

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

April 18, 2019

Gene L. Dodaro
Comptroller General
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G St., NW
Washington, D.C. 20548

Dear Mr. Dodaro,

We write to request that the Government Accountability Office (GAO) conduct a review of federal disaster relief programs to determine the extent to which the structure and administration of those programs exacerbate racial and socioeconomic inequities in the United States, and the extent to which they have a disparate impact on Native tribal nations.

According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the United States experienced a “historic” number of high-cost natural disasters in recent years. From 2016 to 2018, the “annual average number of billion-dollar disasters” in the U.S. was “more than double the long-term average.”¹ In 2018, the country experienced 14 disasters—including cyclones, droughts, storms, and wildfires—that cost the federal government over \$1 billion each.² The 2017 hurricane season, which included Hurricanes Harvey, Maria, and Irma, was “the most expensive in U.S. history,”³ and the country spent over \$300 billion in 2017 to recover from natural disasters—a “new U.S. annual record.”⁴ As climate change worsens, scientists predict that the number of extreme weather events taking place each year will increase.⁵

When natural disasters strike, U.S. citizens in affected communities rely on the federal government for emergency resources and disaster relief. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) works closely with state, territorial, tribal, and local officials to help communities “respond to and recover from disasters.”⁶ The agency administers the Disaster Relief Fund, which supports “the repair and restoration of...disaster-damaged public infrastructure,” “hazard mitigation initiatives,” and “financial assistance to disaster survivors,”⁷ and the National Flood Insurance Program, which provides renters, homeowners, and businesses

¹ National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, “2018’s Billion Dollar Disasters in Context,” Adam B. Smith, February 8, 2019, <https://www.climate.gov/news-features/blogs/beyond-data/2018s-billion-dollar-disasters-context>.

² *Id.*

³ National Geographic, “2017 Hurricane Season Was the Most Expensive in U.S. History,” Willie Drye, November 30, 2017, <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2017/11/2017-hurricane-season-most-expensive-us-history-spd/>.

⁴ National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, “2017 U.S. billion-dollar weather and climate disasters: a historic year in context,” <https://www.climate.gov/news-features/blogs/beyond-data/2017-us-billion-dollar-weather-and-climate-disasters-historic-year>.

⁵ U.S. Global Change Research Program, National Climate Assessment, 2014, <https://nca2014.globalchange.gov/highlights/report-findings/extreme-weather>.

⁶ Federal Emergency Management Agency, “About the Agency,” <https://www.fema.gov/about-agency>.

⁷ Federal Emergency Management Agency, “Disaster Relief Fund: Monthly Report,” <https://www.fema.gov/media-library/assets/documents/31789>.

with affordable flood insurance.⁸ In addition, thirteen other federal agencies offer over 70 forms of disaster aid, including assistance with post-disaster housing, food, education, and health needs.⁹

U.S. citizens in need deserve equal access to and fair treatment from federal disaster resources. However, a growing body of evidence suggests that natural disasters exacerbate existing racial and socioeconomic inequities in affected communities—and that the aid administered in the wake of those disasters amplifies these impacts. In August 2018, researchers from the University of Pittsburgh and Rice University analyzed survey data from 1999-2013 to assess the impact of natural disasters on inequality. Their analysis revealed that natural disasters—particularly those that cause significant property damage—were associated with increased “wealth inequality, especially along the lines of race, education, and homeownership.”¹⁰ The study reached a stark conclusion: “At any given level of local damage, the more aid an area receives from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the more this inequality grows.”¹¹ Similarly, earlier this month, a National Public Radio (NPR) analysis of 40,000 FEMA-funded property buyouts found that “disasters, and the federal aid that follows, disproportionately benefit wealthier Americans. The same is also true along racial lines, with white communities benefiting disproportionately.”¹²

Inequities in disaster relief could stem from the structure of federal aid programs, which “are designed primarily to restore property, or wealth... This approach means that those with more property as well as more income with which to insure it are likely to experience significantly different recoveries than those with less property and income.”¹³ NPR investigators illustrated this phenomenon by profiling two families in Houston, Texas, who sought federal aid in the wake of Hurricane Harvey—one who owned their home, and one who rented. FEMA provided the homeowners with \$30,000 as compensation for their destroyed house; the family is now “financially stable.” The renters, meanwhile, are “facing bankruptcy” after receiving only \$2,500 in FEMA aid and struggling to navigate the federal aid application process.¹⁴

While federal disaster aid exacerbates inequities in some communities, it hardly reaches other communities at all. According to the National Congress of American Indians, the nation’s 573 federally recognized tribal governments are largely shut out of federal funding intended to help communities meet minimum standards of emergency preparedness developed by FEMA, the

⁸ Federal Emergency Management Agency, “The National Flood Insurance Program,” <https://www.fema.gov/national-flood-insurance-program>.

⁹ DisasterAssistance.gov, “Forms of Assistance,” <https://www.disasterassistance.gov/get-assistance/by-category-or-agency>.

¹⁰ Junia Howell and James R. Elliot, “Damages Done: The Longitudinal Impacts of Natural Hazards on Wealth Inequality in the United States,” *Social Problems*, August 14, 2018, <https://academic.oup.com/socpro/advance-article/doi/10.1093/socpro/spy016/5074453>.

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² National Public Radio, “How Federal Disaster Money Favors The Rich,” Rebecca Hersher and Robert Benincasa, March 5, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/03/05/688786177/how-federal-disaster-money-favors-the-rich>.

¹³ Junia Howell and James R. Elliot, “Damages Done: The Longitudinal Impacts of Natural Hazards on Wealth Inequality in the United States,” *Social Problems*, August 14, 2018, <https://academic.oup.com/socpro/advance-article/doi/10.1093/socpro/spy016/5074453>.

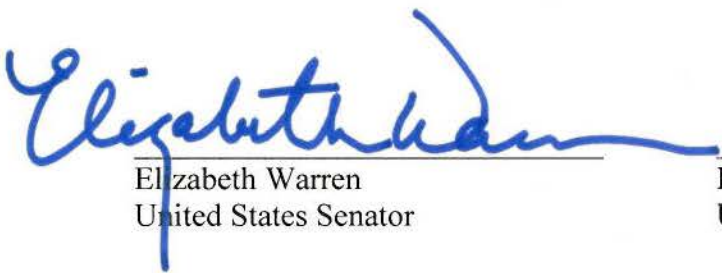
¹⁴ National Public Radio, “How Federal Disaster Money Favors The Rich,” Rebecca Hersher and Robert Benincasa, March 5, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/03/05/688786177/how-federal-disaster-money-favors-the-rich>.

National Fire Administration, and other authorities.¹⁵ Tribal governments also require funding for necessary emergency management training needed to understand and comply with new Stafford Act tribal disaster declaration guidance, which affects tribal nations' access to disaster funds.¹⁶

As the federal government continues to grapple with the rising incidence and cost of extreme weather events and natural disasters, it is critical that lawmakers understand the socioeconomic impacts of current federal disaster policy. We therefore request that the GAO conduct a review of the following issues:

1. What key federal funding streams and programs are available to help individuals recover from natural disasters, such as hurricanes, floods, cyclones, storms, and wildfires?
2. To what extent do these programs and agencies collect data or conduct analyses of the impact of these programs on various racial and socioeconomic groups? Is any data collected or analysis conducted on the programs' impacts on Native tribal nations?
3. What research is available on the long-term recovery impacts of these programs on various racial or socioeconomic groups? What research is available on the long-term recovery impacts of these programs on tribal and non-tribal communities?
4. What legislative, regulatory, and other policy changes, if any, should Congress or the Administration consider to ensure that federal disaster aid programs assist individuals in their ability to fully recover from a disaster-related event?

Sincerely,



Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



Bennie G. Thompson
United States Representative

¹⁵ National Congress of American Indians, "Winds of Change: Protecting Our Nations and People into the Future (Indian County FY2020 Budget Request)," p. 39, <http://www.ncai.org/NCAI-FY20-BudgetReport-PREVIEW.pdf>.

¹⁶ *Id.* at p. 41.