

118TH CONGRESS
1ST SESSION

H. R. 6567

To require the Federal Emergency Management Agency to establish a Territorial Disaster Recovery Program to continuously identify, monitor, and address factors and capability gaps that hinder the execution and completion of recovery activities relating to major disasters by eligible entities located in the territories of the United States.

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

DECEMBER 1, 2023

Ms. VELÁZQUEZ (for herself, Ms. BARRAGÁN, Mr. TORRES of New York, Mr. SABLAN, Mr. VARGAS, Mr. GRIJALVA, Ms. MENG, Mr. ESPAILLAT, Mr. GREEN of Texas, Mr. GOLDMAN of New York, Ms. CLARKE of New York, Ms. OCASIO-CORTEZ, Ms. TLAIB, Ms. TITUS, Mrs. GONZÁLEZ-COLÓN, and Ms. PLASKETT) introduced the following bill; which was referred to the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure

A BILL

To require the Federal Emergency Management Agency to establish a Territorial Disaster Recovery Program to continuously identify, monitor, and address factors and capability gaps that hinder the execution and completion of recovery activities relating to major disasters by eligible entities located in the territories of the United States.

1 *Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representa-*
2 *tives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,*

1 **SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.**

2 This Act may be cited as the “Strengthening Capac-
3 ity for Disaster Resilient Territories Act”.

4 **SEC. 2. FINDINGS AND PURPOSE.**

5 (a) FINDINGS.—Congress makes the following find-
6 ings:

7 (1) The United States territories are particu-
8 larly vulnerable to extreme weather events, which
9 have become more frequent and stronger in recent
10 years.

11 (2) Category-5 Hurricane María, which made
12 its landfall in Puerto Rico on September 20th, 2017,
13 is considered to be the second deadliest storm re-
14 corded in United States history.

15 (3) Category-5 Hurricane Irma, which struck
16 the U.S. Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico on Sep-
17 tember 6th, 2017, is considered to be the second-
18 most intense tropical cyclone worldwide in 2017.

19 (4) Typhoon Mawar, which struck Guam on
20 May 19th, 2023, and the south of Rota, Northern
21 Mariana Islands on May 24th, 2023, is considered
22 to be the strongest to hit Guam since 2002.

23 (5) Super Typhoon Yutu, which struck the
24 Northern Mariana Islands on October 24th, 2018, is
25 considered to be the strongest typhoon recorded to
26 impact the Mariana Islands.

1 (6) Hurricane Fiona made its landfall as a Cat-
2 egory-1 Hurricane in Puerto Rico on September
3 18th, 2022, causing severe flooding and
4 compounding the damage left by Hurricanes Irma
5 and María.

6 (7) A major disaster declaration was issued for
7 the territory of American Samoa on September 16th,
8 2022, due to high surf, high winds, and flooding.

9 (8) Rising sea levels, caused by ocean warming,
10 contribute to the increased frequency and intensity
11 of hurricanes, and the fragile condition of coastal
12 environments in the United States territories. This
13 translates to disrupted economic activity, such as
14 tourism, agriculture and fishing, damaged dwellings,
15 and limited drinking water supplies.

16 (9) The Federal Emergency Management Agen-
17 cy (hereinafter referred to as “FEMA”) has obli-
18 gated significant amounts of funding to address
19 multiple natural disasters in the United States terri-
20 tories.

21 (10) As of October 2023, FEMA had obligated
22 an estimated \$40,980,000,000 in Public Assistance,
23 Hazard Mitigation, Power Reconstruction and Per-
24 manent Work to address damages caused by Hurri-
25 cane María in Puerto Rico. In addition, as of Sep-

1 tember 2023, FEMA had obligated an estimated
2 \$328,000,000 in Public Assistance to address dam-
3 ages caused by Hurricane Fiona in Puerto Rico.

4 (11) As of April 2023, FEMA had obligated an
5 estimated \$2,900,000,000 in Public Assistance and
6 Hazard Mitigation to address damages caused by
7 Hurricane María in the Virgin Islands. In addition,
8 as of December 2022, FEMA had obligated an esti-
9 mated \$89,000,000 in Public Assistance and Hazard
10 Mitigation to address damages caused by Hurricane
11 Irma in the Virgin Islands.

12 (12) After the passage of Typhoon Mangkhut
13 and Super Typhoon Yutu in Guam and the Northern
14 Mariana Islands, FEMA obligated a total of
15 \$677,200,000 between 2018 and 2020 to aid re-
16 sponse and recovery efforts related to both disasters.

17 (13) The United States territories have similar
18 vulnerabilities that result in long and difficult recov-
19 ery processes.

20 (14) The economies of the United States terri-
21 tories depend heavily on tourism to create revenue.
22 Such dependency undermines disaster resiliency,
23 given the industry's susceptibility to external shocks,
24 such as atmospheric conditions, financial crises, and
25 global pandemics. Any of this phenomenon can re-

1 duce the number of visitors and trigger the closure
2 of businesses and lay-offs.

3 (15) The United States territories struggle with
4 high levels of public debt, which impact their ability
5 to provide cash advances to initiate disaster recovery
6 projects. Notably—

7 (A) Puerto Rico is in the midst of debt re-
8 structuring proceedings that, as of 2023, have
9 reduced Puerto Rico’s public debt from over
10 \$70 billion to \$37 billion and pension liabilities
11 from \$55 billion to \$7 billion;

12 (B) as of 2019, Virgin Islands’ public debt
13 stood at \$2,600,000,000, representing 65 per-
14 cent of its Gross Domestic Product; and

15 (C) as of 2021, Guam’s public debt stood
16 at \$2,600,000,000, representing 43 percent of
17 its Gross Domestic Product.

18 (16) The physical infrastructure of the United
19 States territories, including electricity grids and
20 water plants, is outdated, and has lacked appro-
21 priate maintenance and hardening.

22 (17) The United States territories face housing
23 affordability and availability challenges that impact
24 their ability to absorb the influx of the recovery
25 workforce after a disaster occurs.

1 (18) The United States territories are situated
2 in remote locations, which results in higher import
3 costs, significant delays in the shipping and trans-
4 portation of construction materials necessary to
5 carry out recovery projects, and barriers for staff
6 seeking to travel to the continental United States to
7 receive recovery training.

8 (19) The United States territories have limited
9 specialized staff to adequately navigate and manage
10 recovery programs, including developing projects for
11 obligation, using Public Assistance to cover adminis-
12 trative and managerial costs, and procuring goods
13 and services according to Federal standards.

14 (20) The United States territories hurdle to
15 find and procure specialized personnel to advance re-
16 covery efforts, such as engineers and construction
17 contractors, given the high demand for these profes-
18 sionals by public agencies and large corporations in
19 the aftermath of disasters.

20 (21) The United States territories struggle with
21 dangerous demographic patterns that exacerbate so-
22 cial, financial, and economic fragilities. From 2010
23 to 2020, the populations of the territories shrunk,
24 and at a faster pace than any other continental
25 state. In such period, Puerto Rico's population was

1 reduced by 11.8 percent, U.S. Virgin Islands' popu-
2 lation by 18.1 percent, Northern Mariana Islands'
3 population by 12.2 percent, American Samoa's popu-
4 lation by 10.5 percent, and Guam's population by
5 3.5 percent. Additionally, the islands are experi-
6 encing lower birthrates and higher death rates.

7 (22) The postal addresses used in the United
8 States territories have not been recognized and reg-
9 istered by the United States Postal Service, which
10 can result in additional obstacles for recovery, pri-
11 marily for individuals and households seeking to ob-
12 tain FEMA assistance.

13 (23) The United States territories have endured
14 consecutive major disasters, which has made it more
15 difficult for FEMA to correctly assess recent and
16 older damages, and therefore obligate funding for
17 Public Assistance projects.

18 (24) The United States territories encompass a
19 variety of languages, political sensitivities, and cul-
20 tural differences that Federal authorities like FEMA
21 have not traditionally considered, thereby impacting
22 the territories' full and equal participation in Fed-
23 eral disaster recovery programs.

24 (b) STATEMENT OF PURPOSE.—It is the purpose of
25 this Act to establish a program within FEMA to continu-

1 ously identify, monitor, and address factors and capability
2 gaps that hinder the execution and completion of recovery
3 activities by eligible entities located in the territories of
4 the United States under sections 403, 404, 406, 407, and
5 502 of the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emer-
6 gency Assistance Act (42 U.S.C. 5121 et seq.).

7 **SEC. 3. DEFINITIONS.**

8 In this Act:

9 (1) ADMINISTRATOR.—The term “Adminis-
10 trator” means the Administrator of the Federal
11 Emergency Management Agency.

12 (2) COMMUNITY.—The term “community”
13 means a network of individuals and families, busi-
14 nesses, governmental and nongovernmental organiza-
15 tions, and other civic organizations that reside or op-
16 erate within a shared geographical boundary and
17 may be represented by a common political leadership
18 at a regional, county, municipal, or neighborhood
19 level.

20 (3) ELIGIBLE ENTITY.—The term “eligible enti-
21 ty” means an entity eligible for a grant under sec-
22 tion 403, 404, 406, 407, or 502 of the Robert T.
23 Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance
24 Act (5121 U.S.C. et seq.).

1 (4) RECOVERY.—The term “recovery” means
2 the capabilities and actions necessary to recover ef-
3 fectively from a major disaster declared under the
4 Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency
5 Assistance Act (42 U.S.C. 5121 et seq.), including—

6 (A) rebuilding infrastructure systems;

7 (B) providing adequate interim and long-
8 term housing for individuals impacted by such
9 incident;

10 (C) restoring health, social, and commu-
11 nity services;

12 (D) promoting economic development; and

13 (E) restoring natural and cultural re-
14 sources.

15 (5) TERRITORY OF THE UNITED STATES.—The
16 term “territory of the United States” means Amer-
17 ican Samoa, the Commonwealth of the Northern
18 Mariana Islands, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico,
19 Guam, the United States Virgin Islands, and any
20 other territory or possession of the United States.

21 **SEC. 4. TERRITORIAL DISASTER RECOVERY PROGRAM.**

22 (a) IN GENERAL.—Not later than 1 year after the
23 date of enactment of this Act, the Administrator shall es-
24 tablish a Territorial Disaster Recovery Program (in this
25 section referred to as the “Program”) to continuously

1 identify, monitor, and address factors and capability gaps
2 of local emergency managers, or other applicable emer-
3 gency response coordinators, and eligible entities located
4 in the territories of the United States in carrying out re-
5 covery activities relating to major disasters declared under
6 the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency As-
7 sistance Act (42 U.S.C. 5121 et seq.).

8 (b) DUTIES.—In carrying out the Program, the Ad-
9 ministrator shall—

10 (1) not later than 1 year after the date of en-
11 actment of this Act, and every 2 years thereafter,
12 identify and analyze gaps in identifying, applying
13 and receiving assistance, and carrying out recovery
14 activities described in subsection (a) that are specific
15 to eligible entities located in the territories of the
16 United States;

17 (2) provide technical assistance to the entities
18 described in paragraph (1) in applying for grants
19 under sections 403, 404, 406, 407, and 502 of such
20 Act that—

21 (A) is tailored to meet the needs of appli-
22 cants at each stage of the administration of
23 projects for which grants are made under such
24 sections; and

25 (B) takes into account the challenges of—

1 (i) applicants who are located in re-
2 mote or difficult-to-access areas;

3 (ii) applicants who are part of a mi-
4 nority cultural group;

5 (iii) applicants with limited English
6 language proficiency; and

7 (iv) applicants with slow internet
8 speeds or limited broadband access;

9 (3) design online and in-person training courses
10 that are specific to the entities described in para-
11 graph (1) and that address the capability gaps iden-
12 tified under this section;

13 (4) develop best practices regarding the admin-
14 istration of projects in the territories of the United
15 States for which grants are made under sections
16 403, 404, 406, 407, and 502 of such Act;

17 (5) develop feedback mechanisms for entities re-
18 ceiving technical assistance or training under this
19 section; and

20 (6) foster meaningful collaboration with local
21 experts, community leaders, and other members of
22 the community, that leads to the performance of ac-
23 tivities under this section that are locally informed
24 and relevant to local needs.

25 (c) REPORT TO CONGRESS.—

1 (1) IN GENERAL.—Not later than 2 years after
2 the date of enactment of this Act, and every 2 years
3 thereafter for the duration of the Program, the Ad-
4 ministrator shall submit to the Committee on Trans-
5 portation and Infrastructure and the Committee on
6 Homeland Security of the House of Representatives
7 and the Committee on Homeland Security and Gov-
8 ernmental Affairs of the Senate a report on—

9 (A) any capability gaps identified under
10 subsection (b)(1);

11 (B) the nature of any technical assistance
12 provided under the Program;

13 (C) any online or in-person training
14 courses developed, or planned to be developed
15 under the Program;

16 (D) any best practices identified under
17 subsection (b)(4); and

18 (E) an analysis of, responses to, and any
19 activities carried out as a result of feedback re-
20 ceived by applicants for assistance under the
21 Program and entities receiving such assistance.

22 (2) FINAL REPORT.—In the report required to
23 be submitted in the final year for which the Pro-
24 gram is authorized, the Administrator shall include
25 recommendations on—

1 (A) whether to continue the Program;

2 (B) if a continuation of the program is rec-
3 ommended, the suggested duration of such con-
4 tinuation; and

5 (C) the necessary funding to carry out the
6 Program.

7 (d) AUTHORIZATION OF APPROPRIATIONS.—There is
8 authorized to be appropriated to carry out this section
9 \$50,000,000 for each of fiscal years 2024 through 2028.

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