

United States Senate

December 16, 2024

The Honorable Deanne Criswell
Administrator
Federal Emergency Management Agency
500 C Street, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20024

Dear Administrator Criswell,

During my service as a Lieutenant Colonel in the Iowa National Guard performing flood response efforts across Iowa, I saw firsthand the devastating and life-altering impacts of natural disasters. These experiences reinforced my appreciation for the importance of a well-managed Disaster Relief Fund (DRF) in delivering immediate support to communities in crisis, in a fiscally responsible way. However, at a time when President Biden is requesting Congress provide nearly \$100 billion in what he claims are “critical disaster funding needs,” I write with deep concern regarding the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s (FEMA) recent spending patterns and financial management of the DRF.

Notably, about 75 percent of the \$125.3 billion FEMA allocated for COVID-19 assistance from the DRF was obligated in 2020 and 2021 for COVID-19-related expenses.¹ This spending, which was in the first place obligated toward the tail end of the medical emergency (distinct from the long-extended national emergency declaration) falls far outside the scope of what could be considered traditional activities as part of an emergency medical response. Specifically, your agency used the DRF funds on pandemic-era programs like crisis counseling and \$3 billion for funeral expenses²—long after most Americans had returned to normal life.³ Worse still, COVID-19 funeral assistance will continue draining DRF resources until September 2025.⁴ This is ludicrous.

As you are undoubtedly aware, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) in March 2024 revealed FEMA is hoarding the remaining roughly \$20 billion in unobligated DRF funds.⁵ Instead of rushing aid to thousands of Hurricane Helene survivors shivering through a harsh winter without heat, FEMA has cooked up a two-year plan to stretch the spending into 2026.⁶ If FEMA has at least \$20 billion in

¹ “Disaster Relief Fund: Lessons Learned from COVID-19 Could Improve FEMA’s Estimates,” GAO-24-106676, Government Accountability Office, July 9, 2024; <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-24-106676.pdf>.

² Federal Emergency Management Agency, “Historic Disaster Assistance for Coronavirus (COVID-19): Economic and Funeral Assistance,” <https://www.fema.gov/disaster/historic/coronavirus/economic/funeral-assistance>.

³ “Disaster Relief Fund: Lessons Learned from COVID-19 Could Improve FEMA’s Estimates,” GAO-24-106676, Government Accountability Office, July 9, 2024; <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-24-106676.pdf>.

⁴ Federal Emergency Management Agency, “Historic Disaster Assistance for Coronavirus (COVID-19): Economic and Funeral Assistance,” <https://www.fema.gov/disaster/historic/coronavirus/economic/funeral-assistance>.

⁵ “Disaster Relief Fund: Lessons Learned from COVID-19 Could Improve FEMA’s Estimates,” GAO-24-106676, Government Accountability Office, July 9, 2024; <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-24-106676.pdf>.

⁶ *Id.*

unobligated funds, shouldn't the agency use these funds to accelerate assistance for the thousands of displaced Hurricane Helene survivors?⁷ Or is FEMA's big idea still to cram taxpaying Americans into rebranded migrant shelters?⁸ Between Fiscal Years 2020 and 2024, Congress has funded the DRF to the tune of \$97 billion through annual and supplemental appropriations.⁹ In addition to this generosity, FEMA also recently received an annual \$20 billion appropriation for the DRF at the start of Fiscal Year 2025.¹⁰ Perhaps it is a culture of expectation that drove FEMA to spend nearly half of what was supposed to last six months in just the first eight days of Fiscal Year 2025.¹¹ This reckless spending was on full display in North Carolina during Hurricane Helene, where the agency funneled resources into the state yet still failed to deliver meaningful aid.¹² Months later, countless residents remain in limbo, waiting for assistance to rebuild their lives.¹³ The glaring disconnect between FEMA's spending spree and its inability to provide timely, effective support is exceptionally disappointing and leaves those impacted questioning the agency's ability to fulfill its mission.¹⁴

Agencies typically carry over balances from year to year. Indeed, GAO has reported on various agencies' efforts to effectively manage carryover balances since 1996.¹⁵ But carrying over an amount equivalent to an entire annual appropriation for activities related to a public health emergency that officially ended in 2023,¹⁶ so that you can spend it through 2026, is insane. This is especially true given the new Trump administration's emphasis on achieving government efficiency and cost savings.¹⁷

Even more perplexing, in light of President Biden's recent request, is FEMA's decision to reject GAO's recommendation to produce a "lessons learned" document aimed at enhancing its ability to more accurately estimate obligations for future catastrophic disasters.¹⁸ It is unclear to me why your agency

⁷ Hayley Vawter, "North Carolina Helene survivors facing winter without heat," AOL, November 18, 2024; <https://www.aol.com/north-carolina-helene-survivors-facing-232943557.html?guccounter=1>.

⁸ Brayden Stamps, "FEMA to take control of Greensboro immigrant facility," Fox 8, October 9, 2024; <https://myfox8.com/news/north-carolina/greensboro/fema-to-take-control-of-greensboro-immigrant-facility/>.

⁹ "Disaster Relief Fund: Lessons Learned from COVID-19 Could Improve FEMA's Estimates," GAO-24-106676, Government Accountability Office, July 9, 2024; <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-24-106676.pdf>.

¹⁰ P.L. 118-83, Continuing Appropriations and Extensions Act, 2025, October 26, 2024.

¹¹ Thomas Frank, "FEMA spent nearly half its disaster budget in just 8 days," Politico, October 10, 2024; <https://www.politico.com/news/2024/10/10/fema-disaster-budget-hurricane-helene-melton-00183219>.

¹² Deirdra Funcheon, "Rep. Edwards sets up hotline for help with FEMA," Blue Ridge Now, December 6, 2024; <https://www.blueridgenow.com/story/news/local/2024/12/06/rep-edwards-sets-up-hotline-offering-help-with-fema/76794323007/>.

¹³ Claire Kopsky, "FEMA apologizes after failing to deliver promised trailers to Helene survivors in North Carolina," WBTV News, December 4, 2024;

<https://www.wbtv.com/2024/12/04/fema-apologizes-after-failing-deliver-promised-trailers-helene-survivors-north-carolina/>.

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ "Financial Management: DOE and NNSA Have Opportunities to Improve Management of Carryover Balances," GAO-22-104541, Government Accountability Office, July 25, 2022; <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-22-104541.pdf>.

¹⁶ "Fact Sheet: End of the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency," U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, May 9, 2023; <https://www.hhs.gov/about/news/2023/05/09/fact-sheet-end-of-the-covid-19-public-health-emergency.html#:~:text=At%20the%20end%20of%20the%20COVID%2D19%20PHE%20on%20May,19%20Vaccination%20Program%20Provider%20Agreement>.

¹⁷ U.S. Senator Joni Ernst, "Ernst Creates Senate DOGE Caucus to Eliminate Government Waste," November 22, 2024; <https://www.ernst.senate.gov/news/press-releases/ernst-creates-senate-doge-caucus-to-eliminate-government-waste>.

¹⁸ "Disaster Relief Fund: Lessons Learned from COVID-19 Could Improve FEMA's Estimates," GAO-24-106676, Government Accountability Office, July 9, 2024; <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-24-106676.pdf>

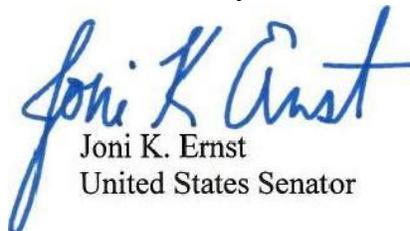
would decline to engage in what is clearly some much needed introspection to better serve the American people.

To better understand FEMA's financial management plans, and ensure proper oversight of taxpayer funds, please provide the following information to me by no later than December 30, 2024:

1. A line-item breakdown of all accounts with unobligated funds in the DRF as of December 16, 2024, including the specific purposes for which these funds are reserved or intended.
2. A line-item breakdown of pandemic-related expenditures from the DRF from May 11, 2023, to December 16, 2024, including spending summaries and accompanying justifications.
3. What is FEMA's process for approving outlays from the DRF related to pandemic-related activities?
4. Will FEMA reconsider its decision to reject GAO's recommendation to produce a "lessons learned" document aimed at enhancing the agency's ability to more accurately estimate obligations for future catastrophic disasters?

I trust you agree the American people deserve a FEMA that is prepared, transparent, and efficient when responding to catastrophic disasters. Thank you for your time and attention to this request. If you have questions, please contact me or my staff, at (202) 224-3254.

Sincerely,



Joni K. Ernst
United States Senator