

FEMA Funds are Not Political Bargaining Chips: A Quick History of DHS & FEMA

Every year Congress has to approve twelve [appropriations](#) bills that provide the government with the funds it needs to function and keep the government open. One of these appropriations bills funds the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Because of the actions of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) in vulnerable and marginalized communities across the country, and particularly in California, Minnesota, and Maine, advocates [demanded](#) lawmakers refuse to pass the DHS appropriations bill if it continued to fund ICE and CBP without, at very least, accountability for and restrictions on DHS' actions. These demands [resulted](#) in DHS receiving just two weeks of funding instead of a full year. Unfortunately, now, our elected are looking for an easy out to justify continuing to fund DHS.

In addition to ICE and CBP, DHS also contains the country's disaster response agency. Prior to 9/11 the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) was an independent agency, but in 2003 it was redesignated as an office of DHS. This means that the DHS spending bill also provides funds to FEMA for disaster response and recovery. FEMA's placement within DHS has always created significant issues, and we are seeing that play out in real time.

However, a DHS spending bill is not the only way that FEMA can get funds from Congress. Congress can pass funding for FEMA separately from DHS through a disaster supplemental spending [bill](#). While FEMA has sufficient [funding](#) right now, a disaster supplemental spending bill would let Congress top off FEMA's funding, while also passing critically needed HUD long-term recovery funds for places like Los Angeles, Alaska, and other areas impacted by disasters last year. If Congress doesn't pass a supplemental spending bill, FEMA dollars will continue to be used as political [bargaining](#) chips to allow ICE and CBP to continue their actions in vulnerable and marginalized communities, and recovery efforts will slow across the country.

As disaster survivors, we know that the actions of ICE and CBP and the entanglement of DHS and FEMA prevent the minimally necessary conditions for an equitable and just [recovery](#). For all these reasons and more, concerns over funding for FEMA should not be used to [justify](#) enacting the DHS appropriations bill.

This situation reiterates why the agency should be separated from DHS and re-established as an independent agency – as it was prior to 2003. To keep FEMA from being subject to political whims, Congress must pass the bipartisan “Fixing Emergency Management for Americans (FEMA) Act of 2025” ([H.R.4669](#)). Not only would this [bill](#) would restore FEMA as an independent agency and implement a host of improvements that will allow the agency

to respond faster, fairer, and with increased flexibility and efficiency to the needs of all disaster survivors across the country.

This bill was created with direct input from disaster survivors and advocates, including members of the NLIHC-led Disaster Housing Recovery Coalition. It was introduced by Transportation and Infrastructure Committee Chairman Sam Graves (R-MO), Committee Ranking Member Rick Larsen (D-WA), former Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management Subcommittee lead Republican Daniel Webster (R-FL), and Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management Subcommittee Ranking Member Greg Stanton (D-AZ) and has 35 Republican and 22 Democratic cosponsors. It passed out of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee nearly unanimously and is waiting to reach the House floor.