

## Representative Jared Moskowitz (FL-23)

Thank you, Chairman Graves, Ranking Member Larsen, and Members of the Committee. As the Representative for Florida's 23<sup>rd</sup> Congressional District — and the only former statewide Emergency Management Director to ever serve in Congress — I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today about how we strengthen FEMA and improve the way our country prepares for, responds to, and recovers from disasters.

I want to thank the Committee for holding this important hearing and drafting a FEMA reform package that reflects several proposals that I have long supported, including giving states more flexibility in how they administer disaster assistance and restoring FEMA as an independent agency. I believe that these reforms would help cut red tape, improve coordination, and ensure that help reaches communities faster when they need it most.

These reforms come at a critical moment. The truth is, disasters are becoming more frequent, more destructive, and more expensive. Communities across the country, from coastal regions to the rural heartland, are facing events that strain emergency management systems and complicate recovery. FEMA must be equipped to support a range of needs, from states that can lead their own response to those that need more direct assistance.

Unfortunately, some are calling to abolish FEMA entirely. That cannot be the path forward. FEMA isn't perfect — no agency is — but we don't fix that by walking away. We fix it by making the agency better. That's why I'm encouraged that the reform package we're discussing today reflects several proposals I've long supported — reforms that would make FEMA faster, more efficient, and more effective.

The worst thing Congress could do right now is dismantle the only federal agency whose sole mission is to respond when Americans are at their most vulnerable. Eliminating FEMA would force states to take on disasters alone, regardless of whether they have the resources or capacity to do so. It would slow recovery, raise costs, and leave families without the support they need.

It goes back to what I said: the rate of disasters isn't just increasing — it's also intensifying, and the facts back it up. In 2023 alone, the United States faced 28 separate billion-dollar disasters, the highest number ever recorded, totaling more than \$91.3 billion in damages.<sup>1,2</sup> Events like these aren't concentrated in one region, either — they strike nearly every part of the country, and the damage is such that communities simply can't recover alone.

We saw it in Hawaii, when wildfires tore through Maui, decimating the historic town of Lahaina in what became the deadliest U.S. wildfires in more than 100 years. Nearly 100 people were killed, and thousands of families lost their homes and businesses at incredible emotional and financial cost — more than \$5.7 billion in damage.<sup>2,3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Wu, Shuang-Ye. "Billion-Dollar Weather and Climate Disasters Broke U.S. Record in 2023, NOAA Says." PBS NewsHour, January 10, 2024. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/science/a-record-28-billion-dollar-weather-and-climate-disasters-struck-the-u-s-in-2023-noaa>

<sup>2</sup> National Centers for Environmental Information (NCEI). *U.S. Billion-Dollar Weather & Climate Disasters 1980–2024*. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. <https://www.ncei.noaa.gov/access/billions/events.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Blake, Mike, and Marco Garcia. "Maui Wildfires Deadliest in Century as Death Toll Hits 93." *Reuters*, August 13, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/death-toll-maui-fires-hits-least-80-damages-billions-dollars-2023-08-12/>.

We saw it in my home state of Florida, when Hurricane Ian made landfall as a Category 4 storm, flattening coastal communities, cutting power to millions, and causing nearly \$120 billion in damage.<sup>1</sup> It was one of the costliest storms on record.

And of course, during COVID-19, our country experienced our first-ever nationwide Major Disaster Declaration. All 50 states, all five territories, and the District of Columbia were under active declarations at the same time.<sup>4</sup> It was the first time a public health emergency triggered a response under the Stafford Act.<sup>5</sup>

These are just a few of the many examples, but in all of them, who showed up to help? It was FEMA — working alongside state and local responders — that helped provide shelter, coordinate aid, and begin the long but necessary recovery process.

In the years after Ian, FEMA provided \$1.15 billion in direct grants to help nearly 400,000 Florida households repair and rebuild, and another \$2.3 billion to local communities for debris cleanup and infrastructure repair.<sup>6</sup> In total, federal support for Ian's recovery topped \$10.2 billion.<sup>6</sup> In Hawaii, FEMA is still around almost two years later, offering direct housing assistance. And during COVID, the agency helped deliver billions of units of PPE, supported field hospitals and vaccine sites, and provided more than \$125 billion in emergency aid to state and local governments.<sup>4,5</sup> If there was ever any doubt about FEMA's importance, COVID made it clear.<sup>4,5</sup> FEMA delivered the national response that the pandemic required.

All of this to say, this is not a regional issue. It is national. As more and more Americans live in high-risk areas and the climate continues to change, the scale and costs of these disasters will keep rising. And FEMA is the only federal agency with the expertise and infrastructure to coordinate response and recovery at this magnitude.

But FEMA can only do that work if it has the structure, authority, and agility to meet the challenges we face. That's why I introduced the FEMA Independence Act — to restore FEMA as a stand-alone agency with a direct line to the President. I'm honored that this Committee included that reform in the broader package. It's a commonsense step that reflects what many of us already knew from experience: FEMA needs the ability to act quickly, cut through bureaucracy, and lead when disaster strikes.

While that is an important step in the right direction, I also believe we should continue exploring ways to give states more flexibility in how they administer disaster recovery programs. Just last week, I introduced the Disaster Housing Flexibility Act and the Disaster Response Flexibility Act to allow states to opt into a block grant model for housing and public assistance. These proposals are rooted in my experience managing state block grant programs during my

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<sup>4</sup> Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). *FEMA Led Historic Pandemic Response, Supported Record Number of Disasters in 2020*. U.S. Department of Homeland Security, January 11, 2021. <https://www.fema.gov/press-release/20210111/fema-led-historic-pandemic-response-supported-record-number-disasters-2020>.

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Government Accountability Office. *Disaster Relief Fund: Lessons Learned from COVID-19 Could Improve FEMA's Estimates*. GAO-24-106676. Washington, D.C.: Government Accountability Office, July 9, 2024. <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-24-106676>.

<sup>6</sup> Federal Emergency Management Agency. "Hurricane Ian: Two Years into Recovery." *FEMA.gov*, September 19, 2024. <https://www.fema.gov/press-release/20250122/hurricane-ian-two-years-recovery>.

time as the Director of Florida's Division of Emergency Management, where getting resources out the door quickly made a real difference.

These kinds of reforms are not about shifting responsibility. They are about recognizing that some states have the capacity and readiness to move faster — and we should empower them to do so when appropriate. A voluntary block grant framework would allow FEMA to focus more of its capacity on states that need the most federal support, while giving states with strong emergency management infrastructure more say in their own recovery. Not only would it reduce administrative burden and increase efficiency, it would also give states the flexibility to tailor assistance in ways that make the best use of available resources. It is a flexible, scalable model worth considering as we look ahead.

FEMA is not a luxury. It is a lifeline. Whether it is hurricanes in Florida or Texas, wildfires in Hawaii or California, floods in Vermont or Iowa, tornadoes in Kentucky or Mississippi, or heat waves in Nevada or Arizona, FEMA shows up with the people and resources to help. That work does not replace state or local efforts — it supports and strengthens them when the scale exceeds what any one community can manage.

That is why proposals to abolish FEMA are so dangerous. Eliminating the only federal agency solely focused on disaster response would not make our communities safer or recovery faster. It would do the opposite. We should be improving FEMA, not tearing it down — and that is exactly what this reform package begins to do.

You all have taken a critical step forward by restoring FEMA's independence and exploring new ways to cut red tape and strengthen the federal-state partnership. I appreciate the Committee's work to advance these reforms, and I look forward to continuing the conversation about how we make FEMA stronger, smarter, and more responsive for the challenges ahead.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today.