

**Written Testimony
by the
The BuildStrong Coalition
for the
The Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency
Management**

**Hearing on
“FEMA’s Priorities for 2022: Stakeholder Perspectives.”**

Wednesday, February 16, 2022, at 2:00 PM

Thank you for the opportunity for the BuildStrong Coalition to submit written testimony for the Subcommittee’s hearing, “*FEMA’s Priorities for 2022: Stakeholder Perspectives*” focusing on the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s (FEMA) priorities for the upcoming year. Chairman Titus and Ranking Member Webster are to be commended for leading the subcommittee in prioritizing the need for disaster mitigation and resilience investments as a core component of the national conversation on resilient infrastructure and communities. This committee’s leadership has facilitated historical resources and incentives to help American communities invest in cost-effective, risk reducing disaster mitigation efforts that will help make our nation more resilient. Smart investments in lifeline infrastructure and community resilience are the best way to address the threat of worsening disasters. As the Committee considers the next chapter of disaster policy and legislation, through the Resilient Assistance Mitigation for Environmentally Resilient Infrastructure and Construction by Americans (AMERICA) Act (H.R.5689), the BuildStrong Coalition is honored to continue our role to drive the focus on laws, policies, and programs that aid in the creation of a disaster resilient nation. We remain ready to continue this work and are prepared to serve as a resource to advance your commitment to enhancing our country’s resilience profile.

The BuildStrong Coalition, formed in 2011 to respond to an increasing number of severe disasters, is made up of a diverse group of members representing firefighters, emergency responders, emergency managers, insurers, engineers, architects, contractors, and manufacturers, as well as consumer organizations, code specialists, and many others committed to building a more disaster resilient nation. The BuildStrong Coalition has been a partner with Congress’s work to investigate causes of, and devise the solutions to, the rising costs and impacts of disasters, in the U.S. over the past decade. We have been honored to present witnesses and participants in hearings, roundtables, and briefings to identify opportunities for policy changes that promote mitigation and the smart investment of federal resources to address our country’s increasing number of severe and costly weather events, including informing several key provisions of this Subcommittee’s Disaster Recovery Reform Act of 2018 (DRRA) (P.L. 115-254) and the current legislative proposal, the Resilient AMERICA Act.

One of those critical provisions in DRRA authorized FEMA to create a pre-disaster mitigation program, which is now operated through the agency as the Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) grant program. This program shifts the federal focus from a reactive spending pattern to a proactive resilience investment one, so when disasters strike, communities are better prepared and protected. It is important to note here that the BRIC

program is still in its infancy, and with more money than ever being poured into pre-disaster mitigation efforts, FEMA is grappling with how to manage these unprecedented funds. However, as can perhaps be expected with the implementation of a new program, Coalition stakeholders have noted a number of issues worth your consideration. Our collective stakeholders are reporting frustration with this process from various angles. We have heard from different principals that BRIC implementation is being inconsistently awarded and that guidance is not always followed, including funds able to be used towards the enforcement of strong, modern building codes that are proven to save lives and homes. As BRIC and other pre-disaster mitigation dollars run the risk of not being used in line with Congressional intent, we feel it is our obligation to call attention to this fact and point out ways the Resilient AMERICA Act will help correct these issues.

In addition to the importance of Congress advancing the Resilient AMERICA Act into law, from a “whole-agency” perspective, the BuildStrong Coalition has also developed the following critical policy recommendations and principles that are supported by data and science and that we should be a core part of FEMA’s community resilience priorities.

I. Secure More Resources for Mitigation

FEMA should work with Congress through the Office of Management and Budget to explore ways to increase the funding for residential retrofits and investments in resilience before the next disaster, climate impact, or catastrophic failure.

Mitigation saves lives, property, and taxpayer money, with multiple studies showing that for every \$1 spent on preventative pre-disaster mitigation and resilient construction, there is a return of \$11 in savings. Mitigation is also critical towards reducing environmental impacts. But the federal resources to help build state and local capacity and fund risk-reducing, cost-effective mitigation projects that harden homes and buildings and help individuals invest in residential resilience are woefully inadequate. Particularly, FEMA needs more tools to help impacted communities recover smarter and stronger in order to help end the cycle of build, damage, and rebuild.

Often, there is a focus by lawmakers and in the public sphere on calling for new homes and structures to be built more resiliently, and rightly so. But equally as important is creating new resources and tools for homeowners and communities to upgrade aging homes and structures that may be vulnerable to severe climate risk, and FEMA should prioritize driving investments in retrofits in order to harden existing neighborhoods and infrastructure. The Resilient AMERICA Act advanced by this subcommittee contains a critical provision that would create a retrofit grant pilot program within FEMA in order to help fund such upgrades to older homes and buildings, and is another reason why it is imperative that Congress advances this bill into law.

II. Drive Resilient Homes and Communities through Strong Building Codes

FEMA should explore incentives for building stronger and tie existing federal funding streams to the adoption and enforcement of strong, modern building codes, to better protect homes, families, and communities.

Individuals and communities are kept safe in times of disasters through the strength of their homes. This is particularly prevalent as we learn lessons from COVID-19 and begin to understand how to increase resilience to wildfires. Disaster-resilient and sustainable construction and the use of stronger building codes have been proven to save lives, reduce the damage of natural disasters, and protect the environment. Unfortunately, only a handful of states have adopted the most modern building codes, and many lack the resources to adequately implement codes. To help correct this paradigm at the federal level involves creating incentives that encourage state and local governments to adopt modern building codes, while simultaneously equipping communities with the tools and resources needed to carry out meaningful enforcement regimes. Through the BRIC program, some states without a statewide adoption of building codes have a hard time being competitive for funding to do code development or code enforcement projects when having a statewide building code is part of the funding point scoring system and in line with the intent of Congress and DRRA.

III. Ease Administrative Burdens for the BRIC Program and Increase Technical Resources

FEMA should explore ways to ease administrative burdens of disadvantaged communities.

A consistent criticism of the BRIC program is that its dollars are going to wealthier areas with better access to resources to pay for tools like consultants and technical information/capabilities to build out application packets that are, naturally, more competitive. Theoretically, localities that are most in need of funding for mitigation are largely those that do not have the reserves to spend on outside resources for applications.

FEMA currently provides BRIC technical assistance for up to twenty low-income communities.¹ To address this disparity, FEMA could explore ways to utilize their intergovernmental partners to offer increased technical assistance to their stakeholders. FEMA, and federal agencies as a whole, must reduce the complexity and administrative burden of their programs and allow different programs to come together in flexible, creative, and truly transformational ways for the benefit of disadvantaged communities.

To be certain, all communities impacted by disasters deserve the ability to build stronger in the face of rising disasters. In making assisting vulnerable populations a point of emphasis in implementing the BRIC program, the entire nation stands to benefit.

IV. Build Capacity

FEMA should ensure that state, local, tribal, and regional entities are given the tools and resources to increase capacity and capability to identify risks and hazards and mitigate those risks before the crisis occurs.

It is clear that for this country to be successful in enhancing our resiliency, we must focus on capacity building for state and local governments and turn to considerations of sustainability, adaptability, and creative financial instruments that can be leveraged to drive socially responsible investments in resilience. State, local, and tribal governments must increase their ability to mitigate against all hazards. Accordingly, they must increase their ability to identify hazards and

¹ [BRIC Direct Technical Assistance \(fema.gov\)](https://www.fema.gov/bric-direct-technical-assistance)

successfully implement these funds to drive critical investments towards effective risk-reducing projects, including though increasing the resiliency of the nation's lifeline infrastructure and electric grids. Increased engagement and education efforts on mitigation planning, program requirements, and opportunity awareness will enhance community resilience across all levels of government.

Further, regulatory controls must be loosened to facilitate and encourage public-private partnerships. Governments must work with the private sector to increase community and national resilience. The private sector is currently conducting high-level work throughout the resilience and mitigation arena and there is tremendous opportunity to utilize expertise and industry knowledge, take advantage of existing programs, identify best practices, and incorporate lessons learned from the private sector. By leveraging the private sector and encouraging and facilitating public-private partnerships, we can maximize available resources for the benefit of the entire country.

Conclusion: Resolving Disaster Capacity Issues Through the Resilient AMERICA Act

There is a solution that can help FEMA begin addressing the above outlined challenges. The BuildStrong Coalition strongly supported the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee's introduction of the Resilient AMERICA Act in late 2021. We were equally pleased to see it subsequently (and overwhelmingly) voted out of Committee 63-2. We believe this legislation should serve as the foundation for the disaster resilience conversation in this country going forward. The Resilient AMERICA Act is designed to follow on the landmark DRRA and addresses climate impacts by incentivizing and providing resources to facilitate smart, climate-conscious behaviors and mitigation. The bill also seeks to remove the moral hazards and policy impediments inhibiting decisionmakers from creating resilient systems and communities. Passage of the Resilient AMERICA Act would resolve many of the capacity, enforcement, and eligibility issues highlighted in this testimony, including through ensuring a certain percentage of BRIC funds are used towards protecting homes and communities through the use of strong, modern building codes. The BuildStrong Coalition calls on the Congress to enhance disaster resilience across the nation through this legislation that would effectuate these policy ideals, changes in authority, development of incentives, and streamlining of assistance to serve our communities in an equitable and transformational way.

The BuildStrong Coalition and its members stand ready to partner with the committee as it drives mitigation and resilience against disaster and climate impacts. The compelling arguments for these policy changes are grounded in overwhelming science and evidence. We are excited to join congressional leaders like you as we identify opportunities for policy changes that promote disaster resilience and the smart investment of federal resources to address our country's vulnerable infrastructure and the increasing number of severe and costly weather events. Together, we can help save the lives and homes of our citizens.