



# Individual Assistance Symposium

After-Action Report

April 2022



FEMA

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# Executive Summary

On March 24th, 2022, the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) Individual Assistance (IA) Division, Office of Regional Field Coordination (ORFC), coordinated and hosted an IA Symposium for state, local, tribal, and territorial (SLTT) partners, other federal agencies, non-governmental organizations, and FEMA personnel. The IA Division includes a range of programs and functions that are implemented during each stage of the recovery life cycle and impact Regional, State and NGO partners. The IA symposium sought to engage FEMA and its IA stakeholders in topics identified to be important to the IA community.

This Symposium's goal was to provide attendees the platform to collaborate and learn so that there is a shared understanding of FEMA's capability to respond to and recover from disasters. Presentations were provided by FEMA Recovery leadership, IA leadership, and state IA partners. Due to COVID-19, the summit was held virtually using the GoToWebinar platform.

# Summit Presenters

The Office of Response and Recovery (ORR), Individual Assistance Division (IA), invited multiple participants to discuss the topics identified by the IA community. Those participants are listed below:

- Dr. Melissa Forbes, Assistant Administrator, Recovery Directorate, FEMA
- Becky Szymcik, Individual Assistance Branch Chief, Region 1, FEMA
- Lisa Castaldo, Long Term Recovery Section Chief/Individual Assistance Officer, Alabama Emergency Management Agency
- Ken Dumais, State Hazard Mitigation Officer/State IA Officer, Connecticut Division of Emergency Management and Homeland Security
- James Garrett, Individual Assistance Officer, Commonwealth of Kentucky
- John Donahue, Emergency Management Program Specialist for Region 3
- Traci Brasher, Recovery Division Director, Region 6, FEMA
- John Carleton, Acting Deputy Division Director

# Individual Assistance Symposium: Topic Review

## 1. FEMA Recovery Directorate Assistant Administrator Welcome Remarks

The 2022 FEMA Strategic Plan has three focus areas: equity, climate change, and readiness. The first session of the March IA Symposium focused on readiness and being ready for an IA disaster declaration. With many states and regions affected by hurricane season, FEMA hopes to foster a productive conversation on how to make preparedness efforts more seamless and unified. The FEMA Recovery Directorate Assistant Administrator called on the Symposium participants to recall some of the best practices or pitfalls experienced throughout their emergency management careers to brainstorm ideas on improving preparedness and readiness efforts for hurricane season.

The second session, Direct Housing Reimagined, aligns with the Administrator's priority for the agency to really assess the IA Direct Housing program and offer recommendations on bettering the program to align with the 2022 Strategic Plan. Conversations with federal agency partners, including Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), the Small Business Administration (SBA), and the White House have been taking place. FEMA hopes to expand those conversations and include other perspectives by discussing with other IA partners and stakeholders. In doing so, FEMA aims to create an inclusive and educational platform to develop recommendations on the best ways to handle the housing needs of disaster survivors following an event. Participants will have an opportunity to provide more feedback and questions in upcoming listening sessions.

In their differences, both sessions address a focus area from the 2022 FEMA Strategic Plan. The FEMA Recovery Directorate Assistant Administrator commented on the importance of equity at the conclusion of her welcome remarks. She added, "Equity is really a sort of a passion project of mine. As we go into this hurricane season, we are looking to continue to find new ways to operationalize equity in the field. We are also finding ways to make sure that we're serving all survivors and especially those from underserved or historically underrepresented groups in our work, not just in our response, but also in our long-term recovery planning."

## 2. What to Expect when Expecting an IA Disaster Declaration: Lessons Learned from States with 10 Years between IA Declarations

When Hurricane Ida hit the mid-Atlantic and the Northeast, several states had IA declarations for the first time in almost ten years. During deployments to Pennsylvania, Connecticut, New York, and New Jersey, the Region 1 IA staff noticed a number of similar challenges on both the FEMA side and the stateside. Many of those challenges were due to the length of time between the last IA declarations in those states. FEMA hopes that these lessons learned can be used as starting points for conversations between FEMA Regional Offices and states<sup>1</sup> who don't have IA declarations very often or have new staff who haven't experienced an IA declaration.

### 2.1. Lessons Learned: Region 1

One major thing that states should do is stay current on FEMA policies. Policies change and may not be the same as they were a year ago and are definitely not the same as they were five or ten years ago. Statutes and regulations also change and mandate that things are done differently, or new things are done. States should reach out to their region if they have not heard of any updates or new policies, and regions should be diligent about sending updates and new policies to their state partners. There should always be a two-way conversation between states and regions, but this conversation is especially important when an IA declaration is coming to your state/region.

Additionally, there are multiple components of IA that will likely be doing different things simultaneously during an IA declaration. FEMA understands that this may get overwhelming and wants to work with the states to help them understand and work through the different aspects of an IA declaration. The states will be asked for many things simultaneously right after a declaration, so it is important to understand the requirements. FEMA will continually walk states through the timelines, requirements, and processes that need to be followed to help them get ready. Then, during the time between completing the preliminary damage assessment (PDA) and waiting for the declaration to be signed off and approved, there are a lot of things that should be thought about so that the state/region can be ready to hit the ground running when the declaration is implemented.

Overall, if you stay current on policy changes and understand the multiple IA components and the timeline for those components, you should be in good shape to start up a disaster.

### 2.2. Lessons Learned: Alabama

At Alabama EMA (AEMA), IA is part of the Recovery Division, and the IA Program is one full-time staff person. Historically there were a few years between events, but lately, there have been overlapping

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<sup>1</sup> While the speakers for this topic are from FEMA Regions and states, the lessons learned can also be applied to tribal nations and territories.

events. Between 2010 and 2019, there were six declared IA events. However, in the past two years, there have been five IA events, several SBA-only events, and numerous non-declared events.

### **2.2.1. ALABAMA: PDA PROCESS**

The PDA process can be very challenging. In Alabama (AL), this is a three-step process. First, the county does an initial assessment; second, we do state/local validations; and third, if it's warranted, the state requests joint state-federal damage assessments. Some of the challenges that AL faces with this process are:

- PDA Coordination with counties who are still responding
- Severe weather season - overlapping weather events
- A lot of time between events/turnover at the county level

There are a few ways that AL is trying to combat these challenges, including:

- Establishment of a single tool/system of record for the state
  - Provided at No Cost to 67 counties and 1 federally recognized tribe
- Conducting regular training
  - Online, Division Meetings, and Conferences
- Development of Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for PDAs and a standard email that includes deadlines and PDA Guide
- Cross-training of AEMA staff to lead PDA teams

### **2.2.2. ALABAMA: STATE IA PARTNERS**

It is important to keep your relationships current with your state partners. In AL, some of the state partners that AEMA regularly work with are:

- Mass Care Coordinator – Alabama Department of Human Resources
  - Sheltering and Feeding Task Force
- State Voluntary Agency Liaison (VAL) and Disaster Case Management – Governor's Office of Volunteer Services
  - Alabama Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD) Coordination Calls/Quarterly Meetings
- Functional and Access Needs in Disasters (FAND) Task Force



- Quarterly Meetings

We also are continuously working to improve our relationship with the state-led Housing Task Force. The task force is not very active between disasters, but they could be better utilized to prepare for potential housing missions.

There are many lessons we have learned about building and sustaining relationships with these key partners, including:

- Keeping contact information current
- Maintaining email group for State IA Partners for consistent communication, including when:
  - PDAs are being conducted
  - Declaration requests are submitted
  - A major declaration is granted
- Forwarding all External Affairs messaging to share with their networks

### **2.2.3. ALABAMA: STATE/FEMA COORDINATION**

State/FEMA coordination is critical, specifically immediately following a declaration. Quickly following a disaster, a call with the FEMA IA Branch Director is essential to:

- Discuss Operations to Date
- Review expectations of the state
- Discuss state participation in IA stand-up calls etc.
- Coordinate prior to Command and General staff meeting for briefings
- Confirm the Other Needs Assessment (ONA) Agreement (updated annually)
- Prepare for Housing Inspector Briefing
- Establish Joint Operations/Joint Field Office (we co-locate with FEMA for the duration of the operation)
- Begin confirmation of DRC locations (always challenging because county EMs are often still working on response)

## **2.3. Lessons Learned: Connecticut**

The state of Connecticut (CT) does not have a county-level government system. There are 169 towns and two tribal nations in CT. The CT Department of Emergency Management Homeland Security (DEMHS) has five regions in the state, with each region having a regional coordinator. CT DEMHS has a relatively small staff, so many regional coordinators wear multiple hats.

CT has an Emergency Support Function (ESF)-6: Mass Care Coordination working group, a blue-sky working group that meets monthly. ESF-6 closely partners with VOAD, state, and federal partners and has quarterly meetings to touch base with everyone when we are not in response mode. Keeping the dialogue open with local, state, federal, and VOAD partners is imperative.

### **2.3.1. CONNECTICUT: HURRICANE IDA RESPONSE**

When Hurricane Ida came up the East Coast, CT DEMHS asked the regional coordinators what kind of damage was being seen. Initially, there weren't a lot of reports for damage assessments coming out of the regions. Over the next few months, the requests for assistance started coming in, and there was an additional need for assistance from flooding events in most coastal regions. We then reached out to our Region 1 IA contacts to begin the PDA process.

The PDA process was started at the state level by building an IA Geographic Information System (GIS) dashboard to compile data, develop GIS mapping, and use the social vulnerability index data to map out the low-lying areas and properties. The data from this dashboard was used to reach out to the federal IA partners. It was decided to collect this data and use it to do a virtual PDA to get initial assessments underway. After a week of doing virtual PDAs, it was realized that it would be important to get boots on the ground. Multiple teams were put together to start assessing areas in conjunction with our partners at the state, local, and federal levels, including FEMA and SBA. After two weeks of door-to-door knocking and looking around, enough data was compiled to request a disaster declaration for two full counties. Two weeks later, a disaster declaration request was submitted for a third county in CT.

## **2.4. Lessons Learned: Kentucky**

There may be many years between IA declared disasters in Kentucky, or there may be a disaster every year.

### **2.4.1. KENTUCKY: FORMS AND FEMA RELATIONSHIPS**

Many things have to be done immediately after a declaration within a matter of hours or days. For each of those duties and job responsibilities, FEMA will bring in additional staff. There could be multiple FEMA staff for each person from Kentucky, which is a tremendous resource. This also means that it's important to know the regional IA staff and have a good relationship with them. As a part of that relationship building, it is helpful to understand who from the regional IA staff may be deployed to your state to know who you will be working with and can already have an established relationship with those people before the declaration happens.

Once a declaration happens, you will start getting daily reports with data, including registration numbers, housing numbers, etc. If it has been a while since you have had a declaration, it could be good to request to see those reports from other states so that you will already recognize them and understand what data is being shown. Ultimately it becomes our responsibility to explain these numbers to our leadership, so it is essential to know what they are and what they mean.

#### **2.4.2. KENTUCKY: RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER STATE AGENCIES**

It is important to work in partnership with state agencies to welcome them into the emergency management world to let them know what assistance will be needed from them and make sure that there are agreements in place for this assistance. One of the areas where it is crucial to have these partnerships is with housing. Even when there is not a declaration, it is important to work with the state housing agencies to understand housing needs on a day-to-day basis. Often times people don't understand how housing works, so it would be good to develop relationships with those housing partners, whether it's a federal, state, or non-profit agency. Building these relationships prior to a disaster is very important because it helps everyone work better together during the disaster.

#### **2.4.3. KENTUCKY: EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT ASSISTANCE COMPACT**

The Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMAC) is a state and territorial-led program where states mutually support one another and share resources in times of disaster. The idea is that states can complement, supplement, and fulfill gaps that they may have in the state delivery of services. It's important to share people and resources who have knowledge and experience because the state requesting the help needs people who can keep them moving forward. They don't have to have direct experience in a disaster, but having that knowledge is helpful. EMAC can be beneficial because you can have that experience brought into your state to help you learn to do things better.

### **2.5. Lessons Learned: Region 3**

From a Regional perspective, pre-event preparation with the states is a critical aspect of IA disaster declarations. Preparation efforts with states include the following:

- Conducting Quarterly Meetings and Discussions
- Providing Training
- Participating in Readiness Day
- Providing Technical Assistance and Guidance

Within Region 3, quarterly meetings with ESF-6 staff and IA counterparts are held. If a state has a FEMA Integration Team, discussions between the region and the state's Team may take place. However, communication between the regions and states should be emphasized throughout all preparation efforts, pre-event. Discussions may also consist of identifying the State Individual Assistance Officer, providing information and assistance with requested programs (e.g., the

Individuals and Households Program, Transitional Sheltering Assistance), and timeframes for the registration period and close-out of disaster.

In addition to continuous communication, individual trainings may take place. These trainings are where IA staff will travel to the states, discuss IA disasters, and open the floor to questions or comments from training participants.

Additionally, Readiness Day is when exercises are conducted, discussions regarding preparedness are had, and the states get to work and become more familiar with the regional staff. For Region 3, a hurricane exercise is generally conducted each year in May.

One aspect of preparation efforts is also providing technical assistance and documentation guidance. IA does this by reviewing Regional SOPs, answering questions regarding filing an IA disaster declaration, providing insight on initial damage assessments and joint damage assessments (in-person or virtually), and conducting an overview of PDA. The PDA overview for states can be located here: [Region 3 PDA Overview Webinar May 2021](#). SOPs should be updated every two to three years to account for changes that occurred over the years (i.e., changes caused by the Coronavirus pandemic). Additionally, the IA Program and Policy Guide (IAPPG) helps bridge gaps with terminology, acronyms, and more between the region and the states.

## **2.6. FEMA Lessons Learned**

### **2.6.1. FEMA LESSONS LEARNED: DISASTER SETUP**

- ONA Selection Forms – Yearly and the first 72 Hours
- Crisis Counseling Program, Disaster Case Management, Disaster Unemployment Assistance, and Disaster Legal Services timelines and implementation process
- Requesting Other Programs – Critical Needs Assistance, Clean and Sanitize, Non-Congregate Sheltering, Multi-Family Lease and Repair, Direct Housing

### **2.6.2. FEMA LESSONS LEARNED: PRELIMINARY DAMAGE ASSESSMENTS**

- Have a plan to collect damage information post-event.
- Plan for both large-scale and small-scale events.
- Socialize and exercise plan with Local and County EMA.
- FEMA IA staff can provide technical assistance for IDAs but cannot be part of the initial data collection or initial data verification.
- Share best practices among states, tribes, and territorial EMA.

### **2.6.3. FEMA LESSONS LEARNED: DISASTER RECOVERY CENTERS**

- Understand the purpose of the Disaster Recovery Center (DRC)
- Develop a plan for operations
  - Who should be included?
  - What services will be offered?
- Are they scalable?

### **2.6.4. FEMA LESSONS LEARNED: PARTNERSHIPS**

Who should you be working with pre-event?

- State VOAD
- State Bar Associations
- Department of Labor
- Mental Health
- State/Tribal/Territorial Housing and Urban Development (HUD)
- State Homeless Coalitions
- Social Services

## 3. Listening Session: Direct Housing Reimagined

### 3.1. FEMA Reimagine Direct Housing Initiative

In line with the 2022 FEMA Strategic Plan, the FEMA Reimagine Direct Housing Initiative was created with the intent to focus more on equity and deliver assistance through a people-first approach. This Initiative calls on the Office of Response and Recovery and the Regions to build upon their relationship and develop recommendations on how the IA Direct Housing program can be reimagined to meet survivor needs more effectively and consistently.

### 3.2. Reimagine Direct Housing Lines of Effort

Post-disaster temporary housing efforts have evolved due to notable successes from previous Direct Housing missions and navigation of hurdles such as existing laws, regulations, and policies. The identified Direct Housing Lines of Effort are the following:

- Conduct Stakeholder Feedback,
- Conduct Survivor Feedback,
- Assess Business Processes and Operational Roles,
- Enhance Housing Mission Support and Performance,
- Identify Data Management Improvements for New Direct Housing Technology System, and
- Messaging

The first line of effort consists of gathering feedback from stakeholders to develop short, mid, and long-term recommendations for the Direct Housing program. Other lines of efforts, like the New Direct Housing Technology System and the Messaging, are also progressing. A toolkit for messaging on current missions is currently in development. This toolkit will address topics such as what the Reimagine Direct Housing Initiative is and what the long-term goals for the Initiative are.

### 3.3. Housing Reimagined Stakeholder Engagement Strategy

The Stakeholder Engagement Strategy consists of an engagement approach that began in February 2022 by building understanding and support of the Initiative throughout FEMA, across the Regions, and among identified external partners. Between April 2022 and May 2022, listening sessions, focus groups, Gallery Walks, and surveys will be conducted and assessed to develop a plan for change to Direct Housing, whether short, mid, or long-term. As of April 2022, one one-hour focus group listening session with National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) has taken place, and another listening session is scheduled to take place at NEMA mid-year.

In preparation for upcoming listening sessions, potential questions or surveys pertaining to the Initiative will be disseminated to IA partners and other stakeholders. Participation and feedback from partners and stakeholders are highly valued and essential in the effort to reimagine Direct Housing assistance.



**Question Posed:** “Are recipients of housing assistance (i.e., disaster survivors) going to be included in the focus groups or surveys?”

**FEMA Response:** “Yes, so we have a team that does survivor engagement already. They do surveys for survivors who are part of Direct Housing missions. We are currently looking at what questions they ask in those surveys, identifying recent disasters with Direct Housing missions, and formulating questions that we would not be repeating, but we would get some of their thoughts and ideas around what would help them most in their recovery as it relates to housing. We will be conducting focus groups with survivors around this Initiative as well.”

### 3.4. Question and Answer Session



**Question Posed:** “Will states be able to administer their own housing mission in the future?”

**FEMA Response:** “That’s certainly a great question and one that we are interested in. We heard that same feedback from our initial NEMA listening session. Right now, that pilot has expired, so we currently do not have authority for the states to administer Direct Housing. It is something we are looking at—how we would be able to do that in the future in a way that allows the state to administer it with the help of locals and not just have to implement FEMA’s Direct Housing program in all the ways that FEMA would do it, which makes it extremely complicated for a state to administer on their own. I think some great ideas have come out of that, some of which would require legislative change. We are interested in upcoming listening sessions to hear your thoughts on what you think a state-led housing mission might look like.”



**Question Posed:** “Has there been any consideration or anyone looking into funding communal housing?”

**FEMA Response:** “Well, I think we certainly need to look at other options there. We currently look at Multi-Family Lease and Repair (MLRP) under housing right now, which tends to not be as successful as we would like. Certainly, a good idea there around communal housing. We’d love to hear more of the thought behind that and how that might work in an upcoming listening session.”



**Question Posed:** “Are there plans to address lack of accessible housing?”

**FEMA Response:** “We will definitely respond to that in the invitations to our listening sessions, subsequent reporting from our listening sessions, and future events.”



**Question Posed:** “Do you see an option in the future for eligible survivors to have a Direct Housing allotment that they could use as a down payment on a house, tiny house, or mobile home, rather than stay in a FEMA-supported house for a period of time?”

**FEMA Response:** “I know that some ideas have come up around mortgages for down payments. Some of those other great ideas on how we reimagine housing would obviously require legislative change, but those are certainly some of the things we’re looking for in a listening session, and would be happy to hear more about that idea or any other ideas that you all have around housing.”



## Next Steps

The IA Division is committed to providing symposiums that address topics identified as important by the regions and SLTT partners. Please work with your regional partners to identify any topics you would be interested in learning about or presenting to the IA community.

Additional IA symposiums are tentatively scheduled to be held in May and July 2022. More information about these sessions will be available at a later date.

Thank you for your interest in FEMA's IA Symposiums. Please continue to engage with FEMA and participate in upcoming events. For questions or more information regarding upcoming events, please contact [fema-hq-regional-field-coordination@fema.dhs.gov](mailto:fema-hq-regional-field-coordination@fema.dhs.gov).