

**HURRICANE IDA AND BEYOND:
READINESS, RECOVERY,
AND RESILIENCE**

HEARING
BEFORE THE
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The documents entered into the record during this hearing are listed below.

- * Articles about FEMA's work in south Louisiana; submitted by Rep. Higin-
gins.
- * Testimony of Constituents Post-Hurricane Ida Experience; submitted by
Rep. Ocasio-Cortez.

The documents are available at: docs.house.gov.

HURRICANE IDA AND BEYOND: READINESS, RECOVERY, AND RESILIENCE

Tuesday, October 5, 2021

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM,
Washington, D.C.

The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 11 a.m., via Zoom, Hon. Carolyn B. Maloney [chairwoman of the committee] presiding.

Present: Representatives Maloney, Norton, Connolly, Raskin, Khanna, Mfume, Ocasio-Cortez, Tlaib, Porter, Bush, Wasserman Schultz, Welch, Johnson, Sarbanes, Kelly, DeSaulnier, Pressley, Comer, Grothman, Cloud, Higgins, Norman, Keller, Mace, Franklin, LaTurner, Fallon, Herrell, and Donalds.

Also present: Representative Carter (waived on).

Chairwoman MALONEY. The committee will come to order.

Without objection, the chair is authorized to declare a recess of the committee at any time.

I now recognize myself for an opening statement.

The committee is holding this hearing to address the serious and growing crisis posed by natural disaster and extreme weather events driven by climate change. Between August 29 and September 1, Hurricane Ida devastated the U.S. from the Louisiana coast to New Jersey, and my home state of New York. This deadly hurricane resulted in over 100 deaths, including 13 in New York City.

In New York and New Jersey, more than 1,000 miles from where the storm first made landfall, catastrophic flooding trapped people and flooded basement apartments and stranded vehicles. In Louisiana, Hurricane Ida took down the electric grid, knocking out all eight transmission lines that deliver power to New Orleans and downing more than 30,000 utility poles, nearly twice as many as Hurricane Katrina. More than 1 million people were left without power. Some are still without power more than a month later.

The unprecedented destruction unleashed by Hurricane Ida is part of a growing trend that the Federal Government cannot ignore. From record-breaking fires in the west, to devastating hurricanes in the south, to rising sea levels that threaten 40 percent of America's population near our coastlines, the destructive impact of climate change is rapidly escalating, and the cost of ignoring this problem is growing.

During the first half of 2021, the United States experienced eight climate disasters, with losses totaling more than \$1 billion. Initial

estimates put losses from Hurricane Ida at between \$53-and \$64 billion. The Government Accountability Office had climate change on its high risk since 2013, in part because of concerns about the increasing cost of disaster response and recovery efforts.

Today we are honored to be joined by FEMA administrator, Deanne Criswell. Thank you so much for being here, Administrator Criswell. I know you and your team are working around the clock to respond to the ongoing recovery efforts and other pressing issues. Your testimony is crucial today because there are thousands of people in New York, New Jersey, Louisiana, and Maryland, and other impacted communities who are desperate for information about how to get help, and when they will get help. That includes understanding what steps FEMA is taking to speed up the installation of temporary roofs on damaged homes in Louisiana, and to work with vulnerable populations to make sure their applications are complete and approved quickly.

I am also interested in hearing about FEMA's efforts to address inequities in disaster readiness and recovery. Vulnerable populations like renters, people of color, people experiencing homelessness, and undocumented immigrants, are more likely to suffer the consequences of extreme weather events, yet, they often face the biggest barriers to getting help.

The Biden administration is taking important steps to make it easier for disaster survivors to receive assistance, including waiving the requirement that survivors have a deed or other form of proof of home ownership to receive assistance.

FEMA has also taken steps to assist vulnerable populations by developing fact sheets tailored to renters, undocumented immigrants, and non-English speakers.

These are important steps, but more needs to be done. It is crucial that we invest in climate resilience and post-disaster assistance to advance racial and economic justice so that we do not leave behind our most vulnerable communities.

Administrator Criswell, I also would like to hear from you today about how we can improve efforts to build climate resilient communities. One critical step the administration could take is to improve Federal data on the full extent of climate change on our communities. By leveraging data across the public and private sectors, we can better understand the future risks of flooding to communities and take action to keep people out of harm's way.

Congress also must act. Today, I reintroduced the Federal Agency Climate Prep Act. This bill will ensure that communities have a say in how Federal agencies implement their climate action plans, which is crucially making sure our taxpayer dollars are put to work where they are most needed. Last week, I was proud to support the \$28 billion for victims of Hurricane Ida that Congress approved, but I was disappointed that 175 of my Republican colleagues voted against this bill, including many members whose constituents are in dire need of the emergency funding approved by Democrats.

I am hopeful that as extreme weather becomes more frequent and more deadly, we can agree on a bipartisan basis that impacted Americans deserve our help.

But recovery funds are not enough. Congress also needs to make long-term investments to stop global warming before it is too late. That is why I call on my colleagues to support President Biden's Build Back Better Act. This transformational bill will make essential investments to solve the climate crisis, while also upgrading our infrastructure so that we can better prepare for future disasters.

In the long run, these investments will save money by reducing the extraordinary costs from natural disasters and extreme weather caused by climate change.

I now recognize my distinguished ranking member, Mr. Comer, for an opening statement.

Mr. COMER. Thank you, Chairwoman Maloney, and I want to thank the witness, FEMA Administrator Criswell, for her willingness to appear before the committee.

I am pleasantly surprised that the Democrats have finally called a witness from the Biden administration to testify before this committee. Maybe the Lugar Center will upgrade the F grade the committee was given earlier this year.

Now, while I appreciate FEMA Administrator Criswell's testimony and look forward to hearing more about the Agency's efforts to assist Americans impacted by hurricanes and other natural disasters, it is critical to mention who from the Biden administration that the Democrats on this committee have refused to call to testify. Chairwoman Maloney, when will Democrats call Department of Homeland Secretary Mayorkas to discuss the crisis along our southern border, or Secretary of Defense Austin to explain the debacle that has been the Afghanistan withdrawals? Or someone to address the growing inflation created by the Biden administration that has gotten so bad that even stores like the Dollar Tree are raising prices on American consumers?

In fact, Chairwoman Maloney, I've sent three letters this year urging committee Democrats to call a hearing to examine the Biden border crisis. Since January 2021, thousands of illegal immigrants, including unaccompanied minors, have crossed the southern border. There's an ongoing security, humanitarian, and public health crisis with no end in sight, and no clear policy to address this issue from the Biden administration.

As I've outlined in my letters to Chairwoman Maloney, one of the most troubling issues at the border is the number of unaccompanied children entering the border and currently in U.S. custody. Today, thousands of unaccompanied children are in U.S. custody. The Biden border crisis became so dire in March of this year that the administration was forced to activate FEMA to support the response for unaccompanied children. Over a period of 90 days, FEMA supported DHS and HHS to get unaccompanied children out of DHS custody and into HHS placements. That FEMA, the Agency charged with the mission of assisting American citizens in recovery from disasters had to be activated, further illustrates the extent of the crisis created by the Biden administration's disastrous policies.

Administrator Criswell, I hope that you can address my concern today with regard to the activation of FEMA to use critical resources reserved for American citizens faced with natural disaster

to respond to crisis created by this administration at the border with regard to unaccompanied children.

Chairwoman Maloney, I would like for the FEMA administrator and members of this committee to hear directly from Mr. Higgins with regard to issues he and his constituents have faced with FEMA's response to natural disaster recovery in Louisiana. I understand there's still people waiting on critical assistance from FEMA, and we look forward to getting answers about that.

I will now yield the balance of my time to the gentleman from Louisiana, Mr. Higgins, to give an opening statement.

Mr. HIGGINS. I thank the gentleman and ranking member, and I thank Chairwoman Maloney for holding today's hearing. And thank you, Mr. Comer, for giving me a few moments to speak.

While this hearing is focused on Hurricane Ida, I would be remiss to not speak on the ongoing hurricane recovery in southwest Louisiana. Just over a year ago southwest Louisiana was ravaged by brutal Hurricanes Laura and Delta back to back, only to be followed by severe weather from winter storms and major flood events. Southwest Louisiana is appreciative of the \$1.6 billion that FEMA and other agencies have delivered to help with immediate response costs, but this is insufficient for what is needed in the long-term recovery. Hurricanes Laura and Delta alone have been estimated to cost \$16 billion in damage to the region, meaning that we have delivered thus far about 1/10 of what's estimated the costs of Laura and Delta.

Even with the passage of last week's continuing resolution, these funds are over a year late, and fall short of the necessary Federal response. The entire Louisiana delegation, including our Governor, has written 14 letters to the administration and congressional leaders to get the funding out the door, yet the political realities have injured the lives of southwest Louisiana citizens for over 400 days.

In closing, I would hope, Madam Chair, that although we can recognize intellectually, we may struggle as a body to address what's been referred to as extreme weather, perhaps the chairwoman would agree to work with myself, my office, and Republican members of the committee to deal with the extreme bureaucracy we face. We can certainly address that whereby response to natural disasters across the country that affect Americans, and at one time or another, in a very negative way, that we could work together to streamline the bureaucracy and red tape that we face as citizenry attempting to recover.

And, Madam Chair, I yield. And Ranking Member, Mr. Comer, thank you for yielding me time.

Chairwoman MALONEY. The gentleman yields back.

I want to briefly respond and address the claim from my good friend that the committee is not conducting oversight. We have today the administrator, Deanne Criswell, who did an incredible job in a job similar to this one in the city of New York to answer all of your questions. She has been to New Jersey and other sites to work with people and respond with FEMA.

And the truth is that this committee is actively engaged in waste, fraud, and abuse. The committee has a joint investigation with the Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis into the Emergent BioSolutions, a firm that received huge vaccine contracts

but had to destroy millions of doses due to deficiencies in its manufacturing; our bipartisan investigation into the F-35 joint strike force fighter helped push Lockheed Martin to return \$70 million to the Department of Defense's F-35 program to compensate for defective spare parts. Again, in waste, fraud, and abuse, this committee helped create the Pandemic Response Accountability Committee, and the Committee of Inspector General overseeing the trillions of dollars in response to the pandemic, IG saved roughly \$17 for every \$1 spent, and we have not shied away from constructive oversight of the Biden administration. In the last 2 weeks, we conducted oversight of the treatment of Haitian asylum seekers, held a classifying briefing, which was the request of the minority, on Afghanistan, and sent a bipartisan letter on the FBI's handling of ransomware attacks. Our oversight record stands in strong contrast to Republicans who turned a blind eye to four years of outrageous abuses by the former President.

With that, I would like to get back to the critical importance of today's hearing. First, I would like to introduce our witnesses. Today we are privileged to hear from the Administrator of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, Deanne Criswell. The witness will be unmuted so we can swear her in.

Please raise your right hand.

Do you swear or affirm that the testimony you are about to give is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?

Ms. CRISWELL. I do.

Chairwoman MALONEY. Let the record show that the witness answered in the affirmative. Thank you. And without objection, your written testimony will be made part of the record.

With that, Administrator Criswell, you are now recognized for your opening testimony. Thank you for being here. Thank you for your public service in New York prior to coming to the Federal Government. Thank you.

**STATEMENT OF HON. DEANNE CRISWELL, ADMINISTRATOR,
FEDERAL EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AGENCY**

Ms. CRISWELL. Good morning.

And thank you, Chair Maloney, Ranking Member Comer, and members of the committee. I thank you for the opportunity to testify about our response and recovery efforts following Hurricane Ida, as well as the longer-term investments we must make to increase our Nation's resilience in the face of climate change.

Climate change affects every single American. It is the biggest crisis facing our Nation, and it is making natural disasters more frequent, more intense, and more destructive. Mitigating the effects of climate change is one of my top priorities for FEMA. And Hurricane Ida has demonstrated the challenges presented by our changing climate, the benefits of mitigation investments, and the importance of equity in our response and recovery.

Fueled in part by warmer than normal waters in the Gulf of Mexico, Hurricane Ida's wind speeds intensified from 85 to 150 miles per hour in less than 24 hours. This Category 4 storm became the fifth strongest hurricane to ever make landfall in the continental United States.

Storms normally break apart quickly when they make landfall, but Ida remained a Category 4 storm for four hours, and Ida's impacts have affected states and communities from the Gulf of Mexico to the Northeast. Ida left a million people in Louisiana and Mississippi without power at a time of sweltering heat.

After transitioning and accelerating to a post-tropical cyclone, Ida caused widespread flooding in the northeastern United States, breaking multiple rainfall records, and causing catastrophic floods in New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. Hurricane Ida caused over 100 direct fatalities, and my heart goes out to all of the families who lost loved ones.

For all its severe impacts, Hurricane Ida was also notable in other ways.

First, the storm came ashore 16 years to the day after Hurricane Katrina made landfall and caused widespread flooding in New Orleans; but this time, the levees in New Orleans held, reflecting significant investments made in the aftermath of Katrina to strengthen the levee system.

Second, FEMA was well prepared for Ida. Thanks to congressional action in the 16 years since Katrina, we have authorities that give us the flexibility and the ability to lean in much quicker than we have in the past to bring the full force of the Federal family into position so we can respond quickly.

We pre-positioned millions of liters of water, millions of meals, specialized response teams, and numerous resources from our Federal community to deploy based on the immediate needs after the storm had passed. At FEMA, we say that disaster response is locally executed, state-managed, and federally supported, and I am proud of how well we supported our state and local partners in responding to this storm. This was particularly true given the special challenges involved in responding to a disaster amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Third, as this storm hit the United States, FEMA was ready to implement important policy changes to help underserved communities, which are often disproportionately impacted by disasters, to obtain individual assistance to the full extent that they are eligible for it. Previously homeowners may have run into difficulties proving that they own their homes if their property was handed down informally through the years.

To address this, we have expanded the forms of documentation that can prove ownership, including documents like receipts for major repairs or improvements, court documents, public officials' letters, mobile home park letters, and applicant self-certification for mobile homes and travel trailers as a last resort.

In addition, FEMA has also changed the way it calculates the threshold for property losses to qualify for direct housing, such as a trailer or a mobile home. This ensures equitable damage evaluation regardless of the size of the damaged home.

The recovery phase for Hurricane Ida continues as we speak, and we will be dealing with the consequences of this hurricane for quite some time. But even as we do that work, we must make the kinds of generational-level investments necessary to reduce the impacts of climate-fueled disasters that we will face in the months and years ahead.

Mitigation investments are incredibly worthwhile. An independent study by the National Institute of Building Sciences in 2019, found that every dollar in Federal Hazard Mitigation Grants invested in mitigation saves the American taxpayer an estimated \$6 in future spending.

At FEMA, a cornerstone of our mitigation efforts is the Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities program, or BRIC. I would like to thank Congress for providing the legislative tools to create BRIC through the Disaster Recovery Reform Act of 2018. By establishing a reliable stream of funding for larger mitigation projects through a nationwide grant program, the BRIC program provides a critical opportunity for state, territorial, Tribal, and local governments to invest in a more resilient Nation, reduce disaster suffering, and lessen future disaster costs.

Earlier this year, President Biden visited FEMA to announce that he was increasing the funding available for the BRIC program to \$1 billion for Fiscal Year 2021 application period. These are the kinds of investments that will protect lives and property in the face of the future storms we are going to face.

Another important element of FEMA's mitigation efforts is the Hazard Mitigation Grant program. In August, President Biden approved more than \$3.46 billion for the HMGP program for the COVID-19 disaster decorations. As a result, every state, tribe, and territory that received a major disaster declaration in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, will be eligible to receive substantial levels of funding to invest in mitigation projects that reduce risks from natural disasters.

For eligible mitigation projects, HMGP funding can cover 75 percent of the total project costs while states or communities cover the remaining share. We will be urging relevant agencies in your states to ensure that these funds are delivered to disadvantaged communities and would welcome your support in this effort.

One more critical piece is the FEMA Flood Mitigation Assistance program, or FMA, which helps provide financial and technical assistance to states and communities to reduce the risk of flood damage to homes and businesses through buyouts, elevation, and other activities. Flooding is the most common and costly natural disaster in the United States, and the direct average annual flood losses have quadrupled from approximately \$4 billion per year in the 1980's, to roughly \$17 billion per year between 2010 and 2018. The bipartisan Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, approved by the Senate in August, would provide \$3.5 billion over five years for the FMA program. The Biden administration has urged the House to approve the bipartisan infrastructure bill without delay, and I would like to add my voice today in calling for its swift passage.

Mitigation is particularly important for underserved communities that are most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. In administering our mitigation programs, we will keep equity considerations top of mind, and will include them in the competitive scoring process for programs such as FMA. Equity is one of my top priorities at FEMA, and the intersection of climate change and equity is a particular concern for our agency, as the impacts are worse for our vulnerable communities.

In closing, I would like to thank all of the first responders across our Nation, our amazing FEMA work force, and our interagency partners, for their tireless work in responding to Hurricane Ida. They continue to answer the call to respond to disasters fueled by climate change, which truly is the crisis of our generation. The intensification of natural disasters will be our new normal, but this is a call to action, and I looked forward to continuing to work with Congress to make our Nation more resilient.

I would be pleased to answer any questions you have.

Chairwoman MALONEY. Thank you. Thank you very, very much for your service and for your testimony today.

And I recognize myself for five minutes.

Administrator Criswell, I know that you visited New York City with President Biden and myself after Hurricane Ida, and saw firsthand the devastating loss and suffering it brought to New Yorkers. As the former Commissioner of the New York City Emergency Management Office—this is the office that rebuilt New York after 9/11, an incredibly important position—you know how unusually intense Ida's rainfall was for New York City. It overwhelmed drainage systems and caused flash floods. Eleven New Yorkers drowned in their basement apartments. Divers had to retrieve bodies, including a two-year-old toddler. You can see on the screen a picture of what remained after one basement apartment was flooded. And when we looked up the addresses of the five homes where New Yorkers died on FEMA's flood map, I was surprised to find that all of them are located in areas marked as having minimal flood hazard.

So, Administrator, I understand that FEMA flood maps are intended to be limited tools and provide information on some flooding risks but not all, but is it true that local emergency responders sometimes use FEMA maps to determine which residents should be evacuated, and what areas to prioritize after a flood? Yes or no?

Ms. CRISWELL. Chair Maloney, thank you so much for the question, and my heart goes out to those families who lost loved ones due to this event.

As you stated, our flood maps are designed to be tools that account for coastal inundation as well as river flooding, and they do not take into account the storm sewer systems. As you saw, we had a record rainfall in New York which was broken by the previous record, which was just a couple of weeks before that, and it's a sign that our infrastructure has an opportunity to be upgraded and mitigated against, so we can prevent future flash flooding urban events like this. And these are the type of projects that are eligible under our hazard mitigation programs.

We are going to continue to see these severe rain events across the country, and so we need to take action now to help mitigate the effects of these types of events.

Chairwoman MALONEY. That is great, and I am sure that the localities will be applying for it. And we saw that the storm water and drainage systems were overloaded in New York and probably across the country too. Will you commit to updating flood maps in New York City to better reflect local limitations such as storm water and drainage systems?

Ms. CRISWELL. Chair Maloney, the flood maps are community maps, and we will work with all communities to help updating their maps with the information that they have available so we can make them more accurate.

Chairwoman MALONEY. Great, great. In addition to updating maps, does FEMA provide funds to communities to upgrade storm water and drainage systems so that they are more resilient to the flooding, such as what we saw with Ida and extreme weather?

Ms. CRISWELL. Yes. Some of those upgrades are certainly things that could be eligible under our hazard mitigation programs. I would encourage communities to check with their hazard mitigation specialist to see if they are eligible under that program.

Chairwoman MALONEY. And we saw in Hurricane Ida the crucial importance of investing in infrastructure before a hurricane hits. You noted New Orleans has a special system to reduce storm risk, which includes raised levees and fortified flood walls. This helped protect New Orleans. New York City has also invested in protecting waterfront areas vulnerable to storm surges and sea level rise after Hurricane Sandy, but Ida brought a different challenge, with more than three inches of rain per hour, far more than New York's 100-year-old drainage system can handle.

How can FEMA help New York and other cities assess the new climate risks we are facing now? Will FEMA give advice to cities across our country on how to become more resilient to extreme weather?

Ms. CRISWELL. Yes, I think you raise a really great point, Chairwoman. Again, the levee systems are designed for certain types of events, but as we continue to see more and more of these severe rain events that are going to happen across our country, we need to start thinking about the future risks that our communities are facing. And so we do have technical assistance that we would be happy to work with local communities to help better understand what their risks are today, and the future risks that they are going to face.

Chairwoman MALONEY. And my time is running out, but, Administrator, do you agree that it's important that Federal agencies, including FEMA, plan ahead for the next disaster, and that local communities have a voice in that plan, which is like the prep bill that I am introducing today?

Ms. CRISWELL. I think it's critical that we continue to plan for what the future disasters might be, instead of always focusing our efforts on our historical events. As we've seen this year, it's going to continue to change, and we're going to continue to be faced with more severe events.

Chairwoman MALONEY. Thank you so much.

And I now recognize the gentleman from Louisiana, which was very hard hit. Mr. Higgins is now recognized for five minutes.

Thank you, Mr. Higgins.

Mr. HIGGINS. Thank you, Chairwoman.

Before I begin my statement and questions, I would like to introduce several documents for the record. In the interest of time, six of them are local articles, media articles detailing FEMA's actions in my district in south Louisiana. One is an official FEMA document discussing NFIP risk rating 2.0 changes for Louisiana.

Chairwoman MALONEY. Without objection, all are accepted. Without objection, all are accepted.

Mr. HIGGINS. Thank you, thank you. Thank you, good lady.

Administrator Criswell, thank you for being here today and for visiting Louisiana in late August. Let me clarify that virtually every public entity, including Calcasieu Parish School Board, Cameron Parish, the Jeff Davis Parish, the Port of Lake Charles, and the city of Jennings, have numerous public assistance applications still outstanding from the 2020 hurricane season. This delay in funding has real world consequences that forces small and local government entities to attempt to fund recovery efforts from very slim margins of revenue, and the leveraged state bond funding and other revenue streams. The fact that over a year after the initial incidences that these cities and towns are still waiting on public assistance reimbursements that they qualify for, on some cases, even to have FEMA inspectors come and appraise the damage a year later is shameful.

Administrator Criswell, as a Biden administration official to participate in oversight hearings and the first as Congress, I appreciate you being here. I look forward to our discussions with you.

FEMA's response to the 2020 and 2021 disasters is an issue within itself, but our overall Federal response is always seemingly late. While politicians and bureaucrats discuss the need for better mechanisms to respond to these disasters, the answer is definitely not to create more bureaucracy. The bureaucracy we have is slow and thick. As we discuss potential changes to Federal programs to better respond to future natural disasters, meeting the citizens needs should be our top concern.

An increase to focus on timely responses between the Federal Government and state and local entities, that should be primary, and better coordination and proactive efforts are needed.

Administrator Criswell, I wrote to you on August 10 regarding Calcasieu Parish School Board's public assistance applications. This is an example of the bureaucracy that we are frustrated with from FEMA. The school board has two Category A, 21 Category B, and 82 Category E projects currently outstanding. This is from a storm a year ago, ma'am. While some of these applications have been approved, there's very few. Most of the requests are still outstanding. Jeff Davis Parish has \$2 million worth of requests. These parishes cannot afford to carry that for a year for programs that they qualify for.

Additionally, regarding FEMA's 50 percent rule, the Port of Lake Charles has submitted multiple projects in order to receive funding and has yet to receive one validation or determination from FEMA.

Administrator, can you explain why this school district, for instance, local governments and others like it in my districts, have had to wait, in some cases, over 300 days, to receive reimbursement that they clearly qualify for? Is it a funding issue? Is it because of inspectors, or is it due to bureaucracy, ma'am?

Ms. CRISWELL. Congressman Higgins, I certainly appreciate your advocacy for your constituents there in Lake Charles. We discussed this previously on the Committee on Homeland Security, and following that, I did make a trip down to Lake Charles. I visited with Mayor Nick Carter to better understand some of the struggles that

he has been experiencing, and I brought my senior leadership team with me so they could followup directly.

Some of the things we learned brand new during that visit, and my team has been following up on it. I don't have the specifics on the school district that you mentioned, but it's taking too long is what it sounds like. So I commit to you that my team will continue to work with the representatives there to make sure that we are moving this forward as fast as we can. I thought that we had made some progress after that visit, but I will followup and make sure that it's continuing to move forward.

Mr. HIGGINS. I thank the administrator for her candid answer. We will communicate directly with you and your office, ma'am, with further details and specifics.

Madam Chair, I thank you for holding this hearing today. And my time has expired, so I yield.

Chairwoman MALONEY. The gentleman yields back.

The gentlelady from the District of Columbia, Ms. Norton, is now recognized for five minutes.

Ms. NORTON. Thank you, Madam Chair, for this hearing.

As you indicated in your remarks, this hurricane was felt in the Northeast as well. Fortunately, the District of Columbia, my district, was spared.

But, Administrator Criswell, we see a rising number of natural disasters. I think that's because of climate change and, therefore, increased reliance on the Federal Government. Your own National Advisory Council has indicated that the public assistance program most benefits communities that can afford to pay the required match and can navigate the complexities of the contracting agencies.

So my question is, what actions is FEMA taking to assist existing disaster recovery and mitigation programs to ensure outcomes are more equitable for all communities, including those that cannot afford to pay the required matching funds?

Ms. CRISWELL. Congresswoman Norton, thank you for that question.

You know, all of our programs always have opportunity for some improvement, and since I arrived here, I have worked with my team and directed them to take a people-first approach, and remember that we can't have programs that come in with a one-size-fits-all way of applying our programs. We have to be able to understand the needs and the unique needs of individual communities and individuals themselves and bring our programs to them instead of forcing them to always maneuver their way through the bureaucracy.

We made several programs going into this—or several changes going into this hurricane season in order to improve the equitable delivery of our individual assistance program. This is just the beginning. We are going to continue to look at ways that we can reach our communities more equitably, understanding that I have seen firsthand how our underserved communities, who already have difficulty, are more disproportionately impacted after a storm has passed. And, so, you have my commitment to continuing to work at our programs to find ways that we don't always go with

this one-size-fits-all approach, and we understand the unique needs of individual communities and individuals.

Ms. NORTON. Thank you, Administrator Criswell.

Indeed, GAO has noted that some communities simply don't have the technical staff, engineers, grant managers, the necessary capacity, in other words, to submit a complex grant application. And as GAO has recommended that FEMA create a centralized inventory of hazard mitigation resources on the FEMA website, has FEMA developed an inventory of resources yet?

Ms. CRISWELL. What we have developed is our mitigation action portfolio which provides examples of mitigation projects that have been done across the country that can help communities better understand the type of projects that could be eligible. I am not sure if that's exactly answering the question on resources, and if it's not, I will certainly look into it and see exactly what you're talking about. But I would also like to say that we also provide technical assistance. We understand that not all communities have the ability to hire somebody to come in and write a competitive grant application, which is why we are doing directed technical assistance through our new Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities program. We offered this to 10 communities touring the first round, and we have doubled that to 20 communities, and I have been working with our state partners to help identify those communities who need this type of assistance the most so we can reach those populations that would otherwise not try to apply for this type of assistance.

Ms. NORTON. Administrator Criswell, thank you for that.

The GAO has published a report in which it notes the complexity of the application process, the timeliness to grant awards and the technical capacity required to successfully apply is a problem. What specific opportunities has FEMA identified to simplify, or shorten the application process?

Ms. CRISWELL. Again, there's a couple of ways that we can help communities with this. One is through technical assistance. It's one of the key ways that we can help communities better understand how to navigate some of the complexities. But with other programs, like our Assistance to Firefighter Grants program, we have shorter applications for smaller amounts that can help get those through quickly.

But there's always opportunities for us to improve, and I have asked my grants section here to take a look, an overarching look at all of our grant programs to get a better understanding of where we are missing some communities, and then understand what the barriers are for them trying to reach out and ask for assistance so we can address that root cause of the problem.

Chairwoman MALONEY. The gentlelady's time has expired.

Ms. NORTON. I welcome the opportunity for technical assistance. And, of course, I yield back.

Chairwoman MALONEY. Thank you.

The gentleman from South Carolina, Mr. Norman, is recognized for five minutes. Mr. Norman.

Mr. NORMAN. Thank you, Chairwoman Maloney. And, Administrator Criswell, thank you for coming.

I would like to address your answer to Congressman Higgins, but before I do that, you know, Ms. Criswell, you talk about crisis. We have got a crisis on the border. In seven months, we've had over 170,000 illegals cross the border. It's a medical crisis, and it's a military crisis. We've got an inflation crisis.

Ask any American who is paying 40 and 50 percent more for gas from foreign countries that don't like us, if that's not a crisis, along with the food and everything else that inflation is hitting. We have got a military crisis in Afghanistan. You know, we have got 13 dead Marines. We have got Americans left behind. We have got crises, and this administration has simply not addressed them.

Chairwoman Maloney, as has been mentioned, we've sent three letters on having testify before us different people. Why is Mayorkas not appearing before us to answer questions? Why is General Milley, Austin Blinken not before us answering questions? Why is Janet Yellen not here answering questions? This administration has simply put this country in a crisis mode from the day it took office.

With that being said, Ms. Criswell, in response to Congressman Higgins, in all due respect, ma'am, it's just words. If you were in the private sector, you could not give the kind of answer that you gave. This is—we are two months, three months shy of 2022. He asked you questions about 2020 that has not been addressed. And you said you would address specifics, but why the delay?

Ms. CRISWELL. Congressman Norman, recovery takes a long time and it's complicated. And when you look at an event like Hurricane Laura, followed by Hurricane Delta, there are a lot of complicating factors that make it even longer to recover. We are working as fast as we can in coordination with our state and local partners to assist with their recovery efforts, and there's a number of things we can do to help speed that up. We can—

Mr. NORMAN. Ma'am, in all due respect, when you received a request dating almost two years ago, was Louisiana responded to, the specific questions? Did your agency respond to each one of them?

Ms. CRISWELL. I don't have the specifics of a letter received two years ago prior to my administration, but I know that we have addressed the requests that I have gotten since my time here in office.

Mr. NORMAN. And you have been here how long?

Ms. CRISWELL. I started at the end of April.

Mr. NORMAN. And you would have looked over past requests to see where it was and why the money hadn't been released. I am saying if this would have been in the private sector, you would have had a problem.

My other question to you, President Biden rescinded the proclamation declaring a national emergency at our southern border. If the crisis at our southern border is not an emergency as Biden proclaimed, then why was your agency, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, deployed to the southern border?

Ms. CRISWELL. Congressman, FEMA is really good at coordinating across Federal agencies. It's one of the skill sets that we bring to the table, and it's one of the things that we do best. And in this case, we were asked to come in and help coordinate and support our partners at HHS and CBP. We had a very limited role.

We no longer have a presence in supporting that mission, and it's just done now through our normal interagency avenues.

Mr. NORMAN. How much money has been expended for the limited role that you say that FEMA had?

Ms. CRISWELL. I don't have the exact dollar amount, but all of the funding that FEMA would have incurred has been reimbursed by those agencies.

Mr. NORMAN. All right. Could you get that—I mean, could you get the numbers for us? And could you report on why you were there, the dollars that were spent? Are you still there?

Ms. CRISWELL. We have nobody that is supporting that mission directly. It's all being supported through our normal interagency venues.

Mr. NORMAN. OK. And is there any other outstanding issues with other states that your agency either needs to respond to or hasn't responded to?

Ms. CRISWELL. Sir, I would have to know specifically what types of events you would be talking about, but to my knowledge, we are still managing recovery from disasters across this country, so we will continue to support those disaster response and recovery efforts.

Mr. NORMAN. OK. And you led off with the fact that, you know, climate change is, you know, an overriding issue, and I guess money is no object for combating climate change. Are you aware of a study of MIT that said if every Nation complied with the Paris Accord, that it would only reduce carbon emissions by .2 percent?

Ms. CRISWELL. Sir, I am not aware of that study.

Mr. NORMAN. OK. That's another thing. Could you take a look at it and give us your thoughts on it and give us some idea if that's true or not? That's a pretty big statement for them to make, and they're not some fly by-night agency.

Chairwoman MALONEY. The gentleman's time has expired.

Mr. NORMAN. Thank you, ma'am.

Chairwoman MALONEY. Thank you.

The gentleman from Virginia, Mr. Connolly, is now recognized for five minutes.

Mr. Connolly.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Thank you, Madam Chairwoman, and thank you so much for having this hearing. And, Administrator Criswell, welcome.

And I must say my friend just—Mr. Norman just talked about crises when the Biden administration began, and he is absolutely right. The Biden administration inherited endless crises from the Trump administration, I mean, everything from an insurrection at the Capitol to a pandemic that was made so much worse by the response or lack of response by the Trump administration and by the President himself, Mr. Trump. And, oh, by the way, through one other crisis, FEMA. We just voted for a continuing resolution and \$28 billion in natural disaster relief, and 175 of my Republican colleagues voted against it.

So, Administrator Criswell, if your budget had been zeroed out, as apparently some of my colleagues would have it, would that have created a crisis for you? And could it create a crisis for Amer-

ica in terms of preparedness for disasters and response to disasters?

Ms. CRISWELL. Congressman, I do appreciate the passing of the continuing resolution so we can continue to support the American people. You know, any disruption in funding to our mission would certainly have an impact on our ability to protect the lives of individuals that are faced by disasters.

Mr. CONNOLLY. So let's be a little more specific. Thank you for that diplomatic answer. But you're the administrator of an agency that actually does nuts-and-bolts relief and recovery, and you're the lead Federal agency for responding to natural disasters. I don't know, has the frequency of hurricanes reaching land on the Continental United States increased over the last decade?

Ms. CRISWELL. Congressman, what we are seeing is the number of hurricanes, the number of wildfires, the number of severe weather events continues to increase. They become more severe, more intense. They are intensifying more rapidly, and that's only going to continue to get worse.

Mr. CONNOLLY. So I was looking at some interesting data. In 2017, three hurricanes of, you know, magnitude 3 or 4, hit Continental United States, which I believe was the first time that's happened. And the cumulative damage of those three events that affected Puerto Rico, Texas, and Florida, was \$265 billion, a record. That's the largest disaster cost out in American history.

And the question is, given climate change, are we—when you do your planning, what do your experts tell you, Administrator Criswell? Should we expect more, or was this just a fluke and we're out of the woods?

Ms. CRISWELL. Congressman, I think that we are seeing from the impacts of climate change is that we can expect to see more events like you just mentioned, which is why it's so important right now that we start to think about what these future risks are going to be and we invest in mitigation projects so we can reduce the impact, the financial cost of these disasters.

Mr. CONNOLLY. And are you also working with states, Administrator Criswell, to do more resiliency planning? You know, flooding is more frequent. Tidal surges are bigger and more dangerous and damaging. We've seen it even in urban areas like New York where the subway system now floods anytime there's any kind of major storm because the tidal surges and the rise of ocean level are now affecting places like Manhattan and shutting down subways.

Are those events you're planning with local governments and state governments in terms of resilience? And, if so, can you tell us a little bit about it quickly?

Ms. CRISWELL. States and local jurisdictions are required to have hazard mitigation plans which address some of the concerns that you talked about, and FEMA does provide assistance, again through a technical assistance program, and we also fund the development of those plans through our hazard mitigation grant programs. What we need to do is work with them closely to think about, again, what are these future risks that you're going to face so the next iteration of their hazard mitigation planning is thinking toward the future and what are the crises that our children

and grandchildren are going to face so we can better protect against them.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Thank you.

My time is up. I yield back.

Chairwoman MALONEY. The gentleman yields back.

The gentleman from Pennsylvania, Mr. Keller, is now recognized for five minutes.

Mr. Keller.

Mr. KELLER. Thank you, Madam Chair.

Natural disasters and flooding poses enormous risks to our homes, businesses, crops, and infrastructure. They also jeopardize the safety and well-being of Americans nationwide. I think we can all agree that flood protection and prevention are essential tools to mitigate damages caused by severe weather, such as hurricanes, tropical storms, and heavy rainfall that have the potential to decimate communities like the ones all across Pennsylvania, all across our Nation, but particularly in the area that I am privileged to represent, Pennsylvania 12. Events like Hurricane Ida and other storms that took place this year underscore the need for our communities to remain resilient when challenged with these storms.

That all starts with investing in disaster protection. In Pennsylvania, the Williamsport Levee is the second largest flood control project of its kind. The system protects central Pennsylvania from catastrophic flooding of the Susquehanna River. The levee system originally completed in 1955 is in desperate need of repair. The 2020 Water Resources Development Act named the levee as a priority, and Lycoming County's 2018 County Comprehensive Plan update calls the state of the levee system, quote, "the single greatest threat to maintaining and pursuing economic resilience."

Commissioner Criswell—or excuse me, Administrator Criswell, thank you for being here today. I understand you have experience with emergency management in the Northeast, having served the state of New York previously. And in many cases in New York, there are plenty of river towns like that here in Pennsylvania. Do you believe—what do you believe are some of the most pressing disaster-related needs for communities like the one I represent in Williamsport?

Ms. CRISWELL. Congressman, I think the example you gave is a really great example of really understanding what our current risk is, and looking at the age of our infrastructure. We have to understand whether or not the infrastructure that was built decades ago is still adequate to support the extreme weather events that we are starting to see and will continue to see moving forward.

I think it's critically important for all of us, and we have a shared responsibility, to look at what we can do to upgrade current infrastructure, or also improve the mitigation projects that we have so they can reduce the risk, reduce the impacts from this increase in the number of weather events that we are seeing.

Mr. KELLER. Yes, I guess I agree with that.

Are there ways we can streamline items in the project delivery process for investments in priority flood protection projects, like the one in Williamsport?

Ms. CRISWELL. I don't know the specifics about that project, but I think that there's always ways that we can work together to try

to streamline the delivery of projects. If there's something specific on that one, I'd be happy to have my team get back with you and see what we can do.

Mr. KELLER. I appreciate that because, you know, looking back to 1955, you know, we want to be able to lower the risk and severe damage from a process standpoint, and that's really what we want to look to do. We certainly need that flood protection here in central Pennsylvania, around our Nation, because it does protect homes, families, businesses, and it's so important from that standpoint.

So if there are things that we can look at and we can do, you know, to lower the risk of severe damage by having a streamlined process, you know, I would like to be able to work with you and your team on that. Again, it will benefit the areas that I represent, but, also, many of the people in Congress. We certainly need that help. So anything we can do to help that along we are willing to work on that.

Ms. CRISWELL. Absolutely, Congressman. I'll have my team get back and see if there's anything specific we can do.

Mr. KELLER. Thank you. Because, again, you mentioned that, you know, these mitigation projects, you know, were completed before I was born actually, 1955, but I've been in the area a long time, and it's so important that we protect. And that's really our job as people who work for the individuals that pay our salaries, whether we're in Congress, whether we're at FEMA. You know, our responsibility is to the people of the United States of America, and we need to make sure that their money is being invested to protect their interests.

So I appreciate the time to be here today. I appreciate you being with us, Administrator Criswell, and look forward to working with you and your team on these important issues.

Thank you, and I yield back.

Chairwoman MALONEY. The gentleman yields back.

The gentleman from Maryland, Mr. Mfume, is now recognized for five minutes.

Mr. Mfume.

You're muted. Mr. Mfume.

Is he there? Let's go to Ro Khanna.

OK. The gentlelady from New York, Ms. Ocasio-Cortez, is now recognized for five minutes.

Ms. OCASIO-CORTEZ. Thank you so much, Chairwoman.

And thank you so much to Administrator Criswell for not only joining us today, but even recently coming to visit so many of our communities in New York, as well as across the country, who are so deeply devastated by Hurricane Ida. And also for, in addition to that, your flexibility in implementation of our COVID funeral fund program, which has helped families all across the country help recover from the devastation of the pandemic, in addition to some of the other natural disasters we've been seeing across the country.

Chairwoman, I would like to seek unanimous consent to submit a record—to submit to the record the full testimony of one of my constituents, Delawar Ahmed, regarding their experience post-Hurricane Ida.

Chairwoman MALONEY. Without objection.

Ms. OCASIO-CORTEZ. Thank you.

Deluwar, alongside many others, wrote to my office, quote: I looked out the window and saw cars uncontrollably adrift during the Ida floods. A woman wading waist-deep in the street, people yelling for help. These are some of the images that we saw across the district. And I strongly believe that FEMA can play an active role in mitigating an experience like theirs.

Now, earlier this year, Administrator Criswell, you told *The New York Times* that the risks we are seeing from climate change are the crisis of our generation. And I think that you're right. When we look at the numbers after doing some digging, according to the agency's data, in 2005, there were 48 major disaster declarations. That was in 2005, 48 disaster declarations. Now, in 2020, there were 104 major disaster declarations, more than double that number.

Now, the climate research commission by the city of New York projected that in 2015, the number of days with rainfall of at least four inches would increase by as much as 67 percent by the end of the decade, and that's compared to the period between 1971 to 2000.

Is FEMA operating and planning ahead with similar projections for the climate crisis?

Ms. CRISWELL. Congresswoman, thank you again for, you know, hosting me in New York City and being able to see some of the impacts that we saw or that people experienced from Hurricane Ida. Completely devastating to many of those individuals.

And I think, you know, the data that you just mentioned, what that highlights is the thing that I'm stressing here, is that we have to stop focusing all of our efforts on historical risk—the historical risks that we faced in the past—and look to our future risk, and better understand what that future risk might be. That's hard to do because it's not tangible. You know, you can put your finger on what happened in the past and build to that. But we have to be able to be comfortable with understanding the potential for the future risk and the investments that it's going to take in order to protect against that future risk.

And so I am committed, with my team, to working with locals as they are upgrading their mitigation plans, as they are looking at what their future risks will be, to help them better understand what that future risk, that future threat from climate change is going to be.

Ms. OCASIO-CORTEZ. Thank you so much, Administrator. And if you could list some of the measures. You know, one of the things I've been thinking about is that as climate change gets worse, the way that we're going to have to approach not just disaster response, but disaster prevention, is really going to have to evolve with the increasing threats that we have, and that includes our approach within FEMA.

And so my question for you is, if you could list some measures that would aid or assist in shifting FEMA's role in responding to more frequent natural disasters, what would some of those measures be? Is it more funding for staff? Is it kind of increasing into or growing into disaster prevention? Streamline response measures during disaster relief time? Internal reorganizations? You know,

from your bird's eye view, what are some of the things that we need to know on the congressional side, whether it's the potential for expanding authorizations, et cetera, that you see is going to be necessary in the coming years and decades?

Ms. CRISWELL. It's a great question. And I think there's two things that I would talk about right now. And, one, we used to see a very cyclical disaster response cycle where we would reset in the wintertime and get ready for the next disaster season, and we don't see that any longer. Our team has been working hard, and now they are working year-round, to support the different types of weather events that we are seeing. And that's just going to continue. And so we are taking a hard look at how do we now create a year-round disaster work force that can keep up with the demand of the disasters that we are seeing.

But I think the only way that in the long term we are going to continue to be able to keep up with this is reducing the impact so we don't have to respond as much. And the way we do that is through mitigation. And so we need to continue to educate communities about the importance of reducing the impacts, putting in communitywide mitigation projects in order to protect their citizens.

Ms. OCASIO-CORTEZ. Thank you very much.

Chairwoman MALONEY. The gentlelady yields back.

The gentlewoman from New Mexico, Ms. Herrell, is recognized for five minutes.

Ms. Herrell.

Ms. HERRELL. Thank you, Madam Chair. And I really appreciate this hearing.

I just want to kind of piggyback on something that my colleague, Congressman Norman, said regarding the border, just because it is such an important part of this entire process. But we know that there is a crisis at the border. And we also—it is worth noting that 458,000 people came into our Nation illegally in the year 2020. But yet, over 1.5 million have come in this year so far. So I don't think that this current administration inherited a crisis at the border; I think he created a crisis.

But with that being said, Administrator, I would like to know, are there policies or decisions that have been made by this administration that caused a crisis on the uptick in the crossings on the southern border, the illegal crossings?

Ms. CRISWELL. Congressman, FEMA's—or, Congresswoman, FEMA's role is to support the response to disasters. We do not get involved in policy regarding immigration. I would have to defer you to the Secretary.

Ms. HERRELL. OK. Thank you. And can you just quickly give a couple of examples of how FEMA was able to help provide HHS and others support to move the children, the unaccompanied minors, out of border protective custody?

Ms. CRISWELL. Yes, ma'am. Again, one of the things that FEMA does so well is helping to coordinate interagency efforts in large complicated structures. And we were able to put a process in place that helped them be successful in managing that mission. It's how we manage any of the events that we respond to, as far as helping with the process, helping with the flow, putting the organization in

place that can facilitate the decisionmaking and setting benchmarks to set standards and goals that we wanted to achieve. Through that we were able to reduce the amount of time that migrant children were in custody and the amount of time that they spent with HHS.

Ms. HERRELL. Great. Thank you. And then, just going back to some of the services, this is just more for clarity. And I know people don't think of flooding in New Mexico, but, actually, we have a large amount of rainfall in some of our areas throughout the district. And this is just for clarifying. Some communities and counties believe that they cannot ask or apply for FEMA grants unless the state declares that specific area an emergency. Is that correct or are there programs where counties and communities can go directly to FEMA?

Ms. CRISWELL. Congresswoman, I'd have to understand more of the specifics. They can't apply for public assistance grants unless there's a state-declared disaster. But our Hazard Mitigation Grant Program, like the BRIC program and the Flood Mitigation Assistance program, does not require a state-disaster declaration. And then there's also our Preparedness Grant program.

So I'd have to know specifically which types of grants that they're talking about. I'd be happy to have my team followup with you.

Ms. HERRELL. I would really appreciate that. Because we have a lot of very small communities that were hit very, very hard, and they don't have the income, they don't have the ability to do some of these repairs, but it's affecting everybody in those communities, but it's not big enough to be called a state disaster.

And I would welcome you to come to New Mexico to look at some of our rural communities that have been hit. You know, you just don't think of flooding in New Mexico, but it happens, and it is devastating for those that live in and around those areas. So I appreciate all of your hard work. And the invitation is open. So thank you very much. And if you could have your people reach out to our office, I would really like to maybe push some of this information out to the district that I represent.

Ms. CRISWELL. Absolutely, ma'am. Thank you for the offer.

Ms. HERRELL. Thank you. Madam Chair, I yield back.

Chairwoman MALONEY. The gentlelady yields back.

But I would like to respond to your earlier comments. Although we do not want to be distracted from today's topic of today's hearing, I do want to note that migration across the border did not start under President Biden. It started long before his Presidency and this Congress. And the cruel child separation policy of the Trump administration did nothing to address the root causes of the problem, but this is a very important hearing on FEMA and its response to Ida.

So I would now like to call on the gentlelady from Michigan, Ms. Tlaib, you are now recognized for five minutes. Thank you.

Ms. TLAIB. Thank you so much, Chairwoman. And thank you, Administrator, for being here. Really impressed in the years of service that you had within FEMA and, of course, as a firefighter for I think over two decades. Very impressive.

Thank you, Chairwoman, for holding this really critically important hearing.

I know when I talk to my residents, they are not talking to me about the broken immigration system when they are saying can you get the sewage out of my basement, or, you know, Rashida, literally there's a river in front of my home. So I want us to really focus on the fact that we haven't invested, I think, the critical amount of money, the kind of bold, meaningful investment that we need to really address the fact that we have a climate crisis in our country.

But, Administrator, I do want to talk to you about something really serious, and I hope that under your leadership changes can be made. As you noted in your testimony, flooding is the most common, costly natural disaster in the United States. I've seen it. My folks have been flooded, I think, four times just in the last two months. And your team on the ground here have been leading with compassion, and I can't express to you how much that means to me representing the third poorest congressional district in the country. These are folks that did not have any savings, anything to really address—again, they had no safety net to address the flooding in their homes and, of course, damage to their homes.

But you know that every five years FEMA is required to update their flood maps. Correct?

Ms. CRISWELL. Yes, ma'am.

Ms. TLAI. And it has to reflect, you know, whether properties are at risk for flood damage. And flood maps are a critical tool, as you know, to where major decisions are made about investment, where folks need flood insurance, where critical infrastructure is built, who gets evacuated during a flood emergency, as you know.

So, last year, I know FEMA officials testified during a hearing in the House Science Committee that FEMA's flood maps may give false impressions to some communities, that they have little to no flood risk. We're already seeing that with, you know, FEMA officials on the ground can tell you and attest to that, Administrator.

We know that new data released by an organization called First Street Foundation, which uses data to provide flooding risk levels for individual properties, shows that 8.7 million properties are at risk from a 100-year flood than what current FEMA maps show. And there have been, you know, other kinds of reports afterwards. But, you know, this is serious, and anything I can do to be a partner in this. But does FEMA plan to update its data and, you know, the method that they use to include forward-looking climate projections in its flood maps, such as heavy rainfall and sea level rises?

Ms. CRISWELL. Congresswoman, thank you for the question. And you represent my home state of where I grew up, in Michigan, in Manistee, Michigan. So it has a very soft place in my heart.

Flood maps are an incredible tool that we have and, again, designed primarily to support the inundation that we're seeing from coastal flooding or riverine flooding. They don't necessarily reflect the rain events that would cause some of the urban flooding that we see. But we work with the communities to help them update their community flood maps as they need to. And we would be happy to work with communities to help incorporate additional

data that they may have to better portray the risks that they may be experiencing.

Ms. TLAI. You know, and I appreciate that, Administrator, but I think we need to go farther in providing the capacity. Many of them are not—you know, don't have the know-all in regards to that. I don't know if it's been a priority in pushing the state to maybe provide that capacity. But we are, you know, at a point, I think, in our country that we need to start thinking about how we do some of the, I think, preventive measures in place to making sure people have that safety net, that they are covered in regards to flood insurance, in regards to infrastructure implementation.

And I say this sincerely. I—you know, my local communities, we're not prepared for this flooding. And I don't know how I can go back to them now and say, hey, I need you all to figure out, you know, what are the tools, what are necessary in regards to figuring that out. If that makes any sense at all. Look, I'm a social worker at heart, and I'm a person that understands, you know, some of my local communities—my larger cities may have more capacity, but my smaller communities, the 11 that I have that were impacted directly by flooding, really don't have that capacity. And I really think FEMA, we need to step up and we need to look at these foundations and reports that are coming out, and say, let's put some of that data point in there in regard to sea levels, in regard to where we've seen flooding. And I think we have a really important responsible role in not saying let the locals do it. And I know I hear that a lot and it is something that I'm learning.

But, you know, Administrator, please, I'm asking you, let's change that culture and let's not, you know, kind of wash our hands in regards to the flood mapping. I think we have a role here and there is enough information out there that says we can do more.

Ms. CRISWELL. Yes. I think what you speak of really amplifies what I've been saying, is this is the crisis of our generation. And we all have a shared responsibility to make sure that we are better understanding what the risks are that we're going to face in the future. I mean, so, yes, we have a lot of work to do, and FEMA has a lot of work as well, to support our communities in helping to understand what those risks are.

Chairwoman MALONEY. The gentlelady yields back.

The gentlewoman from Florida, Ms. Wasserman Schultz is now recognized for five minutes.

Ms. WASSERMAN SCHULTZ. Thank you, Madam Chair.

Administrator Criswell, it's good to see you. And I would really be remiss if I didn't start off by thanking you so much. You and your incredible team, you personally, Tom McCool, who could not have represented FEMA better, nor done more, you know, hands-on work than anyone could during the Surfside disaster in my congressional district. As you know, we're still dealing with that crisis. Families have been torn apart and are in crisis. And I appreciate the President's quick reaction, your team's help. But just would ask for an opportunity to talk with you, because there are some things that we continue to need to sort through. And I just have some questions, so if we can could followup afterwards, that would really be helpful.

Ms. CRISWELL. Absolutely ma'am.

Ms. WASSERMAN SCHULTZ. But, primarily, thank you. Thank you so much on behalf of my community.

Shifting to Hurricane Ida, which made landfall in Louisiana, and that was a Category 4 hurricane, and then it quickly became, as we discussed this morning, one of the most devastating natural disasters in U.S. history. And being from the state of Florida, I'm obviously quite familiar with the experience of the impact of natural disasters and the aftermath.

But in this case, over the course of 24 hours, Ida strengthened from a Category 1 to a Cat 4 storm. Winds increased to 150 miles per hour, leaving so many people, as we heard today, in Louisiana unable to safely evacuate. And that's a story that my constituents in Florida are all too familiar with.

As the storm moved across the southeast, up the mid-Atlantic, to the northeast, as we know its intense rainfall brought dangerous conditions to the communities in its path. I want to show on the screen a picture of the flooding in Louisiana and the flooding in New Jersey.

So my first question is really just, can you underscore why Hurricane Ida caught so many people off guard?

Ms. CRISWELL. Congresswoman, I'll start with the fact that it intensified so rapidly, as you stated, it went from just a tropical wave into a Category 4 hurricane in a very short amount of time. And this is what we're starting to see more often. And it's giving our state officials less time to be able to put their plans in place where they normally, you know, had several days to put those plans in place. And that timeframe is continuing to get shorter and shorter as these storms intensify more quickly.

Ms. WASSERMAN SCHULTZ. Yes. And it feels like that, that window of opportunity is shrinking so quickly. In New York, although the area was bracing for the storm, the city was unable to predict the severity of flooding that would hit. And FEMA does have an integrated public alert and warning system that works in connection with our local alert authorities to send out warnings and other alerts related to disasters.

As the storms came through, emergency alerts blared through cell phones and warned residents of dangerous flash floods, that they should head for higher ground and stay out of flood waters. One of those alerts said, and I quote: This is a extremely dangerous and life-threatening situation.

Do you believe that that system and other warning systems worked as intended for Ida? Are there steps that FEMA or local governments can take to improve the way information is shared about the risks of a pending disaster? Because this was the first time that New York had ever issued a flash flood emergency.

Ms. CRISWELL. Our IPAWS system is an excellent tool that really helps to warn individuals across the country for a variety of disasters. And it has worked successfully across the country. I think when you're in an area that you haven't had to use it before, it's hard to really understand what the significance might be. And so I think we all have a lot of work to do to continue to educate our communities, when we're doing our public preparedness campaigns,

about the importance of when you do get an alert like this, that you need to take it seriously.

But at the same time, we also have a lot of work to do to continue to educate our communities about what their risks might be so they know, when something happens, what are your unique risks to you where you live and what type of alerts should you be looking out for.

Ms. WASSERMAN SCHULTZ. And then just one last question, because there's so many long-term strategies that we need to take, but investing in climate resilience is definitely one of them. And as a senior member of the Appropriations Committee, I always use my position to push for greater funding for the Weather Service, the Hurricane Center programs like the National Mesonet.

How does FEMA work with NOAA and the National Weather Service to get the scientific data and forecasts and translate those into public warnings? And is there more that can be done to encourage residents of our most vulnerable communities to prepare for storms or other severe weather events?

Ms. CRISWELL. NOAA and the National Weather Service and the National Hurricane Center are such amazing partners of ours. And, you know, we have a morning daily operations call that they are part of to let us know what the current threats are. But we also work with them, and we are working really closely with NOAA right now as they are trying to identify what the future risks from climate change are going to be, to develop tools for local communities to better plan for what these impacts are going to be so that they can put the proper plans in place.

So we will continue to work closely with them to try to develop these types of products so we can get additional information into the hands of these communities.

Ms. WASSERMAN SCHULTZ. Thank you so much.

And, Madam Chair, I thank you for having this important hearing.

Chairwoman MALONEY. Thank you. The gentlelady yields back.

The gentleman from Georgia, Mr. Johnson, is now recognized for five minutes.

Mr. Johnson?

Mr. JOHNSON. Thank you, Madam Chair, for holding this hearing.

And it's well documented that natural disasters exacerbate inequality. Communities of color are disproportionately vulnerable to the harmful effects of flooding, wildfires, and tornados. Moreover, people of color are more likely to die from the negative effects of climate change.

When Hurricane Ida struck New Orleans, predictably, Black Americans and non-White communities suffered the brunt of the devastation. Hurricane Ida is yet one more example in a long history of poor marginalized communities getting disproportionately hurt by natural disaster. That's why when it comes time to rebuild in the wake of a natural disaster, the Federal Government should prioritize rather than deprecate historically marginalized neighborhoods.

It's common for many Black families to hold title to what's known as heir property. When a property owner dies without a

will, their home and land is passed down over generations to their heirs and land title becomes cloudy. Because of an array of racist policies in the past, Black Americans particularly in the South were precluded from the legal system and unable to obtain deeds and titles to their land.

How is FEMA meeting the needs of historically oppressed communities who are unable to abide by existing guidelines which were designed to exclude them? And what changes have been made to ensure that those who can't show clear title to their homes can receive disaster assistance from FEMA?

Ms. CRISWELL. Congressman, you raise such an important question. And it's something that, when I came into office, I started to hear about, and I knew that we could do better. And so I challenged my team here to see how we could better provide assistance to survivors. And we made some significant changes going into hurricane season to better help with the issues that you raise about their rights.

And so what we have done is we have changed and expanded quite significantly the types of documentation that we will accept from individuals to prove homeownership or even to prove occupancy. That can range from paying your tax bill, to utility bills, a statement from your landlord in a mobile home community, a wide variety of types of documents that can be accepted now.

The other big change that we have done as well in part of my effort to try to bring services to survivors to bring our help to where the people are instead of making them come to us, in the past, if somebody didn't pass that verification through our online system or on the phone, we would immediately send them a denial letter. Now what we're doing is if they can't pass on that first step, if they haven't been able to identify the type of documentation, even with this expanded amount, we will still send a building inspector to them personally. And if they can see the type of documentation upon arrival, then they'll just check that off in the system.

And so that has—what we're seeing in Hurricane Ida has increased dramatically the amount of people that have not had to go through the laborious process of trying to appeal their determination that they did not own the property or they were not a resident or an occupant on the property.

This is just the beginning. We're going to continue to make changes for how we can equitably deliver our programs, meet people where they're at, and understand that we can't have a program and a process that's a one-size-fits-all approach.

Mr. JOHNSON. Thank you, Ms. Criswell.

Georgia has the sixth highest population of renters and ranks among the top 10 for states most at risk for a natural disaster. And renters applying for assistance through FEMA have to go through a very long process before they can get assistance. What's being done to reduce the wait period for renters who are displaced?

Ms. CRISWELL. I think, Congressman, some of the things that may have delayed their process is, again, being able to prove that they are occupants or renting a certain residence. Those are some of the changes that we made to our program. If there's anything else that's specific that you're aware of that's slowing down their

process, I'd be happy to have my team get with you to better understand the challenges your constituents are facing in Georgia.

Mr. JOHNSON. All right. Thank you so much for your testimony today and for your actions in streamlining the process so that more people can receive assistance.

And I yield back, Madam Chair.

Chairwoman MALONEY. The gentleman yields back.

And the gentleman from Texas, Mr. Cloud, is recognized for five minutes.

Mr. CLOUD. Thank you, Chair. And thank you, Administrator Criswell, for being here today.

I come from a district that was dramatically affected by Hurricane Harvey. And so we've spent the last four years working to help our communities recover from that. I know today's about Ida, but I think some of the lessons we've learned from FEMA or some of the questions we have certainly would be applicable to any disaster that we're dealing with. So wanted to thank you for appearing here today.

One of the issues I wanted to ask about was the definition of "resilience." One of the major issues Congress intended to address in the Disaster Recovery and Reform Act of 2018 was that under the law at the time, the public assistance program was designed to assist communities rebuilding and to rebuild back to—at the time, it was to the precondition of what it was. And what we found ourselves was kind of in a loop where we would rebuild to a standard that would not withstand potentially the next storm.

And so Congress directed that we begin to rebuild toward resiliency for future disasters. But there was supposed to be a rule for what resiliency met that was to be defined by April 5 of 2020, and final guidance for 90 days after that. To date, that has not been issued.

Could you let us know, in writing within the next 14 days or so, when we can expect that rule to be finalized so we have the critical definition of "resiliency"? I know some people are having their claims denied based on resiliency, but that term is still left undefined. And so could you commit to get us a timeline for that?

Ms. CRISWELL. Congressman, I'll have to get with my team. But, yes, I commit to getting you a timeline for what the status is on that.

Mr. CLOUD. OK. I really appreciate that. That would be a big help.

And one issue that has been, you know, probably an issue for decades it would seem, but for a long time has been just the staffing and the turnover. I know many of the people in our district, some are on there in the matter of four years on their twelfth program delivery manager. It's made dealing with these applications very, very difficult. For example, the Refugio ISD superintendent wrote us a letter saying: As you're aware, the rebuilding of the school facilities has been slow, tedious, and frustrating. Two Refugio ISD employees, the District's architect, and I have spent nearly four years daily navigating the FEMA process, and, to date, have received only \$382,488 of the between \$15 million and \$20 million in damages. With 12 program delivery managers cycling

through our case, this has been an—there has never been an opportunity to really make any ground.

And so, I've heard of similar cases. Oftentimes, we've had a recovery—or a team come and do a site visit at a particular site, seven different teams, for example, come up and show up.

Will there be—do you foresee any sort of solution, or what's FEMA doing to deal with the employee turnover or at least to deploy the employees we have for a longer term than—for a longer term in the field?

Ms. CRISWELL. Congressman, I appreciate your insights. You know, and part of it is, especially when we're talking about four years, there will be some change in staff as we go through the years. And these complicated projects that you're talking about do take a long time to get through the recovery process. But I understand the concern, as a previous local emergency manager, how frustrating it is when you have to start over in explaining your story and where you are at in the process. I will work with my team to figure out if there's—

Mr. CLOUD. Right.

Ms. CRISWELL [continuing]. A way to provide greater consistency for your folks down there as they're continuing their recovery process from Harvey.

Mr. CLOUD. Well, thank you. And do you know if there's been any sort of report on how—you know, it would seem to me that we're taking a much longer time processing these claims and that there's kind of a built-in waste, a built-in cost increase in recovery due to some of the staffing issues and how we're deploying them. And I would be very interested if FEMA could look into that and maybe provide a report to us on what we can do to streamline that. Not only will it provide better customer service, so to speak, but it would also, I think, help us be much more efficient with taxpayer dollars in administering this recovery program. So is that something that you all could work on?

Ms. CRISWELL. Yes, Congressman. I think anything we can do to improve the customer experience is worth our research, and so I would be happy to have my team look into that.

Mr. CLOUD. OK. Well, thank you.

Chairwoman MALONEY. The gentleman's time has expired. Thank you so much.

And now the gentleman from Maryland, Mr. Raskin, is now recognized for five minutes.

Mr. RASKIN. Thank you, Madam Chair. Can you hear me now?

Ms. CRISWELL. Yes, sir.

Mr. RASKIN. All right. So, Administrator Criswell, thank you very much for your intense focus on this civilizational emergency that we're in. It is clearly a code red for humanity. And as President Biden said in touring the damage of Hurricane Ida, the Nation and the world are at peril.

We are seeing an increasing frequency of natural disasters but also an increasing destructive velocity of the natural disasters that are coming. NOAA began tracking billion dollar extreme weather events in 1980. Since then, they have visited more than \$1.975 trillion in damages on the country. And here's the amazing thing to me: Between 1990 and 1999, the average number of billion dollar

extreme weather events was five per year. But in the last five years, between 2016 and 2020, as you can see on this chart, that number has jumped to 16 per year. So the number of extreme weather events has tripled just in the last two decades.

Now, you've made climate risk reduction one of your top priorities. What is FEMA actually doing now to measure our progress in efforts to reduce the risks posed by climate change?

Ms. CRISWELL. Congressman, that is such an important graph that you showed, and it demonstrates how we are now in the crisis of our generation, that the climate crisis is going to continue to get worse, and I think that we'll continue to see that number of billion dollar disasters only increase as we go further.

We are investing in mitigating, in reducing the impacts. The President has authorized close to \$5 billion this year to help communities reduce the impacts that they're seeing from climate change. And we have to continue on that path forward. It takes a long time for the mitigation projects to get completed. And so we have to continue to work with our communities to better understand their risks and ensure that we're getting this money in the hands of those people that need it the most.

Mr. RASKIN. Will you help me understand this: When we say "mitigation," what are we talking about exactly? Are we talking about the kind of things that my friend, Congressman Higgins, is talking about, which is the aid that comes after a disaster has hit, or are we talking about readiness, about getting ready in advance, knowing that, you know, there will be another hurricane coming to hit Lake Charles soon?

Ms. CRISWELL. It is a combination of both. Our Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities Grant program is pre-disaster mitigation funding, but our Hazard Mitigation Grant program is funding that's available after a disaster, but it can be used for any type of risk that they're facing. It doesn't have to be directly related to the incident that they had just experienced.

What we have to do is help communities understand the best way to make these communitywide investments to reduce these impacts from future threats.

Mr. RASKIN. I want to ask you a rather odd question, Administrator Criswell. I want to ask you about polarization and division in American society. I know that's not directly under your jurisdiction, but in some sense I think that FEMA can be the place where we bring America back together.

Do you agree with me that the risk in extreme weather events, both the new frequency of the events and the extreme velocity of these events should be bringing people together across geographic lines, sectional lines, political party, and ideology lines?

And related to that, extreme weather is obviously the problem being caused by climate change, but as my friend, Mr. Higgins, said, there is a problem of extreme bureaucracy that Americans have complained about from the beginning of our Republic and we want to make sure government is working for the people. But there's also a problem, isn't there, of extreme propaganda and extreme denialism around climate change? And can't we all gather together through the good work of FEMA, through hurricane and dis-

aster readiness, to bring the country together? Is there a way that this can be the source of unity for us?

Ms. CRISWELL. Congressman, I think that we all have a shared responsibility to help ensure that we are protecting our Nation from the risks from future events so our children, our grandchildren, and future generations will not have to go through what we're going through now.

Disasters don't discriminate where they're going to land. They're not red or blue. And we do have a shared responsibility to work together to make sure that we have the environment that we need to support our future generations.

Mr. RASKIN. Right. Well, I appreciate that very much. I thank you for your hard work. And, you know, there was an attempt to say that the disasters that have been inherited by the Biden administration were caused by the Biden administration. I was glad my friend, Mr. Connolly from Virginia, corrected that. I will resist the opportunity to say that the entire last Presidency was a disaster and hope that the situation we're in will bring all of us together as a country.

I yield back, Madam Chair.

Chairwoman MALONEY. The gentleman's time has expired.

The gentleman from Wisconsin, Mr. Grothman, is recognized for five minutes.

Mr. Grothman, you're recognized.

Mr. GROTHMAN. Yes. Here I am. Can you hear me?

Chairwoman MALONEY. You're here. OK, good.

Mr. GROTHMAN. OK. Couple of general questions. You know, one of the criticisms always is the degree to which are we rebuilding or, you know, rebuilding the same areas again and again and again. I want your general opinion, do we have a problem here in that, you know, some—there's some building going on in areas that you could anticipate are going to have a problem again in the next 10 years?

Ms. CRISWELL. Congressman, we need to take a concerted effort at making sure we know where the risks are. And people understand, if they choose to build in a place, they understand what the risks are going to be and what the potential impacts might be. We need to help provide that information and educate our population on what those risks are.

Mr. GROTHMAN. Well, I think the thing I'm looking for is, is it reflected in premiums? Are we doing something to make sure that people are in particularly precarious areas, that we are not rebuilding there? Are you doing anything along those lines?

Ms. CRISWELL. What I can say is that our new Risk Rating 2.0, certainly the risk of where people build is reflected in their insurance premium in a way that it hasn't been before. And so those that are in greater risk areas will have a higher premium.

Mr. GROTHMAN. On the other side, in my district, I'm dating back to my days as a lawyer, we always felt that there were people who did have very high premiums, and just subjectively looking at it, there's no way anything was going to happen there in 100 years. But for whatever reason, lack of common sense or whatever, they were considered to be in the flood plain.

Are you doing anything in which some people are peeling off from that or not?

Ms. CRISWELL. I don't know that I completely understand your question.

Mr. GROTHMAN. OK. As I understand it, they require flood insurance if you're in a flood plain. Correct?

Ms. CRISWELL. Correct.

Mr. GROTHMAN. And there are areas designated flood plain that, you know, you could talk to somebody, they go back to their grandmother, who never remembers any floods in that area or close to floods. Nevertheless, somebody, when they drew the line said this is a flood plain. So they're stuck paying for this insurance on something that everybody in the area believes will never happen in a million years.

Have you guys, over time, taken into that account and tried to remove people from flood plain who perhaps were erroneously put in it over a period of time?

Ms. CRISWELL. Congressman, again, I think that goes to the new release of our Risk Rating 2.0, where it takes an individual homeowner's particular risk into effect. And so if somebody does not have a risk that they were paying for before, then their rates would go down.

Mr. GROTHMAN. I understand. I mean, the question is, have you peeled anybody out of flood plain that in the past was considered flood plain?

Ms. CRISWELL. I'd have to get back to you on the specifics. But as our flood maps are updated, those types of data are incorporated into the risk premiums.

Mr. GROTHMAN. I would like for you to get back to me.

Now, I think Representative Higgins has a very interesting question, a spellbinding question.

Representative Higgins, I yield my time.

Mr. HIGGINS. I thank the gentleman for yielding.

Ma'am, regarding Risk Rating 2.0, respectfully, members of the Louisiana delegation have written several letters to your agency. And this may predate your service, and I respect that, but would like some answers on this. The quote from a FEMA document stated that 97 percent of current policyholders' premiums will either decrease or increase by about \$20 a month under Risk Rating 2.0.

We know this is not true. We're seeing example after example after example of extreme variances in policy expense; sometimes going from maybe \$500 a year to \$2,000, \$3,000, \$4,000, \$5,000, \$7,000 a year. There's some incredible disparities between reality of the implementation of Risk Rating 2.0 and what was expected and projected and communicated by FEMA as that legislation was passed.

So I ask, can you respond to that, please, to this committee, like, formally? And can we get a commitment from you today that FEMA will consider delaying the implementation of Risk Rating 2.0 until we get solid answers about the realities of what it really means to American citizens that carry National Flood Insurance Program policies.

Ms. CRISWELL. Congressman——

Chairwoman MALONEY. Time has expired. The gentleman's time has expired.

You may answer his question.

Mr. HIGGINS. Thank you, Madam Chair.

Ms. CRISWELL. Congressman, we can certainly get back to you with any of the specific information, but Risk Rating 2.0 has been implemented, and already individuals are seeing decreases in their insurance rates, which is the first time that this program has taken equity into account to make sure people are paying for the risk that they have.

Chairwoman MALONEY. The gentleman's time has expired. He yields back.

The gentlewoman from Missouri, Ms. Bush, is now recognized for five minutes.

Ms. Bush.

Ms. BUSH. I thank you, Madam Chair, for convening this important hearing today.

Hurricane Ida was yet another graphic example of how unprepared our Nation is for increasingly dangerous climate disasters driven by fossil fuels. For communities like mine that have already been hurting for decades, we do not have the room for these new challenges of flooding and heat waves and more. Like those that were destroyed or severely damaged by Ida, our community faces more and more climate risk every day.

Administrator Criswell, numerous FEMA disaster programs are not targeted to those in greatest need. Poor program design combines with unequal access to resources to worsen every single climate disaster that hits this country. For example, when FEMA conducts damage assessments after storms, they are measured based on proper ownership. This focuses relief programs on wealthier parts of a community as opposed to the renters and unhoused neighbors most in need of support. Similarly, the National Flood Insurance Program only supports people who can afford to buy flood insurance; almost precisely the opposite of how this program should work.

Transforming this program would mean saving lives. FEMA's relief program that is available immediately after a disaster is out of reach for frontline communities. FEMA's National Advisory Council described their program as being, and I quote, more accessible to those with time, income, and access.

Thank you for being vocal about your commitment to improving equity in FEMA programs. I was very, very glad to see the recent change in FEMA policy that would allow Black families in the south who did not have a formal deed or a proof of homeownership to access disaster assistance.

But can you explain how this policy change will specifically help Black, Brown, and indigenous families?

Ms. CRISWELL. Yes, Congresswoman. It's so important that we don't overcomplicate the system that is already complicated and that we don't try to use, again, this one-size-fits-all approach, because everybody's situation is specific to them and unique to them. And it's so important for us to make sure that we understand that and that we put people first.

The changes that we have made so far, we're already seeing big improvements in the number people that are deemed eligible for our programs, meaning that they didn't have to go through that laborious process of trying to appeal what we would have normally denied. These are only the beginning of the changes.

We're continuing to look at our program. So the heir rights, the property ownership is just the start. We're going to continue to see where have we taken this cookie-cutter approach and need to adjust it so we can better understand the unique needs of specific communities as we deliver our services. And I'd be happy to work with your team on any suggestions you have in things that you've seen.

Ms. BUSH. Thank you. Well, it's an excellent policy change that we know will benefit many people. We need to expand it to St. Louis, my home, and across the country, as we develop further fundamental reforms to problematic FEMA programs.

What other examples of changes that FEMA has made or intends to make that will improve equity in disaster relief? Can you give us some examples?

Ms. CRISWELL. I think the other example that I would give is that we also change the cost threshold for determining whether or not you would be eligible for direct housing. We used to have a fixed dollar amount for that threshold which left many homeowners that had a smaller amount of damage ineligible for our program. And so now we've changed that to a cost per square foot, which is really starting to effect our lower-income populations and so they become eligible for our direct housing program. Again, just one small example of how we've taken this cookie-cutter approach that we've been in the past and made it unique and specific to the individuals' needs.

Ms. BUSH. Thank you. Thank you.

The Biden administration also launched an important initiative by selecting two of FEMA's predisaster programs to be piloted under the Justice40 program. Justice40, you know, is the whole-of-government effort to ensure that Federal agencies work with the states and local communities to deliver that minimum of 40 percent of the overall benefits to frontline communities. The stakeholder engagement plan and plans have maximized benefits among those that are supposed to be developed already. So how will engagement with impacted disadvantaged communities inform your assessment?

Ms. CRISWELL. We are very excited to be part of the Justice40 initiative. And it's part of our BRIC program and our Flood Mitigation Assistance program that we are incorporating that into.

We have adjusted our scoring criteria to give greater points to underserved communities. And we're working with our state partners and through our Technical Assistance Program to get the message out there and reach out to our stakeholders so they understand the importance of having more individuals that are part of these communities apply for this type of assistance. We're looking forward to seeing where we can include this in additional program in the future, but very much looking forward to seeing how the results of this round of our BRIC funding and FMA funding go.

Ms. BUSH. Wonderful.

Chairwoman MALONEY. The gentlelady's time has expired, regretfully.

Ms. BUSH. Thank you.

Chairwoman MALONEY. She yields back.

The gentleman from Vermont, Mr. Welch, you're now recognized for five minutes.

Mr. WELCH. Thank you very much.

And welcome, Administrator Criswell. Thank you. You have one of the most important jobs. And we've benefited here in Vermont during tropical storm Irene with the extraordinary work that FEMA did. So we're grateful.

Actually, what Jamie Raskin said too is something I think all of us feel, at the time we need them, FEMA shows up. It is something that can unify us; obviously a good thing.

The topic I want to discuss is the grid. It's not directly under your control, obviously, but the breakdown in the grid and the challenges to the grid and the necessity for upgrading the grid. I want to ask about what the impact would be with respect to the scope and scale of what you have to contend with after a big storm, an event like Ida.

So maybe you can start by describing what the impact was on families and communities after Ida because of the long-term shutdown of the grid and how that impacted them and how it made the challenge you and your folks at FEMA had to contend with.

Ms. CRISWELL. Yes. Congressman, the power grid is so important to keep the communities moving, and the sooner we can get the power turned back on, the sooner their recovery begins. And so what we see is that, as it continues to delay getting the power turned back on, these communities have such an increased amount of time for their recovery.

What we saw during Hurricane Ida was hospitals having to be evacuated, communities having to be evacuated, and that all puts a toll on their families and on their communities. And so we need to be able to, you know, work with our private sector partners to help them get back online quicker, if we can.

But it's also an example of how our infrastructure in many places is so outdated. And we have to invest in improving our infrastructure so it can withstand this increasing number of severe weather events that we're going to continue to see.

Mr. WELCH. So this power outage situation we faced in Ida, how long did that last in some communities?

Ms. CRISWELL. I think that there's some communities, some smaller communities, that are still without power in southern Louisiana, but many parts of the state, they were without power for several weeks.

Mr. WELCH. So just on a practical level, if a family can't go back to its house, they can't stay in the house once the storm subsides, that's an added burden for the resources of FEMA to just help those folks have shelter and food and warmth or cooling, whichever the case may be?

Ms. CRISWELL. I wouldn't state that it's a burden for FEMA. That's the type of support that we provide the communities to help them during their recovery process. It's certainly a burden on the

family that's been impacted. But we do have the resources and the tools necessary to provide that temporary lodging to assist them.

Mr. WELCH. Yes. And you were good to correct me on the use of the word "burden" with FEMA, because whatever the need is, that's your job, and I get that. But it does mean that the needs that that family has and that community has are greater, because they can't get back into their house and get things put back together, correct?

Ms. CRISWELL. Absolutely. And it just delays their overall recovery process, making it that much longer for them.

Mr. WELCH. You know, let me ask you about that. Because I think great resilience and modernization is essential, but, you know, when we had Hurricane Irene, the families were able to get back in, even though the house was a mess, there was mud there, they had to start digging it out. My observation was that there was a lot of hope that they had that they're on the road to getting back to normal. Whereas, if somebody's out of their home for, not two days, but two weeks or two months, then that hope begins to fade.

Tell me whether that's a fair assessment, in your experience.

Ms. CRISWELL. Sir, I would think that that is a fair assessment. You know, people want to be able to start recovering quickly. And when they are prevented from doing that, it causes additional despair for those families.

Mr. WELCH. OK. I thank you very much for your good work.

And I yield back.

Chairwoman MALONEY. The gentleman from Maryland, Mr. Sarbanes, is now recognized.

Mr. Sarbanes.

Mr. SARBANES. Thanks very much, Madam Chair. Can you hear me OK?

Ms. CRISWELL. Yes.

Mr. SARBANES. Yes.

Thank you, Administrator Criswell. I really appreciate the testimony, as I know everybody does, today. And thank you for your good and important work.

As you know, Hurricane Ida, obviously, it did huge damage in many parts of the country, but that included Maryland as well. On September 1, it came through the state of Maryland and damaged hundreds of homes and businesses. Unfortunately, it even claimed the life of a resident of Rockville, Melkin Cedillo.

I'm very grateful to the President and to you for granting the Maryland delegation's request to FEMA for Federal disaster assistance through the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program, which you spent a lot of time today talking about. That was granted on September 13. And last week, I joined the Maryland delegation in urging the President to approve the state of Maryland's request for Presidential disaster declaration for individual assistance to Anne Arundel County, which I represent in Congress, and to Cecil County, which were hit by severe flooding and a tornado, in fact, and Hazard Mitigation Grant Program assistance for all jurisdictions in Maryland, so that, you know, our residents, like many others in these various states, can get the assistance that they need. This is Federal assistance. It's very necessary. It's warranted. I hope it can be expeditiously reviewed and granted.

But I want to talk about the grant program a little bit, because as I understand it, FEMA provides for up to 75 percent, it's a cost share situation, so the Federal Government provides 75 percent of eligible project costs, and then states and communities cover the remaining share.

Do you know—has there been discussion, do you know what the capacity is—I mean, obviously, there's a budget dimension to it, but can you give us some insight into the potential for FEMA to increase the Federal cost share to pick up more of the tab for the HMGP program, which would make it more likely that states and localities who have budget crunches could respond to current disasters and better prepare for future ones?

Obviously, this may not be critical in every instance, but there's going to be situations where communities are going to be either reluctant or incapable of accessing the program's benefits because of the cost share obligation. And I wondered if you could speak to any kind of thinking or review on that front.

Ms. CRISWELL. Thank you for raising that question.

The HMGP program is such an amazing tool to help communities again fight against the risks that we are seeing and prevent future damages from the severe weather events. I have heard from many people across the country that they do have a struggle meeting the cost share requirement.

That cost share requirement is set forth in the Stafford Act, and so, that's not something that we can change. However, I think that there's work that we can do to figure out how we can help communities partner and try to find other funding sources that, perhaps, could be available to help them with that. And, you know, I'm going to be meeting with state directors to have this same conversation on how do we help communities take advantage of this critical resource so they can start to invest in their future risk.

Mr. SARBANES. I appreciate that. I mean, any recommendations? I mean, there may have to be statutory changes there to make it work better, but any recommendation that you can offer us based on the data that you're gathering up from across the country that may show an uneven opportunity to take advantage of the Hazard Mitigation Program I think would be very, very helpful.

And, again, I just want to thank the President for committing an historic amount to this Hazard Mitigation Fund, I think about \$3.5 billion, to reduce the effects of climate change, which we know is the most pressing factor in all of this.

You know, Annapolis, over the last 50 years, has experienced an incredible increase in nuisance flooding, which closes road, it overwhelms storm water drains, damages infrastructure. It's one of the most extreme impacts we see in the country. In fact, today, Annapolis expects over 50 flooding events every year now, up from an average of four annual flooding events just 50 years prior, so we are very focused on this.

Thank you for your good work. Thank you for recognizing that climate change is this huge impact that we have to both prepare for, and have resilience for, but, obviously, take proactive steps to curb that trajectory.

And with that, I yield back. Thank you.

Chairwoman MALONEY. The gentleman yields back.

And the gentlewoman from Massachusetts, Ms. Pressley, is recognized for five minutes.

Ms. PRESSLEY. Thank you, Madam Chair, for convening this important and timely hearing.

Certainly, natural disasters are disruptive and traumatic life events. To suddenly lose your home, your savings, family heirlooms, or even the lives of loved ones has devastating impacts on survivors' mental health. When this trauma is left unaddressed, survivors can develop drastic mental health consequences. In fact, experiencing a natural disaster by age five is associated with six percent—a 16 percent increase in mental health or substance use issues in adulthood. Again, experiencing a natural disaster by age five is associated with a 16 percent increase in mental health or substance use issues in adulthood. A large-scale study of earthquake survivors found that one in four had PTSD.

Fortunately, Administrator, FEMA already does have a program in place that assists territories and tribes after a disaster to address the immediate mental health impacts. Administrator Criswell, can you please tell us what the Crisis Counseling Program is, and how FEMA has worked with localities to help survivors in communities across the country?

Ms. CRISWELL. Thank you, Congresswoman.

Our mental health is so important, both for disaster survivors, as well as I stress it for my employees as well, and our Crisis Counseling Program is definitely a tool that is available to help disaster survivors manage the stress and cope with the losses that they've experienced from this disaster. It's a program that's available under the Individual Assistance Program when that is authorized for major disaster declaration, and executed by the state, a really important resource available to help individuals that have been impacted by a disaster.

Ms. PRESSLEY. Thank you.

And I thank you also for including your staff in that. You have to heal the healers as well.

This lifesaving program has been deployed nationwide in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, in Puerto Rico following Hurricanes Irma and Maria, and in New York, following September 11 terrorist attacks, to name a few. However, there are many people who survive disasters from terrorist attacks to mass violence and natural disasters that can't take advantage of this program.

Administrator Criswell, can you—as you know, there are two types of disaster declarations, major disasters and emergency declarations. Is the Crisis Counseling Program currently available following emergency declarations?

Ms. CRISWELL. Congresswoman, no, it is not currently available for emergency declarations.

Ms. PRESSLEY. OK. Well, I would like to, you know, implore you to make that change. I think it should be available under both declarations. Over the last decade alone, there have been more than 4,000 emergency declarations in the United States. And I represent Boston, and the Boston Marathon attack—you know, the ripple effect of that trauma, some of it was immediately manifesting, but some manifested later, and I think it's time to ensure survivors of

all disasters can access counseling and be connected to long-term mental health services.

I appreciate your agency has worked with me already on my proposal to expand the program to emergency declarations and that FEMA does not foresee any hindrances to providing crisis counseling to help more people.

We would love to followup with you beyond this hearing and would love to hear your response to that.

Ms. CRISWELL. Yes, ma'am. We would be happy to continue providing technical drafting assistance on making that change, again, so important that we're taking care of the mental health of those people that have been impacted by these traumatic events.

Ms. PRESSLEY. I did also want to ask you, because I always seek to engage those closest to the pain, Manya Chylinski, who's a survivor of the Boston Marathon bombing, she shared her story in May that she wishes the assistance provided under the Crisis Counseling Program had existed for her eight years ago. So it really is time, again, to ensure that survivors of all disasters can access counseling and be connected to long-term mental health services.

So look forward to being in touch with you about that.

In what little time I have remaining, if you could respond to, you know, what are the provisions and what are the plans for those that are disabled, those that are incarcerated, and those that are hospitalized when it comes to a major disaster or an emergency declaration. Are there any protocols in place, any plans?

Ms. CRISWELL. I don't know that I'm understanding specifically what you're asking, but our disaster response programs, when we respond to incidents, it's to help all people that have been impacted by those disaster. We do have an entire unit here that focuses on the planning and preparedness for individuals with disabilities, and we work closely with our state partners through our regional offices to understand the unique situations within each of the communities once a disaster has happened, like those that may have been incarcerated.

Ms. PRESSLEY. OK. All right. Well, we will followup on that as well.

Thank you so much.

Ms. CRISWELL. Thank you.

Chairwoman MALONEY. The gentlelady yields back.

And without objection, Mr. Troy Carter from Louisiana is authorized to participate in today's hearing. Mr. Carter's Louisiana was greatly impacted by Ida.

You are now recognized, Mr. Carter.

Mr. CARTER. Chairwoman Maloney, thank you the opportunity to participate in this hearing. As a nonmember, I greatly appreciate the opportunity to present.

On August 29, Hurricane Ida made landfall as a Category 4 hurricane with sustained winds of 150 miles per hour. Coastal Louisiana experienced 16-foot storm surges and significant flash flooding 16 years to the day, 16 years to the day of Hurricane Katrina. Of course, the Federal Government made substantial investments in shoring up our levee system, and it made a big difference in this hurricane, and we are hopeful that going forward under Build Back Better and other resources will do the same, like burying our grid

to make sure people never have to suffer weeks of being without power. It's very difficult in the sweltering months of August to be without power, for senior citizens, for people with disabilities, for our young people. It adds insult to injury.

And so we are hopeful as we build back better, we continue to build upon mistakes of the past. We know hurricanes come every year. We don't know the name yet. We may not know the intensity. But we know with climate change, warmer waters bring stronger storms, and we should endeavor to do better than we did from previous years as we did after Katrina.

Administrator Criswell, I want to thank you, President Biden, Senior Advisor Richmond for coming to my district, for coming to Louisiana, walking the streets of the community and seeing firsthand. I cannot tell you how much that meant to the people of Louisiana to have you on the ground to see firsthand the level of devastation.

Hurricane Ida caused major damage in my district and communities across Louisiana, devastating homes, knocking out the electric grid, and leaving trails of damage along the Gulf Coast.

There are two points I would like to get across quickly before my time elapses. The storm showed the value of Federal investments in protecting communities, areas like New Orleans and the river parishes. Storms and flood protection systems stayed dry after the investments after Katrina. We know now we have to do better going forward to make sure that these communities are weather-proofed for the future.

Having lived through my fair share of storms, I've seen recoveries that work and recoveries that don't. The biggest factor in recovery is how fast we get money back into the pockets and start people getting back to some semblance of normalcy with their lives. We need Federal recovery process that recognizes this. Far too many of our programs takes months to kick in.

So turning to my question, as a part of the FEMA recovery, you instituted several policies and granted waivers for people that mischecked the box, and as a result, many people were denied, I should say, for mischecking the box. What can we do to create an appeal process for a person that may have made an innocent mistake or accident in their filing are not summarily rejected?

Ms. CRISWELL. Congressman, the program that we implemented that you're talking about is our Critical Needs Assistance program, and it's an amazing tool that helps us get money into the hands of survivors quickly, and we were able to get money out into the hands of survivors faster than we have in any other disaster. And we did hear that some individuals were having difficulties with how they answered the questions, and so we did go back and take a look at what we were using as criteria to approve those for Critical Needs Assistance, and we were able to give funding to an additional 120,000 families. We are now taking a look at our systems to see if there's anything else we can do to improve that moving forward, as we are always trying to improve the delivery of our services to help give money to those that are eligible for it.

Mr. CARTER. And I want to take time to thank you, too, because you and your people have been incredible. We've challenged you in every possible way. We've pushed the envelope to try to make

things more seamless for people, and we've been on the 1-yard line of FEMA to make sure they do that. And I want to thank you as well as your people on the ground for doing a great job in that regard.

Real quickly, blue roofs, the Blue Roof Program, while it's very effective, can you share with me ways or things that you are putting in place to advance or move them more quickly? As you know, we continue to have rain, and the ability to mitigate the existing damages would be very helpful if we could do it faster.

Chairwoman MALONEY. OK. The gentleman's time has expired, but you may answer his question.

Mr. CARTER. Thank you, Madam Chair.

Ms. CRISWELL. Yes, Congressman. The Blue Roof Program is a partnership with FEMA and the Army Corps of Engineers, and it's a great program to provide some temporary repairs to homes, as you know. I did speak with Lieutenant General Spellman directly to talk about the status of the program, and he has assured me that he's made some improvements into how they're executing their mission. And I think from the numbers that I've seen, they have already significantly increased the number of blue roofs that they have installed.

But I'll tell you that that's never fast enough, and I'm pushing our people, as well as the Army Corps, to continue to find ways to get those on the homes as quickly as possible so we can get people back into their homes sooner.

Mr. CARTER. Thank you.

Chairwoman MALONEY. Thank you.

I now recognize Mr. Higgins for a closing statement.

Mr. Higgins?

Mr. HIGGINS. Thank you, Madam Chair.

Administrator Criswell, thank you for being here today. We have more work to do. My office will be delivering a letter to you and your senior staff by the close of business today documenting specific urgent requests to FEMA on behalf of my constituency who has been suffering for over a year from Hurricanes Laura and Delta. I would like your personal commitment, ma'am, that you will receive our letter and be involved. You have been very gracious today and professional, and I thank you for that. So I'm going to lean on you for a commitment to personal involvement in the letter that we deliver today.

And, finally, regarding rural areas and small towns, I beg of you, madam, to let's make sure that our small towns, rural areas, poor communities get adequate attention and compassionate response, that they don't get left behind. Can I get your commitment on receiving our letter documenting specific requests, urgent requests? And can I get a commitment that our rural areas and poor communities don't get overlooked and left behind?

Ms. CRISWELL. Congressman Higgins, you have my commitment to be personally involved in that response to your letter. And I would like to thank you and Congressman Carter for your leadership in supporting the people that have been impacted by these recent events in Louisiana.

Mr. HIGGINS. Thank you, ma'am.

And to my colleague, Representative Carter, he's been an amazing complement to the Louisiana delegation. I commend him for the work that he does and continues to do. He had big shoes to fill with our friend and colleague, Congressman Richmond, who is now in the White House as a senior advisor. We are Louisiana strong in Congress and in the White House, so we are joined together.

Madam Chair, thank you for your gracious allowances of time during this hearing.

Thank you very much, madam. I yield.

Chairwoman MALONEY. The gentleman yields back.

And I now recognize myself.

In closing, I want to thank Administrator Criswell for testifying today, and thank you and all of the FEMA employees who are working tirelessly to respond to disasters around the country and really visiting the sites personally to oversee and help.

I want to emphasize that survivors of Hurricane Ida, as well as previous disasters, still need help. They need to know how to apply for financial assistance. They need clear information about what qualifies for assistance, and they need quick processing of their responses.

Administrator, I appreciate the commitment that you made today to work with all communities to update their flood maps so that they can be more accurate with community input.

I also think it's important to emphasize your testimony that communities can apply for FEMA grant money to invest in mitigation even when they are in an area that has not been declared a disaster.

As we heard from you today, Administrator, we need to invest in climate and resilient infrastructure, ensuring that we are investing in frontline communities who are disproportionately impacted by severe weather.

I urge all of my colleagues to support the Federal Agency Climate Prep Act, the bill I introduced today that would ensure that the Federal Government has a comprehensive plan to tackle climate change, coordinated by the White House, and in partnership with local communities.

I also call on my colleagues to support the Build Back Better Act, which would make critical investments to upgrade our infrastructure so that we can be better prepared for future disasters. These investments are critical so that states and local governments are not left dealing with the immense cost of recovering from disasters on their own.

In closing, I want to thank all of our panelists for their remarks, and I want to commend my colleagues for participating.

With that and without objection, all members have five legislative days within which to submit materials and to submit additional written questions for the witness to the chair which will be forwarded to her for her response. I ask our witness to please respond as promptly as you're able.

This hearing is adjourned. Thank you so much to everyone who participated. We are adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 1:16 p.m., the committee was adjourned.]