
Stretched Thin: The Erosion of FEMA’s Core Mission Under DHS

**HOW THE DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY DIVERTED
FEDERAL EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AGENCY RESOURCES TO
SUPPORT IMMIGRATION ENFORCEMENT AND THE
CONSEQUENCES FOR AMERICA’S DISASTER READINESS**

INVESTIGATIVE REPORT

Prepared for:

Ranking Member of the Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings and
Emergency Management

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Emergency Management

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Contents

Executive Summary	2
I. Preliminary Findings	3
II. Introduction	5
A. FEMA's Mission and Authorities.....	5
B. The Trump Administration’s Immigration Enforcement Agenda.....	7
III. Summary of Investigation and Methodology	8
IV. Findings of the Investigation	8
A. How DHS Has Directed FEMA to Support the Deportation Agenda.....	8
i. FEMA Details to ICE and CBP	8
ii. Misuse of FEMA Personnel Authorities and Potential Anti-Deficiency Act Violations .	13
iii. Use of FEMA Funding for Detention Facility.....	15
B. FEMA’s Readiness to Respond to Disasters.....	17
i. Workforce Cuts.....	17
ii. Training Curtailments.....	21
iii. Disaster Response Impacts	23
V. Recommendations.....	33
VI. Conclusion	34

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents the findings of an investigation conducted by the Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings and Emergency Management into the Department of Homeland Security’s (DHS) diversion of Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) resources to support large-scale immigration enforcement operations and the consequences of that diversion for the Nation’s disaster readiness.

FEMA’s statutory mission, established by the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act of 2006 and grounded in the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act, is to protect the Nation from all hazards by leading a comprehensive, risk-based emergency management system. Federal law expressly prohibits the diversion of FEMA’s assets, functions or missions to the “principal and continuing use” of any other DHS component in ways that reduce the agency’s capability to perform its missions. The evidence gathered by the Subcommittee indicates that Trump’s FEMA has violated both the letter and the spirit of that prohibition.

Beginning in August 2025, DHS activated a sustained deployment of FEMA personnel to support U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and U.S. Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) detention and enforcement operations across multiple states. FEMA personnel were directed to perform functions, including operational planning for arrests, raids and patrols; processing and logistics for detained noncitizens; recruiting and onboarding ICE officers; and day-to-day management of immigration detention facilities. FEMA has confirmed these roles in writing to the Government Accountability Office (GAO). One witness described FEMA as the “operational backbone” of the enforcement campaign, stating, “ICE could not have done this work without FEMA.”

This has occurred simultaneously with the most severe contraction of FEMA’s workforce since the period preceding Hurricane Katrina. FEMA has lost over 5,000 full-time personnel since January 2025 through a combination of Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE)-related reductions, non-renewals of Cadre of On-Call Response/Recovery (CORE) contracts, voluntary departures accelerated by low morale and forced reassignments. A hiring freeze in place from January 2025 through May 2026 prevented the agency from backfilling these losses. Senior GS-15s and Senior Executive Service employees have departed in unprecedented numbers.

The consequences of these actions were tragically spotlighted during the July 4, 2025 flooding in Texas, which killed more than 100 people. FEMA’s disaster assistance call center collapsed after Secretary Noem declined to renew its contractor. When the former acting FEMA administrator was confronted about this failure before the Subcommittee, he denied the call center contract had lapsed and described independent reporting on the failure as “fake news,” even as his own internal memoranda confirmed the lapse and requested emergency funding to address it.

This report concludes with eight recommendations, including recalling all FEMA personnel from immigration enforcement details, resuming FEMA hiring and training programs, strengthening congressional oversight of the disaster declaration process, establishing FEMA as an independent agency and amending the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act to create enforceable penalties for the diversion of FEMA resources away from its statutory mission.

I. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Based on the evidence gathered to date, the Committee makes the following preliminary findings:

Finding 1: DHS directed FEMA to serve as the operational backbone of large-scale immigration enforcement and detention operations, a function with no basis in FEMA’s statutory mission and without clear legal authority.

Finding 2: Disaster Relief Fund (DRF)-funded CORE employees were detailed to ICE in apparent violation of Stafford Act restrictions, for durations far exceeding prior administrative practice and potentially without required interagency reimbursement agreements, raising Anti-Deficiency Act concerns.

Finding 3: FEMA's National Incident Management Assistance Team (IMAT) was deployed to CBP headquarters to assist in planning interior immigration raids, representing an unprecedented repurposing of a core disaster management asset.

Finding 4: For the first time, FEMA staff are being used to support a non-humanitarian DHS mission that is beyond the scope of FEMA's mission and the Stafford Act.

Finding 5: FEMA submitted a written response to the Government Accountability Office (GAO) explicitly confirming that its personnel performed "operational planning support for executing arrests, raids, and patrols" for ICE and CBP.

Finding 6: FEMA's delayed response to disasters in Texas resulted in demonstrable harm to disaster survivors, and at least one witness has characterized the Texas response as a deliberate suppression of action.

Finding 7: FEMA CORE employees, whose contracts were being denied en masse to reduce the workforce, were offered automatic contract renewals in exchange for volunteering for ICE/CBP details, which created a coercive dynamic.

Finding 8: FEMA employees can no longer spearhead innovative responses to meet the needs of disaster survivors. For example, the Trump White House expressed "strong displeasure" over a \$24 million food box program in Western North Carolina after Hurricane Helene and subsequently directed food box programs to not be used in response to future disasters.

Finding 9: FEMA's Information Bulletin No. 568 directed grant recipients not to have "foreign nationals or noncitizens" in grant-funded positions. FEMA's definition of "foreign nationals" explicitly includes Lawful Permanent Residents.

Finding 10: FEMA's mission to help people before, during and after disasters has been measurably undermined by DHS' policy goals surrounding border security.

Finding 11: FEMA employees have been deployed to support ICE and CBP in detention centers and other facilities for more than 120 days, which may be a violation of the Anti-Deficiency Act.

Finding 12: The Subcommittee could find no evidence of a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) between FEMA and ICE or FEMA and CBP that assures FEMA and the Disaster Relief Fund (DRF) are fully reimbursed for their work related to border security missions.

Finding 13: The DHS Secretary instructed FEMA response teams to provide special assistance to counties deemed to be "presidential priorities" because of the county's voting record.

Finding 14: David Richardson, the former FEMA Senior Official Performing the Duties of Administrator, lied to Congress in a hearing and in a written response to questions for the record

when questioned about disaster survivor call rates and call center contracts in the wake of Texas' July 4 flash floods.

II. INTRODUCTION

A. FEMA's Mission and Authorities

FEMA's primary statutory authority derives from the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act, 42 U.S.C. § 5121 et seq. (Stafford Act). The Stafford Act authorizes the President to declare major disasters and directs FEMA to coordinate the federal government's response. FEMA's DRF is the principal mechanism through which disaster response is financed.

FEMA's current statutory mission, established by the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act of 2006 (PKEMRA)¹, is "to reduce the loss of life and property and protect the Nation from all hazards, including natural disasters, acts of terrorism, and other man-made disasters, by leading and supporting the Nation in a risk-based, comprehensive emergency management system of preparedness, protection, response, recovery, and mitigation."² PKEMRA was enacted in direct response to catastrophic failures in FEMA's response to Hurricane Katrina, and it specifically prohibits the DHS secretary from "substantially or significantly" reducing FEMA's ability to perform its missions, authorities and responsibilities.³ Further, the statute expressly provides that "[n]o asset, function, or mission of the Agency may be diverted to the principal and continuing use of any other organization, unit, or entity of the Department ... except for details or assignments that do not reduce the capability of the Agency to perform its missions."⁴

FEMA has three main employee categories: Permanent Full Time, CORE and Reservists. Permanent Full-Time staff are traditional, career civil service employees who handle the day-to-day operations, management and long-term planning of the agency; their salaries are paid out of FEMA's annual operations and support budget. FEMA's CORE employee category consists of on-call, temporary workers funded directly from the DRF and employment is legally tied to Stafford Act activities. They typically work on 2–4-year contracts, which are eligible for renewal. In prior administrations, FEMA Counsel consistently interpreted permissible CORE details outside FEMA to be 90 days, with extensions limited and typically confined to inter-FEMA assignments. Reservists are intermittent part-time employees who are activated only when specific disasters strike and are also funded by the DRF.

¹ Title VI of P.L. 109-295

² 6 U.S.C. §313(b)(1).

³ 6 U.S.C. §316(c)(1).

⁴ 6 U.S.C. §316(c)(2).

The DHS Secretary possesses authority to detail FEMA employees to other components under 5 U.S.C. §3341, which permits the head of an executive department to detail employees among its bureaus and offices by written order, for periods not exceeding 120 days, renewable in individual cases. While prior administrations have used this authority, they have done so consistently in service of FEMA's humanitarian and emergency management mission. Over time, DHS has increasingly relied on FEMA's flexibility for non-disaster surge missions, particularly its Surge Capacity Force (SCF) and the DHS Volunteer Force housed within FEMA's Field Operations Directorate (FOD). The SCF was activated in specific cases following Hurricane Sandy (2012), the 2017 hurricane season and Hurricanes Helene and Milton (2024) to support Stafford Act disaster responses. Prior uses of the Volunteer Force for non-Stafford missions included Operation Allies Welcome and unaccompanied minor response operations at the southern border, where FEMA's logistical expertise was applied to aid with acute humanitarian needs for limited periods, on a reimbursable basis, and at the direction of the DHS secretary pursuant to the National Response Framework (NRF) and interagency agreements.

Those prior non-Stafford deployments were controversial. A May 2026 Congressional Research Service memorandum prepared for this Subcommittee found that between 2014 and 2021, FEMA's Incident Management Assistance Teams (IMAT) were deployed for non-Stafford Act missions on 502 deployment days, a pace FEMA itself warned "reduces the Agency's overall readiness posture for Stafford Act incidents." FEMA's FY2025 budget request similarly warned that sustained non-disaster deployments, including Southwest Border operations, threatened "staff burnout, subject matter expert attrition, and imperils readiness against future disasters." The current Administration's use of FEMA personnel for immigration enforcement differs from these already contentious precedents in both duration and character and arrives at a moment when FEMA's workforce capacity has already significantly diminished.

As of June 2026, seven of FEMA's Regional Administrator positions are vacant. CRS reported in September 2025 that GAO found that FEMA regions responding to Hurricanes Helene and Milton had never previously experienced such reliance on responders drawn from outside the region, including staff pulled from other active incidents. FEMA further reported to GAO that due to federal workforce reductions, it could mobilize only approximately 600 Surge Capacity Force volunteers in 2025, compared to 1,290 in 2024, a reduction of more than half. This reduction in emergency management personnel, the deployment of FEMA staff for non-humanitarian or non-disaster DHS missions and other actions under this Administration have undermined FEMA's mission readiness and ability to respond swiftly and efficiently when a disaster strikes. As the United States enters the 2026 hurricane season, these issues and setbacks raise grave concerns about the agency's ability to keep Americans safe before, during, and after natural disasters.

B. The Trump Administration's Immigration Enforcement Agenda

Upon taking office on January 20, 2025, President Trump issued executive orders directing an immediate and dramatic expansion of interior immigration enforcement, including Executive Orders 14159, 14161, 14165, and 14167. These orders set in motion a whole of government mobilization that included agencies and personnel well outside the traditional immigration enforcement apparatus, including the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Drug Enforcement Administration, Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), Internal Revenue Service, the U.S. Marshals Service, U.S. Agency for International Development, U.S. Secret Service, civilian DoD employees and Judge Advocate Generals (JAGs), who were requisitioned to serve as immigration judges. ICE has also hired approximately 12,000 new personnel with funds provided by the FY25 reconciliation package.⁵

The Administration has simultaneously pursued a rapid expansion of immigration detention capacity. In 2026, this included the purchase of large warehouse facilities, secured through an expedited bidding process that required prospective contractors to sign non-disclosure agreements, and the expansion of family detention sites. It has been widely reported that the warehouses have been acquired well above market value and will require substantial renovation costs.

A central pillar of Trump's enforcement strategy has been the expansion of 287(g) agreements, under which local law enforcement agencies are deputized as immigration enforcement officers. Florida has the most expansive 287(g) program in the country; it is reportedly being used to locate unaccompanied children using local police rather than child protective services. Emergency managers in states including Florida and Texas face significant pressure to enter 287(g) agreements. Many local emergency management offices are integrated with local law enforcement, so 287(g) risks impacting emergency management capacity in disaster prone states like Florida and Texas.

Habeas corpus litigation has become a principal tool of legal resistance. Because ICE is using its discretionary detention authority aggressively, immigration attorneys, many of whom had never previously filed writs of habeas corpus, are now doing so routinely. ICE has responded to habeas filings by immediately transferring detainees before courts can act on the petitions, complicating judicial review.

Overall, the Administration's sweeping immigration agenda has used FEMA resources and personnel to aid in carrying out large-scale immigration enforcement operations, distracting the

⁵ Public Law 119-21

agency from its statutorily required responsibilities, jeopardizing its workforce levels and expertise, and reducing its ability to respond to disasters and aid survivors.

III. SUMMARY OF INVESTIGATION AND METHODOLOGY

Committee staff conducted interviews with relevant stakeholders and current and former FEMA employees across multiple program offices and regions. Witnesses are identified by anonymized designators in this report. Staff also reviewed publicly available information regarding FEMA's organizational structure, the DHS Volunteer Force and relevant statutory and regulatory authorities.

IV. FINDINGS OF THE INVESTIGATION: NON-DISASTER MISSIONS

A. How DHS Has Directed FEMA to Support the Deportation Agenda

DHS is using FEMA personnel and resources to execute the President's immigration and border security policy goals. FEMA personnel have been utilized to plan deportation raids and arrests, recruit new ICE and CBP officers and manage day-to-day operations at detention facilities. The use of FEMA personnel for a non-humanitarian mission with an undefined time frame is unprecedented.

i. FEMA Details to ICE and CBP

There is precedent for the diversion of FEMA personnel for non-disaster humanitarian work for migrant influxes. DHS used FEMA's surge capacity for border-related support in 2014, 2019, and 2021-2024.⁶ However, those deployments were limited in scope and duration, addressed acute needs and, critically, involved FEMA acting in a logistical support role at the periphery of immigration operations, not as the operational backbone of an arrest and deportation campaign.

The current deployment of FEMA personnel represents a substantial shift in FEMA's mission. In August 2025, the DHS activated a sustained deployment of FEMA personnel in support of ICE detention and enforcement operations across multiple states.

FEMA's operational role is not administrative or peripheral. According to Witness C, a former FEMA employee with working knowledge of FEMA's National Incident Management Assistance Team – Homeland Security (NIMAT-HS) and field experience at a Texas detention facility:

⁶ Congressional Research Service. Memo prepared for Ranking Member Stanton. *Subject: DHS Secretary Deployment of FEMA Personnel to Support Non-Stafford Act Incidents*. May 13, 2026. [See Appendix]

“ICE could not have done this work without FEMA. ICE is good at law enforcement, but operations, strategy, and the big picture—FEMA created that structure for them, building the plan and the operation toward the mission end goal.”

At the onset of this investigation, the Subcommittee requested technical assistance from the Government Accountability Office (GAO) to compile and provide available data and information regarding the extent to which FEMA has been directed to detail employees, reassign personnel or otherwise redirect agency resources to support ICE hiring, operations and other immigration and border security activities. GAO requested information from FEMA in order to fulfill this request. In response to GAO’s inquires, FEMA wrote to GAO:

“For the DHS Southern Border and Internal Immigration Enforcement Mission, volunteers’ duties included assisting ICE and U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) with data entry in information systems; operational planning support for executing arrests, raids, and patrols; processing and throughput logistics for managing the physical flow of detained noncitizens from arrest to deportation; and other logistical support, such as moving law enforcement personnel, operational capabilities and support equipment across the United States.”

The admission that the Department of Homeland Security is using FEMA personnel to conduct arrests, raids and patrols represents a striking departure from the agency's foundational purpose. FEMA was established as a humanitarian body, designed to serve Americans in their most vulnerable moments: in the aftermath of hurricanes, floods and other disasters. It is not a law enforcement entity. Its personnel are trained in crisis relief, logistics and recovery operations, not in the legal standards, use-of-force protocols or constitutional constraints that govern policing and immigration enforcement. Repurposing the agency for enforcement operations does not merely stretch its mandate; it directly contradicts FEMA's own stated mission to help Americans before, during and after disasters. Blurring this line risks not only the integrity of the agency, but the trust of the communities FEMA depends on for cooperation when disaster strikes.

Witness C substantiated that FEMA personnel have served as the connective tissue between ICE and the Department of Defense (DoD) civilians performing ground-level processing at detention facilities. FEMA staff are physically stationed within detention centers where they liaise between ICE and CBP headquarters, DoD personnel and FEMA headquarters. They maintain operational projections, assess capacity needs at individual facilities and make recommendations as new detention warehouse-based facilities come online. They physically transport DoD civilian personnel between detention centers in accordance with fluctuating population size at detention centers.

According to Witness C, the estimated field footprint encompasses 50 to 80 FEMA personnel, with an additional 25 to 30 FEMA headquarters staff supporting the mission in various capacities. FEMA reported to GAO that 41 FEMA personnel volunteered to deploy to the DHS Southern Border and Internal Immigration Enforcement Mission as part of the DHS voluntary force; 25 of the 41 are reported as currently deployed and serving in roles of volunteer sector lead, volunteer crew lead, ops coordinator and planning cell members.

A snapshot of FEMA’s Deployment Tracking System, provided by Witness E, a FEMA employee with access to the Agency’s internal systems, filtered for FEMA managed deployments to ICE and CBP, confirms that FEMA is managing 25 active deployment teams of federal employees across the country.

Row Labels	COR	PFT	ON	STAFF AUGMENTATI	Grand Total
DHS-DoW-CBP-OFO				2	2
DHS-DoW-CBP-OFO NSAE - San Diego, California - AWS				2	2
DHS-DoW-CBP-USBP				10	10
DHS-DoW-CBP-USBP NSAE - Dania Beach, Florida - AWS				1	1
DHS-DoW-CBP-USBP NSAE - El Paso, Texas - AWS Hondo Pass				1	1
DHS-DoW-CBP-USBP NSAE - Imperial, California - AWS 221				2	2
DHS-DoW-CBP-USBP NSAE - San Ysidro, California - AWS				1	1
DHS-DoW-CBP-USBP NSAE - Washington, District Of Columbia - AWS HQ DC				5	5
DHS-DoW-ICE-ERO		13	12	159	184
DHS-DoW-ICE-ERO NSAE - Albuquerque, New Mexico - AWS			1	14	15
DHS-DoW-ICE-ERO NSAE - Chantilly, Virginia - AWS				21	21
DHS-DoW-ICE-ERO NSAE - Chicago, Illinois - AWS				1	1
DHS-DoW-ICE-ERO NSAE - Conroe, Texas - AWS		1	1	9	11
DHS-DoW-ICE-ERO NSAE - El Paso, Texas - AWS 6920				2	2
DHS-DoW-ICE-ERO NSAE - El Paso, Texas - AWS 8915				16	16
DHS-DoW-ICE-ERO NSAE - Houston, Texas - AWS				1	1
DHS-DoW-ICE-ERO NSAE - Norfolk, Virginia - AWS Norfolk Sub Office				2	2
DHS-DoW-ICE-ERO NSAE - Oklahoma City, Oklahoma - AWS				1	1
DHS-DoW-ICE-ERO NSAE - Richmond, Virginia - AWS		1	1	7	9
DHS-DoW-ICE-ERO NSAE - Salem, Virginia - AWS				1	1
DHS-DoW-ICE-ERO NSAE - Washington, District Of Columbia - AWS		1		11	12
DHS-DoW-ICE-ERO NSAE - Washington, District Of Columbia - PDS FEMA Staff		8	7		15
DHS-DoW-ICE-ERO NSAE - Williston, Vermont - AWS Midday Shift 1400 - 2200		1		23	24
DHS-DoW-ICE-ERO NSAE - Williston, Vermont - AWS Morning Shift 0600 - 1400				5	5
DHS-DoW-ICE-ERO NSAE - Williston, Vermont - AWS Overnight Shift 2200 - 0600				3	3
DHS-DoW-ICE-ERO NSAE - Williston, Vermont - AWS Training / Split Shift 1000 - 1800		1	2	42	45
DHS-DoW-ICE-OAFM				3	3
DHS-DoW-ICE-OAFM NSAE - Washington, District Of Columbia - AWS				3	3
DHS-DoW-ICE-SRAD				1	1
DHS-DoW-ICE-SRAD NSAE - Washington, District Of Columbia - AWS				1	1
Grand Total		13	12	175	200

Figure 1: FEMA's Deployment Tracking System to ICE and CBP

An ICE or CBP facility or detention center is present at all of the locations listed in Figure 1., which validates reports from Witness C that FEMA is assisting with day-to-day operations at detention centers.

Witness D, a FEMA employee with working knowledge of FEMA’s Field Operations Directorate and the DHS Volunteer Force, a small section within FEMA’s Field Operations Directorate, informed the Subcommittee that the DHS Volunteer Force was activated for the immigration enforcement mission in September 2025. The Volunteer Force is staffed by approximately four full-time FEMA employees, working in close coordination with FEMA’s Surge Capacity Force. Witness D reported the Volunteer Force’s function has been to recruit, vet and place federal civilian volunteers, primarily from the Department of Defense, at ICE and CBP locations nationwide. Participating DoD components have included the Army, Air Force, Navy, Defense Logistics Agency, Army Corps of Engineers and briefly the Marine Corps.

According to Witness D, DoD volunteers are performing administrative, call center, fleet management and facility support roles. Witness C also reported observing DoD volunteers have direct contact with detainees while facilitating their processing at detention centers. Witness D described the number of DoD civilians required to meet the needs created by the DHS Southern Border and Internal Enforcement Mission as “voluminous,” running into the hundreds of personnel. By March 2026, the pool of qualifying volunteers was effectively exhausted, prompting DHS Secretary Mullin to issue a broadcast message to all DoD civilian employees soliciting additional participation.

From: OSD PR - NO REPLY <osd.pr@mail.mj>
Sent: Thursday, March 19, 2026 10:10 AM
Subject: Support our partners at the Department of Homeland Security

CAUTION EXTERNAL EMAIL: Do not click on any links or open any attachments unless you trust the sender and/or know the content is safe. If you are suspicious of the e-mail, click on the Report Suspicious Emails button.
FOR DEPARTMENT OF WAR CIVILIAN EMPLOYEES

The Department of War has a long history of interagency collaboration to support the critical missions of our country. In addition to the Department’s primary national security mission, our talented civilian employees have dedicated their time, patriotism, and expertise to critical and lifesaving activities, such as fighting wildfires and helping American communities rebuild after disasters.

Secretary Hegseth encourages Department civilians to step up to meet our country’s next challenge: volunteering to support the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in securing our borders. I am renewing the call for additional dedicated civil servant volunteers to meet continued mission-critical roles in support of DHS. Many of our dedicated civil servants have already answered the call to defend the homeland, 900 have submitted applications to answer President Trump’s call for support to immigration enforcement activities that enhance public safety.

Details will directly support the operations of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) as they work to ensure a safe and orderly immigration system. To date, participants have helped ICE and CBP develop concepts of operation, provided logistics support, and managed informant tiplines that led to the arrests of human smugglers, drug dealers, and other criminals.

These voluntary details provide an opportunity for DoW civilians to amplify their impact as public servants. You will broaden your professional experience, witness tangible outcomes from your efforts, and leave work each day knowing you have made your country safer.

Department Components have identified coordinators for this effort who will disseminate information about the application process. Supervisors should ensure their employees receive this information and support them if they choose to apply.

Apply to **Defend the Homeland** here: <https://www.usajobs.gov/job/846915600>

Best,
Tim

Timothy D. Dill
Assistant Secretary of War (Manpower & Reserve Affairs)

Figure 2: Broadcast Message Soliciting DoD Civilian Employees to Participate in DHS Border Security Operations

The Subcommittee Received Figure 2. from GAO on March 19, 2026

Witness D reported that at least one FEMA employee resigned rather than support the DHS Southern Border and Internal Enforcement Mission. Witness D also advised that FEMA personnel have been subject to public protest as a result of their details to ICE and CBP; FEMA employees in Minneapolis supporting DoD volunteers were reportedly surrounded by protesters while en route to an ICE facility. Others operating call intake centers have been subjected to hostile communications from members of the public. Witness D’s testimony reflects genuine concern about the safety of deployed personnel.

FEMA also reported to GAO that 125 FEMA employees from the Office of the Chief Security Officer and the Office of the Chief Human Capital Officer were detailed to ICE during hurricane season between August 2025 and October 2025. FEMA stated that detailees began returning to FEMA in January 2026 or were extended to end in May 2026.

Witness A, a former FEMA employee with working knowledge of the FEMA Office of the Chief Counsel, advised the Subcommittee that the volume of ICE-related Human Resources (HR) processing consumed nearly all of FEMA's hiring and personnel administration capacity. Routine HR functions, including duty station changes, CORE non-renewals and standard administrative actions, were delayed or disrupted as a result. FEMA additionally reported to GAO:

“Human resources personnel supported ICE surge hiring efforts by reviewing applications for qualifications, issuing tentative and final job offers, coordinating start dates, classifying position descriptions, and processing benefits and payroll actions. FEMA Personnel Security Specialists conducted background investigation adjudications and made suitability determinations for prospective hires.”

Upon reading the extent of the role FEMA personnel played in the hiring of ICE agents, former FEMA Chief of Staff Michael Coen said:

“Based on the response FEMA was handling all the hiring steps from classifying position to onboarding. This is significant effort to process all these steps.”

Several witnesses and stakeholders interviewed for this report expressed concern that FEMA personnel are unqualified to hire law enforcement agents since they do not have the requisite experience or training to make informed decisions.

Witness A told the Subcommittee that a separate solicitation was issued to DHS legal staff, including FEMA counsel, asking attorneys to volunteer to represent the government in immigration court proceedings. FEMA attorneys are not trained in immigration law; their expertise lies in administrative law, procurement and emergency management authorities. Witness A believes a couple FEMA attorneys accepted this detail. Witness B informed the Subcommittee that this type of solicitation was also conducted in 2021 and 2022.

Witness C additionally reported that NIMAT-HS, was embedded at CBP headquarters for approximately three months following President Trump's second inauguration to help plan the strategic execution of interior immigration enforcement raids. This deployment was not classified as a detail and was an allowable use of the NIMAT-HS team. However, Witness C

characterized the national security framing used to justify this deployment as “a stretch,” noting that prior NIMAT-HS deployments had a genuine nexus to emergencies rather than being “targeted toward a community or group of individuals.”

In response to deployment of FEMA personnel to non-humanitarian events, former FEMA Chief of Staff Michael Coen told the Subcommittee:

“FEMA supporting ICE further erodes trust in the Agency and mission. How can the American people have faith that their government will be there for them and their neighbors following a disaster if FEMA is supporting arrests and deportations? This a prime example of why FEMA should be independent.”

ii. Misuse of FEMA Personnel Authorities and Potential Anti-Deficiency Act Violations

The staffing mechanics FEMA details to ICE and CBP raise serious legal concerns.

FEMA’s CORE employee salaries are funded by the DRF and are legally restricted to Stafford Act disaster work. Historically, CORE details to external agencies were limited to 90 days, with possible extensions up to 120 days. Extensions beyond 120 days were viewed as a violation of the Anti-Deficiency Act.⁷ According to Witness A, this interpretation was grounded in a legal opinion by former FEMA Chief Counsel Adrian Sevier.

Witness A reported that in 2025, an insufficient number of FEMA permanent full-time employees volunteered for ICE and CBP details, so the current administration opened those details to CORE employees, who then received automatic contract renewals for participating. This created pressure for COREs to accept volunteer details to ICE and CBP because, in January and February 2025, most CORE contract renewals were denied to reduce the size of FEMA’s workforce and satisfy President Trump’s federal workforce reduction goals.⁸

FEMA reported to GAO that the agency followed standard management directed assignments and OPM guidance when detailing employees. However, a photo provided by Witness E clearly shows that details to ICE and CBP extend beyond 120 days, with many lasting more than 200 days.

⁷ 31 U.S.C. §§ 1341-1342, 1511-1519

⁸ Federal News Network. *Concerns Mount Over FEMA Staff Reductions*. January 8, 2026. Available at: <https://federalnewsnetwork.com/hiring-retention/2026/01/concerns-mount-over-fema-staff-reductions/>

Employee Type	Position	Status	Date on Site	Scheduled Release	Today	Actual Duration to 4/28	Scheduled Duration
COR	Special Projects	Deployed	9/8/2025	5/31/2026		4/28/2026	232
COR	Special Projects	Deployed	9/8/2025	5/31/2026		4/28/2026	232
COR	Special Projects	Deployed	10/23/2025	5/31/2026		4/28/2026	187
COR	Volunteer Operations Coordinator	Deployed	11/13/2025	5/29/2026		4/28/2026	166
COR	Special Projects	Deployed	11/20/2025	5/31/2026		4/28/2026	159
COR	Special Projects	Deployed	11/20/2025	5/31/2026		4/28/2026	159
COR	Volunteer Sector Lead	Deployed on Rotation	1/8/2026	7/31/2026		4/28/2026	110
COR	SCF Liaison	Deployed	1/26/2026	5/31/2026		4/28/2026	92
CDR	Volunteer Sector Lead	Deployed	2/17/2026	6/26/2026		4/28/2026	70
COR	Special Projects	Deployed on Rotation	4/6/2026	7/5/2026		4/28/2026	22
COR	Volunteer Crew Lead	Deployed	3/30/2026	6/28/2026		4/28/2026	29
COR	Special Projects	Deployed	4/20/2026	5/22/2026		4/28/2026	8
COR	Special Projects	Deployed	4/7/2026	6/6/2026		4/28/2026	21
PFT	Special Projects	Deployed	9/8/2025	5/31/2026		4/28/2026	232
PFT	Special Projects	Deployed	9/8/2025	7/24/2026		4/28/2026	232
PFT	Volunteer Sector Lead	Deployed	9/8/2025	5/31/2026		4/28/2026	232
PFT	Volunteer Sector Lead	Deployed	9/10/2025	7/31/2026		4/28/2026	230
PFT	Special Projects	Deployed	10/1/2025	5/31/2026		4/28/2026	209
PFT	Special Projects	Deployed	10/14/2025	5/31/2026		4/28/2026	196
PFT	Special Projects	Deployed	10/17/2025	5/31/2026		4/28/2026	193
PFT	Volunteer Operations Coordinator	Deployed	10/20/2025	5/31/2026		4/28/2026	190
PFT	Volunteer Crew Lead	Deployed	11/24/2025	7/31/2026		4/28/2026	155
PFT	Volunteer Sector Lead	Deployed	1/12/2026	5/15/2026		4/28/2026	106
PFT	Volunteer Crew Lead	Deployed on Rotation	1/29/2026	5/29/2026		4/28/2026	89
PFT	Volunteer Sector Lead	Deployed	1/30/2026	5/8/2026		4/28/2026	88

Figure 3: FEMA DTS Data on Deployed Staff to ICE and CBP

Witness A stated a belief that extending DRF-funded CORE employees on non-Stafford immigration enforcement details without reimbursement constituted a violation of the Anti-Deficiency Act.⁹ Witness A added that, by the time they departed FEMA, no MOA between FEMA and ICE or FEMA and CBP had been executed to govern FEMA personnel deployments or ensure DRF reimbursement.

FEMA also wrote to the GAO that two MOAs exist in relation to this mission: one between DHS and DoD that “outlines the terms and conditions, including administrative and financial responsibilities, for detailing civilian employees from DoD to DHS in support of Southwest Border operations” and a one between DHS and FEMA “authorizing FEMA to activate the DHS Volunteer Force.” FEMA did not report an MOA between FEMA and DHS to reimburse FEMA and the DRF for FEMA employee time and Agency resources to support immigration and border operations. Responsibility for securing such an agreement falls to FEMA’s Chief Financial Officer.

⁹ 31 U.S.C. §§ 1341-1342, 1511-1519

FEMA reported to GAO that it spent \$1.33M for salaries and benefits of employees detailed to ICE from August 2025 to February 2026. FEMA clarified that funding for details of Permanent Full-Time staff was non-reimbursable.

FEMA went on to say that FEMA funds were used to pay salaries and benefits of the DHS Volunteer Force supporting the Southern Border and Internal Immigration enforcement mission. CBP and ICE are supposed to pay all associated travel costs for FEMA personnel.

iii. Use of FEMA Funding for the South Florida Detention Facility “Alligator Alcatraz”

The Committee has reviewed publicly available documents and reports showcasing how the Florida state government has long anticipated substantial reimbursements for the \$1.7 billion cost of operating two immigration detention centers, the South Florida Detention Facility, known as “Alligator Alcatraz,” and a jail-turned-detention facility in Baker County called “Deportation Depot,” for a two-year period.¹⁰ Governor Ron DeSantis has continued to reiterate his expectation that nearly half of this spending would be reimbursed by FEMA.¹¹ On September 30, 2025, DHS gave notice that \$608.4 million would be awarded to the State of Florida Division of Emergency Management (FDEM) through the newly created Detention Support Grant Program (DSGP).¹² Records show that Florida aided FEMA in drafting the grant language for DSGP funding as early as June 2025.¹³ Grant eligibility was limited to FDEM only.¹⁴

Although FEMA has not officially confirmed where funding for this program is coming from, former DHS Secretary Kristi Noem shared via her official social media that “Alligator Alcatraz will be funded largely by FEMA’s Shelter and Services Program (SSP).”¹⁵ This statement was repeated by both Governor DeSantis and Tricia McLaughlin, a DHS spokesperson.¹⁶ The SSP program was authorized and appropriated by Congress for non-federal entities to offset allowable

¹⁰ Heddles, Claire, and Churchill Ndonwie. “How DeSantis Signed Away \$1 Billion for State-Run Immigrant Detention Centers.” *Miami Herald*, 5 June 2026, www.miamiherald.com/news/politics-government/state-politics/article315981332.html.

¹¹ Heddles, Claire, and Churchill Ndonwie. “DeSantis Signed Away \$1 Billion.” *Miami Herald*, June 5, 2026.

¹² Vazquez, Christina. “Florida Awarded FEMA Reimbursement for State-Run Detention Facilities, Including Alligator Alcatraz.” *Local 10 News*, 2 Oct. 2025, www.local10.com/news/florida/2025/10/02/florida-receives-fema-reimbursement-for-alligator-alcatraz/; “Fiscal Year 2025 Detention Support Grant Program.” SAM, 2025, sam.gov/fal/9ee7147447584efda2d2ed4ac51a92aa/view.

¹³ Payne, Kate. “New Records Show Florida Officials Burned More than \$1.2 Million per Day on ‘Alligator Alcatraz.’” *The Florida Trib*, Mar. 2026, floridatrib.org/2026/03/01/new-records-show-florida-officials-burned-more-than-1-2-million-per-day-on-alligator-alcatraz/.

¹⁴ “Fiscal Year 2025 Detention Support Grant Program.” SAM, 2025, sam.gov/fal/9ee7147447584efda2d2ed4ac51a92aa/view.

¹⁵ Rozen, Courtney. “US States to Get \$608 Million from FEMA to Build Migrant Detention Centers.” *Reuters*, 25 July 2025, www.reuters.com/legal/government/us-states-get-608-million-fema-build-migrant-detention-centers-2025-07-25/; hlr. “Construction and Management of the South Florida Detention Facility - Harvard Law Review.” *Harvard Law Review*, 11 Feb. 2026, harvardlawreview.org/print/vol-139/construction-and-management-of-the-south-florida-detention-facility/.

¹⁶ Dixon, Matt. “Florida Has so Far Received No Federal Funds for ‘Alligator Alcatraz.’” *NBC News*, 3 July 2025, www.nbcnews.com/politics/trump-administration/florida-no-federal-funds-alligator-alcatraz-rcna216758.

costs incurred for certain services provided to noncitizens who have been processed by DHS and are awaiting the outcome of their immigration proceedings.¹⁷ SSP reimbursed costs related to providing food, beds for overnight stays, short-distance transportation, acute medical care items, hygiene supplies and labor costs.¹⁸ In 2025, FEMA repurposed this funding to detain immigrants, which violated congressional intent.¹⁹

Recent correspondence appears to show that FEMA distributed nearly \$59 million of the expected \$608.4 million to FDEM in May 2026.²⁰ There is no publicly available information about what this funding will cover, or how many additional payments would be made to cover the complete, promised amount. This lack of transparency raises ethical and legal concerns as federal grant and court documents have shown that DSGP limits eligibility to operational costs; reimbursement for construction or facility modification were deemed ineligible.²¹

The reimbursement also triggers new concerns about whether the facility underwent the appropriate environmental reviews mandated by the National Environmental Policy Act. Although an April 2026 federal appeals court case determined that Alligator Alcatraz does not need to undergo an environmental review assessment because plaintiffs demonstrated the facility was not under federal control and had not received federal funding, the recent reimbursement payment to the FDEM alters the role that the federal government is taking with this facility.²² Although FEMA initially placed the disbursement on hold until an Environmental and Historic Preservation (EHP) review was finalized, the agency has not specified whether the recent reimbursement payment was issued because the EHP review was finalized or simply because the agency removed its hold.

The FEMA reimbursement also followed reports of severe human right violations. After a lawsuit argued that detained immigrants' rights were being violated at the facility, U.S. District Judge Sheri Polster Chappell issued a preliminary injunction ordering Alligator Alcatraz officials

¹⁷ FEMA & CBP. Shelter and Services Program: First Quarter, Fiscal Year 2024 Report to Congress. November 18, 2024. Available at: <https://share.google/9lIKgcV8I7maFuCGU>

¹⁸ Caputo, Liv. “Alligator Alcatraz” Payments Land at Last: \$58 Million to Hit Florida next Week.” Florida Phoenix.” Florida Phoenix, 15 May 2026, floridaphoenix.com/2026/05/15/alligator-alcatraz-payments-land-at-last-58-million-to-hit-florida-next-week/.

¹⁹ Rozen, Courtney. “US States to Get \$608 Million from FEMA to Build Migrant Detention Centers.” Reuters, 25 July 2025, www.reuters.com/legal/government/us-states-get-608-million-fema-build-migrant-detention-centers-2025-07-25/; hlr. “Construction and Management of the South Florida Detention Facility - Harvard Law Review.” Harvard Law Review, 11 Feb. 2026, harvardlawreview.org/print/vol-139/construction-and-management-of-the-south-florida-detention-facility/.

²⁰ Caputo, Liv. “Alligator Alcatraz” Payments Land at Last. Florida Phoenix, May 15, 2026.

²¹ Caputo, Liv. “DOJ: Trump Administration Won’t Pay for “Alligator Alcatraz” Construction Costs.” Florida Phoenix.” Florida Phoenix, 25 Feb. 2026, floridaphoenix.com/2026/02/25/doj-trump-administration-wont-pay-for-alligator-alcatraz-construction-costs/.

²² Churchill Ndonwie, and Claire Heddles. “Judge Who Ordered Alligator Alcatraz Shut down Overstepped, Appeals Court Rules.” Miami Herald, 21 Apr. 2026, www.miamiherald.com/news/local/immigration/article315487059.html.

to provide access to timely free, confidential, unmonitored, unrecorded outgoing legal calls.²³ This ruling was made after finding that attorneys had to schedule appointments to visit detainees three days in advance, that detainees were often transferred to other facilities before their scheduled legal appointments and that scheduling delays meant detainees could not meet with their attorneys before key deadlines.²⁴ In extreme instances, two former detainees testified before court that they were being punished for attempting to obtain legal advice and had to use soap to write down their attorneys' phone numbers because they did not have access to pen and paper.²⁵ Furthermore, accounts from people detained at Alligator Alcatraz reveal the deplorable conditions, ranging from a lack of showers or functional toilets to a lack of air conditioning during extremely hot South Florida temperatures to persistent lighting across the facility at all hours to food shortages, questionable drinking water and lack of access to medical care.²⁶ It is illegal to use federal funds in ways that violate human or civil rights.²⁷

V. FINDINGS OF THE INVESTIGATION: FEMA'S READINESS TO RESPOND TO DISASTERS

DHS' diversion of FEMA resources to immigration enforcement has occurred simultaneously with a severe contraction of FEMA's capacity to perform its core statutory mission. The picture that emerges from witness testimony is of a smaller, less trained and hamstrung agency that has been hollowed out while disasters become more frequent and severe.

i. Workforce Cuts

FEMA has lost over 5,000 FEMA staffers since January 2025, through a combination of voluntary departures, DOGE-related reductions and forced reassignments. The losses have not been confined to entry-level or administrative staff; senior GS-15s and Senior Executive Service employees have exited FEMA at a volume unseen since the period leading up to Hurricane Katrina.²⁸ Until May 2026, hiring freezes prevented the replacement of departed employees.²⁹

²³ "Judge Orders Better Attorney Access at 'Alligator Alcatraz.'" AP News, 27 Mar. 2026, apnews.com/article/florida-alligator-alcatraz-lawyers-dd632803b17cbb76ab755654cfba27ef.

²⁴ "Judge Orders Better Attorney Access at 'Alligator Alcatraz.'" AP News, March 27, 2026.

²⁵ Team, CBS Miami. "Punished for Legal Help, Former 'Alligator Alcatraz' Detainees Say They Had to Use Soap to Write Attorneys' Numbers." *Cbsnews.com*, 29 Jan. 2026, www.cbsnews.com/miami/news/alligator-alcatraz-detainees-testimony/.

²⁶ Ceballos, Ana, et al. "Giant Bugs, Heat and a Hospital Visit: Inside Alligator Alcatraz's First Days." *Miami Herald*, 8 July 2025, www.miamiherald.com/news/local/immigration/article310130645.html.

²⁷ 42 USC 21

²⁸ CNN. Progress After Katrina is being Dismantled under Trump, Former Heads of FEMA Warn. August 29, 2025. Available at: <https://www.cnn.com/politics/fema-katrina-20-years-trump>

²⁹ Federal News Network. FEMA Begins Limited Hiring Campaign After Wave of Departures. May 29, 2026. Available at: <https://federalnewsnetwork.com/hiring-retention/2026/05/fema-begins-limited-hiring-campaign-after-wave-of-departures/>

Though FEMA has resumed hiring, a recent court filing claimed, “DHS continue to control FEMA decision making including whether or for how long to renew CORE positions.”³⁰

Witness E submitted a document to the Subcommittee, which shows that FEMA’s Cadre On-call Response/Recovery (IC CORE), Local Hire (L Hire) and Permanent Full-Time (Perm FT) employee sectors have lost 1,500, 1,000 thousand, and 1,100 thousand staffers, respectively, since the beginning of 2025.

Figure 4. was produced using data from Witness E. It shows Incident Management (IM) workforce readiness by cadres. It illustrates the discrepancy between full-time staff that are “available” or currently deployable under current force strength versus FEMA’s current force structure, which is the target. Figure 4. The data does not include full-time staff working at FEMA’s regional offices.

Cadre & Position	Current Force Structure	Current Force Strength	Percent of Force Structure Achieved
Acquisitions (ACQ)	199	178	89%
Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR)	62	29	47%
Civil Rights (CVR)	267	89	33%
Disaster Emergency Communication (DEC)	451	303	67%
Disaster Field Training Operations (DFTO)	83	50	60%
Disability Integration (DI)	63	16	25%
Disaster Survivor Assistance (DSA)	1,363	943	69%
External Affairs (EA)	427	176	41%
Environment Historic Preservation (EHP)	755	622	82%
Field Leadership (FL)	257	91	35%

³⁰ Federal News Network. DHS Continues to Make Workforce Decisions for FEMA Lawsuit Contends, June 19, 2026. Available at: [DHS continues to make workforce decisions for FEMA, lawsuit contends | Federal News Network](#)

Financial Management (FM)	197	160	81%
Hazard Mitigation (HM)	1,631	351	22%
Human Resources (HR)	146	125	86%
Individual Assistance (IA)	2,762	2,105	76%
Interagency Recovery Coordination (IRC)	392	144	37%
Information Technology (IT)	712	509	71%
Logistics (LOG)	2,059	1,254	61%
Office of the Chief Counsel (OCC)	95	75	79%
Operations (OPS)	238	271	100%
Public Assistance (PA)	4,093	1,941	47%
Planning (PLAN)	631	243	39%
Safety (SAF)	131	81	62%
Security (SEC)	112	101	90%

Figure 4: Readiness of Incident Management Workforce Readiness by Cadres

Witness E also provided data, which shows FEMA’s total cadre growth targets versus the current force strength. As of May 2026, there was a 5,000-force gap between staffing targets and actual force strength; the target force is 15,000, and the total current force strength is approximately 9,900.

The result is an agency expected to respond to the same number of disasters with roughly 30 percent of its full-time staff, many of whom lack experience in-line with departed staff. All witnesses interviewed noted that the depletion of headquarters capacity, compounded by the DHS Secretary Office’s disregard for FEMA’s mission, has created significant operations voids.

The reconciliation packages passed by Congress and signed by President Trump in 2025 and 2026 reflect a stark and troubling disparity in how the federal government is prioritizing its

workforce investments. Under the FY25 reconciliation legislation,³¹ ICE received \$8 billion to hire 10,000 new officers and agents, along with signing bonuses of up to \$50,000 for new recruits and retention incentives of up to \$50,000 for current Border Patrol agents. CBP fared similarly, receiving \$4 billion to hire 8,500 new employees, with retention incentives reaching up to \$60,000 for select officers.³² The subsequent Secure America Act adds to this investment by directing \$31 billion to ICE for a sweeping range of functions including hiring, training, transportation, IT infrastructure, facility maintenance, fleet operations, 287(g) agreements, legal advisors and immigration raids. The legislation also provides \$13.02 billion to CBP through FY2029 for hiring, training, equipping and operational support.³³ In total, tens of billions of dollars are being mobilized to rapidly expand immigration enforcement capacity, with generous financial incentives designed to accelerate recruitment at every level.

Meanwhile, FEMA, the agency responsible for protecting American lives and communities from hurricanes, wildfires, floods and other catastrophic disasters, has been moving in the opposite direction regarding federal investment and workforce recruitment. FEMA has lost approximately 30 percent of its full-time workforce, with none of the hiring authorities, recruitment bonuses, or retention incentives provided to ICE and CBP in either reconciliation package. As climate-driven disasters grow more frequent and more severe, FEMA's degraded capacity means slower response times, fewer resources pre-positioned ahead of disasters, and diminished support for the states and localities that depend on federal partnership when catastrophe strikes.

A reaction to the consequences of these workforce cuts and policy choices was submitted to the Subcommittee by Abigail McIlraith, a former FEMA Emergency Management Specialist:

“When FEMA's capabilities are dismantled, unfortunately it means survivors get left behind. I recall many conversations where I was talking to survivors who told me they needed help like yesterday, but there was nothing I could do for them. Yes, FEMA is supposed to provide appeals decisions within 90 days, but when we don't have the staffing to support reasonable casework timelines, there's nothing we can do. These were the most frustrating moments in my time at FEMA, when a survivor on the phone and I both knew they weren't getting the help they needed, but bureaucracy stood in the way and I couldn't do my job to help them.

Maybe they needed money for a contractor to fix their roof, or to buy a generator to stay warm, or to keep renting a place to stay with their kids. FEMA pays for stuff like this, but it requires sufficient staffing of caseworkers and contractor support to make it happen in a reasonable timeframe.”

³¹ Public law 119-21

³² Public Law 119-21

³³ Public Law 119-98

ii. Training Curtailments

FEMA's ability to prepare the national emergency management community, including state and local officials, first responders and tribal governments, depends on a robust training infrastructure. That infrastructure has been significantly diminished since January 2025.

The Emergency Management Institute (EMI), FEMA's primary residential training facility, and the National Fire Academy were closed for several months in 2025.³⁴ FEMA's independent study certification website, a free, publicly accessible resource through which tens of thousands of emergency managers obtain nationally recognized certifications, was taken offline during both government shutdowns of the Department of Homeland Security. Witnesses B, a former deputy administrator at FEMA, noted that maintaining the independent study website during a lapse in appropriations does not violate the Anti-Deficiency Act and that its closure served no legitimate legal purpose. The shutdown occurred overlapped with when state and local officials typically access training resources to prepare for hurricane season. Witness B reported that local emergency managers were unable to access training resources while preparing for World Cup-related emergency planning.

Mikaela Ellenwood, a former operations branch director at FEMA, told the Subcommittee that FEMA's training pipeline has been significantly compromised. Even under previous periods of staff strain, FEMA maintained a fundamental institutional commitment: when the agency was understaffed and simultaneously responding to a disaster, it still brought new personnel in and trained them. That baseline capacity no longer exists. Since FEMA instituted a hiring freeze as part of the Trump administration's effort to shrink the federal workforce, Ellenwood said, "No one is left to train in the first place." The pipeline has not just slowed; it has been severed. The institutional knowledge, the surge capacity and the trained bench of emergency professionals that FEMA depends upon to respond when the next major disaster strikes are not being replenished.

The impacts to FEMA's training and professional development operations over the past year is compounding the staffing crisis. Ellenwood highlighted that between June 2025 and April 2026, training and travel were placed on pause across the agency, frozen until they could receive explicit approval from Secretary Noem's office. While some travel and trainings were eventually approved and allowed to proceed, the overall effect was a significant delay and curtailment of the training program as a whole. For an agency whose effectiveness depends entirely on preparedness, this bureaucratic bottleneck carries real operational consequences.

FEMA has also imposed new requirements on grants used to train state and local emergency managers to respond to disasters. On June 8, 2026, FEMA's Grant Programs Directorate issued

³⁴ The Baltimore Banner. Trump Voting Town Alarmed by FEMA Cuts to National Fire Academy. March 31, 2026. Available at: <https://www.thebanner.com/western-maryland/national-fire-academy-shutdown-emmitsburg-57YVKLTB4NDR3IMQCTOREEMK2M/>

Information Bulletin No. 568,³⁵ directing all state, local, tribal and territorial recipients of FEMA non-disaster grant funding to vet and certify the immigration status of any foreign nationals whose salaries are charged to a federal award. The policy applies to 32 FEMA grant programs and requires subrecipients to complete certification documentation confirming employment eligibility for all grant-funded personnel, with initial certifications due by December 31, 2026. The bulletin instructs grant recipients that "subapplicants should not have foreign nationals or noncitizens included" and directs subrecipients to "prioritize hiring and retaining American workers for grant-funded activities," consistent with the Administration's "staff American, stay in America" policy directive. FEMA's definition of foreign nationals includes permanent lawful residents also known as green card holders.

The breadth of programs covered by this bulletin is significant. Among the 32 programs listed is the Emergency Management Performance Grant (EMPG), which is the foundational federal grant program supporting emergency management capacity at the state and local level across the country. EMPG funds local emergency management office staffing, training, exercises and planning activities. For many county and municipal emergency management offices, particularly in smaller and rural jurisdictions, EMPG funding supports the majority of their operating budgets and personnel costs. Subjecting EMPG subrecipients to immigration vetting requirements introduces a new administrative burden directly into the offices responsible for coordinating disaster preparedness and response at the community level.

There is no precedent for FEMA requiring grant recipients to vet and certify the immigration status of subrecipient personnel as a condition of federal preparedness funding. The bulletin effectively conscripts state administrative agencies, homeland security directors and local emergency managers into an immigration compliance function, requiring them to collect, consolidate and certify personnel vetting documentation from every subrecipient organization charged to a FEMA award.

The timing and scope of this policy reflect a broader pattern documented in this report, in which immigration enforcement priorities have been layered onto FEMA's preparedness and grant management functions. FEMA's grant programs exist to build and sustain the nation's emergency management capacity. Requiring the administrators of those programs to conduct and document immigration vetting of grant-funded employees, under penalty of funding holds and cost disallowances, redirects administrative attention and resources away from preparedness objectives and toward immigration compliance. For local emergency management offices already operating with limited staff and tight budgets, the added compliance burden is significant.

³⁵ FEMA: Grant Programs Directorate Information Bulletin No. 568. June 8, 2026. Available at: [Policy and Process for Foreign National Vetting in FEMA Non-Disaster Grant Programs](#)

iii. Disaster Response Impacts

The Subcommittee received information describing the material degradation in FEMA's disaster response capacity during 2025 and 2026.

First, Witness B described laborious travel restrictions imposed by DHS Secretary Noem for all travel. These restrictions significantly slowed FEMA's ability to deploy personnel to disaster-affected communities.

During the 2026 Department of Homeland Security government shutdown, FEMA travel was temporarily halted with an explicit carve-out: travel in support of immigration detention missions was not subject to the same approval requirements. FEMA personnel could be sent to ICE detention facilities without the bureaucratic hurdles applied to actual disaster deployments.³⁶

The asymmetry is revealing. An agency that cannot move quickly to a flood zone but can move quickly to a detention facility is not consistent with FEMA's mission to help Americans before and after disasters. DHS Secretary Mullin lifted the travel restrictions in late May 2026.

Ellenwood told the Subcommittee that FEMA's operational posture and risk tolerance shifted dramatically under the current administration, requiring entirely different contingency planning for disaster response. During her tenure, the Trump White House expressed strong displeasure over a \$24 million food box mission in western North Carolina following Hurricane Helene. The initiative, created and funded under the Biden administration, could not be reversed, but Trump administration officials repeatedly demanded accountability over food distribution and raised concerns that undocumented individuals may be receiving meals. Although FEMA leadership was unable to claw back the already-purchased food in 2025, senior officials subsequently directed that food box missions not be pursued in the future, citing an inability to defend the expenditure to Trump officials at FEMA and DHS and an unwillingness to expend political capital on such efforts.

Ellenwood added that this episode reflects a broader and abrupt cultural change within FEMA's leadership; risk aversion toward innovative, needs-based disaster response has increased sharply overnight. Ellenwood stated that, were she still at FEMA, she would need to plan responses in fundamentally different ways given the agency's current culture and resource constraints. While difficult to quantify, this theme was raised by all current and former FEMA witnesses interviewed for this investigation. It raises significant concerns about FEMA's capacity and institutional willingness to deploy flexible, on-the-ground solutions in future disaster scenarios.

³⁶ Washington Post. Many FEMA Staff Can't Travel During Shutdown. Some Working with ICE Still Can. February 26, 2026. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2026/02/26/fema-travel-dhs-shutdown-immigration/>

Ellenwood emphasized that FEMA's disaster declaration process, the gateway through which affected communities access federal assistance, has slowed under the Trump administration.³⁷ The pattern of declaration decisions raises serious questions about whether political considerations are supplanting what has historically been a needs-based, data-driven process, potentially delaying or denying relief to vulnerable communities. Additionally, the Trump administration stopped approving new HMGP allocations in early April 2025, marking the first time in at least 27 years that a president denied a state's request for hazard-mitigation money while approving its disaster declaration request.³⁸

Ellenwood described a deployment to New Mexico following a fire-flood event in a repeat-impact area. President Trump denied Governor Grisham's HMGP request for the major disaster declaration. However, Ellenwood explained, since the impacted area is a county that historically votes for Republican candidates, Secretary Noem dispatched a FEMA team specifically to the county, calling it a "presidential priority." The witness said that the term "presidential priority" was known to mean an area with strong political alignment with the administration. In the New Mexico case, the county wanted to fund a post-disaster buyout and relocation effort for flooded homes, an activity typically funded through FEMA's HMGP program. Secretary Noem directed field leadership to find a solution without using FEMA funds by identifying other federal resources and solutions for the county to achieve their project goals. Ellenwood's impression was that DHS wanted to maintain the appearance that it was reducing FEMA's scope and avoid working with the state's democratic Governor while fulfilling the wishes of the "presidential priority" county.

The Subcommittee acknowledges that the sample size of declarations under this administration remains relatively small, which limits definitive conclusions at this stage. However, to date, Democratic-led states have fared dramatically worse under the Trump administration. According to an analysis conducted by Politico, disaster aid requests from Democratic governors have been approved at rate of 23 percent, versus 89 percent for Republican-led states.³⁹ In six instances, President Trump denied assistance to Democratic-led states even after FEMA's own field inspections confirmed that damage levels met the federal threshold for aid.⁴⁰ The disparity extended further when the administration began releasing a portion of long-delayed disaster funding, pointedly excluding California, Illinois, Minnesota and Colorado, all states whose governors have drawn Trump's public ire.

³⁷ Politico. Trump, who called FEMA "slow" is making people wait months for help. May 22, 2025. Available at: <https://www.eenews.net/articles/trump-who-called-fema-very-slow-has-failed-to-act-on-17-disaster-requests/>

³⁸ Carnegie Endowment. The Trump Administration Is Quietly Curbing the Flow of Disaster Funding. September 19, 2025. Available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/emissary/2025/09/fema-disaster-relief-fund-drf-budget-hurting-states>

³⁹ Politico. Trump, who called FEMA "slow" is making people wait months for help. May 22, 2025. Available at: <https://www.eenews.net/articles/trump-who-called-fema-very-slow-has-failed-to-act-on-17-disaster-requests/>

⁴⁰ Id.

Notably, witnesses consistently referenced significant response delays to the July 4, 2025, flooding in Texas.

Case Study: Texas July 4 Floods

On July 4, 2025, severe flooding struck Texas Hill Country, killing more than 100 people and causing widespread destruction across several counties. The floods, which struck overnight during the Independence Day holiday weekend, were among the deadliest natural disasters in Texas history. The Guadalupe River rose rapidly, inundating a children's summer camp and surrounding communities with little warning. President Trump issued a major disaster declaration on July 6, 2025, for the affected area, triggering FEMA's statutory responsibilities under the Stafford Act and activating the federal disaster assistance apparatus. The scale and speed of the disaster generated an immediate surge in demand for federal assistance, placing FEMA's response infrastructure in the spotlight.

In the days following the July 4 floods, FEMA's disaster assistance call center operations collapsed. Abigail McIlraith told the Subcommittee her office was directly responsible for administering the FEMA helpline.

The witness explained that FEMA's call center operations rely on Outsourced Contact Center Contracts (OC3s) to handle call volume, particularly during post-disaster surges. On July 5, 2025, the OC3 contract lapsed after Secretary Noem declined to renew it, due to an internal policy requiring her personal review of expenditures exceeding \$100,000. With the contract lapse, FEMA had no contractors available to answer calls. McIlraith told the Subcommittee that in-house FEMA staff on her team were reassigned to handle incoming calls; she was pulled from her casework responsibilities, which included processing disaster assistance payments to survivors, and reassigned to answering back-to-back calls for the duration of the contract lapse.

The Subcommittee obtained a series of photos from FEMA's live call queue dashboard between July 7 and July 10 from a source who wishes to remain anonymous, which show the conditions during the contract lapse period. The dashboard tracks calls waiting in queue under FEMA's Survivor Services Section (SSS), as well as active interactions (the number of staff simultaneously on calls with survivors). After reviewing the documents, McIlraith explained to the Subcommittee that FEMA aims to keep the number of waiting calls as close to zero as possible under normal operations. On July 7, three days after the tragic Central Texas floods, the queue showed 430 calls waiting in Tier 1 alone. Subsequent screenshots from July 8, 9 and 10 show queue volumes remaining at similarly elevated levels.

Name	Waiting	Interactions	Service Level % Interval/Day	On Queue
DMARTS Next Image	0	9	- -	27
FEMA Manual Determination	0	23	- -	43
Helpline - Tier 1	430	18	0% 0%	1
Helpline - Tier 2	2	3	0% 26%	7
Registration Intake	1	40	0% 64%	65

Figure 5: FEMA Live Queue Dashboard on July 7, 2026

Name	Waiting	Interactions	Service Level % Interval/Day
DMARTS Next Image	0	1	- -
FEMA Manual Determination	0	44	- -
Helpline - Tier 1	512	37	0% 0%
Helpline - Tier 2	0	3	0% 61%
Registration Intake	12	17	0% 65%

Figure 6: FEMA Live Queue Dashboard on July 8, 2026

Name	Waiting	Interactions	Service Level % Interval/Day
DMARTS Next Image	0	11	- -
FEMA Manual Determination	0	30	- -
Helpline - Tier 1	531	47	0% 0%
Helpline - Tier 2	0	4	33% 58%
Registration Intake	4	39	87% 63%

Figure 7: FEMA Live Queue Dashboard on July 9, 2026

Name	Waiting	Interactions	Service Level % Interval/Day	On Queue
DMARTS Next Image	0	9	- -	52
FEMA Manual Determination	0	31	- -	76
Helpline - Tier 1	405	59	0% 0%	60
Helpline - Tier 2	0	5	0% 21%	26
Registration Intake	8	25	0% 46%	95

Figure 8: FEMA Live Queue Dashboard on July 10, 2026

Name	Waiting	Interactions	Service Level % Interval/Day	On Queue
DMARIS Next Image	0	0	-	35
FEMA Manual Determination	0	5	-	19
Helpline - Tier 1	0	2	88% 90%	20
Helpline - Tier 2	0	0	100% 98%	37
Registration Intake	0	0	-	8

Figure 9: FEMA Live Queue Dashboard on May 23, 2025

This photo is an example of what the FEMA dashboard looked like before the call center contract lapsed.

McIlraith stated that the survivors she spoke with during this period had been waiting for hours to reach FEMA. Additionally, she was unable to perform her normal casework functions, including processing assistance payments. Documents obtained by the Subcommittee from a source wishing to remain anonymous confirm that FEMA was fully aware of the call center contract lapse and working around it.

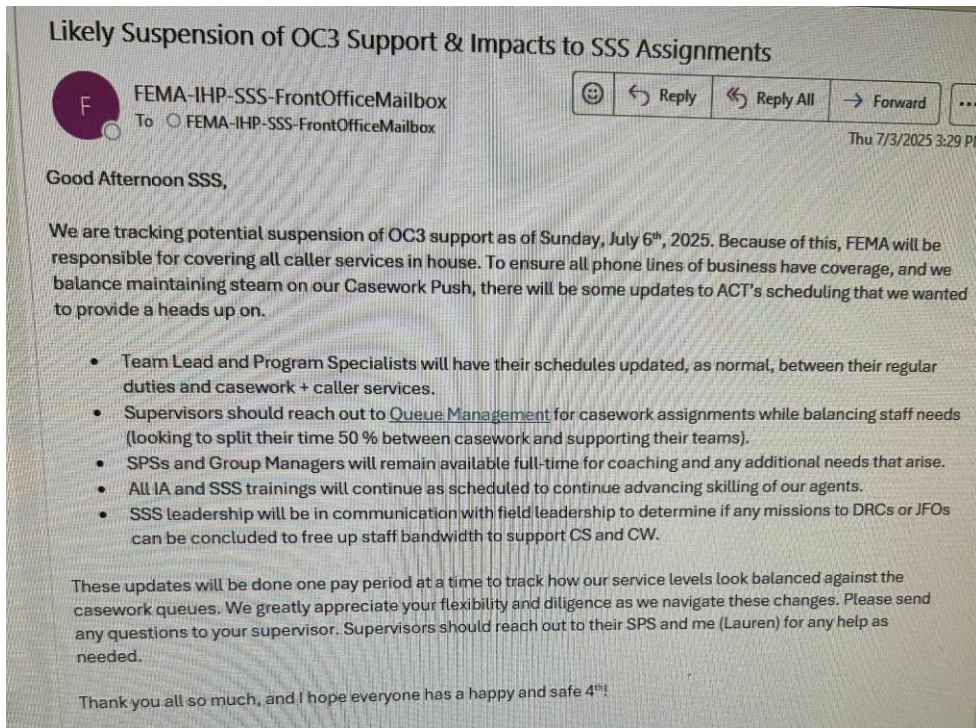


Figure 10: FEMA Email Showing the Agency's Call Services Work Strategy during the OC3 Contract Lapse

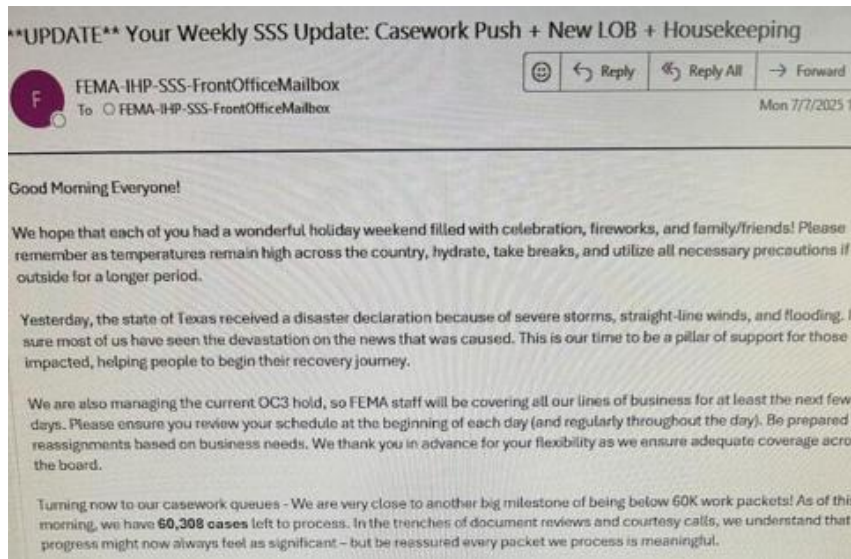


Figure 11: FEMA Email Showing Staff Responded to Post-Texas Flood Calls without Assistance during the OC3 Contract Lapse

Internal FEMA records and reporting based on contract documents establish the following call volume data for the period:

-
- On July 5, FEMA received 3,027 calls and answered 3,018, or approximately 99 percent.
 - On July 6, FEMA received 2,363 calls and answered 846, or approximately 36 percent.
 - On July 7, FEMA received 16,419 calls and answered 2,613, or approximately 16 percent.
 - From July 6 through July 10, FEMA answered approximately 15,000 of 55,000 calls, an answer rate of roughly 27 percent.

An April 22, 2026, GAO report independently confirmed these figures using data provided by FEMA. GAO found that the average unanswered calls rate reached a peak of 84 percent and that average wait times peaked at approximately one hour across three consecutive days.⁴¹ GAO attributed these conditions to FEMA's reduction in surge support and the lapse in private-sector contract staffing.

In sum, McIlraith wrote to the Subcommittee:

"The FEMA Helpline contract was essential. I don't know what DHS thought they were 'saving' by cutting this contract, but it certainly wasn't disaster survivors. I help the survivors of some of the worst disasters imaginable. I was responsible for paying people the money they need to recover. But because DHS cut the FEMA Helpline contract, I couldn't do my job. I took back-to-back low-level phone calls instead of paying people the assistance they so desperately needed."

During a July 2025 hearing before the Subcommittee, Members questioned Former FEMA Senior Official Performing the Duties of Administrator David Richardson about FEMA's call center performance during the Texas floods. Subcommittee Chairman Scott Perry asked Mr. Richardson about wait times during the disaster response. Mr. Richardson stated: "All calls were answered within 3 minutes and no calls beyond 10 minutes. So, it was from 3 to 10 minutes. And the vast majority of phone calls were answered and the questions were addressed."

Representative Friedman subsequently confronted Mr. Richardson with call-log data and reports indicating that on July 7, FEMA answered fewer than 20 percent of incoming calls. Mr. Richardson responded: "When there was a spike in calls, FEMA was there to answer the calls. The majority of the calls were answered at the call centers." When Representative Friedman read directly from New York Times reporting citing the specific call volume figures, Mr. Richardson stated: "I would have to agree with Secretary Noem. That is fake news. The majority of the calls were answered. There was never a lapse in contract."⁴²

In written responses to Questions for the Record submitted by Subcommittee Chairman Perry, Mr. Richardson provided a table purporting to show an answer rate of 69.8 percent on July 6 and answer rates above 80 percent for subsequent days. He further stated that abandonment rates, or calls answered by FEMA and then disconnected, were "not a number FEMA collects." These figures are inconsistent with the call volume data confirmed by GAO, the internal records

⁴¹ GAO-26-108154

⁴² Subcommittee on Public Buildings, Economic Development, and Emergency Management. Hearing title: Fixing Emergency Management: Examining Improvements to FEMA's Disaster Response. July 23, 2025.

obtained by National Public Radio (NPR) and the call queue screenshots provided to the Subcommittee.

b. Can you provide data on average call wait times and call abandonment rates on each of the first three days following the Texas flooding event, both nationally and specifically to the impacted region?

ANSWER: FEMA's current telecommunications platform does not differentiate incoming calls from survivors based on specific disasters, however the majority of the registration intake callers would have been Texas survivors, as that was the only Major Disaster Declaration approved over that week. The table below provides FEMA's answer rate (the percentage of calls answered by a representative) and average speed of answer (the average amount of time it took for FEMA to answer the call) from July 6-9, 2025, for registration intake. The abandonment rate, which is not a number FEMA collects, represents the proportion of calls that are not answered, and could be calculated by subtracting the answer rate from 100 percent.

REGISTRATION INTAKE		
Date	Answer Rate	Average Speed of Answer
Sunday, July 6, 2025	69.8%	0:08:12
Monday, July 7, 2025	82.1%	0:03:59
Tuesday, July 8, 2025	86%	0:03:02
Wednesday, July 9, 2025	82.9%	0:03:52

c. How does call center response to the Texas floods compare to prior disasters with similar call volumes?

ANSWER: FEMA's current telecommunications platform does not differentiate incoming calls from survivors based on specific disasters. FEMA has an internal capacity to handle a baseline amount of activity. However, due to the historic number of disaster declarations in 2024 (56 disaster declarations that included Individual Assistance) and approved during 2025 (17 additional declarations that included Individual Assistance, as of July 23, 2025), FEMA continues to receive a significant number of calls from survivors.

This, in addition, to the call volume received from the Texas declaration, led to increased wait times longer than typically expected during this time of year. Therefore, FEMA has continued to retain some augmentation resources to support caller services (registration intake and helpline).

d. Can you provide an update on the status of FEMA's call center contracts? Did the Agency lay off contractors on July 5th? Did any contracts expire during the Texas flood response? If so, were they reinstated?

ANSWER: FEMA's call center contracts are in place. Major disasters create sudden spikes in demand. As discussed previously, FEMA has a number of ways to quickly shift staff to ensure every survivor can register for assistance, while still moving critical cases forward. The approach used after the Texas flooding followed this model.

e. Are there plans underway to expand surge capacity, modernize systems, or improve performance metrics ahead of future events where call volume might exceed normal levels?

Figure 12: Texas Flood Telecommunication Data Provided by Former FEMA Acting Administrator David Richardson in response to Questions for the Record

NPR obtained a memorandum dated July 10, 2025, signed by Mr. Richardson and addressed to Secretary Noem, in which Mr. Richardson requested funding for call center operations, acknowledging that "the contract was placed on hold on July 5, 2025," that call center service levels had fallen from 99.9 percent to 20 percent and that survivors were waiting "over 90 minutes" for assistance. The memorandum shows that while Richardson had internally acknowledged the need for additional funding to address the response failure in Texas, he refused to admit these findings before Congress and the public, raising grave transparency concerns. A separate witness characterized the response during this period as a "cover-up," stating that FEMA was effectively prohibited from responding, mobilizing or communicating publicly because anticipated costs to restore call center operations exceeded the internal \$100,000 review threshold. Another witness stated that officials were reluctant to authorize actions out of concern that errors would be escalated to political leadership.

Auburne Gallagher, a survivor of the Texas floods from Travis County, a rural county bordering Kerr County, told the Subcommittee that the federal response left her community feeling forgotten. Gallagher recounted that 74 homes in her community floated away and nine people were killed, yet no help arrived for 11 days, and FEMA did not reach her community until six to eight weeks after the flood. The National Guard never came at all. In the absence of any official response, Gallagher spent \$3,000 of her own savings to purchase water and food, which she distributed through the local church. She also described harrowing accounts of community members being forced to recover bodies from debris themselves because no professional search-

and-recovery teams were present. When FEMA personnel finally arrived, three employees set up a small tent on church property with laptops to help survivors register for assistance. Gallagher reported that these employees lacked the training necessary to do the job and admitted to her directly that they had not been properly trained before being deployed to the field. She further testified that, at the same time as her community was struggling to access basic assistance, she learned FEMA was laying off workers for what she described as "no reason," compounding her frustration.

Gallagher told the Subcommittee that recovery in Travis County remains far from complete. Survivors are still living out of trailers, and some cannot access their properties at all. Despite major damage to her own home, she has received only \$752 from FEMA; her insurance claim was denied, and she paid out of pocket to replace her roof and ceiling, with other repairs still outstanding. She noted that roads throughout Travis County remain so damaged that heavy contractor equipment cannot reach many properties to complete major repairs to homes and infrastructure. Gallagher said that, in her assessment, no one affected by the floods in her county has been made whole.

V. Recommendations

The Subcommittee recommends the following actions:

Recommendation 1: Resume hiring of FEMA employees to enable the agency to meet its staffing targets.

Recommendation 2: Resume all training programs to ensure FEMA, state and local emergency managers, first responders and Tribal nations are prepared to respond to disasters.

Recommendation 3: Continue oversight of the presidential disaster declaration process and draft legislation to require an increase in the pace of responses to declaration requests, establish stronger oversight mechanisms and reduce politicization of FEMA assistance.

Recommendation 4: Recall all FEMA employees detailed to ICE and CBP to ensure FEMA's disaster readiness.

Recommendation 5: Establish FEMA as an independent agency to prevent the diversion of FEMA personnel to immigration enforcement missions.

Recommendation 6: Direct CBP and ICE to reimburse FEMA for all costs incurred in support of immigration enforcement operations.

Recommendation 7: Conduct further analysis of the impact of 287(g) expansion on local emergency management capacity and the willingness of immigrant communities to engage with disaster preparedness and response programs.

Recommendation 8: Amend the Post Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act to create penalties if a President or the Secretary of an outside Agency or Department directs FEMA to do work that undermines FEMA’s primary mission.

VI. CONCLUSION

The findings of this investigation reveal deliberate policy choices at the White House and Department of Homeland Security have systematically redirected FEMA away from its statutory mission.

FEMA was built on a foundational promise to the American people that when disaster strikes, the federal government will be there. That promise has been broken. The agency has lost more than a fifth of its workforce, its training pipelines have been severed, its disaster declaration process has been politicized, its hazard mitigation programs have been dismantled and its personnel have been deployed to plan raids, staff detention centers and recruit ICE officers.

The July 4, 2025, Texas floods offered a preview of what FEMA’s diminished capacity means in practice. Survivors waited over 90 minutes to reach a call center that had been allowed to lapse, and search-and-rescue teams were delayed by a \$100,000 approval threshold, but in 2025 FEMA personnel were also deployed to ICE detention facilities without bureaucratic friction.

The legal concerns raised by this investigation are equally serious. The deployment of DRF-funded CORE employees on non-Stafford immigration enforcement details, without reimbursement agreements and for durations far exceeding prior administrative practice, raises substantial Anti-Deficiency Act concerns.

Congress built FEMA’s institutional architecture after the failures of Hurricane Katrina with precisely this kind of scenario in mind. The Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act was designed to prevent political and institutional forces from degrading FEMA’s readiness. That architecture has proven inadequate to withstand the pressure applied by the current administration. The recommendations in this report are intended to close those gaps by strengthening statutory protections, restoring FEMA’s institutional independence and ensuring that the agency’s resources, personnel and focus remain trained on the mission for which they were created.

[END OF REPORT]

