

Community-Driven Relocation

Recommendations for the U.S. Gulf Coast Region and Beyond

More than 200 \$1 billion disasters—including flooding, freezes, severe storms, tropical cyclones, wildfires, and winter storms—have occurred in the U.S. Gulf Coast region between 1980 and 2023. The number of disasters has doubled annually since 2018. This rapid escalation increases the urgency to develop pre-disaster policies to mitigate displacement and decrease suffering.

Community-Driven Relocation: Recommendations for the U.S. Gulf Coast Region and Beyond offers policy makers recommendations to develop pre-disaster plans and implement relocation strategies in ways that are equitable, culturally appropriate, adaptive, and resilient to future climate conditions.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FEDERAL POLICY MAKERS

Community-Driven Relocation offers 13 recommendations for policy makers that span three overarching domains: Centering Well-Being, Developing and Sustaining Local Collaborations, and Strengthening Preparations for Community-Driven Relocation. This document summarizes the recommendations that primarily concern federal policy makers.

CENTERING WELL-BEING

Addressing the traumas, stressors, and dearth of resources, and enhancing individual and collective efficacy are all critical prerequisites to providing a foundation for communities to participate in community-driven relocation projects equitably and

effectively. Bolstering individual and organizational capacity for well-being in climate-threatened communities are priorities for public health and climate adaptation across the nation.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Office of Climate Change and Health Equity and Office of the Assistant Secretary for Mental Health and Substance Use should support and coordinate efforts across HHS and other agencies with the following objectives:

- Accelerate the adoption of task-shared approaches to community mental health care, especially in high climate-impacted areas. Such approaches should use evidence-supported mental health care, prevention, and promotion methods that community members and community-based organizations can adopt and directly provide.
- Facilitate collaborations among federal agencies, programs, and policies that promote well-being and build community capacity to support mental health, effective empowerment, trust, inclusion, equity, and collective efficacy for adapting to environmental challenges.
- Facilitate regional coordination of the array of public health, health care, and social and mental health

services that are required to support the well-being of originating and receiving communities.

- Establish metrics, indicators, and baselines to assess the longitudinal and cross-sectional well-being outcomes of individuals in the context of relocation. These data should be collated with existing data collected by federal agencies and evaluated regularly to improve adaptation governance.

DEVELOPING AND SUSTAINING LOCAL COLLABORATIONS

Communication, participation, and engagement are critical elements that need fostering and enhancing among communities at risk/originating communities, receiving communities, government, and other groups whose participation is necessary to the relocation process. Collaboration in support of community-driven relocation necessitates better integration with ongoing planning efforts at federal, state, regional, and local levels, as well as purposeful capacity building for originating and receiving communities.

Planning for community-driven relocation should incorporate local perspectives about the histories, impacts, and perceptions of displacements and forced relocations, as well as generational traditions.

- Federal and state agencies should institute systematic, Gulf-wide, community-informed, local investigations on how past and current patterns of resilience and adaptation and relevant policies influence attitudes and behaviors toward relocation and resettlement.
- Emergency management and disaster recovery agencies, local public works agencies, mental and behavioral health care institutes, and transportation planning entities should reevaluate their plans, expenditures, and strategies to account for discriminatory policies and practices that have exacerbated vulnerabilities, and should institute plans to redress inequities that have undermined the resilience of communities most likely to face.

Agencies that assist communities with relocation should foster meaningful partnerships to develop and execute relocation plans in collaboration with communities, including decisions about the timing and pace of the relocation process.

These agencies should develop a consistent co-creation process and work with each community to establish specific communication requirements that include face-to-face interactions; and work with locally trusted, community-based organizations to build understanding, trust, and enduring relationships with communities to carry out adaptation.

Federal agencies should engage with local governments and regional planning entities to support community-driven relocation planning across originating and receiving communities. Federal and local government collaborations with regional planning entities should:

- Work with originating communities to establish threshold agreements for the consolidation and regionalization of local governments and tax bases as residents relocate;
- Share data about priority receiving communities and assess the impacts of regional population shifts to aid in planning;
- Modify federal grant programs to include making the programming of open space an eligible Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)-funded activity; and
- Modify federal and other relocation funding guidelines to include a requirement that households relocate outside special flood hazard areas, and, in turn, work with communities to broaden understanding of what special flood hazard areas mean to household-level risks.

STRENGTHENING PREPARATIONS FOR COMMUNITY-DRIVEN RELOCATION

Community-driven relocation relies on federal agency leadership and coordination, which can help to anticipate

and prepare for the scale of the threat and its pending transformational changes. Recognizing the availability of, and high confidence in, climate risks in the Gulf Coast region, systematic federal screening of regions likely to warrant some degree of relocation is an important next step in strengthening preparations for community-driven relocation.

FEMA should, outside of a disaster timeframe, pre-approve properties for acquisition and deem relocation as “cost-effective” in pre-identified communities.

This action would facilitate community-wide relocation efforts by increasing efficiency (see Chapter 10) and raise the potential for ecosystem benefits that come from returning contiguous parcels back to nature.

Federal agencies that provide relocation funding should assess the benefits of annual funding to pre-disaster mitigation programs. Actions to improve adaptive capacity should include:

- Analyzing regulatory and programmatic barriers for converting pre-disaster mitigation programs to include annualized funding for developing adaptive capacities, including relocation; and evaluating potential requirements to transition from a primarily competitive grant-making process to a process that provides ongoing assistance to under-resourced communities to develop and implement risk reduction strategies using a distribution formula that prioritizes the highest climate risk areas.

Federal agencies that offer funding for relocation planning, including infrastructure needs (e.g., FEMA, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development), should streamline the process of obtaining relocation funding, including reimbursements, through the following actions:

- In the short term, agencies should coordinate the eligibility criteria and timing of request for proposals and align the timing of grant delivery and the duration of grants across federal agencies. FEMA

should allow people with National Flood Insurance Program coverage, whose homes have received a certain level of damage, to apply directly for a buyout rather than going through the state and then FEMA’s hazard mitigation program. Agencies should allow funds from partnering agencies to be used as matching funds to the main federal source (i.e., the disbursing agency). States should also provide funding matches to communities for grants that require a non-federal partner.

- Agencies should create an inter-agency mechanism, such as a single relocation grant application platform, that is accessible by states, tribes, municipalities, and households, and establishes a process to triage the applications and direct them to the most appropriate agency. The process should include step-by-step communication with the applicant for transparency and tracking.
- In the longer term, agencies should develop and maintain, across jurisdictions, an information clearing house connecting users to existing and new resources necessary to conduct a relocation program. This repository should be controlled by an operations center that includes the services of skilled consultants, planners, mediators, and stakeholders who have experience dealing with diverse interests and navigating issues that arise during cross-stakeholder discussions about relocation.

Ensuring Equity

FEMA’s current benefit-cost analysis process privileges wealthier households and can limit who is able to participate in relocation programs. With adjustments, federal grant programs could make community-driven relocation more equitable and accessible to under-resourced communities, including renters.

FEMA, through the leadership and engagement of the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs of the Office of Management and Budget, should revise its benefit-cost analysis process. This should include:

- Developing a rubric that accounts for a community’s qualitative values, characteristics, and root causes of vulnerability; extending FEMA’s recent temporary revisions to the cost–benefit analysis for the fiscal year 2022 application cycle of Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities and the Flood Mitigation Assistance Grant Program.
- Revising benefit–cost analysis processes can help to reduce the inequitable distribution of funds available for relocation efforts and to elevate the consideration of social and ecological elements.

Federal programs involved with community–driven relocation should increase acquisition payments to property owners so they can afford a comparable home in a safe location; provide relocation assistance to renters and mobile or manufactured homes; and use management costs to support buyout grant offers to property owners above typical pre–disaster fair market values.

Agencies could base the buyout price not on the home’s market value before the most recent disaster leading to the buyout but on the market value of a similar house in the closest safe area, as suggested in GAO 22–106037 Flood Mitigation. Another method of increasing acquisition payments to property owners is for FEMA to provide vouchers that can be payable to the owners of property that the relocating individuals and families acquire. These would help to close the gap between acquisition payments and the cost of replacement housing for lower–income households. In addition to eliminating cost–effective requirements and ensuring that residents have sufficient funds to purchase or rent housing elsewhere, agencies involved in buyouts could voluntarily adhere to the Uniform Relocation Act, even if it traditionally has not applied to FEMA property acquisitions other than rental units with tenants.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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