

Image not found or type unknown

Opinion | The Disaster Recovery Reform Act has made such a big difference

Opinion / **Published On October 19, 2019 03:13 PM /**

Staff Consortium **October 19, 2019**

Image not found or type unknown



One year ago, Congress transformed the field of emergency management with the passage of the [Disaster Recovery Reform Act \(DRRA\) of 2018](#). These important reforms to federal disaster programs originated as lessons learned from the economic disruption and increased nationwide disaster costs caused by the historic 2017 hurricanes and wildfires.

Over the past year, FEMA has successfully implemented over half of the DRRA's provisions, and we are on track to have more than 75 percent implemented by the end of this year. These necessary reforms acknowledge the shared responsibility for disaster preparedness, mitigation, response and recovery at all levels of government.

They also represent significant changes to our agency's programs, many of which require policy or regulatory changes to implement and sustain. As such, implementation of the law has required FEMA to act quickly, but also deliberately, to effectively accomplish the legislation's intent — bolstering the nation's capacity to prepare for, mitigate against and recover from major disasters.

One of the greatest changes the DRRA allowed for was the creation of a new pre-disaster mitigation program that is funded by a 6 percent set-aside from federal post-disaster grant funding. This new program, Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC), is transformational. It will allow FEMA to support states and communities to undertake new and innovative infrastructure projects that reduce the risks they face from disasters.

The BRIC program aims to categorically shift the federal focus away from reactive disaster spending and toward research-supported, proactive investment in community resilience. In order to inform the creation of this important program, FEMA conducted one of the largest stakeholder engagement efforts in the agency's history. The public will have another opportunity to provide input on the BRIC program when the program policy is published for comment.

In the meantime, FEMA is already using the funding set-aside for BRIC to advance the objective of reducing disaster risk. This September, the agency made an unprecedented \$250 million available for pre-disaster mitigation under our existing grant program — including \$125 million specifically for infrastructure projects.

This funding also included up to \$12.5 million to help states, localities, territories and tribes develop future mitigation projects. The application period for this year's pre-disaster mitigation grant program is currently open for all states, tribes and territories.

These new authorities have also provided significant support for mitigation efforts after a disaster. Earlier this year, FEMA was able to expand its post-disaster mitigation program to areas impacted by wildfires, in addition to areas that receive a major disaster declaration for storms. The legislation also authorizes funding for additional activities that will reduce the risk from both wildfires and windstorms. Since May 2018, FEMA has funded an additional \$86.2 million in wildfire mitigation for 228 projects, providing increased protection to nearly 2,500 properties.

As emergency managers, our mission is to help people before, during and after disasters. Because of this law, we have been able to significantly increase the funding that individuals can access to help them navigate their recovery following a disaster.

By increasing the maximum amount that FEMA provides for housing assistance and other needs assistance, we have already provided more than \$69 million in additional assistance to over 11,000 individuals. In addition, more than \$10 million in additional disaster unemployment assistance has been provided to applicants in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

The DRRA also supports our efforts to strengthen emergency management at all levels of government. Shortly following the law's passage, we increased the level of management costs that we provide to states, tribes and territories to administer recovery and hazard mitigation programs following a disaster.

Pursuant to this law, we have also published additional guidance on the prioritization of assistance during power outages, the identification of evacuation routes and the coordination of emergency response plans for hazardous materials. Very shortly, we will publish guidance on how states, tribes and territories can administer a post-disaster housing program funded by FEMA.

Finally, these new authorities are helping FEMA to recruit and retain experienced emergency managers. This summer, our temporary employees became eligible to compete for permanent FEMA positions on equal-footing with permanent federal employees. Since July, almost 200 FEMA positions have been posted under this special hiring authority and several hires have already been made.

Implementation of these and other DRRRA provisions has been a significant undertaking for FEMA. I am thankful to the countless hard-working employees who have made it possible.

We believe this extraordinary effort will pay dividends for the agency, its partners and the nation for many years to come. We thank Congress, the administration, and our emergency management partners at all levels for their efforts to move this critical reform package forward.

Pete Gaynor is the acting administrator of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

© Viconsortium 2024