

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

September 9, 2021

The Honorable Deanne Criswell
Administrator
Federal Emergency Management Agency
500 C Street SW
Washington, D.C. 20024

Dear Administrator Criswell:

We are writing today to express our concerns about the functionality of DisasterAssistance.gov. In the wake of Hurricane Ida, thousands of Louisianans have logged on to register for Individual Assistance. Although DisasterAssistance.gov promises to be a one-stop-shop that connects disaster victims to numerous disaster assistance resources, the website has been plagued by outages, service issues, and bugs.

We have heard reports from constituents and local leaders across Louisiana's affected parishes that they spend hours gathering the necessary information to apply, searching for a stable power supply and an internet connection, and fighting the website's bandwidth issues – only to immediately be denied as soon as they hit 'submit'. Others report that the website crashes after applicants submit their personal information, then directs them to an error message and blocks them from attempting to submit another application. Should an applicant manage to get past the website issues and through the lengthy application, there are still problems: if a disaster victim misses checking a box – for example, to express a need for critical needs assistance for food, shelter, or clothing – and submits their application, there is no mechanism built into the webform to allow an applicant to go back and update their application. Instead, disaster victims are sent a denial letter explaining that this is an 'unappealable situation' and they have been deemed ineligible for critical needs assistance.

In instances where the website is nonfunctional – or folks simply don't have access to electrical power or internet connectivity – disaster victims are then directed to FEMA's helpline. During FEMA's report to Congress yesterday, FEMA staff indicated that wait times on the phone average about 45 minutes to an hour, although many of our constituents have reported spending much longer on hold or having the call disconnect. While this in and of itself is unacceptable, once disaster victims get in touch with an actual FEMA representative, they are almost immediately directed back to the website. These are disaster victims whose lives have been upended: they deserve better than to be bounced back and forth between long phone wait times and a glitchy website. Making matters worse, the helpline has limited hours which may not work for shift workers or those who are still struggling with reliable access to cellular service.

While we are appreciative of the effort to modernize our means of delivering disaster assistance to Americans in need, this online application system *must* be more functional. Although FEMA continues to assure us that they have sufficient technological infrastructure and personnel in place to handle the number of requests they are receiving and process them accurately, we remain concerned that FEMA's current operations are not able to effectively assist survivors. We echo our constituents' concerns that if FEMA allows these issues to persist, some disaster victims might miss the deadline to apply for Individual Assistance.

Thank you for your attention to this urgent matter and we look forward to hearing what steps FEMA is taking to remedy these issues.

Sincerely,



Garret Graves
Member of Congress



Julia Letlow
Member of Congress