatest support to those with greatest need to achieve a certain minimum outcome.” Equity is recognizing and responding to different needs to ensure everyone can recover with dignity.

That means:

- Making sure we do not leave rural counties behind
- Supporting community members with differing abilities, and
- Protecting everyone’s right to a safe recovery, regardless of their race or ethnicity or their income.

I commend the Biden Administration for working to ensure equity in FEMA programs, including expanding allowable ownership documentation to help families with heirs’ property keep land that has been in their family for generations. These are important steps in the right direction, and we must press on.

Now is the time for bold action. It is time to rethink a system that too often fails those who are already marginalized. I have seen the effect of the status quo on these communities with my own eyes. In June, floods devastated the Mississippi Delta—over 700 homes were impacted—yet residents did not receive

assistance. These families had inches of water in their homes and after 30 days were informed by the State that the Governor would not even pursue Federal assistance.

The Stafford Act relies on Governors and local leaders to act in good faith, but this may not always be the case when it comes to certain communities. I am currently working on legislation to help address this problem and look forward to introducing it in the near future. I also encourage DHS to continue making progress toward equity where it has discretion to do so. It is time to change inequitable policies throughout our disaster response system. Today, we will hear from our witnesses why these inequities exist and what we can do about them.

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