



Written by [Annalisa Pesek](#) on November 8, 2022

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## Hurricane Ian: The Path to Recovery

“Never let a good crisis go to waste.” The phrase commonly credited to Winston Churchill, spoken in the waning days of World War II and said to have inspired Brits to persevere and seek opportunity amid misery, sacrifice, and loss, ironically became the motto of American progressives when Democratic politico and former Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel uttered a similar statement.

The most recent catastrophe, Hurricane Ian — the deadliest storm to strike the state of Florida since the 1935 “Labor Day” hurricane, with at least 132 lives lost and dozens still missing — was declared a national disaster by the federal government on September 29.

To date, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and its federal partners have delivered more than \$1.56 billion to Floridians impacted by Hurricane Ian through grants, disaster loans, and flood-insurance payments. Moreover, Congress is expected to pass a multi-billion-dollar recovery package to further assist those impacted by the storm.

Such extravagant federal spending might be forgiven if relief aid went to helping the hurricane victims and was not misused or misallocated, as investigations into past FEMA programs (think Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy) have shown.

“The point of federal disaster relief is to help states that are overwhelmed by the costs of disaster recovery,” wrote *The New American’s* Michael Tennant in 2015. “If a state is perfectly capable of paying for its own recovery, then there is no justification for soaking taxpayers in other states to pay for it.”

Yet consider that FEMA, from 2008 to 2013, cost taxpayers an estimated \$93 billion to assist those affected by natural calamities the agency declared eligible for disaster relief aid. Plus the organization’s distant bureaucratic controls seem to tie the hands of survivors as they await government aid. As one *Washington Times* reporter astutely observed, FEMA creates “confusing regulations [that] scare off emergency workers from other regions, since you can get called into court if you don’t jump through the right hoops.”

FEMA administrator Deanne Criswell has staunchly defended the agency’s regulations, declaring, “well before this catastrophic storm made landfall, FEMA and the entire federal family took a forward-leaning posture to support Floridians, and we are applying that same approach as we transition to long-term recovery efforts.”

She continued, “together, with the help of our government counterparts, along with our faith-based and



AP Images

Where is FEMA? A month after Hurricane Ian struck the southwest coast of Florida, many residents still remain without relief. Some lawmakers have called on Congress to abolish FEMA altogether, while others have sought to reform the agency to reduce the cost and make relief efforts more fair.



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community partners, we will be here as long as it takes to help Floridians recover from this disaster.”

Then why are so many Floridians still without relief?

Fort Myers resident Kynse Leigh Agles told *The New American* that many people still cannot begin to clean up and rebuild because FEMA, working with insurance agencies, demands that they wait for an adjuster who might not show up for weeks or months.

“The fact that FEMA isn’t sending temporary housing or trailers is awful,” she said. “They are closing the large shelters soon and people have nowhere to go. After Charley we had a FEMA trailer park set up within weeks,” she added.

To date, no such structures have been placed in Agles’ community to offer the relief these folks need. Agles went on to describe areas completely torn apart by the storm: trailers and manufactured homes ripped in half or missing, and families with tents in their yards to protect their belongings.

“I continue to ask where is the temporary housing? Where is FEMA? We have no hotels. The hotels where vouchers have been issued are filled with contractors at higher prices than the voucher. Every reasonably priced rental is full!”

Agles has reached out to state officials, questioning why the shelters were closing when so many locals were now homeless: “Is putting children back in schools that were shelters more important than combining schools?”



**DeSantis jump-starts repairs:** Florida Governor Ron DeSantis wasted no time getting to work to restore access to Pine and Sanibel islands, where causeways and bridges were completely sunken and washed away. The Sanibel Causeway (pictured here) was restored with temporary repairs within weeks after the storm.

## The State Steps In

Florida Governor Ron DeSantis has pushed to reopen schools in the hardest-hit areas of Lee and Charlotte counties, and his efforts have been praised by most Floridians. Even Agles expressed gratitude for his calm leadership amid the tragedy and disaster.

In an address shortly after the storm, DeSantis stated that “within 24 hours after [the storm], I asked FDOT [Florida Department of Transportation] to get involved, and we had more than 130 trucks rolling



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in and crews got to work.” So far more than 1.4 million cubic yards of debris have been collected in huge piles along the roads of impacted communities, with the full economic devastation an estimated \$46 billion. Many companies in business for generations are not sure they will be able to rebuild.

Recovery efforts led by state, private, and nonprofits have included the transporting of electrical crews on landing crafts, the delivery of 13-plus million meals and 2.5 million pounds of ice, and the restoration of 2,507 bridges. In addition, more than 2.2 million gallons of fuel were moved to the region within a week after the storm, and reportedly 99 percent of southwest Florida residents had their power back on in a matter of days. Tesla founder Elon Musk provided over 375 Star Link internet connection devices, and mayors from neighboring cities, including Greg Brudnicki of Panama City, traveled to devastated areas to survey the damage and offer ideas on how to move forward.

By October 5, DeSantis had already restored access to the unrecognizable Pine and Sanibel islands, with construction on the Pine Island bridge in Lee County completed in a record-breaking three days on October 8.

“Construction on the Pine Island bridge has been completed today — just three days after construction began. Happy to have the state step in and help get our Pine Island residents back on their feet,” tweeted the governor.

Weeks later, the Sanibel Causeway was reopened with temporary repairs. “It’s something that shows a little bit of a can-do spirit. The work that has been done to restore vehicle access to Sanibel Island has been historic,” remarked DeSantis during a presser.

Further, First Lady Casey DeSantis announced on October 24 that the state’s private fund, the Florida Disaster Fund — established to assist Floridians in times of emergency and disaster, with 100 percent of every donation used to help the state recover from the devastation caused by Ian — had reached \$50 million. She noted the first million out the door went to organizations such as ToolBank and Team Rubicon, who were “on the ground helping folks.”

“We also understand that this is going to be a long-term recovery effort for a lot of folks,” she said. “And while FEMA is there, the state is there, we want to ensure that those funds are there to help people get back on their feet because we’ve seen so many people who have had flooding at their homes that might not have necessarily had flood insurance.”

Yet weighing the powers of the U.S. government versus the powers of the state regarding disasters and emergencies, it is often the people of the impacted communities, not the government, providing the assistance that is the most effective.

## **Bypassed by Government Efforts**

“It’s all political posturing,” commented Fort Myers resident Charles Hidalgo on the state’s recovery efforts. Hidalgo’s house off Main Street in downtown Fort Myers was not destroyed on the surface, but suffered severe interior damage from flooding that will require extensive mitigation and restoration work to make it inhabitable again. He and his wife, Nanette, lost both their cars to flooding, preventing them from leaving after the waters receded.

Multiple rooms in the house were filled with toxic flood waters reaching three feet high. Hidalgo told the *The New American* that no one from any government agency had been out to check on him or his



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neighbors.

“I worry only of any long-term health effects from exposure to such toxicity with nowhere to go,” he said while cleaning up debris and sorting through what was left of his belongings. Where are the FEMA and state funds?

Hundreds of thousands of Floridians have sought relief aid for rebuilding their homes and businesses ravaged by the relentless storm, yet the process is slow-going and many feel forgotten by the rest of the world.

In the decimated city of Fort Myers, population nearly 100,000, where the hurricane eyewall made landfall, residents claim they were given only 24 hours to evacuate. Yet by that time, hotels were booked and those who stayed behind had nowhere to go.

When the predicted 13-20 foot storm surge swallowed up Fort Myers beach and moved quickly up the rivers and waterways, most of the casualties were people who were caught by surprise and drowned in the rising flood waters.

For many like Hidalgo, with nothing left, support and care from family members and friends remains their only hope. Local organizations are stepping up as well. The Naples Hammerheads Rugby Club, for example, sent volunteers to help Hidalgo move a mountain of debris into the street for pickup when no one else seemed to be coming.

Hidalgo hailed the group as “awesome, caring people who [are] driven into action, not words.” He would later say, “we took a hit. We will rebound given time. It is a process.”



**Nowhere to go:** Hundreds of thousands of Floridians have sought relief aid for rebuilding their homes and businesses ravaged by the relentless storm. Yet the process is slow-going and many feel forgotten by the rest of the world.

## “Unconstitutional and Immoral”

Indeed, getting the most-devastated areas of Lee and Charlotte counties back to where they need to be will take around seven years, said the director of Florida Emergency Management, Kevin Guthrie, during a press conference. Despite the government’s multibillion-dollar recovery package, not all have benefited from federal- and state-led efforts to “step in and help.” Many who have lost everything still



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have nowhere to go.

Brianne Casey, another Fort Myers resident, had everything she owned sucked up and spit out by Ian. Now the first-time homeowner and full-time ER nurse is contending with slow-moving insurance adjusters to get FEMA aid, which has provided so far \$2,900 for housing for two months, though the insurance claim on her home could take several months to complete, and only after it is completed does the real work of rebuilding begin.

FEMA today has become “neither efficient nor compassionate,” argues former U.S. Representative Ron Paul (R-Texas), who in a recent op-ed described why he always voted against disaster aid when he was in Washington.

“The failure of Congress to offset spending on disaster relief with cuts in other programs is one reason why I always voted against disaster aid when I was in Congress, even when the spending was for disasters that occurred in my district,” wrote Paul. “Of course, I also opposed these bills because disaster relief is unconstitutional and immoral, as are all other income redistribution programs.”

He continued, “Federally managed disaster relief is neither efficient nor compassionate. My office often heard from frustrated individuals whose plans to rebuild were put on hold because of delays in getting federal assistance.”

Horror tales of FEMA mistreating disaster victims were commonplace for the congressman. “FEMA was supposed to put a tarp on a house whose roof was destroyed in Hurricane Ike, but it put the tarp on the house next door, even though that house’s roof was fine,” explained Paul. “When the owner of the house that needed a tarp called FEMA, he was told it would be several weeks before FEMA could send someone out to correct FEMA’s mistake.”

As Paul has argued, “FEMA should be abolished and recovery efforts returned to the individuals, local charitable organizations, nonprofits, private organizations.” So far as government is concerned, income-tax relief and state savings accounts for natural disasters should be the norm, coupled with strong leaders such as Governor DeSantis to distribute those funds.



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