



In our opinion: Disaster relief can sometimes be a disaster

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Friday marked the start of a new hurricane season, and with it came a fresh look at the ongoing aftermath of last year's storms. Cleanup efforts, it appears, still have miles to go, suggesting it's time to reconsider the structure of national disaster relief programs.

Any mention of "Katrina" instantly conjures images of 24/7 coverage of helicopter rescues and flooded levees, while "Sandy" might evoke the eerie image of an extinguished New York skyline, disabled by widespread power outages. Yet most Americans could not recall the specifics of the storm that hit Puerto Rico, despite that it was, by quantified metrics of mortality, twice as devastating as Katrina.

The point is not to express glib comparative crisis outrage. Negating one instance of suffering by elevating another is never useful, nor is it compassionate. Instead, what should be identified is the dysfunction of existing federal disaster management efforts as evidenced through a stark disparity in crisis response across the country.

The 2017 hurricanes Maria (in Puerto Rico) and Harvey (in Houston) are clear examples of this divide. Residents of Puerto Rico and Houston are still grappling with the effects of devastation — although those most affected in the aftermath are disproportionately low-income earners. As of last week, more than 11,000 people across Puerto Rico are still without power from the storm that hit eight months ago; additionally, Harvard researchers estimate that the actual death toll (over 4,600) attributed to the hurricane was nearly 70 times the figure reported by the government. On average, Puerto Ricans went 84 days without electricity and 68 days without running water.

In Houston, while clean downtown streets do not bear the scars of the storm, low-income neighborhoods in flood districts across the region remain uninhabitable, their residents left squatting in yards or moldy, damaged homes.

In both cases, victims lament the bureaucratic red tape keeping them from accessing federal disaster funding, citing inane rules like requirements for pre-existing flood insurance as a barrier to needed assistance. This is evidence of the problem of centralizing assistance in a federal government that does not have the realistic capacity to assist. As the CATO Institute noted, "There are 29 different federal agencies that have a role in disaster relief under the National Response Framework. These agencies are involved in 15 different cross-agency 'Emergency

Support Functions.’ There is also a National Incident Management System, a National Disaster Recovery Framework, and numerous other ‘national’ structures that are supposed to coordinate action.”

Bound up in partisan debates in Congress and run by political appointees with minimal disaster response experience, the current approach to centralized emergency response is failing because it is, in reality, highly disjunct. It’s also difficult for agencies based miles away from disasters to identify and meet real-time demands for specific local needs.

In light of this, the federal government should revise the bureaucratic structure of its emergency response, empowering states and local decision-makers to call the shots in sensitive situations where communication is limited. Ensuring that all locales have the adequate support and funding to make those choices is essential in closing the gaps in support between wealthy, urban areas and disadvantaged regions.

Avoiding disaster is up to the whims of Mother Nature, but preparing for one and rebuilding in its wake falls on communities and disaster relief programs. Allowing those efforts to spring from the direct needs of those in crisis will better offer hope and help to those devastated by the worst of the weather.