

July 9, 2020

Dear Member of Congress,

As faith organizations across the country whose members are both impacted by and routinely serve as local emergency volunteers during natural disasters, we wish to express our concern about the country's preparedness to respond to these crises, particularly during the COVID-19 outbreak. While lives lost and property damage are always concerns during any natural disaster, the ongoing pandemic raises an additional concern of how to protect emergency workers and affected communities from exposure to COVID-19 during a disaster response.

This challenge will be exacerbated for communities of color, indigenous communities, and migrants who are already disproportionately and negatively impacted by both [COVID-19](#) and [disasters](#) in the U.S. and for our international neighbors whose struggles to grapple with this pandemic are even worse than our own. The financial burden of rebuilding after a disaster will pose a significant challenge to domestic and international communities alike in their efforts to sustain COVID-19 recovery and reopening efforts.

Historical data from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration shows that climate and weather disasters [peak during the summer months](#) and that 2019 was the fifth consecutive year (2015-2019) in which the United States had 10 or more extreme weather events, each [costing over a billion dollars](#). These statistics combined with predictions of an [above-normal 2020 hurricane season](#) in the Atlantic make it probable that costly weather disasters will impact the United States and the wider region in the coming months while countries address the COVID-19 pandemic.

Adequate disaster preparation and mitigation saves lives, limits property loss, and fosters cost-effective community resilience that provides enduring disaster protection. Implementing these preparations also offers immediate, well-paying jobs that can offset some of the economic hardship local communities are facing and limits the need to move people into cramped disaster shelters that can facilitate the spread of COVID-19. We therefore ask Congress for the following:

- **Ensure disaster management plans and responses are updated to reflect the additional challenges posed by COVID-19.** While state and local governments are the primary actors in this work, these entities are already using much of their capacity to address COVID-19 and may therefore require more federal assistance than usual to appropriately respond to disasters. This will especially be true for low-income and other vulnerable communities already burdened with high COVID-19 infection rates.
- **Promote strategic investments in resilient infrastructure and development.** Properly implementing and fully funding passed legislation like the Disaster Recovery Reform Act, the Water Resources Development Act, and climate resiliency provisions in the National Defense Authorization Act will strengthen the country's disaster response now and minimize future disaster losses. The Federal Emergency Management Agency reports \$6 in savings for every \$1 spent on federal natural disaster mitigation grants, a significant return on investment for taxpayers.

- **Incorporate consequences of a changing climate into disaster preparedness efforts.** Disaster risk assessments, such as those for the National Flood Insurance Program, should be revised to account for the increased likelihood of extreme weather and climate events instead of relying solely on historical data. Since climate change increases the likelihood and severity of many high-cost weather and climate disasters, legislation to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, promote clean energy infrastructure and development, and increase energy efficiency in buildings and transportation should also be passed.
- **Increase international assistance for disaster mitigation and response,** particularly for community-based organizations that fund adaptation projects such as climate-smart agriculture, hurricane resistant housing, and resilient, sustainable, community-focused disaster recovery.

Acting now to strengthen both domestic and international disaster preparedness and response will save lives, minimize financial losses, and ensure fewer communities face disruptions in their COVID-19 response. We pray for a strong bipartisan response to address this important issue.

Sincerely,

Church World Service
 Columban Center for Advocacy and Outreach
 Creation Justice Ministries
 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
 Franciscan Action Center
 Islamic Relief USA
 Islamic Society of North America
 Jewish Climate Action Network DC/MD/V
 Jewish Climate Action Network-MA
 Maryknoll Sisters Eastern Region, USA
 Mennonite Central Committee U.S. Washington Office
 National Council of Churches
 NETWORK Lobby for Catholic Social Justice
 Sisters of Mercy of the Americas Justice Team
 The Episcopal Church
 The United Methodist Church – General Board of Church and Society
 Union for Reform Judaism
 Unitarian Universalist Service Committee
 Unitarian Universalists for Social Justice

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