

RESEARCH BRIEF SUMMARY | OCTOBER 2025

Practitioner perspectives on disaster assistance reform

A roadmap of obstacles to avoid

In 2025 the United States has seen significant change in the disaster assistance landscape. In a period of rapid transition, evidence-based and expert guidance is critical to support both policy and implementation decisions. This study, the first of a three-part series, drew upon the expertise and insights of a diverse group of over 200 stakeholders and seasoned disaster professionals, including those in government and public sectors, including FEMA, state and local governments, nonprofits & community organizations, and the private and philanthropic sectors, as well as academic institutions. This study captures their insights and perspectives about Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) reform and, as a result, reform of the national emergency management system. On average, study participants had over 14 years of experience in the disaster assistance and recovery sector, and collectively they held nearly 2,900 years of experience in the field.

Summary of commonly cited challenges that might arise with state or locally managed disaster assistance

Factors to be mindful of going forward

When asked, "If a significant portion of the responsibility for disaster assistance for individuals and households shifted from the federal government (i.e., FEMA) to a state or local responsibility, challenges that might arise with state or locally managed disaster assistance would be…," participants raised several potential challenges, with findings noted below.

1. There may be a **loss of both quality and quantity of disaster recovery services**, particularly those surrounding planning, preparedness, and mitigation, and that ultimately the diminished level of services provided would disproportionately impact left-behind Americans, who will be further left behind. Introducing additional inefficiencies was another anticipated challenge, including a) significant delays, b) increased fraud and corruption, and c) increased challenges managing the logistics of disaster assistance programs.
2. **Many states may potentially lack the required resources to operate and administer programs** due to a) a lack of funding, b) insufficient staffing, and c) a general lack of capacity.
3. **Many states may lack the experience and associated knowledge to successfully administer these types of programs** due to a lack of sufficient staff experience or expertise in creating and directly managing disaster preparedness, response, and recovery programs.
4. A related potential challenge raised by participants was that **many states and localities may lack the ability and/or capacity to adequately train personnel** administering these programs.
5. There may be **increased potential challenges associated with communication and coordination** between and within states.
6. There may be **increased potential for uneven allocation and access to assistance both within and between states**. Participants anticipated that there would be a) inconsistencies due to a lack of standardization; b) increased potential for aid to be directed based on political motives rather than need, even suggesting that this would create "inherently unequal response systems"; and c) an increased likelihood that rural and socio-economically left-behind states and communities would be further left behind.

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For additional information please see the full brief here.

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