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(515) 288-1145
- ☐ 111 7TH AVENUE, SE, BOX 13
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CEDAR RAPIDS, IA 52401-2101
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United States Senate

CHARLES E. GRASSLEY
PRESIDENT PRO TEMPORE EMERITUS
WASHINGTON, DC 20510-1501

April 28, 2021

REPLY TO:

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The Honorable Deanne Criswell
Administrator
Federal Emergency Management Agency
500 C Street SW
Washington, DC 20472

Dear Administrator Criswell:

Iowa is no stranger to natural disasters and receiving federal disaster declarations. We are very thankful for the assistance that FEMA provides to the state, communities, and individuals after these destructive events. However, many of the FEMA processes are cumbersome and confusing to those who are trying to recover from the disaster, especially the Individual Assistance Program.

After a disaster, survivors are vulnerable and devastated from the catastrophic event. Many are experiencing life-altering situations that cause havoc both emotionally, socially, and economically. While going through this traumatic time, survivors find the complicated, bureaucratic Individual Assistance Program process to be very onerous, adding to the stress of recovery. In fact, many applicants withdraw from the process because it is overwhelming or too frustrating to deal with government speak. This process is further exacerbated by ever changing FEMA field staff that may or may not have the training and understanding of the FEMA process to successfully explain and help the survivors through the program.

My offices try to provide a helping hand throughout the FEMA process to Iowans in need, but not all survivors reach out to a congressional office to understand and get assistance through this government process. While I am happy to do all I can to help my constituents, the process should not be so unmanageable and burdensome that it cannot be easily understood and completed successfully by most survivors.

I applaud FEMA for establishing a strategic goal in its 2018-2022 Strategic Plan to reduce the complexity of FEMA and to streamline the disaster survivor experiences in dealing with the agency. In September 2020, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) released a report on Disaster Assistance: Additional Actions Needed to Strengthen FEMA's Individuals and Households Program. This report found that "survivors faced numerous challenges obtaining aid and understanding" of the Individuals and Households Program (IHP), including some of the following:

- FEMA requires that certain survivors first be denied a Small Business Administration (SBA) disaster loan before receiving certain types of IHP assistance.

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- Opportunities also exist to improve survivors' understanding of FEMA's eligibility and award determinations for the IHP, for example, that an ineligible determination is not always final, but may mean FEMA needs more information to decide the award.
- FEMA has faced challenges managing its call center and field staff.... FEMA staff at disaster recovery centers (DRC) lacked some skills and capabilities needed to support survivors, such as knowledge to provide accurate guidance about required documents.

Furthermore, "GAO found that FEMA did not complete activities that are critical to the success of a process improvement effort.... Specifically, the agency did not fully assess customer and stakeholder needs and performance gaps in the program, or set improvement goals and priorities for the redesign."

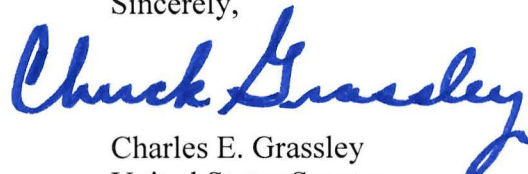
I agree with GAO that as FEMA continues to implement multiple efforts to improve assistance to survivors, FEMA should complete "these process improvement activities," enabling FEMA to be able "to further refine the redesigned Individual Assistance Program, and more effectively direct and focus its implementation efforts."

GAO made fourteen recommendations, and the Department of Homeland Security concurred, "to address challenges faced by survivors, GAO recommends improving the communication of the SBA loan requirement, identifying ways to simplify the application process, improve the IHP award determination letters, and provide more information to survivors about their award." The report further recommends FEMA address the challenges implementing the Individual Assistance Program by "improving the communication of guidance changes, ensure employee engagement to raise morale, and improve training among call center staff." Additional recommendations include improving the information provided to local recovery partners and "implementing best practices for information sharing and coordination on the delivery of temporary transportable housing."

The final recommendations include FEMA's efforts to assess and improve the Individual Assistance Program. These recommendations include "corrections to the methodology used to survey survivors; following key process improvement activities – including engaging stakeholders assessing performance gaps, and prioritization of process improvement – during program redesign activities; and establishing time frames for strategic planning and implementation of program improvement efforts.

I urge FEMA to promptly and fully implement these recommendations to help survivors of devastating disasters in Iowa and across the country receive the assistance they are eligible for in a more understandable and less cumbersome way. As always, I stand ready to assist Iowans in our ongoing disaster recovery efforts. Please do not hesitate to reach out to my office for assistance if needed as you improve the Individual Assistance Program process.

Sincerely,



Charles E. Grassley
United States Senator