



Modernizing FEMA: What to Preserve, What to Fix, What to Build

A White Paper for the FEMA Review Council

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Executive Summary

FEMA is the backbone of our national emergency management system. As the nation faces increasingly complex and frequent disasters, FEMA must be empowered, modernized, supported and not restructured into ineffectiveness. This paper outlines five critical areas for reform and reinforcement:

1. Elevate FEMA's role in executive leadership
2. Preserve FEMA's core capabilities
3. Fix systemic inconsistencies and restore preparedness programs
4. Address the hidden crisis of local capacity
5. Advance innovation and accountability

1. Elevate FEMA's Role in Executive Leadership

FEMA must be elevated within the federal structure. Its role as the nation's emergency management coordinator is too vital to remain buried within the Department of Homeland Security. In national crises, FEMA needs direct access to the President and the authority to act swiftly and not filtered through layers of bureaucracy that delay decisions and fragment coordination.

Currently, FEMA can issue mission assignments and fund agency actions through the Disaster Relief Fund (DRF), but it lacks the directive authority to compel timely execution or waive procedural barriers. That authority must be explicit. FEMA should not have to rely solely on financial leverage or presidential intervention to lead. This is not just about efficiency—it's about saving lives and protecting property when every second counts.

2. Preserve FEMA's Core Capabilities

FEMA's foundational missions must be protected. These include:

- **Standards and Training:** FEMA sets the tone for national preparedness through frameworks, guidance, and training. These tools ensure interoperability and influence local policy and budget decisions.
- **Logistics and Prepositioning:** FEMA's warehousing and distribution capabilities are unmatched. Its ability to coordinate ground and air movement of federal assets ensures rapid, efficient response.
- **Federal Coordination, Alert and Warning, and Continuity of Government:** FEMA ensures agencies like HUD and HHS fulfill their disaster responsibilities. It also maintains the Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS) and the federal government's continuity programs—both essential to national resilience.
- **USAR and IMAT:** Urban Search and Rescue and Incident Management Assistance Teams are FEMA's frontline assets for catastrophic events. They provide rapid deployment, coordination, and reassurance to overwhelmed communities.

3. Fix What's Broken

FEMA's processes must be consistent across all regions. Today, policy interpretation varies dramatically, creating confusion and delays. A national system must operate with clarity, uniformity, and accountability. There should be no room for interpretation when lives are on the line.

Key reforms include:

- **Policy and procedural consistency** across all FEMA regions
- **Grant reform** that mandates pass-throughs to local jurisdictions
- **Restoration of preparedness programs** like CERT and the Youth Council, which build future capacity and a culture of resilience

4. Address the Hidden Crisis of Local Capacity

The greatest threat to disaster recovery today isn't a lack of policy—it's a lack of local capacity. The recent FEMA-sponsored Argonne Emergency Management Capacity Study revealed widespread under-resourcing of local agencies, particularly in staffing, funding, and equipment. FEMA's role in sponsoring research and sharing knowledge is not optional, it is foundational to national resilience and security. Local agencies depend on this information to justify needed funding, staffing, and compliance with national standards.

Communities are still trying to close out disasters from years ago, delayed by complex FEMA processes and too few staff. These delays expose jurisdictions to financial risk of audits and

clawbacks long after the disaster ends. Without targeted support from FEMA, we'll continue to see missed deadlines, wasted dollars, and growing risk in communities that can least afford it.

To fix the national disaster management landscape, we must:

- Fund local staffing, training, and certification
- Require every jurisdiction to maintain a funded emergency management function
- Invest in doctrine, guidance, and research to support local implementation

5. Advance Innovation and Accountability

A. Establish a Federal Disaster Investigation Arm

Disasters are complex, and accountability should not be political. A neutral, third-party body modeled after the NTSB should be created to investigate major disasters, identify systemic failures, and recommend improvements. This would create a feedback loop to improve FEMA's own standards, training, and coordination.

For smaller disasters, FEMA should require after-action reports and fund their development as part of the disaster closeout process. Reinstating a national repository like the Lessons Learned Information System (LLIS) would support transparency and shared learning.

B. Align Insurance and Mitigation

FEMA should partner with insurers to reward communities that invest in resilience. Exploring parametric and catastrophic insurance models could provide faster, more predictable recovery funding.

C. Ensure Digital Access in Disaster Assistance

Disasters often disrupt lifeline systems, including broadband. FEMA's shift toward digital-only tools must not exclude rural, elderly, or low-income populations. Innovation must expand access, not narrow it. Digital access must be a core design principle, not an afterthought.

Conclusion

FEMA's mission is too important to be weakened. We must preserve what works, fix what's broken, and build what's missing. That includes building capacity where it matters most - at the local level. With the right reforms, FEMA can continue to serve as the unifying force in our national emergency management system, ensuring that when disaster strikes, America responds as one.