



The Honorable Charles Schumer  
Democratic Leader, U.S. Senate  
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Mitch McConnell  
Republican Leader, U.S. Senate  
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy  
Speaker, U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Hakeem Jeffries  
Democratic Leader, U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Leader Schumer, Leader McConnell, Speaker McCarthy, and Leader Jeffries:

As the Members and Committees of the 118<sup>th</sup> Congress begin their work, the BuildStrong Coalition looks forward to your leadership in prioritizing the need for disaster mitigation and resilience investments as a core component of the national conversation on resilient infrastructure and communities.

The BuildStrong Coalition has been a partner to Congress's efforts to investigate causes of, and devise the solutions to, the rising costs and impacts of disasters in the United States 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 the Disaster Recovery Reform Act of 2018 (DRRA) (P.L. 115-254).

We applaud your bipartisan work and leadership during the previous Congress to enhance federal policy and increase funding to tackle growing threats from extreme weather, including the ever-increasing wildfire threat, which has caused tremendous human, infrastructure, and financial harm in recent years. We were especially pleased to see the Resilient Assistance Mitigation for Environmentally Resilient Infrastructure and Construction by Americans (AMERICA) Act (H.R.5689), overwhelmingly pass the House by a vote of 383-41 on April 5, 2022. This significant piece of legislation would have 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, and we look forward to working with you this year to move Resilient AMERICA, along with additional mitigation and resilience legislation, into law. As you look to 2023 and beyond for both existing program implementation and new policy, the BuildStrong Coalition offers the following comments and recommendations based on lessons learned from our historic experience as leaders in the resilience space.

**Congress should recognize resiliency as a co-benefit of energy efficiency and secure more resources for mitigation investments.** It's time to stop the endless cycle of rebuilding to the same, outdated standards after each disaster. Studies have shown that for every dollar invested in mitigation, as much as eleven dollars can be saved. Mitigation saves lives, property, taxpayer money, and the environment. We must break the inextricably connected cycle of destruction, loss of life, and federal waste. As a nation, we cannot allocate resources into solving only a singular problem while ignoring more comprehensive risks. Any national discussion of reducing damage from natural disasters (including an emphasis on wildfire), climate events, cyber incidents, and inadequate environmental protections must include disaster-resilient and sustainable construction and infrastructure. In the 118<sup>th</sup> Session, Congress should focus the conversation on the direction of implementing a more holistic solution to resiliency. Such an approach aligns the current federal tack at agencies like FEMA, which are invested in pursuing comprehensive resilience solutions.



**Congress should drive resilient homes and communities through strong building codes by creating incentives for building stronger — such as and tying 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 the latest hurricane season 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.

**Congress should require Federal programs to make risk-reducing, cost effective investments that promote resilient construction and home hardening.** Disruptions to our communities and homes due to disasters threaten lives and impede community recovery. By investing in the resilience of our housing, and communities, as well as critical infrastructure like the electric grid and water systems, we can reduce, if not eliminate, the impact of disasters, allowing people to stay safe and continue with their daily routines, ultimately reducing the duration and cost of recovery. Through the application of the highest building codes, standards, and technologies and ensuring access to resources to invest in mitigation, we can ensure system-wide increases in resilience in homes and communities. Finally, Congress should prioritize projects that utilize recycled content to encourage green initiatives throughout Federal programs. For example, the use of products made from recycled content can dramatically reduce the volume of greenhouse gas emissions and the impacts of virgin resource extraction.

**Congress should incentivize investments in resilience through tax benefits and grant conditions.** In addition to more resources for mitigation and communities, both public and private entities need incentives to drive their investments in mitigation. Whether by supporting the creation of federal tax incentives that reward resilient behavior, the development of mitigation tax breaks, or other incentives, individuals and businesses will find it easier to invest in resiliency, including undertaking activities like retrofitting homes and hardening critical infrastructure, if these resources are available. This would also foster private sector investment in mitigation through new financing opportunities. Targeted tax incentives and removing tax penalties will encourage resilient construction techniques to withstand damage from strong winds or flooding and prevent losses from wildfires and seismic events. Through these investments, homeowners and communities ultimately save money through tax savings and avoid recovery costs and losses in future disasters.

**Congress should ease administrative burdens and increase access to technical assistance.** Federal agencies must reduce the complexity and administrative burden of their programs and allow different programs to come together in flexible, creative, and truly transformational ways. A consistent criticism of federal grant programs, specifically FEMA's BRIC program, is that dollars are going to wealthier areas with resources to pay consultants to build out application packets that are more competitive. Theoretically, localities that need the funding to mitigate are those that do not have the reserves to spend on outside resources for applications. While FEMA provides technical assistance for up to twenty low-income communities, more work needs to be done in this area. To be more accessible for communities, federal programs should simplify requirements, lower cost-share requirements for low-capacity and at-risk communities and establish consistent funding expectations. Additionally, technical assistance programs can help local governments develop action plans, apply for project funding, and implement grants effectively. In some cases, local risk assessments by engineering firms are too expensive for local



governments. Technical assistance programs, however, fund this cost, while also positioning local governments to successfully design the project at hand and build technical capacity for future projects.

**Congress should address the wildfire risk and the lack of transparency and accountability around wildfire mitigation spending.** Wildfires can result in significant, long-lasting impacts to ecological, social, and economic systems. It is necessary, therefore, to identify and understand the risks posed by wildland fire, and to develop cost-effective mitigation strategies accordingly. There exists no comprehensive accounting of federal wildfire spending that would allow policymakers, communities, stakeholders, and the general public to easily understand how their taxpayer resources are being utilized. Smarter wildfire policy will not only save these taxpayer resources but lives and livelihoods as well.

In conclusion, Congress must work together to promote smart actions that reduce risk and remove the many moral incentives that discourage people from driving down disaster costs and losses. This will involve adjusting programs and policies and leveraging federal investment to influence behavior to foster a stronger, safer America. The benefits pay out over time, as greater resilience reduces repair, replacement, and collateral costs over the lifecycle of the system. Greater emphasis must be placed on the long-term benefits to help drive better, longer term decisions.

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.

Sincerely,

Natalie F. Enclade, Ph.D.  
Executive Director  
BuildStrong Coalition