

# Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

September 13, 2024

The Honorable Deanne Criswell  
Administrator  
Federal Emergency Management Agency  
500 C Street SW, 8<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Washington, D.C. 20472

Dear Administrator Criswell:

We write to express our concern about two issues—one short-term and administrative, and the other long-term and structural—regarding FEMA’s disaster recovery response to Vermont’s severe flooding. As you know, Vermont suffered devastating storms in July 2023 (DR-4720-VT), followed by another two storms in July (DR-4810-VT, and a pending Major Disaster Declaration request from Governor Scott for July 29-31, submitted August 27) and one August 2024 (EM-3609-VT).

We want to begin by acknowledging our immense appreciation of the work of you and your team, and FEMA’s immediate response to the damage sustained by Vermont homeowners, businesses, and farms.

The immediate issue of concern is this: homeowners, businesses, selectboards, farmers, and other stakeholders across Vermont have faced, and continue to face, delays, confusing and conflicting guidance, and inefficiencies in getting clear answers and timely responses from FEMA to predictable inquiries about what help they can expect and when they can expect it. These frustrations have caused immense concern, added expense, and despair for Vermonters doing their best to move on from catastrophic losses. For municipalities in particular, we believe that the extraordinary turnover in Program Delivery Managers (PDMG) exacerbates the already complicated Public Assistance process. Let us provide a few examples:

- Ludlow, one of the most heavily impacted communities in 2023, has worked with six PDMGs since July 2023. On August 9, 2024, the town manager learned a seventh PDMG would be starting the following week. Ludlow has nearly \$4 million in projects for which it has not received payment from FEMA.
- Another small community, Lyndon, which was severely flooded again last month, has worked with four PDMGs. The Lyndon town administrator reported that with each new PDMG, he had to file all the required paperwork to receive assistance over again, starting from scratch. This resulted in hundreds of unnecessary emails and hours of duplicated work. As Lyndon was struggling to rebuild its roads and bridges in 2024, it was still awaiting reimbursement for infrastructure repairs made following the 2023 flood, in part because of this bureaucratic backlog.

The second issue is long-term and structural. We believe that follow up services from FEMA would be more effective, responsive, and efficient, if far more administrative responsibility for

resource distribution were transferred to local officials in affected communities. For example, a recent Vermont report found that for every \$2 FEMA spent on administrative costs, it only spent \$1 on Individual Assistance.<sup>1</sup> In order to provide the best relief at the most efficient prices, local leadership is essential.

With respect to our short-term concerns regarding PDMG turnover rates, we request information from FEMA to help us to evaluate concretely how this impacts Vermont. Specifically:

1. What have been the PDMG turnover rates within FEMA Region 1 and Vermont?
2. What is the average timeline in Vermont for towns to get approvals for their reimbursements from their PDMGs?
3. How often do PDMGs reverse project approvals from previous PDMGs? Even without an overt reversal, how often do replacement PDMGs require project requests be submitted from scratch?
4. What processes does FEMA have in place to ensure continuity between outgoing and incoming PDMGs?
5. What specific legislative changes or other support that Congress could provide to minimize PDMG staff turnover?

With respect to our long-term concerns:

1. What are your suggestions on how to concretely move administrative responsibilities, along with resources, to local communities directly affected by disasters?

Thank you for your attention to this important matter. We look forward to receiving a response by October 11, 2024.

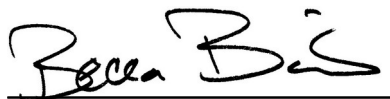
Sincerely,



Bernard Sanders  
United States Senator



Peter Welch  
United States Senator



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Member of Congress

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Hirschfeld, “For some Vermont flood survivors, FEMA was the second major disaster last year,” *Vermont Public*, July 1, 2024, <https://www.vermontpublic.org/local-news/2024-07-01/vermont-flood-july-2023-fema-costs-administrative-fees-assistance-buyouts-hurdles>.