

119TH CONGRESS
1ST SESSION

H. R. 5503

To require the Federal Emergency Management Agency to establish a Territorial Disaster Recovery Program to continuously identify, monitor, and address factors and capability gaps that hinder the execution and completion of recovery activities relating to major disasters by eligible entities located in the territories of the United States.

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SEPTEMBER 18, 2025

Ms. VELÁZQUEZ introduced the following bill; which was referred to the
Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure

A BILL

To require the Federal Emergency Management Agency to establish a Territorial Disaster Recovery Program to continuously identify, monitor, and address factors and capability gaps that hinder the execution and completion of recovery activities relating to major disasters by eligible entities located in the territories of the United States.

1 *Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representa-*
2 *tives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,*

3 **SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.**

4 This Act may be cited as the “Strengthening Capac-
5 ity for Disaster Resilient Territories Act”.

1 **SEC. 2. FINDINGS AND PURPOSE.**

2 (a) FINDINGS.—Congress makes the following find-
3 ings:

4 (1) The United States territories are particu-
5 larly vulnerable to extreme weather events, which
6 have become more frequent and stronger in recent
7 years.

8 (2) Category–5 Hurricane María, which made
9 its landfall in Puerto Rico on September 20, 2017,
10 is considered to be the second deadliest storm re-
11 corded in United States history.

12 (3) Category–5 Hurricane Irma, which struck
13 the U.S. Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico on Sep-
14 tember 6, 2017, is considered to be the second-most
15 intense tropical cyclone worldwide in 2017.

16 (4) Typhoon Mawar, which struck Guam on
17 May 19, 2023, and the south of Rota, Northern
18 Mariana Islands on May 24, 2023, is considered to
19 be the strongest to hit Guam since 2002.

20 (5) Super Typhoon Yutu, which struck the
21 Northern Mariana Islands on October 24, 2018, is
22 considered to be the strongest typhoon recorded to
23 impact the Mariana Islands.

24 (6) Hurricane Fiona made its landfall as a Cat-
25 egory–1 Hurricane in Puerto Rico on September 18,

1 2022, causing severe flooding and compounding the
2 damage left by Hurricanes Irma and María.

3 (7) A major disaster declaration was issued for
4 the territory of American Samoa on September 15,
5 2022, due to high surf, high winds, and flooding.

6 (8) Rising sea levels, caused by ocean warming,
7 contribute to the increased frequency and intensity
8 of hurricanes, and the fragile condition of coastal
9 environments in the United States territories. This
10 translates to disrupted economic activity, such as
11 tourism, agriculture and fishing, damaged dwellings,
12 and limited drinking water supplies.

13 (9) The Federal Emergency Management Agen-
14 cy (hereinafter referred to as “FEMA”) has obli-
15 gated significant amounts of funding to address
16 multiple natural disasters in the United States terri-
17 tories.

18 (10) As of September 2025, FEMA had obli-
19 gated \$10,382,528,245 under the Public Assistance
20 and Hazard Mitigation programs to address dam-
21 ages caused by Hurricane María in Puerto Rico. In
22 addition, as of September 2025, FEMA had obli-
23 gated \$2,497,729,050 under the Public Assistance
24 and Hazard Mitigation programs to address dam-
25 ages caused by Hurricane Fiona in Puerto Rico.

1 (11) As of August 2022, FEMA had obligated
2 \$4,200,000,000 under the Public Assistance pro-
3 gram and \$138,200,000 under the Hazard Mitiga-
4 tion program to address damages caused by Hurri-
5 canes Irma and María in the Virgin Islands.

6 (12) After the passage of Typhoon Mangkhut
7 and Super Typhoon Yutu in Guam and the North-
8 ern Mariana Islands, FEMA obligated a total of
9 \$677,200,000 between 2018 and 2020 to aid re-
10 sponse and recovery efforts related to both disasters.

11 (13) The United States territories have similar
12 vulnerabilities that result in long and difficult recov-
13 ery processes.

14 (14) The economies of the United States terri-
15 tories depend heavily on tourism to create revenue.
16 Such dependency undermines disaster resiliency,
17 given the industry’s susceptibility to external shocks,
18 such as atmospheric conditions, financial crises, and
19 global pandemics. Any of this phenomenon can re-
20 duce the number of visitors and trigger the closure
21 of businesses and lay-offs.

22 (15) The United States territories struggle with
23 high levels of public debt, which impact their ability
24 to provide cash advances to initiate disaster recovery
25 projects. Notably—

1 (A) Puerto Rico is in the midst of debt re-
2 structuring proceedings that, as of 2025, have
3 reduced Puerto Rico's public debt from over
4 \$70,000,000,000 to \$31,000,000,000 and pen-
5 sion liabilities from \$55,000,000,000 to
6 \$7,000,000,000;

7 (B) as of September 2021, Virgin Islands'
8 public debt stood at \$2,200,000,000, rep-
9 resenting 50 percent of its gross domestic prod-
10 uct; and

11 (C) as of September 2023, Guam's public
12 debt stood at \$2,500,000, representing 38 per-
13 cent of its gross domestic product.

14 (16) The physical infrastructure of the United
15 States territories, including electricity grids and
16 water plants, is outdated, and has lacked appro-
17 priate maintenance and hardening.

18 (17) The United States territories face housing
19 affordability and availability challenges that impact
20 their ability to absorb the influx of the recovery
21 workforce after a disaster occurs.

22 (18) The United States territories are situated
23 in remote locations, which results in higher import
24 costs, significant delays in the shipping and trans-
25 portation of construction materials necessary to

1 carry out recovery projects, and barriers for staff
2 seeking to travel to the continental United States to
3 receive recovery training.

4 (19) The United States territories have limited
5 specialized staff to adequately navigate and manage
6 recovery programs, including developing projects for
7 obligation, using Public Assistance to cover adminis-
8 trative and managerial costs, and procuring goods
9 and services according to Federal standards.

10 (20) The United States territories hurdle to
11 find and procure specialized personnel to advance re-
12 covery efforts, such as engineers and construction
13 contractors, given the high demand for these profes-
14 sionals by public agencies and large corporations in
15 the aftermath of disasters.

16 (21) The United States territories struggle with
17 dangerous demographic patterns that exacerbate so-
18 cial, financial, and economic fragilities. From 2010
19 to 2020, the populations of the territories shrunk,
20 and at a faster pace than any other continental
21 state. In such period, Puerto Rico's population was
22 reduced by 11.8 percent, U.S. Virgin Islands' popu-
23 lation by 18.1 percent, Northern Mariana Islands'
24 population by 12.2 percent, American Samoa's popu-
25 lation by 10.5 percent, and Guam's population by

1 3.5 percent. Additionally, the islands are experi-
2 encing lower birthrates and higher death rates.

3 (22) The postal addresses used in the United
4 States territories have not been recognized and reg-
5 istered by the United States Postal Service, which
6 can result in additional obstacles for recovery, pri-
7 marily for individuals and households seeking to ob-
8 tain FEMA assistance.

9 (23) The United States territories have endured
10 consecutive major disasters, which has made it more
11 difficult for FEMA to correctly assess recent and
12 older damages, and therefore obligate funding for
13 Public Assistance projects.

14 (24) The United States territories encompass a
15 variety of languages, political sensitivities, and cul-
16 tural differences that Federal authorities like FEMA
17 have not traditionally considered, thereby impacting
18 the territories' full and equal participation in Fed-
19 eral disaster recovery programs.

20 (b) STATEMENT OF PURPOSE.—It is the purpose of
21 this Act to establish a program within FEMA to continu-
22 ously identify, monitor, and address factors and capability
23 gaps that hinder the execution and completion of recovery
24 activities by eligible entities located in the territories of
25 the United States under sections 403, 404, 406, 407, and

1 502 of the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emer-
2 gency Assistance Act (42 U.S.C. 5121 et seq.).

3 **SEC. 3. DEFINITIONS.**

4 In this Act:

5 (1) ADMINISTRATOR.—The term “Adminis-
6 trator” means the Administrator of the Federal
7 Emergency Management Agency.

8 (2) COMMUNITY.—The term “community”
9 means a network of individuals and families, busi-
10 nesses, governmental and nongovernmental organiza-
11 tions, and other civic organizations that reside or op-
12 erate within a shared geographical boundary and
13 may be represented by a common political leadership
14 at a regional, county, municipal, or neighborhood
15 level.

16 (3) ELIGIBLE ENTITY.—The term “eligible enti-
17 ty” means an entity eligible for a grant under sec-
18 tion 403, 404, 406, 407, or 502 of the Robert T.
19 Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance
20 Act (5121 U.S.C. et seq.).

21 (4) RECOVERY.—The term “recovery” means
22 the capabilities and actions necessary to recover ef-
23 fectively from a major disaster declared under the
24 Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency
25 Assistance Act (42 U.S.C. 5121 et seq.), including—

- 1 (A) rebuilding infrastructure systems;
- 2 (B) providing adequate interim and long-
- 3 term housing for individuals impacted by such
- 4 incident;
- 5 (C) restoring health, social, and commu-
- 6 nity services;
- 7 (D) promoting economic development; and
- 8 (E) restoring natural and cultural re-
- 9 sources.

10 (5) TERRITORY OF THE UNITED STATES.—The
11 term “territory of the United States” means Amer-
12 ican Samoa, the Commonwealth of the Northern
13 Mariana Islands, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico,
14 Guam, the United States Virgin Islands, and any
15 other territory or possession of the United States.

16 **SEC. 4. TERRITORIAL DISASTER RECOVERY PROGRAM.**

17 (a) IN GENERAL.—Not later than 1 year after the
18 date of enactment of this Act, the Administrator shall es-
19 tablish a Territorial Disaster Recovery Program (in this
20 section referred to as the “Program”) to continuously
21 identify, monitor, and address factors and capability gaps
22 of local emergency managers, or other applicable emer-
23 gency response coordinators, and eligible entities located
24 in the territories of the United States in carrying out re-
25 covery activities relating to major disasters declared under

1 the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency As-
2 sistance Act (42 U.S.C. 5121 et seq.).

3 (b) DUTIES.—In carrying out the Program, the Ad-
4 ministrator shall—

5 (1) not later than 1 year after the date of en-
6 actment of this Act, and every 2 years thereafter,
7 identify and analyze gaps in identifying, applying
8 and receiving assistance, and carrying out recovery
9 activities described in subsection (a) that are specific
10 to eligible entities located in the territories of the
11 United States;

12 (2) provide technical assistance to the entities
13 described in paragraph (1) in applying for grants
14 under sections 403, 404, 406, 407, and 502 of such
15 Act that—

16 (A) is tailored to meet the needs of appli-
17 cants at each stage of the administration of
18 projects for which grants are made under such
19 sections; and

20 (B) takes into account the challenges of—

21 (i) applicants who are located in re-
22 mote or difficult-to-access areas;

23 (ii) applicants who are part of a mi-
24 nority cultural group;

1 (iii) applicants with limited English
2 language proficiency; and

3 (iv) applicants with slow internet
4 speeds or limited broadband access;

5 (3) design online and in-person training courses
6 that are specific to the entities described in para-
7 graph (1) and that address the capability gaps iden-
8 tified under this section;

9 (4) develop best practices regarding the admin-
10 istration of projects in the territories of the United
11 States for which grants are made under sections
12 403, 404, 406, 407, and 502 of such Act;

13 (5) develop feedback mechanisms for entities re-
14 ceiving technical assistance or training under this
15 section; and

16 (6) foster meaningful collaboration with local
17 experts, community leaders, and other members of
18 the community, that leads to the performance of ac-
19 tivities under this section that are locally informed
20 and relevant to local needs.

21 (c) REPORT TO CONGRESS.—

22 (1) IN GENERAL.—Not later than 2 years after
23 the date of enactment of this Act, and every 2 years
24 thereafter for the duration of the Program, the Ad-
25 ministrator shall submit to the Committee on Trans-

1 portation and Infrastructure and the Committee on
2 Homeland Security of the House of Representatives
3 and the Committee on Homeland Security and Gov-
4 ernmental Affairs of the Senate a report on—

5 (A) any capability gaps identified under
6 subsection (b)(1);

7 (B) the nature of any technical assistance
8 provided under the Program;

9 (C) any online or in-person training
10 courses developed, or planned to be developed
11 under the Program;

12 (D) any best practices identified under
13 subsection (b)(4); and

14 (E) an analysis of, responses to, and any
15 activities carried out as a result of feedback re-
16 ceived by applicants for assistance under the
17 Program and entities receiving such assistance.

18 (2) FINAL REPORT.—In the report required to
19 be submitted in the final year for which the Pro-
20 gram is authorized, the Administrator shall include
21 recommendations on—

22 (A) whether to continue the Program;

23 (B) if a continuation of the program is rec-
24 ommended, the suggested duration of such con-
25 tinuation; and

1 (C) the necessary funding to carry out the
2 Program.

3 (d) AUTHORIZATION OF APPROPRIATIONS.—There is
4 authorized to be appropriated to carry out this section
5 \$50,000,000 for each of fiscal years 2026 through 2030.

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