



Civil Rights and Protections During the Federal Response to Hurricanes Harvey and María

Key Findings from U.S. Commission on Civil Rights Report

This report examines the federal response to Hurricanes Harvey and María, to include factors such as barriers to providing aid, FEMA's coordinating role in disaster recovery efforts including local factors impacting damage assessments and delivering resources, and efforts to comply with the Stafford Act and other civil rights obligations. This is the first time in the Commission's 65 year history that it has examined the civil rights implications of disaster response.

CURRENT FEDERAL DISASTER RESPONSE SYSTEM

After a disaster occurs, FEMA is responsible for coordinating the federal government's role in preparing for, preventing, mitigating the effects of, responding to, and recovering from all domestic disasters, whether natural or man-made, including acts of terror. This is a highly complex effort requiring coordination among multiple organizations at many stages of disaster preparedness, management, response, and recovery. Currently, there are at least 17 federal agencies, including FEMA, that provide disaster assistance and aid to individual residents, states, territories, Indian tribes, and local governments.

THE IMPACT OF HURRICANES HARVEY AND MARÍA

Hurricane Harvey

- Most significant tropical cyclone rainfall event in the country in terms of scope and peak rainfall amounts
- Responsible for at least 68 deaths in Texas
- Over 300,000 structures in the region were flooded
- 500,000 cars flooded
- 780,000 survivors were forced from their homes.

Just a few weeks following Harvey, Hurricane María affected every resident in Puerto Rico.

Hurricane María

- Official death toll of 2,975
- María hit more than 786,000 homes, knocking down 80% of Puerto Rico's utility poles and all of its transmission lines
- 100% of the power grid, 95% of cellular sites and 43% of wastewater treatment plants being rendered inoperable
- 97% of roads in Puerto Rico impassable in the immediate aftermath

INEQUITABLE RESPONSE TO TWO DISASTERS

The disaster relief and response efforts to the storms differed on many fronts. From landfall through six months after, the disaster response to Harvey in Texas was on a larger scale and faster than the response to María in Puerto Rico, and the Commission received testimony that the slow pace at which federal agencies dispersed aid to Puerto Rico significantly affected survivors' recovery.

Nine days after each of these respective storms, FEMA approved:

\$141.8M

FOR INDIVIDUAL ASSISTANCE FOR HARVEY VICTIMS

VS

\$6.2M

FOR INDIVIDUAL ASSISTANCE FOR MARÍA VICTIMS

Survivors of María received

\$1B

IN AID FOUR MONTHS AFTER LANDFALL

Survivors of Harvey received

\$1.28B

IN AID WITHIN TWO MONTHS AFTER LANDFALL

THE REPORT'S FINDINGS

- A need for **clearer guidelines to apply for aid** to include a more **streamlined portal** for the intake of all federal disaster assistance and developing a process to share data across all responding agencies on the federal, state, and local level.
- The **need for increased collaboration across federal agencies, local governments, and aid organizations**. Disaster recovery experts assert that this type of public engagement with stakeholders should begin with emergency planning and response and continue through the closeout of recovery and mitigation programs.
- The recovery and mitigation process should **focus on survivors with the greatest needs**, particularly people of color, low-income people, people with disabilities, immigrants, LGBTQ communities, and other marginalized individuals, and to provide a sufficient number of staff fluent in the various languages spoken in the affected areas.
- The **lack of electricity and internet had a significant impact** on survivors' ability to access assistance and federal relief programs. The report recommends that federal agencies should adopt a flexible policy to provide aid to those in need, including providing access to technology to address the digital divide, and adopting a paper application process when survivors are without access to electricity or internet.