

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2024

Letter to Congressional Leaders on Federal Disaster Relief Funding
October 4, 2024

Dear Speaker Johnson and Leaders Schumer, McConnell, and Jeffries,

I write to you regarding the needs of the Nation. As communities across the Southeast devastated by Hurricane Helene assess the extent of the damage, they are expecting their Federal Government to stand behind them in their most urgent time of need. I have seen firsthand the devastation that Hurricane Helene brought to communities across the Southeast. During my travels this week to North Carolina, South Carolina, Florida, and Georgia, I met with families, business owners, farmers, local and state officials, and first responders, all of whom shared with me their stories of survival—and resilience. As leaders, we have a responsibility to ensure that everyone in communities ravaged by natural disasters will have the Federal resources they need and deserve to respond to and recover from deadly storms and other natural disasters.

My Administration will be with those affected until the job is done, and we have a solemn obligation to provide confidence that the Federal Government will stand with them as they rebuild their lives and their communities. Furthermore, this responsibility extends to the many communities around the Nation that are still rebuilding from previous disasters.

Over the past 10 days, including in the lead up to Hurricane Helene making landfall, my Administration has provided robust and well-coordinated Federal support for the ongoing response and recovery efforts. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the Department of Defense, and other Federal partners have quickly mobilized to support impacted citizens and communities in the six States where major disasters have been declared due to Hurricane Helene: Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. They are performing critical life-saving and life-sustaining missions and will continue to do so within present funding levels. As with other catastrophic disasters, it will take some time to assess the full requirements for response and recovery efforts, and I fully expect that the Congress will do its part to provide the funding needed.

While FEMA has the resources needed for the immediate emergency response phase, at least one other agency does not. Most urgently, the Small Business Administration's (SBA) disaster loan program will run out of funding in a matter of weeks and well before the Congress is planning to reconvene. I warned the Congress of this potential shortfall even before Hurricane Helene landed on America's shores. I requested more funding for SBA multiple times over the past several months, and most recently, my Administration underscored that request as you prepared a continuing resolution to fund the Government. Now the need is even more urgent. Small businesses and individuals in affected areas depend on disaster loans as a critical lifeline during difficult times. In fact, for individual disaster survivors, SBA loans are often the largest source of Federal disaster recovery funds. Renters and homeowners use these loans to repair and rebuild their homes as well as replace or repair damaged property including their personal vehicles, while businesses use them to cover basic operating expenses. The Congress must act to restore this funding.

In addition, while FEMA's Disaster Relief Fund has the resources it requires right now to meet immediate needs, the fund does face a shortfall at the end of the year. Without additional funding, FEMA would be required to forego longer-term recovery activities in favor of meeting urgent needs. The Congress should provide FEMA additional resources to avoid forcing that kind of unnecessary trade-off and to give the communities we serve the certainty of knowing that help will be ongoing, both for the short- and long-term.

As the Congress heeds the call to assist the communities across the Nation recovering from Hurricane Helene, it must remember that many other communities are also in urgent need of disaster assistance. As recently as this summer, my Administration requested that the Congress provide additional disaster assistance to many communities across America. Many of the programs we requested to receive additional funding would also help response and recovery efforts related to Hurricane Helene. This includes funding for the Department of Housing and Urban Development to respond to devastating fires in Maui and tornados in Mississippi, Iowa, and Oklahoma as well as funding for the Department of Transportation to support rebuilding roads and bridges across the Nation, including the Francis Scott Key Bridge in Baltimore, Maryland.

I urge you to keep faith with those communities and provide the requested additional funding to rebuild housing infrastructure, to support farmers and ranchers with crop losses, to address impacted schools, and to repair damaged Federal highways. In addition to FEMA's ongoing support, these are the resources that communities need and deserve to fully respond to and recover from devastating events.

It is critical that Congress ensures that no critical disaster programs, such as the SBA disaster loan program, run out of funding during the Congressional Recess period. I also urge that after the Congress comes back into session on November 12th, you will act with all appropriate speed and provide comprehensive disaster relief so that the people, families, businesses, and communities affected by Hurricane Helene—as well as those still recovering from past disasters—are not only made whole, but can proceed in a way to make them more resilient in the face of future extreme weather events and other disasters.

My Administration will keep the Congress apprised of efforts to assess the full resource requirements associated with Hurricane Helene, including for long-term rebuilding and resilience efforts, as those estimates become available. I urge you to assist those impacted by this hurricane and every other disaster since the Congress last passed a comprehensive disaster package in 2022. We must stand with these communities on their long road to recovery.

Sincerely,

JOSEPH R. BIDEN JR.

NOTE: Identical letters were sent to Speaker of the House of Representatives J. Michael Johnson, Senate Majority Leader Charles E. Schumer and Minority Leader A. Mitchell McConnell, and House Minority Leader Hakeem S. Jeffries. An original was not available for verification of the content of this letter.

Categories: Communications to Congress : Federal disaster relief funding, letter.

Subjects: Continued appropriations; Disaster assistance, Florida; Disaster assistance, Georgia; Disaster assistance, North Carolina; Disaster assistance, South Carolina; Disaster assistance, Tennessee; Disaster assistance, Virginia; Federal disaster relief funding; Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA); Florida, disaster assistance; Georgia, disaster assistance; Infrastructure improvements; Natural disasters, Hurricane Helene; North Carolina, disaster assistance; Small Business Administration; South Carolina, disaster assistance; Tennessee, disaster assistance ; Virginia, disaster assistance.

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