



History of FEMA

Policy Leads: Zaina Nasir^{#1} Rishya Vemireddy^{#2}

Policy Analysts: Jaslene Szeto^{#3}, Orlyola Tantchou^{#4}, Maiya Olsen^{#5}

[#]Team Name, Institute for Youth in Policy

¹zaina@yipinstitute.org

²rishya@yipinstitute.org

Abstract — The Federal Emergency Management Agency, or FEMA, plays a central role in disaster preparedness, response, recovery, and mitigation across the United States, making its funding, staffing, and organizational structure critical to community resilience. This policy brief examines current changes to FEMA, the risks of reduced federal disaster capacity, and policy options for strengthening prevention, individual assistance, staffing, and youth-focused disaster preparedness.

Keywords — FEMA; emergency management; disaster resilience; federal disaster aid; disaster recovery; vulnerable populations; mitigation

I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This brief explores the history of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) within the United States. FEMA is an agency of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security which coordinates responses to natural and manmade disasters. Historically, FEMA has reflected the federal government's ability to handle crises, but recent budget cuts have constrained personnel availability and research progress.

II. OVERVIEW

FEMA is the U.S. agency responsible for disaster preparedness, response, recovery, and mitigation. Its current role is to support state and local governments when disasters are too large for them to manage alone. FEMA provides emergency aid such as temporary housing, food, medical support, rebuilding funds, and

infrastructure repair. Over time, FEMA's role has evolved from basic disaster response into a larger system focused on planning, prevention, coordination, and long-term recovery.

FEMA can also be used as a political tool because disaster aid often depends on federal approval, especially through presidential disaster declarations. Political leaders may use FEMA responses to show strong leadership, gain public support, or respond to criticism. However, delays, unequal aid, or poor disaster response can create political controversy over accusations of unfair treatment or gross mismanagement. Therefore, FEMA is both a disaster-relief agency and a symbol of how effectively the federal government responds to crises.

III. FEMA TODAY

A. Current Stances

FEMA has been facing defunding and restructuring under the Trump Administration. The Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) cut 600 employees from the National Weather Service, leading to decreases in experienced staff, thus hindering the effectiveness of meteorological operations. Budget cuts under the Big Beautiful Bill from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA)

forecasting and alert programs have raised concerns among experts.

In 2026, FEMA's website states that they have given \$283.3 million in grants to disaster survivors, had 786 hazard mitigation assistance sub-grants, and had 58 disaster declarations. FEMA's stated mission and stance on their website remains to be "to help people before, during and after disasters," but with the recent changes in funding, this may become more difficult.

B. Tried Policy

After Trump took office for his second term, he suggested dissolving FEMA in its current form and issued Executive Order 14180, establishing the FEMA Review Council to undertake a "full-scale review" of the agency. The "Review Council", would "include up to 20 members and advise the president on recommended changes to the agency." In February 2025, FEMA chief counsel issued an internal memo stating the agency intends to stop enforcing a rule finalized under President Biden to mitigate flood damage to federally funded infrastructure.

IV. POLICY PROBLEM

A. Stakeholders

Several groups are directly affected by FEMA policies and disaster-response decisions. FEMA and the federal government are responsible for coordinating disaster preparedness, response, and recovery efforts across the country. They provide funding, resources, and logistical support when disasters overwhelm state and local capabilities. State and local governments are also key stakeholders because they depend on FEMA assistance to help manage large-scale emergencies and rebuild damaged infrastructure. Disaster survivors, particularly vulnerable populations such as low-income households, elderly individuals, people with disabilities, and rural communities,

rely on FEMA assistance for emergency shelter, food, medical aid, temporary housing, and long-term recovery funding. Local businesses, nonprofit organizations, and taxpayers are also stakeholders because disasters can disrupt local economies affecting community stability for years after such an event occurs.

B. Risks of Indifference

Failing to address challenges within FEMA could lead to slower and less effective recovery efforts for communities affected by disasters. Delays in aid distribution, reduced funding, or staffing shortages coordination between levels of government may leave survivors or people in need of aid without essential resources for extended periods of time. Vulnerable populations are often impacted the most because they typically have fewer financial resources and support systems available to aid recovery. In addition, inadequate disaster preparedness and response can increase long-term economic costs by allowing greater damage to homes, businesses, public infrastructure, and critical services. Communities may take years longer to recover, resulting in lost economic productivity and increased financial burdens on both governments and residents. As natural disasters become more frequent and costly in many regions of the United States, inaction could further strain emergency-management systems and reduce public confidence in government disaster response.

C. Nonpartisan Reasoning

Improving FEMA is a nonpartisan issue because natural disasters affect people regardless of political affiliation, geographic location, race, or socioeconomic status. Effective disaster preparedness and response help protect lives, property, public infrastructure, and local economies. Strong emergency-management systems benefit communities across the country

by reducing the human and financial impacts of disasters. Investments in preparedness, mitigation, and efficient recovery efforts can lower long-term recovery costs while strengthening community resilience against future disasters. Improving FEMA's effectiveness is ultimately focused on public safety, responsible government management, and ensuring that communities receive the support they need during times of crisis rather than advancing any particular political agenda.

V. POLICY OPTIONS

Many policy options can strengthen current FEMA disaster prevention efforts. To strengthen FEMA's current prevention and resilience programs, investment must be increased in established programs, such as the Building Resilience in Infrastructure and Communities program. By increasing the funding and ensuring all varieties of programs are in place to maximize the impact of disaster prevention, it mitigates the risks before a disaster happens. Strengthening prevention also helps reduce the human and environmental costs of disasters, thereby reducing the costs for post-disaster rebuilding and assistance. This increased investment is a long-term goal that offers a long-term benefit, assisting in reducing costs and risks in the face of disasters. However, funding is not the only factor that contributes to risk management and prevention. There is a need to improve current programs dedicated to individual assistance. It is crucial to understand and identify the individuals susceptible to disaster damage, ensuring programs include dedication to individual assistance, especially for low-income families, the elderly, disabled residents, and individuals struggling with post-disaster recovery, to offer a more effective and simplified aid process. To ensure that these programs efficiently address current needs, FEMA staffing must be increased. By increasing staffing, the aid application process can move faster,

increasing FEMA's capacity to meet demands. Increased staffing also requires more federal funding, planning, and coordination, yet the benefits largely outweigh the costs.

VI. IMPACT ON YOUNG PEOPLE

Disasters such as hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes and more can have a huge impact on youth mental health, due to the sudden instability and traumatic nature of the circumstances around them. Children frequently experience post-disaster stress such as PTSD, anxiety, or depression. This often stems from the loss of safe spaces as their homes, schools, even neighborhood playgrounds and youth centers are now destroyed. They can also struggle with grief due to the possible deaths of family or friends. They can also experience significant feelings of loneliness. This can also lead to a drop in academic performance and hindered social development.

Historically, organizations such as FEMA have categorized the youth in a broad "at risk" category instead of establishing specific policies to help their long term development and serve as institutional support. Beyond immediate aid, the youth need sustained assistance to process their experiences and utilize opportunities such as access to therapy. It took major events such as Hurricane Katrina for the National Commission on Children and Disasters to be created, and for these governmental programs to take into account and integrate youth conversations in federal disaster aid efforts.

More recently, FEMA has been working to empower the youth and recognize their leadership potential. Encouraging the youth through outreach programs focused on disaster preparedness and community engagement allows them to be better prepared in the case of natural disasters.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

In the United States, FEMA response is one of the biggest determinants in how well communities will recover after experiencing natural disasters. Due to the current administration actively working to dismantle the efficacy of FEMA, communities struck by natural disasters face even more obstacles in recovery. With decreased federal aid and prevention measures, state and local governments must find ways to use already strained budgets to provide the necessary relief to affected communities. Recognizing the importance of FEMA as a nonpartisan issue and rather a necessary pillar of support will increase its power and ability to help people across the country.

VIII. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The Institute for Youth in Policy wishes to acknowledge Sarah Hutchison for editing this policy brief.

IX. REFERENCES

- [1] Feliciotti, Andy. "The FEMA Logo Is Displayed on a Building." Photograph. *Unsplash*. Published March 6, 2025. <https://unsplash.com/photos/the-fema-logo-is-displayed-on-a-building-YjtSOB9JY14>.
- [2] FEMA. (2020, September 1). Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Department of Homeland Security. <https://www.dhs.gov/employee-resources/federal-emergency-management-agency-fema>.
- [3] Forum on Medical and Public Health Preparedness for Catastrophic Events, Board on Health Sciences Policy, & Institute of Medicine. (2014, March 21). Children and Disasters. Nih.gov; National Academies Press (US). <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK195865/>.
- [4] Han, Z., Zhou, Y., Schlegelmilch, J., & Wang, Z. (2026). An evaluation of disaster preparedness policy: linking youth preparedness to household preparedness through the paths of efficacy. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-026-07099>.
- [5] SAMHSA. (2018, September). Behavioral Health Conditions in Children and Youth Exposed to Natural Disaster. Supplemental Research Bulletin. <https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/srb-childrenyouth-8-22-18.pdf>.
- [6] Youth and Emergency Planning | FEMA.gov. (n.d.). [Www.fema.gov. https://www.fema.gov/emergency-managers/individuals-communities/youth](https://www.fema.gov/emergency-managers/individuals-communities/youth).