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# Why Private Charity and Local Communities Are More Effective at Disaster Relief Than Government

Brian Balfour

**R**ecovery from natural disasters like hurricanes Helene and Milton are painful, complex, heartbreaking, and incredibly challenging. They take time, money, resources, manpower, compassion, organization, and a host of other requirements. On these counts, there is no doubt.

One aspect of recovery, however, that remains in doubt among many is the

efficiency and effectiveness of different means of providing relief and aid. On the one hand, there is private charitable assistance along with local communities rallying to help those affected. On the other hand, there is the aid and relief provided by government.

In light of recent events – and some less recent events – I believe the evidence

clearly points to private charity and local communities as far more effective means of providing relief.

For instance, before the water had fully receded in Western North Carolina, volunteers were delivering dozens of Starlinks<sup>1</sup> to provide internet connectivity to enable citizens to communicate with loved ones about their safety.

Certainly, local charities have an advantage in providing swift and tailored response compared with government agencies. About three days after Helene finally stopped pummeling Boone, NC with rain, Samaritan's Purse had set up shop to provide desperately needed supplies and aid.<sup>2</sup> The charitable organization is headquartered in Boone and, according to North American Ministries Senior Director Jason Kimak had, by October 30<sup>th</sup>, "volunteers coming in from around the country, but also local volunteers... showing up every day."

"They're coming in to volunteer to cut trees, move debris, tarp roofs, mudding out homes," Kimak added, in order to best "serve families to help them get back to their homes."

Kimak also added that Samaritan's Purse had chaplains from the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association come and spend time with those affected by the storm.

And then there are the folks at the "Mountain Mule Packer Ranch" who brought supplies on the backs of mules and horses to people stranded in areas inaccessible by car.<sup>3</sup> There's no telling how long they would have been left waiting for government agents to help.

Countless other charities, donations, and volunteers poured into the region to

provide immediate relief. Aside from local first responders, government help – especially federal government assistance – didn't arrive until later.

Many hurricane victims expressed frustration at the lack of government response. A New York Times article found people outside of Asheville, in the small communities of Cruso and Canton, stating that they "were not waiting for help from the state or the federal government."<sup>4</sup> These residents knew they had to rely on each other and the charitable aid made available because "no one was sure whether any (government) disaster relief was coming anytime soon."

Likewise, the small town of Swannanoa voiced complaints about the lack of federal government response. "We need help, but I have not seen anyone from FEMA, I don't even know where to begin," said Nelson Cruz, 44, according to the Times article.

Indeed, FEMA's slow or otherwise non-existent response is by design. As the Times article notes, FEMA is merely responsible for "ensuring that supplies like bottled water are stockpiled and available," but that distribution of those supplies is the job of "state and local officials, and aid groups."

FEMA uses its funds in large part to reimburse local governments and assistance programs for survivors after a disaster, while also deploying search-and-rescue teams to aid in finding survivors.

Regardless of their stated purpose, we know from the nature of government bureaucracy that government agencies like FEMA will often be inherently inefficient and ineffective. As Ludwig von Mises wrote in his book "Bureaucracy," bureaucrats are not "eager to deal with each case to the best

of their abilities; they are no longer anxious to find the most appropriate solution for every problem.<sup>5</sup> Their main concern is to comply with the rules and regulations, no matter whether they are reasonable or contrary to what was intended. The first virtue of an administrator is to abide by the codes and decrees” regulating his actions.

When government agencies take over relief efforts, the localized knowledge and expertise of community charities is replaced by adherence to a leviathan’s mountain of red tape.

“Bureaucratic management is management bound to comply with detailed rules and regulations fixed by the authority of a superior body,” concluded Mises.

Amazingly, a November 2023 FEMA publication entitled “Achieving Equitable Recovery: A Post-Disaster Guide for Local Officials and Leaders” admitted as such, declaring that instead of working to be as prepared and efficient in response as possible, FEMA is “working hard to instill equity as a foundation of emergency management.”<sup>6</sup>

Included among the eight “equity goals” of the document are:

- Conducting an “equity assessment” before determining how resources should be allocated and a “recovery planning process that acknowledges historical and current inequities”
- Monitoring the recovery process to confirm inclusivity and ensure equitable outcomes (i.e. Is the recovery organizational structure diverse, equitable, inclusive?)
- Targeting “underserved areas” to “help focus resources where they are needed

most” rather than based on intensity of the damage

The document also includes a “Checklist for Monitoring Equitable Recovery Progress” that includes 102 questions recovery leaders should be asking to ensure they are centering “equity” in their recovery efforts. Such questions include:

- Was an Equity Impact Assessment conducted?
- Was a Local Disaster Recovery Manager (LDRM) with diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) training hired?
- Were pre-existing inequities documented?
- Was DEIA used in selecting the person/group making recovery decisions?
- Was there discussion about the role of bias, hate, and stereotypes?
- Is on-going DEIA training and education provided?
- Were you able to intervene in the recovery process and make necessary adjustments to ensure equity?

It’s absurd that a group tasked with saving lives in the wake of a deadly natural disaster is prioritizing DEI hiring practices and training above ensuring the most qualified people are leading recovery efforts. Still worse is the last bullet point, which openly declares that FEMA will interfere with the recovery process “if they determine community leaders are failing to support equitable recovery outcomes.”<sup>7</sup>

While stunning in its backwards priorities, it should come as no surprise that

a government agency headed by political appointees centers on a politicized agenda that is prioritized by the current regime.

These highlights are just the tip of the iceberg for the 144-page FEMA document. Imagine the decision paralysis such requirements could cause, and you begin to understand why government response is so inefficient.

FEMA's more recent focus on distractions like "equity impact assessments," however, does not mean government was previously well-equipped to effectively respond to disasters. Hurricane Katrina provides a telling case study.

The Cato Institute's Chris Edwards, on the ten-year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, provided a lookback<sup>8</sup> at the government's failures in the aftermath of that disaster. For starters, Edwards notes that there was general confusion due in no small part to the fact that those in charge of disaster relief agencies like FEMA were political appointees, and not necessarily best equipped for the job. As Edwards wrote: "The 2006 bipartisan House report on the disaster, *A Failure of Initiative*, said, 'federal agencies ... had varying degrees of unfamiliarity with their roles and responsibilities under the National Response Plan and National Incident Management System.' The report found that there was 'general confusion over mission assignments, deployments, and command structure.'"

Indecision also plagued FEMA's response. Observers blamed "too many bureaucratic cooks in the kitchen" for hampering "decision making in areas such as organizing evacuations and providing law enforcement resources to Louisiana."

Other problems included a breakdown of communications, system failures, and unprecedented fraud in government aid that a *New York Times* article described as "one of the most extraordinary displays of scams, schemes and stupefying bureaucratic bumbles in modern history, costing taxpayers up to \$2 billion."

Worse still is that it was found that FEMA was actively obstructing private relief efforts. Some of this obstruction cited by Edwards included: blocking the delivery of emergency supplies to New Orleans' Methodist Hospital, turning away doctors volunteering at emergency facilities because their names weren't on a government list, blocking private flights helping to evacuate victims, denying the Red Cross access to deliver supplies to the Superdome, and turning away trucks full of water Walmart had prepared to deliver to victims.

According to this 2005 PBS article, Louisiana's then-Governor Kathleen Blanco's office "blamed bureaucracy and layers of red tape for blocking an effective emergency effort."<sup>9</sup>

According to the PBS piece, Blanco's press secretary was quoted in the *New York Times*, declaring "We wanted helicopters, food and water. They wanted to negotiate an organizational chart."

Additionally, people in eastern North Carolina's experience with their state government's response to hurricane damage can unfortunately provide a cautionary tale to those in the mountains who have seen their homes destroyed.

The state's program to help residents in the aftermath of 2018's Hurricane Florence remains incomplete to this day. According

to news reports, “more than a third of homes (destroyed by Florence in 2018) remain unfinished. As of late September, more than 1,600 projects were still not labeled ‘complete.’”<sup>10</sup>

In a 2022 legislative hearing on the matter, a state senator slammed the “slow and bungled progress” made by the state’s “Re-Build NC” program set up to rebuild homes destroyed by the storm.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, today – a full six years after Florence – there still remains \$27 million in unspent funds in the Hurricane Florence Disaster Recovery Reserve.<sup>12</sup>

Even early on in the recovery process, the New York Times identified government bureaucracy as a main culprit holding up relief.<sup>13</sup> The process was “hampered by internal bureaucratic problems, staff shortages and trouble meeting a myriad of federal, environmental, and contracting requirements imposed by the Department

of Housing and Urban Development.” The state’s emergency management director at the time said: “it took more than 10 months to comply with federally mandated environmental reviews and other red tape,” to even begin attempts at rebuilding.

All these sclerotic and incompetent government responses echo Mises’ observations. Adherence to regulation and politicized priorities rule the day in government bureaucracies. In contrast, compassion, swiftness, innovation, and effectiveness are top priorities for private voluntary relief efforts.

As with most aspects of society, when it comes to disaster relief the best the government can often do is get out of the way.

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## ENDNOTES

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