



COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

THE “Federal Emergency Management Advancement of Equity Act” or “FEMA Equity Act”

As Introduced by Chairman Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS) and Senator Elizabeth Warren (D-MA)

Groups in Support: Institute for Diversity and Inclusion in Emergency Management Deep South Center for Environmental Justice; Bullard Center for Environmental & Climate Justice; Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) Emergency Management Workforce Consortium; National Association of Counties (NACO); Education, Economics, Environmental, Climate & Health Organization (EEECHO); Ironton Reconstruction and Redevelopment; Unity in the Family Ministry; Center for Sustainable Engagement and Development; Achieving Community Tasks Successfully (ACTS); Green Door Initiative; Ironton Reconstruction and Redevelopment; WE ACT for Environmental Justice; Sankofa Community Development Corporation

Low-income communities, rural areas, racial minorities, tribes, individuals with disabilities, seniors, and children are all more likely to experience the most devastating impacts of disasters.¹ Today, all too often Federal assistance is more available to communities with means than to those who need it the most; a 2020 FEMA National Advisory Committee (NAC) report found Federal disaster relief programs “provide an additional boost to wealthy homeowners and others with less need, while lower-income individuals and others sink further into poverty after disasters.”² The NAC also went on to say that “[b]y perpetually assisting larger communities that already have considerable resources, the smaller, less resource-rich, less-affluent communities cannot access funding to appropriately prepare for a disaster, leading to inadequate response and recovery, and little opportunity for mitigation.”³ The 2020 NAC report helped to explain a 2018 study which found that Black and Latino survivors in areas that received assistance lost wealth compared to their peers that did not experience a disaster.⁴

¹ Domingue, Simone J. and Christopher T. Emrich, *Social Vulnerability and Procedural Equity: Exploring the Distribution of Disaster Assistance Across Counties in the United States*, American Review of Public Administration, 49:8, (2019).; Kathleen J. Tierney, *The social roots of risk: Producing disasters, promoting resilience*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford Business Books, (2014), 141; Mary Babic, *Hurricane Katrina Showed That Even in the US, Disaster Hits the Most Vulnerable the Hardest*, Oxfam (August 28, 2015). <https://www.oxfamamerica.org/explore/stories/even-in-the-us-disaster-hits-the-most-vulnerable-the-hardest/>. FEMA, *FEMA Announces Initial Initiatives to Advance Equity*, Fema.gov (July 21, 2021), <https://www.fema.gov/press-release/20210721/fema-announces-initial-initiatives-advance-equity>

² National Advisory Council, *November 2020 National Advisory Council Report to the FEMA Administrator*, Fema.gov. (30 Nov. 2020), www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/documents/fema_nac-report_11-2020.pdf.

³ *Id.*

⁴ Junia Howell & James R. Elliott, *As Disaster Costs Rise, So Does Inequality*, 4 Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World, (December 4, 2018).

Often, disadvantaged communities face an uphill battle to navigate the complicated Federal assistance processes.^{5,6} Additionally, internal FEMA data analysis found that low-income survivors are less likely than more affluent people to receive crucial Federal emergency assistance.⁷ FEMA’s analysis found that low-income homeowners that survived disasters were denied financial assistance twice as often as high-income homeowners because of “insufficient damage” and that FEMA approved housing assistance to higher-income renters at a rate that was 23% higher than low-income renters.⁸

The Biden Administration has prioritized addressing inequities in the Federal disaster management programs and last year, FEMA identified “instilling equity as a foundation of emergency management” as the first goal of its Agency strategic plan.⁹ The Biden Administration has taken action to adjust documentation requirements for Federal disaster assistance in response to longstanding challenges that heirs, often people of color, face when seeking assistance¹⁰ and established the equity advisor position and Equity Enterprise Steering Group within FEMA.¹¹ While these actions are positive developments, more must be done to ensure that FEMA can deliver on the Agency’s strategic vision of instilling equity as a foundation of emergency management. To that end, the *FEMA Equity Act* would:

- Improve FEMA’s data collection systems to better identify inequities within Agency programs, including barriers to access and disparate outcomes.
- Direct FEMA to design and integrate criteria into all of their programs to increase equity, prioritizing programs that provide long-and short-term support for local governments, individual housing assistance, and mitigation funding to address disasters;
- Empower local governments impacted by natural disasters to request an emergency or major disaster declaration in certain circumstances when requests are not submitted by the State;
- Authorize in law FEMA’s Equity Enterprise Steering Group and the Equity Advisor to counsel the FEMA Administrator to increase equity across FEMA programs and policies; and
- Direct GAO to examine the impact on underserved communities of FEMA’s requirements for authorizing emergency protective measures, debris removal, long-term repair, and construction work for States/territories, localities, and Tribes as well as individual assistance, including housing support.

⁵ *Supra*, National Advisory Council.

⁶ Washington Post Staff, FEMA’s Disasters, Washington Post, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2022/03/28/fema-disasters-abandoned/> (March 28, 2022).

⁷ Rebecca Hersher, *Why FEMA Aid Is Unavailable To Many Who Need It The Most*, NPR, <https://www.npr.org/2021/06/29/1004347023/why-fema-aid-is-unavailable-to-many-who-need-it-the-most> (June 29, 2021).

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ Deanne Criswell, *2022–2026 FEMA Strategic Plan Building the FEMA our Nation Needs and Deserves*, Federal Emergency Management Agency, (December 16, 2021).

¹⁰ FEMA, *Policy, Guidance and Fact Sheets*, Fema.gov (2021), <https://www.fema.gov/assistance/individual/policy-guidance-and-fact-sheets>

¹¹ FEMA, *FEMA Announces Initial Initiatives To Advance Equity*, Fema.gov (2021), <https://www.fema.gov/press-release/20210721/fema-announces-initial-initiatives-advance-equity>