

# Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

May 9, 2024

The Honorable Administrator Deanne Criswell  
Federal Emergency Management Agency  
500 C Street, SW, 8th Floor  
Washington, D.C. 20472

Dear Administrator Criswell:

We appreciate the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s (FEMA) continued efforts to respond to the catastrophic July 2023 flooding in Vermont. We write to request information regarding potential improvements to FEMA’s provision of Individual Assistance (IA) to affected communities.

As you know, in July 2023, severe flooding caused significant damage to cities and towns across Vermont, leading President Biden to issue a Major Disaster Declaration on July 14, 2023. Support from FEMA—including IA—has been crucial to the state’s recovery efforts: among other aid, FEMA has provided over \$25 million in individual and household assistance to over 3,600 households.<sup>1</sup> We sincerely appreciate FEMA’s efforts to work with state, local, and other officials to help Vermont rebuild.

Vermont’s experience recovering from the July 2023 floods, however, also highlighted areas of improvement for FEMA’s IA process. For example:

- **Inadequate Direct Housing Assistance.** Following the flooding, FEMA worked in coordination with state officials to ultimately provide more than \$23 million to Vermonters in housing assistance through the Individuals and Households Program (IHP). However, just 11 households in the state ultimately received Direct Housing Assistance, and many Vermonters struggled to access the assistance they needed. FEMA’s process for providing Manufactured Housing Units (MHUs), in particular, was poorly communicated and implemented. Initially, FEMA committed to siting about 20 MHUs in Montpelier, one of the hardest hit flood communities. Shortly before the planned siting, however, FEMA announced it would be exploring “alternative options” to relocating those residents, rather than placing them in MHUs. State officials and the congressional delegation were not informed in advance.<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, FEMA only delivered five MHUs across the entire state. One of the residents being moved was not able to access the MHU until December—three months after the MHU was delivered and

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<sup>1</sup> Federal Emergency Management Agency, *Vermont Severe Storms, Flooding, Landslides, and Mudslides* (online <https://www.fema.gov/disaster/4720>) (accessed May 7, 2024).

<sup>2</sup> Carly Berlin, “FEMA trailers are no longer coming to Montpelier, but feds will still pay the city \$500k,” *Vermont Public*, December 20, 2023 (online at <https://www.vermontpublic.org/local-news/2023-12-20/fema-trailers-are-no-longer-coming-to-montpelier-but-feds-will-still-pay-the-city-500k>) (accessed May 7, 2024); Sarah Mearhoff, “FEMA temporary housing to arrive in Vermont in the coming weeks,” *VT Digger*, August 23, 2023 (online at <https://vtdigger.org/2023/08/23/fema-temporary-housing-to-arrive-in-vermont-in-the-coming-weeks/>) (accessed May 7, 2024).

five months after the flood.<sup>3</sup> Caseworkers in our offices worked with families who were still in unsafe, severely damaged housing six months after the flood.

- **Unclear application process.** FEMA updated the format of its IA determination letters in 2022, following a 2020 report by the Government Accountability Office which found that the determination letters were a barrier to disaster survivors accessing assistance and did not comply with federal communication guidelines.<sup>4</sup> Reports received from our constituents suggest that, despite FEMA’s efforts, the IA determination process continues to be confusing for disaster survivors. In some cases, constituents reported not knowing whether they were being asked for additional information or that they could appeal an initial determination. In other cases, constituents reported submitting an application to FEMA on multiple occasions before the application was finally accepted. This lack of clarity created a barrier to Vermonters seeking assistance after the flooding—particularly low-income families who often have less time and resources to devote to working through the bureaucratic process.
- **Insufficient technical assistance.** Though Vermont, working with FEMA, ultimately applied for, and received federal funding to support technical assistance through Disaster Case Management (DCM), it took over three months for the state’s application to be approved so that it could begin setting up the DCM program. As a result, Vermonters relied on volunteer organizations across the state in addition to—and in some cases in lieu of—federally- and state-funded resources. Constituents reported receiving inconsistent information from FEMA staff at the national call center, local disaster recovery centers, and a field representative.

We appreciate that FEMA has taken steps to improve its IA program. For example, FEMA recently released the Interim Final Rule “Individual Assistance Program Equity,” an effort to better support disaster survivors by expanding eligibility for housing assistance and simplifying the application process. FEMA has also recently implemented changes to the IA program for Presidentially Declared Disasters on or after March 2024.<sup>5</sup>

To help us better understand the steps that FEMA and Congress can take to further improve disaster response, and to ensure FEMA addresses the challenges faced by our constituents, we request answers to the following questions—accompanied by a staff briefing—no later than May 29, 2024:

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<sup>3</sup> Under current law, FEMA provides Direct Housing Assistance—such as transportable temporary housing or manufactured housing units—only at the request of an affected state and after it determines that the provision of Rental Assistance will not be sufficient to secure temporary housing. Specifically, FEMA must determine that there exists a lack of available temporary housing resources, that increasing the value of Rental Assistance would be insufficient to secure additional housing, and that additional, non-FEMA assistance is insufficient to meet individuals’ housing needs. Federal Emergency Management Agency, *FEMA Direct Housing Guide* (February 2020) (online at [https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/2020-07/Direct\\_Housing\\_Guide\\_Feb2020.pdf](https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/2020-07/Direct_Housing_Guide_Feb2020.pdf)).

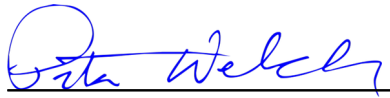
<sup>4</sup> General Accounting Office, *Disaster Assistance: Additional Actions Needed to Strengthen FEMA’s Individuals and Households Program* (Sept. 30, 2020) (GAO-20-503) (online at [www.gao.gov](http://www.gao.gov)) (accessed March 7, 2024).

<sup>5</sup> Federal Emergency Management Agency, *FEMA Updates the Individual Assistance Program* (April 2024) (online at [https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/documents/fema\\_ia-reform-one-pager.pdf](https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/documents/fema_ia-reform-one-pager.pdf)) (accessed May 7, 2024).

1. With respect to Immediate Disaster Case Management (IDCM) and Disaster Case Management (DCM) assistance:
  - a. Please describe the needs required for states to receive Immediate Disaster Case Management (IDCM).
  - b. How many communities with Presidential Declared Natural Disasters were granted IDCM in 2023?
  - c. What barriers, if any, does FEMA face in distributing DCM funding in a timely manner following disasters?
  - d. What process changes, if any, could FEMA consider to make it easier for state, local, and volunteer-run organizations providing technical assistance and case management services to access funds?
  - e. What steps, if any, should Congress consider to better streamline the provision of case management funding?
  
2. With respect to Direct Housing Assistance:
  - a. What challenges, if any, does FEMA face in housing disaster victims under the Direct Housing Assistance program in a timely manner?
  - b. What metrics does FEMA use to determine whether Direct Housing Assistance is needed following a disaster, and in what timeframe is that determination made?
  - c. In the second quarter of 2023, immediately prior to the flooding, the rental vacancy rate in Vermont, as determined by the Department of Housing and Urban Development, was just 1.8 percent. What steps, if any, could FEMA take to expedite providing housing for those with housing damage to ensure that victims are not living in damaged homes?
  
3. With respect to IA determination letters:
  - a. Please provide examples of determination letters sent to Vermonters in 2023, including determination letters that include final denials of IA assistance and determination letters that inform individuals they can appeal their determination.
  - b. What steps is FEMA taking to improve the clarity and efficacy of its mailed correspondence surrounding IA determinations, including any efforts to solicit and implement survivor feedback?
  - c. How often does FEMA update its determination letter process to ensure applicants are aware of appeal options?

- d. What is FEMA doing to ensure survivors do not have to submit multiple applications for the same benefits?
4. With respect to FEMA's new streamlined process for the Individuals and Households Programs (IHP), what is the national denial rate for IA applications before the IHP process updates and what does FEMA project the denial rate for IA applications will be under the new process?
5. What improvements could FEMA make to ensure survivors are receiving consistent and accurate information, provided across disparate outlets, such as the national call center, local recovery centers, and field representatives?

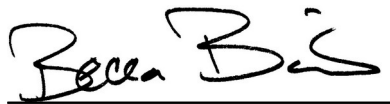
Sincerely,



Peter Welch  
United States Senator



Bernard Sanders  
United States Senator



Becca Balint  
Member of Congress