



**PRESS RELEASE**  
September 21, 2022

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## **U.S. Commission on Civil Rights Releases Report: Civil Rights and Protections During the Federal Response to Hurricanes Harvey and María**

WASHINGTON – Today, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights released the report, [\*Civil Rights and Protections During the Federal Response to Hurricanes Harvey and María\*](#), which examines the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) disaster response and compliance with federal civil rights laws and policies in Texas and Puerto Rico following Hurricanes Harvey and María.

U.S. Commission on Civil Rights for the first time in its 65-year history examines the civil rights implications of federal disaster response. This report examines 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 by federal agencies to comply with the Stafford Act and other civil rights obligations.

Amongst the report's recommendations, the Commission found:

- 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 found in the affected areas.
- FEMA should provide disability training to all of its shelter personnel, including registration, medical, and security workers. FEMA needs to work with state and local partners to find and locate persons with disabilities who will have trouble evacuating to shelters. It should also ensure that such shelters have electricity for electric-dependent persons (i.e., those who rely on ventilators and like medical equipment, but also those with the need for refrigeration, such as people with diabetes
- FEMA should hire and train enough staff fluent in the languages spoken in the disaster areas and ensure information and applications for all assistance programs are available in needed languages and can be submitted in such languages

“The loss of lives following the hurricanes was especially evident among the elderly, persons with medical conditions and energy dependency. We also heard from survivors and experts who testified that the lack of electricity and internet had a significant impact on their ability to access assistance and federal relief programs,” said Norma V. Cantú, Chair of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. “We found 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.”

As part of the examination, the Commission held three briefings, which included testimony from federal officials from FEMA’s Office of Response and Recovery, Inspectors General from the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the President of the Emergency Management Association of Texas, the Texas General Land Office, the Secretary of State of Puerto Rico, and the former Mayor of San Juan, Puerto Rico. The Commission also heard from advocacy leaders, legal experts, and researchers in the field, and met with severely impacted community groups and stakeholders.

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*The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights is the only independent, bipartisan agency charged with advising the President and Congress on civil rights and reporting annually on federal civil rights enforcement. Our 56 state and territory Advisory Committees offer a broad perspective on civil rights concerns at state and local levels. The Commission: In our 7th decade, a continuing legacy of influence in civil rights. For more information about the Commission, please visit [www.usccr.gov](http://www.usccr.gov) and follow us on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#).*