FEMA National Advisory Council
December Virtual Meeting
December 1-2, 2020

PARTICIPANTS

National Advisory Council Members	December 1	December 2
Nim Kidd, Chair	No	Yes
Jeffrey Hansen, Vice Chair	Yes	Yes
Jeanne Abadie	Yes	Yes
Rich Baich	No	No
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Donald Bliss	Yes	Yes
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Deanna Dahl-Grove	Yes	Yes
Dante Disparte	Yes	Yes
Bryan Desloge	No	No
Paul Downing	No	No
Charley English	Yes	Yes
Charles Esteves	Yes	No
August Geisinger	Yes	Yes
John Grathwol	Yes	Yes
Lori Hodges	Yes	Yes
Pat Hoffman	Yes	Yes
Lisa Jones, Equity Subcommittee Chair	Yes	Yes
Ramesh Kolluru, Vision Subcommittee Vice-Chair	Yes	Yes
Anna Lang	Yes	Yes
Jackie Lindsey, Vision Subcommittee Chair	No	No
Linda Long, Capacity Subcommittee Vice-Chair	Yes	Yes
Nicolette Louissaint	Yes	Yes
Warren Miller, Equity Subcommittee Vice-Chair	Yes	Yes
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Brad Richy	Yes	Yes
Carol Salas	Yes	Yes
Carrie Speranza	Yes	Yes
Kevin Staley	Yes	Yes
Tina Titze, Capacity Subcommittee Chair	Yes	Yes
James Waskom	Yes	Yes
Pam Williams	Yes	Yes

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Adrian Sevier, Chief Counsel	Yes	No
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Travis Battiest, Office of Response and Recovery	Yes	Yes
Travis Gaines, Office of the Chief Counsel	Yes	Yes
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Tessa Wix, Public Assistance Division	Yes	Yes
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Trina Sheets, National Emergency Management Association	Yes	Yes
Dwayne Baker, Department of Homeland Security	Yes	Yes
Victoria Lawson, CUNY Institute for State and Local Governance	No	Yes
Lauren Smith, CDC Foundation	No	Yes
Lucia Bragg, National Conference of State Legislatures	No	Yes

Tuesday, December 1, 2020

DELIVERY OF 2021 CHARGES

The purpose of this session was for the NAC to formally receive the 2021 charges from Administrator Pete Gaynor.

Administrator's Remarks

Administrator Gaynor. My goal for the 2021 charges is to keep them as simple as possible. I want to ensure your time is devoted to things that matter. The NAC's role is to offer a strategic view from all our distinct partners, so that we can be a better FEMA, better emergency managers, and be better able to deliver critical resources nationwide. This year, it is obvious that there is a shared responsibility across the board. The three charges, with one new charge, are:

1. Continuation – Implementing Vision 2045: For 2020, the NAC put forward several pertinent recommendations, relating to topics such as data management, the education of political leaders, resource management and supply chain, cybersecurity, and innovation, just to name a few. I ask the NAC to continue to analyze the issues and put forward an implementation roadmap.
2. Continuation – Creation of an equity standard: One of the critical highlights of your 2020 report included improving cultural awareness. FEMA is preparing to release our cultural improvement plan, which was developed after a RAND study. We will be releasing both the RAND study and our plan publicly. We want a workforce that reflects the diversity of the U.S. population. If we cannot get to that standard, it might be difficult to reach equity overall. We want to ensure our programs outcomes are equitable for all communities. Part of my focus is in building partnerships with Tribal governments. These partnerships are critical to ensure disaster assistance reaches these communities. There is no one-size-fits-all.
3. Expedite disaster assistance: Disaster recovery is never fast enough – not for us at FEMA, nor for disaster survivors. This charge is about pushing down some of the roles and responsibilities that make the delivery of disaster assistance less painful. At a macro level, 80% of all disasters cost $41 million or less. About 50% of disasters cost $7 million or less. It would be great to write a block grant to allow communities to manage their own disaster assistance. But to do that, there needs to be capacity established beforehand at the SLTT level. Recovery needs to be a shared responsibility and cannot be an afterthought.

PANEL: EXPEDITING DISASTER ASSISTANCE

The purpose of this session was for the NAC to have candid conversations with FEMA senior leadership about the Expediting Disaster Assistance charge.

Discussion with FEMA Senior Leadership

Keith Turi. This topic is something we in the Recovery Directorate have always been striving for and are always looking for ways to improve. This charge focuses primarily on the Public Assistance (PA) program. There is a lot of flexibility built into PA at the macro level. Applicants, needs, and impacts are unknown and funding amounts are uncapped. Not many federal programs are implemented in such a way. This provides us the flexibility that we require to address applicant needs – this is critical for addressing unpredictable disasters. However, that flexibility requires some level of judgment and some way of assessing applicants. This is where the complexity lies. How do we perform these assessments at scale, across a range of applicants and declaration sizes? FEMA, grantees, and sub-grantees all have their own roles; we have baked in processes around what the fundamentals are of program delivery. To me, expediting assistance is figuring out a way to execute the fundamentals with unity of effort, a clear understanding of roles, and recognition of capacity. The challenge is that each entity does not have the same capacity or goals. How do we bring together all parties in an outcome-focused manner? We use a series of measures to evaluate the effectiveness of the program: timeliness, simplicity, accuracy, accessibility, and efficiency. They are interrelated. The big question is: how can we work to make these processes more streamlined and effective?

Tony Robinson. I will just highlight two points from the Hurricane Laura response. One way we clearly moved forward in the COVID environment to expedite assistance to survivors was through implementing virtual home inspections. The other was that they quickly pushed out the 25% hazard mitigation program in Louisiana. We talk about speed, but we also need to think about compliance. One of Region VI's most common issues from OIG audits are with documentation and contracting. How do we reduce burden while remaining compliant with the law? About 40% of audit findings relate to those two areas. The scoping piece, identifying disaster damage and pre-disaster condition, takes considerable time and effort. We know that codes and standards work. How do we incorporate compliance into mitigation and recovery? Another point is industry standards – how do we incorporate those to expedite disaster assistance? I think there is a great opportunity to synchronize federal programs to create unity of effort in disaster recovery.

Adrian Sevier. FEMA has been trying to find ways to expedite disaster assistance. So often, we run into the practical realities of the restrictions imposed on us by the law, regulations, and policies regarding disaster assistance. It is very helpful to understand the navigation process through all of those laws, regulations, and policies, to get to the result that actually results in expediting assistance. We are hopeful at FEMA that we receive actionable recommendations – meaning that each recommendation spells out exactly what needs to be changed, why, and how. Generally, a lot of focus is paid to getting disaster assistance money out quickly. However, on the PA side at least, getting the dollars out quicker does not necessarily improve the speed of recovery. SLTTs still require capacity to spend that money. Those decisions are incredibly complex. I suggest the NAC examine two questions:

1. Are we suggesting a measure that will get funding distributed faster?
2. Will this measure improve SLTT capacity to spend the money they receive?

There is also the question on balancing speed with waste, fraud, and abuse. FEMA is always trying to strike that balance. I think there is a greater opportunity to tweak that balance on the IA side, rather than the PA side. Those recommendations should be as specific as possible. Another question is on developing estimates for 428 assistance. Every delivery model requires making estimates. SLTTs want to maximize that amount; FEMA is always incentivized to maximize that amount, but often is limited by statutory requirements.

Lori Hodges. A huge hurdle will be how to allow for private/public partnerships within these programs which would help with project completion greatly. This would take statutory changes. I do think these new charges will allow the NAC to address some of the tribal concerns that have been brought up by the NAC regarding equity and these programs. Regarding the timelines, when we had our flood in 2013 we could not even get into some of the canyons due to roads being completed destroyed to get a good look at damages quickly. For tornadoes or hurricanes, it might be easier because the terrain tends to be flatter. But in mountains and canyons, access is a large issue in damage assessments.

Jeff Hansen. The relationship between Region VI and its tribes is a model to echo across the board. Working with FEMA to address these issues could help speed recovery, not just in tribes but in local jurisdictions as well. We need to know the tribal, local, and state perspectives. Often, requirements vary by jurisdiction. 428 grants have been very helpful to tribes, who are often understaffed in the funding process. The more education and funding we can get to those communities will allow them to recovery faster.

Nim Kidd. Some things I like about the PA program, coming from the state perspective: the structure, the categories, the speed, and the support from FEMA and knowing we will work together to determine eligibility. I like that we examine damages. The things I dislike about the program are the same. It is important that we have a program in the Stafford Act that is unlike other grant programs. I don't think those other programs, like block grants, move as fast. It cannot just be about getting money out faster. There must be an equal amount of time for planning and training for recovery as we have for response. There need to be permanent positions for recovery and mitigation. Now, I'm going to ask each of the state directors on the call to give their thoughts.

Jim Waskom. In Louisiana, we have 21 open disasters at about $25 billion in damages, going back to Katrina. One of the big topics each speaker has focused on thus far has been local capacity. I spend a lot of time training locals and legislators on processes and programs. Timeliness is FEMA's focus, but not necessarily ours. Locals are often bombarded with information. From our perspective, the most important areas to balance with timeliness are simplicity, accuracy, accessibility, and efficiency. Another issue that arises relates to damage assessment deadlines. These are front-loaded, as we'll have short deadlines to complete, which stresses the locals out, and then the request sits for months waiting for obligation.

Brad Richy. I completely agree. With PA, I like the staff training through the PA Program and Policy Guide. Something that can be challenging is that sometimes private applicants file claims without speaking to their local emergency manager. It is challenging to identify these potential applicants. It would be helpful to expand the education program so we can understand everything that is eligible. I like the CRC, but sometimes feel it should be re-evaluated.

Tina Titze. I agree with everything that has been said. The training and education bit hit the nail on the head. These might be areas to reduce the complexity and make the process more streamlined.

Carrie Speranza. What Tina said resonates with me in DC's COVID-19 perspective. If we had been able to share information efficiently and effectively, it would have been much more expeditious. It would have been a game changer.

Lori Hodges. What if the program was based more on state management? It seems like a lot of effort is spend on doing something rather impossible. Can this be something that is state led in coordination with the locals?

Jeff Hansen. For smaller jurisdictions, it is a learning process every time. Building that capability on the front end would be beneficial.

Lori Hodges. You also have sub-applicants, like school districts, that have no training. In Colorado, we have peer-to-peer networks where locals can assist one another.

Deanne Criswell. In NYC, we have a robust Office of Management and Budget that manages recovery, so it does not fall in the purview of the emergency management agency. NYC has not had many Stafford Act declarations.

Nim Kidd. I think we lose that visibility sometimes. In San Antonio, once we got out of response and recovery, we shifted away from the emergency management office and pushed it toward the budget office. Could this be part of the expediting problem? For me, at the state level, the hardest part is the paperwork, but at the local level it is the response itself.

John Grathwol. Part of why NYC was successful after Hurricane Sandy was the centralizing of the budget.

Administrator Gaynor. The locals naturally deal with disaster response. Recovery, on the other hand, quickly moves out of the local scope. Recovery requires plans, with roles and responsibilities listed out for all levels. What we need to do better at the federal level is recognize the core components about disasters that never change. One is repeatability – making sure the process used is the same across the nation. We need to stop reinventing the wheel. We need to get better at sharing the best models so that they can be utilized by all.

PRESENTATION: PUBLIC ASSISTANCE

The purpose of this session was for the NAC to gain a working knowledge of the Public Assistance program, given its relevance to the Expediting Disaster Assistance charge. The NAC spoke with Tessa Wix and Gina Valentine, from FEMA's Public Assistance Division.

Opening Remarks

Jasper Cooke. Tessa and Gina are going to be serving as EDA subcommittee members. They have a deep knowledge of the PA program and will be able to field questions, as well as participate in discussions to add a new perspective. They will not vote on recommendations but will still participate in the subcommittee meetings throughout the year.

PA Mission, Process, and Goals

Tessa Wix. Our goal is to help you all work toward the most actionable recommendations possible. Gina and I are going to highlight a few areas as potential starting points, starting with the PA process and goals. The PA program assists with things like debris removal, emergency protective measures, and hazard mitigation. There are multiple roles and responsibilities within the program:

- FEMA: Authorized to manage the program.
- Recipients: Receive funding under disaster declarations and disperse funding to sub-recipients.
- Applicants: Entities that submit the requests.
- Sub-recipients: Those receiving the funding.

The PA process reflects some of the complexity brought up earlier. At different stages in the process, multiple entities are involved at once. The goal is to capture applicants' disaster damage and determine their eligibility within 60 days. That timeline can be extended if needed. The next objective is to develop the scope of the work to be done and the project costs. There are also compliance reviews at this stage. After that comes grant development and obligation.

Gina Valentine. The national delivery model is designed to improve the timeliness, accuracy, effectiveness, simplicity, and accessibility of PA processes – these are its five goals. The model was intended to increase consistency and repeatability of the PA program. However, there are tradeoffs between these different concepts. If you focus on increasing timeliness, for example, you will likely sacrifice some accuracy. That balance must be determined. In mitigation, by increasing timeliness and shifting responsibilities to only one stakeholder, you may end up falling short. That can have significant long-term effects.

Recent Updates to Application Procedures

- Biweekly system enhancements: These need great improvement. They lack stakeholder engagement and SLTTs cannot keep up.
- Regular policy and ad-hoc enhancements, especially after COVID: Again, a good thing, but it is a challenge to determine how to balance enhancements while avoiding overwhelming SLTTs.
- Revamped training: We have shifted away from slide training and lectures, and more toward open-forum training with SMEs that have field experience.
- In 2017, self-certification was implemented for small, completed work projects. Applicants simply provide cost summaries and certify they have met the criteria, to avoid submitting backup documents. When this was implemented, it can have a great reach. It frees up FEMA staff time to focus on large, complex projects.
- In 2019, we implemented state-led PA. States fulfill program delivery functions, rather than FEMA. The state has better knowledge of its communities.
- In 2020, we implemented the direct application. Applicants claiming costs for debris removal and emergency protective measures can navigate PA without a FEMA Program Delivery Manager (PDMG). FEMA has put in place a variety of systems to make this more streamlined for these direct applicants.
- In 2020, we streamlined the project application. This allows applicants and recipients to create, complete, submit projects to FEMA on their own. This is different from the direct application, which just allows applicants to apply directly.

Timelines

Tessa Wix. Phase 1 starts from the date of the declaration and lasts about 4 months. Our data shows we only meet our 30-day goal for the request for PA threshold about 44% of the time. For exploratory calls, we meet our goal of 8 days about 67% of the time. For the recovery scoping meeting, we meet our 24-day goal 83% of the time. Phase 2 focuses on damage identification. The timeline is driven by the activities needed to begin recovery, such as gathering and packaging the information needed to support the grant claim. We examine things like how long it takes to gather this information and applicant response. Some questions to consider include: are we measuring what matters in this phase? How can we simplify the process of what supported application is needed?

Discussion

Lori Hodges. My experience with the PDMG is that it was a huge bottleneck. Has this changed over time?

Brad Richy. I would say that this has changed quite a bit. It is highly reduced from what it used to be.

Tessa Wix. The direct application debuted about 6 months early. One of the reasons we rolled it out during COVID was because we knew we needed ways for folks to directly apply. How do we tier and tailor customer service options to what applicants want and need?

Lori Hodges. Would it be beneficial if a disaster meets a certain threshold, it automatically goes to direct application?

Tessa Wix. Everything is on the table. To your threshold point, we should have tailored approaches that are repeatable for different types of complexity and applicants. What is the right level of customer service and tailoring for these smaller events? There are a lot of opportunities to make the PA program more accessible.

Nim Kidd. This subcommittee is looking at expediting disaster assistance. Would it be helpful to break this up by sub-applicants, cities, and nonprofits to hear what they like and do not like about the program? We could also consider looking at the states, regions, and the CRC. Few sub-applicants are ready for the next recovery mission after a disaster. Very few programs have funding for current or future disasters.

Lori Hodges. Has the NAC ever done a survey on this type of thing that we could send out to solicit this information?

Nim Kidd. I think a blend of both. I would love for us to come up with a list of questions we want to know. The applicant pool is fixed. It is states, territories, and tribes; the sub-applicant pool is what is unknown.

Keith. Many of the steps and processes that take the most time are with those sub-applicants. I agree with you. We need to look at capacity at the local level. I think you can see that a lot of time and effort has gone into this process to streamline it. There are a lot of trade-offs. The good news is that we have a lot of visibility.

Adrian Sevier. I want to circle back to the equity standard comment. Disadvantaged communities are impacted more significantly and differently from wealthier communities. They are less resilient. When considering local capacity, please also consider issues of equity. Can or should we focus our efforts on the more disadvantaged communities that lack capacity, with the end result simply being a slower recovery? The PA program will eventually reach everyone that is eligible, but without capacity, speed becomes an equity issue.

Warren Miller. Currently the disaster declaration process is one size fits all. There is the possibility of looking at the cost it takes to stand up a full-blown disaster declaration. That scaling piece is something I look at for all levels of the programs. I think that the NAC can look at that scaling piece and ensure it is not one size fits all.

Anna Lang. I do not have a granular understanding of PA. I would challenge us not to get siloed in thinking about recovery with this issue. Let’s look at this challenge and incorporate it into making disaster assistance more equitable in 2045. It seems a bit narrow-focused to me.

Lori Hodges. I agree. We should include mitigation as well.

Jim Waskom. I have a question for Tony and Tessa. If you have a joint field office (JFO), what then is the role of the CRC? How does the Regional Administrator play into that?

Tony Robinson. The JFO is the front-end, field-level operation. The CRC gives us consistency by performing some review process queues and is more high-level. As an RA, I am helping to look across the spectrum. We say that all disasters start and end locally. But, are we actually designing a process to where the locals have the least amount of input into that process? Should we be investing more at the local level?

Tessa Wix. One way I tend to think about CRCs is as a back office of disaster recovery. We are able to have a steady state of service that generally develops grants within 23 days. That doesn't mean that more complex grants do not take a longer time. I definitely think there are ways we can be more strategic about using both footprints.

Gina Valentine. What Tessa and I presented are definitely by and large the outliers that are causing extended periods. These are not necessarily where we need to focus improvements, but they might be a root cause to examine. There are so many layers to consider. We need to get more local involvement and make the process more accessible to them.

Steve Birnbaum. You had all those great numbers, but it is not clear what is behind those. Is the target reasonable? There are human problems and technical problems, each with their own implications. I would argue that, until we understand what is behind those timelines, we will not be able to do a good job with addressing those issues. We need to understand human problems versus technical problems.

EXPEDITING DISASTER ASSISTANCE QUESTIONSTORMING

The purpose of this session was to generate questions for the NAC to consider in addressing the EDA charge. The goal was to generate as many questions as possible. This session was completed using Miro; the board containing the questions generated during the session can be found here: https://miro.com/app/board/o9J_ld5iEvA=/

CLOSING REMARKS

Jasper Cooke. From the questionstorming, it seems there are a number of questions around scope. From discussions with senior FEMA leaders, the scope was set to focusing only on the PA program, as it is the largest dollar value program at the Agency. Within that, the scope is almost as broad as possible, ranging from pre-disaster, through response and recovery. Another question that came up was: what is FEMA looking for? Do they want a huge report, or recommendations for Congress, or local applications? I would say: yes. Figure out which of these would have the most impact that you can focus on in just one year, and address those. To be fair, there have to be some recommendations to everyone.

Charley English. I am going to respectfully push back on focusing only on PA. Even though all the money is in PA, I think FEMA's main mission is to help people. IA should be included.

Anna Lang. I agree. I think this charge is too narrow.

Ramesh Kolluru. Is there an opportunity to expand the focus?

Jasper Cooke. You all are able to make whichever recommendations you think are most important. That being said, my concern is that you have one year to work on these charges. You have about 10 calls before the May meeting, which is the bulk of your research time. Then, you have only another 5 calls before September, at which time the report should be about finished. If you want to take a high-level focus, examining IA, PA, and Hazard Mitigation for strategic priorities, you can do that. But, I think a deeper dive into one program would be more valuable.

Jim Waskom. For the purposes of this subcommittee, if you try to tackle all the programs at once, you will not get anything done. Each one of these is so complex and so huge that we are barely going to be able to scratch the surface. If you all think we should redirect to examining IA, we should do it. But I do not think we should try to tackle all three.

Rob Long. I will say that the equity standard subcommittee will touch on all three programs, as well as vision 2045, which inherently touches all three as well. If there is success made with the PA charge this year, I would see no reason not to do a deep dive into IA or Hazard Mitigation in subsequent years.

John Grathwol. PA does help people. From an equity perspective, certain jurisdictions that have experience working with FEMA often get more from FEMA than those without that experience. We should be looking at how to make adjustments to level the playing field and make it easier for small or standardized projects to get through.

A lot of this has to do with the familiarity of the local government with working through the system. For these reasons I think it is important to look at PA.

Steve Birnbaum. I appreciate the suggestion that we tackle these separately. But if we do that, what are the interdependencies? Which bite should we take first? If we start with PA and then go to mitigation, are we going to find ourselves redoing work?

Kevin Staley. Since joining the NAC, I have heard a lot about IA, PA, and mitigation, even when focusing on different charges. Is it within the realm of possibility to go back to the Administrator and say we recommend hitting recovery and relief head on?

Jim Waskom. Maybe we take this subcommittee and make it three – one for IA, one for PA, and one for mitigation. It would be expanding the charge, but I think you are on to something.

Jasper Cooke. My only hesitation is biting off more than we can chew. Pragmatically, I agree with the idea. Practically, I would say, the one good opportunity is that the Vision subcommittee is wide open. The EDA subcommittee is well-scoped for PA. The equity standard piece, I think, has overlap. I think it is worth having the equity standard be separate.

Jeff Hansen. We have essentially followed that subcommittee model before. I think there is an avenue where equity can be applied on the IA side.

Ramesh Kolluru. I am not sure what the path forward might be. FEMA 2045 does not accomplish itself if we do not address these issues.

Wednesday, December 2, 2020

PANEL: CREATING AN EQUITY STANDARD

The purpose of this session was to hear from equity experts in support of the Equity Standard charge. The NAC spoke with Dr. Lauren Smith, Chief Health Equity and Strategy Officer for the CDC Foundation; Dr. Victoria Lawson, Research Project Director at the CUNY Institute for State and Local Governance; and Dr. Melissa Forbes, Deputy Assistant Administrator for FEMA's Recovery Directorate.

Opening Panelist Comments

Lisa Jones. Thank you to our panelists. We are looking forward to hearing your insights from your research, so that we can get started on our charge on the right foot. As a reminder, our charge is to create a standard through which FEMA can evaluate its programs to ensure equitable outcomes, starting with disaster assistance programs.

Lauren Smith. Thank you all. I am the Chief Health Equity and Strategy Officer for the CDC Foundation. I have been in that role for about 6 weeks; prior to that, I was a pediatrician for almost 3 decades. I was very impressed with your report, especially the "focus on equity" section. The first reflection I would like to share is just to question what exactly you mean by an equity standard. There is a desire to have a product that is neat, confined, and digestible, but sometimes the work is not quite as concise. I would encourage you all have a set of principles that can be applied across the emergency management spectrum. I wanted to share some thoughts about what those key principles might be.

1. <u>Authentic communication partnerships and engagement.</u> You all prompted social capital and workforce diversity throughout your report. This idea of ensuring authentic engagement will be a mechanism for promoting those key elements.
2. <u>Awareness of and attention to both historic and current structural issues within communities and FEMA processes that can exacerbate inequity.</u>
3. <u>Attention paid to the social determinants of health.</u> If you can analyze and assess those at the community level, you will be able to track resilience before, during, and after disasters.
4. <u>An explicit and transparent statement about tradeoffs between program reach and integrity.</u> Sometimes those set points are made, but they are not necessarily communicated well. Depending on where you set certain standards, you are going to have different levels of uptake and program integrity. Be explicit about those standards.

Finally, there are a host of resources that address fundamentals around planning and acting, for example the Racial Equity Initiative and Racial Equity Tools. The other piece is data – how do you approach data collection, analysis, and dissemination? That all needs to be done with effective communication to ensure communities feel like they are a part of the process.

Victoria Lawson. I appreciate getting to be part of this conversation and am really excited to hear FEMA's interest in equity. I am a project director at CUNY's Institute for State and Local Governance, heading up the equity portfolio. One of our major focuses is helping governments and their partners make better use of data and using data to identify equity disparities. This is the core focus for the equity indicator project. Equity indicators compare how different groups are progressing. So, rather than looking at wages overall, we might look at the racial disparities in wages. We created a methodology and worked with numerous cities to help them develop these equity indicator tools. I am going to walk you through the process.

The first step is setting priorities and determining the "knowns". You will use that to develop some potential measures. Then, you want to seek feedback from community members, local governments, and other groups to get a sense of whether you are measuring the right things. Then, you want to try to get data for the things you are looking to measure. It is important to figure out where the needs are greatest and who is experiencing those needs. Having an understanding of this prior to disaster can allow you to move from an asset-based focus to a needs-based focus, which is important. I would suggest having a core set of measures, like income, employment, or home ownership, that you can use to look across cities to get a baseline indication of what equity is like pre-disaster. It is also important to have specific measures tailored to specific disasters after they occur. A general set of measures is not necessarily going to tell you the outcomes of a specific program, so you may need more targeted measures. The last thing is to be clear about your goals, objectives, and priorities.

Melissa Forbes. I serve as the Deputy Assistant Administrator for the Recovery Directorate. Recovery has been doing a lot of thinking on equity this past year. We are not equity experts; we have a lot to learn. But, we can set the tone. Our employees make up about 35% of the Agency's workforce, which gives us a great place to lead. Part of leading also means ensuring the workforce reflects the communities we serve, through developing policies and processes with diverse viewpoints. I appreciated Victoria's comments on data availability. That is an area in Recovery where we struggle a lot. Equity work takes a lot of work, but there is always room to improve. Equity is a new term and way of talking for FEMA, but the considerations are foundational to emergency management. It is consistent around our survivor-centric viewpoint and aligns with the core values. An employee group came up with the conditions upon which FEMA can commit itself to equity. It can only occur when we address historical systemic disaster recovery barriers. In order to do that, there are 4 critical conditions:

1. Empathy for known disparities between groups
2. Flexibility to address disparities
3. Embed equity into our business and policy operations; and
4. Train a workforce that knows how to support equity outcomes.

Equity cannot be extracurricular. We have developed two initiatives to enhance equity; we hope to partner with the NAC in these endeavors. The first is an equity analysis work group, which is charged with defining equitable recovery, examining data to identify areas of improvement and best practices, and to make recommendations to senior leadership on how to embed equity into FEMA's policies and programs. We also have a diversity and inclusion forum which is more internally focused. That looks at recruitment, hiring, etc. One thing we wrestle with is FEMA's role in ensuring equity in disaster recovery. FEMA is one player; recovery is federally supported, state managed, and locally executed. All groups have to be involved.

Discussion

Lisa Jones. What is the significance of us creating this standard? What would be the impact if we are successful?

Lauren Smith. This question is essential. Many times, the inequities that existed in a community before are exacerbated by disasters. An awareness of what the principles were that were underneath how you approach the work is important. You have the opportunity to use emergency preparedness as a way of bolstering community resilience. Your report, where you are looking at the structural pieces of who has the greatest need, is a smart way to do that.

Anna Lang (in chat). I don't understand how disaster recovery can be equitable without pre-disaster mitigation. Restoring a family displaced from their home in an historic redlined neighborhood with substandard infrastructure/lifelines/healthcare access, no matter how "equitable" or efficient that process is, does not diminish their vulnerability to future disasters. In other words, no matter how much the recovery process is improved and made equitable, we can never achieve equitable outcome without mitigation.

Victoria Lawson. I agree with the strength-based, asset-based approach. From a resilience standpoint, it is not just how you respond to acute shocks like disaster. It is also how you deal with ongoing problems, such as chronic unemployment. Making communities more resilient to both things is a huge measure of success.

Melissa Forbes. To Anna’s point, I couldn’t agree more that hazard mitigation is critical. In a lot of cases, hazard mitigation has more flexibility in their programs with how they are funded and supplied. One of the things we are looking at in Recovery is the IA program. There is always tension between SLTT needs and survivor choice. Are there ways that better empower individuals to make a choice about their recovery? The notion of survivor choice is important.

Lauren Smith. I also agree with what has been said in the chat. Preparedness has to do with what has been done beforehand just as much as during the response.

Lisa Jones. Understanding this huge lift that we are facing with this charge, what is our next step? How do we head in the direction of an equity standard?

Lauren Smith. You have outlined in your report some important and doable next steps: workforce and social capital. I think the next step is determining what it takes to operationalize that.

Victoria Lawson. I agree. Operationalizing is a big part of developing metrics. You need to figure out how to make everything you are looking at very concrete. You need to determine your target audience – who is the recipient, who needs what? How do you connect to all these different communities?

Melissa Forbes. We plan to create a program guidance or equity lens document that can be a resource for programs. With tribal nations or with disability integration issues, this cannot be an afterthought – it has to be baked in.

Lauren Smith. Victoria and Melissa, I am curious what each of you think about the social vulnerability index (SVI) developed by the CDC? I can imagine it being used pre-, during, and post-disaster.

Victoria Lawson. That is the type of thing I was talking about with building a baseline measure from which you can assess needs. I think you can use those and build on the goals of the NAC and FEMA more broadly. In terms of where in the process it would be used, it would depend on where the data are drawn from.

Nicolette Louissaint (in chat). We've had difficulty with the SVI as it relates to blasting our specific measures that are especially important for disaster preparedness and response, such as functional/access needs. The way the index manages SES has been difficult to parse, but it is a fantastic foundation.

Melissa Forbes. This is one of many tools; we need to make sure we are drawing the specific things we need for us, while also keeping in mind as we look across all the indicators, where do we see overlap for the communities we need to target?

Lauren Smith. Your document talked about the workforce. What are the skillsets needed beyond diversity and representation? What partnerships are needed to do this kind of work? Those should be developed ahead of time.

Melissa Forbes. Are we devoting enough time and energy to hire staff to build those relationships during the steady state? We need career employees with resources, able to build relationship trust.

Lauren Smith. And, how are folks interacting with community-based organizations in these endeavors? That linkage between those organizations that have that trust can be helpful for giving advice during disasters.

Melissa Forbes. What is the timeline of your indicator? Disasters can take a long time to work through. We have voluntary agency liaisons that work with communities to determine how we transition to a whole community response. Sometimes our indicators are focused more on the short- and medium-terms. It is a lot harder to measure the long-term.

Pam Williams. Historically, there have been concerns from immigrants about FEMA’s relationship with DHS and documentation status. How are we addressing the immigrant population that are often invisible or wholly undocumented? They often have a fear of interacting with federal resources.

Melissa Forbes. We do not have great data on that, so I cannot tell you the extent of that problem. We hear it frequently from those communities, but it is difficult overall to assess the problem.

Victoria Lawson. That point emphasizes how important community liaisons are. There just is not going to be trust at the beginning, and maybe not for a long time. It is important to do as much outreach as possible. Liaisons need to have strong ties to communities.

Jasper Cooke (in chat). Re: the conversation yesterday and previously about making FEMA a cabinet-level agency. I wonder whether we shouldn't just move FEMA to HHS - to Pamela's point, we don't have any law enforcement mission but do have a lot of housing and other public health-type responsibilities.

Dutch Geisinger (in chat). Jasper, if you are talking solely about the IA mission, a lot of it relates to HHS but if you are talking prevent, protect, defend, deter that includes mitigation and PA, that is a much broader mission that includes critical infrastructure, dependencies and interdependencies that have a much broader need that what HHS is responsible for.

Anna Lang. Nicolette mentioned in the chat about using the SVI. I found a story about how Houston used the SVI to prioritize flood funds. I would love to hear more from her.

Nicolette Louissaint. The challenge we have with the SVI is that socioeconomic status means both everything and nothing. It gets really difficult when you are thinking through how to layer in other measures that may be critical for disaster response. For example, for functional and access needs, you need specific measures. If you are thinking about housing, then the SVI can be great. We have been struggling with how to pull out indicators that may be connected but not solely related to income. If you are not intentional about understanding how the SVI weights certain things, it becomes difficult to link in another measure.

Anna Lang. What about the national resilience indicators?

Nicolette Louissaint. Most of the indices have too much there. They are very powerful tools on their own. We get into trouble when we try to determine how they can speak to each other. We spend more time ensuring the algorithm isn't double counting that actually examining the data. My concern is that, if you are looking to understand something for your jurisdiction, how do you use the data properly? How do we help guide decision makers to understand how these things speak to each other?

Victoria Lawson. Most of the work with data goes into cleaning it. The analysis takes seconds. We have to determine, not only is the measure interesting, but does it tell us what we need to know?

Lauren Smith. This relates to meaning-making. What are the implications for what an agency or community does? Involving folks in this part is where we are often short-changed. We do not invest the time needed to get people engaged and invested in the information.

Melissa Forbes. The federal government often is not the best at defining the problems we are trying to solve. We need to be crystal clear about that, so you know what to do with the data after you get it. Some people are good with data storytelling, others are not.

Warren Miller. I appreciate the acknowledgment that FEMA is working on making the workforce reflect the communities it serves. In our report, we were citing a recruitment piece with Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and trusted faith partners. The idea is local hiring.

Melissa Forbes. The place where I think we have a lot of room to improve is making sure the FEMA senior leadership cadre also reflects survivors. In thinking about next steps after recruitment, it would be growing those leaders that are familiar with those communities.

Dante Disparte. 2020 has shown many upheavals. Resilience, like equity, cannot be bought when it is needed most. What can the NAC do more broadly? How do we not let the crisis and its lessons go to waste?

Lauren Smith. We have had to get used to doing things differently relatively quickly. This is an opportunity to do things differently and be rather plastic. We have a mandate to act differently. I hear a lot of people not wanting to go back to normal – some people's "normal" was not great; they want something better. People want to feel protected and know there is something to rely on, which goes back to preparation and infrastructure resilience.

Melissa Forbes. For FEMA, 2020 forced us to think about how we deliver programs. We have made some shifts toward online delivery, like virtual inspections. There are pros and cons, but I don't think we will go back to business as usual, especially with IA and PA.

Deanna Dahl-Grove. There are very few metrics which measure the experiences of children and families. I was struck by Victoria's statement about the equity indicator. There are some baselines that are the same, and some that are different for each city. Could you highlight what some of those might be?

Victoria Lawson. As a criminal justice example, in St. Louis there was an interest in looking at diversity of the police force at every stage of recruitment. Another example was in Pittsburgh, where they wanted to look at underbanked or unbanked individuals. I also agree that measures for children are few and far between.

Jim Waskom. I noticed on Melissa's slide the recovery support functions. We have it listed in our plan, but we had never actually gone and fleshed out all the state agencies. We had them all together after the 2016 floods, and each tried to outline what they wanted communities to look like. When you read the recovery support framework, it looks like it is supposed to be a steady state function, but FEMA does not appoint a steady state coordinator until after a disaster. Have you looked at appointing someone full time? Also, information sharing between the federal government and organizations like the Red Cross have been challenging. There is a lot of data, but it is hard to access.

Melissa Forbes. We have recognized the need to put more staff and resource investment into that. There is no one that is fully dedicated across the region. We have a proposal examining what that staffing structure might look like.

Jeanne Abadie. When we are looking at equity and equity measures, mitigation is extremely important. That is the place where we can bring true equity forward.

Jim Waskom. I think BRIC is trying to get at that concept. Those folks that want to participate in elevations or buyouts cannot afford to match. HUD and FEMA rules are fire and ice and are difficult to navigate. BRIC tends to put money up front for those people that cannot afford that. Those communities do not even get considered. Jeanne mentioned earlier a whole community piece. In that scenario, everybody in the community had to agree to be bought out and moved. It is not a Stafford Act funding program. We have to come together as a holistic government and figure out how to do that.

Jeanne Abadie. I was brought in because some of the folks had disabilities. I know a lot of people moved, but some did not want to. I am surprised when you say they were all supposed to have agreed, because a few people did not agree and would not leave. It was a climate issue – the Gulf of Mexico was taking over the entire island. The equity piece could play in, where, to my knowledge, no one there had a lot of wealth assets. Equity plays into how we respond to those people.

Jim Waskom. The challenge is not only the monetary match but also the technical wherewithal to develop projects.

John Grathwol. FEMA PA, IA, and Mitigation are all complex programs. Jurisdictions that have experience with them have the ability to maximize their eligibility for federal resources. Those without that technical experience miss out on that funding. How does one plan for or develop capacity in jurisdictions that do not have capacity?

Lauren Smith. This resonates with what I alluded to earlier with the process for selecting jurisdictions. As an example, some have brief video applications, rather than a lengthy, complicated application. Some offer stipends to help ease the burden of completing applications.

Jim Waskom. The state agencies grade applications, which is inequitable in and of itself. Then, it gets sent to the FEMA region, who also grade them, and then it gets sent to FEMA HQ. The challenge is to bring together all those different funding streams to help communities.

Lisa Jones. Fundamentally, if the application presents challenges, maybe we start there.

Victoria Lawson. For a lot of grant applications, it is a completely different language. If you speak that language fluently, then it is much easier to be successful than if you have never done it before. It should not be a lack of interpretation that prevents funds from being allocated.

Deanna Dahl-Grove. We are trying to make IA and PA simpler to apply to. We are also asking emergency managers to look at new parts of communities and regions that they have not dealt with before. That probably goes into Vision 2045. It seems like emergency managers are moving in a new direction than what they have previously done. There is a lot beyond just the equity piece in looking at making things available to everybody.

Lori Hodges. A lot of folks have told us they are not going to apply for programs because it is too hard to spend the money. Once you get the grants, it is really impossible to try to move through the spending process. It is just that much harder for marginalized communities.

Melissa Forbes. I really like the point about emergency managers and changing the services we provide. One of the difficulties we have with hiring is finding people that want to deploy 300 days a year. If you had more expertise that could provide virtual support, that may be a way to overcome that barrier and a way for FEMA to attract higher-skilled people. Or, perhaps a helpline for people that just have a quick question could be a good tool.

Lori Hodges. I am hoping COVID does change FEMA's model. We spend so much money moving people into the area and they change out every few weeks or so. They tell us different things, which is frustrating. That has to be difficult on the FEMA side as well. I would love to see more virtual delivery. Of course, not everyone has Internet access, so there's an equity piece as well. Also, we really need peer support between locals. The states and federal government do not understand the locals.

Lisa Jones. I wanted to address our charge and the problem statement we have created. How can FEMA provide funding to communities of greatest need while also encouraging communities to build resilience and not simply wait for federal funding?

Victoria Lawson. Part of it is working with communities to build in sustainability. Education is crucial for providing resources in these communities so that they can use it moving forward.

Jasper Cooke. Thing 1 is to only help people that need it. Thing 2 is to make sure that nobody needs it. How do we strike that balance? How do we build capacity ahead of time, but also make sure that communities of greatest need still get what they need?

Melissa Forbes. This gets back to what is the scope of FEMA's role in disaster equity. Some things fall outside of this realm, and more into other fundamental areas where we will need to partner with other federal agencies. States are part of it as well. I do not know if we alone can have the resources when people cannot meet basic needs. It is important for FEMA to manage expectations.

Lauren Smith. The multisector collaboration piece is crucial. Primary prevention around capacity is using analyses to see the specific kinds of needs regions have. That is where the partnership comes into place with other federal agencies, local organizations, and community foundations. Investment in capacity-building in both people and infrastructure is one way to build that in ahead of time.

Lori Hodges. If there was a way to bring back Project Impact, that would be great. From an equity perspective, it involved looking at community cohesion and deciding on partners. If FEMA had a way to say that certain projects will increase resiliency, that would allow for public-private partnerships to do the projects they said they would do. I thought it was a helpful and effective program.

Jim Waskom. This is the recovery support framework piece. It does not come with Project Impact funding, but it's the same basic principle. The role of FEMA is to assist in finding funding streams for local jurisdictions' ideas. The process is there. If you read the framework, it reads like it is steady state, but it is not. That is the model, we just need to figure out how to do it on the front end with the funding piece.

Melissa Forbes. External stakeholders often tell me they wish Project Impact would come back. It was very well-received.

Nicolette Louissaint. How are we defining resilience? Until we have a working definition of resilience, a lot of this becomes window dressing. This is where community engagement fits in. It is an equity-inspired principle. The other piece is how do we engage with communities without being burdensome. Sometimes funding can alleviate the burden, but we have to be mindful that not everyone has the luxury of engaging in this process. There is a role that FEMA plays in disasters that is dependent on how the nation exists prior to that event.

Jim Waskom. The problem is that you will not get all the locals to agree on one single point of contact. It is the same with resilience – everyone has a different definition. I think this is something the recovery support framework gets at. I do take your point about engagement.

Nicolette Louissaint. I think there is a difference between having a representative and having an organizer. There needs to be a single aggregator at the local level where they can deconflict. We will do ourselves extreme harm if we do not have agreed-upon definitions and know how to operationalize them.

Jim Waskom. Maybe the recovery coordinator is the aggregator you speak of.

Victoria Lawson. Community engagement is a huge thing that we have encountered a lot in our work. It goes back to being purposeful about what the engagement is for and what it will be used for. Some people are willing to engage, but not if nothing will come of it.

Melissa Forbes. We had a state director in Region 3, who during COVID was a part of the health task force that did the convening. They prioritized the distribution of things based on some equity work they had already done. This proves that delivering something first opens you up to collaboration and builds trust with communities. There is something about the short-term action piece that is critical.

Matt Behnke. Coming at it from our FIMA side, the context of what you are highlight and how you want to help can help you define resilience and preparedness. This is one of the struggles we have with regards to the National Flood Insurance Program. We want people to have insurance, but it becomes an affordability issue. It is a continuing program we have that is not just in recovery. It still becomes a huge equity challenge.

Steve Birnbaum. What does success look like? There was the question about relocating with individual choice. If you are moving a population, that is a better outcome for them individually. But from the community perspective, that is a detriment. Success in IA may be detrimental to PA and vice versa. If we are focused more on the equity of people that get help that need it, it is a short-term solution every time. We need to go beyond just looking at this as a partnership. If we do not link it together, we would be solving each in a silo. How do we start linking these? The only way to do that is to define what a successful outcome looks like.

Melissa Forbes. I would love for the NAC to help us define that. It is hard to balance. It is complex, but definitely worth exploring more.

Victoria Lawson. And, thinking about success from who? For FEMA, for communities? You need to determine what that actually means and what it looks like.

SUBCOMMITTEE PLANNING

Jasper Cooke. In thinking about IA, Hazard Mitigation, and PA, the looming question is: what is the best way to integrate the three programs? How can we best integrate IA and Hazard Mitigation into our conversation around PA? My perspective is that PA and Hazard Mitigation have some overlap, but IA is more stand-alone. I think Equity is important enough to keep as its own subcommittee. It needs its own focus in order to come up with meaningful things going forward. I think we should keep EDA focused on PA and maybe shift Vision to look at Hazard Mitigation.

Lori Hodges. It wasn’t until the end of the year that we put equity in front and tied it all together. It would be really good this year to hear what Equity is talking about as a subcommittee because I do not want it to be isolated. If there is a way to do some integration across subcommittees, that would be helpful.

Kevin Staley. I agree that equity needs a stand-alone. My concern is that if you work on PA and Hazard Mitigation, we are going to have to incorporate actual equity work into those subcommittees. I am afraid we will not go deep enough if it is not embedded in from the beginning.

Deanna Dahl-Grove. This is a good chance to think about how we can cross-pollinate and ensure we all have an understanding of these equity issues.

Ramesh Kolluru. I am hearing that we need to let Equity develop their standard, and let EDA stay focused on PA, at least to begin with, as charged by the Administrator. As far as Vision taking on Hazard Mitigation, I think we have quite a bit to do and we will need to consult. Based on the work we did this past year, there is a lot to do with the implementation of our previous recommendations. I also agree with the cross-pollination idea. Each subcommittee needs to be aware of what the others are doing. At a minimum, these three groups have their own charges to fulfill and we need to find a way to integrate those.

QUESTIONSTORMING

The purpose of this session was for the NAC to break into groups to identify questions they have about the Equity Standard charge, using Miro.

Group 1

Members: Ramesh Kolluru, John Grathwol, Paul Brennan, Linda Long, Deanna Dahl-Grove, Nicolette Louissaint, Pam Williams, Elizabeth Edge, Jasper Cooke, Lydia Sanchez, Matt Behnke, Travis Battiest, Mark Millican

Linda Long. With cross-pollination, it will be good to see success in other places.

Deanna Dahl-Grove. It was interesting to hear from Dr. Forbes about what they are trying to do with the Equity Analysis Working Group. Other countries handle this much better than the U.S. It would be interesting to hear from some other countries, such as Australia. We could compare and contrast the work other countries do in this area to get some specific examples.

Matt Behnke. FIMA points out that other countries are very different than the U.S. in terms of diversity and size. Australia and Japan have different areas of focus; it is not the same level of complexity. These are national governments, versus our federal government.

Nicolette Louissaint. It would be good to look at best practices versus worst practices, such as looking at the 100 Resilient Cities sponsored by the Chief Resiliency Officer at the Rockefeller Foundation. Are there other models to borrow from?

Group 2

Members: Anna Lang, Tina Titze, Kevin Staley, Dante Disparte, Jimmy Patronis, Jim Waskom, Steve Birnbaum, Brad Richy, Rachel Tranchik, Emily Burdick, Evan Ying, Paden Tranter

Brad Richy. We need to come up with a different concept that mitigation. People always say we should perform risk analyses. We have been asking for these for years. No one is willing to take the time. The incentive is looking at what the community will look like in the future. Very small, challenged communities are going to be in trouble. I don’t think FEMA realizes, that by adding another mitigation program, they have created another problem. The private sector is the perfect partner.

Steve Birnbaum. Success on the IA side creates communities more eligible for PA because of their tax base. Usually federal funds cannot go to private sector entities. As individual programs, as we try to build in equity, they may be in conflict with one another.

Brad Richy. In some situations, they know there is a problem, but the tax base isn’t there.

Dante Disparte. You hit on part of what equity lays out. The true cost of risk and unfunded disasters ends up becoming a societal cost. Soon, all of this will fall at FEMA’s and the taxpayers’ feet.

Brad Richy. My frustration with communities comes from my experience in Idaho. We have been talking about BRIC since 2018. We have had zero competitive applications since then.

Kevin Staley. Why do you think people aren’t applying?

Brad Richy. It goes back to mitigation. When we think about FEMA, we think of response and recovery. We have been asking about mitigation for the state. There are a lot of incentives, but also a lot of roadblocks. People do not understand mitigation. There need to be conversations so that people can understand.

Kevin Staley. Can we say that mitigation is part of resilience?

Jim Waskom. I would say yes. FEMA does not do a good job at selling their mitigation successes. The biggest problem is that communities do not need it to apply. We have enough large disasters to have a large mitigation section. That is part of the problem. You don’t get into mitigation until after you’ve been hit with a large disaster.

CLOSING REMARKS

Jasper Cooke. Great job everyone for all your work over the past few days. So, where do we go from here? Calendar invites went out for our one last call this year to begin planning for 2021. The scoping discussion will be important – you have the opportunity to do that during these upcoming calls. You should try to figure out how much work you want to bite off for the May meeting – what will you tackle, and what will become future research? Finally, Rob has put together a training and team building exercise about strategic foresight that will take place in January.

Rob Long. More information is coming about that. We come to these endeavors with our own perspectives and languages. I think it would be helpful for us to have something that makes it easier to look into the future strategically. In January, we are going to do a training on foresight, and then have two exercises, one where we learn how to use foresight, and one where we apply those tools relating to emergency management. Hopefully, the NAC will eventually be able to become FEMA’s foresight arm.

Jasper Cooke. To quickly continue the cross-pollination and collaboration discussion, Miro is a good collaboration tool. We could have one board that all the subcommittees use, so that everything is in one spot. We will also start the shared document soon, so we can get the ball rolling on that. Finally, you all can expect a response from FEMA about this report in April 2021.