

Patrick Powers
Designated Federal Officer of the Federal Emergency Management Agency Review Council
Office of Partnership and Engagement
Department of Homeland Security

5/15/25

RE: Request to Provide Information (RFI) on Experiences with FEMA Disaster Responses; Docket No. DHS-2025-0013

Dear Officer Powers,

By notice issued on **3/26/25**, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has published a request for information soliciting public input on experiences with FEMA disaster response to guide the recommendations of the FEMA Review Council. **Hispanic Federation (HF)** respectfully submits the following comment in response to DHS request for information, Department of Homeland Security Docket No. DHS-2025-0013.

Our organization welcomes this opportunity to provide comments about FEMA's emergency response and would like to stress the need to protect, fortify, and expand the agency's capacity to serve the people of the nation. We encourage the FEMA Review Council to recognize the need to strengthen the agency and its mission to provide emergency assistance in the United States and its territories.

1. Hispanic Federation Interest in FEMA Review Council RFI

Hispanic Federation is a nonprofit membership and advocacy organization with a network of over 750 organizations across the country. With programs in 40 states, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands and the District of Columbia, HF's focus areas include economic empowerment, disaster relief, philanthropy, education, and health. In the face of manifold natural disasters over the last few years, Hispanic Federation has coordinated relief efforts with FEMA and our communities across the country. As such, HF has been active in disaster relief efforts in Florida, North Carolina, California, and Puerto Rico, providing direct aid to communities and member organizations and working alongside state and federal emergency responses to hurricanes, storms, earthquakes, pandemic, tornadoes, and wildfires to bring timely relief to those in need.

Per DHS' invitation to interested parties to submit relevant perspectives, we include here both general experiences with FEMA and specific contextual stories and reflections on FEMA's

disaster response efforts that unfolded concomitant to Hispanic Federation's own community-driven disaster relief efforts. We conclude that FEMA has consistently played an irreplaceable role in disaster response across a variety of localities and through divergent circumstances. Hispanic Federation notes that past obstacles to FEMA's efforts provide clear opportunities to improve FEMA's ability to support disaster-riven communities. We stand ready to provide community-driven perspectives on how best to strengthen FEMA moving forward.

2. FEMA Review Council and Broad View Considerations

Although we recognize the important task that has been bestowed upon the FEMA Review Council, we want to be clear that the diminishment of FEMA or its ability to respond to disasters is not a viable answer to the agency's shortcomings. FEMA provides critical assistance and funding to states and communities before, during, and after disasters. The agency now known as FEMA has a storied history of national service dating back to the earliest years of the Constitutional era as the Founding Fathers recognized the importance of pooling national resources to support the federal project.ⁱ Since that time, national disaster response has evolved from crisis to crisis, arriving in its current form of defending the United States from both natural and belligerent threats with the creation of the agency under President Carter and then Department of Homeland Security following the 9/11 attacks. FEMA is part of the US Department of Homeland Security, because the nation's safety and economy are weakened by natural disasters. As a New York Headquartered organization, Hispanic Federation has seen FEMA carry out its duties from 9/11 recovery to Hurricane Sandy and beyond.ⁱⁱ FEMA's main role is to supplement, not substitute, the efforts and available resources of states and local governments. FEMA avoids the risk of a fragmented and uncoordinated federal emergency response, which reduces costs when the agency must complement the capabilities of state, local, tribal, or territorial governments.

In the past years, FEMA has increased communication and collaboration with nonprofit organizations and state emergency response agencies to improve the delivery of FEMA's services across the nation and its territories. Based on our experiences with FEMA, and as expressed in previous communications, the agency has many areas of opportunity and must keep improving its emergency response and recovery aid since the US will continue to face different and life-threatening natural disasters. Dismantling the agency would have a negative impact on the nation's ability to protect itself.

3. Hispanic Federation Serving Disaster Relief Initiatives

Hispanic Federation and its network have been serving our communities via disaster preparation, relief, and recovery for years. Since 2017, Hispanic Federation has played a leading role supporting local communities across the United States in their response to and recovery from natural disasters, oftentimes becoming a first responder in times of crisis before government intervention. Most importantly, HF's work does not start and end with recovery

work. Instead, we are committed to the long-term resiliency and empowerment of the communities we support. Recent campaigns have included those in:

- *Puerto Rico*: Since launching our relief work in 2017 when Hurricanes Irma and Maria hit back-to-back causing more than 3,000 deaths, Hispanic Federation has continued to provide not only storm relief but also mitigation against future disasters. Currently HF has achieved over 250 solar energy installations in community and health centers, and schools, many in remote areas that are the last to regain power.
- *Florida*: Hispanic Federation's Florida team went into action just hours after Hurricanes Helene and Milton hit, resourcing and working alongside 17 community groups to provide over 95,000 meals and help nearly 10,000 families in twelve counties restore their homes, micro businesses, and their lives.
- *North Carolina*: Hispanic Federation's Rapid Response team went into action hours after Hurricane Helene's landfall, providing organizational grants and portable heaters, generators, and financial aid to help communities rebuild, focusing on the most marginalized and hardest hit.
- *California*: The 2025 wildfires devastated nearly 25,000 acres of homes and businesses across the Greater Los Angeles region. In rapid response, Hispanic Federation and the Miranda Family Fund together launched *LA Ayuda*, committing 100% of funds raised to provide direct cash assistance to workers, while connecting them to HF's partner agencies for continued services.

4. FEMA Experiences in Consideration of Review Council's RFI

Hispanic Federation's close work with victims of the multiple hurricanes that have struck Florida over the last decade have confirmed our sense that FEMA provides irreplaceable services and resources in the Sunshine State. For instance, amid flooding from Hurricane Ian, FEMA officials adapted protocols to hold advisory meetings with seniors undergoing evacuation transport on buses, employing the sort of emergency-powers flexibility that federal agencies are empowered muster. Maintaining these sorts of logistically and administratively complex ground operation for months with regularity is squarely within the domain of the federal government.

While there is always room for improvement in responding to natural disasters, Hispanic Federation in Florida has known FEMA to be adaptable and responsive in cording educational work between multiple community-based organizations. The agency's work providing unifying best practices and operating protocol to trusted community partners, local government, and even interstate officials provides a clear pathway by which the agency may improve as a model of cooperative federalism to protect the interests of all Americans.

Hispanic Federation's rapid response disaster relief in California, including through our LA Ayuda program, underscores just how crucial FEMA is in supporting vulnerable communities in perilous times. 2018's Camp Fire was the deadliest and most destructive wildfire in California's history, straining local, state, and philanthropic resources. Containing and recovering from the fire was only possible via FEMA's collaboration with the Army Corps of Engineers and

California's Office of Emergency services. The recovery effort was not simply a matter of financial resources, but also expertise and authority of the sort that only federal agencies may provide.

Furthermore, this winter's wildfires highlighted the critical role that FEMA can play in not just recovering from disasters but mitigating them. FEMA provided direct cash assistance *in advance* of the worst of the fires, enabling less affluent families to take preemptive action that their ordinary financial resources would not have permitted. Likewise, housing assistance like transitional sheltering assistance and other in-kind aid were crucial in providing stability to families in a moment of crisis. While there were deficiencies in both state and federal responses to these wildfires, it remains true that most states have greater financial constraints than the federal government, limiting their ability to provide the type of preemptive relief that has saved lives in California and elsewhere.

Hispanic Federation's work in New York during the covid-19 pandemic to support families whose lives were disrupted – by both the virus itself and public health measures in response to its rapid spread – reinforced our sense of FEMA's integrality to nationwide disaster response. With states across the country implementing disparate public health protocols, FEMA provided reliable, in-kind aid including Covid-19 Family Centers that ensured vulnerable families could endure public health lockdown in dignity: able to conduct work, sleep, and learn all while remaining healthy. FEMA's family centers required resources and expertise yes, but also coordination with other organs of the federal government, including the DoJ, HHS, and trade groups for proper implementation. Although state, local, and philanthropic relief efforts are crucial and needed, they cannot substitute for nationwide federal resource coordination that only FEMA and other federal agencies can provide.

5. Conclusion

Based on our experiences in difficult emergency response and recovery processes, such as Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico, Hispanic Federation has recognized critical avenues along which FEMA must implement improvements to fully live up to its mission. In obverse, Hispanic Federation has also repeatedly witnessed firsthand the extent of FEMA's successes in conducting lifesaving work at all stages of disaster, from preparation to recovery. HF is perhaps uniquely positioned to recognize one crucial but understated aspect of FEMA's disaster responses: consistency of disaster relief across states. While states and localities each have varying degrees of expertise and preparation and employ disparate disaster relief protocol, as a federal agency, FEMA's responses are able to address aid and/or resources gaps as needed across jurisdictions, thereby establishing consistent expectations and norms for disaster-riven communities.ⁱⁱⁱ

As a nationwide member organization that routinely conducts disaster relief work, Hispanic Federation relies on the relative consistency of FEMA's aid and protocols to coordinate with members, partners, and community-members across the country. Conversely, having disaster

mitigation and recovery broken apart into 55+ disparate systems would severely undermine our ability to coordinate, plan, or render timely and meaningful aid. Thus, FEMA remains a crucial component of the national security and disaster management apparatus.

Sincerely,

Julietta Lopez

Vice President for Federal Advocacy and Network Mobilization

Hispanic Federation

cc. Assistant Secretary Scott G. Erickson, Office of Partnership and Engagement
Secretary Kristi Noem, Department of Homeland Security
The Honorable Mike Johnson, Speaker of the United States House of Representatives,
U.S. House of Representatives
The Honorable Hakeem Jeffries, Minority Leader, U.S. House of Representatives
The Honorable John Thune, Majority Leader, United States Senate
The Honorable Charles Schumer, Minority Leader, United States Senate
The Honorable Sam Graves, U.S. House of Representatives
The Honorable Greg Stanton, U.S. House of Representatives
The Honorable Rick Larsen, U.S. House of Representatives
The Honorable Dina Titus, U.S. House of Representatives
The Honorable Josh Hawley, U.S. Senate
The Honorable Paul Rand, U.S. Senate
The Honorable Rick Scott, U.S. Senate
The Honorable Joni Ernst, U.S. Senate
The Honorable Ashley Moody, U.S. Senate
The Honorable Andy Kim, U.S. Senate
The Honorable Gary Peters, U.S. Senate
The Honorable Richard Blumenthal, U.S. Senate
The Honorable Elissa Slotkin, U.S. Senate

ⁱ FEMA, “We are FEMA,” Publication 1, 15.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.hstoday.us/federal-pages/dhs/fema-highlights-agencys-role-in-response-and-recovery-for-20th-anniversary-of-9-11/> (Accessed, 5/15/25.)

ⁱⁱⁱ FEMA’s failures to provide adequate support in Puerto Rico stand out as a notable exception to this rule, as official civil rights findings have demonstrated. Hispanic Federation remains prepared to work with the federal government to facilitate more substantive and systematic improvements to FEMA’s work there to better support the archipelago.