

# FEMA Leadership and Policies During Trump Administration

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## Introduction

When people think of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, commonly known as FEMA, they think of emergency relief efforts in times of crisis. FEMA exists to help Americans become whole after any disaster. After any sort of catastrophe within the United States or its territories, FEMA is the coordinating body that ensures that whether there is an earthquake, a hurricane, or a global pandemic, there is a safety apparatus Americans can rely on.

Under Former President Trump, FEMA abrogated its duty to promote resiliency and support recovery without discrimination. Trump pushed the agency to prioritize giving aid based on political expediency, with evident discrepancies in the speed and scope of aid brought to Texas after Hurricane Harvey in comparison to aid brought to Puerto Rico after Hurricane Irma and Hurricane Maria. In addition to the partial distribution of resources, Trump's FEMA was regularly opaque about its actions, especially during the coronavirus pandemic when the agency improperly [reported](#) its resource allocation processes.

## What is FEMA?

FEMA's mission is "helping people before, during, and after disasters."

Housed within the Department of Homeland Security, the Federal Emergency Management Agency ([FEMA](#)) is responsible for disaster management in the U.S. Originally established in 1979, the agency's primary function is to ensure that in the instances of a national emergency, the federal government coordinates with state and local officials to ensure that the substantial resources of the federal government reach communities in times of crisis.

Assistance organized by FEMA includes:

- Supplying shelter, food, and water in the immediate aftermath of a disaster like a hurricane;
- Processing flood insurance claims;
- Crisis counseling for victims;
- Unemployment assistance;
- Providing legal services;
- Connecting survivors and victims with volunteer agencies; and

- Providing search and rescue teams and emergency health providers.

The agency operates under the Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act of 1988, which [outlines](#) the federal processes for declaring disasters, determining disaster response, and distributing resources. In recent decades, FEMA has responded to significant disasters under various administrations, including Hurricane Sandy under President Obama, during which the agency [worked](#) in tandem with the Christie Administration in New Jersey to ensure a speedy recovery, as well as the [controversial](#) response to a Kentucky ice storm in 2009.

## **FEMA Leadership Under Trump**

Brock Long [was](#) Trump's first FEMA chief before leaving the agency to return to [Hagerty Consulting](#), an emergency management firm where he serves as the executive chairman. Long is a career emergency management professional whose resume [includes](#) working as the director of the Alabama Emergency Management Agency from 2008 to 2011 under then Governor Bob Riley.

Despite being a veteran in emergency management, Long horrifically [mismanaged](#) the disastrous recovery efforts in Puerto Rico in 2017 after two consecutive hurricanes made landfall. An internal [report](#) concluded that Puerto Rico's emergency supply warehouse was nearly empty in October when Maria hit the island. Another major issue cited in the report was the lack of adequate staff in Puerto Rico after the hurricane hit due to most of the career professionals being deployed to other disaster areas. Long [acknowledged](#) that poor planning and inadequate leadership were some of the reasons for Puerto Rico's adverse recovery. Long also faced [controversy](#) during the time for calling the efforts "the most logistically challenging event the United States has ever seen" during an interview with then-Fox News host Chris Wallace.

Like several other of Trump's picks for executive branch leadership positions, Long also misused public resources. He was [investigated](#) by the Department of Homeland Security Inspector General for misusing government vehicles when he commuted from his home state of North Carolina. The DHS Inspector General questioned whether the taxpayers had been paying for these trips. These six-hour trips caused notable friction between Long and then-DHS secretary Kirstjen Nielsen; one official stated that Nielsen asked Long to resign over this. The investigation was [elevated](#) to federal prosecutors with whom he [agreed](#) to cooperate.

Long [resigned](#) in 2019, claiming his reasons were unrelated to his alleged misuse of public dollars for personal travel. FEMA Deputy Administrator Peter Gaynor took over as the new FEMA chief and was later [confirmed](#) in January of 2020.

## The Trump FEMA Experience

Trump's approach to FEMA could be summarized as treating disaster recovery as pressing only if it served Trump politically. Trump's FEMA was not the first to face criticism for its emergency response—the Bush administration's [response](#) to Hurricane Katrina, and the Obama's administration's [response](#) to the flooding in Louisiana in 2016, also faced scrutiny. The crucial difference is that Trump actively encouraged prioritizing emergency response to states and localities that helped him politically.

Take the [example](#) of Hurricane Harvey, the catastrophic [category 4](#) hurricane that hit Texas in 2017. Just [six](#) days after Hurricane Harvey had ravaged Texas, the Trump administration provided resources including tarps, food, and shelter after the hurricane. However, almost immediately after Hurricane Harvey, Puerto Rico was hit by two consecutive hurricanes Irma and Maria, both category five hurricanes. It took Trump six days to even [visit](#) Puerto Rico.

*Politico* [analyzed](#) the response to both disasters and concluded that the Trump administration favored Texas over Puerto Rico. One clear example is Trump's FEMA declining to [dispatch](#) veteran FEMA official Mike Byrne to Puerto Rico. Byrne was FEMA's then-Assistant Administrator for the Field Operations Directorate, the office that [oversees](#) the operational needs of FEMA. This role is absolutely critical in guiding disaster response. Byrne was part of the [efforts](#) that made the recovery after Hurricane Sandy such a success under President Obama, as well as supporting the efforts that led to swift recovery after Harvey. Yet the Trump Administration did not see it necessary to deploy Byrne's expertise when Puerto Rico was rattled by two consecutive hurricanes.

The analysis from *Politico* tracked this disparate response, and noted: "a comparison of government statistics relating to the two recovery efforts strongly supports the views of disaster-recovery experts that FEMA and the Trump administration exerted a faster, and initially greater, effort in Texas, even though the damage in Puerto Rico exceeded that in Houston." Among the comparisons that *Politico* makes is that six days after Harvey, the U.S. Northern Command deployed 73 helicopters to Houston, which are crucial for rescuing survivors and delivering supplies. It took FEMA over three weeks after Irma and Maria made landfall for the agency to deploy up to 70 helicopters over Puerto Rico. FEMA [approved](#) \$141.8 million in disaster relief funding for Texas after Harvey, but only \$6.2 million for Puerto Rico. It took FEMA ten days to approve permanent disaster relief work for Texas, but 43 days for Puerto Rico.

Trump went so far as to claim that both Hurricane Maria and Irma were not real disasters. And Trump [refused](#) to give full access to recovery funds to Puerto Rico until 2020, years after the storms—and only 47 days before the presidential election. The response to Hurricane Harvey, though greater than that in Puerto Rico, still did not make the Houston community whole. Despite the administration touting the response to

Harvey as an “[incredible](#)” success, a 2023 [survey](#) from the Coalition for the Homeless found that homelessness increased 8 percent in Houston because of Harvey.

## **The COVID-19 Pandemic Was A Direct Result Of Trump In Action**

FEMA played a key role in Trump’s failed leadership during the coronavirus pandemic. After a full week of widespread cancellations, infections, and growing unease, Trump finally [invoked](#) the Stafford Act on March 13th, 2020, which allowed FEMA to coordinate with states and localities to offer resources for responding to the then-developing pandemic.

In August 2020, FEMA officials [considered](#) rethinking the criteria by which it would distribute federal money to states and localities. At that point, states and localities were trying to find ways to access easy federal dollars to help manage the pandemic. FEMA officials told cities and states that their emergency responders would have to turn to other federal programs to respond to the ongoing pandemic..

A retrospective 2023 DHS Inspector General [report](#) showed definitively that the Trump-FEMA had mismanaged the COVID-19 pandemic. The report found that FEMA did not adequately process the distribution of resources, failing to utilize the Logistics Supply Chain Management System (LSCMS) which has historically governed the distribution of resources during disasters.

The report [found](#) that FEMA did not properly report or track its distribution of resources. According to the report, when the pandemic began, FEMA had been using a newly developed Logistics Resource Tracker to help the National Response Coordination Center, the specific office that [coordinates](#) the federal response to disaster areas. Under pressure to act quickly during the pandemic after a national emergency was declared, Trump’s FEMA began reporting inaccurate data. This was despite the fact that there was a National Security Council [playbook](#) detailing how to properly manage the country during a pandemic. The 69-page memo specifically asked questions about topics like PPE, the use of the Defense Production Act, and even unified messaging; all resources the Trump administration failed to cohesively mobilize during the pandemic, with deadly cost. Mismanagement of FEMA was a notable reason that the United States had a vastly higher death rate from Covid [than its peer countries](#).

***For more on this issue, contact Chris Lewis ([lewis@therevolvingdoorproject.org](mailto:lewis@therevolvingdoorproject.org)) or Timi Iwayemi ([iwayemi@therevolvingdoorproject.org](mailto:iwayemi@therevolvingdoorproject.org))***